The Desired Unsung: Black Middle-Class Men and Intimate Relationships

by

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Abstract

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Popular discourses about the crises of Black family, marriage, and economic stability are refracted through the failure of low-income Black men. But, the academic discussion is also tinged by the “taint of the ghetto,” in which sociologists have tended to analyze the diverse experiences of Black relationships through a reductionist frame based on poverty and family disorganization. Black middle-class (BMC) men also carry the weight of these class-specific narratives (e.g., the absentee father, philanderer, drug dealer, or gang member)—not just because there is a dearth of knowledge about BMC heterosexual relationships but because everyone else—from single mothers, never married women, social commentators, and pundits—are speaking for Black men, except themselves.

Based on in-depth interviews, this dissertation seeks to enrich the debate surrounding Black relationships by including the perspectives of BMC men. It asks one overarching question that is often debated, yet never directly asked of the BMC men in question: How do heterosexual BMC men perceive and negotiate their relationships against the backdrop of dominant narratives that foreground their alleged failure? I find that within-class differences, specifically, the trajectory of BMC men’s social mobility patterns, timing of exposure to predominately white social environments, and racialized dating experiences are the three factors necessary to understand how BMC men experience intimate relationships.
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Chapter 1: The Black Male Crisis

On April 24, 2016, megastar Beyoncé released *Lemonade*, a raw and unfiltered visual album that boldly testified just how personal the political is for Black women. With each chapter, it delved deeper into the painful intricacies of a marriage beset with distrust, deceit, and infidelity. *Lemonade* illustrates both the depths and limits of a Black woman’s love, while once again revealing the dejected state of Black masculinity. As with many popular culture renditions, *Lemonade* depicts the mending of Black relationships through the emotion work of the Black woman, whose forgiveness stems from an understanding of Black men’s oppression. The ever-present costs of Black masculinity (e.g., thug, hustler, baby daddy, etc.) is foregrounded as the undoing of Black relationships, while the strength of Black womanhood and Black men’s investment in masculinity is its constant remedy.

Almost immediately, it sparked conversation, especially among Black feminist pundits, about pain, vulnerability, liberation, the aims of feminism, and Black male-Black female relationships. The lens of Black Feminism through which Black relationships are typically depicted and told underscores how Black men’s (in)actions—across class—affect Black relationships. For example, both low-income and middle-earning Black men are largely held responsible for relationship strains: the former for their absenteeism, leaving the domestic responsibilities to their “baby mommas” (Edin & Keflas 2005); and the latter for failing to marry degreeed Black women (Banks 2011). Middle-class Black men also carry the weight of these class-specific narratives (e.g., the absentee father, philanderer, drug dealer, or gang member)—not just because there is a dearth of knowledge about Black Middle-Class (henceforth BMC) relationships, but because the “taint of the ghetto” pervades discussions of relationship patterns among Blacks.

As such, burgeoning literature on the BMC’s relationship patterns evokes familiar explanations that link the social and economic “pathologies” of BMC men to BMC women’s “romantic deprivation” (Clarke 2011). Romantic deprivation is characterized not only by the difficulty of marrying Black men of the same class but also by reifying stereotypes of Black sexual immorality (e.g., choosing motherhood before marriage) (Clarke 2011). Elaborating on (and confirming) claims of an unsatisfactory male marriageable index (Wilson, 1996), some research explains that because BMC women outnumber marriageable BMC men—referred to as the “new marriage squeeze” (Crowder and Tolnay 2000)—they must racially diversify their relationship desires to avoid being perpetually single (Banks 2011). In other words, BMC women should forsake racial solidarity for class solidarity in their choice of a partner. This continued emphasis on salvaging Black marriage not only obscures other relationship forms (e.g., cohabitation, non-marital relationships, etc.) but also often neglects to consider why these demographic changes occur. In an era characterized by considerable BMC growth and disproportionately higher rates of downward mobility, scholars have sought to link declining

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1 For brevity, I henceforth refer to Black male-Black female relationships as “Black relationships.”
marriage rates with the economic tenuousness of the Black middle-class (Attewell et al. 2004). These stark demographic patterns across racial and ethnic groups may account for the hysteria that has accompanied explanations of the decline in Black marriages among the BMC.

From ABC to CNN to Huffington Post, and from online blogs to peer-reviewed articles, America has chimed in on the changing patterns of Black marriage as a demographic problem rather than how the durability of middle-class status affects marriage potential. The conversation, which seeks to identify the causes of this decline, pits Black men and Black women against each other and creates a sense that Black women face the impossible, and urgent, task of finding a “good Black man” (read: degreed, at least median-earning, etc.) in an ever-dwindling pool. This disharmony, however, is presented as a crisis specific to Black relationships rather than as stemming from the racial history of the United States (Cress Welsing 2004). The effects of white supremacy on Black relationships—specifically on Black men and women’s ability to form and sustain relationships and on their prospects of starting a family—are not discussed. Indeed, the social and economic crux of Black men is a testament to the legacy of white supremacy, yet it is seldom linked to the relationship strains Black men face (e.g., unemployment, lower wages, etc.). The “crisis” of Black relationships, however, is a matter of structural circumstances—and not solely a matter of individual pathology, as dominant discourses assert.

In her book, Anti-Crisis, Janet Roitman (2013) identifies three characteristics of the rhetoric used to define a crisis. She highlights how public discourses: 1) draw upon historical fear to diagnose a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., marriage, economic conditions, etc.), 2) threaten the norm, and 3) encourage competition over the scarcity of resources. The discourse around the “Black Marriage Crisis” fits these three criteria. Public discourse draws on historical fear by foregrounding the woes of welfare-dependent, single mothers, and the myth of the absent Black man, obscuring how structural constraints are at the heart of this condition. Indeed, Black men are rhetorically and literally erased from the family before they even have a chance to begin one. Furthermore, in these discourses marriage is not only constructed as a white middle-class norm but also as a norm that-upolds the economic stability of society. Blacks, by contrast, are depicted as retreating from the marriage institution, which threatens the stability of society because it violates the norm.

The so-called “Black Marriage Crisis” ignores the fact that both Black and whites are marrying less and later in life. As evident from this literature, the fact that Blacks eventually marry later in the lifecycle—a common pattern across all social groups—is not acknowledged in the fear-based public discourses that problematize the declining Black marriage rates. Though, it is important to note that academic discourse makes the same claims as the media, but in a less panicked, more normalizing, tone.

The third strategy invokes the concept of scarcity, which has been examined in this context by scholars such as Staples (1978), Chapman (1986), and Lauman et. al (1994). Staples (1978) believes the sex-ratio imbalance results in women bargaining for Black men’s affection—usually through sex (Staples 1978). As a result, Black men and Black women ultimately compete “for social values that are becoming increasingly scarce” (Staples 1978:65). Chapman (1986),
however, contends that sexual vying comes at a cost for Black women (Chapman 1986). Aware of the unequal sex-ratio, it is assumed Black men use it to their (sexual) advantage, choosing *non-consensual* polyamory over monogamy, in which Black women resort to using sex to solidify relationships with men who they know are having overlapping relationships (Chapman 1986). Laumann et al. (1994), taking a sententious approach, blatantly call out these concurrent relationships as “serial polygamy,” which is more common over a longer period of time among Black men than white men. This finding holds especially true for Black men with higher levels of education, whose class status allows them certain social and sexual liberties. These pre-1990s analyses have given way to scholarly examinations at the dawn of the new Millennium that encourage professional Black women to acknowledge their own liberties: to date outside of their race rather than settling for unqualified Black men in a market of dwindling options (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Banks 2011; Sangweni 2010).

As you see, the understandings of Black relationships are largely gleaned from the point of view of Black women, while Black men’s sentiments can only be inferred from these quite thunderous, but one-sided perspectives that echo the beleaguered representations of Black men. However, this dissertation seeks to enrich the debate surrounding Black relationships by including a much-needed corrective—the perspectives of Black middle-class (BMC) men themselves. I choose to focus solely on BMC men because 1) low-income Black men have been used as a proxy to understand *all* Black men, and 2) BMC men’s voices have been especially inaudible in the cacophonous debate surrounding their relationship preferences, and 3) dominant discourses that shapes BMC men’s hopes, aspirations and practices in intimate relationships. Shifting the focus from problematizing marriage outcomes to the complexity of racialized, gendered, and classed exchanges, this dissertation reveals how the nuances of within-class variations expand our understandings of BMC men’s dating and relationship experiences beyond dominant narratives that implicate them as the source of the Black relationship crisis.

**The Research Question**

BMC men’s views on relationships cannot be seen in isolation from the general violence and oppression that they experience. Consider a popular 2015 *New York Times* article that proclaimed “1.5 million Black men are ‘missing’” from everyday lived experiences due to incarceration, homicide, and HIV-related deaths (Wolfers et al. 2015). This pervasive rhetoric surrounding Black men’s “disappearance” knows no class variation; Black men across the class spectrum are under siege. The so-called middle-class shield, once thought to be an impenetrable force to stave off the effects of enduring racism, is only as powerful as the color of the skin of the man who dons it. As a consequence of these adverse representations, Black men have suffered a “social death” (Patterson 1998) and become representationally bound to their oppression.

From coast to coast, the specter of Black male death pervades narratives about their

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2 Yet across class, Black women are the least likely of any group to marry outside of their race—93 percent of Black women are married to Black men (Todson and Bryant 2011). Two percent of Black women with a GED or less marry white men, while that percentage is only slightly higher (5.3 percent) for college-educated Black women (Todson and Bryant 2011).
capacity to love, feel loved, and for some, (eventually) become a father. The link between Black male crises—as a consequence of economic depression—and the dissolution of Black relationships is not merely a feature of poor, inner-city Black men’s lives but has also become a reality for Black men at every class level. Their economic uncertainty pervades every facet of Black life, from the threat of educational tracking (Alexander, Cook, and McDill 1978; Kershaw, 1992; Hanushek and Woessmann 2005), predatory lending (Williams, Nesiba, and McConnell 2005; Renuart, 2004; Carr & Kolluri 2001; Willis 2006), the racial pay gap (Huffman 2004; Tanzina 2016; Eileen 2016; Gene 2016), and countless other underhanded, racist tactics of subjugation.

At the same time, popular culture portrays Black men through a lens of “racial authenticity” which is based on controlling images of Blackness (e.g., manner of speech, style of hair and dress, where one resides) (Hill-Collins 2005; Johnson 2003; Eversley 2004) that are either imitated or avoided (Peterson 2005; Trilling 1971; Goffman 1959). Hence, racial authenticity is a measure of one’s Blackness against racial stereotypes; it refers to polarized perceptions of either “acting white” or being “too Black.” And, hence racial authenticity most often surfaces when it is called into question (McLeod, 1999). These dichotomous cultural assumptions are based on the opposition of Black inferiority and white superiority, both of which are inextricably bound by hegemonic definitions of masculinity. The ubiquitous images that accompany these stereotypes make the othering of Black men seem commonplace and characteristic of the everyday experience (Collins 2000; Jackson 2005; Ford 2011). In part, this symbolism is maintained by Black “arbiters” of racial authenticity whose possession of “legitimate” attributes of Blackness allow them to police the racial presentation of other Blacks. However, they do not realize that these internal assessments do not exist in isolation from the racial antagonisms of the white gaze. Blacks’ intra-racial assessments lack the hegemonic power that white cultural brokers have (Johnson 2011), and thus, these intra-racial evaluations uphold and reify essentialized forms of Blackness.

Hence, the construction of racial authenticity emerges through the duality of raced and classed limitations (Bendix 1997; Collins 2004; West 1993) wherein Black identity is legitimate, while white identity is invalid (Johnson 2011). The opposing perceptions of race and class become relevant once called into question (Peterson 2005; McLeod 1999), and have powerful implications on how other groups respond to the stereotypes of Black men as well as how Blacks respond to each other. Therefore—at least in public contexts—racial authenticity is dependent on evaluations that 1) are read through controlling images, 2) are in opposition to, yet defined by, dominant white norms, and 3) that only surface when racial authenticity is called into question. But do the same proxies of racial authenticity in public, white-dominated settings apply in the intimate context of BMC men’s relationships?

We know from the literature that to succumb to racially authentic tropes of Black masculinity is to fail (e.g., to wed, obtain a degree, be financially independent, etc.). For instance, low-income Black men are described as shying away from enduring relationships with women. They supposedly prove their manhood to their peers by having casual sex with many women, some of whom will become their “baby mommas” (hooks 2004a). The ability to impregnate a woman, rather than to actively father and provide for a family, is equated with manhood, as the latter is beyond their economic reach (Anderson 1999).

These constructions of Black men as non-monogamous, confident, and competitive

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3 Hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity of the powerful—white, upper-class men. It is not only defined against femininity but against all other types of masculinities (Connell 1995).
embody the ethos of racial authenticity. What happens, though, when Black men’s realities are not reflective of these racially authentic constructions? Are they still affected by the same stereotypical tropes? In white-dominated public settings, middle-class Blacks are often implored to disassociate themselves from the behaviors associated with poor Blacks as both a survival and protective social strategy (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Lamont 1992). Therefore, we see the ways that tropes of Blackness—as measured by racial authenticity—are omnipresent and always inform how BMC men perceive their sexual attractiveness vis-à-vis women. The link between racial authenticity and attraction in an intimate setting extends our understanding of the role authenticity plays in social contexts beyond popular culture (Hill-Collins 2005; Harrison 2008) and educational settings (Peterson-Lewis and Bratton 2004; Carter 2003). As this dissertation reveals, it structured who was sexually attracted to BMC men, whom they dated, as well as the type of relationships they had.

While marriage rates are useful to understand the changing demography of the BMC, it cannot tell us how relationships are formed and sustained. Therefore, I relate micro-level experiences of race and class in a variety of relationship types (e.g., dating, co-habitation, long-term, casual sex, etc.) with national-level discourses about the failure of Black men and relationships. In doing so, it draws on 80 in-depth interviews with BMC men as a primary informant and reference point to elucidate the meaning behind how they act, respond to, and perceive their intimate experiences. This dissertation asks one overarching question that is often debated, yet never directly asked of the BMC men in question: How do heterosexual BMC men perceive and negotiate their relationships against the backdrop of dominant narratives that foreground their alleged failure?

**Contextualizing Place: From Macro-Level Trends to Micro-Level Experiences**

In my initial research design, I hypothesized that local culture would be a distinguishing feature in shaping BMC men’s relationships decisions, which is why I recruited BMC men living in the San Francisco Bay Area and Atlanta Metropolitan Area (See Appendix A for a discussion of methods and case selection). Yet, in fact, the chapter on interracial relationships is the only part of this dissertation that highlights the relevance of place as my findings support existing research that shows interracial relationships occur more often in the West Coast than in any other region in the US because of its more heterogeneous demography and liberalism (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990). But, in all the other empirical chapters I combine respondents’ narratives across cities because place-based distinctions (e.g., West Coast versus the South) were far less important in explanations for BMC men’s understanding of their intimate relationships than their awareness of how they were represented. In other words, respondents’ narratives about relationships and intimacy were not merely about the demographic contours of Atlanta Metro or the Bay Area. They responded to dominant narratives about the Black relationship in “crisis”. More broadly, they also responded to events in Ferguson, Missouri, Sanford, Florida, or Baltimore, Maryland. The charged social atmosphere in which Black men are often the primary targets of social commentators affected how respondents spoke about the purpose and meaning of their relationships. That is, local or regional culture was less of a salient feature than the national assault on Black men—both rhetorically and physically—in cities across America. Thus, while many scholars emphasize place-based ethnography, my study of BMC men shows just that the importance of place is also contextual.

Instead, I show how BMC men’s experiences and negotiations of representations about Black masculinity vary by their own class diversity. Though all respondents were selected based
on their educational status (i.e., at least a college degree, through an inductive research design, I found within-class variation is most telling about how we understand the specificity of BMC men’s relationship experiences. Extending the concept of Black Heterogeneity to discuss the within-class diversity of the BMC, which I call “Black Middle-Class Heterogeneity,” shifts the empirical attention from relationship outcomes to processes that bear on the experiences of relationships. In the next section, I present how class been defined and used in studies of the BMC, followed by a discussion of how this dissertation uses a “BMC Heterogeneity” framework to complicate sociological explanations that hinge solely on class status. In particular, I examine how BMC men grapple with the conditions of their own class diversity in relationships as they have experienced upward mobility. Details of my sample, including demographic and generational characteristics can be found in Appendix A.

**DEFINING AND CHARTING THE DEMOGRAPHY OF THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS**

The concept of class has been widely debated in sociology since the inception of the discipline, and it continues to be. Historical and persistent racism, discrimination, and marginalization have made it difficult to define the Black middle-class, given that the white middle-class is the norm. Scholars writing on the BMC have wrestled with theoretical debates in developing their own criteria for measuring the Black middle-class. Marsh et al. (2007) created a “Black middle-class Index” (BMCi) that catalogs the varying definitions of the Black middle-class (see Table 1.1). These definitions rely on a range of variables such as education (Billingsley 1968; Frazier 1957; Bowser 2007) and occupational status (Wilson 1978; Collins 1983; Landry 1987) in conjunction with income (Drake and Horace 1962; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Landry 1987; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2005; Pattillo) and wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 1997). These variables are not mutually exclusive; some scholars more strongly emphasize certain characteristics over others to define the Black middle-class. However, all of these definitions draw a comparison between the BMC and the white middle-class.

**Table 1.1 Scholars’ Definitions of the Black Middle-Class from Pre-Civil Rights to Present**

<table>
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<th>Scholar(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Definition of the Black Middle Class</th>
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<tr>
<td>Frazier, E.F.</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Frazier defines the bourgeoisie as “those Negroes who derive their incomes principally from the services which they render as white-collar workers.” (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billingsley, A.</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Billingsley explains “the black middle class is a major achievement sustained by education, two earners, extended family, religion, and service to others.” (287)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAdoo, H.P.</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>McAdoo describes a certain level of education and financial security (139-140) and mobilization and support of the wider community and extended family necessary to attain middle-class status (147). McAdoo suggests that mobility would not have been possible without two incomes and could not be maintained without the continued employment of both parents.” (157)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson, W.J.</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Wilson associates the black middle class with “those who are employed in white-collar jobs and in craftsmen and foremen positions.” (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, S.</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Collins states that the movement of increased numbers of blacks into a wider range of professions and higher income brackets has created a “visible” black middle class (369).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landry, B.</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Landry defines the black middle class solely on occupation, including the professionals, managers (non-owners), sales workers, and clerical workers as well as small businessmen and some service occupations such as policemen, firemen, and dental assistants (7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver, M.</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Oliver and Shapiro stress the importance of wealth in determining class. For them “the middle class is characterized by a variety of white-collar occupations ranging from sales clerks and teachers to executives, professionals, and the self-employed.” They also include income (between $25,000 and $50,000) and many of the important factors such as education, experience, and skills in determining earnings (35).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattillo-McCoy, M.</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Pattillo-McCoy says that the middle class is determined by “a combination of socioeconomic factors (mostly income, occupation, and education) and normative judgments (ranging from where people live, to what churches or clubs they belong to, to whether they plant flowers in their gardens)” (13).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowser, B.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Bowser states that “the single most important ticket into the modern middle class is higher education.” (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The need to specifically define the BMC speaks to the racialized features of the American class system. The popular conception of the white middle-class is that it was developed through a strong work ethic. However, the development of the white middle-class dates back to the Roosevelt Administration and its creation of New Deal “social welfare” Programs that provided the economic base for whites’ upward mobility. Tax cuts, the Subsistence Homestead Program, and the GI Bill, to name just a few, were federal programs that provided low-wage workers with plots of land for subsistence farming and public housing that became a stepping-stone to homeownership. The 1944 GI Bill provided returning WWII veterans with money for school, loans for starting a business and financing home mortgages (Kelly, Power, and Cary 2016). In fact, by 1950, the “American subdivision” was born to provide private residential housing to a fast growing middle-class supported by these various subsidies and tax breaks (Whit 2014).

Even today, the government continues to subsidize the construction of (white) suburbs across the U.S. And, the development of the private car was not only a middle-class signifier, but profoundly shaped how land was allocated, what projects were funded, and how cities were designed (Whit 2014). But, let’s be clear about the segregated success of New Deal programs; they were a policy contradiction mixed with ideas about opportunity, individualism, and class mobility with a very sharp vein of racial exclusion (Wye 1972) that perpetuated and “served the interests of those with predominant power” (Whit 2014).

Today, the racialized impact of early federal programs is clear when you consider that, among Blacks, there are disproportionately higher numbers of the working class, the working poor, and the “jobless poor” (Wilson 1996). The middle strata are overwhelmingly lower-middle class (Pattillo 2000), lack wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Darity and Nicholson 2005), and continue to face redlining (Zenou and Boccard 2000; Rice 1996) and predatory lending (Willis 2006; Renuart 2010). Hence, middle-class Blacks occupy a “fragile market position” (Collins, 1983) concentrated in lower-middle class professions such as sales, clerical work, secondary teachers, and ministers, while middle-class whites are represented in more upper-class roles such as managers, executives, and entrepreneurs (Pattillo 2000).

This fragile position is directly the result of government intervention, which funneled college-educated Blacks into low-paying public sector positions that largely serviced a Black clientele, are vulnerable to budget cuts, and are entirely dependent upon the “soft money” of federal revenue. In this tenuous position, the Black middle class was subject to political changes as was seen in the 1980 Republican administration that altered federal policies that had previously helped Blacks to ascend (Collins 1983). This phenomenon is one of the reasons why income is less important than education in measuring BMC. Income is not a decisive measure of Blacks’ mobility patterns due to the racial pay gap and other race-based economic obstacles, such as the strain of lower-income family members (Heflin and Pattillo 2006) and a lack of wealth (Shapiro and Oliver 1995). However, to select BMC participants for my study, I chose to use college degree because, unlike the pre-civil rights era, it is one of the most important predictors of attaining a middle-class position today (Bowser 2007; Murphy and Pierce 1993; Billingsley 1992).

That position, however, is still fragile, and largely shaped by mobility patterns. Much of the BMC is “still first-generation middle-class” whose “high salaries and income will not automatically translate into wealth” (Billingsley 1992: 287). College-educated Blacks experience greater levels of economic instability in childhood and adulthood (Pattillo-McCoy 2005) than college-educated whites. This reality is especially crippling for Black men. Black men not only have higher rates of downward mobility than Black women, but among all racial groups they
have the most difficulty maintaining a middle-class position and the lowest rates of exceeding their parent’s class position (Acs 2011). Under Reaganomics, Black children raised middle-class in the 1970s and 1980s became poor adults (Mazumder 2014). As adults, they will make 80 percent of what their parents did. The rate of downward mobility is significantly higher for Blacks than for whites (Acs 2011); and thus, it is more difficult for Blacks to maintain middle-class status across generations. Since the 1970s, Black families, as with other social groups, have been squeezed above and below the middle-class. Figure 1.1 illustrates Blacks’ gains in mean income overtime; as the numbers show, their mean income is now what whites earned in 1979.

**Figure 1.1 Mean Income for Blacks and Whites, 1979-2014**

![Figure 1.1 Mean Income for Blacks and Whites, 1979-2014](image)

*Adapted from The Urban Institute, 2016

While the number of middle-income households has steadily decreased across social groups over the past forty years due to a greater share of higher and lower earners, Black adults experienced the largest increase during that period. This growth looks promising, but members of this class earn less and have less wealth (e.g., savings, stocks, property); as a result, they are less financially secure than and lag behind middle-class whites (Brown 2016). And while the Great Recession of 2007 had effects on all Americans upward mobility (e.g., for the first time since 1970, middle-income families are no longer the majority), Blacks, who lack wealth, were disproportionately affected by the recession’s consequences of unemployment and foreclosure (Pew Research 2015).

In the next section, I discuss how Blacks’ lack of intergenerational wealth has shaped the social mobility patterns of Black men in particular. White normative renditions position marriage as a pathway to upward mobility, or a mechanism with which to maintain one’s current class position. There is both an assumption that low-income Blacks will not marry due to their absence from the labor market, and also that downward mobility among Blacks can be attributed to the absence of marriage. Yet, until the mid-1960s, Blacks were just as likely to marry as whites (Fitch and Ruggles 2000), while their children were also more likely to suffer downward mobility (Davis Jr 1995; Attewell et al. 2004; Landry and Marsh 2011; White 2015). So, the
question becomes: if marriage does not produce the same patterns of upward mobility for Blacks due to their history of generational and chronic instability, why does the marriage and family literature continue to focus on marriage as the solution to Blacks’ economic precariousness?

BLACK MEN AND MOBILITY

Scholars researching the BMC have focused on the years between 1962 and 1973 because this is the period when the BMC saw the greatest growth and Black men made the largest gains. As Wilson’s (1978) work shows, this growth created class cleavages that did not exist in the Black population before 1960. Between 1962 and 1973, intergenerational mobility for Black men, largely as a result of public sector jobs, peaked (Hout 1984). And yet, one’s father’s occupation was not as strong a predictor of class as the distribution of job opportunities available to middle-class Black men (Ibid.)—indicating that it was difficult to solidify, or pass down, BMC status and is, rather, more dependent on structural factors affecting race. And although Black men’s mobility rates continued to climb after 1973, they did so at a slower pace (Davis 1995).

These mobility trends reveal that compared to white men, Black men who reach middle-class status have difficulty maintaining it over their lifetime or across generations. Despite increasing gains in educational attainment among Blacks, middle-class parents are aware that the economic gains that allowed them to climb the social ladder may not be available to their children (Pattillo 2000). White men and white women raised in middle-class families, by contrast, are more “socially” advantaged than their Black counterparts because whites are more likely to have working fathers, have a college education, and be married (Acs 2011).

Overall, Black men’s gains have always been more modest than those of white men, which can be attributed in part to the unequal transfer of wealth. And even once Blacks do attain a middle-class position, not only is the amount of wealth they amass lower than whites, but the type of wealth they accumulate is of the most tenuous kind. In 2010, Black household’s total wealth was $154, 258, of which almost 50 percent was concentrated in their primary residence, while whites’ total wealth of $783, 224 was distributed across their home residence, other properties, business accounts, and other assets. Compared to Blacks, only 27 percent of whites’ wealth was from their primary residence (Kochhar and Richard Fry 2014).

The racial wealth gap between Blacks and whites also stems from lending patterns. Blacks are more likely to loan money to relatives, simply because they tend to have poorer extended kin. These family loans are returned at a lower rate than those extended by whites to their relatives, and when returned are often less than the original amount. Furthermore, when receiving financial support from relatives, Black families receive a smaller amount than white families. It is important to note that it is not necessarily the act of lending that decreases the BMC’s overall share of wealth, but rather that their higher rates of giving heighten the problem of financial security among Blacks (O’Brien 2012).

Due to BMC’s lack of wealth and lending patterns, they have greater difficulty maintaining intra-generational mobility (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). For example, the BMC was hit particularly hard by the 2007-2011 Great Recession. Not only did their earnings fall, but they were unable to weather the economic maelstrom because their wealth was tied to homes that went underwater when the housing bubble burst. While it is true that the number of middle-income white households also fell, they had more wealth and financial support from family

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members, which prolonged their economic survival during the Recession. Blacks had fewer resources, resulting in a tenuous middle-class position that affects their present economic security. Considering this tenuousness, I approach the study of the BMC in a way that highlights this variability. Extending the legacy of W.E.B. DuBois’ hallmark work on within-group differences among Blacks, I suggest BMC Heterogeneity as a theoretical frame to understand the nuance of BMC men’s experience as Black and middle-class.

BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS HETEROGENEITY & THE THEORETICAL COMPLEXITY OF CLASS

W.E.B. DuBois’ legacy of research, which emphasized the heterogeneity, or intra-racial distinctions among and between Blacks at the turn of the century, is both at the heart of this dissertation’s theoretical impetus, and vital to any study seeking to illuminate the wide-ranging realities of Black Americans. This dissertation is situated in the tradition of Black scholarship that refutes monolithic concepts of Blackness. Research shows that Blacks “do not experience race as a single monolithic state” (Celious & Oyserman 2001), but that within-group distinctions matter in determining social outcomes of wealth accumulation, educational status, and income (Hughes & Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991). The focus on group heterogeneity moves away from the overemphasis on Black-white comparisons, and circumvents the problem of generalizing the experiences of all Blacks.

In the early days of sociology, heterogeneity was characteristic of scholarship that sought to understand and explain how varied the urban American landscape was (see Giddings 1896; Spencer 1896; Simmel 1895). However, DuBois’s contemporaries did not address the role of race and racism in their theorizations about differences in society. Hence, DuBois drew on the concept of heterogeneity to demonstrate how Black communities, though marginalized, were as complex and diverse as the white ethnic groups that captured the imaginary of his white male contemporaries. As Marcus Hunter (2015) writes, DuBois employed the concept to “challenge conventional wisdom” (227) by exposing the “consequential mix of racial tensions and intraracial distinctions” to measure the varying relations among Blacks (225).

Continuing in W.E.B. DuBois’ legacy of analytically emphasizing “Black heterogeneity,” as Marcus Hunter (2015) has called it, contemporary qualitative work on Blacks, like DuBois, points to its “varied forms of socialization and experience” (Carter 2005: vii) related to residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Drake and Cayton 1945; Charles 2006; Hunter 2013), urban change, and more recently, research on the BMC (Wilson 1987, 1996; Anderson 1990; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2007; Lacy 2007; Robinson 2014). Research on the mobility patterns of Blacks immediately before and after the Civil Rights Movement has revealed that as Blacks’ intergenerational mobility increased, within-class differences emerged. Contemporary studies have shown this is a continuing trend: the range of Blacks’ middle-class experiences is wider than that of whites. In particular, literature on the BMC has demonstrated that their residential realities are different from those of whites (Pattillo 1999), and that there is within-class variation across residential patterns (Lacy 2007). Scholars have typically examined the nuances of BMC experience by focusing on their residential mobility patterns (Massey et al. 1994). Middle-class Blacks tend to be downwardly mobile, residually, despite socioeconomic status (Massey et al. 1994), which challenges Wilson’s (1991) optimistic outlook that the BMC were able to escape segregated areas and move into more integrated, upwardly mobile neighborhoods (Pattillo 2005). The BMC’s continued segregation in predominately Black, lower-income neighborhoods do not have a significant effect on their income or employment,
though this outcome may be because formally educated Blacks are more likely to move to predominately white neighborhoods (South and Crowder 1998).

While these heterogeneous features are used to examine neighborhood context (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Lacy 2007; Sharkey 2014), school choices (Allen 2010), parenting practices (Lareau 2003), and level of integration into predominately white environments (Smith and Moore 2000), their effect on the relationship patterns and decisions of the BMC have yet to be explored. Doing so is a theoretical necessity, as the study of the BMC is inadequate without an analysis of its heterogeneity. Below I consider the two axes of variation that emerged from the data: class trajectory and generational cohort. I emphasize how BMC Heterogeneity shapes the experience of class, thereby not only complicating how scholars and the public think about what it means to be positioned as Black and middle-class, but also how they experience relationships.

**CLASS TRAJECTORY**

There is a lacuna of research on how mobility patterns (as an independent variable) shape the structure of mate selection and relationship opportunities (as dependent variables) for BMC men. I contend that individual mobility shapes the kinds of intimate relationships people have. The downward mobility patterns of the BMC characterize its tenuousness, which pervades every facet of social life from the higher ratio of lower-middle class Blacks (Pattillo 2000), continued residential segregation in predominately Black and economically disenfranchised neighborhoods, lower college-graduation rates, and lack of wealth. These structural barriers have been linked to the BMC’s relationship strains, but the mobility patterns which creates said tensions have gone relatively unexamined.

I distinguish between two intra-generational trajectories of mobility: respondents who had “consistent” experiences of class advantage (i.e., those who had been middle-class for a longer time) from those whose class trajectory was “steep” (i.e., those who recently moved from poor to middle-class status). The “consistent” pattern is characterized by a stable middle-class trajectory from adolescence into adulthood, the “steep” trajectory by respondents who first achieved middle-class status as adults. Like in other sociological work on social mobility, I used occupational status to infer respondents’ parent’s class position. This distinction provides insight into the finer gradations of class position that complicate how we think about the contemporary patterns of BMC men’s relationships. A focus on their intra-generational mobility patterns allows me to glean how their relationship decision-making is connected to the evolution of their race and class experiences from childhood to adulthood.

A steep trajectory respondent may have parents who struggled to make ends meet, worked minimum-wage jobs, and may have even required government assistance. However, through college-education and access to higher-paying jobs, such a respondent has become newly middle-class. Consistent trajectory respondents may have parents who were employed by the State, in service-oriented positions, blue-collar occupations, or as small business owners, while others on this class trajectory may have parents who have as much education as they do. I consider, therefore, how the relationship experiences and decisions of BMC men are linked to their class trajectory patterns, but with a specific emphasis on the familial bonds they observed and experienced in their upbringings. These familial bonds “tend to shape the attitudes, habits of being and modes of interacting that we bring to romantic partnerships” (hooks 2004b). Other scholars claim that early socialization sets the stage for the nature of adult relationships (Franklin 1984). Often focusing on low-income Black relationships, this perspective links upbringings with future strains on adult relationships. However, the literature on BMC adult relationships tends to
prioritize market contours and mate availability. Thus, we do not have a complete understanding of how the early intimate bonds of BMC men have shaped their approach to and experiences in their adult relationships. This dissertation fills this gap by using a qualitative approach to examine BMC men’s intra-generational mobility patterns, or their movement up and down the socioeconomic ladder during their lifetime.

The dominant methodological approach to study social mobility patterns uses cross-sectional surveys to investigate the intergenerational parent-child pathways of class (Beller and Hout 2006). This method, however, rarely capture an individual’s movement during their life course (Sorensen 1975). Furthermore, quantitative approaches use occupational status between father and son as a proxy for social mobility, thus failing to account for men who are between jobs. Furthermore, much of the literature focuses on the relationship between father and son because 1) more data exists and 2) women’s mobility patterns are a reflection of gender segregation in the market and subject to economic shifts more so than men are (Schwenkenberg 2015; Payne & Abbott 1990).

Other perspectives argue that women’s mobility is not a question of labor market segmentation, but rather women’s mobility patterns can best be explained through assortive mating. Scholars find assortive mating plays a crucial role for married daughter’s, in particular (Black and Devereux, 2010). Women’s intergenerational mobility comes not just from their mothers’ but also from the “elasticity of her husband’s earnings with respect to her parents’ income is just as great as the elasticity of her own earnings” (Chadwick and Solon 2002). Whereas single women have higher “intergenerational elasticity” because they do not experience the “cross-wage effect” between their father and a husband’s earnings. In other words, a husband’s income enables married women to move out of their origin class at a higher rate than single women. The inclusion of men’s status to examine women’s mobility patterns suggests that labor market segmentation still plays a role. However, it also demonstrates the ways the design of social mobility studies is beholden to the anachronistic, male-centered methods of the 1970s when such analyses began. This remains true even though two-parent household incomes have grown (Pew Research Center 2015b) alongside a spike in female-headed households, especially among Black households (Pew Research Center 2015c).

This male-centered focus also obscures women who are equal contributors or breadwinners of the household. Furthermore, the notion that women’s rates of labor market participation is not true of Black women who have long worked outside the home. While scholars acknowledge the racial nuances of both the labor market and intergenerational transmittance, they have not always been able to account for variable household structures using the survey method. There is an abundance of statistical data that outlines the trends of mobility patterns across race, class, and gender, but there is less data to “explain how and why people follow particular life paths” (Bertaux and Thompson 1997). The qualitative approach to social mobility, by contrast, addresses this methodological shortcoming by gathering data on every family member—not just men or currently employed men—to examine why and how certain aspects of class (e.g., wealth,

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5 Sociologists typically use occupational categories because it is a more reliable measure of class because people can remember with a higher degree of accuracy compared to detailing their parents’ dollar amounts.

6 Assortive mating refers to positive correlations between the social characteristics of spouses (e.g. class, race, age, religion, etc.), in which individuals tend to select partners who are similar to them, which is especially true of today where patterns of hypergamy have declined (Rose, 2011).

7 Intergenerational elasticity, commonplace in economists’ examinations of mobility, refers to the extent to which an individual’s income levels are able to change across generations. The higher the elasticity number, the more difficult it is for the individual to move from their origin class to a destination class.
occupational skills, social networks) are differently transmitted between family members and across generations (Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002). And yet, neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches have thoroughly examined men’s intra-generational patterns, particularly worthwhile among BMC men, who have more difficulty achieving mobility due to the lack of intergenerational wealth transmission and more tenuous wealth patterns (e.g., the majority of wealth concentrated in homeownership).

**Generational Cohorts**

In determining respondents’ class trajectory patterns, I also take into consideration what it meant to be middle-class when they were growing up and when they became adults. Based on the age range of respondents (25-55), which corresponds with two generational age cohorts: "The Millennials" and "Generation X.” As of 2015, Millennials (ages 18-34), who number 75.4 million, are the largest generational age cohort, surpassing the 74.9 million-strong Baby Boomers (ages 51-69) (US Census Bureau, 2015 Population Estimates). Generation X (ages 35-50) is expected to outnumber the Boomers in a decade as well (US Census Bureau, 2015 Population Estimates). As it relates to my sample, Millennials demographically include not-so-recent college graduates who are at least 25 years-old, born in the 1980s and 1990s, and came of age in the 1990s and 2000s; Generation Xers were born at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement but came of age in the era of Affirmative Action; they are no older than 55 years-old. For each generational cohort, I briefly consider their social, political, and economic ethos. The Generation Xers were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, significant economic, political, and cultural shifts occurred that were instrumental in expanding the Black class structure. In the era just before their coming-of-age, the 1950s and 1960s, graduation rates remained low (Heckman and LaFontaine 2007), and blue-collar, service-oriented, and government occupations could provide a lower-middle to a middle-class way of life. Thus, during this period, middle-class status was not as strongly correlated with educational attainment as it is today and began to be with the Generation Xers.

Economically, this generation experienced a recession in the early 1980s, followed by substantial growth in the 1990s. This growth largely benefited those already at the top, widening the fissure between the “haves” and “have nots” (Milanovic 2012;Autor et al. 2008). This concentrated growth was, however, coupled with the wide-scale rollout of affirmative action programs/policies, helping to move Blacks into white-collar positions (albeit, largely concentrated in the public sector) and up the class ladder. In this way, affirmative action policies of the 1970s were instrumental in the formation of a Black middle-class faction that, unlike its Post-Emancipation and Jim Crow antecedents, was for the first time sizeable enough for comparison with middle-class whites (Wilson 1993). Despite these structural gains, this generation was plagued by the crack epidemic of the 1970s and 1980s, which had the severest impact on inner-cities (Dunlap and Johnson 1992; Curtis 1998). Blacks in the inner-city were disproportionately affected by the infiltration of this drug into their lives, which led to an upsurge of violent crimes, child-abandonment, dissolution of the Black family, and increased rates of incarcerated Black men (Western 2006; Pettit and Western 2004).

In contrast, the Millennial generation has been greatly shaped by the effects of the 2008 recession, which has resulted in record rates of unemployment among recent college graduates (Perlata 2014). Of all the generations, Millennials are the most educated but also have the highest unemployment rates and are most likely to live with their parents (Deal et al. 2010). (Still, this generation is the most mobile; many are transplants to the cities in which they reside (RealtyTrac
Despite these economic barriers, Blacks of this generation have moved into management and senior-level positions in both public and, to a lesser extent, private industries, and more Blacks than ever have been admitted to top-tier, predominately white universities (Cose 2011). While affirmative action has largely been phased out across University campuses, many Ivy League schools offer full scholarships for low-income students, which is not affirmative action per se but certainly another non-explicitly racial form of favoring disadvantaged groups. Socially, this generation has seen the emergence of a new movement, “Black Lives Matter,” as a response to a rising number of deadly assaults on unarmed Black men by the police and “citizen-protectors” (Carlson, 2015). The prevalence of this movement is noteworthy in an era that touts itself as “post-racial,” despite the fact that the racial wealth and pay gaps remain quite pronounced (Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Taylor et al. 2011). Looking at this generational history alongside their social mobility provides a substantive context for their micro-level race, class, and relationship experiences.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter 2 shows how perceptions of racial authenticity frame BMC men’s dating and relationship experiences with Black women. In particular, it demonstrates the difficulty of embodying Black masculinity and (white-defined) middle-class status. All BMC men navigate the tension between stereotypes of Black men and the expectations of the white middle-class, but the experience and negotiation of these perceptions vary by class trajectory pattern. And, while Black relationships are touted as a racial safe haven, I show how BMC men continue to feel surveilled by the same tropes that characterize their everyday experiences in predominately white settings.

Chapter 3 complicates existing research that suggests college-educated, high-earning Black men are more likely to have interracial relationships than Black women. These cross-sectional surveys rarely capture the trajectory of the same individuals over their life course, move us beyond their marital outcomes with white women, or distinguish within-group differences among interracially dating Black men. This chapter shows how the diversity of middle-class men’s social mobility patterns, timing of exposure to predominately white social environments, and racialized dating experiences are oft-overlooked but necessary to understand how—and not just why—Black middle-class men date outside of their race.

Chapter 4 examines the fastest-growing segment of the BMC, the “Love Jones” cohort of never-married, college-educated singles. Extending the frameworks of status exchange theory and masculinity theory, I consider how managing masculinity complicates the way BMC men perceive the benefits of marriage. This chapter finds that for the middle class, while marriage success is conditional on maintaining class status, BMC men cannot take their class status for granted. The “status” rewards of marriage are more tenuous for BMC men because, given the ongoing structural constraints, they feel pressure and uncertainty about their success in sustaining the producer-provider role. Hence, this chapter reveals how discussions about the causes of the differential marriage rates between the BMC and white middle-class (WMC) have implicitly assumed a white male hegemonic perspective that makes class status unproblematic for men with a college degree. Yet, I reveal BMC men do not understand marriage as the middle-class status guarantee that underlies the assumptions of the discursive panic around its decline.

In the conclusion, I revisit how questioning dominant narratives about BMC marriage delays from the perspectives of Black men challenges what we think we know about the barriers to relationship formation and sustenance among the BMC. It reiterates the need to move from
discrete, largely pattern-specific understandings of Black relationships to the more intimate, processual aspects of a relationship. I also discuss how it is the comparative leverage of this dissertation—in particular, a consideration of BMC men’s social mobility patterns, generational cohort, and network composition—that quells any confusion about why BMC men who are regarded as having class status discuss making relationship decisions from both a position of advantage and disadvantage. I go beyond typical explanations that highlight relationship outcomes as solely a matter of inequality patterns to show how the subjective experiences of categorical distinctions are not merely negotiated as status markers but are also tied up with the benefits and limitations of racial authenticity.
Chapter 2:  
The Politics of Blackness: The Role of Racial Authenticity in Black Relationships

INTRODUCTION  
The story—more specifically the struggle—of Black relationships is often told through racialized and gendered cultural scripts that reinforce the myth of racial authenticity. Take, for example, sociological inquiries that have examined how structural factors (e.g., lack of wealth, inconsistent employment, etc.) make it difficult for low-income Blacks to realize the matrimonial norm (Edin and Keflas 2005; Wilson 1978). Furthermore, as the BMC has grown, research portends a similar fate of growing marriage barriers (Chiteji and Hamilton 2002; Clarke 2011; Banks 2011). Black Feminist perspectives move beyond marriage patterns to show how the “love and trouble” tradition of Black relationships (Hill-Collins 2005; hooks, 2004b) is not merely an outcome of structural conditions that sociologists typically highlight, but also about the internalization of “authentic” tropes of Blackness that shape how Black men and Black women assess and relate to each other in romantic relationships. That is, Blackness is not only critiqued through the cultural lens of racial authenticity, but BMC men’s desirability is entangled in the “racially authentic” tropes of Black masculinity. Black Studies, of which Critical Race Theory is at the heart, similarly argues that though antagonisms exist between Black men and Black women, they should be thought of as a symptom of white supremacy (Karenga 1979; 1982). While this interdisciplinary mosaic offers various causes for BMC “relationship troubles,” each perspective hone in on how the crux of racially authentic Black men adversely affects Black relationships (see Table 2.1).

| **Table 2.1 Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Failure of Black Relationships** |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| **Discipline & Theoretical Perspective** | **Problem** | **Solution(s)** | **Limitation(s)** |
| Sociology (Structuralism) | Limited options of marriageable Black men lead to problem of marriageability | Address the social and economic conditions of Black men; Black women seek interracial partners | Emphasizes marriage (as economic solution) over other relationship types |
| Gender Studies (Black Feminism) | Patriarchal norms pit Black men and Black women against each other | Black women and Black men must seek to end patriarchy because they are both dominated by it | Intersectional agenda, yet sees categories as essential; solution is based on resisting gendered categorizations |
| Black Studies (CRT) | White supremacy results in antagonisms between Black men and Black women, which leads to disillusionment with relationships and family | End white supremacy | Prioritizes effect of race over other social divisions |
Hence, this chapter draws on the broader literature of racial authenticity introduced in Chapter 1 to examine the role it plays in the intimate context of Black male-Black female relationships. I bear two empirical questions in mind: *How do the tensions between the stereotypes of Black men and (white) middle-class expectations shape BMC men’s relationship experiences with Black women? And in particular, how do heterosexual BMC men make sense of this contradiction?* While all relationships experience difficulties by being situated within a “culture of domination” (hooks 2004b), the Black response to these difficulties is unlike that of the mainstream culture. Blacks implicitly—and uniquely—expect that relationships will undo the psychological, emotional, and social impairments of racism (hooks 2004b). These differing expectations derive from a shared racial experience in which relationships are viewed as a coveted space of racial understanding. However, as my theoretical model will show based on BMC men’s perceptions of Black women’s perceptions of them, Black relationships may not undo racism but rather reveal that Black men and Black women see each other through the lens of white hegemonic definitions of an oppressed Blackness. This, in turn, creates barriers to relationship formation and sustenance.

For example, “acting white” translated to a conciliatory posturing that left respondents feeling that their ability to take the lead in the relationship was compromised because they were perceived as “less dominant.” Being thought of as “too Black,” on the other hand, indicated that BMC men came off as too aggressive and hypersexual, likening them to low-income tropes of Blackness. Navigating between these poles affects relationships: the twin perceptions of racial authenticity and attractiveness dictate 1) the degree of emotional intimacy, 2) undermine or endorse masculinity, and 3) impede or facilitate relationship formation.

BMC men’s class status mediated these perceptions. For example, Consistent Trajectory respondents were more often regarded as “acting white,” while Steep Trajectory respondents were often considered “too Black.” Both perceptions were connected to assessments of their sexual attractiveness. BMC men’s racial identity, middle-class status, and sexual attractiveness are therefore interrelated factors in how they are perceived. These collective perceptions are characterized by what I refer to as either “Emasculated Blackness” or “Besieged Blackness” (see Figure 2.2). Both poles—Emasculated and Besieged Blackness—are perceptual extremes that not only characterize BMC men’s relationship experiences with Black women but also either threaten or reify dominant narratives of racial authenticity.
**Figure 2.2 Emasculated & Besieged Blackness: The Poles of Intimate Policing**

![Diagram showing the poles of intimate policing](image)

*Emasculated Blackness*

Respondents outside the one-dimensional representation of Black masculinity based on “ghetto-specific practices” risked being described with emasculating rhetoric, such as “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), that diminished how sexually attractive they felt they were to Black women. These perceptions are informed by stereotypes of middle-class banality, which construct such BMC men as antithetical to the more alluring working-class and poor Blacks. Hence, the BMC is “raced as Black but cultured as White” (Harris and Khana 2010: 650).

In the context of relationships, it is not possible for BMC men to be authentically Black while demonstrating white or “mainstream” aesthetics without compromising both their racial status and sexual attractiveness. Black middle-class sexuality is scripted not against white sexuality but rather alongside it as a diluted form of working class Black sexuality. That is, Black middle-class men are portrayed as “sissies” or unassuming “sidekicks” (Hill-Collins 2000). These softer (read: less aggressive) qualities are what enable their economic success, which sends the message that Black men achieve middle-class status by relinquishing their heterosexuality. Therefore, a threat to BMC men’s racial authenticity is also a threat to their masculinity. Such threats were most characteristic of Persistent Trajectory men and early-exposure Steep Trajectory men.

*Besieged Blackness*

We might think about Besieged Blackness as a symbolic “sword of Damocles,” in which there is always the looming threat of being perceived as “too Black.” In the intimate realm, this translates to being thought a player, noncommittal, etc., attractiveness read through the lower class-based tropes of baby daddies, absentee fathers, and pimps. At this juncture, it is important to note that this framework does not intend to pathologize lower-class Blacks as a hegemonic entity that impedes the progress of the BMC. Rather, I claim that the perception of that group impacts BMC men’s experiences of intimacy.

For example, Steep Trajectory men who were often perceived as “too Black” linked this perception to an erasure of their current class status. And both Steep and Consistent class trajectory respondents discussed the value of a *stylistic* “ghetto” language, dress, and other accouterments enhancing their racial authenticity and thus attractiveness. Yet only Steep Trajectory respondents actually inhabited at point point—rather than stylistically imitated—the dominant narrative of poverty, crime, and violence that shapes the perception of their race and
class-based performances. These social markers denote racial authenticity; and as such, Besieged Blackness is titillating because there is little glamor (depicted) in a middle-class lifestyle compared to the noble struggle of poverty. However, the allure of racial authenticity has public and private limitations. While Black authenticity may be thrilling and valued within private relationships, in public, white-majority settings, it risks obscuring class status.

**Beyond Extremes**

The theoretical model I have explained lays out two extreme perceptions, but might there be a middle ground? Yes, but it is the *ideal* type: the college-educated bachelor with no children or the married father who is considered racially authentic because he exudes the “stylistic affectations” of the Black thug or gangster rapper, for example, through dress, slang, and cultural competency. Though he does not actually engage in the behavior associated with those tropes, his presentation of self is culturally legible as racially authentic. As such, neither his class status nor his sexual attractiveness is questioned.

To one side of this ideal type is, to recap, Emasculated Blackness, with its perceptual transgressions of racial authenticity and stereotypes such as the platonic “sidekick” or “sissy.” Men in this category may be perceived as non-sexual or “gay” because of their cultural or stylistic deviation from the normative guidelines of racial authenticity connected, as we have seen, to sexual attractiveness. And to the other side of the ideal type is Besieged Blackness, with its perceptions that reify racial authenticity—best encapsulated by tropes such as the “thug,” “player,” or “baby daddy.” On this end of the spectrum, BMC men are perceived to have stylistic elements that denote racial authenticity; yet at the same time, these culturally legible semblances of Blackness come with the presumption of deviant sexual and social behaviors. For example, the “thug” who engages in illicit behavior is relatedly assumed to be a womanizer, non-monogamous, and an absentee father.

It is important to note that even men who were not initially seen through the prism of Besieged Blackness became a “nigga” if it was discovered they had cheated, were seeking a divorce, or were merely attempting to exert power in the relationship. This was not used as a term of endearment but rather as a castigation. To be told “you a nigga” was not uncommon if the woman felt betrayed or the relationship’s demise was near, hinting at the inevitability of BMC men succumbing to the stereotypical characterizations of Black masculinity (e.g., too aggressive, threatening, licentious, etc.). Thus, Black women’s perceptions of BMC men are tied up with the general stereotypical inscriptions of *all* Black men.

In closing, this section presented a comprehensive theoretical framework that illustrates BMC men’s perceptions of Black women’s perceptions of them. The stereotypes that Black men perceive Black women to believe uphold mainstream inscriptions of Black men. That is, BMC men are expected to meet sexual standards based on stereotypes of lower-class Black men and financial and professional standards based on the white middle-class American dream. The former reinforces slavery-based images of the Black man, while the latter buttresses the notion that success is based on merit, regardless of structural and racial inequalities.

In the remainder of this chapter, I show how the tension between stereotypes of Black men and expectations of the white middle class affect the way BMC men think Black women view them. It outlines how BMC men navigate these two contrasting tropes in their relationships with Black women—in particular, the difficulty of both embodying Black maleness and middle-classness. Let me make clear that this process is not about forging a new and emerging self but rather about defending or endorsing racial authenticity. BMC men’s feelings of surveillance
make for a high-stakes game of intimacy characterized by negotiations among racial authenticity, class status, and sexual attractiveness.

**FINDINGS**

“[In] regards to finding love in America, having love for someone with the same melanin as you, has turned into a luxury.” (Montague, Respondent)\(^8\)

Montague’s philosophizing about the luxury of Black Love is consistent with Black Feminist perspectives that highlight the distorted media lens through which Black men and Black women perceive and evaluate “the worth of their potential sexual partners” (Hill-Collins 2000: 255). The public concern about Black relationships focuses on cultural stability, but the interpersonal experience has Black men and women walking a tightrope of intimacy as they are buffeted by racialized and sexualized tropes that would presumably destabilize them. Still, respondents across class trajectory patterns, much like the women whom they dated, wanted to (ultimately) be with someone who identified as Black, and thus had a shared understanding of their racial struggles.

Some respondents like Montague, 40, remain optimistic yet frustrated with how white racism creates Black intra-racial fissures that impede intimacy between Black men and Black women. This racialized dynamic is characterized by the unspoken doom of Black relationships, which is by and large undergirded by the belief that Black men have already or will succumb to the tropes of Black masculinity. As respondents across class trajectory patterns reveal, it is not a matter of *if* but *when* they will supposedly succumb to these limited tropes.

Their class trajectory pattern determines which stereotype BMC men are seen to embody. Respondents who have been middle-class over time (i.e., Consistent Trajectory) fall within the **Emasculated Blackness** category, while respondents who achieved a middle-class status as young adults (i.e., Steep Trajectory), can be characterized by **Besieged Blackness**. The following sections discuss how both groups of BMC men either threaten or reify perceptions of racial authenticity, as well as how they make sense of these tropes in their relationships with Black women.

**CHALLENGING RACIAL AUTHENTICITY: CONSISTENT TRAJECTORY RESPONDENTS & THE THREAT OF EMASculated BLACKNESS**

Montague grew up the youngest of seven children, shuttling between the Bay Area and Los Angeles when his parents split. He went down South to college, where, to make money as a “side hustle,” he began cutting hair. He now owns and operates a barbershop in the Bay Area. In our interview, he explained a scenario that illustrates the contrast between the perception of race and the expectation of class in his relationships with Black women:

I have a friend named James [who is Mexican]. And, I was like, “Being a Mexican man is different for you from being a Black man. Because if you are a Mexican man, you could go out there on that corner and sell those flowers, sell those cherries and all that shit. And you are still going to get the same loving when you get home.” I said, “I cannot stand out there on that corner and sell the flowers and sell the cherries.” Dave Chappelle said he was at Disneyland, and he

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\(^8\) To protect the anonymity of respondents, their names, colleges attended, places of employment, and (previous) partners’ names have been given pseudonyms.
knocked a Mickey Mouse head off of the thing, and he was like, “It’s a Mexican!” A Mexican man could be Mickey Mouse and still get the same loving. A Black man cannot be Mickey Mouse and get the same loving. This ain’t Disneyland loving!

Montague’s reasoning clearly hinges on cultural differences and a host of other assumptions, but it also points to the narrow scope of Blacks’ class ascendancy. Although he feels himself to be a part of the Talented Tenth, he laments that his profession—a skilled trade—is “not enough” to satisfy the prescripts for what it means to be in the Black gentry. That is, while his educational attainment may generate interest from degree Black women, his occupation influences whether Black women’s interest in him is sustained. He feels that he cannot be Mickey Mouse or an Urban Farmer because not only do these positions not satisfy white middle-class standards of reputable employment, but they also compromise his sexual attractiveness. This reveals how sexual attractiveness is linked to class status—not merely having a college degree or being employed—and trumps a favorable perception of racial authenticity.

When asked if he felt similarly in his inter-racial relationships, Montague felt that not only are the “demands” about his occupational status less frequently brought up, which he speculates is due to Black men being exoticized by non-Black women, but that he does not tolerate intimate policing from non-Black women. This is true for other respondents, who discuss being at “ease” with white women, in particular due to their lack of expectations and demands. Thus, relationships with Black women feel more demanding because their expectations of stability and status are different.

Thirty-year-old Afolabi makes a similar point. As an ex-Wall Street employee and now the CEO of a fledgling production company, he has noticed a shift in Black women’s interest in him. He mentions that while living in New York, he dated a plethora of beautiful, single, educated Black women: “[But] I came back home [to Oakland] and … women were less excited about me.” Probing for possible regional differences, he speculates that it was because he “was on the Hawk [making good money] in New York.” He returned home between jobs, transitioned to working full-time on his company, and entered the Bay Area dating scene with his Ivy League degree, some money saved up, and a new, independent business venture. However, he felt that Black women were more interested in what he could provide for them—on dates or in the future. Partly, he put that pressure on himself because he enjoyed being able to “spend big” on dates, ordering bottles of wine and paying for a multi-course meal—things he couldn’t necessarily do in that transitional phase. Ultimately, however, he ended up beginning an inter-racial relationship with a “friend of a friend” who downplayed his list of accomplishments and current employment status while enjoying the casual engagement. Most importantly, this woman celebrated what had typically been considered a cultural deviation in his relationships with Black women: “acting white” by dressing in a preppy style and liking certain kinds of music and popular culture.

This feeling of having to be “great right now,” as Camara, 27, puts it, arises from the tension between the perception of what it means to be authentically Black and the expectations of white middle-class standards. Camara grew up in a close-knit, revolutionary family. His parents, now professors, were founding members of the African Revolutionary Party. With two years left of his PhD program and a flourishing start-up business, he quizzically ponders, “I got a degree from a good school, I am a third-part owner of my company, why can’t I just be myself?” And Albin, who grew up in the Bay Area, attended the Black Panther’s primary school, and turned 50 shortly after I interviewed him, similarly questions why he cannot “feel comfortable that I can be myself in a certain way and not feel judged by anybody.” Both Albin and Camara
have felt judged because their cultural pastimes challenge stereotypical expectations of Black men. Albin performs modern dance and drama, while Camara loves anime and computer science. They have had jobs that reflect these interests, but despite their gainful employment, they have felt that degreed Black women “don’t take [them] seriously.” Therefore, they must foreground their knowledge of and interest in Black culture to seize and maintain the attention of Black women.

Other respondents similarly describe feeling that Black women were not sexually attracted to them because they “acted white.” Take, for instance, Gamon, 26, who grew up in a predominantly white suburban Southern town and moved to an affluent, predominately Black neighborhood right as he started middle school. He reveals that “it was probably the first time I experienced stereotypes based on my race, based on who I was.” This intra-racial scrutiny caused him to be less “comfortable with who I was because I felt like I was expected to behave in a certain way based on my race.” And although Gamon tried to assert and maintain some semblance of his previous identity—AC/DC T-shirts, high-water pants, and “proper” vernacular—he felt that he had to wholly embrace Black culture based on stereotypical understandings. Otherwise, he not only felt uncomfortable, but also that he was making the Black women he attempted to date uncomfortable as well.

Nick, 38, grew up in Detroit with his mother, who had a good-paying job but showed the men she dated more attention than him. Ultimately, though, he was more affected by his father’s absence than his mother’s disinterest. His brother had been the high school bully, then became a dope-dealing “corner boy.” Fearing he might go down the same wayward path, Nick enrolled himself in one of Detroit’s premiere, predominately white boarding schools. This resulted in him feeling less connected to the Black community but also culturally ill-equipped to successfully win the attention of degreed Black women. His interactions with these women were hampered by criticisms such as “You talk white,” “You act too white,” “Why are you always reading books?” or “Why are you always talking about school?” After years of receiving these racially charged and class-based taunts from his Black peers, he realized that “embracing your culture is good no matter who you are, but not to the point that it defines you.” Because of such treatment—or the expectation of such treatment—some men chose to disclose very few of their movie, TV, or music interests to Black women. This reticence created a wider abyss between them and the women they dated because they could not bond through a shared popular culture or laugh over culturally specific jokes.

It is important to note that respondents only report feeling this sense of cultural insecurity and scrutiny with native Black women. These experiences of having their Blackness policed were absent with African women. Diggy, 28, who now lives in Oakland but grew up on the East Coast, offers a sobering explanation for this phenomenon, stating that “African American women just weren’t simply into me because I wasn’t gutter enough when I was growing up. And, even now sometimes, like it’s definitely more easy [sic] for me to meet an African woman and hit it off, whereas I meet an African American woman [and] it is just a little more difficult.” I asked Diggy if he thought this difference might be due to his character, physical appeal, or economic status. He agreed, adding that “foreign women tend to be more so about how your mind works.” Other respondents similarly point out that with native-born Black women, displaying intelligence was criticized, marking them as “Black nerds.”

The Consistent Trajectory respondents point to these criticisms as an explanation for why they have dated fewer Black women than non-Black women. Interestingly, though, these experiences have not deterred them from continuing to approach or date Black women. As we
have seen, Consistent Trajectory respondents experience the conflict between stereotypes of Black men and middle-class values in two ways. First, BMC men feel that, in addition to educational status and class upbringing, they are required to meet middle-class standards based on their type and mode of employment. And second, because Black women are attracted to men who are seen as more “racially authentic” and this too is a test Consistent Trajectory men may fail.

**Reifying Racial Authenticity: Steep Trajectory Respondents & The B(l)acklash of Besieged Blackness**

Many Steep Trajectory respondents experienced relationship strains with Black women resulting from their different socializing class experiences. On the one hand, they felt women were under the spell of the “Ghetto Allure,” only fleetingly desiring so-called “d-boys” and thugs during their “hood” phase. On the other hand, Steep respondents felt somewhat rejected by women who felt they were “too Black,” tipping the scale towards Besieged Blackness, which in relationships, impedes their ability to make decisions without criticism or skepticism.

Arthur, 41, grew up middle-class until his mother became addicted to crack cocaine when he was 13. Initially scared and misguided, he was taken under the wing of a big-time drug dealer in his neighborhood. Eventually, he became one of the major drug dealers in the game and would spend the next twenty years in and out of prison. However, he has been out of prison for the last five years, and during this time, has earned his bachelor’s degree and got married.

His wife comes from a generations-long family of high-powered civil servants, and as he puts it, “has lived a life of privilege.” Arthur rationalized his Black wife’s resistance to his decision-making as a matter of her own subconscious adoption of the white gaze, which sees Black men as powerless. He yearned to bare his soul to her as a pathway to greater emotional intimacy, but had not yet, at least at this stage in their marriage. It would only be possible once his wife relinquished her stereotypical perceptions of his masculinity. As he divulges:

I am not even on the same page as my wife because the image of the Black man has been degraded—we are not leaders. There is a natural rebellion of the Black man when he tries to tell you something...like my last two relationships when I tried to assert my leadership in a positive manner...And every time I would put those things [savings, investment, and financial planning] down, I would get resistance, and it wasn’t me that they just didn’t like, it was the fact that they had been programmed, like I was a talking ape or something. And that is the overall consensus of America, Black men have certain rules and regulations, and when they get outside of that it is alien...A white woman who has a dominant aggressive man, she understands that she is going to be taken care of, she don’t [sic] have that history in her mind. Now, a Black woman, when she has a dominant aggressive man, what does that tie into? A pimp, they screwing around, or so she's looking at this person like he is going to try to get over on me.

Arthur believes his wife’s resistance to him taking the lead in their finances is a function of him stepping outside of the boundaries of Black masculinity’s representational forms. That is, Black masculinity is not considered dominant in such matters because of other axes of racial or class oppression—in Arthur’s case, the specter of his troubled childhood and his toxic relationship with money stemming from his drug kingpin days. Ironically, his ability to demonstrate leadership traits in non-illicit realms is met with hesitation by his wife, who evaluates him through the lens of hegemonic masculinity.

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9 They had only been married one year when I interviewed him.
Arthur also concedes that his “alienation” from a representational form of Black masculinity is unsettling for his wife because she lacks concrete examples of Black men leading in their relationships. Though it is also important to note that Arthur subscribes to the same perception of masculinity that his wife evaluates him by, thus, also expecting to lead in his marriage. In her own relationship history, she has mainly dated non-Black men, and in her parents’ thirty-five-plus-year marriage, her mother largely called the shots. Arthur maintains this experiential absence substantiates his wife’s narrow inscriptions of Black men as feeble and conniving. Furthermore, it elucidates how the perceptual binds of racial authenticity limit the extent to which some BMC men—particularly those whose lived experiences mirror stereotypical characterizations of Black men—feel they can lead in their relationships with Black women. This example also illustrates how BMC men struggle to understand their role in relationships beyond hegemonic conceptions of gender roles. As middle-class, Arthur felt his financial expertise should grant him the unquestioned ability to lead in that arena. This capacity to lead reinforced his status as a “man” in his mind, yet it was challenged by his wife, who had the same—if not more—financial acumen as a highly sought-after businesswoman. Arthur remained unable to reconcile the tension between his pursuit of hegemonic masculinity and the equally bounded perceptions of his wife.

The challenge for BMC men who are considered racially authentic for their history of illicit activity or womanizing is that they continue to be read this way even when they no longer engage in that type of behavior. On the one hand, these experiences reify a racial authenticity that may initially facilitate sexual or romantic interest; on the other, they work against sustained romantic interest because of 1) BMC men’s reticence about the impact of those experiences on them, and 2) the implicit expectation on the part of women that they will revert to their old way of life.

Take, for example, Chapman, 26, who until recently felt humiliated in his relationships, particularly when he had to discuss in detail what he did for work. The majority of his income comes from the informal drug economy, as it did when he began working as an adolescent to help provide for his single, welfare-dependent mother. Thinking it might alarm women he has dated, Chapman has been taciturn about both his upbringing and even more so about the nature of his work. His resistance has led to relationship discord and also affected how he feels about himself:

It would make me think of DuBois and double consciousness; you know, you see yourself through your eyes and you see yourself through the eyes of the oppressor. I partly feel like I haven’t completely ejected it from my value system, but I am grateful that I don’t have to get up and go sell my labor. I think this [approach to work] has humiliated me in some ways, but I feel like my lifestyle demands it of me. It is not a deficiency that like, oh, I am lazy or something.

Although he did not see himself as lazy because he worked just as hard as the “man working a nine-to-five,” his view of himself did change when he graduated from college and could no longer say he was a “full-time student.” At the same time, he could not bring himself to tell inquiring women how he made his money. The pressure to feel comfortable articulating what he did professionally eventually “compelled” him to start a business. He knew that he was neither the “nine-to-five type” nor would thrive working for someone else. Therefore, he started an import business to escape the stereotyping that often characterized women’s responses upon
learning the true nature of his work. He had, for example, been told he was a “nigga” by such women. As a “Black man just tryna make it,” he felt it was inevitable that someone from his background—and employment status—would be regarded as a one-dimensional figure, the representation of a cultural trope.

However, when your identity is bound up with categories that “other” you, then, as 31-year-old Luis suggests, “you are continually searching for a stable identity. And, once you have that, then your respect for yourself is stable.” Luis, who grew up in the “darkness” of his mother’s depression, father’s absence, and sister’s rape, long struggled to feel comfortable in his own skin; consequently, as a young man he often sought that sense of comfort and recognition in the admiration of women. Like Nick, Luis also had a mother too “[mentally] checked out” to help shape his identity as he became a young man. For example, Luis describes his insecurity as feeling like his self-identity was subject to the whims of others. This is common in social interactions, yet Luis lacked the foundation to resist internalizing others’ perceptions. As such, Luis bemoans that his self-esteem depended primarily on what women thought “he had going for himself.”

Other respondents saw their racial authenticity, and the positive impression it made on women, as a matter of status, only to realize that it had more to do with sexual interest than status confirmation. Consider L.D., who grew up among a pocket of Black families migrating to the South Bay in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. What was once a lower-middle-class enclave had in the 1980s become one of the main thoroughfares of crack cocaine. As his neighborhood changed, so did his relationship with women. Since the age of 13, he had, in his words, “destroyed women,” and would continue on this “playboy” path for the next thirty years until beginning therapy and devoting himself to Christ. Ironically, after definitively laying his playboy days to rest and beginning to seek a committed relationship, he now felt that women were more interested in him sexually than in who he was as a person. This realization made him feel like a sexual object to be used and exhibited by the middle-class-raised women he dated. He also took steps to safeguard his own emotions, masculinity, and self-worth. The best way he knew how to do that was to preserve control over the only thing he could—his sexuality—by actively pursuing those women who valued his authentic self rather than succumbing to the advances of women only lusted after it.

Other respondents raised in “the hood” echo L.D.’s experience, similarly feeling that while Black women who were raised middle-class were really attracted to their mystique and past exploits, they did not actually want these men’s authentic “hood” selves. Thus, in response to these policing experiences, some men came up with a few non-negotiable dating preferences moving forward. Mike, 38, a former “d-boy,”10 put it this way: “She has to be spiritually strong, intellectually strong, and ghetto.” “Ghetto” and “hood” can be understood here through Hanerz’s (2004) concept of being exposed to the ghetto yet not subsumed by it. Jonathon, 25, who grew up in a project housing complex in New York but is now a software engineer for a well-established technology company, elaborates on this idea of ghetto: “She has to have an understanding of ghetto. She has to have some temperament because I am from the ghetto.” Similarly, L.D. offers a heartfelt justification for his ghetto preference:

Due to the fact of my academics [advanced degrees], I have run across a lot of non-ghetto girls. So when I am talking and I go into my original vernacular, it scares them. They are uncomfortable, or I have to explain what I am talking about. It was starting to get to a point where

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10 A “d-boy” is slang for drug dealer or peddler.
they loved who I currently was, but they didn’t love me. They wanted to pry him out of me (hits his chest).

Asked to clarify what he meant by “pry,” he explains:

“You are in a different circle now, you are making money, whoop whoop [etc. etc.].” And it is a hard fight because from the education standpoint you got her. She is fine, she is doing her thing, she is fly. Everything popping, everything right. And, then it’s like, “I want you to meet my boss,” and I am like “Ok,” but then she will be like, “I don’t want you to talk that.” I am like, “What?! I got more education than your boss!” So now we are only dealing with imagery. (Emphasis his)

Just as L.D. had become sensitive to what he perceived as hypocritical demands of BMC women, Edgar, 28, a struggling artist, was also cognizant of this polarity. His public/private experiences with some of the Black women he dated led to his decision to stop having sex before he got married (which, to be fair, was not long after he became abstinent). He reflects:

I stopped having sex because the woman would only stay for that. To the girls who have high academics, their experiences with men are zero to none sometimes. They get me and lose they [sic] freaking mind as it relates to experiences. They would be like, you cool in this arena [the bedroom], but you ain’t cool in that arena [white-majority spaces]. And actually, that made me very upset in that arena because I used to try to take advantage of women. But now you are playing me. I am not him [anymore]. But now I gotta be. So it was really weird coming from the hood, going off to college, and doing all of these things, and now you in circles [with people who have degrees] where you thinking you’d be more accepted. You are not.

Having achieved middle-class status as young adults, Steep respondents simultaneously exist within yet outside of the Black bourgeoisie, an “outsider-within” status (Hill-Collins 1986). Their racial performances anchor them to their underclass roots, while their educational attainment allows them access to middle-class public arenas insofar as their class-based performances are absent of “authentic” attributes—that is, illicit behavior. Their non-sanitized racial perspectives and “original language” are “too Black” for the white gaze and are only privately accepted within the confines of the bedroom. Their race-based performances trump their class accomplishment, which creates barriers to forming and sustaining relationships beyond the sexual level. Furthermore, this sense of being policed as “ghetto” lead men to 1) divest themselves of sexual intimacy with women who police them, and 2) respond in kind by highlighting the class differences themselves. For example, they criticize “high achieving” or “academic girls” for lacking [bedroom] experience, yet position themselves as sexually superior to the “[middle-class] weenies” with whom they assume middle-class Black women have predominately had sexual relations. These responses are an attempt to salvage and reinforce their authentic self.

From these policing experiences, Steep respondents have also developed a preference for women who have a similar class experience as themselves. Exposure to the ghetto not only introduces one to trauma but also develops one’s ability to manage it. As men who have witnessed how the structural constraints of their upbringing impinge on the livelihoods of their loved ones and friends, they desire a woman for whom such trauma is not a novelty.

Forest, 27, an Oakland native, refers to himself as a “regular,” a resident of the city before its increasing gentrification. He is now raising his sister’s two children after she fell
victim to sexual trafficking. From a young age, he often took the lead in his family and friend group, whether it was helping his single mom to make ends meet, supporting and guiding his “homies,” and being the “wise kid” who leveraged insights from Black male community leaders and his best friend’s father (his own father has been incarcerated since Forest was 10). Discussing how his upbringing has played a role in his relationship experiences, he poses a question that encapsulates his reservations: “If you have never experienced trauma before, how can I be in a relationship with you? If you don’t know how you will react to it, you know, not dealing in the emotional, but dealing in the rational and knowing the difference between [them].”

To illustrate his point, Forest describes how when his friend was shot, his then-girlfriend, who did not even witness the shooting, handled it worse than the woman who actually did. Based on the common occurrence of trauma in his upbringing, his girlfriend’s inexperience with loss did not measure up to the emotional calm he expected to achieve mutual support in his relationship. Pushing back, I tell him that I thought this was an extreme example. He flatly states: “I have almost lost a homeboy every year since high school.” With those words, it became clear that my question was yet another example of the lack of understanding he felt with the middle-class raised women he had dated. The shooting deaths of Black male friends had become normalized in his life, and while it still emotionally stung, it had equipped him with the tools to cope with the routineness of death.

Other men echo this sentiment, declaring that they prefer a woman who understands how they were raised because it lends insight into who they are and how they respond emotionally without having to articulate anything. Steep trajectory men have learned to be quite introspective on this point, though partly out of necessity and because they have been mulling it over for some time. Coming to terms with their childhood trauma—trauma that has both financial and psychological consequences—is an ongoing personal journey that continues to shape their emotional capacities in interpersonal relationships. Intimate romantic relationships bring to the fore aspects of the self that they have interrogated primarily within white-dominated spaces—that is, the relation of their “authentic self” to their “middle-class self.” However, these respondents were left questioning why their “authentic self” is problematized by Black women, who say they desire a college-educated, professionally employed Black man. This is why many Steep respondents express the desire for a woman who not only understands, but most importantly, can empathize with a class status rooted in the trenches of ghetto culture.

**Conclusion**

These findings highlight a central conflict that plagues Black relationships: On the one hand, BMC men’s racial authenticity was surveilled by women whom they expected to have a similar racial outlook yet in fact they perceived them through the same stereotypical lens as the rest of society; on the other, they imagined themselves through another idealized structure—hegemonic masculinity—that was at odds with women’s perceptions of them. Respondents were, at least initially, tolerant of the jibes and mischaracterizations because they understood that it was coming from decades-long conditioning that has taught Black women to see Black men as walking stereotypes. On the other hand, they felt that women’s stereotypical perceptions impinged on the men’s own self-definitions.

BMC men’s desire to lead in relationships—or rather, their perceived obligation to lead—is an attempt to mirror the hegemonic masculinity that defines white relationships. And yet the notion of the Black man as the dominant partner in the relationship has been nearly eviscerated by the overproduction of “strong Black female” images, which inadvertently
weakens the perception of Black masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a privileged form of masculinity that everyone wants, but only the most structurally powerful (i.e., white, upper-class men) have; it implies dominance and subordination. Not only is it defined against femininity but against all other types of masculinities (Connell 1995).

Hegemonic masculinity thus leaves little room for BMC men whose own masculinity is often marginalized or subordinated. I should emphasize, however, that as men, Black men still benefit from the gender hierarchy, no matter how differently it may play out in the context of Black male-Black female relationships. Nonetheless, respondents’ anxiety over not being the lead decision-maker in their relationships is a function of two dynamics: their own evaluations of themselves based on the most honored and respected definition of manhood, and Black women’s antagonistic perceptions of racial authenticity. How Black men experience and negotiate these dueling perceptions vary by class trajectory pattern.

Steep trajectory respondents’ racial performances anchored them to their working-class or poor roots, which in turn solidified their racial authenticity. These class-based performances were accepted by the Black women they dated as long as they were absent of racially “authentic” attributes. Consistent Trajectory respondents felt rejected by Black women because their deviation from Black cultural aesthetics undermined their sexual attractiveness, yet these men were still congenial enough to be considered “good friends.” For both groups of respondents, this intense policing in their relationships with Black women reveals the challenges BMC men face in expressing and experiencing intimacy. This chapter revealed how respondents discussed these experiences of policing by Black women about everyday experiences of being a Black man. Furthermore, we also saw how respondents’ perceptions of Black women’s “higher demands” are inextricably linked to debilitating psychic structures of internalized racism.

In the next chapter, I explain how BMC men’s perceptions of Black women’s racialized expectations shape their relationship outcomes with non-Black women. Building on the effect of class trajectory patterns and the role of racial authenticity, I show how the driver of inter-racial dating is the timing of respondents’ exposure to and integration in predominately white settings. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how Black men’s tendency to date out is primarily determined by who finds them desirable, opportunity, and ease. These findings not only provide further support for 1) how the complex web of intra-racial dynamics influences how—and not just why—Black men date interracially, and 2) how a primary focus on current class position undermines racial and class experiences that precede inter-racial contact.
Chapter 3  
Beyond Class Status:  
The Complexity of Interracial Relationship Decisions

INTRODUCTION
In 2009, The Yale Center for Research on Inequalities and the Life Course conducted the first-ever study of marriage and family formation among college-educated Black women. The study’s quantitative findings revealed that 42 percent of Black women 18 and older have never been married, which was attributed to a deficit of similarly-credentialed Black men. This finding proved to be quite provocative: over the next few years, popular media was ablaze with commentary about these findings. Black pundits, celebrity personalities, and single women responded with a barrage of op-eds, round-table sessions, Twitter wars, and relationship self-help books. This media debate prodded at one of the most common cultural insecurities between Black men and Black women: the assumption that upwardly mobile Black men prefer non-Black women to Black women.

Academic literature has also narrowly focused on the correlation between Black men’s rates of interracial relationships and the lack of relationship prospects for Black women. Quantitative in nature, existing studies have identified a within-group trend—Black men are more likely than Black women to have interracial relationships, whether they are hook-ups, marriages, or non-marital partnerships (McClintock 2010; Crowder and Tolany 2000; Qian 1997). But like the popular debate, this academic literature has largely neglected the perspectives of those Black men over whom there is so much speculation. The continued omission of Black men’s voices allows for unstated assumptions about their racial preferences and relationship desires. It also overstates the occurrence of Blacks’ interracial relationships; in an era of increased interracial relationships, Blacks are still less likely than other minorities (e.g., Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans) to marry whites (Kalmijn 1993; Qian and Litcher 2001; Rosenfeld 2002, 2005). At least one academic study has drawn on such assumptions about Black men’s relationships in examining the difficulty faced by professional Black women seeking to marry Black men of the same ilk. This difficulty is attributed to degreed, economically stable Black men’s higher rates of interracial relationships (Crowder and Tolnay 2000).

Since scholars have asked different questions, explanations for Black men’s higher rates of interracial relationships diverge. On the one hand, the current quantitative work on social exchange hypothesis (Rosenfeld 2005; Gullickson 2006) provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing Black men’s approach to mixed-race marriages; on the other hand, qualitative studies demonstrate how conceptions of race, class, and gender inform Black men’s interracial relationships and their experiences of them. However, I contend that to understand why some college-educated Black men choose interracial relationships also requires an understanding of their dating and relationship experiences with both Black and non-Black women. I use the empirical case of BMC men’s dating history to examine how class trajectory is an overlooked but critical determinant of how—and not just why—BMC men decide to date outside of their race. I ask: How do the racial experiences between BMC men and their Black and non-Black dating partners shape their decisions to date interracially? And how do these decisions vary by BMC men’s class trajectory?

To answer this question, I offer a theoretical approach that considers how BMC men’s interracial decisions are shaped by their own diversity. This corrective ensures that the experiences of the BMC are not conflated with assumptions of homogeneity that has colored the
sociological study of Blacks and inequality. This chapter extends our understanding of BMC men’s interracial relationship outcomes by 1) including the narratives of BMC men, whose interracial relationships are the point of contention, 2) qualitatively examining the process of interracial relationship decisions through in-depth interviews, 3) highlighting BMC men’s dating and relationship experiences with Black and non-Black women, and 4) foregrounding how within-group differences affect the decisions of BMC men who date out.

To these four points, it is important to note that most research on interracial relationships tends to focus on interracial marriage. Studies on non-marital relationships are often treated as a distinct and isolated phenomenon from marriage. Thus, existing research does not usually examine both relationship forms in the same study, since those who date interracially are not necessarily similar to those who marry interracially (Yancey 2003). In other words, scholars have treated them as dissimilar groups because marriage is seen as more permanent, and dating ephemeral (Yancey 2002), thereby focusing on the relationship outcome rather than the process. This chapter considers the interracial relationship decisions of BMC men who have had some form of a relationship—sexual, dating, and marital—with non-Black women because demographic trends across these different relationship forms are consistent for Black men (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990; Yancey 2002; Gardyn 2002; Batson, Qian, and Lichter 2006; McClintock 2010; Levin, Taylor, and Caudle 2007; Rosenfeld 2008), especially for college-educated Black men in particular (Crowder and Tolnay 2000).

It is also worthwhile to consider multiple relationship types because non-marital relationships take up a longer portion of the life course. Furthermore, this approach allows us to examine the processes that led to the various relationships—and perhaps their unravelling—rather than merely focusing on the outcome. Finally, due to disparate views on dating and marriage, people who date out are not necessarily similar to those who marry out (Yancey 2002). These differences exist because marriage is seen as permanent, while dating is considered more short-term, fleeting. This distinction is tied up with the notion that interracial dating, because seen as a more temporary arrangement, is more socially acceptable than interracial marriage (Yancey 2002). Speaking about Black interracial marriages in particular, Jan Doering (2014) cautions us “to realize that, more than simply naming dyadic relationships, intermarriage constitutes a political symbol.” However, the different processes that lead BMC men of similar educational characteristics to choose dating versus marriage has not been empirically considered. Rather, existing perspectives, which I discuss in the next section, highlight how either the racial composition of BMC men’s social networks or their intersectional identities explains an interracial outcome.

**Social Network, Racialist, and BMC Heterogeneity Models of Interracial Dating**

Dominant theoretical models—typically adopting social network and racialist perspectives—examine BMC men’s interracial decisions solely as a matter of *current* circumstance—that is, whether they are married and to whom. While considering how early socialization and neighborhood experiences shape decision-making is central to the study of sociology, it has not been theoretically leveraged to explain this topic. And despite the fact that Black men’s subjective experiences in diverse social networks and relationships do vary depending on income, education, occupation, etc., this theoretical omission persists. My theoretical approach, which emphasizes the considerable variation of class measures, disrupts monolithic assumptions about the inevitability of upwardly mobile Black men dating out;
furthermore, it emphasizes intracategorical distinctions among Black men who do date out even though there are clear class patterns.  

Black men’s interracial relationships are most commonly viewed from the social network perspective. This perspective addresses questions about mate selection and determines what objective factors (e.g., race, class, gender) are necessary to facilitate an interracial relationship. Status exchange theory, which is the primary theoretical lens of this perspective, postulates that Black men marry white women to reap the social benefits of her socioeconomic status and prestige (Merton and Davis 1941). However, these studies tend to focus on what white women lose by marrying a Black man: exchanging their racial prestige for their Black partner’s higher economic status or occupational and educational prestige (Davidson 1992; Kalmijn 1993; Lewis and Yancey 1997; Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Fu 2001; Gullickson 2006; Gullickson and Fu 2010; Hou and Myles 2013; Kalmijn 2010; Qian 1997). For Black men, education has a positive effect on interracial relationships because it allegedly breaks down group barriers (Merton and Davis 1941; Condran 1979; Gordon 1964; Greeley and Sheatsley 1971; Lieberson and Waters 1988; Kalmijn 1998), increasing interracial contact. While educational attainment increases Blacks’ propensity for interracial contact in majority settings (Mare 2000; McClintock 2010), even highly educated Blacks remain socially isolated in racially diverse contexts (Quillian and Campbell 2003). The outcome of interracial relationships is, then, subject to the whims of whites to cross racial boundaries. Therefore, in the racialist perspective, BMC men are not regarded as active agents who make interracial decisions; rather, by emphasizing educational attainment, this approach shifts the focus to the partner’s choice—why non-Black women choose them over less-educated Black men.

The racialist perspective, however, does reveal that a diverse social network and interracial contact are not sufficient to explain interracial relationships, which are also mediated by social locations (e.g., gender, race, etc.). Early-twentieth-century versions of this perspective reveal how class, specifically a subjugated class position, can be used to explain interracial desire. In this perspective, interracially dating Black men are “Revenge Rambos” or “Status Seekers” (July, 1998) who aspire to climb the social ladder and choose (so it is assumed) white women as a symbolic gateway to their freedom (Wade 1991; Solsberry 1994, Cleaver 1999). I highlight this decades-old but still relevant perspective because it is the basis for contemporary cultural arguments about the inevitability of “good” (read: college-educated and median earning) Black men who date outside of their race to achieve greater upward mobility.

This perspective also provides a glimpse into the racialized, gendered, and classed nature of these cultural “exchanges.” BMC men must negotiate racialized gendered stereotypes (Wilkins 2005) that are influenced by media portrayals of both their own racial identity and interracial unions (Childs 2005). For BMC men in majority settings, boxed in by the cultural frames of masculinity and Blackness, their intersectional identity presents both problems and opportunities (Wilkins 2005). They can either make an effort to distance themselves from or embrace stereotypes as a way to navigate the constraints of hypersexualization (Childs 2005).

Therefore, it is critical to contextualize the sexual stereotyping that Black men experience through a broader analysis of sexual attitudes. For example, given the sexual nature of hook-ups, we might expect certain groups who are sexualized to be considered more desirable

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11 While prior research has not examined within-class differences among native-born BMC men, at least one study investigates the diversity of Blacks’ intra and interracial dating patterns among native-born Blacks and Black immigrants (Batson, Qian, and Litcher, 2006).
as sexual partners than others. Hypersexualized Black men and Asian women have higher rates of hook-ups than Black women, who are stereotyped as physically unattractive and aggressive, and Asian men, who are stereotyped as effeminate (Hill-Collins 2000; Harris-Perry 2011; Joel et al. 2012). At one time, individual-level predictors such as sexual attitudes (Yancey 2002) and alcohol use (Owen, Finchman, and Moore 2011) explained these group variations, but now institutional-level differences—based on Eurocentric standards of beauty and sexual stereotypes—are the modal explanation that scholars offer for why particular groups encounter barriers to participating in interracial relationships.

Thus, on the one hand, this chapter adopts an intersectional lens to consider how the performance of masculinity, race, class, and gender are shaped and reshaped through interaction with both Black and non-Black women. On the other hand, it also considers how the racialized and classed nature of these interactions, which inform decision-making about interracial relationships, is shaped by the period in which BMC men’s social networks became integrated. Through an inductive approach, I conduct an analysis that simultaneously considers BMC men’s class trajectory, timing of exposure to racially integrated networks, and racialized dating experiences to arrive at a more fine-tuned, procedural, and interactional explanation of how BMC men make interracial decisions (See Figure 3.1). Rather than producing a snapshot of passive exchanges that occur in a racially diverse network, this dynamic model demonstrates how Black men’s experiences of socialization and sexualization that precede their introduction to majority social settings not only structure their opportunities of interracial contact but also inform their racialized and classed experiences with both Black and non-Black women. Therefore, to understand why BMC men date out, we must contextualize their interracial relationships within their dating history, not merely consider the outcomes of those relationships. The contextualization of these experiences is mediated by BMC men’s individual class trajectory patterns over time, as well as by their perceived racial authenticity as sexually desirable, heterosexual Black men.

**Figure 3.1 Interaction of Class Trajectory, Timing of Exposure, and Racial Dating Experiences**

These interconnected factors—class trajectory, timing of exposure, and racial dating experiences—precede and are important determinants for BMC men’s interracial dating. The
factors that shape the *process* of BMC men’s contemporary interracial outcomes are: 1) neighborhood context during their adolescence, specifically *when* they were exposed to predominately white or racially mixed social settings, 2) their racial socialization as Black men in such contexts, and 3) their history of intimate experiences with Black and non-Black women. Men’s class trajectory shapes when they have contact with non-Black social environments, which in turn shapes the type of relationships they can have with Black and non-Black women. These opportunities are not only structured by their sexualization, as previous research shows, but also by racial authenticity, which links sexualization and Blackness.

For the first factor, as described in Chapter 1, I identified two class trajectory patterns in my data—“Consistent” and “Steep”. The first pattern is characterized by a steady middle-class trajectory from adolescence into adulthood; the second pattern, “steep” trajectory, refers to respondents who first achieved middle-class status as adults. Class trajectory patterns are not as linear as the binary model I suggest above. I observed fluctuations in the entry points of respondents who experienced a steep class trajectory. Most entered the middle-class as adults, while others experienced initial middle-class exposure until their pre-teens, followed by downward mobility, and finally re-entry into the middle-class as adults. Despite these fluctuations, however, their racial dating experiences and interracial decisions were categorically similar, and thus for brevity, I group all these men under the steep class trajectory pattern.

While the social network perspective takes Black men’s presence in a racially integrated network as a starting point to identify factors that determine their interracial relationship outcomes, timing of exposure considers *when* respondents were exposed to predominately white environments. These environments, it has been shown, are important social pathways or exchanges that facilitate interracial relationships through interracial contact (Sigelman and Welch 1993; Smith 1994; Moore 2004). Those who were raised in predominately white neighborhoods experienced an “early exposure” to white social settings. Many attended predominately white private or charter schools from primary education, and therefore usually were exposed before college. However, respondents who grew up in predominately Black neighborhoods, which were often in economically disadvantaged areas or contiguous with them, experienced a “late exposure,” largely occurring in college or through post-collegiate employment. From the existing literature, we know that Black men in predominately white settings are more likely to have more diverse social networks, more opportunities to date interracially, and received greater social support and tolerance from their cross-group friendships (Wright et al. 1997). Respondents with largely monoracial networks, by contrast, are more likely to have same-race partners. These insights, while valuable, are linear and elide the preceding experiences that lead to the interracial outcome. By considering the timing of exposure as well, though, we can better evaluate the opportunity structure of a diverse social network alongside the length of time BMC men have been integrated into it.

The third factor, racial dating experience, is shaped by BMC men’s timing of exposure to predominately white environments. Focusing on the interactional milieu and all of its accompanying scripts of masculinity and Blackness, I examine how the racialized and gendered nature of interactions determine the *type* of relationship chosen. Those who were exposed early to white environments had more favorable dating experiences with non-Black women than Black women. Late exposure respondents successfully dated both Black and non-Black women, but felt fetishized by non-Black women. Moreover, respondents who experienced a steep class trajectory largely dated Black women. From this theoretical model, I conceptualized three distinct categories of BMC male respondents: “Consistent + Early Exposure” (N=19), “Consistent + Late
Exposure (N=11), and “Steep + Late Exposure” (N=22).  

**Findings**
Across categories, two dominant trends emerged. First, nearly 95% of respondents reported having had sex with white women. However, respondents in the Consistent and Early Exposure category were most likely to be married to non-Black women, followed by Consistent and Late Exposure respondents who dated non-Black women, and then by Steep and Late Exposure respondents who largely had non-committal interracial relationships. Respondents’ explanations of their decisions varied across categories. Second, all respondents revealed how challenges to their racial authenticity made by Black women (and, to a much lesser extent, by non-Black women) were part and parcel of their dating experiences. Across categories, the measure of respondents’ racial authenticity—whether they were “Black enough” or not—was a mediating factor in their dating and relationship experiences with Black women. These intraracialized dynamics are central to how they discuss their interracial decisions. Hence, my discussion of authenticity adds to our understanding of how non-Black partners are selected. Table 3.1 illustrates how the interaction between class trajectory, timing of exposure, and racial dating experiences differently shape BMC men’s interracial relationship decisions across the three categories.

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12 There were 24 total respondents who experienced a steep class trajectory. And of those, only two experienced an “early exposure” to a predominately white setting through private or charter school. The majority were exposed after their adolescence.
**TABLE 3.1  INTERRACIAL DECISION BY CLASS TRAJECTORY PATTERN, TIMING OF EXPOSURE, AND RACIAL DATING EXPERIENCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Consistent + Early Exposure</strong></th>
<th><strong>Consistent + Late Exposure</strong></th>
<th><strong>Steep + Late Exposure</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighborhood &amp; Social Context</strong></td>
<td>• Predominately white from childhood</td>
<td>• Predominately Black and adjacent to disadvantaged communities</td>
<td>• Predominately Black and disadvantaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Exposure to white settings through college or post-collegiate employment</td>
<td>• Exposure to white settings through college or post-collegiate employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men’s Perceptions of their Dating Experiences</strong></td>
<td>• Not “Black enough” for Black women</td>
<td>• Racial authenticity questioned, but still “Black enough” for Black women</td>
<td>• “Too Black” with Black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Black enough” for white women</td>
<td>• Fetishized by non-Black women</td>
<td>• Fetishized by non-Black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interracial Decision</strong></td>
<td>• Both casual sex &amp; relationships</td>
<td>• Relationships with “women of color” &amp; casual sex with white women</td>
<td>• Casual sex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONSISTENT CLASS TRAJECTORY WITH EARLY EXPOSURE: A MATTER OF RACIAL AUTHENTICITY AND RELATIONSHIP PRIORITIES**

This category is characterized by a Consistent middle-class trajectory from adolescence into adulthood and early exposure to predominately white social environments in their childhood. Their interracial decisions—to have casual sex, date, and marry—are shaped by two dominant factors that arose in their dating experiences with Black and non-Black women: first, the different interpersonal—and often racialized—dynamics they experienced with Black and non-Black women; and second, the disparate relationship priorities of Black and non-Black women.

Alexander grew up in a middle-class block of a historically Black East Coast neighborhood, but he attended a racially diverse magnet high school and eventually an Ivy League university. He is in his early 40s and has been married to a mixed-race (white and) Asian woman who attended the same college. They married shortly after he moved to the Bay Area almost two decades ago. He is convivial, of average height, caramel toned, has a lean build, and wears glasses. Throughout our interview, he drew attention to his self-presentation, making light of his difficult dating experiences with Black women, when he was often “friend zoned.”

He muses that despite growing up in a mixed-raced environment, he never questioned his Blackness because his family proudly asserted their racial identity. Therefore, he was taken aback when Black women began to cast doubt upon his racial authenticity. Recalling the
expectations of one Black woman, Alexander explains why he felt he was often “friend zoned” because of his appearance. While dark-skinned Black men are criminalized in every other social context, the stereotypical depiction of sexually desirable Black men as strong, shaping many BMC men’s dating experiences. As one respondent puts it, “I am not tall dark and handsome. I am beige and alright.” Similarly, Alexander’s explanation draws on this notion: “She had in her mind a stereotype of black masculinity—darker skin, taller, muscular, or [those who] talk a certain way—that stuff is really important in specific ways.” At that moment, he realized not only that there was a prescribed and essentialized mold of Blackness, but also that he did not fit it. This hindered his relationships with Black women, in his opinion, because assessments of his attractiveness were closely intertwined with their perceptions of his racial authenticity.

Even though Alexander was a member of a Black fraternity, Black women still cast aspersions on the authenticity of his Black identity. Slightly perplexed, I ask why he was not successful with Black women. He quickly corrects me:

I didn't say I didn't have success with any Black women. I don't want you getting the wrong idea. Not zero. It was just easier with white women. They are more forward…If a white woman wants you, she is just going to take you. Not all of them obviously…Black women I knew were thinking about marriage, and this [college] is the time to meet your spouse.

When pushed on this point, he says that of the Black women he went to college with,

…they were there with a purpose that was bigger than themselves [e.g., family, community], and so generally the Black women I knew were not going to mess around. Those were behaviors of white girls. That was the stereotype and the perception.

While my respondents did not feel the pressure to begin building a familial legacy as soon as their Black female peers, they also conceded that as men they had more leeway to hook-up without the gendered repercussions Black women sought to avoid by choosing monogamy.

Andrew’s high school dating experiences mimic those of Alex: limited success in his sexual pursuit of Black women, coupled with short-lived sexual relationships with non-Black women. He grew up in a predominately Black Bay Area neighborhood but attended a majority white, suburban public school forty-five minutes from his home. Now thirty-three years old, he similarly recounts a string of affairs with white women, whom he found more open to casual relationships. His ebullient personality, slender frame, and extensive knowledge of popular culture was a hit with non-Black women, but these traits were not as valued by the Black women he dated.

Describing his high school dating experiences, he bluntly explained, "People thought of me as a player, I guess you could say a male whore. It was just so easy, and I didn't have to answer questions about who I was." I responded, "You mean in the way you felt with Black women?" He sighs, "Yeah. But then again, I didn’t want anything serious with them [white women].” One white woman did speculate about his identity, calling him a chameleon, but he did not feel called upon to challenge her, responding instead: “Chameleons have been on this earth for millions of years, and they have survived by just being able to blend in. As long as I am consistent with you, that should be what is more important.” As with Alex, Andrew’s non-essentialized Black identity and “code switching” facilitated his sexual relationships with white women.
Now in his 40s, Ro recounts a similar narrative to Alexander’s and Andrew’s regarding the role of racial authenticity in his dating experiences. He recalls “not [being] cool enough for Black people in the 1990s.” Partly, he attributes this deficiency to his physique; he is 5’8” and has light skin. Moreover, he didn’t dress in apparel (e.g., Air Jordan sneakers, name-brand jeans) that he felt verified Black men’s racial authenticity. He was not seduced by “being cool” because as he describes it, he had college-educated parents who exposed him to opportunities to witness Black identities beyond the scope of its essentialist forms.

He admits that he was initially uncomfortable dating white women, not only because his Black authenticity had been put on the line so many times before by his scrutinizing Black peers but also because he always thought he would be with a Black woman as was the case with the majority of men in his life and the constant yet implicit nudging of his pro-Black mother. So, when he met his wife-to-be, who is white, he had conflicting thoughts. He thought she was funny and attractive, but then said to himself, “Wow, I don’t want to be with a white woman. That seems awful…I don’t want to be that kind of Black person.” As he explained, however, through some mental gymnastics he ultimately suppressed those “stupid” thoughts because he was not dating anyone else and had been unsuccessful with the Black women he pursued. He has no regrets: “It was one of the best decisions…I have the best wife a guy could ask for, the best mother, amazing. I am very fortunate in that regard.”

The early incorporation of these respondents into predominately white social settings resulted in their acculturation of both Black and white cultural traits that played out differently with Black and non-black women. They suffered a racial authenticity penalty with Black women, yet it is precisely their perceived transgressions of normative Blackness—whether intentional or not—that is sexually rewarded by white women. As a consequence, these BMC men felt “Black enough” for white women but not “Black enough” for Black women. These racialized outcomes cannot be divorced from their context. As I have shown, Consistent Class Early Trajectory respondents thought the Black women they met in their early exposure to white environments judged them according to standards that were of less consequence to them.

Consistent Class Trajectory with Late Exposure: A Thin Line Between Racial Authenticity and Racial Allegiance

This category of respondents experienced a consistent middle-class trajectory from adolescence into adulthood but was not exposed to mixed-race social environments until college, as they grew up in predominately Black neighborhoods. While respondents in the Consistent and Early Exposure category mainly discussed their interracial experiences with white women, respondents in this category made a distinction between their experiences with white women and “women of color.” They group their interracial dating experiences into a three-tiered commitment hierarchy: Black women at the top, then “women of color” (in particular, historically disadvantaged minorities), and at the bottom, white women, whom they dated less commonly and saw as less viable long-term prospects (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Consistent and Late Exposure Respondents’ Hierarchy of Interracial Relationships
Brian, 34, grew up in a lower-middle-class, largely Black section of Detroit in the 1980s. He is tall, describes himself as medium-toned and youthful-looking. He explains that Black girls in his neighborhood always told him he “acts white” because he was an avid reader, had an extensive vocabulary, and spoke “proper” English. This attitude was to be expected in a neighborhood deprived of resources, but when he began attending a historically white school, he was surprised that he still was not “Black enough” to fit in with the Black students there. He tells me that “[there weren’t] a lot of us…I wasn’t a jock. I am an actor. I just did theater…That actually made me stand out...A lot of white girls just wanted me to be their dirty little secret.” When I asked him if that meant he dated a lot of white women, he responded:

No, I ended up fucking a lot of [white] women by default. I dated Black women. I have a really skewed view of white women because I was always viewed as a sexual object to them, [and so] I viewed them as a sexual object. Whereas I viewed Black women as the type that you date and marry you know, which is weird because it is kind of the opposite from the rest of the world, you know?...It is the exact opposite for me because of that experience.

Since Brian felt that white women desired him only sexually, he was averse to developing longer or more committed relationships with them.

Mark, 38, also a Midwestern transplant to the Bay Area, recalls experiencing a similar difficulty developing sexual relationships with Black women when he was coming of age. Mark, grew up in a similar neighborhood as Brian, but went to both a predominately Black high school and college. He remembers with a hint of scorn how "Black women didn't necessarily want light-skinned dudes in the nineties,” mentioning the dark-skinned actors popular among women in that period, Morris Chestnut and Wesley Snipes. He credits them for steering Black women’s desire from light-skinned to dark-skinned men, lamenting that his light skin was no longer in fashion: "I guess I looked more like the [white] oppressor. The Black female is going to gravitate more towards darker from where I was from. I guess I came at the wrong time."

Mark’s social environment was racially split between Blacks and whites, as it was in the large southern city he lived in for college. He says his light complexion remained a hindrance in
his pursuit of Black women even though he was in the South. Upon moving to the Bay Area, he explained, he realized just how much he “was discriminated against” in the Midwest, South, and East Coast where he had lived. Once on the West Coast, however, “I got mad love from everybody else—Asians, Latinas, Caucasians, whites.” The Bay Area’s racial diversity exposed him to options absent in his upbringing and young adulthood. Soon after moving to the Bay Area, he surprisingly began dating a Filipina woman who would become his wife.

Throughout the interview, he discussed—at length—his opposition to racial integration, or “racial mixing.” Glancing up at me almost as soon as he revealed his wife’s ethnicity, he offers a swift justification: “Filipinos are like the niggas of the Asians” because of their history of colonization and downward trajectory once they immigrate to America. These similar experiences of oppression eased the guilt he felt dating outside of his race, but at the same time allowed him to safeguard his allegiance to the Black community. In turn, he expresses that he was very uncomfortable with "openly dating" white women "because there is too much attention. I wouldn't want that sellout stamp. Now, regarding having fun, I am not discriminating. [Laughs]...It is just [that] the European female…would not get the ‘wife up’ title.”

Like Mark, George did not date his first non-Black woman until he moved to the Bay Area. He is tall, stocky, and mocha-complexioned. He grew up in Black environments in both Southern California and Western Africa and attended a predominately white university in the Eastern United States. In describing his first and only interracial relationship at the time of our interview, he immediately downplayed its seriousness. At the time, he had just come out of a relationship. He “wasn’t looking for anything, happened upon her, and started sleeping with her.” She was a white woman he had met through his graduate school network. George was a self-described monogamist who moved from one long-term relationship to the next, but interestingly this was one of the few women he dated at length that did not result in a committed relationship. He reenacts the conversation he had with her when she asked if he had ever thought about them being together: “I think you are a cool person and you know we have fun, and we have done new shit I haven’t done before, but if you ask me now are you somebody [with whom] I think this has lasting power, I don’t.” The relationship, he says, made him realize that he needed something more to move beyond a sexual relationship with a woman. He continues:

You know, she grew up in Cupertino, she went to Princeton, her dad was super wealthy. Her general life had been one of privilege. And mine had [also] been one of privilege, but there were times when there wasn’t privilege, and I felt like those grounded me and humbled me or whatever you want to call it. And I didn’t sense that she had those.

Pausing, he says, almost as an afterthought, “And that’s why I like [to date] Black people, because more often than not, I am sure they identify with some part of my struggle. So we [the white woman and I] ended.” George, however, was also troubled by the perceptions of the Black women he dated. He explains that his girlfriends would tell him after they had been dating for a while, “I thought you were gay [when we first met].” He was always startled by this assumption, wondering what it was about him that made women question his sexuality. With a mixture of sarcasm and pragmatism, he lists a few possibilities that undermine his racial authenticity: “Maybe it is because I enunciate, or wear suits, hmmm.”

George acknowledges that his class privilege sometimes resulted in attacks on his racial authenticity by Black women, but distinguishes it from the generational privilege of the white woman he dated. In doing so, he distances himself from a meaningful relationship with her. Her lack of racial struggle disqualifies her as a long-term partner. Meanwhile, despite their similar
class experiences, he can justify his continued allegiance to the Black community by highlighting the gulf in their racial experiences.

Consistent and Late Exposure respondents’ tripartite ranking, with white women at the bottom, contradicts conventional understandings of upwardly mobile Black men’s desire for white women. Their elevation of “women of color” to the top of the “desire pyramid” is based on a shared sense of struggle. As for minority women, BMC men assume that they have experiences with racial oppression that begets a certain perspective and understanding. Dating someone who has experienced racism makes Black men feel less like they are completely stepping outside of their race because of the shared element of “the struggle.” Dating white women, on the other hand, jeopardizes their racial credibility. That they prefer to date women of color while having more casual sexual relationships with white women testifies to their attempts to retain their racial credibility in a social environment where there are a greater number of available Black women. Despite slights against Consistent and Late Exposure respondents’ racial authenticity, they were still considered “Black enough” for many Black women, unlike Consistent and Early Exposure respondents.

**STEEP CLASS TRAJECTORY WITH LATE EXPOSURE: THE SIMULTANEOUS SPECTER AND ALLURE OF CLASS BACKGROUND**

“By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man...when my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.” (Franz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks)

Fanon’s (2008) provocative claim (first published in 1952) about interracial intimacy between Black men and white women from the perspective of Black men, argues that, on the one hand, the Black man’s sexual relations with white women free him of racial prejudice and is a “ritual of invitation into ‘authentic’ manhood” (52). On the other hand, he “is castrated” symbolically by lying with the oppressor. Is this twentieth-century duality still useful in thinking about Black American men today? My data reveals the answer is a bit more complicated than equating sex with the symbolic usurping of the racist system.

Steep and Late Exposure respondents grew up in predominately Black and economically disadvantaged environments. They first achieved middle-class status as adults, and on the whole, tended to date Black women. Unlike Consistent and Late Exposure respondents who described having monogamous relationships with white women, Steep and Late Exposure respondents primarily had sexual relationships with white women. This categorical difference is not only due to a lack of exposure, but also because these men strongly uphold narratives of racial allegiance. In their adolescence, they worried about being considered racial “sellouts” who succumbed to the vice of desiring white women. They also felt non-Black women were not necessarily interested in them but only in the experience of the racialized and sexualized Black male trope.

Steep trajectory respondents felt Black men were in vogue with white women who cautiously skirt around marital commitment. As Montague—tall, fair-skinned, bald headed, and dressed with “Black Dandy” flair—explains, the “Black man is to white woman what Disneyland is to kids. We are a plaything.” Montague has dated across the racial spectrum, but confides that he has largely been uncomfortable in his relationships with non-Black women. His discomfort stemmed from his belief that the these relationships were built on mere curiosity, and thus would
dissolve once that curiosity was satisfied. (We should also note that it is difficult to disentangle Montague’s own discomfort from the racial pressures exerted by his seven sisters, who routinely made offhanded comments, such as “she better be able to use my comb,” which made clear their racial preferences for their would-be sister-in-law.)

Similar family concerns surfaced with other respondents as well. When discussing his aspirations for his children, L.D., whom we already met in Chapter 2 and whose comments echoes Montague’s, juxtaposes his teenage years of Black-white-Mexican segregation with his 15-year-old son’s experiences in a multiracial world:

As a playboy, beauty didn’t have a color to it. So race didn't really matter. But, nowadays, I can see with my son—every girl want him [sic]. He has no problem getting girls. The young Black male today—cream of the crop, as it relates to just having fun... The white male is still the man, don’t get it twisted. But like I tell my son, the only thing is that the father does not want you to be her husband...because they eliminate their race like that. He’s Black—and so your lineage is over...This is the fear really.

Again, desire for Black men is temporal and institutionally limited. These vignettes force us to reconcile Fanon’s proclamation that Black men who marry white women want to be white, with how Black men view sexual intimacy with white women today. One can’t help but consider if respondents’ feelings of being exoticized by white women are shaped by their racial consciousness and its remnants of an “inferiority complex.” With Khari, for example, the decision to distinguish between frivolous sexual intimacy and serious marital commitment to white women seems to come from his feelings of inadequacy. Khari, who has dated his fair share of white women, candidly explains that:

When dating white women, you put your race on the backburner because you don’t want to expose her—you are kind of embarrassed to expose her to all the elements we have talked about [drug addiction, incarceration, and homeless kin] because you don’t want to be looked at like that, because it is so much to handle. People go, I don’t want that in my life. You know it’s like you don’t want to let “that nigga” out. Once you’ve exposed the certain type of white woman to that, you don’t want them to go, “oh, no. I don’t want to deal with that.”

He continues by elaborating on class differences as race differences:

You might be attracted to this Black male, but when you see all the drama that comes with being with someone who is Black, who [has] those families, who [has] the drama and the this and the that. Someone [she] is going to go, “You know what? Do I really want that? Do I really want to experience that? I am already getting shit from my white side, but then I have to deal with the drama that is on the black side.” It’s easy to go back [to dating white men].

Furthermore, he adds that for women who still want “color” started:

dating Indian guys in Pacific Heights...because [as his white female friend told him], ‘they look like you, but they are not broke like you.’ That was one of the realest things I have ever heard [chuckles]. Saying, I get the culture and the color, but I also get security with the money. Where the Black guy who is still trying to figure it out, I don’t have to worry about that.

Is putting “race on the backburner,” as Khari does when dating white women, a subconscious desire to be white? Or is it a matter of suppressing details of self and family that speak to the
structural disadvantages of race? With white women, Khari’s feelings of inadequacies (economic and social vis-à-vis white and Indian men) are connected to the *signifying* power of race (Miles 1989). Khari draws upon race as an ideological tool to make sense of how group boundaries and his generational class status are limits to achieving a sustained relationship with a white woman. The signifying power of race accentuates difference but also legitimates “folk” notions of Blackness as carnal and lustful despite class status. Khari’s race-as-class explanation, however, ignores Black men who have both high economic and cultural capital and successfully date and marry non-Black women with high levels of education, income, and occupational prestige (Crowder and Tolnay 2000). The effects of assortative mating shut men like Khari out of the interracial dating market, despite his middle-class status. For similar Black men, the specter of his intergenerational class history has consequences for his capacity for intimacy with white women.

Another respondent in this category, Kyle, 27, is husky and brown-skinned with big brown eyes. He uses an expressive manner of speech that includes all of the colloquialisms of the predominately Black East Bay neighborhood in which he grew up. Explaining his sexual relationships with white women, he thought they jeopardized the credibility of his racial politics: "How can I have a voice in my community with a white girlfriend or wife? Now you know if Obama was up there and the First Lady was white, [Black] people wouldn't look at him the same."

Kyle, in fact, seems remorseful about having slept with white women, recounting an instance of public humiliation that occurred in high school. Although his first sexual experience was with a Black girl on prom night, he initially had a crush on both a “Latina girl” and “white girl.” He recalls:

I remember…I had this friend who was on the swim team, and I kind of liked her. I won’t lie. And she kind of liked me too. And we ended up having this psychology class together and she sat right in front of me. I had two Black girls that sat right in front of me, and they were like “I always knew what it was. I was trying to figure out why you don’t like me. But I get it. I get it. Last year, you went to prom with a little brown skin girl, then you started dating that light skin girl, and now you [sic] best friends with this white girl. You just don’t like Black women! I knew it the whole time…” That shit affected me."

This insinuation about his whitening racial preferences reminded Kyle of his mother’s logic that he should only date women he could see himself marrying. From that moment on, while he had private sexual liaisons with white women, he did not date them, both to uphold his family’s wishes but also to establish himself as a respectable Black voice in his community.

Other respondents described coping with the absence of a parent or parents by sexually pursuing women—regardless of race—as a way to deny or mask their emotional pain. Tay’s narrative about his casual relationships with women exemplifies this reality. He is 29, of average height, medium-brown, has a slight southern drawl, and sports gold teeth. As the main breadwinner for his mom and sister, he grew up dealing drugs. Tay has had many non-Black sexual partners, some of whom are now the mother of his children. In discussing these relationships, it became clear that he understood their interest in him through racial stereotypes that highlight his and their desirability:

I found that in dealing with [white] women…the ones I dated, they preferred Black men. Obviously, they didn’t prefer Caucasian men, period…And not only that, certain ones preferred educated Black
men. And [with] Hispanic women, [education was] not so much all that. [It was] irrelevant, they just needed you to be able to make babies.

Ironically, while Tay does not realize his own stereotyping of non-Black women, he can readily identify how he was fetishized by them. At the time, though, he was unbothered because the fetishizing came with sexual rewards. But now that he is one of the few Black male tech consultants at his firm, he has become uncomfortable with the very physical characteristics (i.e., his gold teeth) that piqued (and continues to pique) non-Black women’s interest in him. Moreover, his upward mobility has introduced him to a different class of Black women who criticize him for being “too Black,” most notably because of his gold teeth. Nonetheless, he says he is unfazed by these accusations because he is already in a committed, long-term relationship with a Black woman (in his hometown).

However, unlike Tay, 37-year-old L.D. expresses intolerance towards middle-class Black women who scorn him when they witness glimpses of his class upbringing. By age 13, L.D. was fully enmeshed in “the [street] game,” selling drugs in his rapidly deteriorating Black, lower-middle-class neighborhood in Northern California. He still desires Black women, but she “must have an understanding of ghetto…because I am from the ghetto.” As his upward mobility gave him access to new social arenas, the Black women he met painstakingly pointed out the ways in which he was “too Black” for the white social settings they professionally navigated. He was dejected by these restricting perceptions of him and Black men, feeling he was only desired in the privacy of the bedroom.

Khari also feels that he was merely a spectacle for white women, but delighted in the novelty of his experiences with them. A 40-year-old Bay Area native, Khari grew up as a nomad, his single mother moving between various Bay Area cities and the Midwest. In his youth, Khari’s decision to have sex with white women was purposeful; it was a private escape from the lingering gloom of his broken home life. But now as an adult, his sexual relationships with white women remind him of his economic difficulties. As a consequence, he admits that he feels more comfortable dating:

A white girl with low self-esteem or from a lower class like me…it’s easier…she’s not the white girl who is looked upon or courted from [sic] most white men because she is thicker or she might be overweight or have a little bit more insecurity where she could go and get that attention from a good-looking Black guy.

As this demonstrates, Khari’s dating preferences are mediated through both race and class. Also revealing is that he juxtaposes the “ease” of having sexual relations with white women and the difficulty of dating Black women. In these relationships, Black women both “lack self-love” (read: inferiority complex) and the mainstream cultural perspective that he found to be a comfort in his relationships with white women. He felt white women introduced him to new music, movies, and pastimes such as hiking, and did so without antagonizing him. We should note, though, that his comment about Black women “lack[ing] self-love” was perhaps a reflection of his own tenuous feelings of self-worth. In his relationships with white women, he would deliberately mute aspects of himself (e.g., his unstable upbringing and its reverberating effects) that he only shared in his relationships with Black women. That is, while white women introduced him to new cultural pastimes, Black women’s criticisms from their insider perspective evoked feelings he tried to suppress.

In contrast to men who only feel comfortable in long-term relationships with Black women, Arthur, 41, who is now married to a Black woman, says he could have seriously dated
non-Black women because his breadth of knowledge on a range of topics and wide-ranging music tastes makes him culturally intelligible to whites and puts them at ease. However, as he explains, his racial politics are not conducive to a relationship with a white woman: “You know, I’ve slept with white people or Mexicans or whatever. That don’t mean I am a coon [a “compromising Negro” as he earlier described it]. I don’t need white people's validation. I don't walk my life to do what makes them comfortable.” When asked why he had relationships with non-Black women if he felt it might lead to jabs about his racial credibility, he explains that his segregated environment "programmed" and "perverted" him to approach relationships in this way.

Shareef, is a 25-year-old, 6-foot-tall, dark-skinned man from one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles but spent a brief stint in the suburbs after a family crisis resulted in his temporary dislocation. While there, he began tutoring a fellow white student, and soon after they started dating. However, this relationship quickly ended because of her disapproving father. Shareef describes the relationship as “safe” because it existed outside the gaze of his all Black peers and family who would have surely scolded him. Shareef admits he was curious; he had already been gravitating toward light-skinned Black women and had a father who was notorious for dating white women.

Shareef rationalizes this interracial relationship, his only, as a product of his earlier skin color preferences. I deliberately say “color,” as he explicitly talks about the effect of psychological conditioning on his preferences over time: white women initially, followed by light-skinned Black women, and now brown-skinned women. As he has developed a stronger racial consciousness and analysis of the “white supremacist structure,” he also became less tolerant of interracial relationships, in particular with white women: “To this day—if I wasn’t married—I wouldn’t engage it anymore because there is so much culturally that white folks just would not get.” At the same time, he concedes that not all Black women “get it.” He explains that women pigeonholed him to rap video clichés because he was raised in the “hood.” And since he did not fit this image, he felt there was an expectation to be something he was not. As he describes it, “I am just like, yo, I know so many brothers that are dope, but these ain’t the brothas that sisters are checking for. I guess they want people with some type of hood or street aesthetic. I guess I kind of have it because the way I grew up, the way I speak, you know things like that. But shit, if I had to move to the hood, I wouldn’t have it. I would just be some tall ass lanky dude.”

Other respondents also expressed this sentiment, discussing how their racial experiences growing up as a Black man in a segregated inner-city with heightened interracial tensions are at odds with the changing cultural mores regarding interracial relationships. Steep and Late Exposure respondents uphold their segregationist attitude toward interracial intimacy because the expectation is that they will date out as they ascend the class ladder from their subjugated position. Instead, while their upward mobility engenders serious interest from white women, many initially resist entering serious relationships with them even though a small percentage still do.

**DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

Previous work has focused on how upwardly mobile Blacks’ social networks become more racially integrated as they ascend, leading to greater opportunities for interracial contact and thus interracial relationships. However, this chapter complicated this widely-held belief about the impact of social networks. It demonstrated the need to not only consider Black men’s
racially integrated networks in their adulthood, but just as important, their timing of exposure to racially integrated networks. Their timing of exposure affects the types of interracial relationships they have: men who experience early exposure are more likely to marry non-Black women, while those who experience late exposure are more likely have casual or non-marital relationships with non-Black women. In particular, these latter are more comfortable dating “women of color” who have experienced similar disadvantages.

My consideration of BMC men’s class trajectories and dating histories with both Black and non-Black women revealed how BMC men’s decisions are not merely a function of the racial composition of their social environment, but are also contingent on the nature of their sexual experiences over time. An analysis of my respondents’ dating history from their adolescence to adulthood revealed that across class trajectory patterns, they initially sought relationships with Black women as a function of their neighborhood context, to subconsciously fulfill the expectations of their family, or because of socialized same-race attraction. However, racialized expectations for them as Black men shaped their relationships with Black and non-Black women in different ways. Specifically, BMC Heterogeneity determined how they experienced these interpersonal dynamics.

My analyses delved into the subjective and interpersonal dynamics of the “race” category, revealing just how fluid it is. This fluidity, which is modulated by women’s perception of how BMC men fit in the category, affects the decision-making process more than to which specific class trajectory group the men belonged. I found that BMC men’s interracial decisions depend on more than merely racial preference or interracial contact; rather, they powerfully reveal how the perception of their “Blackness” structured who they felt was available to them as intimate romantic partners. This finding supports existing research that shows how intra-group dynamics, specifically the perceptions of race (e.g., Blackness) and gender (e.g., masculinity and femininity) traverse discrete social categorizations (Deaux 1984; Maddox 2004; Green et al. 2005). In their experiences, BMC men perceived that Black women’s sexual attraction was tied up with the men’s racial authenticity. They revealed that their sexual attractiveness was assessed either in terms of cultural aesthetics (e.g., style of dress, language, and demeanor), which is typically the focus of sociological literature that examines how such characteristics emerge from and are shaped by Hip-Hop (Harrison 2008) or in terms of phenotypical characteristics (e.g., skin tone, physique, and height) that the relationship formation literature has so far neglected.

Although BMC men may not be subjected to these types of racialized assessments with non-Black women, their experiences of strained intra-categorical dynamics with Black women are pivotal for how they make sense of their interracial decisions. For example, respondents who were repeatedly scrutinized by Black women—and because of this racial scrutiny, were less successful with them—pointed to these interactions as not only encouraging an openness to date interracially but also as a defense against the internalized and externalized criticism dating out engenders. This finding was true for respondents across categories, though Steep and Late Exposure respondents did not report experiencing racialized taunts by Black women to the degree that Steep and Early/Late Exposure respondents did.

A consideration of intra-class variation reveals the number of ways in which racial authenticity mediates BMC men’s dating experiences once they have entered a racially mixed social setting. Ethnographic research has shown how the neighborhood demographics of the BMC result in differing socializing experiences, depending on their specific residential realities (Pattillo 1999; Lacy 2007; Sharkey 2014). This body of research largely focuses on the current neighborhood conditions of BMC subjects (with the exception of Pattillo 1999). Until this study,
little attention has been paid to how the neighborhoods and extralocal environments in which BMC adults were raised also shape the race and class experiences in interracial relationships.

I found respondents’ socialization in their adolescent neighborhood to be foundational to their racial experiences and cultivation of a racial attitude toward interracial dating. For Steep and Late Exposure respondents who were raised in predominately Black contexts and achieved middle-class status as adults, their family and Black peers exerted pressure to not date out. They were taunted for being seen with, or even flirting with, white women too often. Respondents who grew up middle-class in predominately Black environments relayed similar intra-group experiences, but added that they felt less derided when dating “women of color.”

By contrast, Consistent and Early Exposure respondents who grew up as minorities in middle-class, predominately white environments were not met with derision, at least blatantly, from their non-Black peers. Moreover, they rationalized their relationships with white women as an outgrowth of the racialized fault lines between themselves and Black women, which was accompanied by a spate of interested—or simply curious—non-Black women.

My focus on social mobility revealed how race-based decisions accord with BMC men’s class backgrounds. This analysis deepens our understanding of how socializing experiences over time are just as important to BMC men’s current class position as how racially integrated their social network is. What is so compelling about this finding is that it demonstrates how subjective experiences develop BMC men’s propensity to date interracially, complicating the assumption that their favoring white women is the outcome of internalized, racist standards of beauty. It also elucidates how these peer interactions, which are shaped by the racial demographics, influence the types of interracial relationships BMC men are willing to have. And more generally, it reveals the persistence of white definitions that have been, and still are, inscribed onto Black bodies.

I foregrounded the kaleidoscope of Black men’s dating experiences and relationship decisions to serve as the much-needed corrective to monolithic assumptions about their desire for white women. This anachronistic but prevalent assumption positions Black men’s interest in white women as a symbolic quest for status and respect. The BMC men’s narratives about interracial dating, however, revealed a reverence for Black women that is as powerful as the purported status white women confer. If they were not currently with a Black woman, they expressed the desire to ultimately settling down with one. Or, if married to a non-Black woman, they initially thought they would marry a Black woman.

These findings also contradict the canard that Black men prefer non-Black women, particularly relevant in a contemporary moment when BMC men are under assault for allegedly privileging white womanhood over Black womanhood (as evidenced by their higher rates of interracial marriage compared to Black women). Instead, this chapter illustrated a far more complex web of interpersonalized dynamics that shaped and continue to shape how they begin dating interracially, which offers a revised and updated way of understanding Black men’s interracial decisions. It shifts the myopic focus from their interracial relationships as an outcome of white racism to Black gender relations that typify racialized tropes of Black masculinity and authenticity as an extension and outcome of internalized racism. This shift indicates just how agentic BMC men are in their interracial decisions, because they are reacting to who finds them desirable, even if this desire stems from racialized tropes.

Finally, I built on Chapter 2’s discussion of how respondents’ racialized dating experiences with Black women enter into the decision-making process regarding interracial relationships. I showed how BMC men initially seek relationships with Black women, and how
racialized expectations shape their outcomes with Black and non-Black women in different ways. In the next chapter, I show how the dominant discourse holding that upwardly mobile Black men prefer white women over Black women has single-handedly framed the issue of Black marriage as a critique of Black men’s failure to wed Black women.
Chapter 4:
“Love Jones” Men and the Marriage Question:
Why Never-Married Men Delay Marriage Entry

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Blacks’ access to the institution of marriage has been denied by a regulatory regime predicated on white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. Slave marriages were not recognized by whites (Foster 2010; Pinsoff 2002), yet when the North won the Civil War, whites were faced with integrating Blacks into the social, economic, and political fabric of American society. Blacks were thus granted the legal right to marry, and although this was framed as a newly won freedom, it became yet another way to surveil them and exert control over the “unstable” Black family in public discourse (Pinderhughes 2002; Starks and Brooks 2015). Regardless, the recognition of Black marriages led to the near parity of Black and white marriage rates until the 1960s (Fitch and Ruggles 2000), which was around the same time that the Moynihan Report issued a warning about the dangers of female-headed Black families (Moynihan 1965). Since then, the relationship between the structure, composition, and class trajectory of American families has drastically changed over the past sixty years.

In 1960, almost 90 percent of children lived in a two-parent household, with both parents holding at least a high school degree (US Census 1960). In fact, high school graduates in that era were more likely to marry than those with a college degree. Yet the converse is true today: high school graduates are less likely to have ever married, but more likely to have out-of-wedlock children than their college-educated counterparts (Coontz 2014). Today, children experience far more household transitions than children did fifty years ago. In fact, in the 1960s, the composition of working-class and middle-class Black families strongly resembled that of the white, married, nuclear family because Blacks were more likely to be married than Whites from 1890 until the 1960s (Fitch and Ruggles 2000).

Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, the number of never-married Blacks over 25 years old reached 10 percent (Fitch and Ruggles 2000) climbing to 35 percent in 2014 (American Community Survey 2015). Thus, today, the BMC looks demographically different than it once did: married couples with children are becoming less the norm. In 1990, almost half of college-educated Blacks 25 and older were married, while only a quarter were never married (US Census 1990). But by 2015, there was a decline in BMC married households, especially among women, and this change was coupled with an increase of never-married BMC to 32 percent (ACS 2001-2015).13 As such, Kris Marsh (2008) hypothesizes that young (aged 25-44), never-married, college-educated, and childless individuals—which she dubs “The Love Jones Cohort”—will soon comprise the second largest segment of the BMC (after married households). The Love Jones nomenclature is based on a shift in media portrayals from the Black middle-class from the married-with-children “Huxtables” in The Cosby Show to single, young, Black professionals, as depicted in the film, Love Jones. However, unlike other social groups, never-married BMC men’s marriage delays are not regarded as a demographic shift but rather

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13 By MSA (based on ACS 2001-2015 data), twice as many Black women as Black men (25-55) with at least a bachelor’s degree living in the Atlanta Metro area are never married. Whereas there is a similar trend in the San Francisco Bay area, it is less marked. There is no reason to expect these types of differences based on the higher concentration of Blacks in the South, but this difference could be due to the fact that college-educated Black men in the Atlanta Metro area are more likely to be married at an earlier age than SF Bay Area BMC men. For example, on average, BMC men tend to marry by about age 25 in Atlanta Metro, but around 22 in the SF Bay Area.
criticized as a sociological problem. As such, this chapter presents the marriage views of never-married men—the oft-problematized fraction of the growing share of BMC singles.

The dominant explanation for high rates of BMC non-marriage is that there are not enough “qualified” (read: degreed and at least median-level income earning) Black men for Black women to marry (Banks 2011). In other words, Black women’s “male marriageable index” is hampered either by suboptimal candidates—i.e., unemployed men, in the case of low-income Black women (Wilson 1996)—or a shortage of comparably college-educated Black men for professional Black women (Crowder and Tolnay 2000). Since Black women obtain college degrees at a higher rate than their male counterparts, they are the least likely of any group to marry a man with a similar level of education (Fry and Cohn 2016; Blackman et al. 2005). The crisis-like language around the issue focuses on the “problem” of Black women’s perpetual singleness. However, Marsh (2008) suggests that we need to shift how we think and talk about singlehood, as never-married Black professionals will soon make up the largest share of the BMC. Rather than treating these demographic changes as a problem, more research should explore what these changes mean for the Black class structure, especially as the meaning of marriage is being reshaped and defined by new *generational* norms across all racial/ethnic groups. Instead of treating this shift as a problem, therefore, this chapter focuses on the fastest growing segment of the BMC, the “Love Jones” cohort, to understand, on their own terms, *why never-married BMC men delay marriage*. It explores why BMC men delay marriage when, on one hand, the market is said to be demographically in their favor, yet on the other hand, they are depicted as “missing” by the media and other commentators due to their lower rates of college education and higher incarceration rates.

**Black Men and Marriage Delays**

The existing literature on why men delay marriage has tended to focus on the individual-level factors that facilitate or inhibit marriage formation. These quantitative studies typically refute or support social exchange theory to explain key factors that people negotiate in their decision to marry. They, in effect, perform cost-benefit analyses of what individuals are willing to give up (e.g., financial and sexual freedom, ability to socialize with peers) in exchange for rewards (e.g., status approval and shared resources) (South 1993; Anderson 1999; Bradbury and Karney 2010). Generally, individuals with a comparable racial identity, occupational status, educational attainment, religious affiliation, etc., are more likely to marry each other (Rockwell 1976; Rosenfeld 2005; Blackwell and Litcher 2004). Financial stability is also a key factor. The expectation therefore is that men—across social groups—delay marriage entry if they work in low-wage or menial labor jobs (Oppenheimer 1998) or fail to meet financial milestones (Schneider 2011) that would allow them to buy a home, own a car, or secure financial assets (Edin 2000; Lawson and Thompson, 1999; Schneider, 2011). As evidenced in the growing wealth gap between the married and never-married, “assets are now a broad social standard of marriageability” (Schenider 2011). While this shift tells us why marriage delays have increased, it also makes clear that unbalanced social exchanges (e.g., white women’s race in exchange for Black men’s educational attainment) is less common among marrying singles today. Instead, status homophily is valued across social groups; thus, the decision to marry is in large part dependent on (men’s) accumulated wealth.

While this literature provides an analysis of men in general, its racial distinctions generalize the marriage decisions of all Black men through the lens of low-income or unemployed Black men. Despite a widening class schism among Black men, the literature tends
to offer a principal declaration: Black men’s (under)employment is regarded as the quintessential barrier to marriage (Wilson 1996; Clayton and Moore 2003; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005). The existing marriage literature emphasizes the perspectives of Black women through which Black men are read, but this chapter focuses the empirical lens on BMC men themselves. I identify two modal explanations BMC men use to describe why they are not married that expand the current market-based approach to the problem: 1) the tensions between commitment to marriage and commitment to a career; and 2) the need to generate wealth. Both issues extend our understanding of why and how the role of personal wealth matters for first marriages among Black men. As I will show by offering a critique of the “marriageable men” literature, given the precarious nature of middle-class status for Blacks, class aspirations might be a better predictor of BMC men’s first marriage entry than class status.

Existing explanations tend to emphasize the relationship between status and marriage entry across groups. This chapter, however, focuses on one of those groups—BMC men—and analyzes the relationship between generational cohort, class trajectory pattern, and masculinity to reveal how BMC men’s marriage decisions are shaped by their intersectional realities. These nuances influence how BMC men talk and make decisions about marriage, which I show occurs in relation to hegemonic masculinity, blackness, and class trajectory. This chapter situates these explanations within the literature on masculinities to document how Black men grapple with, endorse, and resist the producer-provider masculine ideal (as well as the expectation of others) that is at odds with their structural realities.

It is important to note how gender ideology shapes the narrative about Black marriage’s putative doom; its failure is entangled in the gendered tropes of the “weak” Black man and the “strong” Black woman. These tropes reinforce white patriarchal definitions of masculinity that set the standard by which Black heterosexual relationships are evaluated, even as they exclude them. As I will show, this rigid white patriarchal thinking has not so much been challenged by Black male partners as it has been reinforced as a measure of relationship integrity, fruition, and permanence. Instead of problematizing matrimonial ideals defined by and for white men, Black men by and large subscribe to it and use it to evaluate Black masculinity.

The literature on Black men, marriage, and family also routinely explains the failure of Black men based on masculine ideals that have little to do with their lived reality (hooks 2004a, 2004b; Hill-Collins 2000). Since masculinity is defined by the ability to provide for a family, single Black men—whether absentee fathers or never-married—undercut the concept’s core tenet. Absentee fathers fail to build the financial base for their families they have helped to create, but not support, while never-married Black men have failed to uphold the producer-provider ideal of masculinity. Like white men, Black men see it as their responsibility to be a provider, but their economic circumstances make it much harder to become one. This difficulty is not only due to the fact that they have no safety net and a steeper path to climb, but also because many BMC men—even single ones—must continue to fiscally support their nuclear family and extended kinfolk. Even though Black men were excluded from the definition of hegemonic masculinity, they are evaluated through that lens, and therefore are not immune to its ideals (hooks 2004b; Hill-Collins 2000; Matlon 2016).

I argue, therefore, that BMC men’s decision to delay marriage should not be seen as the refusal of an outmoded patriarchal institution (as is the case for white Millennials’ retreat from traditional marriage norms). Rather, their never-married status—even if an intentional, short-term retreat from the marriage institution itself—could be more accurately described, at least in the men’s minds, as a failure to fulfill the perceived requirements of hegemonic masculinity.
Using this critique as the theoretical foundation, this chapter shows how these norms shape Black men’s rationale and capacity for marriage. In doing so, it argues that BMC men delay marriage because they are trapped between their acceptance of hegemonic masculine ideals and their knowledge of how difficult they are to attain. Even as they understand—and often reject—these expectations placed on them both by societal norms and the women they date, they struggle to balance marriage commitment with their desire to be seen as successful men. The chapter further shows that, particularly for Steep Trajectory men, these tensions are heightened by experiences of acute financial hardship in their youth and familial instability.

**White Masculinity and Its Discontents**

The subheading above is a take on *Manliness and Its Discontents*, in which Martin Summers (2004) challenges masculinity studies by demonstrating the ways Black men were agents in their identity formation, rather than merely relational objects against whom white men defined themselves. This is a bold proclamation in a literature that is often fixated on how Black men compare to white men, though increasingly, some studies have begun to examine masculinity from the perspective of Black men’s structural position in relation to other Black men (Hill-Collins 2000; hooks 2004b; Matlon 2016). Rather than continue to document the abyss between the tropes of breadwinner masculinity and “gangster culture masculinity” (hooks 2004b), this new literature emphasizes that though they are outside of its structural bounds, Black men continue to participate in patriarchy by producing relationships of power that perpetuate domination (Summers 2004; hooks 2004b; Matlon 2016).

It is this tension between subscribing to patriarchy while critiquing white masculinity that provides the theoretical frame I use to analyze how BMC men discuss and rationalize their decisions to delay marriage. To understand how this tension colors the decision-making process of respondents, it is necessary to understand the two opposing masculine constructions—hegemonic masculinity and marginalized masculinity—that they negotiate. In the next section, I discuss and critique these two relational poles of masculinity to contextualize how BMC men discuss their never-married status.

**Interrogating the Masculinity Typology**

What Black feminists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill-Collins refer to as “white patriarchal masculinity” is a version of what R.W. Connell typifies as hegemonic masculinity. Regardless of the name, it is the ideology of the dominant group: in the contemporary United States, this means white, upper-middle-class men without any structural barriers to achieving the producer-provider ideal of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual, closely tied to marriage, and represents the most successful way of being a man (Connell ([1995] 2005:77). It is a white inscription of “adult masculinity” (Lindsay and Miescher 2003). Connell’s ([1995] 2005) typology also includes four other forms of masculinity that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to: complicit, subordinated, and marginalized (see Figure 4.1). Complicit masculinity is not hegemonic but supports, or consents to the gendered structure of, hegemony. Subordinated masculinity, usually homosexual, is oppressed by the rules of hegemonic masculinity. Marginalized masculinity embodies masculine ideals but is blocked from reaching the hegemonic form of masculinity because of its devalued racial status (e.g., Black men).

**Figure 4.1 Visual Adaptation of R.W. Connell’s ([1995] 2005) Masculinity Taxonomy**
Jordanna Matlon’s (2016) recent work on Black men and global masculinities challenges and extends Connell’s widely held distinctions. Following in the theoretical footsteps of other Black Feminists, Matlon (2016) argues that masculinity is not just constructed in relation to other forms of masculinity but positioned in relation to “white racial capitalism.” This theoretical shift illustrates the ways Black men can escape their structural marginality by participating in the patriarchy that asserts dominance over others. Furthermore, Black men’s relation to capitalism in the “new version of patriarchy” (hooks 2004b) allows them to participate in a system that has exploited and excluded them; by remaining single, so the argument goes, they amass capital, but not enough to play the producer-provider role and thus fully embrace the patriarchy. Matlon (2016), however, pushes back on hooks’ theorizing of a “new version of patriarchy” to highlight the nuanced distinction between participating in capitalism and having access to capital.

The access point to the capitalist system for Black and white men differs. Yet the pursuit of money in a capitalist system—no matter its method—is a way to prove masculinity. For white men, wages act as a conduit to marriage, whereas for Black men, it is more about amassing as much capital as possible, through whatever means possible, than earning wages from a job (hooks 2004b; Hill-Collins 2000), because for Black men absorbed in gangster culture, validation of their masculinity rests on capital. Hence, as hooks (2004b) and Hill-Collins (2000) argue, robbing, stealing, slanging, and hustling are all fair conduits to accessing capital in a system only 300 years removed from slavery that disqualified Black men from the ideal type of masculinity and thus never validated them as a producer-provider. It is important to note, however, that “unmarriageable” Black men have always continued to assert masculine identities amid economic crises—asserting alternative masculinities through, say, sexual conquest.

But does this theory about amassing capital being the basis for validating Black masculinity also hold up for upwardly mobile Black men? Some scholars argue that as Black men ascend the class ladder, they imitate the mores of middle-class white men; and thus, unlike their poorer brethren, they emphasize their responsibility to provide for their families (Hill-Collins 2000; hooks 2004; Summers 2004; Gaines 1996). In other words, although BMC men
critique white-defined masculinity, they support patriarchy because it allows them to be seen as masculine—whether they are the “man of the house” or not.

For both middle- and low-income Black men, the literature emphasizes how they circumvent their exclusion from capital to prove their masculinity by other means. Yet this “proof” of masculinity rests on “the myth of work access to patriarchal manhood [for Black men]” (hooks, 2004b). Therefore, making money is of greater importance to Black men in a racist capitalist system that is built on the ethos of greed. By pursuing money—rather than steady professional employment, from which they were often barred—Black men could not only participate in a system that structurally excludes them but also assert their masculinity through the capital they had amassed. For those BMC men in particular who “must still submit to the whims of whites [in mainstream work]” (hooks, 2004b), generating the most capital is of utmost importance, as their patriarchal worth is defined by their net worth. Ironically, then, this drive to amass capital for marriage is often a higher priority than marriage itself.

From the literature, we know that low-income Black men maintain a masculine identity through an alternative means of economic participation—for example, in the underground economy or through hustling—that defies conventional modes of wage labor. While this alternative masculinity yields capital, it does not create a conduit to marriage, as the producer-provider ideal suggests, because marriage becomes a (burdensome) economic choice rather than a moral choice (hooks 2004b).

What, then, about BMC men who have access to capital yet still remain unmarried? How does their access to capital shape their views of the producer-provider ideal? If Black masculinity—by virtue of its devalued racial status—is considered an alternative, resistant, and even revolutionary identity, then why the vocal critique of BMC men who have capital but choose to delay entry into an institution (i.e., marriage) of patriarchal masculinity that excludes them? In the next section, I answer this question, demonstrating that although the alternative masculinity for Black men rests on the demonstrable greed of capital accumulation, BMC men who attempt to disentangle their self-worth from wages and capital are problematized. First, I present findings for all never-married respondents in my sample, then by generational age cohort and class trajectory pattern.

**Findings**

*Detaching Status from Selfhood: The Crux of Resume Lovin’ & The Expectation of the Producer-Provider Ideal*

Existing literature suggests that educational attainment and income predict marital outcomes (Bernard 1966; Mare 2000; Gullickson 2006; Todson 2011; Greenwood et al. 2014), but it does not provide insight into the decision-making process of Black men and Black women that inform this statistical trend. Therefore, why BMC men are less likely to be married is a puzzle for the quantitative literature, which relies heavily on the explanatory variables of education and income. In other words, if educational attainment and income are positively related to marriage, then why are Black men, who possess these characteristics, still less likely to get married? As my analysis reveals, current studies overlook the emotional, familial, and philosophical factors that men emphasize alongside the structural factors that shape their marriage views.

As bell hooks (2004b:29) notes, “responsible middle-class black men who embody all that is best about the Protestant work ethic find that work satisfies best when it is not placed at
the center of one’s evaluation of manhood or selfhood, but rather when it is seen simply as one aspect of a holistic life.” For BMC men, their educational and professional success was not indicative of their readiness for marriage; rather, they saw such success as a merely part of “the grind” of trying to climb the economic ladder. Respondents also distanced their work identity/educational status from their potentiality as husbands because some were dissatisfied with their job, which led to their uncertainty about future financial stability. This fear is undergirded by the notion of confirmation bias—that if they were to fail to meet the expectations of the producer-provider ideal, then they would succumb to the dominant narrative about their moral and economic failure.

Many respondents spoke of not wanting to be desired for their status but for a genuine interest in them. For these men, having a wife is a component of success but not the exclusive aim. To this point, respondents revealed that in some of their dating and relationship experiences, they felt women were trying to accomplish a goal: marriage. These experiences left them feeling that their resume was the most important thing about them. As Montague vividly puts it, “They don't feel love for being! More so love of possession! So, it is challenging to be intimate and discover a real sense of love for a person without the reward attached to it.” Respondents like Garen indicated that they were aware of how their college degree attracts some women: “Having my degree is just like a box that gets checked off. College education, check. He works for a pharmaceutical company, check. He makes x amount of dollars, check. And blah, blah, blah.” This status obsession led Nathaniel to conclude the following about his past partners: “[They] have been more enthusiastic about being in a relationship and less about if it is lasting and affirming.” That is, some respondents thought the excitement of being in a relationship was overshadowed by considerations of long-term compatibility.

For this reason, many of my respondents spoke with nostalgia about young love. Hakeem reasons that the "purest form of love [between a man and a woman] happens between teenage years, followed by a few years after college graduation" because, in his experience, relationships then were not based on possession or status. Bobby cautions that there is danger in loving for the sake of possession and status because it does not “automatically tell you if you are like a great guy or successful, because people can get a college degree in just about anything. And the first thing people say is, I graduated. I got a college degree.” In fact, respondents generally held that education was not a necessary condition for beginning a relationship—or even a prerequisite for marriage. Rather, respondents noted that intelligence matters more than educational training, because it is born out of a myriad of life experiences. These respondents were critical of looking upon formal education as the holy grail, as it was in the dating realm, where college-educated Black men are regarded as unicorns.

Other respondents likened women’s desire to be with a man who has status to the laws of attraction and conditions of patriarchy. As Donte describes it, “Women are attracted to men who have ‘more’ than they do—more height, more money, more status, more power, etc. But what happens when women achieve more? Compared to her accomplishments, the man might become less attractive to her.” This perspective is particularly insightful because it demonstrates that Donte feels that even once a man has a woman’s love, it is tenuous because it is subject to the increasing aspirations of professionally successful women. Donte’s response also makes clear how the hypergamy rules of patriarchy, in which women must marry up, results in a sense of anxiety about BMC men’s ability to maintain the status that draws women to them in the first place. All of these factors demonstrate how the tenuousness of being Black and middle-class threatens the ability to uphold the masculine ideal.
Some respondents felt “pressured” to marry by women who were merely attracted to the allure of their educational status. Garen concedes:

A man will take a good woman [read: attractive, wholesome, smart, single] regardless of her color, and women are more picky [sic] because a woman is a status symbol to most men. The value system of America creates the desire to seek and have status. I get that, but then I have seen a lot of marriages that are unhealthy because of it.

Respondents like Garen understand that women’s desire for men with status is about the ability to participate and survive in a capitalist system. Still, it stirs up resistance or anxiety in respondents. Rodell talks about adopting a “me first” attitude by prioritizing his career over a relationship: “It was more me first, trying to set myself up. I was hoping that the diploma would put me in good standing! But, now I’m just a smart single guy. I didn’t prioritize it [marriage].” Although Rodell attributes his singleness to not “prioritizing” marriage, it is important to note that he did not begin relationships with a “me first” mindset; rather, over time he felt that he could not simultaneously build his net worth and a family.

In fact, since respondents felt their current stability was tied to their future ability to provide, the fate of any relationship rested on BMC men’s professional ascent. This cautious approach is often at odds with the more eager approach to marriage of women they have dated. Diggy makes clear that the decision to marry is an economic imperative, and thus there should be little surprise about marriage delays among Black men: “I have a bucket list of things I wanted to achieve before I get married. A lot of that is financial. Yeah, you want to make sure your family is set up to do well, so you don’t want financial issues to be the reason your family doesn’t work out. And I wanted to eliminate as much of that stress as I could. This is probably more important to me [than for women he has dated].” Alfred is also anxious about “marrying, then breaking up a year from now because we got money issues.” As these two answers show, anxiety about marriage entry stems from the need to feel financially stable as men—now and later.

It was difficult for respondents to abandon what may be considered a more materialistic way of thinking because as college-educated Black men, they felt socially catapulted into the “Talented Tenth,” which is accompanied by a set of relationship expectations or “demands.” As a consequence, respondents felt there was less room for them to be, for example, between jobs, have legal side-hustles (as their primary income), live at home, or not own a car. Respondents felt that taking steps to build generational capital outweighed the far-off goal of marriage.

When some respondents say that they were “not ready” for marriage, they were also referring to the marriage readiness of their partner. Reggie uses the example of running for public office to demonstrate what informs his decision to wed: “Will she be a woman at the top of her profession? Will she be a woman that is respected?” Like Reggie, who connects relationship longevity to a consideration of what a woman will, or might, be in the future, Camara, who is finishing up his PhD, opines:

What is the projected outline for this person twenty years from now? Will this person be successful? Does this person have something to offer at 40? 45? I have a lot of older friends who are divorced. You know, they got married at 21, and I think a lot of them thought just for that moment, I want to get married now. But, a lot of it is about knowing what you have to offer later, too.
Thus, BMC men’s decisions to delay marriage is a matter of considering what one wants in the current moment and what one can offer (and financially sustain) in the future. They hold this perspective because they feel women’s desire for marriage is conditional on their financial expectations. This creates two problems: 1) Men feel desired only insofar as they are capable of earning money, and 2) they feel an enormous pressure to forecast and secure their financial future. For BMC men, their ascendancy up the class ladder does not automatically equate to financial stability because in this society, the discourse of inevitable failure marks Black masculinity. As a result, they emphasize attaining wealth, rather than marrying, so that they will have the confidence to provide over the long term. In the next section, I discuss how respondents’ emphasis on wealth attainment prioritized a future, sustainable relationship.

**WEALTH BLOCKADES: TRADING COMMITMENT TO MARRIAGE FOR COMMITMENT TO CAREER**

Respondents talked about marriage as a financial institution that involves more than the heart. While an emotional connection is important, respondents believed that it would not sustain a long-term marriage. This section delves deeper into the various ways respondents discussed wanting to (eventually) marry, trying to reconcile hegemonic expectations with continued structural constraints as Black men. I show how BMC men perceive that women’s expectations of a professionally employed Black man are at odds with how these men think about themselves. Black men understand employment leads to (self-)respect and instills confidence, but as I have suggested above, stable employment does not confirm masculinity in the same way that it does for white men. Hence, many BMC men would rather postpone marriage entry until they reach a certain tax bracket, or have a certain amount of stock and other investments, before making a decision that could compromise their masculinity. Since masculinity is still measured by financial success, and this success seems harder to gain while supporting a family, Black men opt to postpone marriage.

As we see, therefore, Black men’s hesitation is less about losing money than how the financial weight of marriage could threaten their masculine identity. Yet too often, BMC men’s decision to delay marriage entry is read through the producer-provider masculine ideal of the “older version of patriarchy” (hooks 2004b:16), in which marriage and starting a family was considered a moral obligation (rather than an economic imperative). In the current system of patriarchy, in which Black men’s participation is based on financial stability and wealth accumulation, marriage choice is not based on morality but rather on how access to capital is connected to masculine identity.

Patriarchal dividends, from which Black men also benefit, allow them to decide the pace of their relationships. And while relationships involve mutual decisions, the specific decision to wed is gendered. That is, respondents reported leading in deciding the timing of marriage. For example, at the time that Montague began his career as a substitute teacher, he had been dating his news executive girlfriend for three years. They had had conversations about marriage, though he felt “in transition,” not having opened his barbershop yet and becoming the entrepreneur he wanted to be. While proud of his work in the community, he compared himself to his corporate girlfriend. The more she succeeded, he began to emotionally distance himself from her.

To illustrate how he became more distant as his three-year relationship deepened, he shares: “It took me years to leave a toothbrush in her bathroom. It signifies comfort. And I lived down the street. I would just go home. That really bothered her.” When asked why, he looked at me plainly and says, “The next thing you know, it’s a shirt, a sock, a jacket, then she is carving out an entire space for you! Nooo!” When asked why he was not comfortable with that level of...
intimacy three years into what would be a five-year relationship, he sighs:

That is a good question. It was more so that I was not on my ones and twos [at my best] when she was in her career making moves. I had just finished grad school, playing football, and started teaching. She was supposed to be with someone on that level; I was in transition, so to speak. No money, no honey!

Montague’s reasoning reveals his tenuousness as a member of the Black middle-class—the realization that his capital was too unstable for him to launch into marriage. He excitedly explains that he is not “seduced by the felonious images of Black wealth and prosperity! Somehow, we managed to forget about that, or shit, maybe we are just misinformed. [Laughs].” As proud as he is of his class ascendency, he still faces the structural realities of BMC men, who despite their educational status or professional success do not feel financially stable. In this vein, Montague laments the unrealistic expectations of “Free Market Princesses,” or women who attach value to wealth without acknowledging these structural constraints.

As with other respondents, Montague felt that the danger of slipping down the economic ladder was of greater concern than appeasing women’s marital aspirations. Montague feels himself to be more precarious and slower-paced professionally compared to his girlfriend, though from his responses, it is difficult to glean if she actually held him to the standard. However, both the perception and internalization of his girlfriend’s standards were great enough for him to delay marrying her. Instead, the decision to focus on his career first placed a strain on how (emotionally) comfortable and available he was, which often resulted in him feeling like even his best efforts were unsatisfactory. As my respondents felt that status drove BMC women’s interest in them, when they did not live up to a particular standard, they themselves opted out of the relationship.

For example, Marcus, a rising sales associate at Coca-Cola at the time of the interview, explains the tension between climbing the corporate ladder and investing time in a relationship: “The last woman I dated complained that I didn’t give her enough time. And it was like, this is the same woman who was telling me that her last dude wasn’t [consistently employed]. So I am out here doing my thing, and now it’s a problem.” Similarly, Donte, who has had a string of emotionally substantial relationships, remembers: “[it] might be more beneficial if I do that [work on career] without somebody, because the attention that I need to give you I can’t, and I feel like there are way more women who don’t get it or don’t understand.”

However, part of the problem is that respondents did not know, or were more likely hesitant to communicate, why they could or would not simultaneously meet their professional aspirations while being in a serious relationship. Rodell talks about the difficulty of having to be candid with a woman when he had not necessarily been honest with himself. After his last breakup, he realized that “[I] see marriage as having a baby, a family. And, I wasn’t done focusing on my career yet. I didn’t want to be in a position where I didn’t explore my talent based off of what I know it could be.” Although white men also delay marriage for professional reasons and to build wealth, for Black men the road to economic stability is not only steeper but also more difficult to maintain. This economic drive, in turn, gives rise to perhaps unrealistic “fantasies of having more” before feeling comfortable with marrying (hooks 2004b: 29).

The anxiety of building wealth while single is exacerbated by the thought of providing for a family. And because BMC men consent to the producer-provider ideal type of hegemonic
masculinity, they feel that the most respectable way of starting a family—and one that also validates their masculinity—is through assuming sole financial responsibility in the lead-up to marriage. Respondents scoffed at the idea of sharing financial resources before marriage, though many residing in the Bay Area admitted that a dual income was necessary to purchase a home in the inflated housing market. As Reggie puts it, “Marriage is supposed to be long-lasting, and a lot of that happens before ‘I do.’” Jabari agrees, saying that “women don’t want to marry a guy who doesn’t have his own; he has to come to it [marriage] with something.” This perspective stems in part from the fact that Black men are unable to relinquish the fantasy that wealth is the solution to life’s problems, but it is also tied up with the “ethos of greed” that determines masculine identity in a capitalist system.

These professional-intimate tensions resulted in the respondents’ inability to communicate their delaying rationale without feeling censured by their partners. They felt that women perceived this tension as selfishness, a matter of what he wants and when he wants it. And yet, most respondents were uncomfortable with having the exclusive power to dictate the pace of relationships. Instead, they prioritized making it on their own, deflecting from marriage talk by highlighting their own fears and insecurities about not succeeding professionally, as well as letting down family who have supported and invested in them. As Gamon notes, “I dated this one woman for probably about seven or eight months… She got a little clingy to a certain extent—and, I know that sounds like something every guy would say—but it was to the point where I could not focus. You know, because my parents paid my way through college, I cannot fail. And, she just didn’t understand [that] well.” Thus, family expectations, coupled with discourses premised on the failure of Black men, push BMC men to prioritize their professional goals over their relationship goals—no matter how successful, beautiful, and interesting the woman may be.

These circumstances—feeling like they have to choose between marriage and a career—ultimately led respondents to decide to put a hold on subsequent relationships. An exasperated Alfred calls it a “damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t” situation. As a result, respondents have dated women, sometimes even for several months, but have chosen not to make it exclusive because they knew they would not be able to give it their all. As Monte puts it: “I was really just giving them 50[percent]/50 [percent], career 50, her 50. And for me to have things the way that I want is for me to be able to give 100. And if I can’t do that, I don’t want to stunt anyone else’s growth.” When like Marcus he was honest with her about what and how much he could give, he felt criticized for it because it didn’t align with what the woman wanted. As these interviews show, some BMC men who are not only economically stable but also possess some degree of wealth have still chosen not to marry because they are unable or unwilling to give 100 percent to developing and maintaining a relationship.

This situation arises from the pressures of hegemonic masculinity; in BMC men’s imagination, there is a certain level of economic success necessary to obtain hegemonic masculinity. Wealth accumulation is both a newer phenomenon for BMC men and amassed in disproportionately lower amounts (compared to middle-class whites), but still respondents chose to live up to standards of hegemonic masculinity by seeking a level of stability within a system beset by structural difficulties. Because respondents do not expect that marriage will in and of itself bring money in, they fear it will make them less stable over time. Moreover, because of their class status, they cannot generate capital by hustling in the way that Black men enmeshed in gangster culture are expected and able to do because it goes against middle-class respectability politics.
Consider, for example, Kirk, who has owned his home for ten years, owns a car, and considers himself established in his career. He described the undoing of his five-year relationship as linked with his decision to cultivate his career and grow his wealth. He conceded that he had a surplus of material things, as his ex-girlfriend had repeatedly pointed out, but was still hesitant to propose because of financial reasons. He somewhat defensively explains, “I am saving for a down payment on a second house right now, and she knew that. I can’t afford to buy a ring and save for a house.” Bobby further elucidates and supports Kirk’s stance: “I have everything in order as far as my finances. But can it be better? Yes. Always. But when you start adding someone else into your household, you want to make sure you are able to support them if an accident or something happens.” Neither Bobby nor Kirk, as was the case with many other respondents, felt that they could be reliable and fully supportive with their current means. While they could comfortably provide for themselves, they did not feel they could adequately provide for a wife, let alone the “accidents” (i.e., unplanned pregnancies, family emergencies, job loss, etc.) that accompany marriage and starting a family.

To recap, these examples demonstrate: 1) how BMC men’s consideration of their ability to financially provide and prepare for future economic fluctuation shapes their decision to build wealth before marriage, and 2) how middle-class Black men, despite their educational attainment, measure their accomplishments against a woman’s, which leads to them possibly delaying their marriage decisions. Like their white male counterparts, BMC men postpone marriage to generate wealth (Schneider 2011). Yet when they have it—be it in the form of investments, down payment for house, etc.—the specter of BMC economic tenuousness (e.g., downward mobility, sudden job loss, living from one paycheck to the next) dominates their decision-making.

As I illustrate in the next section, the threat of downward mobility, which hovers over them due to their own family history’s economic trajectory, weighs heavily on Steep Trajectory men across generations. The majority of these respondents grew up in female-headed households, and the economic challenges of growing up in low-income, single-parent household follows respondents in two ways. First, now as part of the middle-class, respondents bear the responsibility of helping to provide for their family; and second, their upbringing can either instill in them an urgent desire to start their own family or cause them to shy away from starting one because they lacked a male provider role-model growing up. I further unpack these within-class differences in the next section.

**Generational Cohort and Class Trajectory: Intra-Class Variation & Marriage Readiness**

BMC men’s marriage views vary by *generational cohort and class trajectory pattern*. To get a sense of these generational differences, consider that 26 percent of Millennials (ages 18-34) are married, while 36 percent of GenXers (ages 35-50) were married when they were the age of Millennials (Raso 2011; Taylor and Gao 2014). About one-third of GenXers, who were born between 1964 and 1980, were married by age 30, and 70 percent are married today (Flemming 2016). Thus, despite growing up in the age of increasingly common divorce and in which women grew increasingly independent, GenXers still married and stayed married. Millennials, who were born between 1981 and 1997, are burdened by educational debt, less religious, more politically agnostic, and marry later (Flemming 2016). In fact, fewer Millennials have married than in any other generation. This shift speaks less to their complete abandonment of marriage than to their
challenging of traditional norms. Millennials eventually marry but do so closer to age 30, though one in three will still have never have been married by age 40. For Blacks, these rates are postponed by an additional few years.

In my sample, 65 percent of respondents (ages 25-55) were never married: 79 percent of Millennials, and 21 percent of GenXers. Table 4.1 shows the cross-tabulation of these respondents by class trajectory pattern and generational cohort. I draw on these two analytical threads to parse the differences among BMC men’s marriage views and decisions. There are fewer GenXers who have never been married, which is consistent with marriage trends across social groups. While there are delays in age at first marriage, people eventually marry (Wang and Parker, 2014; Fry, 2014). And, hence why there are more Millennials represented in the never-married group of respondents.

**Table 4.1. Never-Married Respondents by Class Trajectory Pattern & Generational Age Cohort**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Trajectory Pattern</th>
<th>Milennial</th>
<th>GenX</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N= 21</td>
<td>N= 20</td>
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<td>N= 4</td>
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For both Millennials and GenXers, variation by class trajectory was most pronounced among Steep Trajectory respondents. Their childhood—in which single-parent households were the norm and they experienced abandonment—colored their desire to marry and the significance of marriage to them. It is important to note that some Consistent Trajectory respondents also grew up in single-parent households; however, they noted having examples of intact nuclear families through extended kin and social peer groups that influenced their outlook on marriage. Finally, from a generational cohort point of analysis, GenXer’s responses were reflective, considering the “what if” and “could have been” of past relationships, while Millennials’ perspectives reflected changing marriage norms, but also as a virtue of their younger age, did not look back on past relationships to consider alternative paths.

**Steep Respondents and The Role of Unresolved Childhood Angst**

Throughout the dissertation, I have demonstrated how the class trajectory patterns of BMC men shape their interracial relationships decisions as well as their interpersonal relationship dynamics. Individual class trajectory patterns, as I have argued, complicate how we understand BMC men’s relationship decisions because they expose men to social environments with a different racial and class composition than their own. However, in discussing their marriage views, both Steep and Consistent trajectory respondents connect their marriage views to the composition (single- or two-parent) of their childhood household.

If raised in a two-parent household, respondents emphasize the type of relationship their parents had, while if raised in a single-parent household, they highlight their parents’—often their mother’s—ability (or failure) to singlehandedly keep the family economically afloat. These early familial experiences are the lens through which they formulate their views on their own marriage. As the findings show, there are greater similarities between respondents who grew up in similar household types than between those within the same generational cohort.
However, Steep Trajectory Millennials’ and GenXers emphasize different factors in explaining their hesitation to marry. Millennials point to the challenge of shouldering the financial responsibility. GenXers, too, once worried about their ability to comfortably provide for their own family. However, now that they are older, more self-reflective, and have had more relationship experiences, they assess their reluctance to marry as due in part to unresolved interpersonal issues from their childhood.

This section primarily focuses on these distinctions but also considers Consistent Trajectory respondents, some of whom were also raised in single-parent households. What distinguishes Consistent Trajectory respondents from Steep Trajectory respondents is that growing up, they were more like to witness examples of two-parent households, which influenced how they talked about marriage. Unlike Steep Trajectory respondents, Consistent Trajectory respondents emphasized the importance of a future mate coming from an intact, “good” nuclear family.14

**Steep Millennials: Fiscal Responsibilities Greater Than Themselves**

The Steep Millennials I interviewed were only between five and ten years removed from college, yet making more than their parent(s) had ever had. They soon realized that they were an economic resource for their families, who continued to struggle to make ends meet. The combination of these demands from their family and the (eventual) financial obligations of engagement and marriage were often too great for them to consider marriage in the near future. It is not that Steep Millennials did not think they would ever marry, but rather that the financial barriers were too high.

For example, Luis, who grew up on the south side of Houston with two sisters and a volatile and emotionally absent mother, has always been considered the “little caretaker” for his family—well before he started making his present income of around $90,000 per year. In recounting his relationship with his college sweetheart, he says he initially thought she was “demanding,” but now realizes that he wasn’t prepared to fulfill his role:

> It was just the timing of it. I wasn’t eligible for that level of commitment. But I had no mentor to say, “this is not no [sic] girl that you fuck around with.” But I didn’t know, man. I was going through it with my family at home, my sister getting raped, my mom… I’m barely making it in school, I am not focused at all, I don’t even have books, and quite honestly, I wouldn’t have graduated without Leslie [his then-girlfriend]. You know, I wasn’t sensitive to her needs. She had some things going on too. As her nigga, she deserves my heart. I should have taken it out and put it on a plate. I just wasn’t mentally there. I was physically putting the work in, I just wasn’t emotionally, financially, and really honestly physically capable of the level of connectivity we would have needed to sustain to still be together today.

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14 Since they were exposed to these alternative examples, they “looked for women who had both parents around, and that usually meant they were, or they came from [some] sort of affluence,” as Benjamin puts it. Nicholai agrees, insisting on “a nice family, [a] two-parent system, because you are marrying the family too whether you realize it or not.” Consistent Trajectory respondents who had grown up in single-parent households, or even toxic two-parent households, knew from experience how class background affects how a person approaches and conducts themselves in a relationship.
Luis’s challenge stemmed not only from their lack of economic security but also from having to juggle both of their traumatic pasts while providing for her and his family. This desire to “save her” from the darkness of her “crazy family shit” was related to his own background, in which love was inconsistent and intimacy in short supply. Still, he clung to Leslie as he had never clung to a woman before, partly, as he put it, because “she was the type of woman that you marry.” However, Luis was looking to be saved by Leslie as much as he was looking to save her. After they had been dating for a few years after college, he felt like he was ready to finally marry and start a family with her, but he was still supporting his mother and two sisters. Luis never told his girlfriend the extent of his support for his family, which amounted to half of his pay check. Thus, while Leslie knew he was in a certain tax bracket, she was unaware of where much of his money was going, which led to speculation about Luis’s activities and ultimately to the dissolution of the relationship. It should be noted that Luis was not forthcoming—not because he was ashamed of being the financial mainstay of his family, but rather because he wanted it to seem as if he was capable of being the provider for both them and his family. In thus consenting to hegemonic masculine norms, he compromised his ability to stay with a woman for whom he cared.

Like Luis, Chapman, 26, has found himself in lengthier, committed relationships, but in the back of his mind, he has always been skeptical about just how genuine his past girlfriends were. He explains how this skepticism is rooted in his relationship with his single mom:

I was talking to my mom the other day, and I said, “How did you get to work?” She paused and stuttered and said she caught the bus [although unbeknownst to her, he knew she had been unemployed for some time]. So instead of telling her, “Mom you lied,” I said, “Do you know what it feels like to be a boy and try to become a man to be having intimate relationships, and not even the first person you love [tells you the truth]. You feel like you just can’t trust what they [women] are saying.”

His experience with a mother, who opened credit cards in his name and falsified tax documents, led him to associate deceit with close relationships. His self-identity was shaped by his mother’s actions, and the severity of her lies further hampered his coming into manhood.

Such experiences of betrayal and deceit create distrust in some Steep Millennials, who question whether marriage would enhance their life, asking, “What will marriage give me that I am not already getting right now?” This skepticism is tied to financial anxiety. Whereas a college education was once the elevator to higher class status, we are now living in economic times in which a college degree no longer guarantees a job or class stability. William, who grew up on welfare in the Midwest and has climbed the ranks of a technology company since moving to San Francisco, opines: “Marriage is a question of economics, [and a] corporate job creates pressure. I want a certain amount of stability before marriage.” Afolabi, who quit his high-paying job in New York City and returned to the Bay Area to pursue his passion project—film production—illustrates a Catch-22 of the career/personal life divide: "I like to have a little financial fortitude to enact my thoughtfulness. So for me, I have to already have my own to do that. I am home alone when I don’t got it like that [when his finances are unstable]. It seemed like when I lost my job, no one was interested [in him romantically]." Because finances were so important to BMC men’s sense of self and to the women they dated, prioritizing professional development over a relationship came easy to some respondents—even more so for respondents whose maternal figures had taken advantage of them financially in the past. For Steep Millennials, it is
thus important to move beyond class status and take into account the ongoing and defining childhood struggles with women and finances that figure prominently in their decision to wed.

**STEEP GENXERS: BROKEN-HEARTED SONS BECOME BROKEN-HEARTED LOVERS**

GenXers, who felt similar to Millennials when they were that age, now lament that they did not prioritize marriage. With age comes more clarity about what they want and the purpose of marriage. One of those clarifying insights was that marriage was never going to be a succession of perfect moments but a long, rewarding, and emotionally challenging process. Other GenXers thought that missed opportunities in their youth translated to their lack of current intimacy. They described feeling successful and “playing the field” while younger; yet as they grew older, they wondered who they would have to share their success with and care for them. Not only was their youth devoid of examples of Black men fulfilling the patriarchal role vis-à-vis work and family, but it was also inundated with messages that reinforced the notion that sexuality (as opposed to domesticity) was the only arena in which Black manhood existed and mattered (hooks 2004b).

As Steep GenXers grew older and began to see other alternative examples of masculinities, they reconsidered their views on marriage and starting a family. It usually began with them questioning just how much of a personal choice marriage was. Failing to come up with “good” reasons why they were still single, they began to reflect on their childhood experiences. This self-reflection brought many of them to bring up unresolved interpersonal issues from their upbringing, typically with their mother, as a way to explain their misgivings about marriage. In particular, they “missed opportunities” in their 20s and early-30s because of the marriages (or lack thereof) they saw growing up, the nature of the relationship with their mother, and the types of relationships they observed her in.

Respondents highlighted how their broken homes tainted their desire to marry. Khari, raised by a single-mother who dated a series of men as he came of age, poses a question that encapsulates this very point: “Most Black boys was [sic] raised by single mothers, so our view on marriage is a bit distorted. How can we want something we never saw?” Another respondent, Montague, brings up the fragility of Black male life: “Black men don’t grow old, right? So, what’s the point in even seriously thinking about it?” Montague’s comment reflects a sad truth: as a youth, he lost several peers to gun violence. From that point forward, he questioned whether he would live to an old age. In his 20s and early 30s, he chose to focus on the day-to-day, as his future or even survival—as a Black man—seemed uncertain despite his successes. Thus for him, marriage seemed distant precisely because it implied a question about that uncertain future.

Other respondents felt just as bleak about their marital prospects, sharing that contemplating marriage forced them to deal with deep-rooted issues about themselves that they otherwise did not feel obligated to address in more casual relationships. Bobby, who is about to close on a house in the Atlanta metro area, explains the reason he remains single in his mid-30s:

> It’s because I am stubborn, fickle, pigheaded, hard to satisfy...a lot of that stems from a strained relationship with my mother: distrust, pessimism, looking for hidden agendas, waiting for the proverbial “next shoe to drop.” If something is too good to be true, then it probably is...So, in the back of my mind is...what my dad went through.

Beginning in his pre-teens, he was raised by his single father and has since grown skeptical of women because of his unresolved relationship with his mother. In particular, his parents’
marriage colored his views of women. It took him until his 30s to realize that the tension with his mother was the root of his “failed relationships,” as he puts it. “There is no reason why I am not in a relationship or a long-term relationship. This would lead me to accept and believe that obviously there is some deep-set issues.” Khari shares a similar perspective. He, however, is currently in a long-term relationship, and the question of marriage comes up routinely. Now 39, he has been with his girlfriend for three years, but became visibly uncomfortable when asked why he feels pressure:

My personal experiences with my own mother and my own family...leaves me with this wall or obstacle. It’s almost like my personality, my education, and who I am is like this broad field, and somebody can go and just traverse [it]. Then you run into that one section that says “No Trespassing,” and that’s where all the baggage and garbage is—from [my] upbringing to my mom from my aunts.

Khari was not ready to fully deal with this baggage. The stakes of failing in an eventual marriage were heightened, he thought, because he knew he had not fully come to terms with his childhood, during which his mother had paid more attention to the men she dated than his emotional needs. Speaking through pain, he insists, “I have seen her [his mother] do both overt and covert things to me, my dad, and hell, even her own family. And [I realize] at this stage, in my mind, in my subconscious somewhere, that I [have] an issue because there’s no reason why [I am still single].”

Montague, who came of age at the height of the crack epidemic, similarly prods at the “deep-seated issues” and “subconscious” conditioning that other Steep trajectory respondents spoke about. His introduction to gender relations—through his mother and father’s marriage—was flawed, creating a sense of distrust not only with women whom he dated over time but also making him skeptical of the significance of marriage. Before he sought spiritual counseling, he says, he did not have the capacity to trust women, and thus marriage was a non-starter. As his religious faith has strengthened, he realizes:

My parents’ relationship was good to be honest, but my relationship with my mother was horrible because of her relationship with my dad. Let’s do the math here. So psychologically, boys and children learn warm things, how to cuddle and all of that from they momma [sic]. Due to the fact that my father was depressed [on drugs], he used to
abuse my mother verbally and all of that, so she checked out, just tryna [sic] survive. She…checked out with her baby as well. So the thing I was looking for, she didn't give me. My love of my life broke my heart at seven years old. So, you are saying to yourself, how do I trust a woman when the love of your life left you?

With both his mother and father “checked out,” Montague was raised on the street and entered the “dope game.” One of the youngest street kids on the block, he emulated his older brother and his friends and their attitudes towards women. Montague responded to his mother’s neglect by relying on the comfort of various women. This was also the case for Khari, who also had a difficult relationship with women. As he divulged the details of his previous relationships to me, he realized that the very ways he felt neglected and cheated by his mother have come to characterize his own conduct towards women. This has manifested itself as a combination of resistance to intimacy and a tendency not to follow through that has placed strain on his relationships. Ironically, Khari describes himself as a “savior” in his relationships, but in reality, he uses relationships as a mechanism to work through his feelings of familial abandonment. He admits:

I never finish things on time, or at all, because I have been so used to chaos in my life. Like I am scared to see what the finished product is, but I need that security [from a relationship]. I had that need for somebody to want me. It was me helping her with this and helping her with that and feeling like I am the lion in somebody’s life…that’s like the selfish side of it. And going into a relationship and not really knowing what you want, going [into it] insecure—a lot of my insecurities played [out in] that relationship.

As a result of this insecurity, he has read previous girlfriends’ desire for him to be more involved in their interests and professional development as them being demanding. But in retrospect, he realized that he inadvertently neglected them because their drive brought his insecurities to the fore. Like Khari, Bobby similarly notes that the Black women he has dated have generally demanded more from him: “I want you. Not you in the boardroom. Not you doing everything for everybody else.” Both men describe women wanting to be there for them—to support them in ways their mothers didn’t—but these women have felt emotionally locked out in their attempts to do so. Opening themselves up to these partners would have required a vulnerability that they were emotionally unable to display in a non-marital relationship.

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This is also related to larger cultural constructs. The men could not easily express the more vulnerable aspects of themselves to the women they dated because their conception of masculinity forbade it. As Steep GenXer John puts it, “I am a man. It is my role to be strong, a warrior, caretaker, and provider. I don’t talk about shit like that.” Men thus engage in a rhetorical dance, cautiously sharing enough to forge a genuine bond while not divulging just how much their class and family background affected their capacity for intimacy.

These responses demonstrate how Steep GenXer’s marriage views are shaped by strained family dynamics that 1) they did not always readily understand, and 2) were unable to communicate. As bell hooks poignantly remarks, Black folks “are often unable to tell the truth that the vast majority of us are coming out of dysfunctional families…and that these early intimate bonds make it difficult for us to achieve emotional maturity and wellbeing” (2004b:16). And as I have shown, dysfunctionality is not merely about the limitations of single-parent households, or even the discord within broken two-parent households, but begins with BMC
men’s first emotional experiences with their mothers. Some felt emotionally abandoned, others lied to and cheated by; these adolescent experiences fundamentally shaped how they thought of themselves as men, how they expressed, or didn’t express, intimacy, and their eligibility for marriage.

However, one must question how much the way they perceive these experiences are influenced by controlling cultural images, in this case, that of “Bad Black Mothers” (Hill-Collins 2004). As a controlling image of Black femininity, the Bad Black Mother—often single, working-class, or welfare-dependent—represents the moral failures of motherhood either through neglect or abuse of her children. As such, she is stigmatized as rejecting a traditional gender ideology that is based on “appropriate” female qualities that uphold the American family ideal (Hill-Collins 2004). For example, recall Montague, whose drug-addicted mother had emotionally “checked out,” partly to numb herself to the verbal abuse of her drunken husband. And yet, in his youth, Montague simply read her “super-tough” and lonely struggle as a failure of motherhood. And even though his father’s substance abuse was the cause of his mother’s emotional distance, Montague did not hold his father to the same parental standard. Ironically, Steep respondents who experienced an absence of traditional femininity in their upbringing sought to fill this void through compulsive sexuality, pursuing countless emotionally unattached, sexual relationships.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter begins where the literature on Black men and marriage ends: the limited supply of marriageable Black men. The literature plainly links this deficit to the disproportionately high number of Black female-headed households, but less explicitly articulates how such an explanation rests on the normative assumption about what men ought to be doing to fulfill their roles as producer-provider. Hegemonic measures of manhood imply a breadwinning husband; as such, extended-kin and female-headed households are seen as deficient. In the meantime, Black men who internalize these norms keenly feel their failure to live up to them. As a consequence, explanations that problematize these alternative familial and relationship arrangements among Blacks do not acknowledge the diversity of gender roles that Blacks created out of necessity.

This chapter complicates explanations that hinge solely on educational and wealth attainment as barriers to marriage entry by showing how BMC men also struggle with the gap between their status and white hegemonic ideals. Extending this theoretical approach to BMC men and delayed marriage entry, I showed how despite demonstrating key characteristics of the masculine ideal (e.g., being professionally employed and median-earning), the tenuous conditions of the BMC leave them feeling less secure about their long-term “masculine” ability to provide for a wife and family. As with their white male counterparts, wealth is an important predictor for determining BMC men’s marriage readiness, but BMC wealth is more tenuous. BMC men, in other words, must weather the greater economic uncertainty of the racialized capitalist system. This economic uncertainty, coupled with the patriarchal expectations of the producer-provider ideal (to which they also subscribe), limits their optimism for sustaining a marriage.

In response to these hegemonic expectations, BMC men’s decisions about marriage involve negotiating their ambivalence about their status as Black men in a white world; the expectation that they should be the producer-provider in a racial capitalist system that denies them; and finally, their perceptions of Black women’s relationship standards and desires. These
ambivalences stem from the tension between being committed to patriarchal thought as men while distancing themselves—as Black men—from a system that structurally denies them and invalidates their masculine identity. BMC men may subscribe to masculine ideals as producer-providers, yet they also sense that marriage is but further evidence of the BMC’s “conspicuous consumption” (Frazier, [1957] 1997). That is, marriage, with its symbolic accoutrements—the house, financial stability, children, etc.—communicates class status, is an economic as well as emotional transaction.

As their narratives revealed, BMC men struggle to reconcile the “costs of masculinity” with “investments in class” while attempting to prove their masculinity under white-defined standards and racialized class expectations. Their decision to delay marriage, degreeed and professionally employed though they are, flirts perilously with the narrative about Black men’s failure. But more precisely, they are struggling to carve out a space in which they can opt for marriage on their own terms. In other words, BMC men may speak the white patriarchal language of “producer-provider,” but they want to do so in a way that will not compromise their masculinity (e.g., choosing marriage without enough capital to sustain it over time).

Finally, while BMC men’s decision-making processes became more present-oriented as they aged, they wondered if they missed their opportunity with “the one” while they focused on growing their wealth. This was the clearest difference between Millennial and GenX respondents. As GenXers grew older, and may not have necessarily amassed the amount of wealth that their Millennial selves imagined was a prerequisite for marriage, they lamented their decision to prolong marriage for purely financial reasons. But they also have come to see marriage through a rosier lens, less as a (potentially volatile) financial institution than a stable, loving relationship. Current Millennials’ decisions are entrenched in this wealth-before-marriage framework, even more than the GenXers were because they feel immense pressure to commit or marry sooner than they would like to, despite the changing cultural context in which everyone is marrying later.

However, with regard to the analytical distinction I make between GenXers’ and Millennials’ marriage views, one must question whether it is indeed a generational rather than an age effect. That is, how do we understand the demographic trends of marriage rates increasing over the lifespan alongside the generational nuances that shape evolving marriage views? From the qualitative data presented here, I would suggest that the two—generation and age—cannot be disentangled; it is this intersection between generation and age that BMC men’s marriage views were formed. On one hand, the GenXers, who were approaching their mid-30s, felt they should have been married by now; on the other hand, they tried to reconcile this sense with the ethos of current generational norms—“marrying later” or opting for long-term, non-marital relationships. Yet Millennials, subsumed by the generational spirt of delaying marriage later and later, may not express the same regrets as they age because never marrying is less taboo, even if long-term relationships still carry with them the expectation (or hope) of marriage.

These generational trends also varied by the respondents’ class trajectory pattern. For example, Steep Millennials and Steep GenXers both highlight how their family is a mediating factor in their decisions to marry, but in different ways. Steep Millennials emphasized that the financial responsibilities of some family members impeded their ability to accumulate wealth, while Steep GenXers reflect on strained familial relationships. This finding supports earlier research describing the tension between financially supporting both family members and a potential marriage, a tension that undermines the likelihood of marriage (Lawson and Thompson 1999; Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan 1995; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). Steep respondents
also revealed that they did not think their Black women partners, in particular those who desired an established Black man, were not sensitive to how the continued structural constraints placed upon them by family members affected their own financial stability and marriage readiness.15

This chapter’s focus on the interaction between generational cohort and class trajectory pattern revealed how BMC men’s marriage decisions must be understood through multiple experiential points that expose their relationship to wealth beyond their educational or occupational status. Marriage is not met with fear or obstinacy, as generally believed; rather, BMC men’s decision to marry is entangled with their masculine identity, which depends on how much economic capital they bring to the union. Both the specter of economic tenuousness and narratives of failed Black masculinity impinge on BMC men’s entry into an institution that they see as an initial financial barrier and threat to their own economic security. Their decision to delay also undercuts the notion that marriage is a status marker that affords each partner greater rewards. Unlike degreed Black women who highlight “Black power couples” and building wealth together (Clarke, 2011), BMC men tend to emphasize its costs, including financial strain and monogamy, which limit ways in which Black men can prove their masculinity.

While I acknowledge the merits and usefulness of a cost-benefit analysis, I also consider how managing masculinity complicates the way BMC men perceive the benefits of marriage. This perspective challenges a key component of social exchange theory: that the primary motivation for marriage entry is that relationship rewards outweigh its costs. These “status” rewards of marriage are less alluring for BMC men because, as we have seen in some cases, promiscuous heterosexuality offers continued proof of their manhood. Existing studies that take this cost-benefit approach have seldom considered the role masculinity plays in negotiating and determining the rewards and costs of marriage entry. This omission is particularly surprising as marriage entry is one of the most important markers used to evaluate hegemonic masculinity. Delaying marriage entry is another example of how BMC men both consent to hegemonic masculinity while proving their masculinity in alternative ways; they do not consider marriage to be the ultimate proclamation of manhood, as the hegemonic ideal suggests, because their racial status does not guarantee the economic security necessary to sustain a marriage. This consideration reveals how reasoning about the differential marriage rates between the BMC and WMC have implicitly assumed a white male perspective that makes class status unproblematic for men with a college degree.

While hegemonic masculinity upholds men’s marriage entry as proof of “producer-provider” status, BMC men’s delayed entry is related to the most recognizable avenue to masculinity available to Black men: capital accumulation. The research shows that men—across social groups—are less likely to form marital unions if faced with economic uncertainty and structural conditions that prevent them from providing for a family (Anderson 1999; Waller 1999; Pinderhughes 2002). Due to continued structural determinants, educational and professional status do not necessarily reassure BMC men that they are financially stable enough for marriage; these are simply a proxy for earning capacity but not correlated with marriage rates. In these ways, this chapter demonstrated that while middle-class marriage success is conditional on maintaining class status, BMC men cannot take their class status for granted.

15 It is important to note that BMC men marry outside of their race, as I have shown in other chapters, but their discussions of marriage often focused on what Black women expect and want. Partly, this is because these are the women they have generally dated, but also because the popular narrative about Blacks and marriage is fueled by an all-out gender war between the deficit of happily single Black men and the plethora of unhappily single, never-married Black women. And, perhaps, because they were interviewed by a Black woman.
because they continue to feel pressure to prove their masculinity through current (and future) financial success as their experience of class status is so tenuousness.
INTRODUCTION

Turn on the television or log onto any social media platform, and the resounding narrative is that Black relationships are an endangered species threatened by structural racism, white supremacy, and changing cultural norms. The failure of Black men is constructed as the primary pain point, yet their perspectives on marriage and family are drowned out by the chorus of voices opining on the singlehood of professional Black women. As a result, there is much speculation about how Black men make decisions about relationships, marriage, and intimacy. This dissertation is the corrective to countless roundtables, Twitter wars, op-eds, and research papers that have written Black men off as suffering a social death from the effects of incarceration, lack of wealth, and racial pay gaps.

This dissertation took steps to investigate BMC men’s alleged retreat from relationships. It began by questioning why BMC men’s marriage delays are problematized despite changing cultural norms regarding marriage entry. Even though age at first marriage has increased across all racial and ethnic groups, the narrative about Black relationships remains one of “alarm” and “crisis.” Since all institutions—including marriage and family—have been shaped by racism, Black relationship patterns will differ from that of whites. Yet these patterns become constructed as “pathological” because they are evaluated through white middle-class norms. Both respectability politics and the strengthening of Black men’s “subordinate masculinity” are suggested correctives that could allegedly increase Blacks marriage rates and thus rescue them from the “narrative of pathology” (Jenkins 2007:23). Such narratives color the perceptual lens through which all Black men are seen, but we know less how these narratives continue to shape the intimate lives and decisions of BMC men themselves.

To address this empirical gap, this dissertation offered a portrait of Black relationships based on first-person accounts of BMC men. It sought to move beyond second-hand empirics based on Black women that highlight relationship strains as primarily a matter of Black male inadequacy. This deficiency explanation is no different from the pervasive narratives about low-income Black men that stand in for all Black men. I used a “BMC Heterogeneity” framework both to avoid homogenizing Black men’s relationship experiences and to challenge the too-often unquestioned barometer of white middle-class norms. By shifting the empirical lens to BMC men, I offered a new paradigm for analyzing Black relationship experiences and decisions that emphasizes the diversity of the BMC to complicate how we understand BMC men’s relationship decisions. The comparative leverage of this dissertation is derived from the consideration of social mobility patterns, generational cohort, and network composition.

For example, in considering the relationships between BMC men and women, I distinguished two class trajectory patterns, which I call “Steep” and “Consistent,” to glean how BMC men’s decision-making about relationships is connected to the evolution of their race and class experiences from childhood to adulthood. The Consistent trajectory describes respondents who have been middle-class over time (from adolescence into adulthood), while the Steep trajectory refers to respondents who first achieved middle-class status as adults. I also denote respondents’ timing of exposure to predominately white neighborhoods. Those who were raised in predominately white neighborhoods experienced an “early exposure” to white social settings. Respondents who grew up in predominately Black neighborhoods, which were also economically disadvantaged or contiguous with such areas, experienced a “late exposure,”
largely occurring in college or through post-collegiate employment. The combination of these two analytical distinctions shaped the dating experiences of BMC men and ultimately the extent to which they felt comfortable in relationships with Black women or women of other races. In particular, trajectory in combination with timing of exposure explains inter-racial relationships as well as relationships with Black women. But, the intra-racial diversity to explain BMC men’s postponement of marriage has more to do with generational cohort and less with trajectory, though trajectory still matters to some extent.

On the one hand, these differences expose the limits of existing racial explanations that homogenize the interracial decisions of all BMC men. On the other hand, they illustrate the limits of “objective,” census-defined categories. As I have shown, BMC men’s relationship decisions are just as complex as the social world they inhabit. Focusing simply on outcomes upholds broad categorizations without considering how individual experiences of a “messy” social world not only affect their interracial decisions but, more importantly, others’ perceptions of them. Examinations of BMC men’s relationship decisions typically reveal how demographic distinctions shape interaction (except, see Wilkins 2012), but these fail to take into account how subjective experiences are shaped by these categorical distinctions.

I contend that examinations of eligible BMC men must: 1) address assumptions about what it means to be middle-class by considering how the interaction between racial and class boundaries complicate the way BMC men experience race and class, and 2) how class trajectory is linked to the way women evaluate these men’s racial authenticity and sexual attraction. This intervention thus quells any confusion as to why BMC men who are externally regarded as having status (though this does not necessarily reflect how they view themselves) felt they make relationship decisions from both a position of advantage and disadvantage.

While my analyses do not ignore Black men’s male privilege, I tell a cautionary tale about how agentic they feel in making relationship decisions. The discourses that proclaim the advantages of BMC men in romantic markets only tell part of the story; they fail to shift the empirical focus to the interior of relationships where race, class, gender, and sexual attraction play out. This sex-ratio approach, while useful for understanding relationship trends across groups, operates from an inequality framework—be it income, wealth, etc.—that trumps the actual experience of those very predictors. As a result, a checklist of the status markers themselves are treated as the most telling predictors of relationship outcomes. Therefore, the “numbers game,” or sex-ratio argument, which refers to how the ratio of eligible Black men gives them an advantage in their romantic pursuits, is tone-deaf to BMC men’s experiences of the market.

This dissertation has shown several limitations of the sex-ratio framework to explain BMC men’s relationship patterns. First, it strips Blacks of their individual agency to make relationship decisions on their own terms. Instead, it assumes their relationship outcomes are structurally determined by racial, class, and gender inequalities. Second, it suggests that Black women’s decision to stay single is not voluntary but rather stems from a dearth of unsatisfactory Black male partners. Yet Black women are not the only ones who have difficulty navigating the market. BMC men, who despite the favorable gender ratio, also discuss the challenges of the market. And third, the focus on inequality obscures the process of relationship formation, which for BMC men is always rooted in the twin perceptions of their racial authenticity and sexual attractiveness.
BMC Men’s Intimate Decision-Making: Negotiating Racialized, Gendered, and Classed Perceptions

Analyzing how the performance and perception of masculinity, race, and class combined with the timing of BMC men’s exposure to an integrated social network, I found that their experiences of racialized expectations shaped their experience of inter- and intra-racial relationships, as well as marriage formation. In Chapter 2, I showed how dominant explanations about Black relationship failure highlighted the socioeconomic subversion of lower-class Black men as evidenced by the male marriageable index (Wilson, 1978), lack of generational wealth (Schneider, 2011), hyper-incarceration (Western, 2006), and unemployment (Wilson, 1993; 1996). These, I showed, draw on the same cultural narratives that define all Black men.

However, this chapter turned our attention away from such narratives and to the lived experiences of Black relationships. Drawing on the racial authenticity literature, I revealed how although there is value in a stylistic “ghetto” habitus (because it is linked to sexual prowess), the actual “ghetto” experience threatened the integrity of respondents’ class status. The allure of ghetto culture came at a cost for many Steep trajectory respondents, who observed that Black women’s interest in them was demarcated: they were accepted within the privacy of the bedroom, yet risked being perceived of as “too Black” in white-majority, public settings. As for Consistent Trajectory respondents, they described having their racial authenticity called into question, which they thought undermined Black women’s sexual attraction towards them.

In Chapter 3, I built on Chapter 2 to gauge how their perceptions of Black women’s challenges to the respondents’ racial authenticity were central to their inter-racial decisions. Consistent Trajectory/Early Exposure respondents were “not Black enough” for Black women; this perceived racial transgression facilitated their relationships with white women. Consistent Trajectory/Late Exposure respondents, by contrast, rationalized their interracial dating decisions through a three-tiered racial stratification system: Black women at the top, “women of color” next (because they shared some sense of racial struggle), and white women, with whom they had casual sexual relationships but didn’t publicly date for fear of jeopardizing their racial credibility. Finally, Steep Trajectory/Late Exposure respondents, who were unable to relinquish their segregationist attitudes stemming from their upbringing in inner-city, racially stratified neighborhoods, had sexual, but seldom monogamous, relationships with white women. This focus on interracial relationships as an outcome of white racism and Black gender relations raises the question of just how agentic BMC men feel in their interracial decisions. BMC men’s interracial decisions are a function of who finds them desirable, even if this desire derives from racialized tropes.

Chapter 4 revealed that my data confirms the existing literature’s findings about the increasing stratification, declines, and delays in marriage patterns due to ideological shifts in which marriage came to be seen as more of a status marker (Cherlin 2005, Edin and Keflas 2005; Schneider 2011). While marriage success is conditional on maintaining class status, BMC men, unlike their white counterparts, cannot take their class status for granted because of their current and future financial uncertainty. That is, BMC men did not conceive of marriage as offering the economic class buffer that women imagined it to be and that hegemonic masculinity presumes. Thus, respondents saw marriage as threatening both their current and future economic security (as the costs of providing for a family increased), preferring to wait until they built a sufficient nest egg.

My heterogeneity framework revealed that this anxious viewpoint was more characteristic of Millennials. GenXers, now in their early 40s and still single, once held similar
views at that age but now lamented those delaying decisions because their personal wealth index had not grown as they imagined it would over the last ten years—due to high rents and investment learning curves. The specter of economic tenuousness leaves Black men feeling less secure about their long-term financial stability; yet at the same time, they understand their accumulation of wealth does not guarantee security—despite its symbolic value—in a racialized capitalist system. These structural conditions may limit their optimism for being able to sustain a marriage, but they certainly do not eradicate the desire for marriage—the decision is simply delayed until they are confident they can not only grow their wealth, but sustain enough of it to provide for a family.

The intimate relationship experiences discussed herein are a reflection of macro-level constraints. That is, BMC men’s experience of relationships cannot be understood in isolation from the oppression that structures their everyday life. We saw how their experiences and decisions vary based on their own class, neighborhood, and generational diversity, and how they are refracted through a lens of racial authenticity that simultaneously restricts and facilitates relationship formation. This negotiation of discursive and structural boundaries reveals just how fluid categories are, exposing the limitations of relying on analyses of group trends. In-depth interviews, in particular, allowed me to disaggregate BMC men’s responses to avoid “groupism” (Brubaker 2004), one of the pitfalls of survey research. The categorical fluidity evident in BMC men’s experiences stems not only from their own diversity but also from the racialized and gendered perceptions that shape intra-group dynamics. These exchanges powerfully revealed how the perception of “Blackness” and masculinity structured perceptions of their sexual attractiveness.

These findings also support existing research on skin-tone stratification that considers how intra-group dynamics and narratives about dark-skinned and light-skinned Blacks shape the social outcomes of Blacks vis-à-vis wealth attainment, health, and occupational prestige. The results call attention to the intimate cost of skin-tone stratification for a subset of Blacks—light-skinned Blacks—who typically are regarded by both Blacks and whites as more attractive and more educated than dark-skinned Blacks (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 2004; Hamilton et al. 2009). However, in the realm of intimacy and sexual attraction, light-skinned BMC men have no such advantage. Self-identified light-skinned respondents routinely recalled criticisms by Black women—sometimes said in jest, though usually more bluntly—about their lack of melanin. These findings thus support research on how physical assessments of individual traits trumps the meaning of established categorical distinctions (Deaux 1984), which confirms the power of intra-group dynamics that extend and reframe the understanding and negotiation of external categorizations.

**Future Work**

These findings also raise a broader theoretical question about the relationship between racial authenticity, sexual attractiveness, and class status. From this dissertation’s evidence, it would seem that BMC men perceive women as most preoccupied with racial authenticity. Across class trajectory patterns and generational cohort, respondents commented less about whether women were “Black enough” as a critique of her class upbringing. Two questions thus arise for further exploration: 1) How does Black women’s heterogeneity shape their assessment of BMC men? and 2) How do racial authenticity and class interact in gendered ways to produce sexually attractive Black mates? Research has focused on how economic changes differently impact men and women’s marriage outcomes. For example, Wilson’s (1978) findings demonstrate the
correlation between deindustrialization and Black men’s declining marriage rates; Becker (1981) focuses on the correlation between increasing workplace opportunities and women’s declining marriage rates; and Clarke (2011) queries the negative correlation between Black women’s social mobility and falling marriage rates.

These large-scale group trends indicate prerequisites for marriage, which is useful to understand historical change, but do not provide insight into the subjective experiences of an individuals’ social position. And since one of the driving theoretical thrusts of this work was to identify how experiences of socialization over the life cycle shape relationship experiences and decisions, other work might consider a multi-city study that examines generational cohorts of men and women from the same neighborhood. This dissertation, which took the “most-different” case approach, found little variance between the Bay Area and Atlanta Metro Area but within-variation among respondents from the same region. Perhaps because almost half of the respondents were transplants to either metropolitan area, the variation among respondents in each locale increased.

Another possible empirical approach would be to conduct focus groups with Black men and Black women. Existing research (including this dissertation) has shown (hooks 2004; Hill-Collins 2000) that Black men and women each draw on stereotypical narratives to discuss relationships. However, these evaluations are too often read in isolation from each other. That is, less scholarship focuses on the perspectives of couples or mixed-gendered singles, but rather tells—just as I have—a gendered narrative from the perspective of one group. A gendered exchange in a focus group setting might bring out aspects of perception and boundary negotiation that is muted in a one-on-one interview.

Additionally, with the legalization of same-sex marriage, it would be fascinating to examine what factors are salient in the decision-making process of BMC gay men. Is racial authenticity still a viable proxy for sexual attractiveness for a group whose very sexual choices are antithetical to the constructions traditional notions of Black masculinity? Does it differ by gender presentation (e.g., more masculine or feminine)? And is class status still a salient predictor? Recent work on occupational segregation has revealed that gay men are disproportionately employed in academic jobs (Tilesik, Anteby, and Knight 2015). While this research is preliminary, scholars have made a few recommendations based on the data. Thus, future research could draw insights from work on gay men’s occupational segregation to identify what factors shape how they evaluate their identity (and others’) in public settings. As with this dissertation, identity research and masculinity studies were a crucial starting point for understanding how perceptions of self and others not only vary by context but also by demographic profile. As the research on the BMC continues to grow, additional work would benefit from a consideration of how other intra-class distinctions shape BMC men’s decision-making.

Finally, future work should replicate the design of this study, but alternate the positionality of the interviewer. How might the findings presented in this study vary by the racial, gender, and sexual background of the interviewer? As a Black, heterosexual, woman interviewing Black men about their desires, fears, and hopes, I would be remiss to ignore how my position influenced what I was told as a researcher. On one hand, my racial matching with respondents was advantageous, creating an underlying assumption that I understood the “Black American” experience. So, both during the interviewed and debrief, respondents used culturally binding phrases like, “you know how it is,” or “you know what it is like.” These remarks indicate that I, as an African-American, perhaps had experienced similar racialized experiences that are
part and parcel of growing up Black in America. This sense of racial familiarity allowed me to quickly establish rapport with respondents in ways that may not have been afforded to a non-Black researcher.

On the other hand, as a Black woman, some respondents were hesitant to disclose “locker room talk” over upholding the façade of a respectable educated Black man—which was certainly an implicit ode to the bounds of respectability politics. As disclosed in the debriefing segment of the interview, many respondents did not want to disrespect me with the quotidian banter (e.g., “hoe,” “bitch,” “big booty,” “good pussy”)—that they and other men—regularly use to describe and talk about women. But, ego sometimes overshadowed colloquial and gendered niceties. That is, the interview offered the rare occasion for Black men to talk—at length—about themselves, coming of age, relationship challenges, heartbreak, and triumph to someone who looked like the majority of the women who were the subject of their intimate retellings. So, in some sense, it was a re-hashing of closeted emotions that they never had the courage or space to speak. And, when spoken, often felt misunderstood, and thus, spent more time defending themselves than explaining their original sentiments. But, this gender mismatch between myself and male respondents, could also be regarded as helping to create a level of transparency around the emotions of hurt, pain, and loss that might not have been otherwise captured by male or non-Black women interviewers.

Hence, it would be worthwhile to conduct this same study with, for example, a Black male interviewer, white fe(male) interviewer, and a POC female interviewer to identify how respondents’ narratives change, if at all. What might a Black male interviewer capture that I did not as a Black woman? Did I only miss the misogynistic language and bravado that accompanies respondents’ descriptions of Black women? Or, would Black women occupy less of a central point in respondents’ narratives about interracial relationship decisions if interviewed by a non-Black woman? These are the types of questions that I have received from audience members at talks and conferences. While I am not underestimating the power of my own subjectivity as a Black, college-educated, heterosexual woman, I am not entirely convinced that the substance of the respondents’ narratives would have drastically changed. Yes, the rhetoric might have, but I do not think the emotions that were illuminated in the interviews would have changed as much. And, I might be less confident in this assertion had I not reached the point of saturation around respondent #30—collectively, men cursed, shared misogynistic views, stories of regret, drew on racialized and sexualized tropes, yet were mindful of how crass their delivery was during the interview—and, that does not necessarily mitigate the substance of what respondents disclosed.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This dissertation contributes to and expands existing literature in marriage and family about BMC men’s intimate decision-making in an era marked by the growth of the BMC and a demographic increase of never-married singles. Existing quantitative examinations have provided a snapshot of marriage, and increasingly cohabitation, outcomes. My work goes beyond standard explanations that highlight relationship outcomes as solely a matter of inequality patterns. I show that Blacks’ intra-racial diversity of class trajectory patterns and neighborhood upbringing and generational cohort informs their subjective experiences across categorical distinctions. The structural approach of the inequality-based framework ignores just how fluid categories are, especially in an intimate context where race and class boundaries are not merely negotiated as status markers but are also tied up with the benefits and limitations of racial authenticity.
My work also contributes to sociological understandings of the role of wealth and marriage outcomes. Although the status bar for marriage has risen (Edin and Keflas 2005), the prerequisites have not changed. Yet BMC men, I found, largely do not only use these prerequisites to assess a woman’s marriageability. College education or occupational status are not as important for BMC men because the majority of men do not typically enter relationships—sexual or otherwise—thinking that the woman will be his wife.

There are two slight caveats, however. First, the BMC men’s lack of emphasis on the women’s status is in response to the hyper-emphasis on their own status in the dating realm. This is not to say that status is altogether unimportant to BMC men, but its importance varies by respondents’ class background and generational cohort. For example, both Millennials and respondents who have attended prestigious schools emphasized the importance of educational status for marriage—though to a lesser extent than women did.

Second, because respondents admit they were not readily looking to marry, status-based characteristics were secondary to fulfilling their immediate needs. And yet, though marriage was a far-off prospect, their desire to achieve financial security for an eventual marriage extended beyond conventional understandings of how wealth matters to marriageable outcomes. As has been shown, Blacks have more financial pressure to support family members than do whites, and this also impedes their ability to allocate their savings or investments elsewhere. BMC men, many of whom described shouldering the financial burdens of their families, had the added pressure of both reaching their financial goals and helping their relatives stay afloat. It also reveals how the emotional toll resulting from a dual sense of power and powerlessness that the combination of race, class, and ideas about masculinity bear on BMC men’s intimate experiences.

This dissertation also revealed how one attaches meanings to, makes distinctions among, and experiences relationships is contingent upon early socialization. Previous literature has tended not to focus on how such micro-level experiences play a fundamental role in decision-making, particularly in the context of intimacy, where relationship choices are informed by economic position. It was useful to consider how cultural meanings of relationship, family, and marriage are differently constructed depending on BMC’s formative experiences. For example, it is not that some BMC men are averse to the idea of marriage, but rather that they have unresolved relationship qualms stemming from childhood (e.g., parental abandonment, questioned racial authenticity, etc.) and from the unattainable expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

Despite their status as degreed and median earning, some respondents told me that these pain points—troubled upbringing, hegemonic ideals—had deeply affected them. For example, respondents whose racial authenticity was called into question felt that there were cultural boundaries that had been drawn between themselves and the Black women they pursued. Others felt that women used their hesitancy towards commitment as the basis for personal attacks on their masculinity, their ability to provide as a man.

In conclusion, this dissertation offered data driven theoretical insights using intra-class comparisons of BMC men to (re)tell their marriage and family narratives. These intra-class distinctions disrupted entrenched narratives that compartmentalize the diversity of BMC men’s experiences. This theoretical move illustrated the complexity of BMC men’s decisions that stem not just from their current relationship experiences, but which are also shaped by the racialized and gendered interactions that precede their adult relationships as middle-class men. This theoretical approached pivoted away from comparisons between the Black poor and the white
middle-class to reveal the layers of complexity that exist not only within the Black populace, but also within a particular class stratum. In so doing, it showed how childhood maladies commonly discussed as problems pertaining exclusively to lower-class Blacks also incontrovertibly shaped the relationship experiences of middle-class adults (Pattillo 2000; Sharkey 2014). Middle-class attainment does not erode these foundational socializing experiences.

As such, this dissertation foregrounded intra-racial diversity 1) to challenge how we think about the middle-class as (hopefully) less white and in opposition to the poor, and 2) to recognize how class trajectory patterns give rise to variable BMC experiences and decisions. The former is an empirical step towards untangling low-income Black men’s relationship decisions from those of BMC men; the latter attempts to further fracture the homogenized view of Black social life. A better understanding of how BMC men think about, perceive, and engage their intimate lives—in lieu of this intra-class framing—is a crucial step in expanding the narratives about Black relationship patterns beyond the narrow scope of poor, single women, thereby de-racializing narratives about middle-class sexuality and emphasizing the BMC’s race-and-class-based negotiations of culture.
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Appendix A: Methods and Case Selection

Using nationally representative quantitative data, scholars have typically focused on two relationship extremes: marital outcomes and college hook-ups. These studies devote less attention to the various relationships that span the life history of an individual, which is peculiar in an era when Americans are marrying later and cohabitation rates continue to rise. They also overshadow the role of local dating markets on relationship outcomes. In fact, not many scholars have paid attention to local markets, and when they have (see Lichter 1991), they have statistically analyzed hundreds of market areas solely in terms of the economic factors that shape single women’s marriageable outcomes. By “local,” I refer not specifically to neighborhood contexts, as is the focus of urban sociology; rather, for my middle-class subjects, I use local to denote citywide limits.

Previous research has shown that middle-class residents tend to have “weak ties” to their neighbors due to exposure to and membership in networks outside of their neighborhoods, while poor residents tend to have stronger and more localized ties (Briggs 1997). These expansive limits are also true for college students and college graduates, who often have three local environments: their home city, the city they attended college, and the city where they are employed. Thus, I chose metropolitan areas—as opposed to just the city of Oakland or Atlanta—as middle-class individuals’ networks are much more dispersed. Hence, neither metropolitan area is “homegrown,” both are comprised of an influx of transplants (more than half of my sample were transplants to either metropolitan area), which is characteristic of the migratory patterns of the American middle-class.

Lastly, much of the work on the Black middle-class is regionally concentrated in Chicago (Drake and Clayton 1993; Pattillo 1999; Boyd 2008) and the Northeast (Haynes 2001; DuBois 1996; Lacy 2007; Moore 2008). There is, though, some work on Atlanta’s BMC from a historical viewpoint (Hornsby 2015) and contemporary perspective (Pooley 2015). For Blacks who have a long history of migration to the West Coast, there is even less empirical work that examines their lives in areas beyond their inner-city, poor enclaves. To my knowledge, there is only one study that examines the professional BMC on the West Coast in the Post-Civil Rights Era (see Brown 2013).

Recruitment

Between January 2015 and August 2015, I conducted 80 interviews: 52 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and 28 in the Atlanta Metropolitan area. In both regions, I initially recruited participants from the alumni organizations of historically Black colleges and universities, the Jack and Jill Association, Black Greek-Letter alumni organizations, employee resource groups (e.g., “Black Googlers” or “Black Birds”), Black churches, Black barber shops, and Black professional networking events. However, because all Blacks are not represented in race-specific organizations, I also recruited through non-Black networks. I did this in two ways: 1) I received referrals from individuals who are not Black, and 2) I recruited through organizations without a race-specific mission (e.g., East Bay Engineering Group, CAL Alumni Association, etc.). When initially recruiting through organizations, I did so via e-mail, which stated the purpose of my research and what I hoped the interviews would uncover (see Appendix C for the sample e-mail recruitment). Finally, I acquired additional respondents through the respondent-driven sampling method, in which respondents distributed information about the research on my behalf for potential subjects to connect with me.

The semi-structured interviews took the form of a “relationship history” interview, which began with questions about familial relationships and friendships in their upbringing, then moved
to questions about their romantic and sexual experiences. In these two-to-four-hour, audio-recorded interviews, I started with questions about their first crush and then asked the respondents to chronologically walk me through their relationship history, highlighting the racial and class demographics of the women they have dated. My use of interviews had three important empirical implications: 1) it allowed me to move beyond a focus on a marital end to relationship experiences over their lifetime; 2) it allowed Black men to speak for themselves rather than having their perspectives gleaned through what Black women have said about them; and 3) it allowed me to discern the role that local variation plays in shaping BMC men’s men racial, class, and relationship experiences.

CASE SELECTION: THE “MOST-DIFFERENT” APPROACH

Typically, researchers who study multiple cases create a selection criteria based on the most similar control variables and hypothesize different outcomes. This common way of selecting cases allows researchers to explain how various similar factors contribute to different outcomes (Seawright and Gerring 2008; Gerring 2008). While there have been some in-depth, single case studies on the BMC (Lacy 2007; McCoy 2007; DuBois 1899), other research has compared cities with a disproportionately large demographic of middle-class Blacks (Banks 2009). Less commonly used to examine the BMC is a case selection criteria based on difference. Here, the background factors of the cases vary, but share a common outcome. For example, I employed a “most-different” approach (Seawright and Gerring 2008; Gerring 2008), selecting the San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward and Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell Metropolitan Statistical areas (MSA) as cases.16 While these cases vary by racial demography, geographic location, cultural context, and size of the BMC, marriage outcomes among the BMC are still disproportionately lower than any other group. By comparing these cases, I am able to discover what background factor is observed in both settings that account for the common outcome.

Atlanta Metro has experienced record numbers of return migration, one of the South’s fastest growing regions due to the emergence of new and growing industries (Wolfers et al. 2015). But the Bay Area—with its tech boom—has also experienced a surge of transplants to the area. The effect of this boom, however, has been two-fold. On the one hand, the transplants have pushed Black natives to suburbs, yet the boom has also allowed college-educated, highly skilled Black migrants to move into the city (though in much smaller numbers).

In addition, the marriage trends in each MSA are similar: in Atlanta Metro, 47.3 percent of the population is married, compared to 47.3 percent in the San Francisco Bay Area (US Census Bureau, ACS 2013 3-Year Estimates). Although the marriage rates across groups for Atlanta’s and the Bay Area’s MSAs are comparable, the demographic breakdown reveals a slightly different trend. In Atlanta Metro, 37 percent of Black men are married and 28 percent of Black women are. Moreover, 48 percent of Black men and 45 percent of Black women have never been married. In the San Francisco Bay Area, 30 percent of Black men are married, and 22 percent of Black women are; 50 percent of Black men and 48 percent of Black women have never been married (US Census Bureau, ACS 2014 5-year estimates).

In considering these statistics, it is important to note that there are variances by region. For example, marriage rates for men tend to be lower in the Northeast; and the rates are higher in the Midwest than in the South. For California and Georgia in particular, men’s marriage patterns—across social groups—diverge. In the former, marriage rates are comparable with the national average, while for the latter, they are above the national average (Elliot and Simmons

16 From this point forward, I refer to these MSAs as San Francisco Bay Area and Atlanta Metro.
In the following empirical sections, I show that BMC men’s experiences of intimacy is not merely an outcome of their geographic location but is profoundly shaped by the Black experience in cities across the nation. I unpack each case by providing a glimpse into demographic patterns that shape their racial and economic composition of BMC men’s social networks.

THE ATLANTA METROPOLITAN CASE

Atlanta Metropolitan is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States, with Atlanta as its cultural and economic epicenter. As of 2010, about 5 million people lived there, 32.4 percent of whom were Blacks. Atlanta Metro is largely comprised of suburbs, with only about half a million people living in the city of Atlanta (US Census 2010). The suburbs are racially demarcated by 1) historically Black suburban counties, including Clayton, Dekalb, and Southern Fulton; 2) counties that have experienced a significant growth in their Black population and are now “near-majority Black” as of 2000, including Cobb, Douglas, Netwon, and Rockdale; and 3) majority-white suburban counties that are farthest from the city center and include Gwinnet, Henry, and Paulding. However, Atlanta Metro’s population has steadily been growing in predominately white counties and slowly diversifying what were once majority-white areas. Between 2000-2010, 20 percent of growth occurred in counties that had recently had only a fraction of Black residents; there has been less growth in historically Black counties of the MSA (Tavernise and Gebeloff 2011).

In 2012, the U.S. Census reported that the Southern US had the largest percentage of Blacks, with 20.2 percent. Of the Southern cities, Atlanta has the largest Black population (32 percent). However, Atlanta Metro is quite suburban, sprawling across several counties. In fact, the population of “Atlanta city” residents is relatively small—just under five million (U.S. Census ACS 5-Year Estimates). Of those residents, there are three dominant demographies: young professionals in Midtown/Buckhead, Old Money whites in the North Druid Hills area, and Section 8, mostly Black residents who are concentrated in parts of downtown and Southwest Atlanta. Even this demographic composition began to change at the dawn of the new millennium: between 2000-2010, over 30,000 Blacks were pushed from the city center into neighboring suburbs; whites who leave the city center settle on the edges of the metro area in counties like Henry or Paulding, for example (US Census 2010).

The majority of residents in Atlanta Metro live in neighboring suburbs, and like my sample respondents do, it is common for Atlanta inhabitants to live in suburban, Black communities (Kicklighter 2001; Raines 2005). As of 2010, almost 90 percent of Atlanta Metro’s Black residents lived in suburban counties adjacent to the city, which is almost three times the 27 percent who lived outside of city limits in 1970 (US Census 2010). Yet these neighborhoods fared worst when the housing bubble burst and have virtually been neglected in recovery efforts. While almost 50 percent of Atlanta Metro’s Black population owned their homes in 2013 (US Census ACS 3-Year Estimates), they live in lower-valued homes and face some of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation (Rugh and Massey 2010; Grenstein, Li, and Ernst 2010). Hence, while Atlanta-area Blacks may own homes, they are concentrated in zip codes where home prices are lower than in neighboring zip codes comprised of mostly white residents within the same county (Mellnik et al. 2016). These findings reflect BMC residential realities in other parts of the country as well (see Lacy 2007).

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17 According to the 2009 ACS survey, the U.S. national average is 19.5 marriages per 1,000 men 15 and older.
Despite these residential patterns of segregation, Atlanta Metro continues to be ranked as the premier city for Black excellence, opportunity, and entrepreneurship, which is certainly indicative of its middle-class success. Since 2000, these factors have also contributed to a demographic trend that has not been seen in more than a century: the return migration of Blacks to the South from the Northeast, Midwest, and even the West Coast (Tavernise and Gebeloff 2011). Unlike their ancestors, who fled the socially, economically, and politically uninhabitable South, young, college-educated Blacks are escaping the inner-city for more professional opportunities, affordable cost of living, a growing economy, and the vibrant Black entertainment and arts scene in the South (Clayton, Hewitt, and Hall 2009; Stack 1996). Atlanta Metro has not only become a mecca for Blacks returning to the South, but also has one of the largest middle-class Black populations (US Census 2010), with 51.2 percent owning a home and 27 percent with at least a bachelor’s degree (US Census ACS 5-Year Estimates). Many of these return migrants are middle-class themselves; the region’s significant BMC population, cost of living, and growing economy are what draws them to Atlanta Metro (Frey 2006).

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA CASE

The San Francisco Metropolitan Area is officially known as San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward. Like other historically Black areas to which Blacks migrated in the North and Midwest, it has a history of ghettoization, clear patterns of segregation, and more recently, the out-migration of Blacks (Glaeser 1997; Whitehead 2000; Logan et al. 2015). That is to say, the Bay Area, despite its unique social and economic features, does not exist in a vacuum; it has been shaped by a particular racial character “as with cities east of the Mississippi River” (Brown 2013). The Bay Area is comprised of five counties, including San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, and San Mateo County. According to 2010 Census data, the San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward Metropolitan Area had about 4 million people. This MSA is a subset of the San Francisco Bay Area’s nine counties, and Blacks compose nearly 7 percent of the population, with the majority (28 percent) living in Oakland. Of the counties, the majority (13.6%) of Blacks live in Alameda County (US Census ACS 5-Year Estimates). This demographic trend is reflected in the data presented here: all Bay Area respondents lived in Alameda County, with 73 percent residing in Oakland.

While Atlanta Metro is known as the "capital city of Black America" due to its substantial Black middle class and its serving as a key hub for commerce, politics, and culture in the South (Lloyd 2012), the Bay Area was once a predominant destination for Blacks fleeing the South since the 1900s, eventually becoming the birthplace of the Black Panther Party in 1966. However, the percentage of Blacks in the area has declined over time: from 2000-2013, there was a 9.1 percent decrease in the number of Bay Area Black residents (Association of Bay Area Governments, 2015). In fact, Oakland, where the majority of this dissertation’s respondents reside, has seen a mass exodus of its Black population from the city to outer-ring suburbs. From 2000-2010, Oakland lost nearly 25 percent of its Black population (US Census, 2010), with many moving to Antioch, Vallejo, and Stockton, for example. While 34.2 percent of Blacks still own homes in Oakland, 61 percent of homeowners are white (US Census 2010). And like Atlanta Metro, Black and white homeowners in Oakland are racially segregated. Blacks were once concentrated in the “flatlands” of West and East Oakland, with whites in the “hills” or Piedmont, a wealthy city encompassed by Oakland. However, due to immigration, gentrification, and whites’ return to the city center, these residential patterns are changing. While there are still
more whites per capita in the hills, as gentrification has intensified, they have increasingly moved into the once predominately Black neighborhoods in the flatlands.

This decline is significant in a city which once housed the second-largest Black population in the state and where Black national consciousness, entertainment, and politics was mainstreamed by Black Panther Party members, Olympic athletes, and Black congressional leaders. Yet this is not an Oakland-specific trend. Other former Black metropolises, such as Washington, DC, Chicago, and New York City have seen a significant decrease in their Black populations, with many returning to the South, where the largest growth in Black cities has occurred (Wolfers et al. 2015).

Still, it is important to note the economics of Oakland’s demographic shifts. As long-time, Black Oakland natives are displaced by rising rents, higher incomes, a paucity of new median-income homes, and a booming tech industry, newly migrated or transplanted college-educated Blacks have moved into the city. With this point, I do not intend to mitigate the effects gentrification has had on the parity between whites and Blacks. In 2000, the percentages of whites (31.3 percent) and Blacks (35.7 percent) in Oakland were nearly equal (US Census ACS 5-Year Estimates). But by the end of the decade, whites made up 34.5 percent of the population and Blacks 28 percent.

Of these Blacks, at least 22 percent had a college degree or higher, compared to 69 percent for whites (US Census ACS 5-Year Estimates). Looking at educational attainment by gender, 11.7 percent of Black male Oakland residents between 25-55 years of age have a college degree, compared to 13.9 percent of Black female residents (US Census ACS 3-Year Estimates). Although the rapidly growing Latinx population now composes 26 percent of Oakland residents, Blacks still have the highest levels of educational attainment among any other minority group. However, they still have the lowest levels of representation in the workforce. In Oakland, 15 percent of Blacks are unemployed, while only 9 percent of Latinx and 8 percent of Asians are (US Census ACS 3-Year Estimates). While the median income across demographic backgrounds was $49,721, Blacks’ median income was $35,050 between 2008-2012, down from $42,975 in 2000 (US Census ACS 5-Year Estimates).
Appendix B: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table B.1 Demographic Overview of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Class Trajectory</th>
<th>Current Residence</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khall</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Oakland</td>
<td>BS</td>
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<td>MD Medical</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000-$59,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defiore</td>
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<td>Decatur</td>
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<td>$60,000-$59,999</td>
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<td>$40,000-$49,999</td>
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<td>Marcus</td>
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<td>Sheep</td>
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<td>BA Sales</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<td>Atlanta</td>
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<td>$150,000 or more (with spouse)</td>
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<td>$40,000-$49,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
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<td>Clay</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>Sheep</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BA Finance</td>
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<td>$50,000-$59,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
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<td>BS Tech</td>
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<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
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<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BS Sales</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricci</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BA Finance</td>
<td></td>
<td>$40,000-$49,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
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<td>Millennial</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BS Aviation</td>
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<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Nick</td>
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<td>Sheep</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>MA Medical</td>
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<td>$60,000-$49,999 (with spouse)</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kathleen</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>Sheep</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BA Medical</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrrik</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>BA Consulting</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures B.1-B.6 Combined Demographic Profile of Respondents

Figure B.1 Educational Attainment for All Respondents

Note: 41% of respondents had higher degrees; some with more than one type of higher degree.

Figure B.2 Relationship Status for All Respondents

Note: Of the 26% who are married, 38% have been married before; of the 67% who are single, 7% are cohabitating.
Figure B.3 Occupational Field for All Respondents

Figure B.4 Class Trajectory for All Respondents
Figure B.5 Generational Cohort for All Respondents

Generational Cohort

- Millennial: 61%
- Generation X: 39%

Figure B.6 Current Residence for All Respondents

Current Residence

- San Francisco Bay Area: 65%
- Atlanta Metro Area: 35%
# Tables B.7 & B.8 Demographic Profile of Respondents by Location

## Table B.7 Demographic Profile of Atlanta Metropolitan Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Profile</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<td><strong>Educational Attainment</strong></td>
<td>BA/BS</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generational Cohort</strong>*</td>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<td><strong>Class Trajectory Pattern</strong></td>
<td>Steep</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
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<td><strong>Fatherhood</strong></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Father</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeownership</strong></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transplant</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
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*Note: The mean age of respondents was 31.*
Table B.8 Demographic Profile of San Francisco Bay Area Respondents

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Relationship Status</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<td>Engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>BA/BS</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MD</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational Cohort*</td>
<td>Millennial</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Trajectory Pattern</td>
<td>Steep</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatherhood</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Father</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<td>Homeownership</td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transplant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The mean age of respondents was 35.*
Appendix C: Recruitment E-mail

My name is Joy Hightower, a PhD Candidate at UC Berkeley. I am looking for participants for my dissertation study, which examines how college-educated Black men negotiate and engage their intimate lives at different relationship stages (i.e. single, married, divorced, separated, widowed, polyamorous, friends with benefits, noncommittal, etc.).

The interview will begin with questions about your family's class history and upbringing, moving into questions about your stance on Black politics, and concluding with more specific questions about your thoughts and experiences on intimate relationships. I am interested in aspects that worked well and dilemmas posed by your position as a Black, college-educated, upwardly mobile man. I will conclude the interview with demographic questions about your racial preferences, religious/moral beliefs, and local-specific dating experiences.

The interview may last up to 2 hours, depending on your level of candor. To take part in this study, you must: 1) be between the ages of 25-33, 2) be U.S. citizen, 3) identify as Black or African-American, 4) have resided in the San Francisco Bay Area or Atlanta Metropolitan Area for at least 2 years, and 5) have at least a Bachelor’s Degree from an accredited university.

Your participation provides a much-needed narrative about the intimate experiences, choices, and decisions of middle-class Blacks amidst a very narrow representation and understanding of Black sexuality as monolithically and inextricably tied to the sexual patterns of the Black underclass.

If you are interested in participating or would like further information about the study, please email me at jhightow@berkeley.edu or call/text me at (510) 730-1325.

In the interim, you can find more information about myself here: http://sociology.berkeley.edu/graduate-student/joy-l-hightower

Thank you,

Joy L. Hightower
Ph.D. Candidate, UC Berkeley
Appendix D: Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

I’d like to begin by asking you questions about your upbringing.

1. Let’s start with you telling me about yourself. Where did you grow up? What was it like?
   i. Probe for:
      1. type of schools attended?
         a. Where do you go to college? Grad or professional school?
      2. What type of work do you currently do?
      3. Racial composition of neighborhood?
      4. Went to church often?
      5. What type of work did your parents/guardians do?
         a. Are (were) they college-educated?
         b. Were your parents/guardian married? Divorced? Never married?
            i. What was this relationship like? Was their infidelity? How it affect your views on relationships?
      6. Who is the most important person in you life (aside from your spouse, if married)?
         a. If it is not their mother and father, why and what was this relationship like?

Kinship Networks

i. Probe for more specific family background details to assess what generation of BMC they are

1. Grand) Mother?
   a. Place of Birth
   b. Highest Level of Education
   c. Occupation

2. (Grand) Father?
   a. Place of Birth
   b. Highest Level of Education
   c. Occupation

3. Siblings?
   a. Where do they live?
   b. What do they do?
   c. Would you consider them middle-class?
   d. (How) have their relationship patterns/choices influenced your own approach, views, or perceptions?

4. Cousins?
   a. Where do they live?
   b. What do they do?

Racial & Class Identity

Now, I’d like to ask you questions about racial and class identity.

1. What does it mean to be middle-class to you?
2. Is your class position important to your identity?
3. Would you consider yourself to have a strong racial identity?
4. Do you feel similar to low-income Blacks? If so, in what ways?
5. Do you feel aware of your racial identity in your everyday life?
   1. How so?
   2. What about in your intimate life?
      i. If so, in what ways?
1. What ideas of masculinity were prominent to you growing up?
   1. Where did you learn them?
   2. Do you feel they were representative of you?
   3. Do you think they shape the way others see you in your everyday life?
   4. What about the intimate context?
      i. If not, how do you think folks perceive you?
1. Have these representations changed now?
2. What is Black culture to you? Do you feel apart of it?

**Friendship/Associate Networks**

*So, now I would like to speak with you more about your relationships with friends/associates.*

1. Tell me about the company you keep.
   1. Probe for:
      i. How did you all meet?
      ii. What type of activities do you all usually do together?
      iii. What do you all typically talk about?
         1. Do you all talk about romantic relationships?
            a. If not, whom then do you confide in?
         2. Do these conversations and their opinions shape the way you think about relationships?
            iv. What line of work are they in?
            v. Are they college-educated like you?
            vi. Are they mostly Black like you?
   1. Do you select friends/associates who have a similar racial and class background with you? Does this matter (or not)?
      1. Have any of your friends been involved in criminal activity before? What about you?
   2. *(If they mention that they have friends/family of lower-class),* How connected do you feel to them? In what ways?

**Relationships Questions**

*Now, I am going to ask you questions about your romantic, sexual and dating relationships over time.*

1. Let’s begin by discussing what a relationship means to you.
   1. Probe for:
      i. What makes a relationship good? Bad?
         1. Probe for: examples from personal experiences.
1. Are you currently in a relationship?
   1. **If yes:** Tell me a little about it.
      1. Probe for:
a. how long?
b. How did you meet your her?
c. Where do you see this relationship going?
d. Where would you like it to go?
e. Are you in love?

1. **If no:** When was your last relationship? Tell me about it.
   i. Probe for:
      1. How did you meet?
      2. Was it serious?
      3. Why did it end?

1. Tell me about your dating experiences overtime. Have you ever felt your options were limited?
   1. Probe for:
      i. What were their partners like?
      ii. How did you meet them?
      iii. When did you become sexually active?
      iv. Types of dates?
      v. How have you dealt with disagreements in your past relationships?

1. What have been some of the most important things you’ve learned from your past relationships?
2. Have your previous dating experiences shaped the type of relationship you desire now?
   1. Probe for: Purely conjugal, cohabitation, platonic, friends with benefits, monogamous
3. Have you ever been unfaithful? Why? In how many relationships?
4. Do you have any sexual fantasies that you feel your past partners have been uncomfortable with, or where you have felt less free to engage in certain sexual acts?
5. Have you ever felt your masculinity was called into question? If so, how?
6. Now, tell me specifically about your dating experiences in Oakland/Atlanta (And, how long have you lived here?)
   1. Is what you describe similar to other dating experiences you’ve had living elsewhere? Why or why not?
   2. What type of relationships were you looking for, if any?
7. What do you think attracts wo/men to you? How do you think they see you? Do you think it varies by race?
8. Have you ever been in love? Can you tell me more about this experience.
9. If single, do you enjoy being single?
10. If single, do you want to be in a relationship right now?
   1. And, if in a relationship, are you content in your relationship right now?

**Preferences**

11. So, now I would like to know more about your relationship preferences. With each preference that I mention, I want you to rank it on a scale from “absolutely must have” to “I could care less, but it does not hurt.” We will take a moment for you to expound upon each one.
   1. Race
   2. Income
3. Education
4. Physique
5. Height
6. Skin tone
7. Natural hair or Weave?
8. Wealth Awareness
9. Intellectual Stimulation
10. Criminal Record
11. Type of clothing they wear
12. How they speak
13. The type of friends they have/the company they have

2. In addition to these preferences, what ideals and principles are you set on? And, what would you compromise on?

3. Have you dated outside of your race before?
   1. If not, what was their race/ethnicity?
   2. Do you date inter-racially often?
   3. How did it feel being in these relationships?

4. Do you feel pressure to date someone of the same race?
   1. From where do you feel this pressure?
      i. Probe:
      1. Media (what shows? And, in what ways?)
      2. Church (If so, are you still involved? How has church membership influenced your approach to intimate relationships?)
      3. Friends/family
      4. Race politics

1. Conversely, how do you feel Black folks dating outside of their race? Why?

2. Have you dated someone with less education than you?
   1. How did you meet him or her?
   2. Was this relationship different from other relationships you had?

3. And, how do you think these preferences have shaped your dating experiences?
   1. Among your friends and family, are there explicit or unspoken expectations about who you should date?

4. Do you ever feel that you must initially withhold information about yourself in your intimate relationships?
   1. If so, what specifically do you feel you need to control and how does this change or vary at different stages in the relationship?

5. Has there been a relationship where you felt like you have settled?
   1. If yes, what made you feel that you were settling?

6. How have your romantic interests and relationship standards changed overtime? Do you think your views differ from the older/younger generation?

7. How does/did the social, political, or economic climate matter in the intimate relationship choices you make/have made?

**Fatherhood Questions**

1. Do you have any children?
   1. If yes, were your children planned?
2. If not,
   i. When did you have them? How old are they? By same or more than woman?
   ii. Did you and your partner discuss abortion or adoption?
   iii. How did you ultimately reach a decision?
   iv. What was your family’s reaction to the news?
   v. Are you with the child(ren)’s mother?
      1. If not,
         a. Are you co-parenting?
         b. What has the relationship been like with the mother (before, during, and after the birth)?
         c. How often do you see them?
         d. What is your opinion about raising children out-of-wedlock?
   vi. How has your life changed since having children?
1. What does it mean to be a father to you? How and where did you develop your parenting ideas?
2. How does your race shape your parenting practices? Your class?
3. How do you think your father’s life experiences shaped your parenting ideas?
4. Is there an ideal time to parent?
   1. When did your (grand) parents, siblings, and cousins become parents? (How) has it influenced your decisions about parenthood?
5. What is your relationship like with your child(ren)?
6. What values do you try to impart upon them?
7. How, and in what ways, are you involved in your child(ren)’s life?
8. What do you think the expectations of being a parent are? Is this your reality?

Marriage Questions

I would like to conclude the interview by asking you questions about marriage.

1. What does marriage mean to you?
2. How is your marriage different from other relationships you have had?
3. Are there aspects of your relationship that you are unwilling to give up or change? Have you discussed this with your wife?
4. Do you feel comfortable openly discussing sexual needs and concerns with your wife?
5. Are you satisfied in your marriage? In what ways, or not? What could be improved upon?
6. If not married, do you ever want to get married?
   1. What is an ideal time to marry?
      i. Probe for factors that make for an ideal time:
         1. Simply being in love?
         2. Financial stability?
         3. Religious beliefs?
         4. Education completion?
         5. Career satisfaction?
         6. Family’s age at first marriage?
   1. If so, where do you think this desire comes from?
      i. Probe for:
1. Family? Marital Status of parents?
2. Friends?
3. Church?
4. Fear of social stigma?
   1. Do you feel the pressure to get married? From whom?
   2. What makes a partner potentially marriage potential to you? And, what do you believe makes you marriage potential?

**Conclusion**
1. Do you have any questions about the interview, or for me, that you would like to discuss?

**Demographic Information**
1. Age
2. Race/Ethnicity
3. Highest Level of Education
4. Religious affiliation
5. Sexual orientation
6. Occupation
7. Do you belong to any professional organizations?
8. How do you define your class status?
   1. Elite?
   2. Upper-middle?
   3. Middle?
   4. Lower-middle?
   5. Working Class with Qualification?
   6. Working Class
   7. Other Self-definitions? (Please define)
9. What is your/total household (if, married) income range?
   1. Less than $10,000
   2. $10,000 to $19,999
   3. $20,000 to $29,999
   4. $30,000 to $39,999
   5. $40,000 to $49,999
   6. $50,000 to $59,999
   7. $60,000 to $69,999
   8. $70,000 to $79,999
   9. $80,000 to $89,999
   10. $90,000 to $99,999
   11. $100,000 to $149,999
   12. $150,000 or more
10. Do you own a home?
    1. If so, how long?
    2. Where?
11. What city do you reside?
12. What is your relationship status?
13. Ever engaged or married?
1. If so, how long?
2. Why did it end?
14. Do you have any children?
   1. Ages?