

Philosophy and the Black Experience



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Stephen C. Ferguson II and Dwayne Tunstall

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Philosophy and the Black Experience

STEPHEN C. FERGUSON II AND DWAYNE TUNSTALL, CO-EDITORS

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FROM THE EDITORS

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In this issue of the newsletter, we are excited to include two articles and a review of Tommy Curry's newest authored book, *The Man-Not* (Temple University Press, 2017).

In the first article, "Howard Thurman as Philosopher," Anthony Neal examines what justification we have for considering Howard Thurman as a philosopher. Neal argues how Thurman is to be located within any given school of philosophy is predicated on the presumptions we hold about the nature of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise. Neal gives special attention to the reflective character of Thurman's philosophical orientation.

In the second article, "*The Man-Not* and the Dilemmas of Intersectionality," Olúfemi Táíwò provides an interesting discussion of intersectionality as it relates to Tommy Curry's argument in his recent book *The Man-Not*. While Curry takes his aim to be a critique of intersectionality as a theoretical concept, Táíwò charges that *The Man-Not* should be read as a work of intersectionality. Táíwò raises some interesting questions about the theoretical impact and methodological pitfalls of intersectionality as a concept. Following Táíwò's contribution is an insightful book review by Ronald B. Neal who agreed to explore the significance of Curry's book *The Man-Not*.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

The *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between 10 and 20 pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between 5 and 7 pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

DEADLINES

Fall issues: May 1
Spring issues: December 1

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FORMATTING GUIDELINES

- The *APA Newsletters* adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use *italics* instead of underlining. Use an "em dash" (—) instead of a double hyphen (--).
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90.

See Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

ARTICLES

Howard Thurman as Philosopher

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My testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. Therefore, a way of life that is worth living must be a way worthy of life itself. Nothing less than that can abide. Always against all that fragments and shatters and against all things that separate and divide within and without, life labors to meld together into a single harmony.¹

Since Thurman's departure, there have been many books written with the intent of outlining his ideas, and some were produced by authors with aspirations of using philosophical frameworks to analyze these ideas; but sadly, many of these authors feel it necessary to use another thinker's framework to throw a shaft of light onto Thurman's thoughts. This article will expose Thurman as having a humanist intent; by that I mean accepting the task of making humans better, through his metaphorically argued account of the possible, based upon a reasoned intuition, using the reflective method, and the rhythms of life.² It is my belief that when an analysis of this kind is performed on the ideas of any individual for the purpose of discovering their intent, it is important to know and understand how the individual saw themselves. That is to say, it is important to know the individual's framework. The type of analysis that will here be performed is processual, meaning simply emergent in nature. Thurman even admits to the truth of the necessity for a type of analysis that overcomes the obstructions caused by peering through a tunnel. He does so in a reflection in the preface to his book, *The Search for Common Ground*. About this he would say, "When I completed this manuscript, I was struck by the feeling that here I had set down the case in rather formal terms, for what reveals itself is my lifelong working paper."³ He would further intimate that it was because he could reflect on his many works in the moment, rather than in their realized sequential and temporal moment, that he had a better understanding of what he had accomplished. In the language of process, he was able to reflectively see all of his writings as an event, as opposed to individual moments.

Nearly all of Thurman's books have displayed, on the rear cover, the description "Poet, Mystic, Philosopher, and Theologian," as a type of root narrative for the way in which Thurman comported himself in the world. In his meditations, we find his poetry. Several of his writings contain titles referring to his mystic posture. Time spent at Colgate-Rochester validates his credentials as a theologian. Why did he think of himself as a philosopher? Why are there no writings of individuals critiquing him on this claim? Howard Thurman certainly poses an issue for anyone accepting his claim. These questions and others can be flattened to resemble the total sentiment of the query as such: If Thurman considered himself a philosopher, what did he consider a philosopher to be? In answering this question, I think it necessary to describe Thurman's understanding of philosophy, the task or tasks of philosophy of which he considered himself to be performing, and others of whom Thurman considered to be similarly situated within philosophy.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman provides a method of how he would perform a study of this nature—the major variance being Jesus did not write as much as Thurman. About this type of study, Thurman writes,

It is a privilege, after so long a time, to set down what seems to me to be an essentially creative and prognostic interpretation of Jesus as religious subject rather than religious object. It is necessary to examine the religion of Jesus against the

background of his age and people, and to inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.⁴

This passage brings to the fore several important points which I will also consider in my analysis, only after squaring the subject of Thurman and philosophy. Here, Thurman indicates initially that his study was to be "creative and prognostic"; essentially, this study was performed to determine the usefulness of studying the person of Jesus in his experiential moment for other oppressed cultures, specifically, Black people in America. In order to create a robust understanding of Jesus, Thurman thought it also necessary to understand the effect of his being a part of an oppressed, minority culture. Lastly, Thurman considered the significance of the teachings of Jesus to his people. Since there could not possibly be a one-to-one comparison between Thurman and Jesus, there would of necessity be some adjustment made to the method of analysis. Nevertheless, it should serve as a sufficient commitment to the goal of this study, which is to bring clarity to the purpose of this twofold query, which is first to gain insight into Thurman's understanding of philosophy and then to determine the usefulness of studying Thurman.

Now, as I go further into this analysis, the aim is to be in accord with Thurman concerning what philosophy is and what philosophy does. Of course, it must here be acknowledged that Thurman's writings can only serve as a heuristic device in the absence of the ability to perform an in-person interrogation. Respect for the discipline of philosophy was a characteristic that Thurman displayed early in his matriculation at Morehouse College, and he credits a young professor with an A.B. in philosophy (honors) from Bates College, Benjamin E. Mays, for awakening in him a "keen interest."⁵ Thurman wanted to engage in a more systematic study of formal philosophy which implies he had knowledge over and beyond the basic. His opportunity to deepen his understanding of philosophy was limited because Morehouse, at that time, only offered courses in logic and ethics. Of this, Thurman would say,

I do not think this was accidental. In the missionary colleges of the South, few (if any) courses were offered in the formal study of philosophy. I believe that the shapers of our minds, with clear but limited insight into the nature of our struggle for survival and development in American life, particularly in the South, recognized the real possibility that to be disciplined in the origins and development of ideas would ultimately bring under critical judgement the society and our predicament in it. This, in turn, would contribute to our unease and restlessness, which would be disastrous, they felt, for us and for our people.⁶

Columbia University became the chosen location where he would find suitable conditions to feed his hunger to learn philosophy proper.

Before arriving in New York, Thurman spent May and June of 1922 in Cleveland, Ohio, working and reading philosophy independently. In July of 1922, he made his trek to New

York and began a six-week summer session taking two courses in philosophy, Introduction to Philosophy and Reflective Thinking. During Thurman's time at Columbia, the philosophy department was fertile ground, in part because of the presence of John Dewey and the "young radicals," as they were called. This was "a lesser-known group of Pragmatic Naturalists," who were "mostly disciples of Dewey's reconstructed philosophy," also known as genetic history and reflective thinking.⁷ Although Dewey was on leave and a visiting instructor in Japan during Thurman's time at Columbia, his presence was certainly felt there. It would be Edwin Arthur Burt, a young professor who had recently completed his dissertation, who would serve the purpose of providing an introduction of Dewey to Thurman, but certainly not without pressing this knowledge together with his own intellectual grindings.

The Golden Age of Philosophy is considered to be a name suitable for this period, and during this same time, philosophy was conceived of as the guide of life.⁸ Philosophers, particularly at Columbia, were employing the techniques of philosophy to solve the social and moral problems of their day. This philosophical aim was rooted in the propensity of the department at Columbia towards metaphysics. In this citadel, Thurman would be invested with the tools to struggle with and solve many of the issues which thwarted the very existence of the multitudes of Blacks in the United States, causing Thurman to refer to the bleakness of Black existence as the "Luminous Darkness." Burt, not Dewey, recounted for Thurman, in this session, the process of reflective thinking as a philosophical method, a method Thurman would use throughout his life. Thurman expressed, in detail, the effect this philosophical style had on his writing, but this point is missed by many authors eager to read Thurman in terms of their own philosophical proclivities. Thurman puts it this way:

It was an analysis of the structure of reflective thinking as a process. It examined a basic methodological approach to problem-solving in all fields of investigation, from simple decision-making to the understanding and treatment of disease and the most confused patterns of human behavior. This course established for me a basic approach that I would use not only in my subsequent work as a counselor but also in thinking through the complex and complicated problems I would encounter in my personal life as a social being. As a tool of the mind, there is no way by which the value of this course can be measured or assessed.⁹

Of course, many will read this statement by Thurman on the matter but continue to manipulate his writings so that they fit a particular philosophical method. However, it is in part the intent of this essay, as stated earlier, to demonstrate the value of Thurman to oppressed peoples and others. In doing so, I simply cannot read into Thurman things that aren't there. To do so only obfuscates this purpose.

In order to see Thurman's use of this method clearly, a return to those writings which were specifically reflectively created gives more clarity to this description of his style.

Thurman's understanding of the method is limited to the six-step method listed in the text used in the course and Burt's explication of the method.¹⁰ The steps are as follows:

- (1) occurrence of something felt as perplexity, difficulty, wonder;
- (2) observation, designed to make clear precisely what the difficulty is;
- (3) occurrence to mind of suggested solutions to the difficulty;
- (4) reasoning out the consequences involved in the suggestions thus entertained, and evaluating the suggestions by their aid;
- (5) observation or experiment to test by empirical fact the suggested solutions in the light of their implications; and
- (6) survey of the preceding thinking to uncover inadequacies that might be corrected (if possible).

Thurman wrote a three-volume set of meditations, entitled *Deep is the Hunger*, to be read for the meditation period of the worship service at Fellowship Church. These volumes of meditation consisted of short essays attempting to produce a solution to a question or issue, using the reflective method, and also a few poems of Thurman's creation. Thurman's understanding of the reflective method is demonstrated in essays like "Every Man Must Decide," particularly in the reductive five-step method which was certainly his takeaway from Burt's instruction:

The ability to know what the right thing to do in a given circumstance is a sheer gift of God.¹¹ [*something felt as perplexity*] The element of gift is inherent in the process of decision. Perhaps gift is the wrong word; it is a quality of genius or immediate inspiration.¹² [*observation, designed to make clear precisely what the difficulty is*] The process is very simple and perhaps elemental. First, we weigh all the possible alternatives.¹³ [*occurrence to mind of suggested solutions to the difficulty*] We examine them carefully, weighing this and weighing that. There is always an abundance of advice available—some of it technical, some of it out of the full-orbed generosity of those who love us and wish well. Each bit of it has to be weighed and measured in the light of the end sought. This means that the crucial consideration is to know what is the desirable end.¹⁴ [*reasoning out the consequences*] What is it that I most want to see happen if the conditions were ideal or if my desire were completely fulfilled? Once this end is clearly visualized, then it is possible to have a sense of direction with reference to the decision that must be made. If it becomes clear that the ideal end cannot be realized, it follows that the pursuit had to be relinquished. This relinquishment is always difficult because the mind, the spirit, the body desires are all focused upon the ideal end.

Every person thinks that it is his peculiar destiny to have the ideal come true for him. The result is that, with one's mind, the ideal possibility is abandoned but emotionally it is difficult to give it up. Thus the conflict.

He continues,

The resources of one's personality cannot be marshaled. A man finds that he cannot work wholeheartedly for the achievable or possible end because he cannot give up the inner demand for the ideal end. Oftentimes precious months or years pass with no solution in evidence because there is ever the hope that the ideal end may, in some miraculous manner, come to pass. Then the time for action does come at last. There comes a moment when something has to be done; one can no longer postpone the decision—the definite act resolves an otherwise intolerable situation.¹⁵ [observation or experiment to test by empirical fact the suggested solutions] Once the decision is made, the die is cast. Is my decision right or wrong, wise or foolish?¹⁶ [survey of the preceding thinking to uncovering inadequacies that might be corrected] At the moment, I may be unable to answer the question, for what is right in the light of the present set of facts may not be able to stand up under the scrutiny of unfolding days. I may not have been largely influenced by my desires where at work at the very center of my conscious processes. In the face of all the uncertainties that surround any decision, the wise man acts in the light of his best judgment illumined by the integrity of his profoundest spiritual insights. Then the rest is in the hands of the future and in the mind of God. The possibility of error, of profound and terrible error, is at once the height and the depth of man's freedom. For this God be praised!

In this reflection, Thurman demonstrated his awareness of and facility with the reflective method. Of necessity, the reflective method and the steps must be explained in detail before proceeding.

The reflective method, as created by John Dewey, was then a part of the basic philosophy curriculum during Thurman's time at Columbia. A departmental effort was utilized to create a text suitable for the course, which was entitled *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking*.¹⁷ In this text, the reflective method was explained, along with additional chapters, which made applications of the method to examples in medicine, physics, evolution, astronomy, biology, mathematics, bible, ethics, values, social science, and law.

Before *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking* was written, or prior to Thurman's enrollment in the class, John Dewey gave a speech while at the Imperial University in Japan, which became an influential book entitled *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.¹⁸ It is in this work that Dewey proposed to bring into focus his view of the necessary direction philosophy would be conscripted to take based upon the

radical changes in scientific investigation. Dewey felt that philosophy was no longer able to assume any claim to the ability of achieving objective or absolute knowledge, but that philosophy was bound just as any other system of inquiry by the science of the day, and its methods should reflect as much. This was to be achieved, to the degree possible, by a reliance upon empirical knowledge, held in tension with the understanding that the investigator's interpretation of the relied upon knowledge is limited to an inchoate science.

From Thurman's writings, it would seem that, while his metaphysical explanation for the oneness of being was intuited from an intense mystical connection to nature, he certainly used the reflective method as a way of grounding his solutions to philosophical questions in the material world.¹⁹ The major example put forth by Thurman is his attempt to answer the query put to him while traveling in India in 1936. Thurman was asked if he were betraying all people of color by traveling abroad as a representative of the Christian church.²⁰ An occurrence of perplexity for certain, it is the major question Thurman would return to again and again for the rest of his life, and this is apparent in many of his subsequent writings. Constantly, the desire to live out the impulse he felt of the experience of community would cause him to commit this as his life's aim. Thurman felt that he had received insight to the possibilities for community, when he visited the Khyber Pass;²¹ however, it was his givenness to pragmatic solutions which would move him to accept the offer to help found the Fellowship Church in San Francisco. This opportunity created for him the ability to make the application of step five in the reflective method the experimental step.

In working out this problem, Thurman demonstrated why he considered himself to be performing the task of a philosopher. As previously mentioned, Thurman was instructed in philosophy during a time when it was understood to be the guide of life, and having received a classical liberal arts education with instruction from several members of Phi Beta Kappa, it can be assumed that the motto of the fraternity had some influence on his experience. This was certainly true of the instruction he received from Mays and Burt, in spite of Mays's induction being delayed for fifteen years after his graduation. This influence spurred him to enroll for the summer at Columbia. He would take three classes that summer, but the impact of the two philosophy classes was so profound that he doesn't even mention the third class in his autobiography. Besides, he received a grade of "C" in this third class, and the future valedictorian was not usually a "C" student. In answering how philosophy guided his life, I must revisit the earlier question of what he understood philosophy to be. It would suffice to say that, for Thurman, philosophy was simply a way of life.

In expanding on this claim, I will point to three tasks of philosophy Thurman saw himself performing, while not claiming to limit philosophy to only three tasks. To be clear, these may have some overlapping functions, but I believe them to be distinct enough so as to be distinguishable from one another. The first of these tasks was, of necessity, performed in a broad manner, and it is certainly a task

Thurman would have thought to be basic per his reading of philosophy, from the most extant writings of antiquity to those of his contemporaries. It was the idea of philosophy as education, particularly as it pertains to the dictum, "Know thyself." To this end, the first question Thurman puts forth for the individual seeking to embark upon the quest of committing to a way of life, essentially creating a life philosophy, is "Who am I?"²² Even as individuals we can be fragmented, alternating between different iterations of the self, responding differently in situations that really don't require multiple types of responses. Chaotically, or de-centered, the individual reacts to situations out of an inability to define the self. The process of education, when thought of in this manner, gives the individual a sense of direction, a "True North."²³ Of this Thurman would say, "Fundamental, then, to any experience of commitment is the yielding of the real citadel."²⁴ Essentially, the individual drops all pretenses, bringing about a type of self-knowledge gained necessarily from committing to a "way" of life, which is a whole way of living, and not "ways" of life, which would be a fragmented way of living.

Next, the task of discourse, although certainly interwoven with the task of education and at points indistinguishable, is listed here separately because, although it can be referred to as a type (species) of education, it cannot be equated with education in the general sense of the term. However, it is undoubtedly applicable to even a cursory analysis of Thurman's written corpus, recorded sermons, and overall mode of life. In an analysis of this type—one that holds that the claim of a particular action of an individual is true or false—it is not wise to compartmentalize the analysis to a reflexive description of the target. Descriptive evidence from outside sources. In doing so, the moniker "social mystic" will soon appear in reference to Thurman. Operative in this descriptive phrase is the word "social," which inherently implies interaction on one level and engagement on another. Here, I simply mean that when the term "social" is applied in this way, the object of this description (Thurman) can be thought to be in communicative contact with other individuals and that in order to carry out the aim of the type of mysticism linked to him, he must have acted in a manner which was likeliest to have led other individuals to label him as such. Thurman also was, by vocation, a professor, a communicator of ideas, and as such, he spent large amounts of time in discourse with students, grounding them in many of his original thoughts concerning how to understand the nature of the lived experience and the possibilities for actualizing that which was desired. It is also in this type of discourse that Thurman would focus the bulk of his writings. It would give him the ability to commit to the realization of his desired experience for humanity through the practice of a "form of life."

This practice of a "form of life," directed toward bringing forth the realization of a desired experience is the last of the tasks of philosophy to be listed here. Certainly, it can be said that the other tasks previously listed can and are all included in this, the last of his tasks of philosophy, but they can be performed without being intended to be part of a way of life. It is only when the other tasks are offered in tandem that they can be said to be a part of a philosophical way of life; however, even in tandem they are only a part of

a philosophical way of life. The final distance to be covered on the journey towards a philosophical way of life is found in teaching, when there is a particular teaching/philosophy, and in discourse, when there is a philosophical aim in the discourse. It would seem that the philosopher would have to be a seeker of wisdom or knowledge. To be a philosopher may take the form of making logical inferences about the possible. Or to be a philosopher may simply be the putting forth of a method to make the best judgment when confronted with the choice of competing options. While I am not limiting what it is to be a philosopher to these types of searches, I am claiming that the philosopher must be a seeker of some type. Also, while the particular search may be momentary, the act of searching must be perpetual. Lastly, the philosopher may not think that there is something that can be accounted as truth; however, the philosopher must be concerned about the manner in which the particular knowledge, or knowledge in general, is attained in order to be certain that they have indeed attained knowledge. Given this limited set of qualities that I take to be peculiar to a philosopher, I will now assess Thurman, accordingly.

Actualizing potential, is a description Thurman applies to the manner in which life expresses itself. Instead of "being," which may denote for some existence in the moment, a better description would be "becoming" or an "event" in the Whiteheadian sense. Characterizing the principle of life as "becoming" has implications for Thurman's understanding of humanity and humanity's need for the search for beginnings. What's more is that it also has bearing on Thurman's philosophy, which is the greater concern at this juncture. Wholeness or oneness is the philosophy, or more precisely, the metaphysical claim, which undergirds all three works and is expressed with the most fervency in *The Search for Common Ground*. Actualizing potential as it pertains to humanity is demonstrative of Thurman's philosophical aim in discourse, and it is what enticed him to be a perpetual seeker of knowledge. Lastly, wholeness or oneness was instructive in Thurman's ability to contextually determine the logic of his propositions and to attend to any epistemological concerns.

I have maintained in past discussions²⁵ concerning Thurman's basic philosophical premise that wholeness over fragmentation was the dominant idea in all of his philosophizing. Even reconciling the notion that the contradictions of life are never permanent, a notion put before him by George Cross, rested upon wholeness over fragmentation. As he states, "from my childhood I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life."²⁶ This was indicative of his locating his method of inferences in the idea of wholeness. Deviating from this notion would affect and significantly alter all of his writings, sermons, and meditations. Although Thurman maintained the possibility that he could be mistaken, his philosophical praxis demanded that he commit to it even at the threat of death. Just as Socrates' maintenance of the idea that knowledge was virtue caused his demise, Thurman, while not suffering death, would experience his own crucible in order to demonstrate that his conception of how all things hang together²⁷ was better than a fragmented conceptualization.

This premise will be elucidated further in a later book on the subject, but the first landing of the staircase will be secured in the current analysis. About wholeness, Thurman would say,

The degree to which the potential in any expression of life is actualized marks the extent which such an expression of life experiences wholeness, integration, community. The clue to community can be found in the inner creative activity of living substances. The more highly developed the organism, the more pronounced seems to be the manifestation of the clue. Cells and organisms always show certain characteristics of direction persistence, and adaptability in their efforts to realize themselves, to round themselves out, to fulfill themselves, to become, to ripen in integration—in fine, to experience community. The more highly developed the organism, the more plainly manifest are these characteristics.²⁸

The implication to be lifted from this paragraph is that the individual expression of life cannot feel complete or whole without experiencing community. This is a profound proposition, even if it is found by some to be doubtful, because it means that it is not just good to experience community, but that community is necessary for survival. Even though we become more complex, it simply doesn't follow, according to this logic, that we become more independent. The opposite would be true, such that humans, being more complex, have a greater need for community and for more complex reasons. Also, we don't just desire community but we are affected by community. Thurman's interpretation of Jesus in *Jesus and the Disinherited* demonstrates this mindset when he points out how his explication breaks from traditional theological categories and positions Jesus as a "religious subject rather than a religious object."²⁹ This radical transvaluation denotes Jesus to be a fellow participant and exemplar in community as opposed to a relic or icon over and above the community. Finally, Thurman proclaims life to be alive,³⁰ which is not to say life as observed in a particular form, but to describe the universe at large. The significance of the term "alive" in this statement is connected to the desire life has, as Thurman explains, to live and extinguish all potential. This is the aim of life writ large, and to live in harmony with this aim requires the ancillary aim of fulfilling potential. This aim is essential to understanding Thurman and his philosophy.

NOTES

1. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 269.
2. Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 15.
5. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 42-43; and Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (University of Georgia Press, 2003), 91.

6. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 43.
7. Diane Elizabeth Davis Villemare, *E. A. Burtt, Historian and Philosopher: A Study of the Author of The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (Dordrecht; London: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 7.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.
10. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 33.
11. Ibid. Step 1. Something felt as perplexity.
12. Ibid. Step 2. Observation, designed to make clear precisely what the difficulty is.
13. Ibid. Step 2. Occurrence to mind of suggested, solutions of the difficulty.
14. Ibid. Step 3. Reasoning out the consequences.
15. Ibid. Step 4. Observation or experiment to test by empirical fact the suggested solutions.
16. Ibid. Step 5. Survey of the preceding thinking to uncovering inadequacies that might be corrected.
17. Columbia Associates in Philosophy, *An Introduction to Reflective Thinking* (New York, NY: Houghton, 1923).
18. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920).
19. Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 26.
23. Bill George and Peter Sims, *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley & Sons, 2007).
24. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 27.
25. American Academy of Religion, Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy, Morehouse College, and Spelman College.
26. Thurman, Howard, *The Search for Common Ground; An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), xiii.
27. Wilfrid Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Robert Colodny (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 35–78.
28. Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 4.
29. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 15.
30. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 14.

The Man-Not and the Dilemmas of Intersectionality

Olúfemi Táíwò

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tommy J. Curry's recent book *The Man-Not* aims to challenge narratives around Black males that are dominant in academia and among the general public. Overall, this book is well researched and an important addition to philosophy and the study of gender and race. However, the book also takes aim at contemporary theorists who make use of the concept of intersectionality, portraying

the theory and its adherents as complicit in the circulation of negative and pernicious narratives about Black males in academia and the wider culture in the US.

In this paper I will critically discuss the role of intersectionality in Curry's argument and in the wider literature, arguing that intersectionality as a theoretical approach or sensibility does not and could not have the content to adjudicate the sort of disputes between Curry and the feminist theorists he targets. Instead, Curry's book itself ought to be considered a work of intersectionality, and the implications of intersectionality as a concept need to be seriously reconsidered. Part II will briefly contextualize Curry's project, Part III will critically discuss disputes between Curry and intersectionality theorists, and Part IV will conclude the discussion.

II. THE MAN-NOT

The Man-Not covers a lot of ground. It includes an intellectual history that engages with prominent figures in Black intellectual traditions, taking Black historical figures like Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Hubert Harrison on their own terms. One particularly striking example is the careful analysis of Eldridge Cleaver's thought, to which Curry devotes chapter two. Though Curry contextualizes Cleaver's conception of race and gender using sources that primarily describe racial dynamics in the South, sidestepping an analysis that could have centered on the US West's own local conceptions, histories, and technologies of white supremacy and incarceration, it shows convincingly that Cleaver gave a clearly articulated theoretical treatment of gender and sexuality, one that engaged fruitfully with the contextualizing factors of racial violence and incarceration and that is usefully juxtaposed with Fanon's analysis of gender. The book succeeds in presenting an unusually nuanced take on Cleaver and the other figures considered in the book.¹

However, the main positive goal of the book is to challenge a different (though related) set of narratives. Curry argues that scholars have failed to make characterizations of Black males in the United States that adequately respond to the material conditions of their lives.

Curry begins by drawing on Sylvia Wynter's analysis of gender. According to Wynter, gender is a social construction of "kinds" built upon a particular, binary conceptualization of biological markers (sex characteristics) within the category of those accepted as humans: European "MAN" and "WOMAN."² Black people, who Wynter and Curry take to be excluded from the category of the human, are also separated into kinds. But these kinds are merely based on sex designations, since gender is a category for those considered human, and the anti-Blackness of the Western world excludes Black people from that category. This second kind of categorization is "genre." The Black male genre, then, is analogous to gender distinctions among white folk but crucially different in its implied relationship to the overall power structure since that relationship is mediated through the concept of the human.

Curry thoroughly reviews the available social science about Black males in the United States to criticize pervasive

"super-predator" narratives that conceive of Black males primarily as perpetrators of crime and abuse rather than also as victims; provides an intellectual history discussing how major Black intellectual figures like Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Eldridge Cleaver discussed gender and sexuality in their various historical contexts; and discusses the relationship of the Black intellectual class to the Black underclass that is so often the subject of academic analysis. These discussions orbit around the book's two primary objectives: one negative and one positive. The negative goal is a debunking project; setting the record straight where Curry feels that gender-based and related theories have missed the mark. The positive proposal advocates for a genre study on Black male life in the United States, which will involve shifting from a conception of Black males on which they are disadvantaged by racism only but advantaged by sexism to one in which the oppression of Black males is genred.³

These goals are best represented by the introduction and chapter three, "The Political Economy of Niggerdom." In chapter three, Curry applies a thoroughly researched assessment of the available social science about Black males in the United States to pervasive "super-predator" narratives. According to these narratives, Black males are just perpetrators of crime and abuse rather than also victims of both. Among Curry's findings in this chapter are that Black male-identified folks are victims of intimate partner violence and homicide at similar rates as Black female-identified folks, face significant barriers to placement in the foster-care system, and are more likely at high school age to be in prison than in the labor market. Curry argues that the effects of poverty, drug abuse, and the stigma of criminality have specific genred effects on Black males as such and that social theory ought to account for this.

Curry delivers on the positive side of things. He argues that, contemporarily, the stigma of criminality affects interpretation of Black males' actions and threatens their job prospects and relationships with others. Historically, stigmas related to Black physicality, especially with respect to sexuality, took center stage—for instance, the stereotype of the Black male as a primal rapist, which was an integral part of the ideological justification for the lynching era of racial terrorism.

Persuasive arguments throughout the work establish that the intersection of Blackness and maleness is poorly theorized by analogy to, say, whiteness and maleness. Instead, the "conceptual exploration of Black male vulnerability—of his dehumanization economically, politically, and sexually—must confront his material reality, and that confrontation should bridge the gap between theory and facts."⁴ In a contemporary context, the interpretive framework of general criminality affects interpretation of Black males' actions and in turn threatens their job prospects and relationships with other people, especially ones in which potential rape or other violent possibilities are psychologically salient. Historically, the interpretive framework provided by narratives around Black physicality, especially with respect to sexuality, takes center stage in some context. Via engagement with Baldwin, Curry claims that Black male hyperphysicality and hypersexuality ties

their symbolic or literal castration to white masculinity, which would present a problem for theories of patriarchy that tie patriarchy to the interests of male-identified people across the racial spectrum.⁵

III. THE MAN-NOT AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The main negative goal of the book is to take issue with several theoretical approaches, lines of discussion, and ways of engaging with the Black working class (both theoretically and socially) in the academy. In service of setting multiple records straight, Curry takes aim at multiple targets in this book for, ultimately, the same basic reason: he argues that they pathologize Black males.

The most obvious targets are mainstream social scientists who pathologize Black males, exemplified by Dilulio Jr., the progenitor of the “super-predator” theory that predicted a large class of young Black male criminals without basic empathy whose extraordinary violence would challenge the US social order. The empirical evidence Curry surveys contextualizes statistical arguments that Black males are disproportionately violent by setting them next to evidence that Black males are also disproportionately subject to violence of structural, sexual, and other physical kinds.

Curry also takes issue with “the Negrophobia of the Black academic class.”⁶ The end of chapters three to five provide searing indictments of this class. He is on well-trodden ground in the Black intellectual tradition: he follows Elaine Brown and Malcolm X in likening this group to the archetype of the traitorous and self-interested House Slave, and E. Franklin Frazier in alleging that this class thinks like white people, even where Black folk are concerned.⁷ He alleges that the Black intellectual class uses the categories of “the worker, or the woman, or the progressive” to cling to the trappings of solidarity with these identities considered as conceptual categories or labels, all while distancing themselves from the people that these labels describe.⁸ In both cases, Curry alleges that behind the thin veneer of theory that both of these groups traffic in lurks a deep anti-Blackness, to be exposed by serious empirical analysis of the material and other sociological conditions of the Black working class being described.

This accusation hangs menacingly over the book’s discussion of its main target: “intersectionality” and the scholars who make use of it. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.”⁹ The essay targeted “single axis” analyses of discrimination and subordination in favor of a different analytic structure, “intersectionality,” which Crenshaw maintained would be better suited for addressing Black women’s experiences and concerns as “multiply burdened” people.

However, against the advice of the text itself, I read *The Man-Not* as a work of intersectional theory. I suspect this conclusion will be equally unwelcome to the author and the overlapping sets of scholars that the book makes it its business to criticize. That there is a genuine dispute is not in question. But what exactly is in dispute from a conceptual and theoretical perspective, and what would

negotiating that dispute demand of us? Put simply: Does Curry have a dispute with intersectionality theorists or with intersectionality theory? In my view, *The Man-Not* conflates these.

Curry isn’t solely at fault. While Crenshaw noted that a multiple-axis analysis was necessary in her landmark article “Mapping the Margins,” she did not explain how one should decide which axes to involve and which to elide. Decades later, Collins’s response to the underlying conceptual difficulties with intersectionality nearly three decades later is the aptly titled article, “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas.” She recalls Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous answer when asked to define pornography: “I know it when I see it.” Collins answers similarly: “Despite our best efforts, by the end of the course my students and I both seemed stuck in Stewart’s dilemma—we thought we “knew” intersectionality when we saw it but couldn’t quite define what it was.”¹⁰

This raises more questions than it answers: Whose knowing and seeing will mark an analysis as a success or failure with respect to intersectionality? After all, we often add “sexuality, nation, ethnicity, age, and ability” to the more established list of race, class, and gender. There are other relevant categories as well, like gender identity, citizenship or documented status, and perceived religion. We could further distinguish between how these play out in the First World and the Third World. Which of these intersections are required for good intersectional analysis? How many of them? Most crucially, whose knowing and seeing will mark an analysis as a success or failure with respect to intersectionality? *The Man-Not*’s conclusion raises these questions.¹¹

Indeed, it would be good to have principled answers to those questions, or at least a basis for imagining some. It would also be good for those answers to make sense of the current norms and practices around the use of the term—concerning who is taken to be the proper subjects of “intersectional” analysis—and so on. But whenever the theoretical commitments of the concept of intersectionality are stated explicitly, it is difficult to see how the concept itself either could do this work—how it could rule out the kinds of conclusions about Black men that Curry disagrees with, or, for that matter, exclusively rule in a focus on Black women, women of color, or any other intersectional groups.¹²

Perhaps the disadvantageous effects of most oppressed identity categories will only vary in strength as intersections are added. If that were how things work, intersectionality theory would work just fine if it were primarily or exclusively concerned with figuring out how intersections exacerbate or ameliorate identity-based disadvantages or oppressions—how adding “woman” to “Black” makes racism more acute, or, equivalently, how adding “Black” to “woman” attenuates experiences of patriarchy. Perhaps a thought like this is behind the “categorical hegemony” Kwan and Curry accuse intersectional theorists of.

But there are serious conceptual problems with this approach. LaKeyma Pennyamon points out that the

basic framing of Crenshaw's intervention in "Mapping the Margins" is in tension with the supposed theoretical upshot of intersectionality: Crenshaw frames "minority women" or "women of color" as "multiply burdened" or oppressed folks in society, seemingly with men of color as an implicit contrast class. To make this generalization work, we have to have a conceptual commitment about how the intersections of race and gender will play out in different groups, namely, that race and gender/genre will always function as disadvantaging forces, relative to some unstated contrast class. But Pennyamon points out that to treat race and gender's causal contributions to a person's or group's experiences as conceptualizable before they actually intersect in a context is to treat race and gender as separate, autonomous vectors of oppression—precisely the kind of argument intersectionality was supposed to militate against.¹³

Indeed, a sober reading of intersectionality as a conceptual claim vastly complicates this picture. Bright, Thompson, and Malinsky point out that, conceptually speaking, intersections could make identity-based effects vary in many other ways. For example, intersecting effects could change the valence of either or both effects: what was a disadvantage could become an advantage.¹⁴ Intersections could even affect whether a specific identity effect is triggered at all in a particular context—for example, if, in some US contexts, being Black ordinarily leads to specific racist assumptions about one's upbringing that an audience will tend to abandon should they learn that the Black person in question is West Indian or African (perhaps in favor of a different list of specific anti-Black stereotypes, perhaps not). And all of the above could be strongly domain relative: being a Black man could work out well for someone in church politics and badly on heavily policed street corners; being a white woman could be overall disadvantageous in the home but net advantageous at the all-women, feminist-conscious-raising meeting.

These complications cast doubt on how well we can work out the typical effects of intersections without submitting our initial hypotheses to some kind of empirical analysis or review. It is not enough to acknowledge these complications at the level of individual cases or one-off concessions to objections, which, to their credit, everyone involved seems willing to do—our generalizations, which purport to describe and predict cases, ought to reflect this as well. It will take difficult and complex empirical work to sort out what our generalizations should be regarding different intersectional categories of people, whether Black males or any other.

Some intersectionality theorists have themselves noticed this genre of complication and responded to it, and as such don't seem to advocate claims quite as strong as the ones Curry attributes to the group. For example, critical legal scholar Sumi Cho explicitly denies that Black women are the only ones who intersectionality can apply to, contra Peter Kwan, who had argued that intersectionality necessarily granted "categorical hegemony" to some identity groups.¹⁵ Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, for example, characterize intersectionality as an analytic "sensitivity" or "disposition," and are concerned more with what intersectionality "does"

than what it "says."¹⁶ Each of these moves is broadly compatible with labeling groups of theories that disagree quite substantively about content as "intersectional," whether the content in question concerns the historical conditions of the Black male genre in the US, the extent of their oppression relative to that of other groups, or equally contentious claims about any other groups in the world.

Not only have theorists conceded that intersectionality as a concept is compatible with wide variations of claims, but this compatibility has been demonstrated by intersectional theorists' discussion of Curry's specific target demographic: Black males in the US, especially those that are working class. Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins," whatever its issues with framing, considers disadvantages specific to the intersection of Blackness and maleness (e.g., the dominant narrative of the Black male as constant rape threat towards white women) and causal links between these disadvantages and violence directed at Black women.¹⁷ Athena Mutua noted that gendered phenomena like racial profiling of Black males challenged the theoretical connection of maleness as a privileging aspect of Black male experience, and worked towards the general insight, just stated, which she labels "gendered racism," and is quoted in Curry's own text as challenging the conception that Black men are everywhere privileged by gender and disprivileged by race.¹⁸ Devon Carbado relativizes intersectional effects to specific contexts, which straightforwardly implies that "privilege" or lack thereof could be similarly relativized. Angela Harris even goes as far as to consider the claim that "more men than women suffer from gender violence" to be plausible (though carefully noting that this fact wouldn't delegitimize a focus on violence against women, with which I agree).¹⁹

These careful claims are very congenial to Curry's analysis in *The Man-Not*, and all of these authors are cited in the text, some even as making these very sorts of claims, demonstrating that Curry was aware of examples by which he could have framed his work as an instance of intersectional theory rather than a debunking project. Curry's lack of interpretive charity with respect to contemporary feminist theory is oddly out of step with the book's virtues in other respects: the careful attention paid to Black political thought (feminist and other) of past epochs and the carefully crafted sociological arguments given in reply to "super-predator" theory and related tropes in social sciences.

IV. CONCLUSION

I see two main takeaway points about *The Man-Not* and intersectionality theory from these considerations. First, if it is true that being male is theorized by intersectionality theorists as inevitably and in principle bound up with privilege across the racial spectrum—as Curry alleges—then intersectionality as a *concept*, theoretical approach, or "sensitivity" is no defense of or even explanation of this tendency, and intersectionality adherents and sympathizers have themselves explained why.²⁰ Then, Curry's dispute with intersectional theorists should be understood like his dispute with social scientists: the dispute is less about the tools themselves and more about what they are used to do.

The second takeaway point is methodological. Indeed, if claims made by theorists are being adjudicated based on their ability to vindicate expressions of frustration and disappointment and to advantage theorists in related professional and/or interpersonal disputes, it's not hard to imagine how the truth will be among the first casualties of the resulting wars of attrition and position. This could be how things turn out even in cases even where the frustration and disappointment are entirely justified, as I feel they are on both sides of the dispute in this case. Indeed, this very sort of distortion seems to be at play in Curry's own critique of contemporary feminist and related scholarship. But the truth will not be the only casualty. This kind of mistake runs the risk of making scholarship irrelevant—or worse—to the people and social movements it aims to benefit, since the strategic value of acting based on the claims theorists make might well depend on them being true. Scholarship that aims to support social movements and political progress has *more* reason and responsibility to maintain strict epistemic and methodological standards than disinterested scholarship, not less.

Given the complications considered here about guessing at effects of intersecting oppressions, a sober empirical and systematic analysis of how things go in the world seems like the right tool for the job of accurately describing our social world, and for grounding our attempts to change it. The sort of approach taken by Du Bois and the Atlanta school of sociology might provide a road map for the job, and *The Man-Not* would be a good start towards that kind of project.²¹

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NOTES

1. For historical discussions of mass incarceration based in California, see Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (UNC Press Books, 2017); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, vol. 21 (University of California Press, 2007).
2. Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Temple University Press, 2017), 6–7.
3. *Ibid.*, 142.
4. *Ibid.*, 147–51.
5. Curry, *The Man-Not*, 106.
6. *Ibid.*, 128.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 191–92.
9. Collins points out that the narrative of Crenshaw's single "motherhood" over the term leaves out important histories of organizing and knowledge production. As an example, Frances Beal's "double jeopardy" address took place in 1969 and was included in Toni Cade Bambara's influential *The Black Woman* anthology, and expresses a related concept.
10. Patricia Hill Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (2015): 1–20.
11. Curry, *The Man-Not*, 218–21.

12. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810.
13. LaKeyma Pennyamon, "Inversion and Invisibility: Black Women, Black Masculinity, and Anti-Blackness," *LIES Journal*, August 2015, <http://www.liesjournal.net/volume2.pdf>.
14. Liam Kofi Bright, Daniel Malinsky, and Morgan Thompson, "Causally Interpreting Intersectionality Theory," *Philosophy of Science* 83, no. 1 (December 17, 2015): 60–81, doi:10.1086/684173.
15. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis"; Peter Kwan, "Jeffrey Dahmer and the Cosynthesis of Categories," *Hastings Law Journal* 48 (1996): 1257; Devon W. Carbado et al., "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 303–12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349>.
16. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies."
17. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1258, 1266, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
18. Athena D. Mutua, "Multidimensionality Is to Masculinities What Intersectionality Is to Feminism," *Nevada Law Journal* 13 (2012): 341; Curry, *The Man-Not*, 132, 215, 221.
19. Angela P. Harris, "Gender, Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice Prosecuting Violence: A Colloquy on Race, Community, and Justice," *Stanford Law Review*, 2000, 779.
20. Curry, *The Man-Not*, 215.
21. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and Isabel Eaton, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Published for the University, 1899).

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BOOK REVIEW

The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood

Tommy J. Curry (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017). 298 pp. Hardcover, \$99.50. ISBN: 978-1-4399-1486-1; paperback, \$34.95, ISBN: 978-1-4399-1485-4; e-book, \$34.95, ISBN: 978-1-4399-1487-8.

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Tommy J. Curry's *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* is a groundbreaking and highly ambitious book that deals with the condition of Black men and boys in the United States. Based on historical research, sociological findings, and statistical data, Curry argues compellingly that the condition of Black men and boys is one of disadvantage. Through meticulous research, which undergirds each chapter of this text, Curry demonstrates that Black men and boys lag behind every other demographic group in the United States in every metric and index of human growth and development. The empirical data interpreted and employed by Curry demonstrates that no population in the United States endures unemployment, incarceration, death, disease, undereducation, and underrepresentation in the professional classes as much as Black men and boys. By focusing on the specific disadvantages of Black men and boys, Curry questions more than four decades of race, class, and gender theory that minimizes, ignores, or denies the precarious condition of Black men and boys in the United States. To this end, Curry exposes an enormous gap between the prevailing modes of race, class, and gender theory in colleges and universities and the findings from the past and present studies of historians, sociologists, political scientists, and bio-statisticians that point to the precarious condition of Black men and boys. What is more, the empirical findings cited in *The Man-Not* expose and unearth the problematic ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions which have driven race, class, and gender theory for more than four decades.

The fundamental problem which *The Man-Not* addresses is an ahistorical approach to Black men and boys across disciplines for the last couple of centuries. From the late nineteenth century to the present, derogatory accounts of Black men and boys have been articulated in metaphysical, speculative, fictive, mythological, and poetic terms. These accounts, which are treated as definitive and irrefutable, have been written by, among others, ethnologists, social scientists, creative writers, and gender theorists. These accounts are marked by presuppositions and conclusions about the nature, status, and destinies of Black men and boys which are not empirically and historically informed. The ahistorical approaches to Black men and boys built on these accounts revel in the view that Black men and boys are predators and criminals. This predatory, criminal view of Black men and boys, which persists in the writings and pedagogy of academics today, has gone uncontested. In chapter one, Curry unearths the nineteenth-century roots of this problem in ethnology. In chapter three, "The Political

Economy of Niggerdom: Racist Misandry, Class Warfare, and the Disciplinary Propagation of the Super Predator Mythology," and chapter five, "In the Fiat of Dreams: The Delusional Allure of Hope and the Reality of Anti-Black Male Death that Demands Our Theorization of the Anti-Ethical," Curry delineates and critiques the consequences of this ahistorical and positivist view of Black men and boys.

One consequence of this view of Black males has been the deaths of many Black men and boys. These deaths have been social and mortal in nature. In fact, Black male death is a theme that echoes throughout *The Man-Not*: death through rape, castration, child abuse, incarceration, unemployment, exploitation, and neglect. Curry views the 1944 execution of James Stinney, a fourteen-year-old Black boy who was convicted of raping and killing two white female teenagers, as the archetype for the deaths experienced by Black men and boys. With no evidence and an all-white jury, Stinney was convicted and sentenced to death in the state of South Carolina. After over seven decades of challenging the 1944 conviction of Stinney, a court of law determined that Stinney was wrongly convicted and executed for those crimes. Yet, the State of South Carolina has not acknowledged its wrongdoings in this case and has upheld Stinney's conviction. In *The Man-Not*, the case of James Stinney is a deep symbol of an enduring condition suffered by Black men and boys in the United States. Stinney, whose picture is on the book's cover, is also one among the countless cases of the deaths of Black men and boys that informs this work. Indeed, the normalization of Black male death is the main reason Curry engages in a research program about the condition of Black males in the United States. Integral to this program is the study of how Black men and boys are criminalized and how this criminalization of Black males legitimates the idea that their premature deaths are not only acceptable but also normal in the United States.

Another consequence of the ahistorical view of Black men and boys prominent today is the erasure of trauma and vulnerability in the lives of Black males. In an effort to overcome this erasure, Curry devotes two chapters that outline a mode of trauma suffered by Black men and boys, rape. In chapter two, "Lost in a Kiss?: The Sexual Victimization of the Black Male during Jim Crow Read through Eldridge Cleaver's *The Book of Lives* and *Soul on Ice*," and chapter four, "Eschatological Dilemmas: Anti-Black Male Death, Rape, and the Inability to Perceive Black Males Sexual Vulnerability under Racism," Curry engages Black men and boys as victims of rape and sexual abuse. Chapter two is the more provocative of these two chapters. Here, Curry presents original scholarship on the sexual abuse of Black men and boys. This scholarship is framed in light of the writings of Eldridge Cleaver, whose writings on sex and sexual violence are contextualized in relation to the history of sexual violence during the age of Jim Crow.

All of the concerns taken up in *The Man-Not* are crystalized in the concluding chapter, "Not MAN but Not Some Nothing: Affirming Who I Cannot Be through a Genre of Black Male Death and Dying." Here, Curry's concerns about the problems of theory and ahistorical treatments of Black male existence is amplified through an engagement with

intersectionality, the most popular theoretical framework utilized by gender theorists today. After a thorough engagement with intersectionality and the manner in which it has been used by scholars, such as those in legal studies, Curry concludes that it is antithetical to sociological and historical facts and assessments related to the precarious condition of Black males in the United States. Intersectionality privileges female victimization and imagines Black male disadvantage as superficial and trivial. Under intersectionality theory, Black men are fundamentally predatory and criminal. The Black male is a privileged victimizer (of women) whose status as victim is comical and nonsensical. If conceded as victim at all, his status as victim is tertiary to that of women. Curry contends that the logic of intersectionality is incapable, theoretically and otherwise, of fully addressing the social existence of Black males in the United States. For this reason, more intellectual/theoretical options and resources are necessary for the study of Black males. A completely new genre of writing and scholarship is called for to meet this demand.

Overall, *The Man-Not* is a groundbreaking text that raises necessary epistemological and empirical questions where the nature and status of the existence of Black men and boys in North America are concerned. Its deep engagement with history, sociology, racial ideology, and gender theory distinguishes it from standard works on race, class, and gender in the United States. Notwithstanding its contribution to the fields of African American studies, philosophy, race theory, and gender studies, the only major shortcoming of *The Man-Not* is its evasion of religion. Curry correctly states and explicates the ahistorical problems that have prevented a robust engagement with the condition of Black men and boys across disciplines. Curry is effective in outlining, exposing, and critiquing the ideological commitments which sustain and preserve a view of Black men and boys as intrinsically violent, pathological, and evil. However, *The Man-Not* does not entertain, explain, or explore the theological and moral roots of the ahistorical accounts of Black men and boys. The normative ideas by which Black men and boys have been judged, pathologized, and rendered evil in the past and the present are tied to historical expressions of Christianity in the West, particularly those expressions of it which are mired in slavery, colonization, and imperialism. Such expressions of Christianity have been integral to the rhetoric of civilization in the West and its impact on populations who are not white, which have been understood as in need of civilizing and civilization owing to their sinfulness and their primitive, savage nature. *The Man-Not* persuasively argues that Black men and boys are imagined to be among the uncivilized groups of the world. However, Curry does not factor in the normative force and impact of religion in creating and maintaining this view of Black males as uncivilized and/or savages. A robust engagement with religion in the West may be too much to ask for such a preliminary and groundbreaking work. What is clear is that the theoretical, methodical, empirical, and ideological questions asked by Curry in *The Man-Not* call for an analysis of religion, particularly Westernized Christianity, as a contributor to the dilemmas of Black manhood faced by Black males.

In conclusion, *The Man-Not* is a young philosopher's book. As such, it effectively accomplishes what such books do: it engages, reimagines, and moves beyond its immediate predecessors. With respect to its particular subject matter, Black men and boys, *The Man-Not* demonstrates that the condition and status of Black men and boys in the United States is unresolved and precarious and that more scholarly work needs to be done on the condition of Black men and boys in the United States.

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