Postscript

Black Masculinity and New Precedents

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The notion of national manhood that consolidated in the late eighteenth century as the republic itself emerged prioritized elite white men in its definition and coalesced against the ideological backdrop of an Enlightenment philosophical discourse that defined black people as inferior and incapable of rationality. Manhood in the United States has never been imagined as an interracial fraternity, nor has the office of the presidency, any more than the nation has ever truly actualized its great potential to be a true interracial democracy. Even some radical black liberation activists of the 1960s, for example, who frequently invoked the ubiquity of “the man” to describe how white men dominated the nation’s power structure and the centrality of whiteness in defining manhood—and notwithstanding the masculinism and misogyny that tinged aspects of this ideology and its failure to provide a fuller critique of patriarchy—were keenly instinctive in apprehending and referencing the hegemony of this raced, sexed, classed, and gendered system. With great accuracy, they articulated the ways in which it excluded and devalued black men and regarded them as unequal. As this volume illustrates, black men, since the antebellum era, have been perceived as alien from and fun-
damentally incompatible with the dominant and inherently hierarchical national model of manhood, a model in relation to which ideals of freedom, humanity, democracy, and citizenship have been historically constituted. The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States on November 4, 2008—a mixed-race man who identifies as black and African American and is descended from a black Kenyan father and a white American mother from the state of Kansas—shattered the conventional racial (and arguably racist) fantasy of manhood in the national imaginary as white. To be sure, President Obama has set a new precedent by also unsettling the conventional definition of “presidentialism” in this nation.¹

One cannot overlook this history, including the purist and racialist perceptions of the presidency as “white” that have been deeply entrenched in the consciousness of many citizens in the United States, in thinking, for example, about why some contemporary neoconservative grassroots political movements such as the Birthers have been so invested in constructing a narrative of Obama as “foreign” and in questioning the constitutionality of his presidency. Similarly, it is important to consider why their close compatriots in the public sphere, the Tea Partiers, as they have theatrically enacted dress dating back to periods such as the American Revolution and the Civil War, have simultaneously disseminated an unremitting barrage of propagandistic visual images of the president that make him over as Adolph Hitler to associate him with fascism, portray him as a naked “native,” and cast him lynched in effigy.

The span of years to which this new critical volume draws us back, especially the Reconstruction era of the late nineteenth century, during which gross caricatures of blackness began to circulate—caricatures that authors such as Charles Chesnutt confronted in fiction—is a necessary framework to draw on for understanding these perverse images that have circulated so unapologetically in the public sphere of politics in recent times, along with the new forms of nativism that inflect them. The anecdote mentioned in this volume’s opening pages about Judge Joseph Mills’s recounting of how he mistook Frederick Douglass for a president in a dialogue with Abraham Lincoln illustrates some of the competing and contradictory models of black manhood that were operative during the antebellum era. It confirmed the potential among white men to think progressively and inclusively to the point of admiring and embracing a black man like Frederick Douglass who was eloquent, commanding and visually iconic in the public sphere sincerely as a “man” and a “brother,” to invoke the famous slogan of abolitionism set forth in the plea, “Am I
Not a Man and a Brother?” However, it also attests to the titillating allure of an image of the president in blackface within this exclusive white male fraternity, an image that rested, incidentally, in the continuum with a range of other minstrel images of blackness of the time, images that had currency on liberal political circuits during the nineteenth century.

The efforts of Obama’s detractors to invalidate his presidency by constructing grotesque images of his body function as a form of neo-minstrelsy whose racism is intrinsic and undeniable and cannot be rationalized or camouflaged as a form of free speech. The byproduct is a scripting of him in a continuum with the perverse and notorious archive of caricatures that portrayed black politicians of the Reconstruction era as unintelligent and incapable of leadership, who were imagined as bedfellows of Reconstruction’s white Carpetbaggers and Scalawags. This new concerted and calculated partisan script of Obama in the public sphere, I believe, is fundamentally distinct from those intramural assertive criticisms of him that have been staged as a form of “tough love” and that have been counterbalanced, say, by donations to his campaign and attendance at his historic presidential inauguration.

Some of the earliest critical studies of “maleness,” “manhood,” and “masculinity” tended to repeat and mirror the exclusions in the nation’s conventional definitions of these various terms by focusing exclusively on white middle-class men as a category of analysis and presuming their experiences as normative and representative, just as work in women’s studies, which helped to pave the way to some of the new ways of thinking about male subjectivity and new epistemologies on gender and sexuality that have emerged over the past several decades, frequently excluded black women and other women of color. Work that underscored the importance of thinking about race in the construction of masculinity set new precedents in studies of masculinity. Critical work on topics such as “black masculinity” and “black manhood” has proliferated over the past several decades, to the point that it represents a thriving subfield in and of itself. The many graduate and undergraduate courses that have emerged in this burgeoning field of study in recent years, and the academic conferences of national scope that have been devoted to it, illustrate that it is a viable area for teaching, research, and study and attracts diverse audiences.

The essays in Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men make an important contribution to the dialogues on black masculinity and chart some new directions for the interdisciplinary field of study that in recent years has been shaping up as “critical black masculinities.” It reveals how black manhood
has been shaped dialectically in varying historical moments by a diverse range of identities and clarifies how they have impacted its complex processes of formation. It registers the role of blackness in shaping notions of manhood at the national level, and further unsettles the myth of a pure white manhood. It demonstrates the utility of black manhood as a concept to “think with” in light of processes of gender formation given its broad cultural reach. Even the diverse group of scholars who have contributed essays to this volume—white and black, male and female—reveals that the critical interest in black masculinity and manhood as topics is widespread, and for analytical purposes in fields such as gender studies, is broad, and even increasingly universal.

Given the fascination with President Obama in a range of cultural contexts in the United States and abroad, the history related to his revolutionary campaign that gained momentum through new technological innovations, his election as the nation’s first black president, and the debates about his approaches to policymaking, a figure like him presents a great opportunity and also poses new challenges for scholarship on black manhood and masculinity. His speeches and books and his iconic construction in the public and popular spheres are already the subject of growing fascination in scholarship and in teaching. This anthology registers awareness of this important paradigm shift that has come in the nation’s public sphere with the election of the first black man in history as president and, notably, is one of the earliest comprehensive studies of black masculinity published in the wake of this moment. It sets a range of new precedents of its own through its interdisciplinary and comparative methodology in a text on black masculinity.

Its basic organization recalls aspects of “call and response” in the African American musical tradition. That is to say, one quality that makes this volume distinct is a structure that pairs a range of topics or figures and puts them into dialogue from chapter to chapter. Such a structure forces the members of the audience to think with more focus than we might ordinarily, for example, about distinctions between the experiences of enslaved black men and free ones, and black men in the North and the South. Chapters that juxtapose Thomas Nast and Charles Chesnutt highlight the complex relationships of white men and black men to the politics of visual representation in areas such as magazine illustration during the politically charged years after slavery. Similarly, it is useful that several chapters in this rich volume, such as the one by Julius Bailey, draw attention to black female subjectivity in the process of analyzing male subjects. In the course of dialoguing about how figures such as the black itinerant
preacher helped to expand and diversify notions of black manhood during the nineteenth century, he adds to our insights about the experiences of some of the best known black women in this sacred league, such as Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw. Such layers embedded in the volume help to move us beyond the “separate spheres” approaches to gender during the nineteenth century that, as critics in American literature argue, have long cast a shadow over studies of gender during the period. At the same time, this dimension underscores the indispensability of comparative approaches to gender when analyzing not only black masculinity but also black male and female identities.

For a long time in academic discourses, and particularly in areas such as literature and history, the experience of slavery has served as the primary framework for documenting and interpreting the black experience during the antebellum era, a perspective that has obscured the experiences of free blacks in the black population, even as their condition was volatile, provisional, and of necessity conditioned and circumscribed by the ubiquity of the slave system in society. This study moves beyond the former premise and heralds newer methodologies of comparativism that have impacted the historiography on slavery in recent years, which have drawn attention to the diversity in black communities by acknowledging the broad range of subject positions that black men occupied during the antebellum era, from being enslaved and categorized as property to being free and literate. The presumption that blacks were unlettered during the antebellum era and that the white master class mainly produced the written records of slavery that have been valued for archival research and study is unsettled in the diaries of William Johnson, a free black man who owned slaves. As his writings reveal, at times he adapted and relied on the protocols of paternalism in his relationships with his black male slaves. Furthermore, this section makes clear how the barber shop, which has long been recognized and analyzed as a public sphere in black masculine contexts in the contemporary era, established this function during the antebellum era. Similarly, this study shows that in spite of their subordinated position, black men who were slaves typically have been dissociated from notions of honor. However, it reveals how they internalized aspects of the culture of poor white men to formulate notions of masculine honor and invested energy in protecting and defending it among themselves, even through forms of violence. Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men also breaks new ground by expanding the understanding of the methods that black men in the antebellum era used for resistance beyond the forms of violent confrontation that have been romanticized in rela-
tion to figures such as Frederick Douglass. This is a critical revelation that invites us to consider more of the ways in which black women may have claimed agency within the slave system, that went beyond the quieter and subtler strategies of resistance that critics associate with them in light of their feminine gender and status as mothers that tended to make them less individualistic and more bound to family and community. In general, the volume is richly historicized. The meticulous archival work on which its essays draw, along with their exacting and eclectic methodologies, make this volume a model one in the field on this topic. The harmony that draws these essays into running and sometimes overlapping dialogues from chapter to chapter—dialogues that are detailed and highly integrative—is another admirable quality. Their seamlessness is all the more remarkable and noteworthy given this volume’s interdisciplinary orientation.

The widespread critical fascination with black women that emerged during the 1980s in scholarship shows us that new markets of consumption and exchange, even in academia, can mirror and extend the exploits of the old forms of black objectification, consumption, and specular-ity that coincided with the rise of modernism. It is telling that just as black women became the subject of growing scholarly interest in academia, young, single, poor, and unemployed black mothers in the nation’s “inner cities” were simultaneously being pathologized in the nation’s public sphere as “welfare queens” by conservative Republicans invested in reducing government spending. This background is important to consider in a university system that increasingly has been corporatized during the first decade of this new millennium. Similarly, it is crucial that the growing critical fascination with black men not obscure aspects of their lived reality in society or the ways in which they are so frequently stereotyped and misrepresented in the contexts such as the public sphere and popular culture. Black men have become the emphasis of more and more critical discussion in academic contexts at precisely the same time that statistics reveal that they encounter the highest levels of unemployment in the labor market in decades, some of the lowest enrollments in the nation’s colleges and universities, high rates of infection from HIV/AIDS, increased forms of surveillance such as racial profiling, and mass incarceration within the nation’s corporatized prison industrial complex. Study of archives related to black masculinity, including some of the key literary, historical, and visual narratives, is inevitably shadowed by the reality of black men’s continuing marginality in some of the nation’s institutions, including academia.
To put it another way, even as black men are studied more and more frequently in academia, in the real world, black men, along with other men of color, are not necessarily prioritized in recruitment and hiring processes in academic departments, and they typically have very few opportunities for tenure, promotion, and administrative leadership within academic institutions. Even though it is important, of course, to avoid the pitfall of positioning them as “native informants” and reinscribing essentialist identity politics, it is significant that the work of so many black male scholars has been foundational in shaping this field. It is work that has been at the forefront in formulating questions about black masculinity in relation to areas such as law, sexuality, popular culture, art, sports, and politics, and that has approached the topic with an understanding of the value of considering the intersectionality of factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and region. As the field itself has become more and more diverse, black men’s voices have continued to make unique and important contributions to critical dialogues. This field will be enhanced, I suspect, by yet more comparative work that looks at black masculine formations in relation to a more diverse spectrum of racial and ethnic contexts, and in global and transnational perspective. In general, it is exciting that the field itself, in terms of its major researchers, is increasingly reflecting the growing racial and ethnic diversity that characterizes U.S. society, even as the prevailing ideology of the United States as a “post-racial” society given the election of Barack Obama registers as a cruel fiction, especially when we consider the bitter and racially charged contestations regarding his policies and the glaring disrespect for his presidency that is apparent in some reactionary political sectors.

In January 2010, the devastating earthquake in Haiti and the catastrophe left in its wake drew an outpouring of support from around the globe. This tragedy has increased interest in the history of Haiti, the first black democracy established in the Western Hemisphere. One of this volume’s penultimate essays, which compares and contrasts U.S.- and Caribbean-based forms of resistance through the models offered by John Brown and Toussaint L’Ouverture, makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Haiti, a nation, as Susan Buck-Morss has recently shown in her groundbreaking philosophical scholarship on Hegel and Haiti, that is useful to think with to help unsettle notions of “universal history.”

When I was serving as a Cultural Envoy to the U.S. Embassy under the auspices of a grant from the U.S. Department of State, and hosted for a week in the “Speaker Series,” it was sobering that as I was speaking to a group of high school seniors in the banlieues in Saint-Denis and
discussed black male leaders and the upcoming presidential inauguration in the U.S., and as I underscored the importance of situating Obama and Martin Luther King in relation to Frederick Douglass, several black male students from Africa and the Caribbean stopped me and asked me who Douglass was; they had never heard of him. On the spot, I gave an overview of his slave narrative and history, along with other figures with whom they had no familiarity, such as Olaudah Equiano. This moment underscored for me that as much as we may value and understand certain histories related to black masculinity, we cannot presume that they are shared, even throughout the African diaspora. It also underscored the value of comparative and transnational approaches in studies of black masculinity. Similarly, the multi-ethnic group of nineteen teens who interviewed me at the Bondy Blog—the first media outlet to report on the unrest in the banlieues in the fall of 2005—admired the election of a black President Obama in the United States, but doubted that an “Obama” was conceivable in a context such as France, given its history. I mentioned prominent historical figures such as Toussaint L’Ouverture, Alexandre Dumas, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, and Frantz Fanon to remind them of the historical legacies of black masculine leadership and achievement in Francophone contexts to help them imagine and think toward a future that might include leaders at the national level who look more like they do, and who might someday occupy the position of the presidency in France, which has been defined across time by legacies ranging from those of Napoleon Bonaparte to Jacque Chirac. It is crucial that in doing this work on black masculinity, we conceptualize the field in the broadest and most inclusive sense and understand its potential to inspire people, give them hope, and potentially transform their lives. I know that I have deeply appreciated how the work in this field has helped to transform mine.

This volume comes at an important time and is a gift to the field of black masculinity studies. It opens up more interpretive possibilities for black masculinity, even as it challenges many things that we thought we know about it. From essay to essay, it challenges, enlightens, inspires, and teaches all at once. It has opened the door to many more exciting possibilities.
Notes

1. Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), ix. In this important study, Nelson defines “national manhood” as “an ideology that has worked powerfully since the Constitutional era to link a fraternal articulation of white manhood to civic identity.” Furthermore, this study reveals how the concept of presidentialism has played a central and even foundational role in shaping this raced and gendered ideology.


4. Here, I reference Susan Buck-Morss’s short and masterful critical study entitled *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), which is the outgrowth of an earlier article published in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. 