

## Something Wicked This Way Comes: A Historical Account of Black Gangsterism Offers Wisdom and Warning for African American Leadership

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### **Abstract:**

Black Americans who exist outside of the American Dream have historically had a direct relationship with street revolutionaries and ghetto superstars more than the appointed Black leadership. Hence, it continues to be an unfair criticism for any “integrated” Black leader to suggest that another Black leader is not authentic enough to have universal appeal, particularly when there is a noticeable social distance between the majority of Black leaders (past and present) who emerge from the middle class and the Black underclass. The gang has traditionally been a significant socialization agent in gangland areas; thus, Black leadership should access the wisdom of the gang when looking for answers to the tough life course conditions of the urban underclass resident. This article provides a brief history about Black gangs in an attempt to provide some insight relative to just how significant the Black gang has been to the Black experience in America.

**Keywords:** Black leadership | gangs | racial representation | Black experience

### **Article:**

After banging our heads against the walls of oppression and with a trickle of blood on our foreheads, we cried for our manhood. We cried for our manhood in the late night hours after experiencing a day littered with frustration over what we are not allowed to do, and whom we are not allow to become. We cried for our manhood as we watched you march into our communities, and infect our women and children with the idea that this community is void of real men. We cried in defiance after watching you drag our fathers off to prison. We cried for our manhood because we were just kids when you came to take the men in our lives away. We cried for our manhood when you bashed our heads and spilled our blood, and offered us infectious vices to cope with the nefarious conditions of the ghetto. We cried for our manhood as we watched our own black people leave us to the horrors of the ghetto. We cried for our manhood when we realized that the

black church ministered to the people on the mountain top and not to the people in the valley. We cried for our manhood when we realized that there was no answer at the altar, we kept waiting for a change to come and it never did. We cried for our manhood when you said, your suffering does not matter, so we ain't crying no more!

*Steven R. Cureton, 2008*

If Senator Barack Obama becomes president of the United States in 2008,<sup>1</sup> his presidency would certainly serve as evidence that America has taken a step toward judging men based on character and merit. However, there are whispers coming from Black leadership (i.e., politicians, the Black church, ministers, public and cultural intellectuals, university scholars, traditional community activists, Black power rebels, etc.) concerning Senator Obama's racial authenticity. The loudest echo is that Senator Obama's life course detracts from his ability to relate to the Black masses. In response, Senator Obama typically digresses into testimonies that validate his Blackness, and he usually ends up winning the support of his Black critics. The irony is that the leadership criticizing Senator Barack Obama is more in tune with the Black middle class than the Black underclass.

In reality, these very same critics are just as alienated from the Black underclass and suffer from issues of grassroots, Black authenticity given the exploitation, co-optation, and cultural imposition experienced in their rise to leadership status in an integrated society (Dyson, 1996; Frazier, 1968; Ture & Hamilton, 1992; West, 2001).

The inner city's street history is clear. The street gang (not the family or the church) is the most important social network organization for urban youth. Even though gang involvement has proven to be the surest way to end up a felon, convict, or dead, a significant number of marginalized Black youth continue to gravitate toward gangsterism, whereas older males are finding it difficult to withdraw from the gangster lifestyle. Thus, to become better representatives for the urban underclass and develop a practical blueprint for better living conditions, Black leadership will have to enlist the street expertise of the strongest socialization agent urbanity has to offer, the gang!

Seeking the assistance of gang members, and bringing them in on discussions concerning the needs of the grassroots masses is a risky proposition and one that I'm sure most would denounce as foolish from the start. However, a socially conscious person with some sense of historical understanding of Black gangs might be inclined to agree with me. The gang (in some version) has always been a staple of the Black underclass community. The history of Black gangsterism offers profound evidence concerning how urban poor Black males and incarcerated Black males have handled oppression, isolation, resource strain, deprivation, denial of rights and freedoms, and blocked access to economic and social legitimacy.

Apparently, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood street protocol and the power of gangster involvement better than some of his advisors (who thought it better not to interact with the inner city's gang members). Dr. King understood that his nonviolent, integrationist philosophy carried "no favor" with residents in urban declined, socially segregated communities. Dr. King further understood that youth violence could be curtailed if older male gangsters signed on; therefore, when Dr. King wanted to stage nonviolent protests in Chicago, he was tough minded enough to

seek the endorsement of street elites (i.e., Vice Lords, Disciples, and Black Stone Rangers; Dawley, 1992).

Black leadership (exceptions being Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Deacons for Self Defense, the Nation of Islam, some NAACP chapters, and nontraditional cultural ethnographers) did not consistently deem it necessary to understand the social nature of the poor urban male. Evidently, Black leadership did not heed the warning of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz's (Malcolm X) that the most dangerous man in America is the ghetto hustler (Haley, 1964). It logically follows that Black leadership does not represent the grassroots masses and is not in a position to offer any credible explanations for why the gang remains the most dominant social force in urban poor communities. Essentially, Black leadership has silenced a population that has been "screaming" for help since 1920 and has failed the Black underclass mainly because their agendas (in similar fashion to Senator Barack Obama) have traditionally been middleclass specific (Dyson, 1996; Ture & Hamilton, 1992; West, 2001).

To open the channels of communication where effective dialogue can take place between Black people regardless of class, Black leadership needs to at least examine the rich history of Black gangsterism to develop some level of sensitivity.

Black America's collective conscience relative to the Black gang phenomenon seems so focused on gangs' current criminogenic activities to the point of ignoring the historical reality that Black gangs evolved from community activism, Black power, and progressive grassroots efforts. The legacy of Black gangsterism reveals that Black gangs were civil enough to assist in the struggle for equality. In addition, some Black gangs were endorsed as positive community organizations by local political leadership (i.e., Crips, Vice Lords, and Disciples), whereas others were intelligent enough to secure government grants and purchase buildings that served as home base for community improvement social programs (i.e., Vice Lords, P-Stones/El Rukns). Alternatively, history reveals that no matter how noble the intent or righteous the blueprint, Black street gangs (morphed into a monstrous agent) because of federal, state, and local governments' legitimate and illegitimate practices, the criminal justice machine's discretionary justice, and urban criminogenic vices (i.e., hustling, gambling, running numbers, pimping, prostitution, and drugs). If only Black leadership had assisted these gangs when they were sparring with the federal government and corrupt police practices, perhaps some direction, resources, and social networking could have changed the course of the gang. Instead, Black leadership and the Black middle class completely separated from the urban poor, and as more and more older males were shipped to the modern-day slave ships (prisons), the community was left to the youth who developed a "lord of the flies" mentality (Cureton, 2008; Golding, 1954; Knox, 2004b; Shakur, 1993; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Sloan, 2007).

The proliferation of gangs in most major urban areas (e.g., South Central Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, New Jersey, Baltimore, Florida, Texas, etc.) and even smaller poverty-stricken areas (e.g., Ohio, Connecticut, North and South Carolina, Arkansas, Mississippi, New Orleans, Kentucky, Kansas, Oregon, Portland, Seattle, and Connecticut) is significantly related to Black migration and overcrowding in socially disorganized areas, a tradition of inter- and intraracial conflict, a subculture of deviance, crime, and violence, relative participation in the civil rights movement, securing federal grants and governmental support for preventive

programs, coercive social regulation and control from local police, negative media attention and public scorn, dysfunctional family dynamics and fatherlessness, blocked access to legitimate opportunities, isolation, alienation, and nihilism (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Cureton, 1999, 2008; Hagedorn, 1988; Sloan, 2007; Wilson, 1987).

Black gangs formed and evolved in two social climates: (a) a democracy where valued humanity and equitable living arrangements were not traditionally extended to Blacks and (b) behind prison walls where being a Black convict carried less social value than being a White convict. Black street and prison gangs emerged from close-knit familial brotherhoods and neighborhood crews, cliques, and posses (all taken to mean an association of peers with similar environmental and social circumstances). These groups became integrated defense and/or conflict groups because of environmental and institutional isolation, societal rejection, labeling, and social conflict. Moreover, these defense or conflict groups evolved into criminal gangs or an association of peers with a collective conscience that deviance, crime, and/or violence are viable options to transcend blocked legitimate opportunities, resource strain, and material deprivation.

### **The Genesis of the Black Street Gang**

The emergent gangsterism perspective offers some insight relative to the emergence of Black street gangs in most urban cities (Cureton, 2008). This perspective fundamentally assumes that a combative, predatory group of Black male groups evolved from four community transitional stages: defined community (Stage 1: 1920 to 1929), community conversion (Stage 2: 1930 to 1965), gangster colonization (Stage 3: 1966 to 1989), and gangster politicalization (Stage 4: 1990 to 2000).

During the defined community stage, the mass migration of Southern Blacks (seeking better employment opportunities and social conditions) landed many of them in urban locales near all White neighborhoods, which sparked interracial conflict. Some Whites moved away, whereas others participated in community covenants, which banned Blacks from establishing residency in certain neighborhoods. White male youth groups formed and violently resisted racial integration of neighborhoods, which led to Black brotherhoods evolving into social protection groups (Alonso, 1999; Short & Strodbeck, 1965; Sloan, 2007; Suttles, 1972; Thrasher, 1927).

During community conversion, the Great Depression (1930 to early 1940s) and the civil rights movement (1955 to 1965) produced an underclass-specific, socially disorganized, and isolated community (Ashmore, 1997; Marable, 1998; McCorkle & Miethe, 2002; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Wilson, 1996). The Great Depression severely crippled the economic foundation of the Black community, and the civil rights movement was far more beneficial to a select group of Blacks (better educated, professionally trained, and vocationally skilled).

A significant proportion of unskilled Blacks were unable to take advantage of the numerous opportunities to improve their life chances, which produced a massive Black inner-city underclass. Essentially, the urban neighborhood conversion between (1930 and 1965) produced economically strained, socially isolated, unsettled neighborhoods. Residents in these unsettled neighborhoods were exposed to the reality that they were excluded from mainstream society's allotment of opportunities and resources to achieve financial independence and social success.

Gangster colonization (Stage 3: 1966 to 1989) was a period when street gangs became entrenched in the social fabric of the urban underclass. Marginalized male residents did not accept exclusion from mainstream society's opportunities, so hustling drugs, guns, and stolen goods, prostituting women, and gambling became suitable alternatives for inclusion in a capitalistic, material-driven culture. Respect, the ultimate social currency, governed street interaction and length of survival. Unfortunately, respect was earned and maintained by participation in violence and murder. In addition, dying in pursuit of respect or giving one's life in defense of street credibility was understood as a righteous existence more so than living with no respect. A person with little to no street credibility lacked street-corner social value and was perceived as socially irrelevant or a "mark" (prey or a person to be picked on). Most researchers, scholars, and outside interest groups poll community residents only to find that such a value system concerning respect does not exist or is denounced in the community; however, the wrong people are being asked if they subscribe to a value system that promotes violence.

The reality is that the transition from boyhood to manhood occurs within a social hierarchy where social status is significantly related to a code of ethics that govern how respectable masculinity is seized and maintained. In an environment where deprivation dominates, social conflict becomes lethal (Anderson, 1999; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960, 1962; Cureton, 2002). Residency in urban depressed areas is particularly difficult for males who have to search for alternative ways to demonstrate manhood; thus, it should be no surprise that there would be a strong interest in the most dominant group of males the community has to offer.

During gangster colonization (1990 to 2000) neighborhoods became ganglands. Ganglands were socially organized around traditional rites of passage (from boyhood to manhood or baby gangster to original gangster) and normative expectations relative to gangsterism (i.e., street protocol, dealing with enemies, the value of gang alliances, seizing control of turf, drug and gun distribution, recreation, etc.). During this period, the gang became further embedded in the fabric of the underclass Black community as each generation of potential young male gangbangers needed a street education to become better gangbangers. Older gangsters assumed the responsibility of passing on knowledge of gangster history, protocol, and politics (Cureton, 2008).

Essentially, the emergent gangsterism perspective posits that as the community evolved into hood enclaves, the gang became the number one organization that male youth turned to negotiate manhood. In gangland areas, it was (and remains) nearly impossible to have a social life without the influence of the gang.

### **Chicago Gangland**

The origins of Chicago's contemporary super predator street gangs can be traced to Blacks' disproportionate residency in socially disorganized inner-city areas between 1917 and the early 1920s. The rapid transition of traditionally White neighborhoods to Black, challenged the sanctity of Whites' social fabric, yielding interracial conflict between White youth (strong-arm community defenders and social gatekeepers) and street-corner congregations of Black males (e.g., Jewtown, Egyptian Cobras, Racketeers, Chaplains, Imperial Chaplains, Roman Saints, Nobles, Mafia, Vampires, Braves, Navahoes, and Sioux; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Thrasher,

1927). White youth battled for the right to remain racially segregated, and Black youth battled for social freedoms, including the right to congregate wherever they wanted. Thus, early interracial youth interaction was thoroughly immersed in conflict as each group declared street supremacy and control over streets, alleys, railroad tracks, storefronts, building stoops, and small waterfronts. Challenges from White and other non-Black immigrant groups declined in the later years of the 1920s and the early 1940s, giving rise to intraracial conflict and competition for the ghetto's scarce resources and control of the underground drug market. Three major street organizations were formed during the latter years of 1950 and early 1960s (i.e., Devil's Disciples, P-Stones, and Vice Lords). The original founders of these organizations represented a new breed of gangsters advancing street-corner hustling to organized gangsterism through recruitment and subsuming smaller street-corner groups. These new breeds exploited respected community personalities and used government grants to bolster the gang's short-lived community appeal and governmental acceptance.

The Vice Lords (1958) and the Black P-Stone Nation/Black Stone Rangers (1959) were formed in the Illinois State Reformatory School at Saint Charles (Dawley, 1992; Knox & Papachristos, 2002). Internal rifts and deciding against initiating Peppilow into the Imperial Chaplains led to the formation of the Vice Lords. While incarcerated, seven youth, including Peppilow, conceptualized the Vice Lords. Once members were freed from St. Charles, they quickly moved to battle, overpower, and subsume the weaker street corner groups (i.e., Barons, Van Dykes, and Imperials) to pose a more formidable threat to the Egyptian Cobras, Comanches, Imperial Chaplains, Continental Pimps, and Cobra Nation (Dawley, 1992; Short & Strodbeck, 1965).

The Black P-Stone Nation represented an association of juveniles who participated in ordinary street crimes. Fort and Hairston captured the interest of Minister Fry and were able to convince him that his tutelage and federal grant money could mobilize an otherwise juvenile organization into a positive community group. On the contrary, this group traveled the criminogenic path, battled with other small groups to eventually become the Nation of Brothers (i.e., umbrella organization for Gangster Stones, Jet Black Stones, Rubes, Future Stones, P. R. Stones, and Corner Stones; Knox, 2004b; Short & Strodbeck, 1965). Fort changed his name to Abdullah-Malik and declared himself the sole leader of the newly named El Rukn gang. The transition from P-Stone to El Rukn was based on the idea that an organization with an Islamic focus could advance the life-course outcomes of Black felons and ex-convicts. The El Rukn gang became a haven for felons and ex-convicts as Rukns were known to participate in the underground drug economy.

In addition, the El Rukn gang is most infamous for allegedly attempting to negotiate with Libya's Moamar Khadafy, where the group would become a homeland terrorist organization in exchange for approximately \$2.5 million. Deemed a group gravitating toward terrorism, the El Rukns came under federal watch and prosecution, ending the Rukn's brief (approximately 10 years) tenure (Knox, 2004b).

The Devil's Disciples gang was formed in 1960 and splintered into three warring factions between 1960 and 1973: (a) Barksdale aka King David's Black Disciples, (b) King Hoover's Black Gangster Disciples, and (c) members of the Supreme Gangsters became the Gangster Disciples. Black Disciples and Black Gangster Disciples were preoccupied by an intense rivalry

stemming from prison assaults and attempted murders. Moreover, Gangster Disciples are allied with a constellation of ethnic gangs commonly known as the Folk Nation (e.g., La Raza, Spanish Cobras, Latin Eagles, Latin Disciples, Spanish Gangster Disciples, Two Sixers, and Simon City Royals), which is an adversary of the People Nation (e.g., Nation of Brothers, Cobras, Latin Kings, Spanish Lords, Bishops, Gaylords, Latin Counts, and Kents). The Chicago style of gangsterism stretches to Gary, Indiana, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where alliances are fragile enough to promote intraracial mistrust and solid enough to fuel feuds lasting for decades (Knox, 2004a, 2004c; Knox & Fuller, 2004).

### **The Gang Capital of America is South Central Los Angeles**

Similar to Chicago street gangs, South Central's Crips and Bloods originated from leisurely associations of neighborhood boys. The transition to street fighting groups was the result of community opposition interracial peer group conflict and eventually intraracial competition (Thrasher, 1927).

The migration of Blacks to historically White southern Los Angeles, began with the Argonaut Express, a freedom train of sorts, considering this express line was responsible for transporting Blacks (mostly from New Orleans and Mississippi) to non-Black immigrant communities (Italian, German, Lithuanian, Russian, Armenian, Croatian, and Serbian). Southern Blacks were simply looking for a better life, and the West was considered the land of prosperity because of employment opportunities in factories. In addition, the West appeared to offer an escape from Southern oppression, but the reality was that it turned out to be fertile territory for traditional White supremacist ideology, institutional inequality (in housing, education, and employment), and restrictions relative to where Blacks could socialize, which led to a regional civil rights movement between 1946 and 1950 (Cross, 1973; Sloan, 2007). Furthermore, opposition from White youth vanguard groups (Spook Hunters) manifested as racial hate crimes. Being no stranger to racial hate and peer group conflicts, Black males had learned that sticking together proved a successful coping strategy, so brotherhoods (e.g., Slausons, Farmers, Businessmen, Gladiators, Watts Gang, and Devil Hunters) were formed to defend Black legitimacy to social and recreational leisure from about 1940 until roughly 1963 (Alonso, 1999; Sloan, 2007). These Black defense groups desired victory on their home fronts and developed a thirst to go wherever they wanted, so these defense brotherhoods traveled to battle White youth groups in their territory. Essentially, early brotherhoods consisted of liberators or pioneers expanding the territory that Blacks could use to enjoy the pleasures associated with a teenage lifestyle.

The freedoms and social gains experienced by these interracial confrontations were short lived because Blacks still had to contend with structural oppression (i.e., community crowding, strained resources, physical and social deprivation), which led to intraracial strife and eventually urban unrest (e.g., 1965 Watts riots; Alonso, 1999; Cureton, 2008; Geschwender, 1971; Sloan, 2007).

The local government's response to the community unrest was the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The Southern horror was, of course, lynching, and the Western horror was (and in many ways still remains) the LAPD. The LAPD's philosophy was to govern by force; thus, police brutality was the method of suffocation for South Central's Blacks. Even though the

LAPD represented social regulation, their law and order practices likened them to an institutionalized version of Spook Hunters. However, once again Blacks responded with a more powerful version of community self-defense, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. It was founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, who crafted an organization that directly confronted civil inequity, social injustice, and police brutality (Foner, 1970). Black urban youth were attracted to the Panthers' defiant rhetoric, willful display of guns, and military style. As the Panthers' appeal spread, chapters began springing up in ghettos across the country.

The Los Angeles chapter became strong because it directly recruited frustrated, angry youth who felt alienated from mainstream society and older males who were already involved in gangs (e.g., Slausons, Gladiators, Farmers, Businessmen, Watts Gang, and Athens Park youth). Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and Raymond Washington were very much attracted to the Black Panthers.

Carter, whom many consider to be one of the most influential urban Black leaders in history, eventually became the president of the Panthers' Los Angeles chapter (Alonso, 1999; Foner, 1970; Sloan, 2007).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation quickly designated the Black Panthers a street terrorist organization and a significant threat to social order on American soil. The FBI launched a campaign to eliminate the Black Panthers' grassroots appeal by neutralizing the credibility of Panther Leadership. As a result of the FBI's counterintelligence program, many Black Panther leaders were arrested and imprisoned, which left the movement in the hands of urban youth who were not prepared to assume leadership (Cleaver, 1968; Foner, 1970; Magida, 1996). Disappointed with the Panther Party's inability to endure government attacks, Carter and Washington organized the Crips in 1969. In similar military style as the Panthers, the Crips were organized under such names as Common Revolution In Progress or Community Revolutionary Inter-Party Service. The Crips were originally organized to be a community help association and were even endorsed by the mayor as Community Reform Inter-Party Service. However, with the murder of "Bunchy" Carter in 1969 and the increasing pressure of strained resources and physical, social, and material deprivation, Raymond Washington, Stanley "Tookie" Williams, and initial recruit Jamel Barnes shifted the focus of the Crips to more self-centered activities such as drug (marijuana, PCP, and heroin) and gun (Uzi, AK-47, and Colt AR-15 assault rifles) sales that involved much violence and crime.

As criminal activity began to dominate the agenda of the Crips, the name was bastardized (e.g., Cradle to the Grave Rest In Peace, CRYPT from Tales from the Crypt, KRYPTS from Kryptonite, and Baby Avenues to CRIBS; Alonso, 1999; Cureton, 2008; Knox, 2000; Shakur, 1993; Sloan, 2007).

Street gang feuds began to dominate the social scene as the Crips were fashioning themselves as the most omnipotent street gang in South Central. The gangster appeal of the Crips was overwhelming as neighborhood after neighborhood united and became a branch of the Crips Empire (e.g., Rollin 20s through 60s, Hoover, Eight Tray Gangsters, Grape Street, East and West Side, Avalon Garden, Shot Gun, Kitchen, Compton, Venice, etc.). However, there were some neighborhood groups who opposed the Crips. These groups did not want to lose their identity, but they did not have the manpower to stand alone against the Crips. Logically, an umbrella



organization unifying these groups (e.g., Athens, Brims, Bishops, Bounty Hunters, Denver Lanes, Pirus, and Swans) provided a formidable enemy. Hence, the Bloods were born (1973 to 1975), and their philosophy was that a far more ruthless approach was needed to compensate for being outnumbered by the Crips (Alonso, 1999; Sloan, 2007).

Crips and Bloods subscribed to the American dream of territorial ownership, material acquisition, money, power, social status, and respect. Lethal violence became the preferred method to seize control of territory, drugs, and guns (Bing, 1991; Cureton, 2002; Ice T, 1995; Shakur, 1993; Sloan, 2007). The Crip and Blood feuds were historic, featuring the rise and fall of peace treaties, community stress, shock, and sorrow over the unforgiving nature of fatal violence.

Currently, South Central's Black gangs are beset by trust and solidarity issues, leading to intragang feuds and in-hood killings. The influence of the pioneering street gangsters (e.g., Slausons, Farmers, Businessmen, and Gladiators) has regressed, the fatherhood of social regulation is incarcerated, the universal brotherhood of similarly circumstanced Blacks has evaporated, and, in its place, a thriving civil war exists.

### **Black Prison Gangs**

Even though street and prison environments may seem different, the life course outcomes of urban lower-income Blacks and incarcerated Blacks appear to be qualitatively similar. The noncriminal Black male has traditionally been perceived as a threat, and the criminal Black male having been convicted and incarcerated has been relocated to an environment where his social worth is reduced to zero. Black prison gangs were born out of a struggle for recognition, the right to exist with some degree of humanity and dignity, and greed for the pleasures of leisure, sex, drugs, and environmental control. Black prison gangs are more than an institutional organization. By virtue of the longevity of prison sentences, convicts are relegated to making the gangster orientation, a lifestyle choice. Hence, many gangsters diffuse notions of even being in a gang. These prison gangsters suggest that they are political prisoners and incarcerated liberators and that their organization is rooted in religious doctrines. The number one Black prison gang is former Black Panther George Jackson's Black Guerrilla Family, organized in 1966 out of San Quentin (Leet, Rush, & Smith, 1997).

Similar in philosophy to the Black Guerrilla Family, perhaps in desire to overthrow the more corrupt agencies in the U.S. government, the Melanics organized in Michigan's Jackson Prison in 1982.

The Melanics considered Nat Turner to be a prophet, which certainly elevated them to public enemy number one. Moreover, Melanic members carried out assaults on correctional officers, so they were deemed a clear and present danger for any agent working for the Michigan Department of Corrections (Knox, 2004d).

Many states have passed antigang legislation, enhancing the sentences of suspected gang members. Currently, prisons are bursting at the seams with so many different types of gangs that it is hard for the Black Guerrilla Family to maintain dominant status. Hence, the Black Guerrilla Family has recruited Crips and Bloods, and the Melanics have formed alliances with the

Gangster Disciples. Prison officials have encountered what appears to be a bastardized version of the Nation of Islam. Clarence 13X's Five Percent Nation (predominantly found in New York and New Jersey) appeared to be a positive organization that elevated Black manhood to God status. Even though the Five Percenters rebuke the gang label, their illegal conduct has contributed to the swelling inmate population, making the Five Percenters a new threat to departments of corrections (Corbiscello, 2004; Leet et al., 1997).

The Black convict is America's proven nightmare, languishing in an institutional warehouse where humanity, civility, universal brotherhood, and peace are contingent on allegiance to race segregated gangs. Unfortunately, the prison context makes individualism impossible and participation in gangsterism the best vehicle for navigating through a confusing prison subculture.

## **Discussion**

Certainly, this presentation is in no way exhaustive of the entire history of Black prison and street gangs. There are far too many street corners and deprivation pockets with rich histories of gangsterism that have gone unmentioned. Moreover, this research completely ignores the contribution of young girls and older women to gangsterism. The social fact is that Black female gangs operating independent of dominant male gangs were rare. Female gangs and female gangsters were more likely to be auxiliary in nature. Certainly, independent or auxiliary female gangsters were just as deviant, criminal, and violent, often being drivers, weapon carriers, set-up girls, and assassins. In fact, it is safe to assume that female gangsters were just as important to gangsterism as women were to the civil rights and Black power movements.

Black street and prison gangs borrowed principles emphasizing Black nationalism and Black consciousness from the Nation of Islam, Black Power, and Black Panthers. Christian principles of love thy enemy played second fiddle to eye for an eye, whereas church was reserved for funerals, mourning, and renewed interest in revenge. History will record that Black street and prison gangs formed with noble intentions of humanity, civility, and racial pride. History will also note that the best and brightest of authors for these various gangs witnessed their gangs evolve into something less uplifting and more parasitical and predatory. At worst, Black gangs have represented dead-end organizations for dead-end conditions, and at best Black gangs have represented (on a grassroots or street level) Black social conscious, manhood, and right to exist with the freedoms afforded to every American citizen.

## **Conclusions**

As it stands now, Black leadership is far too detached and alienated (from the urban underclass), so those young boys who could be nurtured to become exceptional men are not listening to anything coming from Black leaders. The prisoners are the fathers, and the elder gangsters are the role models for the urban outcasts; therefore, the same message coming from Black leadership would carry more weight coming from men whom urban youth look up to (prisoners and gangsters). If the goals are to provide a better life for Black people regardless of class and to be more representative of the masses, then instead of being enamored with integration and interracial coalitions, Black leadership should work to establish intraracial coalitions with

gangsters and prisoners. Coalitions between leadership and gangsters are not inconceivable, nor are such coalitions impossible. Black leadership must make an earnest effort to open the channels of communication. Black leadership should be laced with a sincere desire for success, which is possible by having compassion, understanding, respect, a noncondemning spirit, economic resources, and a strong will for universal Black improvement. Approach the grassroots brotherhood, the street gangster, and the inmate with this blueprint and watch how they respond. Black leadership would become far more universal in class appeal by paying some knowledgeable tribute to the rich history of Black gangsterism. Doing so would reveal how original street and prison gangs were revolutionary, with a revolutionary voice and an imagination for community improvement. Somewhere along the way, the revolution was derailed. It is the duty of Black leadership to resurrect Black men regardless of class, for such a resurrection will prove critical in the campaign to make Black America good for all Blacks in America.

**Author's Note:** This article is inspired by South Central's Hoover Community and the North Carolina bangers whom I'm fortunate to know. For all of my brothers caught in gangsterism, West Coast, East Coast, thank you for pulling my coat to what needs to be offered up for public consumption.

### **Footnote**

<sup>1</sup>Any references in this article to Barack Obama as either "Mr." or "Senator" was due to this article being written prior to the outcome of the November 2008 election. With respect to the outcome of the election, the author recognizes that Barack Obama is now President Barack Obama.

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