

George Yancy, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, and Susan Hadley (editors)  
*Our Black Sons Matter: Mothers Talk about Fears, Sorrows, and Hopes*  
Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016 (ISBN 978-1-442-26911-8)

*Reviewed by Shaeeda A. Mensah, 2018*

**Shaeeda A. Mensah** completed her dissertation "Hidden in Plain Sight: A Philosophical Examination of the Invisibility of Black Women in Analyses of State Violence," in the department of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. Her areas of specialization are social and political philosophy, African American philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and feminist philosophy. Her research focuses on the marginalization of Black women's experiences in analyses of mass incarceration and police brutality. She has worked in the departments of philosophy and women, gender, and sexuality studies at American University for the past three years. In the fall of 2018 she began as a post-doctoral fellow in the department of philosophy at Temple University. Prior to beginning her postdoctoral fellowship, she worked in the Department of Philosophy and in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at American University.

\*\*\*\*

*Our Sons Matter: Mothers Talk about Fears, Sorrows, and Hopes* takes up one of the most pressing social-justice issues of our time: state violence. The book, though, diverges from the traditional approach of exclusively theorizing about the ways in which Black men and boys are affected by state violence. In this way, the volume offers an important juxtaposition to works such as *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2010) and *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Curry 2017), which centralize the experiences of Black men and boys, giving very limited attention to the experiences of women. The volume also centers the voices and experiences of the mothers of Black men and boys, and offers an account of the impact of state violence on women.<sup>1</sup> It provides a broad spectrum of experiences and a complex analysis of the ways in which women, who are variously situated, are affected by state violence by virtue of their relationship to Black men and boys. Perhaps most valuable about the book is that it enables numerous Black women to speak for themselves, about themselves, and in their own voices, which is a crucial component of Black feminism. Black feminists including but not limited to Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks have written extensively about the importance of Black women being able to speak about their own experiences (hooks 1981; Combahee 1983; Collins 1990). This demand has been largely shaped by Black women's marginalization both in Black studies and in feminism. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states, "everyone has spoken for Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves" (Collins 1990, 124).

The entries, though diverse in a number of ways, are divided into four sections: reflections, essays, poems, and letters. Each entry varies in length, writing style, and even purpose. For example, one essay recounts a woman's story of a neighbor who witnessed her brother's death;

she worries about the toll this loss has had on her ability to protect her own son (105). In another essay, a woman who does not have children tells the history of rape in her family (131). The book also includes a reflection co-written by a mother and her Black son, and a letter in which a Black mother expresses her anger both at her white co-workers' racism, but also at her Black son who "can't relate to these dead black men and boys" (173). Additionally, the poetry section includes a series of poems written not about a mother's fear of her son being killed, but a mother's account of having to continue to live after having lost her son to state violence (145). In this way, *Our Black Sons Matter* speaks to the multitude of ways mothers specifically, and women generally, experience life in light of their relationship to Black males and the reality of state violence.

The book opens with an introduction written by George Yancy. He describes the book as filled with "pain and joy," as offering mothers who love Black sons the opportunity to fulfill their "need for release" (9). Both of these statements are true. Perhaps most importantly, though, the book provides readers with an opportunity to trace the shared experiences of countless women. It provides much-needed accounts of women as systematically affected by state violence. The fact that state violence is systematically experienced by Black women by virtue of their relationship to Black men and boys is evidenced by the similarities in the stories of the women whose writing appears in the book. In articulating this point, my goal is to contrast a dominant understanding of Black men and boys as systematically affected by state violence, whereas women in general, and Black women in particular, fail to be seen in this way. For example, countless books address the impact of state violence on Black men and boys, but very few consider the impact of state violence on Black women and girls. The similarities are both shocking and appalling.

Several of the entries speak to the experience of mothers having to come to terms with the fact that their Black male children would be expelled from the realm of innocence, a position available to other children. In the poem "Lamentations from a Black Mom," Dyan Watson expresses the tears she shed at being made aware of the fact that she was having a male child. Her tears, she explains, were the result of seeing both Mike Brown and Eric Garner when she looked at her son. Her tears were reflective of the reality that one day a police officer might see her son as a monster (141). Tracey McCants Lewis recounts enrolling her son in pre-k and receiving a call in which teachers expressed concerns about his tendency toward aggression on the grounds that he did not need a blanket or stuffed animal in order to fall asleep. The reflection "The Box" tells of a Black mother's rush of fear as her Black sons entered their kindergarten classrooms for the first time given her awareness that in just a few years they would be feared by the very people who were currently their friends and teachers (46). In "Watching and Waiting," Nichole McJamerson writes of the uneasiness she feels about her son's classmate's mother who keeps referring to him as "cute" and "good." She tells of her worry that this woman is married to a police officer who may, when her son is older, remember her son, "or just jam his knee in my baby's neck like I imagine he does all the other Black men he arrests" (62). In "Reflections on Black Motherhood," Linda Tomlinson acknowledges the ways in which her dreams for her sons' survival have been shaped by the potential of their demise. Accordingly, she admits that her dreams for her sons have been limited to hoping that they live past the age of twenty-five (90).

Another stream that runs through several entries is the paradoxes that mothers of Black sons face. These paradoxes involve teaching their sons that they will likely be punished even when

innocent. Sara Lomax-Reese speaks to the experience of having to prepare her son for how to engage with police in order to reduce the possibility of the loss of his life, while simultaneously trying to teach him to understand his value and self-worth (15). The Letter "Dear William" recounts a mother's experience of telling her son, who was six at the time, to defend himself, and his refusal to do so on account of his assertion that "that is not me." Yet although she is aware that her son would not physically defend himself if confronted with violence, she tells of her awareness that if he is ever in an encounter with a police officer he will be described as an aggressor (161). Michelle Moody-Adams in "A Long Way from Home?" compares the willingness of most Americans to forgive what are cast as the "mistakes" of white adolescents to what she describes as a lack of forgiveness for the actions of Black male youth, even when they "have consistently played by the rules of American society" (103).

Newtona Johnson tells readers of the paradox of the social mandate to raise Black males to be masculine subjects, knowing their masculinity can and may be used to justify a too-early ending of their lives (94). Susan Hadley recounts the experience of her adult, white male neighbor being so startled by her Black male child that he screamed and lost his footing, and her inability to imagine that this was not at least in part due to the fact that her son was Black (67). Regina Sims Wright writes in a letter to her son about the dilemma of living in a predominantly white neighborhood. She explains that the community gave him access to resources that might not be available in other communities, while at the same time she knows that the "better the neighborhood or the better the school, the more [he] might be perceived as an outsider" (166).

The book also addresses complexities of state violence that one might not immediately turn to when considering the topic. These complexities include how to grapple with the existence of Black male police officers who are the Black sons of mothers, but who are also seen as threats to the survival of other Black men and boys, given police culture (71; 33), and how to grapple with the realities of black-on-black crime during a period of immense state violence (57; 28). Shelly Bell, in her reflection "A Bottle of Mike Brown and Robin Williams," speaks to the realities of mental illness as experienced by her Black son, and how his mental illness led her to take an unpopular position in debates concerning whether the suicide of Robin Williams should be understood as a distraction from the death of Mike Brown (31).

The essays "Once White in America" (21), "White Mama, Black Sons" (57), and "A Black Jewish Boy Facing Manhood" (75) are written by white mothers of Black sons. Each speaks to the mothers' shift in their relationship to Blackness as a result of having a Black son, as well as the realization that their white privilege was something that could not, and/or would not, be inherited by their children. Several entries in the book also highlight the physical and emotional turmoil mothers of Black sons experience. Jacki Lynn Baynks writes of the high blood pressure she has developed as a result of her growing anger, which she describes as "exhausting" and attributes to her inability to vent about the threat that Black men and boys face on a daily basis (171-73). Veronica Watson draws on the work of Laura van Dernoot Lipskey and introduces the idea of "hypervigilance" as describing the condition of mothering Black sons. She defines hypervigilance as requiring so much focus that the ability to attend to other things in life is rendered nearly untenable (122). In "Dark Radiance," the mothers of slain sons are referred to as having "homicide eyes," a term introduced by a police chaplain in a *New York Times* article (34).

At the very outset, *Our Black Sons Matter* establishes a dichotomy between Black male experiences and Black female experiences. In the introduction, Yancy, who acknowledges he has never been pregnant, hypothesizes that when a woman is made aware that she is bearing a Black male child, the rubbing of her abdomen "can function as both a loving, welcoming gesture and yet an early gesture of saying goodbye" (9). It is on the grounds that state violence poses a threat to Black male lives that he tells of imagining that pregnant mothers have a "profound moment of hoping it is a girl" (8-9). The dichotomy between Black males and females is supported by many of the mother/authors in this volume. In an essay titled "Death Passes Twice," Autumn Redcross writes of her first living child being a girl, her initial disappointment at the "misstep in [her] 'ideal' birth order," and her later relief that her firstborn was a daughter who "looks out for her brothers" (152). Tracey Reed Armant tells of sharing in the childhood qualities of her son--compliance, politeness, and pleasantness--and her awareness that their difference meant that she was accepted in ways he would not be (47). But there are also indications that what has been cast as a dichotomy between Black male and female experiences might not actually be a dichotomy. Becky Thompson, for example, writes of the fear she has not only for her Black son but also her Black daughter, who is gender-nonconforming (33). Karsonya Wise Whitehead speaks of the worry she has for her two sons, but also of her own fear during encounters with police officers (167).

In this way, I take *Our Black Sons Matters* to speak to the experiences of women as a result of their relationship to Black men, but it is important to point out that this is only part of the story. Discussions of state violence, when they consider Black women, focus nearly exclusively on the ways in which Black women are affected by virtue of their relationship to Black men. The limit to this approach is most apparent in considering the policy implications of this strategy. It assumes that if the lives of Black men and boys are improved, so will the lives of Black women and girls. This is true, but only partially. Approaches of this kind--consider the My Brother's Keeper Initiative--will do nothing to improve the life prospects of Black women and girls who are affected beyond their relationship to Black men and boys. The My Brother's Keeper Initiative would have done little to address, for example, the high rate at which Black girls are suspended from school, and/or the fact that Black women and girls are the victims of police violence often as a result of their failure to adhere to hegemonic notions of femininity, as in the case of Sandra Bland refusing to put her cigarette out. Black women, as evidenced by both the presented examples and the text, are also directly affected by state violence, fearful of the demise of their daughters and of themselves. This book does not set out to tell that story, and so it doesn't. It does, though, point us toward the need for added attention to the numerous ways in which Black women are affected by state violence, both indirectly and directly.

## ***References***

Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The new Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Combahee River Collective. 1983. The Combahee River Collective statement. In *Home girls: A black feminist anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Inc.

Curry, Tommy. 2017. *The man-not: Race, class, genre, and the dilemmas of black manhood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I use the term *woman* generally, as the book includes entries written by women who do not identify as mothers.