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**BLACK MEN,
BLACK
FEMINISM**

Lucifer's Nocturne

Jared Sexton



Black Men, Black Feminism



Protester rests during a November 2014 demonstration in Oakland, California, against the grand jury decision in the case of Officer Darren Wilson. Image reproduced with permission from Reuters Pictures

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Lucifer's Nocturne

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*To DAS, in memoriam, for a love too big to appreciate in one lifetime.
To CJD, for putting me on a path before I could see my own way.*

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CHAPTER 1

Speak of the Devil

Living alone never ensures what a boy will become, but black men, above all, are the boys spared long enough to live.
—Stacia L. Brown, “We Have Known Black Boys (But None Have Been Bullet-Proof)”

Abstract This chapter introduces the problematic of black masculinity in an antiblack world. It draws, to that end, upon legal scholar Paul Butler’s *The Chokehold* and literary critic Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection*. “Lucifer” is discussed as a useful name for the complexity of black masculinity in theory, culture, and politics. Readings of Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1978) and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) help to illustrate some of the main points.

Keywords Black feminism • Black masculinity • Devil • *Get Out* • *Killer of Sheep* • Lucifer • Policing

1

Black masculinity is always something extraordinary; it is also always something extra ordinary. Whatever it may turn out to be, in any given context or situation, however it is defined or refined, it is never unremarkable, least of all for those living and dying under its heading. It is, from most every vantage, foreign and domestic, the site and sign of ravage and ruin, and of

revelation too. Insofar as it signifies the greatest exception to the rule and the furthest deviation from the law, it returns no less to claim or to be claimed by a proof of the rule and an institution of the law. Hyper-masculinity, one supposed characteristic of the forms of life in question, is both abandonment and recuperation of the desire for dominant masculinity, for masculinity *as* dominance. It misses the mark by overshooting or overwhelming it. Likewise, though, black masculinity is often enough figured as hypo-masculinity, as lacking, as wanting; it would seem to represent a certain failure of masculinity as well. In either case, we find masculinity in and as permanent crisis.

We might wonder how this can be so: a phenomenon seemingly too much and too little of itself by virtue of its most controversial qualification—black. Would it make a difference to describe black masculinity as an *oscillation* between surplus and deficit, or even a paradoxical *insistence* of both less and more at once, or neither? If black masculinity suggests a limit-case, we must ask, what is masculinity at all that one can have too much or too little of it, in turn and in tandem? Is there, by contrast, really such a thing as masculinity that is necessary or needed, one that is indeed proper to anybody? Is black masculinity, then, not a negative instance of the very masculinity to which it lays an illegitimate, even illegal, claim and by which it is claimed, imperiously, as too-much-too-little? What better way to outline its conditions of emergence and contestation than through a figure of ambivalent value?

I borrow that last phrase from Jonathan Munby's (2011) survey of "criminal self-representation in African American popular culture," *Under a Bad Sign*. There, Munby is interested in how depictions of the "badman" have permeated black popular cultural production throughout the twentieth century (and indeed for much longer) as a strategy for registering and resignifying the tropes of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchically organizing the larger society. The broad appeal of the badman's resistance, Munby suggests, is soldered to equally strong concerns about his liability to the well-being of the good people of the neighborhood:

As a figure of ambivalent value to the community that both venerates and fears him, the badman-pimp-hustler-trickster of black folklore clearly violates the doctrine of racial uplift that is meant to pave the way to equality. He is antithetical to that which the leaders of the struggle against racial subordination have required and invoked to legitimate their cause: the idea of a unified and virtuous black community. He claims a name (possession of a

reputation) through the disrespecting of other's names (bragging and besting others through superior insult exchanges—leading more often than not to murder) (Munby 2011, 9).

The sense of fear, however, is not restricted to those committed to the accommodationist doctrine of racial uplift, those promoting middle-class mores for a narrow politics of respectability. This is not only a worry about fueling racist myth and stereotype. Nor is it a fear confined to the badman per se, but rather to the actual or potential elements of the badman within any black man whatsoever. For as we see already in the symbolic amalgamation of the trickster with the pimp and the hustler, the badman is, as well, one who can and does exploit those within the community more vulnerable than himself—principally women and children, but also weaker men of any age. The badman surely flouts bourgeois social norms and breaks the white man's law, but he also attenuates or undermines the prospect of any radical transformation initiated by black collectivities themselves. Legendary blues guitarist Albert King sang the eponymous 1971 track, "Born Under a Bad Sign," declaring in a late verse: "Wine and women is all I crave/A big legged woman is gonna carry me to my grave." King's downtrodden illiterate protagonist, whose only luck is "real bad luck," raises the question of how black masculinity can serve the cause of an unlawful and unseemly freedom without retaining or resorting to generational, gender, and sexual violence, at home or on the street, and thereby contributing to the reproductive oppression of black communities. Put the other way around, the question is raised whether there can be a black feminist reconstruction of black masculinity without retaining or resorting to law enforcement and thereby contributing to the reproductive oppression of black communities.

Stacia Brown's (2014) above elegy, written in the immediate aftermath of Michael Dunn's mistrial for the 2012 murder of Jordan Davis in Jacksonville, Florida (he was later convicted at retrial and sentenced to life without parole), spoke about the communal hope that black boys be allowed to grow up, "reaching bullet-free adulthood," but, as she was quick to add, this requires their "outreaching *everyone's* fear" (emphasis added), not only that of white police and vigilantes. If black men live in the shadow of the badman, as figures of ambivalent value—loved/hated, desired/feared, embraced/rejected, and so on—then any (real or imagined) promise they hold or (real or imagined) threat they pose would invariably contaminate one another as its obverse or underside. So too

would any support for and defense of that promise or any opposition of and defense against that threat. This is just another way to say that if black masculinity is riven by a certain structural ambivalence, and by ambiguity no less, then any black feminist critique of its impetus, source, aim, and object cannot help but be similarly torn. Developing habits of language adequate to address the resultant complexity—the permanent destabilization of our ideas of moral clarity, ethical certainty, political direction, and conceptual rigor—remains the pressing task at hand.

Lucifer's Nocturne is not, however, a critique of black feminism, nor is it an attempt to contribute to black feminist thought. It is a commentary on some examples of black men's attempts to take up and take on black feminism, for better or worse, and, more specifically, some of the basic assumptions that have guided, or misguided, those efforts in the last generation. In what follows, we interrogate some of the more taken-for-granted intellectual postures adopted by black men writing about black feminism and highlight those who have written from other, perhaps more critical vantages in order to depart from a prevailing discourse on "black male feminism" (Awkward 1995, Lemons 2008, Neal 2015) that has likely left many black readers—across the range of genders and sexualities—unsatisfied, unenlightened, or uninspired. This text should be read, then, as a respectful disagreement with, or dissensus within, the project of raising "black feminist consciousness for black men and boys," as one recent initiative put it (AAPF 2017).¹ Not because there is a problem with "a vision of racial justice rooted in a Black feminist ethic of liberation." Indeed, the thrust of this short book is to sustain that point and even to draw out how some of black men's best efforts to participate in such an ethic are themselves shot through with false humility and resentment.

Rather, the inquiry pursued here is prompted by the unremarked, if unavoidable, tension between, on the one hand, reclaiming "a vision of racial justice that centers the concerns of all Black lives" by displacing the exclusive focus on the concerns of black men and boys and, on the other, "acknowledging and advancing the need to center the concerns of Black women and girls at the heart" of that vision. These may be two sides of the same coin, but the relation between these twin political moves nonetheless remains hazy. If we can see the manifest problems with an exclusive focus on the concerns of black men and boys, and if we can note as well that centering the concerns of black women and girls is not only a critical improvement but also a crucial precondition for true racial justice, it is