

# Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing



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Jared Sexton

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Jared Sexton  
Department of African American Studies  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, CA, USA

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*To CES,*

*For teaching us that patience and perseverance are the roots of possibility.*

*TO AJS,*

*For sharing an inherited love of movies and always appreciating a good line.*

## Preface: The Perfect Slave

*Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* offers a critical survey of the contemporary field of images of black masculinity in early twenty-first-century United States.<sup>1</sup> It argues that popular representations of black masculine authority have become increasingly important to the cultural legitimization of executive power within the national security state and its leading role in the maintenance of an antiblack social order forged in the epoch of modern racial slavery. The projection of American Grand Strategy today navigates a domestic political terrain pulled taught between, on the one hand, official pronouncements of neoliberal multiculturalism and neo-conservative colorblindness and, on the other, between progressive racial justice movements and newly resurgent right-wing white nationalism. While the second decade of the 2000s revealed these conflicts in stark relief, from the founding of the Tea Party in 2010 to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the lineaments of the current political conjuncture can be traced with careful attention to recent work in the culture industry. This book provides, to that end, a series of close readings of Hollywood films released between 2001 and 2009—between President George W. Bush’s announcement of the US-led War on Terror and President Barack Obama’s acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize—alongside discussion of several antecedent television series.

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<sup>1</sup>Burgin (1996) distinguishes “the contemporary field of images” from “the field of contemporary images” where the former allows for the persistence, recirculation, and reiteration of past images in present day visual culture (304–305).

Rather than offer a glancing look at a comprehensive filmography from this period, the approach employed here examines a constellation of representative samples to illuminate the complex and contradictory dynamics at work in the repeated attempts to reconcile the promotion of black male patriarchal empowerment and the recrudescence of gendered antiblackness within the narrative space of the film and television productions in question. This study suggests that Hollywood is of two minds about depicting a post-feminist patriarchal restoration through figures of black masculinity, whether military personnel or police officers, sports coaches or aspiring athletes. For the reassertion of patriarchal values so vital to the maintenance of an embattled American global hegemony—militarily, economically, politically—requires the simultaneous preservation of an antiblack matrix of value deeply rooted in American history and a cultural myth of racial equality and liberal democracy supposed to distinguish the USA from the rest of the world. If film and television are rightly regarded as aspects of an ideological state apparatus, then we should expect that the ambiguity and ambivalence of constituted power at home and abroad will play out in vivid detail on screens large and small, year after year, as the interpretive frame of public discourse shifts from post-civil rights to post-cold war to post-9/11 or, more recently, from to post-racial to post-truth (Althusser 2014; McDonald 2016).

The immanent critique pursued in the following chapters takes productions of the culture industry, no less than its independent offshoots and countercurrents, as privileged occasions for thinking again about how profoundly the global practice of racial differentiation, from slavery to segregation and beyond, structures the totality of state and civil society. This study questions to that end the very terms of the post-civil rights historical periodization in order to broaden and deepen the context for the particular readings presented below. Not only because there are other relevant and appropriate ways to understand the last half-century, but also because the very idea of a discrete “civil rights era” itself warrants greater scrutiny. Dubbed the “Second Reconstruction” by many within its ranks, the modern civil rights movement was meant to rejoin the collective efforts initiated in the aftermath of the US Civil War to pursue the effective abolition of racial slavery. But the permutation of such efforts over the subsequent hundred years alerts us to another and, I think, more adequate interpretive framework. Rather than approach the civil rights movement as a mid-century political moment spanning the 1950s and 60s, we are better served by thinking instead of a protracted black freedom struggle that encompasses the everyday resistance and episodic revolt of enslaved Africans from the fif-

teenth century onward; the petition, protest, and politics of abolitionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the twentieth-century social movements organized under the headings of New Negro, Civil Rights and Black Power; and the range of ongoing campaigns to end police violence, to promote environmental protection and to ensure economic and reproductive justice, among others (Birnbaum and Taylor 2000; Cain 2016; Fairclough 2002; Lebron 2017; Robinson 1997; Ross and Solinger 2017). This more expansive historical view allows us to reconsider the prospects for abolition across the *longue durée* of the modern world and along at least two primary lines of stress.

First, there is a concern about the continuation of the political conditions of slavery *despite* the claim to emancipation enshrined in the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution and similar legislation throughout the transatlantic region. Legal scholar Guyora Binder reminds us that emancipation, far from providing a remedy for slavery, is actually a component part of its form and function, so much so that “the institution of slavery could persist without any individual being lawfully held as a slave” in the usual meaning of the term (Binder 1996, 2064). Binder contends that, with respect to the USA as a principal case study, the legislative action and the preceding executive order of the mid-1860s served mainly to manumit slaves already effectively emancipated by the enormous dislocations of the Civil War. Thus emancipated, however, was the abolition of slavery a *fait accompli*? Binder finds to the contrary that “for reasons intrinsic to its subject... the Thirteenth Amendment confronts interpreters with multiple dimensions of ambiguity,” most importantly “which of the deprivations imposed on slaves to regard as essential to slavery and which to legitimize as incidental to slavery” and “how the abolition of slavery redistributes the resources and power of the masters and what sort of historical narrative justifies those distributive consequences” (Binder 1996, 2070). Abolition would, accordingly, entail far more than universal manumission *ceteris paribus*, something we can only indicate here as the generalization, on a global scale, of the ex-slaves’ demands for a radical reconstruction of society. Eric Foner’s (2014) and Manisha Sinha’s (2016) prodigious historical researches demonstrate exhaustively the chasm that separated the conceptions of freedom held by ex-slaves and those held by nearly everyone else in the nineteenth-century USA.

Where Binder seeks to “provoke uncertainty about the meaning of freedom and slavery, at least insofar as the alternative to such uncertainty is a reductive definition of slavery that places it at a safe distance from contemporary American society,” he is all too right to claim that “when we speak of

freedom and slavery we *do not* know ‘what we are talking about’ and *should not* speak with self-assurance” (Binder 1996, 2063). It is against that overwhelming tendency toward self-assurance that the second line of stress is expressed. It consists in a concern about a paradoxical “perfection of slavery” *through* emancipation and the ongoing struggle for black equality. Critical race theorist Anthony Farley (2004) has articulated this thinking most prominently, pulling together arguments regarding race, law, and society that he has developed since the early 1990s. Farley is not arguing that the basic elements of slavery persist *despite* emancipation under cover of a narrative of progress, though he surely would agree with Binder’s insights to that effect. Neither is he at pains to track the cunning of political retrenchment and revanchist legal maneuvering *after* emancipation. Farley is not interested primarily in the machinations of the slave power as such or its functional surrogates. The perfection of slavery issues forth, rather, from *the slave’s desire for equality* itself, from the dream-work aimed at participation in slave society. The more strident the demands for reform grow, in fact, the more perfect slavery, and the slave, becomes. “We are strangers to ourselves,” Farley writes. “The dream of equality, of rights, is the disguised wish for hierarchy. The prayer for equal rights is the disguised desire for slavery” (Farley 2004, 224). He continues further along:

It seems that after “a division of mental and manual labor appears” that the slave is assigned the latter and the master is assigned the former. All is not as it seems. The slave actually does the *mental* work that keeps the structure from falling apart. The slave dreams of rights and of equal justice under law. The production of dreams is the slave’s true and secret function. The slave produces all of the equations that stabilize the system of death-over-life through its prayers for equal rights. The slave’s prayer resolves all present contradictions into white-over-black, for white-over-black is all that equal rights or law can ever be or become. (Farley 2004, 227)

Emancipation, in this view, is a desire bound to the dream of equality, a palliative, an opiate of the enslaved masses, that wards against the true thought of freedom and the destruction of the terms of order of a global system of slavery it requires. Racial slavery does not simply persist in attenuated form as a legacy or aftermath demanding continued vigilance. Neither does it only persist in vacated institutional form post-emancipation, as slavery without slaves. Those are problems enough. Rather, it persists more fundamentally as a problem compounded by every effort to abolish it that fails to unravel the fabric of the modern world it brought into being, and not

only its prevailing economic system. “To wake from slavery is to see that everything must go, every law room, every great house, every plantation, all of it, everything” (Farley 2004, 222–223). More to the point: “Without the dream-work of the slave, the many crises of the system of white-over-black blossom in revolution. The flames are wooed from their buds and continue to unfold until the entire plantation system is gone. The servile insurrection continues until it brings down the system of marks, the system of property, and the system of law. Slaves are trained to *not* think this way” (Farley 2004, 244).

But how, exactly, are slaves trained *not* to think this way? This is not an antiquated question for the historic instance of the chattel system alone, but also an urgent question of the present conjuncture. How are manumitted slaves, nominally free people of color—still, today—trained *not* to think critically about the system of marks, the system of property, and the system of law? How is that black radical thinking forestalled, preempted, disallowed? *Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* is interested in tracing the contours of the sustained ideological labor dedicated to that sort of discipline and punishment in mass media representations of black masculinity during the years of Barack Obama’s extraordinary political ascent, from the Illinois General Assembly in 1996 to the US Senate in 2004 to the White House in 2008. This chapter’s title is drawn, in fact, from the high-profile figure of President Obama—not only a nominally free person of color, but also the proverbial leader of the free world—whose career and, more essentially, whose *character* is held up as a perverse ideal for so many urban black youth whose masculinity is said to be in acute crisis. My Brother’s Keeper, a White House initiative meant to “bolster and reinforce our African-American boys... helping young African-American men feel that they’re a full part of this society,” was Obama’s answer to George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the killing of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013. The official response of the first black male president to the openly racist murder of a black male teenager was to redouble *ex officio* efforts among the rest of society to convince black male teenagers that they are educable and employable and therefore valued by the rest of society; as if the spectacular violence of a vigilante assault were a symptom of the victim’s education level or employment status—a slave’s prayer if ever there was one. Insofar as we endorse the above claim of a present-tense regime of racial slavery dependent upon the dream-work of “equal justice under law,” the Obama Administration, rather than fulfilling the promise of freedom, presents us with the paradoxical achievements of the perfect slave.

This text speaks directly, then, to the convolution of slavery and freedom that informs the historic discourse on post-bellum black masculinity, from the heated 1865 congressional debate over “Negro manhood rights” to the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report on “the Negro family,” from the fated 1890s anti-lynching crusade to the eclipsed 1990s campaign to end racial profiling. Vexation over the prospect of unbounded black masculinity, and the attendant worry about heteroclit black male sexuality, continues to animate current projections of racial uplift like the Open Society Foundations Campaign for Black Male Achievement (scaling previously local mentorship and job-training endeavors into a coordinated partnership of federal agencies, state and local governments, private foundations, and non-profit organizations) or the growing slate of single-sex charter schools aimed at the education of “underachieving” black boys (promoted and underwritten by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and renewed by the US Department of Education’s 2009 Race to the Top grant program). It even shapes the controversy surrounding the 2016 release of *The Birth of a Nation*, writer-director-actor Nate Parker’s film rendition of the 1831 Nat Turner insurrection (raising again the problematic of interracial sexual violence in relation to black male agency—real and imagined, material and symbolic). It is telling that Parker’s *pièce de résistance* mutated into an uncanny swan song in the same immediate environment that consolidated authoritarian populism, both nationally and internationally, as a reverie of unreconstructed white supremacy and toxic masculinity. Whereas Parker sought, to a fault, to rewrite D.W. Griffith’s reactionary paean to the Ku Klux Klan as a progressive homage to a twenty-first-century racial justice movement to come, Citizen Trump was far more intent upon, and far more capable of, updating the politics of Redemption for the age of Astroturf mobilization and social media marketing.

*Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* examines the cycle of early twenty-first-century liberal filmmaking that helped to cultivate the ground both for Parker’s flawed cinematic project and for Trump’s successful seizure of executive power in the twilight of the Obama era. The half-dozen or so Hollywood productions under discussion include variations on the interracial buddy theme common to cop action films and sports films alike, as well as versions of the family drama and the (black) male coming-of-age story. And though the settings span the country from small town to mid-size city to major metropolis, and the configuration of characters is by turns inter-racial and intra-racial, inter-generational and near-peer, co-worker and cross-class, fraternal and gender diverse; the central focus of these conflict-driven narratives falls squarely upon the distributed virtues and vices of

black boys and men. The operative question: What, if anything, can be done *with* them, given what has been done *to* them, that is, given their structural disinheritance? Some auxiliary questions: Can a proper morality be instilled in their hearts and minds? Can their bodies be adapted to the burdens and benefits of civilization? Can they be trusted to use the powers vested in them for good and not evil? Can a disciplined black masculinity become a figure of legitimate authority? Can it become a source of value or only a site for the destruction of value? Can it serve, finally, as a condition of possibility, individual and collective? Amid longstanding public consternation and private condemnation regarding the antagonism between black boys and men and nearly every major institution of US state and civil society—arts, athletics, education, employment, healthcare, family, law, military, news media, police, religion, transportation—this study delves into the cultural logic that, on this score, unites the platforms of our dueling political parties and, despite other important divergences, lends coherence to the wide swath of our political spectrum.

Irvine, USA

Jared Sexton

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## Summaries

Chapter 1 examines the place of commercial black filmmaking in the cultural politics of the post-civil rights era United States. It begins by situating what some consider a defining moment in black film history—the 2002 Academy Awards—with respect to widely-circulated images of black participation in projections of a “New American Century,” with all of its intensified policing and militarism. I argue that a reassertion of antiblackness in popular culture has accompanied the clamor about “blacks in officialdom” that both neoliberal multiculturalism and neoconservative colorblindness have amplified over the last several decades, reaching fever pitch with the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008. In this light, I consider whether setting this contradictory logic of representation alongside the continuing conditions of segregation that characterize black life in the United States over the same period undermines easy assertions about contemporary black inroads in state and civil society. More to the point, this chapter suggests that such convergence complicates the idea of an *institutionalized* black complicity with the structures of white supremacy, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. These various guises of black empowerment, particularly images of black masculinity as state-sanctioned authority, should not be contrasted with the associations of illegitimacy, dispossession, and violence that seem to otherwise monopolize the signification of racial blackness. Rather, the former should be understood as an extension of the latter. Antoine Fuqua’s 2001 *Training Day* provides a case study for the discussion, and Fuqua’s professional career articulates the structural conditions for a popular antiblack black visibility on a global scale.

Chapter 2 takes up Sunu Gonera's 2007 *Pride*, a 1970s era biopic about the life and labor of Philadelphia native Jim Ellis, a competitive swim coach whose unlikely program eventually produces the first black swimmers—and soon thereafter the first black medalists—for the US Olympic Team. The chapter situates the film's generally favorable portrayal of Ellis within the twentieth-century history of racially segregated municipal swimming and bathing, and the fairly complicated exploitation of African swimming and diving skills as an aspect of maritime slavery, in order to better comprehend the material and symbolic construction of the stereotype that "blacks can't swim." For Ellis, the introduction of ghettoized urban black youth to this supposedly quintessential white suburban middle-class pursuit will allow them not only to avoid the perils of their imminent recruitment to local street gangs, but also to contest the restrictive avenues of athletic excellence otherwise available to their neighborhood peers (i.e., football and basketball, to which we turn in the following chapter). And though Ellis, as surrogate father, challenges the inefficient and indifferent government bureaucracy represented by the black maternal figure to grant him the opportunity to make good on a promise to help his newly acquired charges, the bid for patriarchal protection requires him to call directly upon the police powers of the state in more ways than one. Ellis, not unlike his own white male coach before him, counsels young black men to seek liberation by soliciting the agents of their own repression and to stand up to racist assault by refusing to fight back in their own defense.

Chapter 3 presents a contrapuntal reading of two films in which high school sport serves as the ground for adjudicating the education of young men and the allegory for prospects of economic recovery, political deliberation, and social change in the contemporary United States: Peter Berg's 2004 *Friday Night Lights* and Thomas Carter's 2005 *Coach Carter*. The former is a cinematic adaptation of H.G. Bassinger's bestselling account of a small, predominantly white, working-class community in 1980s rural West Texas railing against prolonged economic crisis and investing all the more fervently in the success of their local high school football team. Importantly, the conditions of economic decline are exacerbated for residents by the seemingly imposing presence of distant urban black communities assumed to be in political ascendance in the post-civil rights era. The latter, in turn, is a retelling of the headline-grabbing intervention of the eponymous basketball coach in a predominantly black urban community in 1990s Northern California besieged by structural unemployment, concentrated poverty, unbridled policing, and an expanding underground economy. Both films feature narratives of individual salvation for the community's young men,

tutored in the rites of passage by a tough-loving patriarch representing the values of an earlier day and age. Both films also pivot on stimulating the particularly masculine ambition to flee the horizon of dead-end lives and managing the peculiar pressures brought to bear when this mission is figured as a quest for proper manhood. However, these surface similarities are not evidence of an overarching project or underlying common ground. Not only are these two films *not* simply two versions of the same story, but also, more importantly, the success and possibility of *Friday Night Lights*, the efficacy of its symbolic universe, is premised on the failure and impossibility of the transcendent vision at the heart of *Coach Carter*.

Chapter 4 interprets John Lee Hancock's 2009 *The Blind Side*, the most successful sports drama in Hollywood history, as an indictment of the black family nearly a half-century after Senator Moynihan declared a crisis in need of national action in his infamous 1965 report. The film follows Michael Oher's improbable rise from the Memphis public housing and foster care systems to his 2013 Super Bowl victory with the Baltimore Ravens, and it is widely read as a feel-good story extolling the value of organized sports, in which the sad fate of a poor black urban youth is redirected by the intervention of an enterprising professional white woman and the institutional resources she affords. Yet, this work represents something more than an example of the patronage motif. Beyond the troubling reiteration of this longstanding narrative pattern, *The Blind Side* reveals that the NFL and the "Athletic Industrial Complex" that feeds it are essentially understood as aspects of the larger mission of public education in particular and of public services in general. Put somewhat differently, insofar as black football players—high school, college or professional—are assumed to serve at the pleasure of white benefactors—taxpayers, educators, coaches or team owners—we are led to examine the figure of the black male athlete in light of the figure of the black female welfare recipient and the question of reproductive justice raised by her predicament. This perspective not only interrupts the redemptive fantasy of racial capitalism promoted by Oher's rags-to-riches story, but also productively undermines the quest for hegemonic gender differentiation, even within the confines of mainstream narrative cinema.

Chapter 5 looks at some of the antecedent imagery of black youth in US visual culture and discusses the post-civil rights era television situation comedy as an oblique commentary on the racial politics of kinship in the afterlife of slavery. It takes Bernie Kukoff and Jeff Harris's *Different Strokes* (1978–1986) and Stu Silver's *Webster* (1983–1989) as case studies to that end. It traces the wildly popular black man-child characters that featured in primetime programming in the 1970s and 80s to earlier fig-

ures: the black “rascals” of the *Our Gang* film series of the 1920s, 30s and 40s (most notably Buckwheat) and, before that, young Topsy of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its subsequent stage productions. What we find across the great expanse is an indiscernibleness of both gender (male/female, masculine/feminine) and generation (adult/juvenile, parent/child) in the image repertoire of black juveniles. And these most pronounced forms of indiscernible difference are linked to an even more general crisis of categories therein, including autonomy/automaton, pleasure/pain, human/animal, organic/inorganic, and, of course, freedom/slavery. In the intervening years of the mid-twentieth century, the public witnessed sustained attempts by a new generation of black professionals and community advocates to politicize, yet again, the matter of black family preservation against ongoing attempts by state and civil society to shatter the bonds between black parents and children. It is argued here that this ongoing struggle is inscribed in the discourse of the television sitcom and returns symptomatically in its performance and reception.

Chapter 6 addresses Cheryl Dunye’s 2001 *Stranger Inside*, a made-for-television film about a young black lesbian prisoner seeking to find her own incarcerated mother by deliberately transferring from her current unit to a higher security facility. It explores *Stranger* within the context of Dunye’s early cinematic work, especially her 1996 *The Watermelon Woman*, in order to reconstruct her complex meditation on the psycho-politics of black kinship, and specifically of black maternity, as the disinherited matrix of gendering and ungendering as well as the orientation and disorientation of sexuality. Black female masculinity, under conditions of extremity, is the formation here that questions the relation between the psychic life of a state-sanctioned interdiction of black kinship and the willingness to suffer and/or inflict forms of physical, mental, and emotional violence to undo—or preserve or pervert—its effects. This racialized dislocation of embodiment, gender expression and sexual practice—where it is unclear in advance, and at various points along the way, who identifies with whom, who is related to whom, who is attracted to or involved with whom—serves also to upset the normative striving for a coherent social identity aligned with the dominant conceptions of filial love and loving affiliation. The chapter concludes by reviewing the critical itinerary travelled in our investigation of contemporary representations of black masculinity up to this point—from cop to prisoner, from coach to player, from parent to child, from (biological) father to (adopted) mother, from black man to white woman, from housing projects to high-rise penthouse, from post-civil rights retrenchment to antebellum

abolitionism and back again—suggesting, finally, that independent films like Stephen Dest’s 2017 *I Am Shakespeare: The Henry Green Story* and Barry Jenkins 2016 *Moonlight* represent a promising counter-cinema wherein a critical appraisal of black masculinity can be more fully developed. As such, an extended reading of *Moonlight* closes the book.

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