The Modern Athlete, Hip-Hop, and Popular Perceptions of Black Masculinity

By Thabiti Lewis

"We come from a time when rap used to agitate the mainstream, now it represents the mainstream"
Ice T

[B]lack masculinity [is] defined mainly by an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing…developed largely as a result of the commodification of hip-hop culture, and the ubiquity of rap music and the 'videomercials' that sell it. More specifically, it is the result of the popularity of the urban 'gangsta'..."
 -- Matthew Henry

The bad man motif figures prominently in Black American folk culture as a symbol of resistance to racism and white oppression. From Stagolee to Shine this subversive figure has been part of the cultural rituals and symbols of Black American of resistance. At the turn of 20th century these bad men were known to play blues or jazz music and wear zoot suits. Novelist Ralph Ellison aptly depicted such a figure in his Harlem character Rinehart in his famous novel *Invisible Man*. Perhaps the most notorious bad men in athletics were the black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and the Negro League baseball phenomena, Satchel Paige who insisted on playing by their own rules. In the modern world the dark, abiding, "BAAD" bad blues/jazz presence of Johnson and Paige has been supplanted by the likes of the 1990s Dennis Rodman and Latrell Sprewell, and Terrell Owens, Latrell Sprewell, Allen Iverson, Randy Moss, of this century. Perhaps the "baddest" man of them all is Barry Bonds, currently facing an indictment for alleged perjury.

Indeed, the image is re-conjured in the board rooms of music executives and played out in professional sports, spawning new and improved bad man in the world of music and sports. Unfortunately the cool guise or cool posing central to hip-hop's core is seized upon and shaped by media, professional sports leagues, and leading sports apparel companies to construct the negative stereotype of bad black men. Sports and other popular media, as well as the marketing companies that feed them, attribute these qualities to narcissism, questionable values, poor sportsmanship, as well as a propensity for crime and violence. This is how 21st century Black men masculinity struts across television screens and popular culture. The basic ideological infrastructure continues to position non-whites via art, literature, cinema, music, and sport culture.
In this essay I aim to examine from a multilayered perspective popular culture's depiction of and gravitation to blackness via "BAAD" black men in popular culture. I also seek to critique and scrutinize the interrelationship between scholarship, media and institutions of sport and music (Hip- Hop) in the popular sphere that construct these horrific images of black men. And Black males in popular culture who willingly perform these images do

not escape an equally harsh critique. Ignored in rap songs demanding respect, spouting nihilism, anger and other expressions and actions of modern youth is the truth regarding the detrimental forces of urbanization in post-civil rights American that promised so much, yet failed to deliver.

The negative image in popular music and sport has a profound influence upon modern athletes' self-perceptions and racisms cruel persistence in our society. The performance of realness is reshaped into a heavy trafficking of and literal sale of hard, dark hued bodies that are not cerebral. The bad man motif is exploited and sold, without any explanation or recognition of either the history of resistance to oppression that is so central to its genesis, or the reality of the Ku Klux Klan, Timothy McVeigh, and countless other bad white men who bomb, kill, or insight malicious expressions of racism.

Unfortunately what we do see in popular culture is the next phase of 1980s backlash politics aimed at demonizing Black males (single Black mothers too) -- and their deficiencies. What is obscured is a history of American violence and a fascination with gangsta. Nor is much attention paid to the role of an increasingly violent American culture, rife with gangsters, guns, drugs, and social and economic policies that produced many of the ills the bad men get credit for creating. In popular sports and entertainment Black men often emerge as inherently visceral, irreverent, bad people without a cause. The popularization of hip-hop via a gangsta emphasis on violence, explicit sex, and drug use have blurred the unknowing eye from seeing hop-hip as the formidable force of peace and self expression that is its genesis.

What is also obscured in popular representations of hip-hop and the athletes that exude its values is a clear sense of its origins as a maligned form of urban cultural expression. its status as an illegal culture struggling over public space and access to commodified materials is bastardized to sell sodas, sneakers, and tickets. Avoided is how it fits into a legacy of the descendants of the formerly enslaved that migrated to the North and had to deal with control of Euro Americans via segregation, racism, discrimination, dislocation, displacement and assigned place in society.

Everyone knows about rapping, but what is known about hip-hop's ideology of perpetual creativity, innovation, inspired art that is nurtured via being lived and performed daily, or the attitude of doing what feels natural? How much attention is paid to core concepts and aesthetics like layering, ruptures in lyrical, musical, visual art and dance that is predicated upon circularity and rhythmic motion, space and social dislocation? (cf. Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*). Thanks to the gangsta bad niggzas motif, hip-hop has emerged as the top choice among teen music consumers. It is estimated that rap music generated roughly $3 billion in sales. But at whose or what expense has it raised to such heights of popularity? While it is quite clear who controls the music and image making, it's impossible to avoid critiquing the complicity among artists and athletes that allow these images to breath. The hard guise associated with bad men and expressed in hip hop culture is appropriated by popular culture, what is often lost is that hip hop is an expression of young peoples' despair and resistance. The hyper-masculine representations in hip-hop narratives and

athletes' playing performances and personas are also a direct response to a repressive culture; a response to, or attempted compensation for a perceived loss of power, potency, or manhood in the wake of the real perceived power that controls their worlds. But this is rarely articulated.

Many modern athletes, whom I call Ballers of New School (BNS), engage hip-hop's ethos of doing what feels natural in how they play, dress, talk, and think. Some understand such core elements better than others, but the symbols of resistance and rebellion find voice in rappers' lyrics, cool posing, dress, break-dancing, graffiti, and dejaying. However, the only performance that consistently gains attention is that which can be translated into exaggerated symbols of black male hyper-masculine and violent performance as reality. In sports culture it is manifested in celebrations on fields of play, improvised style of play (that breaks set plays), style of dress both on and off fields of play, and sometimes manifest itself in the literal choking of a coach who verbally berates them or a fan who douses them with water. All acts are about being true to the natural self and demanding respect. But instead of contextualizing BNS as post-Jackie Robinson "hold back and chill for the good of your people," what is performed in the popular sphere is a reification of the bad man[1] that has spiraled far out of bounds.

White Masculinity Needs "Bad" Black Men

I see depictions of black men as bad men as essentially performances that reinforce notions of White supremacy and masculinity. In the wake of the disappearance of the White majority within American professional sports, a sign of the physical defeat of the white male body in sports culture, American definitions of White masculinity are resurrected using these constructions of black men. I view these images as falling within the history of the late18th and mid-20th century Europe and American celebration of humanity and culture, ideas and values that ascribed to their own national culture distinct from the Orient and Africa.

Although black males participate in and dominate the most visible or high profile sport they struggle for masculine existence in a world that has historically viewed black males as the female of races. What we see in the depiction of modern black male athletes and entertainers is similar to the alleged European universalism that positions other literatures and societies as inferior or transcended value (Said 44). Cultural critic Edward Said informs us in his monumental work, *Culture and Imperialism,* that culture and cultural perceptions are understated, ignored, yet essential components of sustaining any empire. The popular music and sports perceptions of black manhood enhance notions of imperial White masculinity. A brief examination of the recent NBA dress code presents a similar conflict and example of sustaining empire. Because the current crop of young stars are part of a generation that holds its own standard of what looks good (not suits and ties), what feels good, what plays good on the field and what doesn't, NBA commissioner David Stern was forced to institute a dress code. Media, coaches and fans marveled at

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[1] My forthcoming book *Ballers of the New School: Essays on Racism and Sport in America* examines this and other issues

how well dressed say, Michael Jordan was, and then they looked at Iverson in his sweats, retro hats, jewels and other accessories, and regarded him as inappropriately dressed and detrimental to the image of the league, because he was projecting a gangsta image is a society that certainly has nothing to do with gangsters. No one cared that Iverson's gear (clothing and accessories) costs as much as, sometimes more than Jordan's suit. In fact, for the job he performs, sports gear is actually quite appropriate attire.

I see the cultural language of history, literature, music, sports, and ethnography as equally connected to the official ideology of empire. Those who control and project images of "good" and "bad" style, and is capable of asserting their moral codes and aesthetics as the only aesthetic of merit have an advantage in making villains. Black men in loose jeans, caps, and big jewelry are associated with bad gangsta men, while all "others" or those who wear suits and ties are deemed good. The message: the only valid moral and empirical epistemology and procedures are those in the image of or articulated by Whites. And who decided that anyway? Basically culture conceived in this way helps maintain the empire via what philosopher Charles Mills terms the Racial Contract, which Mills says, "requires its own peculiar moral and empirical epistemology, its nouns and procedures for determining what counts as moral and factual knowledge of the world" (17).

It is imperative to consider the role of the popularization of bad Black men in the erection of white masculinity in a society that relies so much on sports for manhood. What do these images do for the imagination and behavior of those who consume and perpetuate it, as well as those who protect cultural borders? What does the perpetuation of these images and limiting standards of normalization reveal about the nature of American cultural "whiteness"? It certainly speaks volumes about the state of race in America. Although an African presence is mostly absent from discussions of how the American body politics were shaped as well as most other aspects of its life and culture, it has historically manifested as what the writer Toni Morrison has termed a "carefully invented, Africanist presence." This presence has been imaginatively used to connote blackness in negative if not confusing ways. Through the simple expedient of dark, abiding, demonized "BAAD" men in sports and rap music, a dark, abiding Black presence has been reified in the popular culture. The success of hip hop in popular culture relies on reinforcing the stereotypical images of "BAAD" men, which runs counter to hip-hop's complex and varied history as modern "urban folk art" of resistance and free expression in confined and oppressive urban space. These stereotypes reveal the modern American psyche that needs negative depictions of black men. Actually bad men and bad boys in athletics are nothing new but as hip-hop has emerged as one of the most influential cultural influences of our time, it has become scattering images of athletes as negative and confusing bad men that gets performed over and over again.

To keep it real, the question that must be answered is: 'What makes the white moral epistemology the empirical norm for the world?' These same mythologies invented Orients, Africas, and Americas. According to Charles Mills it was achieved using:

correspondingly fabricated population…inhabited by people who never
were—Calibans and Tontos, Man Fridays and Sambos—but who attain a
virtual reality through their existence in travelers' tales, folk myths,
popular and highbrow fiction, colonial reports, scholarly theory,
Hollywood cinema, living in the white imagination and determinedly
imposed on their alarmed real-life counterparts. (Racial Contract 18-19)

In the modern world of television, cable and Internet, images of bad men work for
notions of moral, superior White masculinity. For Black men in popular culture,
especially sports the white imagination spins the simple image of the Calibans, Tontos
and Sambos that are violent, savage, philistines. Indeed modern media and the sports
industry work hard to keep these negative, inferior images alive by placing White males
at the forefront, in leadership roles such as coach or general managers of the "natives."
So the division we see in the world—men against "natives"—is perhaps more
pronounced in sports, which is a direct reflection of American culture. The influence and
growing popularity of hip-hop styles and Black culture is perceived as a direct challenge
to Whiteness; if it prospers White identity will be lost. Although the racial strife was
more overt in five decades ago when pioneers were making strides in baseball, basketball
and football it continues to rear its ugly head. This is Black men in modern sports culture
are situated as gansta hip hop villains—they are "BAAD" Men.

The sad irony is that many companies sell sodas, candy, and everything they can with
hip-hop badness, void the proper cultural context, acknowledgement, history or embrace.
The NBA is a prime example of this disrespectful relationship. The NBA bans hip-hop
inspired clothing and asserts a dress code, meanwhile uses hip hop to boost its popularity
among young fans by playing rap music at games and promoting street-inspired fashion
such as throwback jerseys. In the absence of Michael Jordan's "classic elegance,"
America is thriving with a hipper, edgier persona that sports tattoos, baggy shorts, a
thumping beat and a defiant attitude. But in truth the image is simply a ghetto-centric
futility that confirms white stereotypes of African Americans restyled in the form of
sexually potent, heavily armed, gangsta outlaw. What this does for the white imagination
is to resituate whiteness as superior in the American cultural landscape, while confirming
blackness as violent and negative.

Although in the modern world there is often resistance to discourses on race, or its
constructions, race dominates American sport culture. Contemporary representations of
Black masculinity suggest as much. Race is considered a taboo subject to be foreclosed
or plagued by silence and evasion. As Toni Morrison ingeniously points out in *Playing in
the Dark* often "ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal
gesture," to which silence allows "the black body a shadowless participation in the
dominant cultural body" (9-10). We are deluded if we think that the images projected in
the popular spheres of music and a Hip Hop influenced sports culture in a racialized
society are merely coincidental. We have to intelligently scrutinize how these Black
bodies are *allowed* to participate in the "dominant cultural body" when Black male
bodies dominate physical games that are representative of masculinity. The political and
social meanings inscribe on Black male bodies in popular culture preserve notions of

cultured, mannered, white morality that values sportsmanship and cooperative individualism. All things Black male bodies can only hope to achieve.

When I think about this generation of athletes and entertainers I am reminded of Robin D.G. Kelley's discussion of the zoot suits, or what James Baldwin called the sharpies of the 1930s and 1940s, who were associated with jazz and resistance to the war. They talked jive, revealed a modern black masculinity that attempted to construct itself on its own grounds. Ralph Ellison focused on them in his novel *Invisible Man* as the unmarked African American potential unfettered by passive Christian resistance or narrow bourgeois. In the contemporary world Black bad men are marked-up in cartoonish proportions.

In American society white masculinity has historically been predicated upon attacking and exploiting men of color. Sadly, for this generation the expressive Black youth culture represented in hip-hop has (as Ice T suggested) devolved from "agitating" the mainstream to "representing the mainstream" imagination of a mythical bad man. However, there is a legacy of American struggle for control of the spiritual self in urban spaces from spirituals and work song to gospel, blues and jazz. Always these expressions have represented avenues to maintaining control of self -identity and self-worth in urban America. The struggles of young African Americans, particularly males, are complicated in the face of failed post-civil rights promise of equality and progress.

There is hardly enough outrage that corporations market Black men in sports as selfish individuals replete with edginess, violent toughness that can also perform high flying dunks. Oddly what is sells best (excessive celebrations, fights, and obscene gestures to unruly fans) is used then critiqued. This is why Dennis Rodman was so popular. His outrageous antics earned him millions because media embraced the stereotype of bad man that so many have come to find comfort in. And Rodman is not the first to understand how to play racial stereotypes all the way to the bank. Sports culture takes these gross exaggerations and scores racial stereotype after stereotype of angry, yelling, belligerent, men gushing with uncontrolled rage, lust for white women, and anarchy. The media depictions and public performances of bad Black men (like T.O. who exercised in his driveway for members of the media in Philadelphia) is used to confirm cultural inferiority to white males who rule, run, direct, prod, inspect and determine which black male bodies are suitable for public performance.

Understanding The Bad Man

Historically bad men represented subversive resistance rooted in African American folk songs, stories and legends of tricksters; bad men have always been capable of subverting hierarchical structures via signifying, wit, persuasion, brawn, sexuality or violence. The problem is that this tradition in "popular" spheres such as entertainment and sports is packaged and represented in a grossly negative example of the bad man, black men, and black culture. African-influenced spoken word traditions and music important to the creation of African American music (spirituals, gospel, blues, and jazz). And all forms were used by Black Americans to assert some facet of control over their urban space.

Gangsta is clear example of how to distort folkloric transmissions of bad men. One need only glance at its reified stereotypical, exaggerated characterizations of Black men as "BAAD" Men who are innately bad for the sake of being bad. Rather than emphasize the historical impetus of bad men (like Stagolee, Shine, and Railroad Bill) of whose myths arose during antebellum America as a figure fighting back against oppressors, disdainful of social conventions, unafraid of standing up to white authority, violating taboos, and other acts of courage or badness in the face of racial oppression that made him/her a folk hero, we instead have gangsta and other distortions absent focus on America's shortcomings, neo-slavery, and subversive to assert some facet of control in post-civil rights America.

Modern "bad men" in sports embody commercialized images of Black males who are narcissistic, violent, visceral, and replete with questionable values. In fact, the Black male sports body is constantly exploited and under the gaze of white men who select the hardest ones for performance in the public sphere to be consumed by a predominately white viewing public.

The irony is that young white males gravitate to these images, sometimes mimicking them, while white women and men desire these objects of their gauze. The white males in control (apparel companies, media, owners and league officials) want to profit from the hip-hop constructed black masculinity in American sports culture without embracing the cultural roots of resistance. For example, Allen Iverson may be among the most popular athletes in the NBA, as well as Randy Moss in the NFL but none have embraced them for Madison Avenue endorsements and neither of them care. The leagues that sell their jersey in the top two or three will enjoy the profit but still ignore making them the face of the league because they fail to embrace a mainstream attitude.

What is often lost on many consumers or casual observers is that the hard guise associated with Hip Hop and Ballers of the New School is a response to what Matthew Henry, in his essay "He is a 'Bad Mother*$%@!#," explains as a "method of compensating for a perceived loss of power, potency, or manhood" in the wake of the real power of White supremacy that controls popular and sports cultures but manifests itself in the public imagination as something quite crude and altogether different from its roots of resistance. Now this is quite complex and confusing for many, if not delicate because of the wealth associated with sports and entertainment.

The truth is that Black masculinity has historically been framed in notions of Brute Negro, Stud, noble savage, Uncle Tom and Bad Nigger. In the modern world, sports culture and music frame Black masculinity as Hustler, Militant/Bad Nigger, Super Jock, or Womanizer, lazy, flashy, greedy, violent, and dumb. Consistently ignored is how the bad man has always confronted tyranny, racism, oppression, using his lawlessness and violence to claim victory. The construction of contemporary Black athletes and entertainers as bad men is a delicate situation. Many of them are unaware that the bad man motif is a response to oppression, as well as the subtly guile, passive aggressive confrontation victories of the trickster. This hip-hop driven generation seizes upon the bad man motif as a response to the failed promises of the civil rights movement, but the

expression plays into the hands of racists images. Meanwhile, young Blacks and whites consuming these images without protest or question, but as fact, retard the efforts of previous generations.

Indeed, the depictions of modern athletes in popular culture as hyper-masculine "BAAD" men whose cock-sure sway, "realness," brashness, insistence upon reinventing themselves via the games they play and self-presentation earns them less than friendly public receptions is calculated. What is interesting is as Robyn Wiegman points out in her essay, "Feminism, 'The Boyz' and Other Matters Regarding the Male," hip hop's hyper-masculine façade owes a debt to the Black Power Movement which defined the politics of race within the metaphors of phallic power.

Hip-hop's coolness, social competence, pride, dignity, self-esteem and respect, has been turned into belligerence, violence and a negative badness. However, modern athletes are really just a reflection of the hyper-masculine identities endemic of an American culture. Americans are wired with tough, aggressive, strong, dominating, violent, and ultra-competitive behavior and values, but popular culture flips this script, making it the sole province of Black men, who corrupt America.

The rules of what philosopher Charles Mills terms the racial contract works overtime to radiate a hyper-masculinity that is the antithesis of a bad man history that has always sought to display attitude, and express power and self-determination (shot-calling) in the wake of oppressive white supremacy. Many athletes carry onto fields of play an idealized model of masculinity---exaggerated hardness, icy cool, physical strength, the need for respect and power. Some of it is real and some of it is performance. But what is *real* is an unwillingness to appease the public, media, teams, coaches, or fans on the terms met by a previous generation. Sports leagues like the NBA grin and happily bear the hip-hop generation bred modern athletes, as long as they can depict them as immoral philistines. American culture's insistence upon embracing, and Black male distortions of the bad man motif, presents challenges that are nearly as distorted as the film *Birth of a Nation* (released by D.W. Griffith in 1915) that popularized negative stereotypes of Black men as hyper-sexed and violent.

Even when *real* Black masculinity rears its head in sports culture it is cut off. A clear example of this is what happened to Abdul Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson) who refused to stand during the star spangled banner as vile? Abdul Rauf was a star player on the Denver Nuggets and thriving in the NBA until his *manly act* of refusing to stand for a flag he explained as a symbol of tyranny and oppression. Afterwards he was booed Denver fans and systematically driven from the NBA. The real question that must be asked is who are the *real* bad men? Could it be the men whose legal, social system and laws erect borderlands that function as both literal spaces and as contact zones between ideas, spaces of ideological supremacy that close possibilities of change? Could it be a society filled with legal borders that force us to consider borders of identity created by the legal regulation of bodies, fueled by the construction of race? Unfortunately modern athletes and hip hop have become easy targets for criminalization.

The prevailing folk cultural "misrepresentation" exaggerates and grossly reifies stereotypes of Black males as "BAAD" violent men threatening America. Therefore we should make no mistake that race is real in the world of sport, and littered with formal and informal agreements or meta-agreements between one subset of humans and another, giving one the class of full person and the nonwhite a different and inferior moral status so that they can have a subordinate civil standing in white-ruled polities. Although as Charles Mills points out in his book, *The Racial Contract*, all whites are beneficiaries of the Contract not all whites are signatories. It is our duty to examine constructions of racial borders that have drawn dividing lines between Americans and erase them. The general purpose of this contract is always differential privileging of whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them (11 Mills). This is what real Bad men stand and speak out against.

I will end with another reference to literary and cultural critic Edward Said who reminds us in *Representations of the Intellectual* that the representation itself is a means of essentially "keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior" (44). In a world where athletes and hip-hop culture has gained far too much visibility, the purveyors of the culture spin bad Black men who are mean-spirited, violent troublemakers, just naturally angry and antagonistic against a culture that has given them the opportunity to perform and entertain for millions of dollars in contemporary America. These bad, violent, lazy, ungrateful Black bodies litter the mainstream cultural landscape and fields of play. Indeed, many aspects of sports culture seamlessly carries out the racial contract mission of good and bad or justice and injustice that privilege whiteness and defend all associated with it. We must blow the whistle foul on such modern reifications. A penalty must be assessed for all who contribute to conjuring such inappropriate perceptions of "Bad" Black men.

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