A friend of mine got rolled. He was visiting this girl up near Mercer Street. He come out of this house, and somebody smacked him in the head with a baseball bat. He had all these gold chains on. Had a brand new $200 thick leather jacket, $100 pair of Michael Jordan sneakers, and they were brand new, first time he had them on his feet. He had leather pants on too. And I’m surprised they didn’t take his leather pants.

Elijah Anderson, Street Wise

In the past decade, a frightening trend has emerged within the boundaries of the American inner city. Young, impoverished males and females have become more and more violent in seeking to attain the goods which they have been taught will give them a certain privileged status, both inside and outside of their own communities. Because these young people are usually restricted to the political and geographical limits of their inner city neighborhoods, their activities have generally been ignored by the cultures of middle and upper class America. Unless these offenders leave their own neighborhoods and encroach upon those of the other classes, their behavior is understood merely as a dark stain on the American fabric.¹ Although this increase in violent behavior is unsettling in itself, what is even more disturbing is that it is reflective of a generalized
breakdown of the “social organization” of so many of our inner city communities. Plagued by crime, drugs and the dissolution of the family structure, the urban experience has often become one of despair and utter hopelessness.

How have we come to this point? Although the degradation of so many of our urban communities is often understood as merely a late 20th century phenomenon, it may be argued that the conditions for the possibility of this disturbing social breakdown were defined at the very beginning of our own colonial history. As Michel Foucault might have suggested, one can trace the roots of what is happening in America in the late 20th century to the colonial attempt to define the appropriate political, religious and economic “order of things.”

OTHERNESS AND THE ORDER OF THINGS

In the preface to his book The Order of Things, Michel Foucault presents us with the following quotation from Borges:

. . . Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a very long way off look like flies.²

Foucault says that although this passage kept him laughing for a long time, it also left him with “a certain uneasiness” that he “found hard to shake off.” It was not so much that this Borgesian taxonomy gave expression to “the oddity of unusual juxtapositions,” for, as Foucault himself suggests, we are all quite familiar with the disconcerting effect of the “sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other.” Rather, what unsettled Foucault about this passage was its very “act of enumeration,” its neatly ordered process
of bringing everything together without mixing it all up. Indeed, as Foucault makes clear, what allows the taxonomy of Borges to “transgress the boundaries of all imagination” is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d), which links each category of the bestiary to all other categories in this perverse collection.

Although Foucault weaves this Borgesian notion of reordering through his texts concerning the birth of the clinic, the archeology of knowledge, discipline and punishment and the history of sexuality, it can be traced back to his early genealogical exploration of *Madness and Civilization*. Interestingly, Foucault refers to this first major work in *The Order of Things*:

The history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same—of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kind and to be collected together into identities.³

As is well known by now, Foucault was attempting to expose something important about the evolution of Western thought by bringing together *Madness and Civilization* and *The Order of Things*. What he saw in this union was a certain disturbing and yet necessary homogeneity of oppositions. The same and the other written into both a “history of resemblance,” which allows a culture to determine the nearness of their relationships and the “order by which they must be considered,” and a “history of madness,” which allows a culture to determine the “difference that limits it.”

Although Foucault’s work is often extremely complex, one thing that seems clear is that his strange, oppositional histories are always characterized by his own epistemological struggle with the phenomenology of Hegel, a struggle, according to
Foucault, shared by “our whole age.” As he says in one of his lectures concerning the “order of discourse”:

    . . . [A]ny real escape from Hegel presupposes that we have an accurate understanding of what it will cost us to detach ourselves from him; it presupposes that we know the extent to which Hegel, perhaps insidiously, has approached us; it presupposes that we know what is still Hegelian in that which allows us to think against Hegel; and that we can assess the extent to which our appeal against him is perhaps one more of the ruses he uses against us and at the end of which he is waiting for us, immobile and elsewhere.4

Even though the texts of Foucault do bear the mark of “what is still Hegelian,” they also force us to “think against Hegel,” to think the idea of a radical negation that is never overcome by a moment of pure, historical synthesis. Foucault’s histories are antihistories. Or perhaps more correctly, they are histories without history: no references, no context, just jumbled stories and fanciful mythologies. However, it is precisely in this way that these non-histories act to disrupt the historical boundaries of Western thought.

Another thinker who has sought to disrupt these restrictive Western boundaries is the historian of religion, Charles H. Long.5 Although he has differences with Foucault, Long shares Foucault’s desire to pressure our normative understanding of the order of things. He also agrees with Foucault that although we must continue to “think against Hegel,” nevertheless we must face the fact that the Hegelian dialectic continues to affect any attempt to rethink the problem of otherness.

    In an important little essay entitled “The Humanities and ’Other’ Humans,” Long suggests that the Enlightenment radically changed the way human beings understood the world and their place within it.6 Prior to the Enlightenment, says Long, knowledge was thought to define a union between two necessary structures: First, “the capacity and limitation of human reason,” and second, the “givenness of the creation [of the world] by
God.” Thus, before the Enlightenment the epistemological processes of humanity were predicated on the total otherness of God and his benevolent relationship with the whole of the created order. According to Long, though, the epistemological vision of the Enlightenment itself was focused on the “proper way of knowing the forms of the world apart from an inherent structure of transcendence within these forms or within the knowing subject.” The notion of God as the fundamental structure of human knowledge was now eclipsed by the possibility that human understanding was possible because “the person or community who want[ed] to know was represented by a commensurate rationality in the beings or things to be known.”

The irony of this removal of God as the “wholly other” is that it acted to disrupt the framework of the divinely created order of Western culture. Now, since different cultures were no longer understood to be “other” because they were an inherent part of God’s creation, but rather because they existed within the boundaries of a finite order, it was necessary to rethink the notion of what it meant to be human. As Long points out, the philosophical orientation of the Enlightenment gave rise to the creation of “empirical others,” those peoples and cultures whose debased alterity allowed the “normative” beings of the West to understand their own privileged humanity.

Like Foucault, Long is saying something important about the Western process of ordering the relationship between what is normal and what is not. Indeed, as Foucault did in Madness and Civilization and The Order of Things, in “The Humanities and ‘Other’ Humans,” Long is suggesting that those peoples and cultures who acted as empirical others for the more civilized societies of the West became necessary objects of
existential negation. In other words, even though they were thought to be inferior to the peoples of the West, they were still integral to the Western notion of superiority.

It is this disclosure of the ambiguous relationship between the privileged self and the debased other which forces Long, like Foucault, up against Hegel. For as Long makes clear, it is Hegel, with his metaphor of the master and the slave, who pressures us to see that without a transcendental other, the finite other becomes the necessary counterpart of the self-aware-self. But of course, for Hegel, even the finite other is ultimately effaced, covered over by the synthetic process of sublation, until all that is left is a “self-same-self” in the midst of absolute non-difference. Thus, although Long initially turns toward the Hegelian dialectic in order to expose the problematic relationship between the self and the other, he, again like Foucault, ultimately rejects Hegel’s conceptualization of a dialectical resolution. Both, it seems, want to retain the possibility of dialectical thinking while they seek to uncover the inherent inequities of the unresolved dialectical relationship itself.

THE COLONIAL IDEA OF SELF AND OTHER

The revisionists texts of Foucault and Long are instructive for understanding how America came to be defined by the colonial ideal that was in place in western Europe during the 17th century. As Long’s work suggests, the pre-Enlightenment vision of the English colonialists who came to the New World was predicated on a complex connection between the economic and the religious. This becomes apparent if one examines England’s 17th century colonial expansion into Ireland and America.
Fundamental to the possibility of the English colonialization of Ireland was an understanding of the Irish as savages who lived outside of the confines of civilization. In the minds of the English colonialists, Ireland was inhabited by a nomadic people whose tribal relationships were economically backward and religiously debased. Because they were Catholic Christians, and not Protestants, the Irish lacked a true knowledge of God and his expectations of the created order. God had given man dominion over the earth, argued the English by way of a latter day reformulation of the Biblical account of Paradise, so that it could be settled, not so that human beings, like the other, lower forms of creation, could roam aimlessly over it. God had chosen the English to bring his message to the uncivilized world, and because of this, one of their divinely inspired responsibilities was to “inhabit and reform” the barbarous nation of the Irish. Thus, the colonialization of Ireland was understood by the English as an act of benevolence. The corrupted natures of these primitive peoples would be “nurtured,” assuring both their economic success and their eternal salvation.8

Interestingly, the English encounter with the native peoples of America paralleled that of their encounter with the savages of Ireland. Indeed, much like the Irish, the natives who were discovered in the New World were thought to be uncivilized because they, too, were nomads who refused to settled the land and who participated in strange religious rituals. The English settlers “considered agriculture a superior economic activity and an index of their own cultural superiority.” As in Ireland, “they perceived the lands they entered to be ‘wilderness’—in their eyes, wild, unoccupied, and unused territory.” These lands, then, like those of the Irish, would need to be inhabited and
reformed, and the primitives who roamed them would need to be Christianized and their traditional religious practices eliminated.\textsuperscript{9}

As with the Irish, the primitivism of the Indians was initially thought to be something that was environmentally induced. In other words, the reason that the Indians were not economically and religiously civilized had to do with the perverse quality of the earthly domain in which they found themselves. They were primitive not because God had created them that way, but because they had not yet learned what it meant to be culturally illuminated human beings. Thus, because, in the beginning, the English understood the Indians, like themselves, to be members of the most privileged, human realm of God’s created order, their corrupted natures, like those of the Irish, could be saved by way of a colonial act of compassion.\textsuperscript{10}

What is ironic about the English characterization of the Indians as savages is that the “cultures of the Native American societies encountered by European colonizers in the Western Hemisphere were often more highly developed than European cultures”: These people built great cities and roads, developed advanced agricultural systems, and created calendars and numerical systems superior to those of the Europeans. Significantly, the European invaders borrowed heavily from Native American agriculture and pharmacology.\textsuperscript{11}

It was necessary, though, due primarily to their capitalist concerns, for the English colonizers to maintain the illusion of Native savagery. Sustaining this illusion became more and more difficult, however, simply because the capitalist accumulation of wealth, although thought of as a sign of God’s gift of salvific grace for the colonialists themselves, contradicted the religious notions that the English used to define the Native other. Because the expansion of capitalism required the colonial invaders to procure vast amounts of land, land that was inhabited by Native populations, it became necessary for
the English to reformulate their vision of the indigenous peoples they had encountered in
the New World.

The rise of capitalism as a fundamental dimension of English colonialism
coincided with the emergence of a radically new conceptualization of the Native as part
of God’s created order. Once it became necessary for the indigenous peoples to be
removed from the lands that they occupied, the idea that they could be saved from their
debased existence by becoming aware of the essence of their own humanity disappeared.
What replaced this idea was a notion that “race” acted as the condition for the possibility
of salvation. Now, instead of the Indians being conceived of as human beings who were
merely culturally primitive, and thus redeemable, they came to be understood as beings
whose racial characteristics marked them as creatures beyond the possibility of
redemption. Quite simply, they were thought of as “lower beings” whose natures were
inherently adulterated, and for whom “Christian moral principles would not apply.”

This “racialization of savagery” provided the religious rationalization for the
barbaric removal of the Indians from the land that they had occupied for so long:

English settlers usually gained dominance over Native Americans, forcing
them into the frontier areas or killing them off. Few whites seemed
concerned about the genocidal consequences of this brutal expansion. It is
often noted that some English settlers relied on friendly Native Americans
to survive the first devastating years, but the new settlers soon turned on
their neighbors. In New England, for example, a war with the Pequots in
1637 ended when whites massacred several hundred inhabitants of a
Pequot village and sent the survivors into slavery.

It is often thought that there was no attempt by the English settlers to enslave the
Native peoples of America in order to facilitate their own capitalist expansion. Although
this is not the case, it is true that American Indians never represented more than 5 to 10
percent of the slave population at any given time. What prevented the English from
enslaving the vast majority of the Natives was their powerlessness to control these indigenous peoples without killing them. Most often, if captured the Indians would escape and disappear into the wilderness that they knew so well.

The inability of the English to control most of the Native peoples by making them slaves left the colonialists in a peculiar position. Although the removal and extermination of the Indians allowed for the acquisition of the land that was needed for capitalist expansion, it also left the English with an inadequate labor force. In order to supply the laborers needed to work the land that had been acquired, the colonialists initially turned not to slavery but to a system of indentured servitude. This was especially true in the northern colonies where the settlers depended heavily on the use of indentured servants for labor. These *engages*, who defined a major part of the non-slave labor force during the colonial period, “contracted” with the land owners to work off the payment of their passage to America from England:

They came from the ranks of the urban poor, most of whom or whose ancestors had been peasants squeezed off the land. Some voluntarily became indentured servants in order to escape poverty at home and eventually find land in the colonies. Others had been convicted of crimes and sold by the courts to ship captains for resale at a profit upon arrival in the colonies. A not insignificant number had been kidnapped. . . . The indentured servant trade was an important source of profits for a number of English ports as well as supply of labor for the colonies. As much as half of the white population in the northern colonies came originally as indentured servants.¹⁴

Interestingly, the first Africans who were “sold” in America were probably not considered slaves but indentured servants. As with the Western Europeans who had been contracted to serve a master for a period usually between four and seven years, these Africans were not “reduced to property and required to work without wages for life.”
This began to change, though, as it became clear that indentured servitude was not the best system to fill the labor demands of capitalist expansion.\textsuperscript{15}

Indentured servants, especially those from Western Europe, proved problematic for the colonialists for several reasons. First, because they were treated so harshly, many of them died before they served out the terms of their contract. Second, many of them escaped and were never returned to their masters. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, their contracts, although often extended for the slightest infraction, began to be fulfilled.\textsuperscript{16}

This meant that their masters were compelled to free them and thus lose part of their labor force. More significantly, though, it also meant that these people could now become part of the colonial community and partake of the religious and economic freedoms available in the New World. They were, after all, not racially and religiously different from their masters.

Although the release of western European indentured servants did allow them to become part of the free market communities of the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries, for the most part these “temporary slaves” continued to be cut off from the English elite by way of the imposition of class boundaries. In other words, although they were now literally free, they were still understood to be economically subordinate to the capitalists who had brought them to America, and thus it remained necessary for them to live on the margins of civilized society. An altogether different method of marginalization defined the experience of African servants who were sold in America, though. Unlike whites who, if they did not die, eventually became free men and women, blacks were “degraded into a condition of servitude for life and even the status of property.” Indeed, by 1661, “the Virginia Assembly began to institutionalize slavery” for blacks, as it became clear to the
colonialists that these “Negroes” were “incapable of making satisfaction by addition of
time.” Therefore, as with the native peoples who were discovered in the New World,
blacks who were brought to America also suffered from the racialization of savagery.
Like the Indians, the racial characteristics of these dark skinned others marked them as
beings who natures were inherently adulterated. Because of this, they too were thought
to be beyond redemption.

The creation of racial boundaries, which initially had provided the colonialists
with a rationalization for the removal of the Indians from the land they occupied, now
provided them with a justification for slavery. Slavery was acceptable if it could be
argued that blacks, like Indians, were beings that were essentially less than human. In the
end, the removal and extermination of the Native peoples and the enslavement of the
African peoples gave the English both the land and the labor force that were needed to
carry out their own capitalist agenda.

ECONOMICS AND THE COLONIAL IDEAL

Although the racial distinctions defined by the English further delineated the
borders between savagery and civilization, the imposition of these borders now came to
be understood in an even more perverse way. Living far from the “security and
surveillance of society in England,” the colonialists began to fear the “possibility of
losing self-control over their passions” if they came too close to the racial others they,
themselves, had created. As a result, they began both to project the “hidden” instinctual
parts of their own human nature onto blacks and Indians and to define “internal
boundaries of control” so that they would not be “swept away by the boundlessness of the
wilderness.”¹⁸ Thus, as Foucault might have argued, the history of the racial other in America slowly became a history of madness and contagion. This was true for both Natives and Africans, as these groups inevitably became what Long calls “empirical others.” They were both “interior and foreign,” needed to perpetuate the illusion of Western cultural superiority, but having to be “excluded” from civilized society because the adulterated quality of their natures might somehow infect the English.

It may be argued that the American version of the Foucauldian idea that the “order of things” is determined by the distinction between “madness and civilization” is woven through the “captivity narratives” which were so popular during this country’s first century. Based on Biblical themes, books like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* were allegorical accounts of settlers overwhelmed by the moral decay that surrounds them.¹⁹ As with Bunyan’s character Christian, who flees the City of Destruction and journeys to the Celestial City beyond the Wicked-gate, the English settlers came to believe that they must flee the moral inequities of the real world within which they found themselves. As was already mentioned, though, the colonialists fled by imposing literal and figurative boundaries around their communities. This strange sense of flight by way of exclusion created the possibility for defining narratives of national destiny based on the ideas of “confinement, challenge, and redemption.” Stories were written of “valiant white colonists morally tested during confinement” who “transmut[ed] that harrowing experience into physical and spiritual salvation.”²⁰

These captivity narratives became so common in early America that 18th century writers returned to them in order to explain the need for the American Revolution:
Like the . . . settlers, the colonies as a group were held in thrall by a distant, uncaring foe. To withstand that foe, however, developed strength and nationhood—not simply a courageous people but a just one.  

The English settlers, of course, were unable to see the great irony that informed their revolutionary ideas. Even in the midst of their outcry against the British imposition of the Stamp and Sugar Acts, which they felt constituted taxation without representation in Parliament, the colonialists, now depicting themselves as others forced to live on the margins of civilized society, could not understand their own complicity in the imposition of colonial oppression.

This was true even of American visionaries like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. In regard to Jefferson, in the same moment that he was articulating the reasons why it sometimes became necessary, in the “course of human events,” for one group to “dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,” and to “assume the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them,” he was giving expression to a wholly different set of self-evident truths.

Jefferson argued that as “free individuals and owners of property,” the peoples of America would “become responsible citizens”:

“Here every one, by his property, or by his satisfactory situation, is interested in the support of law and order. . . . And such men may safely and advantageously reserve to themselves a wholesome control over their public affairs, and a degree of freedom, which, in the hands of the canaille of the cities of Europe, would be instantly perverted to the demolition and destruction of everything public and private.”

It would seem from this letter to John Adams that one should find hope in Jefferson’s vision of the peoples of America. After all, unlike the unruly masses of Europe, who would corrupt the sanctity of ownership by demolishing and destroying “everything
public and private,” the citizenry of America, “the chosen people of God,” would lift the new Republic to unprecedented heights by way of their “labor in the earth.” Jefferson’s soaring rhetoric, however, often seemed to have little to do with how he conducted his own affairs. For in the end, he turned his egalitarian notions on ownership and property into perverse expressions of human cruelty.

Jefferson was an “elite planter” who benefited from the 17th century turn toward slavery. Even while composing America’s “Declaration of Independence,” he actively participated in the buying and selling of slaves. Indeed, he privately calculated that “[t]he value of our lands and slaves, taken conjunctly, doubles in about twenty years.” This resulted, claimed Jefferson, because of the “multiplication of our slaves, from extension of culture, and increased demands for lands.” In fact, as late as the 1820s, while he continued to be an advocate for the abolition of slavery, Jefferson still owned over two hundred and fifty slaves. This apparently incongruous position on slavery becomes clearer if one understands just what Jefferson meant when he claimed that slavery should be abolished in America. Once freed, argued Jefferson, the slaves should be “removed from American society” and returned to their homeland. This was necessary, said Jefferson, both because the slave population was becoming so large and because blacks and whites could “never coexist in America.”

Even Jefferson realized that a mass expatriation of the slaves was untenable, however, and thus, he proposed that a colony for blacks be established in Santo Domingo. Any future generations of American blacks would be “deported” to this new American colony, and soon the slave problem would be solved:

“Suppose the whole annual increase to be sixty thousand effective births, fifty vessels, of four hundred tons burthen each, constantly employed in
that short run, would carry off the increase of every year, and the old stock would die off in the ordinary course of nature, lessening from the commencement until its final disappearance.”

Jefferson’s desire to remove the uncivilized other from America was not focused solely upon the slaves, for it extended to the native populations, as well. In 1803, he wrote to Andrew Jackson, a rapidly emerging political leader in Tennessee, advising him that the Indians must sell their “useless” lands and become farmers. In a manner that not even Jefferson might have imagined, Jackson took up the mantle of American colonialism and sought to rid the new Republic of the “savage dogs” who roamed the outskirts of civilized society.

In the same way that Jefferson’s private and public life was linked to the slave issue, “Jackson’s fortunes, both economic and political, were tied to what happened to the Indians.” Jackson, for example, negotiated treaties between whites and natives, which opened up the possibility of white expansion and economic gain, including his own. In addition, he “led American troops against the Creeks in Mississippi and conquered ‘the cream of the Creek country’ for the expansion of the ‘republick.’”

Once he was elected President in 1828, Jackson declared that all attempts to civilize the Indian had failed. Even those who had turned from their nomadic ways and become agricultural still existed outside of the true boundaries of civilization, as they had set up separate and “independent nations” within the states. Because of this, Jackson proposed a solution much like the one put forth by Jefferson in relationship to the slaves. A federal district would be set up west of the Mississippi which would be “guaranteed to the Indian tribes as long as they shall occupy it.” Although it “doubtless” would “be painful” for the Indians to “leave the graves of their fathers,” admitted Jackson, this
federal program of relocation would ultimately be the best thing for them, for it would protect them from the “mercenary influence of white men.”

That Jefferson and Jackson could conceive of the kind of abject relocation strategies to which they gave expression reveals much about the formation of the new American Republic. For even though the peoples of the American colonies had been so overwhelmed by the despotism of English rule that they had risked their lives to gain their independence, they now seemed unaware, or unconcerned, that they had defined their own, “democratic,” form of colonial oppression. What was most unsettling about the establishment of this democratic colonialism was the enigmatic quality of its articulation. Based as it was on the idea of capitalist expansion, and strengthened by doctrines of religious and societal exclusion, the colonialism of the new Republic made it all but impossible for many people to become part of America’s civilized society. In the same moment that government administrators like Jefferson and Jackson were insisting that the ownership of property was the sign of the truly civilized man, they were also denying the right to own property to those who were thought to be inherently inferior because of their race.

As one might expect, the idea of racial distinctions influenced the westward movement of white America during the end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries. This seventy-five year period after the Revolution saw the elimination of most of the European competition for land and resources in America, the annexation of large regions of Mexican territory and the continued displacement of the peoples who constituted the “inferior” races. The second half of the 19th century was characterized by further westward expansion and the establishment of urban communities, both of
which were fueled by the surge of capitalism and the ever-increasing industrialization of American society. As in other countries around the world, the capitalist economy of late 19th century America depended on the production of commodities by way of wage labor in the interests of capital accumulation. Because of this, the city became the focus of such production as well as the center for the industrial factories within which this production most often took place. It also became home to wage laborers, most of whom were immigrants or their descendents, who proved to be the other “commodity” necessary for productivity and further expansion.

What emerged in conjunction with this late 19th century growth of capitalism and urbanization in America was a new concept of the connection between ownership and civilization. Although the possession of property was still important at the end of the 19th century, what became foundational within the framework of the economics of the American Republic was the control of the tools of the industrial world, what Marx termed the means of production. As Marx argued, this control of industrialization required a labor force that could be exploited by being compelled to work for a wage that would never allow it to possess the means of production. In other words, the people of the new industrialized world were bound to the factories and the machines that they could never hope to own.

Although the causes and effects of capitalism are difficult to tease apart, it may be argued that the ideology which informed the capitalist system of late 19th century America bears a striking resemblance to the post Revolutionary ideology of Jefferson and Jackson. Like the slaves and the Indians who were stripped of their identities, deemed genetically inferior and forced into positions of colonial inequity, those who labored in
the factories and lived in the midst of urban squalor were relegated to the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. Again, much of this had to do with race, as European immigrants, like the Irish, Germans and Italians, began to make their way out of poverty during the first part of the 20th century, while peoples of color continued to languish on the outskirts of civilized society.

Not surprisingly, then, the push toward greater and greater industrialization led to a further degradation of those “infected” groups who were forced to live within the boundaries of the inner city:

Urbanization changed not only the distribution of our population but also the quality of its life. One of these changes was the deterioration of the city, symbolized by the rise of the tenement. Because of steady population growth, urban real estate steadily rose in price. In Washington, D.C., for example, land that went for eight cents a square foot in 1882 was selling for forty-eight cents in 1887. In their quest for profits, landlords subdivided and partitioned apartments, converted private residences into rooming houses, and built new tenement apartments to accommodate as many people as possible in the smallest amount of space. The rise of the inner city proved to be truly horrific. In the attempt to utilize every available inch of space, the developers of these new urban ghettos created an environment within which the buildings were literally death traps, water was impure, sewers were often clogged, and disease spread incredibly quickly: “In 1882, half the children in Chicago died before reaching the age of five. In one New York tenement area the annual death rate per thousand for the years 1883, 1884, 1885, and the first three quarters of 1886 came to roughly 42 percent, as compared with roughly 26 percent for the city as a whole. . . .

Of course, the developers of the ghettos were not affected by the horror of the urban environments that they were creating. Indeed, much like the plantation owners
who lived with such grandeur so near to such misery, the colonialists of the inner city created a new world of “extremes and contradictions, where the best and the worst, the highest and the lowest, existed side by side in sunshine and shadow, in splendor and squalor”:

The mansions of millionaire industrialists stood only a few blocks from ugly, unhealthy slum districts that housed the poor families who labored in their factories. Seeing the way people lived in these cities, southern visitors to New York once suggested that antebellum slaves on plantations lived more comfortably. Visiting Pittsburgh, Herbert Spencer, the English prophet of Social Darwinism, commented: “Six Months residence here would justify suicide.”

THE RISE OF IMPERIALISM AND THE SACRALITY OF CARGO

Like other industrialized countries, America eventually broadened its colonial vision until it became imperial in nature. Moving beyond the limits of its own borders during the second half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th, America sought to define an overseas empire that would allow it to expand its domestic production in the form of a monopoly capitalism. In addition to the expansion of production, the imposition of this global capitalism allowed America to gain political, military and ideological control over other peoples and their resources:

General world progress was to be accomplished only by the dominating power of a superior race, and a variety of lesser races were accused of retarding rather than furthering world progress. A traditional colonial empire had been rejected, but it was believed that the expansion of a federal system might ultimately prove possible as American Anglo-Saxons outbred, overwhelmed, and replaced “inferior” races. This time was to be hastened by commercial penetration of the most distant regions of the earth. The commercial endeavors of a superior people were confidently expected to transform the world while bringing unprecedented power and prosperity to the United States.
One of the most troublesome examples of the monopolistic expansion of the West was seen in the post World War II colonialization of the islands of Melanesia, an imperial effort of which America was a part. Naturally, the impact of modern culture on the indigenous peoples of these islands was profound. This was due not only to the imposition of political, economic and ideological control, but also to the fact that the arrival of the Western colonialists gave rise to peculiar cults oriented around the amazing array of “cargo” that was brought by the interlopers.

Members of these “cargo cults” believed that the goods that were possessed by Whites would someday be given over to people of color, to whom these goods had always been denied, and that this process of material exchange would herald the beginning of a period of prosperity and well-being for the Native populations of the islands.32

The first cargo cult was reported in the middle of the 19th century. Fascinated by the seemingly endless supply of possessions brought by the Europeans who had begun to inhabit the islands at this time, the native populations turned to Christian missionaries for an explanation as to the source of these goods. According to the missionaries, this cargo could be attributed to regular prayer and the renunciation of traditional customs such as the drinking of kava, dancing, sorcery and the wearing of penis sheaths. Although many of the islanders did give up their own customs and rituals and convert to Christianity, eventually more and more of them began to resent the fact that they never came into possession of the goods that surrounded them. By the 1930s, this resentment eventually gave rise to messianic movements oriented around the salvific figure of “John Frum.”33

The mythology that informed these movements claimed that John Frum came from the sea at Green Point and there appeared to a group of men drinking kava. He advised them
that he would return and that there would ultimately be an end to their suffering and an
abundance of goods only if the European interlopers left the islands.

Soon after, as a result of the escalation of the War in the Pacific, American troops,
including blacks who seemed so much like the Natives themselves, began to land in the
islands of Melanesia. Because the U.S. troops were willing to share the goods that were
now literally being dropped from the sky, and because the dark skinned figures among
them seemed to understand the magic of cargo, it was thought that John Frum must surely
be coming from America bringing with him the material wealth which rightfully
belonged to the islanders. To accommodate the arrival of this cargo by ship and plane,
docks and airstrips were carved out of the jungle and decoy planes were made out of
bamboo or wood in an attempt to attract the great jets that were seen and heard flying
overhead. The Natives even erected towers with tin cans strung from wire in an imitation
of radio stations so that John Frum could communicate with his people.

All of this seemed unbelievably naïve to the Americans. For although on one
level they were benevolent with the native populations, they were also oppressively
paternalistic. In the end, cargo movements were thought to be simply an expression of
the inability of the uncivilized native to understand the complexity of material wealth
within the framework of a monied economy. These were backward peoples, it was
reported, who developed cults around canned foods, cigarettes and cooking utensils, and
who placed their hopes for salvation in mysterious messianic figures who spoke
prophetically of the end of white domination. Because Western colonialization in “third
world” locations like Melanesia was driven by a mercantile ideology which functioned
within the boundaries of twentieth century capitalism, the importance of cargo as a sacred
element of the native experience of economic distribution was covered over. Further, and
perhaps more disturbingly, this capitalist act of dissimulation led those in power to ignore
the importance of “religious ritual” as a means of acquiring, exchanging and valuing
goods. What the colonialists were unable to understand was that the cargo could not
“come by itself,” that it must be produced and delivered by a deity:

“Everything that we have was invented by a deity: taro, yams, livestock,
artifacts. If we want taro to grow we invoke the taro goddess, and so
forth. Well, then, you people come to us with all your goods, and we
ask, ‘Where is the god of the cargo and how do we contact him?’”

In order to contact the different cosmic gods of the universe, the cargo-cultists
relied on the mediative abilities of their “Big Men,” shamanistic members of the tribe
who possessed unique powers to deliver sacred goods. These Big Men occupied the
highest level of the cult structure, and they acted as the relational nexus for the so-called
“ordinary men” and “rubbish men” who filled the lower levels of the communal
hierarchy:

The position of the Big Men may be linked to the exclusive
possession of special knowledge and expertise. This special knowledge
may consist of sorcery or of magical spells connected with growing crops
or with warfare. Among the Abelam, the role of the Big Man is integrally
involved with knowledge of special magic required for the growing of
large yams, which are the basis for the yam cult. Sorcery and war magic
are the special province of the Kuma and Maring Big Men. . . . It is
common for the Big Men to act on behalf of their groups in
communicating with ancestral spirits. His position as Big Man requires
that he act as a leader in certain ritual acts as intermediary between his
group and the spirit world. 

As can be seen in these passages concerning the cosmic gods and the shamans
who interacted with them, the realm of the sacred was not considered by the cargoists to
be something other than the material world. This is why the goods of the white
colonizers were so important to the cargo cultures of the South Pacific: The cargo itself
carried with it the possibility of salvation—not because it could be used to create more and more wealth, but because it possessed its own sense of sacrality. In a very real way, it was the cargo that connected human beings to their gods.

Of course, the ritualistic practices of the natives were forced into the margins of their own experience. For in another attempt to determine the appropriate “order of things” by distinguishing between the “madness” of the islanders and their own sense of “civilization,” the Western interlopers began to define what Jackson Lears calls an “imperial primitivism.” Like the early American colonialists, the imperialists who came to Melanesia ultimately delineated the limits of a dialectical relationship between themselves and the debased others whom they encounter. As Lears suggests in regard to a more generalized understanding of this dialectics of imperialism, the “vaguely subversive part of this interchange was the idea that knowledge was not all on one side—that ‘inferior’ races, even animals, possessed some fundamental sort of knowledge, especially of physical nature and its needs.”

This acknowledgment, though, “when it became explicit, was always hedged with qualifications”:

[T]he white man enters the dark interior of a tropical land, extracts mysterious remedies, and puts them to the service of Anglo-Saxon civilization. One clear example of this formula was a pamphlet describing the discovery of Peruvian Catarrh Cure (1890). The story was allegedly told to the narrator by Dr. Edward Turner, “an adventurous and daring Englishman,” on the eve of his death by ambush at the hand of “black devils” in Zululand, Africa. Troubled with catarrh since boyhood, Turner endures the failures of “medical men, with whom I got disgusted” until he learns of Mosca, a red root that could be ingested in powdered form. Having acquired some Mosca from a Catholic missionary in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), Turner is thrilled by its effects and heads for the source: the Cotahuasi Indians of Peru. The chief of the Cotahuasi likes Turner’s pluck and even more his apparent desire to help others. Turner, he believes, is not like the other “palefaces,” who care only for money.
The irony is that Turner wants to make a business of the cure but conceals his aim because he fears the chief might want too many presents in exchange for the secret ingredient. “I therefore left him with the idea that I was one of the few palefaces who don’t care for money. That, you know, may work among the Indians, but not with us.”

As Lears points out so powerfully, “the convoluted path of discovery, the aura of mystery and secrecy, the key moment when the shrewd Caucasian outwits the natives—the narrative pattern was repeated often.” What this meant for the Native peoples of Melanesia is that although they did acquire a limited supply of new cargo, in the end the goods that they received did not act as a means for liberation but as a means for the perpetuation of colonial boundaries.

**LATE 20\textsuperscript{TH} CENTURY “EXTREMES AND CONTRADICTIONS” AND THE CARGO CULTS OF THE INNER CITY**

In a disturbing way, late 20\textsuperscript{th} century America has come to define a new colonial ideal by bringing together the economic “extremes and contradictions” of industrialization with an inner city longing for the magic of cargo. Mirroring what occurred in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th}, the dwellings of the upper classes stand only a few blocks from the ghettos that house the poor; and mirroring the mythologies of the island communities of Melanesia, our most impoverished citizens still cling to the illusory hope that salvation will come by way of the arrival of goods.

One thinker who has written extensively about late 20\textsuperscript{th} century colonialism is Elijah Anderson. In his book, *Street Wise*, a work which seeks to address the issues of race, class, and change in the inner city, Anderson says that he is interested in understanding how different cultures delimit their social relationships based on their
interpretations and negotiations of the public spaces of their community. Anderson is especially concerned with the process of gentrification, about which he says the following:

In cities in some parts of the country, a fluctuating movement advances house by house and block by block as sometimes unwitting middle-to-upper-income newcomers struggle to “reclaim” neighborhoods from the poorer residents who have come to be identified with the inner city. Finding it practical to live close to work and play, many pay higher and higher rents for apartments, while others fashionably renovate spacious old houses built by the gentry of an earlier period.  

Gentrification is particularly unsettling because as more and more of the communal space of the inner cities is slowly absorbed by individuals who are primarily upper income and white, the margins of the ghetto must be even more forcefully demarcated. This profound sense of demarcation leaves those who have been excluded in a strangely ambivalent place: They are valued because they are witness to the wealth which surrounds them, and they are feared because they are threats to those who possess this wealth. As Long and Foucault might say, even in the second half of the 20th century, we continue to create “empirical others” who are both “interior and foreign,” and by whom we determine the appropriate “order of things.”

In his newest book, When Work Disappears, William Julius Wilson extends Anderson’s discussion of gentrification. He stresses that a “new urban poverty,” which is becoming epidemic in our society, is leaving more and more people without the means to acquire the goods that have come to define success in America. Because of this, says Wilson, our inner cities have become plagued by crime, gang violence, drug trafficking and family breakups. Wilson concludes that the incredible poverty experienced by many
Americans has acted to “undermine the social organization” of most of the communities in which these people live.

Anderson gives us a striking example of this decline of social cohesion in the inner city in his discussion of the traditional “Old Heads” of urban communities. These Old Heads, says Anderson, were men of “stable means” who were “strongly committed to family life, to church, and, most important, to passing on [their] philosophy.” They “personified the work ethic and equated it with value and high standards of morality.” However, as meaningful employment has become increasingly scarce, drugs more accessible, and crime a way of life for many in the inner city, the traditional institution of the Old Heads has undergone a significant change. Now, for an ever-larger number of young people in these communities, “new Old Heads” are emerging. As Anderson points out, these new “community leaders” are often the product of street gangs who seek to make money quickly and scorn both the law and societal values. As one inner city resident told Wilson:

...I think about how, you know, the kids around here, all they see, OK, they see these drug addicts, and then what else do they see? Oh, they see thugs, you know, they see the gangbangers. So who do they, who do they really look, model themselves after? Who is their role model? They have none but the thugs. So that’s what they wind up being, you know...

It may be argued that this decay of the traditional social organizations of the inner city mirrors what occurred in the island communities of Melanesia. For just as the communal values of the cargoists were overwhelmed by the political and economic agendas of the West, the communal values of many inner city peoples are now being broken down by the same sort of colonial ideology—an ideology which promises a salvific release from the horrors of the ghetto in the same moment that it draws the
boundaries of that ghetto ever tighter. This newly defined process of colonialization has led to a perverse appropriation and revisioning of the notions of the shaman and the sacred that were defined by the peoples of Melanesia. Indeed, an eerie parallel may be drawn between the roles of Melanesian “Big Men,” “ordinary men” and “rubbish men,” and the roles of what Anderson discovered to be urban “top dogs,” “middle dogs,” and “low dogs.” Like the Big Men of the Melanesian cults, the top dogs of the inner city act as intermediaries between the world of the ghetto and the world of the white “wholly other.” Now, though, with the shift from Big Man to top dog, the spiritual mediation of the shaman becomes strictly economic and political:

The way I see it, there’s top dogs, middle dogs, and low dogs. In the neighborhood, right? The top dogs are the guys with the money, dudes with the cars. The majority of them sell drugs. They got big money. They drive Caddies, El Dorados, Rivieras. They selling their drugs in the bars. There’s not many of them that work at regular jobs. They dress casual. Then on the weekends they go on out, they can show off their suits, walk in the neighborhoods. They sell cocaine mostly and heroin. They’re in their late thirties, thirty-six to thirty-eight range. They make big money. They have a little war here and there, when they sell bad stuff; they get their cars shot up. They stand on the corner and some come shooting at them.43

This rethinking of the mediative role of the “shaman” may be linked to a new and very different understanding of sacrality that has emerged in many urban communities. Instead of the sacred being revealed in the materiality of the world, as it was for the peoples of Melanesia, in the inner city, materiality itself has become sacred. The result of this, it seems, is that although the gangs of the inner city have come to develop cults around the goods which are brought by colonial interlopers, these cults are not focused on canned goods, pots and pans and cigarettes, but rather, are oriented around things like team hats and jackets, basketball shoes, expensive jewelry, nice cloths, and cars. And
they are different in another very meaningful way. Where the goods of the Western world were important to the native populations of Melanesia because they were thought to be an expression of divine benevolence, the goods of the inner city are important to the urban poor because they are regarded as an articulation of ownership, as an articulation of the power to emerge from the depths of hopelessness and despair.

As has been the case, though, during our whole, long colonial history, the accumulation of these contemporary goods represents only the illusion of an ownership that would allow one the power to emerge within “civilized” society. Indeed, just as it was during the post-Revolutionary era of Jefferson and Jackson, in the colonial world of late 20th century America, real ownership is being denied to those of the “inferior races.” And perhaps even more disturbingly, in a perverse rearticulation of the great colonial projects of the 19th century, our own 20th century colonialization of the inner city is giving rise to a new version of a dialectics of imperialism. Again, as in the “third world” spaces conquered by 19th century Western colonialists, within the boundaries of our most impoverished urban communities, the white man “enters the dark interior of a tropical land, extracts mysterious remedies, and puts them to the service of Anglo-Saxon civilization.” Thus, what we are now seeing in middle and upper middle class neighborhoods is the children of wealthy parents displaying the same “look” that would ostensibly mark these young people as members of the community of the uncivilized. They wear the same team hats and jackets, the same shoes, cloths and jewelry, even the same gang insignia. The difference, of course, is that the goods of the upper classes truly are a mark of ownership: those who possess them are also the ones who produce them.
As it has always been, one of the inevitable outcomes of the illusion of ownership is violence. Or perhaps more correctly, in relationship to the contemporary inner city, one of the inevitable outcomes of this illusion is the need to act violently. Having faith that the possession of the goods of the white world will allow them to become part of that world, the acquisition and protection of those goods becomes all-important for urban gangs. This is why it is so often the case that the most violent members of gangs are elevated to positions of communal leadership. Indeed, the ability to protect the goods procured by the gang earns those who have this ability a profoundly important sense of respect and prestige from the other gang members. Unfortun-ately, what is often lost as a result of this prestigious gain, is a sense of moral vision. Unlike the Old Heads of the traditional inner cities, who were respected because they “personified the work ethic and equated it with value and high standards of morality,” the new Old Heads of urban cultures create an environment within which a never ending cycle of poverty, disease and loss of identity is perpetuated.

In the end, what is happening in our inner cities is merely one more disturbing expression of the natural evolution of our own colonial ideal—of our American ideal. It is simply a late 20th century narrative telling a story concerning the appropriate “order of things”: Splendor for some, squalor for so many others.
For discussions of the rise of youth violence, see the summary of Alfred Blumstein and J. Erik Jonsson, “Youth Violence, Guns and Illicit Drug Markets,” NIJ Research Review (Library Publications, 1996): “The perception that violence is on the rise is supported by data showing a sharp increase in violent crime among juveniles since the mid-1980’s. Although gender and race account for the differences in involvement in crime, age has become a major factor. Between 1985 and 1992, the number of homicides committed by young people, the number of homicides they committed with guns, and the arrest rate for nonwhite juveniles for drug offenses doubled. These increases appear to be linked to the involvement of juveniles in the illegal drug trade and the availability of guns” (http://www.mninter.net/~publish/gang1.htm); Gail B. Stewart, interviewer, Voices From the Street: Young Former Gang Members Tell Their Stories (Greenhaven Press, 1998); Scott H. Decker and Barrick Van Winkle, Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Rick Landere, Mike Miller, Dee Porter, Gangs: A Handbook for Community Awareness (Facts on File, Inc., 1997); S. Beth Atkin, Gangs (Little, Brown & Co., 1996); Jay MacLeod, Ain’t No Making It (Westview Press, 1987); Michael A. Jones and Barry Krisberg, Images and Reality: Juvenile Crime, Youth Violence and Public Policy (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1994).


Foucault, The Order of Things, p. XXIV.


For one of the best discussions of how the English understood their colonial efforts in Ireland, see Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America (Little, Brown and Company, 1993).


Feagin and Feagin, Racial and Ethnic Relations, p. 201. For excellent discussions of what Ronald Takaki calls the “racialization of savagery,” see Takaki, A Different Mirror and Russell, After the Fifth Sun.


17 Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, pp. 57 and 58.


23 Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, pp. 68 and 69.


25 Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, pp. 84 and 85.

26 Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p. 87.


29 Heilbroner and Singer, *The Economic Transformation of America*, p. 246


33 See especially, Lindstrom, *Cargo Cult*.


44 Decker and Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang*.


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