

CHAPTER 1

Critical Black Feminist Intersections

Framing the Issues

An intersection is a place or the point where two or more things meet, cross, or overlap.¹ The word “intersection” pictures precisely how I conceived of this project. Only by crossing between disciplines, allowing various theoretical perspectives to overlap, and acknowledging how multiple social constructions meet at both individual and institutional levels can the lives of feminist Black men, and the complexities surrounding their concrete practices of manhood, be understood.

The notion of intersections or “intersectionality” is also one of the central themes of Black feminist theory. Articulated early on in a statement by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist Boston-based group, intersectionality emphasizes how multiple and simultaneous forms of oppression in society interlock, work together, and transform one another in people’s lives.² Today, feminist scholars in sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, critical legal studies, philosophy, history, and a host of interdisciplinary specialties use the intersectional model of oppression or “intersectionality” to conceptualize their work.³ In the social sciences, the model emphasizes particularly that “no social group is homogeneous, people must be located in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied by those structures, and there are unique, nonadditive effects of identifying with more than one social group.”⁴

In addition to the intersectional model, I combine (a) social, personality, and political psychological perspectives and (b) interdisciplinary

models from critical social theory, sociology, African American studies, and masculinities studies to contribute to a burgeoning area I introduce as Black feminist masculinities studies.

Critical Psychological Perspectives and Assumptions about Knowledge

Critical social theory grapples with central questions “facing groups of people placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice.”⁵ What makes critical social theory “critical” is its commitment to justice.⁶ Thus, a critical social psychologist like me asks, how can psychology be used to facilitate social justice?⁷

Critical psychology is an umbrella term that describes a broad number of politically radical responses to and differences from mainstream psychology. Although critical psychology comes in different forms (e.g., feminist, Marxist, antiracist, Afrocentric, and queer), all forms pay particular attention to oppressed and vulnerable individuals and groups and tend to be interdisciplinary in approach.⁸ Critical psychologists use our research not only to document social injustices but also to promote social change. We intentionally carry out projects in which research and political practices overlap. We also try to ensure that people who are involved in social change have access to our research findings, and that we have some access to their perspectives.

If the goal of critical social psychologists is to create scholarship that transforms society, we must identify processes that explain change and successful attempts at creating equality. Thus, during the planning stages of this project on feminist Black men, the burning question was: what can be learned about feminist Black men’s definitions and practices of manhood that would challenge institutional inequities, while contributing to the viability of African American communities and the construction of a humane and just society?

Mainstream psychology often views scientific knowledge as an accumulation of objective facts, based on an ongoing quest for a universal truth devoid of personal and political interests or biases. Critical psychologists, however, view all scientific knowledge as infused with political interests, and the field of psychology as a value-laden enterprise heavily influenced by the biases of the elite classes.⁹ As critical psychologists, our aim is not to find an alleged “universal truth”; rather, it is to study multiple perspectives, granting legitimacy to some often ignored by mainstream psychology.¹⁰

Bias is unavoidable. Our values shape “the questions we ask, the methodologies we use, and the interpretations we generate.”¹¹ Thus, critical psychologists accept that some form of bias is part of being human. High-quality research requires recognizing our beliefs and assumptions at the start of the research project, challenging them throughout the research process, and reexamining them as part of the research design.¹² To accomplish this task, we must make concerted efforts to remain open to the views of all participants in the research. Instead of trying to forget, deny, or ignore our biases, prejudices, or expectations, we attempt to discover their limitations.¹³ I would add that we should also acknowledge the strengths of such biases, particularly when they serve the interest of social justice. That is what makes us “engaged scholars.”

Examining our biases also pushes us to examine the power imbalances that we, as psychologists, bring to the research environment itself; it exposes our work to a level of scrutiny that mainstream psychology often avoids.¹⁴ Throughout every phase of our projects we must ask, can we put aside what we think we know in order to make room for the unexpected, the counterintuitive, and whatever else we have yet to learn? This attempt at openness encouraged me to search across disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and research methods for insights that could illuminate the lives of feminist Black men.

Multidisciplinary Intersections: Theoretical Influences

The theoretical framework of this research is designed to underscore that what happens to the individual is not merely the result of individual processes. That is, social structures or institutions shape individuals, and individuals simultaneously shape institutions through their social interactions. Therefore, my concern is with how societal institutions shape individual choices and how human agency creates, sustains, modifies, and outright resists prevailing norms and institutions. Both dimensions are important; however, a particular concern is with how individuals choose acts that resist societal institutions and norms and interpret their lives on the basis of such acts.

Gender, in this research, is interpreted as a social structure and a socially constructed category of identity that is embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society.¹⁵ Social constructionists argue that gender is determined not by one’s biological sex but by various institutions within a society that restrict each sex to characteristics and activities defined as feminine and masculine. However, societal institutions shape an individual’s gender identity only

to the degree that an individual conforms to societal values. An individual may also resist and negotiate the gender norms of a society, depending on existing alternatives; thus, one's gender identity can change and is not fixed, but is dynamic—a means of becoming—often characterized by ambiguity, contradictions, and frustration.¹⁶ Race, sexuality, and socioeconomic class are also interpreted as social structures, as well as socially constructed categories of identity, in this research. Also, the present study is influenced by narrative psychological perspectives on identity changes during adulthood, Black feminist critical social theory, and feminist masculinities studies.

Narrative Models of Adult Personality Change

Psychologist Dan McAdam's life-story model of adult identity change serves as part of the conceptual and methodological framework for this project; thus, life history interviews with feminist Black men were conducted, and the resulting narratives analyzed by content and themes.¹⁷ McAdam conceives of *identity* as an "evolving story that integrates a reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future."¹⁸ Each individual creates and revises his or her life story throughout adulthood "as the changing person and the person's changing world negotiate niches, places, opportunities, and positions within which the person can live meaningfully."¹⁹ In this model, each life story contains different features, some of which appear to remain relatively stable over the adult years while others do not. Life stories typically include turning points, pivotal or nuclear episodes, and key scenes (symbolic high or low points).²⁰ These scenes symbolize the way the individual perceives certain life changes or feels that he or she has remained more or less the same person through changing circumstances. Thus, "adults adopt a narrative perspective of their lives, consciously marking their important personality changes throughout the life span."²¹

Contemporary research on identity narratives suggests that the stories that make up these narratives are often fragmented and full of contradiction in ways that do not provide clear, coherent, or immediately meaningful text. The "self," rather than being unified and coherent, is actually "multifaceted, composed of parts sometimes highly interdependent and sometimes not, some conflicting and some reinforcing."²² A person's various identities compete for expression, may be distant or close in salience, or may share meanings such that behavior reflecting one identity will reflect the other.²³ Many identity narratives include abrupt discontinuities that defy fixed sequences or clear developmental stages. Relational models of identity processes that have emerged within

sociology and psychology underscore how intertwined with social, cultural, and historical factors the processes of identity are.²⁴ In this way the new theories depart from earlier identity models that stressed *intrapersonal* factors such as inner conflicts and their resolutions (like those described by Erikson's identity stages: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, and so forth).²⁵ Insisting that every narrative identity is multiple, fragmentary, and unfinished, the new theories shift our attention from assessing personality variables to studying "how historical events, interpersonal relationships, and the life narrative itself are purposeful social co-constructions by both those who experience these events and those to whom they tell their stories."²⁶ Such telling, which includes the interaction between the interviewee and interviewer, constitutes a performance of sorts. In so performing, "we express, display, make claims for who we are and who we would like to be in the stories we tell."²⁷

I see the life narratives I have gathered from the men in this book as their subjective evaluations of events. I do not regard their stories as facts, *per se*, but as the result of a process by which people selectively construct, retrieve, and change their narratives to fit their own self-concepts.²⁸ Centrally, these narratives represent what each man believes is important in his life, and illustrate how these beliefs and perceptions affect his behavior.

If narratives do not depict actual (and accurate) facts, why are they important? Life narratives are worthy of study—with all of their reconstructions and potential biases—because they tell us how people make sense of their lives. No narrator is ever capable of specifying all of the multiple factors responsible for certain changes in his or her life. However, most people can usually recall the events leading to an important change, the methods they used in an attempt to effect that change, the difficulties they have had with these attempts, and the strategies they used to maintain the change they have effected.²⁹ People's "beliefs and attributions regarding specific changes are related to actual, successful changes in their lives as well as their inability to effect certain changes."³⁰ Whether a change involves beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, the psychology of individual change is a complex process involving many motivational, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal factors that act in confluence and facilitate or inhibit change.³¹

In analyzing these men's narratives, I also explore how certain institutional factors facilitate or inhibit the development of a feminist Black masculinity. Adult personality change has been described, in particular, as nonlinear, gradual, subtle, and often frustrating.³² I ask, what are the individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors tied to the various turning points, peak experiences, or frustrating life crises that shape each

man's feminist masculinity? How does he grapple with his own personal contradictions without becoming too discouraged? What individual and institutional factors continue to create difficulty for each man as he attempts to maintain a feminist Black perspective amid a world of contradictory attitudes or behaviors?

Black Feminist Critical Theory

As a guiding frame for my study, I also adopt Patricia Hill Collins's conception of Black feminist thought as critical social theory. Black feminist critical theory represents a dynamic, oppositional system of ideas that responds to actual social conditions that are always changing.³³

Black feminism is frequently misunderstood. It may help to note what it is not. Adding the adjective "Black" to the term feminism does not mean that it is White feminism donned in blackface, for Black women only or Black people only. Rather, there is more than one kind of feminism because culture, class, sexuality, and a host of other experiential factors shape feminist perspectives. Thus, Black feminist thought, as used here, does not assume an essence of Blackness; instead, it understands "Black" as a construct that reflects the intersection of a variety of institutional power relations. Black feminist thought has historically emphasized the intersection of race, class, and gender, highlighting how African American women *and* other social groups are positioned within unjust power relations.³⁴ Black feminist thought also adds complexity to more traditional approaches to social phenomena that focus only on race, class, or gender, by broadening our understanding of how mechanisms of institutional power mesh with personal expressions of power.³⁵

Black feminism comes in different strains, although the strains are more alike than different.³⁶ Yet, with few exceptions, anyone can apply the principles and practices of Black feminist thought.³⁷ My own use of Black feminist thought to analyze the lives of Black men demonstrates its versatility in addressing pressing issues in African American communities. Even though this study emphasizes Black men who are thriving, it indirectly problematizes the "plight of the Black male" and asks in what ways a Black feminist perspective can interrogate popular "endangered Black male" discourse and contribute favorably to related public policy initiatives. My goal is to deconstruct "endangered Black male" discourse by portraying not only the damage caused by systemic injustices but also the healthy and powerful sense of agency that some Black men display in their daily lives through feminist reconstructions of masculinity. Deconstructing "endangered Black male" discourse using "Black feminist male" discourse allows me to delineate individual and institutional

forces that allow Black men to resist and negotiate patriarchal masculinity norms. Addressing these various discourses and practices requires using overlapping concepts in what is currently referred to as masculinities studies.³⁸

Black Feminist Masculinities Studies

This book introduces an area of study that empirically assesses the lives of Black men who are sociopolitical actors. As such, these men continually reconstruct their lives by actively engaging feminist perspectives in their practices of manhood. Their evolving life stories reveal multiple concepts of masculinity traceable to the multiple influences of power and powerlessness that scholars in the predominantly White field of masculinities studies often investigate.

Feminist Masculinities Studies. The academic area of masculinities studies is “a significant outgrowth of feminist studies and is strongly influenced by queer studies.”³⁹ Investigators in this field agree that “masculinity is not monolithic, not one static thing, but the confluence of multiple processes and relationships with variable results for differing individuals, groups, institutions, and societies.”⁴⁰ Therefore, it is currently beneficial to discuss the different kinds of masculinities, rather than a single masculinity. Scholars in this area also investigate masculinity as a system of power relations *among men* as well as a system of power relations *between women and men*.⁴¹ The belief in universal, unchanging, and “traditional” gender identities suggests that social change is not possible between men and women; therefore, one goal of scholars in masculinities studies is to unveil the masquerade of masculinity as “natural” and biologically determined. What is perceived as masculine or manly is socially constructed and affected by historical, cultural, and political processes.⁴²

Feminist masculinities studies, the discipline, examines in particular “how male power and privilege are constituted and represented, explores the effects of men’s masculinity on women and on diverse men, and seeks to foster more egalitarian forms of manhood.”⁴³ Individual studies examine “who has a stake in retaining masculinity as a coherent category, restricting that category to men, and valorizing it as both a goal of individuals and a necessary component of society.”⁴⁴ Some feminists suggest that masculinity can be restructured so that it is not based on men’s dominance over women.⁴⁵ Others believe that the very concept must be abolished through a “feminist degendering movement” that focuses not so much on binary concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality that emphasize who is male and female, a man or a woman, or even gay

or straight, but on “what does it mean to be human” and “what is personhood?”⁴⁶ Despite these differences, most researchers in this area would agree that it is in men’s own best interests to support feminism because most men are themselves harmed in their efforts to attain the ideal characteristics of “manhood” in patriarchal, heterosexist, racialized, and market-driven societies. Revealing how traditionally dominant ideas and practices of masculinity do in fact harm men is therefore a necessary goal of feminist masculinities studies.⁴⁷

African American Men’s Creative Agency. While most of the published social sciences literature on Black men and boys mentions the harmful impact of systemic racism and economic inequalities on their lives, research accounts using “endangered Black male” discourse often represent Black men and youth as merely pawns, victims, and victimizers.⁴⁸ Paradoxically, Black men are viewed as *endangered*, yet remain stereotyped in U.S. society as the most *dangerous*. The creative and active sense of agency many Black men possess is often overlooked for the sensationalized image of Black men as violent, criminal, jobless, and reactionary. I will not attempt an exhaustive review of that literature. Rather, my intent is to counter its narrow focus by examining the combined systemic effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality on Black men in ways that also encourage the documentation of Black feminist male discourse and practices. I introduce and refer to such documentation as Black feminist masculinities studies.

Although the devastating effects of racism and economic disparities must indeed be documented, social science must also point out the damaging effects of sexism and patriarchal values on the lives of Black men and boys. Patriarchal values underlie Black men’s ideas about manhood and undermine progressive ways of coping with racial, economic, and other systemic injustices. I envision Black feminist masculinities studies as a discipline describing complex stories, not only of the enduring effects of systemic oppression on Black men but also of their ongoing creative resistance and resilience, despite systemic barriers. An emerging trend among scholars who study Black masculinities involves acknowledging the impact of dominant notions of White, heterosexual masculinity on Black men and Black men’s agency in creating alternative masculinities.⁴⁹

My specific interest, however, is in alternative Black masculinities that are explicitly *feminist* and which recognize the limitations of reforming masculinity without dismantling patriarchy. Rather than refashioning and repackaging patriarchy for African American men, I argue that Black feminist masculinities studies must analyze the experi-

ences of Black men under patriarchy in order to challenge patriarchy's assumptions and practices for *all* men. In addition, the emerging discipline of Black feminist masculinities studies must examine the history of African American men's resistance to patriarchal values and practices, and its continuity in contemporary times, from both humanities and social sciences perspectives.

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. African American men have supported each historical "wave" of feminism, and scholars have meticulously documented that stance.⁵⁰ However, no published social science studies describe how African American men develop a feminist outlook in ways that encourage institutional change. The few published studies on profeminist men in general provide demographic information about White American men who join profeminist organizations, childhood and adult factors that shaped the feminist development of White British men in antisexist self-help groups, and White left-wing academics in the United States who use a gendered analysis in their scholarship.⁵¹

Most of what we know about feminist Black men comes from their published creative writings, which shed some light on how Black men negotiate feminist masculinity in their lives. A few autobiographical accounts of Black men's development of antisexist consciousness provide details about what a budding feminist Black man experiences as he tries to unlearn sexism, and how a seasoned feminist Black man tries to expand his feminist analyses and practices over time.⁵² Some feminist Black men's writings also make important contributions to Black feminist theory, history, pedagogy, and literary criticism.⁵³ Their writings criticize heterosexist forms of gender oppression and offer insights on how Black men might resist these destructive forces at individual and collective levels. Feminist Black men's writings also detail their activist efforts in such areas as discrimination against Black women in higher education,⁵⁴ the recruitment of Black men within the predominantly White profeminist men's movement,⁵⁵ Black men's coalitions with Black feminists,⁵⁶ rape prevention in African American communities,⁵⁷ and AIDS awareness and discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered sexualities.⁵⁸ In particular, "out" Black feminist gay and bisexual men have taken the lead in exposing and challenging the underlying assumptions of stereotypical, heterosexist, and destructive notions of Black masculinity in their writings.⁵⁹ Scholars in Black feminist masculinities studies can build on this literature in important, innovative ways.

We can analyze the writings of feminist Black men historically and contribute research on the lives of contemporary feminist Black men,

demonstrating (a) the complexity and situational variability of Black men's identities; (b) how multiple social systems work together to create Black gendered identities; (c) which social contexts encourage feminist Black men's identities to emerge and under what circumstances; and (d) how Black men's varying relationships to privilege complicate the experience of their subordination, conformity, and resistance within interlocking systems of oppression. Black feminist masculinities studies should inform *as well as* transform our understanding of Black men, suggesting that pessimism regarding the plight of Black men is not entirely appropriate.

Social policies aimed at creating opportunities for disadvantaged African American men certainly help to alleviate some of the destructive patterns of violence and high-risk behaviors that are associated with some Black men's failure to thrive. However, without challenging the underlying patriarchal assumptions of our raced-gendered, market-driven system, African American men may increasingly displace their fears about themselves and their masculinity into contempt for Black women, resentment toward disproportionately privileged White men, and disdain for other subordinated men (e.g., other men of color, sexually diverse men, and differently abled men). Ignoring patriarchy in the analysis of the plight of Black men creates glaring omissions in the literature, which keeps researchers, policy makers, and community workers revisiting the problem without creating effective, long-term solutions. The intersectional emphasis of this book and its use of African American men's evolving life stories demonstrate how men perceive change, then actually change themselves and institutions as a result of their perceptions.

The Present Study

Life stories suggest that gender behaviors fluctuate over time, that identities are not completely stable, and that narrative methodology is good at exposing the fragility, contradiction, and context-bound aspects of the human experience; surveys and laboratory studies often miss these non-linear human phenomena.⁶⁰ Therefore, in each chapter that follows, I analyze life narratives of feminist Black men, gathered from face-to-face interviews with them, to discover what contexts at the individual, interactional, and institutional level increase the chances that Black men will use feminist perspectives to develop alternative ways of interacting with women, children, and other men. Although the majority of the men in the study are heterosexual, I also examine gay, bisexual, and transgen-

dered feminist Black masculinities to find out how sexuality and gender identity in various social contexts facilitate or inhibit feminist identity development and practices.

The conclusion links theoretically explained observations from each chapter to practical applications. What can feminist Black men's narratives teach us about how to raise boys? How do we recognize feminist Black masculinities and support the different versions of it when we see them, in the interest of broad social change? What are the public policy implications of their feminist activism? Using a critical Black feminist lens that captures the intersectional aspects of Black men's resistance narratives, I disentangle such questions and their intersecting answers without presuming there is one right answer for all men in all places at the same time.