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Many essays by male and female scholars devoted to exploring the subject of male critics' place in feminism generally agree about the uses and usefulness of the autobiographical male "I." Such essays suggest that citing the male critical self reflects a response to (apparent) self-difference, an exploration of the disparities between the masculine's antagonistic position in feminist discourse on the one hand and, on the other, the desire of the individual male critic to represent his difference with and from the traditional androcentric perspectives of his gender and culture. Put another way, in male feminist acts, to identify the writing self as biologically male is to emphasize the desire not to be ideologically male; it is to explore the process of rejecting the phallicentric perspectives by which men traditionally have justified the subjugation of women.¹

In what strikes me as a particularly suggestive theoretical formulation, Joseph Boone articulates his sense of the goals of such male feminist autobiographical acts:

In exposing the latent multiplicity and difference in the word "me(n)," we can perhaps open up a space within the discourse of feminism where a male feminist voice can have something to say beyond impossibilities and apologies and unresolved ire. Indeed, if the male feminist can discover a position from which to speak that neither elides the importance of feminism to his work nor ignores the specificity of his gender, his voice may also find that it no longer exists as an abstraction . . . but that it in fact inhabits a body: its own sexual/textual body.²
Because of an awareness that androcentric perspectives are learned, are transmitted by means of specific sociocultural practices in such effective ways that they come to appear natural, male feminists such as Boone believe that, through an informed investigation of androcentric and feminist ideologies, individual men can work to resist the lure of the normatively masculine. That resistance for the aspiring male feminist requires, he says, exposing “the latent multiplicity and difference in the word ‘men,’” in other words, disrupting both ideologies’ unproblematized perceptions of monolithic and/or normative maleness (as villainous, antagonistic “other” for feminism, and, for androcentricism, powerful, domineering patriarchy). At this early stage of male feminism’s development, to speak self-consciously—autobiographically—is to explore, implicitly or explicitly, why and how the individual male experience (the “me” in men) has diverged from, has created possibilities for a rejection of, the androcentric norm.

And while there is not yet agreement as to what constitutes an identifiably male feminist act of criticism or about the usefulness of such acts for the general advancement of the feminist project, at least one possible explanation for a male critic’s self-referential discourse is that it is a response to palpable mistrust—emanating from some female participants in feminism and perhaps from the writing male subject himself—about his motives. A skeptical strand of opinion with regard to male feminism is represented by Alice Jardine’s “Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?” Having determined that the most useful measure of an adequately feminist text is its “inscription of struggle—even of pain”—an inscription of a struggle against patriarchy which Jardine finds absent from most male feminist acts, perhaps because “the historical fact that is the oppression of women [is] . . . one of their favorite blind spots”—she admits to some confusion as to the motivations for males’ willing participation: “Why . . . would men want to be in feminism if it’s about struggle? What do men want to be in—in pain?”

In addition to seeking to cure its blindness where the history of female oppression is concerned, a male feminism must explore the motivations for its participation in what we might call, in keeping with Jardine’s formulations, a discourse of (en)gendered pain. If one of the goals of male feminist self-referentiality is to demonstrate to females that individual males can indeed serve as allies in efforts to undermine androcentric power—and it seems that this is invariably the case—the necessary trust cannot be gained by insisting that motivation as such does not represent a crucial area that must be carefully negotiated. For example, I accept as accurate and, indeed, reflective of my own situation Andrew Ross’s assertion that “there are those [men] for whom the facticity of feminism, for the most part, goes without saying . . ., who are young enough for feminism to have been a primary component of their intellectual formation.” However, in discussions whose apparent function is a foregrounding of both obstacles and possibilities of a male feminism, men’s relation(s) to the discourse can never go “without
saying”; for the foreseeable future at least, this relation needs necessarily to be rigorously and judiciously theorized, and grounded explicitly in the experiential realm of the writing male subject.

But no matter how illuminating and exemplary one finds self-referential inscriptions of a male feminist critical self, if current views of the impossibility of a consistently truthful autobiographical act are correct, there are difficulties implicit in any such attempt to situate or inscribe that male self. Because, as recent theorizing on the subject of autobiography has demonstrated, acts of discursive self-rendering unavoidably involve the creation of an idealized version of a unified or unifiable self, we can be certain only of the fact that the autobiographical impulse yields but some of the truths of the male feminist critic’s experiences. As is also the case for female participants, a man can never possess or be able to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth about his relationship to feminist discourse and praxis.

But while autobiographical criticism, like the genre of autobiography itself, is poised tenuously between the poles of closure and disclosure, between representation and re-presentation, between a lived life and an invented one, I believe that even in the recoverable half-truths of my life are some of the materials that have shaped my perceptions, my beliefs, the self or selves that I bring to the interpretive act. In these half-truths is the source of my desire both to inscribe a black male feminism and to inscribe myself as a self-consciously racialized version of what Jardine considers a potentially oxymoronic entity—“male feminist”—whose literal, if not ideological or performative “blackness” is indisputable, and whose adequacy vis-à-vis feminism others must determine. By examining discussions of the phenomenon of the male feminist—that is to say, by reading male and female explorations of men’s places in feminist criticism—and exploring responses of others to my own professional and personal relationships to feminism, I will identify autobiographically and textually grounded sources for my belief that while gendered difference might be said to complicate the prospect of a non-phallicentric black male feminism, it does not render such a project impossible.

At the outset, I acknowledge that mine is a necessary participation with regard to black feminist criticism in the half-invention, half-perception which, in Houston Baker’s compelling formulation, represents every scholar’s relationship to cultural criticism. Such an acknowledgment is not intended to indicate that my male relationship to feminism is that of an illegitimate child, as it were. Rather, it is meant to suggest, like Elizabeth Weed’s insistence on “the impossibility” of both men’s and women’s “relationship to feminism,” my belief that while feminism represents a complex, sometimes self-contradictory “utopian vision” which no one can fully possess, a biological male can “develop political, theoretical [and, more generally, interpretive] strategies” which, though at most perhaps half-true to all that feminist ideologies are, nevertheless can assist in a movement toward actualizing the goals of feminism.
I have been forced to think in especially serious ways about my own relationship to feminist criticism since I completed the first drafts of *Inspiring Influences*, my study of Afro-American women novelists.¹ I have questioned neither the explanatory power of feminism nor the essential importance of developing models adequate to the analysis of black female-authored texts, as my book—in harmony, I believe, with the black feminist project concerned with recovering and uncovering an Afro-American female literary tradition—attempts to provide on a limited scale. Instead, I have been confronted with suspicion about my gendered suitability for the task of explicating Afro-American women’s texts, suspicion which has been manifested in the form of both specific responses to my project and general inquiries within literary studies into the phenomenon of the male feminist.

For example, a white female reader of the manuscript asserted—with undisguised surprise—that my work was “so feminist” and asked how I’d managed to offer such ideologically informed readings. Another scholar, a black feminist literary critic, recorded with no discernible hesitation her unease with my “male readings” of the texts of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker. I wondered about the possibility of my being simultaneously “so feminist” and not so feminist (i.e., so “male”), about the meanings of these terms both for these scholars and for the larger interpretive communities in which they participate. Consequently, in what was perhaps initially an act of psychic self-protection, I began to formulate questions for which I still have found no consistently satisfactory answers. Were the differences in the readers’ perceptions of the ideological adequacy of my study a function of their own views of feminist criticism, a product, in other words, of the differences not simply within me but within feminism itself? And if the differences within feminism are so significant, could I possibly satisfy everybody with “legitimate” interests in the texts of Hurston et al. by means of my own appropriated versions of black feminist discourse, my unavoidably half-true myth of what that discourse is, means, and does? Should my myth of feminism and its mobilization in critical texts be considered naturally less analytically compelling than that of a female scholar simply as a function of my biological maleness? And how could what I took to be a useful self-reflexivity avoid becoming a debilitating inquiry into a process that has come to seem for me, if not “natural,” as Cary Nelson views his relationship to feminism, at least necessary?²

Compelled, and, to be frank, disturbed by such questions, I searched for answers in others’ words, others’ work. I purchased a copy of *Men in Feminism*, a collection which examines the possibility of men’s participation as “comrades” (to use Toni Morrison’s term) in feminist criticism and theory. Gratified by the appearance of such a volume, I became dismayed upon reading the editors’ introductory remarks, which noted their difficulty in locating intellectuals who, having shown interest in the question, would offer, for instance, a gay or a black perspective on the problem.³ While a
self-consciously "gay . . . perspective" does find its way into the collection, the insights of nonwhite males and females are conspicuously absent.\textsuperscript{11}

Even more troubling for me than the absence of black voices or, for that matter, of general inquiries into the effects of racial, cultural, and class differences on males’ relationship to feminism, was the sense shared by many contributors of insurmountable obstacles to male feminism. In fact, the first essay, Stephen Heath’s “Male Feminism,” begins by insisting that “men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one.”\textsuperscript{12} For me, Heath’s formulations are insightful and provocative, if not always persuasive, as when he claims: “This is, I believe, the most any man can do today: to learn and so to try to write and talk or act in response to feminism, and so to try not in any way to be anti-feminist, supportive of the old oppressive structures. Any more, any notion of writing a feminist book or being a feminist, is a myth, a male imaginary with the reality of appropriation and domination right behind.\textsuperscript{13} Is male participation in feminism restricted to being either appropriative and domineering or not antifeminist? Must we necessarily agree with Heath and others who claim that men cannot be feminists? To put the matter differently, is gender really an adequate determinant of “class” position?

Despite the poststructuralist tenor of Heath’s work generally and of many of his perspectives here, his is an easily problematized essentialist claim—that, in effect, biology determines destiny and, therefore, one’s relationship to feminist ideology, that womanhood allows one to become feminist at the same time that manhood necessarily denies that status to men. And while Heath embraces its notions of history as a narrative of male “appropriation and domination” of gendered others, he appears resistant at this point in his discourse to evidence of a powerful feminist institutional presence. I believe that we must acknowledge that feminism represents, at least in areas of the American academy, an incomparably productive, influential, and resilient ideology and institution that men, no matter how cunning, duplicitous, or culturally powerful, will neither control nor overthrow in the foreseeable future, one whose perspectives have proved and might continue to prove convincing even to biological males. In surveying the potential implications of the participation of biological men in feminism, we must therefore be honest about feminism’s current persuasiveness and indomitatibility, about its clarifying, transformative potential, and about the fact that the corruptive possibility of both the purposefully treacherous and the only half-convinced male is, for today at least, slight indeed. Surely it is neither naive, presumptuous, nor premature to suggest that feminism as ideology and reading strategy has assumed a position of exegetical and institutional strength capable of withstanding even the most energetically masculinist acts of subversion.

Below I want to focus specifically on the question of a black male feminism. Rather than seeing it as an impossibility or as a subtle new manifesta-
tion of and attempt at androcentric domination, I want to show that certain instances of afrocentric feminism provide Afro-American men with an invaluable means of rewriting—of re-vis(ion)ing—our selves, our history and literary tradition, and our future.

Few would deny that black feminist literary criticism is an oppositional discourse constituted in large part as a response against black male participation in the subjugation of Afro-American women. From Barbara Smith’s castigation of black male critics for their “virulently sexist . . . treatment” of black women writers and her insistence that they are “hampered by an inability to comprehend Black women’s experience in sexual as well as racial terms” to Michele Wallace’s characterization of the “black male Afro-Americanists who make pivotal use of Hurston’s work” as “a gang,” Afro-American men are generally perceived as non-allied others of black feminist discourse. And, as is evident in Wallace’s figuration of male Hurston scholars as intraracial street warriors, they are viewed at times as always already damned and unredeemable, even when they appear to take black women’s writing seriously. We—I—must accept the fact that black male investigations informed by feminist principles, including this one, may never be good enough or ideologically correct enough for some black women who are feminists.

This sense of an unredeemable black male critic/reader is in stark contrast to perspectives offered in such texts as Sherley Anne Williams’s “Some Implications of Womanist Theory.” In her essay, she embraces Alice Walker’s term “womanist”—which, according to Williams, connotes a commitment “to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, female and male, as well as a valorization of women’s works in all their varieties and multitudes”—because she considers the black feminist project to be separatist in “its tendency to see not only a distinct black female culture but to see that culture as a separate cultural form” from “the facticity of Afro-American life.”

I believe that a black male feminism, whatever its connections to critical theory or its specific areas of concern, can profit immensely from what female feminists have to say about male participation. For example, Valerie Smith’s suggestion in “Gender and Afro-Americanist Literary Theory and Criticism” that “Black male critics and theorists might explore the nature of the contradictions that arise when they undertake black feminist projects” seems to me quite useful, as does Alice Jardine’s advice to male feminists. Speaking for white female feminists, Jardine addresses white males who consider themselves to be feminists: “We do not want you to mimic us, to become the same as us; we don’t want your pathos or your guilt: and we don’t even want your admiration (even if it’s nice to get it once in a while). What we want, I would even say what we need, is your work. We need you to get down to serious work. And like all serious work, that involves struggle and pain.” The womanist theoretical project that has been adopted by Will-
iams, Smith, and others provides aspiring Afro-American male feminists with a useful model for the type of self-exploration that Smith and Jardine advocate. What Williams terms “womanist theory” is especially suggestive for Afro-American men because, while it calls for feminist discussions of black women’s texts and for critiques of black androcentrism, womanism foregrounds a general black psychic health as a primary objective. Williams argues that “what is needed is a thoroughgoing examination of male images in the works of black male writers”; her womanism, then, aims at “ending the separatist tendency in Afro-American criticism,” at leading black feminism away from “the same hole The Brother has dug for himself—narcissism, isolation, inarticulation, obscurity,” at the creation and/or continuation of black “community and dialogue.”

If a black man is to become a useful contributor to black feminism, he must, as Boone argues, “discover a position from which to speak that neither elides the importance of feminism to his work nor ignores the specificity of his gender.” However multiply split we perceive the subject to be, however deeply felt our sense of “maleness” and “femaleness” as social constructions, however heightened our sense of the historical consequences and current dangers of black androcentrism, a black male feminism cannot contribute to the continuation and expansion of the black feminist project by being so identified against or out of touch with itself as to fail to be both self-reflective and at least minimally self-interested. A black male feminist self-reflectivity of the type I have in mind necessarily would include examination of both the benefits and the dangers of a situatedness in feminist discourse. The self-interestedness of a black male feminist would be manifested in part by his concern with exploring a man’s place. Clearly if convincing mimicry of female-authored concerns and interpretive strategies—speaking like a female feminist—is not in and of itself an appropriate goal for aspiring male participants, then a male feminism necessarily must explore males’ various situations in the contexts and texts of history and the present.

Perhaps the most difficult task for a black male feminist is striking a workable balance between male self-inquiry/interest and an adequately feminist critique of patriarchy. To this point, especially in response to the commercial and critical success of contemporary Afro-American women’s literature, scores of black men have proved unsuccessful in this regard. As black feminist critics such as Valerie Smith and Deborah McDowell have argued, the contemporary moment of black feminist literature has been greeted by many Afro-American males with hostility, self-interested misrepresentation, and a lack of honest intellectual introspection. In “Reading Family Matters,” a useful discussion for black male feminism primarily as an exploration of what such a discourse ought not do and be, McDowell speaks of widely circulated androcentric male analyses of Afro-American feminist texts by writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker:

Critics leading the debate [about the representation of black men in black women’s texts] have lumped all black women writers together and have fo-
cused on one tiny aspect of their immensely complex and diverse project—the image of black men—despite the fact that, if we can claim a center for these texts, it is located in the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience. In other words, though black women writers have made black women the subjects of their own family stories, these male readers/critics are attempting to usurp that place for themselves and place it at the center of critical inquiry.19

Although I do not believe that “the image of black men” is as microscopic an element in Afro-American women’s texts as McDowell claims, I agree with her about the reprehensible nature of unabashed androcentricism found in formulations she cites by such writers as Robert Staples, Mel Watkins, and Darryl Pinckney. Nevertheless, in relation to the potential development of a black male feminism, I am troubled by what appears to be a surprisingly explicit determination to protect turf. In their unwillingness to grant that exploration of how Afro-American males are delineated by contemporary black female novelists is a legitimate concern that might produce illuminating analyses, McDowell’s formulations echo in unfortunate ways those of antifeminist male critics, white and black, who consider feminism to be an unredeemably myopic and unyielding interpretive strategy incapable of offering subtle readings of canonical, largely male-authored texts. Despite the circulation of reprehensibly masculinist responses to Afro-American women’s literature, black feminist literary critics do not best serve the discourses that concern them by setting into motion homeostatic maneuvers intended to devalue all forms of inquiry except for those they hold to be most valuable (in this particular case, a female-authored scholarship that emphasizes Afro-American women’s writings of black female subjectivity). If the Afro-American women’s literary project is indeed “immensely complex and diverse,” as McDowell claims, bringing to bear other angles of vision, including antipatriarchal male ones, can assist in analyzing aspects of that complexity.

While the views of Staples and others are clearly problematic, those problems do not arise specifically from their efforts to place males “at the center of critical inquiry” any more than feminism is implicitly flawed because it insists, in some of its manifestations, on a gynocritical foregrounding of representations of women. Rather, these problems appear to result from the fact that the particular readers who produce these perspectives do not seem sufficiently to be, in Toril Moi’s titular phrase, “men against patriarchy.”20 Certainly, in an age when both gender studies and Afro-American women’s literature have achieved a degree of legitimacy within the academy and outside of it, it is unreasonable for black women either to demand that black men not be concerned with the ways in which they are depicted by Afro-American women writers, or to see that concern as intrinsically troubling in feminist terms. If female feminist calls for a non-mimicking male feminism are indeed persuasive, then black men will have very little of substance to say about contemporary Afro-American women’s literature, espe-
cially if we are also to consider as transgressive any attention to figurations of black manhood. It seems to me that the most black females in feminism can insist upon in this regard is that examinations which focus on male characters treat the complexity of contemporary Afro-American women novelists’ delineations of black manhood with an antipatriarchal seriousness which the essays McDowell cites clearly lack.

From my perspective, what is potentially most valuable about the development of black male feminism is not its capacity to reproduce black feminism as practiced by black females who focus primarily on “the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience.”21 Rather, its potential value lies in the possibility that, in being antipatriarchal and as self-inquiring about their relationship(s) to feminism as Afro-American women have been, black men can expand the range and utilization of feminist inquiry and explore other fruitful applications for feminist perspectives, including such topics as obstacles to a black male feminist project itself and new figurations of “family matters” and black male sexuality.

For the purpose of theorizing about a black male feminism, perhaps the most provocative, enlightening, and inviting moment in feminist or in “womanist” scholarship occurs in Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Indeed, Spillers’s essay represents a fruitful starting point for new, potentially nonpatriarchal figurations of family and of black males’ relationship to the female. Toward the end of this illuminating theoretical text, which concerns itself with slavery’s debilitating effects on the Afro-American family’s constitution, Spillers envisions black male identity formation as a process whose movement toward successful resolution seems to require a serious engagement of black feminist principles and perspectives. Spillers asserts that as a result of those specific familial patterns which functioned during American slavery and beyond and “removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law,” the African-American male “has been touched . . . by the mother, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape.” Because of separation from traditional American paternal name and law, “the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself . . . It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within.”22

Rather than seeing the “female” strictly as other for the Afro-American male, Spillers’s afrocentric revisioning of psychoanalytic theory insists that we consider it an important aspect of the repressed in the black male self.23 Employing Spillers’s analyses as a starting point, we might regard Afro-American males’ potential “in-ness” vis-à-vis feminism not, as Paul Smith insists in Men in Feminism, as a representation of male heterosexual desires to penetrate and violate female spaces but rather as an acknowledgment of what Spillers considers the distinctive nature of the Afro-American male’s
connection to the “female.” If Afro-American males are ever to have anything to say about or to black feminism beyond the types of reflex-action devaluations and diatribes about divisiveness that critics such as McDowell and Valerie Smith rightly decry, the investigative process of which womanist acts by Spillers and Williams speak is indispensable. Such a process, if pursued in an intellectually rigorous manner, offers a means by which black men can participate usefully in and contribute productively to the black feminist project.

Black womanism demands neither the erasure of the black gendered other’s subjectivity, as have male movements to regain a putatively lost Afro-American manhood, nor the relegation of males to prone, domestic, or other limiting positions. What it does require, if it is indeed to become an ideology with widespread cultural impact, is a recognition on the part of both black females and males of the nature of the gendered inequities that have marked our past and present, and a resolute commitment to work for change. In that sense, black feminist criticism has not only created a space for an informed Afro-American male participation, but it heartily welcomes—in fact, insists upon—the joint participation of black males and females as comrades, to invoke, with a difference, this paper’s epigraphic reference to Sula.

Reading “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” was of special importance to me in part because it helped me to clarify and articulate my belief that my relationship to feminism need not mark me necessarily as a debilitatingly split subject. The source of that relationship can only be traced autobiographically, if at all. Having been raised by a mother who, like too many women of too many generations, was the victim of male physical and psychological brutality—a brutality which, according to my mother, resulted in large part from my father’s frustrations about his inability to partake in what Spillers calls masculinity’s “prevailing social fiction”—my earliest stories, my familial narratives, as it were, figured “maleness” in quite troubling terms. My mother told me horrific stories, one of which I was, in a sense, immediately involved in: my father—who left us before I was one year old and whom I never knew—kicked her in the stomach when my fetal presence swelled her body, because he believed she’d been unfaithful to him and that I was only “maybe” his baby.

As a youth, I pondered this and other such stories often and deeply, in part because of the pain I knew these incidents caused my mother, in part because, as someone without a consistent male familial role model, I actively sought a way to achieve a gendered self-definition. As one for whom maleness as manifested in the surrounding inner city culture seemed to be represented only by violence, familial abandonment, and the certainty of imprisonment, I found that I was able to define myself with regard to my gender primarily in oppositional ways. I had internalized the cautionary intent of my mother’s narratives, which also served as her dearest wish for me: that I not grow up to be like my father, that I not adopt the definitions of
“maleness” represented by his example and in the culture generally. Because the scars of male brutality were visibly etched—literally marked, as it were—on my mother’s flesh and on her psyche, “maleness,” as figured both in her stories and in my environment, seemed to me not to be a viable mimetic option. I grew up, then, not always sure of what or who I was with respect to prevailing social definitions of gender but generally quite painfully aware of what I could not become.

In order to begin to understand who my mother was, perhaps also who my father was, what “maleness” was and what extra-biological relationship I could hope to have to it, I needed answers that my mother was unable to provide. I found little of value in the black masculinist discourse of the time, which spoke endlessly of the dehumanization and castration of the Afro-American male by white men and black women—our central social narrative for too long—for this rhetoric seemed simplistic and unself-consciously concerned with justifying domestic violence and other forms of black male brutality.

Afro-American women’s literature, to which I was introduced along with black feminism in 1977 as a sophomore at Brandeis University, helped me move toward a comprehension of the world, of aspects of my mother’s life, and of what a man against patriarchy could be and do. These discourses provided me with answers, nowhere else available, to what had been largely unresolvable mysteries. I work within the paradigm of black feminist literary criticism because it explains elements of the world about which I care most deeply. I write and read what and as I do because I am incapable of escaping the meanings of my mother’s narratives for my own life, because the pain and, in the fact of their enunciation to the next generation, the sense of hope for better days that characterizes these familial texts are illuminatingly explored in many narratives by black women. Afro-American women’s literature has given me parts of myself that—incapable of a (biological) “fatherly reprieve”—I would not otherwise have had.

I have decided that it is ultimately irrelevant whether these autobiographical facts, which, of course, are not, and can never be, the whole story, are deemed by others sufficient to permit me to call myself “feminist.” Like Toril Moi, I have come to believe that “the important thing for men is not to spend their time worrying about definitions and essences (‘am I really a feminist?’), but to take up a recognizable anti-patriarchal position.”25 What is most important to me is that my work contribute, in however small a way, to the project whose goal is the dismantling of the phallocentric rule by which black females and, I am sure, countless other Afro-American sons have been injuriously “touched.”

My indebtedness to Spillers’s and other womanist perspectives is, then, great indeed, as is my sense of their potential as illuminating moments for a newborn—or not-yet-born—black male feminist discourse. But to utilize these perspectives requires that we be more inquiring than Spillers is in her
formulations, not in envisioning liberating possibilities of an acknowledgment of the "female" within the black community and the male subject, but in noting potential dangers inherent in such an attempted adoption by historically brutalized Afro-American men whose relationship to a repressed "female" is not painstakingly (re)defined.

Clearly, more thinking is necessary not only about what the female within is but about what it can be said to represent for black males, as well as serious analysis of useful means and methods of interacting with a repressed female interiority and subject. Spillers’s theorizing does not perform this task, in part because it has other, more compelling interests and emphases—among which is the righting/(re)writing of definitions of "woman" so that they will reflect Afro-American women’s particular, historically conditioned “female social subject” status—but a black male feminism must be especially focused on exploring such issues if it is to mobilize Spillers’s suggestive remarks as a means of developing a fuller understanding of the complex formulations of black manhood found in many texts and contexts, including Afro-American women’s narratives.

I want to build briefly on Spillers’s provocative theorizing about the Afro-American male’s maturational process and situation on American shores. To this end, I will look at an illuminating moment in Toni Morrison’s Sula, a text that is, to my mind, not only an unparalleled Afro-American woman’s writing of the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience but also of black males’ relationship to the female within as a consequence of their limited access to “the prevailing social fiction” of masculinity. In this novel, the difficulty of negotiating the spaces between black male lack and black female presence is plainly manifested in such figures as the undifferentiatable deweys; BoyBoy, whose name, in contrast to most of the authorial designations in Sula, speaks unambiguously for him; and Jude, whose difficulty in assuming the mantle of male provider leads him to view his union with Nel as that which “would make one Jude.”

The response of Plum, the most tragic of Sula’s unsuccessful negotiators of the so-called white man’s world, vividly represents for me some of the contemporary dangers of black male “in-ness” vis-à-vis the “female.” Despite a childhood which included “float[ing] in a constant swaddle of love and affection” and his mother’s intention to follow the Father’s law by bequeathing “everything” to him (38), Plum appears incapable of embracing hegemonic notions of masculinity. Instead, he returns from World War I spiritually fractured but, unlike a similarly devastated Shadrack, lacking the imaginative wherewithal to begin to theorize or ritualize a new relationship to his world. He turns to drugs as a method of anesthetizing himself from the horrors of his devastation and, in his mother’s view, seeks to compel her resumption of familiar/familial patterns of caretaking. In the following passage, Eva explains to Hannah her perception of Plum’s desires, as well as the motivation for her participation in what amounts to an act of infanticide:

When he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well . . . I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, got no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. He was growed, a big old thing. Godhavemercy, I couldn't birth him twice. . . . A big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (62)

What is significant about this passage for an analysis of the possibilities of a non-oppressive black male relationship to feminism—to female experience characterized by a refusal to be subjugated to androcentric desires—is its suggestiveness for our understanding of the obstacles to a revised male view of the repressed “female,” obstacles which result in large part from black males’ relative social powerlessness. If black feminism is persuasive in its analysis of the limitations of Afro-American masculinist ideology, emphasizing as it does achievement of black manhood at the expense of black female subjectivity, and if we can best describe an overwhelming number of Africa’s American male descendants as males-in-crisis, the question a black male feminism must ask itself is, On what basis, according to what ideological perspective, can an Afro-American heterosexual male ground his notions of the female? Beyond its heterosexual dimension, can the “female” truly come to represent for a traditional black male-in-crisis more than a protective maternal womb from which he seeks to be “birthed” again? Can it serve as more than a site on which to find relief from or locate frustrations caused by an inability to achieve putatively normative American male socioeconomic status? If embracing normative masculinity requires an escape from the protection and life-sustaining aspects symbolized by maternal umbilical cords and apron strings and an achievement of an economic situation wherein the male provides domestic space and material sustenance for his dependents (including “his woman”), black manhood generally is, like Plum, in desperate trouble. And if, as has often been the case, a black female can be seen by an Afro-American male-in-crisis only if she has been emptied of subjectivity and selfhood, if she becomes visible for the male only when she is subsumed by male desire(s), then the types of refuguration and redefinition of black male subjectivity and engagement with the “female” central to Spillers’s formulations are highly unlikely.

This question of seeing and not seeing, of the male gaze’s erasure and recreation of the female, is crucial to Sula’s general thematics. It seems to me that in all of her novels Morrison’s figuration of black female subjectivity is largely incomprehensible without some serious attention both to her
representation of black manhood and to her exploration of the relationships between socially constructed gendered (and racial) positions. To return explicitly to the case of Eva: What Eva fears, what appears to be a self-interested motivation for her killing of her intended male heir, is that Plum's pitiful, infantile state has the potential to reduce her to a static female function of self-sacrificing mother, which, according to Bottom legend, had already provoked her decision to lose a leg in order to collect insurance money with which to provide for her children. Having personally lost so much already, Eva chooses, instead of sacrificing other essential parts of herself, to take the life of her self-described male heir. And if Plum dies "like a man" in Eva's estimation, his achievement of manhood has nothing to do with an assumption of traditional masculine traits, nothing to do with strength, courage, and a refusal to cry in the face of death. Instead, that achievement results from Eva's creation of conditions that have become essential components of her definition of manhood: death forces him to "leave" her and to "keep . . . out" of her womb. It would appear that manhood is defined here not as presence as typically represented in Western thought, but—by and for Eva at least—as liberating (domestic and uterine) absence.

One of the intentions of this chapter is to suggest that feminism represents a fruitful and potentially not oppressive means of reconceptualizing, of figuratively birthing twice, the black male subject. But, as a close reading of the aforementioned passage from Sula suggests, interactions between men and women motivated by male self-interest such as necessarily characterizes an aspect of male participation in feminism are fraught with possible dangers for the biological/ideological female body of an enactment of or a capitulation to hegemonic male power. Indeed, if it is the case that, as Spillers has argued in another context, "the woman who stays in man's company keeps alive the possibility of having, one day, an unwanted guest, or the guest, deciding to 'hump the hostess,' whose intentions turn homicidal," then male proximity to feminism generally creates the threat of a specifically masculinist violation. If, as I noted earlier, the dangers of a hegemonic, heterosexual Euro-American male's "in-ness" vis-à-vis feminism include (sexualized) penetration and domination, then those associated with a heterosexual black male's interactions with the ideological female body are at least doubled, and potentially involve an envisioning of the black female body as self-sacrificingly maternal or self-sacrificingly sexual. Because of a general lack of access to the full force of hegemonic male power, Afro-American men could see in increasingly influential black female texts not only serious challenges to black male fictions of the self but also an appropriate location for masculine desires for control of the types of valuable resources that the discourses of black womanhood currently represent. But a rigorous, conscientious black male feminism need not give in to traditional patriarchal desires for control and erasure of the female. To be of any sustained value to the feminist project, a discourse must provide illumi-
nating and persuasive readings of gender as it is constituted for blacks in America and sophisticated, informed, contentious critiques of phallocentric practices in an effort to redefine our notions of black male and female textuality and subjectivity. And in its differences from black feminist texts that are produced by individual Afro-American women, a black male feminism must be both rigorous in engaging these texts and self-reflective enough to avoid, at all costs, the types of patronizing, marginalizing gestures that have traditionally characterized Afro-American male intellectuals' response to black womanhood. What a black male feminism must strive for, above all else, is to envision and enact the possibilities signaled by the differences feminism has exposed and created. In black feminist criticism, being an Afro-American male does not mean attempting to invoke an /other political body like a lascivious soul snatcher or striving to erase its essence in order to replace it with one's own myth of what the discourse should be. Such a position for black men means, above all else, an acknowledgment and celebration of the incontrovertible fact that "the Father's law" is no longer the only law of the land.

NOTES

1. Joseph Boone's and Gerald MacLean's essays in Gender and Theory assume that the foregrounding of gendered subjectivity is essential to the production of a male feminist critical practice. Consequently, in an effort to articulate his perspectives on the possibilities of a male feminist discourse, Boone shares with us professional secrets—he writes of his disagreement with the male-authored essays in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith's Men and Feminism, and of being excluded, because of his gender, from a Harvard feminist group discussion of Elaine Showalter's "Critical Cross-Dressing." And MacLean's essay discloses painfully personal information about his difficult relationship with his mother, his unsatisfying experience with psychoanalysis, and an incident of marital violence.

2. Joseph Boone, "Of Me(n) and Feminism: Who(se) is the Sex That Writes?" in Gender and Theory, 158–80. Here and below, I quote from p. 159. For my purposes, Boone's remarks are suggestive despite their use of language that might seem to mark them as a heterosexualization of men's participation in feminism ("open up a space," "discover a position"). I believe that Boone's passage implies less about any desire for domination on his part than it does about the pervasiveness in our language of terms which have acquired sexual connotations and, consequently, demonstrates the virtual unavoidability of using a discourse of penetration to describe interactions between males and females. But it also appears to reflect a sense of frustration motivated by Boone's knowledge that while feminism has had a tremendous impact on his thinking about the world he inhabits, many feminists do not see a place in their discourse for him or other like-minded males. In order to make such a place for himself, violation and transgression seem to Boone to be unavoidable.

3. Alice Jardine, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?" in Men in Feminism, 58.

4. Andrew Ross, "No Question of Silence," in Men in Feminism, 86.

7. Elizabeth Weed, “A Man’s Place,” in Men in Feminism, 75.
9. About his relationship to feminism, Nelson writes: “Feminism is part of my social and intellectual life, has been so for many years, and so, to the extent that writing is ever ‘natural,’ it is natural that I write about feminism” (153). Nelson’s “Men, Feminism: The Materiality of Discourse” (Men in Feminism, 153–72) is, in my estimation, a model for self-referential male feminist inquiries that assume—or, at the very least, seek to demonstrate—a useful place for males in the discourse of feminism.

Jardine and Smith’s difficulties might have stemmed from the facts that most of the men who had spoken publicly on the subject were open about their hostility to black feminism, and most of them did not speak the language of contemporary theory, a high academic idiom which demonstrates that the contributors to Men in Feminism are, despite significant differences among them, members of the same speech community.
13. Ibid., 9.
21. McDowell’s views notwithstanding, constructions of black male and black female subjectivity are too obviously interrelated in black women’s narratives for feminist criticism to profit in the long run from ignoring—or urging that others ignore—the important function that delineations of black male subjectivity play in these narratives’ themes. Certainly the threat of antifeminist male critical bias is not cause to erase or minimize the significance of black male characters in these writers’ work.
23. In this sense, Spillers’s perspectives complement those of Sherley Anne Williams, for the latter demands, in effect, that we consider the extent to which black male repression of the “female” results from an attempt to follow the letter of the white Father’s law.
27. At least one other reading of Eva’s murder of her son is possible: as protection against the threat of incest. In a section of her explanation to Hannah—very little of which is contained in my textual citation of Sula—Eva discusses a dream she has had concerning Plum:

I’d be laying here at night and he be downstairs in that room, but when I closed my eyes I’d see him . . . six feet tall smilin’ and crawlin’ up the stairs quietlike so I wouldn’t hear and opening the door soft so I wouldn’t hear and he’d be creepin’ to the bed trying to spread my legs trying to get back up in my womb. He was a man, girl, a big old growed-up man. I didn’t have that much room, I kept on dreaming it. Dreaming it and I knewed it was true. One night it wouldn’t be no dream. It’d be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I’d’ve had the room but a big man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate.

(72-73)

Morrison reverses to some extent the traditional dynamics of the most prevalent form of intergenerational incest. Instead of the male parent creeping to the bed and spreading the legs of his defenseless female child, in Eva’s dream her man-child Plum is the active agent of violation. Eva’s emphasis on Plum’s immensity and her own uterus’s size makes connections to incestuous creeping and spreading possible. It is not difficult to imagine, given Plum’s constantly drugged state, that frustrations caused by an inability to re-insert his whole body into his mother’s womb during what Eva views as an inevitable encounter might lead to a forced insertion of a part that “naturally” fits, his penis. At any rate, a reading of this scene that notes its use of language consistent with parent-child incest serves to ground what appear to be otherwise senseless fears on Eva’s part concerning both the possible effects of Plum’s desire for reentry into her uterine space and her own inability to deny her son access to that space (“I would have done it, would have let him”).