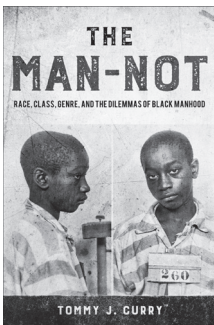


Review Essay

Studying Black Men Seriously: A Reading of Tommy Curry's *The Man-Not*

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THE MAN-NOT: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood. By Tommy J. Curry. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2017.

Tommy Curry's *The Man-Not* is required reading for all who work at the intersection of race and gender, especially in the current political milieu in which dead Black male bodies are frequently on display in America. As such, the book is a timely contribution.

I begin with a summary of the book and the arguments made in the chapters. I then focus on what I take to be the two main contributions made by the book: the expansion of intersectionality to include Black men's experiences and the critique of certain presuppositions that wrongly force Black men into hegemonic structures of masculinity. I then address two concerns I have about the book and offer responses to those concerns. The first deals with the book's self-referential angst; the second deals with my worry about creating yet another opportunity for philosophy not to become more inclusive.

Summary

The five main chapters of *The Man-Not* are relatively independent of each other. What connects them together is a general framework outlined in the Introduction, Conclusion, and Epilogue. I will begin by discussing this general frame, followed by summaries of the five inner chapters.

Curry begins the introduction by addressing the long-prevailing caricature of Black men as the “Black macho.” Although theory is supposed to question the presuppositions it brings from the everyday world, this caricature entered theory unquestioned. The book will seek to remove this presupposition from theoretical works going forward. It is already difficult to write about Black people correctly, as scholars in African American Studies immediately point out, because racism in the academy has already adopted a Deficiency Paradigm in its study of Black people, viewing Blacks as passive objects of history instead of active agents of history. In the case of Black men, this deficiency-oriented approach precludes the ways in which Black men’s masculinity is itself worthy of study, especially at a time marked by the unjustified yet permitted deaths of Black men in American society.

The title, *The Man-Not*, seeks to separate Black men from the patriarchal (white) masculinity that is often, incorrectly, attributed to them. To present this, Curry introduces the notion of “genre” as a substitution for the word “gender,” which is itself a patriarchal term to address how women are different from men. The word “gender” is also a racist term insofar as the standard for “man” and “woman” in such a classification is already a white understanding of men and women. Black masculinity, Curry argues, falls outside of patriarchy, since “racial maleness is not coextensive with or synonymous to the formulations of masculinity, or patriarchy, offered by white reality” (7). At the heart of his argument is his critique of the Mimetic Thesis, which asserts that non-white men seek to become equivalent to white men. Curry challenges this thesis. What if Black men do not *want* to become white men in any way or form? The acceptance of the Mimetic Thesis in much of the race/gender/sexuality literature implicitly grants white masculinity the highest value. Connected to the Mimetic Thesis is the notion of hegemonic masculinity, that puts all male persons into the same group, making white masculinity, and all of the problems it entails, the case for all men, even those men who are systematically excluded and even killed by white men out of a fear that someone is even trying to be equal to or surpass them.

In fact, Curry claims, there is sufficient data to show that Black men in general are more anti-patriarchy than any other group of men, which should make them potential allies in the movement against (white) patriarchy. Like women, LGBTQQIA people, and other men of color, Black men are victimized by white patriarchy in exact ways. Curry calls this victimization “Black Male Vulnerability,” signifying that Black men not only are oppressed qua non-white but also *as*

male; the “being-male” of Black men is involved in their very oppression. Thus, the oppression of Black men is at once racial, gendered, and sexual.

Intersectionality has become an established theory for connecting race, gender, and sexuality as cooperative and codetermining forms of oppression, but it tends to favor people of color (race), women (gender), and LGBTQQIA people (sexuality) in an attempt to show how different forms of oppression overlap or “intersect” each other. Although this favoring is helpful, it has a blindness about men that makes Black men “men” in the same way white men are “men.” This is problematic since intersectionality is quite good at noticing that women of color are not “women” in the same way that white women are “women.”

Thus, *The Man-Not* is a book that attempts to nuance the way in which Black men are not only not part of the patriarchal scheme but also resisters of such patriarchy. It is therefore a corrective to the prevailing understanding of intersectional analysis. As such, the book makes the case for Black Male Studies, a “liberatory knowledge schema” that treats Black men, and the Black men who write about them, as “subjects worthy of study” (230). Claiming that “[t]he Black male is unthought” (197), Curry promotes a more positive approach to theorizing about Black men. In the epilogue, Curry recounts his own frustrations with trying to publish articles written on black men (which is funny only insofar as his publication rate is actually very high) and being rejected “in the name of” feminism, especially Black feminism. Curry wants to understand why there is such a resistance against Black male thinkers writing on Black men. He points to two ways the academy discriminates against Black men: racial chauvinism, a patronizing judgment about whether a Black scholar can write on whatever they wish (in this case, Black men, although academic “gatekeeping” in general has serious racist, sexist, and heterosexist consequences); and a racial misandry that “celebrates his [the Black man] death, finds humor in his rape, and exhibits indifference to his suffering” (233). This discrimination makes it hard to publish on Black men outside of the Deficiency Paradigm or to even be a Black male publishing in the academy at all.

In the conclusion of the book, Curry points out that patriarchy’s power is not aided by the presence of Black men, and that Black men are often the victims of this patriarchal power. Why are Black men therefore presented as the poster child of patriarchy? Black men face gendered and sexual discrimination in addition to racial discrimination. How is intersectionality blind to this fact? Curry argues that intersectional theorists have adopted Dominance Theory as their theory of gender. Curry proposes in the book that replacing Dominance Theory with the Subordinate Male Target Hypothesis would show that non-white men are one of the many targets of (white) patriarchy, not fellow co-conspirators.

I now turn to the five inner chapters. The first chapter, “On Mimesis and Men,” addresses the ways in which Black men are seen and treated as treats to (white) patriarchy, not as allies. To do this, Curry points to the historical record

to look at who is more likely to cooperate with patriarchy. White women are still the greatest allies of patriarchy in virtue of whiteness. The historical record shows this (not to mention the majority of white women, highly-educated and “uneducated,” who voted for Donald Trump in the name of the patriarchal values they sought to conserve). Curry points out how one often excludes the master’s wife from the tales of the horrors of slavery. These wives are not, after all, innocent passive bystanders. Additionally, there are ways in which Black people have participated in patriarchy without it being necessary to be male. Using Anna Julia Cooper’s notions of bourgeois respectability and morality as an example, Curry discusses the way that Black people’s desire to be bourgeois aided patriarchy instead of dismantling it. The task before us now would be to dismantle (white) patriarchy, and Black men have a role to play in that which does not result in self-destruction.

“Lost in a Kiss?” offers a reading of Eldridge Cleaver’s *The Book of Lives* to complexify Cleaver’s explicit misogyny found in *Soul on Ice*. Exploring Cleaver’s homosexual relationship with a fellow prisoner presents the racist, sexist, and heterosexist ways carceral logic marks Black male bodies. Generalizing from the prison example, Curry discusses the sexualization of Black male bodies in general as a form of oppression. Citing Fanon’s notion of the “phobogenic object,” Curry discusses the Black male body as the target for white sexual anxieties and desires, resulting in the (homo)eroticization of Black male flesh. It is this sexual anxiety and desire that creates the Black Male Rapist motif that, as we will see in a later chapter, excuses the rape, assault, and death of Black men and boys. Curry redirects Cleaver’s misogyny through the sexual and sexualized violence that white women have perpetually perpetuated on Black male bodies: “white womanhood . . . is the lynchpin of white supremacy” (103). We see this historically in the lynching of Black men, often to preserve whiteness. We also see it in rape, which Curry presents as the secret technology against Black men. Black men were raped in slavery, not just Black women. Even today Black boys and men are victims of sexual assault and rape. By making rape conceptually that which can only happen to (white) women, the ways in which sexual violence were used to control slaves and present-day Black people of any gender is understated. Curry does not go as far as to correlate having been a victim of sexual violence to the likelihood of one committing future acts of sexual violence, but Curry’s reading of Cleaver in this regard opens up that possibility.

The third chapter, “The Political Economy of Niggerdom,” offers statistical analyses of Black Male Vulnerability, defined in the introduction as “the disadvantages that Black males endure compared with other groups . . . the vulnerable condition—the sheer fungibility—of the Black male as a living terror able to be killed, raped, or dehumanized at any moment, given the disposition of those who encounter him” (29). An immediate example of this is the police’s policy of stating that one felt one’s life to be in danger by the presence of the unarmed Black body, which in turn justifies the shooting. All one needs to do is

express that one had an emotional response to blackness, and the death of Black men is then pardoned. Most of the material presented in this chapter is already in the literature concerning Black men: poverty rates, educational attainment, employment, etc. What is presented in a new light here is the bidirectionality of intimate partner violence in domestic violence cases. Curry does not present this data in order to deny that Black women are not also abused; rather, he does so in order to describe the centrality of violence itself in Black men's lived experience. No one denies that there are Black men who abuse others. What no one asks is whether those Black men were themselves abused. The role of abuse—physical, emotional, and sexual—in Curry's book is particularly striking, and I will return to this fact later. The result of this violence is a fungibility that permits the death of Black men. It is this fungibility against which Curry fights.

Chapter 4, "Eschatological Dilemmas," presents the other main theme Curry addresses throughout the book, the question of death as the condition for the possibility of Black male existence. Although one can existentially state that death is the condition for all human beings' respective existence, Curry highlights the way in which death is specifically reserved in a biopolitical situation for Black people in general, and Black men in particular. Returning to the themes of rape and sexual abuse, Curry presents many different notions of death: physical death by police and violent neighborhoods, sexual violence and rape, emotional death, and social death through ghettoization and imprisonment. Since the physical death of Black men is permitted and normalized, it is no surprise that Black men are also victims of all of the other kinds of death. If one can shoot and kill a person without even a court case, one can definitely rape and sexually abuse that person. This is the experience of Black men in America.

The fifth chapter, "In the Fiat of Dreams," Curry poses a challenge to melioristic philosophies of race that (wrongfully) believe that racism is merely a matter of choice. Influenced by Derrick Bell, Curry presents a racial realism that serves as a corrective to the wishful thinking of hopeful Blacks and liberal whites that somehow all one has to do is wait for the old generation of racists to die out and then we will be in a great multicultural society. Racism, and the racial misandry that goes with it, is a central feature of our culture, not the behaviors of particular individuals. Our society is one in which it is permissible to treat Black men as scapegoats. Using the Subordinate Male Target Hypothesis, Curry highlights the ways in which control and use of non-white males is a requirement for the continuation of white supremacy. The death and political disenfranchisement of Black men is now normalized, even to the point of being misrepresented as somehow being a benefit of "male privilege." To the hopeful, Curry simply poses two questions: "What end can hope serve for the oppressed if the ultimate end of racism is death? Can hope even be justified in a white-supremacist society that murders Blacks to maintain its social order" (181)? The deaths of Black people, especially Black men, is a required element, not

an accidental feature, of American racism. Hopeful Blacks think that someday white people will behave better, and hopeful whites think that their racism is merely some accidental smudge on their moral fabric. Curry does not trust the promise that someday white people will be morally redeemed and cease to be racist. As a result, Curry promotes the idea of a non-suicidal “more just death” (187) instead of one more (many more) death(s) accepted by waiting for moral change in white people. Curry is aware that holding such a position is to ask for exclusion from the racist academy, but it is an argument that has to be made in the name of justice. Curry replaces hope with justice, but justice here does not mean the fulfillment of that for which one hopes.

Intersectionality and Hegemonic Masculinity

The main philosophical contribution of *The Man-Not* is the thesis that Black masculinity is intersectional and anti-hegemonic, although most people who work on intersectionality are mostly focused on the experiences of women of color and thus overlook this fact. Curry’s criticism is not of intersectionality *per se* but a blind spot in its practice. Like women of color, race and gender are at play in the oppression of Black men, requiring a multidimensional approach to resisting oppression. Intersectionality has not adequately captured this fact, perhaps due to its origin in Black feminist thought. Finding themselves at the intersection of racism and sexism, Black women theorists addressed their experiences as both Black and women, aligning with men of color in the fight against racism and with women of all races in the fight against patriarchy.

Curry’s account would require a more complex arrangement, an arrangement that I think intersectionality can accommodate (but simply has not done so). By uprooting Dominance Theory and replacing it with the Subordinate Male Target Hypothesis, one would see that patriarchy, as it is commonly named, refers to *white* patriarchy. Patriarchy is always already racial. Patriarchy controls (white) women in the way that racism controls (non-white) men and women. In fact, non-white persons, regardless of “sex,” were *outside* of the notion of gender (hence Curry’s use of the term “genre” instead of “gender”). Part of racist control over non-white men included racist and sexist techniques of oppression. In short, Black men are oppressed in a racist and sexist society for both their non-whiteness and their being men, a fact that can be overlooked if one were to assume that sexism is only perpetuated against women. It is important to differentiate Curry’s claim here from the “what about men?” anti-feminist arguments made in response to the critique of patriarchy. When Curry writes that Black men are victims of the patriarchy, he is not suggesting that all men are; rather, he is pointing out that sexism is at work in racism, regardless of the gender of the non-white person.

Hegemonic notions of masculinity, perhaps summarized by James Baldwin when he speaks of the “American ideal of manhood,” obfuscates the way in which Black men are themselves victims of sexist violence. Curry is quite thor-

ough in his treatment of violence in this book. The best work is in his account of rape as a racist technology against Black men. Rape is often theorized in terms of sexual violence perpetrated by a man against a woman. Curry is not suggesting in *The Man-Not* the old retort that “men can be raped, too;” rather, he singles out rape as a particular form of racial and sexual violence. By presenting both white men and white women as perpetrators of rape, Curry makes a powerful connection between power, desire, and violence as it pertains to Black women and men. The more traditional distinction was to discuss lynching as a racist practice done to Black men and rape as a racist and sexist practice done to Black women. Curry responds in two ways: first, he shows that the rape of Black men in the South—even if not of equal frequency with Black women—was an in-place method of controlling Black bodies; and second, he presents lynching as its own sexualized process and display of white racist sexual desire. Thus, both rape and lynching serve as sexual forms of racist violence.

The raping and lynching of Black men reformulated itself after slavery in the form of the Black male rapist fantasy. This fantasy, used to justify the mob murder of Black people (mostly Black men, although Black women were also lynched), is itself a continuation of rape. If rape is defined not simply as the violence of non-consensual sexual acts but the transference of guilt to the person violated, then the Black male rapist trope is itself a rape. The fantasy transfers the guilt of white sexual control over black bodies onto the black bodies themselves, regardless of the gender of those Black bodies. Curry’s account broadens the racist notion that Black women cannot be raped to include the “cannot be raped and, in fact, must be the rapist” view of Black men. Only white women are truly raped, racist sexist logic demands, and even then only when non-white men are involved (thus, even consensual sex has to be rape). The myth of the Black male rapist is a masking of rape as a racist technology. Curry spends a lot of paragraphs throughout this book discussing the sexual violence to which Black men are subjected, either directly in terms of rape, molestation, and other forms of sexual abuse or in terms of being witness to such in the lives of others or by “association” through the Black male rapist trope. In fact, the sheer amount of violence absorbed by Black male bodies is a theme throughout the book, a theme that leaves one quite unsettled in its stark presentation yet also confirmed by Black male experience.

The Man-Not’s title points to the fact that Black men not only are not “men” in the way that white men are “men,” but that they are victims of the patriarchy in quite similar ways to women. Masculinity is not hegemonic, a fact that easily corresponds to the same fact about femininity. It is a mistake to assume that Curry’s defense of Black men here is a form of anti-feminism; to the contrary, the experiences of Black men, if allowed theoretical space, offer additional examples of patriarchy’s control over non-white, non-“male” (in the sense of “the man-not”) bodies. Intersectionality has the resources to account for this, so I think it is more of an issue of practical application than theoretical deficiency. Since most of the work in intersectionality has been done by feminists, gender

defined in light of Dominance Theory has occluded the possibility of thinking of Black men as something other than mimetic patriarchs.

The two main targets of Curry's critique are not intersectionality and feminists who use the method; rather, they are the Dominance Theory and the Mimetic Hypothesis. The Mimetic Hypothesis presupposes that every male-identified person is trying to become more and more like white men. This supposition can be refuted, and Curry's book is a kind of manifesto for Black men who wish to resist the hegemonic pull of white masculinity on manhood. *The Man-Not* does a wonderful job at critiquing the Mimetic Hypothesis. Black men do not live lives sufficiently similar to white men, nor do they share in (white) patriarchy's desire for domination over women. The Dominance Theory is harder to defeat, especially given the overall power of (white) patriarchy over our culture. Perhaps Curry would argue that (white) patriarchy uses Black men's masculinity against women, transferring patriarchy through Black bodies in ways that do not benefit Black men and in fact harm them. More could have been said in the book about how women actually do experience patriarchy through Black men, and how that patriarchy undoes even Black men's progress towards overcoming patriarchy themselves.

Taking Black Lives (and Philosophers) Seriously

Another main theme in *The Man-Not* is the disregard or fungibility of Black male bodies. Curry is not only thinking about Black men killed at the hands of the police. In the Introduction Curry writes that he is afraid of being "forced to not speak" (1). He continues: "They shame me when I speak about Black men and boys . . . I hear: patriarch, sexist, misogynist as they condemn me for identifying the murderers and lynch mobs of Black males. They wear hoods with disciplinary embroidery . . . I fear they will make me be still; they will kill me" (1). This theme continues throughout the book. Is the academy against talking about Black men and boys? Is the academy against those who do? Is there room in the academy for Black men to write about themselves?

I agree with Curry that the academy has not made space for Black men (or Black people at all, regardless of gender) as subjects of inquiry. There is plenty of work that treats them as objects, often as statistical trends or the literal number of dead bodies shot by the police. The worry that *The Man-Not* will be negatively received permeates throughout the book, resulting in a very restless writing style and an agonizing self-referentiality that is found in most books that discuss race, gender, or both. There are hundreds if not thousands of philosophy books published every year, most of which are not so worried about whether the ideas presented therein will be published, let alone vehemently critiqued. I personally wish that Curry did not have to write with such urgency and angst about whether the book itself could do both what he wanted and what could be published. There are books published on quite banal matters: quotation

marks, tattoos, even sandwiches. None of those books defend their existence to the extent Curry's does.

What would it mean for the academy to take Black lives seriously? What would it mean for the academy to truly believe that the ideas of a Black philosopher may refute well-established accounts about race, let alone gender, let alone a topic that has nothing to do with either? I simply assert the right for *The Man-Not* to exist, and for the arguments presented therein to be discussed, debated, even refuted if need be. Philosophers can talk about Black men, after all, just as they talk about anything and everything else. If one disagrees with an argument in the book, one should write an article or even a whole book in response.

Of course, the plight of Black people in the academy mirrors life outside of the academy. The very meaning of Black lives now must be asserted by a hashtag, something so basic that it is embarrassing that one would have to utter #BlackLivesMatter in the 21st century. Black lives matter. Black thought matters. Black philosophers matter. Books written by Black philosophers matter. It is an insult to the intelligence to argue for something so basic.

I take exception to phrases used by Ishmael Reed and Charles Mills in their blurbs on the back of the book. Both mean well, and both may very well be correct given the political climate in which we find ourselves, but I worry nonetheless. Reed writes that "Curry has taken a bullet for the brothers." A book about Black men and boys being shot should not itself be equivalent to getting shot. And who fires this bullet, anyway? Are the shots fired from within the academy? Mills writes that this book is "[s]ure to ignite a firestorm of controversy." Perhaps this is true, but no one says this about most books, even if there could be a lot of discussion concerning the book's subject matter. Both comments confirm Curry's urgency to write, and I understand what they are saying, but it should not have to be like this.

I imagine an academy where scholars write books and articles about matters that concern them. There can be objections to what is written, of course: bad arguments must be refuted, errors must be corrected, and alternative accounts and theories must be presented. There should be nothing off limits or not allowed. One could argue that the topic of Black people had not appeared much in the past, but there are Black philosophers now, and they will bring up issues that concern them, and those issues might be different than what had been published heretofore. Regardless of gender, Black philosophers are quickly praised but seldom read, and the intentions of their writings rarely occur. They are immediately relegated to a subfield without grand impact on the discipline as a whole. The biggest worry I have about *The Man-Not* is not that it is controversial or that Curry will have "taken a bullet" for writing it. My biggest worry is that the conversations about Black men will continue as if the book had never been published: the Mimetic Thesis will continue to be held as if unchallenged, the Dominance Theory will continue to have absolute power over the discussion of the intersection of gender and race, and someone years from now will

write a book on the topic of Black men and boys and have the same angst I find in this book.

Taking Black lives and Black philosophers seriously requires taking the things they write about seriously. The current academic response is at best quietness and at worse death threats and intellectual lynching. The work of Black philosophers, including the works of Black women, are politically applauded but usually philosophically ignored outside of Black circles. I believe that a different future for Black thinkers is possible, but that will require the greater academy to change its attitude about non-white scholars and themes.

On the Creation of “Black Male Studies”

Curry advocates for Black Male Studies as a practical consequence of his book. I understand the need for the academic study of Black men, so I want to clarify that I am not arguing against studying Black masculinity with greater nuance than many currently do. I do wonder whether Black Male Studies can exist with any practical consequence other than the continuing fragmentation of knowledge in the academy.

This claim may sound weird coming from a former chair of an African American Studies department. I consider fields like African American Studies, Chicana/o Latina/o Studies, Women and Gender Studies, etc. indictment disciplines, academic fields that emerged out of the inability to do serious work in the “traditional” disciplines. The work done in these departments is important, significant, and usually more practically effective than what is done in standard disciplines. These disciplines usually have a different set of fundamental assumptions about the group being studied than what is found in traditional departments. African American Studies, for example, focuses on agency instead of deficiency, sees Africa as a source of civilization instead of a “third-world” colonial territory, and treats the history of African-descended Americans as a fundamental element of the greater American history instead of a subplot.

The problem lies in the difference between the intentions of those who partake in these fields and the intention of the greater academy for having such fields exist. Given the problems Curry faces in researching and writing about Black men, a field like Black Male Studies would be a welcome respite: “I can now write about what matters to me.” Unfortunately, the academy has a different intention: “Now we will not have to deal with that topic!” Thus, all the erroneous presuppositions stay intact, and the battle for “recognition” continues generation after generation.

The accusation throughout *The Man-Not* is that the lives of Black men have not been taken seriously and thus old racist and sexist ideas about Black men persist even in spite of data and evidence. Creating a new discipline does nothing to change that problem. Interdisciplinary programs are vital for those who work in those fields, but they allow traditional subjects to avoid the much-needed revision of themselves. Using philosophy as my example here (both

Curry and I are (full) Professors of Philosophy, both of us having received undergraduate and doctoral degrees in philosophy), I want philosophy to become able to philosophically respond to the death of Black people, to allow Black thinkers' ideas to challenge and transform disciplinary assumptions and theorems. Doing so outside of philosophy frees philosophy from having to change its ways and take the ideas of non-whites and non-males (defined in terms of white patriarchy) seriously.

Black women and men in philosophy, along with members of other minority groups, have mastered the skills of the discipline and present arguments whose conclusions should change particular philosophical positions. Yet, they often are not even taken as serious challenges or criticisms. They become optional readings that prove diversity in a curriculum or some kind of proof that a professor is "not a racist." Even if such efforts are well-meant, they fail to force philosophy to change its ways. What should be done? Minority scholars are to write books and articles nonetheless, without regard to how the academy is going to take them.

I believe that one need not step outside of philosophy in order to the work that one does as a philosopher. It has become too easy for people of color and members of other minority groups to go to other departments instead of fighting the inertia of racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. that we find throughout the discipline. That solution, I believe, is too easy and lets philosophy off the hook when the problem is not philosophy *per se* but the racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. of a way-too-large number of philosophy professors.

The Man-Not is a book written by a Black male philosopher who wishes to address in a philosophical way the ideology that permits theory to turn a blind eye to the deaths of people the author cares about. It presents strong arguments and raises important questions about the intersection of race and gender in theory. I recommend everyone who works in this area to read it and, most of all, take it seriously.