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TROUBLING THE DEMONIC

Anti-Blackness, heterosexual Black masculinity, and the study of religion in North America

Ronald Neal

Introduction

I’m always getting this shit from the homosexual community—that I’m homophobic. Because I have a character in a movie say, “faggot,” that means that automatically Spike Lee is homophobic, and I’m sick of this fucking bullshit. Why are gays always able to make that distinction with Martin Scorsese—and they don’t make it with me?

Spike Lee, Spike Lee: Interviews (Frutkin, 2002, p. 113)

Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day.

bell hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (hooks, 2004, p. xii)

In 2017, Black American actor, Mahershala Ali, won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role in the 2016 film Moonlight.1 In Moonlight, a film adapted from the work of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, Ali plays the role of Juan, a Black American man with Cuban roots who becomes the surrogate father of a Black boy, Chiron, whose mother is addicted to crack cocaine. Juan, who makes his living in the drug trade, shares a household with his de facto wife, Theresa, who is a surrogate mother to Chiron. In Moonlight, Juan and Theresa offer a picture of stability in relation to Chiron, which is juxtaposed next to a merciless and precarious environment, Liberty City, where Chiron’s struggling drug-addicted single mother attempts to raise him. The struggle to survive under such conditions is heightened by the fact that Chiron is introverted and gay. In Moonlight, the character Juan stands out in ways that warranted the accolades and awards that the film received. Moonlight offered a picture of Black American
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masculinity that is rarely captured in American film. It is a picture of a heterosexual Black American man in a nurturing father-son relationship with a Black boy. What is significant about this relationship is that it was not conditioned, hindered, impeded, or limited by heterosexism. Also, that such a relationship between a heterosexual Black American man and a Black gay boy was imagined and written by a Black gay man, Tarell Alvin McCraney, is noteworthy. What is more, the overall text of *Moonlight* is the product of an adaptive and collaborative vision, where McCraney’s original play, *In the Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, became the screenplay and later cinematic vision of the film’s director, Barry Jenkins, a heterosexual Black man. Beyond the work of Mahershala Ali, as Juan, *Moonlight* has many dimensions and layers that are worthy of interrogation. However, this chapter is concerned with the imaginative challenge of *Moonlight* for current and future treatments of Black masculinity advanced through the study of gender and religion in North America. *Moonlight* is a disruptive film, which confounds deeply held assumptions regarding heterosexual Black men. This disruption embodies the concerns of this chapter, the end of which troubles an American imaginary that casts heterosexual Black men in demonic terms. My aim in this chapter is to understand the impact of religion on this, specifically the biblical justification of slavery and the Eurocentric nature of the study of religions since the 19th century that construct a binary between civilized/uncivilized, and the contribution of feminist and LGBTQ+ scholarship in the study of gender and religion which constructs Black males as demonic.

*Preliminary hermeneutical considerations*

In his classic 1986 work, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, historian and critical theorist of religion Charles H. Long interrogated longstanding problems endemic to the study of religion that have their origins in the 19th century. This epoch, which gave rise to what are now classical theories of religion, posited a primitive/civilized interpretive framework, with respect to non-European cultures and the study of religion. This approach to the study of religion was shaped by European theorists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and Friedrich Max Muller. In the second part of a three-part book, Long addresses this history and its legacy in a chapter called “Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem” (1986, pp. 79–96). Here, Long draws connections between the primitive/civilized calculus and the Western legacies of slavery and colonization. In this calculus, the Christian traditions and institutions of Western Europe were held as a normative standard for assessing the cultures and traditions of Africa, the subcontinent of India, and South America, to name a few. While Long’s work did not deal with the treatment of Black masculinity in the study of religion, or the study of religion more broadly, and his analysis was largely a response to methodological questions that animated religious studies at the time, it offers useful insights to my aims in this chapter. I seek to highlight how the study of religion and gender are bound to a colonial past. I will demonstrate how treatments of masculinity, particularly heterosexual masculinity, are conditioned by this colonial legacy where it is viewed as uncivilized. To heighten the gravity of this Eurocentric problem, I employ another religious category to capture the ideological, social, and political consequences for any population that is classified as primitive and beyond the pale of civiliza- tion. That category is the demonic. The demonic is concerned with the obstacles of an anti-Black Eurocentric imaginary that frames treatments of Black masculinity in the United States. For shorthand purposes, I refer to the aforementioned problem as the demonic imaginary.

The prior considerations have tremendous ramifications for the study of gender and religion, especially those efforts concerned with race, religion, and masculinity. Emerging during the second half of the 20th century, at the end of the 1960s, the Eurocentric problems that plagued
the study of religion in the 19th century were reborn with a new generation of religion scholars. Such scholars sought to remap the study of religion. The study of gender and religion is a product of this remaking of the study of religion. One noteworthy figure who was a pioneer in this regard was Mary Daly, the radical feminist theologian, religious scholar, and philosopher whose prolific scholarship set the terms for the study of gender and religion in the United States (Telling, 2012, pp. 32–43). Beholden to Eurocentric views of non-European cultures and populations, the biases of a then new wave of scholarship in the study of religion, and the study of gender and religion, conditioned all treatments of gender in religious studies. Not without critics, this Eurocentric problem was identified and scrutinized early in the production of this scholarship. One of the most prominent critics of this problem was not a religious scholar but a literary critic, poet, and Black feminist, Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde was highly critical of Mary Daly’s brand of radical feminism, an expression of feminist thought that she regarded as Eurocentric and racist. In 1979, Lorde published an “open letter to Mary Daly” (2007, pp. 66–71), which expressed these concerns in relation to her then recently published book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1990). Lorde pointed to its exclusive focus on European women, the centrality of European Goddess mythology, and the elevation of the experiences of such women as the norm for assessing the experiences of all women. Audre Lorde’s concerns were echoed later by other critics, particularly Black women scholars of religion and theology, as this type of scholarship developed. Because this Eurocentric problem persisted, Black women scholars in religion and theology were compelled to produce a perspective, namely, womanism, which sought to distinguish the experiences of Black women from that of White women. Again, this Eurocentric problem is important for assessing scholarly accounts of race, religion, and masculinity. As I will attempt to make clear in the pages that follow, the latter years of the 20th century and the opening decades of the early 21st century demand attention where race, masculinity, and heterosexuality, in theology and religious studies, embody this problem.

**Black masculinity, theology, and religious studies**

At the end of the 1990s, womanist religious scholar and theologian Kelly Brown Douglas penned a groundbreaking work on sexuality, religion, and Black Americans. In *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999), Douglas forwarded a serious engagement with heterosexism (i.e., the favoring of heterosexual relationships) and its entanglements within the Black American Christian tradition. *Sexuality and the Black Church* was a religious and theological intervention that sought to creatively address homophobia and pressing ethical concerns pertaining to human sexuality that were specific to Black Americans. When *Sexuality and the Black Church* was published, it was as part of the outgrowth of a larger political context and cultural shift, in theological studies and religious studies, where academic critiques of heterosexism became normative. Two decades later, it remains an important document because it reveals in the unresolved imaginative problem that concerns this chapter. This problem pertains to the manner in which heterosexual Black men have been imagined by scholars within and outside of religious studies. This has been a salient feature of the study of gender and religion, theological studies, and gender studies writ large since academic treatments of gender first appeared close to five decades ago.

Since the 1970s, concerns with the problems of sexism and heterosexism have characterized the study of gender and religion (Hopflinger et al., 2012). The literary production and scholarly orientation of this work is ideological in nature. The ideological character of this work was shaped by and is indebted to scholars such as Mary Daly, who began their careers in theology. Due to a shared ideological orientation, theological accounts of gender and accounts of gender
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in the study of religion are largely indistinguishable. With an ethical focus on the limits of heterosexual masculinity, theological and religious scholarship, informed by feminist studies and queer theory, has produced an impactful and significant body of literature that advances feminist interests and the interests of LGBTQ+ populations. Though this literature is significant, it has not exhausted studies of heterosexual masculinities across racial groups, geographical contexts, classes, religious traditions, and cultures. This is particularly true with respect to Black American masculinities. Where Black American masculinities are concerned, examinations of heterosexuality, outside of the current economy of feminist and queer perspectives, are not abundant. Treatments of heterosexual Black masculinities that engage historical contexts, economic circumstances, inherited myths, and political realities are absent if not completely unrepresented in gender studies of religion. The texts that presently exist in relation to Black masculinity, including Kelly Brown Douglas’ *Sexuality and the Black Church* (1999), are driven by concerns pertaining to heterosexism and LGBTQ+ interests. Noteworthy texts in this regard are Roger A. Sneed’s *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (2010), El Kornegay Jr.’s *A Queering of Black Theology: James Baldwin’s Blues Project and Gospel Prose* (2013), and Pamela Lightsey’s *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (2015). Because there is no body of literature that is exclusively concerned with heterosexual Black masculinity, outside of feminist and queer interests, this essay is a preliminary effort that seeks to overcome this deficit.

In light of the concerns outlined at the outset of this chapter, I raise questions that are particular to an American imaginary and that render heterosexual Black masculinities in demonic terms. This imaginary that plagues U.S. society has roots in history, is pervasive in nature, and is very much evident within and outside the study of religion. Troubling this imaginary is requisite to a more robust and multidimensional engagement with Black masculinities in the United States. In the pages that follow, what I call a demonic American imaginary is made explicit with reference to select expressions of Black masculinity, their current and past history, in the United States. The overall consequence of this demonic American imaginary is the criminalization of heterosexual Black masculinity. I argue that constructions of Black masculinity within gender and religious studies has, together with gender studies more broadly, played a key role in shaping and maintaining this demonic imaginary in the United States through their impact on popular culture, through the policing of Black men, and in the lives and careers of heterosexual Black men whose contributions to American cultural life have been significant, such as Spike Lee. One way that this can be addressed is through the establishment of a research agenda that engages with Black masculinities outside this normalizing field, including contributions from Black theologies of masculinity.

The demonic imaginary in the United States

The starting point for engaging this demonic American imaginary with respect to Black American masculinities is popular culture. Thanks in large part to digital technology, smart phones, social media, and the Internet, the legacies of American racism and the struggles of Black Americans with this inheritance have been granted a global platform. Where Black masculinity is concerned, this digital factor has been important politically as it has contributed to the emergence of political movements, most notably, Black Lives Matter (BLM), which has brought attention to the most recent manifestations of violence, state-sanctioned violence and the violence of private citizens, toward Black Americans. Black American men have been the primary objects of such violence, many of whom are members of an emerging generation born since 1995 (Taylor, 2016). Since 2013, the moment at which Black Lives Matter emerged as a public response to a disturbing number of deaths of young Black men, at the hands of private citizens
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and law enforcement, political and well as academic attention has been given to lingering manifestations of American racism. What is more, such attention was and has been accelerated by a political context that is marked by the two-term presidency of Barack Obama, the first Black American elected to the Oval Office. A scourge of violence toward Black American men during the presidency of Barack Obama confounded what was thought to be a new chapter in racial progress. Where Black American masculinities are concerned, it pointed to problems that include yet transcend history, politics, and sociology. It exposed and breathed new life into a metaphysical and ontological problem that is exclusive to Black American men. This ontological problem is the consequence of an American imaginary that has historically projected a savage, criminal, and abject view of Black American men.

Genealogically, this imaginary can be traced to the history of slavery in the United States and to the religious justifications employed to maintain the institution for more than two centuries. Noteworthy scholarly works that capture the demonic imagination in question are historical sociologist Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) and biblical scholar Steven Haynes’ *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of Slavery* (2002). Both texts point to ontological and religious justifications that were racialized as well as gendered. Male-specific biblical texts, Genesis 9–11, were used ideologically to distinguish the slave-holding class from slaves. Ontological distinctions were made to ensure that slaves had no legal rights or protections under the law and no ability to advance socially apart from the slave-holding class. Even with the demise of legal slavery, the ontological distinctions between slaveholders and slaves, under slavery, persisted. The creation and emergence of a post-slavery apartheid society, or Jim Crow, maintained these fundamental distinctions. The social maintenance of these ontological distinctions was characterized by aggressive policing that included acts of terror, namely, lynching. Overall, the policing of Black Americans, which included terror, was undertaken by private citizens and the state. These tentacles of policing reinforced each other. Although all Black Americans were the objects of policing and terror, Black American men were the primary targets of this regime. Black American men were ritually sacrificed for the sake of upholding law and maintaining order. In America’s past as well as the present, the demonic imaginary, when projected upon Black American men, is a conservative force that preserves the legacies of American racism. The ritual sacrifice of Black male bodies, through their death, is what characterizes this legacy. As we shall see, this demonic imaginary is pervasive in its import and its function and, as an instrument of order, is employed in all American contexts and institutions. Before considering the contexts and institutions where the demonic imagination lives—including the academy—it is important to consider the precise manner in which Black men are constructed as threats that necessitates ritual death for the maintenance of order. It is here where sexuality is significant, heterosexuality in particular.

With roots in the history of slavery in North America, fears pertaining to heterosexuality and Black men and the threat it poses to the maintenance of social order have permeated American consciousness. These fears are evident in a tradition of American law that prohibited interracial sex and marriage. These miscegenation laws maintained racial distinctions based on perceived ontological differences and reinforced an apparatus of sexual policing to control reproduction and uphold racial hierarchies. Laws and taboos against interracial sex and marriage were anathema to the idea of race mixing and its implications along the lines of biology, culture, and politics. Biologically, it threatened beliefs in White racial purity and the numerical advantage on the part of Whites that such beliefs maintained. However, culturally and politically, it threatened the maintenance of an entire political economy managed and monopolized by a White majority (Bederman, 1995). At the heart of these fears is the threat of sexual competition and its social and political consequences. Ideologically, the single most lethal weapon of such fears
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is a mythology of predation, Black heterosexual predation in particular. Taboos and laws against interracial sex and marriage were implausible apart from myths of Black men as sexual predators, the perceived sexual threat that heterosexual Black men presented to racial hierarchies. This perceived threat and its logic have fueled an apparatus of policing and containment where heterosexual Black masculinity is its fundamental target.

In pointed terms, the degree to which religion has functioned, historically, as a set of justifications for racial subordination, especially the subjugation of Black men, is inseparable from present and future accounts of Black masculinity. What I am calling a demonic imaginary, in relation to 20th- and 21st-century accounts of Black masculinity, is implausible apart from an engagement with this history. The containment, punishment, and execution of Black men are integral to this imaginary. The most salient feature of this imaginary is the policing of Black male sexuality. Such policing is a marker of the systematic surveillance of Black American men.

In the demonic imaginary, sexual policing is significant because it marks clear lines of demarcation between Black and White. Under this logic, all expressions of Black masculinity are subject to interrogation, criminalization, and demonization. This includes expressions of Black masculinity that are independent of sex or sexuality, be they political, economic, or artistic. Such expressions are given to the same suspicions and fears associated with sexuality and sexual policing. To get a full account of how this policing works, one has to consider those past and present efforts, on the part of Black men, to disrupt the demonic American imaginary and its criminalization of Black masculinity. Those efforts on the part of Black men to end Jim Crow, to address racialized economic exploitation, or to address state-sanctioned violence on the part of law enforcement and penology has been met with an anti-Black demonic imaginary.

The policing of Black men

In American political history, the policing of Black men, as it is informed by a demonic imaginary, is evident in the legacies of the most politically influential Black men ever produced in North America. From Martin Luther King Jr. to Malcolm X to Kwame Ture to the founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the demonization and criminalization of heterosexuality has colored their contributions (Bloom and Martin, 2013; Branch, 1998; Curry, 2017). In the decades following the civil rights and Black Power eras, these heterosexual Black men were caricatured as communists by right-wing conservatives and as misogynists and raging homophobes by feminist writers. Such caricatures have had a criminalizing effect with respect to their quests for justice. How these figures have been interpreted is consistent with the demonic imaginary that has historically plagued Black American men. The function of criminalization (which is synonymous with the overall demonization of Black men) in terms of heterosexuality has been to discredit, belittle, trivialize, minimize, and erase their contributions in advancing racial justice in the United States. The most glaring symbol of this phenomenon is Martin Luther King Jr., who was an object of sexual policing during his short career as an activist. Government surveillance and documentation of King's extramarital relationships with women were weaponized against his activism and leadership. It has been widely documented that J. Edgar Hoover, who was then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, demonized and criminalized King's heterosexual masculinity with the intent of undermining the civil rights movement. This effort to frame politically engaged Black men as inherent sexual criminals was integral to a larger project of defusing and halting the movements for Black liberation and justice at the end of the 20th century. Although these efforts were radically illustrated during the civil rights and Black Power eras, it must be emphatically stated, this strategy of delegitimation flourished prior to the modern civil rights era and has enjoyed a lively career in the decades.
subsequent to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., which includes our current 21st-century context. What makes this demonization imaginary exceptional is that it is specific to heterosexual Black American men.

In American popular culture, the policing of Black men, as it is informed by a demonic imaginary, is also evident in the lives and careers of Black men whose contributions to American cultural life have been significant. Black men in the worlds of theatre, television, film, comedy, and music have been objectified through a demonic lens. If there is a single Black American artist whose work, activism, and overall career has been subject to a demonic imaginary, a heterosexual gaze, it is the prolific filmmaker Spike Lee. No Black American male artist has been subject to the level of scrutiny, policing, and condemnation at the level of heterosexuality as has Spike Lee. In his career, which spans three decades, Lee’s perspective has been regarded as a deep symbol of artistically engaged heterosexual masculinity. With influential films such as She’s Gotta Have It, Do The Right Thing, School Daze, and Malcolm X, to name a number of important works, Lee has drawn the ire of feminists, gay and lesbian critics, as well as Whites (Bailey, 2012). Being imagined as a symbolic purveyor of sexism, homophobia, and even reverse racism, as a heterosexual Black man his work has been interpreted in demonic terms (Massood, 2008; Frutkin, 2002). Where the demonic imaginary is concerned, Spike Lee, along with the political Black men cited earlier, has been subject to a level of suspicion, policing, and even death that is inescapable.

As this chapter is being written, the current political culture of the United States is rife with events and struggles that expose the policing and deaths of Black bodies through the demonic imaginary. The movement, Black Lives Matter, was cited earlier as a current marker of anti-Blackness and its mortal effects on Black American men. Anti-Blackness includes a reinvigorated tradition of White nationalism, which is assisted by a demonizing mode of sexual politics that is quite popular and influential. White nationalism and its sexual politics has revived and reinscribed the most destructive racial and sexual myths about heterosexual Black American men. Again, these myths harken back to the antebellum period, the period of Reconstruction, and the age of Jim Crow. White nationalists and their sexual politics frame and articulate Black heterosexual men in primitive and savage terms. One horrific example of this state of affairs is the June 17, 2015, terrorist attack of a storied African American church, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina (Von Drehle et al., 2015). This attack on the part of a White vigilante resulted in the deaths of nine Black Americans. The terrorist who committed this crime, who is now serving a death sentence, unapologetically justified his actions by invoking racist myths and sexual fears, which have been used, historically, to rationalize terrorism toward Black Americans. Again, the context for this terrorist attack is a climate where Black Americans were the objects of murder on the part of private citizens and law enforcement. These deaths are implausible apart from White nationalism and the sexual fears associated with it. The negative role of religion as a mechanism that sanctions and justifies the policing, containment, and execution of Black men is implicated in these events. The negative role of religion in preserving a master class of Whites who feel justified in their dispositions and actions toward Black men is also implicated.

**Contemporary sexual politics, heterosexual Black masculinity, and the demonic imaginary**

As I have stated earlier, what I am labeling a demonic imaginary and its relationship to heterosexual Black masculinity is pervasive. Because the study of gender and religion does not exist in a vacuum and is influenced by politics, economics, and social conditions, it is necessary to
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acknowledge the impact of secular society on the study of religion. More specifically, in Western societies such as the United States, secularizing ideologies such as liberalism, feminism, and capitalism have thoroughly secularized American institutions, including higher education and the academic study of religion. Although secularization is pervasive, it has not extinguished, completely, the historical and cultural impact of religion on Western societies. What I call a demonic imaginary, which has been shaped in part by colonial and racist religion, is constitutive of these facts. Again, where Black masculinity is concerned, the demonic imaginary is endemic to the American project, particularly White supremacist anti-Black politics. However, it must be noted that this imaginary is not just evident in White nationalism, including right-wing conservatives and the U.S. Christian Right (right-wing Christianity in the United States). It lives and breathes across the political spectrum, which includes the liberal and left side of the political economy. With respect to the perpetuation of anti-Blackness in the United States, liberals and leftists are not innocent. For this reason, the demonic imaginary cannot be accounted for unless we also consider liberal to left-wing political movements (this includes Christian liberals and leftists). The movements noteworthy in this regard are the women's movement and the LGBTQ+ movement. Both movements have contributed, ideologically, to a demonic imaginary that renders heterosexual Black men in criminal terms. As movements that do not stand outside of history, they are bearers of social legacies rooted in earlier periods, specifically, the first-wave feminist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which imagined Black men as inherent sexual criminals, or demons (Newman, 1999). Since the 1980s, this demonic imaginary, rooted in the legacies of American racism, has been cited by a handful of astute Black feminists. In their accounts of racism within the women's movement and American feminism, Black feminists such as Angela Davis and bell hooks have articulated and called out, in print and in public spaces, the heterosexual vitriol, which has been expressed in relation to Black American men as inherent sexual criminals, or demons (Newman, 1999). Since the 1980s, this demonic imaginary, rooted in the legacies of American racism, has been cited by a handful of astute Black feminists. In their accounts of racism within the women's movement and American feminism, Black feminists such as Angela Davis and bell hooks have articulated and called out, in print and in public spaces, the heterosexual vitriol, which has been expressed in relation to Black American men (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981). In their work they have identified and condemned this problem. This demonic imaginary in relation to heterosexual Black men is compounded by an ontologically evil view of heterosexual men, regardless of race and class, under the umbrella of radical feminism and the academic enterprise known as women's, gender, and sexuality studies (Patai, 1998; Kipnis, 2017; Telling, 2012). Where this latter enterprise is concerned, the influence and legacy of radical feminism is paramount. American colleges and universities are the contexts where the influence and legacy of radical feminism, ideologically and pedagogically, produces and reproduces primitive and savage perceptions and interpretations of Black American men, the demonic.

Colleges, universities, and the demonic imaginary

Similar to social movements, colleges and universities are not immune to the legacies of anti-Black racism in the United States. Possessing an image of enlightenment and progress, colleges and universities are not passive actors or bystanders where the perpetuation of anti-Black racism is concerned (Chatterjee and Maira, 2011). To get a fuller account of the gravity of the demonic imaginary, it is important to consider how such an imaginary is produced and reproduced in academic contexts by academic elites. This is true where the study of religion is concerned and is particularly true for fields of knowledge production outside of religious studies. In this regard, departments of religious studies and faculties in the humanities and the social sciences are not immune to the historical, political, economic, and racial forces that govern higher education and the larger society. Moreover, because the study of religion is largely dependent upon and does not determine knowledge production in colleges and universities, it is unfruitful and dangerous to separate the study of gender and religion from the study of
gender in academic fields outside of religious studies. Additionally, in attending to the gravity of the study of gender in higher education, it is necessary to factor in the crucial role played by higher education, colleges and universities, in educating future elites. In educating this elite, what colleges and universities do pedagogically and socially, shaping an American imaginary, is of immense political significance. In this regard, colleges and universities are inescapable sites for interrogating and troubling the demonic imaginary (hooks, 1994; Yancy, 2008). In doing so, there is a necessary task in probing those academic fields where heterosexual Black men are represented in a demonic imaginary as primitives, savages, and brutes. This also means taking seriously the impact of sexual politics on colleges and universities since the 1970s.

Fueled by second-wave feminism and the women’s movement, the sexual politics that emerged during the 1970s, which began outside of American colleges and universities, is now integral to the culture and pedagogy of American higher education. An integral part of the academic economy, current academic sexual politics replicates demonic accounts of Black men, myths and ideas that have their roots in the American past. Under the guise of progressivism and liberation, professional intellectuals and academics have contributed, in terms of books, articles, and overall pedagogy, to a culture that authorizes the policing, imprisonment, and executions of Black men. In a word, sexual politics, framed as progressivism and liberationist, provides ideological fodder and justification for the criminalization of Black men (Curry, 2017). From the standpoint of this chapter, such justifications are similar to the religious justifications of slavery that authorized the subordination and containment of enslaved people. Such criminalization has impacted areas of political life, particularly domestic policy, namely, the welfare state, family courts, and the criminal justice system. Again, this enterprise imagines heterosexual Black men as a dangerous population who are threats to White Americans, women, and gay men. It also renders heterosexual Black men inept as fathers, husbands, and domestic partners. Where women and gay men are concerned, such men are perceived to be exponentially more threatening than other men, particularly ruling-class White men. Where the welfare state is concerned, the government is imagined as a better father, husband, and domestic partner than heterosexual Black men are. Overall, there is a direct correlation between American public policy and American higher education. Those who imagine public policy are educated elites, and such elites are informed by the ideologies and academic programs nestled within colleges and universities.

Troubling Black masculinities

One specific expression of the demonic imaginary, in colleges and universities, are the accounts of heterosexual Black men in the current genre of works by Black American gender theorists, Black feminists, and queer scholars. Since the early 2000s, texts such as bell hooks’ *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), Mark Anthony Neal’s *New Black Man* (2006), Tracy D. Whiting’s *Pimps Up, Hos Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women* (2006), and Tricia Rose’s *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality* (2003) and *Intimacy and Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (2008), and Brittany Cooper’s *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpowers* (2018) traffic in accounts of heterosexual Black masculinity where the demonic imaginary is evident. In a word, these scholars have contributed to the problem that this chapter seeks to overcome. At the end of the 20th century and during the first decades of the 21st century, these scholars have produced a genre that reinscribes a mythic view of heterosexual Black men as brutes and savages. Their productions are standard fare in courses related to gender and sexuality in America colleges
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and universities. Here, the demonic accounts of heterosexual Black men are juxtaposed against a normative sexual politics, promoted by academics, that purports to be hospitable and non-threatening to women and gay men. This non-threatening sexual politics, which is imagined as inclusive and healthy, constitutes a new normal. In religious and hermeneutical terms, it represents a new code of holiness and purity. Academics who revel in such politics are positioned as saints. All deviations from this holiness code are understood as expressions of sin, the demonic. Here, heterosexual Black men are not simply criminal; rather, such men are sinful, profane, and, overall, demonic.

Contemporary sexual politics and the primitive/civilized problem

In the aforementioned expressions of sexual politics that is standard in colleges and universities, there is an ideological problem that is not attended to, a dilemma that fuels the demonic imaginary. Ideologically, gender studies mirrors a civilizationist approach to societies and human beings. I’m referring to the approach to human societies that was typical of colleges, universities, and intellectuals prior to the 1960s, where a European imaginary divided human beings into civilized and uncivilized populations (Freud, 1990; Frazer, 2018; Tylor, 2016). After the 1960s, with the anti-colonial movement across the world, this method of classification was challenged and new modes of classification appeared. The pre-1960s’ ideology of civilization, which has reinvented itself under gender studies, positions the manufacturers of academic sexual politics as priests and guardians of civility, normativity, and holiness and positions heterosexual Black men as deviations from such normativity, casting them as impure and profane, demonic. This ideological problem is amplified by the conundrums of race and class, or anti-Blackness, institutionally expressed.

To echo concerns that were articulated at the outset of this chapter, with respect to the study of religion, contemporary gender studies replicates and reinscribes those problems taken up in postcolonial scholarship since the 1970s. Concretely, these concerns pertain to societies that are measured in terms of development, societies classified as First World and those classified as Third World. Today, the categories First World and Third World are contested terms, but here I use them pragmatically to heighten the gravity of problems outlined in this chapter. Without using the language of civilization, it has been the practice of First World societies to imagine and categorize Third World societies in primitive and savage terms. As such, First World societies have characteristically positioned themselves as guardians of civility, holiness, and purity in relation to Third World countries, demanding Third World countries to ascend to their standards. At worse, First World societies impose their standards, through compulsory means, on Third World societies. Through sexual politics, colleges and universities have been major propagators and instigators of this morality and demand. Echoing a vicious history tied to imperialism, slavery, and colonialism in the West, this morality and demand has done much damage to societies classified as Third World. From the standpoint of this essay, academic sexual politics in the United States is insufficiently cognizant of this problem. As a theoretical and methodological problem, it has gone largely unrecognized for the same reasons societies classified as First World ignore the gaps between themselves and societies classified as Third World. It is a matter of positionality, which includes anti-Black racism. In a word, colleges, universities, and academic elites are members of a First World population who insufficiently interrogate their own positionality, at the level of race and class, in relation to those who inhabit the Third World. Consequently, interpretive violence is done through the study of gender, particularly heterosexual Black masculinity.
Beyond the demonic

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is trouble what I regard as a demonic imaginary with respect to heterosexual Black men. Such troubling is provocative in nature and intended to open a new terrain in terms of research, writing, and theorizing in relation to Black masculinities in the United States. One task of this essay is to highlight the limitations of dominant theories and approaches pertaining to gender, sexuality, and religion where such masculinities are concerned. My argument is that such theories, due in part to their youth and to their mimicry of a pre-20th-century anti-Black imaginary, contribute to the demonization and overall criminalization of Black American men. As such, these theories are limited in addressing a race-, class-, and gender-specific condition, with respect to Black men. Consequently, a new spirit of creative thinking and a new genre of research and writing are needed to engage a demonic imaginary predicated upon anti-Blackness.

The groundbreaking film Moonlight, whose aesthetic significance was cited at the outset of this chapter, is a deep symbol that points to the necessity of questioning the most disturbing, narrow, mythical, and exaggerated depictions of Black American men in contemporary culture. It stands in stark contrast to the way that Black men and Black spaces have been imagined over the last half century. Moonlight questions the politics of race, masculinity, sexuality, and space in a climate where such matters are assumed to be understood, with a priori assumptions about heterosexual Black men. These assumptions are taken to be immutable and beyond the domains of myth and prejudice. In popular journalism and sociological accounts, Black American men who live in contexts such as Liberty City, the setting of the film Moonlight, are devoid of depth, paradox, and ambiguity. Black men in such contexts and beyond are regarded as static essences. In the American imaginary, one-dimensional portraits of Black men are standard fare. Seen as violent, promiscuous, and primitive, Black men, particularly heterosexual Black men, are precluded from humanized accounts masculinity.

The film Moonlight confounds the current intellectual economy that governs gender and the study of religion, especially where heterosexual Black masculinity is in question. From the standpoint of this essay, such an economy, due to an entrenched imaginary that renders heterosexual Black masculinity in demonic terms, is limited in theorizing and engaging such masculinity. For this reason, an entirely new economy of ideas, questions, methods, and research programs is needed for such a task. What this means is that Black heterosexual masculinity has to be rethought. Rethinking heterosexual Black masculinity beyond the demonic imaginary demands a scholarly orientation that is historical, sociological, and philosophical. Where the study of religion is concerned, it demands a rethinking of the history of religion, with respect to the lived experiences of Black Americans. This means reassessing the role of religion as an instrument of conquest, oppression, and social control. How religion has played such a role in relation to Black men is at the heart of such work.

In light of the aforementioned, it is important to rethink the normative paradigm of sexual politics that is characteristic of higher education today. The kind of rethinking of sexual politics that I am calling for was evident in the work of Kelly Brown Douglas in Sexuality and the Black Church (1999). It was also evident in the early 2000s in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. A professional sociologist and leading Black feminist, criticism of heterosexual Black men has been a salient feature of Collins’ work since the 1990s (e.g., 2000). Her earliest critiques of heterosexual Black masculinity were directed at politically engaged Black men, political activists, and intellectuals. The bulk of her critique was categorical in nature with the behavior of such men framed in demonic terms. This categorical feature of her work shifted with her 2004 book, Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism (2004). This
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shift was epistemological in nature, reflecting a renunciation of prior assumptions related to heterosexual Black men. In a word, the demonic power that she once attributed to Black men necessitated reassessment. Collins reached this conclusion with much reflection on the generations of young Black men who had come of age and were coming of age since the publication of her first book in 1990. More significantly, this epistemological shift takes into account the problem of hyper-incarceration, with respect to Black American men. She took seriously the hyper-policing and containment of Black American men, which would later be popularized in 2010 as *The New Jim Crow* in the work of legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010). Taking seriously hyper-incarceration, the popular culture, and lived experiences of young generations of Black Americans, groups who have been categorically demonized in American society, men and women, demanded a different mode of engagement. The epistemological turn evident in Collins’ work is the act of an individual, an academic who has worked in sexual politics in colleges and universities for decades. As far as the argument that is being made here, her later shifts do not characterize the entire enterprise of sexual politics in colleges and universities. However, she does represent a turning point during the opening years of the 21st century, which warrants expansion today.

An inconclusive conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I want to return to a figure, Spike Lee, a heterosexual Black man, who has been the object of the demonic imaginary outlined in these pages. Coupled with the imaginative challenge of the film, *Moonlight*, which has already been cited, Spike Lee is instructive in terms of the disruptive and troubling ends championed here. Despite the manner in which the demonic imaginary has criminalized Lee throughout his career, he has not stood silent in the face of demonic interpretations of his life and art. As an artist and intellectual, Spike Lee has contested the manner in which he has been imagined and policed in demonic terms. As an aesthete, Lee has defended his work under the guise of aesthetic realism, championing a cultural philosophy of an artist who writes the world as he sees it, as it is, not as it should be (Fuchs, 2002). Under these terms, Lee has protected his work and cinematic vision while at the same time acknowledging his limitations and shortcomings as an artist. In troubling the demonic imaginary, Lee has lamented that his work has been held to a utopian moral and political standard that is not applied to other filmmakers, especially White filmmakers who are his peers and elders in the world of cinema. Unlike his cinematic peers, Lee’s critics have demanded that his work conform to the political values and visions that they hold dear, even if such values erase human facts about Black Americans and anti-Blackness in the United States, which he depicts in his work. In this respect, Spike Lee is an artistic manifestation of the way heterosexual Black men are imagined and engaged in America, and he is instructive for rethinking heterosexual masculinity in America.

Over the course of his decades-long career, Spike Lee has engaged in aesthetic trial and error. As such he has learned from his critics and has addressed criticism related to heterosexism and homophobia. However, he has done this on his own terms as an artist. Although he has grown and evolved as a filmmaker, he has not escaped the demonic imaginary, the manner in which he has been imagined by all of his critics. In terms of the troubling ends of this chapter, this is why the demonic imaginary warrants engagement and contestation, that demonic views of Black American men are so deeply entrenched in America that it refuses to relent even when a Black heterosexual man reimagines his own work. This is unfortunate given Spike Lee’s status as one of a few Black American male artists whose work is prophetic, provocative, and deeply interventionist. In a career that spans more than three decades,
Spike Lee has been a prolific interpreter of Black American life in the United States. By employing the tool of film, his art has sought to address anti-Blackness, the life-and-death conditions of Black Americans, the kinds of circumstance and traumas that gave rise to the movement Black Lives Matter. In this regard, his interventionist work as a filmmaker and intellectual is just as significant as, and perhaps more significant than, traditional politics, academia, and the world of religion in engaging, forthright, in an uncensored fashion, anti-Blackness, trauma, and death, with respect to the Black American population in the United States. Spike Lee’s legacy is instructive and is necessary for troubling the demonic. It speaks volumes to the future of the study of gender and religion where Black masculinity in the United States is concerned.

Notes
2 Jim Crow refers to the period of state-sanctioned racial segregation in the U.S. South. Instituted in the latter decades of the 19th century, after the era known as Reconstruction, it was enforced by law, until it was legally challenged during the civil rights era. For a classic account of Jim Crow, see Woodard, C. Van. (2001). The Strange Career of Jim Crow: Commemorative Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

References
Books


**Articles**


**Newspapers**


**Film**