

On Manliness: Black Masculinity Revisited

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Studies of male behaviors, male ways of being, and identity in the U.S. academy (Connell 2005; Hine and Jenkins 2001; Mansfield 2007; Neal 2005; Richardson 2007) and in the political arena—as with George W. Bush’s 2003 \$45 million budget request to support fatherhood initiatives among faith-based and community organizations that promote involved, committed, responsible fatherhood—suggest that America is concerned with masculinity. In February 2001, President George W. Bush’s budget blueprint on “America’s Priorities” declared fatherhood a “national priority.” The thinking in this declaration was that “. . . fathers factor significantly in the lives of their children. There is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father” (Bush 2001). Black men are no strangers to questions of masculinity, fathering, and national belonging.

Even before Bush’s epiphany, leading black male figures had organized the widely televised Million Man March (MMM) of 1995 less than a thousand feet from the Oval Office (reprising it ten years later in October 2005) to parse the crises around black manhood in America in which fathering, the family, and fathers’ roles figured significantly.

Bush’s epiphany, the marches, the frenzied attention paid to the “down low” phenomenon, and the subsequent demonization of black gay male sexuality continue to offer intriguing points of intersection and reflection on matters of sex, race, gender, and masculinity. The precarious state of black masculinity is laden with racial tensions. And certainly there is a dire need to provide alternative images of black men to counter the media-contrived “images,” in the words of the controversial Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan, “of who and what we really are” (Farrakhan 2005). As black men explore what and who they really are, it is clear that the spiraling gang affiliations and violence, rampant police brutality in black communities, the brutal beatings of Abner Louima and Rodney King, the shootings of Amadou Diallo and Sean Bell, and historic events like the Los Angeles riots and the racially tinged media coverage of Hurricane Katrina point to serious problems between white America and black men.

In the last two decades, an impressive body of work has emerged from scholars on black masculinity and black male sexualities. However, studies about black life, the black family, the black father, and black masculinity by black people have a long and well-documented history. Questions of “manhood” have been under investigation prior to and since emancipation. There are many characteristics and experiences that define black men. Life experiences for all have changed throughout the years, as have the laws and the privileges that people have come to enjoy. Nonetheless, core themes can be found in a diverse array of literature written by and about black men: black men’s personal struggles to attain and define freedom, manhood, and their identity. Perhaps the first literary foray to undertake such themes was an intriguing account of slavery by Gustavus Vassa—pen name Olaudah Equiano—in 1789 with his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*. Critic Cassandra Pybus refers to the author of this narrative as “the most famous black man of the age” in her *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for*

Liberty (2007). We've also read these themes in the writings of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, who, like Equiano, provided insight across time—slavery to post-emancipation—of their personal struggles and sacrifices as black men.

And one of the first systematic and rigorous academic studies on black life—indeed the study that set the tone for much of what sociologists, ethnographers, and others who do race work today—was conducted by W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois, in 1899, wrote *The Philadelphia Negro*. In 1903 he penned *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of the most significant studies of his time (and in our opinion for any time). E. Franklin Frazier would rework his University of Chicago sociology dissertation into the 1939 *The Negro Family in the United States*. These works exposed the physical, mental, and structural conditions impacting black life that were centrally yoked to questions of manliness and manhood. And in the vein of Du Bois, some sixty years later, Jewish scholar Elliot Liebow published *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967), a laudable piece of sociological literature that continues to provide invaluable insights into the lives of black men in America.

Over the following forty years, many more important investigations from the field would emerge. These works took on various approaches—academic, historical, biographical, nationalistic—and were oftentimes and rightfully in direct response to current events. Distinguished poet Haki Madhubuti gave us *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* (1991). The title bespeaks the numerous ruminations and connotations thought and felt by the nation regarding its black male citizenry. One year later, Richard Majors and Janet M. Billson (1992) gave us *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, an intricate look at what and how black men developed coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of pride and identity in the face of the onslaughts of discrimination in employment, housing, and skyrocketing rates of incarceration. And in 1996, Herb Boyd gave us *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America—An Anthology*, a major collection of readings on black men.

These various published interrogations, scholarly and lay, attempted to address the scope of black American masculinity in an America that often spins black men as violent, hypersexualized, or non-men because of their race or sexuality, or both. Certainly, there is a long history of artists, activists, and scholars from a myriad of disciplines who have tackled the apparent conundrum of black masculinity in a varyingly racially ambivalent but more often hostile America. The most notable among them are David Walker, Benjamin Banneker, Charles Chesnut, James Weldon Johnson, Marcus Garvey, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Sam Greenlee, John A. Williams, John Oliver Killens, Malcolm X, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Ishmael Reed, and Nathan McCall. In the last decade, scholars like Marcellus Blount, George P. Cunningham, Dwight McBride, Maurice O. Wallace, Marlon Ross, Philip Brian Harper, Brian Keith, Michael Datcher, Michael Awkward, Robert Reid-Pharr, Anderson J. Franklin, Joseph Beam, E. Patrick Johnson, Essex Hemphill, Mark Anthony Neal, Kevin Powell, and filmmakers like Marlon Riggs, Spike Lee (*Get on the Bus*, 1996, and *When the Levees Broke*, 2006), and Byron Hurt (*Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhyme*, 2006 and *Barack & Curtis: Manhood, Power & Respect*, 2008) have interrogated the origins, significance, hurdles, and complex meanings and nature of black masculinity in America. Very few disciplines and venues—public, private, popular, cultural—have little or nothing to say about the subject. Black masculinity is even

investigated in the comics, as in Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001) and Aaron McGruder's *Boondocks*.

Women, too, have had their say. Frances Ellen Harper Watkins, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Toni Cade Bambara, Darlene Clark Hine, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Marita Golden, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Ann Arnett Ferguson, and Aishah Simmons, to name just a few, have long staked their claims in this "manly territory." And clearly, Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Moore's collaborative effort, *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation* (2006), and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's provocative work, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (2007), all represent but a few of the newest feminist voices on the black masculinity studies scene. Other edited works as well have emerged to disseminate research and critical thought on this seemingly complex and intriguing topic and population. Volumes such as *Progressive Black Masculinities*, edited by Athena D. Mutua (2006), Bryant Keith Alexander's *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (2006), and Devon Carbado's edited volume *Black Men on Race, Gender and Sexuality: A Critical Reader* (1999) are but a few tomes on the thriving academic landscape of black masculinity.

Academic symposia and fora such as the University of Pennsylvania's "Poor, Young, Black and Male: A Case for National Study" (April 2006) and mass media outlets like the *New York Times* article entitled "Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn" (March 2006) have also dealt with issues of race, work, poverty, and media stereotypes of black men in America.

We offer this special issue, *On Manliness: Black American Masculinities*, in hopes of contributing to the discussion in divergent and familiar ways, interrogating, while expanding, the scope of the meanings of "masculinity," "maleness," and "manhood" for black men. This volume is necessary and timely because black men—their sexuality, their riffs on various scripts on American masculinity that frequently collude with sexism, misogyny, gender violence, parental abuse and neglect, and homophobia—continue to be a lightning rod for national hysteria on values, moral decline, fatherlessness, aberrant sexuality, and crime. The tough reality is that one in four black men die violently each year, and one in three black males is either in jail, on probation, or on parole. As the rate of black youth graduating from college is at an all-time high, dropout rates and unemployment among black men over the age of sixteen are also breaking records. In 2005 a heterosexist platform for the Million Man March ran alongside slanted and highly contested coverage regarding black (male) behavior (deemed violent, rapacious, and purloining) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. A 2006 *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial called for the declaration of a national state of emergency for young black men. The cataloguing of such grim realities is precisely what fueled interests and pockets of activity in Chicago and other parts of the United States, as blacks (men and women) prepared to, in their words, answer the call by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan for a second march entitled the "Millions More March" on Washington, D.C. Post-civil rights America has offered a rather bleak landscape of opportunities to a generation expecting so much more for and of their children. Add to these frustrations, the history of black men's own contradictory desires for male and class privilege, and full citizenship and a tradition of radical nationalism critical of the very system they desire recognition from as men (Summers 2005).

In fact, a seemingly enduring preoccupation—maybe even obsession—of the American imagination, the ensuing struggles over the meanings of manhood and manliness in America among black and white men were deftly articulated in the crucible of slavery, in the writings of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. That Douglass would later recognize his struggle over masculinity as tied to women’s rights and gender equality provided a radical paradigm for American manhood during that era—and beyond—although some would argue that such a paradigm is at sea in our times. This special issue, even while taking note of these paradigmatic shifts—some progressive, some retrogressive—rejects a deficit model construction of black masculinity.

As scholars trained across a variety of disciplines, at various ranks within the academy, the perspectives articulated in this volume are greatly informed by feminism and feminist studies on masculinity. As already noted, the groundbreaking works of black feminist scholars have indeed provided fresh insights regarding intersections of gender and race that clear space for considering a range of both heterosexual and homosexual identities, practices, and realities. While a swaggering American masculinity in all its racial contours has always been grist for the proverbial mill—from mythmaking in the movies to litmus tests of strong political figures—cogent, long-view academic analyses of the constructed nature of manhood and masculinity took off with second-wave feminism. The first wave of feminism provided important critiques of patriarchy and set in motion the analyses and political and social gains garnered by second-wave activists and non-activists alike. It can certainly be argued that feminism formally launched masculinity studies in the United States; the social and political gains accrued by women via feminism also impacted, in very real ways, traditional gender roles, sex, and concepts of manhood, fatherhood, and masculinity. And in order to honestly represent diverse and critical discussions of “manliness” or “masculinity,” a perspective that embraces, recognizes, and explores all of these varied notions and constructions of masculinity is imperative.

The proposition that studies of masculinity are, therefore, an outgrowth of feminist studies is undeniable—though some may find it disagreeable; but black masculinity studies owe just as much debt to black studies and its grappling with complicated questions of race and its intersection with class, gender, and sexuality. Its (black masculinity studies) topical currency, as evidenced in books such as Mark Anthony Neal’s *The New Black Man* (2005); bell hooks’s *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003); Scott Poulson Bryant’s *Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America* (2006); J. L. King’s *New York Times* best-selling exploration of black male closeted homosexuality and AIDS, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (2005); Dwight McBride’s *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (2005); Senator Barack Obama’s autobiographical *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (2007); Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (2001); and Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins’s collection, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity* (2001)—just to name a few—have as much to do with popular culture and the oversaturation of black male images in various media marketed globally, as with daunting statistics greatly

informed by that media culture and the rhetoric of crises surrounding black men and boys.

Black men have had a rich, varied, and complex quest for recognition as hegemonically masculine subjects; and their search for *the* definition of black masculinity has been as much a conundrum to themselves as to America. This volume then explores the theoretical, philosophical, literary, popular cultural (sports and hip-hop), juridical, cinematic, religious, social and public policy conceptions, interventions, representations (and self-representations), ruminations, and contemporary manifestations of black masculinity across time (nineteenth through twenty-first century) and exclusively in a U.S. geographical context. As an interdisciplinary collection of new essays on the subject, the scholars assembled here hail from various disciplines across the academy (social sciences, education, religion, philosophy, literature, history, and American studies) and deconstruct and reconstruct the subject of black masculinity from various methodological, theoretical, and conceptual approaches; for these reasons, the theme for this issue is “On Manliness: Black American Masculinities,” that is, masculinity in its multiply, conceived plurality. To that end, the volume also expressly resists a heterosexist approach to understanding gender identity formation, sexuality, and maleness. Indeed, to do so would be to ignore the complexity of black men’s lives, the *lived experiences* of black masculinities.

In the face of the deficit analyses undergirding much empirical research involving black men and black masculinity tied to the “baad” man mythology, as both Thabiti Lewis and Davarian Baldwin take up in essays on popular culture, the essays in the volume also present narratives of poor and working-class black fathers involved in their children’s lives and actively resisting systemic barriers to their attempts to find work to support their families.

The reader will note that half of the volume is comprised of scholars from the Vanderbilt University community, while others hail from across the country. Co-editor Gilman W. Whiting’s idea for a volume on black masculinity emerged out of more than ten years of university-level classroom teaching. In 1995, due in part to his life experiences as a black man, the pandemonium surrounding the O.J. Simpson saga, the national coverage of the first Million Man March, and the imminent release of boxer Michael G. Tyson from an Indiana correctional facility, Whiting created a course at Martin University in Indianapolis, Indiana, entitled simply “The Black Male.” He revisited the topic in 2002, while teaching at Hamilton College in upstate New York, and again in 2004 with a move to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Collaboration between Vanderbilt’s interdisciplinary Program in African American and Diaspora Studies and the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture on comparative masculinity (United States and South Africa, specifically) and religion’s meaning-making impact on men’s lives has made it possible to collect scholarly work on and related to this important topic.

Co-editor Thabiti Lewis, author of the forthcoming book *Ballers of the New School: Essays on Racism and Sports in America*, had a similar path. While working as an editor at Third World Press in 1991, he became acutely aware of the pressing complexity of issues facing black men. During the mid-1990s, while teaching in the St. Louis public schools and writing a column for the *St. Louis American* newspaper, Lewis was unsuccessful in assembling an anthology exploring the relationship between black

fathers and sons. However, in teaching courses in African American literature, he developed a course at Willamette University entitled “Masculinity in the African American Novel.” The focus was primarily twentieth-century African American fiction of authors such as Charles Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Sam Greenlee, and Ishmael Reed. What Lewis discovered is that the same issues that plagued Chesnutt, Du Bois, Johnson, and Greenlee haunt contemporary black men and representations of black masculinity in America. When Whiting invited him to Vanderbilt University to discuss constructions of black men as bad men in contemporary popular culture (focusing on sports and hip-hop), they agreed to work together to bring a volume that explored notions of manliness and masculinity into fruition.

On Manliness: The Essays

The first contribution to the volume is an interview with a pivotal figure in the black literary tradition, the poet, essayist, publisher, and author of *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: The Afrikan American Family in Transition*, Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee). The interviewer, Thabiti Lewis, leads a retrospective discussion of Madhubuti’s best-selling collection of essays. Together Lewis and Madhubuti explore Madhubuti’s vision—past, present, and future—for black men and the black family. The interview is honest and visionary, as Lewis asks Madhubuti to address critiques of his work and to consider the impact of his groundbreaking study on this generation of black men and women. Madhubuti, as always, provides very thoughtful answers to the problems facing not just black men but the black community in the face of white supremacy.

Vânia Penha-Lopes’s “Work, Love, and the Family Involvement of African American Men” tackles men’s roles and responsibilities in the family. The essay examines the impact of men’s job experiences and love relationships on their family involvement, arguing that family involvement is both a function of structural constraints and of men’s interpretations and actions about them. Of paramount importance is how men construe their experiences on the job market and how they feel about the breadwinning ethic.

Tarik Smith enters with an essay, “Using Hip-Hop Music to Bridge the Cultural-Competence Gap: Young Black Males and Juvenile Delinquency.” This contribution takes a look at the roles, definitions, notions, and theories of “masculinity” through the eyes—the lives and experiences—of black adolescent males involved with the criminal justice system. Smith asserts that the use of music therapy (namely Hip-Hop music) could be a missing ingredient in the intervention of juvenile delinquency. Smith argues that such therapy could create a higher level of pro-social and healthy behavior for a young, at-risk population.

Victor Anderson, with wit and compassion, begins his essay, “Masculinities Beyond Good and Evil: Representations of the Down Low in the Fictional Imagination of Alphonso Morgan’s *Son*,” with the question “What is this crazy preoccupation these days with the down low? Why is it usually associated in mass or popular culture with black males? Why do people see a romance story in the illicit love between two white cowboys in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, but when black men do the same thing—namely, sleep with other men while sleeping with women, whether in film, video, or music—they are sinisterly represented as being on the “DL”? What is normative? What is grotesque?” To

answer these questions the tragic life of two “DL” black characters, Aaron and Sha, in Alphonso Morgan’s novel *Son* are explored. Anderson contrasts the concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian masculinities. He concludes by revealing societal contradictions and insensitivities to those who are black, male, and gay.

Tia Gafford examines black masculinity through a literary lens in her essay, “‘Split at the Root’: The Reformation of the Mulatto Hero/Heroine in Frances E. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*.” Here Gafford asserts that Harper’s novel is revolutionary in its questioning of whiteness as a symbol of the elite and its rejection of whiteness via Dr. Latimer and Iola Leroy, who choose not to live as white. Gafford contends that Iola Leroy’s and Dr. Latimer’s embrace of the “one drop” rule and decision to cast themselves into the racial pot of blackness is a radical reversal that sets the mulatto up to “work for the people” and embrace black identity. Harper uses the nineteenth-century conventions of the sentimental novel to address stereotypes that marginalized and excluded African American masculinity and femininity. According to Gafford, Harper’s reconfigured sentimental novel allows for a more developed model that defines consciousness between black men and women, and debunks a very marginal and narrowly constructed ideology of black patriarchy used in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In place of such marginality, Gafford claims Harper envisions a different unfolding of this hero that is explicitly masculine and is directly tied to an equally conscientious black woman.

Anastasia Curwood’s “The Hunter and the Farmer: Jean Toomer’s Model of Masculinity” reconstructs the views of the novelist Jean Toomer (1894–1967), who theorized masculinity as universal and biologically determined. Curwood exposes Toomer as mired in reductive theories about men and women, disregarding gender socialization. For Toomer, the responsibilities of masculinity included making sure that appropriate gender roles governed relations between men and women; gender, unlike race, was not at all fluid and changeable. Curwood reveals that race did matter to Toomer’s conceptions; his loud silence on the subject betrays its importance. Racial anxieties interlocked with gender anxieties in Toomer’s most concentrated writing about masculinity and femininity. Point by point, Curwood unveils Toomer’s notions of masculinity as fairly reductive (men as hunters, providers, more rational, more intellectual; and women as domestic, subservient, irrational, possessing lower critical faculties than men), even for his time. Women’s attempts to break out of these roles were viewed by Toomer as detrimental to society, that is, to patriarchy and masculinity.

Frank Dobson, Jr. has written a convincing essay, “Beyond Black Men as Breeders: White Men and the Commodity of Blackness,” that interrogates white male responsibility and accountability in co-opting or adopting black masculine poise, cool detachment, and the existential alienation associated with black men. Dobson explores this issue through an examination of Clint Eastwood as actor and director. His impetus is to reveal how the appropriation by white men like Eastwood of the style of black men makes clear that black men’s personal and cultural production “can still be bought and sold” by white men. In borrowing nomenclature from Carl Rux and Norman Mailer, Dobson calls these white men—who in their performance of black masculinity both desire and fear the black male body—“White Negroes.” Dobson queries what black men get from this relationship in a way that transcends mere critique. Like Rux and James Baldwin, Dobson demands that white males involved in this appropriation also adopt the

burdens and struggles that produce that style, which means relinquishing power, position, and privilege.

Both Davarian Baldwin, in the commentary section of the volume, and Thabiti Lewis, in the concluding essay, attempt to revise constructions of black men in popular culture and sports. Both scrutinize the contemporary misrepresentations and representations of black men as “baad” men in the American psyche. More specifically, Baldwin’s “Pimps Up, Hoes Down?: The Amazing Misadventures of Blackface Masculinity” takes to task investigative exposés about duplicitous, AIDS-infected, “down low” brothers; the national alarm about a particular brand of hip-hop homophobia and misogyny; and the current framing of black masculinity. Baldwin makes a convincing argument that exposé-style discussions have continually mired a needed conversation about the future of black masculinity within a discourse of “blackface masculinity.” With wit and candor, Baldwin reveals how a veritable minstrel show is enacted where the most canned, marketable, and enticing expressions of black masculine deviance in popular culture stand in for a more pointed conversation about the pervasiveness of an American brand of misogyny and homophobia. In the end, this blackface show is an American production that purposefully racializes dangerous expressions of masculinity as inherently “black,” limits black women to a vision of gender defined by social/sexual subservience to all men, and renders invisible current anxieties around gender relations that could help explain the attractive lure of such a hypermasculine posture for men *across* the color line.

Thabiti Lewis moves along a similar track in his essay, “The Modern Athlete, Hip-Hop, and Popular Perceptions of Black Masculinity,” by deconstructing the evolution of black men in the American psyche via sports culture and music and the profound influence such constructions have upon modern athletes’ self-perceptions as “baad” men. He is critical of how the cool guise or cool posing central to hip-hop is seized upon and shaped by media, professional sports leagues, and leading sports apparel companies to construct bad black men (in a negative sense of the word). The media and marketing constructions suggest that narcissism, questionable values, and poor sportsmanship, as well as a propensity for violence, are black American male provinces. In response to these suggestions, Lewis is critical of how the bad-man motif of hypermasculine, violent, black male bodies is flaunted and sold without question, devoid of being placed in the context of its resistance to oppression, or as a response to, or attempted compensation for, a perceived loss of power, potency, and manhood in the wake of the real and perceived white power that controls their worlds.

By way of conclusion, the volume winds down with a review by literary scholar Dana Williams of Olympia Vernon’s *A Killing in This Town*, a novel that interrogates the legacy of lynching and Tamara Lomax’s review of Byron Hurt’s short documentary film, *Barack & Curtis: Manhood, Power & Respect*. It is our hope that this collection of essays will significantly add to the growing body of work on black masculinity and manliness. We hope that it will expand, challenge, and educate. But more importantly, we intend for this special issue that culls reviews, commentary, interviews, and essays from various disciplines across the academy will illumine the complexity of Black American masculinities as both an academic subject and as lived experiences.