Review of
Curry, Tommy J. 2017. *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*.
Temple University Press.
By *Amir Jaima*

It is with great pleasure that I have the opportunity to review *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (2017) by Tommy J. Curry, Distinguished Chair in the Philosophy department at Edinburgh University. In this rigorously-argued, meticulously-researched treatise, *The Man-Not* makes two important interventions that warrant immediate engagement by anyone who hopes to seriously study gender and race in the United States. First, it levies one of the most incisive criticism of contemporary gender theory; in brief, contrary to the predictions of intersectionality, Curry argues that "Black men and boys are, in fact, *disadvantaged* because of their maleness" (2017, 8). This basic, empirically-substantiated insight compels us to rethink our ideas of "patriarchy" and "gender." The second task is constructive. *The Man-Not* creates "a theory and an operational paradigm by which we can understand the intellectual, historical, and sexual diversity of Black men" (9). Furthermore, as the *first* text in academic philosophy that "deals specifically with the history and theorization of Black males," *The Man-Not* inaugurates a new field of study, namely "Black male studies" (8). *The Man-Not* has already been reviewed more than twenty times since its publication, almost all of which have been positive. And in 2018 it was the recipient of the prestigious American Book Award. Where several scholars across a number of disciplines have failed to find significant fault with this impactful text, I would be hard pressed to surpass them. I will begin with a brief but thorough summary of the text, followed by a short discussion of its critical reception.

The book is divided into five chapters, plus a conclusion and an epilogue. In chapter 1, "On Mimesis and Men," Curry draws upon nineteenth century ethnography and historiography in order to dispel the contemporary claim that Black men ever were or aspired to be "patriarchal." First of all, Black men in the nineteenth century were not considered "men"—much less "patriarchs"—because Black people were thought to be savages; this was evidenced not only culturally, but somehow physiologically. For instance, ethnologists and physicians argued that the relatively low pilosity of many Black men presumably disqualified them from "social manhood rights and citizenship" (52). And one physician argued that until "education will reduce the large size of the Negro's penis," he will be "ruled by that appendage, unaffected by religion, morality, or reason" (53). The prevailing political and *scientific* consensus was that, given the innate primitiveness of Black people, the American institution of slavery served an important *civilizing* purpose. Emancipation, however, removed the social and psychological constraints on the violent inclinations of Black people in general, but also on the innate "sexual insatiability" of Black men in particular (53). This alleged "scientific fact" concerning Black men

ultimately gave birth to the pernicious caricature of the "primal rapist," an image that served as one of the motivating tropes of First Wave feminism, and a "rallying point of white-supremacist violence against Black people" (59). The first time Black men were considered "patriarchs" occurred amidst the emergence of Black feminism, which proffered the "mimetic thesis," meaning that Black men presumably sought to emulate white men and white masculinity (59). Curry argues that a closer and more faithful reading of history and historiography betrays precisely the contrary: "some Black men embraced African matriarchy" (70); and in general, "Black males rejected the *gender* of white civilization by refuting the evolutionary claim whites had to racial superiority" (71).

Chapter 2, "Lost in a Kiss," is an illuminating study of two works by Eldridge Cleaver—his unpublished manuscript, "The Book of Lives," as well as *Soul on Ice*. Through Cleaver, Curry describes and criticizes the the pervasive racial stereotype of the Black Buck and Stud, which "subsumes the Black male self only as penis and flesh" (86). Curry notes that one of Cleaver's main contributions to the study of race in the United States are his reflections on "fucking," an analysis that has been "left out of our scholarly accounts of American racism" (92). Echoing Fanon, Cleaver argues that white male fears of Black men ultimately exhibit a "homoerotic obsession with Black male flesh" (90), which is "an inextricable aspect of racial psychology" (91); and white female anxieties predetermine the Black man as "a rapist even when he is not" (97). Curry goes on to argue that Black men are *not* latent rapists—though it is disheartening that one should need to defend such a claim. To this end, Curry analyzes the tragic cases of Willie McGee, Mr. McQuirter, and Emmett Till. He concludes that surveilling institutions, such as the Prison system, but also ideological vantage points such as the "Black Macho," constitute the idea of the Buck, or Black male rapist.

In Chapter 3, "The Political Economy of Niggerdom," Curry describes and indicts the disciplinary obstacles to studying various forms of Black male vulnerability. For instance, the rise and prevalence of the "super-predator" mythology among social scientists served to "solidify the connection between crime and the 'young Black male'" (112), and "to legitimate his execution and death" (133). Also, liberal arts scholars—including, notably, bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw—frame analyses of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH) as the exclusive concern of women, obscuring the complicating finding that in the Black community these sociological phenomena are "bidirectional" (120). Related, Curry argues that studies of the shocking prevalence of the sexual abuse of Black men and boys is "practically non-existent in academic literature," particularly when the perpetrator is female (124). Building on Elaine Brown's *The Condemnation of Little B,* Curry argues that these disciplinary trends among Black intellectuals betray the economic and political *currency* of anti-Blackness in general, but "racist misandry" in particular (170). Black Male Studies (BMS), Curry argues, is a necessary corrective that renders visible the unique vulnerabilities that Black men and boys incur, and discloses the conditions of their unique *speciation* as "not-Man" (92, 133).

Chapter 4, "Eschatological Dilemmas," indicts the morbidly paradoxical quality of academic discourses, whereby Black men and boys are "understood primarily by their dying" (Curry 2017, 145). Curry explains, "To choose to write on Black males is to accept that you and they are in conversation with death," a "necromancer" of sorts (141). Moreover, the abuse and deaths of Black men and boys resulting from "the murderous predilections of whites" has an unsettling erotic quality that scholars are loathe to confront (146). James Baldwin, however, poignantly characterizes this dimension of racism in his short story, "Going to Meet the Man," which Curry analyzes. And Curry's presentation of Thomas Foster's novel study of the sexual abuse of Black men under slavery, not only discloses that Black men and boys have and continue to be the victims of sexual abuse, at the hands of both white men *and* white women, but also "points out cracks in the marble base of patriarchy" (163).

Chapter 5, "In the Fiat of Dreams," articulates the tensions between the psychological outlook of Black men and boys, which is fundamentally pessimistic given their "proximity to death" (179), and scholarly attempts "to sanitize, make tolerable, *academify* Black (male) existence so that it becomes not nihilistic and fatalistic but a live thought experiment that is revised around improvement and optimism" (194), a disingenuous hopefulness that Curry sardonically characterizes as "the fiat of an ahistorical dream" (182). Ultimately, against the cultural and institutional wave of "Black misandry" (170), Curry argues that the "Black male stands alone in his surety of self….He invents concepts that sustain him" (169), concepts like Newton's "revolutionary suicide." Curry explains, "This aspect of Black male existence is deliberately missed by theory" (169), an academic and cultural oversight that Black Male Studies urgently seeks to remedy.

The Man-Not is a *tour de force*. Its conclusions are a radical break from contemporary gender theory. Surprisingly, though, feminist scholars have practically ignored this field redefining intervention. The few engagements have been lamentably superficial. For instance, in a recent collection of essays, Ashley Mack dismisses the arguments of the *The Man-Not* as "polemical critiques of Black feminists," and that "intersectionality need not succumb to singular identitarian politics" (Eguchi, Abdi, and Calafell 2020, xiii). Given the specificity and rigor of Curry's criticisms of the *published ideas* of particular, self-described Black feminists, Mack's characterization of the text as "polemical" is uncharitable, to say the least; and reducing "intersectionality's Black male problem" (Curry 2017, 208), as Curry characterizes it, to "singular identitarian politics" is a willful disengagement from the substance of the argument. Curry's basic point is that the empirical evidence concerning Black men and boys contradicts the predictions of intersectionality and significantly complicates its explanations and inferences, a point that Mack actually articulates quite well elsewhere (see Mack and McCann 2018). In the same volume, Dawn McIntosh suggests, remarkably, that Curry's arguments are "a function of whiteness" and "a function of patriarchy," in that "race and racism are intentionally removed from a race-based theory [i.e. intersectionality] in order to offer white's unaccountable access

to intersectionality" (Eguchi, Abdi, and Calafell 2020, 65). McIntosh does not defend these claims. Nevertheless, my synopsis in this review hopefully communicates the significant incongruity between McIntosh's assertions and my own reading of the *The Man-Not*. Curry's concept of "racial misandry," for instance, which builds upon the "subordinate male target hypothesis," is not an attempt to remove race as a salient factor, nor to defend patriarchy, but an effort to provide an alternate explanation of the relationship between patriarchy and racism that is consistent with the available empirical evidence.

Shaeeda Mensah provides the only somewhat-sustained, critical engagement with *The Man-Not*. In a recent book chapter, entitled "The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Criminality", Mensah argues that Curry inappropriately frames the most direct forms of state violence, not as "racist," but "more appropriately described as misandrist." This framing, Mensah argues, implicitly characterizes the suffering of Black women as *merely* "collateral damage," meaning that Black women are categorically excluding as *intended* victims of state violence, and thus largely ignored (Lee 2019). While space does not allow for a comprehensive rebuttal, it should be evident that Curry's idea of "*racist* misandry" is *descriptive* not prescriptive, drawing on empirical evidence. Thus, on the one hand, nothing in Curry's analysis precludes the possibility of a commensurate heuristic of "racist *misogyny*." Yet, on the other hand, the nature of the sociological and epistemological disadvantage that Curry describes warrants a specific term. Most notably, the sexual victimization of Black men and boys is a conceptual elision in gender theory, exhibiting a prejudicial mechanism that targets them specifically as racialized *males*.

In one oft-cited review, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò—the younger—argues that "against the advice of the text itself, I read *The Man-Not* as a work of intersectional theory" (Táíwò 2018, 8). This convergence, Táíwò explains, is evidenced by the fact that some "intersectional theorists"—e.g. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Athena Mutua, Devon Carbado, and Angela Harris—discuss the "specific target demographic" of "Black males in the US" (9). Táíwò analysis, however, misrepresents the stakes of *The Man-Not*; and he mischaracterizes the sources that Curry analyzes. First of all, as noted above, *The Man-Not* is primarily concerned with theorizing and redressing the structural disadvantages that Black men and boys incur. Thus, while Crenshaw appears sensitive to the myth of the Black male rapist, at least as it pertains to white women, there is no room in her conceptual architecture to account for Black male victims of sexual assault, especially not at the hands of female perpetrators (Crenshaw 1991, 1266).

Táíwò cites Athena Mutua's insightful concept of "gendered racism"—which she uses to refer to the particular kind of oppression that Black men experience—as an instance of intersectional theory (Mutua 2012, 346; 2006, 5, 18). Yet, Táíwò ignores Mutua's own explanations to the contrary in the same article. Mutua notes, "As the operation of gendered racism in the context of racial profiling was counter to the intuition and interpretation of intersectionality theory that had suggested that [B]lack men were privileged by gender and

oppressed by race, it complicated the notion of privilege" (Mutua 2012, 346). The phenomenon of gendered racism also calls into question the usefulness of intersectionality more broadly, but particularly vis-à-vis Black men. Mutua explains:

> [B]ecause women were seen as simply subordinate, despite other complexities, and intersectionality has primarily been used as a tool to examine the external systems of subordination that intersect with the gender regime, feminists' use of intersectionality did not provide an adequate model for applying the theory to men's lives…Masculinities scholars were thus pushed to develop a model that they thought would more fully capture the complexities of men's lives. This seemed particularly true for the lives of men of color. (363)

And while Táíwò reads Devon Carbado's relativizing of "intersectional effects" to suggest that Black men may not be "privileged" in all contexts (Táíwò, 9); Táíwò is unwilling to consider the possibility that the number of contexts where Black men are meaningfully "privileged," may be so few so as to render the ascription moot. Returning to Mutua: "These conditions almost seemed to negate the idea that [B]lack men had any male privilege at all as posited by feminist theorizing" (Mutua 2012, 346). Similarly, Angela Harris's provocative speculation—that "gender violence does not produce only female victims" and that "it may be that more men than women suffer from gender violence"—does not quite contradict, but is certainly contrary to her caveat that "[t]his does not mean that the traditional feminist focus on violence against women is wrong" (Harris 1999, 779). In a telling footnote, Harris ultimately aligns herself with multidimensionality as opposed to intersectionality (Harris 1999, 782, fn23). Nevertheless, Curry's intervention in *The Man-Not* is even critical Mutua's model of multidimensionality, given its conceptual proximity to intersectionality. In other words, while the "context dependent" analyses of multidimensionality enable scholars to *describe* the experiences of "partially privileged identities" (Mutua 2012, 355, 358), its adherence to the intersectional idea that maleness confers privilege limits its ability to *explain* "multidimensional" observations of Black men. This limitation motivates Curry's turn to Social Dominance Theory, and the subordinate male target hypothesis, as explained above. Ultimately, Táíwò suggests that there is no theoretical space outside of intersectionality, in spite of the substantive criticisms and explicit statements by several scholars, including Curry.[1]

On the constructive side, the citation density of Curry's arguments renders *The Man-Not* an invaluable resource for the new, proposed field of Black Male Studies. A number of scholars have already taken up this mantle, employing ethnography, empiricism, and testimony to study and humanize Black men and boys; but also to test and rebut "caricaturization(s) that relegate

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[1] For a comprehensive rebuttal to Táíwò's claim, see Oluwayomi, Adebayo. 2020. "The Man-Not and the Inapplicability of Intersectionality to the Dilemmas of Black Manhood." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 28 (2): 183–205. https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826519896566.

[Black men and boys] to the Macho, the criminal, the liar, the rapist, the murderer, the thug, the deadbeat father, the abuser, the misogynist, the beast, the beast cub, the super-predator, or the devil" (Curry 2017, 197). As a Black man, this text is a vindication; and as an academic, it is an invitation to engage in impactful scholarship that has real-world, anti-racist implications.

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