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## **Toward a *Profession* of Feminism**

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Men who actively struggle against sexism have a place in feminist movement. . . . [M]en have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers. When men show a willingness to assume equal responsibility in feminist struggle, performing whatever tasks are necessary, women should affirm their revolutionary work by acknowledging them as comrades in struggle.

—bell hooks

[M]ost profeminist Black men have to prove themselves to feminists and nonfeminists alike. That is, many people in our society are not used to the radical definitions of manhood that profeminist men are choosing to explore; nor are they used to the racial notion that men, particularly Black men, can be feminists. However, scholars have meticulously documented that men have supported each historical wave of feminism, including Black men.

—Aaronette White

Just as Sojourner Truth argued that she, too, was a woman, I argue that Black men also can be feminists, even though they bring different experiences to the table. . . . [T]he question as to whether men can be feminists arises among feminists and nonfeminists alike. I have come to believe that some men can appropriately be called feminists. As an African American feminist woman, I argue the case for men in general who wish to state boldly their advocacy for feminist beliefs and actions. . . . Accordingly, my view is that anyone who believes in the eradication of institutionalized sexism should be welcomed as a feminist in various feminist struggles. I believe this is especially the case if that person recognizes that institutionalized sexism is equally reinforced by institutionalized racism, economic injustice, and homophobia.

—Aaronette White

As the memoir's theoretical underpinning, this chapter engages the complex relationship between race and gender within the feminist thought of black women and men, particularly related to my classroom practice. I employ both the terms "womanist" and "black feminist" to reference it and to identify my standpoint in this book. Beginning with a discussion of these highly distinctive terms, I do not assume that they are interchangeable. Related to black women's critique of sexism, each term has its own distinct history and epistemology. Narrating the development of my feminist consciousness, I find both terms strategically enabling.

### To Be a Womanist and/or Black Feminist Man?

Many years ago, as a graduate student studying black feminism at NYU, I read in the opening pages of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* Alice Walker's definition of a *black feminist* with intense personal interest. For me, when Walker conceived the term "womanist" to distinguish a black/feminist of color, she opened up a strategic space full of possibility for *black male* profeminists. With its emphasis on the humanity of all people—across gender difference—I found in womanist thinking an ideological and political space to identify myself as a black man supporting feminism. Moreover, while not explicitly stated, its visionary gender-inclusive politics appears expansive enough to embrace "transgender" identity. As Patricia Hill Collins critically delineates in the insightful essay "Womanism and Black Feminism," even as Walker names a standpoint of female autonomy particularized to black women, she "aspires to a universal meaning of *womanist* that transcends particular histories, including that of African-American women" (Hill Collins 2001, 35).

However, Walker's pronouncement in the early 1980s has provoked much debate particularly with regard to sexuality among gender-progressive black women as a signifying difference between "womanism" and "black feminism." Some heterosexual womanists have ignored Walker's view of sexuality as something that transcends the boundary of heterosexuality (as in "womanist": a woman who also "loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (Walker 1983, xi). With forthrightness, Hill Collins directly addresses the issue related to three major concerns of black women having to do with religion, race, and black male gender allegiance. "The relative silence of womanists on this dimension of womanism speaks to many African-American women's continued ambivalence in dealing with the links between race, gender, and sexuality, in this case, the 'taboo' sexuality of lesbianism. . . . [T]he visibility of White lesbians within North American feminism overall directly conflicts with many Black women's article of faith

that homosexuality is a sin. . . . Many African-Americans define Black feminism as being exclusively for Black women and as rejecting Black men” (Hill Collins 2001, 37, 39, 40). In closing, Hill Collins asserts that antiseparatist arguments made by noted womanists Shirley Williams and Geneva Smitherman are, indeed, valid. They assert that a separatist agenda for black feminists is counterproductive to the welfare of black communities. They are silent on the controversy surrounding sexuality. Understanding the sexual politics that separate womanists from black feminists, I hold to the integrity of Walker’s standpoint against heterosexism. Homophobic nationalism was clearly *not* her intention in conceptualizing a personal and political standpoint for black female autonomy.

Progressive black feminists focused on men and feminism—like bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Aaronette White, among others—have boldly spoken out for gender inclusiveness in the struggle to end sexism and the oppression of all women. They gave me the courage to pursue a radical antiheterosexist relationship to feminism. I have embraced the *pro-black* thinking found in both womanist and black feminist thinking. As is the foundation of my pro-woman(ist) professorship, I am committed to a politics of gender inclusiveness in feminism—with respect to differences—as the framework for progressive feminist movement across boundaries of race, class, and sexuality. A longtime ally to women and men in struggle against patriarchy, I reject any tie to race, religious, and/or gender loyalty supporting women’s liberation invested in heterosexism and homophobia.

In 1998, I published an essay entitled “To Be Black, Male, and Feminist: Making Womanist Space for Black Men on the Eve of the New Millennium.” My aim in writing this piece was to situate contemporary black male advocacy of feminism within the historical context of black women *and* men’s pro-womanist struggle against gender and racial oppression:

We [must] resist the power of patriarchy that would have us believe we are more powerful because we can exercise power over women. Such male supremacist thinking is particularly dangerous for black men precisely because our history in the United States has been about the racist obliteration of our manhood. Is our attainment of patriarchal power through the oppression of women any less insidious than racist white people’s perpetuation of a system of racial oppression to dehumanize us? Many of us have become so obsessed with fighting racism as a battle for the right to be patriarchal men that we have been willing to deploy the same strategies to disempower black women as white supremacists have employed to institutionalize racism. (Lemons 1998b, 45)

Black men embracing womanism/feminism, however, is not simply a matter of gender and racial solidarity enjoined at the discursive level alone. Whether we refer to ourselves as *pro-womanist* or *pro-feminist*, black male feminism must continually define itself in relation to the activist history of black women and men against (hetero)sexism and racism. In “Ain’t I a Feminist?” Aaronette White poses a critical question: “[W]hy would a Black man advocate for change that would deny him his patriarchal piece of the pie?” (2001/2002, 29). It is a question with personal and political resonance for every black man in a culture of male supremacy, where *all* men (in spite of race, ethnicity, and/or class) benefit from being a “man.” With this question in mind, in this chapter I seriously ponder the question not only to flesh out the social self-transforming benefits I have experienced teaching against male supremacy, sexism, and heterosexism as a pro-feminist professor, but also to pinpoint its effects as an agent of personal self-healing in my life. Crafting pro-feminist pedagogy of antiracism in the college classroom, most specifically, I contextualize its complexities within historical and contemporary interpretation. Historicizing black men as professors of feminism enables me to correct the myth that “among men [it] is the cultural property of White middle-class men . . . probably due to the fact that feminist White men are formally organized . . . and have greater access to various print media sources than do feminist men of color” (White 2001/2002, 28). Without the benefits of formal organization, networks, and publishing resources, black men advocating feminism in and outside academia have begun to make our voices heard.

While all men stand to benefit from feminist self-transformation, for black men the struggle against the history of white supremacy necessarily “colors” the way we view feminism. Racism in the past and present makes a profound difference in how we must reconceptualize feminism as an ideology of healing in our lives. “Black” in the phrase “black, male, and pro-womanist/feminist” is not simply an adjective of racial distinction—it embodies a constellation of differences. What shifts, moves, and transmits across distance and time in the difference that race signifies in black men’s advocacy of feminism cannot be reduced to a trendy expression of gender consciousness; so much more than this is at stake for we committed black male gender progressives who call ourselves “womanists” and/or “black feminists.”

### Action Speaks Louder than Words (or Feminist Labels)

Whether a black man should be allowed to call himself a feminist is a bone of contention for many black women feminists and for black male

detractors of feminism, but for differing reasons. Joy James, for example, in *Transcending the Talented Tenth* (1997), sounds a cautionary note about the efficacy of black male pro-feminism when she complicates the women's rights activism of W. E. B. Du Bois as he characterizes it his autobiographical writings. James points to "nonspecificity and erasure in Du Bois's profeminism" in the representation of black women's political agency (James 1997, 53). She says, however, that "we can strategize for a gender progressivism that unpacks this legacy to transcend the limits of Du Bois's profeminism. Doing so requires addressing the profeminist politics in the writings of present-day progressive intellectuals. *Given the racial and sexual biases that inform our concepts of political, intellectual, and moral ability, it is unsurprising that black male intellectuals intentionally or inadvertently reproduce sexist thought*" (56; emphasis added).

James praises Manning Marable's essay "Grounding with My Sisters," a pro-feminist rereading of the black liberation struggle: "Although increasingly we find similar writings by black male profeminists, Marable's 1983 text was one of the earliest statements of such politics" (James 1997, 58). A germinal chapter in his book *How Capitalism Undeveloped Black America* (1983), "Grounding with My Sisters: Patriarchy and the Exploitation of Black Women" is, indeed, an exemplary text in which a black male historian critiques sexism in the history of gender politics in the black liberation struggle. James offers an instructive note for black men's conceptual rendering of male feminism (no matter how well intended), particularly regarding black women's intellectual, political, and activist histories. Representations of black women that substitute the history of political agency they achieved for a portrait of "black female victimization offer problematic profeminist politics" (James 1997, 59). James's historical and contemporary critical perspective on black male pro-feminism is well founded and invaluable for understanding its pitfalls. Even as gender progressives, we black men professing feminism must be continually self-critical of our own gender, intellectual, and political motives as allies of black women—not only in word, but in deed. At the same time, we must be willing to place our pro-feminist professions on the line, justifying what we *say* and *do* to advance feminist movement *when and where* black women are concerned. Moreover, we must speak to its opponents (male *and* female) inside (and outside) black communities.

Promoting the viability of feminism in black communities, Marable calls for an ideological shift away from the historically masculinist agenda of black male liberationists and toward a liberatory vision of freedom reconceived in the feminist "wisdom" of black women: "Black male liberationists must relearn their own history, by grounding themselves in the wisdom of their sisters. . . . The underdevelopment of Black America will end only when Black men begin to seriously challenge and uproot

the patriarchal assumptions and institutions which still dominate Black civil and political society" ([1983] 2001, 120, 146). Not only was Marable one of the first contemporary, gender-progressive black men to document sexism in the history of black liberation struggle, he was also among the first to speak against black male opposition to feminism. He cites the black sociologist Robert Staples as one of the leading *antifeminist* black male voices of the 1970s: "[F]ew Black sociologists writing about the Black woman have been more consistently wrong than he has" (138). While Staples was not the only black male (or female) voice heard during the time, his fervent opposition spawned the "black sexism debate" based on an acerbic article he published in the *Black Scholar* (March/April 1979). Entitled "A Response to Angry Black Feminists," it was nothing less than a diatribe against the feminist writings of Michele Wallace and Ntozake Shange. Revisiting the debate on black sexism in light of the ongoing resistance to feminism in black communities today, I wrote my own critique of black male sexism in "A New Response to 'Angry Black (Anti)Feminists'" (Lemons 1998a, 274).

Considering the long-standing accusations of black males against feminist black women, what are some of the accusations pro-feminist black men might incur from antifeminist black males (and from some black women feminists)? Based on some of the attacks incurred by black feminist women, we are generally *guilty* not only of the same crimes against race and gender, but of sexuality as well. To begin with, to its detractors a *black* man speaking and acting in feminist ways is a betrayal of racial loyalty. Secondly, a *black man's* speaking and acting in feminist ways constitutes gender heresy. To add fuel to the fire, the traitorous attitudes and behaviors of a pro-feminist black man go against the heteronorms of black masculinity. Thus, as stated, any black male who embraces feminism is not a man. If not a man, then what is he? To the *antifeminist* black male, he is a *woman*. In this gender-reductive equation—neither a gay, nor a straight, nor a bisexual man professing feminism can be a man, in the heteronormative, *antimale-feminist* definition of it. In vulgar sexist and misogynist terminology, he is a "bitch."

Occupying the same ideological position as Stephen Heath, in terms of some black women's gender-separatist politics, a pro-feminist black man is an *impossibility*. It is, as noted, a contradiction in terms bound up in racist and sexist ideas of black manhood. Quite legitimately, some of the same questions confronting a white man's profession of feminism should be applied to the motives of a black man, or of any other man of color. Is black male feminism simply another form of male appropriation? As women and men from different race and gender backgrounds have questioned (and continue to question) men's motives for feminist allegiance, black men's feminist profession must continue to be interro-

gated—but not simply dismissed or negated because we possess no racial privilege. Aaronette White has noted, “Most profeminist Black men have to prove themselves to feminists and nonfeminists alike” (2001, 5). In a culture of racism and sexism, white men who profess pro-feminist sensibility have achieved a level of credibility that gender-progressive black males have not. This phenomenon exists because public outlets, media, and publishing resources for black men’s feminist voices have only recently opened up. Is there any wonder, as White suggests, that “[m]any people in our society are [still] not used to the radical definitions of manhood that pro-feminist men are choosing to explore, nor are they used to the racial notion that men, *particularly Black men, can be feminists*” (5; emphasis added). In defense of male feminism, she astutely points to the record of male participation in “each historical wave of feminism, *including Black men*” (5; emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> White male scholars have recorded the history of white and black men’s involvement in the feminist movement, especially during the rise of the movement for woman suffrage in the nineteenth century. According to Devon Carbado, “[F]eminist discourse about men and feminism is, by and large, a discourse about white men and white feminism” (1999a, 418). Similarly, as the history of black feminism has documented, female participation in the feminist movement has been focused on white women.

In truth, until the late 1980s, on the heels of a black male, anti-feminist backlash against the feminist writings of Ntozake Shange and Michele Wallace, few contemporary black men publicly supported feminism. Not since the nineteenth-century gender/race debates about woman suffrage and Negro suffrage had so much controversy arisen about black people and feminism. Maintaining the defensibility of feminist black men in “Ain’t I a Feminist?” Aaronette White argues “that Black men also can be feminists, even though they bring different experiences to the table. . . .” (2001/2002, 28). For White, the critical test of identification resides in the assertion of a belief “in the eradication of institutionalized sexism” (28). Anyone who espouses this belief “should be welcomed as a feminist in various feminist struggles” (28). In the tradition of black feminist women’s historical critique of multiple oppression, her qualifying statement about the interrelationality of domination reaffirms the idea of feminism as a gender-inclusive and racially inclusive politics of struggle. White asserts, “I believe this is especially the case if that person recognizes that institutionalized sexism is equally reinforced by institutionalized racism, economic injustice, and homophobia” (28). It is the radical assertion of gender and racial inclusiveness in black feminist thinking that opens the door for “anyone” to embrace feminism, whether or not he or she chooses “feminist” as a self-identifying label.

In the introduction to *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), bell hooks (addressing the need for making feminist thought accessible to the masses) invites us to “come closer” to feminism: “Come closer. See how feminism can touch and change your life and all our lives. Come closer and know firsthand what feminist movement is all about. Come closer and you will see: feminism is for everybody” (2000, x). As part of the foundation for my defense of black male feminism, in the spirit of the universal appeal of Alice Walker’s concept of black feminism I advocate the necessity of womanist education to end domination for all people. The possibility of womanist thinking in the lives of black men is enormous. One such example can be found in Rudolph Byrd’s womanist adaptation in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (2001). As an imaginative reconceptualization of her vision in male terms, he looks to the iconic figure of Zora Neale Hurston’s “High John De Conquer.”

## New Voices, New Direction

In the tradition of John: A mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the abolition of emasculating forms of masculinity; *a mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the abolition of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideological traps.* (Emphasis added)

—Rudolph Byrd

In the prologue to *Traps*, Rudolph Byrd, one of its coeditors, poses a germinal question toward articulating the liberatory possibilities of black male pro-feminism: “What would it mean for Black men to be in the tradition of John? If we chose to reclaim this tradition, and adapt it to meet our very modern circumstances, how might our lives, the lives of others, and the communities we share with others be transformed?” (2001a, 5). Rather than debate whether men can be feminist, I position this question as a pivotal point of departure in my black-male-feminist defense. First, it means openly affirming any black male espousing a gender-progressive view of masculinity linked to feminist self-transformation. Secondly, it means support for any black male advocating feminist education for the eradication of all forms of domination. Black men embracing feminism, publicly claiming its liberatory benefits in their lives, are rewriting the script of heterosexist black masculinity mired in homophobic machismo.

Books, edited collections, and articles on the subject of pro-feminist black men began to appear more frequently in the mid-1990s, and they

contested black male analyses of racism void of its relation to sexism, heterosexual male privilege, and homophobia. These works have opened up pro-womanist/feminist space for black men to dialogue about feminist possibilities in their lives, creating a radical discourse of black male recovery. Rejecting the pre(script)ions of heteronormativity and homophobic notions of masculinity that would have us believe that feminism is a racist strategy aimed to emasculate all black men, we are free to reimagine ourselves as allies of all women in feminist movement. In the process, we end the hold of patriarchy over our lives. We end the grip of heteromasculinist thinking about what it means to be a man. In particular, several recent edited collections have signaled the increased appearance of gender-progressive voices of black males establishing a foundation for pro-feminist discourse by black males on gender, race, and sexuality. The new works include *Representing Black Men* (ed. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, 1996), *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (ed. Devon W. Carbado, 1999), and *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (ed. Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 2001). *Representing Black Men* was one of the first contemporary edited volumes by black men on black men in “dialogue with feminism(s)” focusing on gender and sexuality. It includes Michael Awkward’s widely anthologized, groundbreaking essay on black-male-feminist identity: “A Black Man’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism.”

*Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* continues to define the project of black male progressive thinking by black males on the relationship between “engendered contemporary racial discourse” and sexuality. About the book’s agenda Carbado declares, “My hope is that this volume will inspire Black men to take up anti-patriarchal and anti-heterosexist positions as they engage in antiracist politics. This volume is dedicated to black community building across differences” (1999a, 12). Carbado’s gender analysis of race and sexuality related to feminism provides an incisive framework to introduce and conclude the impressive list of his contributors. In the introduction, he rightly credits black feminists for having transformed black antiracist discourse through their critical insight on gender and sexual oppression. He notes black heterosexual men’s silence on these subjects as the primary purpose for his conception for a collection of essays about them. Citing what he perceives as the key reasons for the silence of heterosexual black males on gender and sexuality in antiracist discourse, Carbado builds a convincing case for the necessity of black men’s pro-feminist profession. He attributes four reasons for black antiracist silence on gender and sexuality: “1) the gendered construction of Black racial victimhood, [a by-product of] *intentional and functional sexism [sic]*; 2) the heterosexist construction of

Black victimhood; 3) the antiracist normalization of hetero-male identity; and 4) the linguistic limitations of identity terminology—that is, the extent to which race, gender, and sexuality operate as distinct identity signifiers; each linguistically submerges the others” (3).

Arguing against the “compartmentalization” of struggle, Carbado decries its formulation as rooted in a separatist ideology that contributed to a failure of political mobilization: “Black civil rights efforts often are not connected to women’s civil rights efforts, which often are not connected to gay and lesbian civil rights efforts” (3). While Carbado does not claim that the essays in this volume constitute a feminist text (though many of the contributors do identify themselves as feminist or write from that perspective necessarily), he clearly couches them within an extended argument around the issues that would shape its contents. In “Straight Out of the Closet: Men, Feminism, and Male Heterosexual Privilege” (the epilogue), focusing mainly on what he conceives as the project of the black-male-feminist critic, he acknowledges Michael Awkward and Luke Harris’s theoretical work on black-male-feminist criticism. Noting the critical import of self-reflexivity in any black male profession of feminism, Carbado points to it as the thematic center of Awkward’s essay, in which Awkward “suggest[s] that Black male feminist acts must begin by interrogating what it means to be a Black man in a gendered and racialized social context. That is, Black men should be self-referential, examining and being critical of the ways in which they benefit from androcentric norms” (Carbado 1999b, 359).

As much as he is concerned about theorizing the aims of feminist criticism articulated by black men, Carbado is even more concerned about the privileges inherent in the social construction of (male) heterosexuality. In several key sections of the epilogue, Carbado (drawing on the antiracist/antisexist work of Peggy McIntosh) defines and identifies male and heterosexual privilege through lists he creates. It is, however, the forty-one-point list he formulates on heterosexual privilege (440–42) that provides an insightful experiential base for identifying heteronormative behavior. Carbado moves beyond just identifying male and heterosexual privileges and challenges the reader to act against them: “My purpose in constructing the ‘identity privilege’ lists is to suggest that identity privilege should be self-referentially contested. We have to remake ourselves if we are to remake our institutions. We cannot hope to institutionalize our political commitments unless we localize our politics” (442–43). Just as Michael Awkward’s germinal essay “A Black Men’s Place in Feminist Criticism” should be required reading on the problematic of black male feminism, for anyone (black males in particular) investigating the racialized politics of gender and sexuality in the context of heterosexual privilege Devon Carbado’s essay is indisputably necessary reading.

While they were not linked directly to a pro-feminist/womanist agenda, new gender-progressive works on black masculinity by black men emerged in the 1990s. The complex interrogation of black masculinity significantly enlarges the critical range of studies related to black men, particularly as they seek to demystify the myth of black machismo and the monolithic image of black manhood. There is a glaring absence of the subject in the history of U.S.-dominant cultural readings of masculinity (as related to white male identity), and these new works embody the work of black male gender progressivism. They include *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996) by Philip Brian Harper, Maurice O. Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (2002), and *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (2004) by Marlon B. Ross.

According to its coeditors, Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* “is the first anthology that historicizes the writings by African American men who have examined the meanings of the overlapping categories of race, gender, and sexuality . . .” (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001, xiii). While calling into question the racial grounds of *Men in Feminism* (one of the earliest critiques of pro-feminist male identity), Byrd and Guy-Sheftall maintain that “[t]he first imperative [of *Traps*] is to contest and dispel the notion that African American men have not supported nor have had any engagement with feminism” (xiv). They correct the erroneous claim that white men were the only long-standing male advocates of women’s rights. What makes *Traps* so powerful as a self-proclaimed, feminist-identified text relies upon two things: (1) Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s coeditorship as a black woman feminist (considering her record of publications and commitment to black gender-progressive politics) and (2) Rudolph Byrd’s concept for a model of radical black masculinity based upon a mythic figure in African American folklore—“High John the Conqueror.” As stated earlier, Byrd begins *Traps* with a prologue that defines “a mode of masculinity” in “the tradition of John.” Enumerating the attributes of the tradition, he articulates seven characteristics to delineate it. Many of its qualities directly echo those Alice Walker conceives as typical of a feminist of color.

The tradition of John promotes “a mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the liberation and survival whole of black people.” It is characteristic of a “mannish[ness]”—“[o]ften referring to bodacious, defiant, willful, and risky behavior, as in ‘He’s smell himself’ or ‘You trying to be grown.’” Similar to the sexual politics that defines the vision of a womanist, in this mode of masculinity there is an acknowledged affinity for the “Spirit.” Love is a key element in men’s relationship to other men “sexually and/or nonsexually.” There exists a love of women “sexually and/or

nonsexually.” A man in the tradition of John “loves children, ancestors, and difference [itself].” Moreover, he is a lover of “creativity, song, and dance.” He is “free, as in ‘I ain’t worried about that’ . . . [c]ommitted to coalitions, but capable of independent action. Nonviolent, but capable of self-defense.” The mode of masculinity “John” represents is anchored in an impressive list of personal and social values, including “tenderness,” “justice,” “freedom,” and “peace.” The thing that most defines the radical nature of the tradition of John is its standpoint on the experience of multiple oppression (Byrd 2001a, 1–2). What ties Byrd’s imaginative and visionary rewriting of the black masculinity script to the projects of *Representing Black Men* and *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* is that all the editors would generally agree that the tradition of John offers a revolutionary “mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the abolition of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideological traps” (Byrd 2001a, 2)—traps that have kept us bound to the falsehood of black machismo, I would add. Convincingly, Rudolph Byrd imaginatively envisions a “mode of masculinity” embodied in the tradition of John that not only is the masculine complement to the womanist vision of Walker, but also offers black men a discursive space to reimagine themselves—beyond the bounds of their past.

### Transgressing the Religious Boundaries of My Past

Telling students I was a preacher, an ordained “elder” in a black Pentecostal church, was critical for the success of the pedagogy I practiced. I revealed it not simply as a point of interest but as way of allowing students to come to an understanding of the impact of religious conservatism in my struggle to embrace progressive notions of gender and sexuality. Some students would refer jokingly to my “preaching style” in the classroom. For many years, I struggled to make the antiracist pedagogy of black feminists emotionally and spiritually relevant to students in my classes. It did not represent a veiled attempt to proselytize but rather a strategic opportunity to stretch the boundaries of intellectual inquiry—particularly for students interested in education for self-recovery. Aaronette White’s concept of feminism enabled me to understand that in black feminist vision of holistic teaching, the secular and sacred are rooted in the inherent value of the whole being, in being well. According to White, “Feminism is a spiritual response to how one should treat women, other men, and children.”<sup>2</sup>

Embracing feminism (conceived by black women) as a spiritual response to domination ran counter to my religious upbringing. I grew

up serving and teaching in black Pentecostal churches most of my life. I did not grow up learning about feminism. Conceptualizing feminism as a spiritual response dismantles the myth that spiritual power is patriarchal, ordained as the province of males only. Yet, the simple but deeply moving definition of feminism Aaronette White offers above implicitly embodies principles of human conduct I learned as a child in church. Even in the midst of church teaching rooted in patriarchy, I learned the meaning of love, faith, and compassion. Today, I practice feminist thinking founded upon these ideals—not those predicated upon male supremacy.

I situate my profession as a pro-feminist educator in the tradition of feminist black women and men (including Frederick Douglass and Alexander Crummell) who fashioned themselves as “preachers” of human rights. Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Julia A. Foote, and Nannie Burroughs—all professed a providential calling in support of black people’s humanity, rights for black women, and rights for women of all races and classes. According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, these black women represent “important foremothers for a cadre of contemporary womanist theologians” (Guy-Sheftall 1995, 51). Moreover, having long ago established an ideological link between feminist political struggle and spiritual vocation in the service of human rights, they secured a historical foundation for the academic and spiritual *callings* I have answered.

In my struggle to teach black feminist antiracist studies, I promote (1) a love for education as the practice of social justice; (2) faith that pedagogy founded upon it will transform students’ social consciousness; and (3) compassion for students’ self-recovery process, for many of them confront internalized wounds of racism and (hetero)sexism. The prime goal of the memoir-writing classes I teach is to show that education can be liberatory for the mind, body, *and* spirit. bell hooks’s belief in holistic learning for self-actualization has deeply influenced my vision of antiracism in the classroom. Writing about students’ desire for holistic education, hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*: “There are times when I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think that want therapy from me. They want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (1994, 19). As early as I can remember, even as conservative as my religious upbringing was, the church was a place of personal affirmation, a sanctuary, a haven. As I grew older, it

became a place of emotional refuge from experiences of racism and the mean-spirited black boys who tormented me in junior high school. In church, I received awards for being different from boys like them. There, most adults (particularly older ones) praised my quietness, politeness, intelligence, and God-fearing obedience. For all of the ways being a “church boy” contributed to my outsider gender status at school, the black churches I grew up in provided me with a spiritual foundation rooted in gender and racial compassion. As far back as I can remember, at the church I attended from age six to sixteen, my grandmother and other “mothers” of the church told me that I would grow up to be a “preacher.” In the Gaines Street Church of God (that many years later my father would pastor), I served as a Sunday school teacher and superintendent, choir member, and performer of any other duty bestowed upon me. In the eyes of the small congregation, my service was all about preparation for the day I would preach the gospel. Suffice it to say, the “saints” adored me—in spite of my vocal (but always polite) resistance to the prophetic calling they had lovingly imposed upon me. The older I got, the more the church became a refuge from black boy culture in junior high school *and* the reality of domestic violence at home.

At the all-black elementary and junior high schools I attended—it was still years before education became integrated in my hometown—life was torturous most of the time. Much of what being a part of that culture represented was considered sinful in church: the church prescribed no participation in “worldly” activities (movies, games, any socially questionable outings) and no relationship with girls that could possibly compromise its religious values. As a church kid, I stayed to myself. However, being a “church boy” at school was a major negative in black boy school culture. I tried to survive in it, but it took a devastating toll on my gender self-esteem. I was not a normal boy; I did not do things other boys did—play ball (of any sort), swear, “feel” up girls. So these were the origins of the “black boy outsider identity” imposed upon me. Yet being a boy outsider had as much to do with the experience of violence at home as did my failing the test of hetero-boy-masculinity at school. Over the course of a decade (from the time I was six to the time I was sixteen), my younger brother and I witnessed my father’s violent abuse of our mother. In the mind of defenseless children, living with his abuse of her was like taking the eye-blackening, nose-bloodying, hard-knuckled punches ourselves.

To counteract the psychic blows of witnessing the violence my father inflicted upon our mother I withdrew into the world of happy white families on television—*Ozzie and Harriet*, *My Three Sons*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Brady Bunch*. In the all-white world, the *good* white father represented in these sitcoms never resorted to physical abuse at home. TV land also

became another place of escape from boy culture. For the most part, until I left home for college at seventeen, home was a self-imposed prison. Outside of school and church-related activities, I had little social interaction with boys my age—black or white. Growing up in a home of family violence further excluded me from experiences of “normal” boyhood. As the older of two sons, I witnessed the abuse in ways my brother did not. I lived in paralyzing fear that any one of the violent episodes would lead to our mother’s death. I had no time to be a boy; I had to be a witness. Even when having become physically strong enough as a teenager to combat my father’s abusive behavior, I was so afraid of his power as a man that no physical force of my own could intervene against his violent temper. All I could do was witness—silently. I could have told someone but never did. I never told anyone—it was our family’s shameful secret. When not in school or at church, I was at home. I had to be. I had to be at home when it happened—when he killed her.

Growing up, I remember there being few boys my age in church before I started going to White Lily, the Pentecostal church my mother joined when I was sixteen. The kids I grew up with before this time were girl cousins—a slew of them. Until we were preteens, our gender difference was not an issue with them or with me. Until junior high school, we did not think much about girl/boy dichotomies. We simply loved being with each other, doing a lot of dumb kid stuff. In church we were just a big clan of kid cousins, brothers, and sisters—singing, performing plays for Christmas, reciting poems and passages from the Bible for Easter. At sixteen, my brother and I left the Church of God to go with our mother, who had gotten “saved” (given her life to Christ) at White Lily (across town).

Away from my girl cousins for the first time in my life, I began to retreat further into a TV world of white sitcoms (where nothing really bad ever happened to white people) and the world of a new black Pentecostal church, which featured shouting, speaking in unknown tongues, and fiery preaching from the pulpit. With it came also a community where dogmatic prescription was everything—particularly about outer appearance. Females could not wear pants, lipstick, nail polish, or short dresses or skirts. There was to be absolutely no liquor drinking or cigarette smoking, and no attendance at movie theaters. More noes than yesses. The dress code for males was not as rigidly policed as the one for females, but the same legalism applied to both sexes when it came to moral conduct. While in small ways I protested this new hyperreligious experience, church continued to be a place of hiding from the life of black males my age. At White Lily, there were also very few black males my age. It did not matter. The church on Gaines Street had been a haven from the punitive imposition of black masculine culture in my life, and

what counted most was that the new Pentecostal church also functioned as a sanctuary for a male outsider like me.

Apart from its rigid dress and moral codes, in the Pentecostal church there were few explicitly heteromasculinist rules to follow—which was ironic, considering it was steeped in patriarchal dicta. As long as it was kept in the closet (and the church unaware of it), any man could be a “nonpracticing” homosexual. In fact, there exists a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on homosexuality in many black Pentecostal churches. From the congregation, to the choir, to the pulpit—one’s sexuality only becomes an issue if you choose to make it one. I grew up having internalized, oppressive religious beliefs on sexuality rooted in belief in the evils of sex (outside marriage) and homosexuality. These were not healthy attitudes toward sexuality, and I look back on the formative years in church (before the age of eighteen) as the most harmful period of religious indoctrination in my entire life. I learned that too much education would lead one away from the church, that sexual desire was evil, that women were inferior to men, and that homosexuals and lesbians were damned. I was a “church boy” growing up in a black religious, sexually repressive environment. But upon the advent of school integration, I was bused to a high school that was mostly white, and as a “black” student experiencing the subtle (and overt) racial inculcation of white supremacy, I adapted. I was a black boy forced to fit into both cultures. Having grown up in an all-black heteromasculinist culture until age fifteen, ill equipped to pass the black male test, I rejected black masculinity as a punitive form of gender identity. By the age of eighteen, I was also a black boy who had experienced ten years of domestic violence. Like the black male protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s celebrated novel, I had come to see myself as an “invisible man.” While I quickly learned to *pass as a smart white student* in high school (as a black student desperately trying to rise above the racist stigma of blackness), no one *really* knew or saw me for who I was—a deeply wounded black boy.

Aaronette White’s concept of feminism as a spiritual response to a culture of male supremacist ideas of manhood embodies much potential for also formulating a model of black male self-recovery linked to inner healing. Being committed to a liberatory vision of black male spiritual recovery, a commitment integrally connected to my work as a professor of black feminism in the classroom, has enlarged its pedagogical scope and social imperative. The viability of black male feminism resides in its proactive engagement in revolutionary, antisexist principles of social change for all peoples. From this standpoint, gender-progressive black men’s commitment to feminism grounds itself in a politics of social agency that

defies the myth of black machismo. Thinking about feminism as “a spiritual response to how one should treat women, other men, and children” allowed me to integrate the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the feminist pedagogy I practice and the Pentecostal background that challenges it.

Worlds apart—one white, the other black. One secular, the other religious. One purportedly progressive, the other unabashedly conservative. For years, I traversed these two dramatically different worlds. One was symbolized by my status as a black professor in a private, majority-white college in Greenwich Village, New York City, known for its history of sexual liberation. The other world was represented by my experience as a minister and cofacilitator of an addiction recovery program in a black Pentecostal church located in the majority-black-and-Latino Tenth Ward of Newark, New Jersey, where I served for six years. Every Wednesday after teaching classes in one of Manhattan’s most celebrated neighborhoods, I traveled by train and a bus to get to the recovery meeting at the church in (what was at one time) one of Newark’s poorest neighborhoods. Over time, as a leader and member of the recovery group, I came to understand that the soul-searching work we did in our sessions was very similar to the work I required students to do in memoir-writing classes I taught at school. In both environments, through the discourse of self-critical autobiographical reflection, individuals were learning how to “deal, feel, and heal” (a common phrase in twelve-step recovery-based programs) from inner wounds of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Race and class differences represented stark contrasts between the mostly economically privileged, young, majority-white college students I taught in Greenwich Village and the older, mostly poor, underclass black women and men in the recovery group in Newark. Yet memoir writing united both groups. Teaching memoir writing and being a participant/leader in writing for self-inventory in my recovery group, I confronted years of silence about being a race and gender outsider. Working in a self-recovery program with low-income women and men over the last few years, I have become increasingly conscious of the striking racial and class inequalities of the white and black worlds I inhabit. One thing I am clear about is that writing for self-transformation is healing for individuals in both settings, regardless of our differences. As asserted in the introduction, I maintain that autobiographical writing at the center of pedagogy conceptualized to confront racism and (hetero)sexism can be a powerful tool for self-liberation in the college classroom.

Twenty years ago, before I began seriously studying black feminist thought, I could not have imagined that I would become a feminist

professor. I think of my work in the college classroom as a life's *calling*—beyond my academic training. As such, my commitment to teaching for social justice is at once personal, political, and spiritual. It continuously calls me to

- challenge my religious upbringing: to reject a patriarchal worldview, to stand against the belief that women (as the “weaker sex”) should be governed by the dictates of men, and to oppose all forms of heteronormative masculinity and manhood, whether or not grounded in religious dogma, black masculinist cultural, or social ideology that promotes the subjugation of women;
- defy the idea that black men should not embrace feminist ideas of masculinity and manhood in fear of effeminization; and
- resist the notion that the academic, secular classroom is not a place for self-recovery practice associated with emotional and spiritual healing, in part by asserting its value in intellectual inquiry, particularly in my approach to teaching memoir writing.

On the grounds stated above, I defend the practice of black male feminist professorship. Based upon them, the next chapter functions as a pedagogical overview to reveal the personal and political themes of self-recovery that run through the autobiographical narratives of part 2 and the classroom case studies that comprise part 3.