Gregory Love told the jurors that he had only been looking for his roommate but had forgotten his glasses in his dorm room. In November 2002, the promising pianist and glee club vocalist was a sophomore at Morehouse College, the nation’s only historically Black college for men. In the shower room of his dormitory, Love peered over a stall to find a fellow sophomore, nineteen-year-old Aaron Price, who immediately took the intrusion as a sexual advance. Price was enraged and began shouting antigay epithets as he stormed back to his room to retrieve a baseball bat. Minutes later, Love lay clinging to life on the cold ceramic floor tiles as his blood ran toward the drain. His skull had been fractured.

Price, the son of a prominent Chicago pastor, received two ten-year sentences for aggravated assault (to be served concurrently). In the trial, which concluded in June 2003, Love insisted that he was not gay, thus sparing his classmate an additional five years in mandatory sentencing under Georgia’s newly enacted antihate crime law—the first time the state had attempted to prosecute such a crime. Most Morehouse students and staff defended the perpetrator. Justifications for Price’s violence swiftly smacked of a gay panic defense—the controversial criminal defense strategy in which mostly male perpetrators of (even lethal) violence against
mostly gay men and trans women often claim temporary insanity, self-defense, or provocation due to unwanted same-sex sexual advances. Responses from administrators attended not to the safety of queer students, but to the loud outcries of a largely homophobic student body. The college’s president assembled a task force that issued a lengthy campus survey with questions that included, “How far should Morehouse go to separate heterosexuals and homosexuals in the residence halls?” and “To what degree does Morehouse’s tradition of producing strong men affect your views about homosexuality?” The survey normalized antigay institutional practices as a response to antigay violence, while elsewhere public relations and media-related efforts from administrators sought to sweep the issue under the rug. While issuing the perfunctory public statements about civility, safety, and zero tolerance, they never addressed the central issues of homophobia, sexuality, masculine violence, the rights of an undeniably significant population of queer Morehouse students in a city that, by the 2000s, was largely considered to be a destination school within networks of gay and same-sex-loving Black men. This incident, the subsequent outcry, and the aftermath of institutional response blew a mask off the face of Morehouse College that it had held tight for so long. How could an institution so preoccupied with refuting stereotypes of violent Black manhood and presenting a face of Black male respectability to the world be stoking the flames of homophobic violence against Black men within its own walls?

When the controversy over this brutal attack erupted, I was a twenty-year-old junior at the adjacent all-women’s Spelman College and the senior columnist for the Maroon Tiger, Morehouse’s official student newspaper. The incident shook me, but the responses incensed me. The dearest friends I met in school were integral to my coming of age then as they remain cherished friends now. When you are part of the family of Historically Black Colleges and Universities
(HBCU) there is both a relief and a reassurance that comes from knowing that as classmates we had each other’s backs as we poised to face the cold blows of white supremacy beyond this incubator of Blackness that forged our adulthood. It didn’t sit right with me that there were students among us who felt on guard from sexual and homophobic violence within Black institutions while the rest of us experienced this place as an oasis and a retreat from being constantly on guard from white violence. How was it that these eloquent thinking men who could exhaustively articulate their racial subjugation could not bring themselves to understand how they were in similar positions of power to do to queer Black people what white supremacy did to all of us?

In that moment, a powerful set of questions about Black masculinity was born within me that I pursued for the next fifteen years, and this book is the culmination of that inquiry. Beyond merely provoking my curiosity, this troubling incident combined with other doubts and misgivings to engender a state of dissatisfaction with Morehouse, despite its stellar reputation within Black communities. I began addressing these questions through the lens of feminist theory in my undergraduate senior thesis. In graduate school, I became a sociologist in order to comprehend the full scope of what was at play for the Black men on that campus. This book, at its core, is a story of how the worst things Black men can do—like Price’s assault on Love—can happen within an institution so invested in promoting “the best” of Black men. Moreover, I hope that this book pushes us to consider that these rigidly institutionalized forms of Black male respectability and success are what lead to such acts of gendered violence and their toleration by the college’s leadership.

Over nearly two decades, I have witnessed a series of events that turn on issues of gender and sexuality among Black men and women thrust Morehouse into the national spotlight. A 2010 Vibe magazine exposé documented a subculture of transgender and gender-queer
“Mean Girls of Morehouse” who were systemically targeted by the college’s dress code policy. A shocking January 2016 *Buzzfeed* investigation revealed the systemic cover-up and continuous mishandling of rape allegations against Morehouse students. More recently, *The Root* published a damning account of in-fighting in the nearly all-male upper administration and the board of trustees titled “The War at Morehouse.” In both 2017 and 2019 the *New York Times* reported on Title IX investigations that were triggered by the gross mishandlings of several reports of rape and sexual harassment by students, some of which accused a student services staff member of sexual misconduct. By September 2019 a headline in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* announced that the college had a “culture of hypermasculinity” in which exaggerated masculine behaviors that included sexual harassment, gender violence, and male aggression among students and some employees were largely enabled by the college’s overwhelmingly male leadership. This pattern of occurrences has led me to believe that there is something deeply disconcerting about the ways Morehouse serves as a model for many of the largely held beliefs and presumptions about how Black men should be groomed to be racial representatives to the white mainstream. In promoting the belief that certain types of Black men best represent the race, rarely do many of us stop to consider the problematic “side effects” that result from a pursuit of such a narrowly constructed prototype of highly visible Black manhood. Men at this institution are a critical site for examining how such side effects occur when gender and sexuality become inextricably linked with class ideologies in pursuit of that racial ideal.

In a scholarly journey that has expanded my worldview far beyond what I could have ever imagined as a twenty-year-old, I have come to see Morehouse and its tribulations as situated within a much broader social and historical narrative. The glaring problems at the institution all have a social context that is both wider and more nu-
vanced than what has been captured by contemporary accounts. The headlines of today arise from issues that were decades in the making, at a time when the rise of mass incarceration and race and class warfare against Black life in American cities gave birth to a campaign of urgently talking about young Black men as a national problem. Across party lines, white interest groups and prominent Black leaders and elected officials repeated a rhetoric of Black male criminality (albeit to differing degrees and with different aims) and spoke of the emergence of violent Black male adolescent and young adult “super-predators” (I unpack this racist propaganda in the following chapter). The passage and enforcement of the 1994 crime bill coincided with demographic shifts in higher education and white-collar employment, so that, for the first time, a cohort of young Black men were coming of age in a generation where Black women outnumbered Black men in college and within the professional-managerial Black middle class that was rapidly expanding. As college-aged Black men could no longer count on outpacing Black women educationally and professionally, that shift was branded as their failure. These young men—the very cohort who were my college classmates and, later, participants in my research—were bombarded with moralistic messages about “endangered” Black manhood and panic over a “Black male crisis” just as they were inching toward success. A dramatic shift has occurred since earlier Jim Crow generations of African Americans who viewed state violence and white supremacy as relentlessly bludgeoning the dignity of persecuted Black men. This was the first generation of Black men who came of age under a belief that they had contributed to degrading and annihilating themselves and thus were partly responsible for being the problem within the race’s problems.

We have had thirty years to autopsy the 1994 crime bill and to experience the long dark night of mass incarceration that packaged Black male crisis within it. In those decades, many academic and
public discourses have finally come to dismiss the cultural and behavioral explanations of Black male underachievement and deviance that were widely popular in the late twentieth century. A few, in the Bill Cosby “Pound Cake” speech\textsuperscript{15} manner, may still believe that a well-tailored suit and a two-parent household can change the outcome of being targeted by police racial profiling, but in the present-day discourse these views are more likely to be met with backlash, critiques of victim blaming, and thorough explanations of the systemic undergirding that is both concealed by and belies these cultural prescriptions. When it comes specifically to the advancement of young Black men and boys, however, many of us both within and beyond African American communities paradoxically can understand the fallacy of cultural prescriptions and yet still cling to a received faith in these cultural and behavioral elixirs. We applaud the viral videos of where Black male grammar-schoolers spend school hours being taught how to tie a necktie and are largely uncritical of the belief that Black boys need rigid dress codes, gender segregated schooling, and stricter disciplinary environments to succeed academically (even as no evidence exists to argue that boys learn differently from girls, nor that Black boys fare better in single-sex schools).\textsuperscript{16}

The promise of schools, mentorship programs, camps, churches, and outreach services that button up Black young men and boys are still presented as the cultural antidote to Black men and boys gone astray. The vestiges of neoliberal rhetoric about the “personal responsibility” of Black communities may have fallen out of favor when describing such issues as poverty or drug abuse, but those beliefs did not entirely disappear. Neoliberalism is still widely accepted in both Black and white liberal politics so long as it is folded within a narrative in which Black boys and their sagging pants are held responsible for bettering their own condition. This “no excuses” approach to Black male success allowed educators and community
leaders to forego the hard job of assessing multiple forms of Black male intelligence and replace that assessment with a lazier presumption that the promise of Black young men and boys can be best measured by good behavior. Moreover, as Black male youth are still seen as having more problems and challenges than other gender and age demographics of African Americans, the exigencies of “improving” Black men and boys have bolstered a moral validation that these unproven cultural prescriptions are antiracist and thus prima facie beneficial for African Americans.

Throughout my graduate training, as I read and critiqued the canon of sociological works on Black men, I learned that my own discipline could not resist the allure of locating ethnographies of Black male experiences within the street life of the urban poor. The bulk of sociological writing on Black men has an almost axiomatic relationship to studies of crime, incarceration, academic underachievement, limited social resources, and widespread social marginalization. When the social sciences were primarily asking why Black men operated so differently from their non-Black counterparts in mainstream society, the answer for many of these researchers was found in masculinity—where either Black men were falling victim to the inadequacies of their own manhood or their masculinity was under siege by structural racism. In these works, Black men’s widespread social marginalization was all too often explained, at least in part, as an outcome of Black men’s historical and cultural resistance to normative gender models and white male dominance in middle-class culture. These studies not only commonly assumed that taking on white heteronormative masculine roles would be best for Black men and their families, but in their myopic focus on Black men who were “failing” masculinity they also overlooked an equally important fact: that these normative masculine gender roles (often associated with breadwinning, patriarchal family structures, and male dominance in Black communities) were also pushed onto Black men
who were not socially marginalized, but who, rather, were navigat-
ing their lives to exist and thrive within conventional cultural ex-
pectations for mainstream middle-class men. These gendered pre-
scriptions of Black male respectability were sold as cultural vehicles of upward mobility and race betterment for African Americans as a group. Throughout Black men’s history in this country, social and political campaigns were conducted as reactive parallel responses to the challenges facing Black men’s putative leadership in Black communities. Black manhood has not simply evolved alongside the history of African American racialization in this country, it is re-
peatedly and strategically positioned to frame a narrative about the race’s most pressing problems and immediate solutions. In this, I see sociology as having missed two opportunities to better under-
stand Black men and their racialized masculinities. First, sociolo-
gists have missed a critical opportunity to tell not only a more com-
plete and multidimensional story about how Black men think about and deploy masculinity as they navigate their social worlds but also to capture how and why these ways of thinking are deployed within the institutions with which they have the most contact. Second, the field has sorely missed the mark in revealing how Black masculin-
ity is not only about how these men come to be raced and gendered in their social worlds but also that ideologies and expectations of Black manhood—due to the priority and disproportionate attention it receives within Black political discourses—have consistently de-
termined how racialization is experienced and delimited for African Americans overall.

We are currently in a heightened moment of reactive respecta-
bility politics. This notion of respectability—which historian Evelyn Higginbotham described as a marginalized group’s belief that ad-
hering to mainstream standards of appearance, behavior, and cul-
tural expression will buffer them against discrimination and social injustice\(^\text{18}\)—has always been staked on ideologies and performances
of sexuality and gender. In that way, all Black respectability politics respond to pernicious stereotypes about our behavior. Reactive respectability, however, is a political project that is organized and institutionalized into social and political campaigns that respond to a particular historical moment in which prominent Black leadership, clergy, and public figures launch a moralistic discourse in response to a social, political, or economic panic.

My approach to this book was particularly informed by the work of historian Michelle Mitchell, whose book, Righteous Propagation, captures an earlier moment of reactive respectability when both Black and white abolitionists conducted sexual morality campaigns among the formerly enslaved and socially prescribed strictly Victorian sexual mores in order to secure and sacralize marital and parental ties during Reconstruction. The following chapter unpacks how sex and gender ideologies were socially promulgated in the years following emancipation to prove the moral aptitude, and therefore worthiness, of Black citizenship—particularly for recently enfranchised Black men. Morehouse is but one of the places we can see this reactive respectability being institutionalized, although, this time, in response to the contemporary moral panic of Black male crisis. Within this campaign, using masculinity to prove the rightful place of Black men as racial leaders and representatives to the white mainstream is no less riddled with anxieties and no less staked on proving the virtuousness of specific forms of sexual and gendered behavior.

With that in mind, this book takes a rather nonconformist approach when compared to many traditional sociological explorations of institutional cultures. One of the most common approaches to ethnographic or sociological studies of a particular group or organization is to focus on a single theme of social inquiry that can be elucidated by examining a site or case in depth. For sociologist Shamus Khan, that meant looking at one of the country’s premier
boarding schools to zoom in on how their cryptic interactions signal the transformation of American elitism. Ann Ferguson observed a public elementary school in order to examine how Black boys were being socialized into deviance by a culture of disproportionate and discriminatory punishments. Respectable, in contrast, does not pursue the ways a single social problem or dynamic manifests within a group of people; rather, it looks at how the institutionalization of a restrictive set of beliefs about acceptable forms of Black masculinity produces an array of social problems from constrictive class hierarchies, to a widespread campus rape culture that uses racial tropes to normalize masculine violence, to a narrowly constructed curriculum about Black male leadership that aligns with white conservatism and ostracizes Black liberatory politics. What I find fascinating is how Morehouse’s cherished ideologies about Black manhood result in paradoxical and often contradictory messages and practices that take root and flourish when the college attempts to actualize those missives into the institutional practices that “make” men.

The Paradoxical Landscape of Morehouse College

An examination of Morehouse College is a particularly important and informative way of considering reactive respectability as a response to the perceived crisis of Black men and boys. From the moment of the college’s founding until today, the mission of producing racial leaders and advancing African American men’s professional success has been central to the institution. Located in southwest Atlanta, Morehouse enrolls nearly 3,000 undergraduates, 93 percent of whom are Black. The college awards more Black male baccalaureates than any other college or university in the country. From its founding at the height of Reconstruction in 1867, Morehouse has been deeply vested within the social and moral politics of racial advancement (its founding specifically as a seminary should be con-