PART 1
The World in Which Black Fathers Live

In 1965 John Oliver Killens suggested that “the Problems and the Burden of black men are historical, economic, cultural, and [sic] social” (p. 44). His point was that, in essence, the problems and burdens of black men are produced and sustained by the structure of American society. The structure of American society has positioned black men on one of the lowest rungs of its hierarchical ladder. Black manhood and, in effect, black fatherhood are elements of life grown within this environment of social and economic inequities. Within slavery and throughout the twentieth century, black men have been faced with uneven and inconsistent opportunities with which to negotiate life circumstances for themselves and their children. Moreover, the condition of their lives as black men have had repercussions for the roles and functions as fathers.

Part 1 discusses the macro- and exosystems that frame the conditions of life for black men in both past and present America. While working-class and low-income black males in general must negotiate their livelihood in a grim political economy, live-away fathers do so as black men and as parents. Chapter 1 provides a brief review and analysis of how traditional Western ideals of fatherhood, issues of black masculinity, and popular culture publicly define fatherhood for lower income never-married black men. In this chapter fathers discuss their public image and social status in a society where their parenting is, as the thirty-year-old live-away father of two insists, “trapped in a system hostile to the self-respect of black men . . . especially black fathers trying to do right by their children.” Chapter 2 describes the historical precedent of black live-away fatherhood and how economics, politics, and social systems buttressed and sustained a live-away parental status for black low-income fathers. Chapter 3 is an overview of contemporary economic conditions and how these fathers attempt to negotiate their work and education within the current environment. In this chapter black fathers talk about their experiences in the labor market and higher education.