

Chapter 1
Notes from a Former Homophobe:
An Introspective Narrative on the
Development of Masculinity of an
Urban African American Male

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The use of one's memory to recall events, traumatic or non-traumatic, for qualitative scholarly inquiry is a valuable research tool. Systematic sociological introspection allows a researcher the opportunity to incorporate their personal narrative into a scholarly inquiry that does not correlate with the occurrence of the event examined.¹ This technique is found most notably in Carol Rambo's account of abuse she experienced as a child. It was after becoming an academician that she, through a reconstructed chronology of field notes, drew upon her childhood experiences to provide a detailed and graphic account of sexual and mental abuse at the hands of both her mother and father.² Rambo's use of a *layered account*, the dichotomous incorporation of the frame of both participant and scholar, enhances her inquiry through an understanding and examination of the subject from the simultaneous perspectives of the survivor of a traumatic event as well as that of a trained social scientist examining the impact of child sexual and mental abuse. This inquiry is similar to Rambo's through the use of systematic sociological introspection and a layered account to frame and analyze past events. The primary objective of this endeavor is to use this personal narrative to assist others in understanding how similarly situated black males can be socialized into their masculinity and manhood. Specifically, this chapter offers an examination of black masculine identity formation within a specific urban poverty level environment and within a highly homophobic culture.

1 Carolyn Ellis, 'Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience,' *Symbolic Interaction*, no. 14 (1991): 23-50.

2 Carol R. Ronai, 'Multiple Reflections of Child Sexual Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account,' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, no. 23 (1995): 395-426.

The Fatherless Household

I was born in 1971 and came of age as an adolescent during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and his trickle-down economic theory. While some may have benefited from this economic philosophy that was grounded in the idea that tax breaks for companies and those in the highest income brackets would lead to prosperity for all Americans, the people living in my poverty tract neighborhood of Hollywood in Memphis, Tennessee were not among that lot. 1983 United States Census data indicate that 35 percent of all black Americans lived below the poverty line. The poverty rate for black female headed households in that year was nearly 60 percent. These are the data that frame the reality of my late childhood and adolescence. My parents divorced when I was two years old. The story that I heard *very* often as a child, and still occasionally as an adult, is that my mother left my father because she tired of the frequent and brutal beatings at his hand. She often recounts one specific event that convinced her to finally leave. After enduring a brutal beating, and in an attempt to literally save her life, she raised the bathroom window of their duplex and, without any clothes on, jumped out and ran to a friend's house for safety. Unlike some women, my mother's salary was the primary source of household income so she was able to support herself and me after the escape even if, by the standards of the federal government, we lived below the poverty line.

My mother worked as a licensed practical nurse (LPN) and attended community college during my adolescence. Her nursing salary was just enough to pay the monthly bills and not much else. There were many nights when we found ourselves eating either cereal with no milk or a single grilled cheese sandwich made with government issued block cheese for dinner. On some nights my mother did not eat dinner. At those moments she would say that she was not hungry or had already eaten. It was only after reflecting on those experiences with her some years later that I learned my mother had not told me the truth and that, in fact, she went to bed hungry on many nights. We had a very supportive extended family that would have cringed and acted upon hearing of our lack of food, however, my mother was a proud woman who always wanted to keep her 'business' private—even if that came at the sacrifice of food for her and her only child. On at least one occasion our extended family became aware of our plight. I vividly remember my grandmother coming to our house one day and demanding that we come live with her. Without resistance we left. The visits to my grandparents would generally last a week or two before my mother's desire to be in her own home kicked in. As we were preparing to leave my grandparent's home on one occasion I asked my mother if I could stay and live with them, at least during the school week. This seemed like a pretty reasonable idea to me as a child since I was already using my grandparents address to attend school. Instead of my mother waking me at five am to prepare for school, preparing herself for work, then dropping me off at my grandparents home every morning at six am, this new arrangement would benefit us all. My grandparents concerns about my wellbeing would be allayed,

my mother would have additional discretionary money to spend and I would be in a home where food was plentiful.

I enjoyed living with my grandparents if for no other reason than I knew I would have a full meal every night. I also enjoyed living with my grandparents because I was finally in a household that included a male figure. Although my father lived, literally, less than a mile away there was very little contact between us. He had started another family with a second wife and began to have children with her. He made it clear in both word and deed that I had no important or significant role in his life at that time. So, it was my grandfather to whom I looked to see how 'men do things' since my family was, and remains, numerically dominated by women. My grandfather was the stereotypical man of the mid-twentieth century who believed men ruled their household with an iron fist and that women and children must 'know their place.' I remember one evening we were on our way to a local restaurant for a chicken dinner as we did every Friday night. Along the way we saw a two-car accident and I exclaimed, 'golly!' Before I knew it I had been slapped in the mouth. Some years later I theorized that he thought I was too close to saying 'god damn' and, being the God fearing man that he was, believed his strike was against my future use of profanity. However, as I sobbed quietly in the backseat of the car I perceived his strike as yet another example of his iron fist. The last and most prominent memory of my grandfather's iron fist is of an argument he had with my grandmother. While I do not remember the specific cause of his discontent, I do recall that he was displeased with something she had done. My grandmother made several attempts to please him and diffuse the situation, possibly because she was aware that I could see them both through the bedroom door that was adjacent to the dining room where the 'conversation' was taking place. Despite her attempts to correct her mistake, even if she had not made one, he continued to curse and rage. All of a sudden I heard a loud slap and corresponding thud. Because their conversation had moved from the dining room to the kitchen I did not see my grandfather hit my grandmother. But there are some things that even a child need not see with their eyes to understand intuitively. Shortly after this event I succeeded in getting my mother's and grandmother's approval to allow me to live with my grandmother's sister.

'You Either Fight that Boy Down the Street or You Fight Me!'

While I enjoyed living with my grandparents, I enjoyed being at my aunt's even more. My aunt was one of the first people in our neighborhood to have cable television, including the x-rated channels that I fought my sleep to stay up to watch on many nights. Plus, she always had a bottle of liquor below the sink that was available at my adolescent whim. Although my aunt and grandparents houses were separated by about seven homes on the same street, my aunt's home seemed many miles away. Not only could I escape hunger, chaos and the occasional episode of domestic violence experienced at my mother's and grandmother's home, I was

enthralled at being treated as if I were the most special child in the world by my aunt and cousins. Consistent with my life prior to this point, I had no positive male role model. After I moved in with my aunt this void was filled by two older female cousins. My aunt provided for the household through her job as a seamstress and my two cousins were charged with the daily task of caring for me. One cousin was very involved in sports and we would sit for hours and watch football. The house would become tense with excitement every time her Dallas Cowboys and my Pittsburgh Steelers played. Bragging rights were at stake and we both wanted them badly. My other cousin kept me focused on schoolwork, and on one memorable day walked me back to school for an intense teacher's conference after I brought home a report card with failing grades. Finally, I felt a sense of calm and peace. I had a home where I could engage in normal activities as a child in a two-parent family environment. The only allowance is that the father role in my household was performed primarily by two young women who were only slightly older than me.

I gravitated to sports at an early age. Tackle football was the sport of choice in my neighborhood and I quickly became known as someone who was fearless and would do anything to catch the football. At the age of ten I was playing tackle football in the community with guys who played on the local high school team. Throughout my neighborhood in general, and through playing football specifically, there was always an emphasis on being tough and being 'a man.' Toughness, in addition to fist fights, was often demonstrated through ones willingness to play street football under 'sideline pop' rules. Theoretically, when football is played in the streets you simply touch the runner with the ball below the waist to 'tackle' them. However, in sideline pop football you are eligible for a regular football tackle if you straddle the curb or sideline. Literally, you could be tackled onto the grass or nearby concrete. More often than not our street football games devolved into tackle football in the street. For many of us with absentee fathers, or in-home fathers who were non-supportive, this was a means by which we could demonstrate our toughness, or manhood. This overt exhibition of masculinity and manhood often resulted in fist fights.

I was an adolescent boy living in a completely female household. In fact, every household that I had lived in, with the brief exception of the time spent at my grandparents, was completely female. This fact was not lost among the women in my life. This is why there was always an emphasis on making sure that I was tough ... that I was not a punk ... that I was not soft ... and most importantly, that I would not become a sissy. Succinctly, it was conveyed to me directly and indirectly that I would develop into a *real* man.

One way that masculinity and manhood was learned and proven was through fighting. As mentioned before, street football games sometimes ended in fist fights. I remember several times when the game was incidental to someone wanting to start a fight with me. While neither I nor any of the kids in my neighborhood had much in terms of high priced or fashionable worldly possessions, I was envied because my aunt and cousins often purchased new, but not expensive, items for me because of my good grades. They also bought me items to supplement

my mother's lack of income and to fill the void left by my father's refusal to consistently honor his child support payments. I remember one particular day I got into a fight after a game of street football. While I do not know for certain, my guess is that I was targeted because of the glorified perception of my life. After the fight I returned to my aunt's home as if nothing had happened and began to watch cartoons. Somehow one of my cousins found out that I had been in a fight. When she discovered that I may not have won the fight or, at worst, chose not to fight 'til the end, I was given an ultimatum. 'You either fight that boy down the street or you fight me! Which one are you gonna choose?' I am not certain of the outcome of round one of my fight, but I do know that I won round two as I did not want to find out if my cousin was serious about her declaration to fight me if I chose not to finish the original fight.

In the environment that I was raised in there was always an emphasis on masculinity and manhood as evidenced through one's ability to physically control the body and actions of others. Whether it was through my father's abuse of my mother, my grandfather's abuse of my grandmother or through fist fights resulting from a football game, I was socialized into believing that being a man meant having physical dominion over others. Being a man also meant that one could not exhibit feminine characteristics, or be soft, because that person would be perceived as being weak, a punk, or a sissy and susceptible to daily fights. In short, being a man in my neighborhood meant to not be homosexual.

'Look At That Punk Peaches!'

I first became aware of homosexuality living with my aunt. She owned a piano that sat prominently in her living room. Nearly every day I sat at the piano and attempted to teach myself to play. At one point I asked my aunt if she would teach me since she was such a great pianist. I do not remember her exact answer, but the response from my extended family of females was a resounding, no! 'Boys do not play the piano,' is what was conveyed to me both directly and indirectly. If I were to learn to play the piano then my journey to homosexuality, through their logic, would have begun. It is quite possible that, in their mind, I would have ended up like Peaches.

Nearly every year there was a parade in my neighborhood. I do not remember the occasion, but I do remember the thundering sounds of the marching bands ... and Peaches. Peaches was a majorette and excellent baton twirler. This is a position in the marching band that is normally occupied by females wearing tight and revealing clothing. One can imagine the repulsion of the males at each year's parade when Peaches, a black male, marched down the street high stepping in his tight shorts and fitted shirt. Statements like 'look at that punk' and 'look at that sissy' were made by nearly every male in attendance. Similarly, my friends and I recoiled at the way he took pleasure in looking and behaving as a female. 'This is what my family is trying to prevent me from becoming,' is what I thought to myself. 'What is wrong with

him,' is what my friends and I quietly said to ourselves, 'He is not a man, he is a punk!' In my cultural environment Peaches was violating the tenets of manhood. He was behaving in an ultra feminine manner that I was socialized to, if not despise, not accept as tolerable. More specifically, he was publicly exhibiting feminine qualities within a cultural environment that shunned such behavior and aggressively pointed to such persons as not good exemplars of 'real men.' In fact, men who publicly and unashamedly exhibited feminine qualities were candidates for whatever physical corrective punishment bestowed on them by the 'real men' in my neighborhood. This idea was reinforced in me with constant warnings from my family to stay away from him and other gay people.

According to neighborhood folklore a gay man lived on the street behind my grandparents and aunt. Not only was he gay, he was thought to be a pedophile. Tales abound about how he prowled the streets at night looking for little boys to rape. I distinctly remember being told by family members to not go on that particular street to play because Pooty Pooty would possibly molest me. While I am certain that a gay man did live on that street, there was never any evidence to support the assertion that he molested little boys. This fictitious boogeyman, in retrospect, was possibly created and supported to further distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of masculinity and manhood. Why else, then, would this tale be promoted by adults, no less, to impressionable children and adolescents? To an adolescent boy this message, supported and promoted by those you love and trust, is a powerful rebuke of any behavior not considered manly. The result of being socialized into masculinity and manhood within an environment such as this is the embrace of notions such as gays are to be hated or feared. For the first quarter of my life I embraced this social construction of intolerance called homophobia.

'Why Would I Choose To Be Hated'

It was not until I entered a master's program in sociology that I was intellectually prepared and challenged to reconsider my covert homophobia. The fear, and to a lesser degree dislike, that I had of gays and lesbians was a direct result of my adolescent socialization which, both directly and indirectly, ingrained into me the notion that true masculinity and manhood should contain no traces of characteristics considered feminine. Refrains from my childhood and adolescence that penetrated my mind during my intellectual civil war were pleas from those in my 'village' for me to 'not be a punk,' 'not be a sissy,' 'not show any emotion other than anger and toughness' and at all times to 'be a man!' Growing up in an environment such as this fosters a mindset that embraces the unquestioned acceptance of hyper masculinity and the simultaneous condemnation of men who do not embrace this posture. Within this socially constructed conceptualization of masculinity, as understood then by an adolescent, one exhibited their manliness through physical dominance over women, the denouncement of anti-male behavior and by the

number of women one could bed. As I entered graduate school I thought everyone had been socialized exactly as I had. It did not take long for me to understand that was not the case and that sociological concepts such as social distance were more than just abstract theories in a textbook.³

I first learned of the social distance concept in a race and ethnicity course where it was presented within the frame of race, prejudice and discrimination. My instructor reasoned that levels of prejudice and discrimination may be reduced if members of opposing groups willingly decrease the distance between themselves. Doing so enables the previously segregated groups to come to the realization that their fear or dislike of the other was caused not by tangible and realistic factors, but because they did not have quality interpersonal and equal status contacts. As I debated this idea thoroughly with my classmates I began to question many of the *truths* that I had been socialized into believing concerning masculinity. I began to question if my notions of masculinity, in general, and homosexuality, specifically, were ill conceived and the byproduct of my socialization within a specific cultural environment. My ideas on this topic were directly challenged and forever changed when I befriended a fellow graduate student who happened to be a black, gay male. Over a period of time I came to know Michael well since we were both members of the graduate student association and were two of the few black males in graduate school at the university. At first we talked often about the challenges black males experienced attending predominately white institutions. We were in complete agreement on the racial problems experienced by blacks at the institution. However, it did not take long for us to venture into the intersectionality of prejudice and discrimination. It should have been obvious to me at the time that such a conversation would be inevitable since I was a student in one of the leading departments in the nation with a specialty in race, class, gender and other oppressions and he was actually experiencing the reality that I was learning.

On one particular day the subject of homosexuality came up during a conversation between Michael and me. After giving him a vague and politically correct assessment of my position on the topic I listened carefully as he talked about the challenges of being black, male and gay. He recounted story after story of hurtful and negative situations that he experienced. While the bulk of that conversation will forever be lost to my memory, I can recite as if it were stated to me today the sentence that ended my tenure as a homophobe. After recounting a harrowing episode of prejudice during his adolescence, Michael looked at me and asked rhetorically, 'why would I choose a lifestyle for which I would volunteer to be despised, disliked and discriminated against?' I was taken aback by this question because, to that point in my life, the idea that one DID NOT choose to be gay never crossed my mind. I had always thought that if a person were gay then they CHOSE that lifestyle. It was at that point I began to consider in a broader sense how some people are treated badly for reasons they had no control over such

3 Carol R. Ronai, 'Multiple Reflections of Child Sexual Abuse: An Argument for a Layered Account,' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, no. 23 (1995): 395-426.

as their gender, race or sexual orientation. It did not take long for me to recall how American Blacks, for no reason other than a physical characteristic over which they had no control, had experienced similar acts of prejudice and discrimination that Michael described. It was this *aha* moment that forever changed my life. It was at this point that I intellectually challenged the notions of masculinity and manhood that I had been socialized into believing and, per social distance theory, embraced friendships beyond my previous comfort zone that mandated fear, hatred and the dislike of those different from me.

Through my discussions with Michael, as well as my intellectual growth during graduate school, my outlook on masculinity and manhood evolved. Armed with knowledge on the topic I began to question my friends on their beliefs on masculinity, manhood and homosexuality. While there is never a good moment to bring up an intellectual discussion on homosexuality to a group of hyper masculine males engaged in binge drinking and illicit drug use, this is often when I broached the topic. Within this setting the use of words like faggot, punk and bitch was the norm, not the exception. Almost always these derogatory terms were hurled as a direct affront against true masculinity and pinned onto their male target as a badge of dishonor. Again, armed with my *book learning* from the local university, I questioned the group on why they would be prejudiced against a group of people who, not by their own choice, were victims of discrimination and prejudice in ways similar to blacks. Although I was the only college student in my friendship circle, I never believed myself more intelligent or 'better than' the others but merely blessed to be presented with a set of opportunities which they had not been afforded. Nevertheless, the group was always in agreement that, as I had previously believed, all gays *chose* to be *that way* and that all my *book learning* was changing me for the worse. I argued that whether one chooses a certain lifestyle or not should not render justifiable their harmful treatment within a society. My well-articulated and intellectual argument, unfortunately, was not accepted by my friends. As time continued so did the jokes and disparaging comments about gays. It was at this moment in my life that I realized I had to take a stand against intolerance. Had I remained in that setting and stayed quiet as derogatory statements were being hurled I would have been guilty of tacitly accepting and promoting their construction of masculinity, manhood and the demonization of gays and lesbians. This was a posture that I could not embrace. It was at this point when I decided that my principles as a human being were more important than friendships that had lasted more than half my life. I then ceased several friendships because of their continued embrace of homophobia. In my mind I was taking a principled stand as a man.

'Integrity Over Ignorance'

The biggest influence on my professional career has been Bobby. I met Bobby while presenting a research paper at a conference. An editor of an academic

journal at the time, he approached me to see if I were interested in submitting my paper for publication consideration. After I informed him that I was only a master's level student he then indicated that he was impressed with my research and thought I had the potential to impact the discipline with the right mentoring. His institution was recruiting students of color into their program and because of their commitment to diversity and mentoring he believed it to be a great fit for me. While I had already decided to pursue doctoral work, the idea of living in the cold Midwest did not appeal to me. However, I politely indicated to Bobby that I would apply to the program. I was convinced that I would never see him again or experience the Midwest as a resident. Although I was adamant that I would not seriously consider attending the school, I thought I would do him a favor by applying. As my master's career wound down I applied to eight doctoral programs. I received letters of acceptance from three. Only one program offered funding. Not surprisingly, it was Bobby's school.

During my stay in the Midwest, Bobby was both a mentor and friend. Because of this role strain he often found himself spending some of his departmental capital on me as there were several times when I clashed with senior faculty, largely because I was not appropriately deferential as graduate students were expected to be. In each instance Bobby supported my position and diffused any situation that would have prevented me from being later known as the fastest person to complete the doctoral degree at that school for one coming in with a master's degree. I was only able to be successful in graduate school because of Bobby and his demand for academic excellence. To this day I remember the moment when I realized that, although I had performed well in my master's program, I had not given 100 percent to graduate study and if I were to remain in the Midwest that would be a necessity. I was enrolled in a course that Bobby taught my first semester. Since he had recruited me to the school and since we shared the bond of being black males I thought I would not have to work as hard as everyone else to receive a high grade. I was wrong. My term paper was returned with enough editorial comments written in red ink that I thought for a minute someone had slashed their wrist and bled over the paper. Bobby offered me an ultimatum: Either re-write the paper for a re-grade, in less than two weeks, or be awarded an incomplete and finish the course the next semester. For the first time in my academic career I had been personally challenged to exceed expectations, not just meet them. While I was disappointed at the prospect of re-writing the paper, I enjoyed the fact that I was placed in a position to defend my legitimacy as a student as I knew I was capable of performing well even though I was not always highly motivated. Over the next two weeks I awoke at 4 am, went to bed after 1 am, and managed to complete the course on time and with a high mark. This is the period in my life when I realized that simply meeting expectations was no longer acceptable. From this point forward I placed maximum effort into mastering all challenges placed before me.

Although I had secured a teaching assistantship that covered tuition, I obtained a small student loan to cover my few monthly bills. After paying my monthly bills I usually had less than \$50 per month spending money. I was adamant that I did

not want to leave graduate school with a large student loan bill and only borrowed enough money to cover my basic needs. Bobby was aware of my financial situation and often invited me to his home for dinner. His invitation was often masked under the guise that he wanted to discuss my dissertation or a manuscript we were working on. However, I knew his invitation was because of my financial situation. As a mentor and friend Bobby is the primary reason that I have been a successful sociologist. It is from him that I learned how to be a mentor, scholar and colleague. Something else I learned from Bobby is how to not let anyone else's construction of reality define who you are. This life lesson combined with my expanding understanding of masculinity and manhood enabled me to forge a true friendship with someone with whom such a bond a few years prior would have been anathema. This friendship would not have been possible because Bobby is a gay black male.

Since taking the doctorate I have remained friends with Bobby and still consider him a mentor. Over the years we have co-authored a number of articles and often attend the same conferences. When we attend the same conferences we normally share a room to reduce our out of pocket expenses. Early in my career some colleagues and friends covertly inquired about my 'masculinity' since I often shared a room with Bobby. 'It is good that you are a heterosexual man who has no problems being good friends with a gay man' is what one person said. 'Does he hit on you?' is another question that I was asked by family, friends and colleagues. While the question was never posed to me directly, I am quite sure what they really wanted to ask was, 'are you gay, too?' For this small network of persons within my circle it was almost inconceivable that a gay and heterosexual man could have a friendship not defined by traditional restraints of acceptable displays of masculinity. Furthermore, the assumption was also conveyed that a heterosexual man could not possibly be very good friends with a gay male unless he was also gay. When this subject was broached by family, friends or colleagues I handled the matter in a manner that put the questioner on the defensive and forced them to think about their question at a greater level than they may not have previously done. My response was simply ... no response. I chose, and still do, to not allow others to force me to explain my friendship with a gay male but to, in fact, allow them to mire in their question through a dead pan silence. For some, I am sure this silence is evidence that I too may not adhere to the real characteristics of manhood and masculinity as I had defined the concept during my adolescence. However, on my journey of discovery for understanding manhood I have come to the realization that I can no longer allow others to define my reality. If I were to allow others to define for me acceptable modes of behavior and friends who properly display masculine characteristics, what then does that say about my commitment to my friends? How would my distancing myself from those dear to me make them feel? More importantly, what would it say about me as a man who is grounded in integrity and guided by good principles that I would allow the thoughts and opinions of others to 'punk' me into dictating my interactions and behavior with those whom I choose to call friend. True manhood and masculinity do not cower in the face of adversity or challenge. True manhood and masculinity

stand firm in its principles and integrity and rejects attempts by others to define their reality.

Conclusion

I was raised in a poverty tract urban community, in fatherless homes and within a homophobic environment. The notion of masculinity and manhood that was conveyed to me included violence against women and gays, physical control over other men through fighting and gun play and the rejection of any behavior not considered stereotypically masculine. I am thankful that I was able to overcome these limiting, problematic and hateful notions. As I matured I discovered that my primary agents of socialization, family and peers, offered only limited and neutered conceptualizations of manhood that I embraced until my 'aha' moment with Michael. But I often reflect on my peers who were not able to escape from my poverty tract neighborhood in North Memphis and experience the emancipating impact of education and broad socialization. Do they still adhere to the constructions of manhood that we were taught during our adolescence? While I cannot answer for them, I can say that my notions of manhood and masculinity have, in fact, changed. Masculinity and manhood as I conceive them now are not determined by wildly stereotypical postures that I, and many who share experiences similar to my own, embraced as an adolescent. Masculinity and manhood are defined, in part, by one's ability to be a positive and productive member of society. In a more traditional manner it may also be defined as one who embraces and conquers, to the best of his ability, the task of providing or sharing both the financial and emotional needs for their family. Ultimately, what I have come to earnestly believe is that masculinity and manhood are also defined, and possibly most, by one's ability to stand for what is right even in the face of severe consequence(s).

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