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# Black Male Exceptionalism? The Problems and Potential of Black Male-Focused Interventions

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# BLACK MALE EXCEPTIONALISM?

## *The Problems and Potential of Black Male-Focused Interventions<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Abstract**

“Black male exceptionalism” is the premise that African American men fare more poorly than any other group in the United States. The discourse of Black male exceptionalism presents African American men as an “endangered species.” Some government agencies, foundations, and activists have responded by creating “Black male achievement” programs. There are almost no corresponding “Black female achievement” programs. Yet empirical data does not support the claim that Black males are burdened more than Black females. Without attention to intersectionality, Black male achievement programs risk obscuring Black females and advancing patriarchal values. Black male achievement programs also risk reinforcing stereotypes that African American males are violent and dangerous. An intersectional approach would create space for Black male focused interventions, but require parity for Black female programs.

**Keywords:** Black Males, Black Females, Ebony Magazine, Masculinity, Achievement Programs, Intersectionality, Exceptionalism, Inequality

*Being a Black man is demanding.*

—Black Star, K.O.S. (Determination) lyrics

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many policy makers and scholars argue that, in fashioning racial justice strategies, we should treat Black males as a distinct group, separate and apart from Black women and other men. Motivating this idea is the view that African American men need special attention because they face unique circumstances and problems.

I describe this articulation of disadvantage and the accompanying claim for gender/race focused remedies as “Black male exceptionalism.” It is a discourse shaped as an appeal for intervention. Its central premise is that African American men and boys fare worse than any other group in the United States. The claim is that by almost every index of inequality, Black males are on the bottom—exceptionally burdened and marginalized. For example, in an amicus brief in *Fisher v. Texas*, a coalition of “Black male achievement” organizations “acknowledged that many young Americans other than Black male youth face serious life course obstacles in need of attention, but . . . the depth and breadth of the negative life outcomes experienced by

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Black males [are] sufficiently grave to warrant independent investigation and policy prescription" (*Fisher v. Texas* 2012, p. 33).

A diverse array of organizations has responded to Black male exceptionalism's appeal. It includes state and local governments, traditional civil rights groups, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, mainstream philanthropic foundations, including the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute, faith communities, and Afro-centric and Black nationalist groups.

Black male exceptionalism is a million dollar industry (Martinez et al., 2010). In this respect, Black male exceptionalism has currency both ideologically and economically, structuring not only how we frame civil rights interventions but how we fund them.

This article draws on intersectionality analysis to explore whether the monopoly power Black male exceptionalism wields is justified.<sup>2</sup> Intersectionality is the concept, from critical race theory, that "group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias. For example, men and women can often experience racism differently . . ." (Young 2013, p. 542).

Intersectionality is interested in, among other things, the difference that gender makes for race, and that race makes for gender. Thus understood, the race and gender specificity of Black men's experiences is properly the subject of an intersectional analysis and programs. But intersectionality also helps us understand the ways that racism and sexism particularly confront African American women. In the words of a seminal text in Black Women's Studies: "All the women are White, all the Blacks are men" (Hull et al., 1993). The challenge is to highlight the particular ways in which Black men are marginalized without marginalizing the experiences of Black women in the process.

This article imagines a project for Black men that recognizes the unique raced and gendered discrimination that they face, but that does not position them as the racial standard bearers, obscure the problems of Black women, or advance patriarchal values. Some of the programs that now exist, however well intentioned, are anti-feminist. And some of the programs are not well intentioned—they are premised on stereotypes of violent, hyper masculine Black men. They are designed to tame the savage beast.

At the same time, intersectionality creates a space for Black male focused interventions. It is not hard to imagine that discrimination against Black men might take different forms than discrimination against Black women, and that the combination of race and gender discrimination might implicate African American men's educational achievement, participation in the labor market, and risk of incarceration, among other things. The problem is that male problems are likely to be prioritized, to the extent that any racial justice interventions are prioritized.

I come sympathetic to the cause of Black male achievement. I want, however, to reconfigure the programs, to transform the Black male exceptionalist project into a progressive one. How should we respond to White supremacy's insults to Black masculinity? Is it possible to specifically support men in a way that is not anti-feminist?

Organizationally, the article proceeds as follows. First, I turn to a particular ideological expression of Black male exceptionalism—the endangered Black male narrative. Here, I identify the genesis of the idea that Black men are endangered, provide a brief sense of how this claim has travelled over time, and offer my own views as to why the metaphor of endangerment is problematic. Next, I focus on the

institutionalization of Black male exceptionalism, paying particular attention to how the idea structures philanthropic initiatives in ways that simultaneously elide Black female disadvantages, trade on patriarchal notions of racial uplift, and operate as a barrier to intersectional interventions that specifically target Black women.

I set out some of the empirical data on which claims about Black male exceptionalism typically rest. My aim here is to suggest that in a few ways Black men are exceptional—in the sense of being particularly disadvantaged in particular contexts—and in most ways they are not. I argue that how we answer the question of whether Black men are exceptional turns in part on the criteria we employ to conduct the comparison and with whom the comparison is made. Then I will show, to some extent, Black male exceptionalism has helped to shore up and normalize an intra-racial gender hierarchy—Black male-focused antiracist organizing and policy advocacy.

The question then becomes: what can we do about this? I conclude with an answer that at some level is both straight forward and formalistic: equal treatment. That is, we should strive to create a discourse about race within which Black women get equal time and equal funding. At first blush, this might seem to offer very little. But, against the backdrop of the limited space Black women currently occupy in antiracist policy-making, this simple idea has radical potential. In offering this solution, I do not mean to suggest that we should jettison Black male specific projects. I imagine interventions that reconstruct masculinity and do not trade on stereotypes. The point is also that we encourage and promote Black female-specific projects and employ Black women's experiences to mark and comprehend the problems of Black racial inequality writ large. Black women should be given the opportunity and the space to stand in for themselves—and the race. To put this point another way, we should engage in intraracial affirmative action to disrupt the male baseline from which we both frame and understand Black racial disadvantages, on the one hand, and structure racial remedial efforts, on the other.

## **BLACK MEN AS “ENDANGERED SPECIES”: A BRIEF HISTORY OF A TROUBLING METAPHOR**

*Most importantly, the statistics . . . are reflections of a society which is, in some respects, an organized conspiracy against Black masculinity.*

—“The Crisis of the Black Male,” *Ebony*, August 1983

One of the first suggestions that African American men suffer unique detriments appeared in 1965, in a memorandum by Assistant Secretary of Labor Patrick Moynihan, entitled “The Negro Family, The Case for National Action.” Moynihan wrote:

The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well . . . There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another (1965, p. 27).

The Moynihan Report rehearses some of what I will term the meta-texts of Black male exceptionalism. One is that fixing Black male problems is a way to establish racial justice. Another is that African American women bear some responsibility for the subordination of African American men. A third is that Black male problems are more deserving of remedies than Black female problems. A fourth is that racism, discrimination, and White supremacy have affected Black men more adversely than Black women. A fifth meta-text is implicit in the Report, and made more explicit in other Black male exceptionalist texts: African American masculinity should be championed as a matter of public policy.

These themes are also rehearsed in an *Ebony* magazine issue in 1983 devoted to "The Crisis of the Black Male." In his "Publisher's Statement," John H. Johnson reports that Black men have "borne the brunt" of the struggle for racial justice, and that the "special issue breaks new ground by presenting the first definitive analysis of an urgent national problem: The Crisis of the Black Male." Johnson claims to have received "hundreds of letters" from men and women who "cited alarming statistics on the mortality, unemployment and homicide of Black males." The letters said "almost without exception that something strange and ominous is happening to Black males in this country and someone should sound the alarm before it is too late" (1983, p. 33).

*Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett, Jr. writes in the Introduction that the "institutions of American society have been systematically and mercilessly manipulated to keep [the Black man] down" (1983, p. 34). Bennett notes that African American men are "losing ground to White men, White women, and Black women in offices and colleges. (The Black male-female ratio at some colleges is three, four, five to one)." Bennett believes that there is an "organized conspiracy against Black masculinity" but "history tells us it is a losing proposition to bet against Black men" (1983, p. 34). The Introduction ends with a quote from a poem by Sterling A. Brown:

*One thing they cannot prohibit*  
The strong men . . . coming on  
The strong men gittin' stronger.  
Strong men . . .  
Stronger . . .  
(Brown 1980, p. 56)

The articles in the special include "Are Black Women Taking Black Men's Jobs?," "The Challenge to Black Supremacy in Sports," "What Black Men Should Know about Black Women," and "Black Men-White Women: An Update." Significantly, it contains the first reference I could find to an enduring metaphor in Black male exceptionalism: the Black male as an "endangered species."

In "Is the African American Male An Endangered Species?," Walter Leavy answers the question in the negative because "the Black man has been incredibly creative in finding ways to adapt to society's demands" (1983, p. 46). Nonetheless the article reads like a pop-psychological version of The Moynihan Report's embrace of patriarchy. Explaining the Black homicide rate, the author writes "America has always defined the male role as that of protector and provider but the Black male is, in many cases, incapable of playing that role for a number of reasons. While he may understand that racism is frequently the cause of his failure, the Black male's structured inability to play his role can take a psychological toll and lead to violence, drugs, alcohol, and other elements that can be responsible for his removal from society" (1983, p. 44).

The *Ebony* special issue also deploys statistics in two ways that are commonplace in Black male exceptionalism. First, data about African Americans that includes both men and women is used to support the case for special interventions for African American men. For example, one article states “Since the unemployment rate is traditionally higher in the Black community, many Black men accept jobs that call for them to work under very hazardous conditions.” Likewise, “the Black male is more likely than his White counterpart to die at a younger age due to the lack of, or inability to pay for, proper health care” (Leavy 1983, p. 42).

Second, statistics about African American males are used to support the necessity of special interventions for Black men, with no description of what the corresponding data is for Black women. For example, the article by Leavy claims that because of “a lack of prenatal and postnatal care, the infant mortality rate of Black males is more than double that of White males” (1983, p. 42). This fact would seem to support the case for a race-based intervention, but without the corresponding data for Black females there is no way of knowing whether the intervention should be focused on gender as well. For the record, I am not aware of any data that suggests that Black male infants have higher mortality rates than Black female infants.

The article’s point about infant mortality also exposes another common move in Black male exceptionalism: advocacy of interventions for African American women when, or because, the interventions will benefit African American men. So, referencing the sentence quoted above, the problem with the lack of pre-natal care for African American women is that it risks the mortality of African American male infants. The implicit “ask” is for better health care for Black women so that more Black male infants will survive.

A June 2013 cover story in *Newsweek* magazine by Joshua Dubois entitled “The Fight for Black Men” employed some of the themes of the *Ebony* special issue, even if not specifically the endangered species trope. The article is subtitled “There are more African Americans on probation, parole or in prison today than there were slaves in 1850.” Because the data cited includes African American women this would be a better subtitle for an article titled “The Fight for Black People” (Alexander 2010). This is another example of the Black male exceptionalism move of citing statistics that include all African Americans to make a point exclusively about Black males. The article states “when one single group of people is conspicuously left behind, it never bodes well for society as a whole. In many ways, black men in America are a walking gut check; we learn from them a lot about ourselves, how far we’ve really come as a country, and how much further we have to go” (Dubois 2013). This is an example of the Black male exceptionalism meta-text that fixing the problems of African American males is a way of establishing racial justice overall.

Dubois writes that:

we focused our social investments in this period—our brief War on Poverty—on women and children, because men were supposed to figure it out. But in the 1970s and 1980s, many of these black men didn’t. Just like their great-grandfathers never fully figured out how to teach their sons about manhood while being lashed in a field. Just like their grandfathers never completely figured out how to pass on lessons about building wealth when theirs was stolen through peonage and sharecropping (2013).

This is similar to the Black male exceptionalism meta-text that Black men are more injured by White supremacy than are Black women. Again, as I will explain more completely later, intersectionality certainly helps us understand that African



American men can, and do, experience different injuries, and that therefore different kinds of remedies, including Black male achievement programs, might be necessary. My concern is not about claims that Black men have been specifically disadvantaged by discrimination but rather with Black male exceptionalism's implicit ranking of Black male harms as more severe than Black female harms.

Since the *Ebony* special issue, African American men have continued to be characterized as an "endangered species." For example, the organizers of New Jersey's Black Issues Convention in 1987 used the term to describe Black men's "fragile status economically, educationally and politically" (Deas 1987).<sup>3</sup> The next year, Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, a professor at the University of California Berkeley, published *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* (1988), which details employment statistics, juvenile delinquency rates, substance abuse, and mental health problems of young Black males.

In 1990, the New York State Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus sponsored a hearing about the plight of African American men, in which the endangered species metaphor was employed by many of the speakers. For example, Vivian Gordon, a professor of African American Studies at the State University of New York in Albany, and a specialist on the Black family, stated: "I believe that Black men are a hunted and endangered species. You kill off the male and leave the woman vulnerable and without a partner. They have done everything to devastate us by devastating our men" (Lee 1990). A task force was formed and charged with paying special attention to criminal justice disparities.

Also in 1990, the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP sponsored a workshop titled "The Endangered Black Male." It focused on "why Black males were at the bottom of nearly every social indicator" with the purpose of passing along possible solutions to the NAACP's 2200 other chapters (Harris 1990).

Sometimes the endangerment narrative is meant literally. Dr. Richard R. Majors, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, described young, Black, inner-city men as actually "an endangered species." This was in response to studies that showed that life expectancy for Black men in Harlem was shorter than men in Bangladesh, and that African American men between the ages of fifteen to twenty-nine died at a higher rate than any other age group except those eighty-five and older (Goleman 1992). Similarly, Robert Staples, a professor of sociology at the University of California, observed: "The most recent figures show that over the last decade, Black men are the only group of Americans to have an average decrease of two months in life expectancy. Every other group, including Black women, gained from three to six years" (Goleman 1992).

In an article titled "Screw the Whales, Save Me! The Endangered Species Act, Animal Protection, and Civil Rights," the author recommended the founding of a coalition of animal rights groups and civil rights activists (Lubinski 2003). In a Comedy Central satirical documentary broadcast in 2012, comedian and political commentator D. L. Hughley lobbies the Environmental Protection Agency to have Black males placed on the endangered species list (Patterson 2012).

The endangerment narrative has received some criticism. In 1995, Kristal Bent Zook noted that the trope is "part of the larger myth of racial authenticity that has been so successfully cultivated in ghetto-centric culture, a myth that renders invisible the specific contours of living in female, working class, gay, and lesbian Black bodies" (1995, p. 281). One conservative commentator suggested that referring to African American males as an "endangered species was misleading, in part because Whites are often the victims of crimes perpetrated by Black males." In a 2005 article for the *Journal of Black Psychology*, Lewsin Laubscher argued that social science research on

African American men is usually put in “crisis terms” (2005, p. 111). He was critical of an “unquestioned assumption of endangered masculinity” and recommended an alternative discourse (2005, p. 111).

I want to advance a more robust critique. First, African American men are not dying off; as with other people of color, their numbers are actually increasing (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2012). I understand, however, that the endangerment story is the foundational narrative of Black male exceptionalism, and the work that creation myths do is not intended to be scientific or empirical. The narrative is allegorical, but even taken on its own terms it objectifies Black men in a way that does not advance their cause.

There is something at once aggrandizing and victimizing about the construct of African American men as “endangered species.” “Species” connotes an otherness, as though Black men are not human beings. It is dehumanizing, implying an analogy to animal conservancy rather than a response to social injustice as it impacts human beings. It draws on a long history of analogizing African Americans to non-human animals.

“Endangered” is more suggestive. Among other things, it stakes a claim in the debate about the cause of the problems that African American men face. Some people have attributed blame to African American men. In a Father’s Day speech, President Obama criticized “too many” Black fathers for “abandoning their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men” (*Huffington Post* 2008). The 1995 Million Man March, the largest ever political formation of African American men, was framed, by its organizers, as a day of “atonement.” In the D. L. Hughley Comedy Central program, *DL Hughley: The Endangered List*, in a bit about intraracial homicide, Hughley states that Black men are “the only species in history complicit in our demise. The passenger pigeon didn’t have shit to do with making himself extinct” (Patterson 2012). Hughley is right in that when we think of endangered animals, we typically do not blame them for their potential extinction. “Endangered” communicates that the danger comes from without, not within; it seems more of a structural critique than a behavioral one.

Still, apart from being too naturalistic, the phrase erroneously frames the problem. Survival is an act of resistance. African American men are still here; they, along with African American women have survived in a country that for most of its history has been extremely inhospitable to them. As a group, African Americans have survived slavery, de jure segregation, and terrorism by White supremacists. While some commentators have argued that present conditions are equivalent to those forms of official subjugation and private violence, it is hard to make the argument that conditions are worse. “Endangered species” is inexact enough that it is careless. It is bad history and bad science. And, as we have seen, it is patriarchy masquerading as racial justice.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these flaws, the metaphor has been extremely influential. It is the central narrative of Black male exceptionalism. As the next section details, the rhetoric has had a major impact on racial justice policy.

## BLACK MALE PROGRAMS

*New York City is going to send a signal that the situation facing young Black and Latino men requires the same kind of aggressive, cross-agency response that a natural disaster would demand, because fixing these outcomes is critical to the City’s health and future.*

—Linda Gibbs, New York City Deputy Mayor



Whatever the term, there is, in many quarters, a sense that Black men are in a state of crisis and/or that they have special needs. What follows is a description of some programs premised on Black male exceptionalism. This is not a catalogue of all such programs, but rather a representative sample. I devote special attention to New York City's Young Men's Initiative, because it is one of the best funded and it is articulated by its implementers in a way that many other programs are not.

### **New York City's Young Men's Initiative**

The Young Men's Initiative is "the nation's boldest and most comprehensive effort to tackle the broad disparities slowing the advancement of Black and Latino young men." It is a three year, \$127 million dollar program. The money comes from New York City (approximately \$68 million), the Open Society Institute, a foundation funded by the billionaire George Soros (approximately \$30 million), and Bloomberg Philanthropies, a foundation funded by Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York (approximately \$30 million) (Barbaro and Santos, 2011).

The program's co-chairs are David C. Bank, President of the Eagle Academy Foundation, and Ana Oliveira, President and CEO of The New York Women's Foundation. In 2010, Mayor Bloomberg asked them to investigate "the barriers that Black and Latino young men encounter, the disparities between them and their peers, and what the City could do to better connect them to opportunities" (Banks and Oliveira, 2011a).

There is no indication why Mayor Bloomberg requested an investigation of the problems of males rather than females. In requesting the report Bloomberg said, "So today, our question is: How can we connect Black and Latino young people—especially young men—to the opportunities and support that can lead them to success and allow them to participate in our recovery?" (Banks and Oliveira, 2011a). This is consistent with the Black male exceptionalism meta-text that fixing Black male problems establishes racial justice.

The investigation found that the poverty rate for Black and Latino young men is 50% higher than White and Asian young men, and their unemployment rate is 60% higher. They were also twice as likely not to graduate from high school, more likely to become teen fathers, and represented more than 90% of victims and "perpetrators" of New York City murders (Banks and Oliveira, 2011a). The report does not contain statistics about what the corresponding data for women and girls are. This is an example of the Black male exceptionalism "move" in which statistics about Black men are deployed to support special interventions for men; women, in both the data gathering and the remedies, are ignored.

The press release describing the Young Men's Initiative asserts broad claims about disparities between Black, Latino, and White men. Most of the data referenced, however, includes both males and females. For example, Mayor Bloomberg states, "When we look at poverty rates, graduation rates, crime rates, and employment rates, one thing stands out: Blacks and Latinos are not fully sharing in the promise of American freedom and far too many are trapped in circumstances that are difficult to escape" (Banks and Oliveira, 2011b).

The program focuses on four areas: education, criminal and juvenile justice, employment, and health. Some of the interventions are limited to males, while others are not gender-specific. Examples of programs just for boys include requiring schools to develop "new metrics focused on the achievement of Black and Latino males," a study of schools that have had the best strategies to graduate Black and Latino males, \$3 million mentoring program for boys, "promoting fatherhood"

(including a \$3 million program to train men in parenting skills “while connecting them to employment and education and the Male Leadership institute to prepare men to enter early childhood education professions”), and utilization of the city’s “Empowering Boys” website to share best practices between schools (Banks and Oliveira, 2011b).

Non gender-specific programs include literacy programs, reforming the juvenile justice system for community-based alternatives to jail, re-structuring “in jail services to inmates ages 16 to 18 to better prepare for success upon release,” employment programs for residents of public housing, investment in internship programs, and the establishment of “teen friendly” health care clinics (Banks and Oliveira, 2011b).

### **The Open Society Foundations’ Campaign for Black Male Achievement**

The Campaign for Black Male Achievement was started in 2008 by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) in response to a “growing body of research that revealed that African American male youth typically faced alarmingly bad life outcomes” (Weil 2008). According to the OSF website, “the campaign seeks to treat Black males like Lani Guinier’s miner’s canary, a critical signal to our society that we cannot exclude and subjugate broad segments of our citizenry without damaging democracy and open society values for all” (Open Society Foundations 2012). This is yet another example of the Black male meta-text that fixing Black male problems is a way to establish racial justice. The campaign’s goals include dismantling the “school-to-prison” pipeline that Black boys face and to strengthen low-income Black families through responsible fatherhood initiatives.

The Campaign for Black Male Achievement’s website documents the support the program has received from some women. Patrice Sams-Abiodun’s “The Truth About My Father” (2011) describes the difficult experience of her childhood because of her father’s drug abuse and frequent incarceration. She supports the campaign because she believes that the role of fathers in low-income communities is crucial to the success of a family. Similarly, the Women in Fatherhood Organization voices its support for the Campaign for Black Male Achievement because of the need for African American male role models (Bouchet and Hamilton, 2010).

### **The District of Columbia Commission on Black Men and Boys**

Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton established this Commission “to help reveal and resolve the pressing issues that Black men and boys face” (Holmes Norton 2011). It has hosted hearings and roundtables on a variety of issues, including youth violence, gangs, HIV/AIDS, marriage, and the Trayvon Martin case.

### **The Schott Foundation for Public Education**

The Schott Foundation was started in 1991 to develop and strengthen American public schools (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2010). The Schott Foundation has two initiatives that are geared toward African American men: the Schott Black Male Initiative, and the Black Male Donor Collaborative. The group has published three reports that detail the problems that Black males face in the public school system (Sen 2006). The Foundation explains that the focus on African American men is because “over the last twenty-five years, the social, educational and economic outcomes for Black males have been more systematically devastating than the outcomes for any other racial group” (Schott Foundation for Public Education

2008a). This is an example of the Black male exceptionalism tropes that Black male problems are more deserving of remedies than Black female problems, and that racism, discrimination, and White supremacy have affected Black men more severely than Black women.

### **Howard University Alumni Association's Black Male Initiative Program**

Howard University's Alumni Association started The Black Male Initiative Program in 2007 to increase the number of African American men enrolled in higher education (Howard University Alumni Association 2011). This initiative was created in response to a study that indicated that Black women's college enrollment rates were nearly double that of Black men (Rascoe 2007).

Again, this is not a complete list of interventions for African American men. The "National 2025 Network for Black Men and Boys" is a governing body for many Black male focused projects. Its website lists projects in forty-four U.S. cities directed at African American men.

The reader should not leave this section with the idea that African American men command a large share of government spending or foundation grants. On an absolute level, funding for interventions for Black men is meager rather than generous. That is one reason that I am reluctant to suggest that these programs be dismantled, despite my concerns about some of them. The most important problem is, as the next section describes, that there are many fewer programs for women than for men.

## **BLACK FEMALE PROGRAMS**

There are virtually no programs for African American women and girls that are comparable to the Black male programs. There is, for example, no New York City Young Women's Initiative, no Open Society Campaign for Black Female Achievement, no DC Commission on Black Women and Girls, no 2025 coalition of Black female achievement programs.

One of the few examples of something like a "Black female achievement" program comes from The Schott Foundation, which awarded \$100,000 in grants to programs that made "Messaging, Media, Organizing, and Policy recommendations for providing girls of color an opportunity to learn." The goal of the program was to seek creative policy proposals that "highlight barriers that keep urban girls from attaining academic and career success" and to "work to ensure that female students of color have a fair and substantive opportunity to learn" (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2008b).

Black female programs tended to be funded by Black women's organizations, as opposed to the governmental and philanthropic support for the Black male programs. For example, the Georgia Association of Black Women Attorneys Foundation offers grants to Black women attending Georgia law schools. Most of the Black female programs also appear to have more discreet missions than the Black male programs. One example is the New York State Association of Black Women Owned Enterprises, Inc., which offers support to African American entrepreneurs.

Most programs for Black females are self-help or networking organizations. Examples include The National Council of Negro Women,<sup>4</sup> The Professional Women of Color Network,<sup>5</sup> Black Career Women,<sup>6</sup> and the National Organization for African American Women.<sup>7</sup>

There is also no discourse about threats and impediments to the well-being of African American women equivalent to the “endangered Black male” narrative. No one filed an amicus brief in the *Fisher* case on behalf of African American women. *Ebony* magazine has not devoted a special issue to the crisis of the Black woman. The *Newsweek* cover story’s observation that the “fight for black men” is “currently being waged by activists, politicians, celebrities, and everyday people alike” would not apply to African American women (Dubois 2013).

I do not mean to suggest that scholars and policy makers have ignored African American women (although policy makers largely have), only that they have not been presented in the “endangered” frame that the Black men have been. As the next section suggests, a close examination of data relative to Black female and male achievement does not support the case that African American women are better off, or less in need of racial justice interventions, than African American men.

### ARE BLACK MEN EXCEPTIONAL? SOME DATA

One possible understanding of the claim that Black men are exceptional is that they exert an outsized influence on popular culture, especially as entertainers in professional sports and popular music. In this sense, “exceptional” means that they stand out.

But this exceptionalism is simply the backdrop against which a more politicized set of understandings is grounded. Exceptionalism in rhetorical and social terms revolves around a set of differences measured as social indicators. As we have seen, the discourse suggests that African American men are uniquely and profoundly disadvantaged in American society as a consequence of being Black and male.

In this sense the claim that Black men are exceptional merits unpacking. African Americans, generally, do not fare as well as Asian Americans and Whites among many indicia of achievement and wellbeing. But, in those areas, are Black men exceptional in a way that Black women are not? Likewise, among some other areas, like life expectancy and involvement in the criminal justice system men, generally, do not do as well as women. In those areas are Black men much different from White men? There is a difference between being first, or last, and being exceptional. Black men would be “exceptional” only if they deviate substantially from other groups.

Because Black male exceptionalism is, in significant part, an empirical claim, I was interested in whether the data actually support the claim. I examined data from several categories that are often used to make the case for Black male exceptionalism, including high school graduation, college graduation, incarceration, and life expectancy. I also examined other categories that don’t come up as frequently in the discourse; rates of poverty and marriage, for example.

This is an effort to interrogate the literature on Black male exceptionalism, taking its own cues to assess whether the claims it makes meet a standard—a substantial deviation. Since the literature itself implicitly invokes a comparison with Black women, and more directly invokes one with White men, I am closely examining the claims with these two comparisons firmly in mind. I was particularly interested in a metric that might reveal whether Black men are “more exceptional” than Black women. So I compared the disparity between Black men and White men to the disparity between Black women and White women.

It is important for the reader to understand that I am, for the most part, interrogating the Black male exceptionalist claim by the criteria that its supporters use to defend it. The central claims are that Black men are not just worse off than

White men, they are worse off than other men, and other African Americans. There are some important data points that this article does not consider, including statistics about groups other than Blacks and Whites.

If the disparity between Black and White men is significantly higher than the disparity between Black and White women, the case for Black male exceptionalism might be made. What level of deviation would have to be assessable if the exceptionalist interventions could be sustained by facts?

A review of existing data helps delineate the question, and possible answers. The data reveal that African American men are at the bottom of many economic and social indices of achievement. If “endangerment” is, as I have suggested, an imprecise way to characterize the issue, the issue now seems somewhat semantic (I do not mean to suggest that semantics is unimportant; quite the contrary, as I explained earlier in this paper). The general claim that Black men are in a state of crisis seems, upon a review of the evidence, entirely sound.

But African American women are not far from the bottom, either. In most of these categories, they lag far behind White men, and considerably behind White women. In some areas, they also lag behind Black men (see Tables 1–9).

The data should make us think in a more analytical way about claims like the Schott Foundation’s that “over the last twenty-five years, the social, educational, and economic outcomes for Black males have been more systemically devastating than the outcomes for any other racial or ethnic group or gender” (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2008a).

The strongest claim that African American men have to exceptionalism is with regard to incarceration. They are locked up at exponentially higher rates than Black women or White men (Table 4). With regard to income, White men far outpace Black men. The disparity between Black and White men is significantly larger than the disparity between Black and White women (Table 3).

In other categories, the disparities between Black and White men do not seem sufficiently different from the disparities between Black and White women to support the claim that Black men are exceptionally burdened. It is true that African American men are at the bottom of most of these lists, and that is alarming. But when African American women are compared to White women, they are also at the bottom (other than for interracial marriage). Since comparing Black women to White women does not capture the fact that White women are subordinated as well, one might expect a lesser disparity between Black and White women, compared to Black and White men. But the race gaps are close for both men and women. In a sense it should not surprise us, given what we know about race and gender subordination, that Black women suffer from both forms of subordination, and the intersectional effect might be greater than the simple addition of black male subordination plus white female subordination. Crenshaw (1989) proved this fact years ago. What is surprising, however, is the continued resonance of the rhetoric of Black male exceptionalism even in light of our understanding of Black women’s subordination.

In four categories, Black women appear to be disadvantaged compared to Black men. Black men have higher incomes than Black women, and they are less likely to live below the poverty line. The significance of the other two categories—rate of marriage and interracial marriage—might be contested, and I do not want to claim that they measure any kind of “achievement.” Those categories do signify something interesting, however, about the comparative play of Black men and women in the market for marriage, and the difference between interracial marrying Black men (22%) and Black women (8.9%) is startling.

**Table 1.** Education: High School Dropout Rates (Percentage of High School Dropouts Ages 16–24 in 2009)

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Compared to White Males	Black Females Compared to White Females	Black Males Compared to Black Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
White Males	6.3%	4.1%	10.6%	8.1%	+4.3%	+2.5%	+4.0%	+0.3%

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, Table 115, Percentage of High School Dropouts Among Persons 16–24, available at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10\\_115.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_115.asp).

**Table 2.** Educational Attainment in 2010 (Percentage of People 25 and over Who Have Earned a College Degree)

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Compared to White Males	Black Females Compared to White Females	Black Males Compared to Black Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
White Males	30.8%	29.9%	17.7%	21.4%	-13.1%	-3.7%	-8.5%	-4.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the United States, Table 230, Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, (2010) available at <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0230.pdf>.



**Table 3.** Income: Median Income of People in 2009 by Race and Gender (in U.S. Dollars)

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Income Compared to White Males	Black Females Income Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
White Males	\$36,785	\$21,939	\$23,738	\$19,470	-\$13,047	\$4268	-\$10,578
White Females							
Black Males							
Black Females							
Disparity between Black Males and White Males							
Disparity between Black Females and White Females							

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Statistical Abstract: 2012, Table 701 Median Income of People in Constant 2009 Dollars (White non-Hispanic v. Black/African American) available at <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0701.pdf>.

**Table 4.** Incarceration: Number of People in Custody per 100,000 U.S. Residents, by Race and by Gender, in 2009

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Incarceration Rate Compared to White Males	Black Females Incarceration Rate Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
White Males	708	91	4749	333	6.7×	14.3×	16.7×
White Females							
Black Males							
Black Females							
Disparity between Black Males and White Males							
Disparity between Black Females and White Females							

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistic, Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009—Statistical Tables, Table 18, available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pim09st.pdf>.

**Table 5.** Unemployment: 2012 Unemployment Rate of Men and Women Ages 20+

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Unemployment Rate Compared to White Males	Black Males Unemployment Rate Compared to Black Females	Black Females Unemployment Rate Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
6.7	6.5	14	11.9	7.3	2.1	5.4	1.9	

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Men/Women 20+, Household Data Annual Averages available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat05.pdf>.

**Table 6.** Poverty: Percentage of People Living Below the Poverty Level in 2009

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Living in Poverty Compared to White Males	Black Males Living in Poverty Compared to Black Females	Black Females Living in Poverty Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
11.2%	13.5%	23.9%	27.5%	12.7%	-3.6%	+14%	-1.3%	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau: Statistical Abstract of the United States 2012, "People Living Below the Poverty Level by Selected Characteristics", Table 713, 2009, available at <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0713.pdf>.

**Table 7.** Life Expectancy in Years for Individuals Born in 2007 (based on projections by the Center for Disease Control)

White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Compared to White Males	Black Females Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
75.9	80.8	70.0	76.8	-5.9	-4.0	-1.9

Source: Center for Disease Control, Health in United States 2010, Table 22, Life Expectancy at birth for individuals born in 2007, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus10.pdf#022>.

**Table 8.** Marriage: Percent of Adults 15+ Who Are Married with a Spouse Present in 2011

White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Married Compared to White Males	Black Females Married Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
53%	51.5%	33%	26%	-20%	25.5%	-5.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Marital Status of People 18+, White Non-Hispanic v. Black, 2011 available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html>

**Table 9.** Interracial Marriage: Interracial Marriage Rates among Newlyweds by Gender in 2008

	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Black Males Interracial Marriage Compared to White Males	Black Males Interracial Marriage Compared to Black Females	Black Females Interracial Marriage Compared to White Females	Disparity between Black Males and White Males Compared to Disparity between Black Females and White Females
White Males	9.0%	8.8%	22.0%	8.9%	+13.0%	+13.1%	+0.1%	+12.9%

Source: Pew Research "Marrying Out," June 4, 2010 available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/755-marrying-out.pdf>.

The premise of “Black male exceptionalism” appears to be overstated. This does not mean that interventions for African American men are unnecessary; each of the charts (with the possible exception of the two that focus on marriage) is a clarion call to action. But other than for incarceration, interventions are as much required for Black women as Black men. As we have seen, this reality is not reflected in the rhetoric or the programming.

## PROBLEMS WITH BLACK MALE EXCEPTIONALISM

If Black male exceptionalism was only an argument in favor of providing race/gender conscious services to African American males, it would be a useful narrative. African American men, as a group, need help. But the work of Black male exceptionalism extends far beyond advocacy of intersectionality. In this part I suggest that some of the current practices of Black male exceptionalism harm African American women, reinforce stereotypes about African American men, and undermine racial justice. This section builds upon the seminal work of Williams (2004), who argued that the push for single sex public schools for Black children, particularly all male schools for Black boys, was rooted in discourse about the pathologies of female-headed households and the violent and sexual threat posed by Black males.

### Obscuring Black Women

Perhaps the most basic problem with Black male exceptionalism is that, as the data demonstrates, its premise is flawed. Black men are not exceptional in most of the ways that advocates purport (other than with regard to incarceration). The claim that Black men have exceptional problems particularly damages African American women because it discounts their experiences.

One of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s contributions to legal scholarship has been documenting the effect of race and gender subordination on African American women (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Her work also explains how racial justice interventions have centered on Black men, and feminist interventions have privileged White women (Crenshaw 1989). For example, she has observed that “antiracist critiques of rape law focus on how much the law operates primarily to condemn rapes of White women by Black men. While the heightened concern with protecting White women against Black men has been primarily criticized as a form of discrimination against Black men, it just as surely reflects devaluation of Black women” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1271).

Black male exceptionalism sometimes seems like a politically correct continuation of the devaluation that Crenshaw describes. An example is contained in the *Fisher v. Texas* amicus brief filed on behalf of the coalition of Black male achievement groups. It states:

From birth, young Black males face complex systemic barriers to opportunity. They are more likely to live in the most disadvantaged environments in the nation, more likely to begin life under the most difficult circumstances (i.e. grow up in poverty, suffer disproportionate early childhood health disparities, be raised in single parent homes with reduced resources), more likely to lack successful same-race/gender role models, and more like to be victims of violence than any other group in the nation. See Erika Harrell, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *BLACK VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME* (2007) (reporting that although

Blacks account for 13% of the U.S. Population in 2005, they were victims in nearly half of all homicides.) (*Fisher v. Texas* 2012, p. 10).

The only one of these data points that is about Black *men* is the claim that they are more likely to lack successful same-race/gender role models. Of course, even this claim is contestable, since probably there are more prominent African American male role models, including the President of the United States, than African American female role models.<sup>8</sup> All of the other data points apply at least equally to Black women, but they are being used to support the case for Black male exceptionalism. The implication is that when both African American women and African American men receive the same blow, women are not hurt as much as men, or their pain is not as important.

Any rhetoric that posits that Black men have exceptional problems should be closely interrogated; even the categorization itself—of problems—might be suspect. Incarceration, for example, is gendered; with every race, many more men than women are locked up. If that is the basis for comparison, men will inevitably fare worse. If the category was, instead, incidence of breast cancer, or rate of interracial marriage, then Black women would be exceptional (compared to men). Again, I am anxious to avoid a race to the bottom, or to pit Black women against Black men. My sole point is that Black male interventions need to proceed with this same caution, and many do not appear to be doing so.

In sum, compared to Black women, the problems that Black men experience are not “worse” and should not be treated as though they are. To suggest that Black males are more handicapped only implies that the struggles of Black women are not understood or considered important.

### Reinforcing Patriarchy

Black men are still men. They don't have access to all the “benefits” of the patriarchy but they have some of them. To the extent that Black male exceptionalism allocates gender-based benefits, there is the danger that it reinforces gender-based hierarchy. In a patriarchal system, empowering men poses potential dangers.

The rhetoric of some advocates of Black male exceptionalism programs reinforces this concern. This is obvious in overt assertions of old-school constructs of Black masculinity like the Million Man March. The slogan of the march was “until Black men stand up, Black men and Black women cannot stand together and accomplish the awesome task before us.” Black men were asked to “stand up” and become leaders of the family, a role that had to be “taken back” from Black women (Carbado 1999, p. 6).

Another example is the discourse about Black male/female gender ratios in colleges and graduate schools. Some Black male achievement programs appear to problematize Black women's achievement relative to Black men's (i.e., the “problem” is that Black women are taking up spaces that rightfully belong to Black men). The problematizing of male problems, and blaming women for them, has travelled from Black male exceptionalism to a broader analysis. In “The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men,” Christina Hoff Sommers (2000) argues that “it's a bad time to be a boy in America” (p. 124). Critics have pointed out the anti-feminist ideology animating Sommers' career (Rotundo 2000). The alarm over a “war on boys” shares analogues with the endangered Black male narrative.



Sommers' selective reading<sup>9</sup> of the challenges facing both boys and girls has been supplanted by scholars, legislators, educators and jurists both examining the efficacy of single-sex education at addressing perceived gender discrepancies in academic performance and evaluating such programs' constitutionality under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and compliance with Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. Those two protections effectively limited public school experimentation with single-sex education until the U.S. Department of Education instituted a rule change in 2006 to provide more flexibility (Cantalupo 2012). Since then, as single-sex public schools and classrooms topped 500 nationwide (Lewin 2011), a number of cases have been pressed by the American Civil Liberties Union (Ward 2012). In a decision enjoining a West Virginia school district from separating its students by gender, the federal district court judge noted "that the science behind single-sex education appears to be, at best, inconclusive, and certain gender-based teaching techniques based on stereotypes and lacking any scientific basis may very well be harmful to students." (*Doe v. Wood County Board of Education* 2012).

Meanwhile, other studies provide strong critiques of the "essentialist myth of masculinity" underpinning the move to separate boys from girls (Cohen 2009), or account for reported performance differences between boys' and girls' grades (Cornwell et al., 2013). In this context—within which apparently well-meaning interventions based on gender difference increasingly face academic and judicial skepticism—an argument to compound such an approach at the intersection of race should make us proceed with caution. It is difficult, but not impossible, to support the intersectional identity of Black men, but not promote patriarchal values. The final part of this article begins to imagine a way.

### **Black Men as Privileged Victims**

Devon Carbado (1999), a law professor at UCLA School of Law, has argued that: (1) heterosexual Black men occupy a "privileged victim" status in antiracist discourse; and (2) the reason for this "privileged victim" status is sexism.

Carbado notes that much of the attention in antiracist discourse is focused on Black men because of their incarceration rates. He argues that, with such a large emphasis on Black men, and without a similar focus on Black women, Black men are perceived to be significantly more vulnerable and more "endangered" than Black women (1999, p. 7). As a result of the "endangered" dialogue, when a Black man is on trial for some criminal offense, the Black community sees first and foremost his status as a racial victim. The fact that a Black man might be on trial for violence against a Black female becomes subordinate to the concern that a Black man may be a victim of a racist criminal justice system.

The most influential book about race in the last ten years is, arguably, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). Alexander's thesis is that the criminal justice system serves the same racial control function as de jure segregation. She frames her argument about racial justice but, consistent with Carbado's critique, she focuses almost exclusively on men.

Another example of privileging males is contained in the *Fisher* amicus brief filed by the coalition of Black male achievement organizations. It states, "Today, admissions officials comb through files searching for signs of that brightness, gauging the potential of aspiring Black male collegians who, despite laggings standardized test scores and GPAs, can add immeasurable value to their college campuses" (*Fisher v. Texas* 2012, p. 16).

## Reinforcing Stereotypes about Black Men

The rhetoric of Black male exceptionalism seldom involves structural critiques of patriarchy; in some ways it resonates more with the anti-feminist ideology of the right-wing than with a progressive vision of social justice. It follows, then, that some Black male achievement programs appear to be posited on a construction of Black men as violent, hyper-masculine criminals. Other interventions supported by some of the programs can be seen as implicit behavioral critiques of Black men as dysfunctional or pathologic. For example, Williams argues that the drive for single-sex public schools in the inner city, while presented as in the best interest of Black boys and girls, “posits Black males as dangerous and threatening” (2004, p. 59).

Many programs contain elements of behavior modification interventions for African American men. The mentoring program of 100 Black Men of America, Inc. includes workshops that focus on social and emotional skills, moral character, and work ethic. The United Negro College Fund Black Male Initiative states that strong African American male initiatives should incorporate activities that help young men “better handle frustration and anger” (UNCF Institute for Capacity Building). New York’s Young Men’s Initiative (YMI) references training Black men for careers as commercial truck drivers, but not doctors, artists, or professors (Banks and Oliveira, 2011b). Indeed \$52 million dollars out of the \$127 million allocated to the YMI program is spent on males placed under the authority of the correctional system (Banks and Oliveira, 2011b). Certainly some monies should be spent on helping Black males who have been incarcerated successfully re-enter society; YMI’s allocation of 40% of its funds to criminal justice-based interventions seems excessive, unless, perhaps, one sees a close relationship between law enforcement supervision of African American men and public safety.

In this regard it is worth noting that New York City’s Young Men’s Initiative was created during a time in which the New York City Police Department was defending its aggressive “stop, question, and frisk” tactics which disproportionately burden young African American and Latino young men. Mayor Bloomberg’s foundation contributed millions of dollars to the city’s Black and Latino male youth initiative, but the Mayor also vigorously defended the stop and frisk program. The *Huffington Post* reported, “In a speech brimming with vitriol, Mayor Michael Bloomberg took aim at all who have criticized the NYPD’s controversial stop-and-frisk policy, accusing them of encouraging a lawless mayhem state. Mayor Michael Bloomberg unleashed a 45-minute tirade in defense of the police tactic. . .” (Bode and Fractenberg, 2013).

It is revealing that Black male achievement programs have not engendered the same kinds of conservative backlash that other race-conscious remedies have. For example, they have not generally been challenged by the conservative groups that have attacked affirmative action programs.

## THE POTENTIAL OF BLACK MALE INTERVENTIONS: TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

*Gender is a social system that divides power . . . Women, by contrast with comparable men, have systematically been subjected to physical insecurity, targeted for sexual denigration and violation; depersonalized and denigrated; deprived of respect, credibility, and resources; and silenced—and denied public presence, voice, and representation of their interests. Men as men have generally not had these things done to them; that is, men have had to be Black or gay (for instance) to have these things done to them as men.*

—Catherine MacKinnon (1989), p. 160

My recommendation is that resources be divided equally between programs for Black males and Black females. Any state or private actor that sponsors an intervention for African American men should also sponsor one for African American women. The programs should receive equal funding and other material resources. This parity objective will strike some as impractical and, if implemented, will raise feelings of a sense of sacrifice in some advocates for Black men. It is a key component, however, of an intersectionalist strategy for Black male interventions. Civil rights law contains an analogue for this kind of approach: The regulations implementing Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 establish general standards for public schools receiving federal funding, allowing gender-segregated programs as long as “substantially equal” provisions exist for the other gender.

In a sense, any intersectionality theory is a theory of exceptionalism. That is the power of the intersectionality idea. Intersectionality is not only a theory of Black women’s exceptionalism; it is a theory that also includes other genders and races. It is a theory about the difference that difference makes.

Kimberlé Crenshaw has noted that “implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial liberation movements, for example, is the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (1991, p. 1242). The empowerment aspects of identity formation are easiest to see, and appreciate, in traditional out-groups, like Blacks and women. But understanding the ways that gender impacts race is also a helpful project for Black men. Lynching, for example, was gendered as well as raced; this is not to say that Black women were not terrorized (rape being one obvious example), but that Black male victims were being punished for gender as well as race.

The potentially empowering space of identity authorizes not only Black male and Black female interventions, but Asian American Cultural Centers, and Latina reading groups, and Native People’s caucuses. One concern about an ideological trashing of Black male programs is that there would be a slippery slope that might ultimately lead to questioning any identity-based formations. Intersectionality is as much as project of political empowerment, based on identity, as a description of modalities of subordination.

Why defend Black male exceptionalism interventions at all, if there are so many problems and if, as a practical matter, there are not likely to be the same number of programs for Black women? My limited defense is based as much on real politics as a moral justification. Black men are still Black. There is a finite number of foundations and individuals who are willing to donate millions of dollars for racial justice in the United States. It would be oversimplistic to say that every dollar that goes to Black men’s programs is a dollar away from Black women’s programs. Many Black women accrue some benefit when Black men are better educated, are less likely to be incarcerated, live longer, etc.

I realize that there is no guarantee that, if Black male programs were not an option, funders would re-allocate resources to Black women. It would be revealing if funders did not, because it would demonstrate that they were more interested in Black men than in racial justice, or at least less interested in racial justice if that includes Black women. But that revelation would be at the expense of Black male programs. I understand that some will view strict parity as too idealistic a standard in a community—the African American community—where the need is so great and the resources so limited. Any charity that thoroughly interrogates the motives of its donors is bound to be disappointed by some of them. In the end, I am simply not persuaded by a “money is green” argument against any standards or ethical expectation of donors to racial justice projects.

My defense of Black male programs is not simply “all about the Benjamins;” there is a theoretical foundation that merits consideration. Intersectionality not only allows different interventions for different identity groups, it provides a basis for understanding why they are necessary. If they can be properly implemented, programs and initiatives targeting Black males are appropriate as part of a comprehensive racial justice strategy. Just because one is not exceptional does not mean that one does not merit special attention. The premise of an intersectionalist intervention is not “best at being the worst.”

Black males also have an intersectional identity. They are Black. And they are male. Their experience is unique because of the interplay between these two categories. Scholarly analysis of the plight of the Black man frequently has been limited to racial discrimination. In reality, their experience has as much to do with their status as males. Only recently has thick analysis pointed to the ways that race and gender combine to effect African American men.

The systems of subordination that affect Black men and women alike are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. These systems of oppression overlap to produce detrimental effects on all African Americans. Williams (2004) has persuasively described this dynamic in the context of single sex education, and the establishment of public schools for Black boys. The goal must be more than stereotypes divided by gender.

## CONCLUSION: DIFFICULT DEMANDS

The rhetoric about Black male “exceptionalism” must be dismissed. Black male intersectionality is a more accurate way of conceptualizing the issues. It acknowledges that Black men have specific issues, but they are not “worse” than Black women’s, and do not require a hierarchy that requires displacing Black women and girls.

One of the functions of White supremacy is to defeat Black masculinity. Still, maleness—even Black maleness—remains a problematic site for empowerment. An important component of an intersectionalist Black male intervention strategy would interrogate and deconstruct traditional ideas about masculinity, including Black masculinity. Articulating a progressive vision of African American masculinity is beyond the scope of this article. I should note, however, that some scholars and activists are already engaged in this project.

Male focused intervention should be closely examined to eradicate any hint of antifemale ideology or practice. The active recruitment, inclusion, and participation of gay and transgendered men might be part of a strategy of reconceptualizing masculinity.

Another necessary component of intersectionalist Black male programs is advocacy for Black women. Some African American men have always supported feminist causes, ranging from Frederick Douglass’s advocacy of women’s suffrage to protests against the Million Man March, organized by scholars Luke Harris and Derrick Bell, among others. Understanding male privilege means acknowledging that Black men’s issues have historically been prioritized over Black women’s issues. Black male interventions should create space for African American women to be racial standard bearers, a discourse that would position poverty and reproductive freedom as racial justice issues, in the way that advocates for Black men have already done with criminal justice.

Some initiatives already are engaged in the project I recommend. The Association of Black Women Physicians and Project Brotherhood are founded by, and work to provide health care to, Black women and Black men respectively. There appears to

be parity, unlike for example, the Schott Foundation's program for girls of color, which does not appear to be funded at the same level as its Black male projects.

The Lutie A. Lytle Black Women Law Faculty Writing Workshop and the John Mercer Langston Black Male Law Faculty Writing Workshop are examples of progressive intersectional interventions. One program exists for Black women, and another for Black men. The creation of one group does not preclude the creation of another. They do not appear to compete with each for funding or status. People come together and foster an environment where their multiple identities—race, gender, profession, etc.—are celebrated and discussed openly. This must be the goal of every public and private intersectional project. The route from Black male exceptionalism to an intersectionality that creates equal space for Black men and Black women is the only way that racial justice will be achieved.

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## NOTES

1. This article was presented as a work-in-progress at Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminar on Intersectionality at Columbia Law School, Georgetown Law School, and the African-American Policy Institute Social Justice Writer's Retreat. I thank the participants in those programs. Special thanks to Sara Sun Beale, Nancy Cantalupo, Devon Carbado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Luke Harris, Issa Kohler-Hausmann, Allegra McLeod, Eloise Pasachoff, Elizabeth Ribet, Christophe Ringer, Robin West, and Verna Williams. Excellent research assistance was provided by Eric Glatt, Bradford Ham, Will McAuliffe, Sonia Tabriz, and Adi Williams.
2. As an initial matter, one might query whether intersectionality is itself an iteration of exceptionalism—Black female exceptionalism. Certainly, some scholars have framed intersectionality in this way. That is not, however, my understanding of the theory.
3. The New Jersey Black Issues Convention brought together a wide range of Black organizations to debate issues that affected the Black community.
4. The National Council of Negro Women ("NCNW") is a non-profit organization that was formed in 1935 to lead, develop, and advocate for women of African American descent as they support their families and communities. The group distributes information to its members about issues that affect African American women, trains young African American women in career development, and provides mentoring and education for young women. The NCNW is affiliated with thirty-nine other national organizations.
5. The Professional Women of Color Network (PWOCN) was founded in 2002 to create a business resource for women of color. PWOCN provides a resource for all women of color, not just women of African descent. They host networking events, provide help with social media websites, and offer marketing advice for women of color.
6. The Black Career Women (BCW) organization is a non-profit that was founded in 1977 to promote achievement of Black women in the workplace. The group was designed because of a concern that the needs of Black women in the workplace were not adequately addressed, and that career related issues of Black women were sometimes ignored. BCW was designed to provide enrichment and encouragement for Black women who deal "uniquely" with barriers in the workplace such as racism, sexism, and economic and societal factors that thwart their efforts of career success.
7. The National Organization for African-American Women (NOAW) was founded in 2007, and is a licensed non-profit organization, located in Washington, D.C. NOAW was created to address the needs of Black women in the work place with the goals of fostering a sense of ethnic and gender pride, promoting social change, and documenting the achievements of African American Women. Their slogan is "making connections between various aspects of gender and cultural issues" (National Organization for African-American Women 2011).
8. Probably the *amici* authors mean in-home role models, since most African American children, male and female, do not live with their father.



9. “She persistently misrepresents scholarly debate, ignores evidence that contradicts her assertions, and directs intense scrutiny at studies she opposes while giving a free critical ride to research she supports” (Rotundo 2000).

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