Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men

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Introduction

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On August 19, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln met with Indian Affairs Commissioner William Dole, Wisconsin judge Joseph T. Mills, and Postmaster General Alexander Randall to discuss the upcoming presidential election and the need for a Republican victory to ensure sustained emancipation. Lincoln's demeanor became heated when he asserted he could never "return to slavery the black warriors" who saw directed combat with the U.S. Army. Later in the conversation, Lincoln related what he seemed to intend as a humorous episode from his 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas in which a black man he described as "a Sambo" declared, "I would vote for Massa Lincoln." Judge Mills then recalled his arrival at the White House when he met Frederick Douglass, and while at the time Mills recognized him, in conversation with Lincoln, Dole, and Randall, he describes in jest mistaking Douglass for the president.¹ This brief account of these white men's conversation depicts competing versions of black manhood as violently heroic, subservient, and presidential—though what humor Mills sought in fictionalizing his encounter with the famous abolitionist may have been lost on Douglass himself, who was nominated as a fringe candidate for vice president at the Syracuse National Nominating Convention in 1856, but was not chosen given the need to establish a more viable (white) candidate.² Here we see competing stereotypes,
the conflation of history and fiction, Douglass and Lincoln as the titans of the mid-nineteenth-century color line, and the dubious viability of a black man for national office.

Almost a century and a half later, the 2008 presidential campaign offered a national political stage for the sustained and vexed challenges of racial difference in the United States. In terms of race history, the election of a black man as president of the United States functions as a symbolic act that does not end racism or resolve long-held implications of race with class in the color of poverty. For the twenty-first century, like those before, there remains the problem of the color line, though its racial calculus of division has become increasingly complicated in the recognition of other powerful demarcations of difference, particularly gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability.

President Barack Obama’s most prominent articulation of these cultural schisms occurred in what has become known as the then-candidate’s “race speech,” a March 18, 2008, address hotly anticipated to acknowledge and perhaps resolve the controversy that emerged in response to inflammatory remarks made by his former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright in 2003 and replayed during the campaign. Its title, “A More Perfect Union,” and initial delivery at the Philadelphia Constitution Center rhetorically join the birthplace of independence and the Preamble of the Constitution, echoing the titular line’s prior use in Abraham Lincoln’s “First Inaugural Address,” as well as the title of a 2001 book by Jesse Jackson Jr., the co-chair of the Obama national campaign, Illinois congressional representative, and son of civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr. The speech provides one presentist vantage point from which to begin an interdisciplinary study of the history and literature of black manliness in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States, because a black man whose election makes him at once exceptional and representative emphasizes some of the common threads uniting the essays in this collection: black stereotypes fostering fear and shame, the legacy of slavery, expectations and realities of criminality and poverty, and the imbrications of autobiography with national history.

Obama derided how Wright’s invective taken out of context “conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators,” though he distanced himself from the anger and what he described as the lack of hope in the minister’s rhetoric. He offered his own family as an American story of racial difference and patriotic commitment; his wife “carries
within her the blood of slaves and slave owners,” while his white Kansas grandmother “once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street” and used “racial or ethnic stereotypes that made [him] cringe.” Obama listed some of the sources of his former pastor’s despair, particularly the “lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family,” silent resentments that “find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table.” The presumptive patriarchy in a black man’s responsibility to provide economically for his family produces the dishonor in being unable to do so, feelings vented in the masculine and public place of the “barbershop” and shared in the feminine, domestic, and private space of the “kitchen table.” Those commonly raced but separately gendered spheres join in the call-and-response of the “voice in the church” that had prompted the controversy for which the presidential candidate then answered, but he pointed out that the history of inequity long precedes Wright’s 2003 remarks. After a comment on the Confederate flag’s persistence, Obama paraphrased a passage from William Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun (1951): “The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past,” at once yoking past with present and fiction with history. The speech concluded with an anecdote drawn from the campaign trail describing an older black man’s commitment to political volunteering rooted in his response to a young white woman’s promise to fight poverty on behalf of all families, a “single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man.” In this campaign speech, mutual resolve across differences of race and gender (and age) provided a starting point toward that more perfect union.

Such an address offers an important textual case in merging history and imagination, as political speeches present documents that record the tenor of their time even as they chart its change, while incorporating literary devices for rhetorical effect. Response to the speech varied widely, and pertinent to the disciplinary approaches of this collection, historian Garry Wills positively compares it with Abraham Lincoln’s “Cooper Union address,” while renowned African American literary scholar Houston A. Baker Jr. describes it as “mimicry, aping Martin Luther King Jr.” Baker’s response is characteristic of his occasionally iconoclastic skepticism regarding supposedly progressive turns in racial relations. Here, he invokes minstrelsy and animal imagery, the mimic and the ape, and thereby self-consciously employs some of the widely held racist stereotypes with which black masculinity contends. Paradoxically, Baker’s critique itself incorporates the terms and tropes that are part
of the history of racism in order to accuse Obama of demonstrating an insufficient commitment to the problems of African Americans, precisely the debate of whether he is “too black’ or ‘not black enough,’” which the candidate addressed in the very speech.

Encoded in the oratory and this trace of academic response, then, we see the critical points of analysis in black masculinity studies crucial to this book: the lasting power of racial caricatures; their co-optation in minstrelsy as a largely white imagination of blackness; the relationship of individual experience with a larger history; the dependence of the present on the past and the need to reinterpret that past in order to open opportunities for the future; and even a gesture to the truth of fiction—tellingly, to an American novelist best known for complex narratives intertwining black and white characters. We are not yet done with the past, nor is it done with us. It is in attention to historical evidence and the literary record that we can recognize how completely the negative stereotypes of black masculinity—poverty, lack of intelligence, physicality, lawlessness, lying, capacity for violence, rapaciousness—were the justifications for slavery that contributed to, on one hand, subsequent structural inequalities, and on the other, the fearful imaginations projected onto black men, masks with which they have had to contend. Baker’s gambit casts Obama as a minstrel, in object and method raising longstanding questions regarding a black man’s authenticity and in what capacity blackness and masculinity might be performatively embodied, particularly in the focus on the individual or the broader collective, whether personal achievement or alliances for the social and economic gain of the disenfranchised. Finally, Baker and Wills look backward to the familiar figures of Lincoln and King as the primary touchstones for the record of racial conflict in the United States, though the presence of African American men in national history is both longer and more crowded.

The History of Black Masculinity—
and Its Subsequent Historiography

Venture Smith’s 1737 account of his arrival in Rhode Island presented one of the earliest documented black masculinities, and his physical strength, resistance, emphasis on family, and struggle to earn his freedom and that of his wife and children initiated the continuing conversation of what it means to be a black man in America. Smith’s 1798 memoir, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa,
but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by
Himself, describes the trials by which his physical strength, “once equal
if not superior to any man whom [he had] ever seen,” has abandoned
him in age, though he retains his freedom, wife, property, and charac-
ter of “truth and integrity.” Such narratives challenged the presumption
that such self-determination in the nation’s infancy was exclusively the
right of white men, a privilege of race as well as gender. In the Revo-
lutionary period, the movement of the British North American colo-
nies toward independence featured highly gendered rhetoric on both
sides of the Atlantic, leading white American men to suggest Parliament
sought to take authority away from them, placing them in the role of
dependents: women, children, or slaves. At the same time, these white
American men over decades had constructed a legal system that removed
African American men from inclusion in conventional masculinity, tak-
ing away its foundations in the ability to control the fruits of one’s labor
and independence, as well as denying them meaningful roles as husbands
and fathers. Famously, revisions to the Declaration of Independence sup-
pressed the metaphoric power of enslavement given its actual practice,
while the U.S. Constitution equated property and personhood to appease
the Southern states. Such nation-making documents consolidated the
paradox of a nation reliant on slavery yet defining itself by liberty.

Enslavement proved the most significant cultural force shaping black
masculinity in the first century of the United States, particularly in obvi-
ating self-ownership, challenging the fundamental integrities of male and
female kinship bonds, divorcing labor from production, transforming the
body into a machine, and limiting both native language use and English
literacy. For black men, slavery included emasculatory rituals and the fail-
ure of the white power structure to recognize individual identity, in part
through the pronouncement of new names or the lack of a name, reduc-
ing black men to gendered diminutives “boy” and “uncle.” The blanket
erasure of African kinship bonds in effect invented blackness as an over-
arching identity in America, subsuming prior filial, tribal, linguistic, and
religious identities under the mark of racial enslavement.

White slave owners both did and did not see their manhood reflected
in these bondsmen. However much a white master might assume as holy
writ his superiority as a man to what he imagined as less than human,
the position of master relied upon a slave’s recognition of the other’s
superiority. At the same time, slave owners recognized in their bondsmen
the potential of revolt, especially given the vast labor fostered in planta-
tion slavery and the thereby disparate populations, with black often out-
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numbering white. Though slave insurrections in the United States were relatively few, never successful for more than a brief period, and resulted in far more deaths among blacks than whites, many slave owners lived in constant fear of a revolution such as that of Toussaint L’Ouverture in Haiti and Nathaniel Turner and Gabriel, each in Virginia. In addition to brutal physical and psychological assault that only worsened in the years leading to the Civil War, slave owners employed other means to prevent such rebellion. They fostered the spread of a strand of Christianity that demanded obedience to a heavenly Father in a fashion that dovetailed with slavery’s paternalism, and it promised that a fulfilling afterlife would mitigate the pain of daily oppression, forestalling resistance. Another means involved resisting education, especially literacy, because knowledgeable black men and women would undermine the presumption of white supremacy, and literate slaves might read of slave rebellions, Northern abolitionists, and the evangelism of the Second Great Awakening, which linked Christian doctrine not to submission but to the anti-slavery movement.

A shift from orality to literacy, testimony of slavery’s injustice, and narratives of religious conversion generally shaped the often autobiographical writing of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century African American authors Smith, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa), Ignatius Sancho, Phyllis Wheatley, and others. Much of their writing provided the basis for the genre of the slave narrative especially popular in the mid-nineteenth-century North, and the conventions of autobiography, sentimentalism, and detailed descriptions of slavery’s brutality and injustice met the imperatives of Northern editors seeking to represent the experiences of formerly enslaved writers for their abolitionist purposes. For black male writers in particular, the gendered modes of description in suffering and sentimentality eroded further already threatened masculine expectations of strength, rationality, and autonomy. Nevertheless, slave narratives laid the basis for stories of self to serve as the dominant mode of African American literary production, but they were from the beginning a suturing of fact and fiction for specific rhetorical effect. That uneasy alliance of authorship, editorship, facticity, and purpose led to publications including authentication by white editors and featuring subtitles such as Smith’s Related by Himself and protestations like Harriet Jacobs’s “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction,” even as later critics and historians demonstrated the lack of absolute veracity in some of these accounts. For black writers, male and female, reliance on white editors challenged their authorial indepen-
dence, and exaggeration or wholesale fiction threatened the “truth and integrity” Smith indicated as specifically definitive of manhood.

The best-known slave narratives were those of William Wells Brown, Douglass, and Jacobs, though others also would provide the basis for popular fictional narratives of slavery, most notably Harriet Beecher Stowe relying on Josiah Henson’s narrative for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852) and Brown’s fictionalization of mythic history in *Closet; or, the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853). Brown also authored a history of black soldiers in the American Revolution, initiating an effort to recuperate obscured historical contributions by African Americans later carried on by Charles Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, and much later, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and many others. In *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), Brown describes Douglass’s reputation as “more widely known than that of any other living colored man” on the basis of his autobiographies and oratory. Douglass’s three autobiographies published in 1845, 1855, and 1881 (the last revised in 1892) recapitulate the ideals of American masculinity for both enslaved and freed black men, emphasizing literacy, righteous violence, and sociopolitical engagement as strategies of self-ownership. In his first autobiography, it is not writing but fighting that marks his self-assertion, as he declares of his physical defeat of a white slave-breaker that he regained “a sense of [his] own manhood,” implicating him within a culture of violence bound inextricably to honor in the nineteenth-century South. The three autobiographies regularly revise the author’s relationship to violence as a strategy of self-formation, suggesting a shift from physical to rhetorical engagement as a means of social transformation.

Through the first half of the nineteenth century, abolitionist oratory and slave narratives rendered indivisible a rhetoric of dissent and an imperative to truth shaped by political expediency within journalistic and literary forms, and the national debate over slavery laid the basis for postbellum American regulations of blackness. These included Jim Crow laws dismantling the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enacting widespread segregation. The frequent practice of lynching African Americans, particularly black men accused of desiring white women, proved the most spectacular, violent, and public of social systems dedicated to the control (and often the destruction) of black male bodies. Also, the Thirteenth Amendment’s guarantee of emancipation did not prevent “slavery nor involuntary servitude” in the case of “punishment for a crime,” and violations as hazily defined as mischief or as minor as petty thievery
produced prison sentences of contract labor, especially in the South, as unscrupulous officials and businessmen conspired to exploit the labor of black and white men to personal profit. A South Carolina prison official in 1888 falsely claimed that Lincoln effectively invented the prison: “After the emancipation of the colored people, whose idea of freedom from bondage was freedom from work and license to pillage, we had to establish means for their control. Hence came the penitentiary.”

If white officials were to treat a fictional past as a present fact, black authors had little choice but to offer in fiction only thinly veiled accounts of actual events. In The Marrow of Tradition (1901), Chesnutt turned his literary attention from his previous tragicomic post-plantation tales to rioting whites in the 1898 racial massacre of Wilmington, North Carolina. That novel’s villain of Captain McBane, a notorious contractor of prison labor, saw revision and expansion in the character of William Fetters in the author’s 1905 novel The Colonel’s Dream, and Du Bois described the 1901 novel as among the finest sociological analyses of 1898 massacre he had read.

The merging of generic forms can be seen not only in the literature but in the historiography of the period, as Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903) famously structures its social, cultural, and political analysis with fragments of lyrics and music of spirituals—and the later Darkwater (1920) extends that work of hybridity. The magisterial Souls of Black Folk effectively initiated U.S. cultural historiography; it also contested Booker T. Washington’s “counsels of submission” in explicitly gendered terms, pointing out that the latter “overlooked certain elements of true manhood,” as “manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses.”

Du Bois challenged Washington’s leadership in terms that questioned the masculinity not so much of his opponent as of the people they sought to lead. Male suffrage effectively established the boundaries of political power, a tenuous right for black men of the time and one that Du Bois, unlike Washington, was unwilling to compromise. However, political agency and economic opportunity were more readily available in the North than in the South, and the “New Negro Movement” Du Bois helped shepherd in the second and third decades of the twentieth century proved at once a social migration and cultural shift, culminating in vibrant African American communities established in New York and elsewhere. The literary production of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance joined the cultural prominence of black jazz musicians, two cosmopolitan coalitions privileging blackness and reinterpreting conventions of African American masculinity. Those geographic and aesthetic
movements occurred immediately prior to other means of expanding the national visibility and recognition of African American accomplishment, often in the then strictly gendered and racially segregated worlds of sports and military service, contributing to the postwar acceleration of the civil rights movement. The gendering of social and political power in the first half of the twentieth century laid the basis for the struggles of the second, but remained tightly bound to expectations of black masculinity that had developed and transformed through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States.21

For scholars of history and literature, black masculinity presents a set of distinct challenges, in part because the justifications for slavery were predicated upon racist imaginings of blackness that shaped not only the historical and literary records but their subsequent interpretation and revision. Though the cultural, economic, and social circumstances of black men in the United States changed, many twentieth-century historical and sociological constructions of black manhood remained rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century justifications for American slavery. In American Negro Slavery (1918), Ulrich B. Phillips argued that slavery was benign to the intellectually substandard enslaved and maintained by paternalistic slaveholders despite its lack of profitability, a position that largely defined slavery in academia from its publication through the 1950s. E. Franklin Frazier's The Negro Family in the United States (1939) presumed that contemporary problems among black communities stemmed from the destruction of the black family, as the female-headed household replaced the patriarchal order. The erosion of the traditional male role led generations of studies to contend that gender identities among black men developed pathologically, creating a sense of social impotence both inside and outside of the family.22

Challenges to slavery as a relatively benign paternalism did not overturn fundamental understandings of racial difference, and Kenneth Stampp and others continued to study the “peculiar institution” by focusing on slave owners, not the enslaved. That object of study shifted with Stanley Elkins’s Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959), yet in arguing for slavery's total brutality and subjugation, the historian reinforced the sense of black male inferiority, albeit as an effect rather than natural state. That historiography influenced public policy, shaping Senator Patrick Moynihan’s infamous 1965 report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” which perpetuated the logic of black male subjugation. Indeed, the first scholarly attention since Du Bois at the turn of the century to black experience not exclu-
sively determined by the white power structure took place in the 1960s and thereafter. The shift to social and cultural history incorporated tools from economics, sociology, and anthropology, and John Blassingame’s *Slave Community* (1972), Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976), and Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976) demonstrated the vitality and self-creation of black culture. Early-twentieth-century literary critics had already paved the way with a project demonstrating how African American literature was defined by enslavement but characterized by folklore and resistance. From 1929 to 1938, V. F. Calverton, Alain Locke, and Vernon Loggins described the “Negro soul,” “the New Negro,” and “Negro Author,” respectively, and efforts of literary recovery surged in the 1970s and 1980s, attentive to black writers whose popularity had faded in the intervening decades, while also committed to renewing interest in formerly widely read women authors since faded to obscurity.23

**Current African American Gender Scholarship**

Feminist historians and literary scholars since the 1970s focusing on African American experience rightly have rejected the masculine normative of a presumptive *homo universalis* and focused specifically on women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Jacqueline Jones, Suzanne Lebsock, and Deborah Grey White, among many others, introduced the value of examining the experience of African Americans in terms of gender as well as race; correspondingly, literary scholars such as Frances Foster, Gates, Nellie Y. McKay, Hortense Spillers, and Mary Helen Washington have participated in the recuperative project of returning black women to U.S. literary history, recognizing their contributions to the imagination of the nation.24 However, the gains created by scholarship focusing on black women only recently have had their parallel in a focus on black men *qua* men, as opposed to a synecdoche for all African Americans. As feminist scholars have noted, gender presents a polyvalent and multidimensional continuum of difference shaped not only by institutional discourses but also by community and individual notions. Based on such work, corresponding attention to black masculine identities has occurred since the 1990s. And indeed, though often denied equal participation in rites of manhood as constructed by whites, black men in slavery and in freedom found ways to assert their belonging in a masculine culture in public and private life. Of course, as many scholars of African American women’s history and
literature have pointed out, black men in the United States often have asserted themselves at the expense of black women, whether in claiming the right to work, a place in the pulpit, or domination at home. However, we can understand such efforts at marginalization as part of a reaction to the culture of white supremacy rather than exclusively demonstrating an inherent masculinist tendency, an effort that partially explains rather than wholly excuses the descriptions of early-twentieth-century black families offered by Du Bois, Frazier, and others.

Many scholars of history and literature have produced excellent work in the area of black masculinity, but more work remains to be done, especially in connecting antebellum black masculine culture through jim crow to the mid-twentieth century. E. Anthony Rotundo’s *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993) helped initiate masculinity studies in history, and many cultural studies entries thereafter emphasize the civil rights era and afterward, as do Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham’s *Representing Black Men* (1996), Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel’s *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (1997), bell hooks’s *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003), Ronald L. Jackson’s *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in the Popular Media* (2006), and Roland Murray’s *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Ideology* (2007). Other works extend a longer historical reach to the early twentieth century, such as Phillip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996) and William F. Pinar’s *The Gender of Racial Politics and Violence in America: Lynching, Prison Rape, & the Crisis of Masculinity* (2001), which pair the history of now with early-twentieth-century events and further refine their objects in emphasizing sexuality. Among strictly historical studies, Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins’s two-volume reader, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity* (1999, 2001), is magisterial in its breadth, but understanding black masculinity can also engage the imaginative discourse crucial to recognizing the fantasies and fears that have a part in producing it.25

This collection brings together scholars of history and literature focused on the discursive performances and lived experience of black men, not to re-center African American identity as male, but to demarcate the specifically masculine character of cultural practices as they have developed historically. While some essays are in and of themselves interdisciplinary, others are situated more fully in one discipline or another, and their combination demonstrates the mutual implications of individual and social, evidenced and imaginative, in the broad, rich, and diverse texture of black masculinity, which presents a complex song of many, many voices. The song must be sung because the imagination of the black man as a threat, whether to personal security or national identity, maintains a lasting power. From the 2009 arrest of African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. at his Cambridge home to the racial slurs of 2010 Tea Party rallies, white anxiety and hatred foster fear and anger among themselves and in the targets of their abuse. The perceived threat posed by black masculinity to the nation’s unity and vitality remains an arresting one in the cultural imagination, and such a singularity proposes a set of contradictions in part definitive of black masculinity: an often mistaken threat of violence, belief in its legitimacy, and the rhetorical union of truth and fiction surrounding slavery, segregation, resistance, and self-determination. These characterizations are embodied in and challenged by the men and movements studied in the essays of this collection, which balances new accounts of well-known figures such as Chesnutt and Du Bois with the less familiar but critically important William Johnson and Nat Love.

Moreover, while singular black men typify important movements, trends, and contradictions of black masculinity, historical study of a broader texture provides valuable insight as well into the development of such formative forces as the emergence of a Northern black middle class and the African Methodist Episcopal ministry. Geographical breadth joins the historical range of these essays because black masculinity is neither limited to the American South nor embodied only in slavery and its resistance. From Los Angeles to Haiti, from Mississippi to New York, black men have defined themselves as husbands, fathers, preachers, rebels, brothers, teachers, sons, scholars, and more—the myriad ways they protested racism and claimed public rights of citizenship. These essays tellingly focus on black men at work, from the forced labor of slavery to working-class laborers to middle-class and scholarly professionals. However, these authors avoid the longstanding expectations of black men as entertainers, whether in sports or show business, performing for largely
white audiences. Furthermore, these essays in their aggregate recognize the turn of the twentieth century as a vital center of gravity, the post-bellum, pre-Harlem period as an essential era of historical tension and literary production. Finally, a number of these essays extend beyond the privilege of print text in historical and literary studies, incorporating visual images and their analysis. The purpose of the collection is not to provide a historical corrective to imaginative work, to demonstrate what actual events were adapted in fictional accounts or otherwise shaped their production; instead, it is to demonstrate how history and literature operate dynamically in the formation and revision of national imaginations of black masculinity. The myth of the black male rapist as a rationalization for lynching is the most obvious and tragic example, but national conceptions of black men as liars, thieves, poor, and poor fathers ignored the history of domination, slavery, and segregation. Lying, stealing, poverty, and shame thereby can be understood more accurately not as causes, but as consequences of racism. Jeffrey B. Leak concludes in *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (2005) that “scholars need not romanticize or demonize black male subjectivity,” and though the scholars of this collection respond to the legacy of such demonization, these essays are populated by African Americans who sought to be understood not as heroes or villains, but men.

**CHAPTEERS 1 AND 2** elaborate how black men in the antebellum South incorporated the demonstrations of white honor and masculinity into their own lived practices, while they negotiated their sense of selfhood directly with the dominant racial class. Historian Jeff Forret resists Orlando Patterson’s famous characterization of a slave as a “person without honor,” drawing from Southern antebellum magisterial court records to demonstrate that, in contrast with most current understandings, enslaved black men fought what amounted to physical and verbal duels on the basis of honor as a performance of character. While elite Southern white men might mock slave pretensions of respect and reputation, Southern white and enslaved black men shared a common culture of honor in the Old South. Black men were threatened with murder, torture, or other injury if they engaged in such challenges with white men, but subaltern black masculinity was produced in contest with other black men. Historian Timothy R. Buckner demonstrates that while slavery may have been the dominant condition of black men in the South before the Civil War, it was not an exclusive state, and black barber William Johnson
interacted with black and white communities. He exemplifies an African American masculinity performed and imperfectly transferred generationally through relationships of trade and property, both within and across boundaries of race and class. Johnson presents a complex figure—free man, entrepreneur, slave owner, community leader—whose life provides a sense of the variability of race and manhood in the antebellum South.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue the emphasis on careerism as a crucible for black male identity, demonstrating how roles of business professional, preacher, and other means of social performance produced black masculinity in mid- and late-nineteenth-century America. American studies scholar Erica L. Ball shows how immorality was not bound within Southern religious confines but was part of a broader class definition of respectability for Northern black professional men. Not only ministers but editors and orators linked young black men’s morality directly to combating white prejudice for racial advancement. By the 1840s, representing oneself as a virtuous “citizen father” or a “heroic son” became a hallmark of the emerging black middle class, as black masculinity was affirmed in public professional roles distinct from both women and feminine domestic space. Religious studies scholar Julius H. Bailey establishes how at a crucial movement in the development of the nineteenth-century AME Church, both men and women offered sermons and led congregations, but male ministers consolidated their authority in raising educational requirements to map the boundaries of gender rules more rigidly. The AME Church offered one of the few public spaces for African American men to demonstrate leadership in the face of their fears of falling short of what they perceived as the standards of masculinity embodied by their forerunners. Facing few professional opportunities outside of preaching and teaching, the educated black men of the ministry enhanced their professional position at the expense of black female church leaders through defining the ministry by conflating bodily strength and social authority.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn from black male self-presentation in print for largely African American readership to popular white illustrators’ imaginations of black masculinity. These chapters build upon those prior in demonstrating how the efforts of black men to define themselves in terms of advancement, professionalization, and middle-class respectability faced the challenge of broadly distributed caricatures fostering images of black masculinity as impoverished and dependent. Historian Fiona Deans Halloran points out that the nation’s top illustrator of the 1860s and 1870s, Thomas Nast, proved deeply ambivalent regarding the abil-
ity of black men to contribute to a public social sphere. For Nast—and by extension, his *Harper’s Weekly* readers—soldiering, citizenship, and the integrity of families produced black manliness, but the possibilities of that masculinity remained limited by widespread expectations of black cultural inferiority. Literary scholar Peter Caster points out how in the wake of Reconstruction, regional reconciliation in part depended on genial depictions of Southern racial relations in publications such as *Harper’s Weekly*, and while that magazine’s articles remained critical of Southern racism in the 1870s and 1880s, its illustrations remained bound to ante-bellum racist caricatures. Black masculinity self-assertion faced massive challenges in those widespread stereotypes, and rather than ignore or deny them, African American author Charles Chesnutt subverted and then overturned them in his fiction in a manner that cost him his reading audience and thereby his full-time profession of author.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on Nat Love, whose 1907 memoir offers a point of both arrival and departure for a black man who embodied diverse turn-of-the-century understandings of manhood, including cowboy, train porter, middle-class homeowner, and family man. Literary scholar Simone Drake focuses less on the text of the autobiography than the photos included and the records of Love’s residences at the turn of the century, determining the specific ways Love refused a narrow definition of blackness and insists on transcending racial geographies. Black masculinity, like much human identity, is produced in ownerships of property, community, and self, however fictive the narratives of that self. In a complementary approach, historian Charity Fox reads the memoir *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* against the grain of autobiography, suggesting instead that the generic conventions of his truth-telling blur to profound effect. His assertion that he is the real-life inspiration for Deadwood Dick, the popular dime novel character of the late 1800s, is one self-representation among many in which he negotiated barriers of race and class. Black masculinity, when produced at a regional frontier, creates new possibilities for economic necessities to trump racist values and foster at least some type of equality.

The final two chapters and the postscript elaborate the complex ways in which twentieth-century black masculinity responded to, appropriated, reinterpreted, or rejected imaginations of race and gender in the nineteenth century. Literary scholar Colleen C. O’Brien turns to Du Bois’s little-examined 1909 biography of John Brown to demonstrate that the insurrectionary tradition of U.S. literature bound revolution to race from the start. Black masculinity thereby proves nation making even
as it is racially fluid, embodied in cosmopolitanism, and bound to the landscape, rejecting both strict racial difference and racist white nationalism. Historian Malinda Alaine Lindquist reinterprets how black social scientists such as Du Bois and Frazier confronted racist expectations through engaging their reverse, the actual and the ideal of black family life. Specifically for Frazier, African American manhood was affirmed through social determinations whose enabling opportunities need not be bound to the challenges of attaining and maintaining middle-class status; black masculinity could include positive understandings of working-class fatherhood, self-concept, and authority. In her postscript, Riché Richardson points how understandings of black masculinity in the twenty-first century must engage meaningfully the complex history of black male experience and representation without being bound to its past or ignoring the transnational and cross-gender contexts of racial and gender identities.

The interdisciplinary nature of this collection recognizes that textual evidence and its interpretation provide the basis for both historical and literary study, contributing to the interdependence of the fields as well as their mutual uneasiness, and the cross-disciplinary nature of this collection results from the intersecting paths of history and literary study. In the 1980s, historians faced increasing challenges regarding the degree to which their practices of compiling and understanding historical records were shaped by narrativization and the interpretive strategies of reading itself. At the same time, canons of literature destabilized due to the recognition that aesthetic valuation did not take place outside of ideology, and literary critics and theorists turned to history and cultural difference as powerful bases of organization. Both humanities disciplines shifted from a foundation of *homo universalis* to social categorizations organized along fault lines of difference, most notably race and gender but also including class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Therefore, the line between historiographic and literary methodologies has blurred even as their shared bedrock has shifted.

Literary scholarship generally has proven more welcome to historiography in critical movements first described as new historicism and later naturalized to become merely good scholarship. Still, many critics of literature relegate historical documentation to evidence of context, an order secondary to the primary interpretive claims. Historians have been less willing to make wide use of imaginative texts beyond ornamental gestures to literary figures (Faulkner remains a favorite for historians of the South), as the emphasis on evidence over interpretation precluded,
or at least limited, the relevance of fiction. The destabilizing intellectual shifts of the recent decades—the interpretative emphasis in history and the empiricism of historical documentation for literature—brought history’s linguistic turn and literature’s historical turn, and the past decades have seen an increase in interdisciplinary inquiry exciting in its impulses but uneven in its execution. This collection brings together historians and literary scholars in a fashion that demonstrates their shared roles while emphasizing their different strengths, and at the same time provides a contribution to race and gender scholarship, necessary precisely because of the tremendous shifts that have shaped that scholarly production. In their aggregate, these essays both join the growing body of work in history and literature attentive to gender, and they offer a response to Brown’s 1863 call in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*. Just as Brown made literary narrative and the writing of history his dual methods in telling the stories of African Americans too large and complex to be contained entirely in either form, so too do these historians and critics attend to both discursive modes in the production not of the singular “Black Man,” but the plural and contradictory depictions of black masculinity, those who have been fathers, preachers, rebels, and men.

**Notes**


10. Republican philosophy dictated that men alone were to become citizens, and conceptions dependence and independence were cast in gendered language or in terms of slavery. The Lockean sense of patriarchy suggested that Adam was made dominant and hence all men were superior to women; John Locke, Two Treatises of Civil Government, Thomas Hollis, ed. (London: A. Milar et al., 1794). George Washington, often described as the “father” of the American republic, declared that “the crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway”; reprinted in Michael P. Johnson, ed., Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, vol. 1 (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 109. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812 (Williamsburg, VA: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Edmund S. Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Sylvia Frey, Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Kathleen Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Witches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (Williamsburg, VA: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Ruth Bloch, “The Construction of Gender in a Republican World,” in Jack P. Greene and Jack Richon Pole, eds., A Companion to the American Revolution (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Blackwell, 2000), 605–9; Clare Lyons, Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the


20. Martin Anthony Summers offers a fine account of the emergence of competing Northern black masculinities in *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). The popularity of jazz and its celebrity center in Harlem’s Cotton Club bears a debt to Jack Johnson, one epitome of black masculinity and the boxer who dominated heavyweight fighting in the early years of the twentieth century; however, he was forced to wait until 1908 for a white champion willing to meet him in order to officially win the title. In 1920, he opened the Cotton Club.


Duke University Press, 2002) are more admirable in intent than execution; the former works with too few sources and offers too cursory a survey, while the latter substitutes intensely theorized interpretations for historical evidence and broader contextualization. Few literary scholars focusing on black masculinity attend specifically to historical evidence beyond the literature itself—see James W. Coleman, *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); Jeffrey B. Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

27. Bederman points out that “masculinity” is an invention of the late nineteenth century to describe characteristics of manliness distinct from “manhood,” a much older term functionally synonymous with honor and delineating the positive attributes men sought to embody, 16–19. The essays of this collection use the term “masculinity” to describe traits characterizing manliness irrespective of positive or negative value as understood in their historical moment.

28. Leak, 139.