ESSAYS

Yearning to Be What We Might Have Been

Queering Black Male Feminism

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It's never too late to be who you might have been.
—George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans)

In *yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks uses the word *yearning* to describe the "common passions, sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice."[1] This yearning promotes the "shared space and feeling" that "opens up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage with one another."[2] Crucial to the engagement of which hooks speaks is self-critique. When cogently applied, self-critique creates the dialogically transformative shared space hooks sees as possible. Similar to hooks's observation, Chicana lesbian feminist Cherríe Moraga writes that we must engage in deep self-critique and get under our own skin as a step toward "entering the lives of others."[3] Michael Awkward echoes Moraga's exhortation of rigorous self-critique in his iconic essay "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism." More specifically, he examines the efficacy of self-critique in his discussion about the prevalence of the "self-referential discourse" within the formation of male feminism and male feminist subjectivities:[4] "To speak self-consciously—autobiographically—is to explore, implicitly or explicitly, why and how the individual male experience (the 'me' in men) has diverged from, has created possibilities for a rejection of, the

androcentric norm."[6] He pays close attention to the ways self-referential critique is contested territory within the relationship of men to feminism, writing: "[P] erhaps the most difficult task for a black male feminist is striking a workable balance between male self-inquiry/interest and an adequately feminist critique of patriarchy."[7] He notes that scores of black men "have proved unsuccessful" in this endeavor.[8] Despite this failing, Awkward maintains that black men can make useful, self-referential critiques to "inscribe a black male feminism."[9] Through this rhetorical choice, Awkward establishes and models self-critique as a common feature of black male feminist discourse.

Through self-critique in writing, film, speaking, and performances, Black male feminists have explored patriarchal oppression and male privilege. Thus, one of the lessons for the future of black male feminism, as exemplified in the crucial work by black male feminist scholars, is the importance of being open to stretch one's self beyond one's comfort zone in order to honestly determine and address areas where black male feminism can be challenged and most productive. Of particular import are the ways self-critiques have also pointed out areas where black male feminism can expand its work, thereby turning the impulse of individual self-critique around to inform the project as a whole. As we've seen with black feminism and queer theory, such critique brings about growing pains that are organic to the development of radical critical intellectual projects. Continuing with the tradition of self-critique as a moment of critical collective growth, this essay focuses on additional unchartered waters for black male feminist discourse. I do this through an analysis centered on a slippage in the discourse in which heterosexual and cisgender identities are assumed. This slippage prevents people from seeing one another, privileges some identities over others, and forecloses some of the useful self-critique of privilege from which black male feminism evolved. Consequently, the discourse is not best positioned to actualize the full critical possibilities that we have been helped to see through scholarship in black feminist and black queer studies to date.

Assumptions of heterosexual and cisgender identities within black male feminist discourse runs the risk of promoting forms of sexual and gender normativity that is antithetical to black feminist discourse. As black male feminist critique has grown quickly in the last decade, self-consciousness of the project itself has not engaged some areas necessary to interrogate. Being attentive to the issues of the scholarly discourse disrupts the conceptual standstill that threatens to stagnate the radical potential of black male feminism. An effect of the assumption of heterosexual and cisgender identities is that issues of privilege become ensconced or misrecognized within the discourse despite earnest attempts to dismantle patriarchy and privilege. This is a common challenge that radical critical intellectual projects confront. For instance, women who participated in the civil rights and Black Power movements critiqued male activists in those movements for their sexism and

misogyny.[10] Within black male feminist discourse, the oversight is represented in the assumption of heterosexuality and cisgender identity that limits the discourse in some crucial ways I will examine. First, the slippage allows for an overlooking of heterosexual and queer male privilege within the discourse. Second, the slippage contributes to inattentiveness to the experiences of gender nonconforming people. Ultimately, the harm of this slippage is a lessened intervention into sexism, misogyny, and racialized gender and sexual violence against women, men, and children. These are areas of concern that black male feminist scholars are committed to, as evidenced in their scholarship, but which are partly obscured by the assumption of heterosexuality and cisgender identity. Thus, this essay queers black male feminist discourse. Here, "Queer" as a theoretical term refers to an opposition or disruption to normative hegemony. Queering black male feminism, then, is a form of destabilizing hegemonically normative black male feminist discourse, and is not exclusively for the purposes of centering queer black men.

This essay is built around four central questions through which I examine the discourse, offer new perspective, and display implications for the critique: (1) What are the barriers to doing black male feminism across genders and sexualities? (2) What forms of heterosexual and queer male privilege are ignored or un/misrecognized due to the slippage in assumptions of heterosexual and cisgender identities within black male feminist discourse? (3) Where are some key areas of potential intervention into the problems enabled by this slippage? (4) How might black male feminist discourse begin to recognize the complex relationships queer black men have to patriarchy that are not limited solely to critiques of homophobia?

Before I proceed, there are two important caveats. First, black queer theory informs some of the critiques that black male feminist scholars have proffered as it relates to heterosexism and progressive black masculinities. In particular, the work of black gay male feminists such as Dwight McBride, Robert Reid-Pharr, E. Patrick Johnson, Roderick Ferguson, and others have been crucial in this regard. These black queer theorists are self-identified feminists; however, despite the feminist investments of black queer studies scholarship, these works are misrecognized as external to black male feminist discourse. As such, this work only comes into the discourse when there are explicit questions about homophobia or heterosexism, instead of always being recognized as part of the discourse whether queer subjectivities are being discussed or not. It is also imperative to note not every queer critique equates to feminist critiques of patriarchy and male privilege or sees itself as grounded in feminist theory. The dearth of scholarly critiques of queer male privilege further emphasizes this observation, a critical gap my analysis seeks to help fill. Concomitantly, my chief aim here is to disrupt this practice by writing at the nexus of these two intellectual terrains. As a result, I hope to make queer men "visible" as

black male feminist subjects. At the same time, I want to illuminate how their privilege as men is often overlooked within black male feminist scholarship because of heterosexist conceptions of black male feminist subjectivity.

My second caveat is that self-critique invites us to engage with the origins and development of a discourse in ways that remind us that "getting it right" is not necessarily the most productive end to imagine. This is especially true when "getting it right" is fixed on an ideal for black male feminism that one suggests could be achieved in uncomplicated ways or without growing pains. Accordingly, this essay operates from the premise that no political ideal is achievable without complication. Black male feminist Mark Anthony Neal offers valuable insights into this political reality when he theorizes a "New Black Man," his shorthand for an imagined progressive black masculinity that emerges from and employs black feminist critique. However, Neal is careful not to impose an ideal of what a New Black Man is, opting instead to conclude on a deliberately generative note when he reminds readers: "[I]t is important the readers remember that I am not the New Black Man, but rather that the New Black Man is a metaphor for an imagined life—a way to be 'strong' as a black man in new ways."[11] Operating from a similar political impulse, my intentions here as a self-identified feminist black gay male professor are to contribute to the self-critique that will assist in developing new reading strategies and sites of intervention in and beyond the academy.

I begin this analysis with an examination of key texts in black male feminist discourse to show how these works create space for critical intervention. I use these texts to demonstrate the reification of heterosexual male privilege within black male feminist discourse and the ways that privilege helps obscure queer male privilege. My analysis of these texts show what interventions are possible by analyzing the slippage of assuming heterosexual and cisgender identity in conceptions about black male feminist forefathers and social relations among black women and men. By examining these areas I show the ways heterosexual male privilege is easily misrecognized and queer male privilege is invisible within the discourse because of the slippage, and are thus primed to thrive in the midst of a project designed to dismantle privilege.

Queering Black Male Feminist Discourse

The 1970s marks the critical historical moment in which black feminist scholars, writers, teachers, and activists started the black feminist movement to challenge the oppressive gender politics of Black Freedom movements and the racelessness of mainstream feminism. Black feminist theory emerged as a critical lens to critique racism, patriarchy, and to account for the unique ways black women experience and challenge oppression. Black feminist theory also documents and examines the diversity and complexity of black womanhood; details how

black women construct their identities and politics on their own terms; exercises interpretive power in the ways they give meaning to their social worlds; and most clearly exercises critique of the specific forms of erasure black women encounter in intellectual, spiritual, economic, cultural, and political life.

The academy has been one area where this work has been done by black feminist scholars, including Barbara Smith, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Barbara Christian, Hortense Spillers, Nellie Y. McKay, Cheryl Wall, Stanlie James, Abena Busia, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Deborah McDowell, Angela Y. Davis, Kimberle W. Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins, to name but a few. Black women feminist scholars produced a body of scholarly work that radically transformed how black women's unique experiences were engaged across the curriculum and outside the academy. Black feminism inspired the evolution of black male feminism, which has grown and generated a body of scholarship.

Black male feminist scholars employ a number of methodologies to engage a range of topics. Awkward, Neal, Kevin Powell, and Byron Hurt have each drawn on autobiography, autoethnography, and other self-reflexive mediums in their writings. These black male feminists examine the ways they have participated in patriarchy. These self-referential critical studies are crucial to black male feminism's role in dismantling racist and patriarchal power.[12] Powell and Hurt, for example, have each written/spoken about physical and emotional violence and aggression in past relationships as part of their black male feminist critiques of patriarchy. Several black male feminists (myself included) have chronicled the life-altering influence of black feminist scholars on our introduction to black feminism.[13] A number of scholars have applied black male feminist theory as a lens of literary criticism and other ways of reading (black) popular culture production and reception.[14] In addition, black male feminists have investigated the necessity of confronting homophobia (others' and one's own) within any real commitment to feminist work against patriarchy. Also, these works have expanded theories of black masculinity in ways that challenge the hegemony of normative black masculinities.[15] And, in one of the most crucial outgrowths of black feminist work, black male teachers have examined the pedagogical challenges and interventions that are possible for black male feminism.[16]

A critical genealogy of black male feminist scholarship can be mapped through key texts written by Michael Awkward, Dwight McBride, Mark Anthony Neal, and David Ikard. I trace this genealogy through these texts to place emphasis on related issues of black male sexuality and masculinity, show the ways that these scholars created space for the questions that shape my essay, and then detail the critical gaps and interventions I posit for black male feminist discourse. Concomitantly, this essay builds on and extends the kind of self-critique that Awkward, McBride, Neal, and Ikard have all championed

and employed. Awkward's "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism" offers a useful starting point for this discussion.

In the essay, Awkward asserts that black male feminism's "potential value":

> [L]ies in the possibility that, in being anti-patriarchal and as self-inquiring about their relationship(s) to feminism as Afro-American women have been, Black men can expand the range and utilization of feminist inquiry and explore other fruitful applications for feminist perspectives, including such topics as obstacles to a black feminist project itself and new figurations of "family matters" and black male sexuality.[17]

Awkward's intervention creates a space to imagine a black male feminism replete with critical potential. The efficacy of this intervention is evidenced in a proliferation of black male feminist texts. However, Awkward's comments expose a semantic hole that enables a slippage into a normative discourse of black gender and sexuality that undermines some of the critical potential of his observations. Take, for instance, Awkward's naming the family and black male sexuality as two key spaces for intervention. Awkward helpfully identifies these areas and leaves them broad, which encourages generative engagement for future inquiry. However, Awkward stops short of language that would have been more transparent about the need for family and black male sexuality to be dislodged from normative interpretation. This oversight limits some of the critical possibilities his comments enable.

The contested categories of family and black male sexuality open up beyond the normative, a fact that is easily misread by scholars unexposed or resistant to critiques of normativity. Such misreading may hold "family" and "black male sexuality" in place despite the possibilities of these "new figurations" as something decidedly nonnormative or narrow. Given the hegemony of normative black gender and sexual discourse, notions of "family" and black male sexuality are always and already normative. Normativity *so* thrives on being commonplace that what is required to articulate the need for new readings of family and sexuality is a clear statement that heteronormativity is at work in how they are generally understood. As stated in the essay, Awkward's observations are not best positioned to be non-heteronormative even though this is implicit to his hopes for black male feminism.

An outgrowth of the heterosexual and cisgender assumption of black male feminist discourse is that some heterosexual black male feminist academics have a greater platform in academic and popular black feminist discussions than many black women and queer black men have experienced. As a feminist black gay man, I anticipate this observation may be misread as self-interested. My point is not that black male feminist conversations need to make queer black males more visible for the sake of simple inclusion

or to regulate "celebrity" among black feminist academics, but rather it is important for black male feminist discourse to engage the question of heterosexual male privilege and tacit black queer male exclusion because of how this exclusion contributes to misunderstandings and tensions between black male feminists of various genders and sexualities. It is equally important because heterosexual and queer black male feminists need to be attentive to the politics of time and space that often allots more time and space to men than women as an issue of patriarchal privilege in general. Returning to the point at hand, Awkward's articulation of black male feminism's potential contributions to an examination of black male sexuality has emerged into important interventions by numerous scholars. Still, some areas of that discourse have been slower to materialize and black male feminism remains challenged to give these areas the critical attention Awkward challenged us to consider. Black male feminist discussion of heterosexism is an outgrowth of the work of women of color lesbian feminists such as the Combahee River Collective (Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier), Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and others. Building on this rhetorical and activist legacy, black feminist and black queer studies scholars have continued to challenge the heteronormativity and homophobia and transphobia within Black Studies and critical race projects. Among them is literary scholar Dwight McBride.

In his essay, "Can the Queen Speak?: Sexuality, Racial Essentialism, and the Problem of Authority," McBride shows the ways antiracist discourse by African American intellectuals enables the exclusion of gays and lesbians from conceptions of black subjectivity. While my claims in this essay are enabled by the critique of heterosexism that McBride and other Black Studies scholars have offered, the essay examines areas that lie outside of his project. First, my critique of assumptions of heterosexuality is located in and focused on black male feminist discourse. McBride's comments focus on black intellectuals and Black Studies more generally, which has a history of hostility toward black queer life and culture. By focusing on a project that has embraced feminist inquiry, critiques of patriarchy, and anti-homophobia, this essay's analysis engages a different set of issues beyond the critical scope of McBride's critique, including queer male privilege.

In the essay McBride writes that "any treatment of African American politics and culture . . . that does not take seriously the lives, contributions, and presence of black gays and lesbians . . . denies the complexity of who we are as a representationally 'whole people.'"[18] Here, McBride establishes the importance of moving beyond heterosexist conceptions of blackness or "black issues" for individuals who claim to be invested in black freedom and community. This belief emerges clearly in his assertion that "any understanding of black oppression that makes it possible, and worse permissible, to endorse

at any level of sexism, elitism, or heterosexism is a vision of Black culture that is finally not politically consummate with liberation."[19]

In "Straight Black Studies," McBride discusses Essex Hemphill's essay "Loyalty," highlighting Hemphill's critique of heterosexism by Du Bois and other black intellectuals.[20] While he affirms Hemphill's position as "one of the great progenitors of black queer studies," McBride takes issue with Hemphill on two accounts. One issue he critiques is that "the exclusivity (or specificity) of [Hemphill's] complaint" about Du Bois "is made on behalf of gay black men, with no explicit recognition of black lesbians."[21] What McBride forecasts, but does not engage, explicitly, is the way that Hemphill's omission is licensed by queer male privilege. Hemphill's actions position him as one side of a phallocentric debate between men in which women are invisible. This essay will move beyond the discursive impasse of assuming heterosexuality in black male feminist discourse so that queer male privilege, sexism and misogyny are visible for interrogation.

Finally, another area where this study expands black male feminist discourse is its attention to the assumption of cisgender identity. This perspective points to what we miss when a critique of normative black gender and sexuality, or a black male feminist critique, is not inclusive of transgender and transsexual experiences. A critique that recognizes gender nonconformance enables black male feminism to explore specific ways that gender nonconforming people experience oppression and marginalization within hetero-patriarchal structures, and also identify instances where people may invest in those structures. This is a critical place where black male feminism must deepen its work.

A clear critique of transphobia within black male feminist discourse is one potential outcome of this intervention. Discussing homophobia often weds sexuality and gender in the discussion, given that many LGBT people experience homophobia at the nexus of normative gender and sexual ideologies.[22] But, it is important to note that critiques of homophobia do not speak directly to the powerfully oppressive and violent gender ideologies that are the undercurrents of the marginalization experienced by gender nonconforming people.

In *New Black Man*, Mark Anthony Neal writes that after the murder of Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old gender nonconforming black lesbian who was attacked and killed by Richard McCollough, a twenty-nine-year-old black man, news coverage attempted to "suggest that Gunn's murder was an isolated example of gay bashing."[23] Neal rightly asserts that this "obscures the relationship between sexuality and gender. Gay men are often 'bashed' because of an affinity to women and lesbians are bashed because they *are* women. In many regards homophobia is rooted in misogyny, a hatred of women."[24] He cites activist Alicia Banks, who notes that because Sakia Gunn "appeared to be masculine, she probably evoked even more hatred in insecure 'men'. . . . Such

gaybashing excuses for real men [*sic*], fear butch lesbian who dare to embrace the masculinity that eludes their own fragile egos and weak sexual identities."[25]

Even as Neal's insights about the relationship between homophobia and misogyny in violence against gays and lesbians are deeply illuminating, the link he draws between homophobia and misogyny encourages a one-dimensional reading of the violence on Gunn's body. First, we must parse out the difference between lesbian and woman as categories of identity that his comments overlook. This distinction is made in Neal's assertion that "lesbians are bashed because they are women." While the ways antifemale ideas are at work in homophobia are clear, and lesbians are killed because they are women, it is crucial to keep in mind that "lesbian" is not synonymous with "woman," and thus lesbians are also killed because they are lesbians. Like Neal, Banks' observations encourage us to recognize homophobia's connection to misogyny. Through this connection Banks makes important observations about the role of Gunn's masculinity in the specific ways she was targeted for violence, as her gender expression was seen as a breach of normative masculinity and femininity. A lens centered myopically on homophobia and misogyny, then, obscures as much as it illuminates. We can see Gunn as a woman but not necessarily as a lesbian. Thus, attention to gender nonconformance and transphobia is crucial to black male feminist scholarship that is committed to dismantling patriarchy on multiple levels.

Another example of the ways overlooking transphobia effects black male feminist discourse is the way our discussion about violence against women overlooks the specific instance of how gendered and sexual violence effects transgender and transsexual women. It is imperative to push back on this damaging oversight, as it sends a message that is antithetical to black feminism because it suggests that only some black experiences of violence are worthy of intervention. Even though there have been a number of murders of transgender women in recent years, conspicuously few have generated public attention, including the murder of Lateisha "Teish" Green in Syracuse, New York.[26] It is thus vital for heterosexual and queer black male feminists to engage why transgender women are rarely included in black male feminists' discussions. One of the issues at work is that the female subject in mind assumes cisgender and cissexual women, and as such, transgender women, do not qualify for concern. In order to understand and eventually eliminate all forms of violence, we will have to be more attentive to how our conversations leave out others whom our ethics clearly intend to support.

Gender has been most prominently discussed in black male feminist discourse through the crucial work of imagining progressive black masculinities. In the course of doing this work, black male feminist discourse has held biological maleness in place in ways that prevent us from seeing all progressive black masculinities. In *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (2007), David Ikard examines African American literary

texts to "expose and explode the victim status upon which black patriarchy is premised."[29] To achieve this, Ikard shows the ways black male assertions about their victimization affects the narratives that black men form about the domination and subjugation of black women, and how it contributes to black men's misrecognition of gender and feminist epistemologies as antithetical to the kinds of liberation they seek.[30] Ikard argues that black males "perceptions" of their victimization "problematizes black men's social and political responses to women (black and white) and to each other and make it difficult to imagine productive paths beyond the social and cultural impasse of black males' victim mind-set."[31] Where Black feminist critics led the way in challenging "the long-standing tradition of phallocentric criticism," and Michael Awkward's "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism" asserted the possibility of a black male feminism for literary studies, Ikard's study realizes the potential of this project within black feminism.

To highlight the problem he notes in the discourse, Ikard examines four key texts within black feminist literary criticism. Among them is Awkward's essay, which Ikard critiques for denying black women individuality and social agency, which "forecloses the possibilities of addressing . . . the relational complicity of black men and women in sustaining the system of black patriarchy."[32] Ikard finds agreement with Awkward on key points, and it is within one of those points where this study sees an opportunity for black male feminism to consider a different path.

Quoting Awkward's warning that black male feminism must be vigilant in avoiding the kinds of "patronizing, marginalizing gestures" some black male critics have made in their discussions about black womanhood, Ikard states:

> The crucial point for Awkward—and for my own study—is that biological maleness is a factor that must remain under scrutiny within black male feminism because black men benefit directly and indirectly from patriarchy regardless of their political investments. To ignore the social advantages of biological maleness as black male feminists is to risk complicity in the very institution of patriarchy we strive to dismantle.[33]

I agree with Ikard's observations about the problematic of ignoring biological maleness as black male feminists. However, the emphasis on biological maleness in his statements, and black male feminist discourse in general, is overdetermined in ways that obscure readings of patriarchy and male privilege that are not tethered to biological maleness. For example, how do the experiences of intersex persons show the limitations of a black male feminist intervention that emphasizes biological maleness? What constitutes biological maleness in such cases? How do analyses that emphasize biological maleness (not) adequately address the vulnerability transgender and transsexual men experience through

patriarchy? Are conceptions of biological maleness here equipped to perform analyses of male privilege among transgender and transsexual men? My point is that these experiences must also be considered in a black male feminist epistemology so that we may challenge patriarchy and male privilege in the many complex ways it represents itself. A black male feminism that assumes cisgender identity is not prepared to realize this necessity. A useful strategy to challenge what this slippage exposes is to engage the necessary problems as they occur in the everyday.

Producing (Heterosexual and Cisgender) Black Male Feminism

Discursively, one may find that when it comes to the black male feminist subject, there is a conception of this subject as heterosexual, or in most cases, cisgender. The assumption of heterosexuality feeds rather than challenges normative sexual privilege. Also this assumed black heterosexual male subject is seen exclusively as cisgender. Thus, the phrase "black male feminist" most readily produces a heterosexual and normatively male-bodied subject. This contributes to the blurred lens that supports the kinds of larger critical inattention of which this essay is concerned. Consequently, a number of problems occur.

One of the problems with the assumed heterosexual and cisgender identities of black male feminist discourse is that the discourse is not extended to more deeply imagine the developing relevance of black male feminism for the feminist project, and specifically, critiques of patriarchy. By thinking of black men exclusively as heterosexual and cisgender, we miss the opportunity to consider the diversity of black men and masculinities that may usefully inform black feminist critique. As black male feminism is committed to interrogating black male privilege within patriarchal structures, it is incumbent upon us to include multiple conceptions of black male sexual and gender subjectivities to ensure that we have the fullest sense of the issues at hand. We see the challenges and possibilities of doing so when we consider assumed notions of black masculinity, sexuality, and family within black male feminism.

Discussion about relationships between black men and their families is one of the ways that black male feminist subject positions are flattened through a discourse that assumes they are heterosexual or cisgender. As previously noted, black male feminist scholars have written critically, and necessarily, about their marriages, dating, and other romantic partnerships with women.[34] Like Awkward, black male feminists have talked about their relationships with their parents, particularly their mothers and "other mothers," and how these episodes have shaped their ideas about masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, and feminism.[35] Black male feminists have discussed their experience with parenting in a sexist, misogynistic, and heterosexist world, while challenging

their own deep-seeded sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Black male feminist scholars such as Neal have specifically discussed this issue as parents of daughters, highlighting another dimension to black men's work alongside women against patriarchal degradation and domination.[36] The matter of being brothers, co-workers, and close friends of women are some of the other familial bonds with women that black male feminists have discussed. Such insights are crucial to have, examine, and reexamine as black men who are serious about the work of dismantling patriarchy and racist oppression. What is necessary to deepen the effectiveness of these insights is greater consideration about the ways black men experience these relationships differently along the lines of gender and sexuality. This will not remedy the matter, but would provide important nuance.

The assumption of heterosexual and cisgender identity within the discourse is apparent even when queer genders and sexualities are critically applied. The gender and sexual identities of queer black men mean that many of them experience these romantic, familial, and professional relationships quite differently than how heterosexual black male feminist scholarship has considered those relationships when interrogating them for what they can tell us about black masculinities and struggles against patriarchy and privilege. In fact, I'd argue that the discussion about black men and women in black male feminist discourse negates the reality of sexual and gender fluidity. This negation is clear when we see that there is no recognition of how queer men may have been or could be romantically partnered with heterosexual cisgender women at various moments in their life and produce children or socioeconomic attachments that continuously condition those relationships. For instance, a gay or bisexual man may produce children through sexual relationships with women, despite his sexual identity as gay or bisexual. Bisexual men may choose to co-parent with heterosexual women because of a mutual desire to parent. In such instances, these men have a familial relationship to women and/or their children that is qualitatively different from a heterosexual cisgender man. We should think also about transgender and transsexual men whose familial and professional relationships are altered as part of their transition.

A black male feminist discourse that examines familial and professional relationships only through the prism of heterosexual or cisgender black men is missing the opportunity to engage what this slippage in our conversations points toward as further consideration. Certainly, black queer theorists are doing work that provides the lens for thinking through such matters. But, as previously stated, a queer critique is not necessarily an adequately feminist critique of patriarchal privilege among queer men. This further shows the usefulness of black male feminism being more critically accountable to a diversity of black men's experiences as we work against patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism, and theorize progressive black masculinities. As the next section

will examine, one area where we might do that work is the ways black male feminist discourse historicizes black male feminist forefathers.

Rehistoricizing Black Male Feminist Subjects

In her essay "Remembering Our Feminist Forefathers," Black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall shows us the usefulness of historically locating pro-feminist/feminist black men as we theorize black male feminisms. Black feminist scholar Gary Lemons, who analyzed writings by W. E. B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass to construct a usable past for black male feminism, shared Sheftall's observation. Sheftall observes, "African American men's contributions to progressive gender or profeminist activism have been largely ignored in black political history . . . even though there is a growing body of scholarly work about black men and black masculinities."[37] Examining the writing of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Benjamin Mays, whom she refers to as "our feminist forefathers,"[38] Guy-Sheftall shows "how we might make use of this legacy's embrace of feminist ideologies in a contemporary context."[39] For instance, citing literary scholar Nellie McKay, Guy-Sheftall examines two of Du Bois's essays, "Of the Meaning of Progress" and "The Damnation of Women," to show how his attention to "the particular plight of Black women," their contributions, and his critique of white America all demonstrate his feminist sensibilities.[40] Guy-Sheftall continues, "Du Bois is certainly an important male figure with respect to his contributions to our understanding of the need for struggle around the emancipation of women, especially African American women, but I believe his writing represent new visions of manhood that are liberating and healing."[41] Part of the influence of Du Bois's work on these "new visions of manhood" is the way in which they inform black male feminism. Guy-Sheftall concludes, "It is important to remember and honor the legacy of the feminist forefathers who understood that eradicating the twin evils of racism and sexism was urgent. We can now imagine the viability of the idea of progressive black masculinity in all its complexity because of them."[42]

As Guy-Sheftall's last comment suggests, the usefulness of the "feminist forefathers" framework is in continuing to examine the potential of progressive black masculinities and black male feminism today. However, I am not certain that the current black male feminist discourse allows us to engage with this matter "in all of its complexity." Discussions of forefathers is another area in which black male feminist discourse could break out of the hetero- and gender normativity of some of its discussions about the feminist sensibilities of historical black male intellectuals and activists. One way to remedy this issue is to examine how queer black men can be more critically, and therefore more usefully, incorporated into this important historical and contemporary intervention. Certainly,

a number of scholars across a variety of fields are ensuring that black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer life, history, and culture get the necessary critical intellectual attention. This is especially true in the areas of literary studies and performance studies.[43] There certainly can and needs to be more of this work on black queer communities. In terms of queer black men, numerous writers have anthologized the works of black gay male writer-artist-activists,[44] while the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has formed a "Black Gay and Lesbian Archive," curated by Steven Fullwood.

Taken together, these projects all make available a range of queer black male experiences across time. We can see how access to these works has informed critiques of heterosexism and homophobia in black male feminist discourse, and also scholars' queer conceptions of black masculinities. I contend, however, that the life and works by queer black men, many of whom scholars have regarded as "feminist forefathers," have been less prevalent in discourse about black male feminism. Consequently, we miss the opportunity to wrestle with other potentially useful ways of thinking through the viability of black male feminism. This is particularly true of the ways we have written about relationships between black feminist men and women, which has not avoided the slippage of heterosexual centeredness in that it assumes the heterosexuality of the black male feminist subject. As such, even when queer black men are visible in black male feminist discourse of heterosexism, homophobia, and black masculinity, queer black male feminists are only visible insofar as examining matters from the perspective that is only relevant to heterosexual black men.

Expanding the list of black male feminist forefathers would be helpful, but not sufficient, given that some regard Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and others as feminists already. But, critical attention to how these queer black men constituted a black male feminist subjectivity would reduce this limitation. For instance, a focus on Beam as a queer black feminist forefather would broaden the possibilities for escaping the trappings of making queer black men "visible" for purposes of discussing homophobia or queer black masculinities. It is also not dependent on serving the interests of conceiving of black male feminism within a paradigm solely concerned with black manhood as a heterosexual or heteronormative way of being. In doing this, we gain entrance to ways of thinking about black male feminism as an ethics, theory, and praxis in everyday ways that are otherwise illegible to us.

In Hortense Spillers's seminal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she asserts that "the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself . . . it is the heritage of the *mother* that the African American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."[45] Meditating on Spillers's provocative claim, Michael Awkward writes:

> [M]ore thinking is necessary not only about what the female within is but about what it can be said to represent for black males, as well as serious analysis of useful means and methods of interacting with a repressed female interiority and subject . . . a black male feminism must be especially focused on exploring such issues if it is to mobilize Spillers's suggestive remarks as a means of developing a fuller understanding of the complex formulations of black manhood.[46]

The proliferation of scholarship about progressive black masculinities, for example, certainly gives a nod to what the female within could represent for black males, though not on the scale that would satisfy the insights Spillers and Awkward offer. Thus, Awkward's and Spillers's comments have not been adequately addressed among black male feminists, and further research must be done to better answer this dimension of examining black male personhood in all of its configurations.

What their comments raise for me is closely connected to the usefulness of Joseph Beam, for example, as a feminist forefather. In a diary entry dated August 18, 1983, Beam wrote a poem about being called "a lesbian man."[47] In the poem Beam states that he was called this by an acquaintance "'cause I want to talk about everything," a quality the friend did not associate with male bonding.[48] This assertion by Beam's acquaintance is gender normative because it assumes talkativeness is an abnormal masculine quality and more representative of femininity. Also, the disdain for these "feminine" qualities is misogynist, as it is decidedly antifemale, and given the focus on lesbians in the statement, also homophobic. Reflecting on his acquaintance's assertion, Beam embraces the label "lesbian man" and begins to lament what he sees as the lack of more emotive and sharing qualities in relationships between men.[49] These details from Beam's diary raise several questions. What does Beam understand to be "a lesbian man"? What do the emotive and sharing qualities he attributes to women consist of? Is it possible for Beam, as a man, to discuss these characteristics he attributes to women in a way that does not fall into essentializing or flattening the complexity of femininity, women's relationships, or lesbian sexual subjectivity? What do Beam's observations offer us in terms of a fuller understanding of the complex black masculinities of which Awkward speaks? How does this inform black male feminist theory and praxis? How does it inform our understanding of black feminist consciousness in a particular historical moment, such as the 1980s and 1990s black gay male literary renaissance? In short, a closer examination of these details and Beam's life would offer useful insights into what the "female" within represented for him, and perhaps, some new and critical ways for what it means for black male feminism today.

Previously, I discussed the ways a heterosexual-centered lens affects black male feminist explorations of familial and professional relationships. Continuing with Beam as a case study, having queer black men as feminist

forefathers, also allows us to think more critically and productively about relationships between men and women historically and contemporarily that are not predicated on a heterosexual paradigm. This perspective would also offer a fuller understanding of black queer men's relationships to heterosexual and queer women as allies in the struggle against racism and patriarchy. For instance, in 1986, Audre Lorde wrote a letter to Beam in which she thanked him for being in her world and in her son's world.[50] Lorde's comments suggest that she recognized Beam as a friend and ally, but also that she felt his personhood was one that promised her son a better world. Whether "better" meant witnessing a black man with feminist consciousness is a strong possibility, it is not exactly clear. However, this moment offers details about a relationship between a black gay man and a black lesbian that offers an historical example in which the complex relationships between gay men and lesbians is not oversimplified. Scenes such as these invite black feminism, and black male feminists especially, to critically imagine relationships between men and women that are otherwise illegible to us even as they beckon from history and our everyday encounters.

Finally, using queer black male feminists to open up historical examinations of black male feminism would also point toward areas black male feminism falls short and must confront, such as queer male sexism and misogyny. Such discussions are largely absent in black male feminist discourse, an absence that is reinforced by our limited considerations of the diversity among black male feminists.

Queer Men, Patriarchal Privilege, and Black Male Feminism

In order to see queer male privilege, sexism, and misogyny within feminist critiques of patriarchy, we must get beyond the assumption of heterosexuality and cisgender identity. Leo Bersani describes queer male privilege in the following way:

> [I]n his desires, the gay man always runs the risk of identifying with culturally dominant images of misogynist maleness. For the sexual drives of gay men do, after all, extend beyond the rather narrow circle of other politically correct gay men. A more or less secret sympathy with heterosexual male misogyny carries with it the narcissistically gratifying reward of confirming our membership in (and not simply our erotic appetite for) the privileged male society.[51]

It is important to disrupt how the assumption of heterosexuality and gender normativity limits our critiques of male privilege, which we can begin to do by stating some facts. Queer men, including gay/bisexual/transgendered/transsexual men have male privilege. Some queer men do also perpetrate

sexism and misogyny, and other forms of patriarchal oppression and violence against women. All of this occurs even as these same queer men experience oppression and marginalization within patriarchy in the form of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, and effemiphobia. As with straight black men, queer black men's experiences of patriarchy are conditioned by racism and white supremacy, though relationally these men benefit from patriarchal privilege anyhow. Even among queer men privilege is not experienced in the same ways. A gay identity is not the same as an effeminate male identity is not the same as a transsexual identity. Given the commitment of black male feminism to ending racist and patriarchal oppression, and heterosexual and queer male feminists assertions about the importance of holding each other accountable on sexism and misogyny, it is imperative that queer male patriarchal privilege receive more critical examination. My observations point to places where more work may be done moving forward, rather than an exhaustive examination of the issue and all of the nuanced critical attention it requires.

Focusing on how heterosexuality and gender normative lenses contribute to the inattentiveness to queer male privilege is not an argument to absolve queer men of their privilege by placing blame on straight black male feminists. Nor is this a move toward absolving straight men of their own privilege, sexism, and misogyny by turning our attention to a "new" perpetrator. Every person is always foremost responsible for checking his or her privilege and confronting the systems of power and tools of oppression in which those privileges are situated and draw strength. My intention is to point out how inattentiveness to black men outside of a normative sexual and gender lens supports the particular forms of un-seeing that occur when queer male privilege disappears or is simply illegible through our current critical lens. By examining some ways in which this occurs, and how it depends on problematic racialized gender and sexual scripts, my hope is to strengthen the ways that black male feminism can contribute to feminist inquiry and critiques of patriarchy.

As a black gay man, I have been confronted with the truth of my own male privilege, both inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. And, as is the case with so many of us "enlightened" folks, unchecked privilege has been more visible to me when wielded by others than by myself. I have witnessed queer male privilege play out in various forms. The most obvious examples are the ways in which gay men are situated at the top of the queer ladder, lording over all the resources, opportunities, rhetoric, and ultimately, the political agenda of LGBTQ communities.[52] Certainly, race complicates this particular matter, as white gay men are particular recipients of this form of privilege as it pertains to having gravitas in the mainstream. There is also a difference in that some cisgender queer men experience these privileges much more than transgender and transsexual men. Overall, the point is that being identified as male equates to patriarchal privilege for gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual men.

Sexism and misogyny are also prevalent among some queer men, and are enacted in ways that contribute to women's experiences of patriarchal violence day to day. For instance, I have witnessed the kinds of verbally abusive language gay men use, such as "fish" and "cunt." Used against women, these words are hateful and misogynistic because they reduce women to offensive and degrading descriptions of female genitalia. These words are often used between gay men also for degrading purposes. In other instances, gay men use these words to describe someone they consider a friend or as a term of endearment, more recently with variations on the words such as "hunty," a hybrid of honey and "cunt." "Hunty" has become more prevalent since becoming part of the regular vocabulary among contestants on the television show, "Rupaul's Drag Race." In an episode of "Rupaul's Drag University," where drag queens serve as mentors to cisgender women, Raven admonishes his mentee for not following his command, ending his quip with "hunty." Logo Television, the network airing the show, subsequently included that clip in heavy rotation while promoting the show's second season. However, such attempts at semantic aversion are no less misogynistic, rooted in patriarchal privilege, and ultimately, fail.

Gay men also perpetuate beauty and body politics that are oppressive. In fact, some might say gay men are the sheriff or deputies in the cultural obsessions with "fierceness" and objectifying forms of diva worship. Such an obsession attributes greater or lesser value to women and their lives on the basis of whether they efficiently acquiesce to constraining and oppressive looks with regard to their bodies, clothing, accessories, and other aesthetics. Gay men have harassed and ostracized butches, transgenders, transsexuals, and masculine-identified females because they do not fit or conform to these ultra-feminine notions of beauty that some gay men enforce. Some heterosexual men and women are complicit with this practice in that objectifying gay men as the judge and jury of style and "fierceness" exemplifies the practice of treating queer men as an accessory. This positionality draws on stereotypes about gay men that are problematic. However, my point is that some queer men all too readily perform the task of accessory, some without their opinion even being invited because they accept the social script that this is "what gay men do." While this particular issue must be challenged from all angles, queer men may choose to resist this stereotype and social script as part of a commitment to anti-patriarchal oppression, or to perpetuate it in ways that continue to enforce the oppressive beauty and body politics that fetishize, objectify, and devalue women.

Other ways queer men are complicit in sexism and misogyny include physical/sexualized violence such as groping and touching women's bodies without permission, and drag and female impersonations by queer men that claim women's empowerment, but actually reenforce patriarchal oppression.

These are some of the many forms of male privilege, sexism, and misogyny that a feminist critique of patriarchy must question.

This essay began with an epigraph by George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans), who reminded us that "it is never too late to be what we might have been." Temporal and subjective distance between George Eliot, myself, and this essay's focus notwithstanding, Eliot's words express the hope of continuously striving toward an ideal. A crucial part of black male feminist scholarship must be continuously engaging what might be in its commitment to dismantling patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. I have argued that troubling the assumption of heterosexuality and gender normativity in black male feminist discourse is crucial to that work.

Notes

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1. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press), 12.
2. Ibid., 13.
3. Cherríe Moraga, "Entering the Lives of Others," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 23.
4. Ibid., 44.
5. Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 45.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 49.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 45.
10. See The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 13–22; Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verson, 1999); Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossings Press, 1984), 134–44.
11. Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York; Routledge, 2005), 159.
12. Awkward, *Negotiating Difference*; Neal, *New Black Man*; Kevin Powell, *Whose Gonna Take the Weight? Manhood, Race, and Power in America* (New York: Three

Rivers Press, 2003); Byron Hurt, "Why I am a Male Feminist," *The Root.com* http://www.theroot.com/views/why-i-am-male-feminist. Accessed June 17, 2011.

13. See Kevin Powell, *Whose Gonna Take the Weight?*; Mark AnthonyNeal, "My Black Male Feminist Heroes," *PopMatters*, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/030226-blackfeminists. Accessed June 17, 2011; David Ikard, *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Awkward, *Negotiating Difference.*
14. Op. cit. See also Michael Awkward's *Burying Don Imus: Anatomy of a Scapegoat* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
15. Op. cit. See also Devon Carbado, ed., *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Athena Mutua, ed., *Progressive Black Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
16. Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Publishers, 2006); Neal, *New Black Man*; Keith Clark and David Ikard, lecture to Afro-American Studies Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Spring 2007.
17. Awkward, 51.
18. Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 206.
19. Ibid., 209.
20. Ibid., 37.
21. Ibid.
22. Black male feminist scholars have written about the importance of an anti-homophobic position in the work of black male feminism. For example, in *New Black Man*, Mark Anthony Neal writes, "[I]t's time that we start championing a movement where 'real black men are not homophobes,' given the damage that homophobia does in our community. Such a movement would encourage black men to forcefully challenge homophobia wherever they encounter it . . . it's not enough for us to simply eradicate homophobia in our own lives, we need to make the message loud and clear that homophobia is not welcome in our communities" (155). As a feminist black gay man, I share and appreciate Neal and other black male feminists discussions of homophobia, and articulating its centrality within the black male feminist project. Still, black male feminist discourse has not grown in areas where discussions of homophobia and misogyny invite us to engage.
23. Neal, *New Black Man*, 95.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 94.
26. Twenty-two-year-old Teish Green, a black transgender woman, was murdered in November 2008. Green was sitting with her brother, who is gay, in a car outside a house party, when Dwight Delee, her alleged killer was reported to have street harassed Green and her brother shouting anti-queer epithets before shooting them with a rifle. Green died as a result of the shooting. News reports continued to

perpetuate this violence by referring to Teish Green with male pronouns, referring to her by the name assigned to her at birth, and ignoring her transgender identity. Green's murder has since disappeared out of the already sparse media coverage it did receive. See "Lateisha Green's Murder Classified as a Hate Crime," Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund, http://www.transgenderlegal.org/headline_show.php?id=83. Accessed July 14, 2011.

27. There is a tendency among men working against violence to discuss women in ways that deny agency in the discourse. For instance, black women have been at the forefront of antiviolence struggles for longer than a century. This does not mean that men should not be struggling with black women against such violence, but it does mean that this should be done in a way that acknowledges their agency. This is important so that we are attentive to women's contributions to antiviolence work. It is also important to recognize women's contributions, so that, as people who are committed to the end of violence, we also acknowledge that women can be perpetrators of violence within heterosexual and same-sex partnerships and in other ways. These incidents too deserve our intervention though they are less visible in the limited and stifling way violence is discussed.
28. Black male feminists' discussions about violence are sometimes framed in ways that exclude the reality of aggression between men, particularly straight male violence against queer men, or the violence inflicted on black boys by adults. More discussion is necessary about the types of gendered and sexual violence men are victims of at various points in their life, such as queer boys who are street harassed, physically beaten by fathers and mothers because they are outside of hegemonic masculinity and boyhood. Such insights would add texture to our understanding of violence as a symptom of patriarchy.
29. Ikard, *Breaking*, 4.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 20.
33. Ibid.
34. See Neal, *New Black Man*; Hurt, "Why I am a Male Feminist; Powell, *Whose Gonna Take the Weight?*
35. See Awkward, *Negotiating Difference* and *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Ikard, *Breaking the Silence*; Neal, *New Black Man*; Hurt, "Why I am A Male Feminist."
36. Neal, 99–125, 156–57.
37. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Remembering Our Feminist Forefathers," in *Progressive Black Masculinities*, ed. Athena Mutua (New York: Routledge, 2006), 43.
38. Ibid., 44.
39. Ibid., 50.
40. Ibid., 48–50.
41. Ibid., 50.

42. Ibid., 51.
43. Among the many works here are the following: E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness* and *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch*; Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Bryan Keith Alexander, *Performing the Black Masculine*; David Bergman, "The Condition of Essex Hemphill," *Lodestar Quarterly* 11 (2004), http://lodestarquarterly.com/work/233/. Accessed November 24, 2011.
44. This includes anthologies such as Joseph Beam's *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), Don Belton's *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream* (1995), Devon Carbado's *Black Men on Race Gender and Sexuality* (1999), Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (2001), E. Lynn Harris's *Freedom in this Village: Twenty Five Years of Black Gay Men's Writing* (2004), and Justin A. Joyce and Dwight McBride's *A Melvin Dixon Critical Reader* (2006), to name only a few.
45. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book, *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.
46. Awkward, 54.
47. Joseph Beam, "A Lesbian Man," Box #1, File #4, Joseph Beam Papers Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NY.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Audre Lorde, "Letter to Joseph Beam," 1986, Box #5 Folder #2, Joseph Beam Papers Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, NY.
51. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 63–64.
52. For example, the focus on bullying and violence against queer youth has been a large part of the LGBTQ political organizing as white gay men have been more visible as victims of these horrible instances. Though transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming youth of color make up a large amount of victims of bullying and anti-queer violence resulting in death, there was never the kind of mainstream attention we have seen with the discussion on bullying in recent years. The fact that transgender, transsexual, and gender nonconforming youth of color are heavily represented among cases resulting in death shows the ways race contributes to the silence.