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Introduction

Some years ago, while a graduate teaching assistant instructing a *Social Problems of Youth* course at Florida State University (FSU), I assigned the class an extra credit assignment to watch the HBO documentary *Thug Life in D.C.* The documentary explores the lives of young Black males locked behind bars in Washington, DC. Filmmakers Marc Levin and Daphne Pinkerson present a raw and uncut reality of the generation of young Black males who have been criminalized. Many of these individuals came from poverty-stricken ghettos, single-parent households, and were devoid of a proper education. While the documentary focuses mainly on Aundrey Burno, a 17-year-old convicted felon facing 115 years in prison for the attempted murder of a police officer, the correctional officer in the documentary was the person (for me) who most stood out.

The correctional officer’s brash, straightforward approach is startling, yet needed when interacting with particular young Black males, especially those who have been criminalized and have become victims of generational psychological slavery. At one point in the documentary, the officer explains how he is able to endure the day-to-day grind of working in the harsh environment of a correctional facility:

You know how I am able to survive in here everyday? Because I tell these young men the truth. I give them an education you don’t give them from one to 16-years-old in your D.C. public schools. I tell them what it is like to be a real nigga in America. What is expected of them. What they must go through. How they must program. And how to stay alive and avoid this system [emphasis added].
When discussing the extra credit assignment in class, one of my students expressed that he liked the aggressive, no-nonsense, disposition of the correctional officer and his advice to the young Black men. However, he suggested that maybe if those in correctional facilities would have heard this advice prior to being locked up, this may have helped to deter criminal actions that led to them being incarcerated—similar to the *Scared Straight* program. Another student countered that opinion and suggested that these young Black males would be better served not by yelling and trying to intimidate them, but by having a conversation with them. However, that conversation must involve older, successful Black males whose backgrounds transcend those of their younger counterparts. They need to hear not only from former drug dealers, hustlers, and pimps, to whom many were exposed prior to being incarcerated, but also from current doctors, professors, and lawyers.

The correctional officer went on to assess the state of young Black males in this country. He stated:

I see him. I hear him. I listen to his music. He has no hope. He has no reason to go on. And one day, his generation is going to lose it. You better understand why they [are] so emotional. Why they shoot so much. Why they don’t care about life. Because nobody is giving them any reason to care.

His assessment, along with the class discussion, weighed heavily on me. These students, like so many other scholars who have attempted to study the pathology of Black males, wanted answers. They wanted answers to the root cause of Black male behavior that eventually leads them to one of two avenues—convicted felons branded by the criminal justice system or death.

Later that day, I attended my graduate statistics course whereby the professor talked about statistical outlier detection. An outlier is defined as an observation on a statistical graph that visually appears to be distant from other observations in the data output (see figure 0.1). Simply, the outlier
appears as though it has been excluded from the rest of the observations on the statistical graph—a Black dot.

The professor made a compelling argument during the lecture that it is important to study outliers, which often contain vital information about the data output. Before considering the possible elimination or discrediting the importance of the outlier, we should try to understand their existence and whether it is likely that similar outliers will continue to appear. To properly handle an outlier, a process should begin immediately to determine its root cause.

This lecture moved me to think. How does this apply to Black males? According to the 2010 US Census, Blacks were 13.6 percent of the US population. Five percent of US citizens were Black males. Historically, racial discrimination and disparities have highlighted the struggles of Black males. They continue to be policed at an alarming percentage, disproportionately incarcerated, disenfranchised by partial voting rights, and face institutional and systemic barriers that at times deny equal access to employment, job promotion, and formal education. Throughout history, the social construct of America has attempted to discredit their importance and plight without trying to understand the devastating effects of slavery and continued discrimination. Black males can be considered outliers.
Since 1619, when the first African slaves came to America, Black people, especially Black males, have been outliers. The 300-year captivity of Africans is not merely an event of the past; it still has relevance. Black male slaves were treated differently than their female counterparts. Slave owners were afraid of their physical appearance and strength. They forbid these slaves from assuming the traditional roles of male dominance and control. Male slaves performed hard labor and were subjected to harsh punishment. In comparison, Black female slaves endured similar hardships, however the methods of abuse were different. Female slaves were highly subjected to sexual abuse. Their advantages were that some became the sexual mistress of the slave owners, developed interdependent relationships with the wives of slave owners and the children they cared for on the plantation, which helped them cope with the inhumane treatment. Black male slaves, as a rule, did not develop interdependent relationships that established emotional bonds. In most cases, they did not even establish bonds with female slaves who could be subjected to sexual abuse from the slave owner. Many believed they were in jeopardy of being sold, which made them less likely to establish certain bonds.

The mental control of slave owners over Black male slaves hindered their ability to have a formable identity on the plantation. The physical, mental, and verbal abuse toward Black male slaves made them an outlier since arriving in the United States. Conceivably written in 1712, the Willie Lynch Writings: Let’s Make a Slave articulates that the mission of the slave owner was to break Black male slaves from their natural state of masculinity. This was done to sustain mental and physical control over Black male slaves, ultimately reducing them to a mere shell of themselves. The document informs, “I have a [sic] full proof method for controlling your Black slaves. I guarantee everyone of you that if installed correctly it will control the slaves for at least 300 years” (Hassan-El 1999, 2). Relative to the time the document was written, the mental and physical grasp should have expired in 2012. But
with more Black males now facing jail than enslaved in 1850, the lasting effects of Willie Lynch’s methods seem to be alive and well. As Michelle Alexander so clearly shows in her highly acclaimed book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), tough approaches to crime mirror that of slavery and are used as a form of social control on Black males.

When social scientists are attempting to research the root cause of the inexplicable behavior of a sample of Black males, history declares that slavery has been a good starting point. However, what in the twenty-first century continues to be the root cause of their behavior? Why is there continual discrimination and racism against Black males? Are Black males still victims of discrimination and racism? Or, are these actions toward them and pointed racial stereotypes now self-inflicted? Have Black males become their own worst enemies?

Of course, many Black males never get arrested, and do not go to prison. They fulfill civic duties, graduate from high school and college, obtain well-paying jobs, and go on to live successful lives. There are examples of Black males who have made significant achievements. Some grew up in the inner-city surrounded by poverty, gangs, and violence, but those negative forces were never pervasive enough to deter them from being successful. Hence, we cannot ignore the disparity between those who have overcome their individual circumstances and institutional barriers versus those who have not.

The continual plight of the Black male deserves attention far beyond the statistical grid, which often does not provide an accurate narrative. One important diagnosis is that statistical outliers can be caused by errors in measurement. Has history led us to an erroneous perception of Black males? How do we measure the plight of Black males? We are concerned about outliers on a statistical graph given the possible effect on the estimates of $a$ (White America) and $b$ (Black America) and as a result affect the fit (or their fit between and/or within the two Americas). This is similar to what W.
E. B. DuBois (1903) in *The Souls of Black Folk* describes as a “warring soul.” It is the warring ideal of having to subsist between White America and Black America in one dark body. How does the Black male assimilate? Is he willing to assimilate? And, if he is unwilling to assimilate, does he then become an outlier? *Is the Black male simply a “black dot” in a socially constructed White world, and unwilling to conform and integrate, never gaining the ability to be indistinguishable from other members in American society?*

The Florida State University statistics class has stuck with me for years. I vowed that when I got to a specific time and place in my academic career, my intent would be to write a book that encapsulates the Black male experience. In 2008, when Barack Hussein Obama was elected as the 44th president of the United States and the first Black president, I initially thought a book that contains this type of dialogue no longer is needed. However, to the contrary, it was needed more than ever. While the 2008 presidential election was the most defining moment for Black Americans in the twenty-first century, many Black males were distressed by Obama’s election and others did not believe he was “Black enough” to hold such a position in Black history. He also had to disassociate himself from his longtime religious mentor and personal advisor, Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., after Wright made controversial remarks that threatened Obama’s candidacy. PBS talk show host Tavis Smiley and scholar Cornel West went on a “poverty tour” to chastise the president for his lack of concern for the economic state of the Black community. The differing opinions among Black males about Obama and whether he has helped to reduce the negative perceptions of them or provokes racial resentment is central to writing this book.

In *Black Masculinity in the Obama Era* I venture forth to expand the discussion on the economic, social, and political plight of Black males in the twenty-first century. The purpose of this book is to provide an in-depth examination of the current state of Black males, and to identify the impact
of living in the Obama era. To begin the process of writing this book, I asked over 100 Black males one primary open-ended question, “What does it mean to be a Black male in the twenty-first century?” This was done with the intent to encourage meaningful dialogue using their own experiences to springboard themes throughout the book. I also did this in an effort to build on previous findings of social scientists that historically have provided suggestive and mixed results about the pathology of Black males. A myriad of quantitative over qualitative research has been conducted to examine the life experiences of Black males from underprivileged backgrounds. Many of those studies have lacked an in-depth understanding of Black male behavior and are void of effective remedies to deal with their problems. As scholar Orlando Patterson explains in his 2006 opinion editorial, *A Poverty of the Mind*:

The main cause for this shortcoming is a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960’s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group’s cultural attributes—its distinctive attitudes, values and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members—and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing.¹

Some researchers have been reluctant to engage in intense personal dialogue when they venture into the environment of Black males to hear about experiences told from their perspective to amass a more refined exchange to their research questions.

To understand the behavior of Black males in the twenty-first century, we must attempt to dissect the multiple layers tied to the life course of their own individual experiences. What better time to continue this exploration than in the age of the first Black president? What has been the impact of the “Obama Effect?” Has his presidency and presence had a profound effect on the Black community, particularly Black males?
After asking the participants, “what does it mean to be a Black male in the twenty-first century?” and several follow-up questions adopted from the social science discipline, a number of concerns emerged: (1) Black males felt that they were still thought of as “invisible” in White America; (2) the cultural identity of the Black male is often stripped to achieve the American Dream; (3) there is a generational shift in Black male identity; (4) misogynist and violence rap lyrics continue to have a negative influence on the Black male culture and create divisiveness among Black males and females; (5) Black-on-Black murders remain an epidemic in the inner-city; (6) the negative perceptions of Black males as criminals, low-skilled, and uneducated continue to plague their plight; and (7) the “Obama Effect” has not had the expected positive influence as initially intended to promote Black male achievement.

The above concerns are key in the organization of the chapters culminating into this book. Chapter One looks at the cultural identity of the Black male. This chapter focuses on the generational shift in Black male identity and on whether the younger generation of Black males has redefined the current Black male identity. Chapter Two explores the influence of misogynist rap lyrics, specifically those that promote the sexual assault and rape of Black women. The objective of this chapter is to open a dialogue about whether lyrics that celebrate the objectification and sexual abuse of women influence the thinking and behavior of Black males.

Chapter Three is a case study of Black-on Black murders in Chicago. For over a decade the city has had one of the highest murder totals of Black males in the United States. The troubling numbers have brought national attention and sparked intense dialogue among the participants in the book. It is fitting to provide a case study that examines this epidemic and the determinants of these murders. Chapter Four discusses the influence that President Obama has had on Black males. This chapter investigates the impact of the “Obama Effect” and whether the election and presence of a Black president has helped to reduce the negative perceptions
of Black males and has led to increased Black male achievement. In Chapter Five, an effective set of individual strategies is offered for Black males to practice addressing the negative structural and cultural factors they face to help alleviate their current condition.

This book is a contribution to American discourse shaped by the perspectives of Black males. It gives readers the opportunity to look at the world through their eyes. They offer a rich and engaging discussion on issues relevant to the Black male subculture. The content in this book is raw, uncut, eye-opening, and takes a no-holds-barred approach to gain the attention of a wider audience and greater majority of Black males that could benefit from reading this study—even those who have made the unflattering statement, “I don’t like to read” or “I hate to read.” The language at intervals is strong and uncensored and speaks directly to this generation of Black males and an older generation. In order to have a critical dialogue with Black males in the twenty-first century, their thoughts have to be recorded as stated in interviews, songs, movies, and other outlets that portray Black male life and not refined to fit in the box of academic and societal acceptance. From critical discourse, dialogue, discussion, and conversation to barbershop talk, shooting the shit, or as this young Black male generation calls it, “choppin’ it up,” a hardline exchange of intellectual thought and action from social scientists, policy makers, activists, and concerned folks alike is needed to improve the current state of this generation of Black males.
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