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Homeless manhood : a study of masculine identity among black homeless men

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HOMELESS MANHOOD: A STUDY OF MASCULINE IDENTITY AMONG BLACK
HOMELESS MEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Karla J. M. Powell

May 2005

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy L. Best", written over a horizontal line.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Chua", written over a horizontal line.

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APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thia I. Williamson", written over a horizontal line.

ABSTRACT

HOMELESS MANHOOD: A STUDY OF MASCULINE IDENTITY AMONG BLACK HOMELESS MEN

by Karla J. M. Powell

This study examines the negotiating of masculinity by Black homeless men within the local context of a social services institution. It is informed by a symbolic interaction theoretical framework. Data for this ethnographic study were primarily collected through participant observations and in-depth interviews of homeless men. The author's analysis discusses the various interactional strategies developed by the members of this setting to construct masculine identities in and against the institutional and interactional assaults against those identities. The author highlights how the researched manage and enact their stigmatized masculine identities through their relations with women, in particular the researcher. The author seeks to complicate previous work on homeless men by developing an analysis that includes race as a defining force shaping how these men come to situate themselves as men. Finally, the author explores how these masculinity-managing strategies can be detrimental to the self and further spoil an already stigmatized identity.

Dedicated to the ancestors,
My loved ones, (especially RJ and Aja)
And the brothers of this study.

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INTRODUCTION

Masculinity has come to be defined by Eurocentric values, therefore making it impossible for African American men to gain a sense of manhood that is at the same level of this standard. This can have debilitating effects because it strips Black men of what society has deemed essential to be a man, opportunity and financial stability. By embracing patriarchal hegemonic models of manhood, the distinctive political and cultural challenges confronted by Black men are heightened in the struggle to define the self.

By talking to the men of Home of Akin¹ I began to conceptualize that the lack of financial stability, the restrictions of the center, and the everyday racism they faced together prevented them from truly feeling like men. Certainly, race and class are defining forces in how these men express manhood. This is obvious in one of the interviews I conducted with Bakari.² His life, replete with ongoing financial hardships, led to him to being in and out of prison. He was on his “second strike,” and was living at the center while he gained enough stability to find an apartment in which to live. While hearing his life story, it was obvious that he had struggled to overcome the debilitating effects of racism in a way that allowed him to actualize his potential and fashion a positive optimal identity.

Penha³ was another resident of Home of Akin that I came to know well. I first noticed Penha my second week of research at the shelter. He was using the pay phone by the entrance and had a large green army duffle bag over his shoulder. When our eyes met

we both nodded as if to say “hello.” Penha is a very handsome soft spoken man. He kept his hair in cornrows that were braided straight back. He was waiting for a room for the night, which I soon realized was an often occurrence. On my next visit I saw him coming down the stairs and when he noticed me, he greeted me, again with a nod, and went to stand in the dinner line. I could not help to feel glad; he had been able to get a room. On my next several visits the “hello nods” turned to actual “hellos” and we developed a connection. I then began to look forward to our talks. On each of our encounters he was always courteous, soft spoken, and respectful. His conversations conveyed a streetwise dignified man that was aware of his disenfranchised status but willing to still to have a voice.

African American men are told that the United States believes in fair play, justice, and equal opportunity, yet all around them they can see that this is not the case. They are expected to embrace white supremacist capitalist notions of manhood, yet are still denied the chance to conform to this “ideal” model. For Black homeless men, the struggle to “upkeep” such hegemonic notions of manliness prove to be difficult often resulting in admonished self respect.

This thesis relates to the self and the intersection of three approaches to social thought: Symbolic Interaction, urban ethnographies, and Black feminist critiques of dominant masculinity. This study explores how talk and other everyday actions, especially interactions with women, work as a resource to preserve a respectable and dignified masculine identity for Black homeless men. This interaction with women is valuable because it reveals processes of heterosexuality and how significant they become

in men's definition of themselves as "true" men. Additionally, this thesis tries to make visible the intersection of gender, race, and class and how it relates to these men's sense of a respectable and dignified masculinity. This research further investigates the implications to the self when these men define masculinity by hegemonic and patriarchal notions of manhood. This work tries to link the struggle of how African American homeless men seek to define a respectably sound and reputable masculine identity with progressive theoretical and Black feminist approaches that call into question these strategies.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

The underlying principle of symbolic interaction is the basic notion that people attach symbolic meaning to objects, behaviors, themselves, and other people and convey these meanings through interaction. This means that social behavior is then a materialization of shared values of symbolic meaning. These symbols are abstract representations and have different meaning for different persons (O'Brien and Kollock 1997). For example, a shopping cart for many Americans has come to be defined in connection with grocery store shopping. Yet for a homeless person, a shopping cart can mean their whole world. It is not simply something to carry their belongings, but a symbol of having some control over a much disempowered existence. Its meaning arises from the homeless experience.

These meanings are then modified and handled through an interpretive process individuals use in dealing with the symbols each encounters (Blumer 1969). People then behave towards objects not on the bases of the objects' properties, but on the constant negotiated meanings the objects come to carry by the individual (Blumer 1969). These meanings set the way in which individuals view, act toward, and eventually talk about the object. The meaning of objects for a person arises out of the way they are defined to the individual by those with whom the individual interacts (Blumer 1969). The individual takes on the role of the "other" and internalizes the attitudes he perceives in both real and

imagined others. As Mead (1962) argued, by continually "reflecting on ourselves as others see us we become competent in the production and display of social symbols." This reflection process can best be understood when looking at how persons can recognize themselves to be Black, man, woman, "poor," or homeless. In all such instances the individual is an object to herself and acts toward herself and others on the basis of the kind of object she is to herself (Blumer 1967). The self then comes to develop through the meanings given to these social interactions of humans. Such interactions allow the individual to take on the role of the "other" and internalize the attitudes she perceives in both real and imagined others. The interaction of an individual's self-conception with the generalized other, the perceived view that others have of the individual, is central to the emergence of the self as object (Mead 1962). Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, or creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. The self, and how others see it, becomes the basic organizing principle of social interaction. This is how identities come to be asserted, constructed and managed by individuals.

IDENTITY ACCOMPLISHMENT AND INTERACTION

Because meanings develop through interaction, language plays a central part. Language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Human behavior is social and thus based on communication. It is by engaging in speech acts with others, that humans come to identify meaning, or naming, and develop discourse. In these interactions, individuals commonly seek to obtain information about each other or bring forth information already possessed. This helps define the situation,

enabling each “actor” to know what is expected of the other (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1967). It is through this continuous dialogue that persons think through intentions of one another and react to them. During these dialogues, social meanings are created and changed. Individuals react not only to the actions of other people, but also to their intentions. This means that individuals’ identities arise as the result of the organization and management of conversational sequences (Antaki and Widdicome 1998). It is something that is used in talk. It is part of the routines of everyday life pulled off in the fine detail of everyday interaction (Adams 2001).

Approaches to identity formation vary in their emphasis on the structure of identity and the processes and interactions through which identities are constructed. The concept that identity arises through social interaction and interactional processes was developed by the work of numerous twentieth century intellectuals of social thought. Cooley (1997) developed the idea of the “looking glass self,” that is, individuals see themselves through the eyes of others. Mead (1962) later followed by developing the idea that people develop a sense of their own identity through their interaction with other people. Goffman (1959) outlined the social processes associated with the “presentation of self” in which people undertake impression management as a means of accomplishing a public identity. The more structural approach relies on the concept of role identities or the characters a person develops as an occupant of particular social positions (Stryker 1980; Howard 2000). Role identities, for example, usually come to be organized hierarchically, on the basis of their salience to the self and the degree to which we are committed to them, which in turn depends on the extent to which these identities are

premised on our ties to particular other people (Howard 2000).

The second approach emphasizes the processes of identity construction and negotiation. Negotiations about who people are, are fundamental to developing mutual definitions of situations. These negotiations entail self presentation or impression management. Identities then come to be strategic social constructions created through interaction with social and material consequences (Goffman 1959; McCall and Simmons 1978; Howard 2000). Identities locate a person in social space by virtue of the relationships that these identities imply, and are, themselves symbols whose meanings vary across situations, race/ethnicities, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Howard 2000). Thus, impression management for the politically and economically disenfranchised becomes part of the identity generation process. Identities are understood then as situational and interactional exchanges that are actively maintained by social actors.

MEANINGS OF HOMELESSNESS

Deriving meaning from everyday life is essential for the survival of the self. Salvaging the self by drawing meaning out of problematic situations is harder for some than for others. For persons faced with the struggle of the dehumanizing and devastating state of living homeless, this is an especially difficult task. Snow and Anderson (1993) depict this as dealing with the issue of existential meaning. The quest for meaning for homeless persons then comes to be sought out through two distinct features. The first is that meaning, while an ongoing challenge in everyday life, is particularly pressing for those individuals whose routines and expectations have been disrupted. The second is the

burden of finding meaning in such disruptive moments rests on the shoulders of the individual (Snow and Anderson 1993). Snow and Anderson (1993) argue that constructing identity oriented meaning is an unconscious but strategic part of homeless life, whether by stringing together casual accounts borrowed from conventional cultural vocabularies or seeking refuge in alcohol, drugs, or alternative realities, homeless persons are still confronted with establishing who they are in the course of their action with others.

Homeless person's situationally specific identities, they argue, can be established in two ways: they can be attributed or imputed by others or they can be claimed and asserted by the actor (Snow and Anderson 1993). Such identity construction involves complementary activities like: procurement and arrangement of physical settings and props, cosmetic face work or arrangement of personal appearance, selective association with other individuals and groups, and verbal construction and assertion of personal identity (Snow and Anderson 1993). For the most part, homeless people tend to enact their identities verbally. Such identity talk is logical since homeless individuals seldom have the financial or social resources to pursue most of the other identity construction activities.

Snow and Anderson's (1993) work show how such forms of identity talk give way to three patterns of managing and asserting a positive identity. The first is through distancing the self from other homeless individuals, from street and occupational roles, and from the caretaker agencies servicing the homeless. These individuals know they are carriers of the homeless stigma. This stigma is inconsistent with their desired identities

so distancing is a way to construct their desired, positive identities.

The second identity preserving strategy that Snow and Anderson analyzed was embracement of the “homeless” identity. Although “embracement” tends to vary across different types of homeless persons, it allows for an affirmation of their implied social identities as a means of preserving positive self worth. The third identity preserving strategy was through fictive story-telling about past, present or future experiences and accomplishments. Such strategies demonstrate that the homeless are active agents in the construction and negotiations of identity. More importantly, such actions suggest that not all homeless actively accept the negative identities their impoverished statuses display (Snow and Anderson 1993). Managing one’s identity has then proven to be an inevitable way of trying to create meaning in everyday life. The impoverished and politically and economically disadvantaged face the difficult task of managing such identities. Homeless persons deal with their plight both existentially and interactionally and attempt to carve out some meaning and personal significance while occupying a stigmatized status that is a constant threat to sense of self.

Such notable work on the homeless and self preservation (Liebow 1967; Liebow 1993; Snow and Anderson 1993) capture the plight of human beings as they face the meaning of their existence within the context of overpowering social structures, dehumanizing living conditions, and overall impoverished realities. Such ethnographies are important because they allow a first hand look into not only understanding the kind of accounts homeless people invoke to make sense of their everyday lives, but also the meanings that they come to attach to themselves in their strategic interactions with each

other.

THE PERFORMANCE OF PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONIC MASCULINE IDENTITIES

With the careful work of strategic interaction comes the work of identity maintenance. This is especially significant when understanding how individuals act out their gendered identities. From an interactionist standpoint gender is conceptualized as a routine accomplishment that is created and maintained through everyday interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987). That is, women and men socially enact, negotiate, construct, and perform femininity and masculinity. So instead of seeing masculinity as something that just happens to men or is done to men, masculinity is seen as something that men do (West and Zimmerman 1987). Masculinity must be performed and presented recurrently in any situation; constant self-presentation occurs throughout every social interaction in which men are involved. Ongoing re-creation is a defining feature of masculinity. This re-creation occurs in the family, at work, in school, and in all other social settings. The underlying goal of this performance is the assertion of power and dominance (Miedzian 1991). When “doing gender,” there are both traditional and alternative outlets that can be utilized to accomplish the same end result. To achieve manhood status, there are certain qualities that social scientists have labeled masculine and manly. These qualities and characteristics have been restructured throughout history; however, some scientists in several disciplines list similar concepts that can be used to demonstrate masculinity. These include but are not limited to marriage, having dependents, providing for a family, and proclaiming an aura of physical and mental

strength and dominance (Meidzian 1991). Accepted by the general society, these characteristics allow men to appropriately display their gender.

The ways men actively do manhood is through specific patterns that are learned through the socialization process that “appropriately” represent masculinity. This representation is best defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” or hegemonic masculinity (Connel 1995). The most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity, however, are not always the most powerful people (Connel 1995). How men do gender depends on the resources available to them (Leyser 2003). This creates a masculine hierarchy where economically and racially privileged men rest on top (Leyser 2003). This becomes particularly significant when understanding how Black homeless men attempt to achieve hegemonic masculinity because Black men are often positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy. Thus, in many ways Black men are not the true bearers of masculine power even though they are men.

In any social interaction, both the actor and the audience have a shared understanding of ideal masculine gender. Appropriate presentation of masculine display is expected based on this shared understanding (Leyser 2003). To present a positive masculine image, a man will rely on learned cultural definitions of masculinity. In the United States, this includes physical strength, aggressiveness, and visible proof of achievement (Messerschmidt 1993). Masculine identity is consistent with being a tough and courageous person. According to Tedeschi and Felson (1994), the preponderance of

research indicates that men take more risks than women and this risk-taking behavior is also a feature of masculinity. The masculine gender then is not what men are, but something men do at all times.

BLACKNESS AND MASCULINE IDENTITIES

Other studies have examined how the quest for dignity and respect (Anderson 1978; Dunier 1992; Dunier 1999; Anderson 1999) is an important way in which politically and structurally disempowered persons, especially African American men, manage their self image and identity. Additional works investigate the culture of street life of homeless and impoverished Black men (Dunier 1999) and their journey to make use of public space by, for example, the “self directed entrepreneurial activity” of selling magazines. Dunier (1999) exceptionally connects the dispiriting structural forces and conditions these men are up against with their effort to persevere. Managing manhood is a very important link to understanding such men’s search for meaning. This is especially significant when attempting to understand and identify the strategies used by Black men to do manhood.

Self representations of Black masculinity are historically structured by and against dominant discourses of masculinity and race, specifically whiteness. This hegemonic masculine ideal often emphasizes positions of dominance and authority over women, strength, and the accumulation of material goods (Connel 1995). It assumes the availability to all of the resources and lifestyles of economically and racially privileged men (Leyser 2003). How men do manhood then relies on what resources are available to them. This difference in allocated resources creates a masculine hierarchy that often

places Black men at the bottom. Thus, understanding that masculinity is as much a racialized construct as a gendered construct is important for an accurate critical analysis of Black men's masculine identities.

"Hegemonic masculinity" comes to be defined and constructed differently by Black men. Feelings of frustration, alienation, bitterness, and rage are often consequences of this inability to acquire what is valued and possessed by the dominant culture (Lazur and Majors 1995). Black men are left to create a form of masculinity that relies on impression management through behaviors, scripts, and physical posturing. This "cool pose" attempts to convey the message of pride, dignity, strength, respect and control in everyday interactions (Majors and Billson 1992). By creating, acting, and redefining selves through handshakes, walking, eye work, and other strategized acts, Black men proclaim that they are proud, in control, powerful and strong even though denied institutional power, while at the same time allowing a way to express bitterness, anger, and distrust toward the dominant culture.

However, such an attempt to preserve masculine identity as the hegemonic status can prove to be problematic for Black men. By internalizing such a masculinity that is defined by Eurocentric values, it is impossible for men to gain a sense of manhood that is at the same level of such a standard. Such a standard's roots stem from centuries of bondage and the subsequent years of oppression. Uprooted African men, even those who came from communities where sex roles shaped the division of labor and the status of men found different and often higher expectations than of those women, had to be taught to connect their higher status as men with the right to dominate women and to use

violence to establish patriarchal power (hooks 2004). Enslaved African men were socialized by whites to believe that they too should endeavor to become patriarchs. To try to attain the liberty to provide for and protect Black women, and ultimately become compassionate patriarchs was something to aspire to. This white supremacist patriarchy was the norm of masculinity that many Black men coming from slavery sought to mimic even as they were systematically denied it (hooks 2004).

Patriarchal socialization teaches that you are “responsible” if you provide for your family’s material well being, a universal process, which different “boys” experience. Yet, poverty and lack of job opportunities have prevented Black men from being responsible in patriarchal terms. Many Black males, however, accept this definition of responsible manhood and spend their lives feeling like failures, their esteem assaulted and assailed because they cannot acquire the means to fulfill this role (hooks 2004). This not only can lead to self destructive behavior through the use of alcohol and heavy drugs, violence, and other risky behavior but also creates a Black male psyche conditioned to “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal,” thinking which ultimately strips Black men of the will to live, to love, to be healthy, and whole (hooks 2004). These feelings of nihilism and failure come to be realized through acts of masculine identity that white supremacist patriarchy owns. Acts of “cool” for example, mask true feelings and construct a nonchalant way of being. They often create a disassociation from loved ones and hinder emotional intimacy and the expression of feelings in a meaningful way in men/women relationships (Lazur and Majors 1995). Other costs such as suicide, homicide, neglect of treatable diseases like diabetes, hypertension, HIV as well as

inadequate health care have all shortened Black men's life span. Pent up frustrations and unexpressed emotions bell hooks (2004) terms "Black Rage" have the potential to explode against others, especially other Black persons. Such masculinity begins to rearticulate the way Black masculinity is "read" by the dominant culture. It denies the history of the real "cool" about being spiritually and soulfully connected, aware, and able to judge the right action for life's decisions (hooks 2004).

Still, little research has attempted to complicate previous groundbreaking work on homeless men by developing an analysis that highlights racism and racialized experiences as defining forces shaping how homeless men situate themselves *as* men. Specifically, research has been slow in focusing how African American homeless men construct and manage their "Black" masculine identities in a context where those identities are threatened by their everyday interactions and by institutional processes such as racism, dehumanizing living conditions, and economic and social disenfranchisement. The underlying assumption in previous research has been how strategies of preserving the self by homeless persons benefit the individual, which many strategies do. However, there has been little focus on how Black homeless men's hegemonic modeled definitions of masculinity can further spoil an already stigmatized identity by keeping them from achieving a possible true sense of self. Furthermore, recognizing and understanding such strategies can lend a hand in comprehending the significance of the hegemonic patriarchal domain of power and its ability to shape consciousness and hinder these men from offering a critique of the structural forces that dominate them.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

Data for this ethnographic study were drawn from field observations and in-depth interviews. I spent three days a week, for three months during the spring of 2004, conducting 19 in-depth interviews with homeless men and gathering supplemental observations in a men's homeless shelter in San Jose, California called Home of Akin. The men interviewed with the exception of a few participants were African American between the ages of 18 and 69 years of age. Although supplemental interviews of Mexican American, Samoan American, and white men were conducted to offer a comparison analysis on masculine identity, I chose to exclude these interviews from my final examination. The men I spoke to had either lived in and out of homelessness most of their lives, had recently become homeless, or recently been released from prison. The structure of interviews usually began more formally becoming more casual as we developed greater rapport in the interviews' course. Although my aim was to structure our talks in a casual and conversational manner, I did commence most interviews with general questions varying from what led to their homeless status to describing "a day in the life" of their daily activities.

The center has a live-in population that fluctuates from about 70 to 85 men. While the majority of the men who live in the shelter are mostly white, Mexican American and African American men also occupy this space. A few Asian American were visible but were clearly sparse within this setting.

THE SHELTER

I chose this shelter because I had served as a volunteer in the past so gaining access was fairly simple. I was familiar with the shelter's programs, aim, and overall "evening volunteer" dinner routines. The shelter's primary focus is to provide a roof for men who are homeless, out of prison, and rehabilitating from drug abuse so that they can "get back on their feet." It also serves the general homeless population by supplying free breakfast and dinner, providing walk-in showers every night and doctor visits weekly. Non-resident visitors are most likely to drop in for dinner. Most of the "visiting" homeless people who come to dine are generally "regulars." For the most part, they are men, although there are a few women visitors who come in to dine regularly. A large part of the visiting homeless persons are residents of a sister facility a few blocks away that houses homeless mentally disabled adults.

The facility's internal operation and material set-up is very institutional. Restrictions include curfew, chores, no stairway access and attendance at mandatory "self-help" meetings. I often found different sets of rules for different men depending on their connections with staff and personal place in the program. These differing levels of powerlessness seemed to create some social distance and resentment between some of the residents, visiting homeless persons, and staff.

The dining room was a key site for observing and interviews. It can seat about 80 persons, but the kitchen serves anywhere from 100 to 300 hundred persons on a given night. The dinner line usually begins forming about 30 minutes before six o'clock, when the dining room opens, and often stretches about a block. The residents of the shelter can

line up inside and have first priority, while non-residents have to wait outside until dinner is opened. At the entrance there is always a resident taking sign ups for dinner. This was usually the man whom I came to know as Danso.⁴ He explained that signing up was not a requirement to eat, but was used to show that the dinner program was needed and to keep funds from getting cut.

In addition to the dinning room, the sleeping quarters were another place where many of the men spent time. It is located on the second floor of the facility. It is divided in two sections that represent the two major program components offered by the facility; emergency housing and transitional housing. The emergency housing segment is set up in a dorm room setting; bunk beds are about two feet apart, filling the room. It is the first stop for men just off the streets. They receive the first 30 days of shelter free along with case management and employment assistance. In exchange for this initial shelter, the men must agree to find a job and take part in “self-help” activities. These activities include Alcoholic Anonymous and support recovery from drugs, “life’s challenges” workshops, computer and internet literacy training, as well as resume, employment and vocational workshops. On each of my visits there were always several men waiting in the “lobby” to get a bed for the night. On a few occasions those who waited were able to get in, but more frequently than not the center was full.

Thereafter, those who find full-time work, stay sober, and continue with the program qualify for the transitional housing component. These men then move into another room which provides more privacy in the form of a small cubicle for up to nine more months. They then become responsible for paying approximately \$100 a week in

rent. The program's intent is to provide low cost rent to allow the men to save money toward a more permanent home. However, some of the men I spoke to struggled to pay the fee, suggesting that it was still too high for persons who were homeless and usually employed in low paying jobs.

THE ENCOUNTERS

A small area in the front lobby served as a space to conduct interviews and observations. Here is where I would normally sit to conduct my observations and informal interviews. On three occasions I conducted formal in-depth interviews here. This was an ideal place to sit because I could observe the activities in the dining area, which is straight ahead, and also be at the center of the in-and-out traffic of the facility. This made me very visible, which helped in the process of engaging in conversations and to recruit for formal interviews with visitors and residents of the facility. As the men of the center got to know me and grew used to my presence, this location was ideal for the hellos and small talk conversations that went on between us.

In total I interviewed 19 men: of those interviews, 14 were African American men, two were Latino men, two were white men, and one man was of Samoan descent. These interviews were in most instances taped and transcribed unless a participant was unwilling to be tape recorded. I also conducted a number of informal interviews talking to different men, most of whom were African American. These informal interviews were never taped, but were noted and later transcribed as part of my field notes. In most instances, these interviews were impromptu; men would stop by and tell me a little about their homeless experience after hearing that I was a student doing "research" on

homelessness. I interpreted their willingness to talk as a way to help me with my work. Because these “interviews” often emerged from informal conversations, pulling out a tape recorder was impossible and seemed too “laboratory like.” To do so possibly risked my losing personal authenticity so I always opted to just listen.

On each of my visits I began my observations by sitting in a place where I could see who was coming in and out of the shelter and the dinner activities. I would strategically place myself in a location where noticing my presence was inevitable. This would usually be on one of the couches in the lobby or to the left of the dinning room in a chair. This is when I would conduct my observations and usually engage in conversations with the men. During my observations, I primarily focused on the mens’ interactions with each other, and with the staff, who were usually part of the daily evening routines. After dinner, some of these daily routines included chores given to the residents by staff which had to do with after dinner clean up and maintenance of the center. Non-residents were required to leave directly after dinner and residents were required to do their chore and then clear out the dining room so it could be mopped. They had the choice of going upstairs to their sleeping quarters or to stand out front. Many stood out front talking and smoking cigarettes.

I also paid close attention to the interactions between myself and the men. People often react to the researcher or observer based on the observer’s personal characteristics (Best 2003). I believe that the fact that I am a young Black female made me more approachable by many of the African American men and also an agent for many of the men to try to affirm their masculinity. Very often I would be sitting down just

looking around, taking notes, or talking to staff when I would be approached by men for different things, although they all led up to the inevitable questions about why I was there. On several instances I was approached, presumed to be a student, and asked “what I was studying in school?” as an ice breaker to initiate conversation. Just as often, I was presumed to be a student social worker recruiting candidates for college, which also served as a way that made being approached by the men more “appropriate.” This grew increasingly common as I became a more permanent fixture in the space. These conversations allowed me to gain insight into their everyday lives. As I became better acquainted with many of the residents and “regular” non-residents, I also came to know some of the staff, mainly those of color. These persons, all men, also became regular “actors” in my field notes. In particular, I got to know one of the case managers very well, an African American middle-aged man I call Sekou,⁵ who served as my main informant. Since he worked with many of the men directly, he was able to introduce me to many of the African American residents of the center, which often resulted in formal interviews.

ANALYTICAL PROCESSES

To analyze data, I make use of grounded theory, “letting findings emerge,” rather than committing to received and preconceived theories (Strauss 1987). In this sense, data directs the researcher to develop, attempt to modify, and extend theoretical propositions that fit the data (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). By employing such a strategy, I was able to discover themes specific to the everyday strategies used to manage and perform masculinity by these men, particularly through their talk. Using this model of analytical

induction, I sought to generate themes and interactional strategies concerning how these men come to define themselves as men. This approach was most useful because it allowed for analysis guided by data rather than the deductive approach in which the theory directs the data. In this quest, I also made use of ethnomethodological approaches that suggest “the researcher’s biography (with specific regard to race, nationality, sexuality, class, age, and gender) is not only central while in the field, but also shapes the theoretical and interpretive processes and claims made after leaving the field” (Best 2003:899).

This means that my position as a young African American female is central to this research, the data, and interpretive processes. My identity strongly affected how these men interacted with me through flirtatious engagements and aligning themselves with me racially. I recollect how I developed rapport with an African American man I refer to as Bakari. He often referred to “us” or “we” in his responses. He was obviously aligning himself with me as an African American. I felt a bond with Bakari based on our shared Blackness that is often unspoken but very apparent among African Americans. This assisted in building rapport and gaining access to the narrative of his everyday life.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

As my analysis developed, several issues emerged. The first challenge that emerged had to do with the actual process of gathering data. In general, the shelter is a noisy open space so engaging in one-on-one interviews in the “lobby” or other designated lounging areas was sometimes difficult. Often it was hard to hear the interviewee and on many occasions we had to move initial interview locations or discontinue interviews

because of this or other external factors such as comfort, chores, and privacy protection, particularly from staff and other residents. At times, this caused the initial dialogue of the interview to be somewhat artificial until reestablishing a sense of comfort and collectiveness. This in turn made the transcribing and analytical process more intense and occasionally more difficult.

One of the most meaningful challenges that materialized was the issue of privacy and trust with some of the men I interviewed and with whom I engaged in conversations. One particular time when this was an obvious concern was when I spoke with Obioma,⁶ a resident of the shelter. He explained that he had taken up residency at the facility because he had recently been released from prison and needed a place to stay while searching for a job. As he told me his ordeal he asked me several times if I was going to put our conversation on paper. Even after assuring him that our conversation was confidential and all names would be changed, it still gave rise to feelings of discomfort on my part. This is also obvious in another interview:

Karla: So how'd you end up here all the way from New York?

Obioma: [He is smiling, is silent for a few seconds then says] Sure you ain't no cop?

Karla: Naw, I'm a graduate student.

He was obviously suspicious of my presence at the shelter. This suspicion was evident several times among some of the men I interviewed formally and informally. But it also revealed to me the sense of political and economic disempowerment that seemed to overwhelm these men. Being attentive to these men's devalued social position and how my status as a Black female researcher partially held some "whistle blowing" potential

power is essential for not only understanding how these men manage their masculine identities within their everyday lives but also possibly unveils inequities dominant in their lives.

Being conscious of these men's marginalized identities also made me aware of the often powerful/powerless relationship between researchers and the researched. Because the researched are usually politically and economically disempowered, access to their lives may often be effortless. This is especially true for homeless people. I often had the feeling that these men were used to having someone come around to "study" them. Although my presence was out of the ordinary, the fact that I was there for research was almost expected, as if I was there to study these "untamable animals." This is obvious in a comment made by Sekou while I was making observations and jottings:

Sekou: [jokingly?] What are you studying now, native eating patterns?"

Karla: [I chuckle and look at him] Hook me up with some of your clients.

Sekou: All you have to do is sit here and they will come to you sweetheart.

Clearly, in his light hearted comment there is a hint of the traditional research setting where the researcher is there to gawk at the powerless for the sake of "scientific advancement." This certainly reveals one of the more sinister side of social science's history that has been well documented.

Other challenges that emerged had to do with the men's autonomy within the shelter. Very often, the men that I interviewed were recruited by Sekou, and would be "sent" to me with no actual knowledge of what we were going to do. On several occasions I heard him say to some of my interview candidates, "I have something for you

to do.” Although all of the interviews were strictly voluntary and some men did refuse to participate, the fact that a person who holds some form of power over their everyday lives asked them to do something is significant concerning their willingness to participate. I attempted to manage this dilemma by formally introducing myself to the men, always shaking their hands and offering up as much information as possible about the research and the importance of their participation while at the same time being conscious of their time and privacy. Homeless persons are often saddled with the stereotype of having nothing but available and insignificant time on their hands. These “introductions” served as a way for me to attempt to personally connect and express my appreciation for their participation. More importantly, these interactional moments served as a strategy to convey respect and dignity to men who are labeled by the public as having neither.

The overarching theme of how the men of this setting negotiate, validate, and reconstruct their masculine identity through their interaction with women, myself included, and themselves was most prominent and became increasingly apparent as my research progressed.

CHAPTER THREE

DOING MASCULINITY IN THE COURSE OF LANGUAGE

Much has been written on the ways the dominant culture's masculine identity norms have been reconstructed by countless African American men to fit their subjugated realities. Many studies focusing on populations experiencing identity struggles and managing the stigmas of social inequalities, discuss such strategies, which rely on language, to avoid stigmatization (Goffman 1963; O'Brien & Howard 1998; Howard 2000).

Such established identity oriented meaning serves not only as a buffer to salvaging the self, but also as means for these men to create a masculine identity against the societal assaults of being homeless and Black. The manner in which the African American men of this setting negotiate, validate, and reconstruct their masculinity through their interactions with each other became increasingly apparent as my research progressed.

PERFORMATIVE TALK: MASCULINITY-PRESERVING STRATEGIES IN DIALOGUE

The men of Home of Akin are aware of the judgment by the public of their failures and try to reject this internalized norm by constructing positive identities through their ordinary talk. Particular features all interact to accomplish the dominant values of masculinity, which include a focus on emotional restraint, ambition, achievement and competitiveness. Since Black homeless men do not have the resources to achieve most of

these hegemonic values, they must use alternate methods to achieve this acceptable manhood. Such alternate ways include sketching out a respectable and dignified masculine identity. These men want to live in accordance with notions of appropriate men's behavior. Conforming to and embodying ideas of moral worth is important to how they see themselves as men (Dunier 1992). Men's respectability has always been tied to their sexuality. By showing disdain for the characteristics of their homeless status they are able to sketch themselves as respectably sound men (Dunier 1992). The men of Home of Akin are able to construct and preserve a masculine identity--that has been called into question by societal standards of manhood--through the narratives of their everyday lives.

This section highlights the strategies the men of Home of Akin relied on to maintain their dignity and respect as men. I focus in particular on how these men beautify talk, present discourse of redemptive practices, discuss the pleasures of degrading activities, counter white middle-class male masculinities, reframe biographical accounts of homelessness and personal finances, and talk about their distancing from "failed" men to construct counter hegemonic gender and racial identities that they develop to protect themselves against threats and assaults.

Beautifying Language

Masculinity is constructed and maintained in all male talk (Coates 2003). Throughout their conversations, the men of Home of Akin often engaged in forms of decorating their language to not only fit "normative" societal standards of being a man, but also to display dignified accounts of manhood. These attempts to neutralize their

homeless status could be seen when they spoke about the everyday bouts of shelter life, to philosophical views on their personal lives. Often accounts of past troubles with the law, drugs and alcohol would be recast so as not to appear damaging to their character. Men like Danso would refer to their drug and alcohol addiction as an “experience.” Describing the crippling state of addiction in this way helps establish such a struggle as just another part of the “bumps and bruises” of realizing manhood.

Attempting to make his experience as “normal” as possible is also evident in Adisa’s⁷ account of how he was fired from a job: “....My recovery, 90 days of recovery in Redwood City. Then I got moved to a half way house in San Jose. I was living there and working. Then the job fell through...” On another occasion he describes another job he lost: “... Yeah, they laid me off. So they laid me off and then I had lost the place so I was sleeping outside. And when they laid me off I didn’t have no income so I was sleeping outside and was just wondering around...” Referring to being terminated as “it fell through” or “they laid me off” permits Adisa to define himself as something other than a failure. Since the role of being “the provider” is central to hegemonic masculinity, Adisa’s definition of losing his job allows him to disconnect from his possible liability in losing the job and to not be responsible for not having the “essentials” needed to be a man. Dunier (1992) argues that responsibility is one of the most important definitions of respectability for many older Black urban men. Adisa knows that his respectability as a man relies on his opposition to things like wastefulness, laziness, and lack of personal responsibility and is beneath the level of respectability, as a man, that he associates with his own existence (Dunier 1992).

Such language serves as a way for the men of Home of Akin to gloss over struggles so as to protect a sense of dignity and respectability. Danso is 55 years old and claimed to be a retired fire fighter. He had been living at Home of Akin for eight months, but for the last four years of his life he has lived in shelters. It is unclear whether Danso was actually a fire fighter, although, I tend to believe that he was. However, what does seem difficult to understand is why he had to retire early. He claimed to have been blown out of a building, which caused him to become disabled. Whether this is true or not, becoming disabled as a fire fighter is a noble and respectable reason for stopping work. This is clear in Danso's description of why he ended up in the shelter: "...My story starts out maybe about 15 or 20 years ago. Um, I was staying, um..I started as a result of an early retirement. You know I retired early and seemed like I'm a victim of cost of living. Cost of living increased and my retirement wasn't enough, um to you know make it..."

Referring to his "retirement" as the grounds leading to his homelessness allows him to not only align himself with values that have come to be connected with "middle class" masculinity, but also allows him to present a respectable way of leaving work. Men are brought up to value work and fix their personal identities around particular occupations because historically men have been defined in terms of what they do (Drummond 2003). Therefore, it is inevitable that they construct their masculine identity around the work that they do as adults. This is why using the term "retire" becomes such a defining factor in how Danso constructs his masculinity. To retire means to finalize a career, and to have a career versus a "job" means that he is doing what it takes to be a respectable man.

Such neutralizing talk is also evident in Nassor's⁸ narrative as he tells why he left the city where he grew up years earlier: "I went back east to help my family member out because I have an Auntie that takes care of patients that have HIV. She's got what you call a home care facility. And I was staying there with her for the last 8 years. Trying to help her. Maintaining the household, you know, grounds keeping. Like that you know."

As the interview progressed it was obvious that he had lost his job and had nowhere to go but to family out of state. However, by describing his passage out of state as a good deed to "help out" his aunt, he is able to present himself in a more dignified manner. He becomes the one who is "taking care" of someone.

Talk of Redeeming Practices

Since claiming a positive masculine identity is partly dependent on a man's life accomplishments, another way the African American men of Home of Akin can sustain that claim, despite lives saturated with hardships, is by focusing on their redeeming practices of the present. Through these practices, they are able to restore honor and worth to their life experiences. Often I heard what many of the men considered to be stories of success as if to show me that all is not lost in their lives. Tales of their life struggles would often be followed with current accomplishments. Danso refers to his present project to make up for his past disappointments:

"My situation isn't as bleak as it used to be as far as my economics.

Economically. Standards. Concerns, you know, my money. I'm doing a lot better now. I can afford to get out and get on my own now. But what I'm trying to do is give back a little bit more. For the past four years I've been going from shelter to

shelter doing a discipleship and it's helping me out too..."

By discussing his economic struggles in such a shorthand, halting manner and interest in giving back through a discipleship he portrays a selfless man who lives in shelters because he wants to "give back." At the same time this allows him to make amends for his past downfalls. He shows this on another occasion: "You know. More than likely what I'll do is I'll wind up at another shelter doing my spirituality thing trying to help somebody else out.... I know what mine is. I have my purpose now..." In having a purpose, Danso is able to construct the identity of a man who is self directed and individually determined to help his peers.

Practices of redemption through spiritual salvation were another vehicle used by the Black men of Home of Akin to sustain their masculine identity. Snow and Anderson (1993) refer to this kind of identity work as ideological embracement. Often homeless people adhere to an ideology and the avowal of a personal identity that is cognitively congruent with that ideology (Snow and Anderson 1993). For the men of Home of Akin, redeeming practices through religious faith became a way to construct a dignified and respectable manhood by following a morally "righteous" path. Much of the men's talk was sprinkled with references to religious beliefs and a number credit their present "second chance" status to a new found-faith in religion. This is especially evident in Rudo's⁹ talk of why he is trying to do the "right thing": "I converted to Islam, so I'm trying to do things differently. It kinda puts a strain on me, it makes it harder cause it's not, like I said, not what I'm accustomed to doing. Like, I'm trying to do the right thing now... So I'm just trying to do my part as a Muslim."

By “doing his part,” Rudo is able to retain a sense of manhood defined by a Muslim faith that gives men social and political authority that is paid for by protecting his family from all the forces and pressures of society. He is aware of the visible signs of social status that he does not hold. “Doing the right thing” is important because it allows him to define another marker of respect. Talking of his submission to Islam permits him to define a masculinity, although still patriarchal, that is similar to middle class values while at the same time sketch out a version of manhood that is dignified and respectable.

Danso also refers to religion: “... I’ve become comfortable with it through a spiritual program. Through scripture I’ve learned to live comfortably with it and you know it’s OK...” Danso, like many of the men of Home of Akin, is aware of his stigmatized status in society. They know that homelessness threatens the personal dignity of those it traps (Seltser 1993). Through his spiritual enlightenment, Danso refuses to accept a masculinity that defines him and his peers as just “homeless men.” He constructs a male identity that allows him to retain dignity and respect as a man who happens to be homeless.

Talking of projects the men were presently involved in also served as a means to salvage their masculine selves. Many of the men revealed their new found interest in education and computer literacy. On one occasion I was approached by a resident of the shelter to talk about our African heritage. He went on to discuss ancient African culture and to give me documents to read that showed African Native Americans’ history. He told me how important it was for me to know this about “us” and to pass on the documents to enlighten others. When I asked what prompted the research, he replied that

he wanted to know more about his history since he had just learned how to use the internet.¹⁰ Talking of our history allowed him to present himself as a self-conscious Black man and who can overcome his possible past ignorance of Black history through his internet research and connect himself to a more enlightening history. Such dialogue also allowed him the opportunity to present himself as a respectable and educated Black man. He is able to adopt a paternalistic stance as “teacher” and “knower,” which have been defined as archetypes of masculinity (Gerzon 1992). More importantly, he rejects the dominant stereotype that says Black men are all body and no mind. Reading has been a fundamental source of knowledge, power, and liberation for Black males. Presenting himself as such a knowledgeable and liberated man is another way he is able to portray that he is “worthy” of respect and dignity.

Danso often talked about how he is writing the memoirs of his homeless plight as if to convey that his life is worth telling. He also spoke about a “spiritual program” he had begun at Home of Akin and plans to continue at other shelters when his time at this shelter is up. Carama,¹¹ a dinner regular at Home of Akin, talked to me about a documentary he is filming about homeless life. Although I never saw him with a camera, his talk of doing something productive, whether embellished or not, enabled him to earn a positive image that is constantly questioned as a homeless Black man. Because men are expected to be productive members of society, managing his assaulted homeless masculine identity through his talk of the “documentary” is essential.

The Pleasure of Degrading Activities

Another masculinity-preserving strategy that numerous of African American men

of Home of Akin enact is to talk of what many consider to be degrading activities as “not so bad” and even fun. The men would often describe activities such as panhandling or begging¹² as “fun” or “exciting” or “easy.” Here Ta’Ziyah¹³ talks about his feelings towards panhandling:

Karla: How do you feel about that, pan handling?

Ta’Ziyah: ...It’s easy! [has a smirk on his face]

Karla: Tell me what you mean.

Ta’Ziyah: If you open your mouth and ask for something, you’re going to get it, you know.

This is also evident in Amir’s¹⁴ view point: “I mean, I was having fun. I enjoyed it. Yeah I enjoyed it.” Describing such a degrading activity as enjoyable is an attempt to rescue his manhood against attacks from a standard of masculinity that says you must make do without handouts from others. This is important for his attempt to sustain his sense of manhood because self reliance and independence are valued masculine traits. People resort to begging and panhandling out of sheer desperation and often as a last resort to come up with money. Panhandling is overwhelmingly driven by need and can often be problematic and dangerous activity to do. Panhandlers often experienced harassment and verbal abuse and, in many cases, physical and sexual assault (Jencks 1994). The perpetrators can include members of the public, other “street people,” and even the police (Jencks 1994). Just as damaging to the self, panhandling involves an attempt to persuade someone, who usually holds or values the standards of maleness that they are attempting to retain, to give away money for nothing in return. This gives the

impression that they are antiethical to a patriarchal and capitalist work ethics that say that honorable living involves the exchange of labor for pay (Snow and Anderson 1993). For men who have come to internalize such a standard of maleness as central to their self worth, panhandling can produce shame and embarrassment. As an attempt to reclaim this honor, at least in their accounts of the experience, declaring such activity as enjoyable locates it outside the realm of work. Instead of being about how they make a living, this is a sport, a game of getting something for nothing.

Given the attitude the U.S. public has toward the “poor” and the “welfare” system, receiving governmental assistance is seen as shameful and degrading. The entire structure of dispensing welfare makes it extremely difficult to maintain a sense of dignity for its recipients (Seltzer 1993). This is especially troubling for these homeless men whose dignity is already under attack because they are in need of help and must depend on outside forces to survive. Many of the men of Home of Akin depended on “welfare” to supplement their virtually nonexistent income. In our interview, Kito¹⁵ talks about how food stamps help him survive. He also displays an attitude that resists the negative judgments that “welfare” creates:

Kito: Yeah. But I still get food stamps so.

Karla: Oh yeah.

Kito: That helps out. I ain’t ashamed of it!

Karla: No, no.

Kito: Shit! That’s money!

Being a homeless man alone is a degrading experience. Goffman (1963) argued that

stigmatized persons respond to an encounter that reinforces their stigma by attempting to correct the objective basis of their failing. In exclaiming that he bears no shame by getting food stamps, Kito is able to deflect the negative labels that are associated with receiving government assistance. By exhibiting a “money is money” attitude he is not only managing his dehumanizing experience, but also rescuing his masculine identity from the degrading assault.

Other attempts to recover from assaults made on their masculinity included talking of living on the streets as trouble free and painless. Adisa exhibits this when I ask him to tell me about sleeping outside: “It was alright, it wasn’t bad. It was summer time. And if it rained then I’d get a spot undercover.” Similarly, Nassor, talks about living without a home: “And you know, to me, it’s not hard living homeless to be honest with you. It’s kinda tough in a way if you’re elements are weathered, you know what I’m saying... But if you have some kinda shelter you can live in, like my car, you’re OK...”

Such dialogue suggests that they are aware of their experience and are willing to “rough it” as men. Being able to deal with their situation and even make light of the hardship of not having a place to call home allows for a manhood to emerge that is self reliant. It shows that they are calm and decisive under pressure. Undermining their experience through talk allows them to construct a sense of manhood that although under the oppressive weight of homelessness, shows they are still in control.

Language of White Middle Class Masculinities

Language has long been a marker of class. How one talks often reveals class location. “Poor” people often parody the rich through mimic of language as a way to

deflect their stigmatized status in society. Achieving such “poise” in conversations is a direct attempt to right the wrong attached to themselves. Through the narratives of the men of Home of Akin, the everyday talk of white middle class masculinity was evident. Often the men would decorate their narratives with classic middle class markers. This is evident in Danso’s explanation about why he accepted an early retirement: “I retired from the fire department. Blown out of a building. Lost hearing so a result of it they moved the office, but I have type A personality and I was always active so it wasn’t enough activity for me so an early retirement was offered, so I took the early retirement.” By attributing his refusal to work in an office to his “type A personality,” he is connecting his creative needs to the dominant culture’s assessments of intellect. He can also, if just momentarily, pass as a man who is familiar with the middle class world, and still values its principles in his life.

Other signs of middle class talk included talking about computers, Silicon Valley, and corporations. For instance, a middle aged man I spoke to on a few occasions engaged in such talk. I would frequently overhear him talking with others about current events in the “start up” corporate world. This distinctive masculine type of talk allowed him to portray himself as “being in on” the financial world of business. By adopting white middle class language, the African American men of Home of Akin were able to perform the identity of men who had once been part of such a world. The men of Home of Akin are confronted with establishing their masculine identities in the course of interactions and come to adopt casual accounts borrowed from conventional or middle class vocabularies as an attempt to manage and construct these identities.

MY STORY: THEN AND NOW

Another form of identity talk that allowed the men of Home of Akin to preserve a masculine self against the attacks on it was telling people about themselves. Snow and Anderson (1997) argue this technique is commonly used among the homeless. The process of “telling their story” allowed them to exercise control over a life that lacks much autonomy or power. Many of the men of Home of Akin had histories of institutionalization through the criminal justice system and social services facilities. Manhood, as defined by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is in part idealized through the gaining of material things or commodities and economic wealth (hooks 1992).

As my fieldwork progressed, I came to understand how many of the African American men of Home of Akin used strategies to preserve their masculinity that conformed to hegemonic masculine standards. This talk provided them with the opportunity to explain their choices and life contradictions. The interview space then became a space to come clean about their pasts; to purge their sins. I found many of the African American men who lived here telling me about themselves, especially their accomplishments. In fact, several claimed to have Bachelors of Arts and Masters of Arts degrees. Telling me of these achievements permitted these men to maintain their identity as men. These strategies were often unveiled through their “telling of their story “of their life before being homeless and their present economic situation to me or other men at the shelter.

Money Talk

Because these men have been stripped of or denied access to a masculine identity in line with the values of “the good provider,” the telling of their story would allow the men to invoke an alternative male identity that portrayed a self sufficient man, who at other times in his life, provided for himself and his family financially (Nonn 2004). They would often speak of past and present accomplishments associated with financial themes (Snow and Anderson 1993). These men’s narratives were sprinkled with stories of past professional careers and successful businesses. Connell (1995) maintains that certain kinds of work are masculine and that doing them well will confirm masculinity. The work men do plays a vital part in constructing their identities as men (Drummond 2003). The men of Home of Akin are aware that too often the marker of a positive and productive man is one with a professional and successful occupation. Dominant culture defines men, in large part, by what they do. This is evident in my interview with Olu:¹⁶

Olu: ...It’s a temporary job. And I’ve been there 3 years. I had my own business before I ended up here which was restoring antique bikes.

Karla: Antique motorcycles?

Olu: Antique bicycles from the 30’s and 40’s, you know just antique bikes. And I had about \$150,000 in bikes which got away from me through the divorce, uh they some crooks. Ended up here with nothing but a sleeping bag.

By focusing on his life “then” as a successful business owner who was in the possession of highly valued antiques, he is able to create a more “valued” masculine identity that does not portray him as a failure but someone who just fell on hard times. This focus on

the patriarchal value of success is also apparent in my interview with Nassor:

“The first time I ended up homeless was because I was robbed at the motel I was staying at. A key was used so I know it was an inside job. I used to have big money before boo. Armani suits, Stacy Adam Shoes, and many things. All kinds of sweaters, socks, and even drawers were named brand but that all went to the trash by my ex.”

By pointing out such markers of upper class life, he is able to preserve a masculinity that may not be apparent to others about someone who lives in a car. By telling of their previous success in business endeavors, of material wealth and self governing accomplishments, these men are able to create a masculine identity that shows that they are truly men because they too were once part of “working” society.

Bruck¹⁷ also discusses the kinds of material things he had once: “...I mean money was nothing. I had brand new cars in there. I’m talking about new. I’m talking about something nobody ain’t never set their ass in.” By sketching out his past as filled with material possessions, he is drawing an identity that he feels is fit for the man he sees himself to be. He later refers to some of his present commodities: “...I got my own little TV. My own DVD player. I got all my little closet space...[laughs] I got to have the luxuries of home, you know what I’m saying.” Such technologically current possessions act as markers of his economic well being, even if it is just on the surface. His having things can then be equated to being an adequate man still, even while homeless.

DISTANCING FROM “FAILED” MEN

When performing a role, associating with others, or making use of institutions that

may demonstrate an identity incompatible with actual or desired self conceptions, individuals may attempt to distance themselves from such characteristics (Snow and Anderson 1993). The men of Home of Akin recognize that they have been stripped of everything that society has deemed necessary for a man to fully participate in society as a true man. This comes with the shame of surviving as less than what dominant culture declares to be a man; the role of a failure. To resist such an existence, many of the men actively disassociated themselves with being homeless and from other homeless men.

This was very evident in the interview I conducted with 19 year old Ekundayo.¹⁸ Throughout the interview he expresses how uncomfortable he feels being in a homeless shelter, since he had never been homeless before. This is apparent when he expresses how unfriendly he perceives many of the people in the shelter to be. He seemed to be putting himself outside of the residents because he viewed himself as friendly. He repeatedly made clear he was not chronically homeless. By doing this he actively disassociated himself from the shelter. He obviously did not want to be aligned with the category of being homeless.

Bruk also shows this when discussing the non-residents who regularly visit Home of Akin:

“Some of em are full of shit of course... Some of em just want to be here. Forever and forever. They ain’t trying to go nowhere... They just sleep over there [points to a line of cars parked across the street from the shelter] and hang out... I seem em get up everyday. They hustle up cigarettes. They hustle up beer, liquor, dope, weed, all that shit and sit over here and do it all day but they

won't get they ass, clean up, put on some clothes and go out there and look for a job. But they'll hustle up fucking dope, that drank, and them cigarettes. I don't got no respect for that. I don't got NO respect for that. None. None whatsoever... I'm serious. You can go get a job man, for real. Doing something... But they couldn't say that about me. Cause I ain't never been that kind of individual. Me, I got... I don't know maybe I got too much pride, too much ego, or whatever to let myself just be run down like that."

By drawing a picture of the non resident men as being responsible for their failures, he can distance himself from such a category. His insensitive attitude to their plight allows him to align himself with middle class values that unsympathetically look down on the homeless. More importantly, he is able to set himself apart from the other men, even though he is homeless and has "hustled" in the past. He has always had goals and they do not. Goal orientation becomes a way in which he constructs a respectably sound masculinity. Only then can he sketch a masculine identity that demonstrates he has "too much pride" to "let himself go."

This was also obvious in my interview with Hamidi.¹⁹ He too disassociates himself from being homeless to maintain his sense of dignity and masculinity. This was clear when he discussed that he was not the stereotypical homeless man because he was not addicted to drugs or alcohol. This allows him to maintain dignity because, unlike many of his counterparts, he was drug free. It was almost like a sense of achievement.

Disassociating themselves from being homeless also allowed many of the men to better cope with being financially unstable, which was a theme that emerged in all of my

interviews. Many of the men expressed how hard it was to live in the Silicon Valley on their wages. In fact, many attributed their homelessness patterns to simply not having enough money to survive on their own. Such techniques reduce the impact of stigma on public interactions with outsiders (Goffman 1963). These strategies may include presenting an appearance that masks their homelessness and minimizes the impact of their stigmatized status (Howard 2000). Most importantly, the men of Home of Akin know the kinds of conduct that is “appropriate” in accordance with their homeless status and perform hegemonic masculinity according to their assaulted masculine identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENACTING MASCULINITIES THROUGH WOMEN

The Black men of Home of Akin are aware of the images of Black manhood that portray them as failures, dangerously violent, and sexual predators. They know that they are in a state of virtual powerlessness. This is why constructing a respectable and dignified masculinity that rejects such expectations becomes a crucial part of the way they navigate through homelessness. By performing a hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes individualism, the Black men of Home of Akin can manage and distance themselves from their stigmatized status. Such presentations of masculine individualism allow for them to portray themselves as independent, “in control” men on the one hand. Yet end up working against them on the other because it prevents them from developing a structural critique of the state’s role in their disempowered status. This is especially evident when looking at the interactions with the women in these men’s lives. They utilize what little gender power they have to counter the race and class assaults they experience daily. The men of Home of Akin strategically assemble and generate gendered identities based on race and class through their relationships with women, fleeting relationships with Black women, and through their interactions with me.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN

Identities are partially created through interactional attributions of others (Snow and Anderson 1993). This is essential when understanding the masculine identities of the

men of this setting. The women in the lives of the Black men of Home of Akin played a central part in the way their masculine identities are defined, constructed, and negotiated as they navigate their being homeless. Their struggle to prove themselves as true men striving for respect is gained through their use of relationships with women as symbols of success. Almost all of the men I spoke with sketch a narrative in which women play a central part of their lives. Many describe their lives before being homeless as consisting of partnerships with women that were meaningful and significant. Through their stories, they enact strategies that allow them to preserve, manage, and construct a respectable masculinity that not only portrays them as significant economic contributors of their households, but also competent, worthwhile men. In what follows I detail the ways men talk about women, especially Black women, as a way to enact gender power and construct a masculine identity that is worthy of dignity and respect. Because of their immobilized homeless status, it is in their relationship with women that they can be men. I demonstrate how the men use their heterosexuality to perform a hegemonic masculinity that portrays them as respectable relationship and family men through talk of relationships with women. I describe how they construct a masculinity centered on heterosexuality and draw from the few resources available to them to do manhood, that is, women and their talk of them.

Blaming

Women play a significant role in the narratives of the men Home of Akin. Almost all of the men I spoke to describe sharing their lives with a woman up until they became homeless. In fact, some of the men blamed women for their plight. This is

evident in the interviews with Olu and Danso, both middle aged men who reside at Home of Akin and are often in each other's presence. They both speak candidly about their past relationship with women. Olu, who has been a resident of Home of Akin for eight months, blatantly blames his ex-wife for ending up homeless. In our interview he talks about his twenty years of marriage, his children, and his successful entrepreneurial business and how that all came to an end when his wife divorced him. His tone was that of bitterness toward her:

"I had... bikes which got away from me through the divorce... they is some crooks. Ended up here with nothing but a sleeping bag... it was all a set up... All of my bikes got taken. I lost my place... Through my wife... she didn't get them from the lady that had them in storage... what she couldn't sell she threw away. She put a dumpster in front of the house. I have of my past life. No pictures no anything. While I was in jail. I'm not saying all women are like that. But she saw a way to get rid of me..."

He blames her for his having to spend time in jail and for his difficult time on the streets before finding Home of Akin. In fact, when I inquire how he ended up at the shelter, he frankly opens our interview with talk of his ex-wife: "went through a divorce, 20 years of marriage and...ah...woman gets everything, that's why I ended up here... She got everything... Place, cars, uuuh, my truck, everything." By blaming his wife for his failures he is able to reject an identity that portrays him as such. In blaming his wife he is also able to deflect the attack on his masculine identity that reflects itself with success through work. He is able to construct a masculinity that does not depict him as a failed man because even though he has lost "everything," he is still man enough to pull through his troubled situation. By simply surviving, he is successful. Thus, blaming his wife functions as a means of disowning a botched manhood while at the same time act as

asserting the masculine “tough man” ideal of still surviving. The animosity he holds against her is a result of his state of powerlessness. This hostile blaming then also acts as a way to manage his stigmatized manhood.

The experience of powerlessness often cause Black men to see themselves as valueless and worthless, as not being able to imagine that they can make a difference to anyone or anything. Lack of self worth has been identified as one of the core causes of anger in Black men (hooks 2003). Rage then becomes the outcome of this shame and anger. Bradshaw (1988) observes that rage allows people to feel powerful. It feeds the empty void within, giving the sense of presence. In a patriarchal culture, anger may be seen as “manly” so it not only becomes the perfect cover up for making the self feel better, but also operates as a detrimental way to repair a broken masculine identity. In this instance Olu’s anger was directed toward a woman and not towards its appropriate object, a system that has failed him.

Woman blaming also manifested itself in Ta’Ziyah’s narrative. He first begins his story by revealing his recent time spent in prison and his past troubles with homelessness. He has been in and out of prison while at the same time battling an addiction to drugs and dealing with in-and-out bouts of homelessness. He talks about finally securing a job while at the same time starting a romantic relationship with a woman. When he ends what he describes a mere “sexual relationship” with the woman, she causes him to lose his job by telling his manager of his past run-in with the law. He recounts this: “She goes up there to P.F. Chang’s. Bam, I lose my job up there cause she’s yelling profanity, screaming and telling them...’I’m a hurt you. I’m a hit you in the

pocket where it hurt', know what I'm saying... 'He's off parole'... So they let me go..."

Like Olu, Ta'Ziyah placing culpability on his ex-girlfriend allows him to manage his spoiled masculine identity. He loses his job because of her failures, not his own. By blaming his ex-girlfriend, Ta'Ziyah portrays himself as a man who fell victim to a scorned woman out for revenge, instead of a man who has "failed" to establish a creditable work ethic because of past run-ins with the law.

Bwana²⁰ also describes a break up in a relationship with a woman as part of the reason why he is homeless. He describes a bad break up between him and his ex-girlfriend that ended with her breaking into his apartment and stealing some of his belongings. Although he never had "proof" that she was the culprit, when calling the police, he ended up in jail because of unpaid parking traffic violations. He had just landed a "career" in sales and was looking forward to starting his new job. Spending several weeks in jail caused him to lose his job, which caused him to lose his apartment because he had no way to make ends meet. He insisted that had he not been involved with his ex, he would have never ended up homeless. "...I know it was her.... I didn't tell the cops it was her though. When they came, they took ME to jail. That's when I found out about the warrant for the tickets...." Bwana goes on to say that he regrets not paying the tickets but continues to highlight the rocky relationship with his ex girlfriend. He undeniably holds her, at least in part, responsible for ending up homeless. In doing so, Bwana is able to deflect a masculine identity that does not portray him as a failure because he did not "cause" himself to be homeless, his girlfriend did. Other men are more casual when stating women to be culpable for their homelessness. Danso responds

to his ending up at Home of Akin with the following: "... I went through a, not a divorce, but a break up from a young lady and that um impacted my life." By indirectly indicating that his homelessness resulted from his breakup, he is able to make someone else responsible for his homelessness. The public often blames poor marginalized men for their impoverished conditions. By indirectly blaming his spiraling into homelessness on a past relationship, he is able to manage the stigma of being a homeless Black man. Yet by doing it so "passionately," he is still able to maintain his dignity as a man. Woman-blaming for Danso became a kind of patriarchal talk that is unambiguous in our culture. The men of Home of Akin blame women for their failures, even if these failures were shaped by forces beyond their control. They feel powerless and are angry at women. Men often see women as the cause of their feelings of powerlessness and as having "sexual power" over "them" (hooks 2004). Most important, blaming women unrelentlessly prevents such men from developing an organized critique of race and class structures that have shaped their life outcomes. This misdirected anger is all too familiar, and can be seen when working class white men blame men of color for loss of jobs instead of deindustrialization.

"If I Knew Then What I Know Now": Coming Clean About Mistakes in Past

Relationships

Men are often socialized to define themselves externally, constantly anxious of whether or not they have done the "right thing" and if they ought to feel good about what they have done or not done (Drummond 2003). This means that when performance cannot be sustained, the masculine self is vulnerable (Connell 1995). For working class

men who have labor intensive jobs, for example, their physical capacities are their economic asset. For the most part, the men of Home of Akin do not have jobs that can economically sustain them. This assault on their masculine identities leaves them with few resources to enact masculinity. For the men of Home of Akin, the interview space acted as an interactional context through which their masculine identities were actively managed, constructed and solidified. The telling of previous romantic partnerships with women served as a way for the men to come clean and purge the sins and errors made in past relationships. Just as the blaming of women acts as a way to ward off the attack of being a failure, blaming themselves for failed relationships allows them to take responsibility for themselves, a socially constructed masculine trait. Many of the men would often talk about how they once had good women and because of their actions lost them. However, they would often counter that by saying that they now realized they had great women and would never make the same mistakes again. Ta'Ziyah, for example, spent most of his time with me talking about the love and respect he had for his ex-girlfriend. He talks about his discontent with himself for "not doing right by her." He even bluntly discusses his struggle with drug addiction and his realization that he cannot "self medicate." He feels as though he has failed her as a man because he was fired from his job and never told her. He describes this "...I lied to her about having a job... I was talking to her crazy. And just you know, just real out of pocket and running my mouth... Just really acting like a little bitch. So she breaks up with me." Clearly, Ta'Ziyah has come to define his masculinity and place as a man in his relationship as a financial provider in the household. He later says:

“You can’t just tell somebody you love ‘em and take a hit of that stuff and trip out on ‘em and then that alcohol.... But you still ain’t doing nothing. You steady making her false promises. That’s what really hurts me because I knew what I was doing by neglecting myself, by neglecting my obligations and lying... you know, after two or three weeks trying to get out there and coming up short...”

By admitting to mistakes or “false promises” and neglected “obligations” he can come clean as a man. Through his account of his past relationship errors, he is able to reconstruct a masculine identity that portrays him as a noble man who is now able to right his past wrongs. By blaming himself for not being able to find work, he is able to take responsibility for the actions he feels caused the relationship to end. For Ta’Ziyah, “coming clean” means that he has learned from his mistakes. He has better control over his life and knows how to be a “successful” relationship man in the future. This assurance is crucial for men like Ta’Ziyah because relationships are where they can truly be men. Many Black men are longing for love and that longing cannot be satisfied until they do “recovery work” (hooks 2004). Part of this recovery work involves such confessions. He shows his redemption when he says

“you got to know how to beat the streets, don’t let the streets beat you... Make everyday positive. Do something positive everyday. Even if it’s filling out one application a day. Or if it’s going to get a social security card, or just going to get your ID...just make everyday positive.”

By mentioning such modest “positive” activities he is able to show the enlightenment gained from lived struggles on the streets.²¹

Coming clean about his carelessness in his inattentiveness with his ex-wife is also clear in Bruk’s story. He recalls the relationship he had with his ex-wife before being incarcerated: “... my ex wife man, man I’m a fool. For real. I had one them kinda

women a nigga beg fo. That dream about in life...I ain't gone lie. For real. I'm talking about top of the line. Class. Dignity. Self-respect. I mean straight woman..." By relentlessly complimenting his ex-wife's "womanhood" he is equally presenting himself not only as a reformed inattentive husband, but also a dignified and respectable man who is worthy of such a "straight" woman. He has come to connect his manhood with the wonderful attributes he sees in his ex-wife. It is as if he is exclaiming that he is a good man, because such a respectable woman married him. In a place where defining masculinity through power, money, and respect is impossible, Bruk is left with maintaining his masculine self through the respectable and dignified attributes of his ex-wife.

The Performance of a "Good Man"

African American men are often times politically or economically powerless. The last thing Black men want is for the way they treat women to be called in to question (Powell 2000). Portrayals of romantic partnerships between Black men and women are often negative (hooks 2004). Black men, moreover, are often depicted as "dogs" in popular culture (hooks 2004). The men of Home of Akin know this and adopt strategies to counter portrayals that they are poor partners in relationships. During my conversations with the men, our talk regularly shifts to intimate details of past relationships. Bruk, for instance, spends a great deal of time telling me about his happy life with his ex-wife before being incarcerated. He talks about the kind things his wife did for him and that he did for her in great detail. Bruk recounts when he would come home late at night: "I would walk in the door one, two o'clock in the morning... the first

thing she say is, 'hey Bruk, you hungry? You want me to run you some bath water?' And I might go in there and look in the closet and I got brand new coats, underwear, t-shirts." By describing his wife's thoughtful actions, he constructs an identity as a man that he has come to define as sound. He is able to show himself as having respect in his home. This is especially important for men like Bruk, who may be treated badly and disrespectfully in public life. Through his talk of his wife's actions, he can sketch a masculine identity that shows him as "king of his castle." This "sound" masculinity comes to represent a sense of worth. He goes on to describe his take on his wife's commitment to him: "And I know, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt the whole time I was with my wife... she ain't never messed around. Not because she feared me or none of that, but because of her own desire not to."

Bruk reaffirms his "goodness" here. By going out of their way to portray themselves as good partners, these men are able to depict themselves as responsible, dignified and respectable men who are not only loved by their women, but also worthy of that love. Such a strategy is especially important when troubling images of Black men permeate popular culture and show them as animalistic, sex crazed, and with a penchant for violence (Saint-Aubin 1994). Constructing themselves as "good men" is how they can counter such attacks on their masculine identity by providing a way for them to distance themselves from such images. For the men of Home of Akin, portraying themselves as "good men" through the stories of women in their lives is important because white patriarchal notions of manhood prevent these men from achieving this role. Being seen as failures can leave these men with their self esteem assaulted because

they cannot acquire the means to fulfill this role (hooks 2004). The performance of a good man allows these men to preserve a sense of being a man that portrays them as worthwhile, loveable men.

Interactional Niceties toward Women

Engaging in interactional niceties toward women is another way the men of Home of Akin attempt to present themselves as dignified men. On all of my visits to the center, there was always at least one woman volunteering in the kitchen. Many of the men from the facility seemed to go out of their way to say please and thank you to the women volunteers, including me. They also thanked the few men volunteers, but rarely was it made a distinct point as with the women volunteers. Several times I helped serve food in the kitchen. Since this was a busy time for the kitchen help, it was hard to engage in conversation, even small talk because the food line needed to keep moving. On a few occasions some of the men that I or other women volunteers served stand and wait until we could acknowledge them to thank us.

I recall one of these incidents in my fieldnotes, “Bakari stands to the side and waits for my attention. He then goes on to thank me for the food and tell me how good it is. When he asks if I helped cook it and I tell him no, his gratefulness and compliments do not stop. I don’t think he cares...” Such interaction between the men of the facility and women volunteers could be interpreted as these men trying to maintain their sense of masculinity in a place where their sense of self is constantly assaulted. Many of the men also take part in doing extra helpful things for the volunteers. On all of my visits to the center a resident always opened the entrance door for me. Almost always I am greeted

with a smile or conversation initiated by a resident of the center. I recall a particular incident in my field notes, “....Danso is in his usual spot by the door and opens the door when he sees me approaching. ‘Looking lovely as usual Karla’ he says as he opens the door. He always has something nice to say...” I also find myself always being escorted to my vehicle for safety. In fact, on one particular occasion I am approached by a man who is a dinner regular. We speak briefly and I soon realize that he may not be of sound mind.²² He, unintentionally, becomes visibly frustrated because I can not make out what he is trying to say. Although at no time did I fear for my safety, Olu, who I came to know well, runs him out of the center. He asks if I am OK, almost consoling me, and then proceeds to tell me about the dinner guest’s mental instability. These interactional niceties, that many would recognize as gentlemanly acts, help the men maintain their sense of masculinity because they feel as though they are protecting me. Adopting such paternalistic or protective roles provided a way for these men to embrace a patriarchal masculinity that is represented with men acting as providers and protectors of the household. Achieving such an ideal allowed the men of Home of Akin to feel like true men. This is especially important for homeless Black men who are in a constant struggle to deflect the assaults on their masculine selves that portray them as lacking the moral and ethical characteristics needed to be nurturing and caring family men (Hanchard 2004). These gentlemanly actions are evident in all of the interviews I conduct. When speaking to me they hardly ever use profane words and when they do, the older men always excuse themselves. When I would try to locate a quiet place in the center to conduct interviews, the men went out of their way to make sure I was comfortable

bringing me a chair or finding a space to conduct the interview. I recall this in my fieldnotes in talking with Penha:

“We are interrupted again. Someone needs the phone so we have to move. The interruptions in the course of our interview cause us to move three times. On all three occasions Penha searches and finds a place for us to talk and then moves my chair and his chair to the new locations. I keep thinking that the next interruption he is going to want to end the interview but he doesn’t.”

Interview participants would always find a quiet room so the tape recorder would not catch a great deal of background noise. They also make sure to leave always the door open so as to not feel my safety was compromised. They also make sure we are not “disturbed” because this is “important school work,” as Bakari often referred to it. In fact, many of the men refrain from smoking and if they do, almost always ask for permission first. When talking to Bruk, I unintentionally mention that I am allergic to cigarette smoke. I do not realize I have done this until he asks several people to refrain from smoking in front of the entrance, where we settle for the interview. As I mentioned in my field notes, much of this seems related to my being a Black woman researcher. Had I been a white woman or a man, I question if these types of “niceties” would have been extended.

These interactions show the countless ways men who are in demeaning situations attempt to maintain their sense of dignity as men. Maintaining a sense of masculinity is very important, especially for men that have find themselves under a lot of control, restrictions, and dependence on the criminal justice system. These men, young and old alike, adopt strategies to preserve their masculinity, including downplaying and disassociating themselves from being homeless, or simply being gentlemanly in a place

where it is presumed no gentlemen are present. This is especially important for Black men who are assumed by a highly gendered racist society to lack gentleness, lovability and are believed to be extremely violent (Kelley 2004). By preserving this in their everyday interactions, they too are maintaining their sense of manhood. Walking me to my car, and always making sure they are “extra nice,” these men are actively trying to maintain their sense of selves as men. They were essentially trying to maintain, and in some instances establish a sense of dignity as men in a place that society has stigmatized as shameful.

THE SIGNIFICANT BLACK WOMAN

An analysis of the African American male identity is incomplete without critical discussion of the role African American women play in the African American male's self-definition (Madhubuti 1990). Each maintains an integral involvement in the other's development, validation, and healing process (Jackson 1997). This became especially evident in the men's detailed description of the Black women in their lives as well as those they encounter daily. The retelling of their encounters became events of meaning making and masculine identity construction. Their narratives began to unveil that what women thought of them, especially Black women, mattered in how they define themselves as men.

These men knew of the stereotypical notions of manhood attached to Black men by the dominant white society. They are aware of what the white public thinks of them. They did not expect to be treated as dignified worthy men by white women, so they did not put much effort in validating their masculine selves through them. This is evident in

Ta'Ziyah's description of who he approaches when panhandling:

Ta'Ziyah: I approach mainly single white dudes that are walking by themselves.

White females. I don't approach no sisters. [I laugh and he chuckles] I don't do that.

Karla: Why is that?

Ta'Ziyah: ...Sista ain't finna give you nothing. You know what I'm saying. [I laugh again and he has a smile on his face] They just gone look at you crazy. You know they might say, nigga you need to go get yo ass a job [I laugh], you know what I'm saying. So, you know, I try to avoid that, know what I'm saying...

That's embarrassing for me.

For the most part, the women who had been part of their lives, whether romantically involved or not, were Black. They are the women they expect will stay with them even after losing a job as they confront the challenges of economic survival. Black women are aware, largely due to their own experiences, of the problems caused by the legacy and contemporary effects of racism. They rely on Black men for mutual support but also expect Black men to be supportive. The Black men of Home of Akin know this and can perform their masculine selves through these relationships. African American mothers, sisters, aunties, grandmothers and significant others are those who interact with them as men. They are the ones who see them with and expect from them a respectable masculinity; it is what they think that matters.

The Encounters: Doing Manhood through Me

The central defining principle of situational specific identities arises from

information gleaned from the appearance or behavior of others (Snow and Anderson 1997). My role as a young African American woman interacting in this space plays an important part in the negotiating and self verification process of these men's masculine identities. Knowingly, and sometimes unknowingly, I took part in the gender performances of these men. As they sketch their biographies, I began to notice that my verbal and non-verbal feedback mattered. I was a central part in the way these men presented themselves as men.

Affirming Heterosexuality

Hegemonic patriarchy is often enacted through men's sexual expression and can be critical to achieving self-worth and autonomy because sexual aggressiveness has come to be defined as highly masculine trait (Saint-Aubin 2002). From early ages men learn that going out with girls is a way of proving their "maleness" (Quinn 2004). This can often be seen, for example, when looking at forms of the "cool pose" in Black men and their sexual encounters with women (Lazur and Majors 1995). They discover that by asserting heterosexuality, often overtly, they are acting as men.

This was often evident during my presence in this space. Although most of the men I came to know seemed to go out of their way to be very "respectful," as a collective, most of the men enacted their heterosexuality verbally and nonverbally. In the course of interviews they would let me know they were heterosexual through compliments, winks, and by referring to me as "baby" or "boo." I was often complimented on my hair. I normally wear my hair in braids and change it often. The changes, however subtle, never went unnoticed. Their manhood performances produce a

certain a type of masculinity that displays a heterosexual desire (Quinn 2004). Every time I would walk through the doors of Home of Akin I would immediately draw attention and I noticed always many men staring at me. If I chose to move locations, I would immediately notice eyes were on me. Most often, the stares would follow a wink, a smile, or even small flirtatious talk. This “girl watching” tactic was a way these men were able to assert a masculinity as men; to demonstrate their right to gaze and sexually evaluate women (Quinn 2004). This becomes a significant way for Black men to enact masculinity because of their history of “girl watching.” Black men have been seriously punished for looking at white women, the slaying of Emmet Till exemplifies this. By demonstrating their “right” to gaze at me, a young Black woman, they can assert themselves as true men, without the backlash of white men. The intention of this gaze was to let me and their peers know they were looking. I had become a physical object for their masculine performances.²³

The overt recognition of a men’s heterosexuality becomes compatible with other aspects of their identity (Quinn 2004). Enacting masculinity through a shared sense of heterosexuality is an identity that constantly must be reclaimed (Quinn 2004). Such masculine presentations act as a means by which the Black men of Home of Akin assert a masculine identity to each other. Often, the mask of “patriarchal notions of cool” keeps African American men detached and removed from themselves and each other. Such assertions of masculinity acted as a way for these men to establish intimacy among themselves (Quinn 2004). It also made it possible for these men to assert power, even if only in small ways, as against heavy social control, restrictions, and difficult financial

situations.

The Ideal Case: Courting with Penha

The men of Home of Akin managed their masculine identities by enacting heterosexuality in our talk. In fact, when speaking to some of the younger men, I sometimes felt a connection I have come to associate with courtship. All of the younger men I interviewed who were residents of Home of Akin had recently been released from prison. This was the case with Penha, a twenty nine year old soft spoken gentleman. He had just been released from prison three days prior to moving to Home of Akin. He initially went to live with a cousin and his girlfriend for the first couple of days until he was able to get in to the shelter. When chatting with Penha I am reminded of some of the small talk that goes on when first having a romantic connection or “flirting” with someone. He even seemed somewhat reticent to mention his ex- girlfriend during the interview. When I ask him where he lived before being sent to prison he replies with a hesitant chuckle, “I stayed at my friend’s house, my ex old lady’s house.” His hesitation may indicate not wanting to bring up a past relationship while talking to someone who might see him as a potential partner. Enacting his manhood by engaging me in a courtship performance allowed him to define himself as a respectable Black man. This is also evident when he brings up a woman’s name when I ask him how long it will take get a hold of his identification documents:

Karla: Oh so it’s going to take about 30 days.

Penha: No, it’ll take less hopefully. [smiles and laughs softly] Hopefully I got resources in high places. You see I have a wallet up in Seattle. And then Kendra

has one of my ID's with her.

Karla: Kendra is your...

Penha: Kinda like

Karla: Girlfriend.

Penha: [slightly nods] Whatever. Lady friend. She has one of them whenever I decided to talk to her again, you know. I'll see if she can send that...

The woman in Penha's talk allows him to assert his masculinity. By hinting to the fact that he is no longer in a relationship or interested in her, he is able to enact a masculine identity that has been assaulted by homelessness. Penha's struggle to preserve a respectable masculinity is further evident when I inquire about his immediate plans to find employment. With a limited amount of time to find employment, his time to gather and mentally recover from being incarcerated is cut short. Finding a job is especially crucial for him because it is also a requirement of his parole. He does not own a vehicle, which means pounding the pavement--an even more difficult endeavor. We talk a little about his plans for trying to find work:

Karla: So how do you think you gonna be able to get to and from work, do you have a car?

Penha: First order of business.

Karla: Get a vehicle?

Penha: See I'm known [chuckles] I'm known for taking care of business...

Usually wake up pretty early. Anywhere between four and five...

Karla: ...Yeah that's early...

Penha: Well I work a lot...

Penha depicts himself as a hard working man who knows how to “take care of business.” According to him, he has a reputation for having it together. Penha has come to define his manhood as being able to provide for himself financially and must affix this to himself because no one else will. The stigma of being homeless automatically denotes him of being financially stable and willing to work. By convincingly engaging me in dialogue about his sensible work ethic and determination to do what he has aimed to do allows him to preserve a masculinity that has been threatened by the mere fact that I am talking to him because he is a homeless Black man.

Penha goes on to discuss his plans for the future. He talks about his conscious effort to not have children until he felt ready:

“You know...cause of the childhood I went through and I was responsible all my life and never had children before I’m ready to. I know at this point, I’m almost 30 years old. If I don’t have any kids by the time I’m 33, 35, then I’m not going to have any kids.”

He draws the picture of a man who is responsible enough not to take part in an unplanned pregnancy. Penha knows the stereotypes the dominant culture holds of Black men being irresponsible, deadbeat fathers. He depicts himself as a responsible family planner to offset such attacks on his masculine self. Most important, he is sketching himself out to me as a particular type of man; a responsible and respectable family man. Penha goes on to talk about moving to a place where there is a good sense of community; a “good place to raise children.” He then goes on to talk about his notions on his chance at the “American Dream”: “Everybody has dreams. Like I’m not really the person to have a

nice house, so it's the white people dream...the picket fence...I don't see it happening... It's not realistic for an African American male..." When I ask him what he does see happening he goes on to say: "Soon as I get my shit together I'm going to be up in Seattle, get me my apartment, get my car, and just working." Again, Penha depicts himself as a man that has, although modest, plans. He sees the "white people dream" as something that may be beyond his reach but still portrays himself as not only worthy respectable and enough to have such a dream, but also worthy and respectable enough to share it with someone.

After our initial interview, I spoke to Penha on three other occasions. I even came to look forward to speaking to him because of the connection we were both aware we made. Every time we spoke he seemed more willing to sketch a manhood that depicted him as young and decent man who was struggling with the everyday bouts of being Black. He continually attempted to portray himself as a knower of how the world around him worked and his place in it. He wanted me to know that he was not stupid. He was aware of the mistakes he had made as outlined by social forces beyond his control. He wanted me to know that he thought about the complicated nature of the world in which he lived. Most important, my interactions with Penha exemplified what many of the men at Home of Akin were struggling to do, construct a manhood that distanced them from the stigmatization of being a homeless Black man. Our unspoken connection allows him to preserve a masculinity that is not only called into question by the public's standards of manhood, but by my mere presence as a researcher.

Because of the nature of my work, I wanted to get to know him better because he

was homeless and Black. By being a young Black woman, who was mainly interested in talking to him because of his status, in itself is an attack on his manhood. By successfully engaging me, he was able to reconstruct his manhood as an “around the way” Black man trying to right his wrongs; just simply trying to make it. He knew he made a connection with me, he was successful in depicting himself as a respectable young Black man. The last time I spoke to Penha was brief. I was on my way out the door and he was using the center’s pay phone. I stopped and we both greeted each other, he with his usual courteous reply. At some point, the exchange came to the unnamed silence that usually signals the end of a conversation. As I turned to leave he mentioned that he wanted to call me “the other day” but did not have the consent form with my number in front of him. Initially I told Penha, as I did all my interview participants, that if any questions arose about the research or consent forms they signed after speaking to me they could call me without hesitation. At that very moment I assumed his calling was about such a concern and assured him to call me if he wanted to talk. It was not until I entered my car that I realize that Penha may have meant he wanted to call me on a personal level. Although I had not noticed it, he was actively doing masculine identity work.

Self-consciousness is a dependent and interactive phenomenon (Jackson 1997). Persons are dialectically juxtaposed and serve as mirrors validating the presence of the other (Jackson 1997). As a result of this juxtaposition, when the mirror image moves, the other must do the same or else one of the two becomes displaced because the counterpart can no longer serve its validating function (Jackson 1997). To satisfy this existential

equation an individual usually does one of three things: recede, proceed, or maintain the same position (Jackson 1997).

For Penha, I was his moving mirror that validated his threatened manhood. As he navigated through our interactions, he clearly struggled with depicting himself and my willingness to see him as a respectable and dignified Black man. For Penha, the obvious strategic choice for preserving his masculine identity was to proceed; to reorient his position to the new space defined by the moving image. Perhaps this is why he never called. By suggesting he would call me, Penha was able to preserve the identity of the respectable Black man who “connected” with a young Black woman. Calling would have reminded him of his status as a Black homeless man, which suggests it may have been another attempt at trying to salvage his spoiled masculine identity.

Problematic Masculinities

Masculinity has come to be defined by Eurocentric values, therefore making it impossible for African American to gain a sense of manhood that is at the same level of this standard. This can have debilitating effects because it strips Black men of what society has deemed essential to be a man, opportunity and financial stability. By embracing a patriarchal hegemonic models of manhood, the distinctive political and cultural challenges confronted by Black men are heightened in the struggle to define the self. African American men have historically felt the need to function with a double consciousness or a negotiated cultural identity that is constantly in flux from one cultural identity position to another (Jackson 1997; Dubois 1903).

Enacting strategies to try to construct and manage masculinities based on such

oppressive models of manhood works against these men because it keeps them from developing a critique of the system that instigated their uphill battle with homelessness. These interactions came to define the countless ways men who are in demeaning situations maintain their sense of dignity as men. Maintaining their sense of masculinity in a context where it is ritually threatened is difficult work. It is very important, especially for men who have find themselves under a lot of control, restrictions, and dependence on the criminal justice system. In their homeless plight, the women in the lives of Home of Akin act as a vehicle to try to achieve the dominant model of masculinity. Their strategies to preserve and reconstruct their masculine identities, although at times act as a means to resist, are rooted in white supremacist patriarchal masculinity. Their struggle represents an attempt to create, develop, manage, define, and defend a space where they can be seen as true men. Unfortunately, patriarchal culture is synonymous with the domination and control of others, that simply being male comes with the right to assert power over others (hooks 2004). Such definitions of manhood and masculinity undercut Black homeless men. It then becomes especially essential for these men to reconstruct a Black masculinity that can provide them with ways to save their core selves and the lives of those caught in their struggle.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

For the African American men of Home of Akin, to measure themselves against the standard that dictates the male gender role for the dominant culture, but yet denies equal access to opportunities that can sustain that standard, evokes frustration, unexpressed emotions, and a drive for survival of self. They are then understood from their meaning-making system only insofar as it reflects the norms of the dominant culture. This creates stress and conflict in ever being able to fulfill the male gender role. The result is an internal struggle DuBois (1903) referred to as “double consciousness.” The strategies the men of this study use to endure the struggles of economic survival are key to understanding how they come to preserve their masculine selves.

People are meaning making creatures. Maintaining a sense of self is important to the ongoing process of making sense of the world around them. Although this shelter’s intent is to help the disadvantaged, structural forces have made it a place that takes part in breaking down these men’s sense of masculinity. The struggle for respect and dignity ends up being tied to the racial and socioeconomic position of these men.

The men of Home of Akin live their lives on the edge. They face the dilemma of managing what it means to be a man while confronting overpowering social structures and dehumanizing living conditions. They speak of once inhabiting middle class life, yet they live their lives with little or no economic cushion. Many lived their former lives on the margin of poverty. Their stories document hardships and struggles and some of the

visible precipitating factors that resulted in their becoming homeless. Whether a former relationship with a wife or spouse unraveled, to the loss of a job, or even being incarcerated, the fact is that these men have few resources for buffering their descent onto the streets. For many, the first stop is their rundown cars, then spending a few nights in an inexpensive motel, and inevitably ending up on the streets until a suitable shelter becomes available. Once in a shelter, they have to endure the realities of institutional life; lack of privacy, strict rules, insecurity, and suppressing pride. At the end of their shelter stay, they often find themselves with little prospects for a stable future (Seltser and Miller 1993). This is why constructing, and managing masculine identities that are assaulted by their racial and homeless struggle is important. Their stories of relationships with women and claiming their past and present breadwinner roles allows them to talk of times when they saw themselves able to perform the hegemonic ideal of masculinity—at least in some part. As Black men, the men of Home of Akin never embody the hegemonic ideal.

SALVAGING BROKEN MASCULINITIES: TELLING THEIR STORY

For the men of Home of Akin, deflecting attacks on their broken masculinity is difficult. This is why strategies to ward off such assaults are important in the way these men perform masculinity. They often are men who have been through the oppressive hands of the criminal justice system and who have been pushed through the cracks of society. Yet they still attempt to carve out a respectable and dignified masculine identity. Through the telling of their “story” they attempt to do just that. Their dialogue is not only filled with their biographical accounts of their struggles through working “poor” and

homeless life, but also are discrete ways in which to define themselves as men.

Telling their story is a respectable way the men of Home of Akin preserve a masculine self against attacks on it. This talk provides them the opportunity to explain their choices and life contradictions. It allows them to exercise control over a life that lacks much autonomy. By carving out their existence as men their way, they protect a masculinity they see as in ruins. Through these stories they are able to neutralize their hardships by beautifying their talk of everyday bouts of homelessness. Their accounts of the everyday struggles of homelessness are recast so as to not appear damaging to their character; so they can sustain a respectable manhood. This neutralization also helps in depicting them as “tough” men who can endure difficult circumstances and still persevere. More importantly, these strategies allow them to sketch out a masculine identity that conveys self reliance and independence, both part of the way they attempt to carve themselves out as responsible men.

This talk of self reliance is also embodied in the language of white middle class masculinity. The men of Home of Akin know that language is a marker of class and they use that to their advantage to carve out a respectably sound masculine identity. Through their talk of their past middle class lives they are able to depict themselves as knowers of and conformers to such a life. They know what it takes “to be a man” and can show their value in a masculinity that draws from the role of the man as a financial provider. This is why their life histories are full of talk of money and successful careers. These are things the U.S. public exemplifies as essentials for being a real man. This is important because being homeless constantly reminds them of their loss of a middle class existence they

sought or any approximation of it. Their talk allows them to still hold on to an existence that characterizes them as true men.

The strategies embedded in the talk of the men of Home of Akin allow them to be able to redeem themselves from past “errors” that further spoil their stigmatized masculinity. These stories show their attempt to carve out identities as men that show they are worthy of dignity and respect. This is why talk of degrading activities as “fun” or “not so bad” is important. Describing such a degrading activity as enjoyable is an attempt to rescue their manhood from attacks of a standard of masculinity that says they must make do without handouts from others. This is important for their attempt to sustain a sense of manhood because self-reliance and independence are valued masculine traits.

This talk of everyday actions works as a resource to preserve a respectable and dignified masculine identity for Black homeless men. However, such strategies can have harsh implications to the self when these men define masculinity by hegemonic and patriarchal notions of manhood.

ENACTING MASCULINITIES WHILE LOVING/HATING WOMEN

The men of Home of Akin have a love/hate relationship with the women in their lives. They use women to utilize what little gender power they have to counter the race and class assaults they experience daily. They need women to depict themselves as true men because these relationships and interactions is the space they can feel like men. This is why coming clean about “mistakes” made in past relationships serves as a strategy to preserve their manhood. The telling about previous romantic partnerships with women

served as a way for them to come clean, purge their sins, and admit errors made in past relationships. Blaming themselves for failed relationships allows them to take responsibility for themselves, a socially constructed masculine trait. This talk of past relationships also works as a respectability preserving strategy because it allows them to depict themselves as men who have learned from their mistakes. It gives them a chance to talk about the “good” and “respectable” women in their lives.

By constructing these women as respectable, they are defining themselves the same because these women “chose” to be in a relationship with them. Such a contradictory strategy works to deflect attacks on their masculine identity by providing a way to distance themselves from images that depict Black men as violent and “dogs.” Constructing themselves as “good men” can counter such negative images. For the men of Home of Akin, portraying themselves as good men through the stories of women in their lives is important because patriarchal notions of manhood prevent these men from achieving this role. Such societal failure can leave these men with their self-esteem assaulted because they cannot acquire the means to fulfill this role (hooks 2004). The performance of a good man allows them to preserve a sense of being a man that portrays them as worthwhile loveable men.

The interactional niceties toward women the men of Home of Akin take part in also allow these men to counter such negative images. In a place where it is presumed no gentlemen are present, the men’s interactions with women are significant because it lets them define themselves as true men. From early on men are taught that one way to assert “manliness” is in interactions with women. Hegemonic masculinity is in large part

idealized through heterosexuality. They knew that by asserting their heterosexuality, often overtly, they were acting like “real” men. In the course of interviews and regular interactions, they would let me know they were heterosexual through compliments, winks, and calling me “pet names.” These performances of manhood convey a type of masculinity that displays heterosexual desire (Quinn 2004). Whether their performance of heterosexuality was for their peers or me, my presence is central in how these men perform masculinity and define themselves as men. The women in their lives, especially Black women, are essential for these men to feel like real men. The men of Home of Akin know that Black women can understand a large part of their experience, due to their own experiences. They know that Black women expect them to be men, so validating their masculinity through their relationships and interactions with them is important for them to feel like respectable and dignified men.

The men of Home of Akin have a love/hate relationship with the women in their lives. On the one hand they attempt to show they are dignified and respectable men by engaging in interactional niceties toward women, and on the other hand they blame women for their homeless plight. This is one of the strategies these men use to feel like real men. They are able to harness their power as men in the only place they can, their relationships with women and talk of them. This becomes problematic because it keeps them from forming a critique of the structural forces that shape their struggles as homeless Black men. It allows them to avoid issues they must confront if they are to assume responsibility over their lives (hooks 2004).

IMPLICATIONS OF BLAMING

The men of Home of Akin adopt a variety of strategies to construct, manage and deflect attacks on their masculine identities that come with being homeless and Black. Patriarchal masculinity is the standard they use to form these strategies to judge themselves and their peers. For most of these men, one of the few spaces that they feel like men is in their relationship with women and talk of them. Women, then, play a major role in the way they perform these manhood-preserving strategies. For these men, heterosexual masculinity is protected at the expense of women. They are able to enact patriarchal notions of manhood to exercise power and control in relationships with women or simply in their talk of them. By blaming women for their hardships, for example, these men can deflect attacks on their stigmatized masculine selves and hold women accountable for their “failures.” Misogyny, then, becomes central in how these men attempt to enact power as men, but it also works against them.

Men learn early on that manhood is synonymous with providing financially for their families (hooks 2004). But homelessness and lack of opportunity have prevented many of these men from feeling like true men. Since many have come to accept this patriarchal definition of manhood, they deal with these “shortcomings” in strategic ways that they think are going to help make them feel like true men. Unfortunately, because the foundation, patriarchy, is oppressive by nature, the end result ultimately works against them. Holding women accountable for struggles beyond their control works against the men of Home of Akin because it keeps them from developing critical critiques of the structural forces working against them. Failure to understand how the patriarchal

domain of power deals with ideology, culture, and consciousness works to maintain these men's disempowered and disenfranchised status and enables them from achieving a true sense of self (Collins 2004).

To suggest that all African American men are tormented by their inability to fulfill a masculine ideal that has been articulated in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is to suggest that Black masculinity lacks complexity and is one dimensional (hooks 1992). Many of the men of Home of Akin have diverse understandings of masculinity and enact complex gender roles. Nonetheless, patriarchal masculinity was maintained despite the individual departures from the norm. Such notions of manhood remain a criteria to which the men of this space are held accountable. Hegemonic masculinity is consistently and continually recreated despite individual conceptualizations that contradict hegemonic meanings. The meanings of the financial provider and control of women were understood and behaviorally followed.

Living in a society that did not and does not affirm their dignity and respect as men, it becomes crucial for these men to reaffirm their masculine identities by recalling and performing times in their lives when they believed selves to be holding up dignified standards of manhood. Doing white supremacist patriarchal masculinity then becomes a terrifying strategy to take up manhood, even at the price of denying an alternative and progressive Black masculine self that seeks true love and freedom for self and others (hooks 2004).

Cultural beliefs about gender and the ideology of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy doom Black homeless men's chances of escaping the street. Understanding

that patriarchy works with race and class oppressions to keep Black men oppressed is key to Black men achieving a possible true sense of self. This is a difficult task because clinging to such manhood-preserving strategies, as the men of Home of Akin do, is done because of fear that they are giving up what little “power” they have. Black feminist and cultural critic, bell hooks (2004) argues that this fear stems from the patriarchal socialization of young boys that forces them to deny their feelings. Once a person loses contact with their own feelings, body, desires, and thoughts, they lose their self (hooks 2004). Black boys are often taught to appear strong and mask their emotions. This is why a Black feminist focus on social change is essential for progressive thinking and free consciousness that is critically attentive to race, class, and gender. It allows for a critical analysis of the paternalistic hold the state has on the Black men of Home of Akin. The significance of the patriarchal domain of power is in its ability to shape consciousness and manipulate ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies. Reclaiming the power of a free mind then becomes essential form of resistance (Collins 2000). Patricia Hill Collins calls for a framework that sees interlocking systems of oppression as critical to this consciousness. Black feminist thought, for example, successfully puts in place the politics of self-recovery that addresses female pains and oppressive struggles while at the same time offers strategies that help all women consciously cope with patriarchy while at the same time connects this to the importance of structural change. It speaks to a focus on freeing the mind and the spirit to be able to fight structural forces that attempt to keep persons politically disempowered. Such consciousness is crucial for the Black men of Home of Akin.

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Endnotes

¹The name Akin, originating from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, means warrior, hero and brave man (Asante 1991).

It is important for African Americans to be self-defining and conscious of their African history to establish a healthy sense of self (hooks 2003). This is especially important for Black homeless men who have been disenfranchised and whose masculine identities are under constant attack. Providing such a powerful African pseudonym defines these men's possible true selves as empowered. I also found it useful in how I manage and deflect their assaulted masculinity in preparing this work.

² African pseudonyms were used for all interview participants and informants. Bakari is of Swahili origin that means, one who will succeed (Asante 1991).

³Penha is of Swahili origin that means beloved (Asante 1991).

⁴ Danso is Ashanti of Ghana origin that means reliable (Asante 1991).

⁵ Sekou is of Guinea origin that means learned (Asante 1991).

⁶ Obioma is Igbo of Nigeria origin that means good hearted.

⁷ Adisa is Ashanti of Ghana origin that means one who will teach us (Asante 1991).

⁸ Nassor means to be victorious (Asante 1991).

⁹ Rudo means love (Asante 1991).

¹⁰ Under oppressive conditions, learning about a history that may have otherwise been denied becomes a sign of resistance to interpellation by the dominant culture, a refusal of that culture's norms and a self defining action (Jones 1991; Conyers and Barnett 1999).

¹¹ Carama is of West African origin that means teacher (Asante 1991).

¹² I do not make a distinction between panhandling and begging and use them both interchangeably. For the purpose of this work they both mean to solicit money from persons they encounter, but not limited to strangers, on a daily basis.

¹³ Ta'Ziyah is of Ghana origin that means passionate soul (Asante 1991).

¹⁴ Amir is of Swahili origin that means prince (Asante 1991).

¹⁵ Kito means precious (Asante 1991).

¹⁶ Olu means pre-eminent (Asante 1991).

¹⁷ Bruk is of Ethiopian origin that means one who is blessed (Asante 1991).

¹⁸ Ekundayo means sorrow becomes joy (Asante 1991).

¹⁹ Hamidi means to be commended (Asante 1991).

²⁰ Bwana is of Kiswahili origin that means gentleman, mister, sir (Asante 1991).

²¹ According to Ta'Ziyah, if an individual is incarcerated for more than 30 days, they must reapply for any documents that were confiscated by the prison or jail when first jailed because these documents are discarded.

²² Drawing from the work of Snow and Anderson (1993) I work with the an understanding of mental illness as forms of adaptive behavior used by homeless persons for coping with the oppressive and dehumanization state in which they find themselves.

²³ This is one of the ways gender inequalities are reproduced. Through the gaze, the targeted woman is reduced to a sexual object, obscuring her other identities. This reduces women's power, as in sexual harassment in the workplace. Calling attention to a woman's gendered sexuality can function to deny recognition of her competence, rationality, trustworthiness, and humanity. In contrast, a man's overt recognition of his sexuality works in his favor and is compatible with other aspects of his identity (Quinn 2004). Although the men of this study are not highly critical of the structural forces that maintain such actions, they are aware of the power behind their stares.