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Book Review Essay

Challenging Thredbare Masculinities: Hazel Carby's *Race Men*

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by Stephen Hall

Thelma Golden, an African American artist and curator, has observed that America's greatest invention is the black man. If we accept Golden's postulation, then, we would do well to consider how we deploy this invention in the public and private sphere, what attributes and qualities we ascribe to it and what impact this invention has upon the perception of blackness and masculinity. In our current postindustrial and technologically driven milieu, the presentation of black masculinity, in both the public and private spheres, is binary and static. In these spheres, punditry and praise abound. For pundits, the reduction of black masculinity to a set of euphemistic code words such as high-risk, menacing, dangerous, incorrigible, and unmarriagable, in turn, evoke a set of meanings which shape social, political, economic and intellectual representations of the particular group.¹

For the praise chorus, the presentation of black masculinity is an uncritical response to punditry. The goal is to uplift and strengthen a manhood often subject to attack and disparagement by the majoritarian community. Instead of critical assessments of the complex nature of black masculinity, a litany of celebratory statements concerning the majesty and divinity of black men often deflate serious discussions of misogyny, homophobia, child neglect and abandonment, and social dislocation and displacement in black communities throughout the country as well as serious discussion of concrete accomplishments. Those who paint black males in less celebratory strokes are treated as blasphemers (violators of the unspoken rules of intra-race politics) or worse, as race traitors. Ultimately, while these constructions (punditry or praise chorus) may temporarily satisfy our insatiable desire to essentialize blackness or to uncritically celebrate black manhood, they ultimately leave us truncated and blunted in a deeper quest for multipositional and complex understandings of black masculinity.

Hazel Carby's *Race Men* offers a critical intervention in this debate. Carby, Chair of African and African American Studies and a Professor of American Studies at Yale University as well as the author of *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro American Novelist*, offers a critical rereading of the social and political sites in which masculinity is produced. Her project can be included among a wide array of contemporary literature which attempts to explore various black masculinities. Some of these works include Henry Louis Gates' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, and *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Black Art*, an exhibition of black male images at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City in the early nineties, and Philip Brian Harper's *Are We Not Men*. Rather than accepting the pundits or the

¹ See Thelma Golden, "My Brother," in Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 19.

praise chorus, Carby opts instead to refashion the debate by historicizing the subjects and presenting a complex analysis of the ways in which masculinity has been staged in the twentieth century. Originally presented as the W.E.B. Du Bois lectures at Harvard University, each of these essays was presented separately but, in the book, they appear seamless as they move from interrogations of the intellectual activist W.E.B. Du Bois to the contemporary actor Danny Glover.²

The strength of *Race Men* lies in its ability to transcend the ordinary and the predictable. Rather than focusing on the overanalyzed figures of black leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X or black artists such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, Carby chooses instead to examine constructions of black masculinities in different mediums and medias ranging from acting to writing. In addition to Du Bois and Glover, Huddie Ledbetter, C.L.R. James, and Paul Robeson are discussed. Moreover, Carby centers the works of marginalized masculinities within the African American community. She uses the work of Essex Hemphill, a black gay male whose collections of poetry *Earth Life* (1985), *Conditions* (1986), and *Ceremonies* (1992) challenge the exclusion of gay males from the rubric of manhood. Carby includes his work at the margins of the study (his poems are quoted at the beginning of each chapter) to signify on the limitations of masculine construction in America. Hemphill's desire to broaden the definition of what constitutes manhood finds its most poignant expression in his statement about the exclusivity of public African American masculinity: "I am eager to burn this threadbare masculinity this perpetual black suit I have outgrown." She also includes the work of Samuel Delany, a black science fiction writer and author of *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1960-1965* (1988) and gay male, whose construction of masculinity she juxtaposes with Miles Davis's misogynistic autobiographical accounts of abusing women mentally and physically.

Two central issues inform Carby's understanding of masculinity in *Race Men*, one, a critical rereading of W.E.B. Du Bois opus *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in terms; and two, the representation of black masculinity within modernism. Carby closes the book with an assessment of black masculinity in contemporary American films through an analysis of the cinematic work of Danny Glover.

It is important to begin this review with her assessment of Du Bois. Carby's concern about the constant marginalization, exclusion, and omission of female voices from the African American intellectual sphere in the twentieth century causes her to ask: where did this project begin. She locates its origins in Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*. While some contemporary intellectuals such as Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates have raised Du Bois to iconographic stature, Carby argues they have presented an incomplete portrait of African American intellectual endeavor.

She is particularly critical of West's attempts to become a twentieth and, I would add, twenty-first century embodiment of Du Bois, especially his attempts to imitate his dress (even his desire to cultivate qualities of gentlemanly deportment and a bourgeois sensibility, common among nineteenth century intellectuals), his political concerns and

² See Marcelus Blount and George P. Cunningham, ed., *Representing Black Men* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Henry Louis Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997); and Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

appropriation of the role of a public intellectual. In Carby's mind, West's linkage of Du Bois to the pragmatic tradition and his statement that his (Du Bois's) work represents "the brook of fire through which we all must pass in order to gain access to the intellectual and political weaponry needed to sustain the radical democratic tradition in our time," raises very specific problems in regards to privileging Du Bois's voice over and beyond the voices of a plethora of African American feminist theorists such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Margaret Murray Washington, and Ida Wells Barnett whose writings and public utterances provide critical insights into the connections between race, gender, and nation.³

Carby's rereading of Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* in gendered terms casts his intellectual projects in broader terms and enables the reader to understand how Du Bois's construction of the African American intellectual project in masculine terms shapes its epistemological claims. In the chapter "On the Meaning of Progress," Du Bois discusses his hopes and dreams for recently emancipated African Americans in rural Tennessee. One could also read this, by extension, as the hopes and dreams of an entire race. Interestingly, in Du Bois's construction, for a fleeting moment, the hopes of the race seem to be in the hands of women. He introduces the reader to Josie Dowell, whom Du Bois describes as a thin, homely girl of twenty, with a dark brown face and thick, hard hair." Eager to learn and adamant that Du Bois establish a school, Josie was the center of her family, the one upon whom they depend to help them achieve their goal to transcend simple work and toil. Her interest in education and social mobility is representative of the larger struggles of African Americans in this era. Fully aware of the seemingly insurmountable barriers (race and class) that African Americans faced in the south, Du Bois seems almost Calvinistic in his prediction of the Dowell's demise.

When he returns to the area, some ten years later, he finds Josie dead and the dreams of her family dashed by the insurmountable barriers of race and caste. Her mother, whom Du Bois describes as somewhat overbearing, has driven her husband away and lives with another man. Du Bois laments "how can one measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies." Carby critically analyzes how Du Bois employs gender and the implication of placing hopes of progress in the hands of women. For Du Bois, it is a losing proposition. Far too frail and unsuited for the mantle of race leadership, women are not suited to lead the race into the progressive future. Despite dreams of success, all that is available is desolation and death.

³ Carby is not the first to address Cornel West's lack of engagement with and inclusion of the work of female scholars in his work. bell hooks offers the same criticism. Referring to an essay written by West titled the "Dilemma of the Black Intellectual", designed to complement her own on African American intellectuals, hooks bemoans West's lack of engagement with African American women's issues: "When black scholars write about Black intellectual life, they usually focus on the lives and works of black men. Unlike Harold Cruse's massive work *The Crisis of the Black Intellectual*, which focuses no attention on the work of black women, Cornel West's essay "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual" was written at a historical moment when there was a feminist focus on gender that should have led any scholar to consider the impact of sex roles and sexism. Yet West does not specifically look at Black female intellectual life. He does not acknowledge the impact of gender or discuss the way sexist notions of male/female roles are factors that inform and shape both our sense of who the black intellectual is or can be, as well as their relation to a world of ideas beyond individual productions. bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 150. West's treatment of Du Bois is found in Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

In the chapter following the “Meaning of Progress,” “the Wings of Atalanta,” Du Bois moves from an individual story of female failings to a more collective assessment of this issue. Critical of the New South philosophy of urbanization, industrialization and modernization that Atlanta represents, Du Bois genders the city by referring to it as a woman, not unlike the Greek heroine upon whose name the city is loosely based, Atalanta who promises to marry the man who can beat her in a foot race. Her suitor, aware of her materialistic interests, wins the race by placing golden apples in her path. Du Bois openly wonders whether or not a black Atalanta will be seduced by materialistic wants and desires and wreak havoc on the race’s possibility for the fullest expressions of righteousness and dignity. Here, again, women represent weakness, the potential for destruction, and compromise.

According to Carby, Du Bois’s answer to the fragility, weakness, and instability of womanhood is to bolster manhood. In the chapters titled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” “Of the Passing of the First Born,” and “Coming of John,” Du Bois offers a counterbalance to the failings of women. In “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” Du Bois asserts the importance of manhood in providing principled and heroic stands to the politics of compromise and submission inherent in Booker T. Washington’s program and the outright violence inflicted on the bodies of black men. Regarding Washington, Du Bois sees him as an individual who submits to whites in the North and the South. His celebration of industrialism and commercialism removes him from a long line of male forerunners such as Crispus Attucks, David Walker, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner who asserted their manhood and refused to submit to white men. For Du Bois, Washington’s program is “bound to sap the manhood of the race.” To achieve manhood, black men must reject Washington’s program and agitate for civil and political rights.

Anxieties about the fate of manhood permeate other chapters. In the chapter “Of the Passing of the First Born,” Du Bois laments the passing of his only son and resigns himself to the idea that he will have to carry on the struggle for the race without leaving a male heir to assume this role. These concerns assume more strident meanings in “The Coming of John.” Black John is lynched for killing a white man, also named John. Unlike the fate of the women in “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Black John’s demise is viewed as a necessary sacrifice to acquit the manhood of the race. The gender implications of Du Bois’s work are unsettling. They disrupt and decenter a narrative that has often received praise as an outstanding contribution to black letters. My sense is that Carby’s call for more careful attention to its gender dynamics offers insights not only into Du Bois’s personal and public politics, what Paula Giddings terms (“his feminist passion and patriarchal practice”) but reveal much about the era in which *Souls* was produced. This was an era in which beliefs in the benefits of Social Darwinism, Anglo-Saxon virility, and imperialism, inform black and white reality. All of these contexts are useful in understanding the underpinnings of Du Bois’s thought.⁴

⁴ Carby’s reading of DuBois meshes very well with other path-breaking works which have raised questions about Du Bois’s commitment to feminism in the private sphere; the intersections between manliness and civilization and the sociopolitical and socio-sexual anxieties of African American intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These books include David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1890-1917* (Chicago: University

Another important component of this study is Carby's examination of modernism, defined as a twentieth century movement in literature which emerged in force after World War I. It sought to capture the essence of contemporary disorder by relating it to a lost order, based on the religion and myths of the cultural past. Carby is concerned with the impact of modernist thought on black masculinity constructions. Carby's treatment of important modernist figures such as Paul Robeson and C.L.R. James is sensitive and evocative. She examines how these individuals sought to escape the masculinist straight jacket of modernism which associates the black body with primitivism and its tendency to focus on the impact of external forces on the psyche instead of the larger social, political and economic underpinnings of modern society's impact on the collective whole. This notion of primitivism is particularly strong in the case of Paul Robeson. Seen as the quintessential modern man, Robeson was simultaneously a football star and class valedictorian at Rutgers, a graduate of the Columbia Law School and later an actor and singer. In short, he is what Carby suggests, "the body and soul" of blackness. Robeson's persona, then, at least prior to the 1940s, embodies the lines and contours of manhood. To assess the portrayal of his manhood, she looks at photographic representations of Robeson by Nikolas Murray, an émigré from Hungary, a dance critic, a national and international champion swordsman and a portrait photographer as well as Robeson's work in the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Oscar Micheaux.

Carby's point regarding Robeson is that "the black body produced a number of anxieties which tortured the soul of modernism." This is particularly true in relation to Nicholas Murray's photographic representations of Robeson. These representations tend to focus on his muscle tone and his physical presence rather than his intellectual achievements. Murray creates a heavy mood in his photography and Robeson's face is partially revealed. Thus, the viewer of these photographs could only see the nose, eyebrow, upper cheek bone, forehead and lower lip. Murray's work, which focused on the primitive, masculine form of Robeson, differs greatly from how he represents himself in a photograph given to Carl Van Vechten, a white writer and active participant in the Harlem Renaissance. A studious, pensive, thoughtful, contemplative Robeson emerges.

Carby also contrasts Robeson's performances in Eugene O'Neill's "All God's Chillun Got Wings" and Emperor Jones with his role as Jeremiah and his alter-ego Sylvester in Oscar Micheaux's "Body and Soul," rather than the deeply individualistic and conflicted characters of Jim (a pathological African American whose sole desire is to become white through interracial relationships and ultimate assimilation into white society) and Brutus Jones (a brutal black dictator on an imaginary Caribbean island whose sadistic behavior sets the stage for his own undoing). Robeson's character in "Body and Soul" has an individualistic construction. He is a trickster who defrauds his love interest and her mother, while posing as a religious leader in the community--when his actions are exposed they are discussed in relationship to their impact on the entire community.⁵

of Chicago Press, 1995) and Kevin Kelley Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁵ The standard treatment of black film is Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University, 1977). For an interesting examination of Micheaux's films as racial representation, see bell hooks' essay, "Micheaux's Films: Celebrating Blackness," in hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 133-144.

As Carby persuasively shows, despite his commercial success, it was not until the late 1930's, that Robeson, working in the Unity Theatre, a socialist inspired group that emerged out of the Worker's Theater Movement, was able "to assertively wrench his body away from performative associations with modernist strategies of inwardness and acted in defiance of all cultural aesthetics that denied or disguised their political implications."

Whereas Robeson found a way to escape the straitjacket of black primitivism and docility, Huddie Ledbetter, Leadbelly, the black folk singer, was not so fortunate. In fact, Carby portrays Leadbelly as the antithesis of Robeson. Leadbelly dutifully fulfills the role of the docile and subservient black man whose entire persona is filtered through the lenses of John Lomax, an employee of the Smithsonian Institution who traveled throughout the South to collect and preserve American folk songs in the 1930s. It was Lomax who produced the first recordings of Leadbelly's music. After meeting Leadbelly in the summer of 1933 at Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana, while he was serving a six-to-ten year sentence for assault with intent to murder, Lomax returns a year later to make more recordings. According to legend, a Lomax recording of Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene" convinced the governor of Texas to commute his sentence. The legend, although untrue, became a part of Lomax's construction of Leadbelly.

Lomax's policing of Leadbelly's voice and his recreation as a dangerous and problematic black reveal much about the need to make his work more consumable for white audiences. According to Carby, Leadbelly, in Lomax's portrayal, is a dangerous African American who has been tamed by an benevolent white patron. She points to full-length article written by Lomax and featured in the New York Herald Tribune headlined "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do A Few Tunes Between Homicides." Additionally, Leadbelly was portrayed in the "March of Time" newsreels, filmed in February 1935. These newsreels were widely used throughout the country and consisted of filmed events and studio enactments of events. In one clip, Leadbelly goes to Lomax's room and engages in the following dialogue:

Boss he I is.

Leadbelly, what are you doing here

"No use trying to run me away boss, I came here to be your man.

I got to work for the rest of my life. You got me out of that Louisiana Pen

You can't work for me, you're a mean boy. You killed two men

Please don't talk that way boss

Have you got a pistol

(hands over a pistol and a knife)

You'll never have to tie your shoestrings anymore as long as you keep
with me with you

Alright Leadbelly, I'll try you

Thank you boss, thank you. I'll drive you all over the United States and

I'll sing songs for

You'll be my boss and I'll be you man.⁶

⁶ Quoted in Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 107-108.

The power of Leadbelly's music seems almost synonymous with his role as a dangerous black man. Lomax's presentation of Leadbelly allays the fear, as Carby notes, "of whether white men can effectively control white bodies and anxieties arising from the struggle of white men to control their own fear of black male bodies." It also says much about the need to offer Leadbelly as a more authentic representation of black musical production as opposed to Paul Robeson, whose renditions of the spirituals were viewed as highly stylized, thus Western, and lacking authenticity.

For C.L.R. James, writer and activist, transgressive constructions of masculinity were easier to appropriate given his melding of individual and collective realities in his political biographies. As Carby correctly states, black intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, were consciously looking for ways to reconstruct or convert ordinary people, the folk, into models for revolutionary consciousness. This is particularly true in the work of C.L.R. James. James, referred to by Edward Said "as the father of Caribbean writing," or more simply, by Grant Farred as the "Victorian with the rebel seed" was a formidable intellectual indeed. Born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1901, his odyssey from his native land to London's multiracial melting-pot Brixton, and finally to the United States reveals much about the complexities and interactions among race, class, gender and nation.⁷

Carby views James's work as a challenge to modernism's more pedestrian and parochial project of individualistic and inward gazes as opposed to examinations of larger societal forces, especially in relation to black people. Much of James's early work is concerned with individual biographies. But James constructs these individual biographies in relationship to how they impact the collective whole. This is clear in his portrayal of *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, a political biography of a Trinidadian nationalist and leader; and *Black Jacobins*, the biography of Toussaint L' Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution. While Carby is critical of how James seems to associate revolutionary nationalism and politics with maleness, she is also attentive to the ways in which James's work marries revolutionary politics and engaged nationalism. Nationalism that involves rethinking collective possibilities and responsibilities.

Carby's account is particularly powerful as she explores James' neglected classic *Beyond a Boundary*, his pioneering exploration of the meanings of cricket in West Indian society, and his discussion of the ways in which the game democratizes the society and decenters the rigid politics of race, color and class. James, like the greatest bowlers and batsman he admires, offers complex portraits of individuals whose lives and larger meaning are inextricably bound up with the fluid movements and motions between the wickets and beyond the boundary.

Lastly, Carby turns to representations of black males in American film using the film career of Danny Glover. Glover's acting career, which thrives under Reaganism in the 1980's, consists of the role of mediator between the races. It is framed around the idea of black and white male partnership in his early performances in "Grand Canyon" as Mack, a race mediator in the form of a tow-truck driver, and in "Bat 21", as an army

⁷ An account of the influences of the metropole and the periphery on the development of the thought of C.L.R. James is Grant Farred's "Victorian with the Rebel Seed: C.L.R. James Postcolonial Intellectual" *Social Text* (Spring 1994); and *Rethinking C.L.R. James* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). An excellent assessment of the varied nature of James' intellectual projects is presented in Selywn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain, ed. *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

officer responsible for saving a fellow officer, played by Gene Hackman. Glover receives his greatest role as Martin Riggs, the consummate companion of Roger Murtaugh (Mel Gibson) in several sequels of *Lethal Weapon* which uses the LAPD as a weapon against everyone ranging from LA gang members to the Asian drug cartel.

The Riggs-Murtaugh relationship in *Lethal Weapon* is perhaps, more importantly, an extension of the nation's anxieties about the meanings of Vietnam. Los Angeles, the urban jungle, becomes a contemporary Vietnam in which a black-white partnership, based on the mutual bonds of respect borne from service in the Vietnam War, allows some equality between the characters. It also allows these men to police a situation of instability and provide a sense of order based on male presence. The unresolved issues of race, class, and nation that Vietnam amplifies in the national consciousness find tidy resolutions in the unrealistic cop and robber sequences that the movie presents. Carby notes the way these movies glorify violence and actively omit females from serious participation in the process of male bonding. Again, men, not women, are better equipped to police the urban jungle and resolve any tensions about the recent past through the imposition of law and order and the phallic symbol of the gun.⁸

In conclusion, Carby has offered an important counterbalance to an intellectual project framed by males. She seeks to democratize the project by making it more inclusive and all-encompassing. Her exploration of the lives of a wide variety of black men in different genres allows the reader to appreciate the complexity inherent in black masculinity. Carby's work also challenges all of us--students, teachers and scholars--to think in more careful and critical ways about the ideological underpinnings of the African American intellectual enterprise. Her careful attention to detail, interdisciplinary focus and critical analysis provide an outstanding model to challenge and expose masculinist laden assumptions in intellectual production. Unlike the pundits or the praise chorus, Carby is fair and constructive in her analysis. Her goal is not simply to disparage or uplift. While she criticizes the patriarchal father of the modern intellectual project, W.E.B. Du Bois, she is extremely attentive to other intellectuals, within and outside of a North American context, such as Paul Robeson and C.L.R. James whose work and representations offer revolutionary conceptions of manhood which in the works of Robin Kelley, historian and cultural critic, threaten to overturn "the prison house of masculinity."

Carby argues, forcefully, and I would add, eloquently, that black masculinity as a social and cultural production has produced blind spots and omissions in our understanding of the meanings of African American intellectual production and blackness. Her clarion call is clear, we can no longer afford to ignore other voices which call for more sensitive and engaging understandings of African American reality. Her message is simple: "Are we going to preserve this threadbare masculinity? Or Are we going to burn it?"

⁸ A useful discussion of Vietnam's historical memory is James Olson, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1995* (St James, NY: Brandywine Press, 1999).