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Culture of the Condemned:
A Critique of How Death Row Became a Symbol of Heroism for America's Street-Gang Generation

By

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Abstract

This is a nearly twenty-year immersive ethnographic PhD project that studied the street culture of the Crips and Bloods youth gangs in California, labeled here as the 'culture of the condemned'. I argue that the racialized history of four-hundred years in the United States has shaped today's urban killing culture among what I have titled the 'black gangster class'. This doctoral project examines that racialized history by tracking three conceptual strands — duality, agency, and freedom — to understand the evolution of certain survival-inspired character adaptations of black male street gangsters. Those character adaptations are threefold. First, a black gangster experiences a duality of consciousness influenced from functioning as both the racially oppressed prey whose life is always in jeopardy *and* as the predator, a violent ruler of the streets, whose mirror image is that of his racialized oppressor now and in the past. Second, the black gangster class uses 'inventive agency' (my phrase) to reframe-by-mythologizing harsh circumstances — derived from racialized policy, such as the targeting of black men for mass incarceration — into iconic-status opportunities, given urban America's street codes. Third, these gangsters crave freedom to make their own rules — even if momentary to claim symbolic freedom — secured at nearly any cost, such as the murdering of others, as well as risking their own safety and imprisonment. It is within such a context that this study affords an alternative understanding of the violence performed by black gang members. My contention is that becoming a murderer in the world of the black gangster class has attained a new and significant purpose: that of serving as a legitimate, culturally normalized 'occupation' leading to an upwardly mobile gangster career path. With this culture of the condemned, murdered bodies are categorized as a type of 'currency' earned by the gangsters who have killed them. Committing murder, then, is considered a rational strategy for accumulating reputational wealth. In this culture, prisons are reimagined by black gangsters to become gladiator schools where gang members get to transform into men by surviving the daily life-threatening environment of incarceration. Further, for some street gangsters, death row is

a desired outcome because it can lead to a greater legendary status. Since prisons are dubbed gladiator schools where street gangsters go to become men, death row is where they go to become *supe*rmen because of the more dramatically violent circumstances required to be charged with a capital offense. That extra drama enhances the street-mythic standing of the black gangster. My theoretical framework for this doctoral project is Critical Race Theory (CRT) with support from Michel Foucault's analytic approach to contextualizing history. The primary aim of this study is to introduce a new starting point — the culture of the condemned — for the academy and policymakers to evaluate America's street-gang generation. My contention is that inquiries into the world of black street gangsterism need to be engaged and guided by the gangster-class perspective itself. Here I argue that maintaining a racialized episteme among America's white ruling class that profoundly misunderstands and thus miscasts the black gangster class has led to an unthinkable outcome: support for and implementation of a death-penalty policy that *incentivizes* murder among street gangsters rather than serves as a deterrent to killing. This study also has an objective of encouraging gangsters to examine, critically, the origins and evolution of their own street 'habitus,' a Pierre Bourdieu concept otherwise known as customs, practices, habits that can culturally valorize behavior. Such self-interrogation could help street gangsters determine how to construct a new way forward for themselves and their communities — or not. It, as always, is their choice. This project has also relied on three currently imprisoned gangsters, two Crips and one member of the Bloods, who are serving as co-researchers. They have read my chapters to provide feedback for reflexivity, given the significant differences in my middle-class upbringing and their street-culture existence, and validation of my theorizing about their lives and culture.

Lay Summary

This doctoral project has sought to understand how a killing culture of street-gang violence emerged throughout urban communities in the United States. Members of the Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles, where the two gangs originated, did not just wake up one morning and start the process of killing each other. My goal, after nearly twenty years of immersive ethnographic practice with California's Crips and Bloods (following them around for up to twelve hours a day), has been to understand how the phenomenon of violent street gangs evolved. Consequently, this thesis is not a history of the Crips and Bloods. Instead, it is a history of the evolution of the culture of urban street violence, which I have named a 'culture of the condemned'. The gangsters themselves I call the 'black gangster class'. This street-culture evolution was influenced by a racialized history in the United States that has prompted several violent behavioral adaptations over the generations by black men resisting social and institutional oppression. Beginning with black slave rebels attempting to gain their freedom from enslavement to black pirates, formerly slaves, purposefully becoming outlaws to outright claim their freedom. These days, the evolution has impacted street gangsters, who accept the mass-incarceration target on their backs, but then reimagines imprisonment to mean something else entirely — a place to learn how to kill, a requisite skill to become a highly-respected man in urban America, ascending to O.G. status, that is, Original Gangster, the Chief-Executive-Officer-equivalent of the streets. This and other acts of reimagining their racialized environment has enabled the black gangster class to *feel* free, if not actually *be* free. This thesis explores a myriad of concepts made even more complex by an ever-present racialized history influencing what those concepts mean. Such concepts include space, place, identity, symbolic freedom, duality as expressed, for instance, in street-style patriotism and the existence of a parallel nation within the United States of America embraced by the black gangster class as the United *Streets* of America. My hope is that this study will become a new tool in the literature of criminology, law, education, sociology, as well as urban and gang studies to initiate critiques

about black gangsters. I also plan to promote this work among public policymakers in the United States to enlighten them about a street culture that is generally not understood, whereby the death penalty for the black gangster class *incentivizes* murder rather than deters murder. Finally, this work uses a novel approach to conceive a radical alternative technique for black street gangsters to envision a new future for themselves. Critical Race Theory provides the theoretical framework for this study and three imprisoned gangsters serve as co-researchers for the work — two Crips currently on San Quentin's Condemned Row and one gangster, the founder of the United Bloods Nation, serving a life sentence in a Central California prison. They have read my PhD, one chapter at a time, and provided me with reflexive assistance, given my black middle-class background and the biases that I initially brought to this project. They have also offered feedback regarding the validation of my ideas that translated into an academic project showcasing what I believed I had learned from my immersive ethnographic experience.

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have happened without my having been privileged by so many members of the black gangster class to become an insider, where I was present in their daily lives for nearly two decades. Giving thanks to them is a nostalgic exercise in that some of the significant characters who helped me are now dead — murdered by other gangsters or the state of California. But in homage to them I list some of their names: Tony Bogard, a PJ Watts Crip leader; Ty-Stick Baker, a Bounty Hunter Blood; Crips co-founder Stanley Tooke Williams III, who was executed by the state of California on 13 December 2005, and who provided some brilliant insights in this work.

Wayne Alleyne, a local Barbados historian, must be thanked. He directed me to one of the most significant research finds of this thesis: the infamous Slave Codes of 1661, passed by the Barbados Assembly, legislation that made its way to the American colonies and became the law that inscribed white superiority and black inferiority into the customs of the United States to this day.

I also must thank my PhD supervisors, Callum McGregor, Richard Sparks, and Shari Shabeti for deftly guiding me through the process of knowledge production. I am forever grateful.

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Prologue: A Long Shadow of Race on History

Lordy, Lordy

On a Sunday night in October of 1993, only four young black men entered the McDonald's restaurant located on the south end of Los Angeles' Crenshaw Boulevard, a main thoroughfare in what was then the African American part of town. But those four young men had a way of walking — with long, loose strides — that took up so much space if felt like a mob had invaded the store.

Their quick dominance of the room unnerved the workers on duty, two male security guards and a nineteen-year-old girl who took orders for food. The sudden tension caused the guards to extend their necks as if they were periscopes, positioning themselves to hear every word and to follow every movement of the four young men. As for the counter girl, the tension touched her differently. It bore down on her, pressing the warmth from her welcoming smile. The McDonald's staff had no idea what might happen next. They were especially worried about the 'mad dog stares' that the approaching customers aimed at Eric Williams, one of the guards. Eric did not like the attention. There was no apparent reason for his being singled out. But if someone was to get picked on that night, he thought that it might as well be him. He believed he could handle it better than the other personnel because he knew something this posse of four young men did not know. He, Eric Williams, was one of their own.

Thirty-eight-year-old Eric, tall, muscular, light brown, was an O.G. (Original Gangster, the C.E.O. of black urban communities) Crip known as 'Nature Boy' more than twenty years ago when the street gang first formed on South Central's east side. So, when the youngsters — not one over twenty-five years old — entered his store two hours into his evening shift, Eric recognized them right away. Although he had never seen this crew before, he knew they were gangbangers. Crips. Killers. Members of the Rollin' 60s, one of the biggest Crip factions in Los Angeles. Eric also knew

these Crips were haters of the Bloods, a rival South-Central gang, haters of other Crips, but mostly haters of anybody who fucked with them.

One of the four young Crips had a tattoo that crept across the space beneath his left eye, inking ‘60s’ on his face to advertise his gangster status to people in the know, homeboys as well as enemies. His long braids hung like thick tentacles from his scalp. An oversized dark-colored windbreaker covered a cheap prison-issue khaki outfit — shirt and pants. He also wore the brown round-toed ankle-high shoes supplied to inmates at most California correctional facilities, shoes that, according to Eric, ‘ruin your feet.’ Eric figured this kid had just been released from a state penitentiary. Perhaps San Quentin. Or Folsom State Prison.

The other three Crips were dressed in tank tops. Knit beanies were pulled down tightly on their heads. Baggy trousers riding low on their backsides, exposing boxer shorts that covered skinny behinds. Two of the men carried forty-ounce bottles of beer. Eric was on the telephone at the end of the counter, his body propped against the wall, nearly blocking the Martin Luther King Jr. poster displayed there — ‘We must never lose infinite hope’ — when the gangbanger in prison khakis drew near. Eric nodded hello. The gangster ignored him, but then demanded help. ‘Lemme have some cups.’

‘Ask her,’ Eric responded, jutting a finger toward the clerk behind the counter who was handing cups to two of the four young men. Eric quickly hung up the phone. The third Crip leaned against the counter, closely watching his braided homeboy and Eric. ‘Well, I’m asking you.’

‘Fuck you,’ Eric snapped, as he slid into a readiness pose — legs gapped the width of his shoulders, feet planted solidly, arms bowed. Eric was ready to defend himself, to kick this youngster’s ass if it came to that. But then two white police officers entered the store to get something to eat. Eric backed away from the gangster just in time to see the officers turning to observe the two Crips with cups and beer bottles stroll to the restroom at the back of the store. Eric motioned to the gangster with whom he had just

exchanged words and leaned toward him. ‘When I spoke to you the first time, you didn’t say nothin’ to me,’ said Eric so softly the police could not hear. ‘That’s why I said, “Fuck you” about the cups. Now check this out, man. Go tell your partners not to bust [open] that beer because the police are here. If they open them now, they’re going to jail.’

‘Fuck them police,’ the young gangster said, lifting his coat so that Eric could see the lusterless gray handgun, a nine-millimeter, tucked in the waistband of his pants. ‘If they say anything, or touch any of my brothers, it’ll be like the shootout at the OK Corral in this motherfucka.’ ‘You mean your homeboys?’ Eric corrected him. ‘No, I mean my brothers. We’re family, man, and we’re all like this,’ he said, stroking is gun. ‘If they mess with my brothers, it’s on. All that harassing and shit, I ain’t havin’ it,’ he said as he spun around to face the police standing only a few feet away. As he was talking, he became increasingly agitated. His voice got louder; his eyes grew large. By the time he spat out his last word, his eyes were bulging, the skin around them stretched wide. Seconds later, when his two brothers emerged from the restroom, sloshing beer from the cups that they held, they had pressed their pistols, holstered in waistbands, against their bellies so the officers could see they were armed.

The cops, having walked into that McDonald’s as a team, began to separate, to move nervously away from each other. And within a few seconds, both men, moving backwards, their eyes focused on the four brazen Crips, stepped out the door. The food they had ordered — still being prepared — was abandoned, their bill unpaid. The four Crips also left the store, right behind the officers. But the gangbangers did not immediately climb into their car and speed off, as did the police. They stood directly out front of the McDonald’s for a couple of hours. Whenever Eric glanced that way, he could see them through the double-glass doors, drinking beer, laughing, talking.

When Eric got off work around ten that night and walked through the parking lot past a small-fenced playground with its colorful plastic swings and

slides, past a twenty-foot pole from which a United States flag hung limply, he noticed the young Crips again. They were finally preparing to leave. As he crossed their path on the way to his car, the gangster with the long braids and prison khakis acknowledged Eric. ‘All right, black man,’ he said. ‘Stay strong.’

‘You crazy bastard,’ Eric thought. ‘If you’ve got that type of sense, why you out here trippin’?’

Now you see why I don’t fuck with them youngsters,’ exclaimed Eric’s forty-eight-year-old co-worker, the other security guard on duty who had sat transfixed as the drama unfolded. Eric shared his co-worker’s utterance with me because Eric understood what that guard meant. Growing up as an O.G. Crip back in the day, he and his South Central ‘homies’ (another form of ‘homeboys,’ meaning gang members who are close friends) avoided ‘the dogs’ (police officers). ‘But now,’ he told the other guard, ‘these youngsters, both Crips and Bloods, take it straight to ‘em.’ ‘

The incident helped Eric to see that he was out of touch with the street game as it was now played. These new-era gangsters were of a very different culture — and mindset. But so were today’s cops. He was furious with the behavior of the two police that night. ‘I looked at those officers and thought, ‘They’re coward assholes. They didn’t prevent nothin’. At least they could’ve come back with reinforcements. Nobody knows what those youngsters were gonna do with all those guns’.

Eric was still shaken by the incident when later in the week he visited his mother. He ended up telling her how much he resented the police for running away from the youngsters, how pissed off he was that the Crips seemed not to care that they were risking their own lives by threatening others. He was outraged over the way the gang member with the long braids had altered his appearance. ‘Who the fuck is gonna give that boy a job with all that shit [the tattoo] on his face?’ And he hated that the kid continued to wear clothes linking him to his prison past rather than clothes connecting him to a civilian future.

But mostly Eric was angry because he felt impotent to prevent a similar incident from happening again, in South Central — or elsewhere. ‘They’re trippin’ out there,’ he told his mother. ‘These gangsters are crazy. The police are crazy. Everybody’s crazy.’ His mother sat silently listening to her son. Even after he finished his tale, her quiet stretched into the evening. It was not until Eric was ready to go home that she finally spoke up. Then, instead of a good-bye, she shook her head and whispered, ‘Lordy, Lordy. What has it come to?’

By the time I interviewed Eric Williams, and he shared this experience with me, I had already been confronted by young gangsters with guns in their waistbands or in their hands — poised to shoot. I had already spent a year immersed in this street gang culture through an association I had developed with two Crip and Blood gang members serving as truce leaders in Los Angeles, albeit their tenure in that capacity did not last long. I recognized the O.G. stride that Eric ascribed to those Rollin’ 60s gangsters at McDonald’s. And I had seen, first-hand, the look of malevolence routinely projected by street gangsters onto law enforcement officials, as well as occasionally onto community outsiders such as myself. Eric and I visited that McDonald’s for me to capture, accurately, some of the environmental details that metaphorically mattered in the telling of this powerful tale.

Overview of Study

The ‘Lordy, Lordy’ story is an illustrative benchmark in this street-gang evolution of what is labeled here as the ‘culture of the condemned.’ With this ethnographic PhD project, I argue that America’s racialized history has shaped today’s killing culture among the black gangster class. This study, then, is not a history of the Crips and Bloods youth gangs. Instead, it is an exploration of how a violent street culture evolved from disenfranchised-black-male character adaptations to hundreds of years of racialized customs and policies. Those customs and policies include experiencing harsh arrest-and-imprisonment practices, access to low-quality kindergarten-to-high-

school education, race-based geographic containment practices, and few opportunities for legitimate employment. And it is within such a pervasive context of racism in the United States, reflected by diminished opportunities to achieve traditional exemplars of success, that this study offers an alternative understanding of the violence performed by black gang members.

My contention is that becoming a murderer in the world of the black gangster class has attained a new and significant purpose: that of serving as a legitimate, culturally normalized ‘occupation’ leading to an upwardly mobile career path. With the culture of the condemned, murdered bodies are categorized as a type of ‘currency’ earned by the gangsters who have killed them. Committing murder, then, is considered a rational strategy for accumulating reputational wealth. The endgame for this occupational trajectory is ascension to O.G. status, which includes a claim to neighborhood-wide hegemonic agency and heroic acclaim that accompanies such street-level attainment. Further, ending up on death row — a mainstream-society-imposed endgame for murder — is for some gangsters a desired outcome that leads to a greater legendary status. This is discussed in more detail throughout the work.

A primary aim of this study is to introduce a new starting point — the culture of the condemned — for the academy and policymakers to evaluate America’s street-gang generation. My contention is that inquiries into the world of black street gangsterism need to be engaged and to be guided by the gangster-class perspective itself. Rather than analyses and policies conjured from a dominant-culture-driven epistemology biased by racial imaginaries. Here I argue that maintaining a racialized episteme among America’s white ruling class that profoundly misunderstands and thus miscasts the black gangster class has led to an unthinkable outcome: support and implementation of a public policy and law — the death penalty — that *incentivizes* murder among street gangsters rather than serves as a deterrent to killing. Another aim of this study, therefore, is to provide research

and reasoning to support the nationwide abolishment of capital punishment.

This work also has an objective of encouraging gangsters to examine, critically, the origins and evolution of their own street 'habitus' or customs, as described by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu in Gieseking and Mangold 2014, p. 139; Asimaki, p. 122) — that is, violent and hierarchical customs informed by street culture. Such self-interrogation could help them to determine whether they desire to construct a new way forward for themselves and their communities — or not. The culture of the condemned normalizes not just the job classification of murderer, but also the expectation of young martyrdom, of a short lifespan for black street gangsters. Thus, to *not* understand or recognize the potency of the gangster class epistemology in America is a very dangerous circumstance. Ultimately, such epistemic ignorance does not keep the dominant society safe, as promised to the mainstream populace by law enforcement and politicians to justify the death penalty. Nor does that epistemic ignorance sustain the lives of black gangsters and the well-being of others in urban neighborhoods where street gangsterism presides.

I am supported in this work by three imprisoned co-researchers. All three are O.G.s. These gangsters are helping me with validity and reflexivity issues only. They are not research participants. They are not helping me to write, create concepts, or theory-build. This relationship and the ethical considerations regarding my work with them are thoroughly examined in Chapter Two: Methods, Positionality, and an Epistemic Struggle with Scholarship.

Two of the co-researchers are Crip gang leaders, originally from Los Angeles: Steve 'Treach' (short for 'Treacherous') Champion and Craig 'Evil' Ross. Both have been incarcerated on Condemned Row at California's San Quentin State Prison for more than thirty-five years after being convicted of murdering a drug dealer. Each of these men have won awards from the PEN International writers' organization (PEN is an acronym for Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists) for their fiction and nonfiction writing, while confined to death row. They have also co-authored a book, *The Architect:*

How to Transform Yourself and Your World (2019), some aspects of which I analyze in the last chapter of this work. The third co-researcher, Richard 'Peabody' Cooper, is the founder of the United Bloods Nation, a collective of all Blood gang factions whose members are imprisoned throughout California's correctional facilities. He has been locked up for nearly forty years because of a murder conviction for which he received a life sentence. Cooper is currently housed in Lancaster State Prison in central California.

I began this ethnographic study with a strong middle-class African American bias that I held against the gangster-class culture in the early stages of my fieldwork. At some point, though, I decided it was more important to understand this culture than to hold on to my class bias. That led me to problematize my own bias by instituting a reflexivity practice involving regularly scheduled conversations with older O.G.s and their girlfriends who were willing to provide feedback on my judgment of the gangsters and what I defined as their lack of morality. Yet, they kept talking to me. They kept explaining the social logic of the streets. They made the case for a different framing of morality. Eventually, I could understand some things from their perspective, which was a very unfamiliar culture, given my upbringing that included a college-educated mother, two-parent household, and the experience of growing up in homes that my mother and father owned.

The 'What' and 'How' of the Black Gangster Class

The culture of the condemned — as was true with slavery in the American colonies — puts a premium on the value of black bodies, while concurrently devaluing the personhood of black people. With this work, I theorize that O.G.s and O.G. 'wannabes' (O.G. aspirants) have created parallel societies within racially segregated, low-income, and socially isolated neighborhoods that mimic mainstream America's upwardly mobile career-ladder culture. Those isolated urban neighborhoods are here referred to as urban enclaves, a spatial, philosophical and political reframing of the inner-city or ghetto concept in the United States. Urban enclaves, then, are defined as small

urban neighborhoods *within* larger urban neighborhoods and function as closed societies whose residents are viewed as ‘the other’ by the mainstream populace. But that view is reciprocal, since those residing in urban enclaves also consider outsiders as ‘the other.’ At its core, this urban enclave concept is an attempt to resist the pejorative language and social constructs of oppression, as applied to the gangster class’s territorial domains.

There is another rationale for my urban-enclave reconceptualization of American cities. Many scholars who critique the culture of black-populated cities, I argue, have a locational misunderstanding of that space. An urban area is often seen by the academy as the *entire* black community with no *geographical* distinctions made to account for a socioeconomically diverse group of African American residents. However, *class* distinctions are made within that given urban area to distinguish personhood and value based on cultural differences among the same group of socioeconomically diverse black people. Claims of elevated social status characterized as ‘decency’ versus some measure of low-class ranking, particularly that of gang affiliation, are made by some residents living within a low-income periphery of the urban enclave — and emphasized by some scholars, as highlighted in the well-regarded book, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life of the Inner-City* (Anderson 1999). However, these self-separating claims from such declarants, as put forth by scholars, do misrepresent an important truth: the periphery of the urban enclave, where the so-called decent people reside, is *not* the urban enclave as defined here. There are staggered-boundary or sub-boundary claims, I argue, that can be made — and are made — by residents located on both sides of these socially constructed borders which provide a line of demarcation for what is and is not perceived to be the urban enclave by urban enclave residents themselves.

From the vantage point of such residents, when the Crips and Bloods were first formed, the location of where you lived, not necessarily how much money your family earned — or collected in Social Security, disability and county welfare checks — is what determined your urban enclave status.

Everything hinged on whether you were from 'the projects' — public housing — or were one of the 'House People.' According to 'Strong Handsome Hank,' one of the original Bounty Hunter Bloods and a long-time resident of the Nickerson Gardens Housing Project in Watts, 'The kids who lived outside the projects we called House People. We hated them and fought them because they had it made, and because they made fun of the raggedy clothes we wore to school every day.' A closer examination, though, revealed that the economic differences between people who lived in the local projects and the House People were often marginal, if at all. House People did not even have to live in houses; they could live in apartment buildings — in rundown apartments — and still qualify as House People. Yet, the social hierarchy in South-Central Los Angeles divined a category of superiority that differentiated between classes of poor black people based on an individual's fate of *not* possessing a public housing address. These days the basic precept of the urban-enclave concept remains that public housing and abject hardship are what delineate membership in the urban enclave. Not indecency. No matter how the concept of indecency is defined. Thus, urban enclaves are deserving of their own analysis. In Chapter Four: Agency and Its Many 'Inventive' Forms and Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class, this study provides an exploration of what constitutes the urban enclave and assesses the urban enclave's unique relevance to the culture of the condemned.

As discussed earlier, with the culture of the condemned, O.G.s in urban enclaves attempt to ascend a career ladder by using a competitive tally of murdered bodies as a representation of career accomplishment and dedicated adherence to the laws of the street, not the laws of the greater society. O.G.s even refer to a killing foray as 'putting in work,'[1] as in completing a job assignment. Thus, the O.G.s have spawned an occupation for themselves — that of ad hoc murderer, not drug dealer, as is depicted in much urban crime literature. They have also established a substitute

[1] I repeatedly heard this phrase from black street gangsters during decades of fieldwork.

‘currency’ for use in the territory they rule. That currency is the dead bodies of their gang enemies. This strategy for accumulating symbolic ‘wealth’ and prestige is, I argue, born from the gangsters’ attempt to cope with what I call a culture of scarcity that includes but is not limited to economic and educational disadvantage. There is also a scarcity of hope in urban enclaves which undergirds the actuarial calculation of these young gangsters who, rightly, have little faith in their long-term mortality.

The career of choice, then, for certain gangsters is to become the leader of a youth gang in an urban enclave by murdering many in the most daring way. This research examines a population of black male leaders of street-gang factions, who are considered significant societal influencers. They are viewed as such by gang members who seek to be like them and by a global gangster-rap genre that composes popular music and displays dramatic video mythology about their exploits — mostly murders or threats of killing sprees. Historical perspective, though, allows that the initial mandate, given America’s dominant class to own black bodies four-hundred years ago, forged a dichotomy in the meaning formation of those bodies. They were at once highly valued as revenue-generating slave property, while highly diminished as human-beings (Coates 2015; Young 2005; Rice and Kardux 2012). I contend the gangsters have learned well from America’s racialized history of oppression and dominance by adapting elements of that culture, though eschewing middle-class assimilation. As explained by one black prisoner and Crip, L. E. Jackson in a collection of writing from his prison cell which he shared with me, middle-class assimilation is a form of betrayal for black people:

> The black people’s attempt at assimilation has not served the purpose we thought it would. I have discovered that the decree of voluntary assimilation by black leaders was a complete mistake economically and racially. It was a mistake for black leaders to beg for admittance into a social circle that refuses to recognize our abilities. Of course, on the political surface, whites pick token black assimilators to play parts in their campaigns using these upstanding negro images to influence black people to vote for their party. They all promise us access to better jobs, better education for our children and a stronger

> voice in the political spectrum. And finally, when they are in office their promises disappear.

Yet, what the gangster class has embodied of a white supremacist culture reflects a complex duality symbolized by the gangster scoreboard for killing and at the same time being killed. And it supports an endgame of being sent to a largely white-operated death row — though an honorable destination within the black culture of the condemned. Even hip-hop and rap genres — public pedagogy for the urban enclave population — reinforce and reflect the culture of the condemned's embrace of executions, as well as death. In 1993, the Geto Boys, a highly respected gangster-rap group from Houston, Texas, used an electric chair as a throne-emblem for its cover art. The album was titled *Till Death Do Us Part*. It was a best-selling album and remained on the music Billboard Chart for twenty-seven weeks (billboard.com n/d). In the early 1990s, what became a seminal Los Angeles-based multi-billion-dollar hip-hop music label named itself Death Row Records and used a death-chamber chair, this time with a hooded prisoner strapped there, as its logo. Understanding these issues demands a dialectic analysis explored in Chapter Three: Duality: Confronting America's Damning Dialectic.

This PhD project presents conundrums that are the crux of the study's problem statements. For public policymakers, the death penalty is a deterrent to murder for gang members. It is their main argument to the American public for supporting such a draconian law. This study, however, argues that capital punishment, with the black gangster class, incentivizes the killing of others. Here I argue that capital punishment is a self-defeating public policy at least because it does not understand the culture of the condemned and therefore the motivating behavior of its target population, mostly low-income black men.

Another example of a misunderstanding of street culture is found in California's infamous three-strikes-and-you're-out law. When first initiated in 1994, the three-strikes law automatically provided a twenty-five-years-to-life

prison sentence for a third felony conviction of any kind, even if not a murder or violent crime (Couzens and Bigelow 2017). But for gangsters observing news coverage of the inevitable start of this new law, their reasoning for how to respond was simple: If I'm going to get a life sentence anyway for committing any kind of crime, then I'll kill all people present and leave no witnesses. And if I end up on death row, so be it. This is what I was repeatedly told during my urban-enclave fieldwork in the months leading up to implementation of the three-strikes law. Again, policymakers did not understand the culture.

More on the Culture of the Condemned

This study asks: Why? And how did such a deadly predatory culture and life-jeopardizing practice evolve and come to thrive in black-street-gang-dominated communities of America?

My thesis is that the culture of the condemned is a social construct with roots anchored in America's slavery legacy. Those roots are especially embedded in that era's brutality against black people, exploitation of power, obviation of freedom and pariah strategy to propagandize the danger and thus 'deserved' outcast status of black males. Further, this pariah strategy was part of a four-century dehumanization campaign waged by a ruling class against its black citizenry. The campaign sought to affirm subhuman status for African Americans through the simianization of black people to make them unsympathetic 'aliens' (Coates as cited in Morrison 2017, p. x; Painter 2010), especially black males. The campaign relied in part on a racialized public pedagogical practice — where a nationwide education to stigmatize black people took place in many forms largely outside the classroom, including editorial cartoons and entertainment industry depictions of African Americans as ignorant buffoons, and product marketing and advertising of degrading caricatures of black people. To illustrate, there is an infamous picture of an overweight black female cook, who in 1893 had a bright-colored kerchief wrapped around her head. This image was placed on the bottle and box of what are now bestselling Aunt Jemima products of syrup and pancake

mix. The product name — Aunt Jemima — has become an iconic brand, as well as an enduring meme for African Americans. It has come to represent black women willing to demonstrate servility to white people, including the 'mammy' character, a domestic caregiver and servant to white children and families (Kemp 1982, p. 262), as described in black literature and as reported in black history (Harris 1982). In June of 2020, after the Black Lives Matter movement gained mass support, worldwide, when a black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was killed by a white police officer who placed his knee on that man's neck for nearly nine minutes, the company itself admitted its one-hundred-thirty-year history of racist product branding would be retired (Selyukh 2020).

Here I posit that O.G.s and their gangster followers have internalized as well as adapted some of the most oppressive behaviors of a ruthless dominant class. One adaptation involves the pariah label. Despite the societal downsides of such branding, today's gangsters embrace that title and view it as an opportunity to impose fear as an element of leadership to dominate their own city-based fiefdoms — even if only two-or-three-square-blocks in size. But within those street-sovereign spaces, O.G.s have the freedom to make the rules, to be the oppressors of *their* communities. That O.G. agency allows them to reframe and upgrade the value of being imprisoned — where they are likely to end up, given mass incarceration policies and their willingness to kill — by defining carceral facilities as gladiator schools (Williams and Becnel 1998). For gangsters, prisons as gladiator schools are a desirous place to prove they are authentic men. But such a foundational definition transforms death row into the ultimate prison sentence. It becomes a chance to prove O.G.s are not just men, but *super*men, by demonstrating extraordinary mythic criminality as the qualification for entrance into a status-elevating prison cell. Thus, certain gangster-class character adaptations auger respect for a super-killer symbolism associated with death row. With this work such adaptations are framed as survival mechanisms, examples of rebellious and inventive agency and, ironically, as a measure of an ongoing fight in America for people of

color to be free. Willis and Krauthamer in *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (2013) wrote an eloquent statement validating how confounding it is to define precisely what the freedom quest for black people means in this nation:

> The history and memory of slavery and emancipation endured in the bodies and lived experiences of both former slaves and the generations of black Americans born in slavery's wake. The extent and meanings of black people's freedom, in their daily lives and on the national stage, took shape unevenly, haltingly, and often incompletely (pp. 129-130).

Here I investigate the following character adaptations that provide insight into the prevalence of a culture of the condemned, and its relationship to the nation's long-term and ongoing race-based dehumanization campaign against African Americans, particularly black men. Those character adaptations are: (1) experiencing a duality of consciousness by functioning as both the oppressed and a mirror image of the oppressor in the role of violent O.G. hegemon of the streets; (2) using inventive agency to reframe by mythologizing harsh circumstances into iconic-status opportunities, given the street standards and constrained circumstances of urban America; (3) craving freedom as gangsters to make their own rules — even momentary or symbolic freedom — secured at nearly any cost, such as the murder of others, as well as risking their own safety and imprisonment.

Inside the Lordy, Lordy Tale

My discovery of the culture of the condemned and urban enclaves is grounded in the concrete experiences — or as the social worker profession calls it 'person in environment' experiences (Oktay 2012, p. 2) — of O.G. Crips and Bloods from South Central Los Angeles. These are experiences that I either witnessed or learned of during thousands of interviews over nearly thirty years. The 'Lordy, Lordy' vignette can be culled for its connections to key elements comprising the culture of the condemned and the urban enclaves the culture influences.

Duality. Those Rollin' 60s Crips from the 'Lordy, Lordy' tale adopted the role of cruel and edgy 'master' of their environment — as in the master-slave model — where the master's threat of violence to maintain control over his slave was ever present. To illustrate, the O.G. demanded that Eric, a security guard, be subservient and secure him empty paper cups for drinking beer, which the gangsters had brought into McDonald's. When Eric resisted, a violent encounter between the Rollin' 60s Crip and Eric seemed inevitable until the police walked into the store. The O.G. also showed no fear of the two white officers of the Los Angeles Police Department. Indeed, the Rollin' 60s Crips in some way personified armed community enforcers. In other words, grassroots surrogates for — as well as enemies of — the police. He was an O.G. with dual personas.

Inventive agency and freedom. A demonstration of inventive agency among the gangsters at McDonald's is also tied to their complex notion of what constitutes freedom. A critical discussion of these issues is found in Chapter Four: Agency and Its Many 'Inventive' Forms and Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class of this study. But some evidence of that connection and complexity can be seen in the 'Lordy, Lordy' story. The O.G. leader of the posse of street gangsters was informed by inventive agency — as well as gangster-style freedom — in wearing prison-issue shoes, open shirt and pants at a McDonald's, which advertised he had served a prison sentence and was in no way ashamed of that fact. Why was prison apparel casually worn like a fashion statement by that gangster? Here I argue his choices reflect some harsh underlying factors that inventive agency and a reimagined sense of freedom can help to mitigate. Since the Mass Incarceration Era there is a longstanding story shared by O.G.s with boys and young men in urban enclaves that makes prison an acceptable place to be and prison apparel an acceptable garment to wear when no longer incarcerated (Williams and Becnel 1998). As this story goes, there is very little difference between time spent at home and time spent in a cell, other than the environment is even more constrained while incarcerated

(Williams 2007). But the advantage, another example of O.G. inventiveness, is that prison is seen as providing an opportunity to prove warrior abilities. And warrior traits are highly valued in the urban enclave. This is an inventive reframing of a dangerous situation that is considered inevitable, given American carceral policies targeting black men. Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has identified this symbiosis between prison and urban enclaves as a phenomenon of fusion where these two entities have become 'kindred institutions of forced confinement' (p. 377; Wacquant 2001). This conceptualization receives a great deal of attention in Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class.

An examination of how freedom is framed by those gangsters was their willingness to taunt the police, to risk being killed at McDonald's in what would have been a dramatic exchange of gunfire. But gangster-style freedom is experienced by the willingness of those Rollin' 60s Crips to fight back against oppressive forces, against being controlled. In those moments, it does not matter to gangsters if they die in the process of engaging in what they deem as freedom fighting. My insight is supported by a street-level example of peril, freedom, and agency given by Wayne Pharr, a former member of the Black Panther Party, in a documentary film (Everett 2010). On 8 December 1969, at around 5:00 a.m., Pharr awakened in the Panthers' South-Central Los Angeles headquarters to realize he was in a shootout with local police. He quickly armed himself with a Thompson machine gun. Though Pharr expected to be killed by the officers, he describes a liberating experience:

> I felt free. I felt absolutely free. I was a free Negro. I was making my own rules. You [the police] couldn't get in and I couldn't get out. But in my space, I was the King. In that little space I had, I was the King. And that's what I felt. You understand? That's what I felt.

This Black Panther Party incident was behaviorally impactful on the Crips and the Bloods because the Panthers, it turns out, were attempting to mentor the male youth in Los Angeles who, a few years later, became

founding members of what grew to become America's most culturally influential black street gangs — the Crips and Bloods, originating in South Central. But their mentoring did not last long. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) initiated a comprehensive but undercover war against Black Panthers named COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) (Bloom and Martin 2016). Secretly, the FBI encouraged and at times orchestrated local police raids on Black Panther Chapters to kill and arrest the group's leadership at locations throughout urban America (Ibid.). COINTELPRO was successful. The FBI effort led to the Panther's collapse. However, the end of the Panther organization left a void of black male leadership in the communities from which the Crips and Bloods emerged.

In the 'Lordy, Lordy' vignette, those Rollin' 60s Crips also knew that provoking a battle with the police assured either their death or the death penalty. This is true because in California if even one of those police officers had been killed in a gun fight, then all gangsters involved in the mayhem would be charged with capital murder and sent to death row upon conviction. Gangsters know this about the state's law but do not see it as a deterrent. Instead, it is envisioned as an honorable endeavor, connecting the sacrifice of imprisonment on death row as not just a function of the fight for freedom, but as an example of inventive agency. A battle of bullets assured an exciting story would be told throughout South-Central Los Angeles about those gangsters leading a do-or-die rebellion against the police, thus cementing their legendary, mythic status. Even without the gun fight, standing up to the police, who are considered a racist and intrusive presence in urban enclaves (Williams, S. T. 2007; Williams, K. 2007; Donner 1992), guaranteed those Crips would become, for a short while, the talk of the gangster community for being fierce and daring. Thus, their rebel act, as well as the story about their rebel act, becomes an integral part the gangsters' mythology and mythologizing.

Those Rollin' 60s Crips in the 'Lordy, Lordy' tale showed the freedom to exercise agency by determining their own destiny — even a life-ending

destiny — and by providing irrefutable evidence that they could at a minimum construct a unique way to *feel* free, if not to *be* free. That perspective, that story they tell themselves, critically links freedom to inventive agency. These are primary manifestations of the culture of the condemned. This is the real-world context that this study confronts and attempts to understand.

Why a Prologue?

During my first month of PhD work at the University of Edinburgh, I volunteered to make a presentation about my research to other doctoral students. I realized that I could not assume my audience would be well versed about the violent practices and culture of black youth gangs in the United States. Quickly, I realized that the issue was not simply how to explain this to my colleagues, but how to explain this work to an audience where epistemic blind spots were common when examining a black gangster class. Theory-building to construct the culture of the condemned, therefore, demanded my grappling with a range of epistemic challenges.

My argument for the existence of a Prologue and other variances from standard PhD structure is connected to that range of challenges. The project's cosmological conceptualization encompasses the navigation of four-hundred years of racialized American history, conflicting and competing epistemologies within and outside of the academy, and an unrelenting presence of racial-bias as well as class-bias that imposes itself upon black street gangsters in the United States. But my contention here is that the special context related to the black gangster class requires an atypical presentation that deconstructs its complexity in a particular way and, to some extent, in a particular order.

Other scholars of black gangster literature have framed their work in equally complex ways. David Brumble, for instance, critiques the Crips gang culture through an examination of the autobiography of Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams, other street-gang autobiographies, and the similarity of street-gang customs with the long tradition of tribal warrior storytelling

(2009). Another scholar, Steven Cureton, anchored his black gangster analysis in the history of black gang leadership's importance for black America and how that importance needs to be noted by black middle-class America (2009). Cureton also examines how class-related issues of authenticity emerge between those who consider themselves 'integrated' black leaders representing the middle class versus their black underclass counterparts (p. 347). These compelling conflicts are exposed and examined by Cureton.

This doctoral project offers a different category of historical critique. It is not a recounting of the history of black youth gangs, though its title subhead talks about 'America's Street-Gang Generation'. Rather this work is a study of how the history of racism in America, particularly against black men, has unwittingly influenced the evolution of a street-killing culture that informs the black gangster class. Such arguments involve an expansive historical critique to assist the reader in understanding my intent to place a significant share of responsibility for this black gangster killing culture on various manifestations of the nation's racialized history. These are the reasons for such a rule-bending approach to this research.

Chapter 1: American Street-Gang Culture — Caught in the Crosshairs of History

‘Around here, you ain’t nobody ‘til you kill somebody.’

— Statement by a black male street gangster, early twenties, from Chicago, who was interviewed on a USA cable network (*All In With Chris Hayes*, MSNBC-TV, 7 July (2017)

1.1 Overview: A New Understanding of the Gangster Class

This PhD project focuses on two street gangs founded in the United States: the Crips and the Bloods. Both gangs originated in South-Central Los Angeles. The study also showcases Stanley Tookie Williams, one of two co-founders of the Crips. The other Crips co-founder was Raymond Lee Washington, whom I did not have an opportunity to interview because he was murdered on 9 August 1979, well before I began this research. The reasons for my focus on the Crips, Bloods, Stanley Tookie Williams, and South-Central Los Angeles are threefold.

First, both the Crips and the Bloods were quickly recognized by the United States Department of Justice as having created a street-culture phenomenon in the 1970s that was attracting the attention of black youth in nearby cities, prompting new Crip and Blood factions to form across California (Howell and Moore 2010). These days, the cultural influence of the two black gangs has spread throughout North America, as reflected in an online Hip-Hop Database, which not only provides a list of Crip and Blood factions in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Houston, Montreal and many other cities, but also lists internationally known rappers by their Crip or Blood gang affiliation (hiphopdatabase n/d).

Second, Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams has been considered a legendary gang leader since the early 1970s, with that status continuing even after his death by judicial execution on 13 December 2005. To illustrate, every year on the anniversary of the death of Stanley Tookie Williams, in prison exercise yards throughout the United States, many incarcerated Crips

and Bloods still celebrate his life and exploits, as has been reported to me during telephone calls from incarcerated gang members in state and federal correctional facilities across America.

Third, South Central Los Angeles has become an iconic community known globally, as heralded in gangster rap, as well as America's film and television industry. The following surface-level historical analysis examines black Los Angeles from a grassroots perspective by providing a glimpse of how a complex culture, such as the culture of the condemned, anchored itself into the archetypal urban enclave known as South Central.

Here I lean on Michel Foucault's ideas in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) about how to critique history, where he divides the study of history into three levels of context. There is a surface level of context that seeks to track political changes and cultural metamorphoses over time. There is a deeper and second level of context that follows the 'slow saturation' of history, including, for example, the evolution and devolution of civilizations over long periods (p. 3). And there is a third level of descent into the deepest context of history where the 'rhythms and resonance of all manner of historical experience — rebellions, famines, the role and significance of racism — become broader and stronger (Ibid.).

This first look at street-gangster and South-Central history, then, offers a 'surface-level' contextualization — using Michel Foucault's language (Ibid.) — of three main themes of this PhD project: the persistence of duality and the reckoning involved with exposing duality's many strands of imposed harm on an oppressed class by a dominant class and imposed harm by a dominated class on itself; the practice of inventive agency by the gangster class where misrepresentation of any form is reimagined to mitigate its impact; a street-level reconceptualization of freedom.

In 1961, when Stanley Tookie Williams was only seven years old, his mother moved the family from Shreveport, Louisiana, to South-Central Los Angeles, a predominantly black, low-income neighborhood (Williams, S. T. 2007).

Tookie's view of childhood power relations was defined by a first-day experience when he stepped outside to play in this new community. Very quickly he was badly beaten by slightly older children for no apparent reason. That experience prompted an enduring assessment of South Central for Tookie. There were only two types of people there, he thought, victims and victimizers (Ibid.). Many years later, a grey-haired Tookie, assigned to a caged booth in a prison visiting room, told me that story and remembered he had made a fateful decision on that day. As a little boy, Tookie claimed his status for life: He would unequivocally be a victimizer. Teenager Tookie became co-founder of the Crips youth gang, which originated in South-Central Los Angeles (Ibid.). In the beginning, this street gang was formed to provide protection for themselves and family members from a raft of other local gangs (Ibid.). A white-dominated Los Angeles police force put into practice a race-based belief that it was not necessary to provide significant protection for the low-income black community of South Central (Ibid.; Williams, K. 2007). The Crips intervened as a protective force — initially. But soon these black gangsters grew in membership — and grew in the territory they dominated — to become one of the largest black street gangs in America. They also quickly became predators against their own community — predators like those smaller street gangs the Crips had formed to protect

Fig. 1. Stanley Tookie Williams, South Central Los Angeles, circa 1962

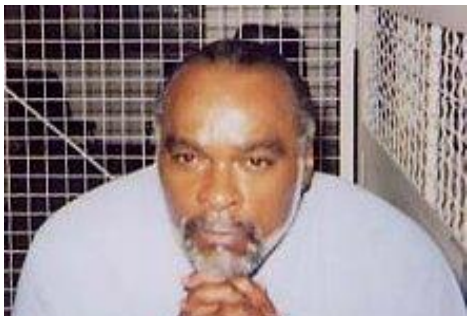

Fig. 2. Stanley Tookie Williams, San Quentin Condemned Row visiting room cage, 2004

Fig. 3. Stanley Tookie Williams, posing in San Quentin Prison exercise yard wearing a blue bandanna, the Crips colour and popular apparel, circa 1980s

themselves from (Williams, S. T. 2007). Young adult Tookie was convicted of four murders during two robberies, sent to San Quentin State Prison's Condemned Row and executed on December 13, 2005. Here I argue that Tookie's 1961 decision to become a predator in South Central Los Angeles is part of a much larger historical trajectory, which did not begin with him. That trajectory, I contend, has led to the emergence these days of a black youth gang culture, which has spread throughout North America and embraces the very act of murder as a way of ensuring personal value — 'Around here, you ain't nobody 'til you kill somebody,' as cited at the beginning of this chapter by the Crips-influenced young gang member from Chicago.

This insider-outsider ethnographic PhD project introduces a new conceptual resource for understanding street-gangster violence in black urban America, which I have labeled the 'culture of the condemned.' Such insider-outsider duality reflects my complex ethnographic practice with this study. I became a privileged insider to this gang culture and, thus, have largely attempted here to provide a critique from the gangster point of view (Bergman and Lindgren 2018; Goodenough 1981). Yet, there are some analyses presented in this study where I have employed an outsider perspective in my examination of black gang culture (Ibid.).[2] Here I make an outsider argument that the racialized field of social interactions in urban America, including individual as well as group expectations involving low-income black males, have contributed to the evolution of a gangster class culture that is comfortable with murder and its effects. Such comfortability exists amongst street gangsters whether they assume the role of killer or accept they may end up in the role of corpse. On the other hand, my insider-inspired contention is that becoming a murderer in the world of black gangsters has attained an elevated purpose: that of serving as a legitimate 'profession'. One endgame for this occupational strategy is ascension to O.G.

[2] In Chapter Two: 'Methods, Positionality, and an Epistemic Struggle with Scholarship' I ask the question: What do I do with me? My effort to answer that question examines some of the nuances associated with the insider concept and interrogates autoethnographic literature to explain how I situated my researcher experience in this work.

(Original Gangster, the C.E.O. or Chief-Executive-Officer equivalent of the streets) status. This status affords the O.G. a claim to neighborhood-wide hegemonic agency and ranking as a myth-inspiring legend deserving of 'props' — urban idiom for accolades — and consent by the community to be ruled.

This culture-of-the-condemned concept is derived from what I discovered during nearly thirty years of urban fieldwork, which includes about nineteen years when I was deeply immersed in the daily life of black street-gang leaders, mostly Crips and Bloods, located primarily in South Central Los Angeles and northern California's North Richmond community. I have also interviewed street gangsters in Chicago, Illinois; Toronto, Canada; South Africa's Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town; Zurich, Switzerland's immigrant youth gang community. My fieldwork has taken me into state and federal correctional facilities throughout California, where I have visited prisoners approximately three thousand times. The roster of prisoners I have repeatedly visited include the co-founder of the Crips, Stanley Tookie Williams (Tookie is his real name, as listed on his birth certificate); Richard 'Peabody' Cooper (Peabody is his gang name), founder of the United Bloods Nation; Mark 'Big Preach' Sutton (Big Preach is a gang moniker), former head of the Pasadena Denver Lane Bloods; the Supreme Commander of the Black Guerrilla Family (BGF) and many others. I do not name that BGF leader because it is a prison gang, which means it started within the California prison system, not on the streets of South Central or elsewhere. Thus, the BGF labors under a special gang classification of punitive rules because of the BGF's prison-based origins.

I have interviewed the girlfriends, mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins and the friends of O.G.s. Additionally, I have spoken to the parents and friends of people murdered by gangsters, as well as prison guards who spend their working lives interacting with the imprisoned gangster class, and police officers who serve as frontline antagonists on the streets where these gangsters roam and rule.

1.2 Thy Cripdom Come

Los Angeles is where the Crips and then the Bloods were founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Williams, S.T. 2007; Davis 1991; Valdez 2001). The Bloods formed to protect themselves from the Crips (Ibid.). While the Crips had black gang contemporaries — the Brims, Denker Boys, the Chain Gang and the Newhouse Boys, who themselves were rumored to know karate — the Crips stood apart from other gangs. By the fall of 1971, Crips had perfected a special style of dress and an intimidation technique that they called 'mobbin.'[3] Wearing black leather coats, starched Levi's, wide-brim or stingy-brim hats and suit vests with back straps loosened to flow in their wake, young black Crips daily mobbed through the streets of Los Angeles, boarding buses, bursting into theatres and stores in packs of fifty or more, knocking people out of the way and taking what they wanted, including the snatching of black leather coats off the backs of victims, coats that they and their families otherwise could not afford. Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams came to understand the significant role that mobbin' would play for his gang well before anyone else.

Fig. 4. Stanley Tookie Williams, about nineteen years old, standing in the middle front, wearing a leather coat and wide-brim hat, surrounded by Crips in South Central, early 1970s

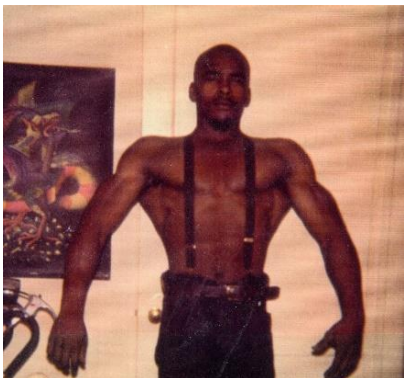

Fig. 5. Stanley Tookie Williams, eighteen years old, posing in his South-Central home, 1971, early days of the Crips

One summer afternoon in 1971, when Tookie was only seventeen years old, he and about seventy Crips were tramping along a sidewalk too

[3] This history of the Crips came from interviews with Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams, Crips member Melvin Hardy, PJ Watts Crip leader Tyrone 'Tony Bogard' Thomas, and at least fifty other Crip gang members who corroborated the stories and events shared here, as well as numerous police officers who were around during the early era of the Crips and Bloods, and photographs of Crips in their apparel circa the early-to-mid 1970s.

narrow to hold them, spilling onto the asphalt of a westside Los Angeles neighborhood in South Central. This was the beginning of mobbin' by black gangsters. Those other Crips, however, did not realize they were forging down Tookie's Street where he and his family lived. Tookie's stepfather, in fact, was standing in the middle of the front lawn, watering the grass. The moment his stepdad looked up and saw the horde of youngsters coming his way, fear froze him in place. As the Crips gained ground and prepared to pass Tookie's home, his stepfather called out, 'Tookie, is that you?' When Tookie, buried in the hub of the pack, smiled in acknowledgment, his stepfather's body suddenly unthawed. 'I'm glad it's you,' he said. 'I was scared there for a minute.' It then occurred to Tookie that the Crips' practice of walking down streets in mob formation could frighten people. Even his stepdad. That simple revelation was to put more steel in the spine of the Crips — and other copycat gangs — in the years that followed.

Tookie himself was quite a legendary character who was a feared and revered role model in the world of street gangsters. His body was that of a muscle-builder. Brawny, hulk-like. Five-feet-ten-inches tall. Three-hundred pounds. Twenty-two-inch biceps. A twenty-inch neck that resembled a small tree trunk. And everybody had a Tookie story to tell, whether or not they had even met the man. Some recounted his habit of stopping his car in the middle of a South-Central Street and then jumping out to turn in slow circles while announcing, 'Big Took is here!' Others said that Tookie would frequently stroll into an urban neighborhood and shout to no one in particular, 'Bring me your biggest baddest muthafucker so I can fuck him up.' Tookie was known as the Knockout Artist. He was proud of his talent to cause a one-punch loss of consciousness to whoever said something that Tookie was not in the mood to hear. Decades later, when Tookie was a prisoner housed on San Quentin's Condemned Row, he chuckled as he told me about an incident

related to his days of being a knockout master. The incident had occurred as he was being escorted in shackles by armed guards across the San Quentin courtyard. Another black prisoner, on the other side of the courtyard, started yelling for Tookie's attention. He was literally jumping up and down with excitement. 'Do you remember me? You knocked me out back in the day,' the other prisoner exclaimed, while proudly poking himself with his thumb in his chest. 'Don't you remember? Don't you remember me?' Tookie said that he and the guard overseeing him thought that this other prisoner was foolish to be proud of Tookie's antics from years ago. But it spoke to Tookie's enduring mythical status among the Crips and Bloods. Even being punched into a state of unconsciousness by Tookie was considered an honor by a former gang member more than twenty years later.

Fig. 6. Stanley Tookie Williams, posing on a West Side South Central street, considered a 'nicer' area than the East Side where Watts and Compton are located, mid-1970s

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On Monday, 20 March 1972, the Crips made national news when a few of them, attending a rock concert in Hollywood, stomped to death a sixteen-year-old civilian — a nongang member, Robert Brooks Ballou. He was killed for refusing to hand over his black leather coat. This was the first recorded Crips-related homicide. Few people in Los Angeles understood the significance of that event. One who did, Mayor Sam Yorty, foresaw a violent future through this crack in the calm of Los Angeles — and he blamed the City Council, as reported by the *Los Angeles Times* (Greenberg 1972). At the time the Ballou boy was murdered, the mayor was angry because his 1971-72 budget request for $284,076 to continue to fund a human relations bureau had been voted down by the Council (Ibid.). In the end, the *Los Angeles Times*' editorial judgment provided one of the least ambiguous indicators of just how far the city's guard had dropped. An *unauthored* Crips-Ballou story — 'Gang of 20 Beats Youth, 16, to Death After

Rock Concert'[4] — was placed on the front page of Part II of the 22 March edition (1972), alongside an article about an elevator falling seventeen floors and a report citing local politicians' complaints about a population explosion. Los Angeles streets, they cried, were littered with entirely too many unlicensed cats and dogs.

The decentralized structure of the Crips and Bloods, where each street gang group is organized around neighborhoods, promotes the creation of many autonomous and violently competitive 'sets,' or factions, ranging in size from twenty-to-thirty gangsters to hundreds of young black men. Control of turf means a great deal in South Central and street-identity politics prevails. Each neighborhood has its own colors and hand signals that designate its location and gang set. For many of these gang members, loyalty to their neighborhoods and sets reflect a type of localized patriotism worth dying for (Williams, S. T. 2007).

There are many Crip and Blood sets, and each set has its own leader. While Crip O.G. Tookie, along with a gangster called Raymond Lee Washington, were the co-founders of the Crips, and Richard 'Peabody' Cooper was the founder of the United Bloods Nation, they were not the only leaders of those gangs. As of 2005, according to Los Angeles Police Department gang statistics, in Los Angeles alone there were one-hundred-thirteen Crip sets and forty-five Blood sets, totaling nearly eleven thousand Crips and just under forty-five hundred Bloods (Los Angeles Almanac n/d). Each one of those sets had its own gang leader. But decentralization had its drawbacks. Fighting each other — Crip or Blood set against Crip or Blood set — was one such drawback. Another was that black youth gangs in Los Angeles had no one to listen to but each other, since there were no edicts from centralized leadership to follow. Such an incestuous exchange within gang sets led these young people down a ruthless path. With time, the Crips subsumed many of their non-Crip competitors, although not the Bloods (Valdez 2001), and Los Angeles became America's street gang epicenter, as

[4] This article is listed under 'Unauthored' in the Reference section of this paper.

reported by the United States Department of Justice on the Los Angeles County Network of Care website. Local police fashioned their own description of how the area's black gangs have transformed both the city and county of Los Angeles. According to a Los Angeles County Sheriff in 2007, 'Los Angeles', he declared, 'is, unfortunately, the gang capital of America', as quoted in a Reuters online news article that went around the world (Serjeant 2007, p. 1).

My PhD project recognizes Los Angeles, California as a significant location for studying and theorizing black street gang culture, its impact on urban communities across the nation, as well as the culture's relationship to America's racialized history. Such a history has left its mark on the lived experiences and struggles of South-Central Los Angeles' black population, some of whom have evolved over many years into a black gangster class. And this gangster class is informed by a culture of the condemned that gang members themselves, via a process of resistance to oppression, have co-created with the ruling class, racialized institutions and American history that have shaped them. This phenomenon will be discussed at length later in this thesis.

1.3 Black Clubs Before Black Crips

Black Los Angeles had seen its sons pitted against each other for many years prior to the emergence of the Crips. Youth groups of the 1950s to mid-1960s — the Farmers, Businessmen, Rebel Rousers, Sir Valiants, Huns, Bartenders, Gladiators and Slausons — often formed alliances to fight their more menacing opponents. Bartenders and Gladiators, living on the west side of Los Angeles, teamed up to battle against the biggest of all the youth organizations of that time: the Slausons, whose members were mostly eastsiders. 'Gladiators could come over to where I lived,' reports Roland Freeman, an alumnus of the Bartenders, 'and we could go over to where they lived. But if any Slauson came into my neighborhood or went where the Gladiators hung out, then there was gonna be some trouble.' Such bravado, however, did not extend to the Renegade Slausons, an especially rough-and-

tumble subset of the Slausons. ‘Didn’t nobody mess with them,’ recalls Freeman. ‘When they [Renegade Slausons] came into your neighborhood there might be thirty carloads of them, and a few might have guns.’

But Gladiators were not to be undervalued. What they lacked in numbers and munitions, they made up for in might and a crazy willingness to do almost anything to get back at those who hurt them. Once they even threw a young Slauson named ‘Onion-head’ through a plate-glass storefront. From the black community’s viewpoint, the saving grace for youngsters of that era was that most of them — not counting Renegade Slausons — did not rely on firearms to settle their scores. Instead, as reported by Freeman and others from that era with whom I spoke, these young people used bumper jacks, sticks ripped from wooden fences, an occasional knife when fists where not sufficient weapons and, of course, a window through which a body could be thrown if it was the most convenient way of inflicting harm.

The style, manner and experiences of these earlier groups significantly influenced the street culture of black Los Angeles, thus providing a legacy on which the Crips built its organization. The Crips’ methods for displaying power and the gang’s use of fashion-as-uniform reflected some of the habits of past youth groups. Still, as black gangsters would on more than one occasion say to me three decades later, the Crips ‘put a twist on things’ by becoming something these predecessors never classified themselves as being: a street gang.

‘To us, that term [gang] just didn’t fit,’ explained a former Slauson who now goes by the name Kumasi. ‘We saw ourselves as clubs, exceptional clubs.’ ‘Bird,’ short for Thunderbird, one of the first leaders of the Slausons, demonstrated the grandeur associated with his Slauson status by dubbing himself Lord High Constable of the Eastside and War Counselor of the Gods during his reign. He even went so far as to give Los Angeles a new name, ‘Slaus Angeles Villa,’ to signify how influential and unique he believed Slausons were. Another Slauson member named Roach conceived the Slauson Village concept — that the community of Slausons encompassed

everything a club member could ever want or need, ergo the club served as a village. Kumasi adds:

> You couldn't just call yourself a Slauson. We had a dress code, we had character, and there was a certain kind of conformity that made you a Slauson. You had to be regimented as a Slauson, just like in the Navy, the Army, the Marines. All that's military service, but there's something peculiar or special about each branch of the service that others can tell, even in street clothes, that that guy's Navy, or this one's Marines. That's because of the soldier's indoctrination, the style that he's learned. Well, that's how we were. To join us, you had to be Slausonized.

Being 'Slausonized' required that an aspiring member demonstrate the discipline to excel at the talents he already had and also involved a willingness to adopt the club's stylish image. 'There were all kinds of ways of developing a rep' [reputation],' explains Kumasi. And developing a rep' — 'being known in the world'[5] for having the ability, skill, or guts to do something exceptionally well — was the goal of nearly all of the area's black youth. Many Slausons were star high school athletes, competing statewide in sports, such as track and field, gymnastics, baseball. Some club members were also excellent students. And other youngsters were in-your-face kind of guys, not afraid of a good fight—which was important—though new recruits who relied solely on boldness and brawn for acceptance into the Slauson Village would be asked, according to Kumasi, 'What *else* can you do?'

In terms of style, the Slausons, Kumasi proudly shares, was one of the few gangs or clubs that did not wear coats with emblems on the back to advertise itself. He reports that the Orientals from Watts — one of the first black clubs representing the Imperial Courts Housing Projects, which eventually became the home of the PJ Watts Crips — wore reversible satin jackets, one side mustard yellow, the reverse bright green. On the back of the yellow-sided jacket was a large, embroidered graphic of a muscular man holding a bloody knife and another man's head by the hair, the head having been chopped off at the neck. Above this image the word 'Orientals' was

[5] This is a common phrase I heard that was used by black gangsters throughout the nation.

arranged from shoulder to shoulder in an arc. Lettering at the bottom of the jacket declared ‘South L.A.’ Whenever there was a need to hide from the police, school authorities, or vengeful rivals, club members would flip the jacket to the bright green side, which had no identifying emblem.

Another black club from Watts — the Huns — wore mint green jackets with logos featuring a medieval soldier holding a shield in one hand while thrusting a sword toward a man pinned to the ground, the soldier’s foot on the man’s chest. Slauson members, by contrast, believed that their style-conscious dressing would make it clear who they were. The Slausons wore pants with wide belt loops, black high-topped ‘old-man comforts’ (a round-toed lace-up shoe), and gray or black Homburg hats. Legend has it, according to Kumasi, that a principal of South Central’s Fremont High School once asked the Slausons to stop ‘out-dressing’ the teachers. There is no evidence the Slausons ever complied.

This black club, the Slausons, was named after a white gang which took the title of a local park, as reported by Kumasi. Before blacks moved into the neighborhood, he explains, the young white males of the area hung out at what was then called Slauson Park, located at 62nd Street and Hooper Streets, which became prime South Central and Crips territory a few decades later. Indeed, as the color of the community changed from white to black, the park was renamed Mary McLeod Bethune Park. Bethune, an African America educator and civil rights activist who opened one of the first schools for black girls in the United States in 1905, as reported by the National Women’s History Museum (2013). But the young black male residents of that part of South-Central Los Angeles decided to adopt the Slauson title for their group. Many other black male clubs of the 1950s and 1960s — the Rebel Rousers, Sir Valiants, Huns and Gladiators — had names that by design symbolized dignity, pride and sometimes historical importance. The Gladiators, for example, was chosen as a club name because the original members lived near the Los Angeles Coliseum, a sports facility whose architecture resembles ancient Roman amphitheaters where enslaved or captive men

fought people and animals to the death to entertain the public. The black Gladiators of Los Angeles even appropriated the Roman Emperor's thumbs-down signal, indicating a fighter's life should not be spared, as the hand sign for club members as they greeted each other.

Slausons had numerous subdivisions or cliques which proved to be one of the first demonstrations of what would later be called gang sets. There were the Big Slausons, Baby Slausons, Little Slausons and Midget Slausons. At one point, some members of the Baby Slausons were sitting in a movie theatre watching a film where the heroes announced, 'We are the Warlords.' The leader of the Baby Slausons was so taken by the fierce imagery of these warrior protagonists that he decided on the spot to change the club's name. Thus, the Warlords, Little Warlords and Midget Warlords became Slauson cliques. Instead of being renamed, the Renegade Slausons was reconfigured by Alprentice 'Bunchy' Carter when he knocked out Paul 'Bo-Cloud' Robertson, leader of the Renegades, during a fight at Franklin Delano Roosevelt Park on Nadeau Street and Holmes Avenue. With one spectacular punch, Bunchy, at the time a Little Slauson, seized the presidency of the Renegades and broke off a specific geographic following for himself. Today that incident takes on historical significance because it was one of the early acts of territoriality, which reinforced an ongoing rivalry between two sections of South Central — the north and south sides of Nadeau Street. Years later, Bunchy also made street history when he became one of the founders of the southern California branch of the Black Panther Party.

Nadeau is a short street that runs east and west for about a mile and one-half from Central Avenue to Santa Fe Avenue, cutting through a twenty-one-block territory considered to be the east side of South Central. West of Central Avenue, Nadeau Avenue becomes 79th Street; east of Santa Fe, Nadeau turns into Broadway Avenue. But black club disputes in this part of South Central were not measured in terms of east and west. During the 1960s, Nadeau became the north-south divide. Slausons residing on one side of Nadeau often questioned the loyalty of those who lived only a few

blocks away, but on the opposite side of a Nadeau. Ironically, this rip in the unity once epitomized by the Slauson Village concept was exacerbated by something as pedestrian as the local public school's districting rules.

Ignorant of black club rivalries, the Los Angeles Unified School District required those kindergarten-to-sixth-grade kids who lived south of Nadeau on an eleven-block stretch, from 82nd Place to 92nd Street, to enroll in Russell Elementary School on Firestone Boulevard between Compton and Hooper Avenues. This placed the Russell School on the borderline of Watts. Consequently, there were children from Watts who attended this grade school alongside youngsters who would one day become Slausons. But black boys from Watts were thought to be the 'natural enemies,' as described by Kumasi, of kids claiming the Slausons as their family. So, the mixing of young would-be Slausons — who lived within a few blocks of Nadeau — with children from Watts, generated a rift within the Slauson Village once youngsters from the south side of Nadeau left the Russell Elementary School to become students at Thomas Edison Junior High at 65th and Hooper, the north side of Nadeau.

The Nadeau factor resurfaced years later when, in 1969, Raymond Lee Washington, who lived north of Nadeau near 76th Street and Central Avenue, would break his association with Craig Munson, the leader of a black gang called the Avenues, to form the Cri*bs*. Upon Stanley Tookie Williams and Raymond Lee Washington meeting in 1971, the Cri*bs* became the Cri*ps*, eventual enemies of the Avenues since Munson lived on the south side of Nadeau — the wrong side — off 83rd Street and Hooper Avenue. A generation later, the Crips and Bloods, as well as Crips and opposing Crips sets from throughout southern California, would see themselves as each other's traditional foes or natural enemies.

1.4. Exploring Historical Context

Despite starting my examination of the Crips and Bloods with a review of the 1950s-1960s history of South Central's precursor clubs and organizations,

this study does not provide a chronological critique of the gangster class. It offers an analysis of America's racialized history that involves varying time frames and different focuses in terms of topics.

In Chapter Two I critique the methods and methodology that I employed to write this thesis. But in the remaining chapters, I shift back and forth in Foucault's three levels of history to identify strands of the main themes of this work, exploring relationships *between* historical contexts that can be evidenced across centuries. These are the conceptual strands that I argue have contributed to the evolution of a culture of the condemned. Again, this PhD study is not presented in strict chronological order.

1.5. Why Decentralize the Literature Review?

This PhD research project covers a wide range of diverse literature involving several disciplines and numerous subdisciplines. Topics, including new concepts, are supported by the accompanying literature introduced in each chapter — and the corresponding literature is reviewed at that time when the subject matter itself is introduced. The literature review is decentralized, chapter by chapter, in favor of topic coherency and lucidness, The one-chapter approach distances the literature review from the new concepts found in this work, instead of bolstering these constructs. There is support in the academy for decentralizing a literature review when dealing with qualitative research projects, such as this study (McMillan 2004).

1.6. Summary of Chapters

This study comprises six chapters, excluding the Prologue, which provides a real-life anecdotal experience involving street-gang culture in South-Central Los Angeles. Chapter One serves as an introduction to this doctoral project, offering a contemporary history of the key entities that drive this analysis: the origins of the Crips and Bloods youth gangs, the potent influence of contemporary South-Central Los Angeles, and the significance of historical analysis for this work. Chapter Two outlines the study's methods and

methodology, including how the novel use of three incarcerated gang leaders from the Crips and Bloods that served as co-researchers for this PhD project provided me with reflexivity and validation support. Chapters Three, Four and Five are core chapters that include analyses of this doctoral project's findings. Also, at the end of two of those core chapters — Chapters Three and Four — a discussion section provides a critical examination of the study's findings via the application to this work of the key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Six, the conclusion, provides suggestions for future research, new public policy, and an idea for what could lead to a new history-in-the-making for the black gangster class.

1.7. This Study's Delimitations

This research project does not cover all the topics that it might be expected to include.

To illustrate, though this study focuses on black street gangsters who live in low-income communities, it does not provide an in-depth economic analysis of such neighborhoods because this work is culture-centric with economics playing a role, but not the definitive role in this research project. Here I argue a culture of the scarcity of many things, including but not limited to economic opportunities, contributes to the formation of the culture of the condemned.

The work also does not provide a gender analysis of black urban gangs since the focus is on black males who aspire to become O.G.s., which is not a viable career path for black females. They are not permitted to become 'shot callers' — urban idiom — over black men. There are females who claim such status over female gangs. But they are not included in this work because they have not reached a tipping point in terms of their confinements on death row. However, the female prison population overall has grown by more than seven hundred percent from 1980 to 2017 (Monazzam and Budd 2023). Yet, the number of imprisoned black females

has decreased by fifty-five percent in recent years, 2000 to 2017, while the number of white women sent to prison during that same period has increased by forty-four percent (Ibid.). This is an interesting topic deserving of future research.

My study does not include a morality critique concerning the murders that gangsters readily commit, because here I accept the culture of the condemned as I have found it to be. This is the concrete circumstance upon which my theorizing rests. However, this work does offer the start of an analysis of the morality of agency for both gangsters and the institutions that seek to define and control them. I say it is just a start because I believe a morality critique of agency demands a focus of its own, which I intend to explore as future research.

Finally, I am not a historian. What I do here is to treat the racialized history of America as a strategic culture-changing and policymaking tool. With this study, I conceptualize a new, more relational meaning of that history by recognizing the dynamics between the epistemes of those who have dominated America's culture and country, and those who have fought that domination in many ways over many centuries. My hope is that such a reconceptualization of history provides an opportunity for the ruling class and gangster class to shift epistemologies in newly created spaces available for understanding their respective pasts.

At its core, this work is an analysis of culture — the culture of a racialized social structure and an urban male-dominated culture created in response to generations of race-based limitations, living under the weight of stereotypical tropes, and the persistence of life-threatening danger. This is my focus — to assess street-gang culture and how it has been constructed as well as caught in the crosshairs of American history.

Chapter 2: Methods, Positionality, and an Epistemic Struggle with Scholarship

2.1. Overview: Tales and Travails of a Doctoral Journey

My extraordinary doctoral journey was fostered by two special circumstances that influenced my methodological choices, positionality, and a shift in my epistemic lens, which could have threatened my scholarship.

One special circumstance involved the highly immersive ethnographic long-term practice I engaged in to study black gang leaders and their street-gang culture. Here I consider 'immersive' and 'long-term practice' as my spending an average of twelve hours per day with gangsters in urban enclaves and prisoner-visiting rooms over a period of nearly twenty years. In Appendix A at the end of this thesis there is a detailed list of research activities compiled from these decades of fieldwork and prison visitation practice involving the Crips, Bloods, and other parties. The list includes an approximate number of interviews I conducted during that period with various categories of people — black gangsters, family members, police officers, and prison officials, for example. I also provide a description of the range of resources I collected: audio tapes of interviews; an extensive collection of handwritten and typed notes; hundreds of boxes of documents confiscated by prison officials from the cells of prisoners, as well as directly from prisoners and shared with me; unpublished books written by several gangsters and shared with me, plus more. I have since learned that intense cultural immersion for so many years offers significant perquisites for a scholar, witness the large cache of research I have accumulated. But it also offers the possibility of significant peril. Such outcomes will be considered later in the chapter.

The second special circumstance that deeply influenced me during this doctoral work involved a complex conceptualization that evolved within me, which I have dubbed a 'shadow autoethnographic experience'. I define this new concept as a powerful personal experience that functions as a parallel *and* interactive force engaging with the PhD project itself. Positioning

oneself as an autoethnographer is generally understood to mean that the researcher's story and lived experience are central to what is being studied (Williams 2021; Qutoshi 2015; Anderson 2006). But this was not my positioning as I began my research. And the question of ethnographic positionality became an issue with my PhD supervisors in the early days of my enrollment as a doctoral student. Indeed, a debate erupted over whether I was in fact an autoethnographer studying my own experience and culture, or a traditional ethnographer studying someone else's experience and culture, in this instance, California's black gangster class. Given that as a middle-class college-educated African American who had never visited, until I launched my ethnographic research, the communities of Watts and Compton in southern California where the Crips and Bloods originated, I could not legitimately claim in the world of scholars an authentic autoethnographic status. Yet, as will be explained below, I did develop an insider's role with the street gangsters, in part prompting a shadow autoethnographic experience with this research project that profoundly impacted my life and this work.

Consequently, my doctoral-student pre-story, the phenomena that brought me to my PhD work, became entangled in my PhD research process. My argument here is that I did indeed at times adopt the persona of an autoethnographer, though in the shadow of, as well as parallel to, my doctoral research experience.

This chapter explores how those two special circumstances were foundational to the novel methodological choices that comprised the research design for this PhD project. The design includes, among other components, an adaptation of the Participatory Action Research model allowing incarcerated gang leaders to serve as co-researchers for this work. The design also embraces a reimagined Critical Race Theory (CRT), the theoretical framework for this thesis, as well as a racialized caste-critique claim for the United States. That caste-critique claim supports a generalized or symbolic representation of black street gangsters utilized throughout this

work, along with a generalized or symbolic representation of the nation's white mainstream and ruling-class societies.

Knowledge derived from my intense ethnographic research practice largely serves as the theory-building basis for my thesis, *Culture of the Condemned: A Critique of How Death Row Became a Symbol of Heroism for America's Street-Gang Generation*. I have also engaged in desk-top theory-building to buttress my immersive street-research experience. But my time spent engaged in real-world first-hand research, as well as deconstructing racialized American history to help interpret that real-world knowledge production, changed my perceptions of my social environment, and of myself. There were times, for instance, when despite my black middle-class background, I matched the rage levels against the criminal justice system in California that the black gangsters with whom I was spending so many hours a day routinely felt. The level of trust I developed with the black gangster class allowed me to see and hear things that outsiders would never be allowed to access. Quickly I realized that this was an immense privilege and aid in understanding and theorizing what I had witnessed. On the other hand, my shadow autoethnographic experience provoked an epistemic challenge for me: How should I position myself in this thesis work? In addition, after researching for many years the extent of brutality exercised against black people during America's centuries-long reign of racism, starting with slavery, my PhD work became a troubling factor in the very construction of my shadow autoethnographically influenced self. As an African American with ancestral lineage connected to the racialized national history of the United States, it was quite difficult for me to absorb such concentrated exposure to the dehumanizing research involving black America that unfolded in front of me . . . page by page. I had to problematize my role as scholar to protect my scholarship from becoming impacted by my own personal sentiments. These are the experiences — and more — that shifted my epistemic lens during my doctoral project and created a dilemma for me as a scholar and as a person. I had to figure out: What do I do with me?

2.1.1. Questions About Self and Scholarship

My immersive ethnographic practice with California's black gangster class — accentuated by its lengthy term — was an instigator of my complex relationship with positionality in service to this PhD project. That complex relationship with positionality caused me to repeatedly question myself: Where do I fit in a space requiring decisions about positionality that account for my identification as a middle-class college-educated African American ensconced in the social structure of the black gangster class and, at the same time, my adherence to the standards of Eurocentric-based scholarship?

What Reeves (2021) would call my 'embodied experience' of the place where gangsters reside — given my immersive involvement with black street gangsters — ultimately prompted my thesis positioning as a navigator of three personas: scholar, activist, and occasionally serving as an epistemic surrogate for the black gangster class itself (p. 108). Here I explore how this challenging navigation of personas became a 'positionality phenomenon' that had to be problematized because such multiple representations influenced, in ways both highly beneficial and highly problematic, my efforts to produce new knowledge.

Further, this chapter examines some of the epistemic consequences provoked by the positionality phenomenon intertwined in the concept introduced here, that is, the shadow autoethnographic experience. My doctoral student pre-story, while paralleling my thesis process, became transformative. It became an interactive force energized by the ongoing story of how the PhD work itself impacted me throughout the doctoral project. In essence, the shadow autoethnographic experience existed alongside the PhD work where the student both shapes and records the knowledge derived from the ethnographic experience, while being epistemically impacted by that same ethnographic experience and possibly the concomitant research effort undertaken in support of the PhD project.

My contention is that the shadow autoethnographic experience is ongoing — though typically not foregrounded, if noticed at all — and thus contributes to the co-creation of knowledge production but in a unique way. Both co-creators of knowledge are the same student: the traditional student ethnographer and researcher, and the shadow student autoethnographer impacted by the work of the traditional student, as well as impacting the traditional student ethnographer's work. Such a complex dynamic demanded both the problematizing of my positionality and a reflexivity plan to protect the scholarship.

Beyond the 'Overview', this chapter has five parts. In 'Part One: Everything Starts with a Streetwise Education', I share my PhD pre-story, that is, how I came to conduct this research about the black gangster class, and why I decided to place myself in the street-killing culture and community of black gangsters for so many years. 'Part Two: Problematizing Positionality' analyzes some of the difficulties as well as benefits of my long-term immersive ethnographic experience and how those experiences were responsible for me having to problematize my thesis positionality. With 'Part Three: More on the Shadow Autoethnographic Experience', I offer more discussion regarding my shadow-autoethnographic concept and how epistemic boundaries can be crossed — sometimes dangerously — and sometimes by the researcher herself. Here I also contest ethnographic literature's preoccupation with the potential of the *researcher's* bias in the interpretation of the participants' experiences, where the power is presumed to be primarily in the hands of the researcher (Pachirat 2017). My contention is that the weight on the researcher of the cultural impact of a long-term immersive research experience shifts the power dynamic towards the dominance of the culture itself, which is explored in this section. The fourth section of this chapter, 'Reflexivity and Gangsters as Co-Researchers', examines the co-researcher participatory model that I constructed for my PhD research that includes three imprisoned street-gang leaders providing reflexive and validation support for me and for my scholarship. Section Four also includes an explanation of how research ethics regarding privacy for the

co-researchers and project participants have been handled in this doctoral project. The final chapter section, Part Five; 'Adopted/Adapted Theoretical Frameworks', I make the case for why I adapted Critical Race Theory or CRT for this doctoral work, as well as explain my need to utilize a caste-based critique to characterize the black gangster class and white America throughout this thesis.

2.2. Part One: Everything Starts with a Streetwise Education

If you head east on Century Boulevard after exiting the Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles, eventually you will come to a dead-end at Grape Street in Watts, California. There you will have no choice but to turn right or left. Whichever direction you take will put you in an urban American enclave that functions as the very heart of South-Central Los Angeles — in this instance in territory controlled by the Grape Street Crips gang. Before the 1992 Black youth gang truce, if you were not a known supporter of the Grape Street Crips, making that right or left turn could cost you your life.

I was both aware and wary of that knowledge when my quest to understand the gangster class began by my driving in May of 1992 into the Watts Jordan Downs Public Housing Project — a breeding ground of Grape Street gangsters — to meet the architects of the Crips-Bloods gang truce. The truce leaders, Tyrone 'Tony Bogard' Thomas, a former general or leader of the PJ Watts Crips, and Tyrone 'Ty-Stick' Baker, an inactive member of the Bounty Hunter Bloods, had agreed to be interviewed for an article I was commissioned to write for a national women's magazine about urban gangbanging, defined by gangsters themselves as the battles that rage between rival street gangs. What I learned from those truce leaders was disturbing. For more than twenty years, they explained, there had been a civil war in Los Angeles' low-income urban communities, a war as devasting to its residents as the fabled North-South conflict in America that had led Congress to pass the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. That

amendment largely ended slavery, with one exception: persons convicted of a crime could be treated as slaves and subject to involuntary servitude.

> Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction (U.S. Const., amend. XIII, § 1).

This contemporary urban warfare saw Crips battle Bloods, Crips kill Crips, Bloods gun down other Bloods, and both gangs become fearless enemies of the police. But the violent exploits typifying this civil war of the gangster class often led to their imprisonment, which ironically and officially returned them to the status of slaves.

This was not their concern, though, when I first began to interview South-Central gang members. These Watts residents were in a partying mode. Just as victory in World War II generated parades and celebrations across the nation, this community was proud, too. For some, the gang truce allowed them to visit friends and relatives who lived only a few blocks away but whom they had not seen in more than a decade because of territorial divisions established during the civil war of the black gangster class. When the message that peace was at hand rolled across South Central, people dared to believe that for the first time in twenty years they could visit family members who may have lived only a few blocks away, but were in the wrong gang territory, so they had not been seen in many years. And with the gang truce came the parties, better known by the gangsters as peace celebrations. Two public housing projects in Watts — Imperial Courts, where the PJ Watts Crips resided, and Nickerson Gardens, which was Bounty Hunter Bloods' home territory — hosted five or six weekend gatherings on their respective basketball courts where hundreds of gangsters from opposing Crips and Bloods sets throughout South Central came to dance, drink, smoke 'bud' (marijuana) and fraternize. 'This is history, this is history,' they repeated to each other as their eyes scanned the peace celebrations, not quite believing what they saw: rival gangsters enjoying themselves. This is what I, too, witnessed, having been allowed to accompany the gang truce leaders as part

of my ethnographic arrangement to record their history, to understand their culture, to learn what it means to be a black street gangster in South-Central Los Angeles.

But the peace did not last. Within two years, one truce leader, Crip Tony Bogard, was murdered by another Crip. He was shot numerous times directly in the chest on the rare day Tony had loaned his bullet-proof vest to another gangster. That request for Tony's vest was later determined to be part of the set-up to ensure his death later in the evening. Hundreds of Crips mobbed Watts's Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital that night to confirm his murder. I also made my way there, just in time for Tony's girlfriend to collapse in my arms and then slide onto the floor of the hospital waiting room when she was told the truth: Tony was dead. Ty-Stick, the other truce leader who represented the Bounty Hunter Bloods, died a couple of years later with no fanfare. He was in a jail cell facing a death-penalty sentence when he was given an improper dosage of medication.

Thus, the gangsters' temporal formation of freedom — characterized by them as the cessation of street warfare — also came to an end. In its wake, another expression of gangster freedom returned. That freedom, as this PhD project's co-researcher Steve 'Treach' Champion explains, reflected the experience of O.G.s violently exercising their authority over the streets, constructing the rules, the codes, the 'laws' that gang members and their families lived by in urban enclaves. These black gangsters were not being constrained — at least in the short-term — by the judgment or control of mainstream or grassroots society. 'My gangster life gave me the freedom to be who I wanted to be,' reports former O.G. Champion from his current home on San Quentin's Condemned Row. 'And I wasn't being judged. So, I felt free, even if only for a few minutes, a few hours.'

As murders ramped up after the gang truce failed, the next phase of my street education and that of my PhD pre-story began in earnest. Why, I wondered, did these gangsters not judge themselves for the killing of each other? And was it true that they were also not judged for such crimes by the

people in their community who were not gang members? Much to my chagrin, the biggest impediment to my understanding street-gang culture had to do with *my* epistemic lens, which rigidly adhered to the values and biases of my middle-class upbringing. Though when I began this journey, I believed my status as an African American and the gangsters' African American status meant that we would culturally have much in common. Soon I realized that I needed to problematize my own researcher identity, I had to problematize my own self. I had assumed myself to be an autoethnographic researcher because of our mutual ethnicity. I learned, however, that I had very little in common with the black gangster class.

In the early days of trying to establish a relationship with the truce gang leaders, I could not claim that first level of necessary success in the life of an ethnographer, which is to achieve 'a palpable sense of rapport [with the research participant], the Holy Grail of the ethnographer', as professed by ethnographers Collins and Gallinat (2010, p. 12). As a black woman, who had already earned a university degree and had been raised by a college-educated mother and truck-driver father in a house the family owned, my lived cultural experience collided with the cultural practices of the street gangsters of the urban enclaves in the United States.

That culture gap precipitated my own identity crisis. It was very hard to accept that my definition of blackness was not universal. And it was just as hard to accept that the gangsters saw me as representing white mainstream culture, rather than a personification of black culture as *they* understood it to be. My task, then, was to figure out how to process 'self-other dynamics', which is when the researcher's cultural lens through which ethnographic observations are filtered distorts the critique of the group being observed (Kenny as cited in Twine and Warren 2000, p. 113; Fabian 1983). My chief self-other dynamic involved a middle-class bias against the culture of the gangster class, a culture that was quite foreign to me. I had to deconstruct my own nonobjectivity to ready myself to learn.

As I observed and attempted to characterize street gangster culture, seeking awareness of my every assumption was one of my reflexive activities. I undertook a meta-analysis of myself during my fieldwork and this technique has remained a mainstay of my self-evaluative researcher habits during the entirety of my doctoral project (Tetnowski and Damico 2014). I also developed a camaraderie with several older O.G.s, who allowed me to share my thoughts and insights about the black gangster class and my own middle-classness — and receive feedback. This communication protocol also provided reflexivity assistance and some measure of validation of my notes on theorizing and conceptualizing about the black gangster class. That model was replicated for the writing phase of my PhD work by my securing the participation of three currently incarcerated black street gangsters as co-researchers for this study who offer me reflexivity support and provide my scholarship with validation feedback. Two of them are Crip leaders convicted of murder and assigned to California's Condemned Row at San Quentin Prison. One is an O.G. Blood, founder of the United Bloods Nation, who is almost forty years into a life sentence because of a murder conviction. He is housed at Central California state prison.

Another important factor that I faced throughout my decades of grassroots and in-prison fieldwork has been the challenge to remain authentic — admittedly a complex concept — while absorbing new knowledge about what for me was an unknown culture. Initially, I was personally challenged by the knowledge of this gangster culture in that I considered it intolerable across the board with no understanding of the nuances involved in its construction. But with time, I was changed by even a nascent and growing understanding of the gangster culture, of what was emerging as new and significant knowledge about this aspect of urban America. I became less culturally judgmental. I became a more intense listener. But I realized that my reflexivity effort was burdened by multiple — and possibly conflicting — tasks. It needed to protect me by attempting to ameliorate my epistemic struggles. It needed to help me transform my originally biased relationship with the gangster class, though changes in my

perceptions could distort my critical analyses of what I had witnessed of the black gangster culture. Further, I did not want my reflexive work to cause me to lose my own authentic self, whatever that turned out to be, because of my immersion in the day-to-day life of the black gangster class.

For me, achieving authenticity across diverse social arenas was important and a motivator for my long ethnographic stint in California's urban enclaves. I wanted to navigate retaining those establishment values that were of significance to me, while permitting myself to acquire new activist-related values given what I had learned about the injustices routinely meted out to black street gangsters by the nation's criminal justice system. The successful navigation of these personas also meant maintaining consistency in how I represented myself in the world. These days, I use the same language and manner of behaving around gangsters that I display when interacting in an academic, corporate or any other environment. There is no misrepresentation or hiding of myself in any social setting.

My choice to engage in a long-term ethnographic practice has been transformative and, in some ways, beneficial for me. Qutoshi in *Auto/ethnography: A Transformative Research Paradigm* (2015) suggests one of the benefits of transformation is that it can enable a researcher's capacity to unearth 'data layers' (p. 184) from the phenomena under scrutiny because of that researcher's newly expanded view of the world (Ibid.). I agree. But there have been times when my transformation has been unnerving. It has been unnerving for me to observe the change in my perceptions of certain social environments and, for that matter, the epistemic change in myself, such as my rage at the inherent racism in the treatment of black versus white encounters with the criminal justice system.

In the last paragraph of ethnographer-scholar Alice Goffman's provocative work, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014), Goffman tells the reader about a particular event that occurred during the six years she spent as an ethnographer in a low-income Philadelphia neighborhood where she was getting to know and study young black men,

many of whom were being sought by the police with arrest warrants. Goffman, a white woman who was raised by a very wealthy Philadelphia family from a distinctly different part of town, started this project for a course she was taking at the University of Pennsylvania. The anecdote shared in the final sentences of Goffman's book was about how she was so enraged by the murder of one of the young men she had spent time with over the six years of her ethnographic project that she jumped in a car with other black men toting guns in search of the person who had murdered their friend. Her intent was aligned with the armed black men in the car: to find and kill the person responsible for murdering someone they cared about. Goffman acknowledges how in retrospect she is still frightened by her actions and mindset in that moment. But Goffman concedes that her epistemic lens had been changed by those six years of ethnographic practice. The line had become blurred for her as to what she had in the past considered right and wrong, and on what side of such a line she might now stand. I understand her fear of epistemic change.

Yet, there were perquisites to be gained from a long-term immersive ethnographic experience studying black street gangsters. The level of trust I developed with them from that physical and cultural immersion permitted me to see and hear things that outsiders would never be allowed to access. Soon I realized my insider access to the black gangster class was an immense privilege and aided in the understanding and then theorizing of my observations. This potent streetwise education that for nearly two decades I absorbed has contributed to my evolution as a researcher at the ground level in urban America. It has also been foundational in my ability to observe, learn, and conceptualize about street-gang culture in the United States. However, it has also led to my needing to construct positionality and reflexivity strategies to protect my scholarship and my authentic self.

2.3. Part Two: Problematizing Positionality

I was not an activist when I began this study. I became an activist because of

my ethnographic exposure to violations of the basic human rights of the black gangster class by members of California law enforcement. Some of those behaviors I personally witnessed. Some of those behaviors I learned about through my interviews with black police officers who secretly shared with me the racism they themselves faced in the law enforcement profession, as well as the racialized practices they saw imposed upon black street gangsters by white police officers. Those officers would often throw black gang members in the back seat of their patrol car, drive the gangster into the dangerous territory of a rival gang, push the gangster out of the police car onto the street, and speed away.

Becoming a social justice activist became another transformational example of how my long-term immersive ethnographic practice with the black gangster class provoked epistemic changes in me. That transformation became another persona, that of an activist, regarding my positionality critique. However, the first issue involving positionality that I had to confront upon entering a PhD program involved determining what type of ethnographer I could legitimately claim to be. I believed myself to be an autoethnographer. I argued that given my insider status for nearly twenty years with the black gangster class, I deserved such a designation. But one of my PhD supervisors told me, firmly, that I was not an autoethnographer because I was not a member of the Crips or Bloods youth gangs, and I did not live and had never lived in the urban enclaves of Los Angeles or elsewhere. Still, I argued that autoethnographic literature made it a close call as to whether I should or should not claim the title of autoethnographer.

Autoethnography, as a term, was first used by Karl Heider in 1975 when he asked sixty-three school-aged children in Dani Valley, Indonesia, ‘What do people do?’ (p. 3). That ethnographic research encounter between Heider and the youth was labeled by Heider as an example of autoethnography. Autoethnography, in this instance, was distinguished from ethnography by Heider’s intent for his study to represent the Dani Valley youth’s *own* representation of their world (Ibid.). More traditional ethnographic standards would dictate that the children’s narrative in Heider’s

study would stand on its own, exclusive of researcher explanation (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Anderson 2006). A few years later, in 1979, David Hayano used the autoethnography term. But with Hayano, the definition changed. This time the emphasis was on the researcher who seeks to study his or her own community or culture (Patton 2017; Tetnowski and Damico 2014). Hayano's definition has become the most common understanding of autoethnography. My work, however, does not perfectly fit into either of these autoethnographic categories.

In the case of the Heider definition of autoethnography, my work did not simply recount a narrative of what I learned from the gangster class, though their voices are certainly represented throughout the study. But the narrative also includes my observations as a researcher in the field, my conceptual insights about the black gangster class and street culture, as well as my own personal in-field experiences. Regarding the Hayano view of autoethnography, I cannot claim to be a bona fide member of the gangster class or to have ever resided in an urban enclave. Thus, I was not a researcher studying in my own community. In the end, I lost the PhD battle to claim an autoethnographic designation regarding my investigation of the black gangster class. But with the introduction of the concept of shadow autoethnography, which seeks to make visible various impacts on me, the doctoral student, of the research I have undertaken, I am an autoethnographer of sorts. I am the narrator of the tale of influence my doctoral research has had on *my* lived experience, scholarship, and aspects of my positionality involving this PhD project.

My epistemic understanding of the black gangster class was a highly beneficial consequence of my long-term immersive ethnographic practice, given what I was permitted to see and learn from the gangsters. It also allowed me to believe that I could presume to be an epistemic surrogate for the black gangster class, yet another persona in my plotting of positionality for this PhD project. There were downsides, however, to my belief in this

newly developed capacity of mine to understand street-gangster epistemology. That new understanding, it turns out, also influenced my epistemic understanding of myself. Scholars Gillian and Pickerill (2012) discuss the complex and ethical issues that arise when just two identities, that of activist and researcher, for instance, are a factor in research involving social-movement scholarship. As discussed earlier, I have three identities or personas to account for with this research project, which I hope will change attitudes about black gangsters and the efficacy of the death penalty.

Sometimes those identities were at odds with each other. When that happened, my strategy was to be transparent first with myself and then with the three incarcerated black gangsters who served as my co-researchers. My ethics plan to navigate the three identities included reflexive self-monitoring, and street-gangster-aided monitoring by my three co-researchers. The terms of that arrangement are discussed below.

2.4. Part Three: More on the Shadow Autoethnographic Experience

As an African American with ancestral lineage connected to a racist national heritage, it was quite difficult for me to absorb such concentrated exposure to project research depicting the dehumanization of black America that unfolded in front of me, page by page. Once again, I had to problematize my role as scholar to protect my scholarship from becoming impacted by my own personal sentiments and trauma.

One of my tactics was to look for ways to ensure fair representation of the perspective in history of the perpetrators of the country's racism. Where I was truly confounded by a racist practice, I would search the literature for political or philosophical or phenomenological explanations for what would otherwise be indefensible behavior or patterns of socialization. Admittedly, rarely could my research make what was indefensible defensible. But it could provide an explanation of sorts for what happened. One of my most significant tactics was to push aside my instinct to let what was horrible, from my perspective, remain uncontextualized. I also relied on my co-researchers

for reflexive assistance. I also sought an audience with a therapist to talk through my vacillations from anger to overwhelming sadness about the history of racism in the United States. Additionally, I found literature that explored the concept of 'self' and the 'ethnographic self' in the world of scholarship (Collins and Gallinat 2010, p. 12). That literature helped me to better understand the malleability of an ethnographic self and thus the dangers with shadow autoethnography, as well as long-term immersive ethnography, of not protecting my ethnographic self. Collins and Gallinat provide an excellent depiction of the concept of self and, I would argue, reveal its vulnerability in the immersive ethnographic as well as shadow autoethnographic realms in which I situated my ethnographic self: 'The self is multiple, socially embedded and emergent, and thoroughly implicated in processes of learning, becoming, experiencing and remembering' (Ibid., p. 14). The ethnographic self, in essence, is a socially constructed concept, albeit a highly complex as well as powerful social construction.

With this work, another insight was to discover that the gangsters themselves have benefited from *my* insights by being provoked to plumb even deeper into the layers of observations presented to them. This has led to a mutual deep dive into the meaning of ethnographic study for both me and the street gangsters. That mutuality has led to a reimagining by both parties of the research findings and of their individual selves (Beach 2002). Such a real-life process of integrative learning has been, as described by Collins and Gallinat, 'thoroughly implicated' (2010, p. 14) in my PhD work with the black gangster class and, I suggest, can extend autoethnographic literature.

Further, in *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*, George Marcus (1998) acknowledges that ethnography is in a transitional state. My adaptation to ethnography's transitioning is to link historical analysis to an understanding of site observations, including the cultural development of street gangsters in urban enclaves, for a special reason. My contention is that in America the enduring experience of racism contemporizes history for

black people. In other words, racialized history is dialectic: It is an outside force that is also powerfully internalized by the gangster class. Such history, therefore, is constantly in the present tense for black street gangsters and, as it turned out, in the instance of this PhD project, for the researcher-scholar as well.

My transformative experience, inspired by long-term immersive ethnographic work with the black gangster class has in some significant ways changed my life. But the circumstances that fostered such transformation also propelled my critique of certain ethnographic-intertwined-with-anthropological tenets established long ago that are still supported by some in the academy. Here I argue for: contextualizing ethnographic findings by relying on history and other conceptual strands found outside the immediate social setting under scrutiny (Hale 2006; Marcus 1998); integrating my learning as researcher into the ethnographic narrative of the population being studied (Anderson 2006), as well as directly sharing such insights with that same population.

2.5. Part Four: Reflexivity and Gangsters as Co-Researchers

Three incarcerated gangsters — two Crip O.G.s and one leader of the Bloods — agreed to serve as co-researchers for this project. They were not project participants. As co-researchers, they interrogated me about my ideas, theories, and research methods, as opposed to me interrogating them. They have helped me with my reflexivity concerns surrounding this work by consistently prodding *me* to identify and critique *my* underlying assumptions about what I believed I had learned from my ethnographic experience with the black gangster class. The process also served to assist my project validity. On a monthly and sometimes weekly basis, we have been able to discuss the PhD project. This has been possible because the gangsters, though imprisoned, have access to telephones. Also, many gangsters have access to contraband mobile phones, thus allowing them to upload materials via online applications installed on their phones. When they are caught with the phones the punishment is typically a few months in solitary confinement.

That has not proved to be a sufficient punishment to deter the acquisition of contraband mobile phones by the gangsters. My experience has been that as soon as the prisoner is out of solitary confinement and returned to what is called the main line, those prisoners typically acquire another contraband mobile phone as quickly as possible. I do not supply the incarcerated co-researchers with contraband cell phones. Such an act could get me banned by prison officials from having any contact with any imprisoned person in the state of California.

Periodically, I have provided draft chapters of this work to the prisoners' lawyers for mailing to their gangster clients. California correctional policy recognizes attorney-client privilege. That means when an attorney mails anything to his or her client, the envelope is not supposed to be opened by prison authorities and read by them. It is supposed to be opened in front of the prisoner for the guard to check for unauthorized materials, and then hand the package to the prisoner. Attorney mail is expected to be passed along in a timely manner, unlike regular mail that can take weeks for a prisoner to receive.

My co-researcher criteria for prisoners participating as co-researchers in this project were threefold:

- I wanted prisoners who had been or were still considered O.G.s representing either the Crips or the Bloods street gangs.
- I wanted prisoners who were a minimum of fifty years old. My thought was there would be the possibility a more mature gangster would know some of the history about the gangs to which they had once sworn allegiance. I was also looking for prisoners whose maturation would have led them to develop a broader perspective concerning how they had lived their lives as gangsters on the streets of urban enclaves.
- I wanted prisoners who I had debated in the past, prisoners who had demonstrated a willingness to challenge my opinions. My intent was to

nullify any selection bias on my part by avoiding co-researchers who I suspected might too readily agree with me.

Together, the three gangsters and I determined the rules of engagement for this project. My ethical stance was to be ever cognizant of my inherently dominant position as the researcher versus the multiple challenges these gangsters faced. Given their prisoner status, they had to cope with a range of lack-of-freedom issues associated with their incarceration. To the extent possible, I have tried to maintain our interactions on a horizontal field of play. I did not attempt to *impose* the terms of engagement, for example, we jointly created the terms. I sought advice and substantive guidance from these gangsters, not deference or acquiescence to my ideas. We agreed that if at any time I presented a concept or point of view in the PhD work that they did not support, then we would engage in a rigorous discussion to attempt to convince each other to change our positions. If we were unable to do so, then both of our positions on the disputed topic would be placed in the study. As it turns out, our respective vantage points were never oppositional, so it was never necessary to incorporate two distinctly different opinions in this work. Indeed, reading the chapters typically stimulated the gangsters, causing them during our telephone conversations to provide even more insights in support of my theorizing. Such additional contributions made by the gangsters were placed in my PhD work and accredited to the appropriate gangster. We agreed that they would not receive a financial or material benefit of any kind for their co-researcher status. But the gangsters did permit me to list their names in this document so that they could receive acknowledgment for their important work on this PhD project.

N.B.: Regarding gangster identity ethics with this work, certain gangsters and the girlfriends of gang leaders have had pseudonyms created to protect their identity. Some of the women, for example, after the murder of their O.G. mates, have had children with men who are not gangsters and did not want their identities made public. Other gangsters required a new name

or no reference at all to even their gang-member name to protect them, while still incarcerated, from harassment by prison guards because of more harsh policies imposed against imprisoned gangsters. There is an example in the narrative of this thesis where such a situation is noted in a footnote.

This overall approach for co-constructing a co-researcher relationship with three incarcerated members of the Crips and Bloods was informed by my adaptation of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Education and ethnography scholar Lindsey Horner's literature review of co-constructed research methodologies provide a core definition of PAR and its origins (2016). As Horner reports, educator and philosopher Paulo Freire was a pioneer in 'emancipatory pedagogy', whereby the oppressed are situated to participate in their own education and thus in the construction of positive change in their own lives (p. 14). Freire labelled this method 'conscientization' (Ibid.). PAR, it turns out, stands on a conceptual framework built by Freire.

Though PAR as a method for knowledge production has evolved into many variations, there are some essential elements of PAR that reflect Freire's influence and can be seen in PAR's variety of practices (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014; Horner 2016). One such essential element, as depicted in Horner's literature review, is that research at the grassroots level should engage the participation of that grassroots population such that they are not just the subject of investigation but are also investigators of themselves, their culture, and community. Another key element of PAR is that the research itself should strive to improve conditions and circumstances in the grassroots community being researched. A third element is to ensure that grassroots research participants are given the opportunity within the knowledge-production process to contest, validate, and frame research conducted in their own community. Thus, grassroots involvement in PAR allows those participants a chance to develop new skills and contribute to their own transformation and to their community's transformation or, as

described by psychologist M. Brinton Lykes, to investigate 'their own social reality' (1997, p. 729).

My adaptation of the PAR paradigm for my doctoral work led me to design a research methodology that included a three-person co-researcher structure of black male gang leaders. That design complies with the three essential elements of PAR. However, I did not involve the gangsters in the framing of the research project. I relied on what I had learned from them during my nearly two decades of immersive ethnographic practice to determine how to organize the knowledge I had acquired and intended to convey. The gangsters were invited to be responsive to what they read of my work and to challenge, if they so desired, my theorizing and conceptualizing about *their* street gang culture. But they were not consulted as I was developing the core research frame.

I did not entirely, then, follow a basic dictate of PAR. Nor did my methodology perfectly align with a growing body of literature on prisoners serving as peer researchers (Perret et al. 2019). My argument for this lack of alignment was that my long-term ethnographic experience, which contributed to my insider status, provided me with significant advantages while conducting this research. My contention is that a significant advantage was *my* reciprocal learning because of PAR and my long time spent closely tracking the lives and experiences of black street gangsters. Such exposure to the gangster lifestyle prompted my own growth and understanding of street-gang culture. That growth and understanding gave me the confidence to frame what I believed I had learned throughout my ethnographic practice with one caveat: my three co-researchers, Crips and Bloods gangsters, would provide validation and reflexivity upon reading my work, chapter by chapter, beginning with my PhD outline for the project. I acknowledge there was a power imbalance regarding how the research about black gangsters was initially framed. But from that moment forward, the gangsters were encouraged to challenge what I presented to them, as discussed above, though that did not occur. Another important advantage, which especially

applies to the peer researcher approach, was that I had already developed the trust of the imprisoned black gangster class from my work with the co-founder of the Crips, Stanley Tookie Williams. Also, my long-term ethnographic practice in California with black gangsters contributed to my attainment of a street-stellar reputation that preceded my meeting with any given prisoner. The development of trust between a scholar and prisoners is an important factor in the application of the peer researcher model and strategies, such as creating educational partnerships with prisoners to develop one-on-one trust relationships, which I had already earned from my immersive ethnographic practice (Thrasher et al. 2019).

2.6. Part Five: Adopted/Adapted Theoretical Frameworks

This section begins with an explanation for how and why I adopted the use of race-based labelling throughout this work and my argument for why such monolithic labelling is justified in this instance. I end this section and chapter with a short discussion about why I adapted Critical Race Theory (CRT) by adding a few new tenets to CRT, while removing one of its original tenets that I contend does not serve the goals of CRT.

My various labels in this work depicting whiteness and blackness — such as ‘the white dominant class’ and ‘the black gangster class’ — reflect a racialized caste system that exists in the United States. Indeed, a caste critique of that system fosters my construct of monolithic characterizations of whiteness and blackness utilized in this doctoral thesis. Further, my caste analysis in this doctoral thesis tracts the evolution of racism over four-hundred years and claims that the very presence or affliction of racism is itself monolithic *and* ubiquitous in the United States. It is an influence from which I argue no person in that nation escapes.

My argument is supported by the introduction of what I call a racialized values infrastructure in the United States. I define this nation's racialized values infrastructure as reflecting historical patterns, social customs, and

laws that have codified racism. These components of a national values infrastructure have translated into social scripts and public pedagogical displays that perpetuate racialized assumptions made by white people about black people, made by white people about themselves, and made by black people attempting to navigate all the stereotypical assumptions projected onto them. Two potent values that animate this social infrastructure are, I argue, white superiority and black inferiority. This is the cultural space that black people in the United States, particularly black men, must learn how to navigate.

Racialized status, then, is inherited in the United States. That's the historical argument I have made in this work. I discuss the origins of America's values infrastructure and how it was constructed in Chapter Four: 'Agency'. I have leaned on Isabel Wilkerson's work that establishes the presence of a race-based caste system in the United States, which can also be found in Chapter Four. What is made clear in this work is that nuanced differences between the character and personality of these black gangsters and even broader, for black America nationwide, are meaningless as captured and neutralized within a racialized caste structure. This is my argument for why I have adopted the description and treatment of black and white people in the United States as monolithic populations.

These are some of the complexities that prompted me to adapt my theoretical framework, CRT, by removing one of its original tenets, that of interest convergence. Interest convergence is where the justice claims of black people are traded for some other desired interest of white people. Such a trade-off centers and thus prioritizes, I argue in this work, the desires of white people over black people in the United States.

I also add other concepts to CRT's list of tenets. These are concepts constructed in this thesis to replace interest convergence, as well as to strengthen CRT as an analytic tool. Selected critiques of CRT, along with CRT's application to my research, are found at the end of chapters three and four. My proposed overhaul of CRT can be found in Chapter Six: Conclusion.

Chapter 3: Duality: Confronting America's Damning Dialectic

Brothers, sisters, when this world began
There was work to be done
And it seemed that someone
Left it to the colored man.

Brothers, sisters, what must be, must be
Though the balance is wrong
Still your faith must be strong
Accept your destiny.

Someone had to pick the cotton,
Someone had to pick the corn,
Someone had to slave and be able to sing,
That's why darkies were born.

Someone had to laugh at trouble,
Though he was tired and worn,
Had to be contented with any old thing,
That's why darkies were born.

—Excerpt from a song written by Ray Henderson and Lew Brown in 1931, 'That's Why Darkies Were Born,' lyrics as performed by American singer Kate Smith

You just a black man in this world
You just a barcode

—Excerpt from rap song, 'This is America,' released in 2018 and performed by Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, and written by Glover, Ludwig Göransson and Jeffery Lamar Williams

3.1. Duality, History, and America's Racial Imaginaries

This chapter is about the role duality and dialecticism — fueled by a racialized imagination — played in the social construction by white America of black stereotypes during the 1800s and early 1900s. That time in history experienced an unanticipated phenomenon: the emergence of an extremely popular entertainment medium called 'Negro' minstrel stage shows, which served as a powerful public propaganda tool for white America to shape the image of black America (Toll 1974; Lemons 1977; Reublin and Maine 2005; Roediger 2007; Johnson 2012). Also known as minstrelsy, this is where

mostly white performers pretended to be black as they sang and danced on stage in ways that caricatured the people who had once been slaves in colonial America.

This work treats the concepts of that duality-of-performance and at times dialecticism — a complex response to such performance — as theory inextricably tied to concrete circumstance. This approach to the critique of duality and dialecticism follows the teachings of Stuart Hall (Clarke 2014). Hall considered theory a necessary 'detour' on the pathway to understanding something more important, that is, a real-world situation of some kind (Ibid., p. 114; Hall 1991, p. 42). Here I argue that there has been a stereotypical vision of American blackness created by a white ruling class using minstrelsy and slavery that has obscured the reality of blackness, confusing even some black people in the search for their own identity. That stereotypical specter of blackness versus the representation of actual blackness reflects a practice of duality explored in this chapter. But when dual representations of black people begin to interact with each other and influence the representations themselves, then the critique also transforms into an examination of dialecticism.

I argue such stereotypes have prevailed into the twenty-first century, contributing to American society's harsh meaning formation of the black gangster class, including how black gang members see themselves. In sociologist Lewis Yablonsky's book about American gangsters and violence, he quotes Crips gang co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams from an interview I had conducted with Williams published by the *Los Angeles Times* (1993). The interview explains dualistic as well as dialectic impact on black street gangsters of the stereotyping of black Americans:

> I believe the core of it is an embedded sense of self-hate. What I mean by that is, an individual who has been spoon-fed so many derogatory images of his race will, after a period of time, start to believe those images. The images I'm talking about are stereotypes that depict the majority of blacks as being buffoons, functional illiterates, violent and promiscuous, welfare recipients, indolent criminals. Unfortunately, too many black people have

> been brainwashed into believing these stereotypes. And when an individual gets to believing such things, that individual gets to believing, 'Well, hell, if it's true, then I must be just as disgusting as those images that are being depicted'. So, you end up lashing out at the individuals [other gang members] that you consider to be part of those stereotypes. In desperation, you're trying to obliterate that negative image to rid yourself of this self-hate monster that subconsciously stalks you. In a sense, you're trying to purify yourself, your environment, your race (Yablonsky 1997, p. 6-7; Becnel 1993, p. M3).

In this chapter, the recounting of American history is being extended backwards to previous centuries not examined in Chapter One's historical analysis, which was a more surface-level or first-level critique, as postulated in Michel Foucault's three-level framework for analyzing history (2010). This chapter will track the origins of certain racialized practices that I argue have contributed to an evolution of the culture of the condemned before the advent of social clubs in South-Central Los Angeles, before the Black Panthers' northern California founding, before the emergence in Los Angeles of the Crips and Bloods. With this chapter, a study of the origins of these racialized practices is informed by what Foucault considers the second and third deepest levels of history. Such levels focus on the slower 'movements of material civilization' (p. 3) — Foucault's second level, which in this work is illustrated by the racial minstrelsy entertainment as an industry — and at the lowest depths, the third level. At that third level, events and circumstances of history move at their most sluggish pace. But it is where the most powerful rhythms are generated, rhythms that ultimately permeate all levels of history, such as America's history of racism, of slavery, and the sociocultural and socioeconomic consequences of these practices. This is also where I situate my analysis in this chapter and from where I argue the racialized branding of America emerged and has endured for four centuries.

Here I critically explore the complex asymmetry involving the use and power of imagination in America among both its black and white residents, and how that asymmetric quality has helped to conjure a culture of America-style racism characterized by some novel forms of racialized duality. How

America's racialized duality and imagination managed to become insinuated into the culture of the black gangster class is explored throughout this chapter and thesis. In the Discussion section, a broader analysis of racism's role in the American history critiqued here is examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Ralph Ellison's famous excerpt from his classic 1952 novel, *Invisible Man,* explores how the imagination of white people impacts what they envision — or do not envision — when they look at a black man. This imaginative act of seeing and not seeing in his storytelling propels a damning duality between the two groups:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in a circus sideshow, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me (p. 3).

Ellison's powerful insight into the racial imaginaries of white America inspires this study to engage an analysis of duality that also includes the racialized imaginaries of black America. There is duality in the relationship Ellison describes between how his black character imagines himself and how this character imagines he is viewed via a cultural scrim of racialized bias that ignores the man he believes himself to be. This is nearly analogous to sociologist William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois' double-consciousness idea where he argues that black people in America are conflicted by two images of themselves (1989). One image is that of a persona black people claim but is not known to the white world. The other image is what white people project onto black people, which is painfully internalized (Brand 2018). My characterization of Du Bois' scholarship as being 'nearly analogous' to Ellison's literary truth is based on a nuanced but

important distinction involving the two interpretive impacts of white imagination on the consciousness of black people. In Ellison's novel, the black character observes with anguish how he is being constructed in the imagination of white people but does not embrace that vision of himself. With Du Bois' double-consciousness concept, black people absorb the derogating imagination of white people. The eloquent words of Du Bois further elaborate this distinction:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1989, p. 2).

Here I ask: Which interpretation of duality is closest to the actual lived experience of black people in America, especially the black gangster class? In seeking an answer to that question, I use the 1931 *That's Why Darkies Were Born* (O'Connell 2019) song cited above — and other related music genres — to navigate a thicket of conceptual strands found in the racialized culture of duality commonplace in America. My focus is on three patterns of expression that have animated this form of racist entertainment and thus contributed to its popularity as a powerful public pedagogical tool for propaganda: 1) white America's destiny messages to black people; 2) white America's cultural appropriation of the ostensible characteristics of black people; 3) white America's trope-making of black people.

Here I introduce a note about public pedagogical theory before continuing the discussion concerning minstrelsy. The term public pedagogy was first known to be used in 1894 (Sandlin 2011), though the practice goes back as far as the Slavery Era to include African folklore since slaves were not permitted by law to receive classroom instruction. Black people, in their resistance to such laws, created their own public pedagogical methods to educate themselves and to inscribe their history into the memories of each other (Nyawalo 2013). Meanwhile, white America used minstrelsy as a public

pedagogical practice to educate themselves, in the most disparaging ways, about their view of black people. According to Sandlin et al. (2011) — who undertook an extensive review of more than four-hundred examples of public pedagogical scholarship, which I also examined — this discipline has historically been defined as extra-institutional processes of teaching and learning in many types of public spaces and via all manner of public discourses. Further, the public pedagogical concept hopes to ignite resistance and social activism by grassroots movements and public intellectuals against ruling-class constructs that do not serve the public good or democracy (Ibid.). However, this discipline's public-good bias and anti-ruling-class activism (Giroux 2004; Sandlin 2011) have failed, certainly as viewed through the epistemic lens of a black street gang leader from America. This discipline's practice, or praxis, has failed from a black-gangster-class point of view because of the racialized public pedagogical use of minstrelsy by a dominant white ruling class to diminish black America — and especially black men — as this chapter's analysis, supported by history itself, demonstrates.

Indeed, minstrelsy was used as a platform for the creation of stage characters that reflected demeaning stereotypes of the nation's black populace. The Merriam-Webster dictionary lists the meaning of 'stereotype' as being something that conforms 'to a fixed or general pattern especially: a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgement'. A 'trope', according to Merriam-Webster is when a concept or a theme has become so overused in the public square that it becomes overly familiar, even trite as a means of displaying a common understanding. So, the stereotype shapes public perception. The trope is the outcome of a process of cultural exposure and repetition that anchors the public perception into the public consciousness and ostensibly lessens its value. My contention is that certain beliefs about the character of black people that informed the construction of black stereotypes and caricatures in minstrel entertainment have manifested into powerful black tropes that

prevail in the imaginations of both white and black Americans today, including the black gangster class.

3.1.1. Destiny Messages

If nothing else, what the lyrics of 'That's Why Darkies Were Born' teach us is that the two white male writers of this song were quite comfortable letting the public know what white people thought of black people in 1931 when the song was released. Black people, however, could not reciprocate or protest the white message describing them, at least not in the public square for fear of exposure to some form of harsh retaliation. There were opportunities for certain black songwriters, such as Ernest Hogan and Bob Cole, who were willing to write tunes promoting the same denigrating stereotypes of black people that were written by white lyricists (Lemons 1977). Even Paul Robeson — a black hero in the African American community for much of the first half of the Twentieth Century from his history as a Columbia University Law School graduate, lettered college athlete, social justice advocate, and exceptional baritone singer and actor — fell prey, I suggest, to the potency of a black-demeaning musical pedagogy when he agreed to record *That's Why Darkies Were Born*. Later in Robeson's life he acknowledged regret for having done so and renounced his own behavior (Ibid). This, of course, exposes another example of duality where black people internalize the musical messages of their white oppressors or are willing to pretend to believe in those messages to become successful and prosperous. Ernest Hogan, for example, who wrote *All Coons Look Alike to Me*, became the first African American producer of a Broadway

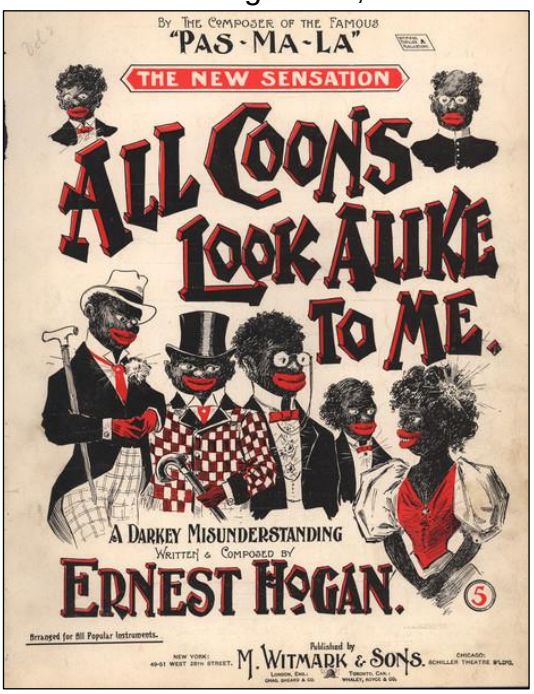

Fig. 7. Cover illustration for song, *All Coons Look Alike to Me* (1896). From Brown University online library. https://library.brown.edu/cds/sheetmusic

show in New York City (Peng 2010). But the word ‘coon’ is a highly derogatory term originally referring to a black person’s supposed appetite, literally, for raccoons and possums, as promulgated by America’s white populace (Reublin and Maine 2005). Eventually, black people themselves were seen as animals and called coons, among other dehumanizing titles. However, Hobson, like Robeson, lived to experience bitter regret for having written this popular song, which became an archetype ‘coon song’ in America that helped to spawn a coon-song minstrel genre (Peng 2010).

The minstrel genre was an immensely celebrated type of entertainment in America. In fact, it was this new nation’s first form of countrywide theatrical productions. The minstrel genre consisted of stage shows that starred characters acting as caricatures of black people dressed in gaudy colorful clothes, who were loud and unwittingly ignorant, as demonstrated through the performer’s use of malapropisms. Or, in contrast, minstrel performers posed as being extremely poor, dressed in rags, slow and with a shuffle as they walked, depicting laziness and dim-wittedness (Lemons 1977). These were the images of black people that entertained white society, that led to white people buying tickets to laugh at such images of the nation’s black populace. This type of stage show was labeled Negro ‘minstrelsy’, whether performed by white or black performers — both in blackface (Toll 1974, p. 272; Rehin 1975, p. 367; Sajnani 2014, p. 303). These were the early days of black people participating in the disparagement of their own imagery. With time, white society’s collection of insulting black stereotypes expanded to include a broader range of caricatures that included more menacing imagery of black men that became enduring cultural tropes.

White men led the way in writing songs during the minstrel era, which began in 1829, peaked immediately following America’s Civil War, and began to fade in the 1930s. There is academic literature, though, that argues certain twenty-first-century black rap music represents an homage to minstrelsy (Sajnani 2014; LaGrone 2000). I agree to some extent with this argument.

Rap's potent role in street gangsterism's iconography and the reimagining of ruling-class-imposed conditions are examined in Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class.

Minstrel-era songs defined the contours of the life and aspirations of black people in a voice positioned as definitive. *That's Why Darkies Were Born* was written by Ray Henderson and Lew Brown, two white men, for a long-running stage play titled, *The 11th Edition of George White's Scandals* (O'Connell 2019) and was first sung in blackface by a white baritone named Everett Marshall. The significance of black-white duality involving the blackface phenomenon is examined in the next section of this work. But the lyrics convey a dominant message about the objectifying of black people, beginning with the title of the song itself referring to them as 'darkies'. What is a 'darkie' besides the obvious inference that it is supposed to symbolize a black person possessing a dark brown skin hue? This is not likely to be a description black people would choose for themselves, which provides another example of the duality that exists between black and white people in America. Who gets to define whom? Clearly, the lyrics imply that the song title means much more than the use of darkie as a descriptor of color. The lyrics also convey a dominant message about the expectations black people should hold for themselves and for their future: to live a life of hard labor with no relief, to 'be contented with any old thing' and, as the song declares, 'accept your destiny'.

I argue in this work that these messages about black people embedded in songs written nearly one-hundred years ago, reflecting the history of black Americans in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s, have been culturally enduring even for black people themselves. In 2018, Childish Gambino (real name Donald McKinley Glover), a black male rapper who got this stage name from an online name generator belonging to the legendary hip-hop group, Wu-Tang Clan (DailyRapFacts 2020), released an award-winning album, *This is America.* The lyrics from this album's title song unequivocally states that black men are no more than 'barcodes',

representing commodities that belong to someone else (Bruner 2018, p. 1). My contention is that Gambino is a black man conceding the reality of his people's positioning in America — a duality that black people are human *and* they are often imagined by others in America to be something that is less human, that is less free than the dominating citizenry of the nation. Such racialized imaginaries have contributed to black Americans not entirely being the authors of their own life stories and thus hampering the construction of their own destinies. It is quite interesting, though, that a famous black hip-hop group would establish a name-regenerator link to provide black entertainers, and others, with the opportunity to reimagine their identities by changing their names. The creation of titles, it turns out, has been an important historical aspect of black identity formation in America since the 1600s, and is examined in conjunction with an identity-theory critique in Chapter Four: Agency and Its Many 'Inventive' Forms.

Meanwhile, here I concede that 'not entirely' have black people been prevented from defining themselves, given the black gangsters' imaginative career-and-street-culture adaptation. Still, that adaptation, at its core, is a rationalization for achievement in an environment of limited opportunities. To illustrate, prison-as-a-gladiator-school-where-you-learn-how-to-become-a-man imaginary by the black gangster class is a response to white America's racialized imaginary that has criminalized black people over hundreds of years. Since the 1980s, this has resulted in the imposition of a mass incarceration policy that primarily targets black men (Alexander 2012; Zimring 2020).

Further, I would suggest that this type of black rationalization, which reimagines the consequences of a white racialized imagination, follows somewhat in the footsteps of black men like Ernest Hogan, who reimagined himself to accommodate white expectations of black people by writing a self-demeaning song, *All Coons Look Alike to Me*. Admittedly, 'somewhat' is used here because a distinction between the 1890s-era actions of Hogan compared to today's black gangster class provides another view of duality

from an internecine perspective. Gang members have consciously and seriously changed *their* view of the racialized world they face rather than parodying the low-expectations white people hold of them. Though that is not generally recognized by the dominant culture. What is seen by white society is the ultimate outcome: black gangsters end up imprisoned as convicted criminals. But what goes unnoticed is how black gangsters see themselves, especially when they are imprisoned. Street gangsters are converting a dehumanizing consequence of the dominant class's racialized imaginaries, as exemplified by the mass incarceration of black men, into a value-added reputational outcome. They see themselves as having imagined the best-possible alignment with the options available to them, which is likely what Hogan also believed he was doing when writing a song such as *All Coons Look Alike to Me*. But black street gangsters claim themselves to be survivors and thus have no regrets for their imaginative choices, as did Hogan later in life. White people in America, however, see gangsters as criminals. But such an understanding of black people is entangled in the history of slavery and of a certain type of racialized American entertainment that symbolized even more duality and provoked even more animus against black people.

3.1.2. **Cultural Appropriation**

Fig. 8. Billy Van, the monologue comedian in 1900. National Museum of African American History & Culture. https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/blackface-birth-american-stereotype

One of the more byzantine examples of America's racialized imagination and duality — helped along by black grease paint, shoe polish or burnt cork — can be found in the historical practice of blackface. Blackface, a fictional-character mainstay of minstrelsy, was when mostly white men covered themselves with black

coloring to dance, sing, tell jokes, and gesticulate in a flashy buffoonery performance that personified white stereotypical perceptions of black people — all of which took place on a theatrical stage. But this was demeaning dramatic showmanship in the depicting of black people or, as cultural historian Saidiya Hartman incisively described it, ‘outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage’ (1997, p. 4).

However, some historical patterns appear resistant to change. British sociologist Beverley Skeggs, for instance, wrote about what I contend is an examination of twenty-first century blackface. Her theory, based on an article written by Manthia Diawara (1998), is that stereotyping is a form of cultural inscription (2004). Inscription marks the person or group upon whom the stereotypical belief is projected. However, Skeggs demonstrates that cultural inscription can be made mobile in the entertainment industry and that very mobility can empower white people as it simultaneously devalues black people — even when inscribing a form of black culture onto white actors. Skeggs’ example for how cultural inscription works in films and television comes from a paper by cultural theorist Manthia Diawara (1998). In that work, Diawara discusses how pop culture has coded what black coolness means and that meaning is routinely used as a mobile cultural resource for the symbolic application to white film and television characters (Ibid.). Blackface — via Hollywood-contrived black cultural symbolism in terms of clothing style or certain affectations — is being performed today by white actors in films and television programming instead of by white performers in minstrel stage shows as happened one hundred years ago. In Diawara and Skeggs work they both use the film *Pulp Fiction* to illustrate this concept. In that 1994 film, white actor John Travolta is inscribed with a ‘black cool’ walk that puts an ever-so-slight hop in his every step (Ibid., p. 1). White rapper Eminem, whose real name is Marshall Bruce Mathers III, had already created a successful stage persona of rapping and prancing in music videos like a black man, having sold more than two-hundred million records, when he decided to star in a feature film. Eminem’s autobiographical movie, *8 Mile*, is about how he, a white guy from a suburb of Detroit could behave and perform rap like a black

man from the urban streets of Detroit and succeed commercially as a white face-black cool rapper. This movie earned nearly one-quarter of a billion dollars and an Academy Award for Best Original Song, ‘Lose Yourself’ (Aswad 2020).

Ironically, the black characters themselves from whom this coolness has been appropriated do not garner, even in the fictional world of feature films and television shows, the same benefits for being cool as their white-character counterparts for being stereotypically black cool (Ibid.). This is an example of modern-day racialized duality ensconced in the white imaginaries of black stereotyping and the white commodifying of those imaginaries. White people appropriating the culture of black people generate more revenue in the arena of American entertainment than black people generate playing themselves. This was true of blackface minstrelsy one hundred years ago. This is true today.

The minstrelsy-era archetypes were initially the ‘Sambo’ character, an illiterate rural slave, and urban blacks were depicted as ‘Zip Coons’ (Lemons, p. 102). Zip Coons tried to socially elevate themselves above the status of country slaves by their colorful outfits and elaborate articulation. But, as the stage characters in blackface demonstrate, Zip Coons are unable to do so because of a lack of education and sophistication in how to dress in a manner that would be approved by the white audience. These stage characters — mostly white men covered in a black ointment of some kind, though black performers were also known to do the same — earned derisive laughter from white minstrel show audiences for mispronouncing words and appearing to be ignorant. There were also a few female blackface characters, one of whom remains iconic: the ‘mammy’ stereotype for motherhood that became

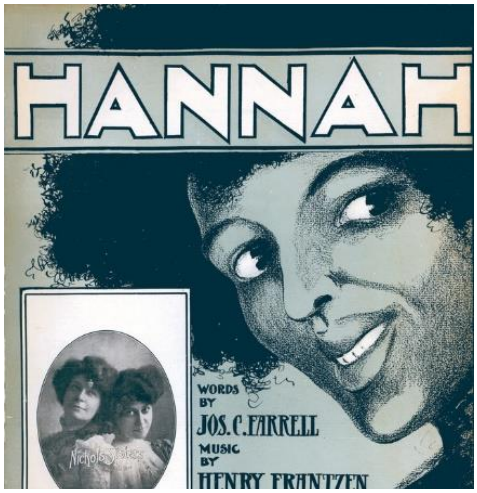

Fig. 9 Frantzen, Henry. *Hannah!*. New York (1434 to 1440 Broadway, New York): Howley, Haviland & Dresser, c1903. From Temple University Digital Collection.

Aunt Jemima and the logo of an overweight dark-skinned red-lipped-grinning kerchief-wearing black woman for a major pancake mix corporation. Black children were referred to as ‘pickaninnies’ with short braids sticking straight up and all over the child’s head like a multitude of thick thorns. There was also a sexually desirable black female character, ‘Hannah’, who was characterized by her half-black half-white slave-master heritage, which is discussed at the University of South Florida’s online digital and special collection site. White women with kinky-haired wigs were used to transform themselves into Hannah. Besides describing the history of American minstrelsy, the literature also offers a couple of interesting critiques to explain the motivation of blackface performers, why they were so willing to disparage black people, and to account for the minstrel genre’s extraordinary popularity (Toll 1974; Johnson 2012). First, I examine the critique that explores what I would call inverse duality to explain the behavior of white performers.

Though most consider Thomas Dartmouth Rice the father of American minstrelsy for having performed and originated the character ‘Jim Crow’ and the song by the same name in 1830, George Washington Dixon sang his first blackface hit song, ‘Coal Black Rose’, in 1829, a year before Rice became a famous minstrel (Cockrell and Johnson 2012). Billy B. Van, the blackface minstrel pictured above in a poster (see Figure 8), became a minstrel in 1892, more than sixty years after Rice and Dixon performed in blackface. But all three performers were from very modest backgrounds in terms of their socioeconomic status (Johnson 2012; Baird 2016). This factor is believed to be true of most if not all white minstrelsy performers. The contention in the literature is that these white lower-class blackface entertainers understood that they were not accepted in the top echelon of American white society, yet they were part of the majority white race. To ensure that they experienced some of the supremacy stature attributed to being a part of the white majority, if not the economic, political, and social benefits of being upper-crust white, Vanderbilt University historian Dale Cockrell claims that this white American underclass created minstrelsy (Foster n.d.). With minstrelsy, the subjugation of black people through mocking performances in blackface

helped them to accept their own white working-class status, which did not otherwise entitle them to much (Hartman 1997; Roediger 2007). As explained by David Roediger, blackface was a disguise used as much to mask the tensions within the white-working class as it was to mask the tensions between black and white people in America (2007). Their intent was to culturally codify not only their stereotyping of and disdain for blackness, but to culturally codify *whiteness* as well (Ibid.). The latter coding signified that whiteness was the opposite of blackface, which was characterized in Negro minstrelsy as being synonymous with blackness itself. Roediger's summary of this American class dilemma follows:

> If languages of class hinged on the quite vague definition of white workers as 'not slaves', the hugely popular cult of blackface likewise developed by counterpoint. Whatever his attraction, the performers and audience knew that they were *not* the Black dandy personified by Zip Coon. Nor were they the sentimentalized and appealing preindustrial slave Jim Crow. Blackface could be everything — rowdy, rebellious and respectable — because it could be denied that it was anything (p. 116).

This is one example of inverted duality as mentioned above. But there is more to be said about why solidly middle-class and upper-class white American audiences became so enamored with blackface minstrelsy.

For more than a century, there was no form of entertainment more popular in America than minstrelsy (Rehin 1975; Lemons 1977). Robert Toll in his important work, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (1974), explains the popularity of blackface as being contextually dependent on a significant historical factor: America's rapidly changing societal engagement with black people leading up to the start of the Civil War and beyond. Toll explains that the advent of minstrelsy occurred at a time when some of the nation's rural population was relocating North in search of 4a new identity and some sense of security in turbulent times (Toll 1974). The theatrical world of negro minstrelsy idealized the South's plantation and slavery history, making the North appear to have cultural deficits that were only available in the South. Also, minstrelsy, through its stereotyping of black

people, provided an opportunity for white residents from the North to get to know the nation's black populace, particularly those white northerners who had little to no exposure to black people (Johnson 2012). Of course, the stereotypes were hardly a fair representation of black people. And, as argued by another scholar, J. Stanley Lemons, the stereotype of the comedic black figure served an insidious national purpose after the Civil War when black people began to surface as freemen in the North and wanted the rights of citizenship. During those times, Lemons contends, the black person as comedic stereotype became a prevalent entertainment that white society enjoyed as blackface minstrelsy humiliated black people, making them the 'principal comic character . . . the butt of the national joke' (1977, p. 104). That provided a phantasmic type of contrived cultural retaliation by white people against the change in status of America's black population. Remember, however, that these were mostly white people painted black mimicking their version of blackness. This represents yet another powerful racialized duality entangled in the imaginations of white people. Further, these stereotypes — Sambo, Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Mammy and others — became a way of 'othering' black people with a political purpose: principal comic characters in minstrelsy, even if they were acted out by white performers pretending to be black, meant that *real* black people were not to be taken seriously and thus were not deserving of full American citizenship (Lemons 1977). There appears to be no end to the capacity of America's collective white imagination to create the most complex representations of racialized duality regarding relations between white and black people in America — or, for that matter, between white Americans *and* other white Americans functioning on the stage as surrogate black Americans.

3.1.3. Trope-Making

Soon after the Reconstruction Era ended in 1877 and America reneged on itspromise of establishing a kind of democracy that would welcome theinclusion of black people, representations of blackface characters began to give way to a more ominous stereotype (Du Bois 1935; Lemons 1977). Another genre of negro minstrelsy emerged called 'coon-shouting' (Brooks 2015, p. 1), which introduced a new character to the American public, that of an urban black male bully who carried a weapon, typically a strait razor, and was very dangerous (Ibid.). Further, during the post-Reconstruction Era, the racialized commercial imagery of black men transitioned from them being cast as humans, albeit with distorted facial and body features — enormous lips and feet, for example — to black men being illustrated in grotesque, sometimes animalistic ways (Lemons 1977). Paradoxically, the white performers who sang the bully songs in the persona of black-men-as-brutes were mostly white women, who themselves were 'plain-faced' (Ibid.), hefty, raucous, and who stomped back and forth across the stage in an attempt to emulate in their angry-singing style and in their aggressive body movement a fantasized idea of the violent nature of black men (Ibid.). May Irwin, Canadian born, became one of the most famous white-female coon-shouters in America and also became a very wealthy woman from performing this genre of entertainment, especially white song writer Charles Trevathan's *The Bully Song*. This minstrelsy song became a national favorite. Here are two stanzas.

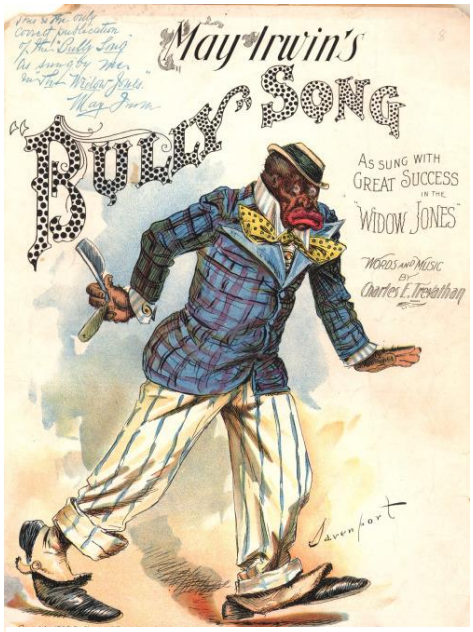

Fig. 10. From the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Sylvia Alden Roberts, 1895

> Have yo' heard about dat bully dat's just come to town?
> He's round among de niggers, a-layin' their bodies down.
> I'm a-lookin' for dat bully and he must be found.

I'm a Tennessee nigger and I don't allow
No red-eyed river roustabout with me to raise a row.
I'm lookin' for dat bully and I'll make him bow.

I's gwine down the street with my ax in my hand.
I'm lookin' for dat bully, and I'll sweep him off dis land.
I'm a-lookin for dat bully and he must be found.
I'll take 'long my razor. I'se gwine to carve him deep,
And when I see dat bully, I'll lay him down to sleep.
I'm lookin' for dat bully and he must be found.

And there were other bully songs performed by white female coon-shouters that became big hits, such as 1885's *De Coon Dat Had de Razor,* written by William F. Quown, a black man. This song's title, in terms of its pernicious stereotype of a criminally violent black man set in an urban environment, is amply portrayed in the cover art. Black people are running from him in fear of losing their lives. A white police officer appears in distress. Even a chicken is flapping its wings to get away from the main character: a razor-carrying black man dressed somewhat satorially.

But there is a befuddling confluence of concepts to examine here. With the musical genre of coon-shouting there were counterintuitive as well as antithetical examples of racialized and gender-confusing duality, given that white women were pretending to be black men and the depiction by white women of violent black men was intended to somehow convey humorous content. Coon-shouting literature that seeks to understand such complex relationships concedes that this genre of minstrelsy is quite a conceptual hornets' nest (Brooks 2015). As stated by Brooks, a historian: 'The staged incongruity of a white female singing — most often — in the voice of a black man . . . poses key questions about the nature of American humor, questions that beg deeper historical and critical investigation' (Ibid., p. 2). How did lyrics like those found in *De Coon Dat Had de Razor* and the *Bully Song* become comedic and very popular tunes in America? What assumptions undergird Constance Rourke's claim that 'to be black is to be funny', which she wrote in what is considered to be her seminal work, *American Humor: A Study of National Character* (1931, p. 74; Brooks 2015, p. 1)? But how does that critique align with a real-world representation of

black humor, which during the minstrelsy era involved *pretending* to be black, *pretending* to be a black man, *pretending* to be violent? How was it that all of those characterizations were deemed funny, as well as *authentic* representations of black Americans?

In general, minstrelsy literature is split into three overlapping analytical camps regarding black humor. One camp is comprised of those scholars who identity the humiliating humor against black people in all forms of blackface as a tool used by white working-class performers to wage covert class warfare against upper-class white society as well as lower-class black people, as discussed earlier (Roediger 2007). This explanantion of black humor involves two interlocking forms of duality. An added bonus was the the black mask proved a cunning device in that it set up white people in blackface to present black people as ridiculing themselves (Skylar 1970) — another form of duality. Of course, in this racialized Machiavellian fanstasy created by dominant white America, white people were provided justification for denying all manner of civil rights to black people, in that minstrelsy performances proved even black people realized they were undeserviing of genuine citizenship, which was almost always the issue at hand for white Americans — a white self-serving and somewhat convoluted form of duality. Although, once again, it was not real black people, for the most part, playing minstrel roles, it was white people in blackface playing roles that they themselves had scripted or that they had imposed on this genre as to what was an acceptable depiction of black people — or not. Finally, for white

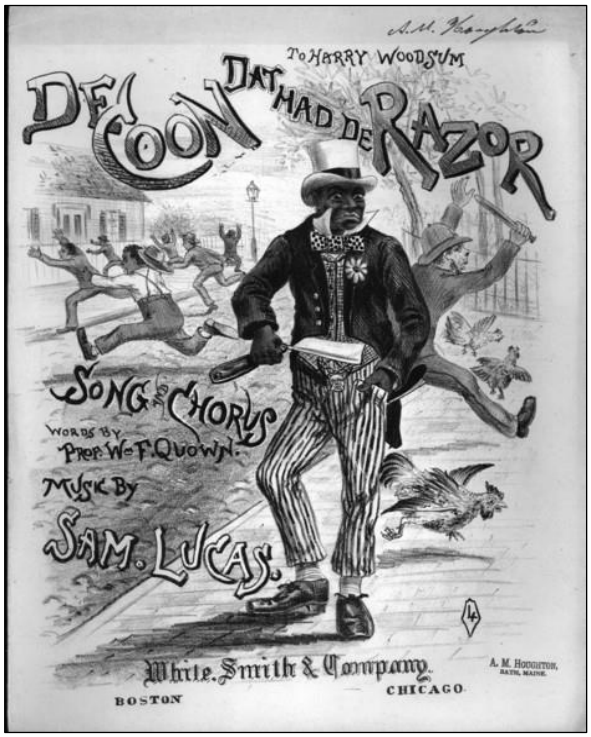

Fig. 11. From the Library of Congress Historic Sheet Music Collection, 1800 to 1922. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100007421/

women comediennes, performing in blackface was the only way they were permitted to display their comedy routines because of gender bias in America. So, for white female entertainers, degrading black men in blackface was an act of professional expediancy, a way to establish a career in comedy and potentially to earn a great deal of money in the process (Brooks 2015).

In another camp, black humor is conflated with the musical and dancing talent associated with black people by white America (Rourke 1931). With this literature, my contention is the critique is really equating a white dominant class' *enjoyment* of the melodic voices and rhythmic movement of slaves and then freed black people with that of black humor. In other words, because this aspect of black culture caused white people to smile from pure appreciation of talent associated with a culture so foreign to the dominant white culture, that their enjoyment, I suggest, was understood to be a product of black humor. Though unintentional, I would guess, Rourke has a passage in her *American Humor* book, that indirectly makes the case I claim here. She explains that 'the Negro' captured 'the popular fancy' of Amerca and describes a white traveler in the country as early as 1795 who she quotes as stating, 'The blacks are the great humorists of the nation . . . . Climate, music, kind treatment act upon them like electricity' (Ibid., p. 71). Yet what is particularly guileful about this conflation of black entertainment-related talents and humor is that it reflects an unspoken assumption about black people, which is openly articulated by Rourke, who was also a leading member of that third camp of what constituted black humor. She wrote that black people are funny in a '*primitive* comic sense' (italics mine). She further elaborated on that point by writing it is common for blackface minstrels to exploit this 'simple circumstance' (p. 74). But what does that mean? Though Rourke makes the case that minstrely wrested all that it could from 'Negro humor' as a 'primal source' for 'ample portraiture' (p. Ibid.), it is hard to tell from her critique whether she believes there is something inherently humorous about black people. Or whether Rourke believes that black people are humorous because they can be so easily caricatured and thus portrayed in satirical ways by white people. Or whether she sees both of these social

constructions as valid and true. And there is another complication. Blackface was not just considered an example of *black* humor. As it gained in national popularity, coon-shouting and other minstrelsy genres, humor involving grotesque black imagry and violence, became for the British and others outside of the United States an example of *American* humor. This is an ironic outcome since black people were being fought at virtually every turn during that period in their quest to secure the status of fully vested *American* citizens (Lemons 1977). To some extent, that fight continues to this day. But it is also interesting to note the surfacing of a type of parallel duality — or a type of cultural dialecticism — in the finding that what the American blackface industry intended to mark and manipulate, the misrepresentation of black people, became at the same time a global cultural representation of the country itself as a whole, which, of course, was dominated by white Americans.

Another finding is that the iconography of racism, that is white America's preoccupation with black body imagery and its special emphasis on the menacing black male physique, has had some twentieth-century and twenty-first-century cultural carryover. The black gangster class, it turns out, prizes a muscular body that can be displayed, proudly, in public settings. Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams was known for attending concerts where thousands of people could watch the spectacle of him removing his shirt and allowing several street gangsters to make his muscles shine by rubbing him down with oil. Sometimes this generated roars of appreciation from the concert crowd. It was a show, a modern-day minstrel-type show without the phony black paint needed to display blackness. Instead, the show involved real black men with bodies made enormous and made a caricature from weightlifting, given the deviation from the normal body size. This, in a significant way, personified black men stepping into the black-body-as-trope phenomenon that had long since been created for them by white America and its penchant for blackface, black tropes, black iconography and other forms of white fanstasy related to *their* construction of blackness. This is another way — well before Williams was imprisoned and educated himself —

in which the black self-hatred that he described above manifested. Mistrelsy was the gift in black culture that, unfortunately, kept on giving.

Here I argue that white America's response to historical context — legal, extralegal, academic, and political context that framed a changing sociopolitical landscape for black people in the late 1800s and early 1900s — contributed to the creation of the black-body-as-trope and the black-male-pariah-as-trope in the United States. With this work, I contend those tropes became the primary archetypes for the black gangster class in twenty-first century America, as embraced by a white dominant class to justify racist policies against black men, and as embraced by black street gangsters themselves to elevate their in-group social status by reimagining the meaning of the same condemnatory tropes.

The historical context that intervened in the transition from blackface imagery of mocking stereotypes to tropes of blacks as hybird not-entirely-human creatures consisted of several factors. First and maybe foremost, white Americans became tired of black people, newly freed from slavery, wanting more from the country than the country was unified in giving up. The issue of Reconstruction — and its experiment in representational democracy, though still not including women — was central from 1865 to 1877, and white Americans grew weary of dealing with the challenges and change expected of the nation once slavery was no more (Ibid.). By the time Reconstruction was destroyed in 1877 by avowed racist President Andrew Johnson, white America, for the most part, was angry with black Americans and thus very receptive to the emergence of what is known as scientific racism — also referred to as eugenics (Ibid.). Sir Francis Galton's theory of eugenics was recognized in 1883 upon the publication of what became his classic collection of essays, *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development*. Eugenics argues that the white race is superior and that such racial stock should be protected and improved through the regulation of marriage, which would impact with whom people engaged in procreation (Skibba 2019).

There is irony, however, in a statement Galton makes in the Introduction of this now infamous book: ‘We must free our minds of a great deal of prejudice before we can rightly judge the direction in which races need to be improved’ (Galton 1883, p. 2). This statement was supported by Galton’s family genealogical classification system that had four categories: ‘gifted, capable, average or degenerate’ (Galton, D. J. and Galton, C. J. 1998, p. 101).

The end of Reconstruction and the introduction into the American culture of science-based racism collided in ways that worked to further dehumanize black people (Lemons 1977). Racism, backed by the symbolic authority of science, supplied a powerful argument in making the case that black people were not worthy of full citizenship rights because they were a race of inferior people — if people at all. Consequently, in the 1880s, the picturing of black people in America transitioned into a more coarse, hideous hybrid-human imagery, as depicted in the advertising of products, for instance, and more menacing black fictional characters appeared in the production of minstrelsy shows (Ibid.). What would be today’s equivalent of baseball cards with the faces of star players were called trade cards in the 1880s and used by product manufacturers to sell their merchandise. To promote their canned beef, for instance, the Saint Louis Beef Canning Company used hairy-handed fingers on a black man that looked a lot like animal paws for their product promotion

Fig. 12. From William McLoughlin Collection, trade card for Alden Fruit Vinegar

(Ibid.; Nye 1970). Trade cards from Alden Fruit even distorted the images of a black child with her big toe extended and her facial structure drawn as if they both belonged to a chimpanzee (Lemons 1977). One company, Magnolia Meat, even used its trade cards to show nonsupport for black citizenship by, once again, as with blackface, using a grotesque rendering of black men to talk against their own best interests by commenting in opposition to the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which gave black people full citizenship rights: 'What de use talkin' 'bout dem 'mendments' (Ibid., p. 105). With regard to minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the famous play that was being staged throughout America, switched from a production orginally written as an attack on the horrors of slavery to a rewritten melodramtic format with black-caped villains in pursuit of young white 'innocent' females who were in need of rescue (Ibid., p. 105).

Fig. 13. Boston Public Library, 19th Century American Trade Card, circa 1870-1900

Meanwhile, in 1890, the stereotype of the criminal black man was pushed to that of trope status with the release of an analysis of United States census data which showed black people as being the perpetrators of a disproportionate number of crimes in America (Wines 1896). In other words, black people were prone to criminality. The researchers presented this work as being scientifically unbiased (Muhammad 2010). But that was not the case. The incidence of crime for white immigrants to the United States was deemphasized, though they represented, according to census data, the vast majority of the crimes being committed in the United States — 29.5 percent of prisoners in 1890 were 'colored' and 69.5 percent were white under various categories, such as, 'parents native', 'one parent foreign', 'parents foreign', 'foreign born' (Wines 1896, p. 8). With time, excuses were made to create a pathway for white immigrant redemption so that they would not become stereotyped as a dangerous criminal element in the nation (Ibid.). To

illustrate, white criminals tended to be described by white progressive as well as white supremacist writers as ‘victims of industrialization’ or a ‘great army of unfortunates’ in constrast to black people being framed as ‘their own worst enemies’ (Ibid., p. 8; Blackmar 1926).

W. E. B. Du Bois recognized the damage that 1890 census report would do and gathered Ida B. Wells, a famous anti-lynching advocate and journalist, to help him beseech white academia to challenge the credibility of that statistical research. Though Du Bois was able to get one white scholar, sociologist Thorsten Sellin, to support his cause, the campaign to right this researched wrong did not succeed (Muhammad 2010). That stereotype is now an enduring trope: black men are more prone to crime than white men; black men are more prone to violence than white men; black men are more dangerous than white men.

This is what has become of the imagination of white America as it divines the meaning of black people in general and of black men particularly. But the paradox of duality and dialecticism remains, as is brutally clarified by Frantz Fanon: ‘Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themsevles to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man’ (as quoted in Gubar 1997, p. 3).

So, how free are black men to imagine themselves?

3.1.4. Answering the Question

While white America in the 1800s and early 1900s was intent on imagining identities to impose on black people for maintaining control over what were now former slaves, black people were attempting to navigate the imagination of white people so as to provide an identity for themselves. Historical context, however, got in the way.

Once Reconstruction ended in 1877, white backlash intensified against America's newly freed black men and women, and a new wave of race-based isolation and terror was unleashed against them. Though

Fig. 14. From Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, circa 1877-1964

Congress had passed the 14th Amendment to the United States consitution in 1866 that gave black people full citizenship rights, the United States Supreme Court issued a 1896 ruling that enshrined racial segregation as the law of the land in the famous — or infamous — Plessy v. Ferguson case. With that decision, the Supreme Court granted the constitutionality of segregating black people from white people under a separate-but-equal doctrine (Lemons). But nothing was ever equal. Black people were excluded on virtually every level of society from equal participation and protection through a law established by the Supreme Court. That meant black people were legally discriminated against in the housing market; in the quality of their public school education; in their receipt of health care services and even in the dispersement of nurses since in Alabama white female nurses were not permitted in the same hospital room where a black man was assigned for care; in the use of public bathrooms; in their seating at restaurants open to the public; in their drinking from public water fountains; in their seating on public transportation; in the placement of environmentally dangerous equipment and processes near where black people resided; in the right to vote; in the right to be safe from physical harm administered by both law enforcement officials as well as private white citizens; in the pursuit of courtroom justice, employment, and much more (Rothstein 2017; Alexander 2012; Lemons 1977).

Then the lynching of black people began. In 1866, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee (Lester and Wilson 1905; Burton 1916). The mission of the group was to fight Reconstruction and to maintain white supremacy. In its Prescript of the Order of the Ku Klux Klan, it tells how the first Grand Wizard would be elected on the first Monday in May 1870 and listed questions that would have to be answered after this would-be Grand Wizard solemnly swore to tell the truth (Burton, p. 33). Two of those questions makes clear the intent of the group: 'Are you opposed to Negro equality, both social and political? Are you in favor of a white man's Government in the country' (Ibid.)? Ku Klux Klan members were known for hiding their identity by wearing white oversized and hooded cloaks that covered their bodies and facies. They could see through holes in the cloth allotted for their eyes and mouths. They burned crosses on the lawns of black people to get them to move away so that they would be no where near white people. Law enforcement would allow white citizen vigilante groups, including the KKK, to kidnap black men, women and children for the slightest offense and hang them from a tree until their death. My own mother escaped being lynched by the KKK in Alabama as a teenager by just six or seven hours. The KKK believed her death was warranted for demanding the correct change from a white woman who owned a local store. That was considered talking back to a white person, which earned black people a death sentence by hanging. Our family, who anticipated their home would be raided by the KKK that night, put my mother on a train to New York to live with relatives there. The KKK did show up around midnight looking to lynch my mother, an adolescent. But they had been foiled, because she was truly no longer in Alabama. The KKK ripped the house apart in their search for her. Scenes like this played out mostly across the south, though not entirely in the southern states, from 1889 to 1902 and beyond. But during that thirteen-year period, each year more than one-hundred black people were lynched in the United States (Lemons 1977). Still, by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, black men were cast as society's pariahs. Their status as dangerous criminals became a trope in America that persists to this day.

Earlier in this chapter there was a juxtaposition presented between W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness and novelist Ralph Ellison's understanding of how white people view black men in America as seen through the eyes of his protagonist in Ellison's famous book *Invisible Man*. With double-consciousness, black people are acutely aware of how they are viewed by white America and painfully absorb that outsider's view of themselves. With Ellison's critque of that same duality, his character anguishes but does not internalize the white outsider view of his person. The question posed then was, which interpretation of that duality is closest to the actual lived experience of black people in America? My answer builds on Du Bois' work, in that I contend it has been necessary for black people — and particularly black men in the United States — to adopt a triple-consciousness approach to constructing identities that enable them to survive pervasive and systemic racism in America. The first two identities mirror Du Bois' work: there is the peson you know as yourself and there is the person who is supposed to be you, as reflected in the eyes of 'the white gaze', a Toni Morrison phrase, spoken in a 2019 documentary about her life (Greenfield-Sanders). But I suggest here that there is a third black self that is everpresent in relations with white people and in black people's relationship with themselves. That third black self notices what white America see when they look at black people and may feel some pain by that recognition, but still that black person self-constructs into something else. That something else is a reimagined persona or circumstance that, as author James Baldwin explains, 'outwits one's situation' (1993, p. 203).

Here I argue that is what the black gangster class has attempted to accomplish with its efforts to construct something better out of the circumstance in which gang members find themselves. What I have learned from the black gangster class is that despite being isolated from the white mainstream, street gangsters realize they have been labeled thugs by American society and are targets of mass incarcertion. They recognize that

they have become symbolic and thus represent a monstrous trope, which has thus far been difficult to overcome. But for them, prison has been reimagined into a gladiator school. Death row has been reimagined to offer hero status. These are destructive outcomes, no doubt, but they are conscious reimaginations of their own lives. It is a way for them to pit their imaginations against the racial imaginaries of white America. And while they may not be winning this life-threatening competition, they have engaged a dialectic strategy for their survival. And they remain in the fight to create their own identity.

3.2. Discussion

This discussion comprises my analysis of the chapter's findings as seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is serving as a theoretical framework for this PhD project. There are five tenets of CRT: 1) establishing that racism exists; 2) utilizing, where possible, counternarratives of people of color to challenge the dominant white normative perspective; 3) deconstructing examples of white privilige wherever conceptually present; 4) recognizing intersectionality as a lived experience; 5) navigating the disadvantages of interest convengence theory, whereby black people must concede to the political desires of white people of both upper-class as well as working-class origins to secure their support for advancement in social justice causes. With this fifth tenet, however, I extend CRT literature by using historical duality, regarding racism and oppression, as a bridge into a common understanding as to what happened during the blackface minstrelsy era. I seek to accomplish this feat by examinig that history of coon-shouting as viewed through the epistemic perspectives of black and white people, respectively. Finally, with this chapter, as with chapters four and five, I will apply the CRT tenets as appropriate to the subject matter and combine the tenets in my critiques when it makes sense to do so.

3.2.1. Acknowledging Racism and White Privilege

Though this chapter is primarily about blackface minstrelsy and thus is riddled with evidence of racism, what surprises is the literature's repeated refutation of the belief that white America considered minstrelsy, including coon-shouting, as a racist entertainment. The common reference is that white Americans thought mocking black people, exaggerating the size of their lips, eyes, and feet, constructing them to look like animals, degrading their language skills, making them appear unintelligent and lazy, all was 'just funny', so there was nothing wrong with it (Lemons 1977). In other words, what is funny, cannot be racist. This is an interesting perspective to deconstruct, given that it reflects a labyrinth of examples of self-serving practice.

The underlying class warfare that for so many working-class blackface entertainers animated their performances — that they could derogate black people as a way of demonstrating disdain and dominance. Blackface proved that they could still codify themselves as white, by clearly *not* being black. And they could codify black people as being significantly inferior to white America. These were conscious choices that these performers made to entertain in the most base and cruel ways regarding black people. How such behavior was classified as humorous has been discussed earlier, though not adequately critiqued because the literature itself is underdeveloped in this area (Rourke 1931; Sklar 1970; Lemons 1977; Johnson 2012).

Still, I would argue that what is missing in the academy's work about American humor in terms of the blackface and coon-shouting minstrelsy era is a critical conceptual analysis of white privilege. That concept, I contend, plays a role in how humor is conceived in white America and how racism is determined. It is a big subject that warrants a study of its own, but for now I would suggest that white privilege's symbiotic relationship with power allows the imagination of white America to create whatever social constructs are needed to sustain their epistemic perspective. So, if they say what they do is not racist, it is simply funny, then that is what they get to decree. Also, there is a complex idea associated with humor that infers how could something that

makes you laugh be harmful. This raises another issue: a characteristic of white privilege is its solipsism of sorts. What exists in their head, in their world, is what counts as reality. The critique of blackface humor and racism, then, is not how the 'outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage', as quoted earlier, impacts the people being humiliated, it is how it makes the perpetrator or the willing audience feel (Hartman 1997, p. 4). This is what white privilege misses. This is why racism could be denied by those enjoying the derogation of black people.

3.2.2. Counternarratives and Intersectionality

This discipline had counternarratives from theorists of color available to critique certain aspects of blackface minstrelsy and I utilzed some of them (Brooks 2015; Cheng 2000). But the discipline is not as broad as it should be considering how contributive the minstrelsy era was to the development of black stereotypes and the very harmful trope of the dangerous black man. Intersectionality, on the other hand, is explored in the minstrelsy literature, particularly the use of white female comediennes to play dominate, violent, black men on stage in blackface. This example of intersectionality is, from my point of view, extremely complex and deserves further research. These female entertainers, including May Irwin, who was discussed in this chapter, claimed coon masculinity as a type of feminist act. When in blackface coon character, Irwin performed in the most raucous and extreme ways on stage, very much against the norms of white female society. Irwin did so because in those moments she was quite willing to align herself with the despised positionality of black men in America. From that perspective, she was demonstrating her freedom to be the female comdedienne prepared to eschew what was expected of white women in America during that era (Glenn 2000). Of course, the complexity of this type of intersectionality arises again along with the specter of white privilige. What Irwin could do to further her career as a comedienne and make a feminist statement of sorts, did not symbolize freedom in any way for the black men she caricatured on stage. They remained pariahs in their land of birth.

The intersectionality of white men in blackface was also of no apparent benefit to black men other than to allow them the opportunity to entertain as well in blackface. Some black entertainers drew some fine lines when it came to debasing themselves, such as Duke Travers, who in 1900 was competing for the world championship of ragtime performers at Tammany Hall in New York (Lemons 1977). As a finalist, he was asked to sing *All Coons Look Alike to Me* and with the widest of smiles he refused to sing that tune (Ibid.). He played one of his own selections and lost (Ibid).

The intersectionality of that era, posed a difficult sorting of identity for black people. From the white American perspective, black people in real life were close in stature to the fictional characters created by mostly white people for the coon minstrelsy stage. For black people, the struggle to determine a public identity was made the more tricky and dangerous by these intersectional appropriations of their culture and of their being.

Even now, with the black gangster class, that same struggle exists but not so much within the culture of street gangsterism. There the Crips and the Bloods are reasonably free to create their own identity. When such an identity clashes with the outside or white mainstream world, the gangster recalibrates by reimagining the best possible option in forging an identity that serves him and the culture in which he resides. There is a duality that black men and black gangsters must still skillfully navigate in America. In that sense, not too much has changed since the days of coon-shouting minstrelsy. As before, the complexity between white and black America is situated at the cultural borders of how and where they respectively live their lives.

3.2.3. Interest Convergence

The performers of blackface minstrelry provide an ideal example of the perils of the concept of interest convergence. In an attempt for black people to seek political allyship with white America, this concept says that whatever the trade-off in the transactional nature of political concession for social justice

advancement, both working- and lower-class whites must be satisfied, along with their white upper-crust counterparts. In the industry of blackface minstrelsy, we learned that working-class performers used minstrel entertainment to humiliate black people in part because of their own exclusion from the class of white people who had some power over blackface performers as well as black people. In that circumstance, to create a strategy of securing suppport to end the humiliation of blackface was in no way possible.

Given that much of white America during this era believed coon-shouting minstrelsy was funny and that blackface performances were not racist, acknowledging there are at least two historical storylines coming out of blackface entertainment is the first step in creating a bridge for the convergence of those respective histories. Blackface minstrelsy's role was extraordinary in the stereotyping of black people in America, in the imposing of white America's imagination on the persona of black America. What began in the 1800s has evolved into unrelenting tropes of the twenty-first-century archetype of the black male pariah. This is what street gangsters must mangage every day of their lives. Though in the minstrelsy's historical fulness, how the two storylines are remembered belie the fact that what is understood by white America and by black America of coon-shouting entertainment are parts of the same factual history.

There is something called collective memory theory that American advertisers have relied upon for decades (Davis 2007). The theory realizes that the collective memory of different social groups remember history differently. One article about this work uses the Aunt Jemima pancake product line, the Aunt Jemima mammy stereotype that came out of the blackface minstrelsy era, to make the point of how advertisers must bifurcate marketing strategies to appeal to the different cultural meanings associated with the different collective memories. What I hope to accomplish with this work is to adapt this theory to focus on the factual history itself, as opposed to the imagined memories of that history. Thus, my aim is to present a

collective history first in order to change the white American fantasies about black male tropes and to change the black male imagination regarding the need for double- or triple-consciousness. Such a strategy also serves as an adaption of CRT and its interest convergence tenet.

Chapter 4: Agency and Its Many 'Inventive' Forms

> 'They ['Negroes'] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit'.
>
> — Excerpt from 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* landmark decision authored by Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney of the United States Supreme Court (Judgement in the U.S. Supreme Court Case, Record Group 267)

> 'Black people have been in this country since the start of this country. And you don't get to be more American than being owned by America. So, we have some special rights of memory, of belonging to this place. I am in awe of the people that I am privileged to be a part of and how we consistently show up for a place that consistently tries to remind us we are not welcome'.
>
> — Statement by Baratunde Thurston, a black cultural and political commentator, who was interviewed on a USA cable news network *(The 11th Hour with Brian Williams*, MSNBC-TV, 9 January 2021)

4.1. Overview: Black Identity and the Co-Construction of Agency

The above statements by Roger Brooke Taney, a white man, and Baratunde Thurston, a black man, demonstrate contrasting examples of presumptuousness regarding the phenomenon of agency in America, and its entanglement with racism and black identity. Taney presumed he had the agency and the solution for settling debates about allowing — or not — legal rights for black people in America, given their history as slaves and Taney's position as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Thurston, on the other hand, presumed black people's very status as former slaves privileged them with the agency to claim their memory as valid history and their travails imposed by slavery as entitlement to a reciprocal American position of ownership, of belonging to a nation, though not ownership of

people in that nation as was afforded white America. These are, of course, dual perspectives of agency. And both presumptions, I argue below, have turned out to be mistaken beliefs. But that dynamic space between such conflicting ways of considering agency is the focus of this chapter. And it is where black-white dialecticism in America is situated, in view of how agency, I contend, has been uncooperatively co-constructed over centuries. Uncooperative because one of the parties, the nation's white citizenry, has been generally indifferent to or unaware of the extent to which black Americans, the other party, base their life choices on white racialized agency forcibly imposed upon or projected onto a black populace, especially the black gangster class. This paradoxical and dialectical concept of the uncooperative co-construction of agency between black and white people in America is examined throughout the chapter and remaining chapters.

4.1.1. The Travails of Constructing Agency

This chapter seeks to understand the black struggle in general for claiming agency, as well as the black-gangster struggle to do the same, while accounting for agency's significant connection to black identity formation. Further, the politics of black identity formation is examined, alongside the elusive standard for who is worthy of American citizenship. Later in this chapter, to explore the citizenship standard applied to black America by white America I conduct a class-versus-caste analysis of black bias and black status. My contention is that historical patterns involving these issues have influenced black gangsters' construction of their own brand of agency, personhood, and citizenship. I also argue here that America's racialized historical context has led to the creation by black gang leadership of symbolic parallel empires situated within urban neighborhoods. I purport that these gangster-governed mini empires are animated by a street-level adaptation of the concepts, rituals, and symbols of citizenship as well as patriotic loyalty to a sovereign *location* — which could encompass as little as three or four blocks — rather than to *country*. These topics are discussed in the section of this chapter titled 'American-Made Outlaws and Empires' and in Chapter

Five. This chapter ends with a discussion of the material covered herein through the perspective of Critical Race Theory. Also, in this chapter Michel Foucault's theory of how to understand history is engaged through the delineation of eras and the critiquing of context across Foucault's three levels of how history is categorized (1972). The first level, which is more recent history, such as political events and influences, resides on the surface of historical impact, according to Foucault. The second level is more submerged in history, representing events that have patterns of reoccurrence, such as wars, famines, and governments formed and dissolved. Beneath those events is the third level of 'unmoving histories' (p. 3) — the patterns and directions of wind, the creation of sea routes, for example, and, here I argue, the social construction of race and racism, alongside class and caste formations in America and elsewhere.

4.1.2. A Long Pursuit of Black Rights in America

Though one-hundred-sixty-four years have passed between the citations listed above by Taney in 1857 and Thurston in 2021, the two men were responding to a variation of the same essential question plaguing black people since arriving as slaves in colonial America: What unalienable rights can a black person claim in America?

As written in the United States Declaration of Independence, adopted 4 July 1776 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, unalienable rights meant that all Americans were entitled to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. The first draft of this document was written by Thomas Jefferson, who became the third President of the United States, and was intended by him to be based on the laws of nature (Jayne 1997). The laws of nature were considered God-given rights that human beings were entitled to receive (Ibid.). But black slaves *in* America were not considered Americans. Further, the underlying premise of the Declaration of Independence, entitling people to rights based on their status as human beings, did not apply to chattel slaves. Slaves were classified as property. And sometimes slaves were cast as hybrid entities

who were ape-like or unidentifiable beasts, as caricatured in the minstrelsy illustrations shown in Chapter Three. Historian George M. Fredrickson provided a devastating analysis of the black-people-as-beast trope imagined by white America in his important book, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (1971). In Fredrickson's chapter, 'The Negro as Beast: Southern Negrophobia at the Turn of the Century', he explains why by the end of the 1800s it was so easy for white America to think the worst of black people in their midst. White scholars, it turns out, as well as journalists and prominent southern members of the United States Congress, were publicly espousing commentary about race-based degeneracy and racial Darwinism theories that included the coming extinction of black people. But even before the 1800s, white America had categorized black people as 'permanently alien and unassimilable' into white American society (Fredrickson 2017).

As early as the 1780s, Thomas Jefferson was a rare voice of national renown who was hesitant to unequivocally condemn the promise of black people. He argued that there had not been enough research conducted about black people to definitively conclude that they were inferior to white people. Jefferson contended, 'I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites both in body and mind' (Ibid., p. 1).

Tulane University professor William B. Smith wrote *The Color Line* (1905), a book proclaiming the doom that awaited black people because of a failure to succeed in their struggles to exist in America. Smith's prediction of doom was the ultimate extinction of black people. He even went so far as to say that there was no reason for white America — or scholars writing about the pending black extinction — to feel any sympathy for black people because their extinction was in line with the 'evolution of humanity' (Smith as cited in Fredrickson 1971, p. 256). Journalist and avowed white supremacist, Myrta Lockett Avary, wrote in her book, *Dixie After the War* (1906), that black people would be removed from the earth by 'elimination', since there was no

longer any need for black people as an ‘industrial factor’ (p. 393). ‘Evolutionary processes’, she importuned, ‘reject whatever has served its use’ (Ibid.).

Avary’s elimination idea stuck in America’s imagination, but without reliance on evolutionary processes. Instead, black elimination became an outcome of America’s mass incarceration policy, many decades later, as straightforwardly stated by historian Kelly Lytle Hernández, who wrote in 2017 about how ‘mass incarceration is mass elimination’ (p. 1). This was the core theoretical framework for her book *City of Inmates*. America’s mass incarceration policies have a long history. But President Richard Nixon, the nation’s thirty-seventh president, specifically targeted black men as a tactic Nixon believed the nation needed, though he suggested that such a tactic be stealthily imposed. ‘You have to face the fact the whole problem is really the blacks’, Nixon informed his Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman (as cited in Williams 2007, p. xi). ‘The key’, Nixon continued, ‘is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to’ (Ibid.). Nixon proceeded to create new national policies that supported in 1971 what he called a War on Drugs. His War on Drugs eventually focused on crack cocaine possession and use, perceived to be preferred by black America, instead of powdered cocaine dealing and usage — from which crack is a derivative — that was understood to be a favorite of white America (Vagins and McCurdy 2006). Prison sentences for crack cocaine were significantly longer than prison sentences for powdered cocaine (Ibid.). White America escaped the harshest punishments imposed by the government’s War on Drugs. But black people, particularly black men, did not (Ibid.).

The degeneracy myth of black people was not scientifically based as was the Darwinian arguments of evolution. Rather, once again, southern experience in dealing with slaves was relied upon by white Americans, as was the case in the minstrelsy depiction of black people, to claim the common-sense expertise of what to know or to be warned about the character of black America (Fredrickson 1971). Those who were proslavery

enthusiasts labeled black people as having a proclivity toward being ‘brutes’ (Ibid., p. 259) and savages, and the only thing that had kept black people from an earlier ‘reversion to savagery’ (Ibid.) had been slavery and its legal granting of white people complete control over black people. One animating argument that emerged from the era’s attack on the humanity of black people was that black men in their savagery could be counted on to sexually assault white women (Ibid). This so-called rapist proclivity was also used in the argument to justify the lynching of black men and was used to characterize black men as ‘wild beasts’ (Ibid., p. 276), which supported the Negro-as-beast stereotype (Ibid.). Senator Tillman from South Carolina described the southerner’s view of a black man as him being ‘a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour’ (Tillman as cited by Simkins 1937, p. 166). This kind of rhetoric largely occurred during the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s.

Here I argue that blackface minstrelsy from Chapter Three, racial Darwinism, and the myth of black degeneracy were all contributors to black identity formation, which was projected onto black America by the agency, supremacy, and racialized imagination of white America. There was political benefit to be gained from this practice of the white construction of black identity. The demonizing supplied a strong rationale for why black people should not be allowed to enjoy the rights of American citizenry — or *white* American citizenry. The emphasis is on white American citizenry because despite the ratification in 1868 of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution, providing citizenship rights to former slaves, and the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, granting black people the right to vote, the battle to ensure the rights of black people to function as bona fide citizens of the United States is still being fought. In 1965, for instance, the Voting Rights Act was passed because the 15th Amendment was not being followed. Further, in 2013, the Supreme Court gutted certain provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which caused in 2021 the John Lewis Voting Rights Act to be proposed as legislation to restore what the Supreme Court removed from the Voting Rights Act.

When Chief Justice Taney ruled against Dred Scott — a Missouri slave claiming his right to be free because he had been permitted by his slave owner to spend years living and working in Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, where slavery was illegal — Taney's presumption of agency over these matters was technically valid, but historically and practically incorrect. As Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Taney's agency to withhold from Scott the rights accorded free men was incontrovertible. However, his presumption that the agency he wielded would serve as the definitive pronouncement concerning the citizenship rights of black people was spectacularly mistaken. Taney's ruling generated great controversy. It was considered overtly racist and deemed the worst ruling of the United States Supreme Court, as proclaimed in 1927 by a future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Charles Evans Hughes. Hughes said the decision rendered a 'self-inflicted wound' on the Supreme Court (Khavtasi 2019, p. 67). Some historians also believe that the debate it instigated between northerners and southerners in America contributed to the start of the Civil War four years later in 1861 (Allen 2004; Fehrenbacher 1977; Alexander 2007).

Nevertheless, ten years later, a bust of Taney was procured by Congress to be sculpted by a famous artist, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (Ibid.). In 1877, the Taney bust was placed on display at the United States Supreme Court (Ibid.). Therefore, the backlash against Taney's ruling was not absolute. Though in 2022, the forty-six president of the United States, Joseph Biden, signed a bill instructing that the bust be removed from the Capitol. Thus, the issues raised by Taney's Dred Scott ruling has remained a tug-of-war fight between different factions of the white populace, as well as the nation's body politic, for generations to follow.

Black people using their agency to vote is what Thurston was referring to in his cable television news interview cited at the beginning of this chapter. He claimed in that citation: 'We [black people] consistently show up for a place that consistently tries to remind us we are not welcome'. But this is what

Taney warned in 1857 when he wrote in his decision that ‘a perpetual and impassable barrier was *intended* (Taney’s italics) to be erected between the white race and the one which they had reduced to slavery, and governed as subjects with absolute despotic power, and which they looked upon as so far below them in the scale of created beings’ (Judgement in the U.S. Supreme Court Case, Record Group 267).

History, I argue, indicates that Taney was prescient in his understanding of a white racialized epistemology existing in a significant number of America’s citizenry. Further, my contention is that Taney’s recognition of this aspect of white American society has been culturally dominant despite the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the battle over the passage of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act of 2021. In fact, America’s repetitive legislative reality involving the quest to ensure equality for black people has exposed how difficult this quest has apparently been to achieve.

4.1.3. More on Thurston versus Taney

Thurston’s and Taney’s comments reflect a duality in the cultural and lived experiences of black and white America. Taney, as a representative of white America, proclaimed without reservation the lowly status of black people — and had the agency to do so, as well as to impact legal and social structures in America with the imposition of his agency. Thurston, on the other hand, valued the essence of black people and praised their persistence in voting while having to face a discouraging but prevalent truth: black people are still unwelcomed in the United States. To illustrate, on 14 July 2019, Donald Trump, the forty-fifth president of the United States, boldly tweeted that Ayanna Pressley, a black elected member of Congress and frequent critic of Trump, should go back to the country where she came from. Congresswoman Pressley, an American citizen, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. The United States is the country she came from. But such duality personifies an ongoing conflict in America between black identity formation and the

different constructions of agency that serve the nation's black-versus-white populations. Unlike Taney, Thurston did not possess the agency and authority to project onto the *external* world citizen rights for black people. But Taney demonstrated he did have the agency and authority to deny such rights to black America. Thurston did, however, have the *internal* agency to presume his entitlement to certain things that could be construed as rights. Thurston believed, for example, that black people were entitled to their historical memories and the right to *feel* as if they belong to America, even if America generally does not agree with them. Yet, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot offers a counter to Thurston's view of how agency impacts whose history is recorded and what history is acknowledged. Trouillot's seminal critique in *Silencing the Past* (1995) would argue that Thurston's memories of American history are likely to mean nothing to the white producers of history. Thus, Thurston's internal agency in that regard is no more than a phantom agency, an imaginary agency that does not impact the external world, though it seems to empower Thurston, which is a value unto itself.

My contention, though, is that black people in America are always functioning in a paradigmatical frame that requires the constructions of their acts of agency — even their internal agency — to be responsive in some way to whatever example of agency white America has imposed upon them. Thus, black people have a dialectical bond with white America and that space is where the uncooperative co-construction of agency in situated. Since the construct is one-sided, white America, in terms of intent, is uninvolved in the co-construction activity, though white America is integral to the results.

With this work, I posit that America's cultural contradictions, as revealed in its Constitution, Declaration of Independence, 14th and 15th Amendments, and more 'beautiful documents with beautiful words', as Thurston agonizingly shared during his television interview, promise much more than has been delivered to *all* its citizenry. That failure is also what has

been consistent about America, which is on display in the history that informs both Taney's and Thurston's public perspectives about racism. Such complexity, I contend, both separates as well as binds black America and white America dialectically to each other, including the black gangster class to America's white mainstream society.

4.2. Titles as Symbols for a Black-Body Dialectic

> Chattel slave. Darkie. Coon. Pickaninny. Monkey. Porch Monkey. Jigaboo. Black Sambo. Tar Baby. Spook. Spade. Aunt Jemima. Boy (title for adult men). Mammy. Sooty. Burr Head. Manchild. Uncle Tom. Mulatto. Quadroon. Colored. Negar. Nigger. Niggra. Niggar. Negro. Nigga. Niggaz. Afro American. African American. Black. Person of Color. Minority.

These are some of the labels divined by white America to identify black America and, to a much lesser degree, a few of the labels black Americans have conjured to identify themselves. This labeling process of black people has been engaged for close to four hundred years in the United States. Though my argument here is while black social activism eventually generated enough agency for black people to demand participation in their own labeling — an unusual example of a limited *cooperative* co-construction of agency between the two parties — the goals of black America and much of white America have been drastically different in determining what it means to be black. Settling on a name, then, that satisfied both parties has been difficult — and complicated. What was meant for bad by white America's labeling of black America at times was dialectically appropriated by black America for purposes of good *and* bad constructs of identity.

The reference to black people as 'colored', for example, developed class implications for black America, which not only separated black people from white people, but in addition turned black people against themselves. An early black intellectual in the United States, Hosea Easton, wrote about this name-titling dialectic when he documented in 1837 how the non-slave black elite of the North, who liked to travel, coopted the word 'colored' and

added ‘travelers’ to it, so that they became ‘colored travelers’ (Pryor 2016, p. 203). This became a self-made title to designate their financial ability to be mobile, to move about in the northern areas of America. Still, the context behind the forming of this new title was to complain about the poor treatment black people who could afford to travel experienced when they — the colored travelers — walked alongside white parents accompanied by their children. Their economic status or indications of middle class did not matter. The colored travelers were called ‘niggers’ — the most ubiquitous of all the titles personifying disdain for black America. They were yelled at with statements like ‘see [the] nigger’s thick lips’ (Ibid., p. 204) and other nigger-related insults hurled at them.

The word nigger, spelled ‘niger’ in its Latin origins, began innocuously enough. The word simply represented a color, black, as recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), as did the word ‘negro’, which meant black in Portuguese and Spanish, and was a derivation of the word ‘niger’. Today the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines nigger as a word that ‘ranks as almost certainly the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English, a term expressive of hatred and bigotry . . . [it is] used as an insulting and contemptuous term for a black person’. In its current-use definition for the word nigger, the OED concurs with Merriam-Webster: ‘This word is one of the most controversial in English and is liable to be considered offensive or taboo in almost all contexts (even when used as a self-description)’.

The word itself became a potent symbol of *anti*-blackness and *anti*-black personhood. The word’s development also spotlighted the agency white America wielded against black America in taking charge of the latter’s identity formation. Further, I argue here that white America’s multi-faceted use of the word nigger, reinventing its meaning at every turn, has aided white America’s — and that word’s — growing power to shape social structure and establish black-caste status in America. I also contend that such racialized machinations in the construction of black identity influenced the emergence of a black gangster class, gang members’ use of the word nigger, and street

gangster attempts at the co-construction of their own identity, along the lines of the uncooperative co-construction of agency concept introduced earlier.

Very quickly, the word nigger became synonymous with the word slave and the title endured even after slaves became free (Pryor 2016). As described by one historian, ‘nigger latched on [black people] like a shackle’ (Ibid., p. 205). Ultimately, nigger was a word that inscribed onto black people an un-American status (Ibid.). Another interesting aspect of the word nigger was its dialectical use within the lower classes of white America. That segment of society employed the word nigger to not only point out how ‘deficient’ was the state of black America, but to shore up their own class-based vulnerabilities (Ibid.). Hosea Easton offers an example of this dialectic phenomenon by showing how the nigger word was taught to white youth by parents and teachers as a way of training them to not misbehave if they wanted to avoid the risk of being downgraded in their social standing, that is having ‘no more credit than a nigger’ (1837, pp. 41). Easton also reported that white children would be frightened by white adults into believing that bad behavior could cause them to be forced to ‘sit with niggers’ in what those adults called the ‘nigger seat’ and that the misbehaving children might even be kidnapped by ‘the old nigger’, whoever that might be. White children were told that misbehaving could lead to them becoming ugly, ‘worse than a little nigger’ (Ibid.)

The word nigger was weaponized by white America to label, to publicly berate, to limit the mobility of black America by making it so unpleasant to place themselves into public space (Ibid.). This was, according to poet and scholar Donald Martin Carter, an example of a way to force the invisibility of black people (2010).

White America also engaged in a type of reverse uncooperative co-construction of agency. In this case, black people were the nonparticipating party in a co-construction process that was disingenuous and dialectical. Northern whites who uttered the nigger word did not claim that word as part

of *their* vocabulary. Rather, they would speak as if mimicking black people, 'ventriloquizing' (Ibid., p. 225) black patterns of English. Historian Pryor named that tactic and the other anti-black arguments made by white America regarding the nigger word as a 'sleight of hand' (p. 227). Pryor considered it a reinvention of the nigger word to distance white Americans from the word's conceptualized beginnings as a weapon against black people. By attributing the use of the word nigger to black people, it proved to white America that black people were acknowledging they were, in fact, niggers and that black Americans therefore were all the bad things that white people had defined the word nigger to mean. By black people using the nigger word, it also displayed to white America the ignorance and weakness of black people to use a word that so insulted them, that had even been used to chase black people from public spaces, as well as threaten the well-being of black people. Finally, those white people who would openly admit to the use of the word nigger, justified such use by stating they were expressing a word that black people used to describe themselves, that they were only repeating what they called a representation of black English (Ibid.). Unwittingly, black America was used by white America in the endeavor to co-construct acts of agency that provided excuses to help white America evade responsibility for any violence and societal unrest caused by the spread of the use of that racial epithet.

White America has created its own form of what I am calling 'white English', where harsh and racialized historical intent is coded into the nation's socially accepted language for describing black gang members. In that context, the word 'thug' has become white America's new nigger word for the twenty-first century. *Ebony Magazine*, a venerable black American publication since 1945, published an article in 2015 with this declarative headline: '"Thug" Is the New N-Word' (Coleman).

For much of black America, then, the uncomfortable internal negotiation to co-exist with white America's titles has been centered around answering this question for themselves and for others: *Who* are black

people? Meanwhile, I argue that white America's effort to control the identity formation of black people has long been centered on an entirely different question: *What* are black people, if they are people at all?

4.2.1. Black Bodies and the Avatar Effect

As demonstrated by blackface minstrelsy in Chapter Three, black people's bodies have been richly imagined by white America. Objectified black bodies have served as a justification for slavery and as a shield from moral judgment for the imposition of slavery. Branding black Americans as something other than human beings, as apes, as coons, as animals, allowed their condemnation by white America to escape a full-fledged morality critique. Still, a dominant legacy for the United States, I argue, is that this emphasis by white America on black bodies stripped of their personhood has led to an elaborate configuration of racialized political, `legal, ideological, and social constructions that have informed the very development of America and its people — *all* its people.

Michel Foucault in the first chapter — 'The Body of the Condemned' — of his classic work, *Discipline and Punish* (2019), argues that public displays of physical abuse of the political outcasts of a society are allowed by rulers of that society to encourage obedience and trauma in those outcasts, and in others who observe or hear about the physical torture. Politics and the law in America allowed terrifying body objectification via violence against black America to be legally and culturally codified, such as acted out by the Ku Klux Klan *after* slavery ended. One result of that codification has been an anti-citizen characterization of black people. Here I argue that anti-citizen characterization has become fixed in American institutions and fixed in the nation's dominant episteme of a racialized depiction of blackness.

Slave codes — laws concocted to define black persons as slaves, to control the behavior of slaves, as well as to govern the slave relationship with plantation owners — have had a brutal history considering the way slave

codes have been recast over the years. What began as slave codes — or '*le code noir'* (Stewart 1995, p. 228), as initially labeled in Louisiana — became black codes when slavery ended (Santos and Bickel 2017). Black codes then became Jim Crow laws after the Reconstruction Era (Ibid.). That is when white society shifted strategies by maintaining a *de facto* slave status for black America, since it was no longer legal to own slaves yet black people were still encumbered by the same disdain and fear accorded their former identity as slaves. This de facto slave status was reflected in the legal system, which was used to control what black people could or could not do and thus continued to mandate them to an inferior societal status. There were restrictions about where they could travel and how — at the back of the bus, for instance; where they could or could not be educated; where they could or could not live; where they could or could not drink water from a fountain or could or could not use a restroom. White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan were allowed to engage in extralegal activities, lynching, castrating, and burning black people to death (Young 2005). Since the latter part of the twentieth century, civil gang injunctions (CGIs) have emerged, which are laws primarily targeting black street gang members to control their movement in and near the neighborhoods where they reside, to control with whom they associate and how many people are allowed to stand with them, to impose early-hour curfews, and other highly restrictive rules governing their day-to-day lives (Grogger 2002; Hennigan and Sloane 2013). A CGI violation can lead to the banishment of a black gang youth by virtue of his imprisonment. Here I argue that the CGI law is a modern-day recast of slave codes, black codes, and Jim Crow laws. These codes and laws offer grim insight into how white America established a corporeal identity for black people.

South Carolina and Virginia were two of the first territories in the American colonies to adopt slave codes. Colonial legislators from South Carolina and Virginia, however, modeled their codes on slave statutes developed in Barbados, a Caribbean Island under British rule in the 1600s (Little 1993; Nicholson 1994; Rugemer 2013). Certain Barbadians even liked

to call the island ‘Little England’, as reported by British novelist Anthony Trollope, who had visited Barbados in 1859 and wrote about what he saw there (Trollope as cited in Tree 1977, p.1). But that nickname referenced by Trollope referred to the white plantocracy’s perspective of Barbados, a dominant class that owned the abundance of sugarcane plantations in Barbados where black slaves had been the primary source of labor. Black people, however, related more to Barbados’ historical designation: Britain’s first slave society.

Slavery brought with it an ever-present fear of violent slave rebellion. That fear quickly translated into an intense focus by British plantation owners on the need to control the behavior, possessions, movement, and the thoughts, if possible, of black people. That captivation with controlling slaves inspired the unofficially named Barbados Slave Act of 1661, officially titled *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes*. This Act became the first of the slave codes in the Caribbean, though its reach extended far beyond the islands of the Caribbean. That 1661 collection of codes made its way across the Atlantic Ocean to South Carolina and Virginia first, and then spread to all the American colonies (Rugemer 2013; Handler 2016; Nicholson 1994; Sirmans 1962).

Quite a few of the original settlers in South Carolina were from Barbados. Sir John Colleton, a British 1st Baronet who made Barbados his retirement home, was one of the early British settlers from Barbados who secured a proprietary charter for South Carolina (Sirmans 1962). During that period, it was common for the British Crown to give away tracts of land to favored aristocrats in the New World for profit-making plantation development (Tree 1977). This was called securing a proprietary charter. Colleton, one such beneficiary for South Carolina as well as Barbados, even exchanged correspondence with John Locke, known as the father of liberalism who propounded the cause of humanity’s inalienable rights to life, liberty and property. Yet the Colleton-Locke correspondence is believed to have occurred while Locke was co-authoring with Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl

of Shaftesbury, the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina that included the statement: 'Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves.' (as cited in Sirmans, p. 463; Hsueh 2002; Isenberg 2016). Historian Sirmans believed that Locke and Cooper had gotten a little help from Sir Colleton in drafting that particular provision of their constitutional document, considering Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* (1661) demonstrated, rather than proclaimed, British colonialists' absolute power over their slaves in Barbados:

> If any Negro Man or Woman slave offer any violence to any Christian [white European] by striking or the like [,] the Negro Slave for his and her first offence. . . would be severely whipped by the Constable. . . For his second offence of that nature [,] he shall be severely whipped [,] his nose slitt [,] and be burned in some part of his face with a hot iron.[6]

Twenty-seven years later, when the Barbados Assembly passed an updated law for slave codes, the name was shortened to *An Act for the Governing of Negroes* and offered more insight into the use of the facial burning. That adaptation of slave law made it clear that at least one of the goals of such harsh treatment was to ensure that the slave was '*branded* (italics mine) in the forehead with a hot iron, that the mark thereof may remain' (Hall 1764, p. 118). Such torture literally and permanently branded the slave to provide a visible measure of that slave's history and character to all who saw him. Some three-hundred-plus years later, a white member of the Los Angeles Police Department, Narcotics Detective Steven Pollock, mimicked this branding idea. He proudly used his metal flashlight in South-Central Los Angeles to bash in the forehead hundreds of low-income black men, members of the black gangster class, with the intent of leaving a gash over the left eyebrow that required stitches. The stitches made the scar permanent, and it also positioned those black men to be immediately identified as having been in contact with Officer Pollock. It was proof of such

[6] Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* was transcribed from an image of the handwritten Old English original 1661 document, made accessible to the author on 22 September 2021 by the National Archives, London. The words 'Negro, Man, and Woman' are capitalized and 'slitt' is spelled with two 't's'. Commas were also included for clarity since they did not exist in the original document.

black men having had to pay a painful, disfiguring price for that contact with Pollock, a reputation he relished, whether those black men had violated any laws. I learned about this practice from a black man named Cornel Ward, who was both a college football star at California State University at Northridge in southern California during the day, and the *literate* night-time top assistant to notorious crack-cocaine dealer Rick Ross, who no one knew was *illiterate*. Ward also knew many members of the black gangster class from SouthCentral who were in his fraternity of scarred men. I have interviewed both Ward and Ross multiple times over a thirty-year period, 1993 to 2023, and witnessed the scar that required thirty-three stitches.

The slave code that dictated the branding of slaves was only one of a long list of slave codes developed in Barbados from which white American colonialists found themselves 'code borrowing', as labeled by legal scholar Bradley J. Nicholson (1994, p. 41). His argument was that too many scholars assumed white colonialists created slave codes that were improvised and thus indigenous to the specific experience of the American colonies (Ibid.). Generally, those scholars were wrong. Much of what was in the first Barbadian slave codes of 1661 was replicated in the slave codes in colonial America. Although some adjustments to Barbadian-inspired codes were made in America from year to year because Barbadian culture supported a few differences in the approach to slavery and the treatment of slaves than what evolved among the colonialists. One such distinction, as argued by virtually all historians who write about the early days of colonial American slavery, is between custom and law (Rugemer 2013; Sirmans 1962; Little 1993; Handler 2016; Handler and Reilly 2017). Barbados relied on custom to define what it meant to be a slave and what it meant to be a slave owner. For the white Barbadian proprietor such an understanding about the very definition of a slave and thus the fundamental meaning of slavery did not have to be codified into law. Slaves and their children were *understood* to be owned by plantation overseers and to maintain very minimal rights. This was the custom in Barbados (Ibid.). Still, there was great concern among plantation owners about the need to control their slave population. The fear

of slave insubordination and rebellion was constant. So, that aspect of the relationship between slaves and their owners was inscribed into the laws of Barbados.

However, American colonialists, according to these historians, wanted the *law*, not custom, to support their basic definition of slavery (Ibid.). They wanted it to be clear that slave owners had absolute power over their slaves and that this ownership right was in perpetuity — once a slave, always a slave, with a generational lineage connected to the mother. Every child of a slave mother automatically became a slave. Further, slaves would belong to every generation of the slave owner's family, unless the owner decided to sell the slave (Ibid.). As purported by many historians, the *law* prevailed as a slave-defining instrument for American colonialists, not *custom*, as was practiced in Barbados.

The British plantocracy needed two primary categories of labor to sustain their plantations: servants and slaves. On the same day, 27 September 1661, that the Barbados Assembly passed *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes*, this Assembly also passed *An Act for the Good Governing of Servants and Ordaining the Rights Between Masters and Servants* (Handler and Reilly 2017). All servants were understood to be white. And as time passed and the servant law was amended in 1688 to give the 'Justices of the Peace' (Hall 1764, p. 378) the authority to issue warrants against servants who did not finish their term of work, a new name for the servants' law would assuage any ambiguity as to their racialized identity. That law was called *An Act to Govern White Servants*.

The two Acts legislatively approved on the same day accomplished something that was nominal in terms of the implicit intent of the laws to define the occupations and life circumstances of servants and slaves, but profoundly significant in terms of how those definitions were racialized. The Acts of 1661 literally codified into law the separation of whiteness from blackness. And with that separation, the objectification of what it meant to be a black body and the humanizing of what it meant to *not* be a black body was

established for hundreds of years to come. This was true in Barbados, and so it became true in the American colonies.

A good starting place for understanding the overt and covert racialized meaning insinuated into both Acts is to compare some of the rights granted the white servant with the manifest lack of rights afforded the black slave. The titles of the two Acts begin to tell the story. The Act governing servants with its phrase 'ordaining the rights between masters and servants' explicitly states in its title that there are rights being decreed that involve how both white servants *and* their white masters interact. The title for the Act governing slaves never mentions 'rights' because slaves were not entitled to any rights. As historian Edward Rugemer states in his work examining the development of white supremacy and race in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, 'The 1661 Slave Act did not attribute any positive rights to slaves whatsoever' (2013, p. 439). Slaves, alias Negroes, or Negroes, alias slaves, were to be controlled by a special category of rules because, according to an introductory paragraph of the slave codes:

> The said Negroes . . . are of barbarous, wild and savage nature, and such as renders them wholly unqualified to be governed by the Laws, Customs and Practices of our Nation [Barbados]: It therefore becoming absolutely necessary, that such other Constitutions, Laws and Orders, should be in this Island framed and enacted for the good regulating or ordering of them, as may both refrain the disorders, rapines and inhumanities to which they are naturally prone and inclined (Hall 1764, pp. 112-113).

On the other hand, *An Act to Govern White Servants* was passed in the Assembly twelve years after the original law, *An Act for the Good Governing of Servants, and Ordaining the Rights Between Masters and Servants*, because the original law did not even provide law enforcement with the authority 'to oblige' runaway servants to complete their indentured term of service or to issue arrest warrants to secure their return (Ibid., p. 378).

In adopting the Barbados Slave codes of 1661, the American colonies followed suit with the same racialized separation of occupations: white people were servants and Negroes were slaves (Ibid.). In 1672 and 1673,

South Carolina's Grand Council, a counterpart to the Barbados Assembly, created laws for punishment of misdeeds by white indentured servants that simply lengthened the timeframe of their service contract (Ibid.). Whereas Negro slaves had no predetermined off ramp from being enslaved. They were already slaves for life. Servants could bring their disputes with their masters to court and sue for his or her freedom, though the chances of winning were slim. Still, white servants had the right to take their grievances with their master to court. Slaves had no rights to challenge a master in the courtroom for any reason. It took until 1831 before a slave was even allowed to testify in court against a white person of any stature. A white servant guilty of theft of the belongings of his master could expect to endure two additional years of indentured service. A slave caught stealing from his master and was convicted of this crime could be put to death and often his body would be subjected to castration, being burned alive, decapitation, and 'gibbeting' (Handler and Reilly 2017, p. 45). With gibbeting, a slave's body was allowed to hang from a gallows-type structure for public display (Ibid.), much like what happened from the late 1800s in America until the early 1950s when recently freed blacks and then long-time free black men, women, and children were regularly lynched by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups and left hanging from trees.

From the beginning of the separation of white indentured servants from that of black slaves, low-income whites have been in a constant struggle with the white elite of American society to be seen socially at a level above black America, as described by Daniel Hundley in 1860, a member of the white elite: 'Everywhere they are just alike, possess pretty much the same characteristics, the same vernacular, the same boorishness, and the same habits. . .everywhere, Poor White Trash' (as cited in Isenberg 2016, p. 135). Members of the northern white elite were particularly disdainful of poor white southerners, given their belief that such whites came from 'the scum of Europe' (Ibid., p. 176), that is from 'brothels and bridewells [prisons]' (Ibid.). Still, black bodies were objectified in ways that white servant bodies or poor white southerners never experienced. But here I argue the way ownership of

black slaves was expressed in Barbadian as well as American law, further embedded ‘the what’ rather than ‘the who’ construction of black people into the imaginations of white colonialists and eventually white America.

On 29 April 1668, the Barbados Assembly passed *An Act Declaring the Negro-Slaves of this Island, to be Real Estate*. This Act ‘declared and put in a certainty’ that ‘Negro-slaves’ (Hall 1764, p. 64) — the hyphen connecting Negro to slave was written this way in the law — were to be categorized as property and thus treated as property for inheritances and other purposes. Slaves in Louisiana were also subjected to a similar law in 1724 that fixed the slave to the plantation, making them a form of immovable property (Stewart 1995). With few exceptions, slaves between the ages of fourteen and sixty could be taken by a debtor only if that plantation on which the slaves worked was also being confiscated by the debtor (Ibid.). These laws made slaves what was labeled freehold property, instead of chattel property. With freehold slavery the slave was irrevocably attached to the plantation, the land. With chattel slavery, the slave was irrevocably attached to the master of the plantation (Sirmans 1962). Chattel slavery eventually became the slavery-method-of-choice in the American colonies. But both freehold slavery and chattel slavery were representations of black bodies as property, as American ‘built’ infrastructure of sorts. In essence, America’s built infrastructure also included in its codification into law body infrastructure, that is, black-body infrastructure. Such a designation helped to concretize ‘the what’ status of black bodies for white America. Of course, these issues did not apply to white servants. In fact, with time, black slaves took over the tasks of white servants, though they did not receive the corresponding rights of white servants (Handler and Reilly 2017). They were still slaves, after all. But what started as two 1661 laws creating a racialized fissure between white servants and Negro slaves had become a cultural chasm nearly two-hundred years later when Supreme Court Justice Roger Brooke Taney declared, as mentioned previously, in his Dred Scott ruling that:

> . . . . a perpetual and impassable barrier was *intended* (Taney's italics) to be erected between the white race and the one which they had reduced to slavery, and governed as subjects with absolute despotic power, and which they looked upon as so far below them in the scale of created beings' (Judgement in the U.S. Supreme Court Case, Record Group 267).

Judge Taney, however, was correct about one important aspect of the Dred Scott decision. The barrier between the races was indeed *intended*. But how did that separation endure? Here I focus on two intertwining ways in which I argue white ruling class agency has been deployed to define, control, and contain black people, thus contributing for many years to the maintenance of black-white separation in America. One such way is what I am calling the 'avatar effect'. My contention is the avatar effect provides what has proven to be a very effective prototype tool for cultural reproduction and ideological sustainability derived from the white imagining and objectifying of black bodies. The second way is an examination of the influence 'values infrastructure' has had on the social construction of custom and law in America (Cook as cited in Vermaas et al 2008, p. 265). Values infrastructure, as described by professor of philosophy Noam Cook, represents what the social beliefs of a group are and how those beliefs can shape what is considered brick-and-mortar infrastructure and possibly the actual design and placement of certain types of infrastructure (Ibid.). But I extend that literature beyond the built environment to unveil other powerful impacts of the values-infrastructure concept on the building of a racialized system of social relations in America.

White colonialists in America, I contend, were really the first to imagine the digital concept of the avatar hundreds of years ago, though the internet did not exist, and they did not call what they were doing the construction of black avatars. But that is exactly what they constructed and what white America has continued to construct for four centuries. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word 'avatar', relating to the digital age, as 'an electronic image that represents [a computer user] and may be manipulated

by a computer user'. This idea allows people to go online and create virtual entities of themselves, which are called avatars. Those new virtual entities are symbolic representations of whatever characteristics their creators desire the avatar to portray. Another formal, more generic definition is also provided for 'avatar' by Merriam-Webster: 'Someone who represents a type of person, an idea, or a quality'. Finally, there is a third meaning for 'avatar' related to reincarnation: 'the human or animal form of a Hindu god on earth'.

White America, I argue, has used the avatar concept as a prototype for the black body, providing the contours of a 'type of person', as described by Merriam-Webster's second definition, that could be filled with whatever meaning the white dominant class needed that black body to represent at any moment in history. This is also in accordance with the first Merriam-Webster definition of avatar. In essence, the black avatar became and still is a fertile space for a white racialized imagination and use of agency to create an ever-morphing type of black prototype that white America believes is necessary to serve white America's historical self-interest.

My contention is the black avatar's power as a tool is propelled by an intrinsic characteristic: it is malleable. It is a tool that can twist and turn with the times and thus adapt racialized meaning formation to historical context. For four centuries, white America's imagination has reinvented the nature of the objectification of the black body, again and again. Thereby demonstrating an imagination that is malleable and strategic in its branding — literally and figuratively — of black America.

To illustrate, what it meant to be a slave was constructed and thus defined in some detail by the slave codes. That even included what slaves could wear — one plain cloth outfit that had to last an entire year (Nicholson 1994; Rugemer 2013). And, of course, such constructing included limitations regarding what Negroes *could be* by figuratively branding them *to be* the core members of a slave society. Permission to burn a scar onto their forehead like cattle was also a literal branding of Negroes as slaves, which was justified because the Negro slave avatar was identified as being related to

apes, coons, and beasts. That animal-inspired identity justified the description of slaves in the codes as ‘savage’, an avatar branding of Negroes that became codified into law, reenforcing racist ideology, which aided in the inscribing of racism into America’s cultural beliefs. Such white constructions of black America became derogating stereotypes and, as posited by political theorist Iris Marion Young, their societal prevalence caused them to be ‘not noticed as contestable’ (1990, p. 59). In other words, black-avatars-as-black-stereotypes became normalized in the culture, which transformed them, with time, into colonial and then American unchallenged custom. As blackface performance showed, racialized custom, which supported the literal countenance of negative on-stage stereotyping of Negroes, was so culturally potent as to establish a new form of American entertainment: minstrelsy. Further, blackface minstrelsy, as discussed in Chapter Three, became the most popular type of entertainment for Americans, lasting more than one-hundred years (Johnson 2014). These theatrical productions provided an even broader platform for normalizing black stereotypes and embedding racism into American custom and culture.

The avatars of minstrelsy, an ideal vehicle for the construction of fantasy Negroes, proved malleable as historical context changed after the Civil War. The theatrical archetypes of would-be black America evolved from the pre-Civil War harmless, lazy, and illiterate ‘Sambo’ and ‘Zip Coon’ minstrel characters to the post-Civil War coon-shouters — grease-painted white women mimicking razor-wielding dangerous black males while singing threatening messages of violence. The malleable shift in the avatar of such alarming blackface characters reflected a changing, more hostile white sentiment toward Negro-slaves-turned-black-freemen after emancipation. Resentment had set in among America’s white populace. The resentment was spurred by a racist ideology that purported newly freed black people, who were demanding a range of civil rights, were not deserving of the receipt of those rights because they were not worthy candidates for American citizenship.

In modern times, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the avatar effect was able to utilize its malleable trait to focus on a new category of black man to demonize: black males labeled as street-gang members. But why did the black-avatar-as-black-gangster image emerge as the newest black symbolic savage? Here I argue there are at least a few reasons why the black gangster class has become the latest target of white racial imaginaries in America and thus a most compelling avatar. Those reasons include historical constitutional circumstance, and the significance of black-body infrastructure on values infrastructure and cultural customs in America.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States eliminated slavery, but with one exception: a person convicted of a crime and imprisoned can be legally treated as a slave or indentured servant. With the advent of the nation's mass incarceration policy in the 1980s to the present — where men of color, particularly black men, have been disproportionally criminalized and imprisoned over the past forty-plus years — black prisoners have reached five times the incarceration rate of white prisoners in state prisons (Nembhard and Robin 2021). Further, the black gangster class has emerged as a dominant segment of the black prisoner-slave population in California, which prompted the largest state prison organization in the United States — the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) — to initiate a policy of targeting gang leaders for long-term (ten or more years) solitary confinement (Associated Press 2015). CDCR's reported goal was to control prison gangs by cutting off the membership from its leaders. But once cut off from gang leadership, prisoner-slave avatars are often forced to serve another function: like the slaves of hundreds of years ago, when black bodies were considered part of the plantation infrastructure, so too were black bodies considered part of the prison industrial complex in the United States. This is an industry that earned $9.3 billion from 2016-2021 (Industry Research Reports 2021). More than four-thousand companies, including American Airlines, Starbucks, McDonalds, and Wal-Mart, use prison labor that ranges from no salary being paid by corporations to prisoners, which is the situation in Texas, to an average wage of $0.08 to

$0.15 paid per hour to prisoners housed in other state prisons (Gutierrez 2020).

My contention is the avatar effect and its capacity to repeatedly reimagine blackness in the worst ways has contributed to the embedding of racialized values into America's culture and body politic. It became the country's custom to consider black people 'the others' in America, a less-than resident rather than a proud citizen of the United States. President Richard Nixon, as stated earlier, blamed much of the nation's problems on black people and was determined to find a way to somehow rid the nation of that problem without revealing his strategy. Nixon's war-on-drugs initiative led to a mass incarceration policy largely focused on imprisoning black men, with black street gangsters eventually becoming a leading cohort of America's prison population. President Nixon's belief system about black America reflects, I would argue, the values infrastructure of the nation, which nurtures a core component of racialized bias socially constructed over hundreds of years.

National custom, which began as the big difference between how Negro slaves were conceived in Barbados versus the role law played in defining slaves across the American colonies, has now paradoxically become a commonplace element in racialized social and political structures of the United States. The nation's values infrastructure, which I posit represents the nation's racialized customs, influences a great deal in America, including social relations between black and white Americans, as well as the making and implementing of law. America's values infrastructure or customs have also had an extraordinary influence on black and white America in another way. It has encouraged a hybrid system of socioeconomic classification, that is, a class within a caste system in terms of nationhood for black and white America. This has provoked, I would argue, an exercise of inventive agency among the black gangster class that has led to unintended consequences for black-street gangsters and the communities where they reside, as well as for mainstream white society. This topic is examined in the next section.

4.3. American-Made Outlaws and Empires

On 15 January 1979, renowned African American writer James Baldwin spoke at the University of California at Berkeley. He shared an anecdote that occurred during a live radio broadcast where he hosted an interview between Malcolm X, who was a celebrated human rights activist and Muslim minister, and a student who had been involved in what was known as direct-action sit-ins, where a person occupies a public space and refuses to move as a tactic in pursuit of some form of social change. As recounted by Baldwin, Malcolm X asked the young civil rights protestor, 'If you are a citizen, why do you have to fight for your civil rights? If you are fighting for your civil rights, that means you are not a citizen' (Natividad 2020). Later in Baldwin's Berkeley speech, he gave his own version of Malcolm X's American citizenship conundrum:

> They needed us [black people] for labor and sport. Now they can't get rid of us. We cannot be exiled, and we cannot be accommodated. So, something's got to give. The machinery of this country operates day in and day out, hour by hour, until this hour, to keep a nigger in his place (Ibid.).

These two critiques of issues afflicting the cause of black American citizenship — or lack thereof — offer overlapping focal points providing insight into an examination of caste, class, nationhood, and citizenship in America for black people. Malcolm X, for instance, makes the case that black people are mistaken if they believe they are entitled to citizenship rights in America or believe they are already authentic citizens. His logic: since black people find themselves, after residing for hundreds of years in American, still socially positioned such that they must fight for basic civil rights, they cannot possibly be considered bona-fide citizens of America. Given that logic, he implies that black Americans have no inherent entitlement to citizen-related rights. So, if not citizens, *what* are black people in America?

Baldwin poses another frightening dilemma for both black and white Americans: that there is no satisfactory solution to the presence of black people in America. Thus, the *what*-are-black-Americans' question is

answered by Baldwin's belief in an oxymoronic status of black people: that is, black America is positioned in society to remain permanently in racially oppressive limbo. This would be so because America's values infrastructure, as I have defined the concept, would maintain that white America is obliged 'to keep a nigger in his place' using the avatar tool for black identity formation, the institution of law for prisoner-slave control, and the embrace of a social heritage concept to support white supremacy and privilege. Here I argue that America's values infrastructure has contributed to the maintenance of the nation's social heritage, an important factor in the creation of caste status and discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Caste status, though, is what the institution of slavery enshrined into American culture and custom for its black, as well as for its white populace.

There are eight pillars comprising the 'organizing principles' for the evolution of a caste society, as described by Isabel Wilkerson (2020, p. 104) in her highly acclaimed book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. In this publication, Wilkerson researched caste practices in India, Germany, and the United States. Here I focus on the American application and experience of caste, as reported by Wilkerson. I have relied on Wilkerson's caste critique as a rationale for my practice throughout this thesis of using monolithic categorizations of both black and white America. Wilkerson's eight pillars of caste are:

(1) Divinity-inspired ordering of humanity as rationalized by a reliance on the laws of nature that placed black America at the bottom of a 'human pyramid willed by God' (Ibid.), which 'suited [black people] to the degraded position they were destined to occupy' (Ibid., p. 103).

(2) 'Heritability' (Ibid., p. 105), as Wilkerson informs us, is defined at birth — the person's societal ranking and role to be played in society — and cannot be changed. Caste status is 'immutable, primordial, fixed from birth to death, and thus regarded as inescapable' (as cited by Davis et al in Wilkerson, p. 106). Inherited caste status was also passed along in America via the mother

slave to her descendants. All slaves and their progenies were intended to be slaves in perpetuity. Wilkerson's argument is that post-slave-era black America still is unable to escape caste status because of a low position in the nation's 'social hierarchy' that is an unfortunate birthright (Ibid.). That social hierarchy is demonstrated, according to Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J. Cottrol, both legal scholars, by how little the cultural subset of middle-classness and financial accomplishment means to black America:

> Like the Hindu caste system, the black-white distinction in the United States has supplied a social hierarchy determined at birth, and arguably immutable, even by achievement. Blacks became like a group of American untouchables, ritually separated from the rest of the population' (as cited by Diamond and Cottrol in Wilkerson, pp. 106-107).

A black Oscar-winning actor was wrongly frisked in public by store employees for being suspected of shoplifting. A black National Football League player was thrown to the ground by police officers and strangled to the point of unconsciousness for getting into a verbal dispute with a motorist who had thrown coffee on the football player's car. A retired black male tennis star was tackled and knocked down by an undercover police officer as he was checking his cell phone for messages, leaning against the front wall of an upscale hotel where he was staying (Ibid.; Spain 2017). The class status of those very-wealthy black celebrities did not prevent them from suffering some of the worst manifestations of America's caste system.

(3) Restricting marriage and mating to those within the same caste, which is known as 'endogamy' (p. 109), serves as a difficult-to-be-obeyed principle for sustaining caste structure. Virginia in 1691 was the first American colony to outlaw black-white marriages. That lawmaking spread throughout the colonies and stayed in effect in forty-one out of fifty states for three centuries, being finally outlawed in 1967 by the United States Supreme Court (Ibid.). Punishment was also used to discourage sexual relations between the white upper caste and the black lower caste. In 1630, a white man named Hugh Davis was whipped in front of slaves for having sex with a black female slave (Ibid.). By 1640, it was the black woman, though impregnated at the time by a

white man, who was whipped for the infraction (Ibid.). Still, most rapes of black female slaves were ignored, and punishment was not administered to the white rapists.

(4) Maintaining 'purity' among the white dominant caste was essential, according to the dictates of caste structure, by keeping the black lower caste as far from the white upper caste as possible (Ibid., p. 115). For many years, the black lower caste was literally considered a pollutant, which accounts for white America not allowing black America to live near them, for instance, or their children to be educated in the same classrooms or even to share community pools with them or to be near the beach where white Americans vacationed. In Heather McGhee's bestselling book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (2021), she writes of how a predominantly white middle-class community literally drained a neighborhood pool to never be used again when laws changed, and they were not permitted to exclude black children and adults from enjoying the use of the community center's ostensibly public pool. The concept of white purity also involved a measurement of the amount of Negro or African blood within a person, which was the basis for not only defining what it meant to be black or nonwhite, but what it meant to be white or nonblack. At one time, the state of Oregon, which is in the northwest region of the United States, legally defined a nonwhite individual to be anyone with 'one-quarter Negro, Chinese or Kanaka blood or more than one-half Indian blood' (Ibid., 124). Georgia, a southern state, was unequivocal in defining whiteness: one had to have 'no ascertainable trace of Negro, African, West Indian, Asiatic blood' (Ibid.).

(5) 'Occupational hierarchy' (Ibid., p. 131) determined that the black lower caste was employed in the most undesirable, low-paying jobs. Black people had to know their place because their place was 'preordained', according to Wilkerson's research findings (Ibid., 136). As framed by historian Bertram Doyle in the 1930s, 'A Negro may become a locomotive fireman, but never an engineer' (Ibid.). Or as more directly proclaimed in the lyrics of the 1930s song *That's Why Darkies Were Born*: 'Someone had to pick the cotton,

someone had to pick the corn, someone had to slave and be able to sing, that's why darkies were born. Brothers, sisters, what must be, must be. Though the balance is wrong, still your faith must be strong. Accept your destiny'. Even very low-income members of the dominant white caste would not carry water that they themselves intended to drink for fear of being seen as functioning, occupationally, as a slave, who would have been required to carry the water for everyone else (Ibid.; Roediger 2007).

(6) Dehumanization of the lower caste, as pointed out by Wilkerson, demands commitment and persistence by the dominant caste to stigmatize a group of people as being something other than human when there is visible, tangible evidence of their humanity (2020). To encourage a dominant-group illusion that overcame reality, the dehumanizing strategy required that the entirety of black America be diminished, instead of dehumanizing one black individual at a time. It became a tactical shortcut because if the group was demonized, then that automatically stigmatized each member of the group. This tactic also served another purpose: it elevated the upper caste while diminishing the lower caste in the socially constructed separation of who was human and who was not (Ibid.). In essence, black America, the lower caste, was symbolically 'quarantined' (p. 141) from the upper caste, which created impactful 'programming' of the upper caste to limit exposure to what could be experienced of black humanity (Ibid.). Thus, American society overall put more credence in the racialized imagination of the upper caste's disdainful judgment of lower-caste black America than in the reality of black life and black personhood.

(7) Terror and cruelty were utilized by the dominant caste to enforce the customs and laws that defined and controlled the socially quarantined black lower caste. For breaches of the caste system, for stepping 'beyond his station' (Ibid., p. 157), such as, running away from their slave site, seeking better economic opportunities as ostensible free men by joining a union, or even attempting to vote in the South, black people of the lower casts were severely beaten or, in some instances, lynched. The goal was to make the

absolute power that the ‘superior’ white upper caste held in American society an omnipresent feature in the day-to-day lives of what was considered the inferior black lower caste (Wilkerson 2020). It was meant for the black lower caste to never feel safe.

(8) Inherent superiority was linked to a type of sovereignty — a supreme agency — that commands lower-caste black subservience. Inherent superiority and inherent inferiority in America were routinely reinforced by the public pedagogical entertainment industry, the law, and rules of behavior influenced by social customs. The ignorant, violent, and indolent stereotypical characters devised by blackface minstrelsy stage performers and theatrical writers to ridicule black America, which was popular entertainment starting in the early 1800s and lasted for one-hundred years or more, was one such example of the inculcation of black inferiority and white superiority into the national culture. Images representing black inferiority and white superiority continued when Hollywood movies took over in the 1920s as the newest form of popular American entertainment. Overweight black women were often cast to be pictured near or embracing waif-like white women (Ibid.). If the black actress was not fat enough, she was stuffed with padding to ensure that her comparison to the white female actress was unflattering (Ibid.). Black actors had to learn how to speak in an illiterate, uneducated dialect (Ibid.). These were the only roles available to black actors. Laws also supported the American superiority-inferiority dichotomy, which was personified by the infamous Supreme Court Justice Roger Brooke Taney 1857 ruling: ‘They [‘Negroes’] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect’ (Judgement in the U.S. Supreme Court Case, Record Group 267). This inferiority-superiority principle of caste was no better represented than in a troubled musing about the afterlife issued by a white American woman in South Carolina who questioned her pastor, ‘Is it possible that any of my slaves could go to Heaven and I must see them there?’ (Wilkerson 2020, p. 164).

Isabel Wilkerson's rendering of the organizing principles of caste is brilliant work. Yet I would argue there is more to be understood about the derivation of the American caste concept and the key role of social heritage, which I present as a more fulsome labeling of Wilkerson's heritability principle. Social heritage, as defined by early scholars in this field, including anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), considered a founder of cultural anthropology, political theorist Wallas Graham (1921), and sociology professor William Fielding Ogburn (1922), collectively provide a clear and concise definition: social heritage is based on human endeavors over centuries; it is what humans teach and learn from each other. Thus, social heritage includes the conceptualization and use of built infrastructure, technological advancement, as well as the construction of social organization, art, and the formation of commonly understood national morals and customs, albeit primarily conceived and approved by the white upper caste in America. An exception to this white American dominance of morals and customs is the example set by America's black outlaws and the communities, morals, and customs they have created, including the black gangster class, which is discussed below.

My contention here is that values infrastructure is what inspires the American caste system. And social heritage is the powerful hub of that caste system because it breeds both entitlement and expectation. Social heritage breeds entitlement for the dominant white upper caste to keep the subservient lower caste subservient. It breeds expectation for the subservient black lower caste to forever face limitations in negotiating their lives in a society ruled by an entitled and oppressive white America. Thus, social heritage is at the epicenter of a racialized caste system. It is also a prime product, I argue, of the values infrastructure that undergirds America.

A dialectical critique is also made here about class versus caste for both black and white Americans. America, I posit, is a class-within-a-caste society. White Americans use class as a nuanced collection of socioeconomic subsets, divvying up the nation's white population from the

upper caste to the less-than-upper-caste, but not ever so low as to coequal the lower-caste black classification. Black Americans, on the other hand, are locked in white America's episteme as a group that only represents the lower caste. However, black America has observed the socioeconomic subsets afforded white America and has reproduced those categories of status for *their* self-acknowledgment, even if ignored by powerful, white-run institutions, such as law enforcement. For the black populace, then, America is a class-within-a-caste society, as is true for white America. But this is true for black America despite the dominant caste's custom of imagining black people as a group of lower caste *non*individuals or, as described by sociologist Wulf D. Hund, 'One undifferentiated social status beneath that of any other' (Hund as cited in Kronfeldner 2021, p. 232).

4.3.1. The Evolution of America's Parallel Empire

Virtually all 'the tentacles of caste' in America — an Isabel Wilkerson phrase (2020, p. 165) — have over the centuries combined to provide, among other things, justification for orchestrating an ongoing anti-citizenship campaign against black America. But the dialectical relationship between black and white America has caused this longstanding campaign to realize unforeseen consequences.

One such consequence, I contend, is that white America has unwittingly *inspired* a black outlaw class, which has relied on uncooperative co-constructed agency to manifest different identity formations across four-hundred years. These identity formations have ranged from black-slave rebels to black-sailor pirates to black-street gangsters, acting out rebellion that at times has been paradoxically modeled on the racialized brutality imposed by a white dominant caste onto generations of the black lower caste. Another consequence of the white upper-caste campaign against black citizenship rights has been, ironically, the emergence in the latter part of the twentieth century of a black gangster class of *anti-patriots*. Today's street gangsters, I have learned from my interviews with them, no longer covet full citizenship rights that white America has been loath to readily

provide. They are not interested in voting, for instance. This is a sentiment that has been reinforced by laws preventing them from voting once they have been convicted of a felony crime. But even those black gangsters who are not felons or those felons who can regain their right to vote after parole has been completed, are not inclined to engage as civic citizens. They have no faith in America's political system to justly serve them. Further, this black gangster class has taken that citizenship antipathy and constructed yet another unforeseen circumstance: street gangster agency has been used to build a parallel urban-enclave empire within the American empire over which the gangsters themselves reign.

Here I name such agency, 'inventive agency', and identify it as a potent measure employed in the black gangster reinvention of a white-imagined trope of the dangerous black male avatar. Inventive agency is used by street gangsters in the reinvention of racialized policy and law that targets black male avatars for mass incarceration, as well as in the reinvention of the isolated, de facto segregated urban enclaves in which such black avatars reside. Inventive agency, I argue, is what street gangsters have managed to weaponize as a double-edged survivor tool: to combat the racialized agency used by a dominant upper caste to harmfully define, control, contain, and sometimes kill them, and to socially construct a way forward that is uniquely their own.

As with nearly every aspect concerning the historical black-white experience in the United States, each group's epistemic stance is on vivid oppositional display when it comes to how black-outlaw identity — and that identity's connection to freedom — has been defined. Rebels. Revolutionaries. Insurrectionists. Outlaws. Criminals. All these titles are conjoined with complexity to white America's fearful imagining and constructing of black identity. But white mainstream's understanding of black-outlaw identities has often been rejected by those labeled as such in favor of a fighter-for-justice persona for the very act of rebellion or resistance — in whatever form —

against white upper-caste oppression. For black America, then, from the 1600s through the mid-1800s, the fight for justice was synonymous with the fight for freedom from slavery. But for white colonial rulers, that fight for freedom from slavery was synonymous with abject insurrection, thereby making such a black freedom fighter one of the first social constructions by white America of what would become an iconic and enduring avatar: the black male outlaw.

Illustrations of the dialectic conflict in how a slave rebellion was typically viewed by black slaves versus the white plantocracy are revealed in a couple of events described below that occurred in connection with a famous slave rebellion, the Nathaniel 'Nat' Turner-led insurrection of 1831. Nat Turner had been born in 1800 a slave in Southampton County, Virginia, on one of the larger and older plantations in the area (Brown 2003). That plantation was owned, as was Nat Turner himself, by an attorney named Benjamin Turner (Ibid.). In fact, Nat Turner's last name had come from his master. Nat Turner's mother encouraged the belief in her son that he was a prophet and would one day become a 'deliverer of his race' (Ibid., p. 10). Nearly thirty-one years from the day he was born, Nat Turner organized a small group of black male slaves from neighboring plantations in Southampton and decided it was time to make good on his mother's vision for him.

One of the members of his rebel entourage was Will, a slave who had refused to call himself by his master's last name (Brown 1867). Will was also in a vengeful state of mind for having had his beloved wife sold to a slave master elsewhere, causing him to never hold her in his arms again (Ibid.). From so many whippings by his slave master, Will's back was almost entirely scarred, starting from his shoulders, and not stopping until his feet (Ibid.). On 21 August, the first day of the three-day insurrection, was when the men went from one plantation to the other in the middle of the night to murder the masters who had brutalized them for so many years. Will struck the first blow with a heavy axe, killing Nat Turner's master (Ibid.). Other slaves joined them

as they marched from one slave owner's home to another. As the list of dead white bodies grew, the community of white plantation owners were alerted to the danger, and they rushed onto the streets in much larger numbers to quell the rebellion. Eventually, Nat Turner and his followers lost the battle and several of them, including Turner, fled into the nearby woods and were not captured until about six weeks later. But rebel Will was killed during the melee with his axe in the air, having just killed three white men, and poised to strike again, when, with his last words, he made one request: 'Bury my axe with me' (Ibid., p. 13). Unlike the white South Carolina woman, quoted earlier, who queried her pastor as to whether she would have to suffer the sight of black slaves in heaven, Will expected to see white people after his death, and fully anticipated that the fight and fury among black and white America would continue. An axe, Will thought, would be a much-needed tool in heaven (Ibid.) — or wherever he and his white enemies ended up. Black slaves and the white-ruling caste, it turns out, were at dialectic odds even with their respective visions and judgments of each other in the afterlife.

Another story associated with the Southampton Nat Turner Rebellion offers a different type of dialectic complexity as to how slavery-fighting rebels were respected by black slaves compared to how much they were despised by white masters. This story involved a slave named Jim and his master, Captain Harris (Ibid.). Jim and Captain Harris were known to be half-brothers with the same father, which likely meant that Jim's slave mother had been sexually violated (Ibid.). When Jim realized that Captain Harris was in the killing pathway of Nat Turner's group, he warned his master, which saved the master's life. But after a few days, when the uprising had been 'put down', as described by a black historian and former slave of that era, William Wells Brown, white slave masters were scouring the woods in search of Nat Turner and a few other slaves who had escaped (Ibid., p. 14). Captain Harris enlisted the assistance of his slave Jim to help in that search. But Jim felt that his helping to find the runaway black rebels would be going a step too far (Ibid.). He believed that his duty had been displayed when he saved his master's life. Once Jim and Captain Harris got to the woods, as recounted

by Brown, Jim stopped his master, handed his own gun to Captain Harris, and did the following:

> ‘I cannot help you hunt down these men: they, like myself, want to be free. Sir, I am tired of the life of a slave: please give me my freedom, or shoot me on the spot’. Captain Harris took the weapon, and pointed it at the slave. Jim, putting his right hand upon his heart, said, ‘This is the spot; aim here’. The captain fired, and the slave fell dead at his feet (Ibid., p. 14; Brown 1867, p. 13).

The above anecdotes are shared here because they provide symbolic examples of at least three interrelated concepts that help explain black-white values underlying each group’s oppositional characterization of slave uprisings and black male criminality. The three concepts are: the role of the ‘moral personality of the slave’ (Tannenbaum 1946, p. xvi), natural law, and natural rights.

Frank Tannenbaum in his 1946 classic book, *Slave and Citizen*, introduces an interesting analysis about the import of what he calls the moral personality of the slave. Tannenbaum’s explanation of this concept begins with a discussion about the implications of the black slave’s relationship to the national polity’s engagement with moral value:

> Slavery was not merely a legal relation; it was also a moral one. It implied an ethical bias and a system of human values, and illustrated more succinctly, perhaps, than any other human experience the significance of an ethical philosophy. For if one thing stands out clearly from the study of slavery, it is that the definition of man as a moral being proved the most important influence both in the treatment of the slave and in the final abolition of slavery (Tannenbaum, p. xv).

Tannenbaum argued that those slave societies which recognized the slave’s moral essence, thus the moral equality of all humankind, and humanity’s fundamental entitlement to freedom, were able to transition peacefully to a free society as slavery was abolished. Those societies which did not recognize the black slave as a ‘moral person’ (p. xvi), as exemplified by entrenched laws, customs, and mores of the American colonies that became the social norms, found themselves embroiled in violent rebellion —

or ‘revolution’ (Ibid., p. xvi) — to abolish slavery. Thus, this concept of moral equality was linked to the principles of natural law. And black people of that era adapted the concept of natural *law* to instead emphasize natural *rights*.

Buried in the concept of natural *rights* was a dialectic interpretation that separated black slave from white master in the understanding of the concept itself. According to both black and white America, natural *law* was not based on man’s law or legislation or custom derived from a pattern of social relations. Natural law was based on objective moral principles from what could be observed in nature, from God’s intentions for man, including a core right to freedom (Barnes 2017). But that is where black-white agreement about the meaning of natural law ended and where both sides exercised their own form of agency to introduce competing interpretations of natural law.

While the white Founders of America leaned on the ideas of John Locke and other white philosophers to tout the belief that all men were naturally free and equal, there was an exception to be made. As proclaimed in 1838 by William Harper, a South Carolinian proslavery politician, natural law provided an allowance for there being a natural order in society (Harper as discussed by Barnes, p. 23) — and black slaves had a place at the bottom of that order. John Locke himself supported such racialized exceptionalism. As noted earlier in this chapter, Locke co-authored the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* in 1668, which included language from the slave codes of 1661 (Locke as cited in Isenberg 2016, p. 43).

From the perspective of black slaves, they framed natural rights as an outgrowth of natural law, which allowed them two fundamental considerations. First, those black slaves believed that they, too, were entitled to the right of personal freedom, as were all men accorded by natural law, and that their rebellious acts to secure freedom were therefore ‘righteous’ acts (Barnes 2017, p. 22). Second, they believed that whatever violence occurred during their battles to resist enslavement could only be judged by the higher law of God, not man-made law, given what black slaves suffered under the dominion of white colonialists (Ibid.).

My argument is that the supposed *immoral* personality of the black slave, particularly as it applied to violent black rebellion — synonymous in white colonial America with outlaw or criminal behavior — became an indelible mark on black men in the generations that followed. Conversely, Frederick Douglass, another former slave who wrote one novella during his abolitionist career, called his book *The Heroic Slave* (1852). The book was about a slave who led a revolt on a ship named *Creole*. In his book, Douglass applies the natural-rights principle from the perspective of black America in his storytelling, which was that violence as a tactic was a legitimate right in support of slave rebellion when fighting for liberty (Barnes 2017). In fact, the slave protagonist in Douglass's tale was depicted by Douglass as a hero, a character deserving of the greatest respect, hence informing the title of this book (Ibid.; Douglass 1852). Nathaniel 'Nat' Turner, considered the most famous slave insurrectionist by white plantation owners, became more than a hero, I argue here, he became a legend among black colonial America and even black contemporary America nearly two-hundred years later. What I suggest is that Turner became a mythic historical figure as much for how deftly he exercised inventive agency to manage his own death-by-execution as for his failed fight for freedom from enslavement. My contention is that Turner coopted the political tactics of kings.

In Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (2019), he assesses the political uses of torture and state-orchestrated execution on the bodies of the oppressed, on the bodies of those seen as rebels and thus enemies of the ruling caste, of royalty. As described by Foucault, the idea was to create a spectacle of macabre theatre that would instill trauma and teach lessons to anyone who would dare to confront or challenge the rule of the King or the oversight of the King's governing representatives (Ibid.). By the time Turner was captured after the rebellion and was quickly found guilty following a trial where he had no rights, Turner made two exceptional political moves. First, Turner spent three days detailing to his attorney, Thomas R. Gray, a meticulous account of his life and role in the Southampton rebellion (Barnes 2017). That storytelling became the famous book, *The Confessions of Nat*

Turner, published a few months after his execution. Turner's last act, though, was to provide, literally, a powerful performance in the way that he allowed his body to experience death by state-ordered execution.

Turner was hanged, though that task was initially difficult to accomplish. He had warned the authorities that upon his death the 'sun would refuse to shine' (Brown 2003, p. 13). And a major storm did occur. That threat alone frightened the sheriff of Southampton County, causing him to refuse to cut the rope that allowed the trap to collapse to trigger the hanging. No black man in the county would touch the rope as well. A white man drunkard from another area many miles away was brought in to be the executioner. But Turner's performance, the way in which he used his body to exercise inventive agency while being killed by the state, is what elevated him in stature, I argue, in ways that made him legendary. Turner did not move the limbs of his body, as his neck was choked and broken. He did not tremble. He did not thrash about. In fact, he did not move a muscle, according to eyewitnesses (Ibid.). He died a martyr, deliberately demonstrating that even an execution could not break him. He died in a way to encourage bravery in the continuation of the fight for freedom from slavery. He made a political statement with his execution that represented the opposite of what was intended by the white colonial powers. Turner employed the last and only thing that he had left, his objectified slave body, to defy the political theatre of executions orchestrated on behalf of governments and kings to create political theatre of his own. As described by renowned slavery historian Eugene D. Genovese, outlaw-slave-hero Nat Turner exercised inventive agency with the sole powerful instrument over which Turner could claim control: 'Those who do not possess external, material resources enjoy a minimal property in themselves' (1992, p. xiii).

One-hundred-seventy-four years later, I witnessed the execution of a celebrated black outlaw, Crips gang co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams. He had been found guilty of killing four people during two robberies and had always claimed his innocence. He had confessed to me, 'I have done many

bad things in my life', that included the killing of other gang members. 'But I have not been charged for the crimes that I am guilty of. These murders that brought me to death row I did not commit. But it's karma I'm here'. His case was moved to a nearly all-white working-class suburban jurisdiction of southern California, where the few blacks who were in the jury pool were dismissed by the prosecution. In that prosecutor's closing arguments, he asked the jury to imagine Stanley Tookie Williams as a predatory animal, a caged Bengal tiger in the zoo, and to consider the black community in which Stanley Tookie Williams resided, South Central Los Angeles, a dangerous jungle. After the guilty verdict, one female white juror described the defendant in the following way: 'I know I shouldn't say this, but he [Stanley Tookie Williams] is as black as the ace of spades.'[7] Five days before his execution, I was exhausted from a hard-fought clemency campaign to try to save him from the 'three-drug cocktail' of death that includes a special type of fast-acting barbiturate, as well as paralytic and heart-attack-inducing drugs (Neilson 2019). I went to visit him and was perilously close to tears. As he sat with his wrists shackled to a chain around his waist, his body shackled to an iron chair, and his ankles shackled such that he could hardly move his feet, he stared at me intensely and said, 'You have to pull yourself together. You cannot allow these people to see you break. They are trying to kill me, and I will *not* allow them to break me. So, pull yourself together. You represent me.' I was in the death chamber when the execution was botched, and it took Stanley Tookie Williams thirty-six minutes to die. It was devasting to watch. But when I exited San Quentin State Prison's death chamber, I squared my shoulders and walked through a narrow gauntlet of armed guards, all of whom were white, with the most erect posture and determined stride. What they could not know was that my unshakeable, rebel display was bolstered by an internal mantra: 'I represent Stan. I represent Stan. I represent Stan. I represent Stan. . . .'

[7] This is information from the court record and case files that were provided me by the appellate attorneys assigned to appeal the death penalty sentence of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Here I claim that Turner's deliberate and disciplined behavior in the moments before his death is an early example of how rebellion can evolve and transform into a culture of the oppressed, where death row serves a purpose for the black outlaw class, as dubbed by white America — or in the twenty-first century the black gangster class — that is far different than the intentions of a white-ruling upper caste and its institutions. The death penalty, as promoted by law enforcement, for instance, is meant to be a deterrent to murder by intimidating potential killers into becoming nonviolent and accommodating members of what is known as civil society. But in Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class, I explore in more depth how the black gangster class uses the possibility of capital punishment as an opportunity to act out defiant heroics. This is a gangster's way of elevating himself into legendary street status despite the slave imprimatur permitted by the 13th Amendment to America's Constitution, which allows imprisoned persons convicted of crimes to be treated as slaves or indentured servants (General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11, National Archives 1865).

Nat Turner saw himself as a revolutionary, not a criminal. Turner believed that his quest for the freedom of his people was like colonial sentiments that spurred the American Revolution. He was quoted in the *Norfolk Herald*, shortly before his execution, explaining that his black slave group's attack on Southampton was what 'the white people did in the revolution' (as cited by Barnes 2017, p. 28). In other words, Nat Turner's resistance to slavery — as colonial white America's resistance to British rule — was a justified act of war, not criminality.

According to historians Gervase Phillips and Laura Sandy (2021), American way-of-war scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to the strong connection between slavery and warfare in the American colonies. Their argument is that the profound cruelty practiced in the maintenance of an American colonial slave society always carried with it a constant fear among the plantocracy of violent and dangerous slave revolt. The slave

society itself became ‘the enemy within’ (Ibid., p. 836) for white colonialists. Consequently, dealing with the black slave threat of rebellion became America’s ‘internal war’ (Ibid., p. 825), which influenced the construction of a militarized south well before the revolutionary — or external — war waged with Britain from 1775 to 1783. Meanwhile, black slaves did not solely restrict themselves to on-the-ground battles for freedom, they also attempted to buy their freedom, go on strikes, flee to become fugitives, and they committed suicide (Shapiro 1984). Most of those tactics to gain freedom violated the slave codes and thus the law, reinforcing for white colonialists the perception of black slaves as criminal outlaws. My next focus, though, is on a particular application of the flight-from-bondage tactic sought by some black male slaves: the quest to become maritime workers or plundering pirates, which provided in centuries to come a cultural foundation for the black gangster class.

Such careers, as a way of escaping enslavement, were romanticized by black slaves. The lure of seagoing freedom — or at least the fantasy of freedom — was so compelling, black slaves were known to persuade slave masters to allow them to become sailor-privateers with profits going largely to the slave owner. A sailor-privateer was a maritime worker hired by merchants to protect the cargo, as well as to load and unload the cargo at trading ports for which the sailor-privateer would get to share in the revenues from the sale of the goods (Chapin 1926). Also, some free black men from northern American colonies offered themselves as sailor-privateers to earn profits that did not have to be shared with anyone. Other black sailor-slaves became sailors because their white owners commanded trading ships and used their black slaves as crew members, which, of course, did not represent freedom from enslavement. But some black men on ships, who were captured slaves or independent maritime workers when pirates attacked a vessel on which they were forcibly sequestered or employed, sought an opportunity to join the pirate crew, considering their options: to be thrown overboard or abandoned on the vanquished ship and left to starve (Bialuschewski 2008; Bialuschewski 2011). Still, even a very young Frederick Douglass, the famous abolitionist

who as a boy slave worked alongside black and white sailors as a ship caulker on vessels anchored on the Maryland shore of the Chesapeake Bay, wistfully and metaphorically compared his slave status with that of ships: ‘Those beautiful vessels, robed in white. . . .loosed from [their] moorings, and free, fast in my chains, and . . . a slave’ (as cited by Bolster 1997, p. 1). But Douglass’s poetic imaginings of freedom to be realized, he believed, by residing on a ship where the primary struggle was a daily wrestle with the sea did not entirely reflect maritime reality for black men. Seafaring of any kind, it turns out, was never an idealized refuge from the vagaries of racism and its avatar effect.

During the Age of Sail, from the mid-1400s to the mid-1800s, when wooden sail boats were the primary vessels facilitating trade and war in the world, a black man’s entry into the seafaring profession — and ability to remain a maritime man — was rife with challenging complications. There were survival concerns for both black and white seafarers, of course. Considering the unpredictability of weather and that era’s quality of ship making, wooden vessels were not always able to withstand a stormy sea’s lashings (Bolster 1997). Also, during the 1790s and 1800s, black as well as white mariners from colonial America were subject to ‘impressment’ (Beiser 2014, p. 16). Impressment was when the British Navy captured American colonial sailors and forced them into military service for Britain (bid.). By kidnapping these seamen and compelling them to reject their country by demanding that they join the British Navy, the intent was to humiliate and dishonor the neophyte American government that had fought to be free of Britain’s rule. This posed some interesting dilemmas around who could qualify to be a citizen of colonial America, which was not a right that most black men at home rather than at sea could readily claim when slavery prevailed. But to save the country’s international reputation, there were instances when colonial America’s consular agents were sent to wrench, by diplomatic means, black *and* white mariners out of British Naval conscription. Still, black sailors had to grapple with additional circumstances of uncertainty — and, paradoxically,

circumstances of certainty — that the specter of avid racism and customs associated with black slavery ensured *they* would experience at sea but not their white counterparts.

When commercial trading ships docked at American ports in southern territories, for instance, the white populace there expected legitimate black maritime workers to defer to them, to behave as ‘submissive and dependent’ inferiors (Bolster 1997, p. 190). Though acknowledging a certain fascination with the sailor profession, which by then had become an iconic American symbol of manliness, a trope of ‘the brave seaman’ (Beiser 2014, p. 18), southern white populations nevertheless referred to black sailors, even free black sailors, as ‘slaves without masters’ (Bolster 1997, p. 190). In the whaling industry, one of the most dangerous and low paying of the seafaring trades, which is where the employment of black sailors tended to congregate, some of those vessels were racially segregated (Mallory 1990). Such black and white sailors were referred to as ‘checkerboard crews’ (Frank as quoted in Mallory 1990, p. 1). Further, sometimes black maritime workers were known to be treated as despised animals on vessels, and thus physically abused by white seamen. A black maritime cook in 1806 shared his experience in graphic terms: ‘They [the white seamen] used to flog, beat, and kick me about the same as if I had been a dog (Ibid., p. 3). Still, he stuck with seafaring for years because as a black freeman from America it was one of the few occupations he was permitted to pursue. The mariner profession also provided black men a type of phantom legitimacy, at least when on a ship in the sea, once Congress passed in 1796 a law that allowed sailors to be issued Seamen’s Protection Certificates (Beiser 2014). Seamen’s Protection Certificates were meant to protect black and white sailors from British impressment. But the word ‘phantom’ is used in this context because of how ephemeral the protection of black maritime workers’ rights — as embodied by Seamen Protection Certificates — proved to be.

There was significant uncertainty in the mariner profession as to how a black seaman’s journey might evolve. But what accounted for that uncertainty

— the values infrastructure of the colonial white culture that viewed black people in the most disparaging of ways on land and at times on sea — also accounted for the certainty that the white dominant caste, given a longstanding pattern of behavior, would devise a way to construct an outlaw avatar identity for even free black maritime workers. This dialectic involving both uncertainty *and* certainty was personified in the enactments of the Negro Seamen Acts over a period of forty-plus years.

The Negro Seamen Acts restricted the mobility of black sailors, including free black sailors, from landing at ports and from having contact with black slaves on American colonial soil (Hamer 1935; Wilson 1994; Schoeppner 2019). At docks located on America's southern border, where the Negro Seamen Acts were often strictly enforced, free black sailors were routinely rounded up and jailed upon the arrival of their ships (Ibid.). Trading companies had to pay a fee to cover the expenses of the imprisonment to get their black crew members released and would have to agree to leave the port immediately with such sailors in tow. If a trading company was unwilling to pay that fee, the black sailors, many of whom were freemen, were sold into slavery and never heard from again (Ibid.). This targeted animus toward black maritime workers was spawned by a famous planned slave rebellion that never happened (Higginson 1861). Plotted in 1822 by a former slave who became a free black man Denmark Vesey of South Carolina, the elaborate scheme of revolt, which was uncovered before the collaborators could strike, involved an assist from a few other free black men, a couple of whom were from countries other than colonial America (Higginson 1861; Hamer 1935). Further, when the six men determined to be the leaders of this rebellion were about to be hanged, they followed in the footsteps of Nat Turner. 'Do not open your lips,' Peter Poyas, considered the second in command under Vesey, told the other captured black rebels, 'Die silent, as you shall see me do' (Higginson 1861, p. 18). They all obeyed. Also, prior to their execution, while being tortured to get more information about who all was involved in the insurrectionist plan, Poyas quietly instructed those who were weakening under the pain they were suffering, 'Die like a man' (Ibid., p.

7). That one statement was enough. Not another word was spoken to the white authorities. What was uncovered about the Vesey would-be rebellion and what was witnessed about the subversive character of the rebels themselves sufficiently informed and inflamed America's southern white communities, prompting South Carolina first, and other states soon followed, to characterize free black sailors as 'moral contagion' because of their 'threats to the social order,' given a fearful belief that the very presence of free black men could motivate black slaves to rebel (Reidy 2019, p. 402; Schoeppner 2019, p. ii). Shortly thereafter in 1822, the same year of the aborted Vesey slave revolt, the first of the Negro Seamen Acts was established in South Carolina.

The Negro Seamen Acts served dialectically linked purposes. First, the law itself ensured that black sailors were treated differently and more harshly than white sailors, which put their very status as freemen in jeopardy. At the same time, the law itself created the legal contours that criminalized black men, allowing them to be placed in prison — without having committed a crime other than being black, employed, and free — while promoting to the mainstream white public that these were dangerous not-to-be trusted men. Free black seamen, then, became yet another white-constructed avatar to be loathed and viewed as enemies by white America. Consequently, there were some black men who exercised their agency to retaliate against the mainstream white culture and its customs and laws by willingly choosing to become pirates, by purposefully embracing lawlessness for the chance to fight and plunder under the black flag of piracy.

This enduringly popular black flag, seen in feature films and in advertisements hundreds of years later, gained its name from its design — a solid black background color with a white skull centered in the middle. Below the skull could be found either two skeletal limbs crossing each other, or two swords positioned in the same manner, serving as a macabre type of pedestal for the skull. The black flag gained its infamy from its representational value — if a sailor saw a ship with that flag rippling in the

wind, the derring-do of pirate depredations, including the bold robbery of cargo ships, as well as the torture, kidnap, and murder of crews, was sure to follow (Duncan 1996).

I use the word ‘derring-do’ in homage to one of the social constructs relating to how pirates have been and still are characterized in the popular culture: as celebrated, though ‘armed’ and dangerous, adventurers for whom many movies have been produced casting stars, such as Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, Yul Brenner, Burt Lancaster, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Errol Flynn, and Sir Basil Rathbone (Huang 2010, p. 278). A review of pirate literature by sociologist Hua-Lun Huang indicates that this is only one of four socially constructed categories of pirates (Huang 2010). A second construct in Huang’s typology of piracy is about the legend-inspiring pirates who warranted their own ‘sagas’ to be told, including Francis Drake, Edward ‘Blackbeard’ Teach, and William Kidd, for example (Ibid., p. 278). The biographies of these legendary characters showed how piracy — or outlaw status — as an actual career choice provided opportunities on the seas for social ascension (Ibid). Piracy literature involving a third category of identity construction for piracy focuses on the demythologizing of research about pirates that intends to separate fact from fiction (Ibid.). Often these maritime historians would work to validate the stories and assertions made about pirates, including the academy’s subsequent critiques of piracy based on such stories and assertions (Ibid., p. 278). Lastly, scholars of international law and criminology have cast piracy as transnational organized crime, that is, global gangs involved in ‘maritime terrorism’ (Ibid.). Sir William Blackstone (1962) even included piracy as one of the three most important criminal offenses in the Law of Nations. The other two offenses were safe-conduct violations and infringement on ambassadorial rights. But Blackstone labeled pirates as *hostis humani generis*, an enemy of all humankind (Ibid.). There are international maritime laws that still exist, which deal harshly with piracy.

Pirates, nonetheless, willingly conformed to the dominant culture’s social construction of them as criminals, outlaws, enemies of humankind.

Those who served under the black flag were seemingly proud of their terrifying exploits. Pirate Captain Edward Low, for instance, once decided that he did not like the 'greazy' look of a cook who worked on a French ship that he and his crew were hijacking (Duncan 1996, p. 1; Johnson 1724, p. 323). So, he had the cook bound to the main mast and then set the ship on fire to burn the cook to death (Ibid.). Another pirate, Captain Francis Spriggs, made the captain of the ship he had just captured eat a plate full of candles while a sword and pistol were pressed against his breast to ensure that he kept eating wax (Johnson 1724, p. 354). Captain William Kidd, who became one of the most famous pirates, began as a sailor-privateer. On the day Captain William Kidd decided to join the pirates he had been hired to fight, William Moore, his gunner, objected to Captain Kidd's pivot to piracy. The captain called Moore a 'dog' and hit him in the head with a bucket (Johnson 1724, p. 446). That blow literally broke the gunner's skull and caused him to die the next day (Ibid.). These scandalous acts of piracy bear some resemblance to the dramatic and often violent black street culture of gangsterism in the United States. One such example is when Crips gang co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams delighted in starting the one-punch-in-the-jaw knockout fad subsequently used by Crips against other Crips who spoke to him or to other Crip leaders in tones that were determined to be disrespectful. More will be explored regarding the similarity of the pirate outlaw culture and the black street outlaw culture later in this chapter and in Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class. But here I argue there are at least two impactful insights derived from the pirate's self-positioning that influenced black slaves and, to some extent, have influenced today's black gang members who control urban enclaves in America. One of those insights entails citizenship; the other insight is ensnared in the concept of nationhood.

At the core of the piracy culture was an unflinching display of agency that informed a pirate's fundamental rejection of country and thus British or other sovereign citizenship, depending on the origins of these maritime marauders (Duncan 1996). Pirate 'Dirk' Chivers, a commander of the ship

Soldado, touted to prisoners sequestered in the vessel over which he reigned, that he and his crew ‘acknowledged no Countrymen. . .and were sure to be hanged if taken, and that they would take no quarter, but would do all the mischief they could’ (Kinkor 1995, p. 4). Therefore, the pirate crew’s sole allegiance to nation, according to maritime historian Kenneth Kinkor, was limited to ‘the deck beneath their feet’ (Ibid). Their vessel, in other words, comprised a buccaneer brotherhood of floating insurrectionists. One consequence of that rejection of country and citizenship was that pirates willfully situated themselves as enemies of their nation’s corporate seafaring commerce — and that of other countries’ commerce — by robbing their ships, murdering or kidnapping their crews at every opportunity. Pirates also understood that such behavior made them the actual enemies of states, as labeled by Blackstone, particularly of the sea-patrolling militaries — or navies, like the British Royal Navy — of those states whose plundered shipping industries were being undermined.

Nationhood and citizenship became interesting conceptualizations for pirates. Those seafaring predators, animated by their fierce agency, claimed authority over an ocean-based de facto empire. The black flag of piracy signified rulership of this buoyant space, with few territorial boundaries, where they could claim independence to do as they pleased. But for black slaves and black seamen, I argue, rejection of citizenship, coupled with a claim under the black flag of some type of floating nation-state status, engaged a far more culturally complicated reality.

Black slaves as rebels, insurrectionists, or revolutionaries — identities imposed on them by white America or that they conjured for themselves — were typically striving in their revolts to be treated as equal citizens with equal rights rather than rejecting that promise. Further, many black slaves as well as black free men imagined a maritime career as an occupation that could provide them with the income and respectability to one day secure the rights of bona-fide citizenship in colonial America — or to hold onto such rights if already acquired (Bolster 1997). Also, through the epistemic lens of

the black population, black seamen were highly respected and admired (Ibid.). They were in a special class, a black socially constructed upper class (Ibid.). The maritime environment itself, however, did not bestow such upscale classifications on its black workers. Indeed, seafaring was an incalculable workspace for black slaves and free black men, given American colonial laws like the Negro Seamen Acts. And there was always the possibility of being captured by pirates, forcing a life-altering choice: to serve under the black flag or to risk being abandoned at sea or a port, whether sailors or slaves.

But not all black men had to be forced into piracy. Some opted to be outlaws at sea and thus willingly step into the enemy-of-all-humankind avatar. And, to some degree, their reasons for doing so corresponded with why a certain vassalized class of white men largely from Britain — struggling at the bottom of the British 'old order' (Kinkor 1995, p. 4) — chose piracy. As described by Kinkor, pirates could be aptly described as 'marginal men driven by desperation and rage to vengeful acts of theft, terrorism and violence against an oppressive society' (Ibid., p. 1). Barry Clifford, a marine archaeological explorer and author known worldwide for finding in 1984 the famous pirate ship Whydah wrecked in 1717 off the shores of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, offers sharp observations about life options available to black male slaves: 'They could either be a law-abiding slave or an escaped convict or a pirate with a chance at the golden ring' (as cited in Jones 2000, p. 3). Given those options, piracy was clearly a viable choice. Clifford's observations also reveal a damning dialectic in the identify formation of black men in America over many generations — slaves, pirates, and street gangsters alike — but that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Maritime historian Kinkor suggested an even higher premium for why some black slaves settled on piracy: 'The deck of a pirate ship was the most empowering place for blacks within the eighteenth-century white man's world' (as cited in Jones 2000., p. 1). This was so because piracy, it turns out, was largely governed by a democratic structure. University of Pittsburgh historian

Marcus Rediker lauded piratical democracy as revolutionary during that era, that is, more than a hundred years before the end of slavery in America (Jones 2000). Generally, every pirate had the right to vote for the ship's captain and for any decision of import impacting the crew. A majority vote ruled. Pirate plunder was also distributed equally among the crew — even big pieces of gold jewelry. To illustrate, when the Whydah pirate ship was found, expensive and ornate gold jewelry that had been broken into pieces were retrieved. They had been broken up so that they could be distributed equally to the crew, including black pirates. The Whydah itself, which had a crew of nearly two-hundred pirates, recorded twenty-five African pirates who had been liberated from a slave ship and approximately twenty-four more African American crew members who had somehow escaped to find their way to a pirate vessel (Kinkor 1995). Pirates created rules of engagement for life under the black flag. Those rules were typically called 'articles' (Ibid., 4) and were viewed as a social compact for pirates, encompassing an oath to obey such articles and to remain loyal to their brotherhood of buccaneers. This was the key requirement for the governing of a shipboard of pirates. Unlike the Slave Codes of 1661, otherwise known as *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes*, there have been no discovered articles that made any reference to the color or ethnicity of pirates nor any reference to a distinction in the treatment to be made of a pirate crew member based on color or ethnicity (Ibid.). So, was piracy a social experiment in equality among outlaws — all outlaws, including black buccaneers? Most of the literature argues in support of that concept. However, one eminent scholar, W. Jeffrey Bolster, author of a seminal work on black sailors, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1997), does not believe that to be the case (Jones 2000). 'For us to say these white pirates always accepted black men as equals is nonsense,' Bolster told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter (as cited in Jones 2000, p. 2). Yet, Bolster (1997) does note that historical records show some black pirates received certain privileges and status.

A black pirate was elevated to Captain Kidd's quartermaster, for instance, and was responsible for divvying up stolen goods among the pirate

crew. Laurens de Graaf, another black buccaneer, was considered one of the most 'successful' seventeenth-century pirates for having amassed a very large treasure chest from his plundering (Jones 2000, p. 4). At one point he had a crew of approximately two-thousand pirates, some of whom were white. De Graaf, who was of African and Dutch ancestry, was also known as El Griffe, a commonly used nickname in that era for mulattoes, black people of mixed heritage. His story is particularly interesting for a couple of reasons. This black pirate retired with so much wealth he was given a minor French title and became one of the founders of Biloxi, Mississippi. He was never hanged, as was the fate of many pirates. Also, de Graaf was described in American history books as being tall, blond with blue eyes, though he was a black man and an escaped slave (Jones 2000). Colonial historians, it has been argued, were dishonest about de Graaf's ethnicity because they did not want his financial success as a pirate to serve as an inspiration for black slaves to revolt (Kinkor). James Nelson, a maritime historian from Maine, explains: 'The thought of a black uprising was the most frightening thing in colonial America' (as cited in Jones 2000, p. 1). Nelson continues, 'Historians did not want people to know de Graaf was black' (Ibid.).

While de Graaf has been identified by historians as one of the most financially successful pirates, the most famous black pirate, Black Caesar from West Africa,[8] was a crew captain and top aide to the infamous pirate Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach (Gates 2014; Conerly 2017). In fact, Black Caesar alone was entrusted by Blackbeard to blow up their ship if the notorious pirate was at risk of being captured or killed (Ibid.). On 22 November 1718, when British Lieutenant Robert Maynard killed Blackbeard during a sword fight on the deck of Blackbeard's ship, Black Caesar attempted to set off an explosion to destroy the vessel, even though that would have meant killing himself. But Black Caesar was captured before he

[8] There was another pirate, Henri Caesar, known as Black Caesar, who was from another era and another country, Haiti. Henri Caesar was involved in the Haitian revolution and was a pirate during the early 1800s, about one-hundred years after the reign of Black Caesar from West Africa.

could complete that task and was hanged shortly thereafter in 1718 (Gates 2014).

Estimates of the number of black pirates varies among historians and eyewitnesses. Kinkor (1995) claims that between 1715 and 1725 about twenty-five to thirty percent of the world's approximately five thousand pirates were black. Historian Arne Bialuschewski (2008) disputes such estimates. The few testimonies of eyewitnesses from those who were on pirate ships reflect a lower percentage of black pirates than claimed by Kinkor. Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr (2014), in an article he wrote about the history of black piracy, uncovered a report written by a white man who had been captured in 1721 by Bartholomew Roberts, a pirate located in Antigua. This white captor estimated Roberts' crew of pirates to be about two-hundred-fifty white pirates to fifty black pirates (p. 2; Bialuschewski 2011). But one major concern for determining the pirate status of black men on board pirate vessels has been the difficulty in determining how many were pirates and how many were slaves. Still, Gates poses the question and then answers it himself: 'Were there black buccaneers? The short answer is yes,' (p. 2) and there is eyewitness testimony that provides evidence some famous black pirates — Black Caesar, Captain Kidd's quartermaster known as 'the little black man' (Bolster 1997, p. 15), Laurens de Graaf, and others, like Diego de Los Reyes, who Spain called the 'mulatto pirate' (Gates 2014, p. 2) — did exist.

There were black pirates who did not mind being labeled by the white upper caste as outlaws, unlike those black seamen who aspired to become respected citizen-sailors. Black pirates, on the other hand, were not enticed by the possibility of citizenship, which they saw as an impossibility. That was not a cause for which they were willing to fight. Black pirates did not see themselves as revolutionaries and did not claim such a title. This positioning was unlike those black slaves who led revolts against their enslavement and in that capacity did not see themselves as outlaws but as leaders of a hoped-for abolition of the institution of slavery. Black pirates mostly and simply saw

plundering in the middle of the sea as a better alternative to the horrors of slavery. And, as was reported to be a key motivation for Laurens de Graaf, piracy provided a black man the opportunity to seek revenge against the country that had enslaved him (Conerly 2017).

These observations return this analysis to my earlier damning-dialectic claim related to marine archaeological explorer Barry Clifford's threefold insights for why black men opted to become pirates. 'They [black men] could either be a law-abiding slave', Clifford stated, 'or an escaped convict or a pirate with a chance at the golden ring' (as cited in Jones 2000, p. 3). I had argued that Clifford's statement involved the identity formation of black men in America, including black gangsters of the twenty-first century. But the damning dialecticism of that early act of black identity formation, the beginning of the avatar effect, is reflected in what I am calling 'box supremacy'. Box supremacy is a socially constructed space created by an empowered group — a ruling class — that exercises its agency to impose an undesirable identity on an oppressed group *and* simultaneously create a system of punishment that criminalizes the oppressed group if its members openly or publicly reject the undesirable identity imposed upon them. Further, as the colonial American slave society was being constructed, a legal-enforcement system was also constructed, which labelled any black slave a lawbreaker, a criminal, if he or she resisted the unwelcome slave identity imposed upon him or her.

Thus, the white ruling class constructed at least two identities for each black person captured and brought to colonial America: that of black slave and that of black outlaw if the black slave dared to spurn his or her ostensible law-abiding slave status constructed by the dominant society. This placed the law-abiding slave in a symbolic though potentially deadly box. This box provided a symbolic structure that allowed white supremacy to control the slave body, identity, and the colonial legal and values infrastructure that supported a damning dialectic of racialized duality, of multiple identity

formations, and the extremely harsh consequences of betraying the identity preferred by the dominant caste.

My argument is that this racialized rubric of life choices for black men has historical significance. Socially constructed during the 1600s through 1700s, the rubric has become a tool that continues to provide, I contend, a box-supremacy blueprint for how today's white dominant caste and black street gangsters have uncooperatively co-constructed the identity, social relations, and imagination of a black gangster society in America.

The black gangster class is the cultural progeny of the black pirate class.

This striking conclusion was reached after a review of piracy literature (Johnson 1724; Kinkor 1995; Bolster 1997; Bialuschewski 2008; Bialuschewski 2011; Gates 2014), accompanied by my nearly twenty years of immersive ethnographic research experience with black street gangsters mostly from California. Despite hundreds of years between the advent of the Golden Age of Piracy, and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century emergence of powerful and violent black street gangs in America, there are many commonalities between the two classes of black men. They are similar in the way the two groups view their homeland, their citizenship, their idea of loyalty and patriotism, their embrace of violent lawlessness and rejection of the rule of law, and their impetus to create alternative empires. These issues are discussed below and in Chapter Five: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class. But the foundation for this historical connection is demonstrated, I argue, by the more complex yet recognizable box supremacy into which certain black men of this era find themselves trapped. And that symbolic encasement, I suggest, has prompted the choice to become outlaws, criminals, street gang members. Ironically, one of the unintended consequences of box supremacy continues to prevail in America, thus supporting an earlier analysis in this chapter. That analysis claimed the white dominant caste's eagerness to construct tools to prevent black rebellion in the days of slavery and piracy had unwittingly and thus uncooperatively

contributed to the co-construction of a fierce agency exhibited by black pirates to ignore the rule of law and engage in acts of predation. Now I posit that the same unintended consequence is true of black street gangsters.

Today's racialized rubric does envision different life and career options for black men who reside in isolated low-income urban communities than were constructed for black slaves during the Golden Age of Piracy, so all is not precisely the same. But there remain similar societal demands in the modern-day racialized rubric that defy viability and thus ensure some level of failure by the disenfranchised black men upon whom these demands have been thrust. One option, for instance, is for these men to somehow become law-abiding citizens whether employment, training, and quality educational opportunities are available to them. All other options for a black man who does not have a job, trade, or college degree typically lead to his inevitable violation of the law, which places him squarely in the crosshairs of America's mass incarceration policy and practice that largely targets men of color. The likely inability to maintain a law-abiding life makes the option of *choosing* to be an outlaw, a black street gang member, an exercise of agency that makes sense. Black street gangsterism, it turns out, much like black piracy, provides a chance for social ascension through dramatic acts of lawlessness. Such street theatrics build individual legendary status and with that status positions gang leaders to oversee empires — urban enclaves within larger urban communities — from which financial maintenance and reputational value can be derived. But beyond the difficulty of the black gangster class achieving a law-abiding posture, there is another contingency that can doom to failure compliance with the law-abiding-*citizen* element of this racialized rubric, which is the white dominant caste's assumption that black gangsters have some national loyalty and thus value their American citizenship. Those assumptions are wrong. My research has shown that black gangsters are not patriotic to the country and do not concern themselves much if at all with being a citizen. But they do exhibit a strong patriotism to their enclave-empires and familial-level loyalty to their 'homies' — their fellow gang members.

One perhaps surprising way to critique the similarities across the centuries between black pirates and black street gangsters is to examine pivotal moments and behaviors that have occurred since the 1970s with the emergence of gangster rap and hip-hop music genres. Both genres, it turns out, play a consequential role in the culture of black gangsterism and urban communities. Moreover, such relationality is reciprocal since the same combination of black gangsterism and black urban enclaves are also the creative muses that sparked the genesis of gangster rap and hip-hop (McCann 2017; Kubrin 2005; RapTV 2021).

Rapper Chuck D, one of the founders of Public Enemy is a seminal rap group considered by their members to be 'heirs to the mantle of Nat Turner and Malcolm X' (Leland 1988, p. 46), as was stated in the music industry's respected *Spin* magazine. As famously proclaimed by Chuck D in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, the rap genre itself was seen as the CNN for black America (Mahoney 2010). Chuck D also described the potency of the words of rap that he said could be used as 'shrapnel' to inspire ideas of black rebellion against conditions and circumstances impacting black America (Ibid., p. 1). In a 1988 interview of Chuck D published in *Spin*, he provided a pointed explanation of the meaningfulness of rap music for black Americans:

> Rap is black America's TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what black life is about. And black life doesn't get the whole spectrum of information through anything else. . . Black radio does not challenge the information coming from the structure into the black community, does not interpret what's happening around the world in the benefit of us. It interprets it the same way that Channel 7 [a national television network] would. . . .The only thing that gives the straight-up facts on how the black youth feels is a rap record. I'm not a politician, I'm a dispatcher of information. I cause activity in the heads of black America (Leland, p. 48).

Gangster rap and hip-hop maintain a dialectical role in black America. On the one hand, the two music genres *chronicle* the existing social relations occurring on what is known as 'the streets' — gangster-ruled enclaves within urban communities to which significant meaning is ascribed by its black residents. This phenomenon is explored in Chapter Five. On the other hand,

gangster rap and hip-hop also *inform* the evolution of those same streets. And both music genres report on and are influenced by the inventive agency of black street gangsters that are often mirrored in the music makers' politically subversive representation of themselves and their art.

To illustrate, while imprisoned in 1995 at New York's Clinton Correctional Facility, influential rapper Tupac '2Pac' Shakur, who would go on to sell more than seventy-five million albums (O'Malley 2011), further spread the shrapnel-like impact of rap on black America. My argument is that he accomplished this feat by culturally appropriating the longstanding, white-imposed black-man-as-outlaw avatar. With inventive agency, he rebranded that stereotype by elevating-through-politicizing the very meaning of the black outlaw concept. Moreover, this occurred only about three years after 2Pac, using his marquee of celebrity, had already uncooperatively co-constructed a new definition in black America for the 'thug' word, which in the OED Dictionary meant 'a violent person, especially a criminal'. Black America has deemed it a white code for the N-word. 2Pac elevated the meaning of the word by converting it into a phrase that offered a broader as well as politically incisive context: 'The Thug Life'. Thug Life, the phrase, became a rapper and street-gangster culture brand among black communities, worldwide.

Regarding 2Pac's reimagining of the ruling-caste-constructed outlaw avatar for black America, in an interview I conducted with Malcolm Greenidge, a childhood friend of 2Pac's and a member of several of the rapper's groups, Greenidge provided revelatory insights about 2Pac's relaunch of himself and his music upon his release from prison in late 1995 (Gladwell 1995). Greenidge recounted that 2Pac had created a new name for their group, Outlaw Immortalz, which soon became the Outlawz. Just like black pirates of many generations ago, 2Pac's rap group, representing street gangsterism, proudly and publicly claimed the outlaw label, rather than the law-abiding-citizenship classification or, in the case of black piracy, rather than settling for being a law-abiding slave.

Given the history and existence of slavery during the Golden Age of Pirates, black buccaneers had rejected the hope of citizenship and thus rejected a belief in nationhood, other than the floating empire they themselves constructed and claimed under the black flag of piracy. For the black gangster class and its reciprocal muse, gangster rap, the political point of view held by black pirates was personified by the aliases 2Pac gave to the members of the Outlawz. Greenidge, for instance, was dubbed 'E.D.I. Mean', an inventive way of expressing the name of Ugandan President and military despot, Idi Amin. Some of the other aliases included Katari Cox who became 'Kastro', named for Fidel Castro, Cuba's longtime ruler from 1959 to 2008. Yafeu Fula became 'Yaki Kadafi', named in honor of authoritarian Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi of Libya. Mutan Shabazz Beale became 'Napoleon', named in homage to the first emperor of France, military leader, and world conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte. Bruce Edward Washington became 'Fatal Hussein', named in deference to Saddam Hussein, Iraq's autocratic President from 1979 to 2003. The alias 2Pac gave himself was 'Makaveli', named for Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian political philosopher known for his treatise, *The Prince*, published in 1582, which promoted the maintenance of power through fear and treachery. Like black pirates, 2Pac's Outlawz group, with members serving in the role of would-be dictators with a street-level attitude, were animated by an anti-establishment, anti-America credo, according to Greenidge during his interview.

Here I contend 2Pac's political staging of the black gangster class's spurning of nationalism and law-abiding citizenship was influenced by an earlier, and what became an iconic, 2Pac tattoo meme. A meme defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary as 'an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture'. In this instance, 2Pac's meme idea was found on his torso, literally, as a tattoo that read, THUG LIFE, in all capital letters because it was an acronym. The tattoo also included a letter 'H' design that incorporated a gun to serve as part of the structure of that letter. A bullet, standing upright, was substituted for the capital 'I' in 'LIFE'. 2Pac's meaning for the THUG LIFE acronym, which

garnered nationwide popularity among street gangsters, was: ‘The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone’ (Reid 2018). This message is compatible with Crips gang co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams’ self-hatred insight affecting black gang members, as discussed is Chapter Three. There Williams was quoted discussing self-hatred’s manifestation in black gang members, caused, he believed, by society’s bombardment of dehumanizing stereotypes on black men that he said accounted for street-gang members’ desire to kill each other.

2Pac’s tattoo meme foretold of the danger of unanticipated consequences from hate projected by white America onto black people from their infancy. An experience, as related by Williams, that held so much meaning it contributed to the formation of a ‘self-hate monster’ that could subconsciously stalk the black gangster class (Ibid.). Still, there is duality and dialecticism to understand in an examination of the meaning and role of black street warrior identity as was portended in the thug-life acronym. Slang dictionaries, rather than OED and Merriam-Webster dictionaries, offer a meaning that includes causative factors of a thug-life sensibility. In the alternative dictionaries, the thug-life frame of mind is described as strong, adaptable, and determined to overcome obstacles created by racism, oppression, and injustice — and to do so by whatever oppositional method is required.

2Pac’s thug-life philosophy, intertwined with the culture of the black gangster class, offers yet another layer of complexity to a black versus white epistemic critique of black identity formation. Those representing a street-gangster culture make a razor’s edge distinction between outlaw and criminal status, between a lifestyle credo and a sociopolitical stance. They openly define themselves as outlaws, for instance, but not criminals, as I learned from my years of interviews with members of the black gangster class. The explanation was that their fundamental survival was almost always at stake — be it for economic or reputational reasons. They were incentivized to ignore the rule of law just to live another day. Here I argue that the outlaw

status for street gangsterism has to do with rebellion against the box-supremacy conditions with which they must continuously negotiate their terms of existence. That minute-by-minute negotiation with life-and-death circumstances requires that they exercise inventive agency for self-preservation. Thus, they have positioned themselves as outlaws, not criminals.

Black street gangsters who are in or out of prison have insisted on using names and forming identities that *they* have uncooperatively co-constructed for themselves, as opposed to the nigger, darkie, coon, monkey, tar baby and other dehumanizing titles that a white dominant caste created to define them over the centuries. The Wu-Tang Clan, a classic black and hardcore rap group that has sold more than forty-million albums, has even created in the twenty-first century an online name generator that provides alternative first and surnames within seconds (Abramson 2010; Carmody 2014)). Donald Glover, a celebrated black rapper and actor, availed himself of Wu-Tang Clan's name generator to secure his Childish Gambino moniker — his rapper alter ego who made the politically pointed and award-winning album, *This is America*. That album conveyed an assessment of the history of the violent consequences of black male oppression and commodification in the United States.

The black gangster class is a cultural progeny of black pirates in another significant way: both outlaw groups have constructed alternative empires to rule. For black pirates, the high seas became their empire under the black flag of piracy as they rejected citizenship in their homeland, given they did not desire to be slaves or slave fugitives. For black street gangsters, small enclaves within the core of black communities are serving as mini-urban enclaves, territorial empires that street gang leaders known as O.G.s control throughout America via a decentralized structure. Every mini empire has a different O.G. leader.

A rap music video for the song ‘Good Day’ by the group called Nappy Roots is about street life, gang violence, and the desire for urban communities to get through one day without death. This rap video begins with a powerful observation by the black male leader of the group: The United States of America has a parallel empire in its midst titled the ‘United *Streets* of America’. It turns out that this rap leader’s inventive agency is interesting and fun. His name is Greg Streets, so he has managed to create a double entendre in reimagining the nation’s acronym, U.S.A., to apply to the vast scope of the other American empire — that is, black-gangster America — situated within the territorial boundaries of America.

Following the lead of black pirates under the black flag, street gangsters and their myriad of mini empires also function under the ‘color’ or ‘flag’ of a bandana symbolizing the street gang faction in question. Gang factions are known as ‘sets’ or ‘cars’. These bandanas are worn hanging from a back pocket or around a gang member’s head. Members of Crip sets, for instance, carry or ‘fly’ — as if a flag — blue, black or purple bandanas. Bloods, on the other hand, fly red bandanas to signify their gang allegiance. Street gangs have oaths of fealty to their gang set. Below is a Bloods gang oath. Black gang oaths can vary across sets. I received this and other oaths from gang members I have met over the years.

> This constitution will make me a revolutionary Blood family party member. As a member of this party, I will respect all of my fellow ‘rades’ [nickname for a Blood member] as complete ‘soldiers’. I am aware of the conventional dangers that will take place during the party’s struggle for future Blood goals. Not to forget that we are black brothers, staying together as one, one nation, one party, one flag, the red flag. All issues pertaining to this party and myself will stay in the party and to myself at all times. I shall abide by this party until death do us part.

Another example of a black gang oath below is from a California prison gang called the Black Guerilla Family, or the BGF. The BGF’s co-founder, George Lester Jackson, became a famous black San Quentin prisoner and author of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, was shot to death by guards on the exercise yard of San Quentin

on 21 August 1971 (Turner 1971). My experience with the BGF includes securing a few interviews with its Chief General,[9] who at that time was incarcerated at California's super-max prison, Pelican Bay Correctional Facility. He had been in solitary confinement for more than ten uninterrupted years. I was vetted for six months by BGF members on the streets of Los Angeles to uncover whether I was a law enforcement undercover agent, which I was not. Finally, I was approved. However, I was warned by one of the BGF's leaders in Southern California: 'You should really re-think wanting a visit with our leader. I'm telling you this because I like you. But if we've missed something, and you're not who you claim to be, you need to know, you will be murdered'. My concern was not that I was an undercover agent, because I knew that I was no such thing. But what I had no control over was the BGF's capacity to vet. What if they made a mistake and decided that I was something that I was not? I took my chances, traveled to Pelican Bay, interviewed the head gangster of the BGF, and eventually sent him some books of his choice. What is significant about this encounter is that the BGF mini empire, in this case situated as black prisoner enclaves across the state of California, treated their leader as a head of state, thus promising exceptionally harsh consequences if their leader was put in jeopardy. Here is the BGF oath:

> If I should ever break my stride or falter at my comrade's side, this oath will kill me.
>
> If my words are ever proven untrue or I betray the chosen few, this oath will kill me.
>
> Should I be slow to stand or show fear to any man, this oath will kill me.
>
> Should I submit to greed or lust or betray the people's trust, this oath will kill me.
>
> Should I grow lax in discipline or at times of strife refuse my hand, this oath will kill me.
>
> I stand firm. I stand firm in name and spirit. . .We, the members of the BGF who strive for impeccability, will rage on into immortality.

[9] I have not used his real name or BGF name because he is still imprisoned in California and could suffer some punitive consequences for his gang status being publicly exposed.

> Long live the mighty spirit of the graceful guerilla. . .George L. Jackson. I stand firm.

There are some common themes and elements found in the two oaths representing different segments of the black gangster class and its mini empires. These black-gangster locales require loyalty and devotion that translate into a type of street-level patriotism. This is even more interesting since loyalty, devotion, and patriotism are not generally offered by the same black gangsters to the country in which they were born. Yet, the cultural and, to some extent, political structure of these mini-urban empires largely mimic what I am calling the parallel world of American government and its underlying social contract to its *recognized* citizenry. This, of course, is a crucible the work here has been attempting to unpack, that is, the black gangster class clearly understands its members are not considered a part of America's recognized citizenry. This disconnect situates itself in nationhood and citizenship literature in interesting ways. According to political theorist Bernard Yack, nationalism can become detrimental to a sovereign state when its citizens' solidarity is based on 'shared heritage' instead of 'shared principles' (2012, p. 42). America's caste system, comprising a white dominant caste and a black inferior caste, as discussed earlier, does in fact lean on a shared-heritage model of nationalism. Meanwhile, black-gangster sovereignty straddles both the shared-principles model, because of its implicit understanding that its heritage is not valued nor properly recognized in parallel America, and the shared-heritage model. Regarding the shared-heritage model, the black gangster class uses its oaths to construct its own heritage element by locking prospective black gang members into a life-long affiliation.. Gangster rapper Snoop Dogg, for example, has been a California Crip gang member since a teenager growing up in Long Beach. He still publicly claims his gang set despite his wealth and international fame, even during his 2022 Superbowl Football half-time performance he threw up the 'C' Crip sign, wore the Crip color blue, and did what is called the Crip walk, a slow sliding dance (Malone 2022). Moreover, when Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams was facing judicial execution, Snoop Dogg requested that I

help him set up a meeting at the prison to visit Williams, which I did. Snoop Dogg's visit attracted international media coverage. After Williams was executed, I invited Snoop Dogg to attend the memorial service and asked him to write a rap song about Stanley Tookie Williams to perform there. Snoop Dogg complied with my request. His memorial performance was widely covered by the international news media. Snoop Dogg had no fear of representing his gang affiliation.

So, the black gangster class developed inventive agency to ensure some measure of what Johann Gottlieb Fichte in his seminal 1807 lecture on the German nation called 'cultural self-identity' (p. 3). Black gangsters have been significantly helped in this quest by their cooperative co-construction partners — the gangster rap and hip-hop music genres. Consequently, the black gangster class has been able to push against centuries of being defined by others and forced into identity formations negatively influenced by box supremacy. There will be more discussion about these concepts and their relationality to the black gangster class's mini empires anchored in space, but not necessarily place, in the following chapter.

Street-level patriotism and the concept of honor are also seen in the two black-gangster oaths presented here. The Bloods oath, for instance, refers to the idea of 'complete soldiers', personifying a highly respected individual who can be counted on to do his duty. Honor as fidelity, honor as strength, and honor as truthfulness are repeatedly symbolized in the BGF's oath where commitments are extracted to meet some street-gangster standard of honor or confront being killed. Given my experience with the BGF, I am not willing to assume the phrase most used in that gang's oath, 'this oath will kill me', should be seen as a figurative statement. Therefore, the disparate meanings of words and concepts used by the black gangster class versus the white dominant caste is vast and must be analyzed as another example of dialecticism constitutive to a racialized American culture.

This section ends with one final comparative insight with signs of potentially good news for black street gangsters in their bid to exercise inventive agency to control their own identity formations.

The black gangster class has in the gangster rap and hip-hop music genre its own trope-making entertainment medium to serve as a potent actor in the cooperative as well as uncooperative co-construction of black identity. This is in comparison to the white dominant caste's reliance a century or so ago on blackface minstrelsy with its coon-shouting, for example, which culturally inscribed over many years the black-as-pariah trope into America's values infrastructure and customs. For certain, there are damning dialectical differences between black-trope-making rappers, who are striving to define themselves and the black gangster class, as opposed to black tropes conjured in minstrel stage productions mostly performed by a white working class and produced by a white ruling caste to savagely define 'the other' — black America. But I argue here that the black gangster class's symbiotic relationship with the gangster rap and hip-hop music genres offer an opportunity to create public pedagogical campaigns that could strengthen the agency and reimagine the future of the black gangster class.

4.4. Discussion

This chapter's subject matter makes the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) a more conceptually dense endeavor than was the case with the previous chapter for reasons that are challenging but necessary to examine. I make that argument because of how existing meanings for commonly used concepts, such as historical context, responsibilities of scholarship, and history itself, fail in providing an ethical understanding of this work about a deeply racialized American society. The subject matter of this chapter has already examined the five tenets of CRT by: 1) providing an overview of America's racist history, particularly regarding black men; 2) utilizing voices of color to counter typically unchallenged racialized narratives about black

men; 3) deconstructing various aspects of America's racialized values infrastructure and customs; 4) reframing intersectionality as an epistemic comparison of two national histories in America, based on caste designation instead of gender-based contrasts; 5) exposing the antecedents of interest convergence theory to examine its ineffectiveness as a social justice tool for black America. Interest convergence theory is a transactional strategy that encourages black America to find issues or outcomes that can be promised to a white working class in return for their support of a black social justice claim.

In this section, the CRT analysis concerns itself with two topics: examining racialized historiography's influence on the distortion of knowledge production and exploring the long-term implications of interest convergence's racialized origins.

4.4.1. Racism, History, and Ethical Knowledge Production

Though this chapter is about the long history of racism in the United States and its impact on black agency and identity formation, how the process of knowledge production has affected the articulation of that history has, thus far, been only nominally noted in this work. There has not been a historiographic examination of America's slave and black-oppression scholarship in this thesis. It is beyond the scope of this work. But there are a few issues emanating from the possibilities of such a study that I will discuss here: the difficulty of seeing what needs to be exposed and critiqued regarding America's historical literature of racism, the special case to be made for the *in*significance of historical context, and the argument in favor of an ethics of scholarship that includes a plan for racial reflexivity.

Regarding the difficultly of seeing the signs of racialized scholarship, Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his unsettling but brilliant book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), provides at least one exceptional reason in two profound sentences for the typical lapse in such critical explication: 'History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so

transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots' (1995, p. xxiii).

In W. E. B. Du Bois' book, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935), he took an unusual and dramatic posture to overcome the invisibility factor of the racialized rendering of history by some members of the academy. He literally named the names of those academicians whom he considered to be the chief offenders of his era. The bibliography for his book is where he placed his protest. Du Bois created nine categories of researchers, provided short descriptions for each classification, and listed the scholars by name along with their offending publications. He did, though, include researchers and publications that he supported, and, in his description of those categories, he explained why they were favored by him. Some excerpts from that bibliography include:

> Standard Anti-Negro (These authors believe the Negro to be sub-human and congenitally unfitted for citizenship and the suffrage) (p. 731).
>
> Propaganda (These authors select and use facts and opinions in order to prove that the South was right in Reconstruction, the North vengeful or deceived, and the Negro stupid) (p. 732).
>
> Historians (Fair to indifferent on the Negro) (Ibid.).
>
> Monographs (These authors seek the facts in certain narrow definite fields and in most cases do not ignore the truth as to Negros) (p. 733).
>
> Negro Historians (These are the standard works of Negro historians, some judicial, some eager and even bitter in defense) (p. 735).

This *Black Reconstruction* book was considered by black scholars to be Du Bois' magnum opus (Robinson 1977). But the book reviews for *Black Reconstruction* included a large coterie of white academics who deemed this book to be a lesser work by Du Bois, who was normally viewed as a highly respected scholar. But this book was a poor exception, as expressed by his white colleagues (Craven 1936; Simkins 1935).

Still, that was in 1935. In 1972, Tony Platt, now a distinguished scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, was a criminology professor co-teaching a class about criminal justice racism at the same Berkeley campus. Platt shared his teaching responsibilities with W. E. B. Du Bois' stepson, David Du Bois, who was also the editor of the Black Panther Party's newspaper (Platt 2021, p.2). Platt recounts in a George Washington University blog that he was accused of displaying 'anti-American ideas' (Ibid.) by lecturing about 'radical theories of racism' (Ibid.). He ultimately lost his job. The academy's antagonism toward a scholar pointing out what was not meant to be seen about racial bias, as argued by Trouillot in *Silencing the Past*, even for a white scholar like Tony Platt, was not an acceptable act in the 1970s. It certainly was not acceptable for a black scholar to do the same in 1935 when W. E. B. Du Bois identified the white members of the academy that he believed were guilty of racialized scholarship.

However, embedded in the above discussion is an assumption that racialized scholarship conducted in 1935 or much earlier or even during the 1970s can be framed as historically contextual and thus not a desired or accepted example of scholarship, given today's standards. But should today's standards be subordinated to yesterday's scholarship? Typically, that is what happens. One such example is provided by the *Encyclopedia of* Philosophy, which openly dismissed John Locke's surprising rationale for slavery:

> Curiously, Locke justified slavery on the grounds that those who became slaves were originally in a state of wrongful war with those who conquered them, and being captive, forfeited their freedom. Apart from being bad history, this argument ignores the rights of the children of slaves. Locke's inconsistency here may mercifully be passed over (as cited in Welchman 1995, p. 68).

But why should that bad history be passed over? It deserves a serious deconstruction. Why not provide one? I contest framing historical context from other times as an excuse to *not* harshly critique racialized scholarship. I do so because such positioning becomes its own form of bias and ultimately

adds, I argue, to the distortion or 'dys-critiquing' (biased assessment) of knowledge production. With such a frame, racialized research is seen as contingent on what I am calling era-bias. With era-bias, the historical weight of different epochs in America and elsewhere often holds sway over how the production of racialized scholarship is considered. Further, era-bias nearly always involves two constructs of bias: bias identified in a previous era and bias manifested in the present era. But why would era-bias permit a scholar in the past to produce racialized scholarship or permit a scholar in this era to overlook or minimize racialized scholarship from the past? In the online comment section of the article, *The Legacy of Un-critical Race Theory at Berkeley* (2012), written by Tony Platt, whose comments were cited above, someone wrote about an unlikely lack of awareness by the academy of right and wrong during slavery:

> White elites and their power structures engaged in enslavement, sterilization, theft of land and resources, subjugation of entire populations, perpetuated violence that lead [sic] to the extinction of entire peoples. And you believe that those acts at the time were not known as crimes (moral or legal) (p. 9).

I agree. With era-bias the key question is, what was possible to know in the past and what was impossible to know? The abuses of slavery, as described above, the abuses that I read about in preparation for writing this chapter, I contend, should have been easily recognized by all the scholars of the day, not just a small group of them.

Heritage scholar David Lowenthal would argue that what I am defining as era-bias is in fact heritage-bias, which he claims cannot be avoided: 'No historian's view is wholly free of heritage bias' (1968, p. x). I agree with Lowenthal. But his very definition to distinguish heritage from history supports the argument that I am making here. As defined by Lowenthal, heritage bias situates the enhancement of the identity of an entity from the past, rather than providing an unvarnished explication of that entity's past, which is a way of defining history (Ibid.). He states:

> The historian, however blinkered and presentist and self-deceived, seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to

> inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate its truths. The heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk (Ibid., p. xi).

As Lowenthal makes clear, the concept of heritage cannot help but co-mingle to some extent with history. Nonetheless, he is definitive: heritage still is not history (Ibid.). Thus, heritage-bias — or era-bias — is not valid history. But I raise these issues to contest myself, to concede that my own positioning within this argument — including my reflexive attempts to ameliorate era-bias or heritage-bias as defined by Lowenthal — could still serve some role in my analyses. In other words, I could be that 'blinkered and presentist and self-deceived' (Ibid.) scholar, though I am striving not to be.

4.4.2. Another Look at Interest Convergence — and Intersectionality

This chapter revealed an important confirmation of the origins of interest convergence theory, which began on 27 September 1661 in Barbados with the passage on the same day by that country's Assembly of two history-altering laws. One law was the Slave Codes of 1661, officially known as *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes.* The other law passed on that same day was for white indentured servants: *An Act for the Good Governing of Servants, and Ordaining the Rights Between Masters and Servants* (National Archives UK CO 30/2, 1661; Handler and Reilly 2017). These two laws sparked what has become an enduring division between black and white America.

The former black slave law was enacted as a part of the Carolina's state constitution first, and then spread across the colonies in what is now the United States, as discussed earlier. The latter law was created to codify the relationship between plantation owners and their indentured servants, that is, white servants. For the slave-code legislation, its title did not include the word 'rights' because the black slave had no rights whatsoever and was consigned to being enslaved for his entire life and for that slave's ensuing generations of children (Handler and Reilly 2017). The white indentured servants had some

rights and some privileges, not a lot, but some. However, one of the rights they had was to receive financial payments for reporting on the whereabouts of runaway black slaves or renumeration for informing slave owners of the possible insurrection plans of the black slaves with whom they worked every day (Ibid.). White indentured servants also had prescribed times for how long they would remain servants, and reporting on an errant black slave could take some time off their service.

This comparison between black slaves and white indentured servants is being provided here because of the purpose these distinctions served. That purpose, it turns out, was to give white indentured servants one category of persons in American society toward whom they could feel superior, that is, black slaves. This was the beginning of interest convergence in America.

Nearly three centuries later, in the early 1960s, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the thirty-sixth President of the United States, summed the essence of racism rooted in the interest convergence concept: 'I'll tell you what's at the bottom of it [racial epithets painted on signs in Tennessee that he had just seen]. If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you' (Moyers 1988, p. 1).

As stated above, interest convergence theory was set up to create an American culture that was forever embedded with a belief that the white working class possessed a superiority over black America. My argument, then, is that every effort to employ interest convergence theory, centering and thus prioritizing the desires of the white middle class in exchange for black America's receipt of some justice concession, further entrenches the assumed superiority of the white working class. It also further entrenches the inferiority of black America by allowing the white middle class to situate itself as the empowered actor with agency over whether black social justice claims can be achieved — or not.

Therefore, I have chosen to reject the intended strategic use of that tenet for black America. My adaptation of interest convergence theory coopts a bit of the intersectionality concept. Here intersectionality is utilized to reveal and reimagine the two histories of black and white America as one factual history — no doubt a challenging task.

Chapter 5: Freedom as Symbolism for the Black Gangster Class

> Nobody can give you freedom.
> Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything.
> If you're a man, you take it.. . .
> Know that freedom comes to us either by ballots or by bullets.
> And when you know that, then you are careful how you use the word *freedom* (italics by Malcolm X).
>
> — Malcolm X (1965, pp. 111-112)

5.1. Overview: Feeling Freedom

The explanation of freedom depicted above by Malcolm X does not capture the black gangster's experience of freedom. Malcolm X positions freedom as a concept to be embraced by what he conceived as only the most realistic of black Americans. Those realistic black Americans whom he cautioned must, as a last resort, be prepared to kill or be killed to secure freedom. Malcolm X's first option, though, would have been for black America to vote for more freedom rather than to use violence to secure the same. But for street gangsters, the ballot box — or voting to create a society that best serves the black gangster class — has long since been abandoned as a worthwhile endeavor. Further, the ballot box is not a revered option for the black gangster class because street gangsters are typically not permitted to vote. Laws in the United States prevent convicted felons, many of whom are black gangsters, from exercising the right to vote until certain conditions are met — or rarely ever able to be met (Chung 2021). Thus, the relevance regarding the imposed irrelevancy of citizenship for the black gangster class is also a dialectic factor in the black-street gangster's construction of freedom and is examined in more detail within this chapter. That narrows the street-gangster fight for freedom to a battle relying on bullets, not ballots. But bullets intended to pierce whom? And bullets relied upon to attain what type of freedom? The Malcolm X specter of *how* to fight for freedom — via the ballot or the bullet — does not answer the salient question: What does the very concept of freedom mean to the black gangster class?

This chapter grapples with answering that question. And grappling is a fair description of the task since the literature on freedom does no more to recognize than did Malcolm X the three crucial factors contributing to how I am arguing the meaning of freedom is constructed by black street gangsters. One such factor is the temporality of freedom — or the significance of time on perceptions of freedom — for street gangsters. There is also a crucial spatial factor that is both concrete *and* perceptual for how street gangsters construct freedom. A third crucial factor is the perpetual need for black gangsters to uncooperatively co-construct a version of freedom for themselves. This has been true concerning the need to uncooperatively co-construct their identity and agency, which I have labeled inventive agency — how street gangsters re-imagine their reality, particularly the worst of their reality, to make life *feel* better for them even when their reality is decidedly not materially better. It is also true, I argue here, that the need to co-construct a special meaning for freedom in the world of street gangsters is influenced by what is realistically attainable. And what is realistically attainable is based on black-gangster perceptions derived from an epistemology generationally forged by a history of racialized constraints.

There is another significant factor that overlays the experience of all three key factors described above and that greatly influences those three key factors: the ever-present potential for danger and death embedded in the black gangster class's understanding of freedom. But it is not quite the danger and potential for death hinted at by Malcolm X, such as was faced by black slaves and years later by black freedom fighters, which is, the fight for freedom — the fight for the rights of citizenship — that was most often a suicide mission. For the black gangster class, the freedom fight is far more elemental: it is learning how to live with a heightened sense of the right to live, to stay alive, unrelated to a battle for some other status, such as bona fide citizenship. Freedom, then, is about the gangster's individual survival. Therefore, freedom is most always a personal battle of survival for the black gangster class, manifested as an insular incitement of aggression in defense

of *their* space and symbolic of *their* very lives, which, as an expression of the senses, is explored below.

Freedom's link to street-gangster survival is perpetual and incorporated into the credos of gangs relating to their very existence, such as Crip commands: 'Do or die' and 'Crips don't die, they multiply'. Even during a brief Crips-Bloods truce in 1992, the peace treaty created provisions that claimed if the rules were followed, they would allow gang members to live at least until they reached the age of twenty-one. I was around when that peace treaty was created in Watts, California, and it prompted one of my few interferences in their culture. I suggested that the Crips-Bloods gang-truce leaders consider the promotion of a longer life span.

With the black gangster class, the three crucial factors of freedom — temporal, spatial, and uncooperative co-constructive meaning formation — interact in a way that I contend support the black gangster class's satisfaction with achieving only pieces of freedom, that is, temporary, short-term freedom, which is what I am calling symbolic freedom. One of my co-researchers, Steve Champion, a death-row prisoner, sums up the reasoning behind a gangster's acceptance of so little freedom associated with so little space and time: 'Everybody carves out a space because everyone yearns for space, no matter how small. We know it's not going to last. But it's all that we have'.

With symbolic freedom, senses that foster feelings of gangster empowerment are substituted for the attainment of material rights, such as a citizenship right to vote. This could mean a few minutes or a few hours of *feeling* free, which is highly valorized and acts as a replacement for *being* free as mainstream society envisions freedom. That would include citizenship entitlements, for instance, or as Malcolm X defines freedom — the ability to attain basic rights through voting or violent revolt. Similarly, spatial freedom for these gangsters can also mean settling for literally a few feet or a few blocks of territory where a gangster can roam or simply exist with some ephemeral experience of freedom that, consequently, is not likely to last. Steve Champion adds that the black gangster class is always 'about

movement, trying to get the space to be ourselves'. In the short-term, the claiming-space experience for a street gangster *feels* empowering in that it allows for some temporary or even momentary control of his life, momentary confirmation that he remains alive. An example of symbolic freedom in the world of street gangsters was on display in the 'Lordy, Lordy' story shared in the Prologue of this work. In that anecdote, a few members of the Rollin' 60s Crips gang in Los Angeles, armed with nine-millimeter guns in their waistbands, boldly threatened two members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) at a McDonald's restaurant. 'Fuck them police. . . All that harassing and shit, I ain't havin' it,' one of them said to a person I later interviewed who was at the scene functioning as a paid security guard, though unable or unwilling to intervene in the incident.

For those gangsters, that small space in the lobby of a fast-food restaurant for those few minutes of being able to challenge the LAPD was freedom, symbolic freedom, that temporarily enhanced their reputations, their street identities. This also allowed them to *feel* free while in momentary control of the McDonald's lobby. That incident, of course, could have cost them their lives since the police were also in possession of guns. And even if they were not killed amidst a shootout, the promotion of symbolic freedom could have led to their imprisonment. But that limited exposure to symbolic freedom was apparently worth the *feeling* of bravado in exchange for the risk of death or incarceration.

This temporal-spatial concept of freedom situated in black street-gang culture where the sensate is foregrounded inspires, I argue, an incrementalizing of freedom. And such incrementalizing of freedom is further influenced by the continuous pressure on the black gangster class to uncooperatively co-construct nearly every aspect of their lives, pressuring street gangsters to settle for less, including less freedom. These topics are discussed throughout this chapter, which is divided into four additional sections.

Section 5.2, ‘Freedom’s Perspectives’, extensively examines the symbolic-freedom concept as it is situated in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s classic 1762 explanation of his theory of freedom, which includes four types of freedom — natural freedom, civil freedom, democratic freedom, and moral freedom — as a model for what a ‘good political society’ (Simpson 2006, p. viii) should offer its citizenry. The *insignificance* for the black gangster class of citizenship and the *significance* for street gangsters of dialecticism associated with that citizenship are also explored.

In ‘Gangster Empire-Building’, section 5.3 of this chapter, a history, beginning in 1781, when the first black people settled in Los Angeles, is presented. Within that historical critique is a demonstration of how the twenty-first century black gangster class in Los Angeles evolved and came to construct its own special space to dominate as an enclave inside of black Los Angeles. That space has been previously referred to in this work as urban enclaves and defined as a culturally potent space in black Los Angeles. As an analysis of space versus place is made in this section, the urban-enclave label is set aside for the remaining chapters to use language emerging from this work’s highly focused space-place critique for black American enclaves throughout the nation. Also, this section examines one of the consequences of the space-versus-place phenomenon for the black gangster class: the portability of space as home and undifferentiated from prison cells.

An examination of what is meant by the culture of the condemned is conducted in more depth in section 5.4, ‘Understanding the Culture of the Condemned’. Again, the role of the sensate — in this instance senses associated with the concept of celebrity — is analyzed in this chapter relying in part on Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus concept as well as some cultural parallels found in the formation of blackface minstrelsy and the cultural precepts involved in that formation. This chapter’s findings conclude with an argument that encompasses the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which ended slavery though leaving one significant exception to the populous, that is, citizens convicted of crimes and imprisoned could

legally suffer slavery or indentured servitude by the state. The final question, then, posed here is: Are black gangsters America's last slaves standing? Section 5.4 attempts an answer to that question.

There is no 'Discussion' section in this chapter to explore Critical Race Theory (CRT) topics, thus breaking with the format of the previous two chapters. The explanation for this format deviation is explained on the chapter's last page.

5.2. Freedom's Perspectives

In Jack Katz's brilliant book, *Seductions of Crime* (1988), he talks about how scholars have not always compared the right things in their attempts to analyze what he calls the 'theories of the gang' (p. 117), particularly in relation to low-income, urban, minority gangs. He says that such academicians do not always 'hone in on the thing to be explained' (Ibid.). I agree. But with the black gangster class, there is an entanglement of concepts and historical circumstances to be sorted in response to the question: What is the thing to be explained?

In this chapter, one of the things to be explained is a focus on the potency of the street gangster definition of freedom, or as I have labeled it, symbolic freedom, which here I argue instigates the direction of a black gangster's life. My contention is that symbolic freedom serves as a hub for a confluence of subjects, ideas, and disciplines that assist in explaining the culture of the black gangster class. I tackle the complexity of symbolic freedom and its meaning to street gangsters by interrogating several issues. First, I situate symbolic freedom for street gangsters in classical theories of freedom and citizenship. Further, symbolic freedom and its traditional connection to citizenship is presented here as a dialectic critique, linking freedom for the black gangster class to crime rather than to citizenship. Finally, I examine the potent application of the senses for understanding gangster-style freedom and its connection to certain aspects of street-gang culture and criminal activity. To that end, I suggest that the extent to which

the senses are foregrounded in an analysis influences the meaning of that sensate display in the culture of street gangsterism.

5.2.1. Formations of Freedom

Formations of freedom in the United States have evolved in different ways for different reasons by different categories of people and institutions throughout the nation's history. But most framings of freedom, be they theoretically, politically, or practically inspired, have been contingent upon certain conceptual staples. Those staples include belonging to nation and entitlement to citizenship, civic participation, and an equal opportunity to achieve a state of well-being.

The notion of belonging to a nation, the United States of America, for instance, and of therefore being a full-fledged and recognized citizen of that nation, has contributed to the construction by mainstream black America, I argue, of a phantom-freedom experience. Like the phantom agency displayed by political commentator Baratunde Thurston of the previous chapter who espoused a claim of black people belonging to America and thus definitively possessing certain rights that in fact were not generally recognized by mainstream America, my contention here is that phantom freedom is situated between what is possible and what is desired by black America. But too often what is desired by black America is claimed as more than the limit of what is possible at any given historical period in the evolution of America's racialized values infrastructure. A striking example of black America's phantom-freedom phenomenon took place in 1893 at Boston's Tremont Temple, a theater-turned-Baptist-church with a long tradition of staging important speeches and literary readings. This is when Ida B. Wells, a celebrated African American journalist and anti-lynching advocate, spoke that day against the nation's 'lynching mania', where primarily black people were targeted to be hanged, skinned, tarred, castrated, and burned alive at 'lynching bees', a source of entertainment for white grassroots audiences (Wells: The U.S. Oratory Project, paragraph 23). Yet, in that same speech Wells proclaimed that 'the Afro-American was raised from the degradation of

the slave to the dignity of the citizen' (Ibid., paragraph 2). Though Wells describes many examples of mob-rule attacks on black people in her speech at Tremont Temple, she never defines how the dignity of the citizen — the black citizen — is realized in the America of her era. Ida B. Wells' great hope was to get white America to simply believe black America's victim tales of violent woe, and then support the human rights of black people (paragraph 32). But to paraphrase a Malcom X insight quoted in a previous chapter — 'If you are a citizen, why do you have to fight for your civil rights? If you are fighting for your civil rights, that means you are not a citizen' (Natividad 2020) — if you are fighting to keep black people from being lynched, are black people truly experiencing 'the dignity of the citizen'? My argument is that Wells allowed her desire for the black American claim of citizenship to far exceed its reality in an 1893 society. Seventy years later, in 1963 at a rally in Detroit, Michigan, Malcolm X gave a speech known as the 'Message to Grassroots' where he conceded little to Wells' phantom view of black citizenship, dignity, and freedom. Malcolm X in that speech defined black people as 'second-class citizens' in America with a status of no more than 'ex-slaves' (p. 1).

The two freedom perspectives of Ida B. Wells and Malcolm X, separated by nearly three-quarters of a century, represent a continuum of how freedom and its staples have been experienced by black America. Again, those staples include a sense of belonging to nation, enjoying citizenship, and a measure of entitlement to civic participation as well as human rights. Here I argue that the black gangster class has extended this historical continuum of freedom by constructing a symbolic-freedom concept in the shadows of United States democracy whereby virtually none of the staples of freedom or even the more radical Malcolm X understandings of and expectations for freedom directly apply to them.

By the twenty-first century, America's black street gangsters were aware of the pejorative thug identity constructed for them by mainstream society, the *hostis generis humani*, enemy of all humankind stereotype that

they were burdened to bear, and that made them a prime target of the nation's racialized mass incarceration policy. Such a policy continues to leave many members of the black gangster class stripped of some of their basic citizenship rights, including the opportunity to vote for elected representation. Consequently, street gangsters do not relate to Wells' idea of 'the dignity of the citizen' (Wells: The U.S. Oratory Project, paragraph 2).

None of the staples of freedom that appeal to most everyone else in America matter to the black gangster class. Instead, freedom has come to symbolize something else: constructing a space in which to *feel* invulnerable, even momentarily. Co-researcher Steve Champion explains: 'When I roamed the streets of my Los Angeles neighborhood as a Crip, that's when I felt most alive, most invincible. Being around other gang members, a group that supported me, felt like being around potent energy. These were homeboys, my fellow Crips, willing to kill for me, willing to die for me. So, freedom was about being able to get the space I needed to exist as my own true self for however long I could'. Notably, Champion acknowledged during our interview that such street-style feelings of freedom, of an energized street-gangster existence, were not and could never be ever-lasting.

Understanding the numerous societal constructs of freedom is an incredibly contextual task, as exemplified by the black gangster class's experience of symbolic freedom. To sort the street-gangster response to the meaning formation of freedom, then, is to sort a host of subjects with a hermeneutical-type critique. A hermeneutical-type critique is used here as a tool to help interpret and thus explain fundamental differences in how freedom is perceived by the black gangster class as opposed to a mainstream population, be they black, white, or another ethnicity.

I begin such an analysis by situating the gangster concept of symbolic freedom in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's seminal work, *The Social Contract*, which includes theories of freedom for nation-building. Rousseau narrowed his theoretical focus to what he believed was needed for creating the best

governmental framework that would lead to ‘a genuinely free political society’ (as cited in Simpson 2006, p. ix). For Rousseau, what constituted a free political society involved establishing a governmental structure that supported individual independence *and* collective participation in the governance process (Ibid.). Rosseau’s political treatise, though published in 1762, has become an influential work contributing, even now, to the development of theoretical literature critiquing the concept of freedom and the nature and role of a social contract (Simpson 2006). Such literature, however, has both supported as well as vehemently opposed Rousseau’s ideas (Ibid.; Williams 2014). With this work, a comparison of the black gangster class’s expression of freedom and Rousseau’s identification of what he contends are the four types of freedom offers additional insight into underlying racialized history and its accompanying sensate motivators of symbolic freedom in the world of black street gangsterism (Simpson 2006).

Rousseau’s four types of freedom are natural freedom, civil freedom, democratic freedom, and moral freedom (Ibid.). Natural freedom, as defined by Rousseau, is when a person has the right to do or claim whatever that person can get away with doing or claiming. So, the limitations on freedom are bound by the capacity of the individual to forcefully do or take what is desired, as well as bound by that individual’s capacity to care about the impact on others of that individual’s actions. Rousseau found this category of freedom to be less significant than the other three categories because natural freedom applied to people living outside of a ‘political society’, which is the state of play that most concerned Rousseau regarding his social contract conceptualization (Ibid., p. 1). However, the black gangster class, as has already been argued, does exist in some important ways outside of the political society of the mainstream citizenry. So, how does the symbolic freedom associated with black street gangsters relate to the natural freedom category? This will be discussed momentarily.

Rousseau was most interested in the remaining three types of freedom — civil, democratic, and moral freedom — because he believed

those freedom categories could only be found in a political society, which was the focus of his analysis in *The Social Contract* (Ibid.). Civil freedom is when the citizenry is permitted to create the quality of life for themselves and of their own choosing without interference from the state or from others (Simpson 2006). In other words, with civil freedom, citizens can reside in a 'sphere of free choice' with respect to their ideas and lifestyle (Ibid., p. 2), if they do not break the law. According to Rousseau, democratic freedom is when the people of a nation or community function as a collective with the power to determine the ways in which they will be ruled (Ibid.). Thus, collectively, the people are ruling themselves, while maintaining that sphere of free choice in their lifestyle. Finally, Rousseau's baseline understanding of moral freedom is when people live by their own autonomous principles that are essentially their personal laws guiding behavior that they have *internally* and thus individually constructed for themselves. This differs from civil freedom where the individual's concern is not having to be subject to laws or rules impacting freedom of thought or a desired lifestyle, which might be enforced *externally* by the state or others. Moral freedom also differs from natural freedom because with natural freedom the individual is free to do whatever he or she can get away with, while with moral freedom there are personal principles held internally by an individual that command some level of self-obedience (Ibid., p. 92).

Symbolic freedom as experienced by the black gangster class defies the underlying assumptions of Rousseau's theories of freedom, particularly where claiming citizenship matters, or where the duties of citizenship are involved. Rousseau's theory of democratic freedom, therefore, does not apply to black street gangsters because such gangsters do not consider themselves part of a national collective of citizens voting for rights and for laws that they hope will support them. Further, black gangsters for the most part are not allowed to be a part of that collective, since as discussed before, they have been largely disenfranchised of their right to vote because of felony convictions (Chung 2021). Also, as the stereotyped bogeymen — *hostis generis humani*, an enemy of all humankind — in today's mainstream

culture, black street gangsters are aware of their social isolation and harbor no such expectations of collective involvement with anyone for nearly any purpose outside of their own urban enclaves. ‘Voting is a waste of time. Nothing’s gonna change *here*,’ I was told by Tony ‘Bogard’ Thomas, O.G. (Original Gangster) leader of the PJ Watts Crips gang located in the Imperial Courts Public Housing complex. However, he was one of many gangsters during my nearly twenty years of immersive ethnographic practice to share that message. So, black street gangsters experience citizenship alienation, which makes it mostly an insignificant factor when applying traditional theories of freedom to the black gangster class. But that same citizen alienation is also quite significant as a dialectic phenomenon influencing the black gangster class’s uncooperative co-construction of freedom.

A critique of this dialectic conundrum begins with an acknowledgment: the black gangster class citizenship alienation and thus relationship to freedom is more than just a disinterest in or lack of access to voting. My contention is that an analysis of such alienation lends itself to an insular, though at the same time historical, examination of how government itself is defined by the black gangster class, how government relates to the black gangster class, and how symbolic freedom’s role is a dominant factor in these conceptualizations.

Political scientist Vesla Weaver from Johns Hopkins University discusses the concept of citizenship as a special and too often demeaning process of socialization for black people. Her argument strongly links unjust and sometimes dangerous treatment by law enforcement to the meaning formation of black citizenship (2014). Weaver explains: ‘You learn that black citizenship itself is suspicious and that your color is itself a challenge to authority’ (Ibid., p. 2). Weaver cites legal scholar Devon Carbado’s evocative phrase — ‘racial naturalization’ — to express law enforcement’s impact on a black person’s experience of citizenship as a ‘moment of racial truth’ (Ibid.). For the black gangster class, these racialized moments can be realized in ritualized life-threatening circumstances, such as when police officers throw a

gang member into the back of their car, drive into a rival gang's territory, and then dump that gangster onto the street in a neighborhood of enemies and drives away. Among the gangster class interviews I have conducted throughout California and across the United States, this is a common tale that has become that moment of racial truth, a type of racial naturalization, an alienating initiation of non-citizenship for the black gangster class. This is a socialization of citizenship that has become normalized for black street gangsters and transformative, in that the concept of government has shrunk in its representation to mean, simply, law enforcement. So, why would a black street gangster want to be affiliated as a citizen, even if he could be a citizen, to a government that symbolizes harm for him and his community? Even W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his autobiography about a year he spent at the University of Pennsylvania working on a research project while living in a one-room flat in a low-income Philadelphia neighborhood: 'The police were our government' (1991, p. 195). Lerman and Weaver in *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control* (2014) recount an insightful demonstration of the spatial as well as perceptive boundaries established for what government means in black communities by three young black men from Covington, Louisiana, whom the authors were interviewing (p. 1). One of the three males began the interview in a local restaurant where, as described by Lerman and Weaver, he used saltshakers and sugar packets to literally map on the table his community's limited relationship with government:

> Government in his community formed a Bermuda Triangle of sorts: in the left corner a police station; in the right corner a court; and at the apex a jail. A majority of what these young men had come to believe about government derived primarily from their interactions with these and other institutions of criminal justice — encounters with Covington police and probation officers, going to court and meeting with the public defender, visiting a brother in prison for life, and spending nights on the cold floor of the overcrowded Saint Tammany jail (Ibid., p. 2).

Sociologist Kelly Miller frames citizenship and government from the perspective of what happens to a black man's psyche after experiencing or

witnessing many violent encounters with police: ‘This engenders in him a distrust and resentful attitude toward all public authorities’ (as cited in Muhammad 2010, p. 251). It makes the black gangster class look skeptically at the viability of being a bona fide citizen of the United States, entitled to the same rights as the white people seen on television. I use television as the racial interface since most black street gangsters reside in racially segregated communities and thus do not regularly brush shoulders with the country’s white populace. Television programming also provides another way of critiquing citizenship inequality. As addressed from a Hollywood-entertainment-producing perspective in a book by Mike Davis and Jon Wiener (2020) about Los Angeles in the 1960s, a provocative analysis of Los Angeles recounts how while the black youth and adults of Watts were rioting in August 1965 against police brutality, Hollywood had edited out black teenagers entirely from television programming’s utopian vision of southern California youth (Ibid.). That televised vision was of white teenagers surfing and enjoying an ‘endless summer’ (Ibid., p. 1). Meanwhile, the black youth of Watts and elsewhere in the Los Angeles area had to suffer racially restricted beach space to surf or to otherwise enjoy the ocean (Ibid.), in addition to being beaten and sometimes killed by mostly white police officers.

Theories of freedom that rely in any way on mainstream societal understandings of citizenship simply do not apply to the black gangster class. Still, there are some interesting issues that emerge in how the symbolic freedom experienced by street gangsters can be understood with respect to Rousseau’s framing of natural, civil, and moral freedom. To illustrate, a gangster credo that originated in prisons throughout the United States pivots on the sensate experience of exercising the power to dominate the space of others. That credo, as has been conveyed to me by many gangsters over the years, is: ‘What you are not strong enough to keep, belongs to me’. Practically, that means a gangster just can take from another prisoner whatever that gangster is desirous of and once it is taken, then ownership of that object changes. It instantly belongs to the gangster-usurper. Further, because of America’s racially discriminatory mass incarceration policy that

targets black and brown men, what was a prison credo has been exported into black urban enclaves. Who controls the space of people and places in those enclaves is who rules those enclaves, which is discussed more later.

On the face of it, that prison credo appears to comport with Rousseau's example of natural freedom and to some limited extent his framing of civil freedom. With natural freedom, the gangster, who is doing what he feels he can get away with while in prison, for example, is functioning outside of a political society and is unconstrained in his behavior. With respect to civil freedom, certain imprisoned gangsters live a double life: they must abide by the rules of the carceral institution, so there is not the freedom to create a lifestyle that flouts those institutional rules without punishments, such as a stint of forced solitary confinement. However, there are incarcerated gangsters, such as O.G.s, who dominate a parallel prisoner society within correctional facilities, as they dominate a parallel urban-enclave society when not imprisoned. By so doing, such prisoners create their personal 'sphere of free choice' within those institutions, with some limitations of course (Simpson 2006, p. 2). So, they manage to somewhat fit Rousseau's civil freedom model. Still, I would argue that the black gangster class's engagement with symbolic freedom — where the sensate, his feelings about who owns the space where he stands in any given environment and at any given moment — is more aligned with Rousseau's theory of moral freedom than natural or civil freedom.

What distinguishes moral freedom's logic, according to Rousseau, is that there are undergirding principles informing the citizen who does what he chooses, but that citizen is constrained by those principles. In the instance of the prison credo, there is an underlying principle guiding gangster behavior that is found in the original Crip-gang mantra mentioned above: street gangsters proudly 'do or die' (Bing 1991, p. 22). This mantra characterizes, literally, the existential importance of time and space for black gangsters — whether in prison or on the streets — because of the imminent threat of death that has become a part of their culture, a personification of their day-to-

day do-or-die lifestyles. Black street gangsters must negotiate two primary personas: they are both predators and prey in all instances and in all the environments where they are permitted to venture, including, of course, in their own urban enclaves. Black street gangsters are predators in their role as O.G.s, or aspirants to that status, in that O.G.s impose their will and leadership on their membership and on communities in which they reside. Gangster leadership can be harsh, and the quality of that leadership permeates urban-enclave culture. Crips co-founder, Stanley Tookie Williams, for example, championed the one-punch knockout against anyone, particularly fellow gang members who challenged his Crip leadership. The 'Tookie' way of responding to perceived disrespect became a Crip trend, practiced by those gang members who had confidence they could knock someone unconscious with one punch in the jaw.

O.G.s are predators who influence social relations in the urban enclaves they dominate. But they are also prey. They are tested because of their leadership status. They become targets for other gangsters and for the police because of their O.G. status. Other up-and-coming street gangsters want to replace the reigning gang leader. Law enforcement wants to imprison or to be given an excuse to kill the reigning gang leader. To illustrate, Stanley Tookie Williams was shot multiple times while caught relaxing in a chair on a porch in South Central Los Angeles. He came close to death from the bullets, but his life was also in jeopardy during his one-year convalescence. He had to be hidden from his enemies by being moved from house to house to protect him from being shot again. Not too long after his recovery from being riddled with bullets, he was arrested on capital murder charges, found guilty, sent to death row, and eventually executed on 13 December 2005. But even during his time on death row, he was prey, and not only from the criminal justice system that eventually killed him. While in prison, he remained prey to younger, ambitious Crips who intended to challenge Williams's gang leadership, as was reported in a *Los Angeles Times* article (Moran 1989). A twenty-three-year-old Crip member, Tiequon Cox, also on San Quentin's Condemned Row, attempted to kill thirty-six-year-old Williams by stabbing

him in the neck while they were both on the exercise yard. Years later, Williams shared with me that his neck wound had been no more than a scratch because the attacker, Cox, had lost his nerve during the last moments of the scuffle.

The lived experience of black street gangsters is tied to an acute and realistic preoccupation with death, that is, the imminent potential of their own demise. Freedom for the black gangster class, then, has a distinct meaning that greatly differs in comparison to the role citizenship and nation play in theories of freedom, like Rousseau's, reflecting the interests of a mainstream American society. Though freedom's meaning for black gang members is more insularly conceived in space and time instead of citizen rights and patriotism, there remains complexity in the street-gangster construction of the concept of freedom. That complexity is enhanced, I argue, by a powerful black-gangster engagement with the sensate — senses stimulated by the specter of violence that is prevalent in the varied spaces of the urban enclave and what has become its extension, the prison environment, a phenomenon examined later in this chapter.

The range of freedom formations that center citizenship or identity or the capacity to seek personal freedom of choice, aligns, if at all, in often contradictory ways with the black gangster class's experience of freedom. My argument is that the impact of the sensate — the gangster senses on the construction of temporal-spatial freedom or symbolic freedom — is such that the word 'freedom' has a meaning that is not at all what the word means to the rest of the nation. But that phenomenon is one of many examples of how the racialized evolution of the black gangster class experiences cultural duality in the United States. And such duality, I argue, has led to the creation by street gangsters of a parallel existence and governing structure of sorts, consisting of mini empires situated in urban enclaves throughout the country that have their own localized street codes — the equivalent to mainstream societal laws — and their own brand of citizenship and patriotism. That

unique gangster brand of citizenship and patriotism is, however, loyal to spaces labeled earlier in this work by a rapper as the United *Streets* of America, not in any way loyal to the United *States* of America.

5.3. Gangster Empire-Building

The practice of uncooperative co-construction regarding most aspects of how black people exist in a racialized United States was officially sanctioned by Warren G. Harding, the nation's twenty-ninth president, in a speech that he gave on 26 October 1921. Harding was speaking at an event celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of Birmingham, Alabama, a deeply southern city that had an historical tradition steeped in slavery. However, Harding's address became known as his 'civil rights speech' (Herr 2015, p. 1), a surprising speech for the time. Newspaper headlines read: 'Race Speech of Harding Viewed as Bold Stroke' and 'Remarks Advocating Political and Economic Equality for Negro are Talk of Washington' (Ibid.).

The event took place in a park before a crowd of about one-hundred-thousand residents of a town with a population of one-hundred-eighty-thousand people, both black and white (Ibid.). But Birmingham's black citizens were segregated in this crowd by being required to stand at the very back of the outdoor venue (Ibid.). Harding's message, it turns out, struck black and white audience members quite differently, as reflected by the heartiness — as well as the lack thereof — of the reception to what the president had to say (Ibid.). Black people cheered and applauded explosively in comparison to a muted white audience response. Yet, Harding made a deliberate racist demarcation in how he characterized what equality should mean for America's black versus white populations:

> Politically and economically there need be no occasion for great and permanent differentiation [between the races] . . . provided that on both sides there shall be recognition of the absolute divergence in things social and racial . . . Men of both races may well stand uncompromisingly against every suggestion of social equality. Indeed, it would be helpful to have that word 'equality'

> eliminated from this consideration; to have it accepted on both sides that this is not a question of social equality, but a question of recognizing a fundamental, eternal, and inescapable difference . . . . [So] there must be such education among the colored people as will enable them to develop their own leaders, capable of understanding and sympathizing with such a differentiation between the races as I have suggested — leaders who will inspire the race with proper ideals of race pride, of national pride, of an honorable destiny . . . [but] racial amalgamation there cannot be (Harding: U.S. Oratory Project, paragraph 18).

President Harding was chiefly advocating the creation of two parallel societies in the United States: one with black leadership and one led by the nation's white populace. Harding believed that if his proposed way forward was implemented, it would lead to 'natural segregations' without having to purposefully narrow the rights of black America (Harding: U.S. Oratory Project, paragraph 21), which he acknowledged was already underway in the southern states. Still, Harding believed such actions were 'satisfying natural inclinations and adding notably to happiness and contentment' (Ibid.) for white as well as black people. And although the black people who attended Harding's speech did cheer his message, W. E. B. Du Bois questioned the fundamental anti-personhood displayed in Harding's vision for the future of black America (Herr 2015). 'No system of social uplift,' Du Bois stated, 'which begins by denying the manhood of a man can end by giving him a free ballot, a real education, and a just wage' (as cited in Herr, p. 1).

In a thesis completed in 1936, by J. Max Bond, a pioneering black student to earn a doctoral degree in Sociology from the University of Southern California, titled *The Negro in Los Angeles*, Bond talks about the concepts of national customs and of 'social distancing' as applied to the black population (p. 160). In terms of the power of racialized customs in the United States, Bond writes:

> In the main, the Negro-white relationship offers a beautiful study of the functioning of the mores. There is little need for passing laws to control the Negro; his treatment by the whites grows out of habits and traditions. The laws that restricted Negroes are unwritten — subtle but understood by all

> concerned. [In comparison,] the Japanese has [sic] been discriminated against by the passage of unfavorable laws; whereas the Negro suffers from the unwritten law reflected in the mores of the white race and the low status that has been given to him (Ibid., p. 149).

With the concept of social distancing, Bond offers a definition and an analysis that differ significantly from the 2020 Covid pandemic understanding of the social-distancing concept. At that time, social distancing was introduced worldwide as a tool informing citizens how far they should stand from each other to avoid illness. But the history of that phrase, it turns out, offers a racially robust meaning that is explored in Bond's doctoral work and that he acknowledges predates his PhD project. The original understanding of social distancing reflects a race-based — not diseased-based — tool, as critiqued in Bond's doctoral thesis, providing a complex explanation of how racialized segregation evolved in Los Angeles where the Crips and Bloods youth gangs were eventually founded. Bond's work, I contend, also helps to explain the mini empires that these gang members eventually formed, which have become the parallel societies in the United States that President Warren G. Harding hoped would occur. But the violent and criminal culture emerging from the United *Streets* of America represents yet another unintended consequence of racialized public policy willfully constructed by America's political and ruling class leadership and supported by working-class white America.

J. Max Bond relied on the critiques of two scholars known for their work in the theorizing of social distancing — Robert E. Park and Emory S. Bogardus — to construct his own understanding of how that concept could be applied along racial lines in Los Angeles from 1910 to 1930. This is relevant here because of my focus on the evolution of black Los Angeles, a focus prompted by that city's role in the origin story of the Crips and Bloods and by the city's subsequent infamy. From the 1920s to 2003, Black Los Angeles had simply become known as two words, South Central, which eventually

became the entertainment industry's quintessential location of violently dramatic black street-gang depictions (Sonksen 2017).

Park and Bogardus both defined social distance theory as being dependent upon the measurement of the extent to which 'sympathetic understanding' existed between individuals or groups in America (Bogardus as cited in Bond 1936, p. 160; Bogardus 1932, p. 328). The emphasis of Park's theory did not purport to be the measuring of actual spatial distance demanded or expected to exist between those individuals or groups of people in America, just the *social* distance that separated or brought together individuals or groups of Americans. Bogardus, on the other hand, conceptualized the social distance concept somewhat less benignly than did Park. Bogardus felt what should be measured was the potential for conflict or the actual experience of conflict between certain individuals or groups (Ibid.). Whereas Park's inclination for understanding social distancing highlighted 'intimacy' as a characterization of how social relations are formed — or not — between certain individuals or groups (Park as cited in Bond 1936, p. 160). But both Bogardus and Park, along with Bond in his PhD thesis, relied on an analysis of social distancing that used geometrical relationships between a horizontal axis that represented potential closeness in relations among friendly entities; a vertical axis that represented leadership relationships and racialized structure; and, lastly, a diagonal line that allowed for the status of black people to slide up or down an angular slope, but with a definite cap on upward mobility.

Street gangsters today are seen as societal pariahs, as described throughout this thesis, and in that capacity face near complete mainstream isolation. So, Park, Bogardus, and Bond's social distancing theory does not apply to the black gangster class in the same way that it has applied to America's black population for centuries. In terms of black gangsters, such isolation has been social, spatial, *and* supportive of imposed invisibility, aided by a mass incarceration policy in the United States. That policy has led to an overrepresentation of black men, including black street gangsters, in

America's carceral facilities where these gangsters have learned how to reimagine prisons into useful space for enhancing their reputations, discussed more later in this chapter. But regarding the ultimate isolation of these men, that is, the consequences of mass incarceration practices that remove black men from both the workforce and their communities, historian Kelly Lytle Hernández starkly sums the consequential end point of that dire circumstance in her book, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles* (2017): 'Mass incarceration is mass elimination' (p. 1).

Here I contend such exceptional positioning of street gangsters in American society has impacted how the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal geometry of social distancing operates for them in twenty-first century America. And, once again, I contend there have been unintended results of these racialized practices, this time to isolate black men or, as theorized by Hernández, to flatly eliminate them from functioning as active members of society. In other words, to make them invisible to America's mainstream citizenry. But this has worked, I argue, to empower the black gangster class by allowing them to create their own small fiefdoms or urban empires within the social and geographic isolation — and invisibility imposed by the greater society — which will be explored momentarily. But for now, tracking the evolution of that monumental isolation begins with revealing a surprising status for black people in Los Angeles: they were among the first 'settlers' in 1781 of what was then known as Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles (Bond 1936, p. 1) in southern California.

Back then, Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles was controlled by Spain with an appointed governor, Felipe de Neve, who had been instructed to recruit a group of people to help colonize spots of fertile land in southern California. Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles was one such spot, and became the Los Angeles — and, in part, Central Los Angeles, alias South Central — that we know today (Ibid.). Governor de Neve sought settlers from Mexico, which was called New Spain. He needed settlers to cultivate crops, build

housing, and literally develop a viable and, hopefully, prosperous Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles.

I have been able to find two primary sources for this event, which is what Bond in his 1936 PhD relied upon: Historian Theodore Hittell's book, *History of California* (1897), and the Historical Society of Southern California's annual publication of 1931. These sources documented that of the eleven families responding to this first call for settlers to develop Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, three or four were either Negro and mulatto men (the two historical sources differed in their count by one mulatto man), six were mulatto women (on that count the two sources agreed), twenty-four children were mulattoes and two were Negroes. A mulatto man or woman was defined as a person with mixed heritage that included African ancestors. There was also a Spaniard and his family, along with four known then as Indian families or now as Native American families. Using either data source, that means upwards of forty percent of the first adult settlers of Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles were black people for whom there is no indication in the historical documentation that they were enslaved. However, there is a mention in the 1931 Historical Society of Southern California report that this group worked for the Governor, who assigned a corporal and three soldiers to oversee the work of settlers. Also, two black men and their families, along with one Spaniard and his wife and children, were made to leave the settlement. There is no record as to what caused them to be expelled. Still, the government of Spain offered relatively generous inducements to encourage these settlers to come to Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, including the provision of land to live on and to farm, monetary allowances and clothing expenses, annually, for up to three years, and tax exemptions for five years (Hunt and Sanchez 1929, p. 99). Slave status would have meant that no inducements were necessary to generate compliance with a call to work. Each black settler was referred to in the historical literature of those times as a 'pioneer Negro' of the city of Los Angeles (Bond 1936, p. 4).

Ten years later there was a hint of hierarchical bias against being dark skinned, given that eight of those first settlers began to make themselves 'officially lighter' in color by changing their ethnic status (Brown et al. 2012, p. 210). Some of the mulattoes reinvented themselves as Indian Spanish (Ibid.). Some of the Indian Spanish settlers reinvented themselves as simply Spanish (Ibid.). And some of the Indian pioneers reinvented themselves as Indian Spanish (Ibid.). But the trail of black people in Los Angeles is picked up again in earnest — along with a race-based bias against black migrants — in the period surrounding California's 1850 successful petition to be admitted into the Union.

In 1850, California was admitted into the Union in the free-state column and the constitutional provision that did not allow slavery or indentured servitude except for punishment for having committed a crime remained intact. However, in the real world of 1850, black people who resided in California could not count on being free. The 1850 census for the City of Los Angeles recorded 1,598[10] white residents in comparison to twelve black residents, who were migrants from New York, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, and other states or colonies, including one woman listing herself as mulatto from Florida (Ibid., p. 4; United States Census 1850, p. 970). The census, then, provides reason to believe that most black residents of Los Angeles were in some way functioning under the control of the white residents of Los Angeles.

There are a few things that we know in terms of the shifting geometry of social distancing for the first black settlers of Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles and the second group of black people, some sixty-nine years later, who arrived in what by then was simply called Los Angeles. In terms of the horizontal axis measuring the willingness of the first black and non-black settlers to live or be close to each other, either socially or spatially, historical

[10] This number is recorded in the Los Angeles Almanac as 3,518, but that includes Spanish-speaking residents and the County of Los Angeles, which is larger than the City of Los Angeles. I have opted to post decennial census data collected by the United States government for the City of Los Angeles.

records do not show any conflict in that regard. But by the end of the 1840s, historians tell us that black-white relations, both social and spatial, had changed in Los Angeles. The fact that a provision to restrict free black men from entering California was debated for inclusion in California's first constitution because of a belief that non-black gold-mine laborers would be degraded by having to work next to black workers demonstrates the social and spatial shift in black-white relations that had occurred in just sixty-nine years.

In terms of the vertical axis, even with the first black settlers there was indeed a social hierarchy, since members of the military were ordered to supervise the settlers. But there is not enough information to know if the horizontal separation between the black pioneers and the soldiers was based solely on socioeconomic status and their orders by Governor de Neve, or if ethnicity played a role in the use of military authority. But by the 1850 census, all but one black migrant of the twelve reporting to be residents of Los Angeles identified a racialized hierarchical relationship with white America demonstrated by how black people described their living conditions, that of belonging to or living within white households. This arrangement was akin to slavery, if not outright designated as such.

By the Gold Rush Era, a diminishing status of black Los Angeles residents was clear: working alongside black gold-mine laborers, for instance, was considered a degrading situation for the non-black worker. Thus, the low status of black people also contributed to their isolation. Also, there was a major downturn in the fortunes of black residents of Los Angeles, ironically, because of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era.

Though California was never officially a slave state, its political and commercial leadership, along with its mainstream white citizenry, showed sympathy toward the pro-slavery movement. In fact, slavery stood as a 'vital question' in California (Bond 1936, p. 7), as confirmed years later, in 1906, by the American Historical Association when its annual report devoted a section

to that circumstance titled, ‘Slavery in California after 1848’. The report explained how California was subject to the Congressionally enacted Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed black people in California and other free states to be ‘reclaimed’ by any white person from the South who issued an affidavit stating that this black person belonged to him or her (Ibid.).

What is interesting — as well as revelatory about the potency of racialized customs and American values — is that Los Angeles, a city in a free state, succumbed to some of the attitudes of the South toward black people. California did not want to allow black people the right to vote. The state only conceded the point when it became the law of the land via the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Los Angeles newspapers provided another way to gauge the anti-black sentiment in the city, which was led by a vocal population of southern white people who had moved to Los Angeles (McGroarty 1921). One newspaper, the *Los Angeles News*, was forced to change ownership in 1865 after writing an editorial that condemned the treatment of black soldiers who had fought valiantly in the Civil War.

Black adults, who began in 1781 as the first settlers — the pioneer Negroes — of Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, where there was no recorded history of their being viewed as people of inherently bad character to be avoided, had by the mid-1800s become publicly identified as putrid in a major City of Los Angeles newspaper. And by 1866 black children were not permitted to sit alongside white children in any California classroom without express permission of white parents (Bond 1936).

This period, from 1781 to the mid-1800s, demonstrated a dramatic shift in the geometric fortunes of social distancing for black Americans. Horizontally, white people no longer wanted to live, work, or learn in an environment that placed them side-by-side black people. Vertically, the hierarchical practice of white leadership and dominance over black people had become culturally normative in Los Angeles and throughout the state of California, as well as elsewhere in the nation. The diagonal that represented

status in the geometry of social distancing was nearly flat for black America at that time. One question to be sorted, historically, is how such a deterioration occurred in the social standing of black people who had once been recruited to develop Los Angeles and ended up as social lepers in that city one hundred years later?

Understanding the role migration played in the growing isolation and ostracizing of black people in Los Angeles may be found in an insight provided by Bond in his thesis. He pointed to the increasing migration of white people from southern slave states to Los Angeles as the culprit in the downward shifting status of the black residents in Los Angeles. Bond implied that Southern white migrants arrived in Los Angeles with racial bias that reflected the values, culture, and customs of the South's black slave society where, according to the 1860 census, an average of thirty-two percent of white families owned black slaves. In some states the percentage of family slave ownership was much higher: for white Mississippian families it was forty-nine percent and forty-six percent for South Carolinians (Pruitt 2020).

Could this be a key to how America's racialized values infrastructure became culturally embedded in many free states? This is an important matter that deserves more examination and will be discussed further in Chapter Six: Conclusion as a topic evolving from this analysis as a worthy research project for the future. But for this work, a potent consequence of black people being positioned as far as possible from white people on the horizontal axis of Bond's, Park's, and Bogardus's social-distancing theories is what led to the clustering of black people in Los Angeles.

Bond applied his ideas about social distancing to the early 1900s in Los Angeles. But what I am calling the forced clustering of black people became an important factor throughout the 1900s and early 2000s in the construction of black gang empires, that is, mini-urban enclaves serving as sovereign street territories. Sovereign is used here to reflect that these territories in the black gangster culture are deemed as space worthy of warring and dying over. There will be more discussion later in the chapter

about this important aspect of street gang life and its representation as a type of political and cultural duality.

The influx of black people to Los Angeles picked up its pace after the 1900s. In fact, Los Angeles became the most popular destination for black migrants throughout California, as well as all the cities within all the states west of the Mississippi River. The black population in Los Angeles grew from 2,131 in 1900 to 7,599 in 1910, and by 1930 the black population had reached 38,894 (Collins 1980). Though by 1940 black people constituted only 2.2 percent of the nation's population outside of the southern states, an incredible one-quarter of that black population resided in one county, Los Angeles County (de Graaf 1970). Still, by the early 1900s a racialized caste system had been embedded into the values infrastructure of Los Angeles: the identity of black people was defined as a group of inferiors, while white people were assumed to be a group of superiors, particularly superior to black people. As described by Historian Keith Collins in *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940*-1950 (1980), 'Personal disrespect combined with legal discrimination continued to be the. . .white mood toward Blacks during the 1910 to 1930 period, and the Black migrant found manifestations of this mood in Los Angeles' (p. 10). Restaurants in white Los Angeles communities would not serve black people. Similarly, hotels outside of black Los Angeles would not house black people. Many theaters would also not allow black people entry. One black woman who sued a Los Angeles restaurant for not serving her was told by the judge that 'she had no business patronizing white restaurants' (Ibid.).

Given such a racialized values infrastructure in a white dominant Los Angeles culture, the increasing number of black people migrating there had an increasingly small geographic area or space in which to find a home. Black people of that era were left to psychosocially construct a space to call home in what was limited and deemed by white Los Angeles as degraded space by virtue of the very overcrowded presence of black people. Overcrowded, of course, because of the segregated 'special districts'

relegated to black people, as shared by a William Ballard, a black 'old timer' in Los Angeles by 1933 when J. Max Bonds interviewed him (p. 12). Ballard had been born in Los Angeles in 1862. His father farmed and raised pigs so that his son, Ballard, could attend an all-Negro all-boys school, since black and white students were not permitted to be taught in the same classrooms. Ballard and his family lived for a time in a neighborhood surrounded by Mexican families. But Ballard was of a different socioeconomic status than 'the Negroes who came here [Los Angeles] in those days [who] were very poor. Some did odd jobs and many farmed', he explained.

By the early 1900s, there were at least two categories involving the identity formation of black people in Los Angeles and a third category that had been constructed nationally by white scholars. There were those who were largely illiterate and struggling economically to survive and a much smaller subset of black people who had managed since 1890 to succeed in various entrepreneurial efforts in Los Angeles, including real estate investment, the owner of a butcher establishment, a van-and-storage businessman, and a scrap-iron vender (Bond 1936). Many of those who were financially successful became the leaders of the black community and engaged in philanthropy to help the poorer Negroes, such as supporting a segregated industrial training program and pressing for four years, from 1886 to 1890, for black police and fire departments to be established in Los Angeles (Ibid.). Eventually the City's Mayor, Meredith Pinxton Synder, appointed one black police officer and one black fireman to become the first city in the United States to have employed Negroes in such positions (Ibid). However, during that same period, following the 1890 census, white scholars working for the national government promoted an analysis of criminology in America that focused on the number of crimes committed by black people, mostly men, and ignored the prominence of white immigrant gang crime, as meticulously researched in the book, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, by Harvard historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2010). In that one act of racially biased scholarship, reports Muhammad, black men once and forever suffered a criminalization of their identity constructed and imposed by white

American scholars (Ibid.). And this projection onto black men of a data-backed determination of criminality became a third and most powerful characterization of blackness.

Beginning in the early 1900s, the black ghettoization of Los Angeles took on a particular configuration. Here I am using the ghettoization term to refer to the forced geographic clustering of black people, given the restrictions as to where they were permitted to live because of race-based segregation (Rothstein 2017; Brown et al. 2012; Collins 1980; De Graaf 1970). Those were the special districts described by Ballard in Bond's doctoral work. But the configuration of how low-income, middle-income, and the rare upper-income black residents lived was impacted by the segregated circumstance that they all faced. For the most part, the black people of Los Angeles, poor or not, had to live in the same special district — in other words, the same neighborhood. Less expensive, sometimes dilapidated housing was often only a very short distance from comparatively upscale housing. During my ethnographic practice with the Crips and Bloods I had the occasion to visit a relic from that era. Only blocks away from several public housing developments, which served as home with the smallest of rooms for the large families of PJ Watts Crips, Grape Street Crips, and Bounty Hunter Bloods, were older, but very well-appointed mini mansions that I once got to visit. The stately home I was invited to enter was on a street lined with other very impressive, meticulously kept properties, and was owned by a very elderly black woman who carried herself as a member of the black elite. She made it clear that she even had some disapproval of me for not openly touting my academic credentials, which she kept prodding me to brag about, especially my time as a doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When I visited this home about twenty-five years ago, before I had conducted desk-top doctoral research regarding the development of black Los Angeles, I was befuddled by the presence of such upscale homes owned by black people so near one of the most downscale neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

Now I know how it happened. The racialized history of Los Angeles explains this phenomenon.

By the late 1950s, when property covenants — codes restricting white owners from selling their homes to black or other people of color — started to be outlawed throughout the white communities of Los Angeles, the perimeter expanded for where black people who were not poor could live (Rothstein 2017). The lowest income black residents of Los Angeles, however, could not avail themselves of more expensive housing outside of their South-Central community, their special district.

Stanley Tookie Williams IV — the son of Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams III — and his family existed in the geographical history of Los Angeles with its black-on-black expanding perimeters of housing, class, and street culture, sometimes separated by a couple of blocks, sometimes by five or ten miles. In an unpublished autobiography, *Son of the Father* (2022), Williams describes the lived experience of black Los Angeles in the late 1970s.

> I grew up with the hub of our family being at my grandfather's three-bedroom house on 117th Street, we called The Seven, between Wilmington Avenue and Mona Boulevard in Watts. It was our family castle. This yellow one-story house set on the corner next to the Watts Willowbrook train tracks. Our castle in The Seven was crowded with family members, but it brought closeness. We were known for having material wealth, and those riches brought unity. In our small yard were three pit bulls chained to the fence in different locations while a neighbor's yellow rooster roamed freely, albeit, in a calculated way around the dogs. Still, our side of the street saw numerous abandoned houses and a field surrounding our house. . . .My young mother, who was 19, and I would zigzag between The Seven or in one of the apartments at the Imperial Courts [Public Housing] Projects, home of the PJ Watts Crips or the PJs. Sandwiched between Imperial Courts and Mona Park, though small in comparison to both, The Seven was every bit as rough. Street fights seem to materialize on a daily basis (pp. 1-4).

Some years later, Williams moved to another black community called Carson that represented another rung on the expanding perimeters of

geographic racism in Los Angeles. Carson is only about nine miles from Watts. But it was an upscale black community, though upscale is a relative term with respect to black finances versus white finances as experienced in the United States. Williams moved in with his mother's sister when his mother was at risk of losing custody of him because of her crack cocaine addiction. His father was already in prison on San Quentin State Prison's Condemned Row:

> Try as she did to change, the gravitational pull of my mother's addiction proved too strong for her to overcome. With the courts threatening to permanently intervene, my mother transferred her parental rights to her eldest sister. I was uprooted from the projects [Imperial Courts] and The Seven and placed in the middle-class Carson area. In contrast to the cramped living arrangements I had always known, my new home was spacious. This was a four-bedroom home with a living room, dining room, and den. The front and back yards were well kept, which seemed to be the trend in this neighborhood. I couldn't help but notice the differences in Watts and Carson. The respect of property and surrounding areas as opposed to Watts and its depressed state (pp. 11-13).

Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles, therefore, which began as an ethnically integrated settlement, transformed over the centuries into a special district for black people only. That special district, known as South Central Los Angeles, became by the mid-1900s the innermost core of black Los Angeles. It also became a largely isolated urban enclave populated by the city's poorest black population. That transformation, I argue, was spurred by a social construction provoked by white Los Angeles to keep black Los Angeles both spatially and socially distant from them. This race-inspired strategy, though, once again produced unintentional consequences. South Central Los Angeles, where the largest population of black people had lived in the Western states since 1900, became one of the first cornerstones of fertile ground for the United *Streets* of America.

The concept of 'the street' in urban America is a deeply important cultural and political touchstone for the black gangster class. The street is a primary

space for gang-street theatre leading to identity formation and to gang-career ascension. The street also serves a domain-of-authority function for the black gangster class, which I contend symbolizes an alternative nation — or 'alt-nation' — that black gangster leaders have socially ordered into small sovereign urban empires, mini enclaves within black communities across the United States. The complex elements of this social construction will be discussed below.

No surprise then that the street is a significant focus of study for criminologists (Fraser and Matthews, 2021, p. 455). But once again, how the street is understood by the black gangster class versus scholars is different because of each group's epistemic perspective shaped in part, I would argue, by history itself.

Criminologist Alistair Fraser and legal scholar Daniel Matthews contend that street-concept scholarship is typically critiqued using a foregrounding frame, as discussed in Jack Katz's *Seductions of Crime* (1988). Katz argues that a foregrounding analysis seeks to understand the quality of the observed lived experiences, particularly criminality pervading the street, which he calls the 'distinctive sensual dynamics' that emerge from the committing of crime (p. 4). Fraser and Matthews, however, promote a different frame for analyzing the street and any criminality occurring there. The two scholars contend that there is much to be learned from the street's 'atmospheric' (2021, p. 455) *background* rather than experiential *foreground* that includes what is 'sensually compelling', according to Katz, in reference to what motivates the committing of crime (p. 3). An atmospheric-background critique embraces as a motivating factor for criminality the examination of a streetscape's *non-human* as well as human elements (p. 455), which Fraser and Matthews refer to as 'sensuous geography' (p. 456).

Fraser and Matthews situate such 'atmospheres' as the friction between the codes of the street that are the preoccupation of criminologists and the ever-lurking 'legal regulations' that externally seek to control the

streets and their inhabitants. But I contend that what has not been addressed in either the scholarly foregrounding or backgrounding of the social or sensuous streetscape is the role history has played in framing the street as a potent symbol for freedom *and* fiefdom as perceived by the black gangster class.

A human geography scholar, David Harvey, makes a definitive point about how history is a determinate of space that he defines as geography: 'Space cannot here be understood separately from time. History and geography cannot be separated. All geography is historical geography' (2005, p. 13). I agree. And history's role is especially significant regarding the meaning formation of the street that has been constructed by the black gangster class. Space — or the street — as animated by racialized history, has itself become a symbol onto which the black gangster class has projected a range of meanings. Such meanings, I contend, are compensational meanings. Compensational meanings reflect the gangster method of employing inventive agency to cope with a history of racism encompassing far more than the segregation of street-space, that is, urban enclaves in Los Angeles or elsewhere in the United States.

Earlier in this chapter I theorized that the gangster's sensate experience influenced the construction of what I have labeled symbolic freedom, which is street-gangster freedom dependent on temporal-spatial provocations. But the argument I made then about the symbolic representation of freedom for the black gangster class was just the beginning of that discussion. What I am arguing now is that such a symbolic representation of freedom is entangled with certain other symbolic representations undergirding the street's meaning for the gangsters that live there. I refer to that gangster meaning as an 'epistemology of the streets' (2019, p. 1). Essentially, what is at the core of that epistemic labelling is the symbol of authority the streets hold for the black gangster class. My contention is that this symbol of authority is personified in numerous ways. But its contours are fueled by a racialized history which has confronted and

constrained black people for decades. Below I seek to deconstruct the complexity of the many ways in which the street symbol of authority is expressed among the black gangster class.

Foremost, black gangsters, I argue here are the anti-citizens of the United States. Most of these gangsters are unable to vote and are not considered worthy prospects for citizenship or legitimate employment by virtue of their criminal record and poor education. Yet they have constructed highly valued urban spaces or territories that are ontological to street culture. Sometimes these spaces are a few blocks in size, sometimes the space is defined by the geographical footprint of a public housing project, such as the Grape Street Crips in Watts, or the name of a city, such as the Compton Pirus, a faction or gang set within the Bloods street gang located in the City of Compton. In his autobiography, *Blue Rage, Black Redemption*, Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams III provides a piercing explanation for how the anti-citizenship status of the black gangster class came to be and how that status literally necessitated the construction of a space and place to be, an empire to rule within a black neighborhood:

> The black community generally was blind to its defiant youth creating increasingly aggressive street gangs. Mislabeled by some as a “lost generation,” we were instead forgotten prodigies who disappeared, children buried alive in a sandbox. We did what was necessary to exhume ourselves. Though we must share the blame, we were products of a culture that bastardized us (2007, p. 85).

That statement epitomizes for the black gangster class the concept of uncooperative co-construction of agency, identity, and the streets. However, I am confounded by one aspect of what Williams eloquently described, which is the notion that members of the black gangster class must share the blame for their current circumstance. My question is: Given their bastardized status imposed by an historically powerful ruling class and culture, how might black gangsters have created a different outcome for themselves? Answers to this question are explored in the concluding chapter of this work.

Williams' namesake and son, Stanley Tookie Williams IV, in his unpublished memoir tells the story of how the process of exhumation, as dubbed by his father, manifested itself in the establishment of thousands of gang territories in Los Angeles. The Venice Shoreline Crips. The 69 East Coast Crips. The 74 Hoover Crips. The Stevenson Village Crips. The Long Beach 20s Crips. The Main Street Crips. The Rollin' Forties Crips. The Rollin' Sixty Crips. The East Coast 190 Crips. The West Side 190 Crips. The Twilight Zone Crips. But those Crip territories that began in Los Angeles have since spread across North America, along with Bloods sets, according to the United States Department of Justice, as well as an online hip-hop and gang data base, named Fandom, that keeps a record of the growth of black gang sets. The U.S. Attorney's Office of the Eastern District of New York, for instance, has issued many press releases announcing the sentencing of various New York-based Bloods gang members, including from the Red Lane Gorillas (June 2022) or the Double Nine Grim Reapers Bloods gang (December 2022) or the Makk Balla Brims set of the Bloods gang (2019). Fandom, which promotes itself as the largest fan wiki platform in the world, meaning that anyone can add to its list of gang sets, offers an impressive online collection of Bloods and Crips sets in North America and the creative way that street gangs claim territory. To illustrate, the city of Colorado Springs in the state of Colorado has been renamed 'Bloodrado Springs' by the Bloods of that municipality with sets there titled Westside 187 Hustler Bloods gang, B Block Bloods, South Borough Block Bloods, along with many more sets (Fandom, n.d.). Fandom also lists Bloods set in Toronto, Canada, including Eastside Kingpin Bloods, Pelham Park Bloods, and True Haitian Bloods, and a Driftwood Crips set there as well (Ibid.). In fact, Driftwood was one of many Crips sets in Toronto.

These Bloods and Crips sets — and far more sets than can be listed in this work — have emerged over decades to form the United *Streets* of America, or of North America.

5.3.1. A Street Culture of Authority and Patriotism

My argument here is that these street territories of the black gangster class symbolize a type of authority embedded in a special category of alt-nations that co-exist within the United States and Canada. These alt-nations are mini urban empires that the gangsters themselves get to socially construct and dominate. Ironically, the racialized history of those communities that suffered what one historian, Lawrence de Graaf, described as 'racial confinement' has also prompted a reciprocal response from members of the black gangster class (1970, p. 324). They have created, I argue, closed societies harboring a distinctive street culture of authority for black gangsters and other people who reside there that differs in many ways from the culture of white mainstream society, while also imitating certain properties of that mainstream society.

One key element of this concept of street authority is how street territories themselves are fundamentally characterized by the black gangster class. Stanley Tookie Williams IV, a son of the co-founder of the Crips, provides a revelation regarding that characterization of street authority when he writes about his irresistible attraction to PJ Crips territory at the Imperial Courts public housing projects in Watts, California. That attraction, he declares, was 'ignited [by] bouts of nationalism' (2022, p. 54). In a follow-up interview, he told me more about what he meant by that statement: 'Those projects [PJ Watts Crips territory] with its outrageous and violent culture, still showed unity of purpose among its members — like kinship and nationhood.'

Here I argue that the concept of nation and its corresponding concept of citizenship, that is, of reveling in the belonging to a nation while acquiescing to its governmental authority, have been adapted by the black gangster class in ways that white mainstream society might consider the concepts to have been bastardized by black gangsters themselves. Given the black gangster class's awareness of their anti-citizen status in the United States, a status that has been uncooperatively co-constructed for decades, black gangsters have created their own street territories that serve as mini urban empires to which they have attached the perquisites of nations. For

instance, every gang set's territory is entitled to patriotic loyalty. The Crips gang do-or-die credo, for instance, is a reference to a gangster's willingness to kill or to be killed in the service of representing that territory, that gang set. Gang members consider themselves to be soldiers with a duty to defend and protect their mini urban empires, as well as other members of their gang set from those mini urban empires. Their loyalty imitates the role of soldiers conscripted in the armies of nations where they swear to defend geographic boundaries and the people who reside within those boundaries.

The typical military conscription age for nations, which is high teens, is still much older than the initiation into soldier status for budding black gangsters in alt-nations. Stanley Tookie Williams III's son labelled himself a 'child soldier' (Ibid., p. 89) in telling the tale of his introduction to gangster life upon his enrollment, when he was around eight years old, at Lincoln Elementary School in Watts-Willowbrook, California (Ibid., p. 9). He describes his child-soldier life as having to be resigned to the circumstance that 'the pressure to fight was immense and unceasing — there was no turning the other cheek' (Ibid.). Children in schools representing rival alt-nations were the enemy in this gangster reimagined vision of nation, nationalism, and war. Steve Champion, one of the co-researchers for this doctoral project, reports in his autobiography, *Dead to Deliverance: A Death Row Memoir* (2010), that he became involved in gangs by the time he was twelve: 'I lived a dual life, behaving one way at home and another on the streets. Street life captivated me. The world of the street was the one place I felt truly accepted, the one place I was not judged' (p. 5).

The irony, of course, is that in denying black gangsters a legitimate stake as respected citizens of the United States, street gangsters, identified here as America's anti-citizens, have socially and geographically constructed their own version of the concept of nation. Albeit the black gangster collection of alt-nations exists within the single nation that represents the United States or another nation, such as Canada, these nations are places where street gangsters have no interest in sacrificing their lives — that is, to do or die —

for country. Yet that is the price they are willing to pay for their alt-nations, the small territories that serve as their mini urban empires, otherwise known as the streets. This black gangster adaptation of the meaning of nation, then, is yet another example of damning dialectics. It is an unintended consequence derived from a racialized history of the geographic and social containment of black people, particularly low-income black people.

Black street gangsters, much like the black pirate class, have constructed their own sovereign space. With the black gangster class, that sovereignty is enmeshed in the streets (land space). The black pirates reigned over a domain of the seas, claiming sovereignty wherever their ships dared to sail. But I would argue that the sovereignty task for the black gangster class is an even more bold act of nation-building, in that, gangsters are creating fiefdoms on the land and in the space (such as public housing projects) that is largely controlled, if not owned, by government and by those who can readily contest street-gangster sovereignty. Whereas pirates, on the other hand, had a vast sea to navigate for claims of sovereignty. But the fact that a United *Streets* of America exists demonstrates, at least in part, the power of racialized social distancing and the ongoing prevalence of the horizontal axis. The white dominant class is largely content with staying as far away as possible from the black gangster class. That racialized custom and practice, I contend, has given black gangsters a measure of freedom in the space and time provided by the streets to create a culture of dominance in their reimagining what nation and citizenship means.

In 1936, J. Max Bond provided an unfortunate contextualized destiny for the black people of Los Angeles in his doctoral thesis. Although, he did offer some advice for how to navigate his sad prediction for what black residents of Los Angeles could expect from the greater white mainstream society:

> Since it appears that the race may expect very little from the majority group in the way of sympathy and understanding, the Negro in Los Angeles seems destined to retain the low status given him. Therefore, in light of our findings, we suggest that he

> enrich his culture and develop favorable attitudes toward new values that will award status (p. 167).

Without having read Bond's thesis, the black gangster class has somehow intuited his advice. But their pathway to status has become the culture of the condemned, reflecting new values — street-gangster values — that are distinctly at odds with what I can only assume was suggested by J. Max Bond.

5.4. Understanding the Culture of the Condemned

This thesis began with a claim that an analysis of three conceptual strands — duality, agency, and freedom — tracked through the racialized history of the United States would reveal corresponding connections to today's street-gang characteristics and killing culture. Those corresponding connections to street-gang characteristics have been argued here to include the dual role of the predator-prey O.G. as well as the parallel society constructed by black gangsters, plus, inventive agency, as practiced by the black gangster class, and symbolic freedom, as experienced by street gangsters. My contention is that such characteristics have contributed to the social construction and perpetuation of what I am calling the culture of the condemned, a culture informing the day-to-day customs, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus, of black street gangsters, whether they are roaming the streets or navigating the box life (a slang phrase for being imprisoned).[11] Note here that by introducing the box-life phenomenon into this discussion I have intermingled the concepts of prison life with street-space. That relationship will be discussed throughout the rest of this chapter.

The day-to-day customs comprising the culture of the condemned involve black gangsters killing rival gangsters in theatrical ways to attain celebrity status in their isolated neighborhoods. And such customs also involve gangsters defining street-space as encompassing the concept of

[11] This is a phrase I repeatedly heard stated by many gangsters whom I have interviewed over a more than twenty-year period.

place by constructing place as a portable cultural inscription of the meaning of home. Place in street-space, then, as a portable cultural representation of home, travels with the black gangster wherever that black gangster finds himself — in street-space or in prison. Thus, my argument is that street-space, place, home, and prison are extensions of themselves, which is discussed in more detail later.

The first sentence in an article written by preeminent human geographer Doreen Massey about what she called ‘space-time’ and human geography versus physical geography states: ‘This paper is a preliminary dip into deep waters’ (1999, p. 261). My paraphrasing of her sentence for this work would be to claim that this chapter section only begins to grapple with the conceptual overlap of space, identity, and symbolic expressions of power. Treatises conceptualizing the idea of space written by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and Massey offer interesting ways, though with different framing, to examine such an entanglement of concepts. But an assessment that can be derived from their theorizing is a salient starting point in support of my thesis. The street, I contend, has emerged as a socially generative space for the construction of a culture of the condemned. It is through this lens that the challenge to understand the complexity of a vital street-culture construct begins.

In *Social Space and Symbolic Power* (1989), Bourdieu’s analysis of how social space can be deconstructed to be fully understood provides a helpful framework for examining street-space itself as a social construction. His work also ties social space to symbolic power, as well as reveals a technique of sorts for how to locate key connections between street-space and the culture of the condemned. Massey, in *Geographies of Responsibility* (2004), talks about ‘thinking space relationally’, which for her means that space should be considered as being ‘bound’ to other concepts that themselves must be reconceptualized because of their connection to space (p. 5). According to

Massey, space has a particular relationship with the concept of identity that is also relational. She argues that space, in fact, is involved in the ongoing reconceptualization of identity. I agree and will explore some of the dynamics of that space-identity relationship below.

Though I rely on Massey's and Bourdieu's theorizing about social space to understand the conceptualization of street-space itself as an identity that influences how the geographic space is viewed by the individuals who reside there and how those individuals view themselves, there is a crucial circumstance that is added here to the ideas of those two scholars. That circumstance is the practice by the black gangster class of employing an uncooperative co-construction of agency, identity, and other self-defining and self-defending concepts as a strategy for functioning in their racialized world. That incumbent strategy, that additional conceptualization, I argue has led to the emergence of a culture of the condemned.

Two ubiquitous phrases I repeatedly encountered in the environment of the black gangster class are used in this work to offer insights into the nature of these social constructions and social reproductions: (1) 'word on the street' and (2) 'to be known in the world'.

The word 'ubiquitous' is used here to describe the widespread use of those two phrases, which I discovered throughout my ethnographic practice with the Crips and Bloods throughout the world. I heard those phrases from black gang members in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Toronto, Canada. I heard these phrases, word-for-word, from sixteen-year-old black members of the South African gang — the AMERICAN$ (the dollar sign and capital letters are not typographical errors; it is a sly homage to gangster money-makers in the United States) — at Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town. In fact, youth from the AMERICAN$ gang knew of Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams and were openly mimicking hand gestures of Crips, where the fore finger and thumb are bent to form the shape of a 'C'. The proliferation of gangster rap on television accounts to a large extent for the global visibility of black street culture, but the significance of these two phrases, given that they have

managed to travel, intact, requires, to paraphrase, Massey, a deeper dip into already deep conceptual waters.

In my immersive ethnographic experience with black street culture, the first phrase, ‘word on the street’, was used by virtually everyone residing in mini urban empires. The second phrase, ‘to be known in the world’, was used exclusively by black male gangsters. Here I seek to mine the meaning embedded in those two phrases for black street culture, beginning with my experience of having to defend against a word-on-the-street accusation issued by the girlfriend of a PJ Watts O.G. Crip in Los Angeles. I do not remember the precise allegation lodged against me twenty or more years ago by this Crip-leader girlfriend, but I do remember that it had something to do with whether I could be trusted. My memory did record that the verification for my suspected disloyalty was that ‘word on the street’ had claimed the suspicion to be true. This was the first time that I, personally, had to discern — and quickly — a more nuanced understanding of what the phrase ‘word on the street’ symbolized. What I already knew about the phrase was that it was quite powerful in street culture. I knew that it could prompt a promise of death if the transgression that word-on-the-street substantiated was of a high-enough-caliber offense not to warrant street forgiveness. On the other hand, I also understood that a word-on-the-street endorsement of a black gangster’s dramatic behavior, such as the gangster at McDonald’s whose confrontation with two Los Angeles Police Officers was recounted in the Prologue of this work, would likely lead to an elevation of that gangster’s reputation and street status. If he was not already an O.G., it is the type of reputational street theater that could lead to his ascension to O.G. status.

My response to the use of the phrase against me was to suggest that the phrase ‘word on the street’ was a symbol for an opinion derived from a rolling representation of community members or, in other words, a rumor. Back then, I was improvising. But it turns out the Merriam Webster dictionary also defines this phrase as a rumor. However, that day when I was compelled to volunteer my view of the quality of the word-on-the-street

phrase by stating that the rumors it promoted were not always correct. I was met with a skeptical gaze by the gang leader's girlfriend. But fortunately for me, since I am here to tell of this encounter, a decision was made by her not to propose to street-gang leadership that I be murdered.

'Word on the street', then, is a critical component of street culture. Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois from the University of California, Los Angeles, provides an interesting definition of what he calls 'inner-city street culture' (2014, p. 8). His work provides a socio-structural context for interacting with Bourdieu's definition of social space and symbolic power, as well as with my critique of how street-space and the culture of the condemned are interrelated. Bourgois introduces his description of street culture by framing it as a response to the 'cultural assault' people who reside in mini urban empires experience when they venture outside of their neighborhoods (Ibid.):

> This [cultural assault] has spawned what I call "inner-city street culture": a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity. In the particular case of the United States, the concentration of socially marginalized populations into politically and ecologically isolated inner-city enclaves has fomented an especially explosive cultural creativity that is in defiance of racism and economic marginalization. This "street culture of resistance" is not a coherent, conscious universe of political opposition but, rather, a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long term have emerged as an oppositional style (Ibid.).

I would put more emphasis on the reciprocity aspect of 'othering' than is explored by Bourgois in his critique of street-space. My argument is that Bourgois' street culture of *resistance* is also a street culture of *rejection* of the very society that has 'othered' those who have been racially constrained to certain locations to live. There is a danger in practices of racial constraint that are seldom considered: what has been withheld from those residents of street-space, which led to their social reproduction of a form of citizenship, the thing they could not have, has, with time, become something they no

longer desire. In other words, the alt-nation that was constructed out of racialized necessity, becomes a preferable cultural option for street-space. One consequence of that transformation — the emergence of a culture of the condemned — is explored throughout the rest of this chapter.

Pierre Bourdieu defines social space as a ‘system of relations’ that serves as the structure for social space (1989, p. 16). That clear identification of where the structure of social space is situated makes visible, I would argue, a potent resource for analyzing the concept of street-space. He further states that social space typically functions as a symbolic entity. When that structure, that system of relations, is identified in an analysis of social space, that is where power is positioned, which Bourdieu calls the ‘field of power’ (Ibid.). ‘Word on the street’, I contend, comprises a complex system of relations, including, as explained above by Philippe Bourgois, a ‘set of rebellious practices’ (2018, p. 8) that are entangled in a complex field of symbolic power, as pertains to Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework.

The system of relations serving as the underlying structure for the word-on-the-street concept entails what I would argue is a way of organizing itself to project the symbolic power of a black collective consensus. That black collective consensus is determined by the people who live in mini urban empires, and these are the people, especially the members of the black gangster class, who imagine and reimagine the culture of street-space.

I conceptualize these acts of reconceptualization as a vital practice in street-space, a gangster-class custom in fact that Philippe Bourgois might refer to as part of a set of rebellious practices, or Pierre Bourdieu would label a form of habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as encompassing ‘schemes of perception, thought, and action’ (1989, p. 14). But what Bourdieu does not account for is another level of profound influence on the black collective consensus and the customs or habitus of the people of street-space: the constant mandates of the uncooperative co-constructions of many racialized circumstances. That factor challenges the Bourdieu analysis, though he does acknowledge a ‘double structuring’ aspect to his social space and habitus

analyses, but it involves an analytical split between the formation of objective and subjective perceptions (Ibid., p. 20). With the black collective consensus, duality is not so easily divided between objective and subjective considerations. *All* considerations, I argue here, be they critiqued objectively or subjectively, are themselves adapted and replicated to some degree by the black collective consensus. The reason members of this black collective consensus engage in so much adaptation and replication is their desire to create an alt-nation for themselves with a unique citizenship formation that compensates for the nationhood and full-citizen rights that have been denied them for centuries.

To illustrate, one property of the system of relations that constitutes a structure for the word-on-the-street phrase is the concept of authority. I contend that this concept of authority stands, at least in part, as a representation of the codes of the streets, an adapted replication of what would otherwise be known as the law of the land. Here I argue that a core component of that authority symbolizes government and governance in street-space, as constructed by the black collective in the use of 'word on the street'. This includes the authority of street consensus to decree who deserves a punishment of death, such as what could have happened to me. Such authority as demonstrated through governance also includes the expulsion from the gang set or community itself, as well as the reputational elevation of gang members who become O.G.s, for instance, based on their daring and dangerous battles with rival gangs. Ironically, authority-through-governance in street-space ignores certain signifiers, both large and small, of authority-through-government in mainstream society.

An example of a law that does not deter the black gangster class includes the illegality of committing murder. Many of the residents of mini urban empires are also not deterred by the illegality of disobeying stop signs, traffic lights, and painted-lane lines that prevent head-on collisions. This is because the word-on-the-street concept governs how you are *expected* to behave in the alt-nations comprising the United *Streets* of America. And, as

noted earlier, there can be do-or-die consequences from not meeting street-space expectations. Admittedly, the latter practices involving unacknowledged traffic laws caused nearly as much anxiety for me when driving through Crip-Blood neighborhoods during my ethnographic research experience, as I felt when I almost fell prey to being seen as untrustworthy by a gangster's girlfriend. Both circumstances could have led to the loss of my life. My time in street-space was always fraught with the fear of not meeting the expectations of a culture in which I was just learning what was expected of me. Thus, when confronted by the authoritarian phrase 'word on the street', my attention was focused on what might follow such a statement, that is, what cultural line had I inadvertently or deliberately crossed, because sometimes I did rebel against the authority and subsequent codes or laws of street-space.

Another property to be reckoned with regarding the system of relations that informs and empowers the word-on-the-street concept is the expectation of patriotism, which for the black gangster class translates as gang-set loyalty and devotion to a specific alt-nation territory. Again, the expectation of the black collective is that its members remain loyal to the street-space that they claim as home. That space is their de facto nation. It is their replicated — or socially reproduced — government that is supported, I argue, by its own unwritten social contract via which a black collective consents to live by the codes of governance, including punishment, distinctive to that of the United *Streets* of America.

5.4.1. A Street Culture of Legacy and Place

The second phrase of great import in understanding street-space — and subsequently the culture of the condemned — is 'to be known in the world'. This is a phrase that I heard repeatedly by only male gang members. I was fascinated by its popularity and its apparent importance in the culture of the black male gangster class. The phrase, it turns out, is at the core of the uncooperative co-construction of agency and identity by black male

gangsters. But the phrase provokes a myriad of questions. Why is this phrase only articulated, out loud at least, by black males? In what world do street gangsters want to be known? Is there some space where they do not care how they are known? What do these gangsters want to be known as — or not known as? Whose opinion of them matters?

‘To be known in the world’ is particularly bound to constructions of identity, so Doreen Massey’s work that links social space to identity will be largely relied on here. Yet the very nature of her work also aligns with Bourdieu’s system-of-relations idea, though in an even more complex way. She argues that not only is space a relational concept, but that it is 'bound up with a wider set of reconceptualizations' (2004, p. 5). In other words, to understand the concept in front of you, you must also consider reconceptualizing those concepts bound to the primary concept because conceptual meanings can change when they are linked to other concepts. My contention is that Massey is teasing a form of transdisciplinarity, though she does not use that word.

But in sorting what is meant by the phrase ‘to be known in the world’ an immediate question arises: Whose identity or what identity is embedded in that phrase? Explored in this section is not only the obvious, that is, the nature of the uncooperatively co-constructed identity of black male gangsters, but also another significant property in the structure of street-space itself: the role *place* plays in the identity formation of street-space and thus the gangsters themselves. Up until this point, I have been careful in my use of the word ‘place’. My caution is associated with its historical and racialized complexity in the conceptual formation of street-space. In fact, my argument is that place has been subsumed by street-space, which is a discussion that I will initiate momentarily. But let it suffice that the concept of place, like other concepts (such as freedom) in street-space, has a different meaning when it comes to the culture in which the black gangster class finds itself, a culture that black gangsters themselves have uncooperatively co-created.

‘To be known in the world’ — a phrase in street-space involving black-gangster identity — falls squarely, I contend, into Massey’s intricate categorization of social space, identity, and relationality. Massey argues that space should be framed ‘relationally’ and that space’s strong relationship to identity, which itself is a relational conceptualization, rightly compounds the analysis (2004, p. 5). In this instance, the to-be-known-in-the-world phrase is enmeshed in the concept of street-space and other properties bound to street-space’s system of relations (its structure), as theorized by Bourdieu. This section reconceptualizes selected topics essential in understanding the phrase’s role in the imagining of street-space, the black gangster class, and the culture of the condemned.

Two key properties that dominate the social structure of street-space are the concepts of legacy and place. As argued here, ‘to be known in the world’ is a phrase that is determinative of those two concepts. A critique of the two concepts begins first with the concept of legacy and the parsing of the phrase — ‘to be known’ — which raises questions. What does it mean for the black gangster class ‘to be known’? And by whom does the black gangster class want to be known? What, then, does the black gangster class expect to gain from being known or to lose from being unknown?

Some of those questions are not easily answered. But deconstructing legacy, as imagined by the black gangster class, is one pathway into an understanding of the parsed phrase ‘to be known’. When I heard the phrase, it was most always delivered as an emphatic statement by a black male gangster, as if it could be made to happen with the forcefulness of a pronouncement. By asking more questions about the to-be-known phrase, my interpretation of the saying linked the black-gangster desire to be known to a desire to be acknowledged and valued by others in street-space, though in a dramatic way. The street-gangster quest, it appeared, was to achieve a type of celebrity status. But for the black gangster class, celebrity status and the drama associated with its attainment have been reconceptualized to mean achievement by any means necessary, including through the killing of

others. There is also a racialized historical phenomenon — blackface minstrelsy — that I argue is foundational in understanding how celebrity and drama became significant factors in street-space and in how the culture of the condemned evolved.

Minstrel stage productions provided a complex-identity phenomenon for black men to navigate. The musical stage shows were based on dramatizing distinctly different, though all demeaning stereotypes of black people, particularly black men. What became so popular among white Americans was an entertainment genre that relied on white people pretending to be black people smeared in black ointment to create caricatures of the diminished identities of black men and women that had already been conceived and imposed first on slaves and then on a newly freed black populace. Further, by the late 1800s, *black* actors who wanted to perform had to smear themselves with black ointment to play *white* people smeared in black ointment who were acting out the negative stereotypes of *black* people that had already been established by a *white* dominant society. The stereotyped minstrel characters ranged from lazy and shiftless blacks, to thieves, to razor-toting dangerous black men looking for someone to slice. One scholar, J. Stanley Lemons, in *Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,* referred to this display of double duality *and* damning dialectics as black actors being forced to 'play the darkey' (1977, p. 115). But by the beginning of the twentieth century, the imagery and depiction had become so common they were not even considered derogatory caricatures of black people, according to Lemons and other scholars (Ibid., Dormon 1988). The shows were just considered funny.

These beliefs, stemming from a genre that helped to establish popular culture in the United States, were based on a white public consensus of who black people were and why that made them funny. Ironically, one-hundred years later, what started as fiction, as a caricature of black people that became an imposed reality for a white public consensus for stereotyping black people, evolved, I argue, to become a reimagined reality for the black

gangster class and the black collective consensus in street-space. For black gangsters, then, the street has become a stage where life-and-death melodrama *in real life* reflects theatrical gangsterism as a method of defining themselves and thus showcasing their celebrity status. Such performances have also become a type of black-gangster-class resistance informed by a defiant willingness to maintain cultural boundaries from the outsiders who have defined them for so many years. For the black collective consensus, street-space has become a domain of power where a black collective can act out a type of duality, replacing the role of a dominant white public consensus with its own self-claimed weighty responsibilities involving life-or-death determinants of gang culture, that is, the culture of the condemned. Still, there is more to be gleaned from the way the concept of celebrity — that is, 'to be known' — has influenced the black gangster class and street-space.

In its Fall 2002 edition of *Granta Magazine*, a well-known UK literary publication, the magazine focused on the theme of celebrity and provided yet another textured definition of the concept. Though not intended to describe the black gangster class, given that edition of *Granta* had a picture of Queen Elizabeth II on its cover to represent celebrity, the magazine still provided an interesting basis for the examination of the celebrity concept as experienced by black street gang members who have craved 'to be known':

> Celebrities are often seen as fictions, the argument being that they are media inventions, with various amplified, distorted or invented parts of their lives assembled for our [the public] benefit and made familiar to us [the public] through the media (p. 5).

There is further discussion in *Granta*'s Introduction by the Editor at that time, Ian Jack, about the complexity of novels based on real-life people and real-world events that I think adds another perspective for understanding the nature of the quest for celebrity status of the black gangster class. Jack makes a point regarding how 'questions about the dimensions and boundaries of fiction and nonfiction — the place of each within or outside of the other' are handled, in *Granta*'s case by an author, but in this analysis by black street gangsters themselves (Ibid.).

To pursue this discussion from a black-gangster episteme, another interpretation of the concept of celebrity is required because gangsters have an even more complex relationship with that concept than do professional actors. History, as discussed above, has provided some of the scripts for members of the black gangster class to act out, shaping the identities that they display today. Those scripts of history, which have mostly been imposed, have profoundly influenced the street-space performances of black gangsters, informing their quest for celebrity. The complication arises in the myriad of roles, expressions of identity — imposed or reimagined — that the street gangster must master.

The street gangster's 'display identity' (my phrase) is a collection of fictional identities. Black gangsters are to an external society the racialized stereotypes that have been imposed upon them for hundreds of years. Black gangsters are for themselves reconceptualized characters that are being reimagined to uncooperatively co-construct identities that function as acts of resistance to the fictional personas designated by others to symbolize them. In essence, black gangsters are perpetually playing against fictional personas socially bound to them though constructed by a racialized external society intent on defining the black gangster class.

This is a real-life example of Massey's theorizing about how the nature of identity is relational and how it is bound by other reconceptualizations, other meaning formations, and 'practices of interaction' that make identity mutable (2004, p. 5). But what is not accounted for in her analysis is the special case of the black gangster class. With those gangsters, the fictional identities imposed upon them from the outside cannot be refigured from the outside by the gangsters themselves. And that core identity forged from the outside has proven over the centuries to remain derogatorily static. Gangsters, on the other hand, have reconceptualized themselves from within street-space by writing their own scripts, often taken from history, leaving the outside society with little to no understanding of the street gangster's co-

constructed persona transformations. The outside society is left believing in the fictional black male character of that outside society's creation.

Celebrity, then, for the black gangster class means how street gangsters have used inventive agency to uncooperatively co-construct a meaning formation for celebrity that give gangsters some of the accolades and thus some public status in street-space normally accorded a celebrity in mainstream society. The word 'public', though, is also uncooperatively co-constructed in street-space.

For the black gangster class, the concept of celebrity has been marked by the racialized history of the United States and historical scripts derived from the past. Thus, the concept of celebrity includes elements of the performative resistance that models doomed leaders of black slave rebellions, including, for instance, Nat Turner, the famous slave rebel leader of 1831 who put on a stoic performance to politicize his hanging by refusing to show any reaction to being killed. It was an act of powerful political theater, as described in a previous chapter. It was also a performance that continues to playout across mini urban empires throughout the United *Streets* of America, that is, it informs the black gangsters' ongoing performative confrontation with death. Ironically, executions were seen by governing bodies as political theater to deter rebellion, not as theatrical opportunities for those condemned to death to send their own political messages to shape the character of potential rebel followers.

An analysis that examines the entire second phrase — 'to be known *in the world'* — offers further insights into black-gangster reconceptualizations inspired by a racialized history. 'To be known in the world' is to be revered in the street-space where gangsters themselves live and dominate. But to be known in street-space by others who reside there involves, I argue, acting out in ways that reflect historical relational patterns — going back as far as the Slavery and Pirate Eras — of black America reimagining the meaning of concepts like death, heroism, and place.

Harvard University historian Vincent Brown creates a very powerful argument favoring this point of view, that is, how a black death culture is socially constructed and is at the heart of street-space culture, as he describes the consequences of 'power and terror' imposed upon black Jamaicans during early colonial times in Jamaica (2008, p. 59):

> Demographic turmoil, rather than terminating social development and stifling cultural practice, was a seedbed for particular forms of being, belonging, and striving appropriate to this world of relentless exploitation. It is thus less revealing to see the extravagant death rate in Jamaican society as an impediment to the formation of culture than it is to view it as the landscape of culture itself, the ground that produced Atlantic slavery's most meaningful idioms. *Death served as the principal arena of social life and gave rise to its customs* (my italics) (Ibid.).

There is a great deal to be critically processed from just this one paragraph of Brown's exceptional work. Here I will examine only a few issues as they directly relate to the black gangster class and the system of relations that undergirds street-space.

Anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas builds on Brown's analysis of the culture of death in Jamaica by adding a role for black bodies that supports Brown's claim that death is 'the principal arena of social life' (Ibid.). Thomas calls them 'spectacular bodies' (2011, p. 87). Her definition of that phrase refers to the 'spectacularity of the murders' — the drama surrounding how murdered bodies in Jamaica are treated *after* death (Ibid.). She reports that corpses are sometimes found in gullies, having been chopped into parts, bodies are buried and then dug up from their graves, people are burned alive during the daytime for all to see. Such behavior, according to Thomas, is purposefully staged as scenes performed on the streets and in the graveyards of Jamaica with political undercurrents. Applying Bourdieu's and Massey's theorizing to Thomas's work, then, brings us to an uncomfortable observation: a racialized colonial history of Jamaica likely provoked social reimagining among black Jamaicans of performative opportunities to be gleaned from a culture of death.

Thomas's arguments, which she frames as having transnational import, also strike familiar themes for the United *Streets* of America. Her concept of Jamaica's spectacular black bodies become in street-space representational of another type of death culture among America's black gangster class. These gangsters reimagine dead black bodies as the literal currency earned and accumulated from killing in street-space. With the culture of the condemned, killing also has performative and celebrity elements. How spectacular the performance associated with the killing is judged to be by the black collective consensus — though not macabre after-death acts of corpse mutilation — can make or break a black-gangster celebrity status. In other words, members of the black gangster class are far more interested in centering their theatrical performances around the creation of corpses, rather than the elaborate destruction of those who are already dead. Celebrity and legacy, then, are calculated on the accumulation of kills, the accumulation of dead black bodies, which not only add to a black gangster's reputation in street-space, but also moves a gangster forward in occupational ascension to the pinnacle of street gangsterism: becoming an O.G. in a mini urban empire that is part of the United *Streets* of America. This has become an essential element of the culture of the condemned.

This work expands on Brown's culture-of-death theorizing in Jamaica by identifying a black-gangster boundness to death in street-space that manifests different cultural-killing practices than have been on display in Jamaica. But examining the system of relations that informs a dead-body-as-currency culture of the condemned involves, I suggest, a discussion about another topic: the reconceptualization of scarcity in street-space.

It is often assumed in discussions about black communities, where income levels are recorded as below the national average, that a neoliberal-inspired economy is to blame for most of the problems experienced there. This work has notably *not* focused on the economic arguments typically used to explain youth gang violence. Instead, my arguments, broaden the view from the outside of this culture to include other limiting elements that get

bounded — once more returning to Doreen Massey's idea for understanding conceptualizations of space and identity — to structural considerations that then transform a range of economic contentions into something else entirely.

What I witnessed during my long-term stint as an ethnographer in black gangster class communities is that the concept of scarcity comprises many categories. In mini urban empires, there is a scarcity of opportunity to secure an education that leads to basic literacy; to have access to fresh produce and a large range of food stock because there are few if any grocery stores in street-space (also known as 'food deserts'); to experience adequate housing space relative to family size; to secure guaranteed safe harbor anywhere in street-space; to travel to other parts of the city outside of an alt-nation; to travel to other states in the nation; to travel to other parts of the world; to witness non-gangster black role models of virtually any kind; to apply gangster leadership skills to commonly accepted business or cultural pursuits; to participate in the mainstream parallel society in ways that uplift the lives of black gangsters, and, given mass incarceration policies, to be respected outside of street-space; to live a hopeful life beyond the racialized confines of street-space and prison, which within the black gangster class are viewed as much the same environment. This last topic is also further explored in this section. These are only some examples of how scarcity *and* economic influences are bound in the United *Streets* of America. But for the black gangster class, my argument is that this broad concept and experience of scarcity has ironically led to a slave-era reconceptualization of the concept of scarcity and its relationship to the value of black bodies.

With the culture of the condemned, street gangsters who do not have the requisite mainstream-society skills to elevate themselves in the world outside of street-space, do have in their parallel street-space society the capacity to utilize inventive agency to construct another path for upward mobility. That path involves the use of black bodies as both available and ultimately valuable assets in a street-space world of scarcity that promotes black bodies being killed as a method of keeping score for determining

worthiness to the ascension of O.G. status. Black bodies, then, become — in lieu of a gangster's capacity to generate large sums of green dollar bills — the black-and-bloodied currency of the United *Streets* of America.

This aspect of the culture of the condemned exemplifies a parallel black-gangster values infrastructure of objectifying black bodies that is dialectically bound to the country's racialized and historical values infrastructure that objectifies black bodies. But this aspect of the culture of the condemned is reconceptualized to serve a black-gangster-class purpose 'to be known in the world' of street-space. This death-by-numbers and dramatic-street-theater-performance strategy generally leads to imprisonment for black gangsters. And the imprisonment of black gangsters raises yet another issue to be reconceptualized here because of the different meaning a prison sentence has for the community of black gangsters than it has for mainstream American society. Here I argue that understanding how the concepts of place and death fit into the meaning of incarceration and the culture of the condemned provides clues for why prison is not the deterrent to crime for street gangsters that lawmakers expect it to be.

Doreen Massey acknowledges in *Places and Their Pasts* (1995) that one conceptualization of place is its connection to national identity, or at the local level, to a place or community that a person can call home. While there are other debates to be had about how to conceptualize the concept of place, this work focuses on the above definition that is a common understanding of place, which, as noted by Massey, typically reflects 'deep meanings' (1994, p. 1) for an individual. But Brown indicates a racialized history can have its way with individuals, leading to different forms of 'being, belonging, and striving' that are socially constructed in Jamaica, which, I argue is also true of individuals representing the black gangster class in the United *Streets* of America (Brown 2008, p. 59). For bell hooks (lower-case is the appropriate spelling), alienation impacts the meanings of those concepts, which opens the door a bit more to a definition of home and

place that sounds as if hooks had been asked to describe these conceptualizations precisely for the black gangster class:

> Home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (hooks as cited in Massey, p. 171).

Of course, for black people during the Slavery Era, the concept of place and home did not exist, only space existed, which, as described by Massey, is no small thing. Space, she argues, is connected to time as 'space-time', that is, space-time is itself defined by the entities or conceptualizations that *inhabit* space and time, rather than space and time modeling a rigid structure not dependent upon other entities or conceptualizations to which space and time are bound (1999, p. 261). Surely Massey's space-time theorizing was true of the conflation of political, economic, and cultural considerations in the space and time of *slave*-space. Centuries later in street-space, though, the concept of place as home, as a source of national identity for black gangsters, has had to be hermeneutically conceived to understand it for what it is: place as home as street-space is the source of gang-set and do-or-die loyalty, not national loyalty, since place as home, paraphrasing hooks, is just another location in street-space. Or, given my conceptual framing and returning to my initial claim: place, in the world of black gangsters, is subsumed by street-space.

5.4.2. Street-Space as Prison-Space as Super-Hero Territory

Another argument posed here about street-space is that prison, for the black gangster class, has become an extension of street-space. This is a significant reconceptualization that is a lynchpin in the black-gangster-constructed culture of the condemned. An analytic resource that supports my contention of there being a connection between street-space, prison, and the culture of the condemned can be found in sociologist Loïc Wacquant's work about what he calls the 'deadly symbiosis' between urban communities and prison (2001, p. 95). Wacquant mostly rests his argument about the meeting

and meshing (my paraphrasing of the title of his article, *Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh*) of street-space with prison-space on three interrelated trends and four interrelated racialized historical institutions.

The three trends involve an acknowledgment of racial disparities in the imprisonment of people of color, particularly black men, versus the incarceration of the white populace in the United States. As of 1989, Wacquant points out that for the first time the number of people of color in prison surpassed the white prison population in the United States. Although the white overall population exceeds the nation's combined black and brown citizenry. This was the first of three significant trends Wacquant used to buttress his theorizing about the 'cultural fusion' of urban America with prison life (Ibid., p. 97).

The second trend is personified by Wacquant's expression of dismay concerning how young black men in the United States are imprisoned at 'astronomical levels' (Ibid., p. 96). One study issued in 2014 by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, twelve years *after* Wacquant wrote his article using what might be considered hyperbolic language for a scholar, provided evidence that Wacquant had not exaggerated. The study found that Milwaukee County alone had incarcerated *more than half* of the black men, ages thirty to forty-four, who lived there (Quinn and Pawasarat 2014). Another study by the Sentencing Project shows similar patterns across the country where in twelve states black people comprise greater than half of the overall number of people incarcerated there, including Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia (Nellis 2021). Even California and Connecticut, both states thought to be politically liberal environments, recorded black imprisonment rates at greater than nine times that of white prisoners in 2021 (Ibid.). Wacquant's 2001 article, then, has proven to be not only correct in

exposing the extremely high black incarceration rates in America, but prescient.

Wacquant's third trend involves what he identified as a growing gap between the respective rates of incarceration between black and white Americans. In ten states, at the time of the publication of the *Deadly Symbiosis* article in 2001, black people were sent to prison at a rate that was ten times that of their white counterparts. This trend, though, has since changed. While there remains a gap between the incarceration rates of the two groups, it is no longer a growing disparity. In fact, the gap is narrowing. According to a national study conducted by the nonpartisan Council on Criminal Justice, headquartered in Washington, D.C., in 2020, black men and women were imprisoned 4.9 times as much as America's white populace (Sabol and Johnson 2022). Black males, however, were 5.7 times as likely in 2020 to be incarcerated than white males, according to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (Carson 2021). And those black males between the ages of 18 and 19 fared worse: they were 12.5 times as likely to be incarcerated in contrast to young white males in the United States of the same age (Ibid.). Though black-white imprisonment disparities in America have lessened among certain age and race groups during the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, there is still another significant factor impacting the possibility of ridding the nation of imprisonment-rate disparities: that is, the *increase* from 2000 to 2020 in the length of time black prisoners spent behind bars versus an actual *decrease* during that same period in the length of time white prisoners spent behind bars (Sabol and Johnson 2022). The length of time a prisoner remains incarcerated is part of the calculation for determining black-white rates of imprisonment.

These examples of exceptional black imprisonment rates show how it became possible for prison, as a location in street-space, as an expected location-destination in fact, to have normalized, over time, the concept of ever-pending incarceration for the black gangster class. What I repeatedly heard was that the gangster 'had a case [court case]' he was fighting, or 'a

case' for which he was waiting to be sentenced. For some black gangsters, then, prison has even become the same as place, or home, in the extended concept of street-space.

Such racialized disparities in the day-to-day dispensing of criminal justice in the United States also provide a platform for the next step in Wacquant's conceptualization of his deadly-symbiosis thesis. And that next step in his analysis — an introduction to what Wacquant calls the four 'peculiar institutions' that have defined, confined, and attempted to control black people in the United States for centuries — offers a critical set-up for understanding the culture of the condemned (2001, p. 98).

Wacquant historically situates the four peculiar institutions — slavery; Jim Crow practices; the emergence of the black ghetto (street-space); and prison, which he has labeled a 'hyperghetto' (Ibid.) — into an 'arc of ethnoracial division and domination' (Ibid., p. 97). This is Wacquant's vivid description of the complex phenomenon he seeks to deconstruct. His fundamental arguments are in part what I have attempted to reveal with this doctoral thesis and its presentation of an historical journey of racialized America's particular focus on the demonizing, objectifying, and thus dehumanizing of black men. The other part of my effort, though, has been to conceptualize what Wacquant's racialized historical trajectory of white dominance has meant to the emergence of a black gangster class and its practices. Here I refer to street-gang practices as being the uncooperative co-construction of agency, duality, identity, freedom, and other crucial markers of existence by the black gangster class. With this work, my argument allows that uncooperative co-constructions generated by black gangsters are, in essence, reconceptualizations bound to each other in varying degrees, as put forth in Doreen Massey's theorizing about space and identity. I further argue that these black-gangster-class reconceptualizations have functioned as symbolic shields used to defend against mainstream society's racially oppressive projections, especially projections defining black-male identity.

Finally, these black-gangster reconceptualizations have also played a role in the construction of street-space's culture of the condemned, which addresses the paramount question of this work: How did the normalization of black imprisonment transform into death row becoming a symbol of heroism for America's street-gang generation?

The pervasive argument for this doctoral thesis has been that a centuries-long racialized history in the United States has been the most important factor in the evolution of a black-gang killing culture. Further, this is a culture that has emerged throughout the United *Streets* of America during the latter part of the twentieth century through to the present. Wacquant's arc-of-ethnoracial-division-and-domination critique offers a similar frame for making this argument. His basic contentions are twofold.

On the one hand, all four of Wacquant's peculiar institutions were purposely formed to accomplish the goals of defining black people as the 'subproletariat[s]' (p. 97) of society, members of America's 'pariah group' (p. 98), thus reinforcing a caste regime over them so that they were — and some, such as the black gangster class, still are — forced to forgo aspirational lifetime improvements in professional status, reputational status, and class status, at least as defined by mainstream societal standards. Black gangsters, though, have rejected what they understand to be unattainable mainstream societal standards. Instead, they have reimaged those standards into street-space standards, via the culture of the condemned, to attain dangerous-gangster celebrity reputations, coupled with the status of having constructed meaningful and hopefully lasting street legacies.

On the other hand, Wacquant's four peculiar institutions are linked in another racialized way: one institution in history followed by the next institution, he argued, and the next and the next has led to a 'carceral continuum' (p. 97). Generally, according to Wacquant, these peculiar institutions were constructed for containing black people, literally and figuratively, in 'physical, social, and symbolic space' (Ibid.). With the

institution of slavery, black people were restricted from free movement and in their ownership of self. In the Jim Crow Era laws were enacted to create a de facto experience of slavery enforced by extrajudicial vigilante practices from entities like the Ku Klux Klan who were permitted to lynch, castrate, and set on fire members of the black populace when they did not stay within physical and social boundaries determined for them by the greater white society. The emergence of small, socially constructed territories of street-space, which Wacquant refers to as ghettos, were also based on policies of racial containment. And, for reasons to be explained below, after the Civil Rights Era, Wacquant argues that street-space culture exported itself into prison-space, creating a reciprocal pathway for the routine exchange of cultures. Wacquant has named this new culturally meshed entity a hyperghetto and offers a multi-layered analysis for how this new street-space/prison-space phenomenon evolved. I offer Wacquant's argument here because it helps establish some of the real-world historical and structural challenges faced by the black gangster class in the evolution of street-space. Further, these are challenges that I contend have provided the contours for the uncooperative co-construction by street gangs of a deadly though in some ways quite practical culture of the condemned.

One way to examine Wacquant's critique of the hyperghetto concept is to observe how his idea of carceral continuum corresponds to what he calls a 'society of captives' (p. 103), which is a phrase he utilized from the seminal work, *Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (1958), by Gresham Sykes, a sociologist and criminologist. This society of captives, according to Wacquant, reflects historical shifts in the make-up of black communities (street-space) and in the subsequent cultural adaptations and accommodations that have led to the emergence of a parallel alt-nation already discussed here as the United *Streets* of America. The uncooperative co-construction of the United *Streets* of America is largely attributable, I argue, to the black gangster class. Wacquant refers to this parallel phenomenon in street-space (or the ghetto, as he has dubbed it) as a 'double-edged sociospatial formation' (Ibid.). He explains:

> It operates as an instrument of *exclusion* (Wacquant's italics) from the standpoint of the dominant group; yet it also offers the subordinate group partial *protection* (Wacquant's italics) and a platform for succor and solidarity in the very movement whereby it sequesters it. Specifying the workings of the ghetto as mechanisms of ethnoracial closure and control makes readily visible its *structural and functional kinship with the prison* (Wacquant's italics): the ghetto is a manner of 'ethnoracial prison' in that it encloses a stigmatized population which evolves within it its distinctive organizations and culture, while the prison functions as a 'judicial ghetto' relegating individuals disgraced by criminal conviction to a secluded space harboring the parallel social relations and cultural norms that make up the society of captives (Ibid.).

While I agree with nearly all of Wacquant's analysis up to this point, there is one reference he makes above that simply does not align with the black gangster class experience. Gangsters are *not* disgraced by having been convicted of a crime and sent to prison. The culture of the condemned supports the black gangster class by providing a socially constructed solution for dealing with imprisonment and status: street gangsters exercise inventive agency in reimagining society-imposed punishment as a consequential reputational achievement rather than a shame-causing experience. There will be more said about that social construct below.

The metamorphosis of street-space into prison-space and prison-space into street-space has had some historical and structural provocations. One reason for the metamorphosis has to do with segregation, Wacquant argues, based not only on race, but also on class. Once the population of black people migrating to Los Angeles, for instance, grew to a level that made the white population uncomfortable, black people were no longer permitted to live anywhere they chose to settle. Thus, black people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds were forced to live in the same special districts that, independent of class status, were racially segregated. It turns out that initially the income of black professionals (business owners, attorneys, teachers, and doctors) was largely derived from the earnings of low-wage residents of street-space, workers that performed duties related to domestic and semi-skilled laborer positions. Ironically, the segregation of

professional black people, alongside uneducated and semi-skilled black people, promoted a type of social and economic integration in street-space. But as the racially-separate-but-equal doctrine decided in 1896 by the United States Supreme Court was found to be unconstitutional by another Supreme Court decision in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the black bourgeoisie were given limited opportunities to move from the heart of the black community (street-space) — and they did. But because of racism, those black professionals were still relegated to the creation of relatively upscale black segregated 'satellite' communities, generally located on the periphery of the urban neighborhoods they had just fled or in segregated suburban neighborhoods (Ibid., p. 104). With time, though, sources of income for the black bourgeoisie shifted from dependence on the black low-wage earner to dependence on salaries from state and other government bureaucracies. Consequently, both economic and to some extent familial connections to the black community — those who could not afford to leave street-space — began to weaken (Ibid.).

This change in the social composition of the black community became, I argue, an historical factor in the construction of an element of the culture of the condemned. Black gangsters had to imagine what exactly constituted a top professional in street-space where traditional professional role models were no longer available to be seen by the youth of those urban enclaves. My contention is that the dearth of readily visible high-status black role models in street-space, especially for black males to emulate, ultimately led to the black gangster class imagining an alternative-type professional. This alternative-type professional, unique to the gangster class culture of the condemned, was that of the O.G., the Original Gangster. But here I argue, alongside Wacquant's critique, that additional historical and structural events, which occurred over the ensuing decades, also contributed to the cultural acceptance and thus emergence of an O.G. as a legitimate and highly respected occupation in street-space. Such events also contributed in due time to street-space's transformation into the legitimate and highly valued extension of prison-space — and vice versa.

World War II brought economic opportunities to black Los Angeles because of the proliferation of defense-industry jobs, while at the same time the military draft created a shortage of workers. Nonetheless, many black job-seekers, even trained black job-seekers, were subjected to racial discrimination that restricted them to janitorial or other low-level jobs, as well as the least desirable all-night shift. But when the war ended, for many black people in Los Angeles the availability of even those jobs evaporated. The country's manufacturing sector naturally retracted following World War II and black people were the first to lose their jobs. This became a pattern in labor practices in the decades to come. In the post-war years — what Wacquant calls the 'interwar' years between World War II and the 1960s — manufacturing did pick-up (2001, p. 105). During that time, the black workforce of street-space was exploited as cheap labor. Therefore, street-space — or the 'dark ghetto', as identified by Wacquant — represented a valuable economic role for the nation — for a short period of time (Ibid.). But as the United States' prominent manufacturing base converted to a knowledge-based and business-based economy, and what manufacturing remained moved from central cities to suburbs and to southern states that were anti-union, black labor in street-space was of little value and thus not called upon to work. Wacquant sums that black-worker circumstance with a stark description: low-skilled, uneducated blacks were seen as *economically redundant* (italics mine) (Ibid.).

With the exit of the black bourgeoisie from street-space, as well as the elimination of jobs for most of the remaining residents of street-space, street-space itself began to take on what I am calling a racialized societal responsibility: that of providing a literal storage location for people 'devoid of market utility', as expressed by Wacquant (Ibid., p. 105). That storage role positioned street-space to resemble prison-space. It also caused the culture of the condemned to accept prison-space as street-space and street-space as prison-space and to construct a culture, a lifestyle, that embraced place

and home as portable locations to be situated in either street-space or prison-space. Here my argument is that this merged perception of place, home, and space has had profound implications on the black gangster class's conceptualizations and reconceptualizations of historical factors involved in the formation of celebrity status, O.G. occupational attainment, killer theatrics in street-space or prison-space, and much more. Those historical factors have at times even provided scripts for the black gangster class to live by, which has been discussed in this chapter.

There are other issues Wacquant theorizes to forward his deadly-symbiosis argument that show the evolution of street-space's similarities to prison-space, as well as some of the distinctions between the two designations, which I will explore momentarily. But an issue that he does not raise, which challenges his lack-of-market-utility argument regarding the black residents of street-space, is the very concrete contribution the black gangster class makes to the employment of prison guards and other law enforcement personnel. Just as in the days of slavery when the black body was of paramount importance to the agricultural industry, the black body, especially the black male body, has become the fodder that fuels a massive prison industry. To illustrate, the Legislative Analyst's Office for the State of California announced a proposed budget for prison expenditures for that one state to reach $14.5 billion for fiscal year 2023-2024 (Petek 2023). Albeit this is the largest prison budget of all fifty states, plus the District of Columbia, in America, it still represents only one state prison budget. There are also privately operated prisons in the nation that top $7.4 billion in expenditures (Kincade 2023) and a federal prison system that expects to spend $8.1 billion in 2023, according to the Department of Justice (Bureau of Prison 2023). And just as during the Slavery Era when the black bodies of slaves did not benefit from the wealth that their captive and forced labor generated, the black bodies of street gangsters (and other low-income men of color) have not benefited financially from the revenue generated by their captive and forced presence via their incarceration.

The culture of the condemned, though, has provided the black gangster class with a way of utilizing inventive agency to reimagine how to measure the value of black bodies to generate some benefit for the gangsters themselves, such as personal elevated status in street-space, if not personal elevated wealth, as in fortunes amassed by plantation and slave owners in colonial America. As discussed earlier, black gangsters killing rival black gangsters, that is, killing black bodies by employing the most dramatic performative techniques adds to the reputational and celebrity status of black gang members. With the black gangster class, killing, that is, 'putting in work', is a way for a gangster to do his duty, his street-space duty, by protecting or defending himself and his alt-nation in the United *Streets* of America. It is deadly theatrical behavior that can lead to the creation of a local or statewide or national legacy. Thus, there is honor associated with committing a murder — as well as being murdered. Committing a murder is a notch of pride on a gangster's symbolic belt. Being murdered offers another reward, as explained by Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams as he sat in a cell on San Quentin State Prison's Condemned Row awaiting his own judicial execution: 'To die as a street martyr was seen as a noble thing' (2007, p. xvii). Further, it is significant in street culture that the phrase 'putting in work' implies association with an occupational responsibility as well as aspiration, in this instance, to achieve O.G. status. There is obviously more to be considered here, which will be explored below as Wacquant's deadly-symbiosis critique continues to be examined.

In arguing how street-space has more and more come to resemble prison-space in the United States and how the reverse has also occurred, Wacquant makes several insightful observations about the impact of racialized historical and structural outcomes on marginalized people and their communities. However, Wacquant's focus is not always on the uncooperatively co-constructed responses of the people and the culture of those communities as they navigate the mark and march of racialized history in America. This is where the culture of the condemned steps into that breach, an intervention that offers more understanding about how these

racialized changes in economic and social structure have impinged upon the lived experience of the black gangster class, impacting their imagining and reimagining of black circumstance. Or, using Doreen Massey's theoretical framing, racialized changes in the nation's economic and social structure have impacted the conceptualizations and reconceptualizations bound to the construction of a culture of the condemned that has promoted the survival and relational success of the black gangster class.

A few of Wacquant's historically revealing observations regarding what led to the symbiosis between street-space and prison-space are examined here. One such observation includes a discussion of how the black bourgeoisie's exit from street-space led to a loss of indigenous organizations, such as a black press, fraternal orders, social clubs, churches and other entities that were able to support the lower-income residents of street-space. From that loss of what Wacquant refers to as the 'communal institutions' of street-space, he argues government institutions emerged providing support, but support coupled with the imposition of social control on the people of street-space (2001, p. 105). The irony is, according to Wacquant, those public institutions — a stigmatizing welfare payment system, blighted public housing with invasive residency rules, low-quality and no-option public health and public schools — were largely staffed by the black professionals who had earlier fled street-space. This put the black bourgeoisie in the 'vexing role of *custodian* (Wacquant's italics) of the black urban sub-proletariat on behalf of white society', rather than in their previous role of providing volunteer services for the street-space community (Ibid., p. 106).

What Wacquant does not explore in his analysis is the street-space resident's response to this shift in the role of the black bourgeoisie. One of my first lessons from my ethnographic practice with the black gangster class was that middle-class black people, such as myself, had become an enemy in street-space. Initially, the black gangsters of Los Angeles were quite hostile to me as I, a college-educated black person, arrived to interview them.

The hermeneutical factor that I have referred to in this doctoral work became right-away evident. We did not understand each other. Literally. The same words did not mean the same things. The street gangsters were — and largely remain — derisive of middle-class inspired values. Some middle-class professionals worked against them by enforcing strict rules that social service institutions required, rules that could restrict access to needed support for the residents of street-space. Thus, middle-classness was not a status that every street-space resident sought to achieve. Once again, I argue that unintended consequences have arisen from the nation's racialized history, which have accompanied as well as sometimes spurred structural change. That structural change allowed the black bourgeoisie to flee street-space and then return to provide some measure of control in the jobs they held overseeing the social institutions serving street-space, was seen as an abandonment and then a betrayal by the remaining residents of street-space (Ibid.). My contention here is that the black bourgeoisie's initial role of looking out for the low-income residents of street-space has been, in a potently hegemonic way, taken over by the black gangster class. I say potently hegemonic because of what has *not* been readily available in street-space, that is, what Wacquant identifies as the 'buffering function' of a given community to protect its residents from outside negative influences (p. 107).

The United *Streets* of America has always maintained an identity informed by both duality and dialecticism in terms of its relationship with the United States of America. The longtime racial containment practice toward the black community in the United States, with or without the presence of the black bourgeoisie, has fostered an isolated, parallel society in street-space. The construction of a parallel society is one aspect of how duality has played out in street-space. Here I argue that the response to race-based isolation and the very need to create an unofficially organized street-space — in other words, a parallel society — are what led to the use of inventive agency to uncooperatively co-construct a culture of the condemned. That culture of the condemned, through street-gang leadership, acknowledges street-space's different needs, as compared to mainstream society, and thus the gangsters

claimed the authority to construct a special code of the streets to govern and control other gang members and the black collective consensus. The culture of the condemned, then, informs a separate grassroots society that in some broad ways mimics, in its parallel form, a mainstream society. But there is cultural *non*alignment undergirded by the nation's racialized history, given, for instance, that the laws of the nation do not coincide with the code of the streets, where murder is not a crime. Murder in street-space is a method for career ascension. It is a way to show loyalty and street-space patriotism. The code of the streets reflects a different values system based on scarcity and isolation, based on what the black gangsters have made of what was available to them. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's brilliant instruction explains this reasoning: 'The people have always had to make something out of the things the system was trying to make of them' (Hall as cited as Grossberg 1986, p. 163).

One of Wacquant's key arguments about the symbiosis between street-space and prison-space is that America's racialized history and structural changes since the end of the Civil Rights Era have reconfigured both street-space and prison-space in that they both serve the same core function: warehousing the nation's 'social rejects' (p. 109). Wacquant also argues that during the same period the mission of the American prison has recast itself as a mirror image of what he calls the ghetto (street-space). In essence, the residents of street-space are primed to become residents of prison-space with both populations maintaining high rates of illiteracy; unemployment and poverty levels prior to incarceration; being raised by female-headed families; and, foremost, the fact of being black or a person of color. Wacquant states that the specter of race in prison-space or as he expresses it — a prisoner's 'ethnic community of provenance' — defines most aspects of how prison-space operates (Ibid., p. 110). In Wacquant's analysis, prisoners are congregated according to race and gang affiliation, whose membership is most often connected to race and racially contained territory. The other similarity between street-space and prison-space Wacquant argues is that

street code, constructed by gangs, now dominates the old ‘convict code’, which he claims was based on prisoner solidarity against the guards. That convict culture produced what Wacquant calls ‘the old hero’ (Ibid., p. 111). Now the heroes of prison-space, according to Wacquant, are the outlaws, the gang members, who primarily demand respect from other prisoners, rather than correctional officers. And gang members, Wacquant points out, willingly resort to violence while incarcerated to secure respect. This is also what constitutes a hero in street-space, where the emphasis is not on law enforcement’s appreciation of the black gangster class or an individual gangster’s reputational exploits but is based on how black gangsters themselves are viewed by other black gangsters and the black collective consensus. As in prison-space, violence is willingly used in street-space to garner respect.

However, the conceptual frame that is more aligned with black gangster class epistemology for how to understand the boundness of street-space to prison-space — and the reverse — is different, I argue, than what Wacquant suggests. Here I contend that while the historical issues and structural changes that have influenced street-space and prison-space discussed in this chapter have played important roles in the similarities found across both spaces, the black gangster class has also played a significant role in constructing a relationship between street-space and prison-space. My argument is that the black gangster class has purposefully conjoined street-space with prison-space, situating the combined space in its culture by using inventive agency. The conjoining of the two spaces has allowed black gangsters to gain a larger domain over which they can rule and in which they can survive for as long as possible. Although, for black gangsters, the value of survival does not supersede legacy-through-martyrdom, which was stated earlier by Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams. The significance of this insight will be discussed below.

As the cultural progeny of the black pirate class, the meaning and existence of space for the black gangster class is paramount. With the

world's high seas, black pirates had a domain constrained only by ocean boundaries established beyond a certain distance from the land belonging to any given country with water at its border. The high seas, therefore, represented a vast space over which black pirates could potentially reign. With the black gangster class already restricted geographically by racial containment practices within the United States, geographic space became yet another element of scarcity to be navigated by black gangsters. Given policies of mass incarceration that target black men and other men of color, along with all the racialized historical and structural factors discussed above, the black gangster class has constructed the culture of the condemned for strategic purposes. My argument is that this culture of the condemned provides a blueprint for imagining or reimagining, for conceptualizing or reconceptualizing harsh reality to master the twenty-first century version of the racialized-rubric concept of the slave-outlaw and pirate-outlaw era.

By casting the concept of scarcity for the black gangster class as solely, or even mostly, a question of pervasive economic poverty in street-space and prison-space, distorts, I argue, our perception of how street gangsters view themselves. With both street-space and prison-space serving as societies of captives (paraphrasing sociologist and criminologist Gresham M. Sykes's description of prison and Wacquant's description of the residents of street-space), there are circumstances constitutive to that type of a restricted environment. Black slaves lived in a captive society, as does the black gangster class today, be they situated at any given time in street-space or prison-space. My argument is that being around-the-clock captives makes a distinct difference in how the personal goals of the black gangster class have formed — or have been imagined — irrespective of their economic status or even considering their economic status.

One aspect of scarcity in the lived experience of street-space is a scarcity of hope, particularly among the black gangster class's chance for a future as a law-abiding well-paid citizen. But what my research has found is that the culture of the condemned has emerged in street-space and prison-

space as a resource for transcending-through-transforming certain categories of scarcity that black gangsters are simply *not willing to give up*. Two examples at the top of that list are gangster self-pride and a way for the black gangster class to achieve some measure of occupational success that is not required to include financial prosperity. Again, for a street-space environment burdened by many categories of scarcity, identifying resources that somehow supplant the most unacceptable representations of scarcity is critical, I argue, for the survival of the black gangster class.

Another unintended consequence of America's racism in the culture of the black gangster class is the already-developed capacity for street-gang members to reimagine most everything about their lives from an ongoing mandate of having to uncooperatively co-construct their agency, identity, freedom and other fundamental aspects of their lives. To apply that skill, therefore, to constructing a solution to the categories of scarcity that street gangsters have determined they were — and are — unwilling to accept has led to a practice of murder-for-positive-recognition. To accomplish that paradoxical goal of constructing a killing culture that destroys black bodies and at the same time exults the black-body killer of those black bodies has been one of the most significant consequences, I contend, of the merged environments — street-space and prison-space — into one socially undistinguishable society of captives.

As abhorrent to mainstream society as this argument may sound — and for mainstream society it may even sound unbelievable — it is an existential argument for the black gangster class. As Tyrone 'Ty-stick' Baker, a member of the Watts Bounty Hunter Bloods gang set once explained to me, 'I'm not a criminal. This is survival.' As I probed him more Ty-stick went on to say that he had no other choices than to steal to eat or to kill to defend himself, to represent his gang set, and to build his personal standing in street-space. Ty-stick's argument — an argument I heard from numerous other gang members with whom I engaged to confirm Ty-stick's point of view — was that he had no other resources at his disposal, literally, to survive in

street-space. ‘Well,’ Ty-stick said to me, ‘what do you expect me to do? Just starve? Just die?’

Although social constructions forged by the black gangster class via the culture of the condemned could very well lead to death, through the process of reimagining in street-space and prison-space the *consequences* of death, black gangsters have claimed some inventive agency or control over their perceived or actual fate. These culture-of-the-condemned constructions occur when the act of killing or being killed is theatrically orchestrated and infused with gangster-directed meaning for dead black bodies, including their own. Such social constructions guided the merging of the terrain of street-space and prison-space for the black gangster class and the idealizing of prison-space as the best place to learn the skills of becoming a man, a gangster man. Manhood, as reimagined by the black gangster class, is being able to kill in the most dramatic way and as knowing how to avoid being killed, thus neutralizing the deterrent intent of mass incarceration. One of the co-researchers for this doctoral work, Steve Champion, shared with me that he and all his preteen friends were looking forward to becoming old enough to be locked up at a juvenile correctional facility when they broke the law. Champion says that he and other ‘baby Crips’ saw incarceration as the first real opportunity to learn what the requirements were for claiming their own manhood. Additionally, there is the question of state orchestrated murder, that is, the implementation of the death penalty, which has been reimagined by the black gangster class as an opportunity to stand as a superman, a hero, a generator of legacy, providing political street theater to be replicated by others long after a judicial execution. This is what Crips co-founder Stanley Tookie Williams pointed out earlier in this chapter, that there is a social construction among the black gangster class that glorifies their own death through the creation of a legacy in martyrdom. ‘To be known in the world’ also means to be known when the black gangster is no longer of this world, if the gangster’s death has led to a legacy of some sort. That, too, is a social construction, which can be attributed to the culture of the condemned in street-space and prison-space.

My argument is that in a society-of-captives, spatial constraints informed by a racialized history, and structural economic and political changes have had a profound influence on the evolution of a culture of the condemned uncooperatively co-constructed by street gangsters. Further, this culture of the condemned has led to the creation by the black gangster class of a collection of imaginative social constructions (or resources in an environment of scarcity where there have been scant resources), which has contributed to the survival and at times the demise of the black gangster class.

This insistence on not accepting a lack of hope on every front is what has helped to situate the culture of the condemned as the definitive system of relations or underlying social structure for the United *Streets* of America.

Leaning on Doreen Massey's theorizing about the relationality of space and identity, my investigation has revealed the existence of a vast and dense network of conceptualizations and reconceptualizations of experiences bound to each other across a racialized American history of hundreds of years. That network has served in this work as a vital connector between a colonial past and a United-*Streets*-of-America present.

In exploring the topic of freedom for the black gangster class, my focus is on the positionality of street gangsters. My categorization of black gangsters as outright-outlaws, as progenies of the black pirate class, does not tell the entire story. Black gangsters, I suggest, maintain a hybrid status that is reflective of their society-of-captives membership. They are outright-outlaws, but they are racially contained outlaws. Thus, as I end this work, I present a new more troubling positionality for the categorization of the black gangster class. Black gangsters are outright-outlaw *slaves*, I contend, rather than simply outright-outlaws. Even the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States claims that persons convicted of crimes and imprisoned can be treated as slaves or indentured servants. But the black gangster class is

coping with far more than constitutional dictates. The black gangster class must navigate in the twenty-first century a perpetual-captive experience from decades of racial containment practices and policies. In response, black gangsters have uncooperatively co-constructed a culture of the condemned, which provides a strategy for feeling free as opposed to being free. This is symbolic freedom, as defined earlier in this chapter. But symbolic freedom for street gangsters, I contend, also connects the black gangster class to the days of enslavement and mirrors in a paradoxical way what white slave owners determined freedom should mean for black slaves.

What can be done to change this dynamic?

In the concluding chapter of this work some ideas will be explored for how the black gangster class, public policymakers, and scholars can work toward a different future for black gangsters, for the communities in which they live and dominate, and for those institutions that have contributed to the damning dialectics that street gangsters have sought for many years to navigate.

For this chapter, because of the nature and range of issues already deconstructed here, there will not be a separate ‘Discussion’ section using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, as was the format for Chapter Three: Duality: Confronting America’s Damning Dialectic and Chapter Four: Agency and Its Many ‘Inventive’ Forms. However, I seek to extend CRT literature in Chapter Six: Conclusion by reimagining that theory to be more responsive as an analytical tool for critiquing various impacts and outcomes of racialized history, especially as pertaining to black street gangsters.

As I end this chapter, a vital claim emerging from the doctoral work is again that members of the black gangster class comprise the last slaves standing in the United States of America and in the United *Streets* of America. And that situation needs to be acknowledged by all.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

> ‘Racism goes through various stages of development, and it uses different patterns of social inclusion and exclusion. Since ancient times, these have been organized in pairs of opposites, which include, among others, the cultivated and the barbarians, the chosen and the outcasts, the civilized and the savages and finally the whites and the coloureds’.
>
> — Wulf D. Hund (2010, p. 57)

> ‘Our presence in this country [United States] terrifies every white man walking’.
>
> — Black American author James Baldwin, 15 January 1979, speech at University of California, Berkeley

6.1. Overview: The Future of Racialized Futures

The core argument for this work has been that a street killing culture constructed by the black gangster class, dubbed here as the culture of the condemned, did not appear spontaneously. Rather, my contention has been that this culture of the condemned, which informs black-gangster behavior, has evolved in response to certain conceptual strands (duality, agency, and freedom) that this work has tracked through four hundred years of racialized history in the United States. I have argued that the evolution of those conceptual strands prompted certain character adaptations by what became a black gangster class. Finally, those character adaptations led to the formation of a normalized killing culture in the United *Streets* of America. Important aspects of violent urban modernity were undergirded by centuries of racialized practices in American law, institutions, and social customs, thus proving a famous James Baldwin quote: ‘People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them’ (1955, p. 163).

This final chapter pivots from analyzing impacts of America’s racialized history to an examination of predicted racialized ‘futures’, even when those futures were conceived decades or centuries ago by members of

the nation's black *and* white populace. My use of the plural 'futures' is, therefore, not an error. I intend to show how even *perceptions* of America's future have been racially influenced in some profound and dialectical ways. The significance of such racialized futures on the evolution of social relations, institutional structures, and the development of laws and public policy are, as argued here, directly connected to America's racialized past, including a racialized fear of black people, as proclaimed by James Baldwin in the quote at the top of this chapter. This fear is based, I argue, on a belief in an ever-present potential that black people, particularly black men, might one day rebel against the dominance of white America. The formation of two key social values have derived from that racialized past — white supremacy and black inferiority, as analyzed throughout this work — and can be seen in futures envisioned about the United States by its black and white citizenry, including by academics possibly of both races (the use of the word 'possibly' will be explained later), a slave owner, as well as a president of the United States.

This chapter also introduces the potential of reimagined futures that can be conceived today by the black gangster class and by a mainstream mass-incarceration-supporting public. My contention is that this doctoral work provides insights that support opportunities at this moment for both entities to shift epistemically in the construction of new ways forward.

The new way forward for black gangsters would demand inventive agency (a talent they have already mastered) and sustained discipline to embed innovative reconceptualizations into the culture of the condemned, which would mean altering the social structure of the United *Streets* of America. For mainstream society, the new way forward would require that policymakers and the public that supports their judgments understand from this doctoral work that the many unintended consequences of racialized history have led to the formation of very different cultures constructed by mainstream versus street-gangster America. Thus, severe prison sentences in the United States, such as life without the possibility of parole and the

death penalty, that would serve as genuine deterrents to committing serious crimes for the middle class would likely incentivize the black gangster class to engage in the criminal behavior such punishments were intended to subvert. This doctoral research has illustrated in previous chapters how such a counterintuitive outcome, as perceived by mainstream America, nonetheless represents an alternative response supported by clear conceptual logic for street gangsters, given the tenets of a culture of the condemned to which black gang members adhere.

But I argue in this chapter that what must also be overcome by both mainstream America and the black gangster class are long-held racialized values in the United States of white superiority versus black inferiority. The chapter extends Critical Race Theory (CRT) with new conceptualizations produced by this doctoral work in the hope of provoking an appreciation of the unintended consequences, as manifested by those residing in the United *Streets* of America, of the country's racialized values infrastructure. Thus, my argument makes a case for why epistemic shifts away from those values are required to change the culture of mainstream America and its policymakers, as well as the black gangster class. Moreover, this extended CRT could provide public policymakers with some recognition of the complex culture that undergirds the black gangster class, thereby assisting them in developing policies that do not incentivize the criminal behavior such policies are ostensibly designed to deter. Lastly, in this chapter I suggest additional research needed to continue identifying a range of racialized circumstances influencing black gangsters' practice of reimagining harsh conditions that have enabled them to cope within a culture of the condemned.

In 'Framing Racialized Futures', section 6.2., one future for the United States and other parts of the world was catastrophically imagined more than a century ago by certain dominant white segments of academia in America and Europe. That future was imagined as a war predicted to be waged and possibly won by black America and other people of color against worldwide

white supremacy. Another future explored in section 6.2. was rumored to have been imagined in the 1700s by a white slave owner, Willie Lynch, demonstrating how to employ a racialized strategy to control the thinking and bodies of black people forever. On the other hand, that Willie-Lynch future was rumored to have also been imagined by a black American only several decades ago, using the white slave owner as a fictional character, a ruse, to show black people how they have, in fact, been manipulated into sustaining their own oppression.

With that backdrop, section 6.3., 'The Black Gangster Class: On Envisioning a New Future of Futurism', is about a future to be imagined — or reimagined — by the black gangster class, America's last slaves standing, who are situated in street-space and prison-space, as discussed in a previous chapter. This new future, articulated in the theory of Mark Dery's Afrofuturism, utilizes storytelling skills, a honed characteristic of black street gangsters, given their use of inventive agency, the uncooperative co-construction of agency and identity, and other innovative conceptualizations derived from the construction of a culture of the condemned for their own survival. The power of such storytelling in the present to create 'an imagined idiom of future futures' is supported by another theorist's work, David Scott (2004, p. 1), in his conceptualizing of how *not* to allow such future-creating processes to devolve into what he calls 'problem-spaces' (Ibid., p.3), which will be explained later. Also, a gangster-related derivative of Afrofuturism will be introduced.

Finally, 'Introducing Radical Race Theory and Other Future Research', section 6.4., renames and redefines CRT. In this section CRT is titled, Radical Race Theory (RRT), and is reconfigured by removing one of CRT's long-time tenets — interest convergence, repeatedly critiqued here in earlier chapters — and replacing it with new tenets. Also, this section concerns itself with identifying some of the additional research that could be undertaken to make more apparent and thus more understandable the difference in cultures and resulting behaviors between the greater mainstream society and the

black gangster class. Some of this research could also assist in identifying racial and class bias among those members of mainstream society who are responsible for knowledge production as well as public policy making related to the people and communities of the United *Streets* of America.

6.2. Framing Racialized Futures

There has been a great deal of dramatic storytelling — both fictionalized and non-fictionalized — in the sustaining of a racialized values infrastructure in the United States. Essential values of such an infrastructure is the fundamental belief in white superiority and black inferiority. Those racialized beliefs, which I have argued throughout this work, has become embedded in the customs, social relations, and institutions of America.

Storytelling, then, has been a basis of doomsday predictions as well as hoped-for predictions involving the future of race relations between black people and other people of color, and 'the white world', as characterized by one highly touted white American author of the early 1900s, Lothrop Stoddard, an historian with a doctorate from Harvard University (1920, p. vi). Stoddard, according to another American professor, Lewis Turlish, was even dubiously known as 'the most popular American racist of the 1920s' (1971, p. 443). A prime example of a racialized doomsday future is found in the popularity of Stoddard's nonfiction book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*. Published in 1920 by well-respected Charles Scriber's Sons, Stoddard's book offers what was promoted as a systematic treatise on the horrifying prospect that inferior people of color — determined by genetic hereditary factors, a eugenics argument Stoddard uses — could become more powerful enemies of the white race in the United States, Britain, and throughout Europe because of immigration policies, the loss of the control of land through wars, and miscegenation. Stoddard, in the second paragraph of the Preface of his 1920 book, reminds readers of what he had warned them in a previous publication years earlier, that race relations should be the key concern of nations:

> The world-wide struggle between the primary races of mankind — the 'conflict of color', as it has been happily termed — bids fair to be the fundamental problem of the twentieth century, and great communities like the United States of America, the South African Confederation, and Australia regard the 'color question' as perhaps the gravest problem of the future (1920, p. v).

In essence, what made this conflict of color so grave a problem to Stoddard and his followers had to do with how long the white race could remain pure as well as empowered to rule over everyone else. Yet, Stoddard's book was not seen as a fringe discourse of little consequence. It was well-reviewed, for instance, in the *New York Times*:

> Lothrop Stoddard evokes a new peril, that of an eventual submersion beneath vast waves of yellow men, brown men, black men and red men, whom the Nordics have hitherto dominated . . . with Bolshevism menacing us on the one hand and race extinction through warfare on the other, many people are not unlikely to give [Stoddard's book] respectful consideration (as cited in Frazier 2019, p. 8).

Moreover, Warren G. Harding, the twenty-eighth president of the United States, referred to Stoddard's book in what became known as Harding's 1921 civil rights speech in Birmingham, Alabama:

> Whoever will take the time to read and ponder Mr. Lothrop Stoddard's book on *The Rising Tide of Color* . . . must realize that our race problem here in the United States is only a phase of a race issue that the whole world confronts (Ibid., paragraph 13).

Stoddard's message was also noticed and amplified outside of the United States. In a 1921 issue of *The Edinburgh Review*, an influential British intellectual journal published from 1802 to 1927, Lord Frederick John Dealtry Lugard, known as F. D. Lugard, a former governor of both Hong Kong and Nigeria, favorably reviewed Stoddard's book in an article that he called *The Colour Problem* (p. 267). Lugard's review ends a summary of Stoddard's historical treatise with an historical point of view of his own that sought to reinforce the validity of Stoddard's argument by providing what to Lugard was an unacceptable example of how the 'colour problem' had been facilitated during World War I: 'The spectacle of the fratricidal war in Europe

— in which both sides lowered their racial prestige by appealing to the coloured races to kill white men — and the events which followed it, are the final causes of that *Rising Tide of Colour*, which had been gathering steady momentum from the dawn of the twentieth century' (Ibid., p. 268).

Four years later in 1925, Lothrop Stoddard's ruinous predictions about the possible demise of white superiority found their way into F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that became a classic bestseller. One of the book's characters, Tom Buchanan, makes a veiled reference to Stoddard's work, changing the title of the book and Stoddard's last name a bit, but not by much:

> Civilization's going to pieces. . .Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* [versus *The Rising Tide of* Color] by this man Goddard [versus Stoddard]?. . .Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved. . .This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or those other races will have control of things (Gidley 1973, p. 171).

Eighty-eight years later a blockbuster Hollywood movie was made about F. Scott Fitzgerald's book, *The Great Gatsby*, and the dialog about *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by the Tom Buchanan character made it into the movie script and was mentioned in *The Atlantic* magazine as part of a film review (Hamblin 2013).

There is another robust racialized concept of the future to consider. This racialized concept of the future has an originator who is shrouded in mystery. And the concept itself has surfaced, though somewhat surreptitiously among the black community and perhaps the white community, with its own name and elevation to that of a proper noun: The Willie Lynch Letter.

The Willie Lynch Letter has become a type of underground doctrine among the black population of the United States, as much for its brutally embarrassing depictions of black America's susceptibility to the long-term

racist intentions of white America, as for the letter's mysterious origin. First, the basic elements of what has become known in the black American community as the *infamous* Willie Lynch Letter will be described, inspiring what has been named the Willie Lynch Syndrome. Then I will discuss the debate among black scholars regarding the authorship of this Willie-Lynch doctrine of the forever control of black people by using tactics that support strategic racism.

The tale of the Willie Lynch Letter begins with a story said to have occurred in 1712. William Lynch, a white slave owner from the Caribbean, is reported to have delivered a speech to a group of male slave owners from the American colonies at their invitation. He had traveled to the shores of the James River in the southern state called Virginia. Lynch's speech presents a cunningly ruthless plan for how to maintain a slave system and thus dominance over black people for hundreds of years:

> I am here to help you solve some of your problems with slaves. Your invitation reached me on my modest plantation in the West Indies where I have experimented with some of the newest and still the oldest methods for control of slaves. . . .I have a foolproof method for controlling your black slaves. I guarantee every one of you that if it is installed correctly, it will control the slaves for at least 300 years. . . .I have outlined a number of differences among the slaves, and I take these differences and make them bigger. I use fear, distrust, and envy for control purposes. . . .You must pitch the old black male vs. the young black male and the young black male against the old black male. You must use the dark skin slaves vs. the light skin slaves and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves. You must use the female vs. the male, and the male vs. the female. You must also have your white servants and overseers distrust all blacks, but it is necessary your slaves trust and depend on us. They must love, respect, and trust only us. Gentlemen, these are the keys to control. Use them. . . .If used intensively for one year, the slaves themselves will remain perpetually distrustful. Thank you, gentlemen.

Another way of framing Willie Lynch's racialized strategy can be seen in the work of modern scholars who claim de facto slavery exists even today for people of African descent (Karenga 2001; Stanford-Xosei 2015; Laccino 2016; Schwarz and Nicholson 2020). As explained in a paper titled *Collapsing the*

Boundaries Between De Jure and De Facto Slavery (2020), Katarina Schwarz, an Associate Professor of Law, argues that slavery can be conceptualized as a condition (de facto), as well as an official legal status (de jure). In other words, transatlantic enslavement is not the complete slavery paradigm. The slavery condition is part of a 'transatlantic system' of harm imposed by a dominant white society upon black America that diminishes their lives, culture, belief in themselves, and hope for a better future (Ibid., p. 394). Thus, Willie Lynch's racialized instructions were meant to become part of a transatlantic system, whether de jure (legal) enslavement existed. Contemporary de facto slavery, then, could still prevail. I agree. My argument is that black gangsters have been maneuvered by societal racism and penal policy into both of those categories. On the one hand, the slavery-type condition of racial containment in street-space is a representation of de facto enslavement. While a policy of mass incarceration that targets black men for long terms of imprisonment is a representation of de jure enslavement. This is true given that the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution allows for slavery and indentured servitude to be imposed on those who have been convicted of offenses that lead to correctional confinement. Thus, black gangsters have had to navigate in some manner both the condition and the status of de facto and de jure enslavement in street-space and prison-space most of their lives.

This transatlantic system of slavery, which spawned the de facto condition of slavery also led to the damning dialectics exposed by an examination of the authorship of the Willie Lynch Letter. Was the letter written by a white slave owner from the 1700s or a black academic from the 1990s? And if it was written by a black academic from the 1990s, what could have been the underlying motivation — or perhaps de-facto-slavery-inspired compulsion — to construct such a document?

Deconstructing the significance of the Willie Lynch Letter for black people in the USA, Britain, and the Caribbean is as ensnarled in an examination of the messenger as the Willie-Lynch message itself (Ampim 2005).

Those black people who have been exposed to the Willie Lynch Letter have generally believed in its authenticity. Though I do not remember how I came to read it, I do remember that I believed what I read as a young adult because of its predictions that I had witnessed and experienced as a child attending school in my West Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) neighborhood. Indeed, the Willie Lynch Letter finally provided an explanation of sorts for the behavior of many black students and teachers in Philadelphia who claimed light skin was superior to dark complexions, and straightish hair, known as 'good hair', was a highly desired attribute because it was closer to the texture of white people's hair. Such beliefs, among black people, became known as the Willie Lynch Syndrome. The Willie Lynch Syndrome reflected black people's general dislike of themselves and general coveting of the physical attributes and social standing of white people.

Yet, for some black scholars and, to a limited extent, for white academics, the search for evidence of the actual existence of a Willie Lynch has been in progress since the early 2000s (Ampim 2005; Rosenzweig 2001). A local Barbados historian, Wayne Alleyne advised me during a 2021 interview to search slave-owner archives where I might find a record of Willie Lynch as having been a British resident of the Island of Barbados. Alleyne's belief was that the Willie Lynch Letter, which he considered genuine, had originated in Barbados. In contrast, a Dr. Manu Ampim, a black historian from northern California, has devoted more than ten years of his career in the early 2000s challenging the legitimacy of the Willie Lynch Letter and Willie Lynch himself.

University College of London (UCL) maintains a data base for slave archives at UCL's Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery. That data base, it turns out, includes the existence of a William Francis Lynch, listed as a British owner of slaves domiciled in Barbados in 1829. But there is uncertainty about whether this William Francis Lynch is *the* Willie Lynch in question. Slave-owner William Francis Lynch of Barbados, who was alive in 1829, could not have stood on the bank of a Virginia river in 1712, more than

one-hundred years earlier. Historian Manu Ampim also found records for a William Lynch from Pittsylvania, Virginia, who was born in 1742 (2005). But this would have been thirty years after the Willie Lynch Letter was ostensibly written. Further, this William Lynch was from an American colony, not the then British West Indies.

There is no reference to the Willie Lynch Letter in historical texts contemporaneous to that era nor in the media coverage of that era (Ampim 2005). In an article written by historian Roy Rosenzweig regarding his research that focuses on access provided by the worldwide Web for inauthentic as well as authentic documents to posted there, Rosenzweig plainly states: 'Some documents found on the Web are, in fact, not "real" documents at all' (2001, p. 558). Indeed, this historian showcases the Willie Lynch Letter as a prime example of an inauthentic document posted on the Internet that employed contemporary syntax in its narration — among other signs of its inauthenticity — that did not exist in the 1700s (Ibid.). Given that Willie Lynch likely did not exist to give such an ominous speech about the future of black America, what, then, has so empowered the Willie Lynch Letter that it has become an urban legend? Willie Lynch as messenger coupled with the Willie Lynch message epitomize, I argue, a dialectical complexity of past and present racialized history in the United States.

As historian Ampim's research was working to prove that the Willie Lynch Letter was a hoax, Kwabena Faheem Ashanti, a black scholar specializing in Africentric psychology, confessed to having forged the letter in the early 1990s. But I vaguely remember being told about the Willie Lynch Letter prior to 1990 and historian Roy Rosenzweig records the Willie Lynch Letter as surfacing around 1970. Still, my argument is that Ashanti's 'confession letter', sent to historian Ampim as an apologia, personifies a complex dialecticism arising from America's long racialized history.

Interviewed in a northern California college newspaper, Ampim referred to Ashanti as a 'novelist' and called what Ashanti claims to have done

‘disrespectful and unnecessary’ (Garcia 2014, p. 1). But I would argue Ampim’s response is too dismissive. There is more to be gleaned from Ashanti’s antics — whether he is the author of the Willie Lynch Letter or not. If there really was no Willie Lynch, then Ashanti created a hoax to mirror for black people what has happened to them because of their racialized history and because of how black people have now turned on themselves. What Ashanti depicts in the Willie Lynch Letter is what Ashanti sees for himself in black society — a damning dialectic, indeed. What the Willie Lynch Letter does not express is a way for black people to transcend the manipulation. Is the hoax an illumination to provoke change or concede to the historical circumstance?

I intend to show in this concluding chapter how the street gangsters of America are not quite situated in these futures in the way that was intended by Stoddard, Harding, or Ashanti. And that street gangsters have honed some special skills along the way that I argue could allow them to disrupt their uncooperatively co-constructed identity practice in a manner that would help them transcend the threatening, socially constrained, or machinated futures imagined by others for the black gangster’s place in society.

6.3. The Black Gangster Class: Envisioning a New Future of Futurism

The last-slave-standing status for the black gangster class does offer one benefit for street gangsters in modern America: the high incident of racial and carceral containment has allowed black gangsters to learn how to create complex societies within the nation’s mainstream society. This task of constructing social structures outside the purview of a dominant white society is very similar to what black slaves were forced to do hundreds of years ago. But the twist on today’s black-gangster society — or culture of the condemned uncooperatively configured by the gangsters themselves — is that while such a gangster society has to some extent been noticed by those in the greater external society, it has been misunderstood. The reason for that misunderstanding is that while the black slave culture may still not have been

fully understood by a white slave-owning society, that dominant group at least attempted to understand black culture in seeking to stay a few steps ahead of a slave rebellion. These days, a state of de facto slavery for the black gangster class has provided the white mainstream with too much confidence. Some people in power have a false sense of there not being a need to understand an internal street-space society constructed by the black gangster class. My argument is that this modern racialized perspective has led to the imposition of laws that have provoked the opposite behavioral result with black gangsters than intended by the policy and law makers. Thus, the death penalty, for instance, becomes a career-escalating tool among the black gangster class provoking more violence and murder, rather than less.

I have presented examples of different futures predicted — or demanded, in the case of President Harding — for black America to assist in an analysis that moves backward and forward in time to frame the significance of current political and social discourse for constructing new possibilities of a street-gangster future. To unravel this complexity, I rely on what David Scott of Columbia University's calls 'the conceptual problem of political presents' (2004, p. 1), which he relates to his theory of 'problem-space' (Ibid., p. 3).

What Scott means by political presents — and he does mean the plural of the word 'present' — involves understanding how any given present is related to the way the past has been 'reconstituted' through intentional discourse and expected futures formed to construct a present with political implications. Such politicized presents, then, represent multiple presents because of the multiple ways different populations have framed (and continue to frame) the past, and predictions of the future, to justify each group's present. Black people have been an integral element at the core of America's political presents for centuries, repeatedly provoking the key question: What should be done with the Negroes? Or in today's parlance and political context: How should the problems of black America be addressed? With the black gangster class, one way of addressing this frequently identified societal

problem has been to impose a mass incarceration policy and practice. But what can be divined by Scott's problem-space concept could conceivably guide the gangster class to radically reimagined futures.

Scott defines the concept of problem-space as when public and political discourse represent arguments that dominate present policy choices and that dictate what is expected of the future. But when expected futures do not materialize, Scott argues there is a tendency to look in the wrong place for answers — literally. He argues that it is *not* the answers to the questions asked in the past that are the most valuable resource to explain why society did not achieve a desired future. Instead, Scott contends that the *questions* posed in the past to frame the arguments for a certain kind of future need to be compared to the *questions* being asked in the present as to why that expected future did not come to fruition. In Scott's book, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, he was deeply disappointed in how soaring anti-colonial rhetoric about what postcolonial sovereignties and postcolonial presents could become in the Caribbean produced instead, what he described as a 'dead-end present' (Ibid., 1). Scott's dead-end present is a consequence of utopian discourses on postcolonial futures that could not sustain the romanticizing of independence with the reality of operational independence.

Essentially, that space where past discourse about the future does not produce an anticipated future is the problem-space of Scott's concept. With black America and particularly with black male America, the key question — What is to be done with black people in the United States? — has fundamentally remained the same over hundreds of years. Comparing questions from the past to the present, then, does not apply to the black experience in America as it might in other nations who had to cope with colonial regimes and eventually secured some semblance of independence. Freedom from slavery for black America meant and still means something different than attaining national independence. A community leader in Accra, Ghana, Reverend Acheampong Yiadom Boakye, made an observation, which

reflected that insight, during my visit there in March 2023: ‘You all [African Americans] didn’t have your own country, and that made a big difference when slavery was over. We did have our country after colonialism. We still do’. Further, for the black gangster class, freedom from slavery has morphed into a de facto slavery status where basic citizenship rights, such as the ability to vote and freedom from targeted imprisonment, have been taken away from most street gangsters. The application of Scott’s problem-space concept to the destiny of street gangsters involves the importance of these gangsters reimagining an envisioned future now, in the present moment, and in every evolving present moment. It involves staying inspired and disciplined by that envisioned future as a way of nurturing to fruition newly imagined presents and their projections into a street-gangster future. My contention is that the way forward for the black gangster class is to treat the future as a continuum of presents, what I would call a future-forward strategy, for reimagining the culture of the condemned.

Mark Dery, a lecturer of media criticism and literary journalism, coined the word ‘Afrofuturism’ nearly thirty years ago in a chapter called ‘Black to the Future’ published in *Flame War: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994, p. 180):

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism’ (Ibid.).

Dery, a white American, was largely concerned with and confused by the dearth of black authors writing science fiction novels. His argument was intriguing as to why black Americans should be best positioned for science-fiction storytelling:

> African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees: they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies

> (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee [University] experiment [where from 1932-1972 black men from Alabama with syphilis were deliberately not given medical treatment to study the progress of the disease], and tasers [often used in police traffic encounters with black men] come to mind)' (Ibid.).

Nearly thirty years later a black American English professor, Isaih Lavender III, confirmed Dery's view of the sci-fi-like travails of black life in his own book, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*, when he wrote: 'The lived experience of black folks *is* (Lavender's italics) science fictional' (2019, p. 46). While Lavender's book studied the application of science fiction to African American novels of the twentieth century, Dery's early work was concerned with the literary status of the science-fiction genre and that status's racialized connection to black people, even if there were not a lot of black sci-fi writers. Dery wrote that sci-fi was considered 'sublegitimate' writing and had thus picked up the nickname of being known as 'the golden ghetto' because the genre made money but was not respected as a literary endeavor. That lack of respect aligned sci-fi's sublegitimate status with the sublegitimate status black America had faced for hundreds of years (1994., p. 180). Therefore, sci-fi became known as the golden ghetto and a celebrated writer of the genre who was embraced by 'the grand salons of literary power' was even labeled, by award-winning and white sci-fi writer Norman Spinrad, as a 'token nigger' (Spinrad as cited by Dery, Ibid.).

Despite Afrofuturism's strong historical, cultural, and experiential link to black Americans, Afrofuturism has also been adapted as a public pedagogical tactic for political messaging about the erasure in the past of black people from science-fiction films and television shows — and thus an erasure from the future. A large sign, for example, that read, 'THERE ARE BLACK PEOPLE IN THE FUTURE', was installed as a movie-type marquee in 2018 by artist Alisha B. Wormsley in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to make a political statement about sci-fi and the entertainment industry (Wallace and Schwartz 2022, p. 2). That installation proved to be so controversial it was removed before its scheduled end-date. However, the sign's socio-political and public-pedagogical influence persisted, and the message has now been adapted and used across protest

movements and musical genres, including signs that read ‘There are Black Trans People in the Future’ (Ibid.). Additional signs of influence and new ways of framing the perils of sci-fi are: protests against the disappearing — or erasure — of black people through gentrification, pushed out of long-established black communities for higher-income white people to move-in; an electronic futuristic funk album by musician Otis Galloway was released in 2018 titled, ‘There are Black People in the Future (REMASTERED)’; There-are-Black-People-in-the-Future projects operating in Michigan and Texas, as well as Germany popped up where ‘critical memory intervention’ and conversations about change are employed (Ibid.).

A journal named *Radical Teacher* devoted its Spring 2022 issue to ‘imagining the unimaginable’. As straightforwardly expressed by the authors of one of the articles in that Spring issue, ‘Imagining blackness in the future is a radical act’ (Ibid.). My intent with this doctoral work is to extend the Afrofuturism concept to inform the future of the black gangster class. That would be a radical act indeed.

Afrofuturism is compatible, I argue, with some of the character adaptations street gangsters have already uncooperatively co-constructed to survive and prosper in street-space and prison-space. Black gangsters are already great storytellers, mythology-creators, self-legend-makers. My argument is that Afrofuturism offers the radical possibility of the black gangster class no longer having to co-construct their identity based on a racialized and thus diminished identity imposed upon them by a mainstream society. Dery’s concept of Afrofuturism, then, is a promising tool in building a new future for the black gangster class, including new identities. Afrofuturism is a tool that could disrupt the many forms of racialized patterns and practices in play for centuries that black gangsters have had to master, have had to navigate. Afrofuturism could help the black gangster class construct a new social system that would replace the culture of the condemned. Such a radical shift in black gangster identity, which would influence street-gangster relationships and behavior,

might finally attract the attention of public policymakers and law enforcement personnel to concede that current mass-incarceration policy targeting the black gangster class is not working as a deterrent to violent crime in street-space.

In 2018, a movie was released, ‘Black Panther’, that was based on a Marvel Comics black male superhero character. The movie showcased an African country of the future called Wakanda, and the film epitomized the Afrofuturism concept. The movie emotionally galvanized the black community in the United States. Black movie-goers watched the film multiple times, which helped the ‘Black Panther’ gross to reach $1.36 billion in worldwide revenues, thus making it the second highest-grossing film in 2018 (Hughes 2022). But what the movie meant to the black community in the United States, appears to have been priceless, as explained in an online NBCNews.com post by Harvard-educated Joy-Ann Reid, a political analyst and black television news anchor for MSNBC, a division of the major American television network, NBC:

> What’s truly revolutionary about the film is its expansive, breathtaking vision. The costumes evoking African glamor. . the panoramic vistas, plunging waterfalls and vast plains of Wakanda are interspersed with an Afro-futuristic reality powered by the most miraculous substance in the Marvel universe: Vibranium. Here, for one of the first times in Hollywood history, an idyllic, technically advanced and regally organized African society has been boldly and unabashedly depicted on the big screen. This is a society that remains perfect because it has wisely been kept secret from the greed and cruelty of the ‘colonizers,’ as the Wakandans call the people of the West, including the Americans. Wakanda, in short, is the Africa of black dreams (2018, p. 2).

The ’Black Panther’ movie is presented with this work as a model for how the Afrofuturism concept can be extended, adapted, and applied to the black gangster class. My focus is on a key theme in the ‘Black Panther’ movie that I would argue provoked such a cultural impact among black America. That theme is succinctly described by a black *Time Magazine* writer Jamil Smith: ‘It’s [‘Black Panther’] a movie about what it means to be black in both

America and Africa — and, more broadly, in the world' (2018, p. 2). Understanding the concept of identity for black America is a complicated endeavor that entangles, at the very least, racialized history, geography, and culture. For the black gangster class, life is even more socially layered than the challenges confronted by mainstream black America.

Black gangsters have been sequestered in street-space for generations, based on racial containment practices, as discussed in a previous chapter. Consequently, black gangsters have been separated from middle-class black America as well as virtually all of white America, except for when they are incarcerated, given that 61.6 percent of federal prison guards are white, as reported online by the Bureau of Prisons (2023). Thus, the compelling geographic and social divisions between black America and black Africa, as illuminated in the 'Black Panther' movie and articulated by *Time* writer Smith, are perceived very differently for the black gangster class versus the black middle class in the United States. Constructing a forthcoming life using Afrofuturism as a model requires, therefore, an adaptation that differs for black gangsters as compared to black mainstream America, who can be excited by the Africa-of-black-dreams idea, as described by television political analyst Reid. But these are not the dreams of the O.G.s of street-space and prison-space. Bridging the space from the United States to Africa, in terms of both geography and culture, is a bridge that spans a farther distance and broader social reach than the typical black-gangster fantasy. To account for those differences — figuratively and literally — I introduce a new concept called Gangsterfuturism.

Gangsterfuturism is a more practical future-forward strategy for envisioning what kind of life is possible for the black gangster class than what Afrofuturism offers. Afrofuturism envisions a grand and culturally unifying future for black Americans that overtly embraces their African origins, alongside a thriving techno-culture that supports superhuman traits for superheroes, who are then exalted in this new society of the Afrofuture. It is a fantasy, then, with great cultural and political intentions. Gangsterfuturism

builds on key reimaginative elements of the real-world culture of the condemned to ultimately reverse the dynamic of a longstanding uncooperative co-construction of identity practice for the black gangster class. Black gangsters, as discussed throughout this work, have already used their imaginations to create hero-personas for themselves in street-space and particularly in prison-space. Those gangsters who end up on death row are considered by other gang members to be the supermen of prison society. This is so because of the hierarchical structure of the culture of the condemned where a first-step toward superman status is attained by reimagining correctional facilities as gladiator schools instead of punitive spaces where gangsters go to learn how to become bona fide men, that is, becoming killers as a mode of self-defense. But a gangster's use of imagination, of reimagining status and environmental circumstance, has not expanded beyond the parameters of their racial confinement, whether they are in street-space or prison-space.

The concept of Gangsterfuturism asks street gangsters to use their imaginations in a broader way by exploring the use of *virtual* reality to gradually morph a new future into *street* reality. Gangsterfuturism encourages black gangsters to tap their storytelling ability, their great interest in stature-enhancing reimaginations of themselves, to become visionaries — virtual visionaries — who go beyond uncooperative co-construction of identity, agency, freedom, and other markers of existence to disrupt such longstanding practices. With Gangsterfuturism, the black gangster class is guided to reimagine their lives, proactively, by ignoring what has been projected onto to them via racialized practices throughout American history, and by constructing, virtually, different current and future circumstances for street-space, prison-space, and a new brand of superman status.

Gangsterfuturism leans in part on guidance provided in a book exclusively for street gang members titled, *The Architect,* written by two co-researchers of this doctoral project, Steve Champion and Craig Ross, former Crip gang leaders from Los Angeles who are currently imprisoned on San

Quentin's Condemned Row. They argue that 'strategies for dealing with them [gang members] must be realistic, pragmatic, *and* [Champion and Ross's italics] radical' (2019, p. 4). This is a way of defining Gangsterfuturism, but in need of one additional factor: that of being *visionary*, as well as realistic, pragmatic, and radical.

Champion and Ross's description of what it means to be an architect, reflecting the title of their book, provides some insight into my hope for how Gangsterfuturism can influence a self-transformational change in the behavior of street gangsters themselves, and spurred by that change reimagine the social structure of the culture of the condemned, which could mightily impact their future:

> In the ancient world, Architects were known as "master builders". It was these craftsmen who constructed the great monuments, pyramids, temples and palaces around the world. According to ancient mystery teachings, the title of "master builder" was only given to someone who had undergone rigorous training and transformation. Thus, Architects were not merely concerned with the construction of edifices, but also with the symbolic temple — the Self. The supreme ambition of every Architect is to build his character and intellect to a level of illumination from which the best of his. . . potential can flow' (p. 6).

The Architect offers a three-pronged strategy for directly involving gangsters in a transformational process, which Gangsterfuturism can adapt by introducing a specialized method of instruction that promotes learning-through-virtual reality to transform gang leaders into virtual visionaries:

1. *Focus initially on training gang leaders, not the general gang population.* My addition to this instruction is to train these gang leaders in virtual reality techniques to expand their ideas of what a very different life and future could be, given that their imagination, in the virtual world, would be their only limitation for future-building and hero-building in virtual space. I also add here that gang leaders should be trained whether they are imprisoned or residing in street-space. Many imprisoned gang leaders, or O.G.s, still exhibit a powerful influence

over gangsters in the United *Streets* of America, as well as gangsters in prison-scape.

2. *Assist gang members in creating a new destiny for themselves.* A curriculum for Gangsterfuturism could utilize virtual immersion tools to educate first the O.G.s, then the larger gang membership, and finally the black nongang community of street-space. Gang leaders themselves would be trained and supported in the role of curriculum developers to create the input for a new world — to be visually seen — created for a gangster-virtual-immersion experience by the O.G. leaders of the United *Streets* of America.
3. *Provide the resources needed to achieve transformation.* Champion and Ross's directive for this prong is what a Gangsterfuturism course of action would also require: 'Provide. . .a mentor, training, investment, or long-term and short-term organizational support' (Ibid., pp. 4-5).

Note that I have purposefully not suggested what the details of a black-gangster visionary plan would be or what, for instance, a gang leader's virtual immersion experience should include. I have not done so because I do not know. Such a future-forward process of social construction can only be divined and implemented by the O.G.s themselves. Seminal black-underclass literature, such as the classic works from William Julius Wilson, *The Black Underclass,* and *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy (*which largely promote mainstream full-employment solutions intended to convert street gangsters into members of America's middle class) are, I would argue, of questionable value. Having spent nearly two decades in an immersive ethnographic research practice with the Crips and Bloods gang leadership, along with their families and more junior gang members, not one gangster has wanted to be me, a prototypical member of the college-educated black middle class. The gangsters' near-disdain for middle-classness was not mitigated by the economic potential of becoming financially secure. Rather, distaste for middle-class status was tied to the *values* represented by a mainstream American society, such as, believing in marriage; seeking nine-to-five jobs that guarantee income but

constrain a person's movement and behavior; obeying the law; fearing the consequences of not adhering to the laws of the land.

Given what I have learned, I do not have confidence in the instincts of middle-class outsiders to the United *Streets* of America to generate plans for black street gangsters that the black gangster class would embrace. To that end, my goal is for this doctoral work to alert today's public policymakers that the death penalty incentivizes murder rather than deters violence in the United *Streets* of America. This is because of the uncooperative co-construction of identity practice that gangsters use to reimagine themselves and their carceral environments into some form of reputational gangster benefit. The death penalty should be abolished in the United States because within certain street cultures it is not working as promised to the mainstream society and will not curtail murders but likely increase the number of people killed in the United *Streets* of America.

It should be noted that my abolitionist argument is but a piece of a broader discussion that has been ongoing for many decades in academia, led in recent years by scholars such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Geo Maher, among others. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), Davis relies on historian Adam Jay Hirsch to highlight the similarities between the institution of slavery and the penitentiary for the imposition of social order. Further, both institutions, as argued by Davis, were taken for granted to be permanent. Eventually slavey ended. But will the existence of prisons in the United States also eventually come to an end? Ruth Wilson Gilmore offers an unvarnished insight regarding the intransigence of the presence of prisons and prisoners who comprise 'the structure of the state' and accounts for the 'legitimacy' of the state in *Abolition Geography* (2022, p. 16). Her insight is that the prison's legitimacy is linked to the state's claim of providing 'social "protection' (Ibid.). But what is not articulated by the state, according to Gilmore, is that such legitimacy is a function of the state's violent domination of selected groups of people who are defined by this process as being so deviant that they deserve mistreatment. Political theorist Geo Maher also

frames one of the challenges of abolition as involving a tussle with the power of the state and that policing, for example, symbolizes a ‘broader social order’ (Chua et al. 2022, p. 115). Even a Critical Race Theorist, Brittany Friedman, has aligned itself with much of the abolitionist literature by examining how prison systems in the United States follow a ‘prison order’, particularly as these institutions dealt with the outbreak of COVID-19. Friedman refers to that prison order as ‘death by design’ (2021, p. 659). She says that ‘prison order is arranged so that people categorized as prisoners die socially, psychically, and physically’ whether or not they are on death row (Ibid.). This is much like the argument connecting degrading aspects of the institution of slavery to the institution of the penitentiary. These ideas and more will be explored in my construction of the Gangsterfuturism concept. Grassroots support for Gangsterfuturism and other resources will be sought to make the idea a viable tool for the gangster class, which will be discussed below.

6.4. Future

This doctoral work could not take all the substantive detours that the author wanted to take for a couple of key reasons. First, I would have produced a two-thousand-page thesis, which would break university rules. But second and more importantly, I needed to limit my focus to best serve the insights I was afforded from nearly two-decades of immersive ethnographic practice with leaders of California’s Crips and Bloods, whether they resided in street-space or prison-space.

This final section of the last chapter of my doctoral work will provide a list of additional research areas to be conducted to deepen the understanding of different manifestations and impacts of racism in the United States, street gang culture, gangster identity formation, for instance, that have been raised throughout this thesis. The list will not be all inclusive because there remains so much that is yet to be learned about the black gangster class, its culture, and the new Gangsterfuturism path that I am suggesting black gangsters undertake. My hope is that this list of additional research projects derived from the historical complexity undergirding the culture of the condemned and

the United *Streets* of America will be expanded by others, as well as by me, in the years to come.

6.4.1. Future Research

I begin with some suggestions for further research regarding the Gangsterfuturism concept and a few other central concepts conceived during the writing of this thesis. Those central concepts to be examined are America's racialized values infrastructure; the uncooperative co-construction of identity, agency, freedom, and other factors; and an extension of Critical Race Theory titled Radical Race Theory that includes a new master-replacement-narrative strategy.

There are other topics that I considered investigating but made the decision to frame my research in such a way that did not allow me to include those topics, although I did believe they would reveal additional insights into the evolution of the black gangster class and its street culture. Those additional topics to be considered for future research are the role of black women in the world of black street gangsters; morality critiques about gangsters *and* American society; the connection of fear to the construction of white privilege; the spread of racism in the United States through the examination of *white* southern migration patterns.

Gangsterfuturism. Gangsterfuturism requires future research in several categories, particularly dealing with education, the politics of gangster organizational hierarchy, and the use of nontraditional allies. To illustrate, by initially conceiving Gangsterfuturism as a tool to educate the leadership of the black gangster class, this concept needs research for education conducted in the public pedagogical realm, rather than as lessons taught in a traditional classroom setting. Many gang leaders are in prison or are on the streets but have long since dropped out of school. How to best train O.G.s, then, is a research task that would be well worth the effort for the introduction of Gangsterfuturism. Also, prison education research will need to make a

distinction between training lower-level gangsters versus O.G.s. My experience with O.G.s is that they are not comfortable being treated in the same way as the membership who looks up to them. O.G.s tend to be solitary figures — and while they are often surrounded by admirers, they do not trust all who idolize them. But O.G.s are excellent originators of and instructors in street culture. Another educational strategy to be researched would be to determine what, if any, literature exists for training O.G.s as the lead trainers of other gang members in the imagining of futuristic visions for the United *Streets* of America. This is an arena that is likely to produce a great deal of original research.

As film, art, music, comics, and novels have been an inspiration for Afrofuturism, there are documentarians in urban areas who might be interested in working with the black gangster class to develop stories about a very different future than mass elimination through mass incarceration. The other storytellers of what happens in street-space, prison-space, and with the black gangster class are gangster and hip-hop rappers who could conceivably be enlisted to become the 'animated novelists' of this era — the nontraditional allies — to launch Gangsterfuturism with a different modality than Afrofuturism. The documentarians and rappers could be surveyed as part of a research project to determine if this is a fruitful strategy to initiate, that is, Gangsterfuturism focused on the O.G.s of the black gangster class. Of course, there is more to be deconstructed with this new concept of Gangsterfuturism, especially in the construction of a new future that is not influenced by the racialized biases of America's values infrastructure and the long-held practice of street-gangster identity formation using the uncooperative co-construction of identity model.

Other new concepts. The existence of a racialized values infrastructure in the United States is a concept that I conceived during the writing of this thesis. My argument is that this idea originated hundreds of years ago when the slave codes and legislation governing white indentured servitude of 1661

codified black inferiority and enshrined white superiority into the laws and customs of colonial America. Black inferiority and white superiority became, I contend, two of the most powerful and enduring American values that remain to this day. The potent racialized value of white supremacy serves as an underlying motivation for a great deal of behavior, policy, custom, and envisioning of the future, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter with Lothrop Stoddard, President Warren Harding, and whoever wrote the Willie Lynch Letter. My contention is that nearly all history or circumstance in the United States can be put through a racialized values infrastructure analysis for establishing — or not — the influence of racism. Racialized values infrastructure is an idea that itself needs to be further developed. I have used it in another application for a paper that I wrote for the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* about racialized public pedagogy — educational instruction outside of the traditional classroom setting — concerning more than one-hundred years of racist cartoons drawn in the United States that depicted black people with oversized lips, feet, and eyes, often eating large slices of watermelon (2023). My argument is that literature in the field of education needs to focus more on racialized public pedagogy as a potent, legitimate subfield of education.

Another concept that I conceived while writing this thesis was the uncooperative co-construction of identity, agency, freedom, and other critical markers of defining black-gangster humanity. This concept has been extensively examined in this thesis. Up until now, though, I have not framed the concept as a powerful analytic tool that emerged from the need to assess racialized intersectionality, perhaps even hyper-intersectionality, given what the uncooperative co-construction concept itself represents. Street gangsters reimagine themselves and their environments to cope with the external character projections imposed upon them by a racialized external society. That racialized external society has the power to define the black gangster class, in sync with the nation's racialized values infrastructure, but does not have the power or interest in controlling the black gangster class response to those racialized projections of identity and other markers. The uncooperative

co-construction concept, then, is a multi-faceted representation of intersectionality's typical components and outcomes of racism's white privilege, but it also allows for an examination of how that racism and white privilege provokes certain types of atypical responses from the black gangster class. The uncooperative co-construction of identity and other markers is a new concept that I am excited about, but it is a concept that should be critically assessed by other scholars. In the discussion below about Radical Race Theory, where an intersectionality application of this concept is raised but requires far more explication, a task for future analysis.

Radical Race Theory (RRT) as extended Critical Race Theory (CRT). This thesis relied on CRT as its theoretical framework, supported by Michel Foucault's critique of how to analyze a multi-layered history. CRT has five traditional tenets, which I have listed below. But as I pursued the research reflected in this doctoral work, I found myself having to construct new ways of meeting the goals of those five tenets. I also determined and argued that one of those tenets needed to be struck from CRT. As CRT is deconstructed below, a new tool for critically analyzing racism emerges. It is an extended version of CRT that I have titled Radical Race Theory or RRT.

The five CRT tenets are: 1) establish the existence of racism; 2) rely on narratives from people of color as much as possible to challenge white narratives often considered the normative perspective; 3) identify and deconstruct the presence of white privilege; 4) acknowledge intersectionality as a lived experience and more, as discussed below; 5) utilize interest convergence as a transactional tool that trades support for the political interests of white working-class Americans to secure support for the social justice claims of black Americans or other oppressed groups. This tenet is rejected in the reframing of CRT. The reason for rejecting this tenet has already been explained in Chapter Four but will be reviewed again in this last chapter.

The five RRT tenets are: 1) establish the existence of racism utilizing the racialized values infrastructure concept that underscores a national belief in black inferiority and white superiority; 2) rely on narratives from people of color as much as possible to challenge white narratives often considered the normative perspective; 3) identify and deconstruct the presence of white privilege utilizing social outcomes constructed by the emphasis on black inferiority and white superiority embedded in the racialized values infrastructure concept; 4) acknowledge intersectionality as a multifaceted and complex example of the lived experience utilizing the uncooperative co-construction of identity concept to deconstruct numerous points of social and political intersection; 5) reject utilization of the interest convergence concept and replace it with a new strategy — securing diverse buy-in for black social justice claims through provocative issue-framing to dominate the news and social media narrative. This RRT adaptation of CRT deserves a major paper to explain its elements thoroughly, which I intend to write.

I have changed the title of CRT to RRT to account for my inclusion of new and provocative concepts as tools for proving racism, which is the first tenet of CRT. Proving that racism exists, for example, requires more than just a declarative statement. Constitutive, though, to my interest in proving to a white dominant class that their society has been historically racist is itself a form of solipsistic racism that seems inescapable. Why must there be evidence provided to prevent the denial of racism? That, too, could be a topic for future research.

Finally, I have also adopted the RRT title because of my academically risky replacement for the fifth tenet of CRT. That replacement tenet involves black America employing news and social media tactics, along with provocative issue-framing, to construct a dominant narrative for social justice claims to convince the broader populace of their worthiness. This interest-convergence alternative tactic is *not* to concede something of value to middle-class white America to gain their support for something of value to black America. Throughout this thesis I have argued that interest

convergence is a compromised advocacy tactic that reinforces, with each use of the tactic, the original codifying of black inferiority and white superiority. White society does not calculate into its political demands what must be given to black America to gain their support for such demands. This, of course, is true because black support is often not believed by white society to be needed. White society's political parameters are not routinely uncooperatively co-constructed, as is the case with black America. Again, this is another topic that needs more critical scrutiny.

The role of women in the world of the black gangster class. I chose not to place much of a focus on the females associated with the men of the black gangster class examined in this study. I did so because I was intent on analyzing the evolution of the street killing culture in the United States, which is mostly carried out by the males in the community, not the females. I was also interested in studying how black male leadership roles provided the contours of the street culture and thus contributed to the social structure of the United *Streets* of America and prison-space. But this unsung role of black females in street-space — to which I have admittedly contributed by very little focus on them in this work — is a very important and complex role that should surely be a project of future research. To illustrate, aspects of that role for a black girlfriend of an O.G. can be both burdensome and dangerous. Earlier in this work I mentioned a longtime girlfriend of a gang leader in Los Angeles had to accept a state of friendlessness. Not because there were no black females who wanted to be her friend, but because she had to be extremely careful of the personal motivation of such would-be friends. She had to worry that if that girlfriend, even someone she had known for years, had been 'turned' — that is, being used by the police to set up her O.G. boyfriend for eventual arrest, or used to get close enough to assassinate her lover (leader of a particular street gang). Consequently, this girlfriend of an O.G. had to learn how to lead a lonely, largely isolated life.

I witnessed another girlfriend of a gangster-general whose relationship left her with a threatened and financially burdened existence even after her boyfriend's eventual murder. This gangster-boyfriend had overseen violent warfare against other black gangsters for many years. During this period many gangsters from his gang faction were sentenced to prison with very long sentences. In California correctional facilities, prisoners are allowed thirty-pound food packages from outside venders to be mailed to them every quarter, plus they have an opportunity to buy food and other items directly from the prison canteen every month, if a friend or family member has put money on their books. Each of those imprisoned gangsters, associated with her gangster boyfriend, expected food packages and canteen money while her boyfriend was alive and even after his death. Because in California there is no statute of limitations for the crime of murder, any one of those imprisoned gang members could have implicated her in the murders and she would have been arrested no matter how many years had passed since the murder conviction of the incarcerated gangster. The last time I saw her, about five years after her gangster-boyfriend's death, she was still juggling the demands of many prisoners to whom she needed to send food packages or canteen money to keep their silence.

The role of the female in the life and culture of the black gangster class carries some of the burdens and dangers of that culture but without the myth-making or legend-making opportunities for glory. These women live in a culturally-hybrid world where they must be tough and strong, while to some extent subservient to their O.G. gangster boyfriends, who are killers, after all. On the other hand, there is a dated measure of white mainstream duality in the way black male gangsters deal with black women. Given that the black gangster class and their girlfriends generally repudiate middle class values, they have still managed to adopt some measure of a 1950s patriarchal (near misogynistic, at times) white-societal approach to their relationships, which I find intriguing. There is much to be understood about black females and their interactions with the black gangster class that warrants future research.

A morality critique of gangsters and American society. My involvement with the black gangster class began with a morality critique: my own. When the co-founder of the Crips, Stanley Tookie Williams, asked me to help him get several gang-prevention books for children published, I had to decide if I forever wanted my name associated with a person who at that time was residing on San Quentin's Condemned Row. He had been convicted of killing four people during two robberies. My decision turned on if I could determine his sincerity about the writing that he intended to do to encourage youth not to follow in his footsteps. What I was able to determine, if not his sincerity, was the genuine response of young black boys to Williams' positive message. That finding caused me to help him achieve his book-publishing goal. I felt it was worth whatever reputational damage in mainstream society that I might incur. This is one aspect of a moral critique that confronted me in my early associations with the black gangster class.

I also discovered in my ethnographic practice with the black gangster class that an epistemic shift was required to understand and then properly research street gangsters and their killing culture. Morality, as middle-class America and academia would understand it, does not align with the gangster class. Yet, much of the academic literature has not caught up with the underpinnings of black street society, which embraces a self-definition that uses a replacement noun emphasizing 'survival' rather than exemplifying 'morality'. Black gangsters do not routinely see themselves and what they do, even when they kill, as evil. During my ethnographic experience with the Crips and Bloods, the gangsters shared a mantra of sorts, 'I do what I do to survive'. The black police I interviewed had another understanding of the black gang killing culture. Their response was to set them up for arrest on insignificant criminal charges while they were minors, so that when they reached the age of eighteen, the three-strikes-and-you-are-out law could quickly put young black men in prison for life. How would a morality critique work with those competing cultures — the street gangster's culture of the condemned and the police officer's culture of the capture to condemn black men to life in prison or death row as fast as possible? I argue that this is the

crucible for morality determinations and future research regarding the world of the black gangster class, that is, mainstream society's institutions and racialized values infrastructure must also be morally critiqued in its response to the black gangster class. Further, a morality critique needs to be engaged about the greater society's role in contributing to an uncooperative co-construction of identity and inventive agency employed by the black gangster class to reimagine an environment that elevates 'survival', using gang parlance, not morality as the greatest good.

In Chapter Four: Agency and Its Many 'Inventive' Forms, I talked about Frank Tannenbaum's classic 1946 work, *Slave and Citizen*, where he introduced an issue that he called the moral personality of the slave. To explain this concept, Tannenbaum also tied the black slave to the national polity's relationship to morality. He further argued that those nations that acknowledged the black slave as a 'moral person' (Ibid.) experienced a peaceful transition out of slavery. Where the opposite was true, violent rebellion could be expected to ensue, which was the case in what became the United States. But there is an interesting parallel to be studied between the history of slavery's end days (and how morality and law were framed by both sides during that process) and today's black gangster class with its relationship to the greater society through its law enforcement representatives. During slavery the debate between natural law and natural rights became the critical intersection of what constituted morality. Natural law was based on the laws of nature, which is what God intended for man and included freedom. Both black and white people agreed with that definition of natural law. But then divergent views of morality emerged in the framing of natural rights versus natural laws. Black people believed that natural rights were an outgrowth of natural laws. With the black construction of natural laws, black people were due the same rights to freedom as were white people. From the white perspective, natural law supported a concept of natural order and white people determined black slaves were at the bottom of that order and thus were not entitled to the same rights as white people. On the other hand, since black people claimed the right to be free as accorded

under the rules of natural law, black people determined a different place for themselves in society and, to that end, reimagined slave rebellions and violent acts to gain freedom as ‘righteous acts’ in support of natural rights (Barnes 2017, p. 22). Black people of that era also deemed any bad acts — such as killing white people to break free of enslavement — could only be judged by God’s law, not man’s law (Ibid.). This is reminiscent of today’s street gangster’s law of survival versus society’s law of the land.

While some may question or object to my comparison of freedom fighters during slavey to members of the black gangster class following the dictates of the culture of the condemned, I do not see it as a clear-cut overreach. The slave rebels of the past were considered by the white slave-owning mainstream, outlaws and dangerous criminals. In other words, the ‘thugs’ of their time. Further, as mentioned before in this work, I have argued that black street gangsters, for many reasons already examined in this thesis, are the last slaves standing in the United States.

At any rate, here I am arguing that gangster morality and societal morality need further research, but as a tandem undertaking. Additionally, my claim that black street gangsters are the last slaves standing should also be tested by other scholars.

The significance of white southern migration on American racism. A major problem plaguing black Americans and America itself is the enduring presence of what I have put forth as a racialized values infrastructure, which has consecrated black inferiority and white superiority into the culture, customs, and institutions of the United States. In trying to figure out its spread across the country, I was given a glimpse into what might have happened when researching how the movement of anti-blackness made its way to the non-slave state of California. There was a brief mention in some of the literature that I reviewed about the influx of white southerners to California. They brought with them the racist sentiment associated with the codified slave codes and indentured servant laws under which they lived in

the southern states of the nation. Immediately, I thought that more census data research needed to be undertaken to see if a strong case could be made for that theory and that I would make such a task a recommended mention in my list of future research.

While I was writing this thesis, a study was released that examined the very issue I had considered and came to the same conclusion: southern white migration patterns to northern non-slave states changed the political temperature of those states to a more conservative and less-embracing-of-black-people environment. This study was published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in 2021 and then revised in 2023. But it covered the twentieth century. I am suggesting that this southern white migration phenomenon started much earlier than that — hundreds of years earlier — but had the same effect, that is, racializing the culture of California and other non-slave states. I have engaged in some preliminary research of census data and believe that what was done by the Bureau of Economic Research for the twentieth century can be undertaken for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I am recommending that work as a future research task that I believe will support the origin story of America's racialized values infrastructure.

The mirage of white privilege. The concept of white privilege is at the core of what has confounded me throughout most of my desk-top research for this doctoral project. My focus, as stated at different times in this work, has been to situate racism in the evolution of the culture of the condemned, which serves as the social structure for the United *Streets* of America and thus guides the behavior of the black gangster class. But what has confounded me has been the extraordinary level of cruelty that has seemingly been so easily visited upon the bodies and lives of black people from slavery up to the present day. I have learned about the practice white slave traders used of starving black women to death in West African dungeons the who fought off white rapists. The idea was to use that punishment to scare other black

women into the acceptance of being raped. I found a study of craniodental body parts excavated from a graveyard in Barbados exclusively for the enslaved that revealed how slaves had experienced 'periodic near-starvation' (Corruccini et al. 1982: 443). Because of such brutal treatment the average life span for a slave in Barbados was only twenty years. Comparable research posted online by the University of Houston for the American colonies was similar: the black slave lifespan was twenty to twenty-two years with a fifty percent infant mortality rate for babies in their first year of life caused primarily by severe malnutrition. And there is so much more to report about the cruelty and withholding of rights that have been imposed by members of white America against black America during slavery, Reconstruction, and now. I have been confounded by this behavior and have wanted to understand why?

In terms of how this happened, a religious scholar, Robert P. Jones, released a very controversial 2023 book, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy*, which explores five hundred years of the Christian church's rationale for slavery and the inferior status of black people. This, Jones claims, set the stage for white supremacy and certainly made the choice to create slave codes, which codified black inferiority in colonial America, that much easier to do without questioning the morality of such a choice. Philosopher Charles Mills has constructed a concept that he calls strategic epistemic ignorance regarding race, which he explains as the willingness to purposefully *not* see the wrong of what you are doing. I call this strategy a form of racialized denial. (This is another aspect of morality that could be explored with respect to mainstream society and racism, as discussed above.) According to Mills:

> On matters related to race. . .[there exists] an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunction (which are psychologically and socially functional) producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made (Mills 1997, p. 18).

White supremacy, then, as sanctioned by the church, and reinforced in the real-world by slave codes and other laws that defined black inferiority, as well as white superiority, has been foundational for bolstering white privilege and the denial of any harm that it can cause. My contention is that 'the why' of white privilege can be found in 'the how' it came to be. Here I suggest that the cruelty against black people is a consequence of not only the desire to control black people for hundreds of years, but also to hide the fear white people, especially white men, have held toward black men for centuries. That would include the fear of black men violently rebelling against enslavement, the fear of the physical strength of black men, and the fear of black male sexuality which translated into white women preferring black men over white men.

I am very interested in conceptualizing white privilege and the cruelty it has spawned to explore the idea of its use as a shield to hide a deeply rooted fear of black America and black men deemed powerful outlaws by mainstream society.

This doctoral project has sought to achieve several ambitious goals.

First, my four-hundred-year historical analysis intended to provide undeniable evidence of how racism has played a key role in the uncooperative co-construction by the black gangster class of a street-killing culture in the United *Streets* of America. I labeled that gangster construction the culture of the condemned. I took the time to describe some of the nuances of this long and troubled history of black men in America to counter any tendency of a reader to fall into the trap of what philosopher Charles Mills calls strategic epistemic ignorance about race or what I identify as racialized denial. I considered it critical to link racism in America to some of its unintended consequences in relation to black street gangsters. These are unintended consequences that are largely unknown, for the most part, to mainstream society, such as the gangster construction of a parallel society,

alongside but distinct from the mainstream, with its own laws or codes of the street caused by generations of racialized isolation and containment.

Another goal was to make convincing arguments for why harsh prison punishments and the ultimate criminal sentence — the death penalty — are often viewed as desired outcomes for black street gangsters. Growing up in the crosshairs of a mass incarceration policy targeting black men in America made ending up in prison an inevitable part of their existence. To cope with that inevitability, the black gangster class reimagined the carceral environment, making it a gladiator school, a dangerous place where gangsters learned how to become a man. This led to the reimagination of a death penalty sentence as a way of becoming even more legendary, that of becoming a superman.

With this work, I also will engage in social justice advocacy by launching a news media campaign to attract the attention of policymakers and the public to alert them to the ineffectiveness of the death penalty and thus to promote that it be abolished. I make that claim given what I have learned about the culture of the black gangster class and how black gangsters have reimagined the death penalty as a reputation enhancer, such that receiving a sentence of capital punishment incentivizes murder, rather than deters murder. Indeed, the death penalty has become a symbol of heroism in the United *Streets* of America.

For unexpected reasons, this doctoral work has required far more courage than I believed beforehand.

My life trajectory has been changed by nearly two decades of ethnographic practice in street-space and prison-space with the Crips and Bloods of California, and by the research I have conducted to learn more about the relentless history of racism in the United States. I traveled to Accra, Ghana during my time at the University of Edinburgh and literally stepped inside of one of the small dungeon cells where kidnapped African women were sent to starve to death if they refused to be raped by white slave

traders. These were slave traders who, when done with the raping, planned to ship these women to the American colonies and elsewhere. If the women became pregnant, they were allowed to stay in Ghana and raise the child up to the age of ten. But at ten years old the child would be removed from the custody of his or her mother and placed in a dungeon cell, as a black slave, to await being shipped to the American colonies or elsewhere. In other words, the cycle repeated itself. As an African American woman, my research aroused the pain of my ancestors' treatment. I had to work hard to prioritize my scholarship over my blackness, which was a challenging task. Yet, as another goal of this doctoral project, only just now articulated, I hope that I succeeded.

Finally, my epistemic lens has shifted from the many years involved in ethnographic work with the black gangster class, and from the knowledge unveiled by research about what I initially viewed as a distant history, which I soon came to view as a personal history. These were my ancestors. I can no longer forget them. The embodiment of that epistemic shift has required courage on my part.

When this project began, the leaders of the Crips and Bloods nicknamed me 'Bougie Barbara', slang for 'Bourgeois Barbara'. I was and still am middle class and have retained plenty of those values. However, this journey has helped me to see what I did not know and to try to understand what I have subsequently learned. These days, I call myself a renegade scholar with the gumption to apply my social justice ethics to the scholarship that I produce and to the scholarship of others that I contest and critique. After reading this work, I hope that you know more about what you thought you already knew and will recognize a shift in your own epistemic lens toward a Gangsterfuturism posture of reimagining a better, more equitable world.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Stanley Tookie Williams (circa 1962). From the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Fig. 2. Stanley Tookie Williams (2004). From the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Fig. 3. Stanley Tookie Williams (circa 1980s). From the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Fig. 4. Stanley Tookie Williams and others (early 1970s). From Stanley Tookie Williams IV.

Fig. 5. Stanley Tookie Williams (1971). From the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Fig. 6. Stanley Tookie Williams (mid-1970s). From the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams.

Fig. 7. Cover illustration for song, *All Coons Alike to Me* (1896). From Brown University Online Library. https://library.brown.edu/cds/sheetmusic/afam/slideshow.html.

Fig. 8. Cover illustration of Billy Van for minstrel show in 1900. From National Museum of African History & Culture. https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/blackface-birth-american-stereotype

Fig. 9. Cover illustration for song, *Hannah* (1903). From Temple University Digital Collection. https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p15037coll1/id/7318/

Fig. 10. Cover illustration for song, *May Irwin's Bully Song* (1895). From the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2014.275.19

Fig. 11. Cover illustration for song, *De Coon Dat Had de Razor* (1800-1922). From Library of Congress Historic Sheet Music Collection. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100007421/

Fig. 12. Illustration for trade card for the Alden Fruit Vinegar Company, circa late 1800s. https://www.google.com/search?q=alden+fruit+vinegar+trade+card+from+william+McLoughlin+Collection

Fig. 13. Illustration for trade card for St. Louis Beef Canning Company, circa 1870-1900. https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:fq977w05r

Fig. 14. Picture of discriminatory sign circa 1877-1964. From Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. https://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/origins.htm

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Appendix A: Ethnographic Research — Summary of Sources

- Five-hundred-plus audio and video tapes of black gangsters, their girlfriends, rival gang members, family members of those killed by street gangsters, police officers, prison officials; gangster rappers, former Black Panther members, and black youth ‘club’ members of South-Central Los Angeles from the 1950s and 1960s.
- Thousands of pages of notes—handwritten and typed—derived from face-to-face interviews with all the above people, including notes written in my car in the parking lots of prisons after thousands of visits with incarcerated gangsters where tape recorders and pens were not permitted; sixty pounds of these notes I brought with me to Edinburgh from California and back again after the Covid-19 crisis.
- Six nonfiction unpublished book manuscripts about the street-gang lifestyle and gangster-class mentality, including the role played by female gang members, written by Stanley Tookie Williams III, Crips co-founder, which I have permission to use as Executor of the Estate of Stanley Tookie Williams; his son, Stanley Tookie Williams IV; a co-researcher for this project, Steve Champion.
- Hundreds of photographs of Stanley Tookie Williams, his friends and family, from when he was four years old to several days before his execution at fifty-three, which I also have permission to use.
- Approximately one-hundred-and-fifty boxes of documents of gang intelligence—such as the Bloods Gang Oath—from prison officials, which they collected over the years from prisoner cells and all manner of documents from gangsters themselves who have shared with me what they have written, including, for example, the original draft peace treaty created during the Crips-Bloods gang truce in 1992.