



WE REAL COOL

Black Men and Masculinity

bell hooks

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

Chapter 6

from angry boys to angry men

Today many black males in our society embrace the notion that they are victims, that racism, The Man, treacherous black women, bitches of all colors and so forth are all making it hard for them to get ahead. Listening to black male complaints one hears again and again scenarios of disappointment and failure wherein someone else is always to blame. Scapegoating is a diversionary tactic. It allows the scapegoater to avoid the issues they must confront if they are to assume responsibility for their lives. Most black males have consistently received contradictory messages from society about what it means to be responsible. Patriarchal socialization says you are responsible if you get a job, bring your wages home, and provide for your family's material well-being. Yet poverty and a lack of job opportunities have prevented many black males from being responsible in the patriarchal sense of the term. Many black males accept this definition of responsible manhood and spend their lives feeling like a failure, feeling as though their self-esteem is assaulted and assailed on all sides, because they cannot acquire the means to fulfill this role.

Very few black males dare to ask themselves why they do not rebel against the racist, sexist status quo and invent new ways of thinking about manhood, about what it means to be responsible, about what it means to invent one's life. Often black males are unable to think creatively about their lives because of their uncritical acceptance of narrow life-scripts shaped by patriarchal thinking. Yet individual black men provide models that show it is possible to go against the grain,

to change the conventional script. The failure of black males to look to those black males who have liberated themselves via new life maps is rooted in misguided allegiance to the status quo—an allegiance that is cultivated during childhood.

Most black males are bombarded in early childhood with the message that they are inhabiting an all-powerful universe that not only does not want them to succeed but wants to ensure their demise. These messages come to black males via mass media. But even before mass media get a chokehold on the black male psyche, most black boys are conditioned to be victims by emotional abuse, experienced at home and at school. Oftentimes the patriarchal socialization that insists boys should not express emotions or have emotional caretaking is most viciously and ruthlessly implicated in the early childhood socialization of black boys. The image of emasculated and castrated black males is so embedded in the cultural imagination that many black parents feel it is crucial to train boys to be “tough.” Houston A. Baker, Jr., in his autobiographical essay “On the Distinction of ‘Jr.’,” describes the psychological terrorism that is involved in socializing black boys to patriarchal thinking:

I am eleven years old, giddy with the joy of fire and awed by the seeming invulnerability of my father. He is removing dead coals from the glowing bed of the furnace. He is risking the peril of flames. We are sharing...we are together.... For some reason I am prompted to move with the pure spirit of being. I begin dancing around the furnace with light abandon. My voice slides up the scale to a high falsetto. I am possessed by some primitive god of fire; I feel joyful and secure. I am supremely happy, highvoiced, fluid. Then I am suddenly flattened against a limestone wall, bolts of lightening and bright stars flashing in my head. I have been hard and viciously slapped in the mouth as a thunderous voice shouts...“Stop acting like a sissy.”

Baker calls this violent response from his dad “moods of manhood.” In actuality the young boy is the celebrant expressing love of maleness. It is the adult black male who decides this must be squashed in the name of patriarchal manhood.

This initiating trauma happens to many black boys. Often the abuser is a mother who fears that her son will be “too soft” if he is allowed to be in touch with his feelings. *Soul murder* is the psychological term that best describes this crushing of the male spirit in boyhood. Enlightened therapist Terrence Real, in his book *How Can I Get Through to You?*, shares that the way boys are socialized is fundamentally damaging. In his workshops all around the country he hears “a hunger for the way out of the dilemma” of patriarchal masculinity. He writes that little has changed in terms of what is expected of boys: “The latest research on boys and their development tells us that, despite our raised consciousness and good intentions, boys today, no less than ever before, are permeated with an inescapable set of highly constricting rules. Those boys who dare to ‘step out of the box’ place themselves in harm’s way since, even today, our cultural tolerance for young men who deviate from what we deem masculine is limited, and our intolerance expressed in singularly ugly ways.... The consequence of opposition is psychological and often physical brutality.” In recent years a number of books have been published which talk about the necessity of “protecting the emotional life of boys.” When the book jackets have an image, it is usually of a white boy, gazing out at the world with tender wide-open eyes. Any mention in these books of the circumstances surrounding black boys and the processes by which they are socialized is rare.

Undoubtedly white boys, across all classes, are damaged by patriarchal socialization, yet that damage is intensified in the experience of black boys precisely because these boys face a situation of double jeopardy. It is not just society’s investment in patriarchal masculinity that demands that black boys be socialized away from feeling and action; they must also bear the weight of a psychohistory that represents black males as

castrated, ineffectual, irresponsible, and not real men. It is as if black parents, cross-class, believe they can write the wrongs of history by imposing onto black boys a more brutal indoctrination into patriarchal thinking.

Young black males, like all boys in patriarchal culture, learn early that manhood is synonymous with the domination and control over others, that simply by being male they are in a position of authority that gives them the right to assert their will over others, to use coercion and/or violence to gain and maintain power. Black boys who do not want to be dominant are subjected to forms of psychological terrorism as a means of forcing them to embody patriarchal thinking. Shaming and rituals of disregard, of constant humiliation, are the tactics deployed to break the boys spirit. Describing how this process works, therapist John Bradshaw writes: "This poisonous pedagogy justifies highly abusive methods for suppressing children's vital spontaneity: physical beatings, lying, duplicity, manipulation, scare tactics, withdrawal of love, isolation and coercion to the point of torture. All of these methods are toxically shaming." Black boys are daily victimized by toxic shaming. In our culture there is very little concern about the emotional lives of black boys.

Even though the welfare of boys began to to receive more attention in this nation as boys committed more violent social acts, particularly murder, the violent acting out of white boys tends to be viewed as a psychological disorder that can be corrected, while black boys who act out tend to be viewed as criminals and punished accordingly. Conservative responses from diverse black communities began to talk about black males as an endangered species. By choosing an animal analogy they embraced racist/sexist iconography that had historically depicted the black male as a beast. Then they focused attention on the need to "civilize" unruly black boys through strict discipline at home and in schools, thus revealing the extent to which they internalized racist/sexist thinking about black masculinity, and paid no meaningful attention to the psychological well-being of black boys. If a black boy obeys authority, is quiet, and does his homework, he tends to

be viewed as psychologically whole simply because he is not a problem. Repressed emotions in black boys tend to be viewed not as a problem but as a boon to society since the quiet obedient black boy will know his place and stay in it.

Soul-murdering attacks on the self-esteem of black boys leads many gifted black male children to develop deep-seated chronic depression, resulting from what Bradshaw diagnoses as a consequence of their “true and authentic selves being shamed through abandonment in childhood.” In our household growing up, my brother, the one boy in a household with six sisters, was constantly shamed and humiliated by our father for not measuring up to the standards of patriarchal maleness. When he was hurt our brother wanted to cry but the standards of real manliness as our dad envisioned it required that he deny his feelings. Whenever our brother did not conform to patriarchal expectations he was subjected to verbally abusive shaming or violent beatings by our patriarchal father. Like many black boys he received mixed messages about manhood.

On one hand he was valued and indulged because he was the boy, and on the other hand he was shamed for not measuring up to some rigid notion of acceptable patriarchal boyhood. He was adored, yet found wanting, and his self-esteem was never allowed to flourish. Like most boys he was rewarded only when he conformed to the patriarchal norm. He could not receive affirmation for simply being.

He was supposed to be obedient and quiet, yet at the same time assertive, aggressive, and able to take control on demand.

He was supposed to show affection when adults demanded it and yet not show feelings. These contradictory demands are part and parcel of the complex expectations placed on black boys to show they are not “sissies” but real men in the process of becoming. Their bewilderment at the inconsistency of these demands leads to overwhelming feelings of powerlessness. They feel psychically impotent because they cannot satisfy the demand to “be a man” that adults are placing on them.

Black boys, more than other group of male children in this society, are asked to surrender their childhoods in order to pursue an elusive patriarchal masculinity. Often this demand

is made by a dysfunctional single female parent who has had all her expectations of being cared for and protected by a patriarchal male dashed; a disappointing father, a betraying love, both are part of her abandonment issues. She then projects them onto the son who she hopes will fulfill all her desires. These unrealistic emotional expectations result in “emotional sexual abuse”—the conflation that occurs when a child is forced to meet the covert needs of the family system. The general perception that adult black males, particularly those outside the privileged class, are no good dogs who abandon their families is so commonplace that it is acceptable for adult black women to expect boy children to be “mama’s little man.” Bradshaw clearly states in *Healing the Shame That Binds You* that when this happens “parents are getting their needs met at the expense of the child’s needs.” When the child’s needs are not being met he receives the message that his needs are not important, that he is not valued or worthy. Bradshaw contends that the child then “loses a sense of [his] own personal value.”

Among black male children, those who learn in early childhood, long before confronting a hostile white world, that they are not worthy will then encounter that same message when they go out into the public world. Thus they are trapped. They are not valued in family life and they are not valued in the world beyond. Often black male children hear adult women repeatedly maligning adult black males, saying things like “he’s no good,” “he ain’t shit,” or “there’s not a black man on this earth you can count on.” All these messages reinforce the notion that he is flawed, that nothing he can do will make him be whole. All he is offered is a life of compensation, where he must work hard to make up for the “lack” others see in him and for his own sense of inner emptiness.

This core of shame—the shaky foundation on which many black boys must try to construct a self—always collapses. Yet most black males cannot confront the collapse so they focus on performing, on doing rather than being, hiding their deep-seated feelings of hopelessness. Rigid sex roles have provided the backdrop for much of the childhood shaming that wounded black male children are forced to endure. They are the targets

of adults who direct their anger and their sense of hopelessness at them. Traumatic emotional abuse happens to black boys of all classes. It may occur repeatedly or it may hit the mark in one soul-destroying act of violation. In Houston Baker's case, though wounded by his father's violent insistence that he not be a sissy, he still feels close to his dad and became an over-achiever, working overtime to show that he is worthy. Baker writes that the admonition to "be a man" was his father's way to communicate that "manhood was a fearless, controlled, purposeful, responsible achievement." Baker was able to actualize his father's vision. His childhood counterpart from an underclass or poor family usually responds to the trauma of being physically abused by emotionally shutting down, by refusing to make any effort to succeed in life. Or if he succeeds he acts out later in life in ways that undermine his success.

Examples abound of professional black men who sabotage their lives for reasons that are not overt. When mass media pay attention to this sabotage there is no discussion of psychological wounding. In recent years when young white males, especially those who have class privilege, violently act out, even killing, psychological issues are explored as possible explanations. Yet when black males act out the message mass media send is that they are "inherently" evil, flawed beyond repair. In even the worst cases, where white males are perceived as committing evil acts (i.e., Jeffrey Dahmer, serial rapists, and killers), immense effort is made to understand their psychological condition, to represent them not as inherently evil but as disturbed. Black male violence is rarely contextualized in this way. During the trial of O.J. Simpson mass-media focus on his childhood was not aimed at providing a sympathetic psychological profile. It was used instead to demonstrate that he was always defective, always a killer in the making, thus reinforcing the racist sexist assumption that all black males are inherently demonic.

That same logic overdetermines racist sexist mass-media reports of black male wrongdoing. Often a symbolic lynching occurs in the press. This was certainly the pattern when Patrick Chavis was murdered. At the age of fifty he was killed in his

neighborhood by men seeking to hijack his car. Patrick Chavis was a black student with a grade point average lower than that of many white applicants who were accepted into a California medical school in the early seventies. Chavis's admission became the basis for a lawsuit known as the Bakke case, which was the first major challenge to affirmative action measures that redressed the past and made it possible for underprivileged black students to enter colleges. Raised by a poor single mother of four, Chavis finished medical school and was a successful doctor, yet he continually acted out in ways that undermined his achievements. The heading of the *New York Times* obituary described him as an "affirmative action figure" then offered a detailed account of his "failings": his divorces, his failure to pay child support, the revoking of his medical license. Since he had once been used by Senator Edward Kennedy as a "perfect example" of how affirmative action works, the *Times* used his death to let the world know how wrong Kennedy was. There is no sympathy for Chavis in the long obituary, no attempt to contextualize his story, no sympathetic psychological profile.

Had there been a psychological profile it would have started with the impact of receiving national attention for not being worthy. It would have made mention of the burdens he faced as a black male from an underprivileged dysfunctional family setting striving to achieve. As is often the case in racially biased media, the failing of an individual black male is not contextualized. Chavis is not accorded any respect by Douglas Martin, his obituary writer. He is simply dehumanized, made to stand as yet another example of how black males fail, even when they are given preferential treatment. There is not the slightest suggestion that the public humiliation Chavis faced early in life played a role in undermining his self-esteem, even though he finished medical school and set up a practice. The conservative media's cannibalization of his dead body, using it solely as a means to swipe at affirmative action, is as tragic an assault as the shots that murdered him. Undoubtedly, Chavis was psychologically wounded. Yet like many black males in

America he ran from the pain, choking it down, denying and repressing the problem.

Repression is one of the ways to cope with the pain of abandonment. If black boys and black men do not allow themselves to feel, then they are not able to take responsibility for nurturing their emotional growth; they cannot access the healthy parts of themselves that could empower them to resist. Children can resist the impact of shaming by creating alternative worldviews shaped by imagination or by fixating on role models different from their source relationships. But this can only happen if a child's imagination and creativity are not destroyed. Since creativity in male children is often viewed as suspect from a patriarchal perspective, those aspects of a black male child's identity may be shut down for fear they will lead him to be punished. Observing diverse black family dynamics, I notice that creativity in black male children can be expressed before the age of five but is viewed as a threat to the assumption of a patriarchal masculine identity if a boy is emotionally expressive and creative beyond these years.

When small, black boys are often overly indulged, made to feel both special and entitled, they may not learn any boundaries. Everything they do may be praised. This overindulgence is often perceived as love or positive caretaking when it is actuality an assault on a child's self-worth, for it teaches the child grandiosity rather than self-acceptance. Harsh punishment is often the way dysfunctional parents seek to alter the behavior of the grandiose child. When the overindulgence ends and the shaming begins, the child can garner attention only for negative behaviors. He cannot stop acting out because aggression is the way he gets noticed. Craving attention and only getting it when he is "bad," he sees no way to gain enough affirmation to feel good about himself. Concurrently, he may learn that if he represses aggression and any other emotional feelings that make adults uncomfortable, he will be treated better. What little affirmation and attention he receives will come only if he is seen as performing well in the eyes of adults.

This need to prove their value through performance is one of the reasons so many black boys look to sports as a site of redemption and affirmation. Given the history of black male success in the arena of sports, an arena deemed “manly” by patriarchal standards, black boys learn early on in their lives that by excelling in sports they can gain both visibility and a measure of respect. Acting out the patriarchal paradigm as competitive performers, black boys who excel at sports are able to shield themselves from the shaming and scorn directed at the boy who expresses his creativity in academic or artistic pursuits. However, black boys who do not find their way to sports or are unable to succeed playing sports have little or no opportunity to regain lost self-respect. Black boys who are repeatedly subjected to humiliations, shaming, embarrassments, or random punishments by grown ups learn that they can relieve this pain by repression and dissociation. Acting out violently is another way to take control of the pain. In *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, therapist James Garbarino explores the link between the harsh repression of boys during the ages when they are emotionally vulnerable and later violent acting out. He found that such boys were often labeled from birth as difficult or as too demanding. Labeled as “terrors” they became just that. He explains: “Without loving guidance, spiritual counsel, and psychological nurturance, children see little alternative to cope as best as they can, and that generally means disassociation—no matter its cost to a child’s inner life.” In general our society does not care about the inner life of black boys. When the emotional abandonment that is more often than not their lot in life leads to dysfunctional behavior, black boys get noticed but rarely in a manner that positively addresses their issues.

Emotionally abused black boys are filled with rage. Primed to act out they become adults who are rageoholics. There is often so much attention given the concrete material manifestations of the impact of racism and other forms of social oppression on black males that the psychological impact of early childhood abandonment is not highlighted. Yet the

powerlessness that many black males feel in childhood continues into adulthood. Gary Zukav and Linda Francis, in *The Heart of the Soul*, identify lack of self-worth as the core cause of anger: "It is the experience of powerlessness. Powerlessness is seeing yourself as valueless, as not being able to imagine that you make a difference to anyone or anything.... When you feel worthless, you are terrified by your life, and when you are terrified by your life, you are continually in the pain of trying to shape your life as you think it needs to be. When that pain is acute, you cover it with anger." Many black males in our nation are consumed by rage. Continually angry, they are in continual pain. And this is one of the reasons they look for scapegoats.

Zukav and Francis state: "Anger lashes out at a target. That target is another person, group of people, or the Universe. Anger is righteous and self-important. Anger does not listen to, respect, or care about others. It makes others wrong, to blame, inferior, or inadequate. It cares only about itself. Anger wants what it wants, when it wants it, on the terms that it wants it. It assumes the roles of judge, jury, and executioner. There is no appeal." The chronically angry black male is living in an emotional prison. Fear-based, he is isolated and terrified. In patriarchal culture his anger may be seen as "manly," so it becomes the perfect cover-up so that no one, not even himself, can know the extent of the pain he feels. John Bradshaw sheds light on the way rage often makes the wounded self feel better: "When we are raging, we feel unified within—no longer split. We feel powerful. Everyone cowers in our presence. We no longer feel inadequate and defective. As long as we can get away with it, our rage becomes our mood altered of choice. We become rage addicts." Black male rage is often interpreted as a positive response to injustice and as a consequence it is encouraged. In actuality black male rage is usually a sign of reactive powerlessness. It rarely leads to constructive intervention. Raging further shames and isolates black men. Addiction is often seen as a way to find sanctuary, a way out of the feelings of powerlessness. Richard Pryor chronicles this in an insightful manner in the autobiographically based film *Jo*

Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling. His character splits into two parts: one that speaks the powerlessness, and one the drug-addicted user who speaks back with a false sense of power. Pryor powerfully portrays the dissociative states black males often inhabit.

Substance abuse is a way black men attempt to contain and control their rage. It keeps the pain at bay, it seems to temper the rage. In *Brothers on the Mend* Ernest Johnson writes: "Many black men prefer to suppress their anger and rage suffering the consequences, rather than open up and talk about their feelings. These 'cool brothers' express their angry feelings in a number of nonproductive ways—overuse of tobacco, drowning the bile through drinking, or releasing the welled-up feelings in a burst of violence—often against loved ones. Talking through the feelings is not seen as an option because they want to appear strong and 'manly.' But understanding the forces that cause sudden, even murderous rage—and more important, learning how to manage and control the impulse, may be the most important factors in the survival of African-American men." Chronic anger needs to be eliminated, not managed. Many black females learn to cope in a society that denies us full access to forms of power without acting out murderous rage, and black males can learn the same survival kills. Rageoholism in black males cannot be addressed if black males are unable to express their pain due to patriarchal repression. The pain underlying the anger causes the feelings of powerlessness, of sadness.

Rage is the perfect cover-up for depression. Black males who feel powerless, who feel as though they are not able to bring any level of meaningful purpose to their lives, are often depressed. That depression may be the outcome of unreconciled grief. In mourning for the self that has not come into being, sad about repeated failure and ongoing loss, depressed black men fade into the background in our society. Their problems go unnoticed. There are few avenues for healing that are open to them.

Ultimately in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy black male rage is acceptable, expected even. No

one really wants to hear black men speak their pain or offer them avenues of healing. Even though Ellis Cose reveals tremendous compassion for himself and other black men in *The Envy of the World*, he does not make the connection between low self-worth and self-sabotage. Instead he writes: "It would, of course, be simplistic—and wrong—to try to reduce all our problems...to issues of self-esteem or self-worth. There are other huge problems, and perhaps none is larger than those that revolve around abandonment." Cose fails to see the link between abandonment in childhood and lifelong debilitating low self-esteem. Yet this is the core issue for black males. In actuality, a great many of the problems black males face are a consequence of feeling that they have no value.

Lack of self-esteem—the consequence of psychological wounding in early childhood—is the heart of the matter. And when those wounds are not healed they invariably lead to self-sabotage. Often in our nation folks ponder why professional educated black males who are "successful" act out in the same self-sabotaging ways as their less-educated economically disenfranchised counterparts. Like Cose, they seem not to recognize that the core lack of self-worth is the same for overachievers and underachievers. Male success in patriarchal society tends to be measured by material standards (how much money a man makes, what kind of car he drives, or even the looks of the babe on his arm). This leads folks to forget that one can have the outer trappings of material success, even wealth and fame, and still feel an inner emptiness, an ongoing feeling of loss. Until wounded black males are able to confront the emotional abuse in their childhood (abuse is always about abandonment) they will not know emotional well-being.

Working on the issue of male violence, Donald Dutton acknowledges that the "way out of this miasma of unrealistic expectation and cyclical disappointment," the trapped feelings of powerless which engender rage, begins with acknowledging and feeling the pain. After breaking through the wall of denial black males who seek healing must do the work of grieving. They must, like all wounded males, "mourn the loss of what was never attained and attempt to integrate the good and bad

aspects of what is still possible,” as Dutton suggests. He points out that most men refuse to acknowledge deep childhood losses, and that “male models for grieving are few.” In traditional patriarchal black culture, male grieving has no place. The black man who grieves is seen as weak. Oftentimes the only black male we see expressing grief (other than at a funeral) is the drunk whose emotionality is dismissed as caused merely by his addiction and not by pain.

In *The Batterer* Donald Dutton states: “Men in particular seem incapable of grieving and mourning on an individual basis. Perhaps that is why the blues are so popular with men. They serve a socially sanctioned form of expression for this lost and unattainable process.” Black men created the blues, articulating in song their pain, their sense of hopelessness, their lamentation. For those individual creators the blues was a way out of the pain. It let them express their sorrow without shame. For men who listen while denying their own anguish, the sense of hopelessness remains. Young black males tend not to want to hear the blues. They do not want to hear an honest emotional expression of black male vulnerability. They would rather hear rap music with its aggressive presentation of invulnerability. If the choice is between exposing the true authentic self and clinging to the false self, most males maintain their fantasy bonding rather than seek the real. Although they like to use the phrase “keeping it real” most black males are too caught up in false selves, too busy dissimulating (taking on any appearance to manipulate) to recognize the “real.”

Resisting the patriarchal masculinity that preconditions men to be mentally imbalanced, that serves as a breeding ground for pathology, is one path to wellness any black male can take. Too often black males confuse whining, complaining, and raging with resistance. Constructive resistance names the problems, affirms the ways folks are victimized and hurt, while also mapping strategies for healing. Imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy reinforces the pathological narcissism that keeps many black men trapped by their identification with being a victim. Excessive focus on the ways

racism wounds black male spirits is often evoked to deflect attention away from all other sources of emotional pain. That deflection is disempowering because it sends the message that there is nothing black males can do to create positive change since they are “powerless” to end white supremacy. Racism does damage black males, but so does sexism, so does class elitism with its hedonistic materialism, and so does abandonment and abuse in family relationships. All the sources of black male pain and powerlessness must be named if healing is to take place, if black males are to reclaim their agency.

Wounded black men can heal. The healing process requires that they break through denial, feel what they feel, and tell the truth. In recovery work the often-evoked phrase “you are only as sick as your secrets” is insightful. A culture of domination is always one that prefers lies over truth. Black males who lie—to themselves, to everyone in their lives—are unable to experience the integrity that is essential to emotional well-being, that is the core of healthy self-esteem. Lies do not work. Telling the truth is the way to heal. Nothing stands in the way of any black male taking this step in the direction of well-being. He simply needs to seek salvation. The root meaning of *salvation* is “wholeness.” As black males courageously confront the pain in their lives, facing reality, they can take the broken bits and pieces and make themselves whole again.