Freeden Oeur
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What is This?
parochial but links the import of racial, gender, and class inequality to the political economy of an art form that trades as much on improvisation, creativity, and counter-hegemonic discourse as it does on masculine posturing, conspicuous consumption, and racism. Read this book to consider how “... hip-hop music and culture continues to have profound implications for understanding how race is constructed and negotiated in popular culture” (p. 6).


Reviewed by: Freeden Oeur, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA
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These timely ethnographic studies by Adam D. Reich and Victor M. Rios examine the reach of the criminal justice system into the lives of young men in the inner city. Reich observed young male offenders who struggled to achieve a sense of manhood inside a juvenile facility, while Rios shadowed young men whose daily lives were monitored and disciplined as though they were *already* offenders. Together their accounts illuminate the subtle mechanisms and structural conditions that disadvantage marginalized young men growing up in an era of an expanding criminal justice system.

For several years, Reich worked as a writing instructor at the Training School, Rhode Island’s only juvenile prison for young men, where he also helped to start a newspaper. His relationships with the young men, the majority of whom were black or Latino, sparked a research interest in the processes that ensured their ongoing marginalization. Data for *Hidden Truth* include observations at the facility, interviews with the young men and staff, and poetry and artwork by residents that appeared in the newspaper.

Reich argues that the young men’s marginalization is produced through their involvement in two opposing “games.” Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, the game metaphor is a unique contribution to research on young men and criminality. Games ensure *participation* (the young men were drawn to competition), while players normally do not question their *premise* (the young men accepted the rules and rarely questioned how the game came together in the first place). Before they landed in the Training School, the young men had long been invested in a “Game of Outlaw.” The players lacked institutional power, agreed not to collude with law enforcement, and used violence to raise their status and to punish those who broke the rules. The game’s objective of achieving “outsider masculinity” captures not only that the
game is played outside the law but also that the young men’s bodies were used as resources for showcasing their power. They wore “bling-bling” clothing and jewelry, held fighting in high regard, and dominated women sexually.

Reich found that the primary objective inside the Training School was to shape disciplined selves. This required the boys to participate in a game at odds with the Game of Outlaw. In the “Game of Law,” the young men competed for “points” that earned them privileges such as additional phone calls and later curfews. This game was intended to achieve an “insider masculinity” marked by obedience and respectability. Yet, many of the young men—particularly young men of color and those from poor backgrounds—remained invested in the Game of Outlaw inside the facility. This limited the ability of the Game of Law to transform the young men. Even facility staff questioned whether teaching obedience could really lead to rehabilitation.

For his book *Punished*, Victor M. Rios returned to the same Oakland neighborhoods he once called home, and where he once found himself a gang member. For three years, Rios hung out with 40 black and Latino boys between the ages of 14 and 17, with the intent of examining how the boys’ generation was coming of age in an era of mass incarceration. He found that an array of social institutions comprised a “youth control complex,” systematically punishing the young men and treating their behavior as criminal in a process called *hypercriminalization*. Just as the state deserts the poor by withholding services and other forms of assistance, it asserts itself in the form of punitive social control. Young men of color are subjected to material criminalization when they are suspended from schools and sent to juvenile prison, and endure symbolic criminalization as institutions stigmatize and monitor them on a daily basis.

One of the book’s many strengths is how it differentiates between “delinquents,” those boys who were involved in crime and had been arrested, and “non-delinquents,” those who were not involved in crime. (Institutions, however, occasionally treated both groups as criminals.) Nondelinquent boys attempted to hone a skill called *acting lawful*, which would allow them to avoid being victims of criminalization. In a particularly insightful passage, Rios describes how delinquent boys did not resent the nondelinquent boys for aspiring to do well in school (the “acting white” thesis). Rather, acting lawful meant that nondelinquent boys had joined with school officials and law enforcement to conspire against the delinquent boys.

While *Punished* describes the youth control complex in rich ethnographic detail, it too often reduces masculinity to being mostly a reflex of punitive social control. Hypermasculinity is the result of young men “overconforming” to hypercriminalization, a somewhat mechanical formulation of manhood that can limit the agentic capacity of the young men. This can be seen in the organization of the book; a single chapter on manhood is slotted into Part 2 of the book on the “consequences” of hypercriminalization.

While *Hidden Truth* may lack the thick description in Rios’s study, the book is admirable for its robust theorizing of masculinity. (Indeed, the book’s organization enables Reich to foreground masculinity, as “outsider masculinity” and “insider masculinity” comprise the first two whole sections of the book.) The game metaphor
avoids the trap of characterizing manhood as mostly a reaction to a position in social structure. Instead, young men are “players” who actively invest and struggle, even if they may not recognize that their game playing reproduces their own marginalization. But it is important to note one potential limitation of the game metaphor: Reich may ask it to do too much theoretical work. Participation in games represents the enactment of masculinity while masculinity makes up the stakes of games. As the means and the objective of games, masculinity sometimes takes on a circular logic that undercut the conceptual utility of the game metaphor.

Despite the great costs of criminalization, both *Hidden Truth* and *Punished* describe the possibility of progressive change. Reich argues that through realizing contradictions inherent between the two “games,” young men can engage in “critical practice,” where they challenge the rules behind the Game of Outlaw and self-consciously articulate their own life goals, turning their attention to the transformation of their neighborhoods. The author praises the work of the Broad Street Studio, an art studio that employed some of the young men and provided a creative space for the young men to begin to engage in critical practice. Likewise, Rios suggests that adult advocates in youth leadership organizations and in similar programs can help to honor the dignity of the young men and to provide them with important resources. Strong, caring relationships with adults can help the young men to properly harness their resistance, pointing the way toward the “short-circuiting” of the youth control complex.

*Hidden Truth* and *Punished* are important contributions to research on the growing penal state in poor communities. Their use of qualitative data is particularly welcome, as they offer fresh insights into the daily lives young men involved in crime and who are treated as criminals, as those young men invest in masculinity games and navigate structures of punitive social control. Finally, the authors should be commended for their accessible and engaging writing, making each well suited for undergraduate courses.

Lois Presser

*Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men (Critical Perspectives in Criminology Series)*

Reviewed by: James Ptacek, Suffolk University, MA, USA
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In this lively and impressive work, Lois Presser offers a fresh sense of why in-depth interviewing is such an important method for studying violence. Her focus is on how men talk about their lives, their sense of who they are, and their violent crimes. She seeks to link men’s identities to their violence, and she argues that studying men’s narratives is really the only way to do this.