

*Chapter 12*

Antiracist (Pro)Feminisms  
and Coalition Politics:  
“No Justice, No Peace”

---

*Joy James*

**Progressive Men and Supportive Women**

When Dave Dellinger, promoting his autobiography *From Yale to Jail*,<sup>1</sup> spoke at a Boulder middle school in a benefit for the Pacifica radio station, KGNU, one of my girlfriends and I decided to check him out. Finding the parking lot packed, we thought the auditorium would be likewise; however, the cars outside were for the girls' basketball practice. Not that many Boulderites heard the radical octogenarian, white activist speak that night. He described travels to the former Soviet Union, labor organizing during the depression, strikes and incarceration; but it was his discussion of the civil rights movement that most moved me. A commitment to anti-racist organizing drew me into Dellinger's recollections of combatting racism; his descriptions of sexism within the movement, though, provided the most memorable story.

In the southern movement, civil rights organizers risked personal injury, if not their lives, in attempting to desegregate and democratize the U.S. Male and female activists were peers, at least in confronting and being targeted by racist violence. Dellinger recounted how, anticipating the brutality of racist sheriffs, Klansmen, or freelance terrorists, nonviolent men argued that if they risked their lives in morning demonstrations, women co-activists should provide sexual favors that night. Some of their female comrades complied. Dellinger added that as a married, older male, he had not participated in this comfort station approach to civil rights radicalism. His race politics reflected a feminism that years later refracted his anti-racist narrative into a profeminist testimonial.

Speaking about gender politics the following day at the university, I related Dellinger's story to a multiracial class of student-activists, asking for their perspectives on sexism and the left. Noting that although the role of females in social movements is no longer mythologized as prone and passive before dynamic progressive males, I argued that decades after the civil rights and women's liberation movements, women are encouraged to assume caretaker roles in relationship to progressive males. Today, this nurturing is recycled more often through supportive speech rather than domesticity (crassly reduced in Dellinger's activist era to the kitchen/bedroom). In fact, the class instructor had invited me to address this group of progressives and feminists in order to confront its internal politics: throughout the semester a few articulate men had dominated class discussions despite the fact that the instructors were three women and the majority of students were female. When the issue of sexism in their class was raised, the two dismissed the possibility, pointing out their numerical inferiority as males and their lack of institutional voice as students. Female students met male dismissals with silence.

Raised by parents who had witnessed or worked in the liberation movements, these students understood the need to transgress racism and sexism; that internalized belief and the external leadership of their female instructors suggested to some that sexism could not exist in their group. Encouraging them to analyze this assumption and their avowed feminism, I used Dellinger's story to examine how the expectations placed on women to assist progressive males might reinscribe male dominance. The male students responded that the women they knew were strong (one cited independent, single black mothers). However, without referring to their own classroom dynamics, several women students began to share stories about betrayals and silencing. For instance, a Native American woman recounted being criticized as "divisive" or "whiny"—even by other indigenous women—when she spoke against sexism within a local Native American organization. A Jewish woman described how the image of the strong Jewish mother—as domineering matriarch against whom progressive males must assert and construct themselves—mirrored the stereotype of the black mother as overbearing.

The questions I posed to students are ones with which I struggle: What are the support roles of women to antiracist male feminists? When men (or women) "do feminism," why do we so infrequently ask what type—conservative, liberal, radical? With what critiques of racism, capitalism, heterosexism? The progressivism of both feminists and profeminists may contain contradictions and elements of betrayal. Will emerging heterofeminism partner males and females by asking that they dance with unspoken expectations and that feminists uncritically support their male counterparts? Perhaps in an antifeminist society, women coalesce partly

in solidarity and partly from feeling "rescued" by male allies from being ideological wallflowers. Missteps occur in uncritical partnerships where collective movements—two steps forward, one back or one forward, two back—sometimes spare the agile the frustration of tripping over their counterpart. In an uneasy dance, the mere ability to not stumble rarely constitutes progress.

Progress proceeds in the quantitative increase of profeminists or male feminists, but what about the quality of their political ideologies? No doubt, we need more feminist men like we need more antiracist whites, or, greater numbers of the materially privileged to struggle for communalism and socialism, and hegemonic sexuals to battle homophobia. The need for feminist men stems from a larger need to grow community where one can shed a thick skin of indifference and isolation for a translucent one of connection and consciousness for social justice. This shared membrane, woven in writings responsive to subaltern peoples, is found in black male feminists' critical contributions to the genre of antiracist, feminist progressive thought.

Black male feminists appear (and likely are) inherently more progressive than mainstream (a.k.a. white) male feminists by virtue of their social status and familial influence. While dominant society constructs black men or "men of color" as less civilized, as hypermasculinized—and counterfeminist—black male feminists understand themselves to be "feminized" because they have neither the institutional power of white men under white supremacy, nor the familial conditioning of the mythic nuclear Euro-family ruled by a (allegedly benign) patriarch. Not only do black profeminists not share the same structural, patriarchal authority and dominance of white males—the supreme fathers—they simultaneously struggle against racism and feminism (although their progressive positions on class and sexuality are less clearly demonstrated). Most mainstream feminists of either gender rarely prioritize or even acknowledge beyond rhetorical references antiracism in their feminism, which is why black male feminism is so appealing. Logically, black women, collectively, have more commonality with black male feminists than they do with white feminists who are not radical antiracists (for years some African-American women have argued that black women have more in common with black masculinists than they do with white feminists, who in a society shaped by white supremacy are in the absence of a praxis of antiracism by default racist).

Male feminists' antiracist endeavors benefit black women as *women* in a patriarchal society, while their profeminist endeavors assist black women as *blacks* in a white supremacist state. (If it seems that I have erred in reversing the emphasis here, that is only because most do not seriously reflect on how antiracism benefits women and how (pro)feminism uplifts

a race.) Given the progressive nature of their politics, it is difficult to argue against naturalizing coalitions between feminists and black male (pro)feminists. Still, questions about coalitions between black profeminists and feminists, and a healthy suspicion toward even the most progressive manifestations of male feminism, remain. Recalling the gender contradictions of progressive males inhibits any uncritical embrace of male feminist works. Interrogating the anti-racist feminisms in Michael Awkward's literary criticism, Lewis Gordon's philosophy, and Devon Carbado's and Richard Delgado's<sup>2</sup> critical race theory, I find models for male feminism that posit and problematize a mutual alliance between black men and women and offer insights into gender progressive politics at the same time that they raise questions about the same.

#### A Black Male Feminist Manifesto and the Femininity of Blackness

In "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism," Michael Awkward presents a black male feminist or womanist manifesto:

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* (52).<sup>3</sup>

Awkward argues that the value of male black feminism lies in its antipatriarchal stance and self-reflexivity in its relations to, rather than reproduction of, a feminism that focuses on "the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience" (52). For Awkward, male feminists' abilities to expand the range and use of feminist critiques and perspectives include a critical discourse on obstacles to a black profeminist project and new constructions of "family" and black male sexuality (51). (Preferring the terms *feminism* or *feminist* for female and *profeminism* or *profeminist* for male advocates of gender equality, I am reluctant to concede Awkward the use of the label "feminism" given that it now requires the qualifiers *male* and *female* to distinguish advocates for an ideology associated with females; perhaps my uneasiness with male feminists is tied to my desire to biologize this ideology.)

Awkward reassures that male feminists are trustworthy. His manifesto

issues a code of conduct or rules for ethical behavior to ensure that they become or remain so. Noting Alice Jardine's concern that male feminists not imitate 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)"<sup>4</sup>—he advocates a form of male feminism that neither appropriates nor dominates feminism. His construction of black male feminism seeks to reassure female feminists that they need not fear the increasing entry of profeminist male voices as authoritative in feminist discourse. Aware that our hierarchical society translates biology into social dominance or subordination, Awkward comforts the uneasy by dismissing the political clout wielded by an ascending profeminism: "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" (47). I am not completely comforted by Awkward's pronouncements. "Gender Studies," with its increasing presence of male faculty, has begun to replace "Women's Studies" in academe. This in itself is not necessarily a sign of counter-progressive politics. But I wonder if the "institutional strength" Awkward heralds for feminism is a bit overstated and used as a defensive maneuver to preempt critiques of male feminists. Historically, marginalized and oppressed groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and women struggled in social movements that had an impact on academic sites. Today, in the post-mass movement era, such studies have become institutionalized and mainstreamed to a certain degree. What were considered to be marginalized, but thoroughly politicized, studies became legitimized by the inclusion and leadership of populations previously considered dominant elites.

Although I welcome the departure of exclusionary disciplines and Manichean depictions of the oppressed and their oppressor(s), I am still left with the uncomfortable perception that if the validity of an area of knowledge, for instance, women's studies or ethnic studies, garners legitimacy only to the extent that privileged intellectuals, for example, men or whites, shape the discourse, then the exegetical and institutional strengths that allegedly safeguard against subversion or mutation are not as powerfully entrenched as Awkward would like us to believe. Rather than follow Awkward's injunction "not to worry," perhaps the issue is what to worry about in the ascendance of male feminism or profeminist men who make their mark in feminist literature.

Michele Wallace expresses reservations about black male feminists in "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism."<sup>5</sup> According to Wallace, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., coeditor of *The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature* and editor of the Oxford series

on black women writers, is “single-handedly reshaping, codifying and consolidating the entire field of Afro-American Studies, including black feminist studies” (251). Given his influential position in academe (as the director of Harvard University’s W.E.B. DuBois Institute of African-American studies) and the literary world of upscale lit magazines, Gates wields considerable clout. This institutional power, writes Wallace, means that “he demonstrates an ability to define black feminist inquiry for the dominant discourse in a manner yet unavailable to black female critics. The results so far are inevitably patriarchal. Having established himself as the father of Afro-American Literary Studies, with the help of the *New York Times Book Review*, he now proposes to become the phallic mother of a newly depoliticized, mainstreamed, and commodified black feminist literary criticism” (251).

Wallace references Gates’s statement that “learning to speak in the voice of the black mother” is the objective of the discourse of the Other. In literary production, men still have greater access and authority as intellectuals and thinkers. This is also true for black literature, as Wallace notes. Despite or because of the fact that (black) women’s greatest recognized achievements in feminism are in fiction, males—whether masculinist, feminist, or hybrid—continue to define the parameters of social and literary nonfiction concerning (black) gender politics. One can hardly ignore the reality of pro forma feminism and opportunism even among those males who highlight the significance of women’s contributions. (Paradoxically, male feminists may acknowledge the “exceptional” woman/women as their intellectual equals—just as some whites embrace the exceptional or aberrational black/blacks—while most women function in their lives as supporting helpmates or the disenfranchised to be succored.)

Sensitive to black feminist criticisms, as expressed by Wallace and others, Awkward cautions black men who desire to be productive feminists not to reproduce dominance or erasure in their discourse about black feminism/women. Instead, he argues that they should deal with the specificity of their gender as males. The self-interest at work here, according to Awkward, is not selfish or narrow but self-enlightened and enlightening. What is furthered in profeminism is the ability to explore male identity and gender construction (similar to the opportunity to explore white identity and racial construction in critical white studies or antiracist discourse). To illustrate his point, Awkward offers an insightful reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, making connections between “Eva’s” infanticide against her only son, an adult male drug addict, whom she feared was attempting to climb back into her womb, and sexism among black males. Awkward writes, “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?” (56) Redefining manhood here, he notes, centers more on not recreating the domestic and uterine enclosure of black women than emulating the acquisitiveness and power of dominant norms.

This profeminism posits the black male as inextricably linked to women by virtue of race-ethnicity. In fact, Awkward’s black male is a gender-hybrid. Using Alice Walker’s term *womanist* as explored in the work of Sherley Anne Williams<sup>6</sup> and other black feminist writers, he contends that for the womanist or black feminist—as opposed to white/mainstream feminist—the discourse centers around women in relationship to the development of a people: “‘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 androcentricism, womanism foregrounds a general black psychic health as a primary objective” (49). Although he writes that likely 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” (49), framing womanism rather than nonblack feminism as his model, Awkward is able to argue for the place of the black male feminist as non-interloper. This is not because he unilaterally pictures himself with such “insider” status but because womanism constructs him as such: it is a people not just a gender that preoccupies womanist discourse.

Offering the progressive intellectual stance of black male feminism, against an undifferentiated patriarchy, he presents patriarchy monolithically while variegating male identity. Awkward uses Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”<sup>7</sup> to discuss how black male identity evolves in a feminine matrix. In Awkward’s case, we may also add “identification.” His autobiographical narrative informs that as a consequence of having been raised by a mother who was brutalized by his father, he attempted early in his life to construct an identity not based on male privilege and violence.<sup>8</sup> As Awkward reconstructs Spillers’s argument, we see the familiar premise that black males are denied full patriarchal privileges tied to racism, the same racism that engendered the much maligned “female-headed household.” Awkward concurs with Spillers whom he quotes: “It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood” (52). This heritage constitutes a form of “power” that Spillers describes as “the female within.” The “female within” is not defined, as Awkward himself notes, writing that the concept needs more exploration in terms of what it signifies in the lives of black men concerning their “repressed female interiority” (54). The “female within” appears strongly tied to a black identity. Although Awkward rejects the Moynihan thesis of the black matriarch, single black women seem to possess a

special essence in his writing. If they are the source of this hybrid-male cognizant of the mother's strong character and will, then what can be said of black men raised by nonblack women? How do they obtain this cultural strength typical of Awkward's matriarchal black communities? In *Get on the Bus* (1996), Spike Lee's film on black males' 1995 pilgrimage to the Million Man March, the fictional character "Gary," the son of a black father and a white mother, embodies both a strong black identity and a feminist consciousness. Art imitates life: African-American males raised by white females display a "black identity" (as nebulous and contested as that may be), and, exhibit the feminization of blackness both in its positive dimensions celebrated by Awkward and its negativity critiqued by Lewis Gordon.

Awkward concludes his argument by asserting that for black male feminists the "Father's law [is] no longer the law of the land" (57). We must ask: Who replaced the father and the father's law? Surely not the mother (and anarchy does not rule). Is it the emergent son, the hybrid with the interiority of the female, who supplants the patriarch? If the new son, or the son for the new age, is ascendant, then how? In a transgender Oedipal drive, can the feminist male supplant not only the father but also the mother (and the sister), proving himself superior to the patriarch because his claims to having transcended the female/male dichotomy of mother/father are buttressed by the authority of his *masculine* feminist speech?

Given that Awkward has stated that black female subjective experience is not the focus of black male feminism, he need not address the mother's law or the liberation of the male interiority of the female/sister. *Sans* patriarch and matriarch, foregoing anarchy, will leadership and the law spring from the progeny's transgender consciousness? And if the "law" or ideology of the hybrid-male, the feminized man, differs from that of the hybrid-female, the masculinized woman, the sistah, will there be contestation or coalition? In disagreements and conflicts among heterogeneous feminists, the hybrid-male retains some unspoken advantage. While the beloved of the interiorized mother (or as black gay-feminist Hilton Als eloquently relates, the "anti-man" or the "negress"), he seems to possess the latent, institutional power of the patriarch, remaining the he/she who is heir apparent to the father. That not every male feminist de facto relinquishes this latent power suggests that Awkward might wish to explore the degree to which male feminists transcend rather than feminize patriarchal privileges.

While Michael Awkward illuminates the black man who is not really a "man" because of his interiority, Lewis Gordon reflects on the black man who is not truly a "man" because of his exteriority. In the essay "Effeminacy: The Quality of Black Beings," the profeminist chapter in

Gordon's *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, which explores sexism within Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Gordon notes the nuances "of antiblack and misogynous worlds" and their coextensive appearances (124). In his discussions of blackness as femininity, this black profeminist writes: "Our descriptions of sexuality in an antiblack world pose a gender problem. From the standpoint of an antiblack world, black men are nonmen-nonwomen, and black women are nonwomen-nonmen. This conclusion is based on our premise of whites—white men and white women—being both human, being both Presence, and our premise of blacks, both black men and women, being situated in the condition of the 'hole,' being both Absence" (124).<sup>9</sup> Gordon notes that this dichotomy raises "a gender question concerning black men and a metaphysical one concerning black women. Blackness is regarded as a hole in being. Black men are hence penises that are holes; and black women are vaginas that are holes—holes that are holes. If blackness is a hole, and women are holes, what are white women, and what are black men in an antiblack world?" (124)

This exploration of the nature of black males and white females in an antiblack world offers a number of insights. For instance, Gordon argues that white women as "indeterminate" face the choice of choosing between their Presence biologically embodied in their whiteness and their Absence determined, again in biology, by their femaleness. Gordon notes that the choice that white women have for Absence is doubly reified by their racial transgressions, viscerally marked for the racist by white women's ability to bear "black" children. Where biology connotes Presence or Absence, race and gender become determining markers. Gordon contends that for the antiblack racist, the "'essence' of blackness . . . is, if you will, the hole, and the hole is the institutional bad-faith mode of the feminine"; antiblack racism is therefore "intimately connected to misogyny" (125). According to Gordon, "As pure Presence, masculinity is an ideal form of whiteness with its own gradations; the less of a hole one is, the more masculine one is; the less dark, the more white" (127). Therefore, the less dark, or more white, the less feminine. This equation allows Gordon to maintain that the black man "embodies femininity even more than the white woman" (what the black woman embodies as doubly feminized by race and gender is unclear here). A "black man in the presence of whiteness stands as a hole to be filled; he stands to the white man in a homoerotic situation and to the white woman in a heterosexual erotic situation with a homoerotic twist; she becomes the white/male that fills his blackness/femininity" (127). Gordon's feminism depicts with evocative imagery the suspect-status of white women in a racist world: "[T]he white woman should not be regarded as the jewel of the antiblack racist. For hidden in her whiteness—like the secret blackness of milk, the secret

abundance of blackness, the fertility that so outrages Manicheanism with its propensity to split apart and weaken the Light—is the antiblack racist's suspicion of her blackness. She stands as a white blackness, as a living contradiction of white supremacy. Out of her comes every white, placing a question mark on the notion of the purity of whiteness in the flesh. Unlike the black woman, out of whom only black children can be born, she can bear both white and black children. Because of this, the white woman ultimately stands on the same ontological level as slime in an antiblack world. She is regarded as a frightening substance that simultaneously attracts and repels" (126).

Despite its incisive analysis of white patriarchy and supremacy, reading *Bad Faith*, I wonder "what are black women in an antiblack world?" Its discussion of black male and female relationships never fully transpires, the focus remaining on black men and white women. Because Gordon does not comprehensively grapple with the issue of where the black man stands in relationship to the black female in his essay on effeminacy as an attribute of blackness, he can argue that whiteness can be worn as a phallus—"The 'phallus,' against which and upon which gender analyses often focus, needn't be and possibly no longer is a penis. In an antiblack world, the phallus is white skin" (128). This assertion is clearly an apt description of an antiblack or "white" world, but what is the phallus in a "black" world? In their relationships with black women and girls, are black men and boys feminized in the same manner in which they appear to be in the nonblack world? Gordon argues that the black man "cannot reject his femininity without simultaneously rejecting his blackness, for his femininity stands as a consequence of his blackness and vice versa" (128). Black men disavow their connection to black women by asserting their "maleness." For him, the black male "has a connection to the black woman in virtue of his blackness, but he can deny who he is by asserting what limited connection to maleness he may have" (128). Interestingly, black men betray their femininity, which is based in blackness, a femininity in a way that is purely negative in its construct, as is this form of blackness, one externally defined and delimited as the antithesis of whiteness/maleness. To go beyond gender, or the male/female dichotomy of dominance, one must go beyond race, or the white/black binary of dominance.

"The black woman stands as the reality of sweet, seductive, open femininity" in an antiblack/misogynist world (128). By the sweet and seductive, Gordon refers to, in the dominant culture's sensibilities toward black females, the putrefying rancidity of rotting fruit. Referencing Hazel Carby, he notes that the black woman appears as "an exotic figure of solution" (129). Her reconstruction as the sugar tit of consolation masks the abhorrence one feels toward her as a source of fecundating decay. But

not only blackness constitutes femininity as debased phenomenon. Femininity is more than blackness just as masculinity is more than whiteness. Given that Gordon's work is on antiblack racism, his black male feminism need not explore the ways in which patriarchy reasserts itself in black forms against black females. That racism contributes to sexism, that white women have patriarchal power invested in their wearing of skins/phalluses, are important points to be made. And Gordon does so with turns of language and ideas that illuminate while they unsettle. Still, the defensive murderous rages and desperate protective measures—ranging from "Eva's" immolation of her son to restraining orders—that black females take against black males suggests that what transpires as black men disavow their connectedness to black women to assert "maleness" can often be deadly and misogynist.

The view that black men are suspect masculine beings, not truly male in an antiblack or racist world, is one shared by both Gordon and Awkward. This view speaks in part to a sense of severance from traditional and historical constructs of a masculinity, for one that is humanized rather than animalized, one connected to femininity embodied in the black not the white female. This suggests that, in part, the black male femininity, influenced by the interiority in Awkward's writing and the Absence or "hole" in Gordon's, is a racialized gender construct (or perhaps a sexualized racial construct). Both writers evoke shared skin, Spillers's "captive community" in which at some level, blacks seem to occupy the same skin, uncut by gender and blood. Spillers's "Mamma's Baby, Papa's Maybe" maintains that an enslaved African-American female "shares the conditions of all captive flesh," as the "entire captive community becomes a living laboratory." For such women the theft and mutilation of the body create a special condition in which "we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related or gender-specific."<sup>10</sup> These shared conditions of racial oppression do not erase the female body as a site for sexual violence. Neither Spillers, Awkward, or Gordon argue for black gender essentialism. But their works, referenced here, do not focus on differences separating black males and females. Instead, the writers emphasize commonalities between black men and women. In times where tensions and strife between black women and men seem to garner the attention of spectacle in the larger society, Awkward discusses ties through shared femininity based on familial conditioning that produces male feminine interiority; and Gordon analyzes a shared femininity based on the racialized epidermal in a racist society. We see male feminists respond to the need to stress what black men share with black women. However, those contributions need not efface the battles that cut through the ties that bind, despite the

despite the realities of the female within or blackness as Absence. Nowhere are the differences and the battles between black women and men more stark than in the area of domestic violence.

### The Pitfalls of Gender Coalition Politics

Legal scholar Devon Carbado explores the issues of coalition politics and anti-essentialism from a black male feminist perspective. In "Race, Domestic Abuse, and the O. J. Simpson Case: When All Victims are Black Men and White Women," he notes that to "the extent that black men ignore the particularities of black women's racial experiences or exclude themselves from discussions about gender dynamics in the black community, they are unlikely to come to terms with . . . the patriarchal privilege they wield. Nor are they likely to challenge the notion that black men, and not black women, represent the paradigm of black being."<sup>11</sup>

Carbado is clearly writing about black masculinists or sexists; but to some degree his critique can be applied to black profeminists whose progressive gender politics or feminization via racism may shield them from their own participation in patriarchal privilege. Carbado's black feminism emphasizes or elevates the status of black women. Hopefully, most black profeminists (and feminists) are unlikely to agree that black women should "represent the paradigm of black being" even if they agree that black men should not be constructed as such under patriarchy. Patriarchy makes men representative of humanity; must a profeminist response make women representative, and must an antiracist profeminist response make black women representative? Surely, even the feminized paradigm remains some form of carceral waiting to be exploded or traded in for some newer, more expansive paradigm.

"Race, Domestic Abuse, and the O. J. Simpson Case" in its concerns about the status of black women focuses on two events in 1995, the O. J. Simpson case and the Million Man March, that generated, and continue to engender, heated debates about black gender politics. Using the Simpson case to raise questions about civil rights advocacy and how the black male "subordinating experience is perceived to have enough cultural currency to represent victimhood for a specific political or legal battlecry" (16), Carbado notes what is generally acknowledged among progressives, that the "racial battlecry" in black antiracist struggles has been gendered male. His essay identifies "unmodified antiracism" as a form of black male essentialism that "derives from intentional sexism and/or functional sexism in antiracist discourse" (3). Functional sexism for Carbado is a strategy or instrumental politics that confronts racism by privileging the male (for example arguments concerning black males as an "endangered species"). He argues that "there is no justifiable basis for treating the subordinated status of young men as more deserving of black political solic-

itude than the subordinated status of young black women" (7). Unmodified antiracism reduces discussions of "black community" or "black people" to references to black males, the struggle against racism to essentially a struggle against black male subordination, while it presents explanations of antiblack racism against males as competent to address antiblack racism against females. Carbado provides an example of unmodified antiracism in the Million Man March injunction for women to financially support the March, yet stay at home and take care of children in order to facilitate males' experiences to assert themselves as the head of households. An example of unmodified antiracism stemming from black women is given, as he describes the July 1995 African American Women in the Law Conference's domestic violence workshop. Carbado discusses the dynamics of a workshop in which black women argued against the incarceration of black male batterers for domestic abuse "because such abuse stemmed from black men's collective and individual sense of racial disempowerment" (9). Using his experiences in the domestic violence workshop, he reflects on the ways in which black women, those who do not option "Eva's" homicidal remedy, render their own experiences secondary, and in service to, or protection of, black males. This self-sacrifice, or Catch-22, faced by some black females, mirrors social expectations on their performance in relationship to black males. Women survivors weighed the need not only to protect themselves from brutalization but also to protect the (black) men who brutalized them.

For Carbado, dominant historical narratives on the unfair treatment of black males in the criminal justice system "contain political and legal symbols of race and gender that function to construct O. J. Simpson as a victim of racism in a way that obscures that he was a perpetrator of domestic violence" (18). The dominant narrative of the domestic abuse workshop, that of protecting violent black males, on one level shows how much women have in common given the hegemonic social narrative: "Blackness (which Simpson represents) and not Nicole Brown is the victim" (47). Carbado notes with irony the reductionist stance many took in response to the (racialized and feminized) jury's acquittal in the criminal trial: "While we, and not the jury, were exposed to the most emotional and sensational aspects of the trial, it is the jury that is being accused of rendering a decision based on emotion" (40).

Examining how black communities view racial subordination in a gendered fashion, Carbado's narratives are nonfiction, unlike the fictive feminist tales of fellow profeminist legal theorists Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado. Rather, he uses communal narratives, journalistic accounts, and, in the story of the domestic violence workshop, autobiographical accounts. The use of the latter is very much in keeping with Awkward's

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” (44). The male-centered paradigm obviously shifts in Cardado’s feminism to privilege (black) women. What this paradigm shift represents for coalitions with black women is unclear given that his work does not theorize gender politics in a larger context connected to privileging black women and denouncing of their brutalization by black males.

Richard Delgado’s “Rodrigo’s Sixth Chronicle: Intersections, Essences, and the Dilemma of Social Reform” discusses coalition politics in ways that both highlight and minimize the presence of black women. Delgado’s narrative presents protagonists “Rodrigo,” a black male law student whose father is African American and whose mother is Italian, and “the professor,” a progressive male legal scholar, a “man of color” who serves as Rodrigo’s intellectual mentor and foil. After being ousted from a women’s law caucus meeting (and criticized by his female partner “Giannina”) because of an uninvited lecture he makes assessing the antagonistic relations between women of color and white women, Rodrigo seeks out the professor for counselling. Discussing the limitations of coalition politics or “the perils of making common cause,” the two debate the role of profeminist men in women’s liberation struggles.

“Rodrigo” first notes that essentialism appears to be “the usual response of a beleaguered group” seeking “solidarity in a struggle against a more powerful one” (648). For “Rodrigo,” essentialism appears in “three guises”—the meaning of words, theory of coalitions, canon of knowledge—which all “share the search for narrative coherence” (649). Identifying relational essentialism, the law student cites the example of black women joining white women because “they stand on the same footing with respect to patriarchy” (649) and share the need to be freed from it. Through “Rodrigo’s” pronouncement Delgado paints a rather one-dimensional view of patriarchy. Contrary to “Rodrigo’s” assertion, black women do not stand on the same footing with white women in relationship to patriarchy.

Rodrigo discusses intersectionality in order to examine the nexus that black women occupy as women and members of an oppressed ethnic group, blacks. As the editors Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, and contributors note in their pathbreaking work on black women studies, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*,<sup>12</sup> blackness has been masculinized and femaleness racialized white. Because “Rodrigo” acknowledges only two intersections, race and gender, the place of class and sexual identity in this intersectionality remains obscured. He does remark, quoting “Giannina,” that

a relatively disempowered person, such as “a lesbian single mother” jeopardizes her powerbase by engaging in strategic essentializing coalitions with a more privileged group (652). Paradoxically, the “Sixth Chronicle” notes the importance of alliances in a passage that represents black women as an afterthought, depicting them as the additive rank-and-file to coalitions rather than the impetus behind feminist and antiracist social movements and coalition politics: “Change comes from a small, dissatisfied group for whom canonical knowledge and the standard social arrangements don’t work. Such a group needs allies. Thus, white women in the feminist movement reach out to women of color; Black men in the civil rights movement try to include Black women, and so on” (669). Although the historical record reveals that black women such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks pioneered the civil rights and feminist movements, their agency disappears in this profeminist essay.

“Rodrigo” critiques the assumed progressivism of coalitions between white women and women of color: “Gains are ephemeral if one wins them by forming coalitions with individuals who really do not have your interest at heart. It’s not just that the larger, more diverse group will forget you and your special needs. It’s worse than that. You’ll forget who you are. And if you don’t, you may still end up demonized, blamed for sabotaging the revolution when it inevitably and ineluctably fails” (655).<sup>13</sup> He cites two reasons against coalition politics. First, often in coalitions strategic essentialism leads to a Gramscian “false consciousness” in which “the oppressed come to identify with their oppressors” (653). Second, the pitfalls of “interest-convergence” are a constant liability; for instance, in *Brown v. Board of Education* black civil rights gains progressed only to the extent that they coincided with the interests of dominant whites who mitigated these rights. “Rodrigo” surmises that under interest convergence between subaltern and dominant groups: “Rights won are generally constrained and those with the least power are scapegoated.”<sup>14</sup> A certain realism or pessimism informs the essay’s observations concerning interest-convergence and coalition politics for disenfranchised groups: “Rights, once won, tend to be cut back. And even when part of them remains, the price of the newly won right is exacted from the most marginal of its beneficiaries” (656). For Rodrigo, one must remain oppositional (despite socialization towards collegiality and civility); he reasons that a “nationalist, counter-essentialist course” benefits both more privileged groups and the outsider group. “Justice first, then peace” becomes “Rodrigo’s” epigraph and motto<sup>15</sup> (in radical demonstrations, one often heard the chant “No justice . . . no peace!”).

Regarding profeminist males and sexual liberation projects, one wonders what are the interest convergence politics of male and female feminists. With the growing appearance of the articulate male feminist, what

sustains coalitions between male and female feminists? Do profeminists, who are more institutionally empowered than their female counterparts, align themselves with feminists only to the extent that the interests of both groups converge? Equally as important, when do coalition politics become caretaking politics for subaltern women aided by the patronage of feminist men (analogies to people of color and liberal whites abound).

### Conclusion

There is no way of measuring peerage between male and female feminists. Yet, surely reading and critiquing the works of Awkward, Gordon, Delgado, and Carbado foster gender egalitarianism among antiracists (and hopefully racial equality among feminists). The proliferation of new profeminist writings, and their promising intellectual and political currency shaping the academic market, allow those appreciative of profeminist contributions to recognize ignore potential deradicalizing tendencies within feminist discourse. For instance, the exploration of "self" or male identity in profeminism creates tangible contributions to feminist struggles; it may also paradoxically lead to narcissistic solipsism for an expanding consciousness (this tendency also appears in critical white studies' ambivalent relationship toward antiracist radicalism). The femininity of the black male in a state where "whiteness" is worn as "phallus" adds a critical dimension to feminist analyses addressing the intersections of sexism and racism; yet the disappearance of the black female in such discourse is a possible byproduct of such a profeminist, antiracist paradigm. Focusing on the conditions of black women, particularly those confronted by domestic violence, elevates the status of black females; elevating the black female above the black male in an analytical framework constructs a paradigmatic pedestal that, even as it addresses domestic violence, inadequately addresses institutional violence and/or the selective manner in which dominant society and state apparatus demarcate the "legitimate" spheres in which black males may exercise and abuse masculine power and patriarchal coercion. Finally, if coalitions are inevitably and inherently flawed—as is apparent in the pitfalls of multiracial coalitions that, dominated by the interests of whites, supplant political parity for inclusivity—then where do male feminists of color stand in relation to feminist women of color, and the distance that must logically span between the two groups in the paradigm shaped by the interest convergence argument?

These are questions I hope that male antiracist feminists will find useful. But whatever value they attribute to these inquiries, these questions like those posed to the student-activists reflect both an appreciation for the work of profeminists and a cautious concern that a growing feminist discourse need not always signal a shift in power relations. Men who

do feminism will be ostracized and marginalized in some sectors (as are antiracist whites), and validated in others. But increasingly their authoritative voices as male (particularly if they filter their feminism through the hegemony of conservative/liberal ideologies) will allow them to be constructed as the site of the most rational, informed speech. At its best, the feminization of male discourse confronts gender hierarchy, inextricably linked to heterosexism, racism, and classism; it also challenges the privilege of the feminized male voice. At its worst, in the absence of a radical praxis, male feminism will foster a coalition politics that brakes before full justice, and consequently, its politics will downplay disputes among feminists, adding to the restive uneasiness of some of its most natural allies.

### Notes

I am grateful to Tom Digby, David Kahane, and Lewis Gordon for their comments on this essay.

1. Dave Dellinger, *From Yale to Jail* (Marion, South Dakota: Rose Hill Books, 1993).
2. All male feminist writers cited here are African American, except Latino legal theorist Richard Delgado whose narratives revolve around the persona of a fictional black man, "Rodrigo," whom Delgado identifies as a relative of "Geneva Crenshaw," the black female (super)protagonist of Derrick Bell's "Chronicles."
3. Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
4. Alice Jardine, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route?" in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987) 60.
5. Michele Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990).
6. Sherley Anne Williams, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," *Callaloo* 9 (1986): 304.

Varied definitions of black feminism are not explored by Awkward. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins defines black feminism as "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision" and "develop a theory that is emancipatory and reflective" for black women struggles (Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. Boston, Unwin, 1990: 139-161, 32). Alice Walker contrasts black feminism with white or Eurocentric feminism, coining the term "womanist"; for Walker, womanist renders the adjective "black" superfluous for women of African descent: "just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with the word 'white,' since the word 'feminist' is accepted as coming out of white women culture." bell hooks, rejecting the term womanist, expands upon Collins's humanist vision and Walker's cultural critique to define feminism as "a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class . . . and a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over

- imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires." (bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1983). Class politics have not always been consistently raised in discussions of (black) feminism.
7. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* (summer 1987).
  8. Awkward quotes from Spillers: "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"; presumably, a number of communities would disagree.
  9. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995).
  10. Spillers, *ibid.*
  11. Devon Carbado, "Race, Domestic Abuse, and the O.J. Simpson Case: When All Victims are Black Men and White Women" (forthcoming *Harvard Civil-Rights Civil-Liberties Law Review*).
  12. Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, Barbara Smith *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).
  13. Richard Delgado, "Rodrigo's Sixth Chronicle: Intersections, Essences, and the Dilemma of Social Reform," *New York University Law Review*, Vol. 68: 639, June 1993.
  14. Delgado's Rodrigo argues the case against interest convergence: "Normativity or prescriptive discourse speech constrained by paradigms which infected with racism and sexism interpret events in conformity with paradigmatic bias (for example, that 'minority' students do better in placement after law school does not reflect their superior qualities but an antiwhite bias shaped by affirmative action)."
  15. As the professor observes: "Justice first, then peace"—a motto that others have employed in different versions to highlight the incompatibility between an oppressive regime that contains structures of unfairness, and social stability. Such a regime is inherently unstable because of the everpresent possibility of revolt" (672).

## Chapter 13

# Feminism and the Future of Fathering

---

Judith Kegan Gardiner

"For the first six months after they left, I was too depressed to phone," said my friend W, "though I sent a lot of cards and presents and stuff in the mail." W was recalling a difficult period ten years ago when their mother took his children to live a thousand miles away. Well, not exactly his children. W and the children's mother are New Leftists and feminists who had lived in a commune with several other adults from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s. Although he was present at both their home births, lived in the same house with them for years, and took them to school every morning, W is not their biological father, nor did he ever marry his former lover, who is the children's mother, since they both considered marriage a bourgeois institution that is especially oppressive to women. "I thought living communally was the answer, breaking up the nuclear family, smashing monogamy, yet providing children with love and support," said W, "but then it all fell apart." Now W talks to these children on the phone every week, but he can only afford to visit them a few times a year, and his sense of loss is unassuaged.

Another profeminist male friend of mine recently remarried. Estranged from his own son, who lives with his mother in another state, he was eager to try fatherhood again with his new wife's much younger son. Since his new wife must commute a long distance to work, much of the primary care for his stepson falls to him. Both ex and current wives are strong feminists, though my friend nevertheless blames his ex for turning his son against him.

After their politically-correct father left our family to remarry and start a new career on the West Coast, my two teenaged daughters heard many "impossible father" stories from their friends, all of whom lived with their mothers. There was the father who invited one sister to Thanksgiving but cut the other, the millionaire realtor who refused to