INTRODUCTION ⁜ "Don't Be Like Your Father"

This book explores my coming-of-age as a black American male in the wake of social, political, and cultural changes inaugurated during the turbulent 1960s. At the core of the narrative are the academic commencements in which I participated. Because commencements mark the culmination of specific stages of the educational process and initiate other searches for knowledge and insight, they offer emotionally charged occasions that allow me to examine my intellectual development. Further, they provide rich opportunities for me to measure my own actions and developing sensibilities against socially prescribed norms of, among other things, racial, gendered, and heterosexual behavior. From the general uniformity of caps and gowns and celebrants' ordered marches into and out of auditoriums decorated with glistening American flags to cautionary addresses by prominent figures, the traditional elements of academic commencements allow institutions to dramatize graduates' submission to the dictates of local, state, and federal law.

One result of my participation in such scenes of instruction is that I have become a scholar of twentieth-century Afro-American literary and cultural traditions. As such, I am well acquainted with depictions of commencements in black narratives that investigate the ironies of education in racist environments. The racial dramas surrounding commencement in, for example, Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* demonstrate that such celebrations are often sites of struggle between operatives of white society and forces of black resistance, both of whom seek control over the form and content of Afro-American expression.

Following the examples offered by such authors, I emphasize how events surrounding my own commencements, and aspects of the ceremonies themselves, placed me at odds with social constructions of black maleness. My struggles were not as communally resonant as those described in Angelou's narrative, where members

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Anna Marie Awkward, summer 1986

of the graduating class respond to a departed white speaker who argues that black aspirations to be more than "maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen . . . [were] farcical and presumptuous" by offering an inspiriting rendition of the black anthem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (152). They were not as economically costly as young Richard's choice to read the valedictory remarks he has composed in defiance of his principal, who promises to help get the boy into college in exchange for his agreeing to read a speech that the school's white benefactors will not deem offensive. And, certainly, they were neither as eloquent nor as lucrative as the invisible man's repetition of a Washingtonian graduation speech for a group of monied whites who reward his accommodationist discourse with a college scholarship and an expensive briefcase. But they were occasions that tested my resolve, the seriousness of my convictions,

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and my comprehension of the social worlds I inhabited and by which I often felt inhibited.

Even when they are analyzing autobiographical texts and speaking self-reflexively, scholars generally emphasize social issues and patterns over the unexpected, unsystematizable twists and turns that characterize an individual life. As I see it, they do so because they believe that scholarship should examine how texts, attitudes, events, and behaviors are produced by a complicated amalgam of political, cultural, and religious beliefs and disputes that permeate and define a segment of society at a particular moment in time. Certainly, my own training limits my capacity, when I am performing traditional scholarly tasks, to deal cogently with the idiosyncracies of my intellectual journey. But because speaking of that journey remains important to me, I have turned, in the following pages, to autobiographical writing.

The academic memoir has emerged as a popular form of writing in part because of the aforementioned limitations of traditional scholarly discourse. But it is also, I believe, an indication that identity politics have become as inhibiting a critical straitjacket as the struggle to produce objective interpretive truths had been for earlier generations of academicians. The formulations of identity associated with even the most progressive versions of multiculturalism require that we claim to see our own—and others'—lives as conforming unproblematically to one of a series of master narratives that attempt to codify the particulars of various social groups' relationships to white male power.

Certainly, formulations of group identity can be used to predict or help account for individual behaviors and attitudes. But we are also all aware that individuals maintain some degree of power to determine how they respond to external stimuli. None of us is doomed to perform others' elaborate scripts of race, gender, or other social circumstances.

As the following pages demonstrate, I've worked diligently to avoid becoming a predictable product of my circumstances. Still, I've been troubled on occasion by a nagging suspicion that I am just

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that—a predictable product of my circumstances—though not in the ways that people who believe in a biologically determined division of intellectual labor, interests, and skills would expect. Indeed, my personal and intellectual interests often seem less a matter of choice than part of a "mission" that I "felt duty bound to fulfill," to echo Paule Marshall's evocative line in *Praisesong for the Widow* (42). As I understand it, this mission has been to figure out how most adequately to deal with being acutely aware, for as long as I can remember, of the social, political, psychological, and economic impact of men's domination of women. My often painful, always confusing, and still-ongoing mission, and the foundations for my acceptance of the bedrock feminist claim that men as a class oppress women as a class, were passed on to me by my mother through family narratives that spoke hauntingly of my absent father's physical, verbal, and spiritual abuse.

Having come of age intellectually in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the emergence of feminist criticism and theory and of black literary theory as important academic discourses, it would have been impossible for me to have avoided them. But I was, indeed, attracted to these discourses in part because they provided me a way of thinking about my own life, including the fact that I loved my mother, who was an alcoholic and who, particularly when she was drunk, offered her four children detailed accounts of her victimization. Sympathizing with my father, who broke my mother's right arm and left wrist, terrorized his small children, and withdrew abruptly from our lives, was impossible. For me, loving my mother required that I try to understand why she drank, why she frequently neglected her children's needs, and why she remained so emotionally remote during much of the first two decades of my life. Loving her meant recognizing logical connections between my father's brutality and her drinking. Even before I started elementary school, I knew that to consider only the pain that her alcoholism caused me would have meant that I did not take her pain, her stories, and her cautionary injunction, "Don't be like your father," seriously enough.

Doing anything but pursuing black feminist insights would have meant being like my father. I could no more have rejected feminism

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than I could have chosen not to love my mother. But prevailing formulations of identity politics insist that to talk openly about my love for her and my interests in, and difficulties with, certain versions of feminism is to risk appearing not to love her. To speak extensively about why I am a black male feminist is to expose myself to charges that I have visited upon my mother a discursive violence similar in intensity to the unimaginable physical pain she suffered at my father's hands. But given my experiences, given her experiences, I'm not sure how else I can explain the personal and professional choices I've made, choices about which I've been asked repeatedly over the last decade and a half. Indeed, how else can I, a self-defined, and flawed, black male feminist, justify my love and myself?

No text has assisted my efforts to think through such matters as much as Wendy Lesser's *His Other Half,* an engaging study of "men's relationship to the feminine—and . . . the way that relationship comes out in works of art" (5). In her investigations of the work of artists such as D. H. Lawrence, Dickens, and Hitchcock, Lesser is uninterested in texts that merely confirm the existence of, and the damage caused by, gender inequity, texts whose interrogation offers easy, comforting support to feminist ideology's already well-documented claims. Instead, she is attracted, as a reader and as a critic, "to the points at which most pressure is brought to bear, to the places where the [male] artist risks (and one often hears) the charge of misogyny" (4).

Lesser insists that such risks are *necessary* if one hopes to encounter provocative artistic representations of women by men, and unavoidable for women who wish to speak frankly about those daring representations that they admire. Also, and quite important for my purposes, she locates males' relationships with their mothers as the source of such risky endeavors. Indeed, in the beginning of her powerful discussion of mothers and their writer-sons, she argues that such mothers and sons must learn to cajole audiences into accepting their assigned roles. Lesser's statement reads as follows:

> Whenever a man sets out to write a story about a mother (or *his* mother, for it comes to the same thing), it is also, inevitably, a story about the extortion of sympathy. Two kinds of sympathy are extorted:

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> the reader's and the male author's. That is to say, it becomes a story both about the sympathy the author had to feel for his mother and about the sympathy we have to feel for him because that other sympathy was forced from him.
>
> This story about extorted sympathy also becomes a story about how that man came to be a writer. For in feeling another's pain, he begins to learn how to create characters beyond himself; and in extracting sympathy from us without making us resentful, he learns the skills of mediating between himself and an audience of readers. (23)

Mothers and sons can be equally adept at extorting sympathy, a narrative skill that the mother teaches the son and without which discursive power is unthinkable. By imitating the mother, the author-son comes to see storytelling as the art of investing the relationship between speaker and listener, or author and audience, with the psychic drama that characterizes his relationship to his female forebear.

Lesser's formulation recognizes the generative nature of artful female expressivity. Lesser's mothers are not unwilling pawns in male efforts to extort sympathy but teachers who pass on to their sons this essential narrative skill. Indeed, they are self-conscious, self-empowered, and empowering models of textual control.

Seen from such a vantage point, my mother's discussions of her abuse provided her with a means of exerting control over her environment and her audience, including—especially—me. She compelled me to empathize with her plight, and to be attracted to, and want to produce, texts that explored the sorts of issues her narratives addressed. Certainly, hers were cautionary tales, which, like all such tales, must be heard—and repeated—again and again, circulating within the culture among a host of complementary and competing stories, if they are to maintain their capacity to influence the attitudes of sons, mothers, and others concerning sexual and racial politics.

If my mother was indeed trying to extort her children's sympathy (and why else would she have told us, before any of us had memorized the contours of his face, that our father broke her right arm by stomping on it?), she summarized her narrative's major

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theme in a line she repeated often to her two sons: "Don't be like your father." I've spent much of my life trying to understand precisely what it means not to be "like" him, and searching for acceptable modes and models of behavior.

This book constitutes my risky attempt to circulate the major themes of my mother's narratives, and to demonstrate that I've absorbed their form and content well enough to contribute to feminism's efforts to challenge patriarchy's unabated rule. A record of events that have marked that still-ongoing search, it combines autobiographical recall, textual criticism, and institutional analysis in a form that, following Henry Louis Gates Jr., we might call "autocritography." Gates uses this term in a promotional blurb for a book of critical essays by Houston A. Baker Jr. to signify "an autobiography of a critical concept."

If autobiography is a genre in which contributors shape their self-representations in response to earlier texts, "autocritography" is a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved into authors' always strategic self-portraits. Autocritography, in other words, is an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns. Although the intensity of investigation of any of these conditions may vary widely, their self-consciously interactive presence distinguishes autocritography from other forms of autobiographical recall.

What follows, then, is my effort, in James Olney's words, to "discuss and analyze the autobiographical act as [I] perform . . . it" (25), to account for and offer evidence—from my childhood, scenes of professional instruction, and readings of contemporary events and expressive cultural texts—of my attentiveness to my mother's narratives.

I am not naive enough to claim that my gender has not been an obstacle to my pursuit of feminist truths; indeed, I am quite aware of the incompatibilities between such truths and masculine self-interest. In my effort to produce an insightful black male autobiographical inquiry, I've chosen not to focus primarily on incidents that could be seen, even by the most skeptical of gatekeepers, as nascent signs of feminist consciousness. Rather, I linger primarily on

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moments that dramatize the tensions between male self-interest and a recognition of women's systemic oppression. I believe that only by exploring such tensions, by remaining both self-interested and cognizant of the myriad costs of misogyny, can the activity that Tom Digby terms "men doing feminism" contribute to this ever-expanding social, intellectual, and philosophical project.

Such exploration requires something other than the timid recapitulation of safe, predictable formulations by a distractingly self-conscious interloper. Indeed, it requires a willingness to take risks. Despite the care I've used to construct this narrative, I am well aware that it is risky to linger on my youthful attempts to negotiate the always politically fraught fault lines of race, gender, class identity, and sexuality. Indeed, for some, this book may confirm masculinist perceptions of the dangers for males of failing to accept the benefits and costs of their gendered legacy. For others, it may offer further proof that men are unable to resist using even those females they purport to love in order to increase their store of material, cultural, and psychic comfort. For still others, exposing an ambivalence I share with countless other affirmative action baby boys and girls about the costs and consequences of our apparent inclusion in the crazy quilt of American society may suggest that I am insufficiently grateful for the assistance of important individuals and institutions. And as I know all too well, through some afrocentric eyes, I may seem too grateful for such assistance.

But given the persistence of pejorative meanings attached to black male subjectivities, if a feminist discourse informed by an acute awareness of such perceptions is not a risky venture, its social and intellectual contributions will be, at best, negligible. I hope that the risks I've taken in the following pages—pages that offer what, following Lesser, I've come to think of as a narrative of "extorted sympathy"—seem justified.

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