

[00:01 – 05:00]

[Music]

**Noelle:** What uuuuup??

**Miranda:** Welcome to The Unpacked Project.

**Noelle:** We're your hosts. I'm Noelle.

**Miranda:** And I'm Miranda.

**Noelle:** We're here to explore all things social justice. It's through casual conversations, interviews and storytelling that we hope to inspire others to take action towards a more compassionate and equitable world.

**Miranda:** Because honestly, it kind of sucks here sometimes.

**Noelle:** For real. We can do better, people.

**Miranda:** Alright. Let's start unpacking.

[Music]

**Miranda:** Hey, everybody! [Laughter] Alright, we are here on this beautiful Sunday. I'm super excited, we have an amazing interview today. We've been getting a lot done.

**Noelle:** Mm-hmm.

**Miranda:** We have a Live coming up, we recorded our 'Cancel Culture' episode to kind of wrap up our sea... we're going back to seasons. We're wrapping up our season.

**Noelle:** Our season non season.

**Miranda:** And yeah, just some really exciting things. I always love days like today where we're recording content, whether that's, you know, Instagram, TikTok, going Live or doing interviews. We just really get to dive in deep with folks and just focus on the things that we really care about and sharing this information with our listeners and our followers on social media, so yeah, I'm excited to get started.

**Noelle:** Yeah, so, this season, I'm really excited about, because it's really all about empowerment and innovative programming and really learning ways that we can start adopting better narratives and more healthy narratives about communities that have been oppressed. So, today, we are joined by Martin Henson, a community organizer and activist, speaker and executive director of BMEN, an inclusive organization bringing Black men together to talk about and work through issues that are often aren't discussed openly. Martin has spent the last 10 years advocating for Black lives, addressing the systemic issues that affect Black and marginalized groups through both conventional and unconventional avenues. Using his background as a mental health counselor, Martin is able to add nuance and clarity to the way we support the livelihood of Black people. Through seminars, community events, rallies and curriculum development, Martin has worked with thousands of people around prison abolition, the fight against white supremacy and lifting up Black communities. Martin has worked extensively with the Black Lives Matter, Boston chapter and is also a restorative justice coach working with various institutions in and around Boston. So, Martin, thank you so much for joining us today. We're super excited to have you on and learn all about your experiences and your knowledge.

**Martin:** Thank you.

**Miranda:** Yeah.

**Noelle:** How are you doing today?

**Martin:** Feeling good, feeling good. Happy to be here.

**Miranda:** Yeah, yeah. Now, we're sorry we had to turn off your heater because we were, you know, getting some sound over the audio. You're in Boston and I know it's kind of chilly, so I hope... now I hope that you're holding up out there as we're in sunny Florida. So, Martin, you know, in more of our recent episodes, they've focused on harmful narratives and really how societal messaging plays such a large role in the way that individuals and groups of people are framed, thought about and treated within our society. You know, we often find ourselves discussing, Noelle and I, discussing the interplay between all the 'isms' whether it's capitalism, racism, sexism, you know, things like that, and you shared in our intake that you've shed many of your previously held views and beliefs and that we should always keep evolving. So, can you share your own experiences and personal evolution living within this society?

**Martin:** Yeah, you know, growing up, living as a Black man, has been... it's been, I would say that it's been hard but you learn to adapt to the way that the world sees you because you have to. So, when I was younger, around 12, my dad was killed. We lost him. And I was surrounded by Black men, in my world that really were able to come together and really got to rescue me from going into a dark place and so much of my life in addition to racial justice has been an effort at maintaining those relationships and making sure brothers stay around, stay in my life, are not victims of the systems that oppress us. So, I've had to read a lot. My stepdad used to make me read different types of books around Black history when I was younger, that was kind of the norm that I grew up with and what I got used to, and then from there, stepping into different activist stuff from whether it be dinner six or going to college and figuring out what you want to do and how to do that and then a lot of the movement around police brutality stuff happened. And with that, there was different people I looked up to at different times, ranging from, you know, MLK is my namesake, I'm named after Martin Luther king.

[05:01 – 10:22]

**Martin:** Let me see, Frances Cress Welsing to Angela Davis to Bayard Rustin, more recently, Ava DuVernay. There's a lot of work in that, Ahmed Baba, you know, just going through that and all the ideologies associated with each one. At different times though I might have been... thought I was a democrat at one point in time, Pan-Africanist another, Black Liberation, Black Revolutionary and now kind of really being a strong advocate for, you know, Black male studies and the ideas associated. So, you know, I kind of went all across the board figuring out how best to do it.

**Miranda:** Well, I think that's so important, right? Like, you sometimes have to explore all of those things to know really where your values lie and what resonates with you and like you said, the best way to go about it. And I think having a lived experience within all of that says so much.

It allows you to connect to people in a different way than someone who maybe hasn't explored all of that, so I can appreciate that deep exploration, you know.

**Noelle:** Yeah, and it's definitely a big reason why we wanted to have you on today. You know, like, one of the things I always say with doing this work is like, I am a white woman doing this work and don't know a lot about, you know, the topics that we talk about. I'm certainly not going to sit here and act like I know a lot about Black masculinity studies. And so, you know, we want to have you on to hear about this because one of the things that I thought was interesting when we were trying to research before the episode, like, when we're coming up with questions and I'm trying to guide the interview is looking at research and looking at, you know, what the field and the studies say, and there seems to be a lot of diversity within the field of Black masculinity studies, so some of the theories that we were reading about the social experiences of Black boys and men are sort of understood from a feminist or intersectional lens and we talk about intersectionality a lot. So, from the intersectional lens, it seems like Black males live within a system that values heteropatriarchy but then they're also simultaneously experiencing that devaluation of Blackness within our society, but then there's research such as from Dr. Thomas Curry, you had sent us over some information that indicates that those disciplines kind of minimize or wrongly analyze the experiences of Black men and so, Dr. Curry uses this social dominance theory as an alternative to intersectionality, and that kind of theorizes that patriarchal societies, like in-group males and females see out-group males as cultural and biological threats to their group, so just a lot of different ways of kind of understanding this. So, then the subordinate males become targets for violence and discrimination. So, there's different ideologies, different theories and we're really interested in hearing what's your conceptualization of Black masculinity, given the research but then also your lived experience obviously within our world.

**Martin:** Yeah, a lot of it came from not being able to connect with some of the intersectional framings and how they thought about Black men. And I was like, 'oh, intersectionality, we can talk about all the ways, the identities, if that's the way that you frame yourself and how it connects with the way that you live and exist', and then I noticed when I would bring the conversation relative to men and it's like, 'well, not you', like, we're primarily talking about women. And I was like, okay...you know, it almost felt like I was rejected from that paradigm. It was like, oh, that's just not a thing that can situate and understand the relationships that Black men have to this and the complexities in it. And then you would have this really weird thing where, you know, Black male queerness was seen as a kind of more just inherently positive factor, kind of redeeming factor of Black maleness, and I was like, what is this? Like, I don't understand where these concepts are coming from? And for them to be really strong and powerful in a movement that was galvanized by the victimization of Black men at the hands of police, while also saying that Black men talking around their victimization is taking up too much

space, I was like, I got to find something different. So, when I came into to the work of Dr. Curry, and talking about how out group males are targeted by society because they're a threat biologically to the prevailing dominance of, let's say, white supremacy, I was like, okay, this makes sense. And this is why I always feel weird when we describe the impact of white supremacy as, you know, when we go into the framing of white heteropatriarchy, it doesn't give an analysis on what white women do to uphold this system, and with my fear of white women where that comes from. So I'm like, okay, this feels like it's more aligned and from... and when starting BMEN, an organization for Black men to mobilize them towards their own support, I initially came from a frame that was more rooted in maybe Black queer feminism and, you know, Black men need to understand privilege and power, and that was a motivating factor until I realized that that men don't relate to that.

[10:23 – 15:00]

**Martin:** That's not motivating them to actually intervene in violence and historically, hasn't. It's been different values as it relates to maleness and masculinity that we've had to develop due to being under, you know, systemic oppression and having been enslaved and trying to hold our culture and our kinship. So, like, I felt like I was rejected from it and I had to find something that valued me in a very particular way.

**Miranda:** Thank you. And, you know, vulnerability is often a topic within Black masculinity studies and it can be understood in different ways, such as an increased vulnerability to experiencing violence and discrimination. You know, but also from this lens of emotional vulnerability and expression, right? So, your work has found that there are many layers to the experience of Black men that are not fully addressed. So, do you think that certain kinds of vulnerability are more recognized or allowed than others?

**Martin:** Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. I think Black men exists a lot of times as objects in relation to, and theoretical formulations often really focus on that. So, when we're seen as being vulnerable, like, you can be vulnerable in relation to your child or to your family or to your partner and those are accepted, but being vulnerable as an object into yourself may make you seem threatening or useless if you're not able to control yourself. So, like, for me, I've had to learn how to moderate my emotionality because if I seem too jazzed up, now I'm dangerous. So, I have to contain that, and part of the work of BMEN is creating support spaces for Black men, as you can have a space where you don't have to worry about that need to moderate due to the fear of people who don't have your same identity. When we can talk about these things that maybe folks don't have the language or haven't felt the need to articulate in the way that I do but we just understand because we in the space with each other.

**Noelle:** Yeah, so, I mean I know a lot of those... the harmful narratives that do exist, often position Black men as perpetrators rather than acknowledging that they can actually be victimized and are victimized. Black men who are the victims of sexual assault or gender-based violence often have very few places where they can turn to for support and I know the Black Men Engagement Network, BMEN, which you've mentioned a few times, we want to hear more about, I'm started with the idea of exploring healthy ways to respond to sexual harm and then expanded to encompass the unique Black male experience. So, can you share more about BMEN and just also the importance of awareness and prevention?

**Martin:** Yeah, BMEN's like, evolution was very parallel to my own evolution and thinking and trying to find things that worked because we were talking so much around, you know, Black men being dangerous or hostile and I'm like, alright, well, you know, what do you... what do we do about this? Before I got to the point where I'm like, the full nature of who Black men are isn't encompassed by the hurts that people have had resulting from us and how that connects with kind of the historical framings of Black men but I was like okay well what do you do with this? So, thinking about, you know, when #MeToo first hit, I just like, I noticed that no men were really saying anything and I was like, what is that? Like, I was like, why? You know, my initial assumptions that it was something like inherently negative, meaning that, you know, men have... they've harmed someone and they just... they're fearful or shameful or whatever, which could have been happening but when I started to talk to men, I realized that how men think about consent is like, less developed. And even like, even their own understanding of consent towards themselves, it's like, very... like, we don't talk about it. So, I was like, man, in order for us to really start being able to address it, you got to have to know what your own relationship to this thing is first and then you can know, you better know when you're kind of moving outside of the norms or moving outside the box. And that kind of started the whole conversation from moving to like, oh, men have stories of being victims of sexual harm and they don't have a victim label or status, so like, how do you process through that? So, we did a few workshops. These workshops, with a couple people in the community, I knew this wasn't specific to Black men, this is more so men in general, around sexual harm and men just telling stories and what came from that is that for one, it was hard to sit through.

[15:01 – 20:11]

**Martin:** It's just hard to witness that and be a part of that process. It was difficult and also like, sharing things, I feel like I could have done better. But what came from that is like, where these things were developed from and some of the misunderstandings, some of the fears, some of their own histories of something happening to them that informed it. So, I was like, oh, okay, this is different. And then, I think when I... some of the prevailing ideas around men, let's say hegemonic masculinity that I found myself struggling with is that people had a hard time believing that men were interested in doing this work without having some interest in dominating other marginalized or less privileged, less powerful folks. So, I was like, I was dealing

with that, I'm like, man, why is this... you've been talking about it, like, I thought I would get more support in doing this, not my only reason but I'm like, I was just surprised and I was like, what is happening here? So all of that was in the beginning formations and continues to be in the evolution of BMEN.

**Noelle:** So, in terms of programming or prevention, you know, that you all have, what are some of the things that BMEN does or things that people can get involved in, through your work?

**Martin:** Yeah, so, we have the regular support groups that we do once a month for Black men, it's from 5 to 7 every second Sunday. Then, we have the Bridging The Gap program, that's straight Black men and trans women of Color coming together to have conversation and dialogue about our experience in the world and how we can better reduce stigma. That happens on a quarterly basis. Then, you have the sexual harm workshop that we do probably like once yearly. So, just making sure we get all the things together to do that. There's no date set up for the next one that, and we've done some Covid-19 support and then continually, we just do education and advocacy that frames Black men positively and talks about interventions and strategies that we've used to either support ourselves or disrupt some of the more harmful things in community. So, that's what we got going on right now.

**Miranda:** I like that disruption piece especially.

**Noelle:** Yeah, I'm curious about that, actually like, what are... like, what are some of the things that you all work on in relation to that, because it's... like, on before, I had heard you mention about white women and how they uphold these systems of harm, obviously, as a white woman, I am interested in that and try to give information to white women out there of like, how we uphold these systems and how we can be harmful and how we can become aware of that and change behavior - our thinking and behavior. So, do you have recommendations or do you have, you know, anything for our listeners in terms of how that can be disrupted? Like, what can we do?

**Martin:** Well, I think part of the kick that I've been on lately is that the assumptions around primary identity in America. Let's say, if we go back to, you know, Black people, when we were enslaved, we're not seen as people, so, it was like, men and slaves or men and Natives. Like, that was the distinction of power. So, when we moved into this kind of thing, I guess America, maybe European, ideas are like men and women are the primary markers for difference. Here, what do those things mean and the... as it relates to white women, the kind of universal

assumption that maleness is always going to have a dominating impact on woman-ness. White women are able to enact racialized assumptions, power engagements in the same way that they always have, and say, well, 'I'm not doing it because I dislike Black men or dislike Black people, it's just their masculinity, we have to target that'. So, it's a progressive framing of the same narrative and lens that have always existed in relation to Black men and just having people evaluate what the nature of maleness and the woman-ness is, as we see like, in feminism struggles with being inclusive to Trans women, like, that's the thing but this idea of like, bio-essentialism is also kind of... it's the foundation to like, American understandings of the self and what men are and what women are. So, like, going back to that very piece and like, really digging into that, that's what I feel like I would have white women do it because a lot of times white women are white people, when harm happens, they begin to refer to Black people like beasts and monsters and all these adjectives. And I think we forget that you can, let's say, as a man, I can still be doing things that are sexist or misogynist and as a, let's say, a white woman, she can still be doing things that are racist or maybe anti-black but you can still do all those things and we can be working at the same time to be better and no one has to be necessarily greater, you know, if we all have that same goal.

[20:12 – 25:09]

**Miranda:** Yeah. I mean, I appreciate that. I think it's a... there's a lot to think about. I think that your work encompasses so much. And ultimately, you know, this work can always sometimes feel like a complete overhaul and essentially, it is, it has to be, right? But I always say, we don't have to change the world, we just have to change our environments around us and if we're able to do that, you know, eventually, we're going to get to where we want to be. So, I'm so appreciative of the work that you do and the experience and the lens that you shared with us today. Is there anything else? Oh, actually, I do have one more question. If you could leave listeners with one message. Sorry to put you on the spot, but if you could, kind of an all-encompassing message or something that is, you know, really near and dear to your heart within this work, what would it be?

**Martin:** I would say to read Dr. Curry's 'The Man Not'. It really gives far more concise explanations and points to our difficulty as seeing Black men and boys as victims and it kind of goes into like, what these structures and these formulations and why they impact us the way that they do. Yeah, that's the thing I would leave people with. It's just we're at the point where we have to kind of evolve and change a little bit and I've... and I'm that's the thing that I like to do. I like the challenge. I'm not the same person I was five years ago, ten years ago, and I just challenge folks, you got to do that work too.

**Miranda:** Yeah, we should always continue growing and I think, you know, you had mentioned this kind of these thoughts that when folks, white folks are feeling challenged by Black people, Black men especially these narratives that they create or start saying in their heads, or out loud, but even if they're not necessarily spewing that hateful rhetoric, our biases, their biases still lie within that mindset. And so, we may not be recognizing these things outwardly but it's also important to note that they still live within us. And so, that is also part of why this work is so important. So, a lot of people may think, I'm not racist, I'm not sexist, I'm not whatever 'ist' or 'ism', you know, but we still live in a country rooted in all of that, you know, kind of as you mentioned...

**Martin:** Oh, I do have another thing. I forgot. I was thinking about this today. So, just to get... the long and short of it is that, you know, racism, conservatives say they just don't like Black folk, they're just clearly or white supremacist if you want to go real hard with it and progressive side, progressives tend to enact and push for their biases in relation to other marginalized groups. So, they'll say, hey, I don't have a problem with Black men, it's just the way that Black men treat Black women, where the Black men treat Black folks, but it'll... they'll do that with us in different groups and just play us off each other. So, I just want to name that because it's so sneaky, you know, it's so slippery, it comes in there, so yeah.

**Miranda:** Yeah. Well, that's the thing about messages, you know. Like, they are loud, sometimes they're loud and they're in your face and they're clear and sometimes they're not, you know, sometimes it's like psychological warfare, right? Like, you know, so...

**Martin:** It is.

**Noelle:** It is. No it literally is. But they feel justified. Like, I mean and that's the scary part, right? Like, you get into these conversations with people and you're like, damn, like, you really believe that, right? And you're out here, interacting with people with these mindsets...

**Miranda:** You have children

**Noelle:** You have children.

**Miranda:** You're a teacher, you're a politician.

**Noelle:** Right? And you're walking around with these thoughts and these beliefs and they can be extremely harmful, and if people don't kind of do that work outside of themselves because, you know, people have to realize like, their experiences are not the only lived experiences of others in the world and we're never going to get anywhere if people don't start to open their minds and listen to other people and what their experiences are and how we all contribute to that as a system and we talk about systems level work a lot on this podcast because like you said, our environment's around us, if we don't start doing the work at interpersonal levels, obviously our own personal level, we need to start with, right? We have the most control over ourselves but then as we're interacting with people in our inner circles and our intimate relationships and outside of us at work and as those systems start expanding, like, how do we then start trying to create impactful change around us? And I think listening is one of the best ways we can start doing that learning, so we thank you so much for coming on today and sharing your knowledge and your perspective and sharing about BMEN. We really appreciate it. And yeah, and over the next few weeks, we're going to be having more speakers on, where we're going to be learning about more programming that exists to help empower Black men and change harmful narratives and just trying to encourage people to do this work.

[25:10 – 26:00]

**Noelle:** So, thank you so much, Martin. We appreciate it.

**Martin:** Thank you.

**Miranda:** You have a good one.

**Martin:** You too.

**Noelle:** See you all later. Thank you.

[Music]

**Noelle:** Show The Unpacked Project some love and be sure to like, subscribe and review our podcast. You can also check us out on Instagram @the\_unpackedproject.

**Miranda:** And if you enjoyed today's episode, visit our website at [theunpackedproject.com](http://theunpackedproject.com) where you can make a donation that supports the research production and operating costs of this work.

**Noelle:** Shout out to all of our listeners who unpacked with us today.

**Miranda:** See you next week.

**Noelle:** Peace.