If in all societies, the transition of young boys and girls to adulthood, and its accompanying gender identities, is a fraught and difficult one, the path is particularly problematic for members of subordinated groups in racist and sexist societies. Here the young adult has to negotiate a way between maintaining one’s self-respect, taking on a socially prescribed gender identity unlikely to be congenial to such a project, and carving out a possibly oppositional alternative in the hope that it will make possible not merely one’s survival but one’s flourishing, while fearing that it may endanger both. Moreover, these gender identities are not, of course, socially and psychologically independent of one another, reciprocally siloed, but involved in an intricate interactive dynamic both intra- and inter-racially, the Self defined in part through relation to the Other. Insofar as transracial sexism will generally place the heavier burden of expectations on males, the barriers to black male success in negotiating this minefield will perhaps loom highest of all. But black women have likewise had to find a way to self-respect in a Jim Crow world that categorically differentiated between “white ladies” and “negro women.”

Unsurprisingly, then, this has been one of the oldest problematics in the African American experience, commemorated in multiple familiar memes and slogans dating back hundreds of years. My title cites one of the most famous—“I AM A MAN,” the AM underlined (with a resulting unhappy ambiguity for a contemporary audience more dubious about “man”’s genuine gender-inclusivity), the defiant proclamation on many civil rights placards in the 1950s and 1960s—and the complementary negative assertion from the recent
The multi-dimensionality of this issue obviously means that it can be illuminatingly approached from a number of disciplinary perspectives, from social psychology to political theory. Since I was professionally trained as a philosopher (even if I originally—things are somewhat better these days—had to transgress disciplinary boundaries to find and bring back home for philosophical reworking discussions and insights from other subjects largely ignored in an overwhelmingly white profession), you will understand if I take a distinctively philosophical approach to the matter. And indeed, perhaps there is no need to be apologetic, since some of the key notions involved—such as personhood and respect—have their provenance in philosophy, even if mainstream philosophy is coming very late to the task of investigating their ramifications in a world structured by racial and gender hierarchies.
Moreover, the pretensions of philosophy—the original home, recall, of many subjects that have now declared their independence and gone their separate ways—are classically to be able to give the Big Picture. Philosophy’s boast is to be exploring and elucidating the human condition as such, at both the macro- and micro-levels. Thus Plato’s *Republic*, unquestionably the foundational text of the Western tradition, maps out for us not merely an ideal polis but a diagnosis of its relation to the ideal moral psychologies of its inhabitants. Nor are such ambitions limited to the world of antiquity; we have the example of modernity’s Adam Smith (albeit a man of many hats) writing both *The Wealth of Nations* and *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. And as a more contemporary example, John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, widely credited with reviving Anglo-American political philosophy from its mid-20th century doldrums, offers not just principles of justice for the basic structure of society but some guidelines for the moral education necessary for these principles’ realization.

So in theory philosophy should not at all be opposed to an examination of the actual workings of different gendered and racialized identities, their critique in the name of a normative ideal (since as indicated at the start, hegemonic masculinities and femininities in sexist and racist societies are likely to be morally flawed in various ways), and the linking of this critique to a larger sociopolitical picture. Though his assumptions were of course radically different from present-day ones, Plato was explicitly setting out to draw the connections between justice in the city-state and justice in its citizens. And political economy in the critical left tradition sought to unite the analysis of socio-economic structures with the appraisal of how these structures were likely to shape the moral economies of those located at different positions, privileged and disadvantaged, in their architecture. Why then—given
this legacy, both classical and modern—has philosophy been so backward in weighing in on these issues?

The argument I have developed elsewhere at far greater length and over a number of years, and which I can only summarize in the barest outline here, is that the abstraction definitive of the profession’s mission (investigating the human condition, remember) has combined fatally with its overwhelmingly unrepresentative demography. Philosophers as class-privileged males in the pre-modern world, philosophers as class-privileged white males in the modern world, have—as a result of their peculiar life experiences—developed the abstractions conceptually requisite for the investigative philosophical project in ways that typically (in Onora O’Neill’s judgment) idealize away from social oppression. So the problem is not abstraction as such, but the kind of abstraction being employed. Ann Cudd’s recent Analyzing Oppression begins by pointing out the startling fact that hers is the first book-length treatment in mainstream philosophy of oppression as a topic, despite the centrality of oppression to all human societies past the hunting-and-gathering stage. So the distinctive problems raised by gender and racial subordination have typically been ignored, even though if you add white women and people of color together, you are talking about the majority of the society’s, indeed the world’s, population. The abstract concepts of patriarchy and white supremacy (used critically rather than approbatively, that is) were not introduced into the philosophy literature by white males. Rather it is white feminist philosophers and philosophers of color who pioneered their usage, and even today they are still being resisted by the white male mainstream.

So if you want to look through a normative philosophical lens at femininity and masculinity in the real-life context of societies of gender and racial domination, you are
going to be handicapped from the start by the fact that these realities are unacknowledged in the most influential framing of issues of social justice, that of John Rawls and his disciples and expositors. The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for example—the most respected reference source for the profession—has an article titled “Contemporary Approaches to the Social Contract” which has zero references to gender and race, zero references to Carole Pateman’s The Sexual Contract and my own The Racial Contract, despite the fact that (especially given the success of our books) we are clearly the most obvious candidates for such an entry. And yet, given the idealizing assumptions of mainstream contract theory, such exclusion makes sense, insofar as it follows John Rawls’s stipulation to think of society as “a cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” whose rules are designed for the benefit of its members. Once you accept such a stipulation, it means that gender and racial domination are then ruled out by conceptual fiat, resulting in a theory of social justice utterly removed from the everyday sense of the term, which is, of course, paradigmatically about the correction of structural injustices in society.

How then would one set about developing a normative theory, a social justice theory, sensitized rather than obtuse to such realities? My suggestion is that we look at the political economy of race and gender in what I suggest should be termed (inverting Rawls) “ill-ordered societies,” and then track the implications at the ideational level of the normative masculinities and femininities generated by such a political economy. And just as “respect” and “self-respect” are key theoretical notions for Rawls (deeply Kantian in the original “comprehensive liberalism” version of his theory, freestanding in the later “political liberalism” version), they should be key theoretical notions for us, but now set against and transmuted by the context of a patriarchal and white-supremacist state. In other words,
whereas “disrespect” is anomalous for the Rawlsian apparatus, given the assumption of 
society as a cooperative venture among equals (let alone the even more idealized notion of a 
“well-ordered” society), it is central for this kind of social system, originally founded as a 
coercive venture by whites to exploit Native Americans and captured Africans. I have argued 
in other work that “personhood”—which becomes a central category with the advent of 
modernity, the American and French Revolutions, and the dissolution of intra-white-male 
class hierarchies of lord and serf—needs to be supplemented with the category of “sub-
personhood.” The periodization according to which pre-modern ascriptive hierarchy is 
replaced by liberal individualism is fundamentally misleading once one realizes how 
restricted the subset of human beings entitled to “individual” status actually is. (See, for a 
wonderful exposé on the subject, Domenico Losurdo’s Liberalism: A Counter-History.) So if 
we work only with the concept of “persons” we are going to be theoretically handicapped, 
treating as anomalous what should be regarded as modal. A political economy of personhood 
(and sub-personhood) in the moral realm needs to be developed to complement the political 
economy of the market and social structure in the socio-economic realm. What justifies white 
males domination of white women and people of color is that neither of the latter group are 
recognized as full persons, though the particular details of their inferiority will of course be 
different.

II

Let me focus on blacks, as the central subjects of my paper. In a white-supremacist 
society, particularly in the period of de jure white domination, black affirmation of equal
personhood will in general be threatening for the simple reason that it undermines the central rationale for the society’s hierarchical structure. “Racism” as a concept has been differently conceptualized by different theorists, but certainly one obvious and straightforward way to think of it is as the denial of equal personhood on the grounds of racial inferiority. Insofar as males are traditionally represented as the more aggressive sex, black masculinity as challenge to the racial status quo will thus be particularly menacing. So as with all white racist societies, white masculinity will be constructed not only in relation to white women, but in relation to black men. Prescribed black masculinities deriving from a long-established white socio-cultural repertoire will constrain which options are deemed acceptable and which subversive alternatives will be met with sanctions or, in the extreme cases, lethal force. Controversy exists among scholars of racism as to whether a short periodization (racism as basically modern) or a long periodization (racism as going back to the ancient and medieval world) is the correct one. But even if the images and stereotypes of pre-modernity are eventually judged to be ethno-religious rather than “racial,” they have had an undeniable effect as precursors to and shapers of modern racism. Whether as Ethiopian demons—black of skin and frizzled of hair, symbolic representatives of the Underworld in Greco-Roman paganism, torturers of Christ in medieval Christianity—or as Ham’s accursed grandchildren, doomed to be slaves by nature—an enduring iconography of misrepresentation has historically targeted Africans in particular, a racial singling-out that would, of course, be hugely materially reinforced by the hundreds of years of Atlantic slavery.

So the point is that black children coming to adulthood in such societies are not growing up in a favorable or even neutral semiotic and symbolic space, but one deeply poisoned in advance by stereotypes of what blacks typically are, the threat they pose, and the
warning signs to watch out for. “Look, a Negro!” the white child in France famously cries out in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, demonstrating that he already knows all he needs to know about what is less a man than a walking symbol of pernicious blackness. In the rich literature on racial domination, whether in the United States or the colonial world, and including not merely black writers like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, but also (even while being racist) white novelists like William Faulkner, a central theme has been the intimate and adversarial relationship between white self-respect and the derogation of blacks: the “ethics of living Jim Crow” in Wright’s formulation, the psychodynamics of colonial “thingification” for Césaire.

Thus we immediately appreciate how the shift to the real-life non-ideal setting of a society structured by white male domination rewrites the Kantian imperative to respect others and to respect oneself. White male self-respect prescribes a normative masculinity requiring gender deference from their co-racials, white women, and obviously a far greater degree of submission and self-abnegation from black slaves, the inferior racial other. Here it is not a matter of a symmetry of reciprocal respect among moral equals, but a racialized and gendered matrix of asymmetries of regard between moral superiors and moral inferiors. In Matthew Frye Jacobson’s summary, a U.S. citizen was essentially someone who could “help put down a slave rebellion or participate in Indian wars,” a racialized civic identity appropriate for a racial polity. From the three-fifths constitutional compromise through the 1857 *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision that the Negro had no rights that the white man was bound to respect to the post-bellum betrayal of Reconstruction and the essential voiding of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, socially recognized black
personhood, whether male or female, has at best been precarious, at worst, non-existent. In the blackface caricatures of Jim Crow minstrelsy, in the “toms, coons, and bucks” delineated by Donald Bogle as the accepted roles for black males in American cinema for most of the twentieth century, in the simian representations ubiquitous in the white racist social imaginary—from King Kong as the most threatening buck of all, imperiling not merely Fay Wray but the heart of Western Civilization itself (New York, if you didn’t know) to the online cartoons of the chimpanzee couple in the White House—we have an iconography of diminished or denied humanity that needs to be understood in terms of the “social bases of disrespect,” to use Rawlsian language, part of the moral infrastructure of an “ill-ordered society.” The hostility even today to a slogan as seemingly innocuous as “Black Lives Matter” represents at best a disingenuous denial of this history, a deliberate amnesia justifying the bad-faith imputation of an implicit “Only” at the start rather than the obvious “Also” actually intended, or, at frightening worst, an intransigent refusal to concede the claim, an overtly or tacitly white nationalist reassertion of the originally openly proclaimed identity of the United States as foundationally “a white man’s country.”

Black masculinity, then, has had to be asserted in opposition and challenge to derogatory white templates denying black male equality with white men, and prescribing a limited range of acceptable options. In Douglass’s fight for self-respect with the slave-breaker Covey, in the advent of the “New” post-World War I emancipated Negro of the 1920s’ Harlem Renaissance, in the post-World War II protest fiction and essays of black authors decrying the status of “invisibility” and “namelessness,” in the more radical 1960s’ Black Arts and Black Power movements, a continuously sounded imperative has been the transformation of norms of accepted masculinity toward the end of a black rebirth. And
unlike a hegemonic white masculinity already in power (if sometimes worried about losing it), this normative revisioning of what it was to be a black man was supposed (at least ideally) to be part of a broader movement for social transformation, a critical moral economy of the assertion of sub-persons rejecting their subordination and sub-personhood complementing a critical political economy of the way forward to the ending of white supremacy. Not merely individual survival and flourishing in a racially hierarchical order but the more ambitious, indeed revolutionary goal of group emancipation through an overturning of that order.

But here too we must be alert to the non-ideal realities that complicate the inspirational revolutionary picture no less than the sanitized mainstream picture. In a society shaped by multiple forms of domination—of class, gender, and sexual orientation as well as race—an assertion of self-respecting personhood by the subordinated along one axis may well recapitulate in disguised or even not-so-disguised form normative hierarchies along another axis. Think, for example, of a proclamation of black manhood whose goal it is to achieve the same patriarchal positioning with respect to black women that white men enjoy with respect to white women. Or a politics of uplift and respectability to overcome the stigma of ex-slave status that requires self-distancing from and denunciation of those at the lower echelons of the class ladder, who (unlike us) deserve their lowly position in the society. Or a black militancy whose uncompromising commitment to violent resistance if necessary mandates a heterosexist denunciation of alternative positions as weak-kneed “faggotry.” Under non-ideal circumstances the quest for self-respect will easily fall into the trap of seeking normative guidance from pre-existing valorizations and devalorizations themselves tainted by prejudicial representation. The founding of Black Lives Matter by three black
women, two of whom identify as queer, is a welcome break from a past tradition of civil rights activism in which women like Ella Josephine Baker and the gay man Bayard Rustin did not get the organizational credit and recognition that they deserved. But an unflinching look at this tradition brings home the extent to which respect and self-respect may—even for the oppressed—become weapons to deploy against those differently positioned in the complicated matrix of intersectional identities. For black masculinity, as for all interconnected identities, the struggle for personhood must be self-consciously located in relation to the multiple other struggles against denied humanity and a withheld equal regard.