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Man and His Violent Valiancy:

A Comparison of *The Red Badge of Courage* and American Gang Culture

Throughout history, many of the ideal traits of masculinity have remained, for the most part, the same. Two that remain relatively unchanged are the assertion of dominance over one's rivals and the pursuit of protecting one's self and one's family. These standards, traditionally speaking, are demonstrated through a man's strength as well as his acts of communally justified violence. In Stephen Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, he tells the story of a young man named Henry Fleming who dreams of attaining manhood through fighting in the American Civil War. Through his acts of war and violence, Henry begins to view himself as a man. In a similar fashion to the way Crane represents these ideal traits during the time of the American Civil War, today's young men who exist in the culture of the American street gang participate in the embodiment of these idealized masculine traits. In his book, *Code of the Street*, author Elijah Anderson discusses the construct of American Gang culture and the conceptions that are its driving force. Anderson, in parts of his book, goes into detail to express the traditional social standards (of masculine traits) that push young men to join gangs. It is common for these young men to not only view these traits as fundamental aspects of being a man, but also to freely personify them through their own violent actions. While being interviewed by myself, three admitted Latino gang members (who will all be identified with fictitious surnames throughout this paper), acknowledged these ideals and the affect they have had on their own belief of what it is to be a man.

Through the examination of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Anderson's *Code of the Street*, and these interviews, one can see that although the idea of war may seem distant to modern young men, the need to prove one's self a man is still very much alive. The burden of patriarchal impressions, social influences, and cultural normalcies weighed on Henry just as they weigh on young men involved in American Gang Culture; today, they shape their view of the ideal man by advocating and supporting violence.

The idea of dominating one's rival is an important aspect of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Through this idea of domination, Henry believes he can prove himself a hero and a man. In the beginning of the book before his regiment leaves their camp, Henry stewes over the chance that he may run from battle. He is deathly scared of this prospect, knowing that he must fight to prove his manhood. After failing to prove himself a hero through "mathematics" (Crane 9) (that is thinking logically about his situation), he realizes it will take much more than mere contemplation. In the novel Crane writes, "He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze...He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger" (9). Here, Crane shows Henry's realization that it is not logical thinking but violent acts (i.e. blaze blood and danger) that will establish his manhood. Because Henry is a soldier involved in acts of war, this violence is not frowned upon but is the thing that heroes are made of; through war, killing your enemy or dominating one's rival, is more than encouraged it is celebrated.

Similarly to Henry, young men involved in American Gang culture find it a necessity to prove themselves worthy of manhood through violent action. It is not the prospect of being seen as a hero that drives them but, in a comparable fashion, it is the achievement of

respect that pushes them towards violence. In Anderson's book, *Code of the Street*, he explains this necessity through the story of a young man named Tyree. Tyree is conflicted with the idea of joining the gang in his neighborhood (young men he refers to as "bols"), but understands that in order to be seen as a man, he must first gain their respect. Anderson recalls a story that Tyree has told him in which he fought one of these "bols"; he loses the fight to a much larger young man but through his display of courage proves himself worthy of their respect. In a part of this story, Anderson explains Tyree's decision; he writes, "Tyree thus has a choice of running or staying. But something inside him—his concern about being manly, his quest to be defined as a person with nerve, heart, or simply street knowledge—makes him hesitate" (85). Anderson makes it apparent through these lines that Tyree's idea of being a man has much to do with earning respect, through showing his physical dominance over others or at least displaying his physical strength. Similarly to *The Red Badge of Courage*, violence is not discouraged in this situation but advocated.

This idea of achieving manhood through dominating one's peers or rivals is undeniable within the culture of the American gang. While interviewing one of the young Latino gang members with whom I was able to sit down (we will call him Ramirez), the necessity for young men within this culture to prove themselves through physical violence became very apparent. The idea of earning respect through physical violence can often be engrained in one's mind from a very young age. Losing in a physical altercation not only ends with lack of respect but often times can result in punishment. Ramirez told me a story about his first fight and the reaction his uncle had when he had come home the loser, which seemed to be less than supportive. While telling me this story, Ramirez said, "I was nine

when I got in ma first fight. I got ma ass whipped. That day I learned; if somebody whipped ma ass I can't go home, cus my uncle 'll get at me too and send ma ass back out till I come home an whipped the other guy" This incident in his life helped Ramirez to understand at a very young age that to be able to do something as typical as going home he must first gain the respect of others (others, in this particular case, being his uncle). Similarly to *The Red Badge of Courage* and Anderson's discussion of Tyree, violent actions such as fighting were not just one way for him to earn this respect, but in fact, were the preferred course by which to earn it.

The ideal of protecting one's self and one's family through acts of war and so through acts of violence, is another idea that seems common in the idea of masculinity presented in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Throughout the novel, the reader is not familiarized much with Henry's actual family; however, his regiment or the men who fight beside him present a familial connection. Henry displays, through his reckless approach to warfare, that he would do most anything to earn the admiration of his comrades. He puts his life between the enemy and his regiment often (always using violence), in the hopes of being seen as a hero. To display this fundamental trait of masculinity, that is, using violence to protect, Crane describes an instance in which Henry and his regiment are being pursued and must fight to protect himself and his family. Crane writes, "When the enemy seemed falling back before him and his fellows, he went instantly forward, like a dog who, seeing his foes lagging, turns and insists upon being pursued" (72). Later, in describing the end result of Henry winning that same battle, Crane writes, "He had been a tremendous figure, no doubt... They [his enemy] had fallen like paper peaks, and he was now what he called a hero" (73). In his own mind through protecting of himself and his family through violent

action, Henry views himself as hero. These actions and this view of himself are reinforced by the admiration he receives from his lieutenant and the other men in his regiment. Because it is a war he is fighting, his violence is endorsed by those around him and his idea of manhood is sustained.

In *Code of the Streets*, Anderson explains this same ideal through Tyree's familial relationship with a young man named Malik. Both Tyree and Malik have found themselves in similar situations, in regards to their status in the neighborhood gang, and rely on each other for defense against other rival gangs. Anderson describes their willingness to perform violent acts in defense of each other, saying that the relationships are "so close that they are ready and willing not only to watch each other's back but to take up for the other in time of need" (88). Through these ties of artificial kinship and the defense of them, young men involved in the American Gang culture are able to gain respect and prove their worth as a man. Once they are known to protect the other men who belong to their particular gang, they have invested a part of themselves in that gang and get closer to proving their worth and earning respect as a man. Through violent acts they protect each other and through violent acts that they prove their worth.

In a very similar fashion, one of the young Latino men I interviewed (we will call him Alvarez) expressed the relationships he shared with the members of his gang as much more than a traditional friendship. When I asked him whether he believed it was important for himself or another member of his gang to defend the others, Alvarez asked me if I thought it was important to protect my family. Throughout the interview he often referred to the members of his gang as "mi familia" (which means 'my family' in Spanish); furthermore when prompted to talk about other people in his life that meant as much as

them he said “no hay nadie” (which roughly means ‘there is no one’). To Alvarez, the members of his gang do not form a fictitious family, to him the family they create is the most legitimate form of a family he has ever known. When discussing grade school and the bonds he may have made there, he quickly said “My teachers never really cared... when I got home they weren’t there. They never taught me nuthin’ good, mi familia did. They got my back, I got theirs.” Just like Henry in *The Red Badge of Courage* and Tyree in *Code of the Street*, Alvarez finds and gives respect through the actualization of violent acts that he commits and that are committed in his defense. This respect in the American Gang culture equates to one’s masculinity, and this respect that Crane idealizes through Henry.

The patriarchal impressions that young men take as examples of how to be a man or prove one’s masculinity, in many cases (especially regarding proving one’s self through violent action), advance the ideals of dominating one’s rival and the pursuit of protecting one’s self and one’s family through destructive force. In *The Red Badge of Courage* Henry is influenced greatly by the patriarchal influences that govern his decisions, referring to the Greeks and their struggles that were decided through war. Henry’s father is dead and so through these men he takes his personal beliefs of manhood and not necessarily those of his own time, which he indicates to be “better, or more timid” (Crane 3). In the beginning of the novel Henry has distrust in the American Civil War and does not believe that modern day men would engage in such acts; yet, he himself dreams of proving his manhood and heroism through conflict. When describing Henry’s aspirations of going to war Crane writes “He had, of course, dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire” (3). Henry’s idealization of violence as a masculine trait does not come through what he believes men to be but through what he

believes men used to be and what they should be: heroes. The patriarchal impressions that Henry finds within ancient Greek struggles push him to prove his manliness through violence, these impressions are where he gains the ideals he holds.

In *Code of the Street* Anderson shows the affect that patriarchal influences have on young men involved in American Gang culture. He explains that Tyree has never known his father and that the boyfriends that his mother has had have bounced in and out of his life, not impacting him in a large way. Because of the lack of a stable father figure it is not his father or his mother's boyfriends that have acted as his patriarchal authority; instead he finds his influence through one of the members of his gang, the leader of the "bols" a young man named Calvin. Tyree's interaction is short; however, he clearly respects him and his command over the "bols" greatly. When Tyree first asks to be a part of the "bols," Calvin decides on the terms of his initiation; Tyree without defiance accepts the terms. Anderson depicts the scene and comments that Calvin "summons the bols" (86) to decide the terms of the initiation, and on conclusion decides Tyree must fight to be initiated. The young man chosen to fight Tyree is three years older than him, taller than him, and outweighs him by a significant amount without hesitation Tyree agrees to fight him (Anderson 86). Tyree, who has never had much of a strong male influence in his life, takes his example from the most powerful man he knows. In his eyes, Calvin is a man and the ideals he exemplifies are those we have been discussing.

While interviewing Ramirez, the idea of patriarchal influences affecting the young men of American Gang culture was evident. His father, like Henry's and Tyree's, for one reason or another was not active in his life; instead he has relied on the guidance of his uncle (who seems to be an authority within the gang Ramirez belongs to) and his uncle's

friends to show him the ideals a man should strive towards. Ramirez was very explicit about the fact that he had nothing but respect for these men, in that they would never ask him to do something that they would not do themselves. When discussing the men in his life that have influenced him and have been pertinent, Ramirez immediately brought up his uncle, saying "I didn't have a dad growin' up, it's my uncle who taught me what was to be a man. He's the best man I eva known; still is. Hes got respect and gives respect." Ramirez's uncle who has been a gangster all his life, who introduced Ramirez to gang culture, and who has continuously pushed Ramirez towards violent actions throughout his life personifies the ideal man in Ramirez's mind. Because his uncle exemplifies both the ideals of dominating one's rival and the pursuit of protecting one's family through violence, Ramirez sees these traits as keys to his own masculinity.

In the case of the outside forces that shape Henry's idea of masculinity, the social influences that Crane displays are among some of the strongest. In, Crane introduces the reader to these influences early on, and uses them to show Henry's desire to enlist in the army. To show the reader these social influences and the affect they have on Henry, Crane writes "Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all" (3). Even before these lines Crane describes Henry's eagerness to join the army; informing the reader that "He had burned several times to enlist" (3). The things that he has been reading (these articles of marches, conflicts, and sieges) have set a social standard for Henry; if other men are engaged in battle, he should be also. These articles have "lit a fire under" Henry because he is reading about men upholding the ideals

he associates with masculinity. Even though his mother has pleaded with him not to enlist, Henry must in order to prove himself a man.

In the case of Tyree joining up with the “bols” in his neighborhood and entering a life dictated by the American Gang culture, these social influences impact his decision greatly. In *Code of the Street*, Anderson explains these social influences, in regards to masculinity, very thoroughly. When discussing Tyree and his decision to make himself a part of the gang, Anderson describes the way certain social standards can cause young men involved in American Gang culture to accept mere assumptions as facts. While discussing this idea, Anderson writes “For many young men.... a man, especially a ‘real’ man, knows what other men know—the code of the street. And if one is not a real man, one is diminished as a person” (91). This social standard drives Tyree to join the “bols.” The “bols,” as Tyree sees them, are the young men in his neighborhood that know and practice “the code of the street”; the only way for Tyree to learn this himself, and in so attain manhood, he must be accepted by them and learn the code from them. Denying these social influences and the social standards he is confronted with daily, would hinder Tyree (at least in his own mind) in attaining his own idea of masculinity.

While conducting an interview with another young Latino gang member (we will call him Garcia), I discussed the social influences prevalent in the American Gang culture today. It was very clear that in order to gain respect and be seen as a man, Garcia needed to listen to these influences and follow the social standards that exist within that culture. Garcia described himself in his early childhood, as an outgoing carefree youth. When asked if he enjoyed school when he was younger he stated “Hell yea, I always loved school... I loved readin too. When I was lil’ I could go into a book for hours. I’d never come out if I

never had to.” After this statement, Garcia told me that when he was younger he had wanted to be a teacher, but went on to explain that where he is from that dream could never be a reality. Garcia stated, “Sometimes we can’t get what we want. Me, I always done what I had to do... Thas’ jus the way life is, one second you a kid, jus havin fun; next you got to be man.” The social influences that surround Garcia seem to have given him the understanding, that to be a real man he could not participate in the act of learning. Giving up the things he loved as a child, even something as common as loosing himself in a book, was a necessity for him to gain the respect of those around him. The standards that exist within the neighborhood Garcia grew up in require a man to be involved in gang culture in order to gain respect.

The ideals of dominating one’s rival and the pursuit of protecting one’s self and one’s family through physical violence, are advanced through their recognition as cultural normalcies. In *The Red Badge of Courage* Crane describes a time in which a man’s violent actions in war are celebrated. At the time Crane is discussing in his novel it was not only normal but in many cases expected for a man to fight in the American Civil War; bearing this in mind, the more violent Henry became in his acts the more he was revered. In *The Red Badge of Courage* after Henry had gone berserk fighting the advancing enemy, Crane describes the manner in which the other men began to see him. Crane writes, “Some of the men muttered and looked at [Henry] in awestruck ways...they had found the time to regard him. And now looked upon him as a war devil” (73). Through the honor that Henry receives through his use of excessive violence, Henry finally begins to see himself as a man. Within this culture (that is the culture of war) it is accepted as a normalcy for a man to be violent, veritably the more violent a man is the more masculine this culture sees him. This cultural

normalcy propels the ideal of dominating one's rival and protecting one's self and one's family through violence, suggesting that in order to increase one's masculinity they must increase their level of violence.

In a very similar style to Henry's world in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the world that Tyree exists in is also influenced by cultural normalcies. Anderson discusses this idea in *Code of the Street*, explaining this concept as just another facet of life within the American Gang culture. While describing the common way Tyree and other young men within his neighborhood view their own masculinity, in regards to respect, this idea appears plainly. Anderson suggests that the implication of manhood in these sorts of cultures is connected to the realization of others manhood and becoming distinguished as a man in your own right. After this Anderson goes on to write, "It implies physicality and a certain ruthlessness. Inner-city men associate manhood with this concept because of its practical application..." (91). Just like in Henry's case the accepting of these cultural normalcies as positive masculine traits, feeds the idealization of both dominating one's rival and the pursuit to protect one's self and one's family through violent actions. The more brutal and unrelenting that one can present themselves in this culture the more respect they will gain. This commonality sustains and advances the violent ideals of manhood in the American Gang culture.

Within the group of young Latino men that I interviewed all three (Ramirez, Alvarez, and Garcia), suggested that it was not only normal for youth in their situations to prove masculinity through violence but that at some point they would be expected to advance their status within their gang through violence. These ideas on manhood appeared to be second nature to these young men and all acknowledged that this is simply how life works.

When I asked Alvarez about people in general and the ideas of manhood and respect within his gang he suggested “es facil” (meaning ‘it is easy’) and went on to say “you know who the men are. If you whipped somebody’s ass, you get love... For reals, respec’ is all that matters.” These violent ideals are ingrained in Alvarez’s mind as commonplace. Through his involvement in the American Gang culture he was, and will continue to be, expected to prove his masculinity through violent action. Alvarez sees these expectations as clear and almost effortless, to him the ideal man is violent. These cultural normalcies communally justify a man’s violent acts and suggest they are a part of who he is, they support the idea of man’s necessity to prove himself through violence, and allow the young men who exist within American Gang culture to gain respect within that culture.

Though the idea of a heroic war seems distant for Henry and the young men involved in American Gang culture, the need to prove one’s self a man through violence remains evident. The ideals of dominating one’s rival and the pursuit of protecting one’s self and one’s family through violence are held by Henry, Tyree, and the three young Latino gangsters I interviewed. These ideals shape these young men’s view of masculinity, and in correlation the actions they carry out in their own lives. The weight that patriarchal impressions, social influences, and cultural normalcies carry, accredit these ideals in the American Gang culture today just like they did for Henry in *The Red Badge of Courage*. By a comparison of Crane’s novel, Anderson’s *Code of the Street*, and the interviews I was able to acquire one can easily see, that these ideals and the pressures within these cultures advocate and require young men to carry out acts of violence to gain respect, find support, and prove themselves men. Though times have changed, violence remains a part of the idealized man.

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