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Allyship in the Time of Aggrievement:

The Case of Black Feminism and the New Black Masculinities

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Black Feminism and its Discontents

In 2019, *Vox* reporter Jane Coaston announced that intersectionality—or the idea of mutually reinforcing systems of oppression—might be the most hated word in American conservatism. Even self-identified liberals have made their contempt for feminist theory and intersectionality known in their attacks on “grievance studies.”¹ Perhaps the strangest bedfellow made by contemptuous reactions to intersectionality has been the New Black Masculinities (NBM). An emergent framework that includes “Black Masculinism” in African American Studies and “Black Male Studies” in Philosophy, NBM elucidates the suffering endured by Black men and boys.² This perspective challenges Black feminism for viewing Black men as perpetrators of violence but not as victims themselves. Intersectionality is viewed as a trap that wrongly blames Black men for aspiring to be patriarchs who seek power over Black women. The adherents of NBM indict Black feminists for profiting off careers that caricature and crucify Black men. They claim that Black men are silenced out of fear that speaking out against Black feminism will mean professional alienation.

Yet Black feminism is hardly the hegemony that NBM perceives. As the post-truth era views their politics with increasing suspicion, Black feminists time and again are forced to defend the legitimacy of their work. And with intersectionality now the lingua franca of gender studies programs, feminist scholar Jennifer Nash has lamented how Black feminists have tried to protect intersectionality as their exclusive property. Other commentators such as Robin Wiegman are discouraged by how an apocalyptic outlook has overshadowed Black feminism’s hopeful and liberatory politics.

With Black feminism on its heels, we ask: What explains this antipathy towards Black feminism? And how do we chart a path forward? As two avowed Black feminist sociologists

who study Black masculinity, we rebuff the notion that supporting the very real cause of struggling Black men and boys requires casting off Black feminism. We demonstrate rather that NBM rehearses what we call *Black male aggrievement*, an ideology that anchors conservative gender politics to its anti-racist motivations and claims injury at the hands of Black feminism as a field, and Black women in particular. Black male aggrievement, and the antagonism between Black feminism and the New Black Masculinities, has been nurtured by a neoliberal academy that delegitimizes critical scholarship and takes delight in conflict between progressive movements. Turning to our own research on schools targeted to young Black men, we highlight how a conservative gender politics animates programmatic efforts to uplift young Black men. These efforts promote what the legal scholar Paul Butler calls Black male exceptionalism, the idea that Black men are more deserving of help than other groups. The “New” Black Masculinities and the “neo”-liberal ideologies which guide these initiatives are, in fact, rooted in an old brand of “progressive conservatism.”³ In a contemporary moment marked by the disposability of Black life and Black feminism’s vulnerability, Black feminism—one grounded in a politics of caring and reparations—is needed more than ever.

Thriving, Dying, and Defensive Black Feminism

Black feminism unearths, critiques, and attacks the forces of gendered racism. Not merely a challenge to white patriarchy, Black feminism is also critical of misogyny and sexual violence within the Black community. Groundbreaking early theorizing of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrated how legal narratives obfuscate sexual violence against Black women. Attempts to call out sexism and sexual violence within the Black community have historically been met with silencing tactics in order “not to bring a good brother down.”⁴

Black feminism has been described as both thriving and dying.⁵ Popular memoirs by Black women—including Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* (2014) and Tressie McMillan Cottom’s *Thick* (2019)—have helped sustained public interest in Black feminism, while exposing rifts between a perceived elite academic feminism and its grassroots politics. This expanded interest in Black feminism has been met with strong resistance to intersectionality, the tradition’s most wide-reaching contribution. Detractors view it as a dressed-up version of identity politics and a form of white-bashing. Conservatives regard it as “dangerous” to claim that oppressed groups do, in fact, experience multiple forms of oppression.⁶ Even still, Black feminism remains a “minority discourse” that constantly needs to justify its worth.⁷ Black feminism has become increasingly vulnerable in the face of the Trump administration’s relentless attack on higher education. And as faculty positions become scarce in our age of austerity, academics of all stripes claim the mantle of objective scientific research and dismiss Black feminist approaches as unscientific “me-search.” The field’s enduring marginalization has led to worries that demands for legitimacy has made Black feminism appear overwhelmingly defensive,⁸ and worries over Black feminism’s territorial policing of intersectionality, which has divided Black women from other feminist scholars of color.⁹ With Black feminism at a crossroads, gender scholar Brittney Cooper wonders if it has a future at all. The seeming demise of Black feminism comes amid the increasing precariousness of the lives of Black women and girls, who, according to the National Partnership for Women and Families 2018, experience disproportionately poor health outcomes and face high maternal mortality rates

Black Male Aggrievement

With Black feminism on the defensive, the advocates of the New Black Masculinities (NBM) have come out swinging. They view Black feminism as a roadblock to a truly critical study of Black masculinity. The backers of NBM allege that while Black feminism claims in theory to account for Black men, gender is instead taken to be synonymous with women. Thus, “actually existing” intersectional accounts prioritize Black women’s experiences and demean Black men and boys, who are viewed as aspiring (white) patriarchs. Under the rubric of Black feminism, Black men and boys are assailants and never victims of gendered racism and sexual violence. These proponents accuse the academy of legitimizing pseudo-theories of Black men rooted in what is actually racist misogyny, or a fear and hatred of Black men.

We acknowledge the good intentions behind NBM. This framework addresses difficult topics, such as an overlooked history of how Black men have been victims of sexual assault. But we are concerned with the larger implications. While NBM is new in name, it relies on an old formula: a progressive anti-racist agenda anchored in an anti-feminist, conservative gender politics, or what we call *Black male aggrievement*. The legal roots of “aggrievement” help emphasize how NBM advocates make a claim to injury at the hands of Black feminism and Black women scholars. Instead of rejecting intersectionality, this ideology *repackages* it as a framework that is anti-racist but also anti-feminist (and as we suggest below, even pro-capitalist).¹⁰ By trading feminism for anti-racism, NBM ultimately views power as a two-dimensional field. It is marred by a zero-sum “seesaw” logic where Black men must be down if Black women are up. The New Black Masculinities resorts to a kind of elementary accounting of disadvantage. For example, in his critique of Black feminism, T. Hasan Johnson essentially reduces social measures to “privilege”—which results in awkward phrasings such as “rape and domestic violence privilege”—and creates graphs comparing “Black male privileges” to “Black

female privileges.” This comparison flattens the impact of those structures, ideologies, and policies that advantage whites over others. Johnson rejects the notion of Black male privilege not by accounting for the myriad ways that Black men are disadvantaged compared to their white peers, but by enumerating ad nauseum the specific advantages Black men and women have “over” one another. And while NBM claims a dearth of evidence of Black male privilege, the historical record shows how “patriarchal assumptions and institutions... still dominate Black civil and political society.”¹¹

The seesaw logic of NBM posits a “Black male exceptionalism,” or the claim “that by almost every index of inequality, Black males are on the bottom.”¹² For instance, Tommy Curry, a leading figure in Black Male Studies, writes that “In our current political-disciplinary milieu, patriarchy is thought to direct its violence primarily toward women through misogyny, despite the historical and sociological findings that show Western patriarchy to be a structural system that directs its most lethal violence against racialized (outgroup) males while preserving the lives of females through paternalism.”¹³ But gender theorists have long argued that patriarchy poses harm to *everyone*, and Curry’s framing creates an uncomfortable situation where readers are asked to choose the side of Black men by virtue of the degree of violence enacted on them.

The New Black Masculinities replaces Black feminism with dubious theories.¹⁴ The various threads of NBM have found a guiding light in the sociologist Robert Staples, the main progenitor of the original Black Men’s Studies of the 1970s. Like Staples, Tommy Curry argues that Black feminists have perpetrated “myths” about Black men and masculinity. Yet race and gender theorists have largely dismissed the work of Staples for its blatant sexism and contempt for Black women. For example, in 1979 Robert Staples argued that middle-class Black men “screen out” strong Black women as partners because they prefer more feminine, and therefore

submissive, women. He even called it the “masculine perquisite” of Black men to desert female partners who are decision-makers in the home.

Though claiming to defend the rights of all “Black males,” the New Black Masculinities offers ultimately a myopic view of Black manhood and gender. As T. Hasan Johnson claims, intersectionality is only popular because of the relative lack of Black men in higher education: “the rightness of intersectionality theory is not based on the merits of Black feminism per se, but on the predominant numbers of Black females who comprise Black academe, especially in gender studies where courses are mostly taught by women . . . to women . . . for women.”¹⁵ By reducing intellectual contributions to bodies, and by focusing narrowly on a struggle between Black women and Black men, Johnson misses the larger intellectual landscape where many white and other non-Black scholars can use intersectionality as they wish while remaining shielded from criticism.

Johnson ignores how a discourse of Black intellectualism has traditionally been rendered male¹⁶; and a concomitant history of how Black male intellectuals, even when claiming to be a champion of women’s rights, have dismissed the radical agency and intellectual contributions of Black women.¹⁷ Indeed, it is revealing that the male adherents of NBM have mainly criticized Black women and *not* other male scholars. By pitting Black female and male scholars against one another, Johnson overlooks a tradition of Black male feminist scholarship where Black men—including Rudolph Byrd, Devon Carbado, and Mark Anthony Neal—have worked alongside Black women as allies. Johnson’s assertion further reflects the cisheteronormativity of NBM. Black feminism, for example, with its commitment to destabilizing the categories of woman, gender, and embodiment, has served as a rich intellectual and political base for queer Black scholarship.¹⁸ And scholars of a nascent Black transgender studies have drawn inspiration

from Black feminism's capacity to disrupt and reconfigure the meanings around racialized gender.¹⁹

The Wreckage of Neoliberalism

In this time of Black suffering and death, Black feminist sociology can reorient thinking about the purpose and potential of intersectionality. Intersectionality can help us understand the *particularities* of gendered racism for each group under white patriarchy, and how the violence suffered by Black men and Black women are connected. We should embrace intersectionality as a “recreative” framework, in the words of Rose Brewer, which can help repair the damaged relationship between NBM and Black feminism. As Audrey Lorde famously warned, “we cannot afford to do our enemies’ work by destroying each other.”²⁰ We therefore here encourage less an *epistemological* view of intersectionality, which highlights the particular standpoints of Black women and Black men; and more a *systemic* view of intersectionality, in which mutually dependent forces of inequality divide potential allies in the service of hegemony.²¹

It is not surprising that Black feminism and NBM are at odds today when higher education is under attack from a cruel brand of neoliberalism.²² The neoliberal university premised on corporate logics, top-down decision making, and diminished faculty governance relishes tensions between Black feminist scholars and defenders of NBM. It can absolve itself of any responsibility to resolve conflict, knowing that “losses”—in courses, programs, and faculty—can be chalked up to necessary downsizing and cost-cutting. Neoliberal ideologies built on divisiveness, competition over scarce resources, and a post-race and post-feminist worldview has fed the gender conservative, cisnormative, and zero-sum politics of Black male aggrievement. The New Black Masculinities, therefore, has been *seduced* by the neoliberal

project. Like NBM, the neoliberal embrace among Black male elites is not altogether new. As Leah Wright Rigueur 2017 has documented, it be traced back to the “progressive conservatism” of 1960s Black politics that turned to entrepreneurialism, free-market solutions, and public-private partnerships as pathways to social mobility.

While overcited and frequently misunderstood, neoliberalism remains a complex and enormously damaging force that has restructured economic policies and advanced a worldview of colorblind racism and post-feminism. Better intersectional thinking is needed, therefore, to help sift through the wreckage of neoliberalism. Yet gender studies courses are increasingly on the chopping block just as they are needed the most.²³ Moreover, Black men and women remain sorely underrepresented in higher education. According to data from the National Science Foundation, Black students in 2017 made up only 5.4 of the nearly 55,000 Ph.D.s awarded nationwide. In many fields, not a single doctorate went to a Black student. One direct consequence is that research on whiteness and masculinity remains largely in the hands of white scholars, whose “exclusionary practices” include squeezing out the contributions of people of color researchers.²⁴ Meanwhile, a Black feminist pedagogy based on collaboration and caring is threatened by the neoliberal university’s “bare pedagogy,” in the words of educational scholar Henry Giroux 2010, one premised on isolation and merciless competition. And still largely shut out from more secure tenure-track positions, scholars of color have flooded the expanding class of precariously-situated contingent faculty.²⁵

Black Male Uplift

Neoliberalism’s common-sense ideologies have spread to every level and corner of U.S. education. In an era of privatization, a number of odd bedfellows, such as corporations and faith-

based organizations, compete for opportunities to “solve” the crisis of young Black men. Like the theories on which NBM relies, these initiatives reinforce social class and gender divisions even as they promote a more explicitly anti-racist agenda. We demonstrate this through an analysis of the federal initiative *My Brother’s Keeper*, and discuss how this effort at Black male uplift resonates in our respective scholarship on Black male educational institutions: Blume Oeur’s research on all-male public high schools and Grundy’s study of Morehouse College, the country’s historically Black college for men.

On May 19, 2013, then President Barack Obama spoke at the Morehouse College Commencement. He charged the graduates with the daunting task of taking the helm of Black racial advancement: “Your generation is uniquely poised for success unlike any generation of African Americans that came before it... Too few of our brothers have the opportunities that you’ve had here at Morehouse.” His words quickly grew weighty: “There are some things, as Morehouse men, that you are obliged to do for those still left behind.” “Excuses are the rhetoric of the incompetent,” he railed. “Nobody cares if you suffered from discrimination.” Before these educated Black men was a clean-up job of the embarrassment to the race attributed to their disadvantaged counterparts.

How did we arrive here, where young Black men are upheld as the saviors of the race and lambasted as its most likely detriment? How has this paradox of promise and peril driven efforts to promote Black male achievement? Our respective feminist scholarship has critiqued both the masculinist constructions of young Black men’s “problems” and how responses to these supposed problems expose how intersectionality has been repurposed to oddly anti-feminist ends.²⁶ While efforts at Black male achievement most obviously penalize Black womanhood,

they also injure Black men, particularly those at the margins of class and sexuality. And they endorse the notion that the advancement of the race is yoked to the advancement of Black men.

The Morehouse speech was a promotional stop for Obama, who a year later unveiled My Brother's Keeper (MBK), an initiative with the expressed goal of addressing the "persistent opportunity gaps" facing African-American and Latino boys.²⁷ The criticism was swift. Over a thousand Black feminists signed an open letter to President Obama decrying a "vicious cycle in which the assumptions that girls are not in crisis leads to research and policy interventions that overlook them, thus reinforcing their exclusion from efforts like MBK."²⁸ What fell below the radar were the politically curious origins of MBK. Seeded in the Department of Justice, the program's neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility, law and order, and Black male criminality have brought both Black and white conservatives to the same table as left-of-center Black community advocates. The launch of MBK was supported by such right-wing figureheads as Bill O'Reilly, who has famously railed that Black poverty rates are driven by the dissolution of Black families. The organization's advisory board is littered with private sector conglomerates such as Prudential and Deloitte. Still, the corporatization of Black community-based initiatives has been widely embraced. As an example of "social justice capitalism," privatization has helped relieve community angst over what to do with Black boys.²⁹ A curious coalition has formed around Black boys in which Black community leaders and white neoliberal conservatives believe that corporate debts to Black communities are a form of economic justice. Accompanying this belief is the congruent idea that private sector action is more effective for African-Americans than social welfare programs.

My Brother's Keeper is an exemplar of what Michael Dumas calls "neoliberal governmentality," where big-business innovations are offered as a way to "fix" the character

flaws of Black male youth. The same has been forged on the grounds of all-male public schools targeting Black boys. When the City of Chicago rolled out its own city-wide MBK initiative in 2015, leading the way was Tim King, the CEO and founder of Urban Prep Academies, the most well-known of these schools. The schools' proponents have argued that Black-white achievement gaps require a radical intervention in the schooling of solely Black boys, despite feminist detractors citing that the performance gap between white and Black girls is actually wider than that between white and Black boys.³⁰ Like MBK, Black male academies have garnered support from the left-leaning Open Society foundation as well as support from conservative organizations such as The Walton Family Foundation by falling in-step with right-of-center ideologies about ending state-run schools and diminishing the power of teachers unions. In bringing together liberals and conservatives in these ways, Black male academies, like MBK, hit, as Kimberlé Crenshaw observes, a "political sweet spot among populations that both love and fear them."

The institutional cultures of Black male achievement are just as paradoxically a mashup of racial advancement ideologies and conservative practices about behavioral modeling, discipline, and morality. Blume Oeur (2018) demonstrates this in *Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools*, his year-long ethnographic study of two such male academies serving class-disadvantaged Black boys in the same city. Following a state takeover of the public-school system, one of these high schools, Northside Academy (pseudonym), assembled a Board of Trustees featuring many of the city's elite, which secured large funds unavailable to most public schools. The school also embraced its own version of progressive conservatism and cultivated a sense of tradition—in the form of a mandatory Latin curriculum and a strict uniform of blazers and ties—to show that their "gentlemanly" students

possessed the disciplined minds and bodies that distinguished them from their more disadvantaged and “unworthy” peers. The school drew on the same principles behind MBK that linked old, conservative respectability politics with newer and trendier “grit” and “resilience” narratives to promote the idea that changes in personal character and temperament—as opposed to structural change—can lift up Black boys. These politics have intensified with the emergence of a “character education” industry over the past 15 years. This industry promotes the idea that in order to be successful, poor youth must cultivate non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, optimism, and self-confidence. These skills can help compensate for their lack of advanced technological skills compared to their international counterparts, who are normally Asian in the neoliberal imagination. In his Morehouse speech, Obama also drew on this belief in human capital development, a foundation of neoliberal ideology.³¹ “In today’s hyperconnected, hypercompetitive world,” Obama asserted, “with millions of young people from China and India and Brazil—many of whom started with a whole lot less than all of you did—all of them entering the global workforce alongside you, nobody is going to give you anything that you have not earned.”

Many of the cultural curricula for K-12 Black male academies were inspired by Morehouse College. As Saida Grundy shows in her forthcoming book, *Manhood Within the Margins: Promise, Peril, and Paradox at the Historically Black College for Men*, a culture of Black male respectability at Morehouse narrowly constructs racial leadership within a promotion of neoliberal individualism. Grundy’s interviews with graduates revealed that racial leadership was most often understood as a default status of individual accomplishment, buttressed by masculinist ideals of ambition and personal responsibility. When asked how Morehouse men improved conditions for Black men writ large, one respondent replied, “The beginning [of

improving Black communities] is not to be a Black man whose condition need be improved. Our broader responsibility is to not only be examples to the community but to empower people to do and be that in communities.”

This promotion of neoliberal ideologies within notions of leadership lent themselves easily to prioritizing individual pathways to upward mobility. Business administration has long been the most popular major at Morehouse, and a culture of corporatization permeates student life and curricula. Similarly, the high-school boys in *Black Boys Apart* were groomed to be leaders of industry, or what Blume Oeur calls “ambitious entrepreneurs.” At Morehouse, mandatory courses in business etiquette teach men to tie Windsor knots and recognize shrimp forks in preparation for interviews with coveted Wall Street firms. That several of their classmates advanced onto lucrative careers in finance was seen as proof of Morehouse’s contributions to Black community leadership. In this thinking, having Black men in corporate leadership produces trickle-down race betterment when Black men steer capitalist enterprises towards anti-racist ends. Like a sequel to the embossed blazers and motivational messaging of the Black male high schools in Blume Oeur’s research, a culture of respectability defined the Morehouse milieu. These institutions double-down on character education to further stave off the belief that Black men face barriers to mobility.

Allyship in the Time of Death

As feminist sociologists of Black masculinity writing in an era of deepening class inequality, a resurgence of ethnic nationalism, continued gender-based violence, and increasing anti-feminist sentiment, we insist that Black feminism is needed more than ever. This Black feminism is critical of all sexist behaviors without pathologizing men. In the words of Tarana

Burke, Me Too, the movement she founded, was never intended as a “vindictive plot against men.”³² The Black feminism we imagine is a deeply caring politics: one that shines light on the myriad forces that promote intra-racial divisions, and helps to rehabilitate those divisions.

Jennifer Nash (2019) has called for “love in the time of death,” or for Black feminists to embrace “radical intimacies” with other women of color. We end with a call for a radical allyship needed to fight a white supremacy abetted and authorized by patriarchy, and protected by the post-race and post-feminist cloak of neoliberalism. For that reason, we embrace the Combahee River Collective’s insight that anticapitalism gives Black feminism its “revolutionary potential.”³³

“What we must do,” Audrey Lorde writes, “is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities.”³⁴ While we have been critical of the New Black Masculinities, we welcome opportunities to work with its proponents to find “some future.” We accept the invitation of our Black feminist colleagues Aisha Upton and Jalia Joseph (writing in this volume) to explore new Black feminist futures, and imagine an allyship of Black feminism and a *Newer* Black Masculinities united against all forms of state and intimate violence against Black populations. We envision a Black feminist politics of caring and reparations which recognizes Black women and men as worthy of recognition and pursues holistic socio-economic policies to address historical injustices. Even if Black feminism must, in the words of Jennifer Nash, “let go” of intersectionality as its exclusive property, it can hold on more firmly to a praxis that shows deep empathy for the victims of gendered racism and capitalism.

Endnotes

¹ Lindsay, Boghossian, and Pluckrose 2018. These researchers fabricated a number of studies in an attempt to expose the perceived absurdity of what they term “grievance studies,” or research on race, gender, and sexuality. Their “studies” ridiculed intersectionality.

² Curry 2017, 2018; Johnson 2018.

³ Wright Rigueur 2017.

⁴ Carbado 1999; Grundy 2019.

⁵ Nash 2019.

⁶ Gonzalez 2018.

⁷ Weheliye 2014.

⁸ Carby 1984.

⁹ Nash 2019.

¹⁰ Lindsay 2018.

¹¹ Marable 2001:146.

¹² Butler 2013:485.

¹³ Curry 2017:231.

¹⁴ Just as the original Black Masculinities studies was non-feminist, inaugural theorizing on masculinities within sociology adopted a feminist stance but paid insufficient attention to race.

¹⁵ Johnson 2018:38. In 2014, only 38% of all Blacks enrolled in college were men (“Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups, 2017”).

¹⁶ Carby 1998.

¹⁷ James 1997.

¹⁸ Ferguson 2004.

¹⁹ Ellison et al. 2017.

- ²⁰ Lorde 2007:142.
- ²¹ Choo and Ferree 2010.
- ²² Saunders 2010.
- ²³ Wright Rigueur 2017.
- ²⁴ Bridges 2019.
- ²⁵ TIAA 2016.
- ²⁶ Lindsay 2018.
- ²⁷ See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/my-brothers-keeper>.
- ²⁸ “Why We Can’t Wait” 2014.
- ²⁹ Wright Rigueur 2017.
- ³⁰ Carbado 1999.
- ³¹ Pierce 2013.
- ³² quoted in Petter 2018.
- ³³ Taylor 2017:69.
- ³⁴ Lorde 2007:142.

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