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BLACK MASCULINITY AND VISUAL CULTURE*

by Herman Gray

I want to inquire into the social circumstances and cultural conditions in which contemporary representations of black masculinity are produced and circulate. Recognizing the dense intertextual nature of electronic visual media, my aim is to unsettle as much as possible the formal and largely constructed ways in which we see and understand visual representations of black masculinity. Much as one might experience them daily through ads, music television, television situation comedy, and sports, my desire is for this text, in effect if not in structure, to approximate the dense and relentless but always rich and increasingly inseparable experience of visual representations of black masculinity.

Self representations of black masculinity in the United States are historically structured by and against dominant (and dominating) discourses of masculinity and race, specifically (whiteness).¹ For example, the black jazz men of the 1950s and 1960s, notably Miles Davis and John Coltrane, are particularly emblematic of the complex social relations (race, class, sexual) and cultural politics surrounding the self-construction and representation of the black masculine in the public sphere.² As modern innovators in musical aesthetics, cultural vision, and personal style, these men challenged dominant cultural assumptions about masculinity and whiteness.

And it was through their music and style that these (largely heterosexual black men) defined themselves in a racist social order. For many of us, jazz men articulated a different way of knowing ourselves and seeing the world through the very “structures of feeling” they assumed, articulated, and enacted—from the defiantly cool pose and fine vines of Miles to the black and third world internationalism that framed the ceaseless spiritual and musical quest of Coltrane. Davis and Coltrane, like their contemporaries, enacted a black masculine that not only challenged whiteness but exiled it to the (cultural) margins of blackness—i.e., in their hands blackness was a powerful symbol of the masculine.³

This figure of the black jazz man was not without contradictions. As a “different” sign of the masculine he was policed as much as he was celebrated and exoticized by white men and women alike. Policed as a social threat because he transgressed the social role assigned to him by the dominant culture and celebrated as the “modern primitive” because he embodied and expressed a masculinity that explicitly rejected the reigning codes of propriety and place. Drugs, sexism, pleasure, excess, nihilism, defiance, pride, and the cool pose of disengagement were all a part of the style,

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personality, vision, and practice of an assertive heterosexual black masculinity that could not be confined within the dominant cultural logic. (The lives and careers of John Coltrane and Miles Davis illustrate the complex and wide-ranging relations of gender at play in the jazz world; Coltrane's wife was a respected member of his band, while Davis often treated women with derision and abuse. My point is that, although the masculinity created by the black jazz man at once challenged dominant white discourses of heterosexual masculinity, with respect to women this same powerful and defiant black masculinity just as often maintained unequal relations of power between men and women.⁴)

These troubling and complex aspects of racial and gender politics continue with respect to representations of black masculinity, from the romanticization of the original gangsta (OG) and neo-nationalist in contemporary rap to the celebrations of the middle class in civil rights discourse. Contemporary images of black masculinity continue to challenge hegemonic constructions of whiteness even as they rewrite and reproduce forms of patriarchal authority, enveloping some of its most disturbing aspects in black vernacular style and expressive performance.⁵

The political disturbances and cultural rearticulations of the black masculine these images produce require new contextualizations and different reading strategies. Black heterosexual masculinity is figured in the popular imagination as the basis of masculine hero worship in the case of rappers; as naturalized and commodified bodies in the case of athletes; as symbols of menace and threat in the case of black gang members; and as noble warriors in the case of Afrocentric nationalists and Fruit of Islam. While these varied images travel across different fields of electronic representation and social discourse, it is nevertheless the same black body—super star athlete, indignant rapper, “menacing” gang member, ad pitch-man, appropriate middle class professional, movie star—onto which competing and conflicting claims about (and for) black masculinity are waged.

Like their jazz predecessors, contemporary expressions of black masculinity work symbolically in a number of directions at once; they challenge and disturb racial and class constructions of blackness; they also rewrite and reinscribe the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality.

Consider how, for example, neo-conservatives used the black male body under Reaganism. Black heterosexual masculinity was used in policy debates, in television news, and popular film representations to link the signs of patriotism, whiteness, family, nation, and individual responsibility. Discursively located outside of the “normative conceptions,” mainstream moral and class structure, media representations of poor black males (e.g., Rodney King and Willie Horton) served as the symbolic basis for fueling and sustaining panics about crime, the nuclear family, and middle-class security while they displaced attention from the economy, racism, sexism, and homophobia. This figure of black masculinity consistently appears in the popular imagination as the logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment and punishment. Discursively this black male body brings together the dominant institutions of (white) masculine power and authority—criminal justice system, the police, and the news media—to protect (white) Americans from harm.

Working this heavily surveyed and heavily illuminated public arena, the figure of the menacing black male criminal body is also the object of adolescent intrigue, fascination, and adulation. Dr. Dre, Too Short, Ice-T, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dog, Old Dog (*Menace II Society*), and other rappers have used cinema and music video to appropriate this surveyed and policed space for different ends: namely, to construct or reconstruct the image of black masculinity into one of hyper-blackness based on fear and dread.⁶ By drawing on deeply felt moral panics about crime, violence, gangs, and drugs, these figures have attempted, often successfully, to turn dominant representations of black male bodies into a contested cultural field. Black rappers imaginatively rework and rewrite the historic tropes of black heterosexual, masculine (hyper)sexuality, insensitivity, detachment, and cold-bloodedness into new tropes of fascination and fear.

The cultural effects of these images are as complex as they are troubling. The complex cluster of self-representations embodied in images of the black heterosexual body as rapper, athlete, and movie star challenges racist depictions of black masculinity as incompetent, oversexed, and uncivil—ultimately a threat to middle class notions of white womanhood, family, and the nation. But representations of the OG (and self-representations of black male youth more generally) are also underwritten by definitions of manhood deeply dependent on traditional notions of heterosexuality, authenticity, and sexism.

These very same images of black manhood as threat and dread not only work to disturb dominant white representations of black manhood, they also stand in a conflicted relationship with definitions and images of masculinity within blackness, most notably constructions of black masculinity produced by the middle-class wing of the civil rights movement and those produced more recently by black gay men. In the first instance, the OG as an emblem of black heterosexual male youth culture threatens and challenges middle-class male (liberal and conservative) conceptions of public civility, private morality, and individual responsibility. From this perspective one might see both the middle-class competence of Cliff Huxtable (motivated by the liberal politics of Bill Cosby) and Clarence Thomas as created by the same moment as that which produced the demonization of black male youth. Both the real Clarence Thomas and the fictional Cliff Huxtable represent different sides of the same historical moment and do the same kind of recuperative work (in a different direction of course) as that of black male rappers.⁷

At the level of representation (and cultural politics) both Thomas and Huxtable work as black heterosexual male members of the middle class who challenge the dominant conceptions of black manhood as incompetent, irresponsible, over-sexed, and a threat to white notions of womanhood, family, and nation. Both Thomas and Huxtable are the realizations of citizen-subjects produced by the civil rights movement. And yet, like the image of masculinity advanced by the OG, the competences and responsibilities of black heterosexual masculinity produced by the discourse of civil rights are organized by allegiances to the existing regime of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and gender relations. As episodes of *The Cosby Show* and clips of the Thomas/Hill hearings demonstrate, there is little disturbance to the “patriarchal order of things” where masculinity and manhood are concerned.

Media representations of black masculinity operate within the cultural politics of blackness on yet another important (and for some) oppositional front. This figure of black masculinity marks the racial and cultural boundaries of a counter-hegemonic blackness which stands for the black nation, the black family, and the authentic black (male) self.⁸ In contemporary reconfigurations of the black nation, especially its most visible and aggressive guise—Afrocentricity (Leonard Jeffries), the Nation of Islam (Kalid Mohammed, Minister Louis Farakhan), nationalist-based hip-hop—it is the ideal of the strong uncompromising black man, the new black man, the authentic black man, which anchors the oppositional (and within a nationalist discourse) affirmative representation of black masculinity. (In light of insights by post-colonial cultural studies and feminist women of color, the persistence and strength of such heterosexual masculinist-based neo-nationalism should give us pause to ponder the rather uneven effects of such interventions at the level of theory and lived experience.)

Despite the persistence of neo-nationalism and its dependence on a cultural logic that views its subjects as monolithic, fixed, and authentic, contemporary conceptions of heterosexual black masculinity in the United States are nevertheless open to challenge from a variety of locations within the sign of blackness.

Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989) and Marco Williams' *In Search of Our Fathers* (1992) illuminate the contested character of this terrain of black heterosexual masculinity. These films, together with the episode of *Roc* featuring Richard Roundtree as a gay black man involved with a white lover, challenge and destabilize the monolithic and hegemonic character of images rooted in stable heterosexual black masculinity and essential notions of family and nation. The works offer different and more complex ways of seeing and imagining black masculinity and black collective identity. And it is this very complexity and vitality that represents new possibilities for seeing and experiencing our black male selves differently, especially insofar as binaries like manhood/womanhood, black/white, gay/straight, high culture/low culture, public/private, tv/film, commodification/authenticity become more and more problematic and unstable. In their travels and circuits, contemporary images of black masculinity are necessarily engaged in the production of complex intertextual work whose cultural meanings and effects are constantly shifting, open to negotiation, challenge, and rewritings.

NOTES

1. See Gerald Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994).
2. One could easily add Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, Lester Young, Charles Mingus, and Ornette Coleman to this list.
3. Despite being a rather romantic and exotic look at black jazz men, *Round Midnight* (1986) is notable in large measure because it features jazz musicians like Dexter Gordon, Ron Carter, Bobby Hutchinson and others cast in screen roles as musicians.
4. See Miles Davis, with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Greg Tate, "Preface to a One-Hundred-and-Eighty Volume Patricide Note: Yet Another Few Thousand Words on the Death of Miles Davis and the Problem of the Black Male Genius," in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 243-48; Pearl Cleage, *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).
5. See Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: The Cultural Politics of Gangsta Rap

in Postindustrial Los Angeles," in Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, Forthcoming), and Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

6. See Dick Hebdige, *Hiding In The Light: On Images and Things* (New York: Rutledge, 1988).
7. See Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), and Manthia Diawara, "Homeboy Cosmopolitanism," paper presented at the Conference on African-American Youth (African-American Studies Department, University of Pennsylvania, March 1994).
8. See Paul Gilroy, "It's a Family Affair," in Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture*, 303, and Angela Y. Davis, "Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties," in Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture*, 317-25.