

# **Scripting Mature Black Masculinity In Toronto**

By

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## ABSTRACT

How do Black men in Toronto express their Black masculinity? How do these men develop a “mature” (Moore, 1991) Black masculinity when they have only been taught white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? In this major research paper, I will look at the ways Black masculinity and Black fathers are framed in North America as symbols of fear and hate whether it is through the media, government policy or society on a whole. I will look at what ramifications these symbols have on Black men in terms of their capacity to engage in self-love and love to others. This paper incorporates my learning from community engagement and representation of Black fatherhood and love from two community projects: *What is Black Love in Toronto?* (community discussion forums) and *Black Men Loving: The Documentary*. These two initiatives serve as initial stepping-stones that have led me to writing this paper. Through this paper, I hope to gain and add new knowledge about Black masculinity and love that can be used as tools for liberation and critical hope that will support my future work with Black men and Black fathers. In this paper, I will engage with three of my learning components: (1) Black male identities, (2) Self-love / Love to others , and (3) Economics.

## FOREWORD

This major research paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master in Environmental Studies degree from York University. It is the final submission as part of a plan of study which has explored issues of economics, self – love and masculinity, pertaining to Black men and fathers living in Toronto. It considers the ways in which systemic racism impacts the lives of Black men in Canada, and how these impacts influence the scripting of Black masculinities amongst Black fathers and potential Black fathers living in Toronto; and what are the opportunities for grassroots' organizations like the Black Daddies Club to engage with these men. My research considers the role of the negative depiction of African and Black men in the Canadian media, coupled with the impacts from daily micro-aggressions of racism felt by these African Canadian men who experience disproportionate rates of violence, unemployment, incarceration, homelessness, heart related disease and mental health illness compared to non-racialized men of other communities that live in Canada.

This paper has contributed to my learning objective to explore, Black identities, the scripting of Black masculinities, self- love and economic sustainability pertaining to Black men in Canada. This research paper is grounded in a biographical perspective which comes from the community work that I have been doing as the founder of the Black Daddies Club through which I have been working with Black fathers living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for the past nine years. Through this organization I have engaged in

projects such as 'What is Black love ? (In Toronto) discussion series, Black Men Loving: The Documentary; The 360 Project: Addressing Racism in Toronto (Addressing the Discrimination Experienced By Somali Canadians & Racialized LGBTQ & 2SP Homeless Youth in Toronto), a project that I coordinated for the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. I have broadened my understanding of the scripting of Black masculinities, identified the threats and the opportunities of working with Black men in Toronto, while developing several economic sustainable strategies through The Schulich School of Business joint certificate program that could be applied to organizations working with Black men in Canada.

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## INTRODUCTION

This major paper aims to interrogate the possibilities of Black masculinities in the context of the violent contours of Canadian racism. "Masculinity," for the purpose of this paper, is defined as hegemonic masculinity which is synonymous with economic solvency, maleness, whiteness and heterosexuality (Back, 1994; Dines, 2006; James, 2009; Walcott, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity also gains its power from being juxtaposed to Black masculinity which is deemed as inferior. In her article, "White Man's Burden: Gonzo Pornography and the Construction of Black Masculinity", Gail Dines (2006) states, "white hegemonic masculinity is always in negotiation with black masculinity.... in that the elevation and mythification of white masculinity relies on the debasement of black men as savages, Uncle Toms and half-wits such as Stepin Fetchit" (p. 286).

I define Blackness for the purpose of this paper in the context of African and Caribbean identities in Canada. Black masculinity is defined as a gendered performance that mimics hegemonic White masculinity, which is "complex, multiple, and contradictory" (Back, 1994, p. 171). This mimicry of white masculinity is problematic for Black men because attempting to conform to a definition of white masculinity will leave Black men always falling short. This idea is summed up by Gail Dines (2006), "On virtually every level, black men are defined by white culture as failing to meet the standards of white

hegemonic masculinity” (p. 286). Frantz Fanon (1952), in his book “*Black Skin, White Masks*” complicates this further by adding, “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (p. 90).

Utilizing my own personal narratives as theoretical entry points, I will unpack the various ways in which Canadian institutions and the social environment in Canada restrict a more dynamic, multifaceted understanding, expression and manifestation of Black masculinity. It is my claim that Black men’s bodies are not loved, respected or valued in Canada. This is evidenced by Collins (2004), in her assertion that “the vilification of Black men, [is the] idea that Black men are tribal, and because they lack the discipline of a punitive father and state--run institutions to keep them in place” (p.165). On the one hand, Black masculinity is exoticized and on the other hand, Black masculinity, at the intersection of race and gender, is constructed as a site of fear. Black men are seen as “brutes, inherently violent and oversexed”. How are discourses circulated about Black masculine performativity highlight the contentions and complexities of the Black male body as revered, restricted and resented (Back, 1994; Collins, 2004; Cukier and Daniel, 2015; Fanon, 1952; Hill, 2004; hooks, 2004; James, 2009, Majors and Billson 1992; Marriott, 2000).

Given my positionality as a Black cis-gendered heterosexual man, I approach this work using two critical processes: firstly, I deploy an internal reflexive gaze centring myself in the context of the research. Secondly, I engage in an external gaze critically analyzing and making connections to the scholarship and broader social world that have

shaped my experiences as a Black men. Here I seek to explore and be guided by three questions: 1) How do Black men 'legitimize' or 'measure' their masculinity?, living in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. 2) How does the dualism of fear and desire impact the construct of Black masculinity? and 3) How can self-love work to re-script Black masculinities in a way that confronts Black male fragility? Using biographical perspective as a methodology, I propose to deconstruct masculinity and maleness by drawing on my personal narrative and in interaction with society as a Black man born in Jamaica. This method will be supported by an interrogation of dominant discourses of maleness, whiteness and Blackness through analyzing text, audio, interviews and conversations.

This paper is organized in sections, the first section "What is Black masculinity and how is it performed?" reviews how is Black masculinity defined in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. The second section "What are the consequences for Black masculinity?" asks what loving while being male and Black looks like in practice. The third section "Measuring My Black Masculinity", asks what the impediments are to authentic love for Black men. The fourth section "Scripting Mature Black Masculinity In Canada" looks at the question, how can we remove these impediments?

## **Theoretical Framework**

In order to understand Black masculinity, I need to first understand myself. Corradi (1991) explains the importance of researching using "life story" as follows:

A life story thus involves a dialogical, interactive situation in which the course of an individual's life is given shape; by reason of the request that stirs and orients them, and of the subsequent analysis to which the researcher subjects them, life stories aim to explain and give meaning to social phenomena (p.106).

This kind of research brings a deeper understanding to self, as Corradi (1991) continues to say, "both the 'dialectic of identity' and the 'dialectic of otherness' are set in motion to answer the question 'who am I?', which lies at the bottom of each life story" (p.108).

As Nias (1989,p.156) argues,. "Since no two people have the same life experiences, we all learn to perceive the world and ourselves as part of it in different ways" (Nias, 1989.p. 156). I will be adopting a biographical perspective for this paper. While it might seem to the reader that I am having conversations with my memories. This process of looking into the past is necessary as I look to unearth patterns of learning that I was taught about Black masculinity, compare them to my thoughts about what Black masculinity is today, and to develop the potentials for Black masculinity for the future. As Corradi (1991) states:

an autobiographical narrative consists of giving an order to the whole of past events, in finding an unbroken line that establishes a

necessary relationship between what the narrator was and what he or she is today; the narrative mediates between past, present and future, i.e. between past experiences and the meaning they have now acquired for the narrator also in relation to a future project (p.107).

A biographical framework is important as I try to understand how Black masculinity gets framed on a social, cultural and personal level. Woike (2008) explains this condition by saying that, "the inherent self referring nature of autobiographical memories was the feature that made them unique from other types of long-term knowledge. And indeed, memories of personal experiences have been found to be closely related to various aspects of personality, including identity formation" (p. 100).

### **Recognizing The Scripts Of Black Masculinity In Canada**

There is a lack of scholarship examining Black men's relationship to self-love and love in Canada. More importantly there is a lack of analysis on how internalized racism affects how Black men love and receive love. Little is known about how love impacts their roles as men and fathers. Nevertheless, I recognize the efforts made by Black-Canadian academics, researchers and authors whose work discusses Black life in Canada (Galabuzi, 2006; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah, 2012; Ford-Smith, 2011; Walcott, 2004; James, 2010; Walcott, 2009; Elmi, 1999; Razack, 1994; Dei, 2008). We see a pattern amongst Black people living in Canada having challenges finding

meaningful employment (James, 2010; Galabuzi, 2004, McCready et al. 2012.; Cukier and Daniel, 2015), navigating the Canadian education system (James, 2011; Dei, 2008), and receiving equitable treatment in the Canadian criminal justice system (Wortley, and Owusu-Bempah, 2012; Wortley, 2003; James, 2011). All of these challenges affect Black-Canadian health (James, 2010; Patychuk, 2011; Elmi, 1999).

While Black men are hyper-visible in the area of crime (Walcott, 2003; James, 2010; McCready et al, 2012; Cukier and Daniel, 2015), they remain invisible in the areas of economics and politics in Canada (Walcott, 2003; Galabuzi, 2004; James, 2010; McCready et al. 2012; Cukier and Daniel, 2015). In the Urban Alliance on Race Relations; 360 Project Report, Somali Canadians stated that they had to change their names on their resume to sound more “Canadian” and hide their “Somaliness.” Some even mentioned that they had to change their postal code (Cukier and Daniel, 2015). Even before Black people can find employment in Canada “there are a number of camouflages that will lead the potential employer to believe that they are in effect ‘white’ and therefore suitable” (Brand and Bhaggiyadatta, 1986, p. 107 ).

Looking at economics, we see that Black people in Canada need to “wear a mask” (Walcott, 2009) or “act cool” (Majors and Billson, 1992) under oppression to ensure that they survive in Canada. These issues have implications for Black men and their families in terms of economics (McCready et al. 2012; Galabuzi, 2004). As highlighted in "Statistics Profile Of Poverty in Canada," whether you are born in Canada or if you are an immigrant to Canada, once you are Black, you stand a higher chance of living in poverty. Another study found that “Canadian-born visible minorities were no

more likely than others born in Canada to have low incomes” (Collin & Jensen, 2009, p.22). To further complicate the situation, “over 75% of new immigrants are members of racialized groups” (Galabuzi, 2004, p.61). Based on this literature, it is hard to refute that in Canada we do not experience “racialized poverty” (Galabuzi, 2004, p.173). There is a connection between economics, self-love, self-esteem and Black masculinity (hooks, 2000, 2004; Majors and Billson, 1992). In the sense that a Black “man’s” earning power can affect his ability to feel good about himself and to love himself.

One of the basic problems is that Black men have been measuring their masculinity based on metrics created by a white society, in which Black men have limited access to economic power (hooks, 2004; Majors and Billson, 1992). This is best articulated in Majors and Billson’s book *Cool Pose* (1992) Which addresses the question of how Black men define their masculinity. As Majors & Billson argues, “Yet African-American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector. Unlike white men, however, blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success. Many have become frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated, and impatient” (Majors and Billson, 1992. p.1).

This situation brings to light the need to rethink how we imagine Black masculinity and ask some pertinent questions: What makes a Black man? What is Black masculinity? How might we imagine Black masculinity? (Walcott, 2009). It also raises the question, of how Black men loved or are valued by society? (Majors and Billson, 1992; hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004; Hill, 2004; Galabuzi, 2004; Dei, 2008; James, 2010, 2011;



Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012; McCready, 2004, McCready et al. 2012). However the more important question is what happens to us when we hate those that look like us? (Rodney, 1990; Fanon, 2008; Marriott, 2000; hooks, 2004)

The literature has highlighted some of the challenges that African Canadian men and fathers face living in Canada. It reviews a range of literature that delves into the scripting of Black masculinity (Jackson and Hopson, 2011; Majors and Billson, 1992; hooks, 2004; Collins, 2004; Walcott, 2009). There are many other challenges facing Black men that I do not explore in this paper, however I recognize the the many barriers Black men face such as the navigation of the prison industry complex, religion, education, love, self-love, employment, media representation, internalized racism (Rodney, 1990; Majors and Billson, 1992; Marriott, 2000; hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004; Hill, 2004; Galabuzi, 2004; Fanon, 2008; Dei, 2008; Collin & Jensen, 2009; James, 2010, 2011; Wortley Owusu-Bempah, 2012; McCready, 2004, et al, 2012; Cukier & Daniel, 2015). Though I have drawn on a variety of literature that challenges the notion that racism does not exist in Canada, I recognize that an exhaustive review of the extensive literature written on Black life in Canada is beyond the scope of this work.

I propose there is a strong need for the creation of more Black spaces in Canada (McCready et al. 2012, Cukier and Daniel, 2015). More specifically, there is a need for spaces that allow for the inclusion of various scripts of diverse Black masculinities because Black masculinity is not a static concept (McCready, 2004; Chandler, 2007; Walcott, 2009). Groups such as The Black Daddies Club, an organization I founded in 2007 to create spaces for Black fathers in Toronto, are well positioned to do this work.

They are already grounded in community and already have a track record of creating spaces where Black men can come together and discuss the “epistemology of the self: the study of what it means to know oneself and the attendant knowledge claims that produce truth for the “self” (Chandler, 2007. p. 56).

It is important that these Black spaces are non-hierarchical, as Black men have different narratives which makes all of us students and teachers. According to Paulo Freire, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 2000.p. 72). For Black men who occupy these Black spaces to be able to critique and mobilize around issues such as racial profiling, employment and housing that affect them, these spaces must be liberatory in praxis (McCready et al. 2012; Cukier and Daniel, 2015); and liberatory in speaking directly to the real world experience of isolation Black men face. As Freire reminds us, “Education as the practice of freedom - as opposed to education as the practice of domination -- denies that [the human] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire, 2000, p. 81). These spaces should be grounded in the idea of dea of Black love and self-love. For Freire, “dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (Freire, 2000, p. 89).

## **Chapter One**

### **WHAT IS BLACK MASCULINITY AND HOW IS IT PERFORMED?**

Since migrating to Toronto, Canada in the summer of 1990 from Kingston, Jamaica, I have been on a constant search for Black community and Black spaces reminiscent of my homeland--spaces where I could feel accepted as a 6' 1", 250 lbs, dark-skinned Black man. The prevalent ideas of Black masculinity in Canada relegate Black men to the category of "waste men" or a "wasted population that has been synonymous for Black crime, non-existing fathers, and Black single mothers" (Walcott, 2009, p.76). Contributing to the rescripting of Black masculinity is the central purpose of this paper. I look at my own journey of negotiating Black masculinity and critique the various masks of Black manhood that I have put on for survival (Walcott, 2009). This guise, mask (Walcott, 2009) or cool pose (James, 2009; hooks, 2004; Majors and Billson, 1992) that Black men wear are tools that Black men use to navigate the stereotypes forced on them by society (Jackson and Hopson, 2011; Majors and Billson, 1992; hooks, 2004; Collins, 2004; Walcott, 2009).

One is not able to critique Black masculinity without first interrogating white hegemonic masculinity (hooks, 2006, p.12) and the implications that it has on Black men's and Black fathers' performance of gender (Back, 1994; Chandler, 2007; Dines,

2006; James, 2009; hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006; Majors and Billson, 1992). The goal of this paper is not to make the claim that Black men are victims (Carbado, 1998; hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006; Walcott, 2009), but rather to inspire Black men to develop the agency to move from what bell hooks (2006, p. 11) frames as "black self-hatred" to Black self-love. Before this shift can happen though, there is a need to heal from the oppressions of white hegemonic masculinity (Bly and Kaufman, 1995; hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006). We have to first acknowledge the proximity between Black masculinity and victimization, as Professor Rinaldo Walcott states in his paper "Reconstructing manhood; Or, the drag of Black masculinity":

"These recent, but not new, critiques of black public masculinity assume not only heterosexuality; all the critiques assume a coherent black masculinity as well. The question of history is one that is interpreted as a set of social, economic, and political obstacles of the past that have been and or has to be overcome – the move from 'victim to victor' (in the words of [Bill] Cosby and [Dr. Alvin] Poussaint) is central to the narrative of coherency in the assumption that black manhood is an impoverished masculinity in need of repair and or rescue, and the unspoken is that a good douse of patriarchy would do it well" (Walcott, 2009. p.76).

It is only when we acknowledge our struggles and oppressions, we can truly transition towards healing and adding value to our Black lives. As bell hooks (2006) mentions in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, "We cannot value ourselves rightly without first breaking through the walls of denial which hide the depth of black self-hatred, inner anguish, and unreconciled pain" (hooks, 2006. p.20). When someone from outside the Black culture asks me the problematic question "What has your experience been as a Black man?" I am forced to try and verbalize the feeling of my lived reality and to explain the feelings of oppression that come with living in my Black skin. I always come back to the fictional character; Bigger Thomas, from the book *Native Son* by Richard Wright. I read *Native Son* when I was 18 years of age. It was first time someone explained Black masculinity in a way that was real to me. It was the first time I read an explanation of the experience of feeling like the constant "other" (Rusk, 2002). Anthony Lemelle in his book *Black Male Deviance* (1995) speaks about Bigger Thomas and the idea of the "other." Lemelle states:

"The novel is divided into three parts: fear, flight and fate.

Bigger Thomas is the central tragic hero who comes to manhood in a society that has excluded him. He is a part of no society. With his mother, brother, and sister he lives in a home that is no home. Bigger develops an alienated conscience, without hope, love, or religion, in spite of the

reality of these qualities in his society; he becomes no one.

In short, Bigger is the Other” (Lemelle, 1995, p.2).

I am using the term “other” to describe the subject position on the edge of authoritative history, the debris and manure of history.

“Otherness is difference that has been relegated, according to hegemony, to the dark regions of the mind. It describes those 'barbarians' who are forced to serve spirits who are not unlike the white God. On the other hand, 'sameness' is the myth derived from the liberal belief in a universal individuality which holds that 'we are all the same.' Holding this view provides comfort for racists who reason that racism does not exist” (Lemelle, 1995. p.2).

As a young Black man, the experience of being "othered" hit home one day when I was working in a retail store, selling men's clothes in a downtown Toronto mall. My manager (a Black man from England), approached me and said, "Brandon, you need to smile more, you are a big Black man, and you need to smile more so that the customers will not be fearful of coming into the store." His comment was a blow to my masculinity and Blackness; his words made me aware of how Black men is constructed as

threatening. His comments made me feel ugly and ashamed like Wright's Bigger Thomas.

### **What Is White Hegemonic Masculinity?**

The problem with white hegemonic masculinity is that it is limited and narrow in its parameters of gender performance. As noted in the article, "The 'White Negro' revisited," "Masculinity', in conventional usage conveys a unitary idea of maleness." (Back, 1994. p.171). Lemelle (1995) speaks about cultural hegemony and how it influences the way we, as a society, think of what is normal, or right or wrong. Lemelle states:

By "cultural hegemony" I mean pluralism on emancipatory discourses in which the power of social movements challenges the established way of life and thought that is considered to be the reality of society. The hegemonic perspective becomes the basis of evaluating taste, custom, morality, and religious and political principles; it extends into setting the rules for social relations, particularly the intellectual and moral aspects of those relations" (Lemelle, 1995. p.2).

Any performance of masculinity that goes against the hegemonic ideologies of normal manhood is seen as queer or abnormal and is met with negativity and fear. In a

white supremacist patriarchal society, this performance acts as a barrier for boys and men who desire to perform masculinity in ways that are “authentic” (Moore, 1991) to themselves. Robert Moore in his book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering The Archetypes Of The Mature Masculine*, speaks of the challenges of realizing “authentic” expressions of masculinity. Moore (1991) suggested that patriarchy is immature masculinity. According to Moore (1991), “patriarchy is not the expression of deep and rooted masculinity, for truly deep and rooted masculinity is not abusive. Patriarchy is the expression of the immature masculine. It is the expression of Boy psychology, and, in part, the shadow -- or crazy -- side of masculinity. It expressed the stunted masculine, fixated at immature levels” (p. xvii). Moore goes on to state that patriarchy is fearful.

“Patriarchy, in our view, is an attack on masculinity in its fullness as well as femininity in its fullness. Those caught up in the structures and dynamics of patriarchy seek to dominate not only women but men as well. Patriarchy is based on fear -- the boy's fear, the immature masculine's fear -- of women, to be sure, but also fear of men. Boys fear women. They also fear real men.” (Moore, 1991. p. xvii).



I grew up with my grandmother (Sister Hay) who lived in Kingston, Jamaica in an area called “Maxfield Avenue” in the Garrison community, a poor, inner-city communities controlled by one of Jamaica's two main political parties -- Jamaica Labor Party or People's National Party. This particular area was influenced by the People's National Party (PNP). My grandmother lived on a street called Berwick Road, and it was there that the foundation of my ideologies around Black masculinity and communal living were constructed. When I was eight years of age, I learned one of the most important and frightening lessons about Black masculinity grounded in patriarchal values. I was hanging out one day with some older kids (around 12-16 years). My grandmother didn't approve because she saw them as trouble-makers. In an attempt to fit in with the group, I called one of the guys a “Bow Cat” (which refers to a man who gives oral sex to a woman). It was a term I heard being thrown around in reggae songs and also by these young men themselves in previous conversations. I didn't quite understand the meaning of the word (other than it was a grown up word, and also a good word to use in order to disrespect someone). But thought if I used the word it would help me fit in and be taken up as “one of the man dem.” However, the guy whom I called a “Bow Cat” got absolutely livid, pulled out a knife and threatened to stab me. I remember how scared and confused I was that someone would get so angry at the use of this word. When I became older, I thought it as funny, but I soon realized that a man who performs oral sex was seen as giving up his manly sexual powers and thus was less of a man. As hook's states, “patriarchal sex insists on penetration” (hooks, 2004. p. 75).

I had a second revelation at that moment after the guy pulled his knife on me, about the fragility of Black masculinity within the context of Jamaican patriarchal constructs. Black masculinity would have to be fragile if words like “Bow Cat” could damage one’s bravado to the extent of committing murder. This fragility is taken up by James and Davis (2014) in their paper, “Jamaican Males: Readings of Masculinities and the Relationship to Violence.” They state:

manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. ‘Males’ performances of their masculine gender roles also tend to be heightened when they are in the company of their male peers. In these instances, males reject performances that might make them appear feminine, weak or unmanly. And since patriarchy, sexism and homophobia operate in tandem to frame males’ performances of their heterosexual hegemonic masculinities, they will make every attempt to avoid labels such as “fag” or “sissy,” since these perceived socially derogatory terms mark them as “failed males” (James & Davis, 2014. p.6).

This idea of “failed males,” as James and Davis put it is a concept I would encounter with Black heterosexual men, and white and Black homosexual men as I got older.

## **What Is The Impact Of White Hegemonic Masculinity On Black Men?**

In bell hook's *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks offers a definition of masculinity by author Robert Staples, She quotes:

"Masculinity, as defined in this culture, has implied a certain autonomy and mastery of one's environment. ... the black male has always had to confront the contradiction between the normative expectation attached to being male in this society and the prescription on his behaviour and achievement of goal. Implicit in [Staples] analysis is the assumption that black men only internalize this norm and be victimized by it." (hooks, 2006. p.97).

This culture creates a problem as the messaging then becomes that there is only one kind of masculinity and any other forms of masculinity that do not mimic the traditional idea is a failure of masculinity.

In a conversation about practicing self-love and masculinity, a colleague at York University, who identifies as a gay white man, said that because he was queer he was a "failed man" (James and Davis, 2014.p.6). He didn't have a problem with the idea of being a failed man, but recognized that he was not the ideal candidate for what

masculinity is “supposed” to be. His view raised questions for me about what “authentic masculinity” (Moore, 1991) is. I thought about this conversation and how it mirrors the sentiments that I often feel as a Black man and Black father: the idea of being a failed man, the concern of failing my families, the concern of not being financially successful, the concern that I will not be able to inspire my children or give them the basic necessities for growing in the right direction. This idea of failing as a man is one of the constructs of hegemonic masculinity that marginalizes and “others” diverse expressions and performances of masculinity. In the book *Scripting The Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, And Racial Politics In Popular Media*, Ronald Jackson argues: “the sickly nature of hegemonic inscriptions may influence an individual to begin to view the self as a stranger, as an obscure Otherized corporeal object, rather than as a familiar subject” (Jackson, 2006. p. 10).

On “This Is Your America” on CNN, Lisa Ling was visiting Black men in prison. Some of these men were fathers and one of them said that he was “tired of failing his family” because he kept coming back to prison over various drug charges. He wanted to be a success for his family’s well being. His words made me think about the criminalization of Black men and what implications it has on Black men loving their children. As bell hooks states in *Salvation*, “Patriarchal thinking still encourages women and men to believe that paternal contribution to parenting is never as important as mothers’. Naturally a culture that teaches everyone that fathers exist to provide material sustenance places no value on the emotional nurturance of fathers. This has been especially true in black life” (hooks, 2001. p.141). When you hear about these individual

stories, one may feel that these are individual problems that Black men face. However after hearing a multitude of Black men telling the same stories, one realizes that the issue of the criminalization of Black men is a systemic issue (hooks, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006; James, 2006, 2011; Majors and Billson, 1992 Wortley and Owusu-Bempah, 2012; Wortley, 2003). Black men have to navigate the path of loving self through systemic racism (hooks, b. 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006).

The challenges to loving oneself come into play when trying to engage in romantic relationships. This idea of Black masculinity being a 'failure' is taken up by bell hooks in her book *Black Looks* (2006). For hooks, "The portrait of black masculinity that emerges in this work perpetually contracts black men as 'failures' who are psychologically 'fucked up,' dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist destiny" (hooks, 2006. p.89). This idea of constantly failing at life can be stressful for a lot of Black men. Some may deal with this stress in healthy ways such as exercise or meditation to combat the mental and physical duress. The benefits of exercise and stress management is taken up David Patchell-Evans (founder of Good Life Fitness) in his book *Living the Good Life: Your Guide to Health and Success*. Patchell-Evans states, "If you are fit, your body is in tune with your environment. You have higher self-esteem and self awareness. If you feel in control of your body, you will also feel in control of your mind." (Patchell-Evans, 2004. p.131). However, many Black men deal with their stressors by utilizing unhealthy vices and habits such as smoking, drugs, drinking alcohol, over-eating, and sex (Corey, 1989; hooks, 2004, 2006, Majors and Billson, 1992). These unhealthy vices became some of

the ways I chose to dull or escape the pain from my own reality when I was younger and negotiating fatherhood, Black masculinity and poverty .

## Chapter Two

### WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR BLACK MASCULINITY?

#### A Single Mother And Her Fatherless Son

Defining Black masculinity became more challenging when I became a young father. My partner and I had two sons and were expecting our third son when I was 24 years of age and my partner was 27. We decided that we were going to move out of my mother's home. I was worried about the move because up until that moment my mother had never really had a romantic partner since she and my father split up. My mother had found out that my father had impregnated a woman who lived next door to my grandmother when I was four years old. While we lived in Jamaica she dated only two men of significance that I was aware of before I was 10 years of age. Since she left Jamaica in 1990 to come to Canada, she had only had two serious relationships. Some would say that she had put the attention she would have put into romantic relationship into the relationship with her son. Some said that she babied or spoiled me. bell hooks speaks about this problematic relationship between the "single mother and her fatherless son" (hooks, 2001. p.151) in *Salvation: Black people and love*. hook states, "Black mothers, like other women in patriarchal society, often feel they are fulfilling their rightful role by serving males, whether they are husbands or sons." (p.147). This kind of

mother-son relationship was something I saw as customary growing up in Jamaica. It was more pronounced because I was a single child and I was used to my mother doing all the cooking, laundry, cleaning and maintenance in the home. bell hooks speaks on this customary relationship between Black men and Black women when she says, "It is not unusual to hear young black boys make demands for service from grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, and it is often seen as a sign of healthy masculinity" (hooks, 2001. p.147-148).

I was paying rent at this time but every now and then, I would be late on my portion and my mother would give me understanding. Now I was moving out with my partner and I didn't even know how to do my own laundry. I was worried that I never had the opportunity to be on my own, to be my own man. I was transitioning from one nest to another and I didn't know if I was man enough to do my part. As bell hooks states, "in reality the male who never learns how to take care of his basic needs is infantilized" (hooks, 2001. p. 148). When I was growing up I always wanted to live on my own and struggle through some of the things that most of my friends who had lived on their own had been through; such as eating canned food or noodles for breakfast instead of a hearty West Indian breakfast that included ackee, salt-fish and all the fixing that I didn't know how to prepare. I wanted to learn how to take care of myself. I was worried that I was a boy trapped in a man's body and would leave my partner disappointed. As hooks continues to say:



Mothers who indulge sons and allow them to be irresponsible are not being loving. Their actions are motivated by the desire to bind the boy to them. This is a context that breeds emotional incest, which is as dangerous to a boy's self esteem as physical incest. We have all heard black males praise their mothers and fault all the other women in their lives who do not subordinate their needs to his the way his mama did (hooks, 2001. p.148).

Growing up, I wondered how many Black boys transitioning into Black men that were in my position that never quite grew up, like the mythical character "Peter Pan." hooks (2001) comments on the Peter Pan syndrome in men: "The Peter Pan syndrome emerges when a boy decides he wants to stay young forever and spend his life partying and having fun" (hooks, 2001. p.141). hooks goes on to quote Dan Kiley who maintains that "irresponsible is a key to staying young. Black men had the added advantage of blaming their irresponsible behaviour on the system's failure to provide jobs." (hooks, 2001. p.141). In *Why Men Cheat*, author Michael Anthony Corey speaks of the fear men have of growing old, stating that "all men lust after youth because all men lust after immortality, and youth is the next closest thing to immortality. This is why most men experience such fear at losing their hair -- not because they are particularly vain, but because they fear the loss of youth and the inevitability of death that it represents" (Corey, 1989. p.115). I have seen many Black mothers who were single and raised

daughters to be responsible, educated and self sufficient. It would seem that these mothers put more pressure on their daughters to be responsible around the house and to ensure more of a balance of shared responsibility. For their sons, mothers often take on responsibilities that their sons should have taken on. Though my mother did fall into this pattern, I appreciate that she did the best that that she could as a single mother and and that she surrounded me with uncles and male cousins that modeled Black masculinity for me. I hold myself accountable and accept the perks that came with being pampered as a Black boy, man, and father being raised by a single Black mother in Toronto came with.

### **The Pressure**

The balancing of my relationships as a new father, a romantic partner, and an only child while trying to maintain self-care was especially difficult living at my mother's home. I remember coming home from work as a telemarketer after eight hours of listening to customers complaining, mentally drained. I was often met at the door with a crying baby or a stressed out partner who needed some time to herself or a listening ear to express some of the emotions that she was dealing with. I also had to negotiate my relationship with my mother, the matriarch of the household. This would also cause a tension between my partner, my mother and myself, especially if a disagreement took place between my partner and my mother. I was often expected to choose sides. In some situations I felt that I had two partners and two mothers (Hendin, 1969; McAdoo, 2006; Meek, 2007; Western and McClanahan 2000). What further complicated things with two matriarchs in the home was that my partner wanted her own space so that she

could parent her children in the way that she felt was appropriate. Meanwhile my mother liked her home to function a certain way and a lot of responsibility had fallen on her with us living in her home with our two children. I felt guilty because she had raised me as a single parent and now she was experiencing the pressures of my not having sufficient means to support my family. The pressures of this living dynamic were so stressful that I started to avoid coming home after work.

I developed a friendship with an attractive female co-worker who lived by herself with a roommate and didn't have any responsibilities such as children of her own. We developed a platonic relationship of hanging out after work that eventually became a romantic and sexual relationship that had me coming home late into the evening and early mornings. This relationship was the first of a sexual relationships that I would engage in outside of the relationship I had with the mother of my children as a way of escaping the stresses I couldn't cope with as a young father. This form of escapism through sex outside of one's relationship is taken up in the book, *Why Men Cheat*, where Corey states:

A good part of the reason why an excessive amount of stress can lead to adulterous behaviour concerns the tendency of overstressed people to become involved in escapist behaviour. When people are regularly faced with stressful situations, especially those situations which they feel they are unable to control, they tend to want to escape their suffering if

they are unable to alleviate it entirely. One of the most popular methods of escape in the male escapist repertoire is the adulterous affair (Corey, 1989. p.95).

This form of escapism is problematic as it usually entails a lot of dishonesty (hooks, 2004). The person cheating is usually not upfront with their emotions or intentions with their partner and sometimes they are not upfront with the person they are having an affair with. It can, of course, also lead to unwanted pregnancies, sexual transmitted diseases, broken families, resentment and sometimes irreparable damages to relationships.

## **Escapism**

The problem I was having was that I was establishing these romantic relationships from a needs-based psychology, I was using the emotional currency that these women gave me as a way to fulfill my self-worth, to recharge my batteries, so to speak, so that I could continue with my day-to-day activities. These romantic relationships were a form of escapism from my reality as a Black man who had limited power, financial resources and political will. These romantic relationships were a way to dull the pain of not being able to provide for my family because I was either unemployed or in a precarious working situation. I felt that I had some power and value in these sexual relationships with these other women that I did not have in the “real world”. These sexual relationships became part of a set of destructive vices in addition to alcohol, marijuana, pornography, and

cigarettes, that I had put in place in my life which ironically reinforced the idea that I was not worthy and that I didn't deserve to be loved.

In *Why Men Cheat*, Corey (1989), quotes John Bradshaw who speaks about the problematic thinking in seeking to valuing or complete value ourselves through romantic relationships with other people. Corey states:

The reason two immature people cannot have a healthy and happy relationship based on need is simple: No one can provide us with the development we need to be whole; we need to acquire it ourselves. Once we start looking for our completion in other people, we invariably begin to get frustrated and angry, because the self-development we are looking for in another person cannot be had, because it simply does not exist (Corey, 1989. p.41).

I would find myself frustrated after engaging in adulterous affairs as they did not fulfil the happiness I was seeking. I was on a desperate search to find self-love. I realized that I had to rethink the value of my Black life.

bell hooks (2004) speaks about valuing black men when she states, "the racist/sexist assumption that the black male is valueless and therefore when you take a black man's life you are just taking nothing from nothing, This is as nihilism lived" (hooks, 2004

p.137). bell hooks recognizes that white supremacist society engages Black men in a certain way, causing the internalization of pain and suffering, as something that they have no control over.

"As one-third of the black males in this country languish in prisons or under the stewardship of assorted probation and parole boards, as black men continue to be over represented in the drug trade, and among the legions of persons with chronic illness -- HIV, cancer, heart disease, alcoholism; as we give our lives over to violence or to a certain silent despair, we have become the emblem of ugliness, bestiality, and barbarism" (hooks, 2004. p.137).

I had to unlearn "Black self-hatred" (hooks, 2006), and then learn how to see value in myself and love myself. Corey (1989), quotes Bradshaw who speaks of the importance of this self-loving act, when he states, "we need to be whole individuals who can stand on our own before we can get together with someone else and have a healthy and happy relationship." (Corey, 1989. p.40). This shift from Black self-hate to Black self-love requires the removal of the "social self" (Lemelle,1995). Black men need a new way of seeing themselves outside of the white supremacist patriarchal lens.



## **Chapter Three**

### **MEASURING BLACK MASCULINITY**

#### **Measuring At The Roots**

My notions of Black masculinity were first instilled in me as a child in Jamaica. Specifically during my time spent at my grandparents home on Berwick Road in the Maxfield Avenue community. This is where my foundation as a Black boy was cemented and my notions around Black masculinity were established. On Friday nights, there were usually street dance parties sponsored by the convenient shop next door to my grandmother's house. My grandmother was a staunch Christian and we (as her grandchildren) were not allowed to go out to our front gates on Friday nights to people-watch and take in the “dancehall” activities. When the opportunity presented itself, my brother, cousins and I would sneak out.

From my grandparents’ veranda, I saw the transition from “Roots Reggae to Dancehall” (Cooper, 2012. p. 37) and with Dancehall came a blatant sexuality that was not as overt in the Jamaican music styles that predicated dancehall (such as mento, ska and roots reggae). With this new Dancehall music came new ideologies of how Black masculinity should be performed. For example, a song like “Gimme Punanny”, originally



by Admiral Bailey and released in 1987, referred to men wanting sex and violently objectifies women by referring only to their vaginas, known as "punanny".

The song was considered "slack" (vulgar) by a lot of the elders, and it was described as a 'one-chord song with raunchy lyrics' (Cooper, 2012. p. 43). But young people (like myself) were gravitating to the music because it resembled the language that was used amongst the youth when no adults were around. The tempo of dancehall was appealing to me and my other adolescent male friends. According to Holder-Nevins, Eldemire-Shearer and McCaw-Binns (2009), "Dancehall music evolved in the nineties as a fusion of reggae and North American 'rap'. Sexuality and violence are common themes in dancehall music which have engendered negative comments from the society including concerns about its influence on adolescent values" (p.125).

Admiral Bailey's song also captured the social context in a snapshot, of patriarchy in Jamaica in the 1980s. In addition, the song gave us a view on safe and not-so-safe sexual practices. Dancehall music also presented to me new metrics of measuring Black masculinity: penis size (Batson-Savage, 2007; Lewis, 2014; Plummer, 2013; Salih, 2007); the number of baby mothers one man could impregnate (Cooper, 2004; Farred, 2001; Frank, 2007; Henriques, 2014); and the fact that only heterosexual Black men can ever really claim Black masculinity in Jamaica, where homosexuality is broadly considered "an abomination" according to the music (Bucknor, 2004; Cooper, 1994; Gutzmore, 2004; James and Davis, 2014; Hurley, 2014) ; and finally the image that a real man should be rich and live a life of luxury (Bradley, 2001; Hope, 2001; James & Davis, 2014, Power & Hallencreutz, 2002).

## **In The Shadows Of My Father**

Around the age of eight, I began to feel self conscious about the size of my penis and the fact that my penis did not resemble the 'broomstick' that many of the dancehall artists spoke about. When I spoke with my male friends about penis size, we all lied and said that "our penis size, spanned from our elbows to our wrist." We felt the pressures of dancehall music's unrealistic idea of manhood.

The healthy transition from "boyhood masculinity to mature masculinity" is supported by an elder male figure head which Moore (1991) takes up in *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*, stating that an "essential ingredient for a successful initiatory process is the presence of a ritual elder [...] The ritual elder is the man who knows the secured wisdom, who knows the ways of the tribe and the closely guarded men's myth. He is the only one who lives out of a vision of mature masculinity" (Moore, 1991. p.7).

What compounded my boyish insecurities was the fact that I "hungered for my father" (hooks, 2004) who was absent and therefore unavailable to field my many questions not just about masculinity but about life overall. This absence created a longing within me which is taken up by Robert Moore (1991) who states, "many of us seek the generative, affirming, and empowering father (though most of us don't know it); the father who, for most of us, never existed in our actual lives and won't appear, no matter how hard we try to make appear" (Moore, 1991. p.7). I couldn't ask my father about masculinity, as a teenager, when my questions about masculinity surfaced, I didn't have anyone to speak to about it. There was no one I felt comfortable enough with to

speak to about manhood, other than my mother, who had been both mother and father to me. As hooks points out, "Since so many black males uncritically accept patriarchal thinking, they continue to believe that children do not need a father's care as much as they need mothers" (hooks, 2004. p. 104). I can only surmise that my father went through his own journey understanding his masculinity. He was murdered in 2005. We never had a conversation in which I could ask him about his journey to manhood.

I say my father was in search of his own masculinity because he fathered seven different children with six different women. I remember when I was around seven years of age, I was on the veranda of my grandmother's home, and a woman and little girl who I had never met before came to the front gate to visit my grandmother. After they left, my grandmother told me that she was my little sister. It was a surreal and confusing moment. This epidemic of fatherless Black children is tied to a patriarchal way of thinking that most Black fathers fall victim to -- the idea of manhood being measured by how many children you have, whether or not you can take care of them. As hooks argues, "From slavery on many black males have chosen to avoid parenting. They breed children they have no intention of raising. Colluding with black women who have been brainwashed by patriarchal thinking, they believe that father-love is not essential to a child's well-being" (hooks, 2004. p.105).

Two of my father's children came from a marriage that he was in up until his death; however, my father was not faithful to his wife; he had "girlfriends" up until his death.

I wonder what provoked my father to sleep with all these women? Was it his way of validating or loving himself - or was it deeper than this? When I was 12 years old, I asked my mother if I should be worried about my penis size and her response was "Son, you shouldn't be worried, your father did not have a big penis either." Her answer left me devastated. I knew my mother's intention was good the damage was done and my insecurities around my Black masculinity was born.

I grew up with a negative opinion of my father. I felt that I was not important to him and felt that I was abandoned. bell hooks captures it accurately when she states, "a lot of black children -- more than ever -- feel that at least one parent, generally the father, has abandoned them" (hooks, 2004. p.103). I was angry at him, and for a period of time I did not want to be associated with my father. I did not want to repeat his mistakes, and when someone would say that I looked like my father or that I am just like my father, it would deeply bother me. This is taken up by Marriott in *On Black Men*:

Our fathers, black fathers – poignant symbols for loss and separation, of what is wrong with black culture and black men. Or, to put it another way: a symptom, a damning performative where, "He's just like his daddy" ... cuts through you like a razor. [...] It may be that black fathers, black sons, are carrying the burden of that anxiety – a burden which, going beyond the agony of the relation between father and son, has become

central to black men's exploration of masculinity and manhood  
(Marriott, 2000.p.98).

Though I desired not be like my father, I was still continuing the narrow form of Black masculinity I had learned from his example. When it came to engaging in love relationships with women, I soon came to recognize that my motivation was not to 'love', it was to 'fuck' (hooks, 2004).

### **This Isn't Love**

It was during the period in my life between my late teens and early twenties, I started to cheat with various women searching for my masculinity in the ways that I was socialized, as many Black boys are - using "fucking" as a way to navigate my masculinity. bell hooks in her book, *We Real Cool* says "sex is fucking. In patriarchy, there is an imperative to fuck -- in rape and in 'normal' sex, with strangers and girlfriends and wives and strangers' wives and children. What matters in patriarchal sex is the male need to fuck. When the need presents itself, sex occurs" (hooks, 2004. p. 70).

I slept with many women as a form of escapism (Corey, 1989) from my reality as a father that could not provide. I was fuelled by my sexual enterprises with many women. I felt powerful, I felt attractive, I felt dominant, I felt like a "man", because "Patriarchal sex was not only the medium for the assertion of manhood; it was also reconceptualized in the space of blackness as entitled pleasure for black males who were not getting all the

perks of patriarchal maleness in arenas where white men were still controlling the show" (hooks, 2004. p. 71).

Yet, I realized that I was feeling empty (and sometimes guilty) after these sexual exchanges. After a while, these women wanted more than just sex. This was a problem for me as I was using sex as a way to forget my reality and responsibilities. I was not looking for more relationships that I could not sustain. bell hooks (2004) speaks about the problematic approach that some Black men utilize, which is chasing sex to fill the emptiness that they feel. She states, "sexual pleasure is rarely the goal in a sexual encounter; something far more important is on the line, our sense of ourselves as men. Men's sense of sexual scarcity and an almost compulsive need for sex to confirm manhood feed each other, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of sexual deprivation and despair" (hooks, 2004. p. 72).

A pivotal conversation in a barber shop changed my thinking. A Black man in his 50s or 60s spoke about coming home after taking out his girlfriend (a woman outside of his marriage) to a nice restaurant. To impress her, he spent a big chunk of cash on the dinner. When he returned home, his eldest son approached him and asked him for \$20 for a school trip. The man was embarrassed to tell his son he could not give him any money towards the trip, and told his son that he should ask his mother for the money. He spoke of the shame he felt in that moment as he had spent all of his money on a dinner with a woman that he wanted to impress in hopes of having sex with her. He realized that his priorities were way off. His son should have been his number one priority.

In her book "*Salvation: Black People And Love*", bell hooks (2001) speaks about Black men playing the "playboy" role.

"As the aging, mostly white playboys gave up their fun and married, black males who embraced pimp masculinity tried to be players forever. If they married, their relationships were torn apart by infidelity and betrayal. White male playboys legitimized the rejection of fatherhood, but when this stance is embraced by black males it had disastrous implications for black family life" (hooks, 2001. p.140).

The story the man shared that day in the barbershop made me aware that the chase for masculinity through promiscuous sex continues for Black men way into the latter parts of our lives.

### **Measuring My Manhood**

The insecurity around penis size can manifest in seeking validation of one's manhood through having multiple sexual partners, and in unsafe sexual practices. In the book *Cool Pose*, this phenomenon of "sexual promiscuity and procreation" is taken up. The author notes that, "For some black males there is an inseparable link between

self-esteem and the ability to have affairs with women who produce their children” (Majors and Billson, 1992. p.16). The idea of monogamy was foreign to me growing up as a teenager and I didn’t think it was possible for me as I didn’t think that one woman could validate my masculinity, which I measured by the number of women I was sleeping with. This calculation has been a problem in romantic relationships I have had in the past as I felt that I was carrying on the legacy of my father’s curse of promiscuity that I could not cure.

I realized from a young age that “fucking” was deeply connected to my ideologies of Black masculinity. bell hooks (2004. p.71) contends that, "equating manhood with fucking, many black men saw status and economic success as synonymous with endless sexual conquest."She goes on to describe the "notion that males should, ‘fuck as many women as often as you can get away with it,’ or ‘fuck a lot of women until you get tired of it, and then find one to marry and just fuck her’” (hooks, 2004. p.71). I also realized that my source of knowledge about sex was porn. Regarding my fixation on penis size, watching Black men in porn made me feel like a “Black sheep or imposter”. Replacing love with fucking, problematizes the possibility for growth for Black men. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) highlights this problematic thinking by stating that:

"linking African people and animals was crucial to Western views of Black promiscuity. Genital sexual intercourse or, more colloquially, the act of 'fucking,' characterized animal sexuality. Animals are



promiscuous because they lack intellect, culture, and civilization. Animals do not have erotic lives; they merely 'fuck' and reproduce. Certainly animals could be slaughtered, sold, and domesticated as pets because within capitalist political economies, animals were commodities that were owned as private property" (Collins, 2004. p.100).

I realized in my 20s that my insecurity about penis size, was a big motivation for me to sleep with lots of women, as long as there was some attraction, and no matter whether I was in a relationship or not. I realized after a few years that sleeping with all these women was not serving me. In fact, I found that I couldn't engage in a real way with women I respected and the impact of all the fucking around on the relationships led to heartbreak and depression. I started to hate myself for not being loyal and for getting caught up falling for women that I could never have for myself.

The impacts of daily oppression, marginalization and alienation can result in Black men fucking not just for the sake of it, but fucking so that we can be seen. However, fucking instead of loving alienates us even more. bell hooks (2004) contends that,

"we are born sensual creatures with an unlimited capacity to feel and an effortless propensity to deeply connect with all human beings. We are then subjected

to continuous conditioning to repress sensuality, numb feelings, ignore our bodies, and separate from our natural closeness with our fellow human beings. All of these human needs are then promised to us by way of sex and sexuality. Of course sex can never fulfill all these needs, yet black men still seek it as though it can” (hooks, 2004. p. 72).

As I came into my manhood in my mid to late 20s, which came with the birth of my three boys (Tristan, Julian and Elijah), my concept of masculinity began to open up. And then, on March 20, 2005, “I became the son of a murder victim” (Burchall and Hay, 2013. p.1). Between those experiences, I found that there was a need to explore what mature Black masculinity means to me. I came to the realization that there is not a “coherent single masculine” narrative (Walcott, 2009) and that Black masculinity is not one-dimensional (Majors and Billson, 1992). This journey to find my own narrative has taken, and continues to take, a lot of hard work and unlearning but there is something bigger at stake than my ability to successfully navigate the question of what mature Black masculinity really means for me. The fact that I have three Black boys makes it imperative that I am able to model for them the agency to choose their own scripts of masculinity. If one day one of my children should say to me, “Daddy, I am gay or trans,” I

want him to know know that I am here to support him. I do not want my sons to continue carrying on the curse of toxic masculinity.

## **Loving In Our Skin**

Loving in my Black skin is a very complicated task. The reason for these complications are due to the contradictory information that I grew up hearing about what makes a “suitable Black man” (Brown, 1999; Chandler, 2007; Collins, 2004; Jackson, 2006; James, 2009; James and Davis, 2014). I often hear from my female friends that they want a Black man who is more sensitive, communicates better, financially provides more, helps out more around the house. I juxtapose these criterias with the popular narrative that a Black man should not be gay or transgendered (Bucknor, 2004; Chandler, 2007; Cooper, 1994; Gutzmore, 2004; James & Davis, 2014; Hurley, 2014; McCready, 2004; Walcott, 2009) because it’s too effeminate and there is only one acceptable kind of performance of Black masculinity (Chandler, 2007; Collins, 2004; Jackson, 2006; hooks, 2001, 2004; James, 2009; James and Davis, 2014). Black men should present themselves as warriors who lack any real kind of sensitivity and they should also be providers (Bradley, 2001; Hamer, 1997; Hope, 2001; James & Davis, 2014; McLoyd, 1990; McMillan, 2012; Power and Hallencreutz, 2002). Social norms dictating race and gender performance also impact Black lesbian and transgendered women (Clarke, 1983; Lorde, 1984, 1985; Richie, 1985). The intersection of race and mental health in Canada (Beiser et al., 2002; Fernando, 2010; Mossakowski, 2003; Williams and Williams-Morris, 2000), has deadly consequences for men of colour living

in Toronto as in the cases of Sammy Yatim and Andrew Loku (Gillis, 2015). Both Yatim and Loku were killed by the Toronto Police Service during incidents where these men exhibited mental health unwellness in the public sphere.

## **Chapter Four**

### **SCRIPTING MATURE BLACK MASCULINITY IN CANADA**

#### **Black Daddies Club: A Movement Built On Love**

In 2007, I created a grassroots community-based organization called the Black Daddies Club (BDC) in an attempt to create spaces for Black fathers in the Greater Toronto Area, and with a long term goal of creating a movement built on love for Black men and fathers. Admittedly, I had my own selfish reasons as a young Black father living in Toronto looking for supports to be a better a father. In the process I learned that there was a paucity of supports being offered to Black fathers and fathers in general in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) through family services or City of Toronto resource agencies during that time.

We (interns and myself) created four small events throughout the GTA (Brampton, Scarborough-Malvern, Downtown Toronto and North York) to see if there was a need for such a group as a Black Daddies Club and there was an overwhelming positive response. In fact, we had both males and females showing up to these meetings in large numbers proving the argument that more Black spaces are needed in Canada (Walcott, 2003; McCready et al., 2012; Cukier and Daniel, 2015). Black Daddies Club started by doing barbershop discussions as we learned of another Toronto-based fathers' group

called More Than A Haircut: The Barbershop Project, doing a similar project engaging Black men and fathers in barbershops in the Eglinton West area. I thought that the model was a good approach to engage Black men and Black fathers living in Toronto to have dialogue. One of the reasons why this approach works is that traditionally the Black barbershop has been one of the few places that is considered a Black space in Canada where Black men come together and reason with each other on varying topics from romantic relationships to politics. According to Davis (2011. p.177), "Black barbers are redefining roles and spaces, recrafting discourse about health care among Black men" .

Black Daddies Club created four mandates that we would operate within: The first mandate was to create intentional spaces for Black fathers to talk about issues and successes that, we as fathers, are dealing with, such spaces speak to isolation that a lot of Black fathers are going through. The second mandate was to work with the media to depict Black fathers as loving and involved parents, this speaks to the importance of storytelling. The third mandate was to create our own media that depicts Black men and fathers in a positive light, presenting them as dignified and hopeful. Finally, the last mandate was to educate the Black community through workshops, discussion sessions and research about issues pertaining to Black fathers and Black men.

I started the Black Daddies Club to address the lack of support for Black fathers in Toronto. Like so many others before me, who do this work in the not for profit sector, this wasn't a planned destination nor was it something I had specialized training to carry out. However, I realized this kind of organization was seriously needed, not only for myself, but for other Black fathers living in Toronto and needing to stay sane in an environment

that was not addressing any of the needs and/or concerns associated with Black fatherhood. Personally, as a Black father of three boys, I often experienced the isolation of having no Black fathers or “elders” (Moore, 1991) to talk with when the problems of raising my boys arose. I needed a community of Black males with whom I could relate and express my problems and concerns about fatherhood. Being that nothing existed in my neighbourhood, I chose to become proactive and create a space for Black fathers in Toronto in order for them to express themselves.

The importance of taking an initiative and being communal when creating spaces for the development of mature masculinity is captured by Moore (1991), when he states :

"because there is little or no ritual process in our society capable of boosting us from Boy psychology to Man psychology, we each must go on our own (with each other's help and support) to the deep sources of masculine energy potentials that lie with us all. We must find a way of connecting with these sources of empowerment." (Moore,1991. p.xix).

In the movie Field of Dreams, there is a famous line, "If you build it they will come." However, working with Black fathers I found that statement partially true. Working with Black fathers, I have revised the saying to: (1) you first have to build it, (2) then bring it to where these men are at (barbershops, or in a shared community space near their

homes, etc.), and (3) then you have to involve these men in the development of the program. With that said, the methodology used working with Black men has to be very thoughtful, relevant, and real.

### **Creating Spaces For Black Men**

I recognized from early that as a Black man and father I needed some kind of 'Black space' (Davis, 2011) where I could seek support from other Black fathers and men who knew that something was wrong on a systemic level, a system that left Black men in a situation of desperation and deprivation.

I understood that on an economic level, many of the Black fathers I knew were forced into a place of "boyhood" (hooks, 2004). Due to the lack of economic power that they had, a lot of them were forced to make choices such as "selling drugs" (Majors and Billson, 1992), especially if they had no high school or post secondary certification to help them gain any meaningful kind of long term work. A lot of poor Black fathers I knew had to pretend that they were not together with the mother of their child because if the government knew that they were together then they were not able to get subsidy for day care, housing or even welfare checks. Women told these men (the father of their children) that they are better off without them in their lives because they are able to get more financial benefits with them out of the picture. Some of these men gave up trying to be involved as fathers as they felt that they could not offer what many of us associate with fatherhood, which is being a "provider" (Hamer, 1997). Some men stayed even if it meant that they would have to park their cars down the road and leave the apartment



early in the morning just in case the superintendent made a surprise visit to their apartment unit to make sure that no one other than the woman whose name is on the lease was sleeping at the home.

I thought about creating a group for Black fathers to speak about our challenges and to also get advice from elder Black fathers. I wondered if I was doing a disservice to myself by creating something only for Black fathers. Was I being too narrow minded? But there was something in holding space intentionally for Black fathers that appealed to me. One day I went to visit a cousin of mine who was in jail and as I walked into the Don Jail in Scarborough, I realized that this was my second time in my life visiting a jail. As I sat down and waited for my cousin to be seated I remembered the first time I came to the prison was to visit my uncle who was to be deported to Jamaica on drug charges. As my cousin sat down in front of me in a similar orange numbered jumpsuit that my uncle, his father, had worn many years prior, it struck me that I needed to call this new venture Black Daddies Club. This movement had to be unapologetically and intentionally focused on Black men.

Over the years, we have had push back from people outside and within the Black community about the name Black Daddies Club I have been accused of "reverse racism" (Chang, 1995; Dei, 1996; Norton and Sommers, 2011). Some could not understand why it was important to have "Black spaces" (Davis, 2011), but I have realized that I shouldn't lose sleep over folks who do not understand the purpose of Black Daddies Club and instead focus on the people who do understand what we are trying to do.

Over the past eight years working with Black Daddies Club, we have made various initiatives to redefine conceptually what is said about Black men and Black fathers. One of those initiatives was a series called "Queer As Black Folks: Conversations on Sexuality and Homophobia in the Black Community." The idea came from a conversation with a friend, who is a gay Black man, who spoke about the double edge sword of being a Gay Black man in Canada. My friend mentioned that most gay spaces are overwhelmingly white and he felt marginalized and felt racism in a lot of those spaces. On the flip side, 'Black spaces' such as barbershop and churches were extremely homophobic, so he felt that he didn't have a community in which he would be accepted.

The conversations on sexuality and gender was held throughout Toronto in various "Black spaces" (Davis, 2011) such as Hairplay Salon and Barbershop, Black Queer Youth (BQY), a drop-in program for Black queer youth in Toronto at the Sherbourne Health Centre, and then a symposium at Ryerson University. The discussion series received a lot of attention from the media as well as a lot of backlash from the Black community. One of the critiques that we received from some members of the Black communities was why is Black Daddies Club engaging in this conversation around homosexuality? Some people who were big supporters of Black Daddies Club in the beginning of our journey asked to be taken off our e-mail list and wanted nothing to do with us, saying that homosexuality has nothing to do with Black fatherhood. My response was what about the Black fathers who identify as gay, trans, bi-sexual, two-spirited, queer? Is this not a good enough reason to have this conversation? We are socialized to

think that Black masculinity is a static concept (Walcott, 2009), and find it hard to imagine Black masculinity as something that is "complex, multiple and contradictory" (Back, 1994. p.171). One of the learnings I took from those discussions was the large amount of gay Black men had damaged relationships with their fathers. A lot of the gay or trans men we worked with had fathers of Caribbean or African heritage, and said that because of cultural norms and religious belief (Clarke, 1983; Miller, 2007; Ward, 2005), they were met with violence from their fathers when they revealed their sexuality. I have come to the conclusion that the work of Black Daddies Club is to provide spaces where the healing of shame can take place for Black men to become more wholesome individuals.

### **Healing Hegemonic Masculinity**

The road towards healing white hegemonic masculinity amongst Black men; will require transparency, vulnerability, trust, honesty and openness (Moore,1991). Creating spaces where men can heal their shame is paramount to transition towards a new and mature masculinity (Bly and Kaufman,1995; hooks, 2004). In 2015, I attended a conference on re-imagining higher learning in Portugal. The conference was held at Tamera Healing biotope 1, an intentional community that is an eco-village grounded in the concept of "free love" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Sears, 1977; Spurlock, 1988). In conversations with folks that lived in Tamera, it was apparent that there was a commitment to honesty, transparency, and trust between human beings which left me amazed. I had never experienced truth-telling in such a manner before. The experience

left me feeling inspired and also intrigued about how this experience could be applied back home in Toronto.

Speaking to folks in Tamera was the first time in my life I found myself practicing being “present” in vulnerable conversations that usually would be impossible for me to participate in due to the “armour” I am used to wearing to ensure the protection of my insecurities that I was ashamed of. It was a refreshing experience in having dialogues in which people were being honest and vulnerable with each other, Allowing myself to be vulnerable made self-love seem possible. While in Tamera I recognized the importance of “community” for this kind of healing to be possible, and for systems put in place to support people who are vulnerable and able do this healing work. Community is important because you need to have people in your environment who are supportive, loving and non judgemental.

I also learned from talking to people, that honesty and transparency enables people to be truly “seen”; it gives others the opportunity to see the person exactly for who he or she is. This is important for true love to take place because we are then able to make the conscientious decision to love someone with all their nuances, instead of lying to a person and telling them only good aspects of themselves which leaves major parts of who they are invisible until those nuances come out later in ways that can disrupt relationships or threaten the sustaining of love. I spoke to visitors at Tamera, who have been visiting the community for years. They said that the place was unlike any other place that they have been and do not think that it is possible to be this honest out in the real world. Many of the visitors I spoke to, said that Tamera is a place in which they can

take off their armour when they arrive but have to put it back on when they depart, because there is no support for honesty in the real world (outside of Tamera).

“Out in the real world, people do not see each other, we just exist amongst each other,” said a visitor from Germany who has been making the trip to Tamera for the past 10 years. I recognized that if I want to do the work of healing through Black Daddies Club, then I will have to address the issue of vulnerability amongst Black men, so that we will be able to share our truths and heal our shame created by living in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society.

## CONCLUSION

The road to scripting mature Black masculinity in Canada will require the creation of Black spaces where Black men can do the work of transforming their “boy psychology and birthing their man psychology (Moore, 1991.p.6).” We have to find new metrics for measuring Black masculinity that are loving and that acknowledge and value Black bodies as being human beings. This cannot be done within a white hegemonic patriarchal capitalistic system -- this system will have to die for Black people to exist.

The media can also play a powerful role in new narratives of Black masculinity that create a new discourse for our young people to consume. We must also hold white supremacist media accountable whenever we see racist stereotypes being perpetuated. We, as Black men, must work at being vulnerable and practice truth-telling with other Black men and women, speaking honestly about our insecurities to ensure that we are able to heal ourselves from whatever may be haunting us. We must also be vigilant in the act of loving ourselves engaging in practices of meditation, eating properly, exercising, quitting addictive unhealthy habits (i.e. smoking, drinking, drugs, etc.), spending time in nature, shedding tears (releasing of emotions). To love ourselves as Black men, we need to see ourselves as loving, capable human beings that are worthy of love. We must face our insecurities and demons to be able move towards a place of

mature love of ourselves. We must raise our little Black boys and girls to see their Blackness with pride, beauty and love.

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