

## Forging Metal

### Black Masculinity, Race, and Multigenerational Trauma

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I grew up in Gary, Indiana, a city located at the base of the U-shaped Lake Michigan. From the shores of the lake in Gary, I would look west to see the Chicago skyline. In the 1960s and 1970s, Gary still appeared to be a bustling city and the foundation of Black middle-class life in Northwest Indiana. Named for the founding chair of U.S. Steel, Elbert H. Gary, in 1906, the city where I grew up was a city whose fortunes were inextricably tied to the ebbs and flows of American manufacturing during the 20th century. Once a favored destination for migrating immigrants and Blacks seeking their share of economic prosperity through employment at one of the many steel-producing plants in the area, Gary began its slow and tragic economic decline from the 1960s to the 1990s. I watched as the men in my father's generation returned home from their service during the Vietnam War to work in the steel mills, only to lose their jobs and never find work again. Men like my father, who was the first to graduate high school in his family, had grown up with a guarantee of lifelong work in the steel mills, like his



father before him. For men like my father, masculine identity and notions of manhood were inexorably tied with factory work.

When I think about those early days in Gary when I was a little four-year-old boy, I think about the smells—the city was filled with a wide range of pungent, burning, chemical-like odors which blanketed my everyday existence. My family lived on 7th and Vermont Street in those days, which was located close to the U.S. Steel plant. I could walk out from the front of our house and look north a few blocks to see the smoke spewing from the towers. Often the sky was hazy and gray. When she hung the clothes on the clothesline to dry after she washed them, my mother used to tell me she would have to hurry to bring them in before too long because all of our clothes would have silver specks embedded in them. Gary was an industrial city with gray, hazing skies and foul industrial odors and smells, and it was, like most other cities, grappling with racial tensions and racism.<sup>1</sup>

I witnessed white flight from the city after the election of Gary's first Black mayor, Richard Hatcher, in 1968. I remember downtown Gary, once filled with ornate department stores and gilded banks, later abandoned to become an emptied, dilapidated ghost town that was hardly recognizable. The stores and banks moved to the new mall—Southlake Mall—south of Gary in the newly incorporated city of Merrillville, leaving Gary to economically wither without a sufficient tax base. The southern border to Gary and the northern



border to Merrillville—53rd Avenue—was frequently patrolled by Merrillville police to intimidate Gary residents who travelled there. The city buses in Gary could not travel south to the mall, so any residents without cars would have to get off the bus at 53rd and walk to the mall on 81st Avenue. When I was in high school in

the early 1980s, the student population shifted from mostly white to mostly black in three years. The city where I grew up became the city that time forgot, as its economic fortunes turned sour.

<sup>1</sup> For details, see, e.g., <https://allthatsinteresting.com/gary-indiana>.

While I was growing up and attempting to find my own identity in a rapidly changing environment, I found myself often at odds with the world around me. My experiences with race and racism were encountered in both visceral and complex ways. My journey of understanding my own masculinity was at first skewed by my father's one-dimensional perspectives of masculinity. Who I am now was forged in the crucible that was Gary, Indiana, during the latter half of the 20th century and is juxtaposed with the decline of Black opportunity through participation in middle class as well as evolving perceptions of Black masculinity—and it was a long journey. So, I have chosen to share my lived experiences, taking a look back through three lenses—race, identity, and masculinity—to provide context to my scholarly work.

**“Man, you’re so dark that you could leave fingerprints on charcoal!”**

I honestly don't remember how or where the feeling began. I just know that, on some level, I perceived the feeling as a young child. When I was about 5 years old, I remember riding in the car with my father. He had a white 1969 VW Beetle. We were driving down 11th Avenue past his old high school, Froebel High School. I was too little to really see over the dash as my father was driving, so I remember looking at him as he drove and shifted the gears. Dad had recently been discharged from the Air Force after having served for four years. At one point during this drive, I quizzically asked my father, “If I take a bath and scrub my skin really hard, will I look like you?” My father was startled and confounded—I remember his facial expression which kind of scared me. “No, of course not! Where did ever hear something like that?” I recoiled. My father was not one to talk much about feelings.

I perceived my skin as a difference at an early age but not because I was called the n-word by someone white. I felt it within the Black community—my community. You see, I am a dark-skinned Black male, and even in the post-Civil Rights era in Gary where we had our first Black mayor, being Black and proud had caveats. Dad was

*café au lait*—you know, lighter shade with the kind of hair that would be wavy when he applied Dax hair oil and brushed it. He



bragged about being prom king his senior year in high school. As for me, I am coffee without milk. As I child, I was called everything you could imagine by the kids on the street where we played—charcoal, licorice, shoe polish, burnt, crispy, tar baby, Sambo...the list goes on. One kid at school turned and looked at me yelling, “Man, you’re so dark that you could leave fingerprints on charcoal!” At best, I was the cute, little chocolate drop kid; at worst, I was the least likely to be considered attractive. I was not going to be the prom king like my dad.

I came of age in what was still a very color-struck Black community, notwithstanding celebrated advances in the Civil Rights era. “Pretty” and “handsome” as descriptors were more aligned with proximity to white physical features. In school, I heard girls say that they wanted to date a lighter skinned boy so they can have “pretty” babies. Racism and the resulting trauma remained internalized and deeply entrenched in Gary. Being Black was differentiated from *acting* Black. *Being* Black was a shared experience by all who had African ancestry by way of the American South. *Acting* Black, on the other hand, was *déclassé* because the standard of success was distance from Black patterns of speaking or dressing. Yet, the Black community in Gary was still proudly identified as Black, with Kwanzaa celebrations during the Christmas season, wearing dashiki’s, and growing afros. No one wanted to be white, but white ways were used as the standard of success.

I have felt that I lived within overlapping spheres without ever fully occupying any particular one. We now call that *intersectionality*, but when I was growing up in the 1970s that language didn’t exist. Is there something experientially different walking around in this skin or in this space in American society? For me, I had considerable challenges to feeling a sense of belonging—within the Black community I felt anomalous and I did not feel affinity with any other racial or ethnic community. I was other. My parents did not allow me or my siblings to speak slang in the house. We were not taught code switching. Saying “ain’t” in my house meant condemnation, but saying “I am not” on the playground brought ridicule. The question of what it meant to be Black was asymmetrical for me; the more this seemed to be quantified, the more it seemed that I did not fit. Peculiar for a dark-skinned Black male from Gary, Indiana.

Navigating white spaces while I was growing up was fraught as well. Not long after my family moved into our new house in

Glen Park—what had historically been a white neighborhood in Gary—I remember my dad parking the car in the garage behind our house. Just as he backed into the garage, I saw a teenager—a young Black male—run past our house down the alley. It was a full sprint, like he was terrified. It wasn't long before I witnessed the source of his terror—a car full of white teenaged males drove past us at high speed, yelling outside the car. One of them was sitting on the hood of the car. It was like a scene from Norman Jewison's 1967 movie, *In the Heat of the Night*; a movie about racial tensions between a northern Black police officer and a southern sheriff in a Deep South city trying to solve a murder. I don't remember much about the rest of that evening; I only remember feeling fear. The next day I went to school where I played on the playground as usual with my friends, who were all white. Several of the boys started chanting a little lyric that I will never forget:

“Daniel Boone was a man,  
 He was big man,  
 But the bear was bigger  
 So he ran like a nigger up a tree!”

Why do I remember that? Because I didn't at that time know what the word *nigger* meant. It wasn't spoken in my house. So, in my young ignorance, I thought that lyric was entertaining—it was funny.

My family loved to travel when I was younger. More specifically, my mother loved to travel, and my father would comply. Either way, we had many adventures driving to places like Washington, DC, Atlanta, and St. Louis. It was always exciting—my father would organize and plan the details, like what time we would start driving, what we would pack and where it would be situated in the car, and what food we would have for the trip. Mom planned what we—my brother, my sister, and me—would wear, and she cooked or prepped what we would be eating. She was also the official co-pilot—she had all of the maps. I remember my mom and dad sitting down the night before a trip to Chattanooga, TN, conferring over a map—estimating stops for gas and/or meal breaks. I was still young, maybe 12 or 13, and I had no idea why so much detail went into planning until one particular experience on that trip. My dad needed to stop for gas, so we stopped at a gas station not far past the Tennessee border as we traveled south from Indiana through Kentucky. The gas station

was an old, kind of run-down gas station just off the highway. My dad and I got out of the car and walked in to pay for the gas before pumping. The clerk, an old greasy and smelly man, said to my father, “What do you want, boy?” My father turned to me and told me to go to the car. I don’t remember much else after that incident other than the whispered conversation of my parents in the front seat. That moment, for some reason, is seared in my brain.

So, navigating both the Black world and the white world as a dark-skinned Black male was more than troubling; it was filled with shame and with fear. It was nuanced and complex in many ways, and no one really explained that to me when I was growing up. More than anything, I felt isolated and unconnected with the world around me—the object of derision and the undesired version of Blackness. On one hand, I was so dark that all the other Black kids made me the butt of their jokes; on the other hand, the white kids felt free enough to make crude, racial jokes at the expense of my ignorance. I was a little boy who wanted to scrub his Blackness away and could not escape the trauma of his experience as a racialized being.

### **Seen and Unseen Me**

Not long after I joined the Navy in 1984, I was sent to Purdue University as a midshipman—an officer candidate in the Navy. I



was one of three Black males within the Navy ROTC cadre, which included more than 300 young people. Military spaces are largely perceived to be extra-racial—that is to say that, for the most part, race was not an issue. The reality, however, was that race was always just below the surface of every topic. Race was never once discussed while I was with any of my shipmates at Purdue, but during the year before my arrival there was a cross burning on campus in front of the Black Student Union—a building which was directly across the street from the Armory where I and other midshipmen had our classes. My white colleagues were adept at benign neglect—they interacted with me during our marching and drilling, but I was not seen or heard if I was not in the uniform, the uniform we all wore once per week. What was occurring in the cadre paralleled my experiences outside of the cadre; for example, in class, it was more of the same. During a chemistry lab class with 30 members—

enough for 15 two-person teams—I didn't have a partner nor would the teaching assistant look in my direction. My invisibility in those white spaces were bewildering and just beyond my ability to articulate at that time in my life.

My parents repeatedly told me when I was growing up that I would have to work twice as hard and achieve twice as much as any white peer to gain a measure of acceptance; My time at Purdue was my first attempt to go to college and proved to be unsuccessful. I resigned from the officer candidate program and returned to active duty a short time after that, but my experience at Purdue would remain a dark cloud over my life for the next twenty years. Because my attempt to go to college had been unsuccessful, I felt increased anxiety when navigating white spaces. I'm not exactly sure when I first thought about it, but my strategy for dealing with the discomforts of race focused on my education and a pursuit for special qualifications. I felt that being Black in white spaces required me to make my Blackness more palatable through education and training. I would later learn that this is called *respectability politics*.<sup>2</sup>

In a strange paradox, however, my father spent considerable time after my exit from Purdue telling me just how stupid and lazy I was because I had not completed college. This particular failure loomed large to him, not because he had finished college but because of his own resentment of the opportunities I had in my life. My invisibility in white spaces was compounded with being unseen by my father. While being at Purdue was traumatizing for me, I was further traumatized by my father who resented me and made it his mission to remind me just how worthless I was.

Playing the respectability politics game by joining the Navy and attempting to go to college had left me feeling more unseen than seen. When I returned from the Persian Gulf War in 1991, I was awarded my second Sailor of the Quarter Award for my unit, Naval Beach Group One. It was a proud accomplishment that affirmed my belief in meritocracy in the military. I had been promoted, and I had earned a warfare qualification—Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist—which, in those days, was a distinctive accomplishment for someone who was not a senior enlisted member. I had been awarded the Navy Achievement medal for my service while deployed to Southwest Asia. Yet despite all of these

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<sup>2</sup> For details, see, e.g., <https://www.studioatao.org/post/understanding-respectability-politics>.

achievements, when I was afforded the honor of representing my unit along with four other members at the taping of a TV show celebrating returning military members, I was still confronted with being both seen and unseen. As I met our group and we loaded in the car for the drive to Los Angeles from our base in San Diego, one of the other members turned to me and said, “Garner, what are *YOU* doing here?” I was stunned by the question. The only context I had for that question was that I was the only Black person in the group. Before I could answer, the officer in charge immediately stated that I deserved to be there as much as anyone else in the car.

I was invisible until I was an inconvenient existence in the white spaces I encountered. At the same time, in the eyes of my father I was resented as a failure for not having completed college. Not long after that time, my career in the Navy was over and the next chapter of my life began.

### “Then go in the house and put a dress on!”

So much of the dynamic between fathers and sons is about monument building, especially at that time in Gary. My father was laid off in 1979. By 1981, many fathers had lost their jobs in the steel mills and other factories throughout northwest Indiana. Men who otherwise were able to take care of their homes and their families were now underemployed, if employed at all. To survive the economic calamity overtaking them, these men were working at McDonald’s and taking on paper routes, the jobs we kids traditionally filled. No longer foremen or machinists, steelworkers, or other tradesmen, football and basketball were spaces for them to exercise their power, prowess, and bravado; playing contact sports gave them bragging rights at church on Sunday or the following Monday morning at their menial jobs. Sons became the monuments for their fathers’ lives. In this old framework, so many men have lived an enduring conflict trying to define themselves within the narrow lanes afforded us by socio-normative structures.



Imagine living in a state where sports—especially basketball—was the absolute right of passage of all able-bodied males. I never had much success at sports, not for lack of trying and not for lack of passion. Athletics just



weren't my best suit. In my father's eyes, the only way I could grow up and begin my path to manhood was through prowess on the gridiron or on the basketball court. I was a bookish kid. I completed on the debate team in junior high and in high school. In fact, I had won a statewide competition, but my space was less celebrated—at least, in the eyes of my father and many of my contemporaries growing up. The first time I played basketball I knew nothing about the game at all. My father turned to me one day when I was nine years old and told me I was going to try out for the Bidly Basketball league. Now, basketball is my father's sport—he loves the sport and spent many hours watching it on TV. He was a diehard Lakers fan. I wasn't so interested, but my dad was in command.

During our first game, my team wore red tank tops and white shorts. Our plan was to all wear red Converse "Chuck Taylors," but my father didn't want to spend the \$25 to buy them. Instead, I was the only one on the team with faded blue boat shoes which had no grip at all on the freshly waxed basketball floor. I remember running on the court feeling half naked and extremely self-conscious—my tank top and my shorts were really big and baggy on my skinny little frame, and I was slipping because I was wearing those horrible shoes. Any time I tried to dribble the ball or run down the court my feet would slip and slide so much that I was called for traveling. I remember thinking to myself, "Why do I have to be half naked in front of a crowd of people for this game?" My complaints to my father were greeted with a callous scoffing, "If you don't want to play sports, then go in the house and put a dress on!" My nine-year-old mind could not process my father's anger. Basketball was a game I didn't know, and didn't like, but it was my father's favorite, so I had to suffer through ten humiliating games.

My father was determined to turn his oldest son into a sport-loving man, and another sport he loved was boxing. My father was a huge Muhammad Ali fan and would call me to watch in my parents' room whenever there was a fight shown on TV. Part of the ritual, of course, was for me and him to have discussions about whatever he felt was important for me to know as young Black male. One evening we were watching a match between Ali and Leon Spinks on my parents' 19-inch black and white TV, which was propped up on a nightstand. My father was seated to my left in his worn-out recliner, which I remember was a hideous mustard color. I was sitting in one of the chairs brought in from the dining room, which

was adjacent to my parents' bedroom. I was attending middle school at that time and had begun to notice girls; one, in particular, I wanted to ask out to the eighth-grade dance. Her name was Kathy Mills, but my father did not know that at the time. During a commercial break from the fight, my father turned and looked me and said the following statements in rapid succession:

“I don't know what you're doing.  
I don't *want* to know what you're doing.  
Just use a prophylactic.”

These three statements comprised the entirety “the talk” that I received from my father with regard to dating and sex. Other than the feelings of shock, embarrassment, and bewilderment I had in that moment, it was clear to me that speaking with my father about anything related to girls would not be a good conversation. Conversations with my father were not so much discussions as they were statements issued from on high etched in stone with lightning bolts to be referred to as gospel. He did not want feedback that differed from his opinion.

Not long after that time, my father was sitting in the living room after dinner. My sister, who is four years younger than me, was with me in the living room watching TV when my father wanted to have a discussion with us about what we wanted to do when we grew up. He asked me first because I was the oldest and soon to be entering high school. I had loved reading about the military from the time I could read, so my answer was fairly accessible: I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy and become a pilot in the Air Force. But, it is what transpired next that has remained with me the rest of my life. My father turned to my sister and asked her—who, I will admit, is the smarter of the two of us—what she wanted to do when she drew up. She replied that she wanted to become a doctor. After hearing her answer, he tilted his head pensively to one side and responded, “Why would you want to become a doctor? All you're going to do is grow up, get married, and have babies. Why don't you become a nurse?” As an adolescent, I did not have the words to articulate how I felt about those comments from my father; all I knew at the time was that I had a visceral reaction to it that lingers to this day.

### **What Has Become of that Kid from Gary**

Growing up it was difficult to resolve my self-perceptions with expectations from my father and from society at large. I remain an

empathetic intellectual who delves into my own humanity to connect with others. What I can now articulate is that humanity is what is key, particularly in a society which fetishizes Black male bodies—in fact, *all* Black bodies. But in the space of Black masculinity, America viscerally responds to the image and existence of Black males overall but readily processes them as athletes and soldiers, *not* as intellectuals. Navigating white spaces is fraught enough but more so if, as I was, a person is ill-equipped because of the trauma that has been transmitted from one generation to the next. My father was not a bad man; he loved as best he could. Nonetheless, he bestowed upon me a legacy of trauma which has been compounded with my own experiences.

In March 2016 I was suicidal, and I was hospitalized at the VA Medical Center in San Diego. I had reached the point in my life—nearly 50 years old at that point—at which I could no longer bear the burden of my father’s perceptions of me and my masculinity, nor could I bear my own internalization of the dynamics of race I had encountered over the course of my life. Like my father, so much of my identity was shaped by my profession, my education, and how I was



perceived by others. My father died unresolved with his own past at 50 years old; younger than I am today. The cost of bearing the burdens of racism as well as unhealed wounds of Black masculinity had consumed him and left him isolated from his family. He died estranged from his children. During those dark, painful days in March 2016, I nearly died, too, likewise estranged from my own son and bearing the burden of multigenerational trauma.

My connection with my past has been both a source of pride and the foundation of incredible pain. I served in the military as my father had. I am proud of my experience in the Navy, and I am proud to have evolved mentally and spiritually. In the time since 2016, I have grown to believe that sharing my story connects me with those who have had similar experiences, but I also find strength, resilience, and courage in my stories as I release them into the world around me. I see myself differently, and I find that I have a voice in the scholarship of Black masculinity.

*Confluence*

All of this was forged in the crucible that was Gary, Indiana—a city that time has seemingly forgotten now. A city and era that consumed my father and the lives of so many men like him. Systemic racism and toxic masculinity are not esoteric terms for me; I witnessed them and felt the effects of them growing up in Gary. My own survival rested on resolving what it means to be Black and to be male in America. It has been a long journey.