

Colonized Masculinities and Femicide in the United States: How Conditions of Coloniality Socialize Femicidal Men

Since the turn of the century, the concept of femicide¹—the killing of women because they are women—has achieved remarkable salience in international and regional arenas, as well as in a few national contexts. Indeed, the Organisation of American States² as well as over sixteen Latin American countries have pioneering legislative frameworks that specifically criminalize “femicide/femicide.”³ The United Nations has also launched a Femicide Watch platform that offers official data, best practices, data collection efforts, investigations, legislation, and prevention measures for policy- and decision-makers.⁴ The propagation of the concept in these arenas demonstrates the successful politicization of the killing of women and calls into question gendered power relations in patriarchal societies.

Nevertheless, the term has largely eluded political, academic, and public consciousness in the United States. Its usage remains sequestered to a small faction of the radical feminist circle that has been sidelined since the sex wars of the 1970s.⁵ This discursive gap is particularly

¹ There exists a semantic debate among feminist scholars regarding the use of the term femicide over femicide, which is briefly addressed in this paper. However, the precise elements of this debate are complex and beyond the scope of the paper. The terms are often used interchangeably and generally denote the killing of women because they are women. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term femicide unless quoting or discussing sources that use the term femicide.

² Organization of American States Inter-American Commission of Women, “Declaration on Femicide,” adopted at the Fourth Meeting of the Committee of Experts (CEVI), held on August 15, 2008, <http://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/docs/DeclaracionFemicidio-EN.pdf>.

³ United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Femicide or femicide as a specific type of crime in national legislations in Latin America: an on-going process,” Notes for Equality No. 17, July 2015, 1, https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/noteforequality_17_0.pdf.

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Femicide Watch platform prototype launched at 2017 UN Crime Commission,” UNODC Everywhere, May 24, 2017, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2017/May/femicide-watch-platform-prototype-launched-at-2017-un-crime-commission.html>.

⁵ Diana E. H. Russell, “‘Femicide’—The Power of a Name,” in *Femicide: A Global Issue that Demands Action*, ed. Claire Laurent, Michael Platzer, and Maria Idomir (Vienna: The Academic Council on the United Nations System, 2013), 20.

alarming given that the rate of intimate partner violence, alone, in the United States has reached epidemical levels; in 2015, over 1 in 3 women experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime.⁶ In 2018, the United States was the only Western country to be named among the ten most dangerous countries for women in a survey of global experts in women's issues.⁷ With respect to non-sexual violence and sexual violence, the U.S. was ranked sixth and third, respectively.⁸

Although femicide has not achieved substantial usage in the United States, female homicide and intimate partner homicides, most of which amount to feminicides, are hot topics in discussions relating to male criminality. A 2017 report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, shows that female homicide rates for African American women are higher than all other races and ethnicities and that they are overwhelmingly perpetrated by persons known to the victim (intimate partners, family members, and other acquaintances).⁹ Statistics also show that the large majority of these murders are intra-racial.¹⁰ Reports and investigations into these murders often invoke a culture of "violence" and "degeneracy" that is endemic to African American communities and seldom call into question the social and historical forces that socialize African American men to commit violent acts against their female counterparts. This

⁶ Sharon G. Smith et al., "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 Data Brief – Updated Release," (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2018), 2, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/2015data-brief508.pdf>.

⁷ Ellen Wulforst, "Exclusive: U.S. among 10 most dangerous countries for women amid #MeToo campaign – poll," *Reuters*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-women-dangerous-poll-usa-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-among-10-most-dangerous-countries-for-women-amid-metoo-campaign-poll-idUSKBN1JM02G>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Emiko Petrosky et al., "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Homicides of Adult Women and the Role of Intimate Partner Violence -- United States, 2003-2014," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, July 21, 2017), 741-44, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/pdfs/mm6628a1.pdf>.

¹⁰ Violence Policy Center, *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2017 Homicide Data*, (September 2019), 6, available from <https://vpc.org/studies/wmmw2019.pdf>.

leads me to question: how can we understand the prevalence of femicide in African American communities as a product of colonial masculinities?

In this paper, I argue that colonial conditions faced by African American men, namely mass incarceration, police brutality and militarization, and racial residential segregation, contribute to the construction of feminicidal masculinities. A focus on the murders of African American women in the United States necessitates an understanding of masculinities within the context of the structural violence they are faced with. Scholars studying violence against Indigenous women in Canada have already raised this point: “If one approaches the deaths as the outcome of a generic male violence against women, then race and coloniality enter as mere complications.”¹¹ In making this argument, I draw on the increasing scholarship on intersectionality, femicide, black masculinities, and the coloniality of power. These perspectives reject coarse conceptualizations of race, gender, and class as distinct experiences and identities, and instead affirm their relationality and mutual-constitution. This is essential to avoid aggregative accounts of oppression that miss the unique socio-structural and representational processes that shaped the lived experiences of African American populations in the United States.

Following in the footsteps of Paulina García-Del Moral,¹² I present a feminist decolonial intersectional framework of the killing of African American women and use it to undermine culturalist and racial explanations for the prevalence of femicide in African American communities. One of the major goals of this paper is to disabuse scholars and policymakers of

¹¹ Sherene Razack, “Gendering Disposability,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 28, no. 2 (2016): 292, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.28.2.285>.

¹² Paulina García-Del Moral, “The Murders of Indigenous Women in Canada as Femicides: Toward a Decolonial Intersectional Reconceptualization of Femicide.” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2018): 929-54.

notions of pathological blackness that dehistoricize the conditions of African American livelihood and disengage the state from fulfilling its duty to provide civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights to its citizens.

Theoretical Framework

Femicide in Radical Feminist Scholarship

The term femicide was first politicized in the 1970s as part of a radical feminist enterprise to expose the patriarchal order and its construction of gender inequality. Diana E. H. Russell introduced the term during the First International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in 1976.¹³ She later undertook the topic more robustly in her academic work, publishing two co-authored anthologies: *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*¹⁴ and *Femicide in Global Perspective*.¹⁵

In the first anthology, her co-editor Jill Radford defines femicide as the “misogynist killing of women by men.”¹⁶ Similarly, Jane Caputi and Diana Russell explain femicide as an act that is “on the extreme end of a continuum of antifemale terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse”¹⁷ and as “a form of terrorism that serves to preserve the gender status quo.”¹⁸ In the second anthology, Russell amends her definition to “the killing of females by males *because* they are female.”¹⁹ This definition, according to Russell, expands the scope of the

¹³ Russell, Diana E. H. “Report on the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (1977): 2. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346102>.

¹⁴ Radford, Jill, and Diana E. H. Russell, eds. *Femicide: The Politics of Woman-Killing*. New York: Twayne, 1992.

¹⁵ Russell, Diana E. H., and Roberta A. Harmes, eds. *Femicide in Global Perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

¹⁶ Radford and Russell, *Femicide*, xi.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Russell and Harmes, *Femicide*, 3. (emphasis in original)

term to include all types of sexist killings beyond overtly misogynist killings.²⁰ As such, female infanticide committed due to a sexist preference for male babies is as much a femicide as an act of sexual terrorism by an incel. In essence, Russell asserts that femicides are motivated by “the hatred of females [,] a sense of entitlement to and/or superiority over females, by pleasure or sadistic desires toward them, and/or by an assumption of ownership of women.”²¹

Patriarchy, in radical feminist theory, describes how power relations govern social structures in a way that privileges the male and the masculine and enables the domination and exploitation of women by men. In this school of thought, the hallmark feature of patriarchy is power, and men deploy violence against women to preserve the unequal distribution of power between the sexes.²² Patriarchy serves as a logical and practical framework to understand why femicide and other forms of violence against women are global and historical phenomena; it is the unequal relations between men and women, a power dynamic that is and has been present in most societies across the world, that produces the omnipresence of femicide.

The radical feminist conceptualization of femicide was instrumental in initiating studies on lethal violence against women. It concretized the notion that the deaths of women by men constituted a pattern of violence, and not a series of individual, discrete acts committed by a minor selection of particularly abhorrent men.²³ Russell argues that this pattern should qualify gender as the most salient category of analysis in male-on-female murders:

In the cases of lynchings and pogroms, no one wastes time wondering about the mental health of the perpetrators or about their previous personal experiences with African-Americans or Jews. Most people today understand that lynchings and pogroms are forms of politically motivated violence, the objectives of which are to preserve white and

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Radford and Russell, *Femicide*, 15.

²³ Ibid., 14.

gentile supremacy. Similarly, the goal of violence against women—whether conscious or not—is to preserve male supremacy.²⁴

Russell disputes the individualist frame that shrouds our assessments of the murders of women. She argues that it obscures the broader issues of misogyny and sexism that permit and inspire violence against women.²⁵ It ultimately relegates the murders of women to the realm of the private and the pathological, where silence and impunity reign, rather than the realm of the systemic and the normalized, where visibility and action are enabled.²⁶

The radical feminist approach emphasizes the difference in nature between male murders and female murders. In a world in which “79 per cent of all homicide victims globally are male,”²⁷ terms such as homicide, murder, and manslaughter do little to capture the gendered motivations behind murders of women. Whereas less than 6 per cent of male homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners or family members, almost half of female homicide victims are killed by people who are expected to care for them:²⁸ “one of the most pervasive myths of patriarchal culture [is] that the home provides a safe haven for women [...] the home is the place where women are at greatest risk when that home is shared by a man, be he husband, male lover, father, or brother.”²⁹ In effect, the intention of the insistence on the term femicide was two-fold: it avoided the use of androcentric terms like homicide and manslaughter and it foregrounded the gendered motivation behind such killings.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data*, United Nations Publication, Sales No. 14.IV.1 (March 2014), 13, available from https://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ Radford and Russell, *Femicide*, xi.

³⁰ Russell and Harmes, *Femicide*, 14.

Though the radical feminist conceptualization of femicide is useful in isolating gender as a predictor of systemic violence, it nevertheless relies on an essentialist model of gender. Russell's theorizing distills gender to a dichotomous and exclusive schema of roles: females as victims and males as perpetrators. Her reductionist vision becomes evident when she refers to femicidal acts committed by females to "*female-on-female murder* rather than to expand [her] definition of *femicide* to include female perpetrators."³¹ This troubling omission reveals that Russell only considers the gender-motivated murders of females as a pattern of violence when committed by males, thereby rendering the plight of many girls and women who die at the hands of other women invisible. Russell's reluctance to view "*female-on-female murder*"³² as a form of femicide exposes the rigidity of her framework—it cannot envisage power relations outside of male dominance and female subordination, and any power dynamics that do not fit this scaffold are underplayed or theorized as anomalies. In effect, the naturalization of gender inequality advanced by the radical feminist framework precludes any explanation of the social and historical conditions that constructed masculinities and femininities as such, and leaves little hope in the way of change.

Femicidio in Latin American Feminist Scholarship

By the late 1990s, the concept of femicide had travelled to Latin America. It was translated by Marcela Lagarde, feminist anthropologist and Mexican congresswoman, as *feminicidio* instead of *femicidio* (note the subtle difference). Lagarde identifies *feminicidio* as "genocide against women [which] occurs when the historical conditions generate social practices

³¹ Ibid. (emphasis in original)

³² Ibid. (emphasis in original)

that allow for violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women.”³³ Much like Russell, Lagarde sees gender as a mechanism that organizes society into a patriarchal hierarchy whereby positions of power and powerlessness are consistently reinforced through gender-based violence.³⁴ Lagarde’s departure from the conventional translation intends to mark a localized adaptation to the term which encompasses the complicity of masculinist states in fostering cultures of impunity that allows femicidal violence to flourish.³⁵ The inaction, incompetence, and sometimes outright collusion of state institutions in matters relating to femicide, as well as their negligence and omissions in rectifying social inequalities and discrimination, is what allows for this violence to continue.³⁶ This qualifies the state as a culprit in femicidal violence.³⁷

Lagarde’s formulation of *feminicidio* is useful in its understanding of how structuralized and systematized oppression are relevant factors in the prevalence of lethal violence against women. However, in having built her theory of *feminicidio* upon the radical feminist groundwork, Lagarde does not offer a sufficient ideological departure from its essentialist inclinations. She understands that gender is socially-constituted and that “women experience violations of their human rights stemming from the subaltern social status and political subordination of gender that affects them.”³⁸ However, what she fails to adequately theorize is how subject formation involves the intersection of many modes of oppression. Lagarde mentions other forms of oppression such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation only as additive

³³ Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, “Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide: Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction” *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, eds. Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

intensifiers to the violence faced by women.³⁹ In other words, for her, womanhood functions as the core identity upon which other identities can be attached to form aggregative identities. This additive model undermines the ways in which intersecting modes of oppression are mutually-constitutive and produce lived experiences that are entirely different from the sum of each stand-alone oppression.⁴⁰ For example, a poor woman does not experience classism the same way a poor man does, nor does she experience sexism the same way a rich woman does; her experience is unique to the juncture of classism and sexism in which both inform the other and produce distinctive instances of oppression.

In their anthology *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas*,⁴¹ Rosa Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano assemble all the innovations in the scholarship on *feminicidio*, including Lagarde's understanding of the role of the state in producing a culture of impunity and fostering violence. They locate femicides within both the public and the private spheres, implicating both the state and individual perpetrators.⁴² They also endeavor to “interrupt essentialist notions of female identity that equate gender and biological sex”⁴³ and operate on the basis that it is “the performance of gender norms (rather than natural biological essence) [that] gives meaning to categories of the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine.’”⁴⁴ This constructivist view of gender leads the authors to consider how “the intersection of gender dynamics with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts”⁴⁵ inform femicidal violence. Finally,

³⁹ Ibid., xxi.

⁴⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1252, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

⁴¹ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴² Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, “Introduction: A Cartography of Femicide in the Américas,” eds. Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 3

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.

the authors integrate a human rights approach to femicide by arguing in favor of “human rights *for living*.”⁴⁶ That is, they situate themselves within the school of thought that civil and political rights are indivisible from the economic rights to food, healthcare and shelter.⁴⁷ This comprehensive approach integrates femicide into a broader category of rights violations that addresses the underlying social conditions that increase the chances of victimhood.⁴⁸ This conceptualization of femicide is a useful contribution to the analysis of the murders of African American women, whereby economic and social disenfranchisement are determining factors in instances of femicide.

Femicide/Femicide in Anti-Colonial Scholarship

Scholarship on *femicidio* in the Latin American context has thus far ignored the legacy of colonialism. The anti-colonial approach to femicide is credited to Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Suhad Daher-Nashif who studied gendered violence in occupied Palestine and argued against the term “honor killings” in favor of the term “femicide”.⁴⁹ Their semantic preference is two-fold: the refusal to use “honor killing” rejects the designation of a murder as “honorable”⁵⁰ and counters hegemonic and exoticizing narratives that invoke a culture of misogyny and barbarism in Arab populations.⁵¹ Shalhoub-Kevorkian was the first to define femicide in the Palestinian context as “all violent acts that instill a fear in women or girls of being killed under

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20. (emphasis in original)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Suhad Daher-Nashif, “Femicide and Colonization: Between the Politics of Exclusion and the Culture of Control,” *Violence Against Women* 19, no. 3 (March 2013): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213485548>.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 296-297.

⁵¹ Ibid., 297.

the justification of ‘honor.’”⁵² Here, femicide is defined based on the localized form that it takes—murders of women motivated by perceptions of “honor”—and its scope is expanded to include processes that maintain a threat of being killed as well as actual lethal acts of violence.

The authors argue that Israeli “exclusionary politics,”⁵³ which limits Palestinian residents’ access to social, political, and economic resources, empowers a “localized culture of control,”⁵⁴ which entails a reactive, hyper-patriarchal logic of masculine control over women’s lives and bodies. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif rely on Agamben’s theory of “the state of exception” to show how Palestinian residents are at once excluded from society due to their perception as security threats to Israel, and included from society through their constant surveillance and physical occupation.⁵⁵ It is in this context that “the dialectic interrelationship between formal and informal legal-social systems”⁵⁶ plays out its violence on Palestinian women. In other words, Palestinian masculinities are constructed through the constant reification of their inferiority to Israeli forces. This, in turn, manifests itself in an intra-community reassertion of dominance over those who are lower on the social ladder: Palestinian women.

Paulina García-Del Moral, a sociology professor at the University of Guelph, offers a decolonial intersectional analysis of the murders of Indigenous women in Canada.⁵⁷ The author employs this framework as a means to critique the radical feminist approach to femicide and foreground the Latin American and anticolonial perspectives.⁵⁸ From a theoretical standpoint, García del-Moral argues that a reliance on gender and patriarchy alone (indeed, the hallmark concepts of radical feminist theorizing) cannot explain the increased vulnerability of Indigenous

⁵² Ibid., 296.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 300.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 295.

⁵⁷ García-Del Moral, “Indigenous Women in Canada,” 929-54.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 930.

women to feminicidal violence.⁵⁹ Furthermore, intersectional analyses studying violence against women in Indigenous communities have often privileged aggregative depictions of oppression.⁶⁰ The author's account of such violence pays special attention to how Canada's colonial legacy has informed poverty, racism, sexism and other forms of social marginalization that, in turn, shape experiences of violence within Indigenous communities.⁶¹

Indigenous women were discursively constructed as lecherous and immoral, which authorized the use of violence against them and fueled the moral duty to civilize Indigenous peoples.⁶² Furthermore, legalized sex-based discrimination in the form of the Indian Act of 1876 created intra-community disparities that have shaped women's dependency and impoverishment.⁶³ Their construction in the imaginary as disposable, as well as their inability to access emancipatory resources due to material precarity, has made Indigenous women disproportionately vulnerable to femicide. The material and discursive imposition of a gender order is only further exacerbated by territorial dispossession and the fracturing of families through the residential school system that normalized violence and prevented Indigenous boys from having positive role models of Indigenous masculinity.⁶⁴ The social marginalization of Indigenous communities is met with failed institutional responses to the killing of Indigenous women, which is only further compounded by a profound and historical distrust for judicial institutions and law enforcement.⁶⁵

Like García-Del Moral's work, my research uses the anticolonial framework to expand upon the *femicidio* approach. In this way, I argue that feminicides in African American

⁵⁹ Ibid., 944.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 944-945.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 946.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 947.

communities are set upon the continued social and political structures that authorize mass incarceration, police brutality and militarization, and racial residential segregation.

The Structure or Agency Debate

A look at femicide in African American communities requires us to question the *lens* through which we analyze intragroup violence. When we ask ourselves the question—“why do black men kill black women?”—we’re often compelled to believe in the agency of the individual and their capacity to choose between violent or pacific interactions. We seldom lay out the complex interaction of socializing forces that influence the way in which we comport ourselves and manage stressors. This debate between structure and agency has long permeated the social sciences and continues to draw the line between culturalist and constructivist narratives of femicide within African American communities.

Pathological Blackness

Cultural explanations for the social marginalization of African Americans have, since the mid-1980s, upheld a cultural deficiency model that views black male deviance as a result of the pathology of “ghetto” culture.⁶⁶ In this model, poor blacks are described as part of a cycle of poverty and social disorganization that is perpetuated by idle, unemployed and disengaged males, dysfunctional matriarchal families, and poorly raised children.⁶⁷ This idea was most famously elaborated by Harvard sociologist and then Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel

⁶⁶ Edmund T. Gordon, “Cultural Politics of Black Masculinity,” *Transforming Anthropology* 6, no. 1-2 (1997): 36.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Patrick Moynihan, in his 1965 report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.”⁶⁸

Moynihan cites family instability, namely, the emasculating presence of single mothers, as the most important underlying cause for racial inequality in unemployment statistics.⁶⁹ Almost three decades after the release of the report, Moynihan echoed his own words with searing racism and sexism:

A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder... that is only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable and it is richly deserved.⁷⁰

At the heart of this model is the notion that the social marginalization of African American males is the consequence of their own pathological culture, and that this culture is immutable, separate from social and political structures, self-perpetuating, and monolithic.⁷¹ The racialized culture proposed by the model is presented as an essence that is transmitted, like a “pseudo-biological property of communal life,”⁷² from generation to generation without any possibility of change.

More covert formulations of this model acknowledge the structural violences faced by African Americans but ultimately prescribe individual- and community-level solutions:

[W]ithout strong, self-sacrificing, frugal, and industrious fathers as role models, our boys go astray, never learn how to be parents (or men), and perpetuate the dismal situation of single-parent homes run by tired and overworked black women. The black family as a survival unit fails, which leads to the ever-fragile community collapsing along with it.⁷³

⁶⁸ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, (March 1965).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “How the Great Society ‘destroyed the American family,’” *The Public Interest* 108, (1992): 56.

⁷¹ Gordon, “Cultural Politics,” 37.

⁷² Leti Volpp, “Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior,” *Yale Journal of Law & The Humanities* 12, no. 89 (2000): 94.

⁷³ Charles Johnson, “Shall We Overcome?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112925639061868480>.

Where the locus of change is the individual or the community, the implication is that the problem lies therein. The logic is as follows: if only black fathers would show up and not abandon their children, and if only black people *chose* to foster communal and civic life, then the poverty and incarceration rate would be lower, and educational and professional achievement would be higher; the devastating effects of oppression would no longer be. Not only do these prescriptions impute culpability on the wrong agents but they have also proven to be ineffective in securing change. Urging more black solidarity or calling upon black fathers to step it up, a narrative that is articulated by both white and black notables,⁷⁴ perpetuates the scapegoating of African American men for circumstances created and sustained by the state's failure to provide and protect.

In detailing the structural violences—specifically, the conditions of coloniality—faced by African Americans, I lean on the notion that “much of human behavior within social space is far less a function of choice and more a function of social climate.”⁷⁵ My intention, therefore, is not to deny personal responsibility in the killing of black women, but to recall the role of the state and society in creating environments that enable nonviolent transactions and to examine the impact on black men when the state and society fail to do so. This is a response to overt and covert accounts of blackness that neglect the effects of racism on the formation of the racialized

⁷⁴ The discourse on black pathology is not only touted by white academics-turned-politicians like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, but also by black politicians like Barack Obama, who recalled the rise in crime and incarceration when criticizing the absenteeism of black fathers. Similarly, black scholars like Charles Johnson, professor of English at the University of Washington, evoked the image of overworked single black mothers when discussing the collapse of black communities.

See Barack Obama's speech here:

Barack Obama, “Obama's Father's Day Remarks,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html>.

See Charles Johnson's article here:

Charles Johnson, “Shall We Overcome?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112925639061868480>.

⁷⁵ Shatema Threadcraft, “Intimate Injustice, Political Obligation, and the Dark Ghetto,” *The University of Chicago Press* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 741, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674382>.

and gendered subject. This stance foregrounds state responsibility in the discussion as it pertains to the safety and livelihood of *both* black men and black women.

The Late-Modern Colony

In his seminal article *Necropolitics*,⁷⁶ Achille Mbembé describes the colony as a manifestation of the state of exception. That is, it is a place where “the controls and guarantees of judicial order [are] suspended”⁷⁷ and sovereignty is enacted through the extrajudicial deployment of state power. He further outlines the difference between early-modern colonial occupation and late-modern colonial occupation. The former refers to what is typically imagined as colonialism—the imperial powers appropriating far-off lands, delineating their boundaries, asserting control over a geographic area and the populations inhabiting it, and imposing a new set of social and spatial relations.⁷⁸ Early-modern colonialism was driven by expansion, and maintained through spatial control and the use of “pure force”⁷⁹ on indigenous populations. It is what we speak of when we mention British India or French Algeria. Late-modern colonial occupation is different in that it embodies “a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical.”⁸⁰ The colony is maintained through both raw violence and the regularization of state power into the ordinary functions and conditions of life. It is a form of domination through which “[i]nvisible killing is added to outright executions.”⁸¹ In detailing disciplinary power, biopower, and necropower, I focus on the power modalities that have most

⁷⁶ Achille Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39984>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

exposed African Americans to conditions of coloniality: mass incarceration, police militarization and brutality, and racial residential segregation.⁸² My analysis relies on these three modes of structural violence because their detrimental effects radiate across and throughout most other aspects of social, cultural, and political life in a way that shatters community cohesion, interpersonal bonds, and self-actualization. The subject cannot escape the omnipresence of these power modalities.

Disciplinary Power: Mass Incarceration

Disciplinary power is a modality of power that exerts its force on the body and aims to both optimize the capacity of the body and secure its docility.⁸³ The mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States has been the primary mechanism through which black bodies have been operationalized for low-wage labor and forced into “a relation of strict subjection.”⁸⁴ In the late-modern colony, where “‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end,’”⁸⁵ the War on Drugs has ensured a continuous supply of bodies to be disciplined through the penal system. Between 1980 and 2012, the United States experienced a 1,100 percent increase in the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses.⁸⁶ More than 31 million people have been arrested for drug offenses since the drug war began in 1982, and the majority of these

⁸² Other structural violences such as employment discrimination, environmental racism, and healthcare inaccessibility are equally detrimental to the lived experiences of African Americans in the United States. By focusing on mass incarceration, police militarization and brutality, and racial residential segregation, I do not deny the oppressive impact of any other forms of structural violence. I use these aforementioned modes of structural violence as exemplary fields because of their broad impact on overall conditions of life and their formative effects on African American masculinities.

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 138.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 23.

⁸⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: New Press, 2012), 60.

are for non-violent offenses.⁸⁷ The racial disparities in incarceration rates are even more alarming; in 2014, African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population even though they constitute less than 15% of the total population.⁸⁸ To put these numbers into perspective, more African American adults are in the penal system today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved a decade before the Civil War began.⁸⁹ As a matter of fact, while the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865, it still allowed for “involuntary servitude [...] as a punishment for crime whereof the party [has] been duly convicted.”⁹⁰ Around half of all imprisoned Americans work full-time jobs while convicted; in 2018, there were around 870,000 working inmates contributing to the invisible labor force.⁹¹ They are not entitled to labor protections such as minimum wage and often work for an average of 20-30 cents an hour.⁹² It is in this way that the carceral system ensures the simultaneous optimization and subjugation of the black body.

While under correctional control, virtually every aspect of one’s life is surveilled and regimented, and any challenge to this authority is met with swift punishment. Probation and parole are characterized by long supervision terms and constant scrutiny, often leading to the detection of low-level offenses such as drug use or technical violations such as breaking curfew.⁹³ Probationers and parolees are also submitted to onerous restrictions. They typically have to meet an average of 18 to 20 requirements a day such as regularly reporting to a parole or

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” NAACP, accessed May 4, 2019, <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>.

⁸⁹ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 180.

⁹⁰ U.S. Constitution, amend. 13, sec. 1.

⁹¹ “Taking Freedom: Modern-Day Slavery in America’s Prison Workforce,” Pacific Standard, accessed May 4, 2019, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/taking-freedom-modern-day-slavery>.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Alexi Jones, “Correctional Control 2018: Incarceration and supervision by state,” accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/correctionalcontrol2018.html>.

probation officer, paying supervision fees, finding and maintaining full-time employment or education, submitting to drug and alcohol tests, abiding by strict curfews, not leaving a designated area without permission, and not associating with people with criminal records, including friends and family.⁹⁴ Probation officers often set unrealistic expectations and offer little resources to help probationers meet these goals, making it difficult to desist from further crime.⁹⁵ In fact, about half of probations and paroles end in revocation and incarceration for minor infractions like failing urine tests, lost jobs, and not paying fines.⁹⁶ Rather than being rehabilitative alternatives to institutionalization for promising individuals probation and parole are actually operative arms of the criminalization process. They have expanded formal supervision to low-level offenders, deploying coercive agents who serve to constantly remind probationers of the possibility of incarceration at the slightest infraction.⁹⁷

The social and political costs of incarceration are plentiful and diffuse. Because of the spatial concentration of low-income African Americans, the mass incarceration of black men means that entire communities suffer from the consequences of the carceral system. Immediate relatives often experience loss of income and assistance with child care, and have to shoulder finances related to supporting and maintaining contact with incarcerated family members.⁹⁸ Furthermore, mass incarceration weakens networks of family and friends that are supposed to provide support during times of hardship.⁹⁹ This undermines communities' ability to withstand economic and social adversity, and form expansive networks capable of generating social capital.¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Victor M. Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 85.

⁹⁶ Jones, "Correctional Control."

⁹⁷ Rios, "Punished," 86.

⁹⁸ Dorothy E. Roberts, "The Social and Moral Cost of Mass Incarceration in African American Communities," *Stanford Law Review* 56, no. 5 (Apr. 2004): 1282. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40040178>.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1282-3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

constant shuffling of large portions of African Americans in and out of prisons means that the presence of socializing agents, such as parents, siblings, and friends, is transient within families and communities. The preservation of informal social controls, which are influential parameters in the development of community norms and morals, is considerably hampered by the fragility of these formative social structures.¹⁰¹ Of the many norms deriving from this social climate, is a profound distrust of law enforcement, which detrimentally impacts the safety of African American women facing domestic abuse. Such women often have to weigh the potentially fatal or compromising results of involving the police with the equally dangerous consequences of enduring physical harm.¹⁰²

The enduring punishments that accompany a prison sentence significantly preclude African American communities from meaningful civic and labor market engagement. A conviction may be the basis for denial of a host of citizenship rights and privileges to offenders such as federally-funded health and welfare benefits, food stamps, public housing, and federal educational assistance.¹⁰³ Moreover, felon disenfranchisement laws disqualify convicted offenders from voting either during their incarceration or in perpetuity. African Americans are four times more likely than non-African Americans to be disenfranchised, and one in thirteen African Americans of voting age has temporarily or permanently lost the right to vote.¹⁰⁴ With respect to labor market participation, time in prison raises significant hurdles to finding legal employment by fostering wariness in potential employers, interrupting employment history, and corroding jobs skills.¹⁰⁵ The magnifying element in all this is that the spatial concentration of mass incarceration

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 1285.

¹⁰² Ibid., 1287.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 1291.

¹⁰⁴ “6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016,” The Sentencing Project, October 06, 2016, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/#II.%20Disenfranchisement%20in%202016>.

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, “The Social and Moral Cost,” 1293.

means that individual disenfranchisement and economic dispossession culminates in the civic exclusion and impoverishment of entire communities.¹⁰⁶

Biopower: Police Militarization and Brutality

Biopower is the sovereign decision to “*take* life or *let* live.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, biopower functions by separating people into those who will live and those who must die. Biopower operates most effectively through racism as it regulates “the distribution of death and [makes] possible the murderous functions of the state.”¹⁰⁸ The militarization of police departments, in particular, has substantially increased African American deaths at the hands of law enforcement. In the 1960s and 1970s, very few civilian police departments had Special Weapons and Tactic units (hereafter, SWAT).¹⁰⁹ Those that existed were located in big cities and were only deployed for emergency situations such as hostage takings and terrorist attacks.¹¹⁰ In 1994, the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice released a joint memorandum authorizing the large-scale transfer of military equipment and technology that had “previously [been] reserved for use during wartime.”¹¹¹ By the late 1990s, 89% of medium and large cities, as well as 70% of small cities had at least one SWAT team.¹¹² Their primary purpose today is to serve warrants for narcotic offenses, oftentimes for low-level drug possession which are disproportionately served to African Americans. These fortified, paramilitary police teams often carry out their mandates late at night under “no-knock warrants”, which means that they forcibly (but legally) enter homes

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 1292.

¹⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 136.

¹⁰⁸ Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 17.

¹⁰⁹ Hannah LF Cooper, “War on Drugs Policing and Police Brutality,” *Substance Use & Misuse* 50, no. 8-9 (2015): 1191. <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2015.1007669>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

while the target and their family are asleep.¹¹³ An analysis by the American Civil Liberties Union between 2011 and 2012 found that drugs were found in only 35% of drug-related SWAT raids, raids that led to seven deaths and 46 injuries.¹¹⁴ Militarized policing, as a biopolitical tool, does not ensure a substantial reduction in street-level drug activity but it does ensure the killing and debilitating of the target community.

African American enclaves in the United States are spaces in which “[d]aily life is militarized”¹¹⁵ such that fatal or injurious encounters with law enforcement become socializing factors in the development of black youths. Besides its routine infiltration of private domestic spaces, law enforcement has gradually acquired access to schools. The Gun-Free Schools Act was passed in 1995 after a series of school shootings across the country.¹¹⁶ The Act imposed harsh penalties for possession of a firearm on school premises.¹¹⁷ By 1997, 94% of public schools had implemented “zero tolerance” policies, not only banning guns in schools but also adopting harsh school safety regulations that surpassed the mandate of the Act.¹¹⁸ The most castigatory measures were implemented in urban schools attended by low-income youth of color, despite the fact that the majority of incidents prompting the promulgation of the Act occurred in majority-white, wealthy suburban high schools.¹¹⁹ As implementation progressed, schools were equipped with metal detectors and surveillance cameras, and students were subjected to the authority of armed police officers who were authorized to enforce school rules through summons and arrests.¹²⁰ Law enforcement quickly expanded their reach from weapons possession to

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 30.

¹¹⁶ Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 76.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

tardiness and nonattendance, brawls, verbal disagreements, and cursing.¹²¹ This escalation of punishments for what is essentially standard “youth (mis)behavior”¹²² has increased dangerous encounters with law enforcement, militarizing the educational sphere, and forging what is now referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” In effect, with its access to the streets, homes, and schools, law enforcement in the United States operates as a veritable occupying presence in African American communities.

African Americans have been constructed as a suspect community, a problematic subgroup of the population that is singled out for state attention.¹²³ Individuals are policed not necessarily because of wrongdoing but simply because of their presumed membership to that subgroup.¹²⁴ An additional result of this hypervigilance is the propagation of cultural productions that become engrained in the psyche of society at large. The calling of police by civil society members on African Americans performing basic activities bears testimony to this. In 2018, police were called on African Americans for napping while black, barbecuing while black, waiting for a friend at Starbucks while black, swimming in a pool while black, babysitting white children while black, and asking for directions while black (among other mundane activities).¹²⁵ The involvement of law enforcement for such ordinary tasks further aggravates the militarization of

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Remy Kharbanda and Andrea Ritchie, “Education Not Deportation: Impacts of New York City School Safety Policies on South Asian Immigrant Youth,” (Desis Rising Up and Moving and the Urban Justice Center Community Development Project, 2006), 66.

¹²³ Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton, “From the ‘Old’ to the ‘New’ Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 5 (2009): 649. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1093/bjc/azp031>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Brandon Griggs, “Living while black: Here are all the routine activities for which police were called on African-Americans this year,” *CNN*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/us/living-while-black-police-calls-trnd/index.html>.

daily life. Biopower, in this way, relies not only on the state's ability to employ violence through agents of the law, but also on its ability to manufacture consent within civil society.¹²⁶

Necropower: Racial Residential segregation

Necropower is the “subjugation of life to the power of death.”¹²⁷ It refers to the *exposure* to the possibility of death rather than to death itself. It is a form of power that exposes people to precarious conditions of life such that they live in what Mbembé calls “*death-worlds*.”¹²⁸ The most important factor in creating “*death-worlds*”¹²⁹ in the United States is racial residential segregation. In 2000, over 74 metropolitan cities had a dissimilarity index of 0.60 or more, meaning that 60% of African Americans would have to relocate in order to eliminate segregation.¹³⁰ The racialized arrangement of space in the United States is a “human production, and not a natural or presocial phenomenon.”¹³¹ Alongside a collection of private practices that ensured spatial segregation (white flight, real estate steering, bank redlining, income differences, and self-segregation), there occurred a much more explicit and systematized push to determine where whites and African Americans should live by government.¹³² Racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices account for the nationwide configuration of urban ghettos surrounded by white suburbs.¹³³ Such policies included expanding public housing along

¹²⁶ Joseph A. Buttigieg, “Gramsci on Civil Society,” *boundary 2* 22, no. 3 (1995): 27-28.

¹²⁷ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/303721>.

¹²⁸ Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 39.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ David Williams and Chiquita Collins, “Racial Residential Segregation: A Fundamental Cause of Racial Disparities in Health,” *Public Health Reports* 116, no. 5 (2001): 405, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4598675>.

¹³¹ Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, “Femicide and Colonization,” 298-299.

¹³² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), vii-viii.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, xii.

segregated tracks,¹³⁴ assigning high risk for default to homeowners in black neighborhoods,¹³⁵ taxing black homeowners more heavily in order to prompt evictions,¹³⁶ and decreeing zoning ordinances that allowed for heavy industrial operations in black neighborhoods only.¹³⁷ The arrangement of space, therefore, is a political enterprise and a matrix of power.¹³⁸

Racial residential segregation affects the life chances of residents as it relates to educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and health outcomes. Residential location determines which public-school students can attend, and the funding of public education is dictated by the urban tax base.¹³⁹ Where there is a spatial concentration of low-income African Americans, schools are more likely to be racially segregated and underfunded. As a result, segregated schools have lower average test scores, fewer students in advanced classes, more limited curricula, less qualified teachers, less access to academic counseling, fewer connections with colleges and employers, higher teen pregnancy rates, and higher dropout rates.¹⁴⁰ This educational deficiency translates into reduced employability, which exacerbates the economic deprivation of African American communities. Moreover, the mass movement of low-skilled, high-paying jobs to the suburbs has created a spatial mismatch that restricts African Americans' access to livable wages.¹⁴¹ Their social isolation further denies African Americans valuable social networks that could provide employment opportunities.¹⁴²

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.170.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁸ Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, "Femicide and Colonization," 299.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 407.

The reduction of the urban tax base as whites and middle-class blacks migrated to the suburbs has stifled the ability of municipalities to provide much-needed social services.¹⁴³ This disinvestment of economic resources has contributed to the decline of important infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, street lights, and levees.¹⁴⁴ The ensuing disparities in socioeconomic status, the desertion of enterprises that offer valuable goods and services like food and insurance, and the continued underfunding of public goods like recreational centers makes it difficult to maintain healthy lifestyles.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, segregation adversely affects health by exposing African Americans to a broad range of pathogenic residential conditions such as litter, noxious odors, pollutants, and allergens, abandoned buildings, large numbers of commercial and industrial facilities, crowding, and low quality of housing (dampness, inadequate heating, noise pollution, lack of space, etc.).¹⁴⁶ The effects of the physical environment are evident in morbidity and mortality statistics. In 2015, black people between the ages of 18 to 34 had higher death rates than white people for eight of the ten leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.¹⁴⁷ They also had 40% higher death rates than whites for all-cause mortality in all age groups below 65 years.¹⁴⁸ Morbidity and mortality rates are, therefore, higher in racially segregated African American neighborhoods, conferring upon them a spatial existence that qualifies as “*death-worlds*.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Chiquita A. Collins and David R. Williams, “Segregation and Mortality: The Deadly Effects of Racism?” *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 3 (1999): 499, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/684876>.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Williams and Collins, “Racial Residential Segregation,” 410.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Timothy J. Cunningham et al., “Vital Signs: Racial Disparities in Age-Specific Mortality Among Blacks or African Americans – United States, 1999-2015,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2, 2017), 446, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/pdfs/mm6617e1.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 40.

Together, disciplinary power, biopower, and necropower operate to expose African American communities to colonial conditions, and it is under these structural violences that black masculinities are informed.

Femicidal Masculinities: Violence Begets Violence

Experiencing oppression over lifetimes and generations can lead to the internalization of violence, self-hatred, and disdain for one's social group.¹⁵⁰ Internalized oppression is a component of the structural violence inflicted on African Americans as it manufactures consent within the alleged inferior group, thereby securing the power of the dominant group.¹⁵¹ In their article on femicide in Palestine, Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif argue that the exclusionary politics of Israel create a hierarchy of masculinity to which Palestinian men respond by adopting a "localized 'culture of control'"¹⁵² in order to reestablish their foregone masculinity upon their female counterparts. This form of internalized oppression occurs when violence and anger is redirected inwards toward those who remind the oppressed of himself.¹⁵³ A similar compensatory mechanism can be seen among African American men who live under conditions of coloniality.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Alternative Masculinities

¹⁵⁰ E.J.R. David and Annie O. Derthick, "What is Internalized Oppression, and So What?" in *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups*, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2013), 9.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, "Femicide and Colonization," 296.

¹⁵³ David and Derthick, "Internalized Oppression," 9.

Hegemonic masculinity is a gender ideology that informs notions of “gender success” for all men.¹⁵⁴ It establishes a normative referent that embodies only the most positive traits of manhood: industriousness, benevolence, financial prowess, athleticism, coolness factor, etc.¹⁵⁵ Hegemonic masculinity, as such, is the highest rank in the gendered pyramid and a status that is, by design, unattainable yet fiercely sought after. To achieve hegemonic masculinity, one must endorse traditional notions of gender roles.¹⁵⁶ However, unlike Caucasian men, African American men are routinely denied the resources to signal their social, economic, political, and intimate superiority.¹⁵⁷ The repeated emasculation of African American men as they are unable to access emancipatory educational and economic opportunities, are cycled through the penal system, and brutally disciplined by militarized police on the streets, in their homes, and even in schools, all come together to disqualify African American men from conventional notions of manhood. It is the unattainability of the “conventional opportunity structure”¹⁵⁸ for many African American men that often leads them to construct and embrace alternative modes of manhood.

A common way of managing this subordinated masculinity is to redefine masculinity in a way that is consistent with, and can be successful within, the available opportunity structures. The internalization of oppression, therefore, may take the form of active self-fulfilling prophecies where “oppressed individuals begin to act out negative stereotypes . . . [and turn upon themselves] the distress patterns that result from the . . . oppression of the [dominant] society.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Lisa Wade, “Inequality: Men and Masculinities,” *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 124.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Casey T. Taft et al., “Intimate Partner Violence Against African American Women: An Examination of the Socio-Cultural Context,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 1 (2009): 52. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2008.10.001.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Hampton, William Oliver, and Lucia Magarian, “Domestic Violence in the African American Community: An Analysis of Social and Structural Factors,” *Violence Against Women* 9, no. 5 (May 2003): 541, DOI: 10.1177/1077801202250450.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 540.

¹⁵⁹ David and Derthick, “Internalized Oppression,” 9.

Alternate hypermasculine roles such as the “hustler,” the “gangsta,” or the “playa”—roles that place value on illegal activities, violence, and promiscuity—are adopted as a way to compensate for their inability to achieve conventional forms of manhood such as the protector, the provider, and the self-made man.¹⁶⁰ In her interview with Shondrah Tarrezz Nash,¹⁶¹ Gertie, a black female who experienced intimate partner violence by a black man testifies to the internalized effects of thwarted opportunity structures: ““Sometimes they go out and...try and find a job, and they can’t get [a] job. Then in place of handling it out there, here they come in mad as the devil and take it out on their wives.””¹⁶² The adoption of violent hypermasculinities, in which violence as a means of resolving disputes is accepted, is what places African American women at an increased risk for becoming victims of intimate-partner femicide.

Furthermore, the structural violences faced by African American men that block access to educational and employment opportunities or may remove them from the labor market due to incarceration, have necessitated the economic and social independence of African American women.¹⁶³ The relative economic success that African American women may achieve compared to their male counterparts is often experienced as an additional form of subordination by African American men, to which they retaliate with a corrective violence. Another respondent to Nash’s interview, Kenosha, expresses this sentiment: ““Black women’s independence? I don’t want to call it a curse, [but] I think the real threat comes from those men who are striving and trying to reach their goals and have not yet met their goals—and they see a woman surpass them.””¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰Hampton, “Domestic Violence,” 541.

¹⁶¹ Shondrah Tarrezz Nash, “Through Black Eyes: African American Women’s Constructions of Their Experiences With Intimate Partner Violence,” *Violence Against Women* 11, no. 11 (2004): 1420-40. DOI: 10.1177/1077801205280272.

¹⁶² Ibid., 1433.

¹⁶³ Hampton, “Domestic Violence,” 540.

¹⁶⁴ Nash, “Through Black Eyes,” 1434.

Kenosha perceives the “real threat”¹⁶⁵ to derive from the lack of opportunities offered to African American men, thereby contextualizing the contributing factors to her experience of intimate partner violence. The stress placed on masculine gender roles is met with a retaliatory violence that not only seeks to maintain the hierarchy between man and woman but also to react to the structural violences faced in the labor market.

The Socializing Effects of Criminal Justice Contact

The normalization of prison life in African American communities has turned incarceration into a key social institution that has substantial influence on community norms.¹⁶⁶ Because children in these communities are likely to have had some direct or indirect experience with prison, and grow up expecting to be imprisoned at some point in their lives, incarceration is effectively a major component in their socialization process.¹⁶⁷ In her ethnography on criminalized black youth in Chicago, Alice Goffman describes how penal transitions such as bail hearings, trial dates, sentencings, returns home, and re-imprisonment, are treated as social occasions.¹⁶⁸ That is, they are occasions in which friends and family dress up, argue over who should pay, pay attention to who is in attendance and sitting with whom, coordinate over who should organize the events, and determine who will handle the possessions of the incarcerated friend or family member.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, Goffman registers how encounters with the criminal justice system become the basis for honor and bravery for African American men.¹⁷⁰ Word of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Roberts, “Social and Moral Cost,” 1288.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Alice Goffman, “The Social Life of Criminalized Young People,” in *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 114.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 120.

how a family member, friend, or acquaintance handled a particularly brutal arrest, managed to evade law enforcement, remained undetected while on the run, or survived a stint in prison often gets around and inspires respect within the community.¹⁷¹ In this way, mass incarceration is undeniably a formative element in the construction of black masculinities.

The conditions under which black youths grow up gives rise to a specific set of gendered practices that responds to persistent punitive treatments, suspicion, surveillance, and excessive policing.¹⁷² Interactions with police, detention facilities, and probation officers is a “masculinity-making resource that [black men] use to develop a sense of manhood.”¹⁷³ Indeed, the harsh and relentless control of the penal system inspires a criminal justice counterculture that glorifies criminality as a way of resisting to authority and reclaiming a self-defined manhood. This results in a hypermasculinity that is violently reactive to gender threat through the physical and sexual domination of others.¹⁷⁴ Propensities to commit crime and engage in violence are nurtured therein, thereby impairing any ability to convert any resources into political, economic, and social well-being.¹⁷⁵ Crime and violence, as such, become race and class identifiers and are upheld as established parameters of manhood.¹⁷⁶

It becomes clear, thus, that femineicidal masculinities follow the logic of internalized violence. In situations of extreme oppression, such as in the colonial setting, violence begets violence. Where there is absolute domination of one group over another, the dominated group

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁷² Victor M. Rios, “The Consequences of the Criminal Justice Pipeline on Black and Latino Masculinity,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 623, (May 2009): 151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40375893>.

¹⁷³ Rios, “Punished,” 125.

¹⁷⁴ Rios, “Criminal Justice Pipeline,” 151.

¹⁷⁵ Threadcraft, “Intimate Injustice,” 743.

¹⁷⁶ Rios, “Criminal Justice Pipeline,” 151.

often projects its internalized violence onto subgroups of a lower social scale—here, African American women.

Conclusion

An analysis of femicide in African American communities in the United States necessitates, first and foremost, an understanding of the modalities of power that shape the construction of African American manhood. The conditions of coloniality faced by African American populations are not negligible: they combine disciplinary power with biopower and necropower in a way that regulates, punishes, surveilles, kills, impoverishes, and disenfranchises African Americans to the point of absolute destitution. As such, drawing together feminist studies, masculinities studies, and postcolonial studies, not only enables a critique of the United States as a colonizing power but also allows for the liberating of scapegoats, namely African American men and women, who were bound by culturalist explanations of pathological blackness.

A decolonial perspective of femicide in the United States means that the right to life for African American women necessitates the establishment and protection of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights for all African Americans. For the United States to meet its human rights requirements, it would need to undertake criminal justice reform that decriminalizes blackness. It would need to spare black men from the incessant surveillance and brutality of law enforcement and restore confidence in black women in the capacity of the police to provide and protect. The state would also need to ensure the provision and maintenance of basic public goods like hospitals and clinics, schools and employment agencies, recreational centers and grocery

stores, and much more infrastructure that would prevent crime, encourage education and employment, and enable more healthy lifestyles. Lastly, universal access to integrated housing and subsidized, insured, and amortized loans for low-income African Americans would be a start in undoing almost a century of engineered racial residential segregation. Fixing the femicide problem in African American communities means assuring the right to bodily integrity, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, and providing the resources for adequate healthcare, educational and employment opportunities. With this structuralist approach in mind, further research is necessary to investigate how conditions of coloniality and rates of femicide in African American communities can be alleviated through public policy.

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