



Loving Black Boys

Tamura Lomax

Black

Boys

A Black Feminist
Bible on Racism
and Revolutionary
Mothering

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A BLACK FEMINIST BIBLE ON RACISM
AND REVOLUTIONARY MOTHERING

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For my hearts . . . and Black boys and men everywhere

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Author's Note

I can't say that I knew the turn of events would happen when I first began conceptualizing this book in 2014. What I knew is that Black boys were in danger and said imperilment was part of a larger discourse on black endangerment. My position was that I could help shift thinking through a text that emphasized mothering Black boys with a black feminist lens. Meaning that I hoped to widen the frame large enough to critically engage antiblack racism and intraracial challenges concurrently impacting Black boys. While I've always been clear about the force and threat of antiblack racism, I didn't envision publishing this book within a context where diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are seen as terrorist threats; where misogyny and rape culture are being normalized from the top down; where binate gender and sexuality ideologies are being written back into law; where reproductive and civil rights would be void; where feminist theory, critique, and practice would be read as anti-American, namely as America is being re/bent toward an unrelenting commitment to right-wing Christian nationalist heteropatriarchal dominance and violence; and where citizenship is on the table for anyone not white. Yet all of this makes too much sense in view of Derrick Bell's work on the permanence of racism and the contradictions inherent in a liberal democracy that claimed freedom, justice, and equality while owning slaves. We're in a deep sense of crisis that is unlike anything I ever imagined when I first set out to write this book. But here we are—doing what Black folks do amid disaster: surviving, fighting for something more, thinking, and creating.

Loving Black Boys is written at the intersections of chaos and perseverance. It takes race, gender, sexuality, and class seriously. However, it's important for me to note that this is foremost a book about my journey mothering my sons. Everything centers on this primary relationship and then moves outward. To

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be clear, I understand gender malleability and how imperative it is to be inclusive across genders and sexualities, particularly in a viciously queerphobic and transphobic historical context. I recognize that identities are fluid and shift and broaden well beyond genitalia. Yet *Loving Black Boys* isn't about erasing Black cisgender boys or men or gender in general. It pushes the boundaries of what we think about, how we imagine, and how we live out gendered identities, thus challenging the very constraints of gender binaries and the constructions of the "masculine" and "feminine." However, while I resist gender essentialisms—boxes about what a "real" man or woman is or isn't—I find value in terms like *man*, *manhood*, *woman*, *womanhood*, and so on, however defined. First, I'm writing to and about my sons who identify as Black men and find significance in their identity and all the ways they share special camaraderie with their father and others. When they think about themselves in the world, it's in terms of black boyhood and/or manhood. Second, that I'm their Black mother matters to me. The bottom line is mothering is both personal and political.

Loving Black Boys was written at the same time as *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* (2025). The books speak back and forth to each other. Neither book uses names, with the exception of public figures. As I wrote in *Freeing Black Girls*, "I highlight relationships or roles instead—for example . . . my 'spouse.' . . . And because I have two sons, I've changed their names altogether . . . [because] my sons' welfare comes before my politics. Moreover, this book is written by a Black woman and mother in deep relationship with Black men, not estrangement. That said, 'self-protective disinformation' is in order, especially for them."¹ Additionally, "I'm well aware of the history of the term [*husband*] and how it relates to household management, control of resources, labor, breadwinning, and the institutionalization of heteropatriarchy in the home, community, law, and otherwise. I'm also cognizant of how Black men didn't historically get to be husbands and fathers during slavery, within the welfare state, in media, and beyond, and aren't always respected as such. Naming those who are, unequivocally, in a positive light matters."² Speaking of names, both books prefer to use *forty-five* or *forty-fifth POTUS* (now, *forty-seven* or *forty-seventh POTUS*).³ Additional explanation is unnecessary.

Readers will also notice my deployment of the word *black*. I write the following in *Freeing Black Girls*:

I prefer *Black* over *African American*. Blackness includes the African Diaspora and refers to a diverse yet shared history in the African continent, contact/conquest, dispersal, trade, freedom, and social movement.

Thus, this book deploys a capital *B* when referring to Black people, specifically, women, girls, men, boys, mothers, fathers, children, family, enslaved people, and folks. Consequentially, liberties have been taken to change *b* to *B* in citations. Additionally, I maintain the disciplinary capitalization of the Black Church. Concurrently, *white* and *whiteness* are lowercased not to suggest a hierarchical racial reversal but to resist how the *W* has historically and contemporarily stood for manufactured supremacy as well as realized structural, institutional, social, political, and other oppressions. Generally, I use *w* to refuse racial dominance, terror, and genocide—namely, as the *W* moves between ideology and practice, for example, when it’s deployed by white supremacist activists and politicians, using three fingers similar to the “OK” sign, to express “white power,” thus evoking violence. Conversely, the *B* or *Black* in *Black folks*, though raveled with our own intracommunal and intraracial oppressions, has never been an invocation for global violence, domination, or collective supremacy. Quests for supremacy and the fight for freedom from that supremacy are oppositional. These moves should come as no surprise in a book centered on Black folks in general and Black girls specifically and our collective survival against white supremacist and patriarchal violence. Still, discerning between *B* and *b* was difficult. This book doesn’t capitalize *b* when referring to ideas, concepts, things, places, and so on—for example, blackness; antiblackness; or black humanity, body, male body, female body, motherhood, mothering, manhood, personhood, femininity, masculinity, gender ideals, communities, institutions, identity, experiences, endangerment, feminine-ism, feminine theology, feminism, gender ideology, “nuclear” family, genocide, death, captivity, oppression, bravado, life, love, music, culture, joy, freedom, thriving, consciousness, patriarchy, monster, sexism, and so on. My intention is to affirm Black people while fiercely critiquing oppression, whether deploying a *b* or a *B*.⁴

I also use *B* when referring to laborers or relations, for example, Black teachers, students, or doctors. Additionally, I write the following about my deployment of Black/African slaves in *Freeing Black Girls*: “There’s much political and academic discussion around whether or not to use *slave* or *enslaved*. *Enslaved* means to humanize and note the dehumanizing structure of slavery, particularly as Black/African bondspeople weren’t seen as human. I’ve worked with many ancestral accounts in which they refer to themselves as ‘slaves,’ not because they were unsure of their humanity but because they were clear about it as well as

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the system they were attempting to survive. I lean toward their deployment.”⁵ Further, “It’s not hard to imagine some slaves felt less African over time. Slave sources speak to that as well. I use *African* when referring to slaves for consistency. However, in some instances, I deploy *Black/African* to highlight the line and/or continuum between African slaves, Black folks, and black thought, ideas, and indignities.”⁶

Finally, a word on capitalism and class. This book critiques capitalism and classism while recognizing my own class position and participation in the capitalist structure. Capitalism as an economic and political system distinguishes between those who own the means of production and those whose labor is used within that system. I call attention to how capitalism, which motivated slavery and imperialism, disproportionately exploits Black people and labor, as it was vital to the triangular slave trade, the creation of the bourgeoisie who in turn profit at the expense of the rest of us, the prison industrial complex, and more. Specifically, capitalist accumulation requires racial and gendered inequality and hierarchy, which negatively impacts access to resources, outcomes, relations, and more. In other words, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few demands an underclass and/or a labor class who must sell their labor for a wage. This enables income inequality and the exploitation of workers.

Black people have historically served as the capital, the underclass, and the laborers. We participate in the capitalist structure—whether as the handful of billionaires, the 5 percent, Mom and Pop business owners, or workers—from the underside. Blackness is a class unto itself and the great majority of us exist outside of the oligarchy. We do not control the flow of commerce, globally, nationally, or otherwise. We’re not owners of the means of production. We sell our black labor for a wage in a capitalistic wheel that’s spinning around us and never meant to include us in any real way. The 2025 deconstruction of DEI, affirmative action, and civil rights protections should tell us that much. Today, due to race, the black wealthy class can be next month’s black poor and working labor class. Thus, this book argues that capitalism has never equaled black freedom, and more, the fight against white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal dominance is our collective fight, regardless of socioeconomic class. Notwithstanding, we need more nuanced discourses on race, gender, capitalism, labor, class privilege, class warfare, class disenfranchisement, and black freedom.

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Acknowledgments

In 2009 the founding figure of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, raised the question “What sort of moment is this?” He argued, one, that part of the work of Black scholars is to provide a counter voice; two, that the moment we’re in is conjunctural (a coexistence between new and old histories); and, three, that the moment requires new strategies of resistance. In a world hell-bent on remixing old ideas, laws, relations, and strategies rooted in racism, sexism, misogynoir, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and otherwise, *Loving Black Boys: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* suggests another way forward. We must become critically honest about what is and how we got here, we must radically resist black oppression wherever it exists, and we must reexamine how we might better survive, together.

Thank you to Duke University Press for seeing and believing in me yet again. Thank you for recognizing the importance of this work. It is truly an honor to work with you. It matters that I never have to contort my voice into something that it’s not with you. I’ve also said many times how much I value your peer-review process. I’ve been blessed to work with the most excellent reviewers, including initial readers who insisted on pushing this project forward. Each of you helped make *Loving Black Boys* what it is and what I already know it will be. I also thank my institution and department for your patience and generous support. I know writing two books at once sounded like an outrageous and impossible feat. It was! I must add a special note of appreciation to my chair, Amy Darogatis, and mentors, Mohammad Khalil, Nwando Achebe, Julian Chambliss, and Kristie Dotson (University of Michigan). Each of you made the massiveness of MSU feel small and reminded me that “black girl magic” is tangible—even in the complexity of my humanity.

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While this is the work I believe I was called to do for such a time as this, I often wrote with my back up against the wall, anxious, through fire, and more. In particularly difficult times, I felt the spiritual guidance of the ancestors pushing me forth. I learned to offer thanksgiving to every bit of support I received. Thank you to my colleagues who read various versions of this manuscript and offered feedback, those who checked in and told me to keep going, those who prayed, and even those who kept asking, “Are you finished yet?” I realize now that we don’t finish books: They release us when we’re done. And while the writing of this iteration of the text is public, I don’t think I’ll ever be finished with the work. Still, I couldn’t have gotten this far without you.

To “B,” “Love’s in need of love today.” Thank you for stabilizing me with love in such harrowing times. Thank you for being the partner you are and for your unyielding, unparalleled support. And thank you for being a present, beautiful, progressive, and radically loving Black father. You have your own book to write. I’ll be here cheering you on when you do. To my sons, you are my reason. Thank you for teaching me about love in the most profound way. Thank you for allowing me to share these stories for what I hope will be a greater good. There is no book without you. Your birth invited me to demand more of myself, others, and this world. I know it seems cliché or perhaps essentialist or exclusionary to say, but there are certain lessons only motherhood can teach us. This is true for me, at least. Some things I only know by being your mother—because mothering you made me see the world and what I wanted from it emphatically differently. And, more, it made me willing to risk everything on account of that love.

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Introduction

*Surviving White Supremacy:
A Practice of Black Living Hope*

I awoke at 6:09 a.m. with a kiss to the forehead. “Time to work out. I cooked chili this morning and got wood last night,” my husband announced as he stood over me, waiting for my eyes to open. Chili is comfort food. And the crackle of firewood calms my nerves and positively awakens a range of senses. As I lay in bed, I tried redirecting the urge to drift away again by surfing Facebook on my iPhone. I noticed that several friends were posting feel-good movies. The week prior, I began watching *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series for a second time. Unlike my social media circle, I was either self-torturing or exploring worst-case scenarios for what was possibly to come. We arrived at the gym at 6:49 a.m. It was oddly empty, and the news wasn’t on. I’m a cardio girl. For the past several years, I’ve spent one hour, five days a week, working out in this section of the gym while facing one of six large televisions hanging from the ceiling, typically tuned to CNN, MSNBC, FOX, local news, ESPN, and Lifetime. However, all channels were turned to either sports or cooking this day. We made it back home just over an hour later. I sat in my favorite chair in my makeshift office in the dining room, stared through the large glass windows into the yellowish green and russet trees outside, and journaled.

“Is this the apocalypse? Will my work be banned?¹ Will I be harmed because I’m an academic? This is America. How’d we get here? I mean we know *how*. White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Do we need extra bullets? Should we get more? What’s more? What’s enough? Is this the way of the future?” My youngest son, Seth, appeared in the dining-room doorway with a white female friend and queried, “Did you hear about the shooting downtown by the Trump caravan attempting to intimidate voters a few days ago?” “No,” I answered. He replied, “The cops came the next day. Not sure if they were

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guarding the statue or keeping the ‘Trumpers’ away.² We [he and his friend] discussed I’d stay in the car so I wouldn’t get shot and she’d use her white privilege and gender to find out or hold them accountable.” “We need our own guns and licenses,” my eldest son, Lee, interrupted as he entered the room.³ He was edgy and pacing. And though I was fighting internally against an embryonic panic pummeling of my own, I shifted to Black momma bear mode and tried to feign normalcy and safety to help keep him calm. However, Tuesday, November 3, 2020, was anything but ordinary. It was Election Day in what was feeling more and more like a neofascist America, or, as my colleague noted, a “friendly fascist” America.⁴ Our day was spent together, eating comfort foods, laughing, worrying, forgetting, remembering, asleep, awake, zoning out and in, and glued to our iPhones.

My neck, head, and chest ached throughout the day as a precursor to and consequence of sundry successful anxiety attacks. “Do white people even fucking know the trauma we’re experiencing or that they cause?” I scribbled on a piece of mail atop random papers scattered about my worktable. The whole of 2020 can be likened to a fencing match between the distressingly ridiculous and the demonically monstrous. Perhaps the future will quantify how the year effectively tyrannized Black folks on the hour, impacting our physical and mental health, quality of life, and capabilities. I entered each new day with an invisible load of bricks on my chest and went to bed uncharacteristically early just to make it to the next day, while yet fearing nightmares about the current state while asleep. Not a day passed without me thinking about death. By Election Day 2020, there were more than 200,000 COVID-19 related deaths in North America, according to trackers provided by Johns Hopkins University.⁵ Not even this paused the hunt for Black people. Breonna Taylor was murdered in her sleep.⁶ George Floyd was asphyxiated in broad daylight, setting the sheltering-in-place nation ablaze. Black folks were individually and collectively stressed. Not because state-sanctioned black genocide is *sui generis*, but because it’s routine, deliberate, omnipresent, and anticipated.

I continued staring out the tall glass windows, wondering how life might be if we had trackers for white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and each of its symptoms and side effects. What might global, national, social, political, economic, institutional, and communal commitments to black public safety look like? What if people recognized white supremacy’s harm globally and across racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and class lines and put all their resources toward a vaccine? To be clear: as a fundamental ideology, moral and ethical failing, and psychosocial warfare—backed by theft, trafficking, settler

colonialism, the unpeopling of Black people, dispossession, structural violence, economic exploitation, mass incarceration, corporate power, drones, policing, courts, laws, and the militarization of societies—white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is equally an urgent matter of public health, particularly as it causes pervasive and infectious mental, physical, and other problems that may lead to death.⁷ November 3, 2020, felt like doom. The only trackers available were seemingly those monitoring the COVID-19 virus and those surveilling black existence and movement. And while I'm clear that American political elections don't have super (problack liberative) powers, both Tuesday, November 8, 2016, and the horror in my fifteen-year-old son's eyes as he asked the dreadful question "Who won?" the following Wednesday morning were still fresh.

Over the course of four years, we learned how much more grim things could get, how deeply antiblack people generally and collectively are globally, and how white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is relentless and means to wear every single one of us down until there's nothing and no one left. "Who won?" is a legitimate concern for a Black boy and a Black girl turned Black woman turned Black mother to Black sons. It also materially mattered to Black poor, disabled, and/or immigrant mothers left to care for children with reduced services and protections. It materially mattered to those forced into capitalist anti-immigration technologies of punishment such as immigrant detention centers. It materially mattered to Black transgender, gender-neutral, nonbinary, agender, pangender, genderqueer, and queer folk hoping to protect their love, lives, loved ones, and livelihoods. It materially mattered to Black folks caught up in the court structure, yearning for justice from newly appointed conservative judges. It materially mattered to those who lost diversity, equity, and inclusion protections and resources at school and work. It materially mattered to those needing and wanting abortions. It materially mattered to those benefiting from affirmative action. It materially mattered to this Black mother when the angry mob of Trumpers came to my state and city and raised deadly hell. Surely, it mattered to my Black teenaged son who had enough common sense to know that a blatant white nationalist capitalist ableist misogynist totalitarian leader threatening outright fascism was trouble in Trayvon Martin's America.

Election Day 2020 provides a looking glass for thinking about varying viewpoints of black vulnerability in America. Of course, I was dreading the postelection discussion with my sons. I was managing my own fright and depression about the historical moment while pretending to be unagitated for the boys. I also knew full well that we were all susceptible to further and heightened

sadistic racialized cruelties. It's one thing to worry about your own life or to care about distant others whose lives and outcomes you never have to witness or answer to up close on a day-to-day basis. It's another thing to love as deeply as a Black mother, othermother, or parent, and to agonize over the vulnerabilities and well-being of those you're 100 percent responsible for being and navigating here—24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.⁸ There're no breaks from black motherhood. We're always "on" and we stay worried about the threat and reproduction of racialized occupation. It makes sense why some Black/African slave mothers practiced infanticide: what Darlene Clark Hine refers to as one of the highest acts of love.⁹ They couldn't bear bringing children into the diabolical abyss of the slave system. For them, death was a complicated mercy, a tangled web of protection if you will.

Howbeit, those who allowed their children to live found interstices of hope among the living (and/or those who'd once lived), despite the netherworld they were in. I understand this all too well. Children will make you hope for the unreasonable. Either that or live in, accept, and/or reproduce despair. That is to say, the projection of a black living hope within a repressive regime isn't foolish, especially for a Black mother. It's a response to an opaque love germinated in the historical path, practices, and faith of the ancestors in defiance of their condition and white imperial ambition. We don't know if or how our practices of hope will work/out or what all the social and political implications will be. However, as Angela Y. Davis points out in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, the living can't afford to not hope. Or as James Baldwin once argued, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means you have agreed that human life is an academic matter. So, I'm forced to be an optimist. I am forced to believe we can survive whatever we must survive."¹⁰ While I wouldn't call myself an optimist, especially since I'm pessimistic about the effective durability of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, I hold that hope is an absolute necessity, as it's the condition of all struggles for freedom. Namely, because it's saying no to black suffering, which is practiced in both life and death.

A black living hope, specifically, is "say[ing] no with our combined spirits, our collective intellects, and our many bodies."¹¹ It's saying we can survive whatever we must. It's refusing to go on as usual or to depoliticize the omnipotence of global antiblackness. It's seeing the world as it is, yet insisting on the power of the people, even as things seem unwinnable. It's trying and trying again at freedom and never stopping. It's making a way out of no way for ourselves while holding tightly to the spirit of opposition and irrepressibility of the ancestors who projected hope into the future as they negotiated with it on

our behalf. It's acknowledging that we're here because they understood doom yet endured long and powerfully enough to ensure our arrival, and because they grasped both the nightmare and the promise of our survival. In an essay titled "The Shape of My Impact," Alexis Pauline Gumbs engages Audre Lorde and writes,

Survival has never meant, bare minimum, mere straggling breath, the small space next to the line of death. . . . Survival references our living in the context of what we have overcome. Survival is life after disaster, life in honor of our ancestors, despite the genocidal forces worked against them specifically so we would not exist. I love the word survival because it places my life in the context of those who I love, who are called dead, but survive through my breathing, my presence, and my remembering. They survive in my stubborn use of the word survival unmodified. My survival, my life resplendent, with the energy of my ancestors, is enough. . . . Survival is what Audre Lorde calls "a now that can breed futures / like bread in our children's mouths / so their dreams will not reflect the death of ours." . . . Survival is a promise . . . that I make with my currently breathing body to the ancestors who move through it.¹²

Loving Black Boys: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering is about belief in the possible; collective black survival in the face of genocidal forces; life after and during disaster; the contexts we've overcome; and honoring, remembering, and making a covenant with the ancestors who died and survived longing for more emancipatory futures. It's "bread" in our mouths, kneaded with black power, justice, courage, mutuality, accountability, love, and resistance. It's a practice of black living hope.

However, *Loving Black Boys* is emphatically not a negotiation with whiteness or a cry for the oppressor to act out of character. Drawing on Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" laments that the white power structure will never willingly cede power. Power must be demanded by a creative minority—because white power has been historically and violently preserved at all costs, including the price of death. King writes that it's the radical work of the minoritized collective to bring these already-existing tensions to the fore, to grapple with the root causes, and to protest the bondage of human degradation, unjust laws, mythology, militarized societies, and devotions to order rather than justice, lukewarm acceptance rather than belonging, and caution rather than courage.¹³ He argues that it's better to live in "true peace" than faking nirvana and adjusting to the "nobodiness" that the hindmost demands. Similarly, part of the work of Black scholars, activists,

artists, writers, and otherwise is to protest bondage and demand power; to call out, interrogate, and disrupt the devastating consequences of black alienation and oppression; to produce works that have a corrective function; to blow up and overturn, where possible, the logic that makes moments of violence and oppression possible; and to help clear the ground for strategizing our shared survival.

Loving Black Boys is committed to this work. More, it insists on truth-*full* talk about the different assumptions and jeopardies that Black folks encounter while surviving white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, and critically engaging antagonisms and their underlying causes and effects, through the lens of a Black mother raising Black sons in what Baldwin called a “burning house.”¹⁴ The metaphor of a burning house notes the precarity of Black people in a country that refuses to see them as fully human and, more, is consistently at war with them.¹⁵ Thus, the reader might note a persistent linguistic emphasis and disposition of war throughout this book. How does one not engage war when steadily seen and treated as a threat and when surviving black genocide? Written in deep conversation with *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering*, this book presents a collection of stories about how antiblackness, racism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and misogynoir trip us up across racial and ethnic lines, genders, sexualities, and class, even while surviving war.¹⁶ Specifically, it engages living in a body that is both despised and fetishized in an America that requires its subjection and bondage, and the horrors of distinct nightmares and materialities that this inflames both for and between Black folks.

However, whereas *Freeing Black Girls* chronicles my journey from black girlhood to motherhood and therefore makes visible certain survival experiences of Black girls and women, *Loving Black Boys* examines mothering my Black sons, from boys to men, in a burning house while fashioning loving, powerful, beautiful, joyous, resistant, and safe spaces for ourselves and others.¹⁷ It unequivocally argues that Black boys’ survival in America is specific and collective. That is, legalized white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy has its foot on all our necks, at all our expense, and impacts our individual and collective lives and relations. A core requirement for its force and permanence is that the collective of Black people remain underfoot and dishonest and/or depoliticized about the historical facts of this reality, enabling further acts of violence and oppression. To make it plain: White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy cross-pollinates globally, structurally, socially, culturally, politically, religiously, interiorly, communally, institutionally, inter- and intraracially,

and otherwise, creating a context where we're all regularly terrorized, hoping, and surviving.¹⁸ A historical survival strategy against white racial threat, violence, and dehumanization has been to reduce black survival methods to resisting white supremacy, white nationalism, antiblack racism, and/or white-on-black violence and discrimination. *Loving Black Boys* asserts that this design is deficient at best.

This in mind, this book engages additional inter- and intraracial and communal structures of dominance and combat, for example, heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, homophobia, transantagonism, classism, antiblackness, and otherwise. *Loving Black Boys* holds that (1) loving Black boys in real life must be revolutionary and thus must attend to their humanity, vulnerabilities, potential, histories, identities, complexities, nightmares, survival mechanisms, and otherwise, while also contextualizing them within the whole of Black people, and more, efforts toward black love and freedom; (2) resisting white supremacy and white racism isn't enough for black survival; and (3) the master's toolbox isn't working for the collective "us." Audre Lorde contends that the "master's tools" (white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy) used to build the master's house can't be used for black freedom because they were meant for our oppression. *Loving Black Boys* submits that we need other methods to help us to collectively hope better, live better, and partner better so that we might survive better, struggle better, and resist better. And these methods must be revolutionary.

On Black Feminism, Black Boys and Men, and Sanctuary

The reader may be wondering what black feminism has to do with mothering and/or Black boys' and men's survival. I'm aware some hold that black feminism is anti-Black boys, men, mothers, families, and communities and that some believe that it further erases and disempowers Black cisgender boys and men particularly. I'm also extremely conscious of the fact that some in this group feel and have been abandoned by society and politics in many ways. *Loving Black Boys* explores my attempt to nurture my Black sons into their own freedom.¹⁹ And as a love ethic, politics, theory, methodology, and movement—against racism, sexism, antiblackness, misogynoir, classism, racial capitalism, imperialism, heteropatriarchy, transantagonism, and homophobia—that is committed to freedom, justice, equity, mutuality, and power for all Black people, black feminism has everything to do with that. Davis opines that black feminism proffers an intervention, strategy, and broader angle for conceptualizing black hope and struggles for freedom because it's concerned with the

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complex ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, and otherwise are intertwined in our daily lives. She writes,

We cannot assume that it is possible to be victorious in any antiracist movement as long as we don't consider how gender figures in, how gender and sexuality and class and nationality figure into those struggles. It used to be the case that the struggles for freedom were seen to be male struggles. Freedom for Black people was equivalent to freedom for the Black man. And if one looks at Malcolm X and many other figures, you see this constantly. But now this is no longer possible. And I think that feminism is not an approach that is or should be embraced simply by women but increasingly it has to be an approach embraced by people of all genders. . . . The assumption that black freedom was freedom for the Black man created a certain kind of border around the black struggle which can no longer exist.²⁰

Davis continues later in the book:

[Feminism] has to involve a consciousness of capitalism, and racism, and colonialism, and postcolonialities, and ability, and more genders than we can even imagine, and more sexualities than we ever thought we could name. Feminism has helped us not only to recognize a range of connections among discourses, and institutions, and identities, and ideologies that we often tend to consider separately. But it has also helped us to develop epistemological and organizing strategies that take us beyond the categories "woman" and "gender." And, feminist methodologies impel us to explore connections that are not always apparent. And they drive us to inhabit contradictions and discover what is productive in these contradictions. Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate, and to disaggregate things that appear to naturally belong together.²¹

Black feminism widens our gaze for considering black survival and resistance inclusively. It sheds light on how radical movements for black freedom centered the needs and experiences of "Black 'endangered' [cisgender heterosexual] men and boys" to the exclusion of Black, endangered transgender, gender-neutral, nonbinary, and queer men and boys; how the needs, experiences, and perils of Black, endangered cisgender, transgender, and queer women and girls have been marginalized and/or completely ignored; and how Black, endangered cisgender men and boys, beaten down by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal racial discrimination, would often take that

out on others intraracially and intracommunally, including other Black men and boys. Black feminism helps us examine overlapping layers of violence and oppression, inclusive of those that may be reproduced intraracially and intracommunally. As I write in *Freeing Black Girls*, “[Black folks] don’t need to be surviving each other while also having to survive pervasive white supremacist harassment, discrimination, terror, and genocide. We need sanctuary/ies—emancipatory literacies, philosophies, relations, and safe places.”²²

A primary aim and strategy in both *Loving Black Boys* and *Freeing Black Girls* is realizing new reservoirs of hope and modes of community. I should note up front that my call for sanctuary isn’t the trite quest for “black unity,” which is typically dishonest and ahistorical as it too often ignores both how routinized racial violence and inequity include racist misogyny and how each impacts us and gets reproduced interracially, intraracially, and intracommunally. The social, cultural, and political demand for “black unity” almost always means to shut Black girls, women, gays, and trans folk up, hearkening back to the notion that “when Black men get their rights, everything will be all right.” In *Freeing Black Girls*, I define sanctuary as a philosophy and ethical practice, which reimagines space as opportunities for revival and connection for Black folks.²³ Inspired by Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison, it’s “where we grow, rest, recharge, see, and value ourselves and one another as ends rather than means to ends, lay our oppressions bare, critically self-reflect, heal, dream new dreams, embrace difference, remove masks, rethink and interrogate who belongs in safe community with us, make mutuality and accountability nonnegotiable.”²⁴ It’s absent of and unapologetically oppositional toward heteropatriarchy, misogyny, antiblackness, and individualism. And it insists on a world where all Black people and all power to all Black people matter, thus creating a context for intraracial and intracommunal allegiances, ethics, and care.

History has proven that a threat to any aspect of collective black freedom is a threat to its entirety. To this end, black feminist politics is key to establishing sanctuary, and sanctuary is foundational to black freedom and survival. In the 1984 *Essence* magazine dialogue titled “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin,” Baldwin posits, “There’s a real difference between the way a man looks at the world . . . [a]nd the way a woman looks at the world. A woman does know much more than a man.” To which Lorde declares, “And why? For the same reason Black people know what white people are thinking: because we had to do it for our survival.”²⁵ *Loving Black Boys* is prompted by this critical discussion between a Black man and woman trying to make sense of themselves and Black folks generally in the world. It’s a dialogue between myself and my Black sons, *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving*

Black Boys, and Black folks across genders and sexualities. Lorde’s response isn’t a claim to know it all. Neither is *Loving Black Boys*. Rather, *Loving Black Boys* attests that examining survival from the furthest edges of the margins enables a wider lens for looking at the human condition, engaging sanctuary, and remaking the world.²⁶

Freeing Black Girls and *Loving Black Boys* underscore black mothering, and specifically black feminist mothering, as it allows an extensive (not exhaustive) and particular critical gaze for black living hope and our mutual survival. *Freeing Black Girls* defines black feminist mothering as an offering—a politics, ethics of care, and direct confrontation with collective black oppression, which notes the precarious place of Black cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, queer, and heterosexual women and girls surviving white supremacist capitalist violence, heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, antiblackness, misogynoir, and otherwise, as well as the multiple vulnerabilities of Black cisgender, transgender, gender-neutral, nonbinary, queer, and heterosexual men and boys.²⁷ Black feminist mothering isn’t the only answer or strategy for black survival. It’s a form of agency among those rendered disposable, those from expanding communities of struggle, and those in the black radical tradition. It takes its cue from Black women, mothers, and othermothers who “insisted on our freedom and stood as guardians over communities and political traditions, giving life to revolutions and revolutionaries.”²⁸ Citing Assata Shakur’s poem “The Tradition,” Davis notes that passing down the black radical tradition is a mandate from the ancestors.

Carry it on now.
Carry it on.
Carry it on now.
Carry it on.
Carry on the tradition . . .
In Selma and San Juan.
Mozambique, Mississippi.
In Brazil and in Boston,
We carried it on . . .
Carried on the tradition.
Carried a strong tradition.
Carried a proud tradition.
Carried a Black tradition.
Carry it on.
Pass it down to the children.

Pass it down.
Carry it on.
Carry it on now.
Carry it on
TO FREEDOM!²⁹

Black feminist mothering maintains that all mothering is political, for good or bad; that Black women, some of whom are mothers, othermothers, and feminists, have always been essential to black radical movements; that we've always complicated, deepened, and enlarged practices of hope, freedom, and resistance; and that black mothering and othermothering are interdependent and vital to black abolition, progress, advocacy, survival, love, and realizing sanctuary. Black feminist mothering asserts that if mothering is a significant and continuous point of contact and influence, and if the family is a primary institution for political education where racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, antiblackness, homophobia, transantagonism, and misogynoir can be taught and reinforced, then we may also help shift that culture by teaching black feminist politics, which seeks (1) to imagine a more expansive collectivity and resistance, (2) to transform ways of seeing and relating, (3) to develop a richer and more intersectional politics for living together, and (4) to inform mass movement to bring about systemic change.

My black feminist mothering politics began taking shape in the early 2000s when Lee and Seth were born. However, I began writing *Loving Black Boys* after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. My purpose was to explore the practice of intentionally mothering Black sons toward a powerful identity and social consciousness that wasn't structured in the status quo (namely, heteropatriarchal dominance). In other words, what does it mean to survive white supremacy and black genocide while cultivating a context for black love from an emancipatory foundation? How might this require a different engagement on black masculinity and raising Black cisgender boys to men? How can such a partaking resist inter- and intraracial heteropatriarchal politics, violences, and redundancies simultaneously? And how would dealing more fully and honestly with the horrors of our different nightmares permit more rewarding possibilities for our shared survival, resistances, and futures? Surviving white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal warfare creates imbalance, fear, and angst for Black boys. Still, I wanted Lee and Seth to remain whole and in community while in rebellion against racial antagonisms.

I didn't want them accessing black power and wakefulness through heteropatriarchy and misogynoir, or to take out their terror on Black cisgender,

transgender, nonbinary, or queer girls and women. I wanted them to love us collectively like I've loved them and to prioritize our survival as I've centered theirs. Further, I wanted them to love themselves confidently enough not to tyrannize other Black cisgender, transgender, and/or queer boys. Mainly, I hoped they'd realize the most spacious, brave, and revolutionary freedom dreams possible. However, what follows isn't about how Lee and Seth grew up to save the world from white supremacy, how they became black feminists, or how black feminism saved them from heteropatriarchy, although I did try. Nor is this an exercise in defining or capturing Black men's and boys' experiences or identities. I'm completely and admittedly incapable of that. *Loving Black Boys* insists on self-definition and holds that "a man has a certain story to tell . . . just because he is a man."³⁰ Still, this isn't a book on recovering a singular or "real" black manhood or masculinity, which is necessarily dominant, violent, and heteropatriarchal.³¹ Nor is it sermonizing on how Black mothers need to "think like a man." We have enough books, movies, and think pieces on that topic and absolutely none of them are useful for sanctuary or the collective good.

Loving Black Boys establishes that Black mothers have a story to tell as well. Like many Black mothers, I'm concerned about global antiblackness, racial oppression, hate crimes, policing, incarceration, school-to-prison pipelining, intracommunal violence, mental health, health care, reproductive justice, jobs, economic relief, our ability to self-sustain, and more. As a black feminist mother invested in sanctuary, I expand and intersect these interests to include all the ways each is shot through with gender, sex, class, capitalism, and sexuality interracially, intraracially, and intracommunally. However, whereas *Freeing Black Girls* emphasizes sanctuary as a critical safe space and ethics for Black people, *Loving Black Boys* pushes this discussion further toward black resistance and social movement. This book was written against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the administration of the forty-fifth POTUS, the Charlottesville riot, the global pandemic, and the January 6th insurrection.³² Each broadened my view and what I needed and wanted this book to do. Hence, the following pages articulate the political climate that structured my sons' coming of age, influencing my politics around mothering.

Black mothers have historically gotten a bad rap. We've been stereotyped for alleged immorality, promiscuity, cheating the welfare system, and having too many children. We've been demonized and blamed for *partus sequitur ventrem*, absent fathers, the emasculation of Black men, and otherwise.³³ The BLM moment reimagines Black mothers in the political economy in the twenty-first century in terms of grief for slain sons.³⁴ However, historical racial stereotypes on black mothering haven't gone away. They've widened to include an under-

lying sentiment on the failure of Black mothers to successfully raise Black boys to (“real”) men in a police state that seems to prefer them dead.³⁵ Black feminist mothering explores these traumas while not only centering Black boys and men but also engaging Black women, mothers, and othermothers. My interest isn’t in Black mothers’ lack, however, but instead our revolutionary labor within the home, communities, and public sphere.

Full disclosure: Black feminist mothering didn’t always turn out the results I hoped for. Sometimes the fight against black genocide and oppression wasn’t as inclusive as it should’ve been. On occasion, Lee and Seth found the world’s messaging to be more interesting, powerful, and seductive than mine. At times, they leaned into toxic masculinities. Periodically, my black feminist politics required checking, particularly as I live in gray, messy space—between progressive black feminist politics and sometimes regressive forms of survival, arduously struggling with the former while every so often slipping comfortably into the latter. There were times when I was downright wrong and hurtful as a mother. And there were moments where I got it right. Black feminist mothering is neither perfect nor a prototype. As I write in *Freeing Black Girls*, it’s a conception toward freedom, sanctuary, and expansive survival for Black folks who weren’t supposed to live and Black women who were never supposed to mother their own children. All the same, it’s trying something extraordinary again and again, despite difficulties and mistakes.

A Note on Language, Structure, and Methodology

I refer to both *Loving Black Boys* and *Freeing Black Girls* as bibles because black living hope, building sanctuary, and black radical resistance constitute sacred work for minoritized subjects of cruelty, militarized violence, and disenfranchisement, and further, because these books are sacred forms of literacy. I write the following in *Freeing Black Girls*:

Most Black folks in North America are still Christians and thus the Christian bible remains an essential form of literacy. In *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (1978), Albert J. Raboteau asserts that many North American slaves who embraced Christianity were “Bible Christians” who used the Bible for literacy and to support and articulate their right to freedom. It was a spell book for learning to read, naming, resisting, plotting, and a sacred object full of wise tales and sayings. Their interpretations of the text were irreducible and often oppositional to that of white missionaries, ministers, and slavers. . . . Leaning

into this, *Freeing Black Girls* reinterprets “bible” through a black feminist framework. Specifically, it deploys black feminist religious thought and black feminist religio-cultural criticism as lenses for reading phenomena and redeeming Black women and girls from profaned ideologies, theologies, and representations. . . . [S]uch an offering is . . . a sacred form of literacy . . . meant to articulate and support black self-re-creation, communal advancement, and freedom. What makes it sacred is its unyielding commitment to black love, liberation, thriving, and sovereignty, and its belief that all black lives—whatever their gender, class, or sexual identity—matter.³⁶

In an article titled “The Bible and Black People: A Torrid Love Affair,” Reverend Osagyefo Sekou writes that while “the Bible was used [by enslavers] to teach docility and command Black people to believe that their lot in life was ordained by God,” “the Biblical narrative has served to empower and describe Black emancipation. Whether it be the quest to escape slavery, the struggle against Jim Crow, or the Great Migration . . . Black people [have] taken up the Exodus story to communicate their divine right to be free. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman were called the ‘Moses’ of our people. The Bible animates much of Black self-understanding.”³⁷

A bible is also a keeper of pertinent history and artifacts, ancestral names and connections, and futurist dreams. Sekou maintains,

In addition to the family tree diagram on the first few pages, obituaries, birth certificates, semblances of a will and flower petals from deceased loved ones’ floral arrangements were neatly placed between the pages of the Holy Writ. The Bible kept our family genealogy—a shrine to our past, present and future. Every family I knew as a child had that Bible in their homes. In the United States, Black people’s encounter with the text is fraught with meaning. Our ancestors were beaten for reading this book. The Bible authorized our subjection and authenticated our experience. In short, Black folk and the Bible have a torrid love affair.³⁸

Loving Black Boys uses *bible* to mark this text as a consequential source for re-thinking black hope, survival, self-understanding, individual and communal re-creation, histories and futures, resistance, sanctuary, and the divine right to be collectively free. It’s a reference for loving, gathering, and plotting. One might interpret the work that this book does, particularly the building of sanctuary; how it speaks to the personal and collective plight of Black folks; its

emphasis on black humanity and resistance; and its engagement with religion and theology, as a black feminist theology of liberation. As I expound elsewhere, black feminist theology notes a black feminist engagement on theological phenomena, categories, interests, signs, symbols, and meanings using black feminist texts and analyses.³⁹ A black feminist theology of liberation does this work while specifically complicating and broadening language and strategies toward freedom and against the status quo.

Nevertheless, despite reconfiguring terms like *bible* and *sanctuary*; examining religious distinctions, for example, those between the Black Church and white Christianity; and exploring theological questions such as “Is God a white racist?” the goals of *Loving Black Boys* are foremost political. This book is disinterested in traditional discussions around biblical inerrancy, Christian supremacy, or maintaining structures of oppression and/or dominance.⁴⁰ Further, it vehemently rejects the idea that Black people and/or Black women should be docile and/or accept second-, third-, or fourth-class citizenry as a divine station. Additionally, it considers works by Lorde, Baldwin, and others as sacred texts. This may seem peculiar for the wife and daughter of Black Baptist preachers. Howbeit, I’m a black feminist scholar of religion that critically engages black religiosity in general and the Black Church specifically while actively participating in the latter. The Black Church helps shape my hope for a more emancipatory world, even as it strains to nurture radical politics of sanctuary, and even as I sometimes depart from it theologically, particularly on matters of heterosexism, heteropatriarchy, sexuality, respectability, and more. The value of the Black Church for me is in how it historically affected black resistance in an otherwise absurd environment and how it remakes black culture and community in critical moments of despair in the present.

Loving Black Boys includes a big letter, mini letters, and storytelling. It begins with a love letter to my sons, and each chapter starts with a mini letter to them and Black boys generally—across genders and sexualities. The stories aren’t in chronological order. They’re thematic, personal, historical, theoretical, and, in some instances, theological. The black feminist methodology guiding this book is “personal is political,” as we come to our politics through our histories, and as personal narratives on race, sex, class, sexuality, and gender help build a collective story, which in turn aids in combating structural oppressions. I employ this methodology not because my experiences are ubiquitous or ontological but because, as black feminists have already argued, the origins of feminist theory (and therefore the most profound radical politics) come directly out of our own identities, and thus collectively they present a certain offering that is

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political and useful within the larger record and efforts toward freedom. Davis contends that we learn a great deal about the structural when we examine the various and complicated dimensions of the personal and the collective.

In view of this, *Loving Black Boys* uses “I,” “we,” “our,” and “us” in chorus with the distant academic “they,” “them,” and “their.” I posit the following in *Freeing Black Girls*:

It proudly utilizes Black Language throughout the text, but especially in the letters. . . . [T]hough a “no-no” in academic writing, the reader has likely already pinpointed the perhaps alarming deployment of contractions, which aid the flow of storytelling, voice, and moving in between the personal, political, academic, and otherwise. In *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy* (2020), April Baker-Bell argues that Black Language is the mother tongue, which comes out of North American slave experiences, and which imparts knowledge, reflects knowing, and socializes Black folks to understand the world and survive. The academic tendency to suggest there’s a standard way of writing or Standard English implies a racial linguistic hierarchy that is interconnected with the larger social ordering, which diminishes Black people, culture, life, and so on. This book doesn’t just center Black people, stories, and language; it’s meant to be both read and *felt*.⁴¹

The following chapters represent what it’s like mothering as a Black woman in America as well as significant moments and lessons experienced while mothering Lee and Seth. The stories come alive at the intersections between major categories in black feminism and black feminist mothering: race, sex, gender, sexuality, and class. Chapter 1, “Proverbs for Black Boys: A Letter to My Sons (Writing the Kitchen Table),” is a critical loving “hope” letter to Lee and Seth, reminding them of the black feminist politics instilled in them since they were little people. If it reads like I’m pleading with them, it’s because I am. It’s hard to care about others in a world that seems to not give a damn about you. Chapter 2, “Periodizing and Parrying Crisis: Black Mothering from the Other America, or, Notes from the Field,” explores being a Black mother in America against the backdrop of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal permanence and how mothering in America while Black is distinct because Black mothers mother from the “other” America, which anticipates racialized crisis.

Chapter 3, “The Talk: Public Enemy #1 (‘Is God a White Racist?’),” engages connections between antiblackness, white racism, and white supremacist Christian theology. It asserts that white supremacist Christianity is inherent in notions of manifest destiny and white divine favor, which lead to white

racial terror and territorialism.⁴² That said, “the talk” (about race and racism in America), which everyone should be having regardless of race, must include critical discourse on white Christianity. Further, “the talk” must move beyond racism and Black cisgender men and boys to examine how white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and white supremacist theology together cut across genders, class, sexualities, ethnicities, and so on. Chapter 4, “Blood-letting in the Mouth of a Dragon: Black Patriarchy Won’t Save Us,” explores how “the” patriarchy, what bell hooks notes as “the primary genocidal threat,” produced a script for heteropatriarchal masculinity that informs aspirational black heteropatriarchal masculinity. Although the hindmost may be appealing, humanizing, and viewed as a counter and challenge to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, both white heteropatriarchal masculinity and aspirational black heteropatriarchal masculinity are at war with Black people, building radically loving relationships and communities, and nurturing equitable and justice-centered connections and alliances.

Chapter 5, “Total and Absolute War: The Miseducation of Black Boys,” interrogates how the US educational system uses colonial curricula and colonial disciplinary praxis to alienate and dispose of Black children in general and Black boys specifically. It centers Carter G. Woodson’s work on miseducation and Jarvis R. Givens’s work on fugitive pedagogy to consider black feminist mothering as a fugitive pedagogical lens necessary for combating America’s educational indoctrinating complex and the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal social order. Chapter 6, “#ProtectBlackMen: For Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Michael Singleton, and All Black Boys,” examines the sociopolitical, socioeconomic, physical, and emotional disregard of Black boys as a consequence of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal antiblack misrecognition, estrangement, exploitation, deputization, militarized policing, and otherwise.⁴³ It asserts that the murders of Black boys by the state and overzealous white vigilantes are targeted yet interconnected with the killing of Black people in general. Additionally, the destruction of Black people includes but extends beyond policing. Meaning, the killing of a Black boy (or man) isn’t solely a physical death but may include the demise of spirit and/or emotional health, interracial and intraracially.

Chapter 7, “Competing Pandemics: Autonomy, Misogynoir, and Rape *Are* Urgent Black Matters,” takes stock of the intersectional viruses that obstruct sanctuary. It holds that, in addition to racism, police violence, stereotyping, white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, mass incarceration, miseducation, socioeconomic and sociopolitical disenfranchisement, and otherwise, our collective lack of bodily autonomy and experiences with misogynoir and

rape culture matter. Whereas the previous chapters emphasize protecting and fighting for Black boys, this chapter pushes Lee and Seth and Black boys in general to protect and love others. It asserts that loving Black boys necessitates calling forth a future where we engage black lives more comprehensively, where all black lives matter, and where all violences against all Black people, whether interracial or intraracial, are matters of concern. The coda, “Parable of the Living: Surviving Octavia Butler’s America While Black,” is a continuance and warning about the difficult days ahead.

I already know my “black feminist card” might get pulled a few times while reading this book. Conversely, I imagine that my black feminism will have some folks wondering whether I love Black men and boys at all. *Loving Black Boys* engages living and breathing beings with whom I’m in deep loving relationship with. Black feminist mothering requires upsetting harmful race, sex, and gender arrangements interracially, intraracially, and communally, not erasing, demonizing, or marginalizing loving Black men and boys who want to partner in black living hope and building sanctuary. The aim is certainly not to alienate progressive Black fathers who want to share in the emotional, financial, political, physical, spiritual, and other emancipatory needs of children, mothers, the home, and communities. That said, while *Loving Black Boys* is in part a radical critique of ideologies, structures, and relations, it’s also an engagement of the sacred in Black boys and men. I note the sacred in all the ways they manage to survive while still loving themselves, each other, and us, and while fighting for black mutuality, autonomy, connection, healing, difference, belonging, presence, place, and beyond. Honoring the sacred in each other across genders, sexualities, and class, which requires realism about our differing vulnerabilities and nightmares (including those that may be intraracial and intracommunal), might be the most revolutionary response to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy yet. It’s an indispensable step not only for our survival but also for revolution.⁴⁴

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Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE

- 1 Tamara Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), ix.
- 2 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, x.
- 3 The forty-fifth POTUS became the forty-seventh POTUS at exactly the same time that I finished writing this book. Notwithstanding, all references to *forty-five* or *forty-fifth* POTUS will remain the same.
- 4 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, x–xi. For more on the *B* in *Black*, see “AP Changes Writing Style to Capitalize ‘B’ in Black,” *AP News*, June 19, 2020, <https://apnews.com/71386b46dbff8190e-71493a763e8f45a>; and Mike Laws, “Why We Capitalize ‘Black’ (and Not ‘White’),” *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>.
- 5 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 163n26.
- 6 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 162n24.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 History presents this as a possibility: for example, the Holocaust and what’s happening in Florida from K–12 to the college and university level. We’re also seeing moves in other states to ban books and college courses related to DEI, critical race theory, and “woke” subjects. Republicans have noted a significant lack of confidence in higher education and have made ways to control it in the same way that they’ve dominated K–12 public education. The weaponizing of anti-intellectualism is vital to neofascism, disenfranchisement, and class warfare. The rich and powerful maintain power and allegiances through binary thinking—for instance, what’s right versus wrong, what’s good or bad, what and who’s acceptable and/or status quo or not, what’s lawful versus illegal, what’s moral versus immoral. This creates a lack of trust in education in particular. The attack on higher education, which is seen as liberal, is clearer today than previously, as academic freedom and tenure are considered threatening to the social order and therefore bad. Higher education also creates access to capital for nonwhites as well as radical thinking for students in general. See also Zachary Schermele, “Public Trust in Higher Ed Has

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Plummeted. Yes, Again,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/public-trust-in-higher-ed-has-plummeted-yes-again>.

- 2 Monument Avenue in my city is a grassy mall once lined with statues honoring Confederate soldiers that lost the Civil War. Confederate monuments are never innocuous. They are scenes meant to tell a story about power, the Old South, and what social order once was and should be. They reinterpret history (making the losers of the war look like winners) and call attention to black ancestral and contemporary vulnerability to white supremacy and plantation politics. During the 2020 uprisings, the monuments on Monument Avenue were overwritten and eventually removed.
- 3 I’m not nonviolent. Like other American families, we own guns. Our primary interest is in protecting ourselves and our home if we’re forced to. For me, guns are less about rights and more a response to fear and a desire for safety. For some readers this may read like a contradiction. As I argue in *Freeing Black Girls*, I don’t desire a world shaped by gun enthusiasts. Yet that’s what we have. Angela Y. Davis discusses black shared vulnerability within the context of normalized racialized violence in America. Davis recalls her house shaking from a bomb exploding a house across the street at a very young age. Her friend Carol was one of the “four little girls” murdered in the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Davis’s mother had to take Carol’s mother to the church to pick up her body, only to find “limbs and heads strewn all over the place.” She posits that her father always had guns at his disposal in anticipation of perpetual racialized terror. That is to say, white racial violence exists on a shared continuum. The black traumatized collective memory and present reality forecast racialized violence because Black folks share vulnerability to white racism from generation to generation as witnesses and participants. We understand that racialized violences that happened in history or to someone else in our present can also happen to us. As Black folks are hunted as prey and murdered at home in their sleep, black gun ownership becomes a way of survival and choosing life, despite research suggesting that guns in the home mostly increase homicides and suicides. Racial realism notes our context as anti-black and black life as collectively vulnerable to everyday violences. Meanwhile, the state refuses to offer protections. In short, violent contexts require alternative ethics. So, yes, I long for a gun-free world where no one is prey. I also find the phrase and/or action “hands up, don’t shoot” inefficient. The ancestors and 1960s Black Panther Party understood this. We also need space for black self-protection, rage, and other forceful forms of resistance. Black folks historically may die either way. But we also survive. Images of powerless victims are rooted in respectability. I’m disinterested in the latter.
- 4 This term is used by Zillah Eisenstein to note the everyday and cordial way that fascism initially gets introduced in a society and how many people look the other way in denial until it’s too late.
- 5 COVID-19 is often interchanged with the new coronavirus. However, COVID-19 is the name of the disease caused by the coronavirus. SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19. The disease is highly contagious and deadly and requires people

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to limit face-to-face interaction to decrease transmission. In America, this meant wearing face masks and “sheltering in place” for several months.

- 6 Shaun Harper, “Why It’s Important to Say George Floyd Was Murdered,” *Forbes*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shaunharper/2022/10/14/why-its-important-to-say-george-floyd-was-murdered/>.
- 7 Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).
- 8 As I write in *Freeing Black Girls*, othermothering refers to “Black people who mother beyond gender and blood ties.” See Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships,” *Sage* 4, no. 2 (1987): 3–5. See also Tamura Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), 157n1.
- 9 It’s sometimes difficult to know when to use *African* or *Black* when referring to those subjected to the triangular slave trade, especially since blackness as a racial category and identity is primarily a twentieth-century conception. I write the following in *Freeing Black Girls*: “W. E. B. Du Bois writes about the interpretive shift from *African* to *Negro* to *Black* in *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, some slave sources use *negro*. Some also deploy *nigger*. . . . I deploy *Black/African* to highlight the line and/or continuum between African slaves, Black folks, and black thought, ideas, and indignities” (162n24). Additionally, I’m in no way advocating infanticide. I’m naming a difficult response to a deplorable and demonic condition. For more on Black women, rape, breeding, pregnancy, and childbirth, see Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and The Reconstruction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- 10 Emersonian Eye, “A Conversation with James Baldwin | Dr. Kenneth Clark | May 24, 1963 | (Full Length),” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhop-eFBosI> (accessed December 2024).
- 11 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 145.
- 12 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “The Shape of My Impact,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 29, 2012, <https://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/the-shape-of-my-impact/>.
- 13 I use *belonging* in two ways in this book. First, as a critique of white nationalism (which declares who belongs to the state to gauge who gets political rights) and white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal masculinity (a quantification and mechanism of white supremacy as well as a quest for white sovereignty and/or nationalism). Both exclude Black people and fuel intersecting violences toward those deemed out of place. Second, I use the term to reimagine black sanctuary, radical connectivity, and mutuality, namely, valuing and recognizing each other as whole and as ends. Although exclusion isn’t a goal for me, I do suggest rethinking and interrogating who belongs in sanctuary/ies, namely if communities find certain persons consistently harmful.
- 14 Martin Luther King Jr. also used the metaphor. Before his assassination, King told Harry Belafonte, “We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will win. But I’ve come to believe we’re

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- integrating into a burning house.” The phrase is attributed to King by Belafonte in his memoir *My Song: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 333.
- 15 Baldwin engages the “burning house” metaphor in a few places. See, for example, his conversation with Dr. Kenneth Clark and his book *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963).
- 16 *Loving Black Boys* employs a range of sources, including personal experiences from the last twenty years, history, black feminist theory, black feminist religio-cultural theory, black and black feminist theology, academic and popular press books and articles, statistics, government documents, social media posts (new age letters and papers), and otherwise. It’s unconcerned with the boundaries and rules of empirical data, dominant paradigms and methods, and so on, and is much more invested in an organic multitextual and critical cultural dialogue. The ancestors showed us that storytelling matters. As one colleague put it, “Morrison, Baldwin, Jordan, hooks, Lorde, Walker, Wright don’t need empiricism. They still knew this world!”
- 17 I see black safety as aspirational, particularly as Black people are perceived as threats, the site of crisis, and therefore out of place. Baldwin notes that safety “sleeps” beneath racism. Put simply, antiblack racism makes black safety sometimes inaccessible and/or difficult to access. Yet *Loving Black Boys* explores creating some semblance of safe space for us among us, despite racism. That is, can Black folks be safe to one another and produce safe spaces among us for our mutual survival? The notion of sanctuary herein says yes. For more on Baldwin, see Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin,” *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, no. 39 (Fall 2016): 42–52, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/revolutionary-hope-conversation-between-audre/docview/1868053685/se-2>.
- 18 I write the following in *Freeing Black Girls*:

The distinction between *inter* and *intra* is significant. While *interracial* denotes interactions between different racial and ethnic bodies, *intra-racial* highlights engagements within a racial body. I deploy it to engage happenings within and among Black folks, sometimes interchanging it with *intra-communal*. This isn’t meant to absolve what happens interracially due to white racism and white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, however. Simultaneously, this book deploys *black community* and *intra-communal* not in terms of a monolith or singular entity but instead as a range of spaces where Black folks gather. They’re communities within communities where Black people live, connect, work, build, encounter each other, and make meaning and sense of their lives. While *community* and *communal* can be about a certain district, zone, or four-block radius, it’s much more than that. More, it’s both tangible and imagined. (161n16)

- 19 June Jordan, “The Creative Spirit: Children’s Literature,” in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai’a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 11–18.
- 20 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 47–48.
- 21 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 104.
- 22 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 152.

- 23 Sanctuary is foremost for Black folks. Perhaps one day the outer layers may be more inclusive along the lines of politics. See Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 67.
- 24 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 67.
- 25 Lorde and Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope.”
- 26 Jordan, “The Creative Spirit,” 12.
- 27 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 154.
- 28 See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai’a Williams, eds., *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).
- 29 See Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 80. See also Assata Shakur, “The Tradition,” AssataShakur.org, <http://www.assatashakur.org/poem1.htm> (accessed May 29, 2024).
- 30 Lorde and Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope,” 45.
- 31 In *Freeing Black Girls*, I argue the patriarchy refers to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, a resource of white/ “true” manhood and white masculinity, which maintains the idea that white men are the “original” men and centers the rule of the white cisgender *pater familias*—namely, the (white) heteropatriarchal father/man—within the home, society, politics, and empire. “True” refers to what white cisgender manhood is supposed to be (or not) in relationship with historical ideals around “true” womanhood. Thus, “true” manhood / “the” patriarchy is distinct from “real” manhood / aspirational black patriarchy. I place “real” and “true” in quotes throughout *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* for both citational and critical purposes and to critique the belief that there’s a singular script or set of rules for gender, or that there’s some sort of “real” or “true” prototype. “Real” manhood is a cultural term that refers to Black men and intraracial stereotypes about what black cisgender heteropatriarchal manhood is supposed to be (or not). “Race makes black patriarchy at best aspirational (some would say oxymoronic) because Black men don’t collectively hold dominion in American society. *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* argue that though patriarchy has different points of access and rewards, aspirational black patriarchy is no less material intracommunally. Its impact is still operative and felt” (Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 164n36). “Aspirational” screens in how patriarchy activates, even if from a place of victimization, among Black folks. It’s no less tangible. We’re collectively vulnerable to its convictions. The latter requires critical, not false, consciousness. I’ll say more about intracommunal heteropatriarchal violences in later chapters. See Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 161n23, 173n32, 179n31, and chapter 5, “Ordinary or Insurgent? From Toxic Femininity to Revolutionary Mothering.”
- 32 It’s imperative to discuss the nuance between the BLM hashtag, movement, and organization. The origins of the hashtag and movement are disputed. I won’t argue that here. Notwithstanding, the BLM organization, founded after the murder of Trayvon Martin, was linked to demonstrations in Ferguson by the media after the murder of Michael Brown. Some of the activists in Ferguson saw this linkage with the BLM organization as a hijacking by out-of-town activists. Others hold that the BLM organization was the “real” or official activist structure. This caused tensions. As an organization and/or movement, BLM exists on a continuum of radical social movements for black lives. However, not every person standing up for the rights of Black people is part of the BLM organization or

movement. Still, black social movement since Trayvon Martin's murder has been framed in relation to the BLM movement. However, the BLM movement, which encompasses a range of activities, peoples, and more, in the movement for black lives, isn't reducible to the BLM organization.

Today, it seems we're in a post-BLM *moment*. Whether a movement or moment or both, BLM was a significant spontaneous organizing body that made structural connections among global and local policing, militarization, the carceral state, sex and gender violence and discrimination, and otherwise in the continuous struggle for freedom. They periodize something particular and were successful in the things that they achieved on the continuum (Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 16). The crises among the leaders in the formal organization as well as what appears to be a collapse, or a lapse at best, raises questions about the sort of post-moment that we're in. Activism in BLM was most explicit between 2012 and 2020. Unfortunately, black social justice uprisings have quieted since 2020. After the 2020 uprisings, foundations, book and movie deals, red carpets, and other lucrative media platforms appeared more prevalent, despite steady police violence, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and affirmative action, a rise in "anti-woke" laws, campus protests for Palestine, and otherwise. To be clear, social justice movement work can happen in a range of venues. Many of the BLM leaders and activists are still working for justice in other spheres. We also cannot ignore the long history of American intelligence efforts to silence black social action. Nor can we negate how capitalism, along with white supremacist harassment, may also corrupt movement work. All of this to say, the present moment needs more unpacking.

- 33 As I write in *Freeing Black Girls*, *partus sequitur ventrem* is a legal doctrine which established that Black/African children born during slavery followed the status of their mothers. It comes from Roman civil law, which concerned personal property. Black/African slave mothers and their offspring were considered chattel, the property of slavers. Some Black men were angry with slave mothers because they interpreted slave childbirth as Black/African slave women keeping the slave system going. However, some women and girls gave birth due to breeding, which was a form of rape. Children created through rape or consensually were born into a structure of bondage that was no fault of the mothers.
- 34 #SayHerName came about due to silence around the police state and its violence toward Black women and girls. While the 2020 uprisings did a better job of speaking the names of both George Floyd and Breonna Taylor after some criticism, it's still the case that police violence against Black cisgender men and boys receives the most national attention. The black, endangered male narrative remains an organizing force in ways that Black endangered women, girls, queer, and transgender folks are not. *Loving Black Boys* explores a more inclusive framework for endangerment. Concurrently, it discusses how Black men and boys are specifically and differently targeted. For more on Black mothers and Black slain sons, see Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 35 Black children in general are coming of age in a context where black death by the state is consistently on display as well as a persistent possibility. The pressure for Black children to avoid the hunt is taxing as well as a kind of psychological warfare.

In the opening story, Seth worries about getting shot. It was understood between us that death could come by way of the Trumplers or the police. Black mothers navigating the present moment have heightened anxieties about being “good” mothers. One, “good” mothering is often equated to keeping Black children safe and thus alive. Two, the burden is largely on Black mothers to produce successful Black sons who become “real” Black men but aren’t killed by the state. Three, not only are Black mothers still fighting against racial stereotypes about immoral and insufficient mothering, but we’re trying to survive ourselves. The political and social anxieties around raising boys to be “real” and productive men turn some Black mothers into heteropatriarchal apologists that support problematic behavior from their sons. I’ve been that mother, even as a black feminist. I’ve never taught heteropatriarchal dominance. I always critiqued it when I saw it. Yet I also sometimes struggled between affirming my son’s humanity and doing so at the expense of others.

- 36 Black sovereignty for me has to do with building more emancipatory, love- and justice-centered communities and relations among Black folks while also collectively and individually surviving and resisting the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal state. Some may feel this is an impossibility. Perhaps. It’s a goal. I say more about it in the book chapter “The Black Church Movement Profile Is Dead: The Audacious Absurdity of Transgressive Imagination between ‘The American Dream’ and the Nightmare,” in *Moved by the Spirit: Religion and the Movement for Black Lives*, ed. Christophe D. Ringer, Teresa L. Smallwood, and Emilie M. Townes (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023). For more on my use of *bible*, see *Freeing Black Girls*, 20–21.
- 37 Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, “The Bible and Black People: A Torrid Love Affair,” *Newsone*, September 11, 2023, <https://newsone.com/4710931/bible-black-people/>.
- 38 Sekou, “The Bible and Black People.”
- 39 See Tamara Lomax, “These Hos Ain’t Loyal: White Perversions, Black Possessions,” in *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 34–58.
- 40 I discuss Christian supremacy in *Freeing Black Girls*. It notes the lineage between slave-owning Christianity, white supremacy, manifest destiny, and white (and white-adjacent) conservative evangelical Christianity as well as the demand for legalized conservative Christian governance, superiority, and dominance. I place emphasis on white supremacist Christianity in this book, particularly in chapter 3. Each insist on Christian governance and a Christian nation. While there may be room in Christian supremacy for nonwhite yet white-adjacent people, white supremacist Christianity centers a theology of white supremacy.
- 41 Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls*, 21.
- 42 Manifest destiny is the white settler colonial belief that white people were divinely destined to own, expand, and dominate in the West.
- 43 I discuss misrecognition at length in *Freeing Black Girls* to critically engage the work of racial stereotypes and scripts.
- 44 The longer I live, the more I realize the latter is inevitable. While my hope is for a nonviolent revolution of values, I’m reminded of King’s “Letter from the Birmingham

Jail,” where he writes that power is never ceded willingly. It must be demanded through a radically courageous devotion to justice.

1. PROVERBS FOR BLACK BOYS

- 1 In chapter 4 of *Freeing Black Girls*, “Emancipating Proverbs 31: Liberating Rough, Nasty, and Aggressive Black Girls to Women,” I argue that Proverbs 31 in the Bible is misused as a heteropatriarchal script for constructing gender hierarchy and identity for cisgender women and girls. What is often left out are the warrior characteristics of the imaginary woman in the text and more importantly the Queen Mother’s instructions to her son, King Lemuel, to be righteous and just (Proverbs 31: 2, 9). I center these instructions in this letter to my sons, just as the Queen Mother did when she wrote to King Lemuel. I write not as a queen but as a black feminist mother with emancipatory hopes for the future. Simultaneously, Proverbs 4: 10–14 (KJV) contends, “Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; And the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; And when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: Keep her; for she is thy life. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men.” I offer these sayings with similar hopes. Tamara Lomax, *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025).
- 2 I discuss various difficult personal experiences with Black boys and men throughout my life in *Freeing Black Girls* and how I wish they knew and did better.
- 3 Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, 1992), 3–5.
- 4 See *Freeing Black Girls*, chapter 1, “Black Girls Matter: Letter to My Fourteen-Year-Old Self.”
- 5 Martin Luther King Jr.’s theory of inherent dignity and worth is shaped in part by his grandmothers’ notion of “somebodiness.” It’s the idea that everyone is somebody, sacred, and valuable. This undergirds his desire to achieve beloved community where everyone matters; everyone has a right to vote; no one is humiliated or castigated by unjust laws; every person is treated as an end and never a means to an end; and everyone has a right to safety, impartial protection under the law, a decent job, a living wage, housing, the free choice of neighborhood, equitable education, the full benefits of modern science in health care, and participation in the political decision-making process. Everyone should experience “genuine equity” through the radical promotion of the cause of all people. King believed this required nonviolent direct confrontation with the status quo and that it is the moral duty for all people to establish a socially, politically, and economically more just society. He had some challenges in terms of sexism and gender. I’ve critiqued those elsewhere. Notwithstanding, I find his ideas on somebodiness and “genuine equity” useful for building sanctuary and resistance efforts. For more, see Tamara Lomax, “Black Feminism and Black Moses, Part II,” *The Feminist Wire*, January 21, 2019, <https://thefeministwire.com/2019/01/black-feminism-and-black-moses-part>