



**EVERYTHING  
BUT THE BURDEN**

EDITED BY GREG TATE

**WHAT WHITE PEOPLE ARE  
TAKING FROM BLACK CULTURE**

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## 4. Pimp Notes on Autonomy

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BY BETH COLEMAN

*For R. D. G. Kelley, pimpologist and friend, and Joe Wood, Jr.*

IF ONE HAD TO SAY IT FAST, the slave economy in America produced the American pimp. Pimping may be the second-oldest profession in the world, but it was in America first that the pimp became a black pop star. It is the particular undying racial swagger of the pimp as he has become famous in America that I pursue here.

Proposition one: What if a fetish is not a thing or a person, but a job?

Proposition two: You are free.

### PIMPOLOGY

"At one time we lived on the coast of Africa that was called Mauritania. We were a proud family. We were people of dignity, people of structure. The Canary Islands is where they actually was making them slaves. By the time they got over to America the Europeans was so impressed with the beautiful black sister that he would often rape her. What happened was the male African got wise, 'What does he do to you when you are with him?' 'He makes me have sex and offers gifts like pork chops.' Being that we was in a precarious situation, being that we were in a negative disposition the African at that time who was a slave, he said, 'Alright, what you do is ask him for two pork chops,' you know what I'm saying, and the system of manipulation began for survival. The European, the slave master, knew that this was transpiring but he did

not want to do anything about this because he was so into her he would get her at any cost, but his wife did not condone it and his children did not condone it, so it was a secretive movement. We being an intelligent people, we knew that it was happening any way so we had to benefit from it. At that time the white men called us wimps. In 1865 Lincoln freed the slaves, the African kings and queens. And once he freed them what happened was we remembered the things that had transpired during the plantation system so we began to execute certain elements. We would tell the European that I would connect you. They wanted to continue their barter system, the female for the money. People would see these brothers back in the day driving these horse and carriages. They thought they were driving these carriages for the master, but they realized these are not wimps, these are pimps. We went from wimps to pimps. From horsy backs to now modern day Cadillacs."<sup>1</sup>

I quote Pimping Ken from the video documentary *Pimpology*, of which he is executive producer. Pimping Ken breaks down the classic components of pimping like a banker with lyrical flow. He reduces the economy to two pre-conditions of capital: property and autonomy. In *Pimpology*, Pimping Ken draws a portrait of himself as a self-made man in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and Iceberg Slim. In this case, he substitutes the printing press for the video camera. The "written" form for pimping in a postmedia landscape is video, website, DVD, and modeling agencies, forms which have become as indelible as ink. Like the rest of the culture, pimp culture dubs itself via virtual portals. What used to be an informal economy now has shelf space at Tower Video. To state the obvious, the pimp video exist because there is a market for them.

Post-gangster rap, the call for verisimilitude in black thug life is clearly demonstrated. When the pop star R. Kelly graced the cover of *Vibe* in

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<sup>1</sup> *Pimpology*, a Ken Ivory film, executive producers Ken Ivory, Father Devine, Jarrod Cook, 2001.



November 2000, a story on pimp life also received a cover line. Magazines such as *F. E. D. S.* and *Murder Dog* publish monthly escapades into the real criminal-minded, creating a new order of penitentiary pinups: the mythic stories of "street life" told in the first person by the pimp stars themselves. The Hughes brothers' 1999 indie documentary *American Pimp* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival to controversy. The same year, "This American Life," the acclaimed National Public Radio show, ran a piece called "Pimp Anthropology" devoted to the nuances of the pimping game. Pimps, with the help of popular culture, have made a fetish of their business. A business which is, of course, based upon the appropriation of a person for commodity.

Pimping in the twenty-first century reflects a porous relationship between an illegal or at least illicit commodity and the hot glow of publicity. The media intersection expands the game in manners ingenious and diabolical. The video camera takes a profession with territory but no boundaries (sometimes a pimp has got to take his bitches on the road) into a space of accelerated circulation. The prostitutes don't know when they are on camera, thus video creates a tool for extended surveillance.<sup>2</sup> For the pimp, media extends control. In turn, covert operations extend his domain. The clandestine footage used to keep order functions equally well in the form of a calling card ("If you want an intro or outro, talk to Pimping Ken, I'll put you in the game"). *Pimpology* is unmediated (raw) but self-edited. It is a moving image ad for a culture of incarceration. The thing being advertised is not the women but the pimp himself.

Pimp theory lies at the intersection of fetish and pathology. The first really is external, such as a shoe, a show, or an exhibition, while the latter

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<sup>2</sup> The home movies are a form of entertainment and punishment, as described by Pimping Ken: "Bitch, I don't want you to do nothing I don't tell you to do.' But that bitch is on tape recorder. Scoop her like ice cream. Once you play that tape for that ho I guarantee you, you won't have no more problems with that ho. These are some mutherfucker rules that I really should not be telling. I'm giving you mutherfukers some raw ass game" (*Pimpology*). Pedagogy has always been a critical issue in black communities and the pimps "give back" in these videos by providing instructional material for the aspiring young player.

the boss because he masters the art of black representation. He's a veritable signpost for black fame in his shiny shoes.

When Iceberg Slim wrote famously of pimp theory in 1969, what Slim made clear is that the sexy part of pimping is not the sex, but the control. He writes, "A pimp is happy when his whores giggle. He knows they are still asleep."<sup>3</sup> In the incredible opening paragraphs of the memoir, Slim describes the perils of leaving oneself wide open to interpretation. His nose inflamed from the "gangster" he just snorted, tired, and psychically leaky, he needs to stop up the holes in his persona. (The pimp is anal if nothing else.) To get himself together, Slim performs a ritual transformation that is repeated throughout the book. He disciplines his whores by, uh, metaphorically speaking, tearing them a new asshole. The right of mastery is dedicated in the most mundane of manners: a car full of dirty, tired people, creeping through the early morning. But what is played out for the pimp, at the expense of the women, is the reassertion of right. He lays down the law.

Big Daddy Kane, the ur-pimp hip-hopper, rhymed, "I'll tax that ass like the government." The point is, you are the boss. Like the government, like inevitability, that ass will be taxed. The unchallenged patron rapper of pimping is the California wordsmith Too \$hort. A featured interviewee in *Pimpology*, Too \$hort tells the boys that he himself was turned out by a grade-school pimp when he was just a little Short: "[The guy] was nine years old and he said he was a pimp. I said, 'You nine, how you a pimp?' He said, 'People pay me to talk.'" You have to be a bad ass to get paid just for your breath. The magic trick of pimping is to make something from nothing. He is a student of power, a classic trickster. The pimp sees an impossible situation, then finds a way to maximize it. Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther, author, and politician, wed sexual violence to black liberation. In doing so, he played a trump card that electrified the nation.<sup>4</sup> Get that second pork chop, brother.

<sup>3</sup> Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Co., 1996), pp.11-12.

<sup>4</sup> No doubt, the Black Panthers were (a) supersexy and (b) had some pretty Stone Age



is externalized, like pimping. And that is why pimps must wear good shoes, handmade genuine leather from Italy. Because the pimp is both. He is a parody of propriety, a levered mechanism, an electronic Negro. The essential overvaluation of the object, the black fetish, is his trump card. "Daddy, we sure been humping for you" is the siren's call in this the recapitulation of mastery. To play the black fetish one has to make one's peace with our man Osiris, he who rocks the double affirmation, who is kissing cousins with the dog-headed god—the dead dog is transformed into the top dog.

It is worth noting that the women who appear in *Pimpology* are silent, with the exception of an entrepreneurial "model" who gives the viewer a sample of a girl-on-girl moment that seems like a parody of sexual pleasure, low production values not excepting. The women are shiny, frosted, boosted, and bleached. They walk, they dance, they sex, but nobody home. In a sense, this is progress, as the industry organizes itself, proliferates, and celebrates itself. You can see the pimp balls and pimp award ceremonies much in the same style as the Oscars or music awards, just more razzle-dazzle (*bling bling*) to the participants.

You're a star, baby.

The fame of black people possesses the retro glamour of a Marlene Dietrich. It is a fame based on the foresight that race does not exist anymore, which does not necessarily make a body right. The definition of a fetish is an essential overvaluation of the object. It is a thing, often an inappropriate thing, like a shoe or hair, substituted for the person. In a tradition with Scheherazade or Salome, in her films Dietrich mastered her own representation. She did that iconic thing so well that Dietrich became a fetish of a fetish, a sign of a sign. *M* is for machine, the thing that turns you on. The "essential overvaluation" of the object is the basis of such performances as *Blue Angel*, *Thriller*, *Pimpin Ain't Easy*, and *Elephant Shit*. With Dietrich it was a performance about total control. For the black superstar, on the flip side, you are that famously abject thing. Whether old or young, rich or poor, you are famous for being invisible, and already misappropriated. (Criminality and black identity get linked from the getty up.) The pimp is

America did not invent pimping, but it did invent the famous black pimp. He has run rampant through Europe as the devil or another figure of temptation for ages. In the Americas, due to the devilry of slave culture, he was made manifest. The black pimp produces such glee in his audience precisely because he cross-wires the machine. For him to be the master is a local revolution unto itself; for him to trade in a localized zone of human labor is the twist of the screw to the point of giddiness. The irony is that if he does his job well, in order to become a free agent, he must reproduce a peculiarly limited mode of bondage. For, of course, the commodity of pimping is sex. It is a commodity rendered *lifestyle* by the pimp, formatted across much the same blueprint as the plantation system. One might say pimps are simply repeating a scene of mastery dear to the history of Western culture. Fast-food slavery for a commodities market. Instead of selling the whole person, it sells but a part. It is the business of dealing with people reduced to parts at which the pimp excels. The pimp is the one who shines up some dark thing and takes her to the market. He maintains control of his stable by circumscribing all behavior, shuttering her down to size.

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thoughts on the position of women in the revolution (prone). Nonetheless, the Panthers, and Black Nationalism in general, made the dangerous move in America of public black self-determination. Fundamentally, nationalism calls for the self-recognition of a people. Leather jackets and machismo aside, this is revolution. The pimp evacuates politics for style, which is a maneuver far more conducive to longevity. Leather jackets and machismo are the only things left. The glossy image of pimps that suffuse magazines, music, and Hollywood makes unintelligible the aspects of enforcement, terrorism, and violence that go with the business. A whore is broken. Pimp economy reaffirms the historically established Western mode of mastery: in mastering oneself, there is an indivisible urge to master others. In fact, the pimp is celebrated for doing it so well, reducing the figure of mastery to the crucial bits. The question is not so much, How does a punisher get to be king (that seems like standard inherited behavior)? No, the question is, Are there other role models that actually work in the representation of mastery *without* pimping?



CODE NOIR: THE HISTORICAL FETISH  
OF SLAVE PROPERTY

Even from the point of view of early colonial travelogues, sexual repression was not an aspect of West African culture, but self-discipline was. Europeans mistook for lasciviousness in Africans the same qualities of self-determination hailed in liberal theory in the models of Greek and Roman republicanism. Sex and choice had not yet been invented in European culture. The European creation of primitivism in the literature and philosophy of the eighteenth century one might understand as a strategy to contextualize difference by making it ahistorical, thus nonthreatening. When we get to a formal theory of the fetish in the late nineteenth century it is not a coincidence that this same difference is ascribed to the dark continents and primitive peoples to provide an analogy for sexual perversion. In the fantasy of the Industrial Revolution and the destiny of the twentieth century all are subjected to mechanization (rendered object or fetish). Slavery had been a preview to what it's like to be a machine. And that subjection to the inhuman became a national obsession.

The *Code Noir*, a conglomeration of loosely assembled laws from early Spanish and French colonial endeavors, as well as strands retained from Roman slave law, established in the late seventeenth century the basic outlines that would govern black slavery in America through the nineteenth century. The *Code* attempted to address, as all slave law does, the classical anxiety of holding a person property. It is also, I would argue, a legal history that tells the story of how black became a fetish. I quote historian David Brion Davis in his description of the *Code*:

The capacity to marry was closely related to the capacity to make contracts, own property, and hold offices or commissions, all of which were specifically denied by the *Code Noir*. As early as 1623 Bermuda prohibited Negroes from exchanging goods for tobacco without the

consent of their owners; and within a century British colonies from Connecticut to Barbados had evolved an elaborate system of police regulations which required Negroes to have a pass or ticket, signed by their masters, for buying or selling goods. These measures, which were designed to curtail theft, were a tacit admission that a slave might act as his master's agent.<sup>5</sup>

As Davis points out, it is the possibility that the slave can *stand in* for the master, i.e., be his agent or accurate representative, that reminds the lawmakers why there is need for the law in the first place. One rarely fears that one's cat or horse will pay for the groceries or sleep with one's wife. It is the slave's ability to mimic the gestures of agency that make him the most helpful of tools and the most dangerous. ("People pay me to talk.") The prohibition against slave marriage is a critical point in dehumanization and the "ruin" of slave mores. To allow a slave to marry recognizes agency and right to contract—it would make the slave too close to the citizen. Of course, slaves did marry and some masters blessed the unions, but the *law* went unaltered. The fundamental shift between American slavery and the history of world slavery is that in the New World, slavery was not a caste but a race. All of the weight of the *Code Noir* would come to be justified not upon "rightful" conquest but a racially organized holy mandate, and, by the late eighteenth century, science. The basis of slavery shifts from social condition to genetic precondition. In the growing black population of the colonies, and the growing imbalance of power between slave and master class, the legal system and social custom moved further away from the slave as subject by reinforcing the slave as property. That the use of black slaves as sexual slaves became part of a black-market economy was an event preestablished by laws such as the *Code Noir*. Slavery in the United States created an economic and social order. What it also reflected was a cathartic relationship to blackness.

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<sup>5</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 253.



Skin can't really be a fetish because it is a whole, not a piece. But color, like class, can be. "I go for maids." "I dig black girls." They are equivalent statements regarding desire for a type, not a one. In 1909, sitting in Vienna, Freud wrote that everyone is subject to perversion. "A certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love," he wrote in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. The distinction he draws between normal and broken is expressed as a difference of scale. You have tipped the scales once a lady's garter can actually replace the lady herself. This kind of mistake is characterized as a sexual perversion. What the *Code Noir* and other such documents institute is the serial repetition of taking the lady for a garter: slave law validates the condensation of a person into an intimate object quickened only by the desire of the master. This, one might say, is a social perversion. Fundamentally, a person is an unsuitable fetish. A fetish, by definition, has to be a thing. The specific and finite (personal perversion) is directed toward the public and general (a cultural mandate). One can say then that the overcompensation and overinvestment that historically characterize slavery can be considered a kind of fetishist behavior.<sup>6</sup> For black people to be treated that way was not just wrong, it was pathological.

Examples of race as a national pathology pervade the legal and political history of the country. A 1790 slave law stated that not only must slaves submit themselves to the usage of their masters, but slaves were also compelled to submit to the will of any white person encountered. That's anybody who counted (universal suffrage based on universal suffering). No one would allow a law that said not only you but also your neighbors had a right to treat your horse in a niggardly manner, yet that applied to bondsmen. Blacks had to be indentured in duplicate. There was a demand for a public, universal interpretation of blackness in order to mandate slavery. Subjugation was rendered racial terrorism. After emancipation the

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<sup>6</sup> In psychoanalysis's history of sexuality, the urge toward mastery is the same as the urge toward pleasure. In the child it is described as an autoerotic mechanism driven, primarily, by cruelty. Pity develops later. Baby cruelty, though, is preconscious, and in that sense without intentionality or responsibility. What we find in American slavery are conditions of mastery where the instinct remains unchecked. It is an externalized structure that stimulates the option to ill.

bondsman, who had value for his owner, was transformed into a creature of no value. Noble or pitiable was the best paternalism could get you, forget about the forty acres and a mule. Blacks were no longer available as property, but their symbolic stature under Jim Crow was amplified: Slavery is no longer the *bête noire*, black people are. One's presence is built on a social structure that involves one's absence. In the reconstruction of the invisible black subject—invisible still but no longer a slave, perhaps just a problem—one discovers that the culture needs a solid black surface on which to project itself.

The machine by which blackness is produced in America does not rely on the genitals or teeth or hands but the whole thing. There is no particularity to the object (this shoe or this ribbon or this garter), only the generic position holder of black. Instead of a small thing being substituted for the whole person, as in a normal perversion, in this case the person is shuttered down. Once emancipated, black agency must remain a black-market item in order for mastery to be able to respect itself in the morning. Black agency has historical material impact, yet it is invisible. You can do everything in the world if you are invisible. (Juanita Moore can slip into an all-white fancy theater in *Imitation of Life*. Because no one sees her, she can walk in the front door.) And you can do nothing that remains. When Ralph Ellison writes, "I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people,"<sup>7</sup> one might understand him literally. The early colonial slave trade was the *key element* in the speed, agricultural choices, development of market, and overall economy of the conquest of the Americas. America might have been found without slaves, but it could not have been conquered. For the history of black people in America to have had profound impact yet to remain profoundly invisible fits again into a pimp economy. It is an economy of pleasure based on an economy of pain.

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Ralph Ellison: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 44.



RESISTANCE IS FUTILE: SLAVE FETISH  
AND THE URGE TO MASTERY

Black pleasure becomes a real problem for black people when it is generally understood that blacks are always having fun. Black is synonymous with pleased, rhythmic, cool, and if you can't pull that off while maintaining your day job (chillin'), then you're failing the race. The logic is one of association: black pleasure is more pleasure because black pain has been, systematically, more pain. Black Love and Black Paranoia exist in equal parts, as the dynamics of black mastery are still unreconciled. Even Colin Powell, the dean of mastery, reflects for the country in mixed proportions Black Love and Black Paranoia.

Cultural critic Saidiya Hartman has argued that the black body represents the body in pain. Translated into psychosexual terms, she explains that pain tends to be someone else's pleasure.

I have chosen not to reproduce [Frederick] Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body . . . and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Dietrich, black people are famous for representing suffering. Given those conditions, Hartman refuses to represent. Her argument is that the terms of representation in relation to the history of black people in America are a setup. They have been imposed. In her study she looks at scenes of antebellum black pleasure: the coffle (slave market parades), the plantation

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<sup>8</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

holidays, and minstrelsy. Pleasure, one would think, is for the good of the slave, just like anybody else. Black pleasure, Hartman argues, is subsumed by the pleasure of the master. Hilarity or pain, sexuality or humility, they are interchangeable experiences of terrorism in this economy.

Pimp theory understands that one cannot refuse representation. The scene of mastery in Frederick Douglass's work is required reading, despite Hartman's caution, for it predicts the future that gives us Iceberg Slim, Big Daddy Kane, Too \$hort, *Sweet Sweetback*, *The Mac*, and Pimping Ken. Mastery is a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. The former slave and father of black American public discourse, Douglass would write in 1855, "The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection."<sup>9</sup> Douglass describes a structure of subjectivity by which one comes into being. The terms are emptied of racial category; rather, they are generic. In a sense, anybody could fill either position. In his analysis of authority and authorship, Douglass points to the need for the slave to bend mastery to his service.

Pimp theory is a formal readdress of the mechanism of mastery even as it is a form of repetition compulsion. It relies on the double spin, playing the black fetish. It is a philosophy that states that a priori the consolidation of power happens—with or without your consent. Pimp theory says, "We being an intelligent people, we knew that it was happening anyway so we had to benefit from it." After planning an escape by water and land with his comrades on the Freeland plantation, Douglass was finally returned to Baltimore as an overly independent, skilled, difficult Negro. One day he wrote himself a note that explained he was a sailor traveling for his owner along such-and-such a route. He then put on a sailor's uniform and took the train to New York. Pimping it, Douglass rode the wheels of steel to freedom. He went from horsy back to Cadillac.

What one finds in the legacy of African-American letters is an ongoing fascination with the structure of mastery. Ellison's *Invisible Man* breaks

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p. 69.



down the social contract: "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement." All the big dogs understand that rhetorically you're in a double bind when engaging mastery: agency calls for representation in order to be recognized, yet black had no public agency. If you are outside the economy, you are free to play any card in the deck. In the pimp discovery of America, the joker's wild. Pimp theory is to be that thing so thoroughly for your audience (whores, patrons, colleagues) that one is able to rob the man and have him thank you for it. That is the magic trick, the moment of transformation, and that's why he's a Black Nationalist hero. The initiative is to avoid crawling like a dog and, indeed, become the top dog. And now you know why the little girls love L'il Bow Wow. The pimp perfects that peculiarly black American skill to hide in plain sight. One's life becomes quite literary on account of that trait. You are a purloined letter, the missing phallus and missing link, activating the troublesomeness of a sign of a sign. Everyone wants my simian drugs. One exploits perversion and violence, terms that already resonate in the precinct of "black." The pimp by mastering himself is thus free to exploit exploitation. Pimp theory says some forms of adoration are necessary. The serious limitation on pimp theory as a liberation ideology is that it must reproduce the structure from which it hails. Pimping is not the only form of black agency to exist during slavery and to prosper in a nation with a racial policy. It is, though, one of the most famous forms of black representation because it reaffirms the logic of mastery.