

THE FETISHIZATION OF FIREARMS
IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND CULTURE

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by

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For my mother,

Mrs. Sheila Bernice Almond Summerville

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter	
Introduction: The Fetishization of Firearms in African-American Folklore and Culture.....	1
Chapter One: Young Guns, Folklore and the Fetishization of Firearms among Juveniles at an All-Male Correctional Facility in Tucson Arizona and in Hip- Hop.....	42
Chapter Two: Violence as Folk Ritual in Film: Representations of Dueling in Harlem Nights (1989) and A Rage in Harlem (1991)	93
Chapter Three: The Fetishization of Firearms in Stagolee Narratives.....	131
Chapter Four: Guns, Loss, and Racial Identity in Blues Lyrics.....	167
Conclusion.....	203
Works Cited.....	217
Vita.....	230

THE FETISHIZATION OF FIREARMS
IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The following work analyzes the fetishization of firearms across a number of different mediums including, the corporeal world, African-American folklore, film, and music. The overarching theme is that firearms are sometimes fetishized, meaning that they are sometimes used as ways of negotiating various aspects of identity. It examines a number of ways that guns are used across the aforementioned mediums that fall outside of their utilitarian uses. The majority of the evidence suggest that a significant amount of symbolic power is attached to guns regardless of the medium. Guns are used to signify different aspects of identity (i.e. gender, sex, and ethnicity) and they are also used to negotiate interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the fetishization of firearms in the physical world mirrors ways that guns are fetishized in other representational realms such as music, folklore, and film. The representational magnitude of guns indicate that they are often fetishized for real purposes including to navigate violent and often unpredictable environments.

Introduction

Guns, commodity fetishism, male juveniles, and hip-hop are topics that together, seem to over extend the very possibilities of interdisciplinary work. This dissertation seeks to explain ways in which these subjects can be used in concert in order to begin conversations concerning a growing predicament in American culture—gun violence among male youth. Guns have been a part of American culture and American folklore for centuries. While the presence of guns in folk music and tales predate the arrival of modern technology, what was once only passed on by word of mouth is now also shared by more advanced forms of transmission. Guns are frequently depicted in film, television, music, print, and other forms of popular media such as the internet and video games. Representations of firearms can also be seen in conventional art, jewelry, clothing designs and even body art.

The way that guns are presently represented and discussed in American culture has created a strong passion for the firearm that has surpassed any perception of the various general functional uses for firearms that people have traditionally recognized. Furthermore, many of the current representations of guns that most American youth are exposed to today are also parts of extensive marketing schemes that are directed towards young people for the sole purpose of generating capital. Of course, that is where hip-hop comes in. Although violence is clearly visible in all aspects of the entertainment industry, the popularity of hip-hop music among youth make it a relevant source of influence for some teens. Likewise, it is also a genre that has been influenced the most by commodity fetishism and capitalism. Millions of people world-wide from a variety of different ethnicities listen to hip-hop, in part, due to its characteristic heavy hitting bass lines, clever rhymes, and catchy hooks. However, the music, in and of itself, isn't

always the only attraction. Many hip-hop artists also feature guns in their music. Many teens consume hip-hop annually and coincidentally much of the negative repercussions of firearm usage are also felt by the same group—more specifically, the young black male population.

The Origins of Fetish Theory

According to, Alphonzo Maurizio Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism* (2016), “Many contemporary philosophers, historians, psychoanalysts, art historians, sociologists, and psychologists have employed the notion of *fetish* or *fetishism*, sometimes drawing on de Brosses, sometimes on Marx and other times on Freud. Still, one of the most substantial contributions to the history of this concept has been made by William Pietz, who recently declared: ‘The continuous changes in the use of this word, the innumerable transmutations of its meaning, represent the most fascinating chapter in the history of theory; a history that keeps unfolding and whose semantics are constantly enriched. Ultimately, this is what happens to every fetish worthy of the name’” (qtd. in Iacono 8,9).

As suggested by this statement about Pietz’s archeology of fetishism, fetish theory presents us with a way of interpreting human behavior and interaction. It is a field that is continually growing, due in part, to the fact that it both recognizes and addresses the idea that semantically, there is always the threat of erasure when dealing with material objects and the meanings that human beings attach to them, but where did the concept of fetish theory originate? Fetishism has its early origins in the Western study of “primitive” religions, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the late 19th century French school of psychiatry. However, the term fetishism first came into usage as Portuguese and Dutch explorers came into contact with West

African religions. They used the term “*fetisso*” in order to describe the seemingly minute, intricate items and religious ornaments that they would collect from the West African indigenous traders (Pietz and Apter). As a theoretical concept the term “fetishism” was first coined in 1757 by Charles de Brosses in his *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760) (Pietz and Apter). Some sources cite Alfred Binet as being the first to coin the term “fetishism” (Steele; Macey), but Binet’s essay “Le fétichisme dans l’amour” wasn’t written until 1887. According to Pietz “Historians of religion around the turn of the century, especially Germans such as Christoph Meiners and Philipp Christian Reinhard, but also French writers such as J.A. Dulare, discussed fetishism extensively as the earliest stage of religion” (Pietz and Apter 131). “This notion of the fetish worshiper’s desire-driven delusion regarding natural objects, his blindness to the unprovidential randomness of physical events, was an element in de Brosses’s original theorization of fétichisme as the pure condition of un-enlightenment” (Pietz and Apter 136).

Another influential early text came in the 1840s from the founder of sociology, August Comte, who according to Pietz “published a theory of fetishism so elaborate and so important to his theory of positivism that subsequent writers in the emerging social sciences were forced to react ...” (131, 2). Comte’s views on fetishism led to other sociological theories that relied heavily on the ethnographic documentation of indigenous groups. Studies such as these sought to relegate fetishism to ancestor worship, kinship organization, and totemism—as a way of preserving and perpetuating the colonialists’ mission (Pietz and Apter). Karl Marx in 1824, drawing from previous conceptions of fetishism, established his own theory, which Pietz discusses extensively in “Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx” (1993). According to Pietz, Marx defined fetishism as “the religion of sensuous desire” (Pietz 133).

Marxian fetishism sought to explain ways in which labor power, surplus value, and capital (in the form of credit money) operate in a global market economy. Pietz asserts that “The Marxian theory of fetishism may be described as a critical, materialist theory of social desire” (129).

Despite fetishism’s origins in the historical study of religion and early cultural and social sciences, Sigmund Freud remains one of the most widely regarded figures in the field of fetish theory. Sigmund Freud in *Fetishism* (1927) established a psychoanalytic interpretation of fetishism that relies on the ambivalence and disavowal of the child, of which Freud states:

In all cases the meaning and purpose of the fetish turned out under analysis to be the same. It revealed itself so unequivocally and seemed to me so categorical that I should expect the same solution in all cases of fetishism. When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but was afterward lost. That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the purpose of the fetish precisely is to preserve it from being lost. To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego—we know why” (205).

Freudian interpretations of fetishism became popular during the eighteenth century and subsequently helped to fuel the rise of psychoanalysis. As illustrated in the above passage, Sigmund Freud brought forth the argument that the actual act of fetishism is indeed a replacement for the female phallus. According to Freud, the child in a prepubescent state is

faced with the sudden realization that their maternal figure is not what they originally understood her to be—to the child’s own consternation he discovers that his mother is without a penis. This discovery leads the young child to believe that the woman has been castrated and therefore places the ownership of his own penis in jeopardy. The apparent shock of this discovery along with the fear of castration lies at the center of the Freudian psychoanalytic school of fetish theory. When thinking along the lines of psychoanalysis, fetishism may be viewed as a productive act for the fetishist because the fetish replaces something that was once considered a source of security for the male child—the female phallus. One must presuppose in interpreting Freud’s theory that these processes are taking place entirely on subconscious levels, especially in applying them to individual’s lives beyond childhood.

Freud is most often credited with popularizing fetish theory, but historians recognize that the practice came about long before Freud. In the 15th century, Fetishism as a practice, existed as a way of negotiating cultural difference among various groups that encountered one another through trade routes. As E.L. McCallum points out, to us it is “...William Pietz [that has] shown in his extensive discussion of fetishism’s history, [that] the term first came into use in the sixteenth century as Portuguese sailors and West African societies encountered one another and began to establish trade relations; in that context, technological and economic changes were transforming the boundaries that delineated national interests and identities. The term that emerged in this cross-cultural space has accrued significance in a rather astoundingly vast number of contexts: religious, aesthetic, cinematic, commercial, and sexual” (xii). As McCallum explains, traditionally it has always been important for us to consider a multitude of ways in which fetishism may be relevant to society. She asserts that it is the changing social dynamic

that is to blame for fetishism's importance. This also sheds additional light on the significance of Pietz's historical analysis. Through fetishism, social roles which were previously thought of as fixed have come to be unstable, and thus increasingly subject to interpretation. It is this kinetic nature of identities, that according to McCallum, requires us to continue to use fetishism as a lens that will allow us to take a much closer look at the nature of subject-object relations as well as ontological, epistemological, and cultural practices.

Although Freud's early work on fetishism remains highly regarded, many modern scholars view Freud's theory as being problematic, namely because of its inherent contradictions (McCallum; Steele; McClintock). Some feminist scholars such as E.L. McCallum, however, believe that Freud's inherent contradictions only leave room for further interpretation.

An Etymology of Fetishism

According to William Pietz, historically, commodity fetishism is not a concept that may be linked to any one discipline. It emerges in the cross-cultural interstices of the West African coast in the 1400s and it isn't until the twentieth century that it finally gains establishment within the discipline of psychology. Until this point, it is witnessed only in situations involving cultural clash. One of the defining features of the fetish object is its ability to slide semantically, shifting between one mental association and the next. Despite this inherent inability to pin them down semantically, we know that fetish objects mean much more than what initially meets the eye. The etymology of the term fetishism, in many ways, illustrates complications that arise historically, in attempting to determine what the fetish object truly means. Fetishism as a concept first came about in the 15th century as a reaction of Portuguese sailors and merchants to

West African religion. The word, fetishism, took many forms all of which have slightly different meanings. Historically, the terms *fetisso*, *feitico*, *fetiches*, *fétichisme*, and *fetishism* have all been used to denote what may be interpreted as the overvaluation and commodification of material objects. Each of these terms speaks to some aspect of the way that fetish objects are conceptualized today, which also helps to support the notion that the fetishization of firearms in hip-hop music and other areas of culture does not entirely deviate from the way that commodity fetishism has been conceptualized historically. In fact, the direct opposite seems to be the case.

The term *fetisso* is a noun that developed in the 1400s and was used frequently throughout much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It came about as a kind of pidgin language used between Portuguese merchant sailors and West African merchants and vendors who created it, in part, out of necessity, as a way of mediating daily trade relations and interactions. *Fetisso*, as a term and concept, basically described the manner in which personal and communal value was attributed to material objects by the indigenous West African population. Derivatives of this term, *fetisseros*, and *fetisheers* were used to describe African priest that engaged heavily in the practice of attributing religious value to seemingly insignificant trinkets (Pietz). The travel writings of William Smith, published in the 18th century reveal the random nature in which a material object is granted the status of *fetissos*. Smith says:

The most numerous sect [in Africa] are the Pagans, who trouble themselves about no Religion at all; yet every one of them have some Trifle or other, to which they pay a particular Respect, or Kind of Adoration, believing it can defend them from all Danger's: Some have a Lion's Tail, some a Bird's Feather, some a Pebble, a Bit of Rag, a Dog's Leg; or, in short, any Thing they fancy: And this they call their FITTISH, which Word not only signifies the thing worshipped, but

sometimes a Spell, Charm, or Inchantment. To take Fittish, is, to take an Oath; which Ceremony is variously perform'd in several Parts of Guinea (qtd. in Pietz 1988: 109).

In addition to the most trivial of items, European technology was also fetishized by West Africans. This included their navigational instruments, ships, and firearms. According to Pietz, “In his fifteenth-century voyage account, the Venetian merchant, Cadamosto, mentioned that the blacks marveled at the Europeans’ guns and they said they must be ‘an invention of the devil’s” (qtd. in Pietz 1987: 41). European technological advancements were often attributed to the work of the devil or other supernatural forces. Ultimately, it was fetishism that led to the European belief in the African’s ignorance, irrationality, and false sense of causality. Likewise, it was this lack of knowledge of science and technology, and their willingness to easily lend their own sense of physical and emotional autonomy over to material objects that helped to justify slavery in the minds of Europeans. In addition to these external observations, the notion of slavery was supported even further by the trading complications that West African fetishism posed. Certain objects (especially gold) were oftentimes rendered unavailable due to their status as fetishes (Pietz). This aspect of West African/European trade relations made the barter of human beings a much more viable option in the eyes of *fetisheers* and Europeans.

The Portuguese terms *feitico*, *feiticerro*, and *feiticaria* are derived from the Latin adjective *facticius* which originally meant “manufactured.” Like fetisso, this terminology came about as early as 1400. The term *feitico* and its derivatives were used by Portuguese sailors and merchants in order to identify anything that was thought to be associated with witchcraft. This includes things, objects, individuals, and any practice thought to be influenced by superstition in any way. The notion of *feitico* most closely reflects ideas of early Christian theologians on the

subjects of idolatry and superstition (Pietz).

The term *Fetiches* is a verb that was used in reference to the obligatory oaths which came to characterize political and mercantile relations between Portuguese sailors and West African priest and merchants. The practice of engaging in obligatory oaths or “making fetiches” is referenced often in 18th century travel writing literature about Africa. According to William Pietz, “...Europeans noticed that fetishes, with their credulously attributed lethal power, were used in all kinds of ceremonies and formal procedures involving obligatory oaths...” (Pietz 1988: 114). The 18th century travel writings of Willem Bosman reveals the nature of such practices. Bosman writes, “Obligatory Swearing they also call, making of fetiche’s; If any Obligation is to be confirmed, their Phrase is, *let us as a farther Confirmation make Fetiche’s*. [Italics in original text] When they drink the Oath-Draught, ‘tis usually accompanied with an imprecation, that the Fetiche may kill them if they do not perform the Contents of their Obligation” (qtd. in Pietz 1988: 115).

The term *fétichisme*, coined in 1757 by, Burgundian philosopher, Charles de Brosses, provided the medieval Portuguese with a way of characterizing the *feitico* and the *idolo*. *Fétichisme* may be understood as an amalgamation of the two distinct terminology. The *idolo* represents the free standing statue while the *feitico* references the divinity and mysticism attributed to the objects. *Fétichisme* is a term that is meant to depict, in a general sense, both material and terrestrial features of objects (Pietz).

In the 19th century the concept of *fetishism* becomes popularized by way of the fields of psychology, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The founder of modern sociology, August Comte

and Psychologist, Alfred Binet first used the term in reference to the sexual fetish. Later Sigmund Freud was primarily responsible for its designation and association with sexual deviance. The patriarchal theories of Freud firmly established its connection to sexually biased ideologies that heavily informed 20th century views concerning female sexuality and mental illness. Considered by many to be the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud's views concerning fetishism helped to create the institutional construction of the subconscious (Pietz).

The semantic fluidity witnessed in the etymology and history of fetishism can also contribute to modern conceptualizations of the way that fetishism operates. Likewise, the multiplicity of meanings to be negotiated through the fetish object can become even more apparent in examining the semantics of guns in popular culture. The complex nature of fetishism's evolution and history make it almost a necessity for one to indicate what aspect of fetishism one is referring to when referencing a specific instance of the phenomenon. As Pietz asserts, the field of commodity fetishism involves analyzing the fetish object along, at least, four lines of thought. These four separate areas that are unique to the fetish object include: historicization, materiality, territorialization, and personalization, all of which are fields that are visibly represented in examining the fetishization of firearms in folklore and in other areas of popular culture, such as music, and film.

Commodity Fetishism

The most significant component of commodity fetishism is what takes place during the process of exchange. When we buy and sell things we are not exchanging objects we are

exchanging independent values. Every object has a use-value and an exchange-value.

According to Thomas Keenan "...exchange can take place only on the basis of something common to the things (use values) being exchanged, something shared that allows them to be compared, measured, the proportion or relation to be calculated. When things are exchanged as commodities, they are related to each other not as use values but as exchange values..." (Keenan 162). Through the process of exchange, one value is being exchanged or substituted for another, but this cannot happen in the absence of reduction. "No substitution without reduction, without the reduction of the 'manifold ways of using the thing'" (Keenan 163). Of course, the object is not being reduced physically, only the object's exchange-value. The concept of exchanging value is described by Thomas Keenan as a process "...by which one 'part' of the thing has been made to stand in for the whole" (163). This description makes exchange-value synonymous with the way that simile or metaphor works in the process of language creation. The transitory process of exchange has been described by theorists in a number of different ways. Karl Marx spoke in terms of *abstraction* saying that "It is obvious (...) that abstraction from their use-value is precisely what characterizes the exchange relation of commodities" (qtd. in Keenan 164). This process which is essential in the act of exchange is "the erasure of difference in the service of likeness or equality...Abstraction converts the thing from use-value to exchange-value, transforms it 'within' into something exchangeable" (Keenan 165).

In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) Georg Lukács expounds further upon Marx's theory coining the term "reification." It is essentially an aspect of Marxian theory which Lukács emphasizes and then expands. As a result of abstraction human beings and physical human labor

become independent of one another and the very objects that they produce. Lukács says:

Marx describes the basic phenomenon of reification as follows: “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour became commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses...It is only a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (86).

Lukács links the process of reification to objectification and also subjectification. According to him objectification and subjectification can only occur after abstraction has taken place. He says (...) because of this situation a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. There is both an objective and a subjective side to this phenomenon. Objectively a world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market) (...) Subjectively—where the market economy has been fully developed—a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article” (Lukács 87).

Fetishism in its simplest form can be defined as the overvaluation of any object whether

it be material or otherwise. According to E.L. McCallum “The definition of fetishism has consistently boiled down to the use of an object to negotiate (usually binary) differences to achieve an immaterial end, whether it be economic gain, cultural prestige, or psychological satisfaction” (xi). Based on this interpretation of fetishism there is much to be gained from it, at least from the perspective of the fetishist. The gun fetishist’s fixation on guns is primarily a productive thing (for the fetishist at least) although outsider interpretations will almost certainly yield different perspectives. In fact, we know this to be the case when speaking in terms of guns and American male youth. Guns have been a fascination in American culture dating back to the seventeenth century. It is the history of this attraction with guns that we have to turn our attention to in order to better understand why and how guns have become fetish objects among people in society today.

Guns: An American Tradition and Problem

Guns are fetishized not only for what they do, but also because of what they have come to represent. They have become a cultural symbol that embodies many of the characteristics and values that numerous Americans continue to believe are necessary to survive in a culture where agency and autonomy is valued over all other virtues. The ability for one to thrive and determine one’s own fate through the use of firearms has always been an attraction for Americans and even immigrants seeking to come to live in America today. An English colonist writes in 1774 that “There is not a man born in America that does not understand the use of firearms and that well... a gun, is almost the first thing they purchase and take to all the new settlements and in the cities you can scarcely find a lad of 12 years that does not go a Gunning” (qtd. in DeConde 3).

Traditionally, in America the right to own a gun has been a right that has been intrinsically connected to what Alexander DeConde describes as “self-reliant patriotism” and is thus considered one of the most important components of the American constitution. Early English settlers seeking to reestablish themselves in North America depended on the firearm to eventually win the American Revolution. Centuries later, over 600,000 Americans died during the Civil War. What followed the Civil War may be described as the frontier movement in American history (1865-1890) where both White and Black settlers matriculated westward in order to homestead lands which previously belonged to Native tribes. Gun fighting was intrinsic as various groups struggled to carve their own existence into what seemed like free territory. Many died in transition, and racism eventually became prevalent in the West just as it was in the South, but it was Native Americans who nearly became extinct. The firearm was certainly not the blame for casualties. All blame must be placed on the human beings that use them. However, the growing popularity of the firearm was a catalyst that would change the face of the West forever. John E. Lewis, in *The Mammoth Book of the West* (2001) expounds further. “If the frontier mentality had attractive features, it also had ugly aspects. It justified the cleansing of Indians from their lands in the name of Manifest Destiny, and encouraged the cult of the gun, the use of firearms to settle all matters, big or small” (xiii). Since then, new battles have emerged on the American home front and abroad that have changed American’s relationships with one another and also the way that Americans view guns. These battles have not always been of the physical sort. They have also been fought on philosophical fronts. In addition to defining and sustaining a sense of national identity, the gun has also been branded as a source of disagreement

and divergence. The fight over how to interpret the second Amendment, which grants every American citizen the right to bear arms, is one of the most prevalent debates today. The most common question that has emerged in this fight is what should be done when guns fall into the hands of the wrong people? “The wrong people” is a comprehensive term that would most certainly always include children. At an alarming rate guns are being used for purposes that fall outside of the confines of the law. According to Alexander DeConde:

Available statistics tell us that in exercising this alleged right Americans have used guns, particularly in the twentieth century, ‘more often to assault, maim, and kill one another’ than most other peoples in the world. In the 1990s, for instance, Americans killed more people with guns in a typical week than did western Europeans in a whole year. This record stands out because peoples in other technologically advanced countries have not had, and do not have, homicide rates connected to shooting as high as those of Americans. Nor have those countries allowed their citizens to possess firearms with a freedom comparable to that tolerated in the United States. (3)

“With freedom comes great responsibility” is an old saying that effectively characterizes the nature of the problem that DeConde describes. Americans are currently faced with the predicament of deciding how to best regulate the sale and use of firearms, so that they are not illegally obtained or used with harmful intentions. While most would agree that making the country free of gun violence is an impossible task, they would also agree that many of the current statistics on gun violence illustrate a pressing need for law makers to do something to remedy the problem. Some of the most alarming statistics have emerged within the past two decades.

According to Phillip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, authors of *Gun Violence: The Real Cost*, “In 1997, over 32, 000 Americans died of gunshot wounds—more than died from AIDS or liver disease in that year, and in the same ballpark with motor vehicle crashes (42,000). Since 1965 more than *one million* people have been shot and killed, more than the number of Americans killed in all foreign wars combined during the twentieth century (617,000). Our firearms death rate is not the highest in the world—Columbia’s, for example, is higher—but exceeds that of any other developed nation by a wide margin” (16). These findings are comparable to the findings of DeConde. They both seem to highlight the fact that gun violence is a much bigger problem in the United States than in any other western, developed, or technologically advanced nation. Cook and Ludwig seem to add another layer to the equation. They describe a new method of categorization that statisticians have developed in order to account for the overwhelming number of young people that are affected by gun violence in America in relation to other age groups:

Gunshot fatalities impose a disproportionate public-health impact because so many of the victims are young. A measure that takes account of the fact is “years of potential life lost before the age of 65” (YPLL-65). Firearms injury was ranked number four in YPLL-65 during the early 1990s, behind only unintentional injury, cancer, and heart disease.

Actually the Vital Statistics do not usually group gun deaths together; instead they are found with the homicides and suicides (both of which have guns as the agent in the majority of cases) and unintentional deaths. Homicide and suicide each rank among the top four causes of death for youths age 10-34. (16, 17)

Alfred Blumstein, professor of urban systems and operations research at Carnegie Mellon

University, discusses the phenomenon of youth gun violence in “Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime” (2002). According to Blumstein, “The period from 1985 to 2000 saw some sharp swings in the rate of violence in the United States. Much of that swing is attributable to changes in violence committed by young people, primarily against other young people. Beginning in 1985, the rates of homicide and robbery committed by people under age 20 began to rise drastically, as did the use of handguns to commit those crimes” (40). The rapid increase that Blumstein discusses here is followed by a significant decrease in the rates of youth gun violence, but only after they peaked in the early 1990s. However, this decrease does not necessarily signal an approaching end to the growing crime epidemic. In fact, it may only signal a leveling off as lawmakers scrambled to devise and impose stricter gun control laws for youth. Blumstein also explains that other forms of youth gun violence such as school shootings also began to surface during this same era. Our urban male youth may be committing gun crimes at increasingly alarming rates, but contrary to the belief of many experts, it is not chiefly due to a new breed of “super predators” that suffer from nihilism in its most extreme forms. Blumstein recognizes various cultural elements that have also contributed to the rise of juvenile gun violence over the past two decades. Among these elements Blumstein lists, “the rise of illegal drug markets, particularly for crack cocaine, the recruitment of youth into those markets, and an increase in gun carrying among young people” (39). The increase in the number of juveniles that carry weapons is significant because the presence of guns, in most cases, serves as a catalyst that enables juveniles to transition quickly from regular fights with fists to committing sudden homicide. However, it is the prevalence of all of these social variables together that contribute to a rise in

youth gun violence. If current statistics regarding gun violence tell us anything about the society in which we live in, they tell us that the fetishization of guns by juveniles can only be unproductive for young people, and also for American culture as a whole. However, this essentialist argument only includes the outsider perception. For one to see the problem holistically one must, at some point, place the perspective of the fetishist above all other common knowledge. One must be willing to consider ways in which the fetishism of guns can be viewed as a productive act that is in fact beneficial to the life of the fetishist. After all, if the fetishization of guns did not have something to offer the people that engage in it one must assume that they would not do it.

How does one distinguish between a regular object and a fetishized object or, rather, how does one determine if a gun is being fetishized? The difference lies in the way in which the gun is being represented. According to Stuart Hall “Representation connects meaning and language to culture... [and is] an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (1). The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two basic descriptions of representation. It says to represent an object is “... to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses...” (qtd. in Hall 2). A secondary definition describes it as a “...means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for” (qtd. in Hall 2). The first definition focuses on mental imagery or the ability to create an image of something in our minds while the second definition focuses solely on substitution. The order in which they appear insinuates the notion that an image or idea must be created before it can be used to replace another idea. Some

synonyms for representation include the terms: designate, express, typify, and emblemize. Each term is different by measure of form and also by measure of degree, but regardless of what we call it we know that the process of representation involves the use of signs, images, and language (Hall). Likewise, there are two separate systems by which human beings represent ideas, through mental representation and also through language, each constituting separate systems of meaning (Hall). These systems are used together in the act of sign interpretation. French philosopher, Ferdinand de Saussure first conceptualized the sign of which he distinguishes among two different kinds—visual signs and iconic signs. Visual signs are called *iconic signs* while written and spoken signs are labeled *indexical*. “Saussure analyzed the sign into two further elements...the *form* (the actual word, image, photo, etc.), and ...the *idea or concept* in your head in which the form [is] associated. Saussure called the first element the signifier and the second element...the signified” (Hall 16). One important point that Saussure makes is that the relationship between the two is completely arbitrary (Hall).

There are a number of different theoretical approaches which seek to conceptualize the manner in which representation connects meaning and language to culture including: the *reflective* approach, the *intentional* approach, and the *constructionist* approach (Hall). The reflective approach asserts that meaning already exist and that human beings simply reflect preexisting meanings through various forms of communication. The intentional approach asserts that meaning is created by human beings. The most significant approach to cultural studies and also folkloristics, is the constructionist approach, which in some ways may be seen as a combination of the two. “The *Constructionist* theory proposed a complex and mediated

relationship between things in the world, our concepts in thought and language. (...) The correlations between these levels- the material, the conceptual, and the signifying- are governed by our cultural and linguistic codes and it is this set of interconnections which produce meaning” (Hall 20). Other structuralist such as Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes made other contributions to the field of semiology. While some of Baudrillard’s work deals with value and signs, Barthes conceptualizes two separate levels by which we interpret signs, the denotative level and the connotative level. The denotative level refers to a literal level of meaning while the connotative level connects signs to “broader themes and meanings, linking them with...the wider semantic fields of our culture” (Hall 23). Rather than describe things and ideas, the denotative level connects signs to “...realms of social ideology, the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society” (Hall 24).

There is a difference between an object such as a gun being fetishized and simply being represented. As physical objects, guns exist as both iconic signs and indexical signs. This area of fetish theory deals primarily with objects, the representation of objects, and the value that human beings place on material objects. When one sees the same object being represented repeatedly across a number of different mediums one may assert that a greater amount of cultural value is being placed on that particular object, and it is in this sense, that it may be considered to be a fetish object. Baudrillard’s early work on signs (drawing heavily from Marxian commodity fetishism) focuses on what some call the collapse of use-value and exchange-value in commodity items. By way of this process identified by Baudrillard, the object is thought to function as a free

floating signifier that may come to signify an infinite number of things. Regardless of what the object actually signifies we know that as a commodity it stands for something other than what it actually is. As a fetishized object or commodity, firearms operate culturally on connotative levels, denotative levels, and also on ideological levels.

Whereas some of Baudrillard's work combines Saussurian semiology and Marxian commodity fetishism, there are a number of different kinds of fetishism. Some of them are established areas of scholarship implementing a variety of different fields (such as commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism) while others have been written about to a far lesser extent (such as moral fetishism and racial fetishism). To say that one kind of fetishism exist in a particular instance does not exclude other forms of fetishism. In fact, different kinds of fetishism may be present simultaneously or they may even overlap or intersect in different areas. Scholars often engage a number of different areas of fetish theory in order to interpret a single phenomenon involving fetishism. It is a very broad discipline that is still growing and it often intersects with issues concerning power, colonialism, imperialism, race, gender, and sexuality. This is due, at least, in part, to the way that the field has evolved as an area of study.

Contemporary Scholarship

A number of contemporary fetish scholars who have recently made widely regarded contributions to the field of fetish theory are also significant to this study. Among them are E.L. McCallum (1999), Ann McClintock (1995), and Homi Bhabha (1994). These scholars collectively compose an important cornerstone in the study of ways that fetish theory often

intersects with issues concerning power, gender, and race.

Contemporary scholar E.L. McCallum has worked to expand ways in which fetishism had previously been applied. McCallum depicts fetish theory as an epistemic tool that may be used to analyze a wide variety of ideas. McCallum says that her study is “...an effort both to redefine fetishism as an instructive strategy for postmodern thought and to examine the implications fetishism holds for modern assumptions about the nature of the world and its inhabitants. It is a serious effort not just to think *about* fetishism, but more importantly, to think *through* fetishism, using it as a strategic perspective for analyzing assumptions about subjects and objects, desire and knowledge, identity and difference. By positing how a fetishist would look at certain pressing questions of today—such as identity politics, the ways we define gender and other sexual differences, the question of how to know things when there is no absolute standard of truth, or indeed how to read and interpret at all—this analysis hopes to demonstrate fetishism’s epistemological possibilities... (xv). McCallum seeks to expand the epistemic and ontological boundaries of fetish theory.

McCallum also introduces ways in which fetish theory may be used to analyze various aspects of identity and also different kinds of cultural representation. One of the most important aspects of McCallum’s work is the fact that she deviates from the traditional and limited view of fetishism as sexual perversion and discusses it as a modern strategy for understanding human relationships and human’s relationships to material objects. McCallum contends that “By moving away from the notion of fetishism as perversion, we can see more clearly how fetishism

is a subject-object relation that violates the modern, Western assumption that subjects and objects are mutually independent” (xxi). Additionally, McCallum’s perspective of fetish theory allows for many positive outcomes which simply cannot be realized through Freud alone (and other similar perspectives). Elaborating on these aspects McCallum says:

My analysis sprang from observing that fetishism often is used synecdochically to mean any number of things that comprise it: overvaluation, fragmentation, fixation, repudiation of difference, or rigidity. This synecdoche has often occluded the interconnections between these elements and deeper motives in fetishism, some of which are potentially quite productive or interesting. Fetishism, for example, helps a subject negotiate the difference between self and other(s). It is also a strategy for dealing with anxiety and contradiction in order to reach satisfaction. Most importantly, it is a strategy which uses ambivalence in order to achieve a coherent and even creative interpretation. Fetishism is, at heart, a hermeneutic strategy, one which aims to interpret the world by negotiating the difference between self and other. (xv, i)

McCallum begins by discussing the usefulness of Freud’s theory in initiating discussions of binary gender differences and sexuality. McCallum asserts that while Freud was seen as radical in the 19th century his ideas, in many ways, resemble a rather blind allegiance to ideology. While Freud actively interrogates issues of gender and sexuality his conservative commitment to the notion of the fetish as a substitute for the mother’s penis or as a phallus substitute represents a rather dualistic way of thinking. McCallum sees Freud’s interpretation as

limiting because it does not allow for iteration, ambivalence, or *différence*. According to McCallum, meaning is unfixed and Freud's semiological analysis, when interpreted literally, provides a somewhat unrealistic interpretation of subject-object relations. McCallum feels that fetish theory, in and of itself, is a hermeneutic endeavor or one that relies mainly upon the act of interpretation. McCallum sees the need for variability and so, emphasizes the importance of always considering at least two views of the fetish scenario. On the one hand, from an outsider's perspective, fetishism may appear to be an unproductive fixation on material items. On the other hand, from the perspective of the fetishists, fetishism is a process that involves "symbolic exchange, epistemology, and political imagination by virtue of its investment in ambivalence, particularly in the ambivalent tension desire sets up between belief and knowledge" (McCallum 4).

McCallum's ideas are very significant to this study. McCallum is one of the first scholars to illustrate ways that fetish theory may be applicable to any discussion involving human being's relationships to objects. The terms by which we view subject-object relations must be critically analyzed if we are to understand the multitude of ways in which people relate to objects. Historically, people have always viewed subject-object relations in one way; that is subjects create objects and subjects also formulate the roles that these objects play in our lives. This notion is at the heart of western philosophy, but eastern philosophical thought calls for us to take into account the view that subjects relate to objects and also the notion that subjects sometimes believe that these objects possess the ability to relate back (McCallum). It is the reciprocal nature of the subject's exchange with objects that has traditionally separated the "primitive"

societies from those that were once considered “savage.” This one distinction was used to shape the rules of engagement between seemingly incompatible cultures and also as a way to justify imperialist projects that lied ahead for wealthier nations. McCallum depicts fetishism as an important aspect of humanity, moving past Marxian and Freudian interpretations in order to bring us closer to the aspect of fetishism which is most significant; the actual object, in and of itself. By focusing on the object she easily illustrates the plethora of ways that human beings use these objects as ways of negotiating various aspects of their own identities and how these ways are continually changing. McCallum’s views may ultimately help one to consider ways that firearms may mean different things to different people. In other words, her work may help in questioning preconceived notions pertaining to knowledge and belief.

Conceptualizing an epistemological view of fetishism requires us to reevaluate knowledge. Fetishism forces us to think critically about the things which we believe to be true and also the things which we simply want to believe to be true. Thus desire, as an act of will, cannot be entirely alienated from knowledge (McCallum). Additionally, an epistemology of fetishism forces us to unpack the loaded systems of signs which we have always relied on to interpret our own behavior and also the world around us. What has been traditionally regarded as signifier and signified may take on new meanings and also new levels of importance in the process of interpretation. In many cases, fetishism reassigns boundaries that serve as important social markers making it necessary for us to think critically about the multitude of elements that we depend on as identity markers. Elements such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, and gender become disengaged from notions which were previously thought of as fixed. The process of rethinking

identity and also how we view objects serves to elucidate entirely new systems of meaning. The role that desire plays in this thought process is a prominent one. Desire along with a belief in knowledge makes an epistemology of fetishism possible. Fetishism tells us that what we know to be true has the ability to falter. More specifically, what we recognize as true regarding objects, how we identify objects, and how we choose to relate to objects is in a constant state of flux. It is this state of iterability which allows the fetishists to retain a sense of agency. This is also one of the reasons why fetishism may be viewed as positive or productive for the fetishists. According to McCullum:

...a fetish object...could produce, through iteration, a subject with confidence and a stronger sense of self in the face of the threat of loss—of death, obsolescence, or waning prestige. But because the investment is in an object with its independent existence, the renewed fetish subject will never be confused with the object the way the man of genius is conflated with genius. The fetish relation holds the elements apart...with its meanings, remains distinct from the owner. This is similar to how, as a paraphilia, fetishism throws sexual difference into sharper relief against the norm of heterosexual subject-subject relations. (150)

Many theorists would agree that fetishization or the overvaluation of material objects is an innate human quality, but objects in turn have to mean something and they also have to contribute some value to our lives. *The Fetishization of Firearms in African-American Folklore and Culture* is an interdisciplinary cultural study that is intended to examine what guns mean to human beings. It seeks to interrogate the value that people place on these deadly weapons across

a variety of mediums including, film, folklore, and music. We know that firearms serve a multitude of different purposes in our society. They are often used for sport and recreational purposes, as well as for protection, and for this reason, they may always be viewed as a necessity. Guns are also a very significant aspect of the way that human beings express themselves, and entertain one another, but what is so fascinating about these objects? In folklore, music, literature, and film, guns are often the main source of action; the good guys shoot at the bad guys, and the bad guys shoot back while spectators look on in amazement. In film, guns frequently help to facilitate the dramatic action packed sequences that many people enjoy watching (for example, most people can easily visualize scenes from the *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator* franchises that collectively span the 1980s through the present). For some individuals, many famous scenes from films such as these have become cemented in their minds forever. The images of guns that we are exposed to in our lifetimes serve to cultivate cognitive connections to firearms that influence us in many different ways. Additionally, in folklore, guns frequently contribute to the rising action or dénouement. Guns in folklore are often very significant in terms of overall plot development, but they may also contribute in aesthetic ways as well. Whether it is the .44 Smith and Wesson of Stagolee narratives, or assault rifles like the ones that are frequently used in some action films, the make and model of gun that is featured is often very important. Certain makes and models often come to signify important characters in folklore and in film. The audiences generally find out what guns mean to the characters involved in plots and narratives, but how do we begin to understand the possible influences that gun imagery may have on the diverse audiences that consume these images on a daily basis. One

place to start is with the very idea of representation. Analyzing some of the ways that guns are represented across different mediums may help us to understand how people interpret the messages that they are exposed to, and also how people view firearms in reality. More emphasis must be placed on distinguishing between the utilitarian functions of guns (i.e. protection and recreation) and ways in which firearms function on symbolic levels. In the symbolic realm guns may symbolize a seemingly unlimited number of things and ideas. What are some of these ideas? And how are the cognitive associations and connections transferable to the corporeal world? This study seeks to explore these questions and ideas primarily through the use of folklore and fetish theory.

In addition to McCallum, McClintock also makes important contributions to the field of fetish theory that are significant to this study. McClintock forces us to reevaluate the roles that racial fetishism plays in acts of colonialism. The work of McClintock (1995), focuses on many of the cultural implications of fetishism. This is significant to the study of firearms because it illustrates how fetishization can embody a number of ideological ideals simultaneously. McClintock reveals how concepts such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, Victorian purity, colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism may become intertwined with the fetish object. McClintock says,

(...) I argue, nationalism inhabits the realm of fetishism. Despite the commitment of European nationalism to the idea of the nation-state as the embodiment of rational progress, nationalism has been experienced and transmitted primarily through fetishism—precisely the cultural form that the Enlightenment denigrated as antithesis of

Reason. More often than not, nationalism takes shape through the visible, ritual organization of fetish objects—flags, uniforms, airplane logos, maps, anthems, national flowers, national cuisines and architecture as well as through the organization of collective fetish spectacle—in team sports, military displays, mass rallies, the myriad forms of popular culture and so on. Far from being purely phallic icons, fetishes embody crises in social value, which are projected onto and embodied in, what can be called impassioned objects” (374,5).

In applying this concept to firearms, one may envision ways in which firearms, as fetishized objects, are often used as vehicles in the reproduction of important social and cultural ideals. This knowledge effectively helps us in redirecting our focus from the object and the individual to the broader implications that the fetishized object may have on particular subgroups and cultures. Thus throughout this work my aim is to continually consider ways that the fetishization of firearms may illustrate ways that people express many of the ideological values that are addressed throughout McClintock’s work. One of these ideals is imperialism. According to McClintock “...imperial power emerged from a constellation of processes, taking haphazard shape from myriad encounters with alternative forms of authority, knowledge, and power. I am thus deeply interested in what Gilroy calls ‘the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by agents.’ Imperialism was a situation under constant contest, producing historical effects that were neither predetermined, uncontested nor ineradicable—in the context, it cannot be forgotten, of extreme imbalances of power” (16). McClintock forces us to acknowledge the role of power imbalances in fetish

formation. The firearm is of particular interest in this investigation because it is an object that easily evokes images of social unrest and discontent. Thus, when one sees guns depicted in folklore, film, music, and other areas in the twenty-first century it is important to consider the extent to which the firearm, as a cultural symbol, may be viewed as an accident of slavery or a symbol that is clearly rooted in colonialism and imperialism, and yet is still accepted and reproduced on a mass scale even by cultural groups that have been negatively impacted by this symbol the most. As a historical byproduct of expansionism and colonization, the gun, in all of its symbolic forms, may be indicative of what James C. Scott (1990) calls “hidden transcripts” or cultural symbols that collectively speak against the imperialistic or colonial powers that be, as acts of insubordination. This idea helps one to see ways in which the gun, as signifier, may be a significant aspect of anti-colonial and anti-imperial projects. In this study, I seek to investigate the possibilities of this phenomenon across a number of different areas.

The work of Homi Bhabha (1994), like McClintock, forces us to reconsider the role that fetishism plays in postcolonial thinking. Utilizing many important concepts from fetish theory, Bhabha focuses on ways that fetishism connects race to culture. Additionally, Bhabha’s focus on semantic instability allows one to visualize fetishization in new ways. Bhabha helps us to understand how meaning becomes inscribed to fetish objects. He describes in detail some of the different processes by which this phenomenon may take place and in doing so he also helps one to consider the many different racial implications of fetishism (i.e. the notions of *stereotype*, and *hybridity*). This is crucial as we seek to understand ways that the fetishization of firearms may be instrumental in the construction of ethnic identity. Bhabha shows us the significance of

stereotyping in the creation of cultural identity. According to Bhabha "...the stereotype...is a [discursive strategy that is also] a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be repeated..." (94,5). Bhabha's focus on the repetitive nature of the stereotype allows one to consider the possibility that cultural messages may be reinforced, in part, through stereotypes pertaining to African-Americans and firearms. Bhabha does not allow us to forget the fact that the most significant aspects of this process are the modes of (i.e. reification, iteration, ambivalence, subjectification, etc.) by which stereotypes undergo inscription. These terms have become germane to fetish theory and for this reason these concepts will also become relevant at various points throughout this study.

The very idea that guns, as cultural symbols, may be used to formulate a kind of cultural identity forces one to consider the idea that the fetishization of firearms may be indicative of a number of mimetic cultural processes. If this is the case one must also consider the possibility of the fetishization of firearms being an aspect of what Bhabha calls *hybridity*. According to Bhabha "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (159). For Bhabha, hybridity is not equal to difference or the kind of difference that one witnesses in cultural relativism. Hybridity

is instead, a kind of colonial representation that involves the individuation of the colonial subject which ultimately displaces its position within the dominant discourse. Bhabha states that “The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism (...) do not simply or singly refer to a ‘person’, or a dialectical power struggle between self and other, or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the reference of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid” (159). What Bhabha is describing is a situation in which the colonized subject occupies a different kind of in-between space or liminal territory. With hybridity, the break is not a temporal one, but a division involving representation and meaning. The position of interstitiality occupied by the colonial subject is one that projects the image of both colonizer and colonized, not in one unified act of symbolism, but in a partially dichotomized, partially adherent representation—what Bhabha calls a “hybrid.” This hybrid projects a distorted view of both subject and object and according to Bhabha “It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversions that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (159, 60). The hybridized colonial subject possesses a Manichean need for power. Despite the fact that this intrinsic desire is derived from its colonial source it still forces one to reevaluate both the colonial subject and the powers that created it. Bhabha’s discussions concerning stereotype and hybridity also forces

us to investigate possible connections among the ideas of power, cultural identity, and agency; all of which may be central to understanding ways that firearms function as cultural symbols.

E.L. McCallum, Anne McClintock, and Homi Bhabha all represent important cornerstones in fetish scholarship, post-colonial studies, and in all matters pertaining to race, gender, cultural identity, and power. For this reason, some of their theoretical underpinnings will serve as underlying threads that connect the chapters of this work. They are mentioned in the introduction, in part, due to the fact that so many other scholars that discuss matters of race, ethnicity and gender have implemented their ideas. They may be considered cultural catalyst in that they are responsible for initiating many discussions pertaining to culture and identity and they also often provide one with new modes of understanding cultural phenomena.

Folkloristics

Each of the four chapters are organized in such a way that it reveals some aspect of fetish theory as well as explores some aspect of the representation of African-American people. Each chapter also deals, in some way, with the juxtapositioning of *esoteric* and *exoteric* forms of representation. In folkloristics, these terms represent two competing styles as William Hugh Jansen explains. “The esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself and what it supposes others think of it. The exoteric is what one group thinks of another and what it thinks the other group thinks it thinks” (206,7). The esoteric-exoteric concept in folkloristics is basically an attempt to conceptualize dynamics involved in insider versus outsider forms of group representation. The concept applies to implicitly held and explicitly expressed views concerning

race and ethnicity. According to Jansen “It is perfectly possible for the esoteric beliefs of a group to be unconsciously held. On the other hand, depending upon isolation, communication, and the like, it is equally possible for a group to know the exoteric concepts held about it and either to reject those concepts or to recognize them tolerantly” (207). In addressing a different realm of representation, each chapter is simultaneously addressing a different aspect of cultural perceptions of race, class, and gender as they pertain to African-Americans. Thus fetish theory is paired with a specific aspect of depictions of African-Americans in culture, folklore, music, and film. Additionally, addressed are ways in which firearms have become integral to these portrayals of black people.

Other aspects of folkloristics that will be applied are literary folkloristics and some other performance based theories that have been derived from Sandra Dolby Stahl (1989), Richard Bauman (1986) and other folklorists. This study will examine some personal narrative and a number of song lyrics each of which may be best interpreted and analyzed through the lenses of literary folkloristics, performance based folklore theories, and other concepts which may be applicable to all forms of folklore. In applying concepts from folkloristics and other areas, I aim to illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of folkloristics. Concepts that are considered to be from within the field of folklore and those which are considered to lie outside of the sphere of folkloristics (such as fetish theory or psychology) may be used and applied in concert for the purpose of better understanding the same kinds of phenomena. Another idea that I aim to illustrate is that the majority of the ideas are not entirely separate and they often provide one with ways of understanding different perceptions from one’s own.

Chapter Organization

The first chapter entitled “Firearms and Commodity Fetishism at an All-Male Juvenile Correctional Facility in Tucson Arizona and in Hip-Hop” uses fetish theory to analyze ways that firearms are depicted in a particular sub group of males that are housed in a juvenile detention center, and in a number of hip-hop lyrics from various songs. This is done primarily through the lens of Marxian commodity fetishism. Based on a qualitative study conducted by Bernard E. Harcourt *The Language of the Gun: Youth, Crime and Public Policy* (2006), this chapter seeks to uncover some of the possible ways that the fetishization of firearms among this isolated sub group of teens may be similar to the way that firearms are fetishized in some hip-hop music. This side by side comparison also seeks to gain a better grasp of the extent of the influence that music may have on young males.

Hip-hop artists, including those that wear the label “gangster,” reach a diverse range of audiences world-wide, and some listeners are young and impressionable. Law professor, Bernard E. Harcourt, interviews dozens of youth at the Catalina Mountain juvenile correctional facility in Tucson Arizona in order to find out more about how guns have influenced their lives. He ultimately finds out that the majority of their lives have been impacted by guns in some way. Harcourt’s subjects range from 12 to 17 years of age and the group is culturally mixed or heterogeneous. The marginal range of variety among Harcourt’s participants is overshadowed by the fact that they come from similar backgrounds, they are also incarcerated for similar crimes, and the majority of them express similar worldviews (as indicated in many of their responses).

Commodity fetish theory is very important in this chapter, due to the fact that hip-hop (more specifically the gangster rap genre), as a musical art form, is heavily influenced by capitalism. In fact, the forces of corporate capital investment are at least partially responsible for its growth as a popular American musical art form and its continued success. One of the major drawbacks of capitalism in the hip-hop industry is the marginalization of some hip-hop sub genres, some of which may be considered more socially and culturally conscious forms of rap. Gangster rap music has been widely criticized for being hyper-masculine, misogynistic, materialistic, and violent. Many proponents of gangster rap argue that the music primarily depicts the dangerous and hostile environments that many gangster rap artists either grew up in or were exposed to at early ages. Furthermore, many proponents of gangster rap music also feel that the music reflects a social reality that many Americans are reluctant to accept, which is the fact that the environments depicted across many gangster rap songs also produce countless numbers of troubled youth, some of which share a number of similarities to the youth in Harcourt's study. All in all, capitalism may connect the youth in Harcourt's study to gangster rap music in ways that may overextend the scope of this particular project, but the goal of this chapter is to establish some of those connections.

The second chapter, "The Sexual Fetishization of Firearms in 'Harlem Nights' and 'A Rage in Harlem'" draws primarily from the psychoanalytic and feminist schools of fetish theory due to their strong influence in the field. This chapter also draws heavily from the area of film studies in order to place the films into some kind of historical context against white films and films that are considered mainstream. It also combines folkloristics with film theory in order to

analyze ways that firearms, in the act of dueling, are used to negotiate gender, race, and sexuality in the films “Harlem Nights” (1989) and “A Rage in Harlem” (1991). “Harlem Nights,” a film that is staged during the Harlem Renaissance is about a club owner, Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor), who with the help of his adopted son, Quick (Eddie Murphy), turn a small hole in the wall club into an elaborate club, casino, and brothel. At the height of their success it becomes the center of night life in Harlem. Due to their fortune and fame, Sugar Ray and Quick face threats from both the Italian mob and a racist police department who conspire with one another to kill Quick in order to steal Sugar Ray’s money and growing clientele. Using a network of forces made up of business conglomerates and club patrons they are ultimately able to outsmart all of their foes and leave Harlem wealthy. While the film romanticizes 1930s Harlem, it also seeks to address the issue of racism in a realistic fashion. It illustrates the nature of segregation in 1930s Harlem. While schools and businesses were heavily segregated due to redlining and other measures, Harlem night life was largely mixed, due to the droves of people from all parts of the world that would come to absorb the music and dance. The film also illustrates the measures that white club owners and the police force were willing to take in order to intimidate black entrepreneurs. They were willing to use both physical force and a number of other coercive tactics in order to strip blacks of their wealth and political influence. Although, the film addresses serious social issues it is also extremely comedic. The film is written, produced, and directed by Eddie Murphy, a popular comedian who gained most of his fame and popularity during the early 1980s. It also stars a number of other important comedians and actors (i.e. Redd Foxx and Robin Harris) who collectively helped to shape the face of black entertainment in the Twentieth century.

“A Rage in Harlem” (1991), based on a Chester Himes novel of the same name, is also staged in 1930s Harlem. It is about a gang of bandits from Mississippi who steal a trunk full of gold with plans of taking it to Harlem in order to sell it. At the center of the plot is a love story between the two main characters, Jackson (Forest Whitaker) and Imabelle (Robin Givens). Ultimately, they both fall in love after Imabelle chooses to live with Jackson in order to seek refuge from Slim, her violent ex-boyfriend. Before they can truly enjoy a life together, Jackson must wrestle her away from the grip of this sinister figure multiple times, risking his life and the lives of others in the process.

As stated previously, this chapter incorporates fetish theory primarily from the psychoanalytic and feminist schools of thought, largely because these areas have proven to be relevant to sexual fetish theory, but it also draws from film studies as well. The perspective of film scholars such as Christopher Sieving *Soul Searching* (2011) and others are used in order to place the films in their own historical context. Additionally, some theoretical ideas from Jeffrey A. Brown *Dangerous Curves* (2011) are used in order to illustrate ways that firearms are often fetishized in ways that often help to negotiate gender, sexuality, and also ethnicity.

The third chapter “Racial Fetishism and Firearms in Stagolee Narratives” focuses on ways that firearms are fetishized in narratives about Stagolee. My main argument is that firearms are often fetishized as a way of negotiating race and ethnicity although other definitive elements such as gender and sex must be examined in the process. Stagolee narratives, at the height of their popularity in the early twentieth century were circulated by African-Americans primarily in the form of folktales and toasts. Stagolee is viewed largely as an anti-hero and as a

Manichean version of white outlaw heroes such as Jesse James.

In this way, Stagolee may be viewed as what Bhabha calls a cultural hybrid in that he embodied values (such as self-reliance and individualism) that were visible in both white and black cultures. Throughout Stagolee narratives guns and the violence that guns are used to precipitate are fetishized in ways that may also allow Stagolee to be viewed as a device created for the purpose of restoring a sense of agency and autonomy to an African-American population that frequently faced the threats of racism and lynching throughout the Reconstruction era. Stagolee illustrates ways that black stereotypes can be utilized in ways that work against colonial powers. For these reasons, much of Homi Bhabha's discussion pertaining to the racial fetishization of stereotypes will be relevant as well as some of McClintock's discussions concerning race and imperialistic violence.

The fourth chapter "Guns, Loss, and Racial Identity in Blues Lyrics" is about the way that guns and gun violence is used to negotiate issues pertaining to loss and racial identity in blues lyrics. In this chapter, blues lyrics, and performer narratives from Eric Sackheim's *The Blues Line: Blues Lyrics from Lead Belly to Muddy Waters* (1969) are investigated for evidence of firearm fetishization. In blues lyrics, when guns are mentioned, they are often used as a way of negotiating a form of loss. They may be used to negotiate a loss of love, or from a socio-cultural perspective, guns may also be used as a way of reflecting a grave sense of loss communally felt by African-Americans after suffering countless numbers of lynchings and racial injustices from the time of slavery through the Reconstruction era. In some of the blues lyrics,

gun violence may be depicted as the only available course of action in the face of danger. Some of the personal narratives in Eric Sackheim's *The Blues Line* reflect this phenomenon. Many of the blues lyrics in Sackheim's collection were written and performed in the early Twentieth century, a time when racial violence had reached its peak in America.

The chapters and topics are assorted and presented in this fashion in order to provide a depiction of how the gun fetish may function in a number of different realms. Another goal of the work is to illustrate some ways that the fetishization of firearms in the various realms may also influence one another to varying degrees as well. Firearms may be fetishized in a number of different ways and although I focus primarily on one kind of fetishism in each chapter a number of different kinds of fetishism may be present in any particular instance of fetishism. My aim is to at least uncover some of them in every chapter.

Finally, *The Fetishization of Firearms in African-American Folklore and Culture* is about human-object relationships, human-human relationships, and humanity's position in relation to society and history. An inherent idea in this work is that the areas of folkloristics and fetish theory can be combined in order to better understand African-American culture and aspects pertaining to the representation of African-Americans from a cultural and historical perspective. This is due to the fact that fetish theory, in and of itself, is critical to the way that human beings conceptualize their relationships to objects and their relationships to other people. In approaching the representation of African-American people it is important to be able to

conceptualize ways in which perceptions of race and ethnicity may have been effected by social, cultural, political, and historical forces. Fetish theory is instrumental in taking such an approach.

Chapter One: Commodity Fetishism and Firearms among Juveniles at an All-Male Correctional Facility in Tucson Arizona and in Hip-Hop

The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the gray light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white. And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him. It was a big gun, with a long barrel and a heavy handle. He raised and lowered it in his hand, marveling at its weight. (Wright 376,7)

The above passage from *The Man Who Was Almost a Man*, a short story, written by Richard Wright in 1940, depicts an African-American juvenile male, Dave Saunders, who fetishizes firearms. By fetishization, I mean that Wright's narrative illustrates the way that guns are sometimes used by African-American males as a way of negotiating a number of different definitive aspects of identity including: age, ethnicity, and gender. It depicts an ongoing inherent struggle within the main character for power, agency, and autonomy in a racist environment that systematically denies all of these things to him, his family, and his black ancestors. In Wright's short story, the gun is depicted as an invaluable commodity, and to the main character of the story, its ownership is primarily viewed as a rite of passage. In *The Man Who Was Almost a Man*, the gun represents independence, freedom, and also black masculinity. The small pistol that Saunders purchases for only two dollars is meant to remedy the oppression felt by himself and by many other blacks in the South during the Reconstruction era. It is Saunder's solution to being forced to work all day in sweltering heat for little pay. It is his answer to the numerous

beatings and frequent disrespect that he has endured as a seventeen-year-old sharecropper on a small farm. On a macroscopic level, Saunder's firearm is a response to centuries of systematic assault and abuse on black bodies under slavery and a racist legal system. In *The Man Who Was Almost a Man*, the gun did not resolve any of Saunder's problems, it only made his problems much worse, and ultimately led to his undoing. What Wright depicts in 1940 is a phenomenon that is all too common, even in today's society. Many young African-American males are incarcerated for gun related offences and as Harcourt (2003; 2006) demonstrates, the reason behind youth gun possession is often a need for power, autonomy, and respect. This chapter seeks to explore the growing epidemic of the fetishization of firearms in two areas, at an all-male juvenile correctional facility in Tucson, Arizona (which is the subject of Bernard E. Harcourt's case study) and in hip-hop music. This is done primarily through the lenses of folkloristics and commodity fetishism.

Characterizing the Commodity

Commodity fetishism has been described as "An extreme form of alienation induced by the structures of commodity-exchange in capitalist society. (...) The social characteristics of human labour thus take on the appearance of objects that appear to exist independently of social relations, whilst the products of labour appear to possess magical properties that bear no relationship to the labour that produces them. The characteristics of labour appear to be the natural properties of objects" (Macey 67).

Karl Marx developed his theory of commodity fetishism in order to explain the global

market system and capital accumulation. According to Marx the buying and selling of goods involve a number of ephemeral processes that can only be interpreted as fetishism. Marx believed that “A fetish is an object invested with supernatural powers by those who worship it; Marx holds that the commodities that are exchanged in a capitalist economy are invested with similar magical powers and an illusory autonomy” (Macey 67,8). Much of what Marx knew regarding fetishism came from nineteenth-century European attitudes towards African religions (Macey). Marx’s exposure to religious philosophy is clearly visible in an 1842 newspaper article in which Marx describes fetishism as “the religion of sensuous desire” (qtd. in Pietz 1993: 133). According to William Pietz, “In his mature thought, Marx understood ‘capital’ to be a species of fetish (...) The truth of capital for Marx, is found in its social essence as an organizing principle, as the universal form for social processes aiming at the formation and accumulation of precisely this sort of materialized value: that odd type of ‘sensuous supersensuous thing’ called capital” (Pietz 1993: 129,30). Thinking in terms of commodity fetishism may help us to understand ways that firearms function as commodities in society.

Harcourt’s Case Study

For examples of male juveniles who fetishize guns it would be useful to turn our attention to *Language of the Gun: Youth, Crime, and Public Policy* (2006) which explains and analyzes a case study performed by Bernard E. Harcourt, Professor of Law at the University of Chicago. Harcourt’s case study was performed in the Fall of 2000 at The Catalina Mountain School which is located in the scenic Catalina Mountain foothills twelve miles north of Tucson, Arizona. The

school is very secluded and is surrounded by the hot and dry Sonoran Desert. Even though it is a correctional facility the place is much better than what most people imagine when they think of incarceration. At CMS, all of the students are required to attend classes and abide by strict curfews. The school grounds are very neat, clean, and well-kept. The students are even forced to wear uniforms, grey khakis and white shirts. There are also a number of armed security guards that patrol the school grounds around the clock. The facility is owned and operated by the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections. Harcourt's case study involves interviews with thirty of over 150 young males between the ages of 12 and 17 that call CMS home. The juveniles are being incarcerated mainly for the recidivism of charges that include, "...burglary, robbery, auto theft, drug possession and sale, firearm possession, criminal damage, running away, and curfew violations" (2003: 69). The young men have not been convicted of felony charges such as murder or armed robbery for if they had been they would have been tried as adults and sent to adult prisons to serve out their sentences. Everyone is released from CMS once they reach the age of 18 (Harcourt).

Harcourt's main focus is on what he calls "the semiotics of the gun" (2003: 70). He is concerned with the symbolic meanings of the gun and how these assigned meanings work to shape the lives of youth. Harcourt feels that understanding more about the way young people feel about guns can help us to better manage the problem of gun violence among youth. Furthermore, he hopes that research of this nature will be beneficial in the future for things such as restructuring laws and also planning public policy. The endless possibilities of studies of this kind become even more apparent when one takes into account the fact that of the thirty students

that were interviewed, eighty-seven percent of them admitted to possessing a gun at some point in their lives. Seventy-seven percent of them admitted to carrying a gun on their actual persons, and sixty-three percent of them admitted to having an extensive background involving both gun possession and gun carrying. Surprisingly, the majority of these respondents were incarcerated for non-gun related offenses (Harcourt 2003; 2006). If the criminal justice system is not effectively detecting gun usage among youth, then studies such as Harcourt's may mediate between the court system and the young people that are impacted the most by gun violence.

Harcourt used a method of systematic random sampling to choose his respondents¹. He then conducts semi-structured interviews of thirty detainees. The interview process begins with a set of free association prompts and then the students are shown 3 color pictures of handguns that come from the Nov-Dec issue of *American Handgunner*. The first photo is of an HS 2000 full-size 9mm service pistol from I.M. Metal of Croatia. Harcourt describes it as "a polymer semiautomatic, black plastic-looking pistol that resembles closely a Glock or SIG 9mm" (2003:70). The second photo is of a Para-Ordinance P-14 LDA. It is described as a "full-size .45 semiautomatic pistol with a five-inch barrel" (2003:70). The third photo is of a Smith and Wesson .45 Colt CTG revolver (Harcourt). The free association prompts that are provided to students include: "What are you thinking of right now?" "What are the first experiences that these guns remind you of?" and "What do these guns make you think of?" (2003:70). By posing

¹ Harcourt's respondents range from 12 to 17 years of age and represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds including Mexican, Irish-American, and African-American. They also come from various regions around the U.S.

free association prompts, Harcourt is also able to collect a lot of information regarding their histories with guns including: ways in which they used guns, how often they carried guns, their attitudes towards guns, the attitudes that their peers have towards guns, how they obtained the weapons, and also what the guns actually mean to them in terms of symbolism.

In analyzing Harcourt's qualitative data, it is clear that many of the student's strongly identify in various ways with the images of guns that they are shown. The statements that many of the student's make can easily be interpreted as evidence of fetishism. Harcourt never explicitly applies fetish theory, but his language and data clearly indicate that for the students, guns are much more than simply material objects. This is especially evident in Harcourt's closing remarks. "Guns are...deeply fascinating objects of desire to the male youths detained at the Catalina Mountain School. They hold a surprisingly powerful grip over these youths. They generate deep passion. They are seductively dangerous" (2003:88). Harcourt stops short of applying fetish theory in his study; however, it is evident that fetish theory could help to better illuminate the roles that guns play in the lives of the youth—more specifically the roles that they play in the formation of identity and also in subject-subject interactions.

Economic Determinism

One aspect of commodity fetishism that may be useful in determining the roles that firearms play in the lives of youth is economic-determinism. Evaluating the role that economic-determinism plays in Marxian commodity fetishism may help to conceptualize the youth's position as consumers in a global market economy, a market that they have no influence or

control over. It may also help us to better understand how the juveniles see themselves with respect to society. When they carry guns, commit crimes with firearms, or use guns as barter, to what degree are they acting as autonomous and free-willed individuals, and to what extent are the youth simply fulfilling predetermined roles as microcosms of a global market system of exchange?

According to Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari, “Economic determinism, as an essentialist discourse is based on a translation: the translation of a discursive privilege that Marx gave to the concept of labor and to the concept of an economic process into an ontological claim about the universality—the historical eternity and all-pervasiveness—of labor and economy” (194). The inherent deterministic nature of commodity fetishism identifies the consciousness of human agents as products of objectification. They are objectified in the process of commodity circulation and this in turn creates a kind of false consciousness that is dictated by “universal relations described by the law of value. (...) Since producers do not come into contact with each other except through the process of circulation, the law of value can assert itself only by reference to commodities as objects of circulation and of production, that is, by reference to ‘things’ and through a consciousness of reification” (195,6). What this means in reference to the juveniles at the Catalina Mountain School is that we often forget or ignore the fact that as consumers they are alienated from all means of production and more than likely have little knowledge of production processes. Based on Marxist theory being alienated from modes of production has a profound impact on us as consumers. Furthermore, as reified agents in a global market economy they are not consuming goods from a needs based perspective, but from a

perspective in which the human and social element is under a constant and pervasive form of erasure. The effects of this erasure ultimately impacts the way that consumers identify themselves. The economic deterministic interpretation argues that “the self-identification of economic agents as private individuals derives from a structurally produced inability of these agents to recognize their true social nature, which consists of their essential constitution by the social function of commodity circulation as a distribution of labor time” (196). Consumers can only conceptualize their own existence by way of this false-consciousness which renders them oblivious to the socially constructed nature of their very own consumer needs.

In Marxist commodity fetishism false-consciousness is the product of economic-determinism, but the critique of economic determinism is “...a call for Marxist discourse to adopt a theoretical strategy that does not hinder analyses of the cultural and political as well as economic constitution of such forms of social agency as individuality—a theoretical strategy that would challenge the discursively produced determinist instinct to dismiss the concept of the individual as a figment of the bourgeois imagination” (Amariglio and Callari 197). Some feel that Marx’s discourse on commodity fetishism is too far reaching and that the all-encompassing abstraction of values involved in commodity fetishism cannot be the only driving force involved behind the global market economy. In fact, Francis Mulhern is one who believes that this is due to flawed logic in Marx. Mulhern says “Yes, fetishism is a disposition inhering in the structure of commodity exchange; yes, the potential for it is everywhere in the ensemble of exchanges; and it may be that the system as a whole promotes the fetishism of money. But none of these propositions is sufficient for the argument that commodity fetishism is general and necessary in

conditions of regular commodity production” (486). According to Mulhern, fetishism may be the case in some instances, but it simply cannot be the case in all forms of market exchange. Regardless of whether fetishism is an inherently necessary component of capitalism or not, Mulhern feels that we need to have a way of determining exactly when and why it may or may not be the case. Mulhern is certainly entitled to her critique of economic determinism, but what if extremity in Marxist discourse is the point, and we simply can’t be cognizant of fetishism’s limitations, boundaries, or the full impact that it has on the global market economy?

One thing that we can be certain of is that commodity fetishism is a powerful force that has a lot of influence on the ways that human beings think and interact with one another. In thinking critically about the language that Harcourt’s respondents use when speaking about guns, it becomes evident that the students at the Catalina Mountain School see guns as fetish objects. Aside from the traditional materialistic forms², the guns (in and of themselves), are also viewed as: protectors (in a supernatural sense), feminized sexual objects, currency (in the form of exchange-value), and also death. Simultaneously, the students also use the gun to negotiate various aspects of their own identities—aspects such as gender, sex, and also group affiliation. In these ways the gun fetish may be viewed as being productive even if only for the fetishist (McCallum; Steele).

² In *Language of the Gun* (2006) Harcourt identifies three clusters of primary meanings of guns, they are action/protection, commodity/dislike, and recreation/respect. The action/protection cluster carries with it the associated meanings of protection, danger, attraction, power, showing off, and fun. The commodity/dislike cluster carries the associated meanings of commodity and dislike. Finally, the recreation/respect cluster carries the associated meanings of recreation, respect, self-defense, suicide, and tool.

Some of the respondents see guns as both protector and protection as if guns are being regarded as religious idols. According to one respondent it is inevitable that one will be harmed or killed without one. One youth says “Trouble come automatically when you don’t have a gun” (2003:71). He sees the gun as protection, but he also seems to ascribe some element of the supernatural to guns. In order to avoid harmful situations, one must be “strapped” at all times as if the very act of carrying the weapon is the protection in and of itself. No further action is required on the part of the owner. It is as if the gun were actually alive. The gun is afforded agency for the purpose of defending the fetishist.³ Harcourt explains that the respondent’s notion of self-defense is twofold. On the one hand, they believe that a gun will protect them from being physically injured. On the other hand, they feel the need to protect their image with it. They fear being harassed, humiliated, or intimidated by other youth (Harcourt). This is important because protection from physical injury may require a weapon, but emotional maltreatment would not. The respondents make no distinction between the two.

The guns also embody death for some respondents. They speak of incidents in which guns have been fired accidentally, injuring or killing someone in the process. One respondent says “They look nice, but they’re dangerous...Like, they’re, they look nice and everything. They can do powerful stuff, but like, their dangerous...” (2003:73). Another youth responds to the photos

³ *In Lost Bullets: Fetishes of Urban Violence in Rio de Janeiro* (2011) R. Ben Penglase discusses the fact that *stray bullets* are seen as living as opposed to inanimate objects. According to Penglase “they are alive, even if confused and misguided” (415). I juxtapose this view of bullets with the way that CMS respondents seem to compound their definitions of protection to encompass all notions of physical harm and emotional discomfort. The gun is afforded agency to prevent both.

by saying that “they’re pretty deadly” (2003:73). The language that the respondents use may also indicate that they find the weapons awe inspiring—the constant juxtaposition of the visual aesthetic and the physical function of the weapon being indicative of trepidation (which may also increase their value as commodities). One may also interpret their language as the respondents ascribing tangible personality traits to the weapons. The adjectives “nice” and “dangerous” are generally applied only to people, and yet the respondents seem to personify the weapons—it is the gun itself that is either “nice” or “dangerous” and not the owner. In this sense, the gun has been ascribed a personality of its own entirely—one that may be comparable to that of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One may argue that religious idols may be regarded in similar ways. In fact, it may be an unconscious attempt on the part of the fetishist to disavow human involvement in the often deadly outcomes that guns may have produced in their lives. Much like the young child that disavows the mother’s sexual difference in Freud’s psychoanalytic interpretation. This disavowal is a coping mechanism which simultaneously accepts and denies through the fetish (McCallum 24; Penglase 418; Steele 14).

Many of the youth who were interviewed also saw guns as feminine sexualized objects⁴ which may also increase their value as commodities. Harcourt explains that several of the responses that are interpreted by him as intense desire are also accompanied by certain

⁴ Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) discusses a process by which men project feminine power and agency onto the city. This projection involves both conversion and disavowal. The city is thus manifested in the mind of the fetishist as something which is “more easily represented and made docile for male knowledge and power, for such representations could depend on the prior fact of the social subordination of women” (82). Analyzing these processes may help us to better understand how and why the male juveniles are able to ascribe feminine characteristics to material objects and also the social dynamics and implications that are involved.

physical signals as well. These signals include, fixation on the photos, laughter, giggling, or even quiet moaning—all attributes that most would associate with intense lust. In effect, the statements portray desire and also sexual gratification. If one were to replace the word *guns* with *girls* much of the intended rhetorical meaning would still remain intact. Each of the following statements are made by separate respondents as they are being shown the photos:

“Guns are nice... They just, I don't know, I just, I just like guns a lot'. 'I want to go shoot them... Yeah, I want to see how they handle'. 'I would love to have one of these.... I always want, I always like, I always like guns'. 'I'd say they look pretty tight'. 'Those are some tight guns. I like the guns on there. I like them. I like the way they look'. 'Those are some pretty tight guns'. 'It's just tight right there. I like it. It's just tight like the way it looks. The way you can shoot. Those can shoot like ten rounds, huh? But they get jammed a lot. I had one.' 'Nice guns' 'They look nice' 'That's a wicked looking gun...(laughter) I just haven't seen guns in a long time' 'I kinda like how they look. I just want to go shoot them' 'I love guns. Hell ya, I love guns. [I love] everything about a gun'" (2003:74).

Language such as this resembles what one might hear during an intimate conversation between lovers. The repetition and subtle nuances in some of their statements may indicate that they have become completely spell bound by the weapons that they are shown. The gun is spoken of in terms of the feminine sexualized body (which for adolescent males) may significantly increase their value as commodities. The desire to physically “handle” or fire the weapon can be interpreted as sexual yearning. One may also draw the conclusion that there is also a sense of satisfaction that is derived from the very thought of firing the weapon. The desire for this discharge may be equated with male ejaculation. The fact that some of the respondents go so far as to verbalize their “love” for guns, may be indicative of a belief, however momentarily, that a reciprocal relationship truly exists. Another statement made by a seventeen-year old Mexican-

American gang member takes the feminine sexual association one step further by expressing that a certain level of commitment is involved in this subject-object relationship. He says:

I had me two baby 9s. I fell in love with those. They look beautiful to me. They were chrome, like perfect size, they had some power to them. I was like damn, I really don't use them because I don't want to get them burned. Somebody's body to it...I don't really use those. Those just like, I'm gonna keep those for a long time...They're like tight. They're just all chrome. (86)

Again, the satisfaction that the respondent expresses in the weapons, as well as the fact that he wants to keep the guns and protect the guns (seemingly forever), display characteristics that most would only attribute to the sacred institution of marriage. Perhaps in the mind of the fetishist finding the perfect gun is, in fact, like finding the perfect wife⁵. For gun fetishists all weapons are not simply one in the same. This meticulous nature of the fetishist seems to suggest that beauty lies solely within the eyes of its beholder. Yet this does not fully explain why the gun fetishist would find the gun to be so physically attractive or even why the fetishist would go so far as to impress female characteristics upon the weapon. One thing is for certain, this practice would most certainly increase a gun's value as a commodity.

Some of the respondents looked at the photos of the guns and saw exchange-value only. They did not see the guns only for their intended functional purposes. They primarily viewed them as potential bartering leverage instead. Some recalled instances when they exchanged guns for drugs, money, or other material items. One of them says "Sell those and party and buy things, you know...stereos, gold, help my family out, rent hotels, buy all kinds of beer, get all faded,

⁵ Here the gun is feminized, but it can also be seen as a phallic symbol as discussed in Carl P. Eby's *Hemingway's Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood* (1999). Although Eby applies Freudian theory to literature his discussion illustrates the complex and personal nature which is inherent in the fetish.

live the fast life. Party hardy, all kinds of drugs, coke, cook all kinds of crack, sell it too, you know” (Harcourt 2003:87). Another respondent also thought solely along the lines of commodification. He says “This one [9-mm pistol] I would keep. These two [.45-caliber pistols] I would sell. I would keep that one [9-mm pistol] personally. Forty-fives always sell and that’s what I did” (Harcourt 2003:76). As Harcourt points out, for some of the respondents, guns may have been the first available and only means of participating in a market economy. In many ways, the very exchange-value of the guns may be interpreted as a fetish, in and of itself.

William Pietz helps to explain how commodity fetish theory can be used to elucidate relationships that may exist between the fetish and an increasingly consumer driven culture. In the following passage Pietz discusses the fetishistic nature of exchange-value. He says “Exchange value is identified as the syntagmatic dimension wherein different commodity-signifiers circulate through exchange transactions that equate their economic value, rather the way words in a poetic text are substituted for each other through metaphorical equations of meaning. Such circulation itself produces novel value representations (meaning-effects) because the exchange values borne by commodities have a certain independence from their alleged use values (their ‘proper meanings’)” (Pietz 1993: 123). This statement helps to explain the significance of the fetishists’ ability to isolate the gun’s practical use from its monetary value. The statement also helps one to see the subjective nature of exchange-value. The fetishist must be able to negotiate between multiple levels of exchange-value in order to be able to assign a certain exchange-value to the guns that they wish to sell. They must be knowledgeable of

preexisting market values, current street values, and also the value that they place on the weapon. For the fetishists, it may be a good thing that they see guns in the same way that most others only view currency. It may be one of their few methods of survival and also their only way to experience any measure of personal autonomy in a consumer driven culture.

For some, the sharing of guns is something that impacts intergroup relationships to a great extent. Having guns may mean the difference between having friends and not having any at all. Having a gun or even being willing to hold a weapon for someone else may mean that you are becoming a valued member of that group. As a physical gesture it may even be symbolic that a certain level of trust has been formed. One respondent describes a situation in which he frequently held guns for one person in particular. He says “‘It was given to me by an older friend of mine... ‘Hey if you need this, have this, in case anything happens’... ‘So if you hang around with us, you just might need this, so take this. But be careful with it, don’t play around with it’” (Harcourt 2003:82). The group member is older than the respondent and he is also showing some degree of concern for the respondents’ safety and well-being. Furthermore, the phrase “...if you hang around with us” indicates that it was not just a physical transaction, but rather a welcoming into the group or a rite of passage. This special rite of passage may be significant to the respondent for a number of reasons. The group identification may provide him safety from rival gangs or from other opposing groups of youth. It may also provide him safety from the threat of incarceration, that is, only if they are able to seek shelter or go into hiding when needed.

Even after recognizing the transition as a rite of passage one may still inquire as to why a

youth would place themselves in such a dangerous predicament by accepting the weapon. From an outsider perspective, the transaction can be viewed as both a gift and a curse. Being caught by authorities with an unregistered weapon is no small offense, even as a juvenile. It could potentially cost one their freedom for decades, if not a lifetime. According to fetish theory, the origin of the problem does not lie in the functional use of the gun, but rather with the functional use of the *fetish* in the process of group identification or interpersonal affiliation. It is the collective desire of the group for the commodified fetish object. After all, it was Karl Marx who first identified fetishism as "...the religion of sensuous desire" (qtd. in Pietz 1993: 133). These are some of the more difficult aspects of fetishism to understand. Louise J. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism* (2006), provides us with more insight into the nature of the problem. Kaplan says:

We crave to be the same as, if not better than, everyone in our immediate social order. We want and desire, sometimes more than any freedom offered to us, to be considered normal—which means to be just like everyone else. Even after we open our eyes and are able to see the symptoms of the fetishism strategy all around us, it is still immensely difficult to choose to be different. For those sorts of changes might make us seem weird...The fears of being different and out-of-step with our neighbors are sometimes much greater than the desire to liberate ourselves from the shackles of the fetishism strategy⁶. (182)

⁶ Louise J. Kaplan prefers the term *fetishism strategy* as opposed to *fetishism* because of five mental processes that it connotes. She outlines these five processes in *Cultures of Fetishism* (2006).

For some young male gun fetishist, the threat of rejection from a group could be feared far more than the threat of imprisonment or the threat of any kind of physical harm. If what Kaplan says is true, then it may be useful to reconsider the roles that we assign to all material objects in our culture and not just guns.

Self-image is another reason why some male youth fetishize guns. Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna L. Wilkinson make critical correlations between the formation of self-image and gun violence among teens. They say “Teenagers may situationally engage in violent behavior to form or maintain certain social identities within the broader social context of the neighborhood. Projecting the ‘right image’ may have consequences for personal safety, social acceptance, and self-esteem among individuals. Within the isolated social world where respect and valued social standing is limited, the threat of gun violence introduces new complexities for the development of social identity” (149). This information speaks to the importance for some male youth to be perceived as being tough by other male youth in and around their own neighborhoods through the use of guns⁷. Furthermore, once violent behavior is initiated it becomes more and more flagrant through the act of repetition (Fagan and Wilkinson). One respondent who carried a gun explains that he did so only because he wanted to be more like the tough gun carrying figures that he encountered frequently on the streets and also on the screen. He says “When I was younger, I used to kick with those fools and I was looking. ‘There’s a bad mother fucker right

⁷ Jeffrey A. Brown in, *Dangerous Curves...* discusses ways in which women in popular film use guns for much of the same purposes as the male youth—females depicted as heroines utilize the gun (as phallic representation) to impose threat on other characters. He says that “the symbolically loaded image of women with guns...[is]...an ingredient of gender performance, in other words, [it is used] as a semiotic device...in films like *Aliens* and *Terminator 2* to align the female leads with a clearly masculinized subject position” (130).

there. Look at that shit. Nobody fucks with that fool.’ And in the movies, ‘Man that’s a bad mother fucker.’ And I just wanted to be a bad mother fucker...Like nobody, nobody crosses him...” (Harcourt 2003:72). Possessing a gun may provide youth with a short cut to attaining the dangerous persona that this respondent describes, but for reasons why, culturally, so much implication is placed on being “bad” in the first place one may be able to find answers to this question by examining hip-hop music.

Capitalism, Commodity Fetishism, and Hip-Hop

Let’s first take into consideration the previous phrase from Harcourt’s respondent. He says “There’s a bad mother fucker right there. Look at that shit” (Harcourt 2003:72). Regardless, of whether he encountered the gun toting image in real life or on the screen he wants to embody that personality because “Nobody fucks with that fool” (Harcourt 2003:72). The gun toting bad man is fearless and invincible and whether we like it or not many young males want to be exactly like the “bad mother fucker” with the gun. This image has been popularized in movies for over a century. From the spaghetti western, to Blaxploitation films, to the rise of the action film genre, the “bad mother fucker” will always be the one with the gun. This iconic trope is also predominant across hip-hop music. Hip-hop provides an interesting case study, because as stated previously, it is an area of the entertainment industry that reaches a lot of people worldwide including young black males, and it has been greatly influenced by commodity fetishism and capitalism. Through hip-hop millions of youth like the ones in Harcourt’s case study have constant access to imagery of “bad mother fuckers” with guns. The commodification that takes place across hip-hop music wasn’t always quite as pervasive as it is today. Commodification

quickly took hold after hip-hop's propensity for capital accumulation became evident to the world.

Beginning in the late 1960's and early 1970's in Brooklyn, New York, hip-hop was characterized by its four elements which included: emceeing, DJing, graffiti, and breakdancing (Chang). Hip-hop provided an outlet for many inner-city youth whose parents were often busy working long hours in city factories often for very low wages. Hip-hop often took place in public parks, recreation centers, empty warehouses, or any other place where young people could find refuge. Although criminal activity such as drug dealing, and gang violence were predominant in the inner city, hip-hop often provided youth with creative outlets and a means to engage in friendly competition with one another (Chang). As hip-hop grew from a limited niche to a global audience it was greatly impacted by capitalism. One of the most unfortunate effects of capitalism has been corporate control. Corporate control often affords artists less control over their own music and public performances. It also sometimes forces the artist to produce the kinds of records that the company wants them to make. Consequently, the artist must conform to the record company's wishes or run the risk of being dropped by the label (Asante). This phenomenon is also responsible for what most people consider a narrowing of the genre or significant limitations on the kinds of recording artists that become mainstream. Today, the original four elements of hip-hop music are not quite as visible. While most parties still feature DJs and emcees, emcees rarely rap. Likewise, graffiti art and competitive breakdancing are hardly visible at all, and if so, on a much smaller scale. Hip-hop will more than likely never again be viewed as a competitive group activity that takes place in public parks. Today, hip-hop

largely takes place in (private or corporately owned) studios and is not largely viewed as a public recreational activity. If any of the original four elements of hip-hop are still present they have more than likely changed drastically in form and also in function. Many technological, social, and political factors have impacted the music industry, but the economic force of capitalism has effected hip-hop music the most.

Capitalism being one of the most visible and widely recognized catalyst in the hip-hop industry, diverted the focus of the music away from the communities in which the music began and recentered it around the goal of accumulating capital (Rose; Asante). Capitalism is also one of the forces that helped to popularize the “gangster rap” genre. Hip-hop was already a growing global phenomenon throughout much of the 1970s and 80s with groups like Sugar Hill, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Kool Moe Dee, L.L. Cool J., Boogie Down Productions, etc., but the rise of gangster rap began in 1988 with a rap group from Compton, California called N.W.A. The group consisted of five members, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Easy-E, DJ Yella, and MC Ren. Since the outset their music has been very controversial. Despite going gold, their first album *Straight Outta Compton* was widely criticized for being too vulgar (Asante; Chang). Although much of their music depicted environments in which they were raised in, many outsiders viewed their rap style as nothing more than misogynistic, violent, profanity laced tirades, all to be yelled over loud music. On the one hand, much of their music seems to promote sexual promiscuity, drugs, and violence directed towards other black people and the police. On the other hand, from an insider perspective, N.W.A.’s music depicts all of the social realities that many black inner city youth face on a daily basis, but America wasn’t quite

prepared to receive the message in the fashion that N.W.A. presented it to them. According to Quinn “For N.W.A., much of the power and pleasure of the music rested on its repudiation of traditional strategies of black culture protest, of uplifting images that were no longer deemed efficacious or relevant in the context of radically reconstructed and deindustrialized urban life” (211). Nevertheless, N.W.A.’s music continued to sell. In fact, the gangster rap style caught on quickly. “In reaching number one on the *Billboard* Top Pop Albums chart in its second week of release, [Niggaz4Life] marked the moment of [gangster rap’s] emergence as rap market leader and music-industry powerhouse. Only four rap albums had previously hit the number-one spot—two by party rappers, Tone Lōc and MC Hammer, and two by white rappers, Beastie Boys and Vanilla Ice. Unlike, any of these much more mainstream acts, N.W.A. reached the top without the aid of a single or MTV video” (qtd. in Quinn 202). The world quickly found out that N.W.A. was here to stay. They have sold millions of records world-wide (as a group and as solo artists) and in 2016 N.W.A. was inducted into the Rock and Roll hall of fame. The same year they released a biographical film “Straight Outta Compton” that made over \$200 million at the box office. There is no doubt that the rap group or the genre that N.W.A. helped to establish has been successful. N.W.A.’s success helped to pave the way for many other gangster rappers as well including: Ice-T, Geto Boys, MC Eiht, Nas, Wu Tang Clan, Dipset, the Lox, Jay Z, T.I., 50 Cent, the late Tupac and Notorious B.I.G., and many others. According to Quinn “It must be remembered that Eazy E’s Ruthless Records paved the way for the phenomenal recent rap business success of Suge Knight’s Death Row, Master P’s No Limit, and Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Comb’s Bad Boy (all founded on lucrative new ‘joint-venture’ deals). Widely publicized as

black financed and black owned, and having negotiated a favorable ‘hands off’ deal with ‘major independent’ distributor Priority, Ruthless circa 1991 was the prototype for rap’s fierce new entrepreneurialism” (Quinn 209). One of the biggest downsides to the popularity of the gangster rap genre is that the black, dangerous hyper masculine image of the gangster rapper has since become commodified by corporate America, and as a result, has been recreated, repackaged, and resold by major recording companies and other outlets countless numbers of times over a vast range of mediums including: radio, television, print, and film. Many material items are fetishized and commodified in the entertainment industry including, clothing, cars, jewelry, and nearly any item that may be associated with wealth, but the commodification of the gangster rapper as an individual is made possible, in part, due to the commodification of a single object—the firearm. Gangster rap music cannot exist without guns. It is not a necessity for guns to exist in a literal sense. An artist doesn’t need to carry one physically, but guns must be incorporated into the music in some way, shape or form. Firearms are a critical component in the commodified image of the gangster rapper and for this reason they can be viewed as fetish objects which are best understood through the lens of commodity fetishism.

In the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx describes the nature of commodities. He says:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood ...The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet for all that, the table continues to be that common, every day thing, wood. But as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other

commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than table-turning ever was. (qtd. in Maxwell 29)

In the above passage Marx describes the transcendent nature of the commodified object. He is describing the moment at which things cease being one dimensional things and began to symbolize other things and ideas that they previously were not associated with. Based on this excerpt from *Capital* these associations seem to spring forth from the very objects themselves, but according to Marxist theory the transcendent element of material objects lies not in the things themselves, but in their corresponding values. Through Marx we know that every object has a use-value and an exchange-value. In the entertainment industry, these values are attached to human beings. According to Rick Maxwell, across the entertainment industry value is created through the commodification of stars and celebrities and also through the commodification of the audience (Maxwell). Of course, the audience is most often never aware of its own commodification, but the inherent value in stars and celebrities is their ability to generate audiences which in turn have their own inherent use-value for corporations. According to Maxwell, "...the audience functions, as any other commodity form, as a temporary disguise for capital while it goes through a series of exchanges that enable its growth" (32). Audiences are exchanged when major corporations buy and sell access to them. When one sees a rapper like Lil Wayne in a Samsung commercial it is due to the fact that Samsung wants to gain access to Lil Wayne's audience. In this equation, everyone becomes commodity, the entertainer, the audience, and the products and services that their images help to promote.

When it comes to the wide spread appeal of guns in gangster rap music guns have

become attached to the image of the gangster rapper. In the era of post-Fordism, technology has made the transmission of such images much simpler and faster, but what makes gangster rap music more effective at transmitting imagery of guns is that the images don't necessarily have to be visual. Imagery of guns can be created and transmitted verbally through the lyrics. These images can even be transmitted in the absence of technology. They are then recreated, and reproduced even as one simply recites their favorite verse from memory. The incarcerated youth at the Catalina Mountain school more than likely encountered imagery of gun yielding gangsters in a variety of places, but one of the most influential places that young people often encounter imagery of firearms is through the lyrics of gangster rap music.

Commodity fetishism is an elusive term that encompasses religious, aesthetic, erotic, commercial, and sociopolitical semantic fields simultaneously (Pietz). Thus identifying ways that firearms are fetishized in hip-hop music requires one to take into account the plethora of symbolic and allegorical scopes that may be represented among this vast range of areas. The prevalence of guns across hip-hop music, more specifically gangster rap music, may be indicative of growing social and economic inequities in American culture. Furthermore, guns and the violent narratives that guns help to facilitate may represent the struggles of generations of young African-American males to negotiate identities that both separate them from and simultaneously connects them to a history that involves both chattel slavery and racism that often came in the forms of lynching and discriminatory laws.

If hip-hop music informs us of anything, it informs us of the referential power of the firearm. In hip-hop music guns are frequently used to represent masculinity, power, authority,

prestige, wealth, freedom, security, and autonomy. Guns may also represent social and political unrest and growing discontent with the current social and political backdrop in American culture. Many argue that even “early gangsta rhymes display a remarkable critical awareness about representational burdens and the operations of cultural power” (Quinn 198). Through the symbolic power of the firearm in gangster rap music one may depict a complete divergence from traditional and accepted means of gaining social and economic upward mobility. This scenario is most often displayed across gangster rap music that is centered around the illegal drug trade. In real life, the dangers involved in the illegal drug trade oftentimes make firearms seem like a necessity, but as stated previously, firearms across hip-hop lyrics are used to negotiate much more than drug deals, guns are also being used to negotiate identities.

The fetishization of firearms have become evident across many current hip-hop songs that have been released within the past couple of years. This fact is indicative of a growing trend that is not strictly limited to the gangster rap genre. Guns are also fetishized across much of popular culture, but where does the firearm gain its referential power? Likewise, does the gun, in and of itself, come to symbolize the black hyper masculine gangster rapper, or does the individual gain referential power from the object? Robert Miklitsch, would more than likely argue that one comes to symbolize the other through a unique process involving the reduction of values. In order to describe the kind of signification that takes place as a result of commodification, Miklitsch coins the term “commodity-body-sign.” He says “I call the ‘perverse,’ general economy of the commodity-body-sign, where sign-value is the supplement or super-signifier of use-exchange value. The point here is not so much to deconstruct the

ostensibly restricted political economy of use-exchange value, as in Baudrillard, as to figure a way to ‘produce’ an alternative conception of consumption as ‘cultural sign labor’” (Miklitsch 5,6). The commodity-body-sign is a direct result of commodification. The commodity-body-sign takes into account the commodification of the audience, the celebrity, and the inherent labor involved in viewership. In conceptualizing the commodity-body-sign, Miklitsch gleams from Baudrillard’s early work on signs. Baudrillard is one of the first to use Marx and Saussure in order to explain how an object can come to stand for something other than what it truly is. “According to Baudrillard, contemporary consumer society increasingly reveals- through the technological forms of its own self-spectacle the degree to which commodities are no longer objects (those posited, but absent, signifieds) but rather image signifiers, ‘Simulated’ objects existing in a ‘hyperreal’ social order that has been schizophrenically freed from all fixed investments of individual personality and particular desire. In postmodern society...it is no longer the material use of products that is the object of our consumption so much as their commodified meaning- the content of their form, their exchange value—now revealed as autonomous forces in packaging and advertising” (Pietz 1993: 124). Miklitsch expounds on Baudrillard’s work and provides us with a reading of Marx that incorporates use-value, exchange-value, and also *sign-value* (Miklitsch). Miklitsch attempts to advance previous debates concerning use-value and exchange-value and bring us closer to the true purpose of commodity fetish theory. He says “...the general-economic account of ‘commodity fetishism’ is to be able to elucidate—to describe *and* explain—the specific allure, produced today via advertising and packaging, marketing and publicity, that is the hallmark of the postmodern (art-) commodity”

(Miklitsch 16). Thinking in terms of Miklitsch's commodity-body-sign, one could say that the firearm, as a symbol in gangster rap music, is the result of a kind of cultural sign labor. This cultural sign labor involves the audience, and does not take place outside of historical, social, and political contexts. All of these forces are at play in the labor of signification. The commodity-body-sign seeks to explain how through the commercial industry, we see not a fetishization of the object, but the fetishization of signs, and this includes all of the things that the object has come to signify. It also helps to explain why the youth in Harcourt's study see a photo of a gun and immediately associate the object with all of the "bad mother fuckers" that he's seen use guns, regardless of whether they are real or fictional characters.

Literary Folkloristics

A literary folkloristic methodology may be used to interpret any form of narrative and this includes hip-hop lyrics. A literary folkloristic interpretation is possible due to the fact that hip-hop music embodies all of the traditional components associated with personal narrative (Stahl). For instance, most hip-hop narratives embody their own dramatic structure, the narrative events communicated in the songs are often assumed to be either true or believed to be based upon some degree of truth, and the artists generally speak from a first-person perspective (Stahl). By implementing literary folkloristics, one may be able to better understand the symbolism used within the narrative. One may also be able to better understand the various social meanings and cultural implications that such symbolism may have. This is accomplished primarily by examining allusions. In literary folkloristics "...the allusion is assumed and relied upon as the

fundamental stylistic convention supporting the narrative, its performance, and its reception”

(Stahl 8). Allusions that revolve around guns and gun violence in gangster rap music may be interpreted as a kind of semiological cultural script which may be employed in order to express a number of things including social and political discontent.

Within an emic system of interpretation, the firearm, as a cultural symbol, may be viewed as an important thread connecting one hip-hop generation to the next. This pattern may be revealed by juxtaposing gangster rap music from two separate eras. Two influential and successful artists from separate eras in gangster rap history that employ similar themes in their music are N.W.A. and Jadakiss.

N.W.A.’s music is considered incendiary and divisive by some due to the abundance of violent content aimed towards the police. Their first album, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), was largely viewed as threatening. So much so, that shortly after its release, attempts at censorship were made. Also, (to no avail) an FBI investigation was initiated. One underlying reason for the album’s powerful influence is that it was released on the heels of a turbulent time in American history. Many of the racial injustices that became major focal points during the Civil Rights movement were still occurring throughout the 1980s. Among these problems were unequal housing, poorly kept schools, and a lack of employment opportunities for black people (Hine; Taylor). These issues, in addition to police brutality, became the impetus for a number of bloody riots that plagued poor black inner city neighborhoods around the country (Hine; Taylor).

Additionally, in the 1980s, the United States witnessed a growing drug epidemic in which poor

African-American neighborhoods were disproportionately affected. This is due, in part, to a series of unfair legislation. This legislation included: “The Omnibus Crime Bill (1984), Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1986), and the Omnibus Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1988)” (Asante 134). Overall, this legislation hurt African-Americans by making the laws that were already in place even more strict and severe. According to Asante:

The racism apparent in these laws, which are still in place, troubles the soul. For instance, although crack and powder cocaine are pharmacologically the same drug, possession of only five grams of crack cocaine yields a five-year mandatory minimum sentence; however, it takes five hundred grams of powder cocaine to prompt the same sentence. Moreover, crack cocaine is the only drug for which the first offense of simple possession can trigger a federal mandatory minimum sentence. Yet simple possession of any quantity of any other substance by a first-time offender—including powder cocaine is a misdemeanor offence punishable by a maximum of one year in prison. With 90 percent of those convicted in federal court for crack cocaine being Black, these laws were targeted at our communities” (134).

In examining the lyrics from two songs that appear on N.W.A.’s freshman album, *Straight Outta Compton* and *Fuck tha Police*, one will notice that firearms are fetishized in the sense that they take on multiple layers of meaning. As it pertains to literary folkloristics and interpretation, I speak from an emic or insider perspective, in part, because I am African-American. Of course, it is Alan Dundes who defined “... ‘the folk’ as “any group” of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (qtd. in Stahl 34). A common factor that I

share with N.W.A. may be ethnicity, but this factor is not the most significant factor in group formation, nor is it physical locale. “A folk group is not a communal undifferentiated unit; rather, the identity shared by any two members of a folk group is not individually pervasive but only sufficient to support a limited corpus of shared folklore. The two individuals are alike—share an identity—only insofar as they share items of folklore significant to their sense of identity” (Stahl 34). From this perspective, “shared folklore” may include a number of things including verbal folklore (such as colloquial expressions, proverbs, and riddles) or nonverbalized forms (such as unspoken folk values). In addition to implicitly held values, nonverbalized folklore also includes covertly held, taste, worldviews, prejudices, and attitudes. If these things are unspoken, how does one identify them as characteristics of any particular group? An outsider wouldn’t necessarily be able to, and because of this, there are an infinite number of folk groups that remain undocumented (Stahl).

As an avid hip-hop enthusiast, I am familiar with some of the many ways in which guns are represented in hip-hop music, including the “gangster rap” genre. It may be this particular aspect of my identity which helps to establish an insider perspective the most. From an emic perspective, one may interpret the firearm symbolically on two separate levels in N.W.A.’s music—cultural and personal (Stahl). At the cultural level, the firearm in N.W.A.’s music, symbolizes growing unrest and discontent within the African-American community due to a long history of discriminating treatment at the hands of police. On a personal symbolic level, I have experienced unfair treatment at the hands of police. I have also met many other African-American people who have as well. I have yet to meet a person of any other ethnicity who has

experienced this problem first-hand. For me, the firearm is symbolic of a kind of fortification or indiscriminate defense against any kind of vulnerability or weakness. Of course, in reality, the firearm, in and of itself, could never achieve this goal, but on symbolic levels, in gangster rap, it represents an attempt to reconstruct a black masculinity that is impervious to this kind of treatment. On cultural symbolic levels, the gun is a critical component in the construction of the image of the black gangster rapper and it is often employed in the process of attempting to navigate a hostile and volatile landscape that seeks to destroy black males. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the narrative of *Straight Outta Compton*. The first verse reads:

(Voiced by Ice Cube)

When something happens in South Central Los Angeles, nothing happens, its just
anotha nigga dead.

(Verse 1: Ice Cube)

Straight outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube
From the gang called Niggaz With Attitudes
When I'm called off, I got a sawed off
Squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled off
You too, boy, if ya fuck with me
The police are gonna hafta come and get me
Off yo' ass, that's how I'm goin' out
For the punk motherfuckers that's showin' out
Niggaz start to mumble, they wanna rumble
Mix 'em and cook 'em in a pot like gumbo
Goin' off on a motherfucker like that
With a gat that's pointed at yo' ass
So give it up smooth
Ain't no tellin' when I'm down for a jack move
Here's a murder rap to keep yo' dancin'
with a crime record like Charles Manson
AK-47 is the tool
Don't make me act the motherfuckin' fool

Me you can go toe to toe, no maybe
I'm knockin niggaz out tha box, daily

Yo weekly, monthly and yearly
Until them dumb motherfuckers see clearly
That I'm down with the capital C-P-T
Boy you can't fuck with me
So when I'm in your neighborhood, you better duck
Cuz Ice Cube is crazy as fuck
As I leave, believe I'm stompin
But when I come back, boy, I'm comin' straight outta Compton

In the first verse of the narrative, the speaker works to establish a sense of dramatic personae. Characterization is very important throughout the narrative and it is used to establish a sense of identity for the speaker, Ice Cube, who is simultaneously establishing the identity of the entire group (as the first voice to be heard on their first release). Characteristic of the genre, the speaker of the narrative, the “I” in the narrative, and the hero are all established as one and the same person (Stahl). The very first sentence of the narrative, “When something happens in South Central Los Angeles, nothing happens, its just anotha nigga dead” speaks to a complete lack of police presence in black communities and a complete disregard for black life all together. The imagery and symbolism evoked by both the sawed off shot gun, and the AK-47, help to construct an image of a cold-hearted killer. In the first few lines of the narrative the speaker says “When I'm called off, I got a sawed off/ Squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled off.” This image of the ruthless, fearless, murderer replaces the need for law enforcement or police protection in the black community and speaks to a need in black communities for independence,

self-sufficiency, and respect. Some lines in the narrative may simply be viewed as dangerous threats used to strike fear in the hearts of any would be rivals. For instance, lines 12 thru 14 read:

Goin' off on a motherfucker like that
With a gat that's pointed at yo' ass
So give it up smooth
Ain't no tellin' when I'm down for a jack move

Lines such as these contributes to the speaker's hyper aggressive, hyper masculine persona. The fact that the speaker is willing to rob, kill, and steal indiscriminately creates the image of a threatening figure. It helps to establish a persona that the speaker is willing to equate with serial killer, Charles Manson. While this particular comparison may not be meant to be taken literally, it serves the purpose of helping to establish the fearless and ruthless identity of Ice Cube and the entire group.

One allusion which is evoked by Ice Cube, from African-American folklore, is that of the bad man. Badmen such as Stackolee, John Hardy, Harry Duncan, and Devil Winston exists for many of the same reasons (Roberts). Some folklorists describe badmen as "champions of violence" (Roberts 173). The violence that badmen exhibit is directed primarily towards other blacks, but their inexcusable actions also serve as a buffer for African-American communities in that the tales are a way of transmitting and strengthening attitudes and values which were considered necessary for survival at the turn of the twentieth century. Values exhibited by both

badmen and N.W.A. are quite similar. Among these shared values are independence, fearlessness, and self-reliance. They also both exhibit a kind of seemingly uncontainable fury that serves to ward off danger or threats which may come from either internal or external sources.

Another allusion that is brought to mind are African-American literary characters like Dave Saunders in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Was Almost A Man* who is mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Saunders buys a gun because, as a young black teenager, he wants to avoid being trampled upon, and he wants to be heard. Much like Saunders, the teenage Ice Cube of N.W.A., wants to avoid being beaten or killed by the police or by other African-Americans. He seeks to establish a black identity and voice that won't be ignored. Also, like Saunders, Ice Cube, is in the absence of traditional resources (implied by the first line of the narrative), thus, within the narrative, he seeks to dismantle all things linked to the systemic racism and oppression of black people using the only resources at his disposal—guns. Guns throughout the narrative represent a reclamation of African-American masculinity. When Ice Cube says “AK-47 is the tool, Don't make me act the motherfuckin' fool,” it is the threat of this very possibility that insures his own survival.

The song *Fuck tha Police* also embodies the anti-police theme, only in a more direct fashion. Narrative parallelism is established in this song with skits between verses that attempt to reenact some of the unfair treatment experienced by themselves and by many other African-

American teens in the inner city at the hands of police. One of them reads:

Police: Pull your god damn ass over right now!

MC Ren: Aww shit, now what the fuck you pullin me over for?

Police: Because I feel like it! Just sit your ass on the curb and shut the fuck up!

MC Ren: Man, fuck this shit!

Police: Alright, smartass, I'm taking your black ass to jail!

Judge: MC Ren, will you please give your testimony to the jury about this fucked up incident?

Skits such as these are examples of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes as motivated Signification⁸ and they work to create allusions within the minds of listeners. Symbolically the skits may function on personal levels by causing images of one's own encounters with police to surface in one's mind. On a cultural level, they may serve as cautionary tales meant to warn other black teens about the racist practices of police. The first two lines of MC Ren's verse affirms this message. He says "Fuck the police and Ren said it with authority, Because the niggas on the street is a majority." Here the speaker is confirming the fact, that the African-American population significantly outnumbers that of the police force. Additionally, MC Ren's group identification transcends his immediate rap group or any particular gang affiliation. He says "A gang is with whoever I'm stepping." Also, within the opening lines of the narrative the

⁸ In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) Gates describes Signifyin(g) as a black form of expression and interpretation. Gates says that it is represented as a form of "...styling which is foregrounded by the devices of making a point by indirection and wit" (78). Gates also makes distinctions between what he identifies as motivated and unmotivated forms of signification saying that unmotivated forms most often appear as pastiche, while motivated forms offer negative critique often in the form of parody. Furthermore, Gates says that "...substitutions in Signifyin(g) tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner" (49). All of these aspects of Signification are visible in many black musical art forms including gangster rap.

threat of gun violence is immediately posed as a solution to the problem of police harassment. He says “And the motherfucking weapon is kept in a stash box, for the so-called law, Wishing Ren was a nigga that they never saw.” The narrative of *Fuck tha Police* is filled with violent death threats against the police, and these violent threats are supported with ample gun imagery. For example, at one point in the narrative the speaker says “I’m a sniper with a hell of a scope, Taking out a cop or two, they can’t cope with me.” The repetitive nature of the gun imagery supports the notion that it is the firearm that helps to negotiate the invincible persona of the gangster rapper. In the following lines, he reiterates his desire to shoot police officers saying “Put in my clip, yo, and this is the sound, BOOM, BOOM, Yeah, something like that, But it all depends on the size of the gat, Taking out a police would make my day.” One allusion that this line brings to mind is the *Dirty Harry* film series (1971-1988) in which Clint Eastwood plays hard-nosed cop, Harry Callahan. Callahan is known for brandishing large handguns and belittling criminals. In one of the films, *Sudden Impact* (1983), Callahan, relishing in the thought of shooting a criminal, says “Go ahead, make my day.” MC Ren seems to employ his own variation of this popular catchphrase in order to express the extent of his own desire to kill police.

In *Fuck tha Police*, the imagery and symbolism involving firearms is a part of a much larger pattern that seeks to create a kind of role reversal in the minds of listeners. The speaker clearly aims to reposition himself in relation to law enforcement and dispel all traces of his own

human vulnerabilities. Borrowing a term from psychology, folklorists, Alan Dundes attributes this kind of symbolism to a mental process called *projection*. Dundes says:

Projection refers to the tendency to attribute to another person or to the environment what is actually within oneself. What is attributed is usually some internal impulse or feeling which is painful, unacceptable, or taboo. The ascription of feelings and qualities of one's own to a source in the external world is accomplished without the individual's being consciously aware of the fact. The individual perceives the external object as possessing the taboo tendencies without recognizing their source in himself.

(qtd. in Stahl 65)

According to the theory of projection, the gun symbolism that appears throughout the narrative of *Fuck tha Police*, may be the result of the speaker's own pain, and the belittling characterizations of police may stem from the speaker's own insecurities, which according to Dundes, may not be completely realized. Overall this demonstrates what may be interpreted as a kind of distress, insecurity, or anxiety which may also be associated with the fear of facing an uncertain future due to police violence. The theory of projection helps one to see how the narrative may be read as a kind of role reversal in which the speaker, having not yet come to terms with his own pain, seeks to project emotions of fear and weakness onto police—emotions which he himself is made to feel whenever he encounters police who use overly aggressive tactics.

By juxtaposition, the music of Jadakiss, provides us with a contemporary view of the way that the imagery and symbolism of firearms are being employed in gangster rap music. Ironically, today, guns in gangster rap music carry many of the same meanings that they carried three decades ago. Guns are often used to negotiate various aspects of identity. Guns are also employed on symbolic levels as a way of navigating violent and dangerous environments. These dangerous environments depicted in the music often become a part of the dramatic structure of the narrative. In a sense, one could say that on symbolic levels the firearm in gangster rap music contributes to a lack/lack liquidated structure, such as the one proposed by Dundes in his study of North American Indian Folktales (1963), the dangerous environment posing the lack, while the gun, employed by the hero, is used to help liquidate this lack. In examining the narrative of the song *Jason* by Jadakiss one will see that the internal and external threats depicted in the music are identical. This similarity is due to the fact that the very same social problems that existed in America in the 1980s still persist today. African-American communities are still disproportionately impacted by drugs and crime. “The level of crime in black communities is high. The murder rate, for example, for African-Americans in 1997 was seven times that of whites, and black victims accounted for 49 percent of all those murdered, even though African-Americans make up only 12 percent of the population” (Hine et. al 593). Furthermore, every year since *Straight Outta Compton*’s release, America has witnessed a number of assaults on innocent black people at the hands of police including: the beating of Rodney King (1991), the beating and sodomization of Abner Louima (1997), the shooting of Patric Dorismond (1999), the shooting of Sean Bell (2006), The shooting of Trayvon Martin (2012), the killing of Eric Garner (2014), the

shooting of Michael Brown (2014), the shooting of Philando Castile (2016), the shooting of Terence Crutcher (2016), and the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott (2016). Each of the shootings were followed by violent protest and public outcries for justice. Trayvon Martin is a black teenager who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch member, but his case still clearly illustrates the ongoing problem of racism in the policing of black communities (Hine). In *Jason*, the speaker of the narrative makes both direct and indirect references to police killings. This is most visible in the song's hook which reads:

Don't shoot please, can't breathe
Officer don't shoot, can't breathe
I got my hoodie and my mask on
I got my gun and my blast on
Don't shoot please, can't breathe
Officer don't shoot, can't breathe

Much like N.W.A., Jadakiss addresses both internal and external threats to black masculinity. From an emic perspective, the allusions are clear. "Don't shoot please" is a direct reference to the Michael Brown killing in Ferguson, MO, in which Brown, a young black teenager was shot repeatedly by a white cop after making continual pleas for the officer to spare his life. Brown's killing sparked numerous riots and protests similar to what was seen in the Watts riot following the Rodney King beating. The phrase "Can't Breathe" is a direct reference to the killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, N.Y. Garner was choked to death by an officer despite telling the officer

numerous times that he could not breathe. The lines “I got my hoodie and my mask on, I got my gun and my blast on” is a direct reference to the Trayvon Martin killing, in Sanford, Florida. Martin, a seventeen-year old high school student, was wearing a hoodie when he was accosted and ultimately shot to death by a member of the neighborhood watch. The last part, “I got my gun and my blast on” may be viewed as reactionary and thus it may be interpreted as a call for physical retaliation, as a solution to the problem of police killings.

As with N.W.A., Jadakiss also addresses immediate internal threats that may be faced in the black community. Internal threats revolve around the exorbitant crime rates experienced in African-American communities. “Over 90 percent of those who murder, rape, and assault black people are black themselves” (Hines et. al 593). Jadakiss addresses this threat in the first four lines of the second verse:

I'm just one of the five, I'm just one with the vibes
Even niggas is jealous so they just want you to die
They don't want you to rise, they just want your demise
So I be crossing my T's and I be dotting my I's

In the second half of the verse, the firearm, on a cultural symbolic level helps to establish the speaker as a gangster. He says:

You on the opposite side, shots gonna fly
Best part about it, I can stay right up in Yonkers and hide
Keep a gun in the door, that's all in the ride

Til my niggas come home, free all of the guys
This shit is all a facade, thought it was all a surprise
I heard of the stories, seen all of the lies
Long as the work is official, and the corner supplied
At the end of the day niggas, we gonna survive
What

The allusions that exist in the second part of the verse are numerous. As with N.W.A., we see firearms being used to construct the identity of a gangster, but unlike, N.W.A., the allusions are much subtler, and may be completely ambiguous to an outsider, or a person who has no knowledge of either gangster rap or organized crime. Symbolism, in this sense, creates what Stahl calls “a multivalency of meaning” in the sense that all of the symbols are used in concert with the firearm to construct the speaker’s gangster identity. The first three lines “You on the opposite side, shots gonna fly, Best part about it, I can stay right up in Yonkers and hide, Keep a gun in the door, that’s all in the ride” speaks to the threat of violent shoot outs with rival drug dealers. Allusions are created in the minds of listeners by associations with scenes such as these that are depicted in many gangster films and television shows about organized crime including *the Godfather* (1972) and *the Sopranos* (1999-2007). The following line “Til my niggas come home, free all of the guys” works as a direct reference to the constant threat of incarceration while the use of the word “guys,” as opposed to any other term for men, works to evoke the image of members of an organized crime family or “wise-guys.” The next two lines “This shit is all a facade, thought it was all a surprise, I heard of the stories, seen all of the lies” works to evoke the imagery of a complicated and

dangerous lifestyle. A lifestyle in which the threat of death or incarceration always looms. Plots that involve elements such as these are played out frequently in books, films, and television shows about organized crime and any previous exposure to them may contribute to one's understanding of the song on the personal symbolic level. The line which appears near the end of the verse "Long as the work is official, and the corner supplied" is a direct reference to a drug dealing underworld, the term "work," being slang for drugs. The last line "At the end of the day niggas, we gonna survive" may be interpreted as a message of encouragement and upliftment directed towards all African-American people. It evokes a very significant allusion in that it draws from tradition, being suggestive of the social and political spirit of the Civil Rights movement. The last word of the verse "What" may be interpreted as a kind of emphatic metanarrative expression intended by the speaker to express satisfaction in the construction and delivery of his own verse. From an emic perspective, this expression helps to evoke a communal sense of competition in rap and alludes to hip-hop's competitive origins.

Also, as it relates to hip-hop's competitive origins, competition in gangster rap music is often expressed differently than in other realms of society such as sports. In gangster rap music, competition is most often expressed in terms of guns and gun violence. However, these references are not always meant to be taken literally. In such cases, guns only seem to be promoting black on black violence, but upon closer examination, the firearm is simply a metaphor with a completely different meaning. For instance, in a Jadakiss song from the same album entitled "Kill" featuring Lil Wayne, guns are used metaphorically as a way of articulating a desire to be the greatest rapper.

The hook reads:

What am I (a real nigga)
This coupe I'm in cost a quarter mil nigga
Niggas hatin, I feel niggas
AK47 locked and loaded bout to kill niggas
(Huh now what you say) I'm bout to kill niggas
AK 47 locked and loaded bout to kill niggas

The trope of the AK47 is employed as a way of Signifyin(g) a sense of invincibility as a rap artist⁹. Having the ability to Signify upon the trope of the gun in a multitude of different ways is largely viewed as an important skill in gangster rap music. It is another way for gangster rappers to set themselves apart from other artists.¹⁰ As opposed to promoting black activism like the song “Jason,” “Kill” embodies a much more playful message. As indicated by the song's fast paced rhythm and Lil Wayne's high-spirited vocals on the hook, “Kill” is a dance or party track and both the gun and gun violence are employed as playful metaphors to distinguish oneself both lyrically and stylistically from other gangster rappers and hip-hop artists. Based on Jadakiss's body of work, “Kill” is a song that more than likely expresses his desire to be a highly-celebrated rapper and not a passion for killing black people in any literal sense.

⁹ The song also incorporates what Samuel A. Floyd Jr. *The Power of Black Music* (1995) identifies as “Call-Response,” another form of Signification. According to Floyd “...the African-American musical tradition is fueled by African cultural memory, by Call-Response performance practices...by the participation of its spectators in the performance event by way of responding to ‘calls’ through yea-saying... [or by other means]” (151).

¹⁰ Self-aggrandizement is a defining feature of rap music that is also highly visible in the toast tradition. One difference between self-aggrandizement in toast and gangster rap is that gangster rap generally incorporates firearms to a much greater extent than toasts. Also, self-aggrandizement in the toast tradition relies largely on the skill of bragging or boasting, in and of itself. Thus, the toast is primarily a form of Signifyin(g) that may be viewed as being similar to playing the dozens (or the trading of insults in a sportive manner).

In gangster rap music, guns are fetishized in the sense that the imagery and symbolism evoked by guns are essential to the construction of the identity of the gangster rapper. In comparing songs from N.W.A. and Jadakiss, gangster rap music from two separate eras in history, one will notice that guns embody a multivalency of meaning.¹¹ The associations that one may make may be infinite. Guns negotiate identity, they are employed as a way of resolving conflict, and yet this still does not encompass all of the ways that guns may be fetishized in gangster rap music. The following section will examine ways in which firearms are fetishized to the extent of idolization.

The Idolization of Firearms in Gangster Rap Music

As Pietz illustrates, it was once common practice for indigenous groups in 14th century West Africa to fetishize material objects. These items included the technical and mechanical items of westerners such as navigation equipment, and firearms. As fetish objects, these goods often became invaluable to the natives, oftentimes embodying the spiritual properties of gods. Along this line of thinking, seemingly insignificant items such as trinkets of jewelry or ordinary pebbles or stones became causation for natural phenomena. As westerners gained exposure to this phenomenon they began to identify the practice as fetishization. Fetishism posed many problems for western traders, in that fetish objects (such as gold) were generally off limits in terms of availability for trade. The randomness and unpredictability of this roadblock helped to

¹¹ According to Sandra Dolby Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (1988) "Symbols... evoke a 'multivalency of meanings'" (82). Stahl uses this term in reference to personal associations that may be made in the act of interpreting any form of narrative.

encourage the buying and selling of African people. Overall, fetishism caused westerners to view Africans as inferior and ultimately came to justify slavery in the minds of Europeans.

The very notion of material items being personified to the extent that they embody god like characteristics may be considered rare in the twenty-first century, but Folklorist, Anand Prahlad, does just that in his analysis of proverb use in American print advertising. Prahlad describes a structure by which “American advertising operates as a system of signs reflecting what can be called a ‘religion of capitalism’” (128). According to Prahlad “...the term *religion* loosely [refers] to a system of beliefs, rituals, and dogma that guides behavior, offers answers to the most profound philosophical questions of life, and provides a structure in time and space that helps to order existence on both cosmic and day-to-day levels. Within this religion, the god is capital, and the focus is ardently this-worldly. [sic] There is an extreme emphasis on material wealth, accumulation of objects, and an ongoing demonstration of power” (128). In his analysis “...advertisements [are] read as paying homage to revered objects, persons, and ideas, as visual displays of icons and power objects” (Prahlad 129). Within this semiological system, American advertisements are equated with religious altars. As a term and concept, the ad/altar illustrates “...that as visual displays, advertisements provide us with inventories of those objects that are most valued within the society and have the greatest symbolic meaning within the capitalist system. Additionally, the term recognizes the religious overtones characterizing the way in which consumers relate to commodity culture. In other words, there is a kind of reverence not just for specific commodities but also for the system that places such an emphasis on buying power and an endless acquisition of objects” (129).

In gangster rap music one may say that firearms also operate within a semiological system of meaning. The gun, as a cultural symbol, is afforded more meaning than any other commodified object that may be considered to be a part of this intricate web of signification. As Prahlad's work may suggest, songs in the gangster rap genre may depict a strong motivation for the entire system of commodification, and not just the individual sign. This is made evident by the fact that gangster rap artist continually devise new ways of depicting firearms in their music. In some songs, gangster rap artist boast that their guns are either powerful or technologically advanced. Some artist brag about the quantity of guns that they have at their disposal, and yet others attribute super natural powers to guns. In fact, this phenomenon may be witnessed in the song *Bible* (2016) by Yo Gotti featuring Lil Wayne. It also illustrates how one may see represented in one hip-hop song, each of the four terrains (historicization, materiality, terretorialization, and personalization) that William Pietz maps out in his archeology of West African fetishism. *Bible's* hook and opening lyrics read:

Prayin to my gun that be my bible
Hand on my gun, hand on my bible
Hand on my gun, hand on my bible
Hand on my gun, hand on my bible
Prayin to my gun that be my bible

In terms of historicization, the manner in which firearms are fetishized in *Bible* alludes to ancient Greek, Judeo-Christian debates pertaining to idolatry. Christian Theologian, Tertullianus held the most respected view of idolatry and in his writings he poses the argument that "...because certain material objects can be used to commit murder, this does not mean murder is

good or permissible—indeed, God made a commandment to the contrary” furthermore, “...any misuse of the material objects of the natural world constitutes idolatry (in effect murdering one’s soul), even though the constituent elements of an idolatrous act of fabrication are not themselves evil” (Pietz 1987: 26). This interpretation may be compared to that of Augustine who felt that idolatry was simply any creation of cult like images that are not attributed to the real God. Augustine’s interpretation of idolatry was much looser, but Tertullian’s view of idolatrous worship required one to make a clear distinction between *true Sacramental objects* and *false sacramental objects*. Thus, the attribution of divine like qualities to a firearm in *Bible* does not necessarily qualify it as what ancient theologians would call “spiritual fraud” or “deviant religious activity,” in and of itself. According to Tertullian’s theory of idolatry, Yo Gotti’s gun in *Bible* could be deemed a *true sacramental object* through the church upon two conditions (1) the individual must have the voluntary component of personal faith and (2) the material object must become a vehicle of faith and divine power through the church (Pietz). Thus, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, Yo Gotti’s bible/gun would be perfectly legitimate if the above conditions are met.

In the above passage from *Bible* we see the firearm draw some of its referential power from the historical imagery of the traditional bible as true sacramental object. The very notion of the gun as powerful protector is also something that we see running through the narratives of many of the youth in Harcourt’s study. Keep in mind that the youth in Harcourt’s study are only teenagers. In fact, many of the respondents identified power as one the most significant benefits of owning a gun. One respondent says “When I think gun, its like power, But its power that you

can't neglect, you have to respect it... [Power is] just something that almost everybody wants. Because to be powerful...it's better to be powerful than it is [to be] weak and submit" (2006:42). This respondent seems to already afford the firearm as much power as the sacramental object that we see illustrated in *Bible*. But does the power lie in the commodified object or in the individual? Miklitsch would more than likely argue for neither. According to Miklitsch, power lies instead in the commodity-body-sign or the sign-value that the gun has accumulated through the labor of signification.

The gun of *Bible* is not materialized as traditional combinations of elements that may be considered firearms, instead the gun is imagined as a feminized sexual object and an open bible on a dresser. One portion of the second verse performed by rapper Lil Wayne reads:

Hand on my gun, hand on my bible
Fingers on the trigger like vagina
The bible open right there on the dresser
I just pray that all my enemies watchin me from heaven

Imagining the gun as feminized sexual object, bible, and weapon simultaneously speaks to the way that all objects function as commodities. The same kinds of negation and appropriation are clearly visible in both Freudian and Marxist discourse and both interpretations of fetishism contributed to Miklitsch's conceptualization of the commodity-body-sign. According to Miklitsch "...fetishism represents a negation of castration (of the penis-phallus) as well as an affirmation of sexual difference as such (i.e., the complex of 'real female genitals'), commodity fetishism—in the parlance of classical Marxism—represents a 'negation' or effacement of exploitation as well as an affirmation of economic difference as such (i.e., Value)" (16).

In terms of territorialization, the firearm in *Bible* basically works with a number of connotative signs in order to illustrate a picture of the drug dealing underworld. Guns, sex, drugs, and money dominate the narrative. Ironically enough, these are also elements of society which are most often under the control of capitalism. Collectively the images work to depict a volatile environment in which firearms are a necessity. The world that is created through the imagery of the firearm is one in which threats from rival drug dealers always pose a risk to one's physical safety. Also, there is the implicit threat of law enforcement due to the illegal activity of drug dealing that occurs in the narrative. This constant state of imbalance or liminality that exist between the drug dealing underworld and the civilian world requires that the firearm be used as a way of negotiating a sense of security. However false, the sense of safety afforded to the speaker by the *fetich*e allows him to navigate among both worlds with confidence.

The form of fetishism that we see, in this instance, closely resembles the *fetich*e or obligatory oaths that we see in 15th century West Africa on two levels. According to Pietz, "Fetishes were thus the ground of social order both in the private sphere of the family and in the public sphere of state and civil society" (1988: 115). Thus, on the one hand, the speaker in Yo Gotti's song, *Bible*, is literally praying to his weapon in order to maintain order among all of the aforementioned realms of society. On the other hand, the speaker's worship of his firearm can be viewed as an obligatory oath that is made between the two speakers in the song using the firearm as an intermediary. Likewise, the two speakers in the song may also be viewed as business partners in an illegal transaction that takes place in the underworld of drug dealing (the imagery of the song lends itself to such an interpretation) and the *fetich*e may also be seen as an

obligatory oath taken between two business partners in a legitimate legally binding recording contract (thus a more literal interpretation). Either interpretation closely resembles the *fetich* oaths that became common place in 15th century transactions between West Africans and European traders. Pietz informs us that, “Europeans found themselves forced to enter into the reality of fetishes in a practical way, since commercial contracts and diplomatic treaties were inevitably put into the language of the fetish (as the vehicle for the creation of new interpersonal obligations)” (1988: 115).

In conclusion, examining the fetishization of firearms in hip-hop allows one to see ways in which the fetish object is always what William Pietz calls a *composite fabrication*. Meaning that it represents a culmination of many different elements that through processes involving iteration and repetition, create a widely recognizable and universal symbol. The gun is symbolic of the gangster rapper, and one problem with the image of the gangster rapper with guns, is that it may serve to support some preexisting stereotypical notions of black males (such as “the dangerous thug” stereotype). Many would agree that African-Americans are already one of the most stereotyped ethnic groups in America, which may be one of the reasons why some gangster rappers work to diversify their talents once they have gained high levels of notoriety. Such is the case with gangster rappers: Ice Cube, Ice-T, Snoop Dog, Master P, and Dr. Dre who have all done a number of child and family friendly projects in film, and television, as well as a number of humanitarian projects. The same artist may still appear on gangster rap albums, but because of social advancements made by African-Americans during the past thirty years, and the nature of their own diversified portfolios, the same gangster rappers today, resist the kinds of

stereotyping that they may have faced thirty years ago. Gangster rap has a much larger global audience than it had initially, and it now represents a number of ethnicities including whites, Asians, and Hispanics. In fact, due to the success of the genre many gangster rappers are largely viewed as entrepreneurs, whose ultimate goals are to franchise and engage in lucrative business ventures. Much of the criticism that gangster rap artists face is due in large part to the gun violence that has become an inherent characteristic of the genre, but many argue that gangster rappers only seek to depict reality. If they are simply depicting reality as they view it, then Eithne Quinn may be right when he says that “Gangsta rappers ‘get the rap’” and that they “receive undue blame as discursive targets and media scapegoats” (211).

In gangster rap music, the fixation on this singular object—the gun, may be repeated and commodified endlessly, and it is through this innate repetition that social and cultural values become inscribed on the weapons. Pietz, reflecting on the words of French Philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, asserts that “‘The fetish is the natural object of social consciousness as common sense or recognition of value.’ Fetishes exist in the world as material objects that ‘naturally’ embody socially significant values that touch one or more individuals in an intensely personal way” (qtd. in Pietz 1985: 13,14). Based on the words of Deleuze, the guns in gangster rap music may help to create the “intensely personal” and emotional element that artist of other genres strive to create. Regardless of whether or not this is the case, it may be possible that guns in gangster rap are here to stay. Fortunately, this possibility has become far less problematic due to a much wider range of images of African-American success and the expansive reach of gangster rap artist into other areas of business and entertainment.

Chapter Two: Sexual Fetishization and Firearms in “Harlem Nights” (1989) and “A Rage in Harlem” (1991)

Firearms are used in very instrumental ways throughout the films “Harlem Nights” (1989) and “A Rage in Harlem” (1991). The opening scenes throw viewers into the middle of gunfights or scenes in which gun violence takes place and it doesn’t exist as mere spectacle. Gun violence is used throughout both of these films to make serious statements regarding sex, gender, power, and as tools of characterization. The fact that guns are visible in any scene is indicative of significant power differentials. In terms of characterization, guns help the audience to determine the good characters from the bad. Guns also help to inscribe male and female identities, oftentimes through the attributes of strength, sexuality, or weakness. For these reasons, it may be said that guns may be viewed as sexual fetish objects, and these objects in turn aid in the fetishization of some of the characters. Consequently, in order to understand how guns are being used in both of the films they are best interpreted through the lenses of psychoanalytic fetish theory, feminist fetish theory, and folkloristics.

To begin with, both of these films are of the action-drama genre, but they are also very comedic. “Harlem Nights” is arguably one of the funniest films ever produced, involving a number of iconic comedians such as Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, and Robin Harris. The films are also very significant in terms of African-American filmmaking. “Harlem Nights” being a black film and “A Rage in Harlem” being considered a black-oriented film, they

are both made in such a way that they help to work against racist stereotypes of African-American people that have been in existence since the creation of one of the earliest cinematic motion pictures, “Birth of A Nation” (1915)¹². According to hooks “Politics of race and gender were inscribed into mainstream cinematic narrative from ‘Birth of A Nation’ on. As a seminal work, this film identified what the place and function of white womanhood would be in cinema. There was clearly no place [in film] for black women [or black people in general]” (119, 20). Black films and black oriented films such as “Harlem Nights” and “A Rage in Harlem” respectively work to disprove this notion. They also prove that black films can be humorous without being self-deprecating. In fact, it would probably be more accurate to view them as being a part of a system in which it has historically been necessary to work both with and against traditional and main stream modes of film making. Black films may also present African-Americans with what hooks describes as opportunities to implement our own oppositional gaze, which is a response to mainstream forms of entertainment that seem to deny and reject African-American forms of representation. hooks says:

Spaces of agency exist for people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is

¹² Christopher Sieving in *Soul Searching* (2011), identifies a “black film” as a film that features a primarily African-American cast. In black films, African-Americans also control every aspect of production. By contrast, “Black oriented” films are only identified by black casts and themes.

oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (116)

The films “Harlem Nights” and “A Rage in Harlem” seek to create such an oppositional gaze. They were created in 1989 and 1991 respectively, a time which marks significant shifts in the film making industry. This era in black film making marks a movement away from the Blaxploitation era (1970-1974), an era that is characterized by films such as “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song” (1971), “Shaft” (1971), and “Superfly” (1972). These films featured African-Americans in dominant roles, but they also relied on a lot of the same stereotypes that were persistent throughout Hollywood since “Birth of A Nation.” According to Christopher Sieving, Blaxploitation is a term that is used to identify “...studio-produced action pictures featuring black protagonists and marketed to an urban black audience” (5). The key term in Sieving’s description is *marketed*. Racist depictions of African-American ethnicity were very easily commodified and marketed to broad audiences. So much so, that they became commonplace in early cinema. From a financial standpoint it only made sense. Hollywood found stereotypical depictions of blacks to be extremely profitable. Type casting resulted in easily recognizable characters that audiences could identify, but all in all, the black characters were merely simplified, watered down versions of African-American ethnicity that relied heavily upon exaggeration and hyperbole of expression. Blacks were most often cast as hyper-sexual, hyper-aggressive, dope fiends and criminals. While films created during the Blaxploitation era helped to remedy institutionalized forms of racism that have always plagued Hollywood by garnering

more African-American involvement in film productions, they were also denigrating to a certain extent (some more so than others). Films that came much later, like “Harlem Nights” and “A Rage in Harlem,” may play off of some of the earlier stereotypes, but they also provide a broader range of characters and scenarios that also work against stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans.

“Harlem Nights,” a film staged during the Harlem Renaissance era, is about a club owner, Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor), who along with his adopted son, Quick (Eddie Murphy), turns a downtrodden night club, *Sugar Ray’s*, into the most profitable establishment in Harlem. In fact, the establishment becomes so profitable that it gains the attention of the local Italian mob boss, Bugsy Calhoun (Michael Lerner), who conspires with law enforcement to drive Sugar Ray and Quick out of town. Sugar Ray and Quick use business savvy and intelligence to outsmart their competition. Ultimately, they withstand the racist coercion long enough to accumulate the wealth that they (and all of their associates) need in order to move and start new lives elsewhere.

“A Rage in Harlem,” also set during the Harlem Renaissance, is about a gang of thieves from Mississippi who steal a trunk filled with gold in order to sell it to gangsters in Harlem. At the center of the plot is a love story between the two main character’s, Imabelle (Robin Givens) and Jackson (Forest Whitaker) who fall in love after Imabelle seeks refuge in Jackson’s home in order to escape her homicidal gangster boyfriend. Throughout the film, Jackson must rescue her a number of times, but in the end Imabelle becomes the heroine when she kills her ex, sparing Jackson’s life in the process. Sigmund Freud’s work is crucial to understanding how fetishism

functions in both of the films. The Freudian school of psychoanalysis teaches that fetishism is a male behavior that stems from childhood. This theory was first introduced by Freud in his 1927 essay *Fetishism*:

(...) I should expect the same solution in all cases of fetishism. When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but was afterwards lost. That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the purpose of the fetish precisely is to preserve it from being lost. To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego—we know why. (205)

One could say that for Freud the rationale behind all fetish behavior lies in the fetishist's recognition and subsequent denial of the fact that his mother does not have a penis. As an acknowledged lack, it thus places his own penis in jeopardy. Thus, fetishism is an attempt "...to disavow the threat that the female lack poses to men. The range of techniques and symbols used to fetishize women means that, in Freudian terms, every sexually idealized female form is in essence a "phallic woman" (Brown 68). This interpretation may also be extended to the fetishization of isolated body parts, and all accompanying outside accessories, including guns. Ironically, Freudian fetishism has also been applied in sociological ways as well. According to Jeffrey A. Brown "John Stratton insightfully describes the transition of fetishism from an individual pathology to an institutionalized cultural condition as the result of changes in

consumption, industry, and public life from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. ‘Cultural fetishism,’ Stratton argues, ‘refers to the effect of the institutionalization of the difference between the individual man’s penis and the cultural phallus which, in the light of his experience of the modern state, he comes to feel he should have’” (qtd. in Brown 69). Stratton describes cultural fetishism as a symptom of modernism. It is a communally shared sense of entitlement that all male members of society experience equally. Thus, the fetishization of women in film may be thought of in terms of a kind of cultural fetish from a Freudian perspective. As Brown asserts, women’s sole purpose in film (more specifically action films) has been “to be fetishized by the camera” (8). Brown goes on further to explain ways in which the camera lens in action films may be viewed as an extension of the cultural phallus. Brown says “The audience for all forms of action has traditionally been exclusively male; thus, portraying action heroines as both tough and sexual, violent but desirable, allows producers to expand the basic range of action narratives and still cater to the more prurient interests of their key consumers” (7).

Feminist theorists have in turn used Freudian fetish theory to better understand the patriarchal angles of vision that have been projected onto women in film. One of the most significant contributions from feminism comes in the form of typification. Laura Mulvey, “*Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*” (1975), helped to initiate ideas concerning “an active male subjectivity and a passive female objectivity” (Brown 25). Mulvey argues that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (qtd. in Brown 25). Mulvey is describing a cinematic system in which women are frequently the objects of the male voyeuristic gaze. This dichotomy also represents the

power differential that is imposed as a result. As Brown explains “This masculine gaze of the camera forces female viewers to adopt either a narcissistic over identification with women on the screen or a masochistic male point of view” (25). hooks provides another interpretation—one that also recognizes the significance of race. According to hooks “Reading Laura Mulvey’s provocative essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” from a standpoint that acknowledges race, one sees clearly why black women spectators not duped by mainstream cinema would develop an oppositional gaze. Placing ourselves outside that pleasure in looking, Mulvey argues, was determined by a ‘split between active/male and passive/female.’ Black female spectators actively chose not to identify with the film’s imaginary subject because such identification was disabling” (122).

Brown takes Mulvey’s interpretation into another direction by using it to interpret women who wear the label *action heroine*. Brown’s intention is to bring attention to what he calls “...the combination of passive and active phallicization in the figure of the action heroine as a means of compensating for male insecurities” (70). In doing this he employs the concepts “fetishized passive” and “fetishized active” (Brown). Regardless of whether or not fetishized women in film are considered to be active or passive the swapping of the Freudian terminology *fetishized* for *phallicized* draws attention to the fact that both representations ultimately amount to fetishization and they are also subsequently “symbolic substitute[ions] for [a] perceived lack” (70).

In addition to Freudian psychoanalysis and feminist fetish theory, folklore is also an integral component in each film. It has always been common practice for film makers to

incorporate folklore motifs in their films. The use of folk motifs allows the film maker to create an easily identifiable folk group or an ethnic group audiences feel they can easily recognize or identify with. The folk motif(s) may be used to shape character's identities, foreshadow certain character's actions and also to foreshadow certain events or sequences of events in a particular film. References to a particular ethnic group's folk music, dances, religions, food ways, rituals, and beliefs help the film maker to construct images of ethnicity that may easily coincide with the audience's preexisting notions of what they feel it means to be a member of a particular ethnic or folk group. Additionally, when a given motif is repeated throughout a film, to the extent that the thematic focus of the film would be drastically altered without the presence of the given motif, this may be equated with fetishism. Along this line of thinking, as a fetish object, the folk motif takes on a multitude of meanings that lie outside of concrete realms of representation. Juwen Zhang believes that various elements of folklore are oftentimes strategically placed in films without regard to the given folk motif's degree of authenticity or the actual extent of prevalence of the motif in a given culture, thus it becomes necessary for one to differentiate between

traditional folklore and what Zhang calls filmic folklore. According to Zhang:

Filmic folklore by definition is an imagined folklore that exists only in films, and is a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridized in fictional film. Taken out of the original (social, historic, geographic, and cultural) contexts, it functions in similar ways to that of folkloristic films. Filmic folklore imposes or reinforces certain stereotypes (ideologies), and signifies certain meanings identified and consumed (as “the truth”) by a certain group of people. The folklore in filmic folklore may appear as a scene, an action, an event, or a storyline (plot), and in verbal or non-verbal form. (267)

In addition to the construction of ethnic identity in film, motifs are also commonly used in allegorical ways that may systematically propel a film’s plot’s development while simultaneously creating a sense of didacticism. Most films are didactic in the sense that film maker’s want the audience to walk away feeling as if they learned an important moral lesson and using easily identifiable folk motifs, such as firearms in dueling scenes, oftentimes helps to facilitate the kind of moral messages that filmmakers are aiming for. At surface level, the practice of creating filmic folklore may seem unethical to some, but similar to the traditional folk tale, most Hollywood producers seek to be morally and ethically sound while also appealing to certain values. For example, one convenient way of appealing to an audience’s Christian values and Christian belief systems is to juxtapose Christianity with other folk religions and folk belief systems. When this particular practice is applied in films, secular religion, and folk belief are

most often associated with evil, and thus become embedded in the film's antagonists, clearly made visible by the antagonist's speech patterns, mannerisms, and actions. In doing this, the film maker perpetuates moral and ethical codes that some audiences may agree with. Thus is the case with the films "Harlem Nights" (1989) and "A Rage in Harlem" (1991). Both of the films feature primarily African-American casts and both films integrate firearms and dueling scenes in ways that pass them off as African-American folk motifs. This practice allows film makers to construct representations of African-American and Western identity that they feel audience members will easily recognize and identify with.

The most important motif and example of fetishism that appears in both of the films is the ritualized violence in the form of dueling, meaning that firearms in "Harlem Nights" and "A Rage in Harlem" are used strategically as a way of negotiating various aspects of identity in the film's main characters. The gun primarily appears whenever conflict emerges. Likewise, the conflicts are resolved through variations of dueling. Dueling, in and of itself, actually represents a phenomenon that evolved with the rise of Western society and evidence of dueling may be found in ancient Greek and Roman mythology. "The word 'duel' is from Latin *duellum*, *duo* plus *bellum*, or a war between two. Historians agree that its roots lie in the medieval trial by combat, which itself goes back a long way and rested happily on the notion that the winner would not be the stronger man, but the virtuous man" (Holland 9). Dueling is not a traditional African-American motif, but it is used in both of these films alongside other motifs (such as jazz, dancing, and city night life), so that it may appear to be solely an African-American tradition. The culmination of ritualized violence in "Harlem Nights" and "A Rage in Harlem" illustrates

ways in which filmic folklore may influence one's perception of African-American identity. According to Zhang, "Filmic folklore does not mirror the culture and the people of a certain time and place, as folkloristic film is supposed to do, but it likewise does offer an interpretation of folklore (or folklore-like practice) as an entity of a culture. Films with filmic folklore do not have the purpose of documenting folklore, but rather of deconstructing and reconstructing folklore through the medium of film, thus creating a time out of time. Such filmic folklore, in turn, influences the filmmakers and viewers, and the actual folklore practitioners whose folklore is partly revealed (with invention) to the public domain" (Zhang 267, 8).

Rather than being an African-American motif, as some Hollywood scripts would have us believe, dueling as a form of folk ritual is pervasive, transcending all of Western society, and historically has taken countless forms. According to Roy A. Rappaport, ritual is "... the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers" (249). Variation is an inherent characteristic of the ritual of dueling. Rappaport contends that by definition the term ritual "...stipulates that the sequences of formal acts and utterances constituting ritual are not absolutely invariant, but more or less so. This stipulation not only allows for imperfection in performance but also recognizes that some variation will likely be present within any liturgical order (ritual) no matter how punctilious its performance must be" (250). Despite appearing in many variations, dueling has always been a highly recognizable form of violent ritual even in ancient times. One of the most well-known fictional duels in the world comes from ancient, pagan, Greek mythology, and appears in the Iliad as early as the fifth century. It depicts a number of bloody duels and battles including the most famous

one which occurs between Hector and Achilles. According to legend, this battle lasted for days on end and included horses and chariots, a number of different weapons, and even divine intervention. Some battles that appear in ancient Greek epics are fought for material gain, but men primarily fought in order to display personal attributes such as honor, respect, reverence, and social prestige—feeling that they were equally important, even worth dying for. Ancient bards shared tales that recounted epic duels and battles as a form of entertainment, but they also shared them as a way of creating and perpetuating a sense of social solidarity. Within these tales one would find important rules of engagement. As depicted in the fight between Hector and Achilles, violating the rules of battle is viewed as transgression. For example, at one point in the tale Achilles chooses to desecrate the corpse of Hector and is subsequently punished by the Gods. Breaking sacred rules of engagement in the society in which such tales were told meant suffering dire consequences at the hands of others and also at the hands of the pagan Gods that the Greeks worshipped.

Formulas from ancient Greek mythology evolved into the kinds of tales that we see later in Roman mythology which appear in the tenth century, some of the most famous tales being the many legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table (Bulfinch). Presently, there are many stage and film adaptations of the story of King Arthur and his heroic feat of defeating the Saxons and thus preserving the honor of Great Britain. Medieval folk tales and legends, such as the tales of *Robin Hood*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *King Arthur*, that offer depictions of medieval knighthood, also illustrate what historians have termed the Age of Chivalry. Chivalry as a concept and a code of conduct for all knights to follow has its origins in medieval Roman

Catholicism, and like the Roman Catholic religion, it was very much a prescribed way of life for medieval knights. Chivalric codes dictated knight's actions on the battle field, and also their interactions with the people that they encountered daily. In the Dictionary of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry (1986), chivalry is defined as "The qualities of being a knight, of knighthood. At its loftiest, and assuredly in its underlying theory, chivalry depicted the perfect gentleman—gently born, gently mannered, truthful, faithful, courteous to women, pure, brave and fearless, unsparing of self, filled with deep religious feeling, bowing before God and womankind, but haughty in the presence of all others. To these were added the elements of maintaining a high sense of honor, disdain for danger and death, love of adventure, compassion for the weak and oppressed, generosity, self-sacrifice, and altruism" (Broughton 108). Roman Catholic knighthood of the 10th and 11th centuries also demanded that all knights devote all of their time and energies to god. Therefore, the knight was considered to be a strong arm instrument of the Roman Catholic Church, and in many cases the cathedral is where knights were expected to reside (Broughton).

The codes and rules of engagement during battle that Roman Catholic knights followed evolved into the dueling codes and laws that we see implemented throughout the Western hemisphere. There were codes and laws regulating the practice of dueling in places across the globe including: Ireland, Britain, Italy, Russia, France, Germany, and the United States. Historically, one of the most important documents pertaining to dueling is Ireland's Code Duello which became official in 1777 (Holland). The Code Duello is very explicit describing

punishable offenses, guidelines for apology, and also parameters by which a person may fire their weapon in a duel. The first statement reads:

The first offense requires the first apology, though the retort may have been more offensive than the insult. Example: A tells B he is impertinent, etc. B retorts that he lies; yet A must make the first apology, because he gave the first offense, and (after one fire) B may explain away the retort by subsequent apology. (Holland 43)

After the Code Duello became common practice in Ireland, other nations replicated and implemented their own versions. For instance, “In 1838 ...South Carolina’s Governor, John Lyde Wilson published a sixteen-page pamphlet revising the Code Duello for American use” (Holland 149). One significant difference in Wilson’s version is that he places more responsibility on the role of *second*—even specifying when it is acceptable for seconds to intervene on the principle’s behalf. Wilson’s version reads “If the other man fires before the signal, you as a second may shoot at him, and if your friend got hit by the illegal shot, its your duty to do so” (qtd. in Holland 152). For the most part duels were permissible and highly encouraged by the populace. They were especially popular in the American West and South. It was seen as an inexpensive and expedient way to regulate behavior, being much cheaper than the common law suit. Duels were primarily fought by men although sometimes women also engaged in this violent practice. Although rare, when women did engage in dueling, they did so for much of the same reasons as men (to defend one’s honor, romance, or pride). According to Barbara Holland “In a single dramatic meeting, the duel settled questions of political and

regional loyalty, land ownership and boundaries, job preferment, legislation, gambling debts, honesty, newspaper editorials, gossip, female chastity, genealogy, and personal courage” (3). Any particular instance of contention, conflict, or opposing points of view could naturally result in a duel. This was not seen as a barbaric practice, but an honorable one—uncivilized people fought while gentlemen dueled. The two being completely separate practices as Holland explains “If, in a bar, someone offends you, and you wheel and knock him off his barstool, and he snatches up a chair and comes after you, this is simply a fight, or a brawl, and the bouncer will break it up and throw you both out. But if, as still the custom in punctilious places, you invite the villain out to the parking lot...and some of your friends and some of his come along to hold your coats and see fair play, and you fight there, this is a duel. A duel with a challenge and acceptance, meeting grounds and seconds” (1). In order to constitute an actual duel these three components must be present. Unlike a spontaneous fight, a duel is preceded by a formal challenge from one of the parties involved. Once this formal challenge is accepted by the other party, both parties must both agree on neutral grounds in which to fight. Negotiations of this sort are usually taken care of by the seconds (or close associates of the respective duelers) who also oversee the proceedings, making certain that each party adheres to the established codes of conduct. If the established rules are broken, the offending party could face serious consequences including fines, imprisonment, or death. In the rare case of disagreement, the seconds may also be allowed to duel. Rules were rarely ever broken, because much like the medieval knight, the gentleman was primarily concerned with issues of courage, pride, and honor. Thus, cheating in a duel would go against all of these values. Even though strict rules were legally in place, some

variation on the structure of the duel was allowed. For instance, sometimes physicians were actually present to dress wounds, and if needed, to determine if participants were physically able to continue after being injured. In many cases, participants could also choose their own weapons. In ancient times, weapons of choice included pike and shield. In the medieval era, we see a transition to swords, which gave way to the rapier, followed by the single shot dueling pistol of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 20th century we see the birth of the six-shot revolver, which ironically still symbolizes the old West.

The duel as a motif is used profusely in the films “Harlem Nights” (1989) and “A Rage in Harlem” (1991). Guns are fetishized through the dueling scenes, but the firearm may also be discussed in terms of the stand-alone fetishized object. The dueling scenes are primarily important in both of the films for four reasons: dueling scenes offer conflict resolution, they help to establish and negotiate various aspects of individual character’s identities, they help to mediate violent interactions between character’s (oftentimes justifying the act of violence for the character’s involved in the conflict and also in the eyes of the spectators). Finally, in some cases the dueling scenes help to move the plot oftentimes marking important points in the plots development along the way (i.e. the rise in action, the climax, the dénouement, etc.).

The film “Harlem Nights,” is a comedy/drama set in 1930s Harlem, offering audiences a fictional representation of the jazz age. “Harlem Nights” romanticizes this era in American history much like the legend of King Arthur romanticizes medieval England. As a black film, “Harlem Nights” may even be interpreted as a reclamation of chivalric codes which were often appropriated by white supremacist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan, the Knights of the White

Camellia, and others. This element is even implied by the title which may also be read as a play on the words *night* and *knight*. The main character Quick (Eddie Murphy) may be interpreted as a celluloid version of King Arthur. Quick's Arthurian identity is established, in part, by the opening scene which ironically involves a duel. Many parallels to King Arthur are established throughout the film and in this opening scene we even find out that like the legendary King Arthur, Quick comes from mysterious origins, losing both of his parents at a young age. In the opening scene, we see a young Quick (Desi Arnez Hines II) running through the deserted streets of Harlem in the middle of the night. Quick's destination is Club Sugar Ray to deliver a small package to the club owner, Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor). Along the way, the audience may even notice a poster for a stage play production of *King Lear*—a subtle allusion to the age of chivalry. Like a number of clubs in 1930s Harlem, Sugar Ray's serves as a casino, speakeasy and brothel (definitely not a place for small children). Once young Quick is let inside the club by a disgruntled bouncer he is slowly led past a number of drunks and prostitutes to Sugar Ray who is overseeing a dice game involving a number of the club's patrons, one of which who has suddenly become irate at the sight of the young child who he claims will give him "bad luck." His reliance on a secular folk belief helps to establish the irate gambler as an evil character—the belief that children are an omen for bad luck opposes Christian values and places him in opposition to the other characters in the scene that apparently carry no such beliefs. When the man ultimately loses the dice game he becomes enraged and demands his money back. When Sugar Ray refuses, he grabs Sugar Ray, puts a razor to his neck and threatens to kill him. In some ways the mad gambler can be equated with the evil dragon that exists in some versions of

Arthurian legend. The dragon must be slayed in order for the kingdom of Camelot to flourish and Arthur is the only knight in the kingdom that has the power to do it. Quick is the only individual that has the power to kill the angry gambler and save the club and his future father. This scene is also reminiscent of the way that young King Arthur inherits Camelot upon pulling the sword from the stone in other Arthurian legends. It is a similar rite of passage or initiation rite, but as opposed to a magic sword, young Quick pulls a small pistol from a hidden compartment underneath a pool table and shoots the man in the head before he has the opportunity to slash the throat of Sugar Ray. In killing the furious gambler, young Quick, saves Sugar Ray and becomes the sole heir to the wealthiest and most powerful man in Harlem.

In the very next scene we see that Quick (Eddie Murphy) has grown into adulthood. Why does the film skip Quick's teenage years, cutting directly to adulthood? Boswell and Loukides, reflecting on the early work of anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, assert that in the "... history of childhood and adolescence in Western culture...before the Renaissance children were regarded as small adults 'without special needs or privileges' ... The 'teenager,' also a term associated with Western culture, was established as a distinctive phase in the human life cycle in America...in 1904, and has become such an entrenched aspect of our life cycles that "we quite forget there was ever a time when people passed from childhood to adulthood without being 'teenagers'" (qtd. in Boswell and Loukides 25). Quick's early initiation rites or the ritual in winning the face off with the angry gambler was sufficient for him to gain full acceptance into the group, even earning him the second highest place in the chain of command. Therefore, the camera cuts directly from this point in his life directly to adulthood.

Another possible explanation for this dramatic jump cut comes from Freudian psychoanalysis. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the previously described scene from Quick's early childhood years may be interpreted as a *screen memory* or "...a memory of childhood characterized both by its exceptional sharpness and its apparently trivial or insignificant content (Freud 1899,1901). Screen memories are not preserved because of their own content, but because of the way that their content relates to a content that has been subject to repression. They literally screen or mask repressed memories" (Macey 344). Freud's rationale for analyzing screen memories are due to the fact that "The analysis of a screen memory leads to the discovery of indelible childhood experiences and unconscious fantasies, usually of a sexual nature" (Macey 344). According to Freud's theory, this seemingly random flashback can also be viewed as information that is crucial to understanding the overall plot. It is the opening scene, the audience isn't made explicitly aware of its importance until later, and the scene isn't referred to again in the film. Freud's theory adds a different slant on why the scene isn't addressed again. As a fully grown adult, perhaps Quick has repressed this "indelible" childhood experience to the point of it being relegated to the subconscious. From this perspective, it may also help one to better understand the nature of Quick's childhood. The content of the screen memory or the memory of him shooting an adult in the head (according to Freudian theory) is more than likely related to the complete childhood that we as an audience cannot witness. In short, as a screen memory, this psychoanalytic perspective illustrates how one may view this scene as a characterization of Quick's entire childhood. In viewing this scene as a screen memory, there is also the implication that it may have a drastic impact on future events in Quick's life as well.

In the following scene, Quick is in the same club, only now club Sugar Ray's is no longer the hole in the wall, bucket of blood that it was previously. It has grown into a lavish night club, complete with gold railings, marble floors, crystal chandeliers, and live bands. In the following scene Sugar Ray and the rest of the club's staff is completing the night audit in Sugar Ray's office when Quick realizes that the club's brothel has come up short once again. Quick believes that the club's Madame, Vera (Della Reese), is stealing money. Quick approaches Vera with the matter and she is angered greatly and even visibly hurt by the accusation. With her honor and integrity being questioned in front of all of the other club associates her only option is to fight. Vera demands that Quick step outside and fight her one-on-one. According to feminist fetish theory, at the point that Vera challenges Quick she steps outside of traditional feminine boundaries. A scenario that feminist, Elizabeth Hill, identifies as a condition of the female action heroine. Hill says "...these powerfully transgressive characters open up interesting questions about the fluidity of gendered identities and changing popular cinematic representations of women, action heroines are often described within feminist film theory as 'pseudo males' or as being not 'really' women" (qtd. in Brown 46). Hill argues that "...feminists working within the dominant model of psychoanalysis have had extremely limited spaces within which to discuss the transformative and transgressive potential of the action heroine. This is because psychoanalytic accounts which theorize sexual difference within the framework of linked binary oppositions (active male/passive female) necessarily position normative female subjectivity as passive or in terms of lack. From this perspective, active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or "figuratively male"

(qtd. in Brown 46). Based on Hill's interpretation, characters such as Vera, are different because they seek to defy the confines of the traditional gender binary.

According to Mulvey this may also subject aggressive women to another binary—that which involves morals. Mulvey describes the extent that matters of “right” and “wrong” become intertwined with gender issues in film. Mulvey says “Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman (evoking castration, psychoanalytically speaking). True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness—the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong” (371). Furthermore, Jeffrey Brown feels that active women's unique quality is due to the fact that they dare to “straddle both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide” (46). Vera is established as a matriarch earlier in the scene (as it is revealed that she is in charge of all of the women in the brothel, and we later find out that she is also a mother figure to Quick), but as Brown's theory suggest, Vera's role becomes both maternal and paternal as she challenges Quick to a duel. As Quick reluctantly follows Vera outside into the dark alley, two of the club associates accompany them. The two spectators function much like seconds would in a traditional duel. Historically, seconds in a duel most often served a similar role to referee or simply witness. In the film, the two men seem to function as witnesses only, but we also see Quick turn to them several times during the fight as if he is seeking their advice or approval. What begins as a fair fist fight turns to chaos when Quick is knocked to the ground and succumbs to a barrage of Vera's punches. Temporarily incapacitated, Quick decides to violate the rules of fair play by striking Vera over the head with a garbage can lid. After Vera falls to the ground, Quick then lifts the entire trash can overhead,

and drops it on her. Quick believing that the duel is won, begins to celebrate, but his impromptu victory celebration is interrupted by Vera who is visibly much angrier than she was before. Determined to make Quick pay for his transgressions, Vera reveals a razor, and her intentions to use it on him. Quick, becoming worried, demands that she put the razor away, but his request is denied. Quick then brandishes a small pistol, and presents Vera with an ultimatum; she can either put the razor away or have her pinky toe shot off. Quick turns to his associates (or seconds) for advice, but they simply shrug their shoulders with no advice to offer him. Then the screen quickly fades to black as you hear a single gunshot followed by Vera screaming in pain. This scene illustrates the significance of honor and respect to the characters involved and it also marks an important point in the action. At this point in the film, it is revealed to the audience that at Sugar Ray's, honor, dignity, and respect is far more important than money. In challenging a male authority figure, Vera is not only preserving her own sense of dignity, but she is also subverting traditional patriarchal narratives which view any opposition to male authority as transgression. Nevertheless, in winning the duel with Vera, Quick has retained his position as second in command.

Another notion from feminist theory that may apply to Vera in the previously described scene is that of the abject mother. This theory is established by Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horrors* (1982). "Central to Kristeva's theory is the contrast between maternal authority and the law of the father. Kristeva argues that the semiotic process involved with an individual's contact with authority can be contrasted between the alignment of the abject (e.g., bodily wastes) with maternal authority and the association of proper social regulation with paternal law" (Brown 79).

According to this feminist theory, Vera's maternal authority, in this scenario, may be viewed as being necessitated by Quick's transgression in challenging her authority. In turn, she becomes the ultimate obstacle to Quick's patriarchal reign. According to Brown "In its semiotic association with the abject, the maternal can represent that which must be shunned in order to ascend to the realm of the father" (81). Vera's maternal authority is not isolated to the brothel it extends to Quick as well. At the very beginning of the film we find out that Quick was adopted by Sugar Ray after the death of his parents. Consequently, Vera is the only significant mother figure in Quick's life. Thus, her influence on Quick becomes that much more imperative. Throughout the duration of the duel her ferocity, size, strength, and fighting skills make Vera a larger than life adversary. Vera's form in this sense is best described as the "monstrous feminine" (Brown 81). "In its extreme form, Barbara Creed has described the abject mother figure as the 'monstrous-feminine' archetype so often found in horror film. Creed characterizes one aspect of the monstrous-feminine as the obsessive maternal figure...who [B]y refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the Symbolic" (qtd. in Brown 81). Barbara Creed's theory may help to more accurately interpret the scene's resolution. In defeating Vera, Quick is able to "relinquish" the control that Vera has (more than likely) imposed upon him since childhood, and in the process, he firmly establishes his own authoritative position.

Additionally, there are other scenes in "Harlem Nights" in which the firearm is noticeably depicted as a fetishized object, detached, in many ways, from its functional use. In these two scenes one can clearly see the symbolic power that the weapon possesses and this may be the

reason why these particular scenes also mark pivotal points in the narrative. The first instance of this particular angle of vision comes at a point in the film that precedes Quick's duel with Reggie. In this scene, the audience sees Quick leaving the apartment of Smalls, who Quick has just discovered has been murdered by Bugsy Calhoun's men. After witnessing Small's gunshot wounds and slit throat, a stunned Quick hurriedly exits Small's apartment building and drives away only to be followed immediately by Reggie and his crew who firmly believe that Quick is the one who murdered Smalls. As soon as Quick notices that Reggie and his men are trailing him, Quick opens the glove compartment and grabs two shiny, chrome, pearl-handled pistols. The extreme close-up shot of Quick's bright pearl-handled pistols is indicative of their symbolic significance. Contrarily, the high-powered machine guns carried by Reggie and his crew remain obscured in the shadows throughout the entire scene. At this moment, Quick's weapons, in all their extravagance, become fetishized symbols of Quick's chivalric virtue and the dark and obscure firearms of his adversaries become symbolic of their malevolence. Based on the events that follow, one may even say that the guns take on a magical quality reminiscent of an earlier scene in which a young Quick kills the angry gambler. Overall, these scenes support the notion that it is through the fetishization of the firearm that Quick's identity as noble hero is established. Furthermore, throughout the film, Quick is the only character that seems to have access to guns when protection is needed and he is also the only character that seems to know how to use them effectively.

Later in the scene we see Quick involved in a stand-off with Reggie (Arsenio Hall), who believes that Quick has murdered their brother, Smalls (Thomas M. Ford) who worked for rival

club owner, Bugsy Calhoun (Michael Lerner). After a brief car chase, in which Reggie accidentally kills one of his own men, Quick is cornered. Having nowhere else to run, Quick dives through a storefront window in order to avoid being hit. At a surface level interpretation, this particular scene is more of a shoot-out than an actual duel, but upon closer analysis, the scene also reveals many similarities to the traditional duel that may not simply be coincidental. In fact, some elements of the scene may even be viewed as a social and cultural critique of the formal dueling practices of the past. The fact that Quick is outnumbered presents an unfair advantage, but despite this unfair advantage, everyone involved in the conflict is armed. They also maintain the same amount of distance throughout the entire fight as if it is a formality. The men even take turns firing as if they are being polite to the other party by affording them with the opportunity to fire their weapons in return. The adversaries also plead their own separate cases to one another in the midst of the action (Quick voices his own innocence while Reggie and his crew voice their disdain for Quick). The communication between both of the parties helps to distinguish it from a random act of violence. Since they do not believe that Quick is innocent of murdering Reggie's brother, the fight or duel must continue until death. At this point the scene begins to read as a social and cultural critique of formal dueling. In opposition to the powerful automatic weapons that Reggie and his associates fire, one lone member of Reggie's crew attempts to fire a smaller, much quieter weapon, a weapon that closely resembles the early 18th century dueling pistol. He even raises his arm in a calculated fashion and takes careful aim, as if he will only be given one opportunity to hit his intended target. After firing, he then lowers his arm, and patiently waits for Reggie's reckless scatter of bullets to cease before he carefully takes aim again. If his strategy is

to gain control of the gun battle through control and accuracy, then the strategy is not successful. He never even hits his intended target but, he does infuriate Reggie who then strikes him several times with his hat and vehemently demands that the man not fire his inferior weapon anymore during the fight. Afterwards, Quick emerges from hiding and kills all three of them with three successive shots. In this satirical scene, the film maker is able to make fun of the notion of the formal duel while simultaneously making the statement that weapons of the past may be rendered obsolete, but the more powerful weapons of the future are equally ineffective in the wrong hands.

Another scene in the film depicts how firearms (as fetishized objects) are also instrumental in the fetishization of women. The scene occurs at a point in the film when Miss Dominique LaRue (Jasmine Guy) is hired by Bugsy Calhoun to murder Quick. Miss LaRue is depicted as a mulatto seductress. She accompanies Calhoun to an upscale restaurant where Calhoun makes Quick a business proposition. Calhoun asks Quick to abandon Sugar Ray to come work for him with the hopes of increasing the clientele at his own less successful establishment, the Pitty Pat club. Throughout this business meeting LaRue is clearly on display and Calhoun intends to use her presence as an incentive to attract Quick to his organization. LaRue's good looks and lighter complexion subjects her to the eroticizing and exoticizing male gaze of both the camera and the audience. Due to this fact, LaRue is an example of what Mulvey describes as the "passive/female" which becomes objectified by the male gaze. However, this shouldn't be confused with the fetishized/active role that she embodies later in the film. Mulvey says "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is

stylized accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotiv of erotic spectacle ...she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire” (366). According to Mulvey “The woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the story, and as erotic object for the spectator [of the film], with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (qtd. in Brown 121). There is also a racial component to this style of representation as well, which Brown equates with Orientalism. He says “The specter of Orientalism and Colonialist-influenced beliefs is intimately intertwined with almost every media representation of non-whites in contemporary popular culture. In particular, women of color are consistently marketed and consumed as more bodily, more sexual, and more mysterious than their Caucasian counterparts. In short, ethnically identified women are routinely overwritten by cultural stereotypes and expectations of exotic Otherness, and all the sexual fantasies that implies” (170). One of such sexual fantasies described by Brown is hypersexuality. Feminist scholar Celine Parrenas Shimizu, asserts that “Hypersexuality is the inscription of pathological or non-normative sexuality as if it were a natural characteristic, one that is directly linked to a particular raced and gendered ontology. A Western fantasy of a perverse subject position for racial and gendered subjects in popular representation, the production of hypersexuality directly contrasts with normal or standard white male sexuality...” (qtd. in Brown 176). LaRue’s hypersexual characterization contributes to her “fetishized active” role, meaning that it makes her even more of a threat to Quick.

Overall, the very point at which LaRue is introduced in the film, seems to work against many of the previous scenes in that it disrupts the film's action. According to Mulvey, this may be an inherent effect of presenting woman-as-spectacle. Mulvey asserts that "Main-stream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative. (...) The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative" (366). LaRue functions as more than mere spectacle. LaRue is also a sexualized threat. Even the very name, Dominique, evokes the sexual term *dominatrix*, and likewise, her future actions prove to be sadistic. After Quick turns down Calhoun's business proposition, Calhoun decides to use LaRue (and all of her alluring qualities) to murder him. At Calhoun's request, LaRue invites Quick to her home with the intention of making the attempt on his life look like a sexual liaison. When Quick visits Miss LaRue, he clearly does so with the intention of making passionate love to her. As LaRue "slips into something a little more comfortable," Quick secretly discovers that she keeps a loaded pistol underneath her pillow that is nearly identical to his own. Quick initially finds humor in the fact that she also sleeps with a pistol underneath her pillow, but he quickly comes to his senses. Suspecting foul play, he is able to unload her weapon without her knowledge. Near the end of the scene when Miss LaRue brandishes her gun with the intention of murdering Quick, to her surprise, the gun doesn't fire and Quick kills her instead. This particular scene marks a pivotal point in the plot because it is at this point that Quick realizes that Bugsy Calhoun is trying to murder him. This scene may also provide an interesting juxtaposition

between the film's treatment of Quick and LaRue. As opposed to merely being subjected to the gazes of others, Quick embodies empowerment which may be viewed as a byproduct of what Mulvey describes as "an active/passive heterosexual division of labor" (367). Mulvey asserts that "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence, the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen" (367). Not only does the male role control the action of the story, but it is through the leading male role that the audience is allowed to navigate the cinematic realm. "The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by women as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonists, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (367). Quick's resistance to objectification contributes to his heroic appeal and is the main reason why male spectators are more likely to identify with him than any other character in the film. This feature of the film may be the reason why hooks identifies "Harlem Nights" as a "phallogocentric representation of black masculinity" (105).

In terms of fetishization, the love scene is significant because we see the firearm being

sexualized. The gun is being fetishized in the sense that it is used as way of negotiating Quick's masculine, sexual identity. Furthermore, Miss Dominique LaRue's nearly identical pistol is used to establish her identity as Quick's worthy adversary, or better yet, his femme fatal. Quick uses the gun to gain dominance over his female counterpart and it is in this way that the gun functions as a phallic symbol that helps to negotiate a number of binary differences simultaneously.

This scene may also be interpreted from a Freudian perspective. From a Freudian perspective, it may be viewed as a direct result of the aforementioned screen memory, meaning that one could infer that the scene depicts Quick's fetishization of homicidal women and guns, each brought about as a result of the repressed memory of killing the angry gambler at the beginning of the film. As a young child, Quick shot the man at nearly point blank range in the head. Ironically, Quick also shoots LaRue in the head at point blank range with a similar weapon. Ultimately, the screen memory may have caused Quick to subconsciously fetishize dangerous women. Furthermore, LaRue may have become even more of a fetish once Quick realized that she had a gun. The gun as fetish object, represents a phallic means of power (Brown). In setting her trap, LaRue believes that she has usurped a kind of phallic means of power from Quick, but he reclaims it by killing her instead.

According to hooks, this scene presents audiences with what she identifies as a "tragic vision of black heterosexuality" (104). hooks contends that in Quick and LaRue's love scene, one witnesses a scenario in which "Both black woman and black man are unable to respond fully to one another because they are so preoccupied with the white power structure, with the white man. The most valued black woman 'belongs' to a white man who willingly exchanged her

sexual favors in the interest of business. Desired by black and white men alike (it is their joint lust that renders her more valuable, black men desire her because white men desire her and vice versa), her internalized racism and her longing for material wealth and power drive her to act in complicity with white men against black men” (104).

The “tragic vision of black heterosexuality” that hooks describes may actually be the result of the film maker’s efforts to produce a film that is historically accurate on many levels. During the Harlem Renaissance, night life was plentiful. The crowds that this night life attracted were often mixed, but despite Harlem’s reputation as being one of the most liberal places in America, racism was still very much prevalent. In the most highly sought after establishments, racism was most often accompanied by colorism as well. According to Hine, some of the most prestigious clubs in Harlem (such as The Cotton Club, and Connie’s Inn) helped to firmly establish social dichotomies (based solely on skin tone) within the African-American community. As Hines explains:

The Cotton Club was Harlem’s most exclusive and fashionable nightspot. Opened in 1923 by white gangster Owney Madden to peddle illegal beer, it catered to well-choreographed and fast-paced two-hour revues that included a chorus line of attractive young women—all brown skinned, all under twenty-one years old, and all over 5’6” tall. No dark women appeared. Music was provided by assorted ensembles. Cab Callaway might sing “She’s Tall, She’s Tan, and She’s Terrific” or “Cotton Colored Gal of Mine.” (423)

In clubs such as the ones described by Hine and the numerous Harlem clubs featured in the film, the exploitation of lighter skinned African-American women for the pleasure and economic gain of white men was all too common, but as hooks asserts, the prevalence of this phenomenon in Harlem Renaissance culture makes the scene in the film no less tragic. The film only attempts to articulate some of the alienating effects that this form of discrimination has had on African-American communities.

On a macroscopic level, all of the aforementioned elements in this scene, work to emphasize traditional notions regarding gender binaries. The sexualized and fetishized nature of female characters is a tool of commodification, and according to Brown the casting of sex symbols in the film industry is done to attract male viewers. As Brown asserts “The casting alone is indicative of the film industry’s attempts to present established sex symbols (such as Jasmine Guy and Robin Givens) as tough heroines in the attempt to create a combination of sex and violence irresistible to action film fans” (59). The firearm becomes instrumental in creating both dangerous and seductive images. In the action film, the gun serves as an aid in the juxtaposition of “conventional sexual attractiveness and violent abilities” (59). Together these elements ultimately serve to enhance male viewing pleasure.

Similar to “Harlem Nights,” “A Rage in Harlem” is set primarily in 1930’s Harlem and firearms are fetishized predominantly through the trope of dueling. Throughout the film, the filmmaker works to establish the connection between dueling, Christianity, and the notion of chivalry. In the opening scene, we see the main character, Jackson (Forest Whitaker), on his

knees praying aloud to a picture of Jesus which is beside a picture of his deceased mother who is dressed in nun-like attire. This is the first of many scenes in which Jackson is characterized as an ascetic Christian. We find out that Jackson detests the idea of sinning, or committing any offense against God, and throughout the majority of the film Jackson avoids drinking, swearing, and is also a virgin until Imabelle (Robin Givens) seeks refuge in his home, and he falls deeply in love with her.

In many ways, the characterization of Jackson as a pious Christian allows this character to function in a role similar to that of the medieval Christian knight. According to Broughton “...the qualities of the chivalric knight were honor, piety, and love...” (108). Additionally, Medieval Christian knighthood required that all knights abide by strict moral and religious codes and devote all of their energies to God. In the film, Jackson embodies the medieval Christian knight who is in turn commissioned by his Lord’s majesty to rescue the beautiful damsel in distress. From a feminist perspective, this represents a very typical narrative structure. Feminist scholar, Susan Bordo characterizes this formula as the “oppressor/oppressed” model and it is an instrumental component in active/passive portrayals of women. According to Bordo “[the oppressor/oppressed model as a feminist trope] theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women—who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless’ (qtd. in Brown 21). As Brown points out, from a narrative standpoint this does not leave very many options. “This binary structure situates men as active, women as passive—men as violent, women as having violence done to them” (Brown 21).

In addition to traditional narrative elements folklore is also heavily implemented

throughout the film. Folklore becomes instrumental in terms of characterization and in terms of narrative plot development. The characterization of Jackson as the medieval Christian knight prototype is easily contrasted by the film's antagonist, Slim (Badja Djola) who is the direct opposite of Jackson. Slim is characterized as being evil and sinister, and only interested in recovering a trunk full of gold that he, his bandits, and girlfriend, Imabelle steal at the beginning of the film. Much like the angry gambler in "Harlem Nights" Slim's evil persona is developed in part through the use of folklore. Whenever Slim feels cheated or disrespected in any way he says "Pop Goes the Weasel," a line from a popular 19th century nursery rhyme (Opie). Slim's use of the nursery rhyme in the film signals that he is going to kill someone, and in most cases, no sooner than he says it, a duel or gunfight is underway. In this sense, one could say that the folk rhyme mediates all of Slim's violent encounters including the duels. The use of the nursery rhyme is also one of the more significant uses of folklore in the film and it also serves the purpose of positioning the protagonist and the antagonist against one another, thus you have Jackson's Christianity versus Slim's folk belief evidenced by his repetitive use of the phrase "Pop Goes the Weasel." Ironically, Slim's use of the nursery rhyme mirrors some of the ways in which the nursery rhyme functions in society. Historically, most nursery rhymes or folk rhymes were created by adults, for adults, and written with adult themes. For example, some 19th century nursery rhymes feature such topics as murder, the killing of domestic animals, and kidnapping, all of which are things that actually do happen in the film (Baring-Gould). Another important aspect of the nursery rhyme may even provide some details concerning the overall structure of the film. According to Iona and Peter Opie "Pop Goes the Weasel" is a well-liked

folk dance that is choreographed for multiple couples. In some versions of the dance, couples are required to switch partners a number of times; such is the case in this 1853 version of the dance. The instructions read "...they form a circle of three with one of the couples next to them on the line, and turn once round to the right, and once to the left; then making the one they have selected pass quickly under their arms to his place (while singing 'Pop goes the Weasel') they return direct [sic] to the other line, and repeat the same figure with the partner of the last chosen" (qtd. in Opie 217). Similar to this multifaceted couples dance, the presence of the nursery rhyme "Pop Goes the Weasel" in "A Rage in Harlem" may allude to the fact that the film's leading lady, Imabelle, is kidnapped and changes hands several times before finally finding her way back to Jackson, like the many sudden exchanges of partners in the popular folk dance.

In one scene in the film, Slim engages in a duel with Easy Money (Danny Glover) to defend the honor of Imabelle. Slim becomes infuriated when Easy Money continues to make sexually suggestive statements regarding Imabelle despite Slim's repeated warnings. After this offense is committed a number of times, Slim finally loses his temper, and heatedly yells "Pop Goes the Weasel," all to the dismay of his comrades who had every intention of exchanging their trunk full of gold for Easy Money's briefcase filled with cash. What was intended to be a fair trade transpires into a full-blown duel in which Easy Money and all of his associates are killed. Even Easy Money's beloved Pomeranian meets an ill-fated end after it is crushed by the door as the police rush in. Even though wealth is at stake, the duel is fought primarily in defense of Slim's masculinity and position as "alpha male" in his gang. Slim feels that this identity will be

placed in jeopardy if he allows Easy Money to continue to disrespect him and his girlfriend, Imabelle. Overall, this scene helps to establish Slim as a ruthless figure who is willing to do anything in order to keep the gold and Imabelle. In many ways, this scene also sets the stage for the final and most important duel that takes place near the film's ending.

The final dueling scene which takes place at the end of the film closely resembles a traditional dueling scenario. Jackson and Slim cautiously approach one another as Jackson attempts to negotiate the terms of the duel by beckoning Slim to put down his knife and fight with him one-on-one. After Jackson tries unsuccessfully to set guidelines for what he hopes will be a fair fight, he prays to God, as Slim recites a few bars of his favorite folk rhyme, "Pop Goes the Weasel." Ironically, as if dancing, they encircle one another on the empty dance floor, each waiting for the other to make a move. After a brief struggle, Slim knocks Jackson to the floor and prepares to cut his throat with his razor, but this time Slim's nursery rhyme is interrupted by Imabelle, who decides to cut in, shooting her former lover in the back, thus sparing Jackson's life. Imabelle acts as the perfect second by standing ready to punish the transgressor or the one who violates the rules of fair play in the duel. In playing the role of second, Imabelle also subverts patriarchal notions of femininity by becoming the heroine of the film as opposed to maintaining the patriarchal, one-dimensional role of damsel in distress.

For the most part Imabelle is similar to "Harlem Night's" Dominique LaRue. Like LaRue, Imabelle is fetishized and also eroticized. She is very much objectified by the male gaze. But one could also say that she is fetishized in slightly different ways as well. Throughout much of the film Imabelle is *fetishized passive*, meaning that she is very much the damsel in distress

that needs to be rescued by Jackson, her knight in shining armor. Near the end of the film her role changes slightly. She attempts to escape from her ex-boyfriend on her own and eventually kills him. When Imabelle kills Slim, she becomes an action heroine, and as a result, can be characterized as being *fetishized active*. From a feminist perspective, it is difficult to determine the level of agency afforded by the action heroine label. According to Brown, when it comes to the action heroine, fetishization may even overshadow women's accomplishments. He says, "Because our depiction of women in the media is so grounded in eroticism and objectification it is difficult to conceive of them in different terms. It would also be a mistake to consider new roles as clearly demarcated from the larger culture-wide system of fetishizing women. No matter how progressive action heroines may be, they still operate from within a system better prepared to exploit women's looks than celebrate their achievements" (13). Based on Brown's statement, Imabelle may not deviate entirely from this system of fetishization. But even from within this system, Imabelle may still be viewed as what Brown calls a "progressive role model" (13). This is due to the fact that she makes a conscious decision in choosing Jackson as her mate. It demonstrates a great deal of agency on her part to break away from Slim, her possessive and abusive ex. Furthermore, her possession and mastery of a gun (as a phallic means of power) displaces the authority of the other male characters in the final scene. Therefore, despite every indication of her fetishized status, Imabelle may still be viewed as a progressive role model.

In "Harlem Nights" and "A Rage in Harlem," the medieval notion of chivalry is revived and used to construct an ideal notion of the film hero. Due in part to the fact that they are both black and black oriented films, respectively, they may also be interpreted as a reclamation of the

kinds of chivalric codes which were often appropriated by white supremacist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan (Hine). Through the use of filmic folklore, the film's protagonists are constructed to be prototypes of the medieval Christian knight and like the knight, they embody the characteristics of courage, strength, love, loyalty, faith, and compassion. In order to uphold and defend chivalric ideals they are obligated to risk their lives in the act of dueling. As recurring motifs, the duels and the firearms involved in the duels both work on symbolic levels to emphasize the chivalric value system, mediate the violent encounters, and mark important shifts in plot development. Furthermore, without the dueling scenes in "Harlem Nights" and "A Rage in Harlem" it would be much more difficult to identify growth and transformation in the film's protagonists.

Chapter Three: Racial Fetishism and Firearms Across Stagolee Narratives

If race may be viewed as a performative social construct, then all individual characteristics used in the service of creating a sense of ethnic identity (aside from phenotypical and biological traits) may be interpreted as a kind of racial fetishization. Racial fetishization is a key component in the creation of controversial folk hero's such as Stagolee. An antecedent of the African and African-American trickster tradition, and also containing elements of the conjurer tradition, Stagolee is a bad man with a narrative oral history that spans nearly two centuries.

As a key feature of the legend genre, Stagolee is based on real people and true events. In *Stagolee Shot Billy* (2003) historian, Cecil Brown pieces together and reinterprets the tragic series of events surrounding the Stagolee legend. Brown's work reveals that the legend is based on the actual shooting of Billy Lyons by a local pimp, Lee Shelton. The shooting occurred in a bar in St. Louis, Missouri on Christmas eve in the mid-1800s after a verbal altercation regarding Shelton's Stetson hat. The photos and documents that Brown uncovers reveals the actual extent of accuracy displayed in the numerous oral narratives about the event, some of which remain in circulation. One aspect of the legend that has made it so enduring is the fact that it is representative of an era in American history when African-Americans were beginning to enjoy a lively night life in many urban areas. Included in this urban night life culture was high-fashion. According to Shane and Graham White *Stylin': African-American Expressive Culture from its Beginning to the Zoot Suit* (1998) "In the 1930's, on 'Seventh Avenue in New York, and on 47th Street in Chicago, the boys were wearing wide-brimmed hats, peg-top trousers and long coats,"

and ‘fancy shirts, hand-colored socks, and odd slacks and jackets were the rage’ (251). The Stagolee legend, in and of itself, represents a number of different fetishes that have come to embody the pimping lifestyle including: fashion objects such as smart canes, colorful zoot suits, Stetson hats, and expensive cars. It is the culmination of all of these aspects that have made the legend of Stagolee so enduring. The firearm, which is the focus of this study, exists among a plethora of fetishes displayed in the legend.

Narratives about Stagolee appear in many forms including: ballads, folk tales, legends, rock & roll, rap, toasts, and blues music. Stagolee ballads have been in oral circulation since the mid1900s. The first Stagolee toasts appear in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of the toast tradition in African-American urban pimp culture. Soon after toasts appeared in urban pimp culture, various elements of the toast tradition also took hold in other areas of the black vernacular oral tradition, and ultimately impacted the kinds of rhyme schemes and forms of humor that we see today in African-American entertainment. Every physical element that becomes associated with Stagolee in oral narrative form, contributes in some way to Stagolee’s racial identity, and also the racial identities of the African-Americans who share the tales. As White asserts, “...the ways in which black men and women have presented their bodies have been shaped, in important respects, by a distinctive and identifiable African-American aesthetic” (261). This African-American aesthetic is illustrated in many ways by speakers of Stagolee toasts who come to embody this black heroic figure through the act of Signifyin(g) performances. This is visible in the many variations of Stagolee toast collected by Roger Abrahams *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1964). Abraham’s interpretations of the toasts indicate that

speakers of the tales traditionally attempted to convey all of the attitudes and values that Stagolee embodied through their speech and mannerisms. It is in this way that the transmission of the tales may be interpreted as a kind of racial performance. The racial markers which are integral to this figure include: physical appearances, physical actions, language, Signification,¹³ clothing, and even sexuality. Stagolee is also racialized through guns. Guns are integral to the creation of the bad man as a trope in the black heroic tradition. The trope of guns are Signified upon frequently in Stagolee narratives. In order to better understand how these features work together to construct racialized performances or interpretations of blackness, one must also understand: the function of gender and race as definitive categories, ways that racial identity has functioned historically in society, and the historical roots of the oral narrative art form from which Stagolee originates.

Racial Fetishism

A number of scholars cite the origins of theory pertaining to racial fetishism in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Popular culture scholar, Jeffrey Brown stresses the significance of this idea saying that Butler's primary objective is to "...provoke gender trouble by denaturalizing traditional gender categories grounded in biological determinism" (22). Based on Butler's theory, gender may be interpreted in two ways: as performance and as parody. This

¹³ Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) argues that "Signifyin(g) is the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures" in that Signification is viewed as a black style of communication which may be visible in speech patterns, physical movements and gestures, folk material culture, literature, and all forms of instrumentation (51). It is also viewed as a method of interpretation by which all black forms of expression may be understood. Gates asserts that "The language of blackness encodes and names its sense if independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference (66).

makes identity solely an object of creation. As Brown asserts “For Butler, gendered identities are not a reflection of one’s authentic core self, but are a culturally coded effect of performance. Gender does not prescribe our performance, rather it is performance that ascribes our gender” (22,3). It is also through Butler that Josephine Lee is able to conceptualize race as performance. According to Lee “The particular ways in which we perceive, interpret, and value racial difference in the United States today can be understood as a kind of ‘performance’ that takes its significance from not one but, in fact, many layers of social meaning that history has deposited on bodies. Some of these meanings are determined by racist ideologies disguised as ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ hierarchies of difference, ‘punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternatively embodied and disguised under duress’” (qtd. in Lee 72). Lee’s perception of race as performance is overdeterministic in that she emphasizes the existence of social and historical catalysts that have historically influenced the way that definitive categories such as race and ethnicity are “perceived, interpreted, and valued” (qtd. in Lee 72). She also stresses the fact that these perceptions change based on social and political forces and also cultural needs. The most significant aspect of conceptualizing racial performance as fetishism is the value that people place on such performances. There are many things that have come to be associated with the exhibition of racial and ethnic identity. These things are most often expressed in terms such as: racism, exploitation, appropriation, and cultural nationalism. While many of these ideas have negative connotations, cultural or ethnic nationalism (in certain situations) may be viewed as positive in that they may serve as forms of social and cultural cohesion, or as identity markers that helps to bind members of certain ethnicities. This only becomes problematic when they are

used in the service of racism or as a means of excluding certain groups of people based on some of these very same racial markers. Regardless, of how they are used, these abstract ideas speak to the level of value that we place on racial identity, and the way that race as a performance may also express certain values. Reflecting on the work of Nobuko Miyamoto and Kobena Mercer, Josephine Lee discusses the transformation of racial performance during the Civil Rights era. This era is significant because it is during this era that Stagolee toast became widely circulated. In many ways this archetypal bad man figure began to embody many of the characteristic traits of black expression and attitudes that were embraced and shared during the Civil Rights era as a response to white racism. The narratives may be viewed as overt displays of black pride. As overt displays of blackness, Stagolee narratives depended on black dialect, exaggeration, and hyperbole of expression. Joseph Ryan contends that “Folklore can be defined as the collective objectifications of basic emotions such as awe, fear, hatred, reverence, and desire, on the part of the social group” (qtd in Ben-Amos 7). Ethnic pride is an emotion that may also be included in Ryan’s list. As Dan-Ben Amos and other folklorists have observed, at its inception as a discipline folkloristics had a preoccupation with groups that were considered to be marginal or of low socio-economic status (Ben-Amos). Today it is common knowledge that folklore transcends race, class, and gender, but the common focus on marginal groups may not be without any merit at all. This early trend may have been indicative of some marginal group’s ability and tendency to communicate certain world views and values through unconventional means. The dissemination of folklore, in the form of Stagolee narratives, didn’t necessitate the use of formal organizations such as ones that were associated with black activism in the 60s and 70s. These

narratives also circulate in the absence of literacy. Illiteracy was often a sad reality for many inner city African-Americans during the Civil Rights era and Stagolee narratives, as folklore, functioned as a way for some members of the black lower class to express the same kinds of black pride, confidence, and swagger that were expressed by some of the more educated members of the black bourgeois. Furthermore, during the Civil Rights era, issues surrounding racial identity often became wedded to politics, thus racial performance became an important part of political struggle. In fact, it demonstrates what Lee describes as a process by which one's thinking and physical appearance become intrinsically connected. She explains that during the Civil Rights era, an individual's visual and bodily aesthetic had to be in sync with the movement. Many black expressive forms represented a kind of "refusal" and may be interpreted as "subcultural gesture[s] that refused to concede to the manners of subservience" (qtd. in White 256). Reflecting on this wide-spread phenomenon in the work of Miyamoto, Lee says "...a theatrical recollection of Miyamoto's experiences in the Civil Rights movement, recalls the quest for a 'new look' to accompany a nascent Asian-American movement's pan-ethnic, diasporic, and collective politics" (Lee 73). An excerpt from Miyamoto's *A Grain of Sand* reads:

"now blacks had black berets, Latino—brown berets
maroon was our color...better with our complexion
[...] we were remaking ourselves
creating our own images and expressions" (qtd. in Lee 72)

Miyamoto's search for ways to display her ethnic pride during the Civil Rights movement illustrates an important aspect of being a minority in America during this time.

Marginalized groups such as the Asian-American movement were forced to carve out their own niches in society or risk being forgotten in the political struggle. This reality increased the value that one placed on racial performance. As for African-Americans, many of their organizations had already established a strong collective sense of group identity. As Lee asserts "...the wearing of Afros, the urban guerilla look of the Black Panthers, and elements of 'traditional' African dress such as the dashiki or the head wrap did indeed delineate 'massive shifts in popular aspirations among black people,' thus furthering 'a populist logic of rupture' (qtd. in Lee 73). According to Lee cultural nationalistic performances such as these also function as racial fetishism and they also involve more than what initially meets the eye. As Lee asserts "Certainly more is involved than surface changes in dress, hair, clothing, language, movement, elements that constituted the memorable 'look' of more radical cultural nationalistic groups. Such stagings show that their particular modes of signifying race on the body were inspired not just by a taste for stylistic innovation and self-expression but by more deeply rooted desires and political principles" (Lee 75). Lee's argument is especially useful in determining where Stagolee fits within the overall scheme of racial fetishism. In speaking in terms of political aims and desires, Lee illustrates ways in which social and political dichotomies that existed during the Civil Rights era may allow us to place a number of historically politically charged racial identities (such as Stagolee) on a continuum. Doing so may even help us to better analyze their meanings and functions in society. In order to analyze the motivations and desires that incentivize racial fetishism, Lee describes the debate that existed during the Civil Rights era between the cultural nationalist and the liberal humanists. At the very heart of this debate is the notion of racial

performance. According to Lee “Cultural nationalism differed most strongly from liberal humanist attitudes towards integration and civil rights in the very idea of performing race” (75). Additionally, “Integrationist identified social progress with ‘the transcendence of a racial consciousness.’ Integrationists saw race as the unfortunate product of long-standing racism: in order to eradicate institutional racism, one had not only to abolish racial categories but also to eliminate the performance of racial difference. Inherent in this idea was the figuration of race as simply a surface characteristic over an interior self that would be essentially the same for all people; in this view, once the legal barriers to racial equality were abolished, race would become obsolete” (75). Integrationist viewed racial categories as obstacles to social and economic equality, but cultural nationalists such as Stokely Carmichael viewed this argument as a form of avoidance saying that “White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say: ‘We’re all human, everybody is really decent, we must forget color.’ But color cannot be ‘forgotten’ until its weight is recognized and dealt with” (qtd. in Lee 76). As Lee explains “If integrationism advocated the discarding of racial markers as a false ‘mask’ over the true self, the cultural nationalist relied on a particular performance and a foregrounding of racial markers- as a political reminder of past and existing inequalities and a gesture of protest at the white domination of culture and power” (Lee 76). Cultural nationalist emphasized the transformative aspects of performing race. For them, the racial fetish had the power to produce what Lee describes as “...a projection of certain desires and fantasies on a particular form of the racialized body” (76).

What Lee’s work clearly illustrates is the transformative power of the racial fetish and

that it is the transformative ability of the racial fetish which allows the racialized body to take so many different forms from a historical standpoint. This concept is critical to understanding American folklore in the early part of the twentieth century. Folklore must be viewed in terms of racial performance. Racialized figures from American folklore indirectly influenced the way that race is viewed in America today. Figures such as Uncle Remus and African-American badmen like Stagolee may both be viewed as prime examples of racial fetishism. They are two disparate forms of racialized bodies that both (through the acts of performance) convey divergent conceptions of racial history and ideology in America. As characters from American folklore that both predate debates among integrationist and cultural nationalists, they also embody the conflicting post-colonial conflicts that culminated into the kinds of semiotic dialogues that we see taking place later during the Civil Rights era. The primary focus of this work is Stagolee, but one of the aims in this chapter is to illustrate that this character can be understood through a kind of truth revealing juxtaposition which may also help to reveal some of the more defiant, subversive, and revolutionary aspects of racial fetishism. Furthermore, as disparate depictions of cultural nationalism, these characters also illustrate changing racial ideologies and shifting desires and fantasies that are expressed through “a fetishism of racial signification” (Lee 79).

Both Uncle Remus and Stagolee exist as transformative racialized bodies in that (as characters situated within oral narrative traditions) they represent racialized performances that also express their respective group’s social and cultural needs during their respective eras in American history. Each character type has undergone its own series of transformations that as a necessity, play off of preexisting racial performances. This is especially evident in the history of Uncle Remus.

Antebellum Racial Fetishism in America

Joel Chandler Harris, a slave owner, who made a living appropriating African-American folklore, produced staged depictions of a character he called Uncle Remus. Uncle Remus, an enslaved African-American, storyteller, simply told trickster tales involving the characters Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox. In communicating the tales that he had collected from enslaved African-Americans over the years, he felt that he had mastered their language style, and mannerisms. Harris's performances became so popular among white audiences that his collection of tales were eventually published as *Uncle Remus His Songs and His Sayings* (1880). Using black cork to paint his face, Harris represents a long lineage of blackface minstrelsy performers. A style first popularized by T.D. Rice in the 1800s. Blackface minstrelsy is widely known as the earliest form of popular entertainment in America and it was generally included in vaudeville style variety shows which featured a broad range of acts that sometimes included singing, dancing, drama and comedy. Blackface minstrelsy may be viewed as one of the earliest forms of the colored body being exoticized, exploited, and commodified as a racialized stereotype (Lee). As Lee explains, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, and others identify Freudian loss as the origin of all racial fetishism. "...the desire for the fetish is prompted by a deeply felt loss or anxiety over loss. This fetish is essentially a false front, something covering a 'lack,' signaling anxieties that can only be alleviated through repetitive and obsessive projections of significations" (80). While Bhabha emphasizes repetition, he also identifies the racial fetish as a product of the colonial encounter. "The racial stereotype...is a type of fetish that is produced out of the anxieties of the colonial encounter; it is out of his own 'phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body'

that the colonizer produces the racial stereotype—fragmented, distorted, grotesque, repetitive—as a compensatory fetish” (Lee 80). On the other hand, in reflecting on the work of Joel Chandler Harris, Franz Fanon *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) places more emphasis on anxiety and guilt. Fanon also speaks to the dangerous effects of appropriation. Saying “The black man has penetrated the culture of certain countries. As we indicated above, we cannot attach enough importance to the way white children come into contact with the black man’s reality. In the United States, for example, the white child, even if he does not live in the South, where the Blacks are a visible presence, knows them through the stories of Uncle Remus” (151). Through Uncle Remus the stereotype as a signifier becomes a stand in for African-American ethnic identity. Fanon attributes this style of racial fetishization to unconscious guilt. Fanon says:

We know full well what these stories are about. (...) it is relatively easy to recognize the black man in his extraordinarily ironical and artful disguise as the rabbit. In order to protect himself from his unconscious masochism, which obliges him to go into raptures over the (black) rabbit’s prowess, the white man has endeavored to remove any potential aggressiveness from these stories. As a result, he has convinced himself that the black man makes the animals act *like an inferior order of human intelligence, the kind the black man himself can understand*, and that the black man naturally feels *in closer contact with the ‘inferior animals’ than with the white man who is so superior to him in every respect.* [italics in original] (151)

Reflecting on the work of Eric Lott, Lee explains that the fetishistic origins of blackface

minstrelsy are anchored in anxiety and fantasy, both emotional drives that result in what Lott identifies as the *pale gaze*. “Blackface minstrelsy, as performed by white male performers, signaled a racial dynamic that might be called the ‘pale gaze,’ a ‘ferocious investment in demystifying and domesticating black power in white fantasy by projecting vulgar black types as spectacular objects of white men’s looking.’ Such spectacular ‘black types’ were clearly fetishistic in nature, and through the comic antics of blackface they turned into ‘uproarious spectacles for erotic consumption’” (qtd. in Lee 80). The racial dynamics involved in the production of blackface minstrelsy and other forms of racial fetishism are multifaceted and profoundly connected to the construction of colonial identity.

Stagolee as Black Ethnocentrism

By juxtaposition Stagolee is a far different character than Uncle Remus. If Harris intended for *Uncle Remus* to be an organic representation of African-American ethnicity during the antebellum era, then Stagolee may be viewed as reactionary against survivals of Harris’s racist sentiments. Furthermore, while Harris felt that *Uncle Remus* rightfully depicted enslaved African-Americans as being complacent agents within their own subjugation, many contemporary folklorists such as John W. Roberts *From Trickster to Badman* (1989) believe that animal trickster tales (such as those told by Harris) instead depict the significance of certain values and skills (i.e. intelligence and craftiness) which were critical to surviving the severe conditions of plantation life—thus displays of blackness presented in bad men and Harris’s depictions of blackness embody the differences between emic and etic interpretations. As a representation of the archetypal badman, Stagolee is somewhat of a composite character or what

one may call a transmutation of sorts and his lineage includes the animal trickster and the conjurer. Black folkloric figures depicts the very values and qualities that were deemed important by African-Americans during their respective eras and it is for this reason that tricksters, conjurers, and badmen are equally thought of as African-American folk heroic types, all which are reflective of a heroic age in ancient story telling tradition. According to Roberts “...a hero is the product of a creative process and exists as a symbol of our differential identity. As such, our heroes act within boundaries defined by our perception of immanent social needs and goals which are, in turn, determined by historical and emergent realities of which we, as individuals and groups, may be only dimly aware” (1). Heroes often emerge in times of conflict and are critical in the process of culture-building (Roberts). According to Roberts, the attributes embodied in heroes are universal and stem from a *heroic age*, a point in time in which important cultural values became inscribed in heroic figures (Roberts). According to folklorist, Roger Abrahams “The actions that we recognize as heroic are based on contest values and a model of a male-centered family. A hero is a man whose deeds epitomize the masculine attributes most highly valued within a society” (qtd. in Roberts 2,3). The bad man, as a combination of the trickster and the conjurer, is viewed largely as a reaction against a racist legal system and those in the African-American community that worked against community values. African-Americans who were class conscious and desired an upward means of economic mobility “tended to emulate and idealize white social and moral values, they viewed the secular lifestyle in general as problematic and ‘bad niggers’ as particularly so. For this segment of the black population ‘bad niggers’ represented the worst element within the black community and the types of

behavior associated with them were accepted as a primary reason for black persecution in the society” (Roberts 213). Individual’s whose behavior and lifestyle completely contradicted bourgeois values were often labeled either *bullies* or *bad niggers*. However, during reconstruction the term *bad nigger* was also often used by racist whites to justify lynching and other forms of violence towards any African-American who dared to disrupt the racist legal system (Roberts). The bad man is a figure which combined the guile of the trickster with the mythical elements of the conjurer in order to create a character that would pose a serious threat to bullies while also remaining impervious to racist laws. Thus the badman is a completely autonomous figure that can ward off any threat regardless of whether it is internal or external. According to Roberts, “In studies of the black badman as a folk hero, folklorists have consistently painted a portrait of this figure as a champion of violence, directed primarily at the black community. Black badmen heroes are described by Levine as individuals who ‘preyed on the weak as well as the strong, women as well as men. They killed not merely in self-defense but from sadistic need and sheer joy’” (qtd. in Roberts 173). Bad men such as Stagolee were motivated by their own self-interest, but they clearly represent a strong divergence from antebellum stereotypes embodied by Harris’s Uncle Remus portrayals. Bad men were extremely volatile characters that perpetuated a notion of indestructibility and immorality. They may also be described as what Abrahams calls “...rebels whose rebellion ‘is consciously and sincerely immoral’” (qtd. in Roberts 173,4). In fact, according to Abrahams “The action of black badmen ... ‘is not directed in positive terms’ but rather against anything that constrains them” (qtd. in Roberts 173,4) Likewise Bruce Jackson asserts that “...the ‘ultimate badman’ ... ‘[is]one who

fears and respects nothing' and is, therefore, 'dangerous to his community'" (qtd. in Roberts 173,4). The badman's indiscriminate use of violence poses a threat to everyone. Violence (more specifically gun violence) is a feature that is prominent across all representations of the badman. It is a trope which is Signified upon in order to position him as a completely autonomous agent. In fact, the characteristics of agency and autonomy take precedence over all other values. Some folklorists feel that the rationale behind the badman's behavior is fear. As Roberts asserts "As a result of their portrayal of the black badman as a source of unrelieved violence in the black community, folklorists have repeatedly suggested that the black conception of the badman as hero derives from the fear such figures generate among African-Americans. Therefore, the folklore of black badmen offers African-Americans merely an expressive outlet for their feelings of hostility and violence, (presumably resulting from their oppression in the society) and not a model of emulative behavior adaptable to real-life situations" (174). As a psychiatrist, Franz Fanon placed even more emphasis on the role that violent oral narratives may play in society. Fanon feels that violent entertainment contributes to a different kind of release. He says "If we want an honest answer, we have to call on the notion of collective catharsis. In every society, in every community, there exists, a channel, an outlet whereby the energy accumulated in the form of aggressiveness can be released" (124). If this is the case for every society as Fanon argues, then badmen like Stagolee may serve this purpose in the African-American community.

It would be useful to return to the Uncle Remus/Stagolee juxtaposition in order to analyze more fully the possible significance of Stagolee narratives in the African-American community. While only Uncle Remus is the only one of the two which would more than likely be viewed by

most as being inherently racist, ironically they both depict two divergent forms of racial fetishism. If Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* exoticizes blackness, then Stagolee may be viewed as a form of racial fetishism known as autoexoticization, meaning that they are purposefully exaggerating any traits that may be differentiated from white expressive forms (Lee). According to Brown "In reciting the Stagolee toast, the speaker 'performed' Stagolee, taking on the hero's character along with the role. The toast became an instrument enabling young black men to assert themselves as bullies and badmen, and thus to be powerful and charismatic" (178). From this angle of vision, the performance of Stagolee may be viewed as a form of cultural nationalism. When reflecting on the various racialized performance styles that existed during the Civil Rights era one can easily see ways in which racial performance became representative of a way of thinking. Again, to place the previous examples of racial fetishism on some kind of continuous scale. Harris's *Uncle Remus* performances basically illustrate exoticization for the purpose of domesticating racism. The various civil rights groups of the 60s and 70s also relied on racial markers, but they did so with the intention of constructing a strong sense of racial solidarity and also to differentiate themselves from other groups who may not have been in agreement with their values or core beliefs.

By comparison, what we see with performances of Stagolee toasts are examples of racial signification which rely heavily on black vernacular styles in order to evoke the image of a badman. It is through the language, more specifically, in part, through the use of the first-person pronoun "I" that this persona of Stagolee is brought into existence. The self-aggrandizement, and the boasting are used to evoke the same kinds of qualities and values (i.e. black pride, power,

freedom, etc.) that were widely expressed throughout the Civil Rights era. One of the main differences is that the usage of black vernacular forms of expression makes many of these messages much more accessible to the secular classes. According to Lee, acknowledging such tensions may help us to better understand connections that exist between “racist ideology and cultural representation” (81). Stagolee, heralded as a black hero, is not considered to be a real depiction of African-American ethnicity. However, Stagolee and other badman tropes rely on the usage of certain racial signifiers in order to bring this character to life. Without these racial markers one could argue that there would not be very much difference between Stagolee and white outlaw heroes such as Jesse James.

The Toast Tradition

According to Roberts one important aspect of the African-American folk heroic tradition is dynamic continuity meaning that Stagolee can only be thought of as “the product of a [single] continuous tradition” (185). This means that many social, cultural, and political elements forced transmutations, in which the trickster, the conjurer, and the badman ultimately became important heroic figures in the African-American storytelling tradition at opportune moments. Stagolee’s profanity, violence and hypersexuality are all stereotypes that are intended to counter act the epistemic violence of white supremacy. As Josephine Lee’s previous examples illustrate, racial performance became critical for the various groups that sought to gain a foothold in politics during the Civil Rights era. As an example of racial performance, the toast tradition, in and of itself, is a reflection of this purpose. Toasts are considered by many to be one of the earliest forms of rap. Toasts are elaborate oral narratives that embody a particular narrative plot

structure and rhyme scheme. In comparing rap music with toast one will find many similarities especially when speaking in terms of rhyme scheme, subject matter, and content. At the height of the Civil Rights era a number of African-American public figures also delivered public toasts on occasion. Some utilized the tradition in the name of politics and others in the name of fun or for entertainment purposes. Some of the most notable being, comedian, Rudy Ray Moore, boxer, Muhamad Ali, and SNCC chairman, H. Rap Brown.

As a motif, the legend of Stagolee has survived and eventually matriculated into many areas of popular culture. This phenomenon may be attributed to the important role that firearms play in the formulation of this character. The prevalence of firearms across folklore that feature gun slinging badmen like Stagolee may illustrate that firearms are used in these narratives as ways of responding to social, economic, and political systems which did not afford African-Americans with equal protection and opportunities. The badman, with his gun in hand, was seen as a way of leveling the playing field. Badmen like Stagolee would sometimes do things such as rob from the rich and give to the poor, a trope that is also prevalent in lore surrounding white outlaw heroes like Jesse James. In fact, there were many white gunslingers who became a part of American oral tradition, but as Eric Mottram and others assert, African-Americans had no use for “white killer myths” (81). From this information one may infer that it is only through the medium of storytelling that a world could exist in which it is possible for an African-American man to completely escape the confines of racism. For many African-American people, Stagolee was the first black super hero. Some characteristics of Stagolee include supernatural powers marked by the ability to fly or to shape shift, (some narratives attribute this power to a magic

Stetson hat), the carrying of a large gun or pistol, and an uncanny shooting ability. There exist countless versions of Stagolee folk narratives which are told in the form of legends, ballads, toasts, and folk songs. Stagolee remains important to the African-American heroic tradition; however, he is not the sole badman figure. There are other important badmen as well, including, but not limited to, Devil Winston, John Hardy, and Harry Duncan.

Folklore Representing Reality

Folklore that involves Badmen are generally based on real people and events. The verisimilitude of the tales suggests that society has always been intrigued by the dangerous gun toting types. For instance, Morris Slater, an Alabama Turpentine worker, became *legendary* after killing a white police officer in 1893 after the officer confronted him with hopes of confiscating his gun. Reincarnated as a folk hero Slater became the iconic figure that we now *only* recognize as Railroad Bill. The act of an African-American male shooting and killing a white police officer in the 19th century was virtually unheard of. Such an action, no matter how justifiable, would nearly always result in the African-American man being lynched by an angry white mob. The public perception of Slater's fearlessness and toughness in the face of a hostile and racist environment may be the single most important character trait that has allowed this legend to persist for so many centuries. The need for the public to celebrate Slater's crime can certainly be seen in the following lines from one version of the legend. "Railroad Bill was mighty sport/Shot all the buttons off high Sheriff coat/Den holler, 'Right on desperado Bill'" (Roberts 171). The Sherriff was executed for attempting to confiscate the very symbol of Railroad Bill's toughness—his gun. For him, as in the case of most badmen, the firearm is the

main source of his tough persona. It is a defining characteristic of their identities. This is most certainly the case in the folk legend of Stagolee. Like the legend of Railroad Bill, the legend of Stagolee also survives in countless forms. It is also widely believed to be based on real people and events. However, in the case of Stagolee, there is much more evidence to substantiate such claims.

Despite the transformations of the badman becoming somewhat less apparent and even less traceable to the present as we transition from the oral tradition to the most modern forms of visual media, the oral legends of Stagolee and other badmen reemerging in the forms of literature, Rhythm and Blues, and even Rock & Roll still helps to substantiate the claim that the African-American oral tradition has effectively impacted popular culture. This cultural influence includes the implementation of firearms and also the implicit and explicit social approval of the people and artist who continue to perpetuate lore about gun toting badmen. The prevalence of this phenomenon makes it necessary to explore connections that may exist between folklore and reality. Does folklore simply reflect reality? Or do these narratives really have the power to dictate the world we live in? Regardless, of how one chooses to answer, Stagolee narratives illustrate that there is an intrinsic relationship between reality and fiction. One piece of evidence is the fact that Stagolee narratives are based on real documented events, and like oral narrative, these events are filled with gun violence as seen in the following accounts of actual occurrences that eventually precipitated the Stagolee legend.

The dispute between Lee Shelton (a.k.a. Stagolee) and Billy Lyons that ended in Lyons' death took place at the Bill Curtis Saloon which was located at 1101 Morgan Street and the

corner of Thirteenth in downtown St. Louis. At the turn of the century this general location was widely known as the Bloody Third District. It obtained its reputation due to its outstanding crime rate which included high rates of robbery, murder, drugs, and prostitution. The area was predominantly African-American and due to segregation. It was also the heart of African-American nightlife. Crime, drugs, and the promise of cheap entertainment made the Bill Curtis Saloon an incendiary atmosphere. According to police reports nearly two dozen people witnessed the argument that took place at the bar on Christmas night between Shelton and Lyons. Cecil Brown is able to contrive the following narrative from the collective eyewitness accounts that exist:

According to eye witness George McFaro, Shelton asked, “Who’s treating?” In reply, someone pointed out Lyons. Shelton approached him. Apparently, he and Lyons drank and laughed together for some time until the conversation turned to politics. Soon they began to exchange blows by striking each other’s hats. Shelton grabbed Lyon’s derby and broke the form. Lyons said he wanted “six bits” from Shelton for damaging his derby.

Then Lyons grabbed Shelton’s Stetson. When Shelton demanded it back, Lyons said no. Shelton said he would blow Lyons’ brains out if he didn’t return it. Next Shelton pulled his .44 Smith & Wesson revolver from his coat and hit Lyons over the head with it. Still Lyons did not relinquish the hat. Shelton demanded the Stetson again, saying that if Lyons didn’t give him his hat immediately, he was going to kill him.

Then Lyons reached into his pocket for the knife his friend Crump had given him and approached Shelton, saying, “You cockeyed son of a bitch, I’m going to *make* you kill me.” Shelton backed off and took aim. The twenty-five people in the saloon flew for the door. Only the bartenders, Thomas Scott and Frank Boyd and a few others—Henry Crump, George McFaro, and Leslie Stevenson—were left drinking at the bar. Both bartenders later testified to the coroner that they saw Lee Shelton shoot Billy Lyons.

After shooting Lyons, Shelton walked over to the dying man, who was still holding on to the bar, and said, “Nigger, I told you to give me my hat!” He snatched his hat from Lyons’ hand, put it on his head, and walked out. Shelton walked to his house, a few blocks away, checked his gun in with his landlady, went upstairs, and presumably went to sleep. Meanwhile, Billy Lyons was taken to an infirmary; later he was moved to a hospital, where he died about four’o clock in the morning. (23,5)

Based on reports Shelton was arrested at his home soon after.

The Evolution of the Toast Tradition

The legend of Stagolee, historically, has existed in many forms. The narrative is certainly significant in that each of the earlier forms contribute in some way to the forms which follow. In order to identify one form while ignoring the next may be a mistake. As Roberts contends “Most critical discussion of the badman as a folk hero, however, has been based on the conception of this figure in the toast tradition, a more recent expressive embodiment of the exploits of badmen. Although folklorists generally acknowledge that the conception of the badman in the toast tradition has its roots in folk heroic literature created around the turn of the century, they have not dealt critically or systematically with this earlier tradition, which portrays the exploits of badmen primarily in ballads. A consequence of ignoring the earlier manifestations of the badman tradition in black culture is evident in folkloristic discussions of the tradition, where there is a constant emphasis on the destructive and unproductive nature of badman heroes” (174).

According to Brown “The first Stagolee Ballad ever collected consisted of eight stanzas sent to John Lomax in February 1910 by Miss Ella Scott Fisher of San Angelo, Texas” (8). This ballad does not recount the original event as it is documented in 1895, but it does capture the majority of the important details. It includes the correct date; the names of the two parties

involved, the exact caliber of weapon used in the murder, and even emphasizes, through repetition, the fact that Shelton (*or Stagalee*) is soon arrested for the crime (Brown). According to Brown, the only mistake in detail is the actual hour that the incident takes place, Fisher's version mistakenly says 10 when the actual incident occurs later (Brown). Like many versions of the Stagolee ballad this adaptation includes a number of subtle details that accurately describe Shelton's life. It reads:

'Twas a Christmas morning,
The hour was about ten
When Stagalee shot Billy Lyons
And landed in the Jefferson pen
O lordy, po' Stagalee.

Billy Lyons' old woman
She was a terrible sinner,
She was home that Christmas morning'
A-preparin' Billy's dinner.

Messenger boy came to the winder,
Then he knocked on the door,
An' he said, "Yer old man's lyin' there
Dead on the Barroom floor."

O Lord, po' Stagolee!
"Stagalee, O Stagalee,
What have you gone and done?
You've gone and shot my husband
With a forty-four gatlin' gun."

"Jailer, O Jailer,
I jest can't sleep;
For the ghost of Billy Lyons
Round my bed does mourn and weep."

According to Brown, "As an oral narrative, Stagolee has what folklorists Albert Lord called 'multiformity,' which allows for 'the existence of alternative forms of a particular component or theme' (7). Among the many narrative versions, types, and subtypes of Stagolee

that exists, the guns seem to remain the same, and it is the prevalence of firearms among the plethora of versions of the Stagolee ballad that make it necessary to explore their symbolic significance. Guns are fetishized throughout Stagolee narratives while also helping to demarcate and establish various ethnic, cultural, and gender boundaries.

Most versions of the Stagolee legend mention the gun, although the caliber of the weapon and some subtle details such as the make or model of the gun may vary. For instance, a version of the legend from 1918 reads:

What a bold bad man he must be:
With his fourty-four and his bowie knife,
Never hesitate for to take your life.—
Oh, everybody talk about Stackerlee! (Brown 130)

Another version of the legend collected in 1911 reads

Stagolee shot bully; fell down on de flo'
Bully cry out: "Dat fohty-fo' it hurts me so."
Stagolee done kill dat bully now. (Brown 67)

While the .44 caliber is the most prevalent firearm that appears among competing versions of the Stagolee narrative, it is common to see a variety. For instance, a 1963 version of the legend reads:

Now Staggerlee come running
In the red, hot, boiling sun
Said, "Reach down in the drawer, Roberta,
Get me my forty-one. (Brown 51)

In a toast version of Stagolee that was collected by Folklorists, Roger D. Abrahams one sees a number of different firearms and the narrative plot is filled with violence and sexually explicit content. The Stagolee toasts seems to glorify violence, particularly gun violence enacted on other blacks, and one can tell that these violent and sexually explicit elements are included, in part, because they contribute to the entertainment value of the tale. Furthermore, as racial

signifiers, they become essential in establishing a sense of racial identity. Of course, the most valued aspect of the African-American toast tradition was the satiric and somewhat sadistic kind of humor, also a racial signifier. Humor often serving the purposes of releasing physical and psychical tension as well as promoting a communal bond (Gordon). Dexter Gordon explains that this is a defining feature of African-American humor dating back to slavery. He states that “American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African-Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd. This often included self-deprecation, as the slaves themselves were often the subjects of their comic tales” (256). Furthermore, these elements illustrate what Welsh and Asante describe as the “Stagolee complex” which may be characterized by “wild, outrageous, hostile, and antisocial behavior that occurred in response to a more hostile, outrageous discrimination” (393). Taking the Stagolee complex into account one can see that humor can be seen as a reactionary element in the toast that effectively “(...) served as an avenue for the expression of anger and even rage, which was part of the slave experience. Humor [was] a relatively safe way to do violence to the oppressor in return for injustice” (Gordon 259).

As a fetish object, the gun and gun violence in Stagolee, becomes intrinsically connected to notions of independence, masculinity, power, and race. While we know that the absence of the firearm in the narrative would deviate significantly from the actual historical event, we also know that its absence would drastically reduce the hyper masculine effect that the tale has on listeners. In describing the hyper masculine effect of the Stagolee trope and also its impact on American culture, Robert G. O’Meally asserts that “[in America] (...) as long as there is a

Stagolee with a ‘tombstone disposition and a graveyard mind...a bad motherfucker who didn’t mind dying’ in the place, it cannot become absolutely totalitarian. Probably since they got here, blacks have admired black badmen, real life and folkloric, for their brash unwillingness to accept any mistreatment, and to enforce their own codes, down to whether or not you can touch their hats, with quick fists or a big gauge gun” (44).

Across the Stagolee toast tradition one may find many racial signifiers. As racial markers these signs work together in order to construct a powerful and unique portrayal of ethnicity; one that values agency and revels in a newly found freedom of expression. These signs include: hyper masculinity, guns, gun violence, and hypersexuality. Additionally, as a significant verbal art form, toasts exemplify many aspects of black vernacular expression. According to Richard Bauman all verbal performances must be *framed* in order to be made distinguishable from ordinary speech acts. Furthermore, performance frames must also be *keyed* which refers to the “structured set of distinctive communicative means” by which each culture recognizes verbal performances (16). Among these communicative means are: special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimer of performance. According to Bauman, any combination of these elements may be used in any act of performance. The easily recognizable formal patterns invite audience participation and “fixes the attention of the audience more strongly on the performer, [and] binds the audience to the performer in a relationship of dependence that keeps them caught up in his display” (16). These fundamental elements identified by a number of folklorists, cultural anthropologists, and

linguists are considered to be universally applicable. However, performance frames and keys, in and of themselves, are very much culture specific. Therefore, they may also be viewed as racial signifiers which work together to construct an easily recognizable symbol of blackness in Stagolee toasts.

In explicating a toast version of Stagolee collected by Roger Abrahams *Deep Down In The Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964) one will notice that many of the aforementioned elements are present. The following Stagolee toast identified as 2A, was collected from an informant identified known as Kid. The opening eight lines read:

Back in '32' when times was hard
I had a sawed-off shotgun and a crooked deck of cards,
Pin-striped suit, fucked-up hat,
T-model Ford, didn't even have a payment on that.
Had a cute little broad, she threwed me out in the cold.
I asked her why, she said, "Our love is growing old."
So I packed all my little rags, took a walk down Rampail
Street.

The first thing that one may notice is the usage of special formulae. The first line "Back in '32 when times was hard" is a formulaic expression that signals the beginning of the story, and combined with all of the details that follow, also helps to make an appeal to tradition. These opening lines also establish the speaker as a loner from difficult or uncertain circumstances which is a characteristic shared by many heroic figures (Roberts). Additionally, the opening eight lines also helps to establish a sense of temporality in the narrative. The reference to 1932

marks a time in American history that is close to the beginning of the Great Depression, a time associated with wide-spread economic hardship for many Americans, especially African-Americans, due to unfair labor laws and the increasing threat of racial violence. The very fact that among the speaker's meager belongings is "a sawed-off shotgun and a crooked deck of cards" insinuates that he may also be a cold-hearted killer who is prepared to break the law if need be.

With the following lines one sees rising tension within the narrative:

That's where all the bad motherfuckers went down to meet.

I walked through water and I waded through mud,

Come a little hole-in-the-wall, they call the "Bucket of
Blood."

I walked in and asked the bartender, "Dig chief, can I get
Something to eat?"

He threwed me a stale glass of water and flung me a
fucked-up piece of meat.

I said, "Raise, motherfucker, do you know who I am?"

He said, "Frankly, motherfucker, I just don't give a damn."

I knowed right then that chickenshit was dead.

I throwed a 38 shell through his motherfucking head.

So a broad walked over, she said, "Pardon me, please.

Can you tell me where the bartender is, please?

I said, "Sure, whore, behind the bar with his mind at ease."

She looked back and screamed, "No! My son can't be dead."

I said, "You think so? Look at the hole in that mother-
fucker's head."

She said, “Who did this terrible crime, may I ask you
please?”

I said, “Me, bitch, and my name is Stackolee.”

In the above passage we see a number of special codes at play, one of which is the black vernacular. Black vernacular dialect may be interpreted as Signification. Consequently, it is also a racial marker. Among the many instances of black vernacular language are: the extreme usage and placements of the term “motherfucker.” In this instance, motherfucker is used liberally as a pronoun. Also, the expressions “dig chief,” and “raise motherfucker,” the former meaning “listen man” and the latter being an expression of caution or warning. We also begin to see an emphasis placed on the notion of *badness*. Bad is a figurative expression which simply means tough or lawless. But this term is also Signified upon in black vernacular speech to indicate a certain level of badness. An inclusion of extra *a*'s and a prolonging of the *a* sound would be indicative of a greater degree of badness. In Stagolee toast there are also a number of other characteristics that are associated with badness, like hyper masculinity, and hyper aggressiveness. We also see the gun and gun violence become a part of Stagolee's heroic persona. Stagolee kills the bartender with no pretense; indicative of fearlessness and a lack of consciousness. This is also where we began to see a lot of self-aggrandizement, which is another primary characteristic of the toast tradition that carries over into other black expressive forms such as hip-hop and R&B. As a performance key, it is highly visible in rap music. When the woman asks him, “Who did this...” he responds, “Me, bitch, and my name is Stackolee” (130). The demeaning language that he uses in reference to the woman contributes to this hyper masculine, hyper aggressive persona and it is also this bold hyperbole of expression that also

serves as Stagolee's calling card.

The next stanza reads:

She said, "Oh, I heard of you, Stack, from the tales of old.
Be here when my son Benny Long get back."
I said, "Bitch, I'll be here till the world go to pass.
You tell your son, Benny Long, that I said, 'kiss my ass'."
Just then a cute little broad came over, a terrible smile.
She looked me up and down and said, "You look like you
ain't had none, Daddy in quite a while."
I said, "Now raise, bitch don't hand me that shit.
I'm used to pussy quite a bit."
She looked at her watch, it was quarter to eight.
She said, "Come on upstairs, I'ma set you straight."
The bed gave a twist, the springs gave a twistle.
I throwed nine inches of joint to the whore before she
could move a gristle.
We came back downstairs. They was fucking on the bar,
Sucking on the floor.
Just then you could hear a pin drip, for that bad-ass benny
Long walked in the door.

The first performance key that we see in this previous passage is an appeal to tradition. In the opening line the woman exclaims that she knows who Stagolee is "from the tales of old" (131). Based on this appeal the woman has established a point of reference by which she can judge all of Stagolee's prior and future actions. It is also an appeal to a tradition of storytelling.

This sudden acknowledgement also triggers her threat which immediately follows. She tells StagoLee to “Be here when my son Benny Long get back” (131). This meta-narrative element also serves as foreshadowing; the woman seems to already know how this tale may end, so she seeks her son for protection. This particular line also marks a point in which we see blackness being equated even further with sexuality and physicality. According to Michael Eric Dyson “Few images have caused more anxiety in the American sexual psyche than the black male embodiment of phallic prowess. A sordid range of stereotypes, jealousies and fears have been developed around black men wielding their sexuality in ways that are perceived as untoward, unruly, or uncontrolled” (qtd. in Cornyetz 124). The inclusion of the name Benny Long is a sexual innuendo (symbolic of the penis). Phallic signification is an element that was greatly valued and openly embraced by the pimping community. From a narrative standpoint, Benny Long also serves as an indirect challenge to Stackolee’s masculinity.

In the following section of the narrative guns become more integral to the plot:

Now he walked over to the bar where his brother lay dead,
And quietly said,
“Who had nerve to put a hole in *my* brother’s head?”
I jumped up and screamed, “Me, motherfucker, put your
mind at ease.
I’m known as a bad motherfucker called Stackolee.”
He said, “Oh, I heard of you, Stack, from tales of old.
But you know you done tore your ass when you fucked
My hole.
I’ma give you the chance my brother never had. I’ma give

You the chance to run,
Before I throw open my bad-ass cashmere and pull my
Bad-ass gun.”

Benny Long repeats the same appeal to tradition saying “Oh, I heard of you Stack, from the tales of old” (131). Benny Long’s appeal elicits Stagolee’s response in which he reasserts himself as the badman a third time saying “I’m known as a bad motherfucker called Stackolee” (131). These elements and a number of other frequented expressions contribute to a sense of parallelism. According to Bauman parallelism, as a performance key, is one of the components which allows the speaking pattern to be easily recognized as a formal performance. Bauman says “the capacity of parallelism to extend from brief passing utterances to lengthy and elaborate poetic forms is an important factor, because it gives us a clue to potential continuities between elaborate, scheduled, public performances, involving highly marked performance forms, and other contexts for discourse in which performance may be more fleeting and transitory” (19). Bauman, reflecting on the work of Abrahams, also illustrates how parallelism may be viewed, in some ways, as a racial marker. Bauman contends that “...the performance motive in contemporary urban Afro-American culture, illuminated by Roger Abrahams, is manifested in clichés, brief leavetaking formulas, the rhymed dozens (a form of verbal dueling), the epic toasts, and the religious sermons of male performers in this community; all these forms—from short and conversational to elaborate and highly marked—are suffused with parallelistic constructions” (19). Based on Abrahams, parallelism is a performance key that extends across a number of African-American narrative forms, thus it may also be viewed as a racial signifier.

In the following passage we see the climax of the narrative which is propelled in part

through guns and gun violence.

Just then some little short motherfucker, way over in the
corner jumped up and hollered, “Somebody call the
law.”

Benny Long threw a 45 shell through the motherfucker’s
Jaw.

His broad walked over, she said, “Benny, please.”

He beat that whore down to her motherfucking knees.

Just then everything got black, ‘cause out went the lights.

I had that old bad-ass Benny Long in my 38 sights.

When the lights came back on and all the best,

I had sent that old bad motherfucker to internal (*sic*) rest.

Thirteen 38 bulletholes ‘cross his motherfucking chest.

The previous passage depicts a climactic gun battle, between Benny Long and Stagolee. During the gun battle three emergent values or qualities appear which may be attributed to many African-American communities in the late twentieth century: a disdain for the law, a reassertion of black male patriarchy, and autonomy through the use of firearms. Benny Long first shoots the patron who wants to call the law. The irony, in the situation is that it is Benny Long’s brother who is murdered at the hands of Stagolee, thus Stagolee is at fault. This scenario illustrates a wide spread distrust of police in a racist legal system during the Civil Rights era, which often times made gun carrying a necessity for blacks. According to Nicholas Johnson “SNCC activist James Forman confirmed that keeping and carrying guns was consistent with community norms. (...) Forman observed that ‘self-defense—at least of one’s home—was not a concept new to

Southern blacks in 1963 and there was hardly a black home in the South without its shotgun or rifle” (247). This passage from Johnson also illustrates that the fear and distrust of police transcended class boundaries during the 60s when Stagolee toast were still being circulated.

Afterward shooting the patron, Benny Long beats the patron’s girlfriend. It is at this point in the narrative that Benny Long represents a Manichean version of Stagolee, that ultimately seeks to displace Stagolee’s heroic position within the narrative. Furthermore, the firearm exists as a racialized phallic symbol that consequently polarizes the masculine and the feminine; the masculine representing fearlessness and power, while femininity is reduced to helplessness and weakness. From a cultural perspective, this hyper aggressive, hyper masculine persona represents a strong desire for a reaffirmation and reclamation of one’s masculinity identity.

The final passage marks the climax or dramatic ending. This is also where we get to see Stagolee deliver one of his best verbal performances.

His boys jumped up and said, “Ain’t this a shame.
Here’s a man got our boss, Benny Long there on the floor
dead.
This jive-ass motherfucker’s reputation we haven’t ever
heard.”
They dove in their coats and went down for this shit.
I said, “Cool it motherfuckers, let me tell you a bit.
I was born in the backwoods, for my pet my father raised
a bear.
I got two sets of jawbone teeth, and an extra layer of hair.

When I was three I sat in a barrel of knives.
A rattlesnake bit me and crawled off and died.
'Cause after I get up and leave, my ass-hole print leaves
'danger'."

Like other passages in the narrative, the final passage depicts special code usage in the use of certain black vernacular expressions. For example, the slang expression "cool it" and "jive-ass," *cool it* meaning, calm down, and *jive-ass* referring to a sense of inauthenticity. Also, as a special formulaic element, the term, *cool it*, also marks the beginning of a metanarrative or story in which Stagolee reasserts himself as the ultimate bad man for yet a fourth time. Stagolee indicates that the men were going to make an attempt on his life saying "They dove in their coats and went down for this shit" (132). Ultimately, Stagolee is able to stop them from drawing their weapons, but not with more bullets from his .38, Stagolee stops them with a performance of verbal art instead, saying "Cool it motherfuckers, let me tell you a bit" (132). What follows is a defiant show of self-aggrandizement as Stagolee communicates the story of his life, which is also a lesson in hyperbole, and rhyme. In a series of perfect end-rhymes, Stagolee tells the men, through the use of a number of racial signifiers, that he is a black *baaaaad* man. Stagolee is able to reaffirm and reinforce his own sense of black masculinity while also reestablishing his status as a legendary folk hero. Furthermore, as an act of cultural nationalism, Stagolee toasts represent, in many ways, a new racial type. Stagolee represents an attempt to displace the old images of black subordination and inferiority that were popularized, in part, through blackface minstrelsy acts and replace them with a completely autonomous and defiant symbol of blackness.

Inherent in the idea of racial fetishization, is the fear that racial stereotypes will lead to

the formation of new racial stereotypes. According to Lee, there is always the possibility that “New versions of spectacular difference, then, become served up in order to placate social anxieties that—like racism—have never really gone away. This worry only intensifies if one understands fetishism as constructed through the ideology of capitalism as well as through the broader terms of racial pathology” (81). Racial stereotypes will always be perpetuated in our culture. However, as our society attempts to lessen the impact of Otherness. Understanding where the stereotypes originate and what they mean will always be useful in our attempts to create progressive images of African-American ethnicity.

Chapter 4: Guns, Loss, and Racial Identity in Blues Lyrics

Firearms are fetishized in early twentieth century blues music as a way of performing racial identity. On a macroscopic level blues music represents: a fundamental loss of freedom, a denial of social status in America, a denial of political influence, a denial of any means of economic upward mobility, and a renunciation of African-American agency and autonomy. On a microscopic level, embedded within the blues tradition, as a racial identity marker, the gun exists as a recurrent trope which is deployed in the service of signaling a sovereign black masculine persona. In the act of evoking the persona of the bad man/ blues man, guns and gun violence are sometimes placed at the center of the blues narrative, and because of this strategic placement, in certain instances, guns may be said to signify a number of different things including melancholic loss and a black masculine ethnic identity.

The act of Signification, in and of itself, is one major aspect of performing racial identity in blues music, and as a form of figuration, it appears in many forms of African-American expression including: humor, dance, instrumentation, and literature. Signification is especially important in interpreting blues music because blues is one of the earliest original black musical forms of expression and it presents a visible assimilation of both African and African-American musical forms. Thus by examining Signification in blues music one may also reveal traces of its African origins as well. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "...it is the realignment of the signifier that is the signal trait of expressive genius. ...It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz—and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime..."

(64). Gates describes Signification as a kind of *tropological revision* of which he says is "...the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts" (xxv). The idea of repetition and revision is crucial to understanding ways that guns are employed symbolically in blues music.

Due to tropological revision in blues music, the gun comes to signify race on a number of different levels, but it is through the act of Signifyin(g) that the firearm as a racial identity marker becomes recognizable. As Gates points out, one of the most effective descriptions of Signification comes from Mitchell-Kernan whose description emphasizes the interpretive aspects of it. In addition to being a kind of verbal play, she contends that "...*Signifying*...refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection...*signifying* might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse. Such *signifying* is not focal to the linguistic interaction in the sense that it does not define the entire speech event" (qtd. in Gates 80). Based on what she says here, signifying may describe a number of particular kinds of speech acts, but Signification never completely quantifies a given speech act in and of itself. Furthermore, Mitchell-Kernan's linguistic interpretation also highlights the practice of Signification as a rhetorical mode of communication, but as she points out, it still should not be confused with the way that the term "signify" is used in black vernacular speech. She says:

What is unique in Black English usage is the way in which signifying is extended to cover a range of meaning and events which are not covered in its Standard English usage. In the Black community it is possible to say, 'He is signifying'

and ‘Stop signifying’—sentences which would be anomalous elsewhere. (...) The Black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. (qtd. in Gates 81,2)

Mitchell-Kernan highlights and accentuates the somewhat ambiguous implications that the term may have in black vernacular speech. This imperative distinction allows one to identify the practice as a racial marker, and this finding subsequently became the impetus for Gate’s unique spelling of the term, as Gates explains:

I have decided to signify the difference between these two signifiers by writing the black signifier in upper case (‘Signification’) and the white signifier in lower case (‘signification’). Similarly, I have selected to write the black term with a bracketed final *g* (‘Signifyin(g)’) and the white term as ‘signifying.’ The bracketed *g* enables me to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final *g* as ‘signifyin.’ This arbitrary and idiosyncratic convention also enables me to recall the fact that whatever historical community of Afro-Americans coined this usage did so in the vernacular as spoken, in contradistinction to the literate written usages of the

standard English ‘shadowed’ term. The bracketed or aurally erased *g*, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re) naming ritual graphically in evidence here.

(46)

As Gates explains, the spelling of the term is important due to the fact that in black vernacular speech the *g* is inaudible thus it must still be represented graphically in order to bring attention to the presence of black difference. According to Gates, evidence of Signifyin(*g*) may be found in African religion, African folklore, and ante-bellum and post-bellum African-American expressive forms. The most remarkable thing about this revelation is that each instance of Signification both retains and transfers some of its original semantic influence, creating a kind of residual effect on imminent black expressive formations. Consequently, traces of African influence may still be found in contemporary black culture. According to Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. it is this aspect of Signification that contributes to what he identifies as a sense of “cultural memory” in black music (8). He asserts that he uses the term to “...refer to nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs that members of a culture seem, without direct knowledge or deliberate training, to ‘know’—that feel unequivocally ‘true’ and ‘right’ when encountered, experienced, and executed” (8). Cultural memory as a concept may allow one to realize how Signification has become so thoroughly ingrained in black cultural expression. Floyd asserts that “It may be defined as a repository of meanings that comprise the subjective knowledge of a people, its immanent thoughts, structures, and practices, are transferred and

understood unconsciously but become conscious and culturally objective in practice and perception. Cultural memory, obviously a subjective concept, seems to be connected with cultural forms—in the present case music where the ‘memory’ drives the music and the music drives the memory” (8).

The concept of cultural memory is especially useful in identifying semantic patterns that may be inherent components in blues music, due to the fact that blues music evolved the most in an era in American history when African-American culture seemed to be in one its most transitional states—during the Reconstruction era. During Reconstruction African-Americans were adapting from slavery to freedom and still undergoing fluctuating transitions caused by random violence which was frequently imposed upon them by racist whites. Thinking of Signification as an important aspect of cultural memory allows one to conceptualize a theory of the interpretation of black music. This theory begins in Africa and includes expressive forms created during the tumultuous era of Reconstruction and in each successive era up to the present. Signifyin(g) tropes that may be identified in black music are derived in part from various forms of expression used by Africans. This idea is highly visible in spirituals, jubilees, and blues music (the former two contributing extensively to the latter). According to Floyd “Africans used calls to make announcements, arrange appointments, organize meetings and work details, and convey greetings. African-American calls and cries were used similarly, and these short, rhythmically free phrases employed all the characteristic inflections and decorative colorings of their African counterparts. There were night cries, field cries, hunting cries, and street cries, the character of

each matching its function” (46). Reflecting on the work of Willis Lawrence James, Floyd describes the sound and function of these distinct Signifyin(g) forms of vocal expression. He says:

...these cries can be classified as plain, florid, or cororatura. The florid cries were simply plain with decorations; the coloratura were elaborate displays ‘which were among the most amazing and remarkable vocal feats in folk music.’ There were cornfield hollers, ‘whoops,’ [and] water calls,’ all sung in the typical falsetto, ‘hoarse, rough, or foggy’ voice that is cultivated and highly valued in black culture. Sometimes the fragments and phrases were verbally articulated and communicative; at other times, they were wordless. But *meaning* was always present and was always communicated. (qtd. in Floyd 46)

Additionally, hollers and calls have been distinguished even further—each having completely separate functions. “Hollers were portions of yodelized song, derived from Pygmy singing by way of Kongo peoples, which the slaves used to communicate across fields, valleys, and hollows. Calls and cries were used for closer and more personal communication” (Floyd 46,7). African calls and cries evolved into the kinds of calls and cries that are frequently incorporated into blues music and other forms of black musical expression that came before and after blues. Like blues music, the broad array of vocal inflections represented in cries were also used to convey serious emotions. Ashenafi Kebede expounds further on the emotional aspect of the cry. He says “Unlike calls, which are primarily used to communicate messages, cries express a deeply felt emotional experience, such as hunger, loneliness, or lovesickness. They are half-sung

and half-yelled. Vocables are often intermixed in the text. The melodies are performed in a free and spontaneous style; they are often ornamented and employ many African vocal devices, such as yodels, echolike falsetto, tonal slides, embellished melismas, and microtonal inflections that are often impossible to indicate in European staff notation” (qtd. in Floyd 48). Generally speaking, calls, cries, and field hollers were all critical forms of communication for enslaved Africans in America due to the fact that Africans were brought from many different regions and the multitude of dialects and languages that existed made communication difficult. Furthermore, they were also forced to abandon their native languages soon after they were introduced to American soil. According to Floyd “It was in these practical genres that African-American musical expression in the United States first crystalized as it was being spread to and within the other musical forms that were emerging” (48).

Blues music is a complex blend of both African and African-American elements. Many features found in blues also derive from ring music, spirituals, jubilees, and other forms of expression that were inherently apart of the early African-American church service (Floyd). In addition to the aforementioned elements, African folklore also played a significant role in the evolution of blues music and also the trope of Signification. Embedded in the folklore was an entire system of world views and values that became inscribed upon the blues man. Scholars such as Gates and Floyd identify the African trickster as an important influence on blues music. Gates emphasizes the trickster’s African origins saying “Esu, both a trickster and the messenger of the gods, figures prominently in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures found in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, among others” (xxi). Both Gates and Floyd acknowledge the trickster’s

African and transcontinental origins. Additionally, they also emphasize the role that the trickster played in shaping blues and other forms of black expression in America. Floyd says “Trickster’s divine incarnation as one of the African gods did not survive the Middle Passage to North America, but he was reincarnated in some parts of the Americas in a form that contained Esu’s more malevolent traits—that is, as Legba, the Devil. In Latin America, as Eshu, or Ellegua, he was associated with both Jesus and the Devil—as both originator and settler of quarrels. Probably brought in this form to North America in the early nineteenth century by slaves imported from the Caribbean, this new incarnation of Esu as the Devil took hold as he emerged at the crossroads some-time in the late nineteenth century to deliver superior creative skills to black songsters, and exerted a powerful influence on the development of the blues, which would become ascendant following Emancipation” (73). Gates identifies the African trickster as the source of Signification, attributing this trope to both Esu and The Monkey of African-American folklore. Likewise, Floyd focuses on the fact that the trickster is the source of the blues man’s creative musical talent while illustrating some of the ways that it is described in different versions of African-American legend.

Many versions of African trickster tales involving Esu mention *crossroads*. The notion of the crossroads in African-American folklore refer to a place where the devil supposedly met bluesmen, to impart on them musical ability in exchange for their souls. The idea of crossroads raises an interesting parallel between African-American folklore and African-American history. Blues music began to evolve during and immediately following Reconstruction, and in many ways, the crossroads represented through African-American folklore, Signifies the liminal state

experienced by newly freed African-Americans in the late 1900s.—they were at a crossroads, so to speak. Likewise, some scholars believe that the blues man, and all of his mystically acquired musical talents also signify the hope and optimism felt by many African-Americans immediately upon experiencing freedom for the first time, following the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation. As Floyd asserts “The blues recognized and represented independence, autonomy, a certain amount of liberation, and release from the oppression of slavery. (...) bluesmen ‘acted as proselytizers of a gospel of secularization in which belief in freedom became associated with personal mobility—freedom of movement in this world here and now, rather than salvation in the next’” (qtd. in Floyd 77).

The legend of Esu also provides one with an interesting example of folklore’s powerful influence on culture. This popular legend demonstrates the significance of cultural memory in the evolution of blues music. According to Floyd, the cultural influence of this myth are still felt today. He says “For African Americans, Esu’s appearance as the Devil at the crossroads affirmed African custom and tradition, an affirmation so vital to their spiritual survival that they treasured the memory of this trickster and behaved as if the legend were true long after they had stopped believing it, as evidenced, as we have seen, by the music and the statements of bluesmen such as Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, and Peetie Wheatstraw” (74). This information allows one to see the significance of African influence on the creation and evolution of blues music. It is virtually impossible to know the full extent of African influence on blues music, but one has to believe that one is hearing it in all of the subtle intricacies involved in its performance. Some scholars have even attempted to pinpoint the original source of some of the more powerful

emotive elements to be heard during vocal delivery. As Floyd asserts “The impetus, tone, and emotional quality of the blues may have come from Senegambia. Michael Coolen has shown, for example, that Senegambians suffered inordinately from the slave trade, due to their convenient proximity to the Senegal and Gambia rivers, on which ‘slave factories’ were located and where slave ships arrived to pick up human cargo. The consequent large concentration of Senegambian slaves in America, he believes, is the reason for the structural and tonal similarities between the blues and the Senegambian *fodet...*” (qtd. in Floyd 75). In fact, the bluesmen may be a direct reflection of the Senegambian *gewels* or *griots* who are “‘entertainers who play for dances, do acrobatics, tell stories, pose riddles for members of the audience to solve,’ and, like many African-American songsters and instrumentalist, ‘pride themselves on being able to provide the appropriate music for any situation’” (qtd. in Floyd 75).

The way that blues music was performed illustrates African influence and the lyrics actually display a great deal of eclecticism, covering a wide range of topics coming from a variety of sources in the African-American community. In fact, there were two main sources for material in blues songs, and they were “life as the singer saw it, lived it, and survived it, and from the ‘traveling’ lyrics of African-American culture” (76). The topics covered in blues songs are numerous and “represent a wide expressive spectrum, spanning ‘proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more,’ including satire; they describe social phenomena and treat romantic relationships” (76). Although blues music may embody some mythic African origins and share similarities with the spiritual, it is entirely secular. As Floyd explains “Unlike the spiritual—a communal testimony oriented

toward the next world—the blues song is a personal statement about an individual’s view of his or her current circumstances” (76). Blues music represents an African and African-American aesthetic which is influenced by a multitude of black musical figures and forms. According to Floyd “Blues singers composed their songs by combining fragments and verses from the hundreds or thousands of formulas that were floating around in black communities everywhere, spread by the traveling songsters. Black creativity combined these fragments with African-American performance practices, transforming them into original works of musical poetry” (76). Each unique musical innovation in blues music contributed to the next, and in the process of transmission, an original “communication system” was developed and employed. This new communication system also embodied its own “semantic code” (Floyd 78).

I argue that an important part of this semantic code is the firearm due to the fact that guns are a recurring trope within the blues lyrical repertoire. The powerful trope represented by firearms in blues music may also be viewed as a racial identity marker in that its use draws upon African-American cultural memory which extends to other black expressive traditions as well. Thinking along these lines, one may conceptualize the culmination of guns represented in blues lyrics as a chain of signifiers—each intended to signify something different. According to Gates this feature may be attributed to “intertextuality” and it is characterized by both “repetition and revision” (60). In fact, Gates demonstrates intertextuality by emphasizing the frequent use of the .44 revolver in black poetry. Gates says that “the placement of the figure ‘fourty-four’ is an instance of a formulaic phrase being repeated from poem to poem—because it has achieved a formulaic insistency—but repeated in distinct ways” (60). According to Gates, “Precisely

because the concepts represented in the poem are shared, repeated, and familiar to the poet's audience, meaning is devalued while the signifier is valorized" (61). Gates description of the way that the forty-four is represented in black poetic forms is consistent with the collapse of value in commodity fetishism. The firearm (as a sign or symbol) has become detached from its original meaning—thus existing as a free-floating signifier to be revised and repeated endlessly. Gates stops short of using the term fetish, but once the firearm becomes attached to notions of blackness, melancholic loss, or other aspects of identity, that is how guns began to function in the narratives—they become fetish objects. Consequently, as a fetish object, the gun is sometimes “valorized” and used to evoke images of *bad men*. Many of the bad men that brandish guns across blues ballads are often bad in the sense that they have taken the law into their own hands. The badness that these men project is often a reaction to a sudden sense of anger, confusion, or emotional turmoil. Furthermore, they often convey that they are poor, sad, lonely, and rejected, all conditions and emotions that characterize the blues genre. According to Stephen Calt, *to have the blues* is to be overcome by a sudden sense of emotional strife. In *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (2009) Stephen Calt defines the blues in the following manner. He says, “Apart from the customary meanings of feeling dejected or depressed, this phrase is used in blues songs to express a general sense of disquietude. *To have the blues* variously means to feel out of sorts, to feel agitated, or to be disgruntled. When coupled with a noun or adverb, it connotes a feeling of wretchedness attributable to some external circumstances” (26). The feelings which are projected in blues lyrics should not be separated from the historical context of the music. The phrase “to have the blues” may also

Signify upon the racial violence that many African-American people were exposed to during Reconstruction. The testimony of blues man, Booker White, supports this notion. White says “...things used to get rough in them days. Not that they don’t these days, but back then they wouldn’t think no more about killing a Negro than they would about killing a chicken. I became more acquainted with lynchings than I was with hanging up my socks...” (Sackheim 473,4). White goes on to describe the lynching of a relative which had a profound impact on his life. He says:

I had a first cousin to get lynched. His name was Robert Lee Hatchett. He was just about 18 years old. A bunch of white boys was drinking one Saturday night and Robert Lee was coming home and they killed him and laid his body on the railroad tracks for the train to run over. But the engineer stopped. The white boys went home and went to bed and nothing was ever done to them. And that was one of the things that started me to being mean... (Sackheim 474)

The historical context of blues music in many ways dictates the lyrical content of the songs. Consequently, the themes that are present across blues music often revolve around some form of loss, as illustrated in White’s testimonial. In fact, one very common theme in blues is unrequited love. One also often sees complicated love triangles in which a female (or sometimes male) protagonist is caught cheating. It is only rarely that the narrative involves two male characters. When two male characters are involved, the disputes generally revolve around the love of a woman.

When firearms appear in blues narratives, it is generally done so in the face of loss. This presents another way that guns are being overvalued or fetishized. Fetishism has been defined as the "...use of an object to negotiate (usually binary) difference to achieve an immaterial end, whether it be economic gain, cultural prestige, or psychological satisfaction" (McCallum xi). In the case of blues narratives, the gun is being used as a way of negotiating difference. According to E.L. McCallum, "Those who study the phenomenon would concur that fetishism originates in loss; indeed, this is a founding tenet of theories of fetishism. The origin of fetishism, as Freud has famously noted, is the loss of what the boy had believed was there—namely, the mother's phallus. Or as we saw in the 1909 lecture, the loss that generates fetishism is the loss of an instinctual pleasure, whose original object remains preserved in the fetish" (110).

All in all, one may say that the badman/bluesman persona is facilitated, in part, through the Signification of the firearm, and this Signification is a reaction to the threat of two kinds of loss—the threat of the loss of love and also a reaction to the threat of emasculation or the loss of one's own sense of masculinity. As White's testament illustrates these are emotional states that many blues men were historically forced to confront. Additionally, as White asserts, living with the harsh realities of racial violence often lead to a kind of nihilistic withdrawal or a negativism that one may equate with the sense of badness that is expressed in many blues lyrics. White says "I had to burn a guy a little and they gave me a little time down there on Parchman's Farm...when I got out I felt like shooting somebody else..." (Sackheim 474). In White's case the blues man ultimately becomes the bad man, and it is due in part to a sudden sense of loss in

the face of racial violence and an attempt to reclaim one's own masculine identity which he feels has been systematically denied to him by a racist legal system.

In some cases the physical possession of the female contributes greatly to their own sense of masculine identity and once she is gone an overwhelming need to regain this sense of masculinity through gun violence is expressed in the lyrics of some blues songs. Thus, the notions of love, masculinity, and loss are all mediated, in part, through the use of firearms. All of the characters that we see across blues narratives are not bad men, but the badman is a common figure that is represented across the genre. Stemming from the trickster of African and African-American folklore, the term badman is deeply rooted in blues music and is an important word in the blues lexicon. According to Stephen Calt, the term *bad man* is a reference to "A notorious gunfighter or outlaw...The term is generally understood to mean a professional fighter or man-killer, but who, despite this drawback, is said...to be sometimes...perfectly honest. These are the men who do most of the killing in frontier communities..." In at least two instances, blues-era works invoke such figures by means of the modifier *bad...*" (9). As Calt states the term *bad* is often used as an adjective to describe these characters and it also appears as a refrain within some of the narratives. It is even signified upon in some cases, being misspelled with extra *a*'s, each *a* inserted intentionally in order to indicate a heightened level of badness. Such is the case in the following song *Bob McKinney* by Henry Thomas. The first stanza reads:

Went down on Johnson Street

Bob McKinney came passing by

Going down that Johnson Street

Make trouble in their lives

Wasn't he bad

Yes wasn't he bad (Sackheim 70)

The adjective *bad* is used to characterize the antagonist, Bob McKinney, but McKinney's bad intentions are not revealed until the following stanza which reads:

Bobby said to *Marg'et*

Come to me I said

If you don't come in a hurry

I put a 38 through your head

Wasn't he bad

Yes wasn't he bad (Sackheim 70)

Here the source of the protagonists' perceived badness is revealed in the form of a .38 revolver which he uses to threaten the life of his lover, Margaret. The reason for this threat is revealed in the following stanza which reads:

Bobby said to *Ben Cass* [italics in original]

I'm bound to take your life

You caused trouble

Between me and my wife

Wasn't he bad

Yes wasn't he bad (Sackheim 70)

In the third stanza we see the complicated love triangle unravel as it is revealed that McKinney's threat towards Margaret has been extended to Cass, Margaret's alleged lover. The refrain, which appears throughout the song, poses the question, "Wasn't he bad?" The definition of the term *bad* offered by Stephen Calt, allows one to answer in the affirmative. According to Calt, across the blues genre, to be "bad" basically entails being, "Tough; lawless; indomitable...morally depraved, wicked, or vicious" (8). All of these characteristics are enforced in the narrative of *Bob McKinney* through the threat of gun violence.

In another song, *Got the Blues and Can't Be Satisfied* by Mississippi John Hurt we see a similar scenario. The protagonist of the narrative buys his lover a diamond ring, but he later finds her at home engaged in sexual intercourse with another man. The third stanza of the narrative reads:

Bought my gal a great big diamond ring

Bought my gal a great big diamond ring

Come right back home and caught her shaking that thing (Sackheim, 230)

The term *shake* is “A blues euphemism for engaging in sex” (Calt 210). After demanding an explanation from his lover, the enraged protagonist decides to take matters into his own hands.

The fifth stanza reads:

Took my gun and I broke the barrel down

Took my gun and I broke the barrel down

Put my baby six feet under the ground (Sackheim 230)

Out of anger the protagonist kills his cheating lover, but doesn't stop there. The man whom she is caught cheating with suffers an even worse fate. The sixth and final stanza of the narrative reads:

I cut that joker so long deep and wide

Cut that joker so long deep and wide

You got the blues and still ain't satisfied (Sackheim 230)

Here we see in both of these narratives scenarios in which the crime of cheating is punished with gun violence. The gun, as a mediating device, seems to resolve all of the protagonists' issues. The protagonist is never concerned with the threat of being caught or punished for their crimes. This air of fearlessness is a defining characteristic of bad men, across blues narratives and across other folk narrative forms, but the fact that the bad men of blues music don't fear punishment may also be a result of a kind ambivalence and disavowal, both of which are defining characteristics of fetishism that stem from loss. As McCallum explains, “Loss of the maternal

penis, or loss of the maternal body, or loss of the accepted, loved self—all of these forms of fetishism...entail a belief in the existence of these lost objects, a belief which is contradicted by the knowledge of their loss. These losses all raise interesting questions about what it means to know, and the degree to which knowledge is inflected by desire and interpretation. In this light, ambivalence emerges as the most important element of fetishism” (111). Based on this information, one may draw the conclusion that the experience of loss has a profound impact on the way that the gun yielding protagonists interpret reality. One could say that the subject refuses to accept reality or one could also say that the fetishist is able to navigate cognitively between both reality and fantasy. However, a more accurate interpretation points to both disavowal and ambivalence as possible reasons why the fetishist may refuse to fully accept the situation at face value or why they never address the possibility of being punished for their actions. According to McCallum it was Freud that first stressed the significance of this feature of fetishism. She says “...what saves the fetishist from psychosis is the thinking that in fact does align with reality, in addition to the current of thought that denies reality by asserting another belief. While many have taken disavowal to be a central mechanism in fetishism, a refusal to confront reality is not the only process at work. Disavowal is part of the larger mechanism of ambivalence in fetishism, and it is the combination of attitudes in the fetishist—both disavowal and recognition—that makes it possible for fetishism to be construed as potentially productive” (111,2). According to McCallum disavowal and ambivalence are both involved in the act of fetishism and they are in turn defining characteristics that also make fetishism a potentially constructive behavior for the fetishists, regardless of how morally corrupt their actions may be.

Many of the bad men of blues music turn to firearms after confronting the devastating reality that their spouses are cheating on them. Some do so in response to unrequited love. In this scenario the gun appears to provide their only sense of solace. Such is the case in *Pistol Slapper Blues* by Blind Boy Fuller. Fuller says in the second stanza:

You's a cold
blooded murderer
when you want me out your way;
says that's all right, mama:
you gonna need my help some day. (Sackheim 346)

The speaker seems to equate unrequited love with death saying “You's a cold blooded murderer” and he responds to this rejection by threatening her life. He says in the following stanza:

And I feel
like slapping
my pistol in your face:
let some brown skin woman
be here to take your place (Sackheim 346)

Pistol Slapper Blues basically depicts a homicidal protagonist, who in the face of rejection, threatens to kill his lover in order to replace her with another woman. *Pistol Slapper Blues* is

unique, in the sense that the firearm is the main feature of the narrative. It appears in the title and as a motif, the firearm facilitates the climax. If the gun were not a part of the narrative, then the story would simply revolve around the speaker's own sense of sorrow, thus making it a traditional blues song. The inclusion of the firearm makes the blues man seem much less sympathetic. In a sense, the gun, facilitates a kind of merging of two identities, between that of the blues man with that of the bad man. Based on the narratives of some blues men, the merging of these two identities may also be due to a reaction to the violent environments that blues men were often forced to perform in. Blues man, Lonnie Johnson, describes such an environment. He says:

...I tell you who I was working with. Roosevelt Sykes. Working right on Indiana. And Sonny Boy Williamson was working just around the corner. So we would alternate on our intermission time and go round to the Plantation Club and keep him company and play with him, and on his intermission time he'd come round to the club where I was working at, a place called the Flame. So he just come round, and then he went back, went round the corner. He said, "Well, I'll see you after a while when you get off; come on round to the club." I say, "O.K." And about five minutes later a fella come round and say he's dead. And we thought he was kidding, you know? He had seventeen holes in his head with an ice pick. They ganged him. He was 'bout one of the finest fellas I know. (Sackheim 494)

Another blues man, Will Shade says:

Used to be wide open houses in them days. You could used to walk down the street in days of 1900 and like that, and you could find a man with throat cut from ear to ear. Also you could find people lying dead with not their throat cut, money took and everything in their pockets took out of their pockets, and thrown outside the house. Sometimes you find them with no clothes on and such as that. Sometimes you find them throwed out of windows and so forth on Beale street. Sportin' class o'women running up and down the street all night long...get knocked in the head with bricks and hatchets and hammers. Get cut with pocket knives and razors and so forth. (Sackheim 479)

As opposed to precipitating violence in these dangerous environments blues men Signify upon it by including guns and gun violence in some of their lyrics. Thereby, possibly neutralizing or reducing the threat of violence in their immediate surroundings. This form of Signification may have helped the blues men to connect to their audiences, and in some cases, it may have even saved them from their audiences.

The firearm serves as a recurring trope in *45 Pistol Blues* by Walter Roland. This blues song is unique in the sense that the firearm is Signified upon in the title and throughout the entire song. There are two kinds of firearms mentioned in the narrative, the .38 revolver and the .45 revolver. The speaker in the narrative expresses the fact the he carries the weapon for protection. Stating in the first stanza:

I'm going over to 3rd alley

Lord, but I'm gonna carry my 45

Lord I'm going over to 3rd alley

Lord I'm gonna carry my 45

Because, you know, ain't many men

Goes there and comes back alive (Sackheim 386)

The speaker is somewhat of a sympathetic character because he is carrying the weapon out of fear, but the firearm also serves the purpose of implicitly depicting the speaker as a badman, only in this case, this sense of badness is created, in part, through the imagery of the setting which is characterized through gun violence. The second stanza reads:

They will shoot you and cut you

lord they will knock you down

Lord they will shoot you and cut you

lord they will knock you down

And you can ask any body

ain't that the baddest place in town (Sackheim 386)

Also conveyed in the narrative is the significance of the caliber of weapon. The speaker says that he will carry a .45 while the men on 3rd alley carry .38s. The fact that his weapon is larger makes him the *baddest*, even though both weapons are essentially deadly. After reiterating the dangers involved in visiting 3rd Alley, the speaker of the poem, contemplates changing his mind.

In the fourth stanza, which is also interspersed with Signification in the form of dialect, he says “Cause you know I done got shot once over there/lord, and stobbed three or four times” (Sackheim 386). Based on this information one could certainly question the speaker’s motive for visiting 3rd Alley in the first place. Perhaps performing on third alley is his only means of income. Although, such a move would clearly place his life in jeopardy, the threat of death is not the only source of the speaker’s troubles, as we find out in the fifth and final stanza which reads:

Said you know I’m gonna leave

lord, my 45 most at home

Lord

my 45 most too big

‘cause you know when I carry that gun

lord I can’t keep it hid (Sackheim 386)

In the fifth stanza it is revealed that the root of the speaker’s dilemma lies in the fact that he cannot take the larger caliber weapon, the .45, due to the difficulties that would be involved in attempting to conceal such a weapon. As implied by the title, *45 Pistol Blues*, this sudden realization is also the source of the speaker’s troubles. Based on the narrative one could say that, through the firearm, or the intense focus on the gun, the speaker transforms himself from a sympathetic character into a badman. As a badman, the speaker no longer fears the dangers,

involved in visiting 3rd Alley. The speaker is instead, seeking out danger and he is eager to take the law into his own hands if the need should ever arise.

Similar to *45 Pistol Blues*, the song, *Take a Walk Around the Corner*, by Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell also feature a .45 caliber pistol. The .45 is depicted as a way of negotiating loss. The speaker in a depressed state says that he plans to take a walk by himself to look for his lover whom he can't seem to find. The first stanza reads:

B'lieve I'll take me a walk 'round the
corner by myself

B'lieve I'll take me a walk 'round the
corner by myself

And if I can't find my baby, I don't
want no body else (Sackheim 384)

The first stanza basically establishes the speaker as an individual who is suffering from the blues. In the second stanza the speaker elaborates by revealing details surrounding his lover's disappearance. He says:

She went out last night and she
didn't even say good-bye

She went out last night and she

didn't even say good-bye

How come she left me?

lord I really don't know why (Sackheim 384)

After the speaker laments his lonely condition, he goes into a homicidal state contemplating murdering his lover with his "forty-five." He says in the third stanza:

Now I'm going out this morning, my

forty-five in my hand

Now I'm going out this morning,

my forty-five in my hand

Now I'm gonna kill my woman

for loving a nother man (Sackheim 384)

The speaker never reveals if he finds out if his lover is actually with another man. Likewise, the decision to take a walk never goes any further than mere contemplation. This particular aspect is one of the things that makes *Take a Walk Around the Corner* so unique. It depicts imagined violence. Likewise, the speaker also contemplates being remorseful for his actions. His remorse may come as a consequence of not actually knowing if his lover is cheating on him. Never the less, the speaker imagines throwing himself at the mercy of the courts. He says:

Then I'm going to the judge and I'm gonna

fall down on my knees

Then I'm going to the judge and I'm gonna

fall down on my knees

And ask him, Please, fair judge,

have mercy on me please (Sackheim 384)

The fact that the speaker would express remorse for his actions makes him less of a bad man character, but like the bad man, he still relies on the firearm in order to negotiate his sudden sense of loss. Another aspect that seems to differentiate this character from the badmen that we see in other narratives is that this character seems to be aware of the extremity of his actions. Likewise, he also knows that it would take a sudden loss of reason for such a scenario to actually occur. He says in the fifth stanza:

Judge, I done killed my woman

'cause she treated me so unkind

Judge, I done killed my woman 'cause she

treated me so unkind

Treated me so unkind till, I

swear I lost my mind (Sackheim 384)

The speaker imagines his own loss of reason which ultimately leads to his contemplation of the only options available to him if he were to follow through with the murder of his lover. The speaker's options would be to either plead a case of temporary insanity (with the hope of spending the remainder of his life in prison) or to face the electric chair. He says:

Well it's please please please don't

send me to the electric chair

Now and it's please please please don't

send me to the electric chair

Just give me my time and I'll

try to do it any where (Sackheim 384)

In this particular instance, the speaker knows that he is not a bad man and this could be due to the fact that he does not plan to follow through with his actions to commit murder.

Consequently, in the seventh stanza the speaker directs his attention to his own mortality. He says:

When I'm dead and gone and

six feet in the ground

When I'm dead and gone and

six feet in the ground

You can only say there's a

good man has gone down (Sackheim 384)

This particular point marks an interesting turning point in the narrative. The speaker seems to return to reality, abandoning the notion of murdering his lover all together. As McCallum explains, this is a defining feature of fetishism. The ability to oscillate between reality and fiction through the fetish object. The speaker knows in reality that murder is not his only option in a situation such as this, but the fetish object, in this case the “forty-five,” has a way of simplifying things, which is why fetishism can still be viewed as being a productive mode of thinking even if only for the fetishists. Ambivalence, an inherent attribute of fetishization, is clearly demonstrated as the speaker makes his sudden return to reality. He says in the eighth and final stanza:

Well it looks mighty cloudy and I

b'lieve it's going to rain

Well it looks mighty cloudy and I

b'lieve it's going to rain

I just love to hear my

baby call my name (Sackheim 385).

The speaker of *Take a Walk Around the Corner* is unique because he only imagines the criminal act that he describes. Furthermore, the speaker also displays a great deal of rationality in the

sense that he knows that he would never actually follow through with murdering his lover. His return to sanity is marked by his sudden recognition of the weather, “b’lieve it’s going to rain” and the emotion that he feels when he hears his lover’s voice, “I just love to hear my/baby call my name” (Sackheim 385). This is what separates this character from the typical bad man who generally demonstrates no remorse at all for his actions and yet the speaker of *Take a Walk* still doesn’t completely diverge from the typical gun yielding bad man. He still illustrates a fixation on the firearm in the face of an overwhelming sense of loss, but this speaker’s fixation is followed by a sense of remorse and seems to be grounded in reality.

Two other blues songs, *Frankie* and *Ain’t No Tellin’* both by Mississippi John Hurt feature women as the protagonist. The men involved in the narratives are still bad, but only bad partner’s in a relationship because it is them who have been caught cheating this time. In turn, the men in these narratives are either shot to death for their cheating ways, or they express fear for their lives. The scenarios play out almost identically to the other blues narratives that involve firearms except it is the women who pose the threat. For example, the 4th stanza of *Frankie* reads:

Frankie shot old Albert

And she shot him three or four times

Said, Stroll back out the smoke of my gun

Let me see is Albert dying

He's my man

And he done me wrong (Sackheim 231)

The fact that the women in these narratives are depicted as gun yielding and homicidal raises the question of whether or not women may be considered fetishists in the same manner as the men. Freud in his 1927 essay, *Fetishism*, asserts the impossibility of such a case. Freud believes that fetishism is an attribute that originates and lies within the male psyche. He says “When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but was afterwards lost. That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the purpose of the fetish precisely is to preserve it from being lost. To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego—we know why” (205). Freud views the fetish as a penis-substitute that men subconsciously project onto women as a replacement for the mother's imagined phallus. Furthermore, for Freud, it is the fetish object that allows the woman to become more attractive to the male thus preventing the possibility of homosexuality. McCallum, believes that Freud's theory does not restrict women from the possibility of being fetishist and she points to ambiguities in Freud's language as the cause. McCallum examines a number of Freud's ambiguities concerning female fetishism. The first one being that Freud excludes all women from being fetishist, but also asserts that everyone including women are clothes fetishist. Freud believes that women fetishize clothes simply out of an inherent need to be recognized as women. A point which McCallum questions saying, “Is

Freud's description likewise confused and contradictory? Or is it cogent, since it comes from the other direction—not the man fetishizing the woman, but the woman fetishizing herself or her objects? Certainly there is an implication that the woman's clothes fetishism is somehow not as erotic as the male fetishist's, since the objects are her own and thus familiar to her" (51).

McCallum feels that Freud's assertion that all women are clothes fetishists is unfair and that his theories are rooted in patriarchal bias, a symptom that has plagued the academy throughout the twentieth century. Another ambiguity that allows for reinterpretation is the fact that Freud makes no clear distinction between the penis, the phallus, and the clitoris. He simply refers to the clitoris as the "...real little penis of the woman..." (Freud 209). A number of feminist thinkers have questioned this particular uncertainty in Freud's language including Valerie Steele who turns to Lacan for a more productive interpretation. She says:

According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the phallus is not the same as the penis, although we tend to use the words interchangeably. Whereas the penis is a part of the male body that may or may not be especially impressive, the phallus is the eternally erect and massive symbol of power and potency. 'If the penis were a phallic symbol, men would not need...neckties or medals.' Neither men nor women 'have' the phallus, but they both want what it signifies" (17).

This interpretation places both men and women on equal ground by not attributing the phallus to a particular gender. Along this line of thinking the phallus is unobtainable. Thus, it exists in the symbolic realm only.

For McCallum, another way to level the playing field, is to think in terms of loss as opposed to lack. To view fetishism from the perspective of melancholic loss makes the possibility of female fetishism much more plausible. Melancholia is a kind of deep sadness or depression that is attributed to the loss of some thing, whether it be an object or a human relationship. McCallum asserts that melancholia as a psychological disorder has long been associated with male genius and creativity, but she also believes that since everyone experiences loss (even if only in the form of individuation from one's maternal mother at the time of birth) that this theory is worth considering. This line of thinking also helps to draw attention away from self-imposed gender boundaries and redirect our focus to ways in which human beings negotiate identity through relationships with material objects. She says:

“...fetishism is as much about the distinction between subject and object as melancholia is about sexual difference. For as much as fetishism is about the negotiation of differences, sexual or cultural, it is also about the negotiation of identity, through the oscillation between autonomy and connectedness, distance and proximity. In this regard, melancholia offers a particularly compelling parallel to fetishism, since the melancholic achieves a limited autonomy by separating himself from the incorporated object, yet he cannot, as Freud notes, give up the love for the object, even if he gives up the object” (121).

The gun yielding women that are featured across blues narratives do demonstrate the kind of melancholic loss that McCallum describes and if melancholia can be viewed as being “parallel

to fetishism” then the women too are firearm fetishists (perhaps even more so than some of the men are). The women in the narratives display a profound sense of sadness upon finding out that their lovers are cheating on them. In *Frankie* this moment is described in the second stanza of the song which reads:

Frankie went down to the corner saloon

Didn't go to be gone long

She peeped through the keyhole of the door

And spied Albert in Alice's arms

He's my man

And you done me wrong (Sackheim 231).

Here Frankie comes home from the saloon only to find Albert in the arms of Alice. The feeling of loss that Frankie experiences due to this sudden and unexpected betrayal is expressed in the refrain which reads “He's my man/And he done me wrong” (Sackheim 231). These two lines are repeated at the end of each of the seven stanzas of the poem indicating that Frankie is devastated by her discovery. Thus one could summarize the scenario in the following way. Frankie, suffering from a kind of melancholia due to the sudden loss of her lover, Albert, seeks to negotiate this sudden sense of loss through gun violence. As a human being, Frankie may realize the plethora of possibilities that exist which may be much more productive than

committing homicide, but Frankie's fixation on the firearm does not allow for the exploration of other possibilities. In terms of fixation on the firearm, the same may be said of the male characters, but the male characters also tend to express anger, so much so, that anger as opposed to depression dominates the narrative.

Another song by Mississippi John Hurt, *Ain't No Tellin'*, depicts a male character that seems to fear being caught in the act. He says, "Don't let my good girl catch you here/She/might shoot you/may cut you and stob you too/Ain't no telling/what she might do" (Sackheim 232). This character expresses an intense sense of fear of the kind of interpersonal violence that may ensue if he is caught in bed with another woman. Narratives that feature female protagonist also display a characteristic gender role reversal. As depicted in the narratives of Mississippi John Hurt, when women have guns, it is the men who fear the women. This feature demonstrates the power of the firearm, in terms of phallic symbolism. Rather than to take a defensive stance, the antagonists seem to prefer submission, allowing the women to dominate them instead.

Most blues songs depict some sense of loss. They also express sorrow, depression, despair, hopelessness, and grief, all of which are emotions that extend in some ways from a history of slavery and oppression. Regardless of what the blues song is about, these emotions are an inherent characteristic of the genre. Furthermore, the majority of blues songs don't feature guns, but when firearms are introduced into blues narratives they are used in critical ways that have an overall profound impact on the narrative. Guns become fetish objects in the sense that the gun and also the violence that guns precipitate is Signified upon in the lyrics as a way of providing characters with ways of negotiating their own black masculine identities as blues

men/badmen. For the male characters, the firearm seems to reaffirm masculinity as is the case in Blind Boy Fuller's *Pistol Slapper Blues*. Furthermore, the female characters seem to negotiate feelings of grief and dismay through gun violence as is the case in Mississippi John Hurt's, *Frankie*. Whether the fixation on firearms belongs to men or women, the primary problem that arises from this fetish remain the same. When the firearm is introduced, it carries with it the impulsive and false causality that no other solutions exist except gun violence, and it is with the appearance of this undeviating line of thinking that fetishism may become problematic.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of significant assertions that may be drawn from this study. First, there is the notion that fetishization is an important aspect of humanity. Even before the advent of fetish theory human beings have always created associations to material objects that go far beyond ordinary utilitarian functions. Material objects in many ways, make us who we are. They reinforce our identities. Secondly, firearms often hold more symbolic weight than other material items. This idea is supported by the fact that guns are so prevalent in the world and across a wide range of other mediums. They are fetishized in ways that even go beyond the negotiation of identity. They are symbolized in ways that seem to mark personal, interpersonal, and even national boundaries. This does not mean that firearms should be eliminated altogether from our immediate surroundings, but it does mean that it is important that we, as human beings, remain cognizant of the physical and symbolic power that these items possess, so that we may devise positive ways to use them as opposed to allowing guns to control us.

Furthermore, guns function tropologically and symbolically in folklore, film, literature, and popular culture in ways that adhere to William Bascom's four functions of folklore. In Bascom's 1954 essay, *Four Functions of Folklore*, he contends that folklore primarily serves the purposes of: entertainment, cultural validation, education, and maintaining social conformity. Although Bascom primarily focuses on the genres of fairy tale, legend, and myth, contemporary folklore scholars continue to explore new areas that also constitute new genres of folklore. Presently there are a number of studies that explore folkloristic topics in film, online social networking, and digital media. Despite new developments in the field, Bascom's four functions

from nearly a century ago, still apply. According to Bascom folklore "...may provide a means of getting at esoteric features of culture which cannot be approached in any other way; it reveals the affective elements of culture, such as attitudes, values, and cultural goals..." (337). As Bascom's statements suggest, focusing on firearms and the ways in which the imagery of firearms are projected through the language and expressive forms of a particular cultural group can help to provide one with valuable insider knowledge; valuable in the sense that cultural symbols such as guns always transcend any one distinct folk group. One may find a multitude of shared signs and symbolic codes in any two folk groups and these mutual semantic codes will always illustrate the importance of folklore. The relevance of the field has been stressed by Bascom who also reminds us of two of the most important overarching goals of folkloristics. He says "The extent to which folklore is a mirror of culture has been mainly the concern of anthropologist, but when stated conversely it becomes the concern of all folklorists: the folklore of a people can be fully understood only through a thorough knowledge of their culture" (338). Folklore is primarily a mode of understanding culture. As a cultural study one the main goals of this work is to understand the extent to which the firearm is used symbolically as a way to reinforce and transmit the inherent values and world views of a people and of culture on a holistic scale.

Another important goal of folkloristics is centered around cultural stability. According to Bascom:

Viewed in this light folklore is an important mechanism for maintaining the stability of culture. It is used to inculcate the customs and ethical standards in the young,

and as an adult to reward him with praise when he conforms, to punish him with ridicule or criticism when he deviates, to provide him with rationalizations when the institutions and conventions are challenged or questioned, to suggest that he be content with things as they are, and to provide him with a compensatory escape from ‘the hardships, the inequalities, the injustices’ of every day life. Here, indeed, is the basic paradox of folklore, that while it plays a vital rôle in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon him. (qtd. in Bascom 349)

This statement by Bascom speaks to the way that guns function on symbolic levels. As I have aimed to demonstrate, fetish theory helps to reveal the degree to which guns, as cultural symbols, embody folklore. As folklore, the firearm may be used to serve many of the same purposes that Bascom outlines. As it relates to the group of respondents at the Catalina Mountain School juvenile correctional facility discussed in the first chapter, shared imagery, shared narrative, shared stories, and mutual life experiences relating to firearms serve the purpose of making this group of youth a cohesive and distinct cultural group. This common thread may be extended to broader society as well. The youth’s perceptions of firearms impact the way that they live and interact with one another. Guns are also used to create scripts that in many ways dictate respondent’s lives. According to “Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkinson, in their research on the processual dynamics of youths’ aggression and violence, rely in part on a resonant notion of ‘violence scripts,’ by which they mean a preset cognitive framework within which youths act.

Scripts are the ‘cognitive structure or framework that organizes a person’s understanding of typical situations, allowing the person to have expectations and to make conclusions about the potential result of a set of events. Different contextual junctures trigger different scripts, automatic behaviors by youths that are scripted in previous and repetitive encounters” (qtd. in Harcourt; 2006 155). To provide an example “When John pulls out his 9-mm at the Rillito River wash and taunts his rival— ‘you know both you and me aren’t gonna pull the trigger, so why don’t you shut up and leave?’—he has created a valuable script. To be sure, a script with a gun. A dangerous script. But a valuable script nonetheless” (Harcourt: 2006 231). One of the most important points that may be concluded from this study is that these scripts are generated from and through the transmission of folklore. Harcourt’s interpretation seems to support this notion. He says “These youths do not seem to be giving meaning to guns in an automous way, independently, on their own, outside the webs of meanings. They are not the ‘signifiers.’ Instead, they seem to come to the social space and interact with it. They develop their relation to guns through this medium” (Harcourt 2006: 232). The multitude of ways that the youth attach symbolic meaning to guns comes from folklore that is created in a variety of different areas of culture. I have chosen to focus on the areas of film, music, and folk narrative, but firearms also build their semantic force from folk material culture (including pictures, drawings, paintings, folk art, clothing, accessories and body art), other forms of graphic representation (such as digital and print media), and other modes of transmission that overextend the scope of this project. If conclusions which may be drawn from this study may also be extended to broader society as

well, then all of the other aforementioned areas are certainly worth examining, because they also influence and reflect what guns mean to human beings.

One of the benefits of examining hip-hop music and the influence that it may have on youth is that in analyzing hip-hop music one may at least implicitly or indirectly speak to some of the other ways that guns are fetishized across other mediums. This is due to the extent that the image of the gangster rapper has been commodified, repackaged, and resold. Presently, to demonstrate a successful business model, a successful gangster rap album may impact all of the aforementioned mediums in some way shape or form. Today, gangster rap albums often generate music videos, films, books, clothing lines, commercial advertisements, and even video games. Some of which contain depictions of black men yielding firearms. One idea that is worth exploring is the notion that firearms are also represented across other musical genres as well (such as rock & roll and country music), however to a lesser degree. For instance, in one verse from Johnny Cash's 1955 album *Folsom Prison Blues*, and song of the same title, Cash sings:

When I was just a baby
My Mama told me, son
Always be a good boy
Don't ever play with guns
But I shot a man in Reno
Just to watch him die
When I hear that whistle blowin'
I hang my head and cry

Here Johnny Cash, a popular white country artist, seems to borrow heavily from the blues

tradition. Like the blues man, Cash's lyrics certainly illustrate an anti-law sentiment. Cash also incorporates commonly used blues tropes such as trains and guns. Trains are often used in blues music as symbols of freedom or hope. The gun, in this case, is a fetish object in that it is used as a way of juxtaposing boyhood and masculinity. In another song, "Cocaine Blues," Cash sings:

Early one mornin' while makin' the rounds
I took a shot of cocaine and I shot my woman down
I went right home and I went to bed
I stuck that lovin' .44 beneath my head

One may infer that Cash clearly adheres to the African-American blues tradition. It illustrates the firearm being used in an act of interpersonal violence. In this case, the make and model is also significant. As Gates illustrates, the .44 is the most commonly used make in the blues folk narrative tradition. To sing about cocaine use in 1955 is quite rare. We don't see cocaine being heavily incorporated into popular forms of music until the modern rock and hip-hop eras, but one could draw the conclusion that early blues music heavily informed each of these succeeding forms. Some interesting questions may be answered in doing cross cultural comparisons. Such a study could help to determine if the gun imagery is derived from the same sources (such as folklore about badmen) and does the symbolic uses of firearms impact listeners in similar ways? Another idea to consider is the notion that some artist resist labelling due to blending in their music. Today hip-hop may be mixed with R&B, country, or soul, and similar to the way that music has the ability to influence people, musical genres also have the power to influence other musical genres. Given the rapid growth that gangster rap has experienced within the past thirty

years, one may draw the assertion that we could one day see the impact of gangster rap music in the form of increasing representations of guns and gun violence in other musical genres as well and this could have a profound impact on ways that guns are viewed in society. The same assertion may also apply to the increasing representations of guns in contemporary film.

One must also consider ways that an increase in gun imagery depicts an ever increasing rise in illegal drug markets. As Harcourt's study demonstrates, youth often possess and carry guns illegally because of their involvement in these illegal drug markets which sometimes coincides with gang affiliation. Research shows that involvement in illegal drug markets transcend race, age, gender, and class, but guns are often an inherent part of this culture. Also, integral to drug culture, is gang affiliation which may also make youth feel that it is necessary to both possess and carry guns. For instance, some of the youth at the Catalina Mountain school were not directly involved in gangs, but affiliation with a gang member would make them statistically more likely to experience some form of victimization, which may, in turn, make the youth feel that gun possession and carrying are necessary acts. Terrance J. Taylor asserts that "...Curry, Decker, and Egley's (2002) study of middle school youths found that simply being associated with gangs enhanced violent victimization. Although self-reported gang members were the most likely to report being threatened with a gun, shot at with a gun, and/or injured by a gunshot, the percentage of 'gang affiliated' youths who reported experiencing these things were much higher than youths who reported no gang involvement whatsoever" (433). The extent that our culture has become saturated by both drugs and gangs may have a direct correlation with an

increase in people's desire to own guns and to also consume various forms of popular media and entertainment that represent firearms symbolically.

Another goal of this study is to demonstrate the prevalence of guns in contemporary film and to illustrate ways that guns are sometimes used as ways of appropriating ritualistic behavior in film. When this is the case it represents what Zhang identifies as filmic folklore. In the case of the formal ritual of dueling, when gun duels are incorporated into black films (or some variation of dueling), it is sometimes made to appear to be solely an aspect of African-American culture when in actuality the enactment of this practice in society has an expansive history that transcends a multitude of ethnic and national boundaries. In *Filmic Folklore and Chinese Cultural Identity* (2005). Zhang asserts that "In addition to studying the 'folklore' that is already represented in the film, folklorists are also interested in looking at the intent and impact of using or creating such folklore in fiction films. What shall be done about the films that are *not* made to document folklore, but use folklore or folklore-like (or mimic folklore) elements (e.g., fictional films)? What shall folklorists do about those made not to mirror folklore, but to create folklore so as to impose some idiosyncratic ideas by the filmmaker or producer or writer" (266,7)? Zhang's statement raises some interesting questions pertaining to the intended purpose of incorporating guns and gun violence in both "Harlem Nights" and "A Rage in Harlem." I contend that firearms and firearm violence, as an appropriation of ritualistic violence, is incorporated in the films as an act of reclamation of the chivalric virtues and values most often associated with medieval knighthood. These virtues include honor, piety, bravery, honesty,

leadership, and respect, all of which have historically been appropriated by the KKK and other white supremacist organizations as a way of denouncing black culture. These virtues were also appropriated as a way of justifying the lynching of black men in the name of protecting the sanctity of whiteness.

Even if the cultural group represented through filmic folklore does not actually exist in society as they are represented in a given film, the artificial or constructed representation of the particular group will still live in the minds of viewers. This is not to say that they are simply stereotypes, but rather representations that may still help to inform viewers perceptions of past, present, and future events that relate to that specific group in a particular era in time. According to Zhang:

As seen through filmic folklore, the medium of representing folklore itself has become folklore, and thus the three components of folklore (folk, lore, and their interaction through certain media) should all be given equal attention. Unlike traditional concepts of folklore, filmic folklore, through the lens and screen, establishes a communication among the filmmakers and viewers (even with different cultural/lingual backgrounds), through the 'text' of the filmic folklore. It links the past and the present in a unique way, and thus impacts the future. Thus, the artistic communication of filmic folklore functions to facilitate the construction of new identities. (268)

As Zhang asserts films that include filmic folklore depict new identities, however imagined, that may exist alongside (or even displace) viewer's perceptions of that particular group in reality. In

films such as “Harlem Nights” and “A Rage in Harlem” even though most viewers know that these characters did not actually exist in real life, viewers may still want to believe that the folk groups that are represented offer some new perspective on African-American culture. If anything, as filmic folklore, the two films offer viewers who may not be familiar with African-American history, a black temporal space that is not centered around slavery, incarceration, or ghetto life. The film makers offer audiences an informed interpretation of 1930s Harlem, however romanticized these depictions may be, and as I attempt to demonstrate in the second chapter, they also offer critical social and historical revisionists critiques as well.

Another interesting idea that overextends the scope of the chapter are African-American films that in many ways deviate from the conventions of mainstream representations of African-American culture and instead illustrate much of the same kinds of imagery that are depicted in gangster rap. Films such as these are most often dubbed “hood” movies and whether these films actually reach the box office or not, hood movies that are similar to “Juice,” (1992) “Boyz n the Hood,” (1991) “New Jack City,” (1991) and “Menace to Society” (1993) that depict the hyper-aggressive, hyper-sexual, drug addicted and drug dealing, homicidal black men are still popular. Being released in close proximity, one could say that “Harlem Nights” (1989) and “A Rage in Harlem” (1991) also worked against the gangster rap and hood movie eras. Today hood movies seem to have run their course at the box office. As opposed to being released in cinema box offices, as is the case with the 1990s cycle of hood movies, they have found their own niche audiences, as straight to video releases, through some online vendors, and in urban areas and places where films can be purchased via “black market.” They are most often extremely low

budget and independently produced and marketed. They also follow the same kinds of scripts that are visible in many gangster rap videos. In many cases hood movies illustrate a black drug dealing underworld in which black on black gun violence is depicted as an accepted norm. On the one hand, as with gangster rap artist, some may pose the argument that film makers who produce hood movies are only attempting to depict reality as they see it. However, on the other hand, the films may also function, to a certain extent as filmic folklore for some viewers. In some cases, the stereotypical filmic representations of black masculinity may actually replace or displace more positive images of black manhood. This would depend on what the viewer has been exposed to. Images of gangster rappers brandishing had guns in music videos is common, however, it would be interesting to see how youth interpret the images and plots that they encounter in “underground” or “black market” hood movies. Exactly how many people do these films still reach and how do these films impact people’s perceptions of guns, black people, low income-black neighborhoods, and black life in general?

One interesting question raised by folklore pertaining to Stagolee is the extent that myths and legends regarding the African or African-American trickster or bad men like Stagolee have impacted successive forms of black or black vernacular expression. Is it possible to realize the extent that gangster rap or the black gangster film era reflects and projects images of this anti-hero or other bad men folk heroes such as Devil Winston, John Hardy, or Railroad Bill? According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. black texts Signify upon other black texts in both motivated (critical) and unmotivated (uncritical) ways. He says:

Black texts Signify upon other black texts in the tradition by engaging in what

Ellison has defined as implicit formal critiques of language use, of rhetorical strategy. Literary Signification, then is similar to parody and pastiche, wherein parody corresponds to what I am calling motivated Signification while pastiche would correspond roughly to unmotivated Signification. By motivation I do not mean to suggest the lack of intention, for parody and pastiche imply intention, ranging from severe critique to acknowledgement and placement within a literary tradition. Pastiche can imply either homage to an antecedent text or futility in the face of a seemingly indomitable mode of representation. Black writers Signify on each other's texts for all of these reasons, and the relations of Signification that obtain between and among black texts serve as a basis for a theory of formal revision in the Afro-American tradition (xxvii).

Based on the above passage Gates feels that this is an area of scholarship that deserves more attention. Focusing on the extent that black texts Signify upon other black texts could impact the kinds of materials that are created in the future. The acknowledgement of a black folkloric and literary tradition can only lead to more progressive forms of black expression. One idea that this raises is the notion that guns and gun violence should somehow be reduced or omitted all together from black texts, to say this would mean ignoring the social and historical circumstances that made the bad man tradition possible in the first place. The bad man emerged in black culture, in part, as a response to racism and racial violence. According to John W. Roberts "In the badman folk heroic tradition, those individuals who served as a focus for folk heroic creation were not the professional criminals, but rather their victims who responded to victimization with violence" (206). It may not be possible for a progressive revisionist texts to

include a folk hero that is void of guns or gun violence. The gun, in many ways, embodies the message that such texts seek to convey. As Roberts asserts in black folk heroic tradition “individuals turn for a superior source of power not to inherent supernatural ability or a conjurer but rather to the gun—that source of power that Laws notes as an endless source of fascination in black bad men ballads” (206). Whether this folk hero is considered necessary or not, one must take into account that “...all texts Signify upon other texts, in motivated and unmotivated ways...” (Gates xxv).

Another interesting idea to consider is the notion that through African-American folklore one may be able to critically analyze contemporary threats that still exist in the African-American community. Police violence still exists and black on black violence is also still very much prevalent. The black folk heroic tradition, in and of itself, is a direct response to a racist legal and justice system that transpired during and after slavery, but black on black violence is represented in the black folk heroic tradition by the “bad nigger.” As Roberts asserts African Americans have had to fight continually against individuals whose actions they have defined as those of a “bad nigger,” whether they appeared as professional criminals or simply bullies who sought to take advantage of the law’s apparent indifference to the well-being of black people” (215). If Stagolee is a direct response to bad niggers and bullies, then is there a remedy for the negative stereotypes that such imagery may perpetuate? According to Roberts African Americans have had to struggle continually against a more insidious manifestation of the “bad nigger”—the image in the white mind that every black person is a potential “bad nigger.” In creating an outlaw folk hero, African Americans conceptualized this figure within a tradition of

folk heroic creation based on values traditionally recognized as the most advantageous for protecting their identity and well-being as African people from both external and internal threats” (215). If the black heroic tradition may be viewed as a manifestation of cultural memory, a way of Signifyin(g) racial identity, and a way of transmitting cultural values, then it may make sense for bad men and similar figures to resist alteration. This notion may also be extended to figures that may be considered to be their manifestations such as the gangster rapper. Perhaps it is necessary that black folk heroic traditions and their antecedents resist the influence of competing values that may exist within and outside of the African American community. It may also be necessary that they resist a reorganization of worldviews and values based on social and cultural changes as well. The trait of being resistant to change may help to ensure that the black folk heroic tradition survives.

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