

PLOTTING THE BLACK MASCULINE: THE FIGURE OF THE BLACK RAPIST  
BETWEEN THE WARS

by

DONNA FORD GROVER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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by

Donna Ford Grover

Advisor: Jane Marcus

In this dissertation I examine black masculinity and its symbiotic relationship with white femininity and how this relationship forms 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses on citizenship and political rights in the US. I show how the literary works of Jessie Redmon Fauset, Walter White, Richard Wright, William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell, construct a rape plot in which a black man's desire for political and social enfranchisement is read by the white man as desire for the white woman. White men use the body of the white woman to mediate the discourse of manhood and political rights between themselves and black men. Therefore the rape plot has little to do with the act of rape: It underwrites a system of white male hegemonic power. Centuries old archetypes of the black male rapist, white female victim and avenging white male are manipulated, subverted as well as reified within the rape plot to address issues around black male agency. These issues are as diverse as citizenship, sexual agency and social equality.

Black male agency, or the lack of, is usually central to building a rape plot, as are other specific constructions of gender. Absent from this triangle is the black female. The power relations between white and black men in the rape plot serve to negate her and the abuse she suffered at the hands of white men during slavery. My discussion begins with World War I and the emergence of the “New Negro.” The participation of black men in the armed services during the war was seen by some as a great stride in the battle for equal rights. But the figure of the uniformed black soldier led to major riots across the US. Desiring of citizenship and full enfranchisement, the patriotic soldier was reduced to rapist and became a target of white violence. In the period between the wars, the black rapist occupies the consciousness of both blacks and whites. The figure of the black rapist is historic and a part of the American landscape of race and gender construction.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction.....  | 1   |
| Chapter 1 “The Negro No Slacker,” Agency and the Call to Action: World War I and the Construction of New Negro Manhood.....            | 14  |
| Chapter 2 “Her Preference For Her Father,” A New Black Patriarchy in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s <i>There is Confusion</i> .....            | 45  |
| Chapter 3 Violence and the Struggle for Post-War Manhood: Walter White’s <i>Fire in the Flint</i> .....                                | 81  |
| Chapter 4 Native Sons and White Prostitutes: Black Manhood, White Womanhood in Scottsboro and Richard Wright’s <i>Native Son</i> ..... | 121 |
| Chapter 5 Revisions of War, Manhood and Blackness: <i>Gone With the Wind</i> and <i>Absalom, Absalom !</i> .....                       | 161 |
| Bibliography .....   | 201 |

## Introduction

In 1997 Chautauqua County, New York was peppered with posters of a young African-American man, Nushawn Williams. The posters showed Williams's black face and short braids, surrounded by a red border. The "wanted style" poster warned that Williams was carrying the AIDS virus and anyone who'd had sex with him ought to come to any number of clinics for a test. The poster also added that all testing was confidential. Williams's right to confidentiality was purposely waived by health officials who viewed him as a danger on the same level of danger as anyone else who would warrant a wanted poster. Williams had allegedly had sex with upwards of 48 women in and around Chautauqua County and knowingly infected them with HIV. The women were white, working class mostly from Jamestown, New York a small somewhat isolated town in southwestern New York. The media descended upon Jamestown in droves. They labeled Williams's sex partners "sluts" or "victims." Williams himself was called "lethal lothario," "sexual predator" and "a monster." It is not difficult to speculate on just what drew the media to Jamestown. Among the poor, HIV had spread like wildfire. So the fact that the virus impacted an economically depressed town and its impoverished occupants should not have been news. However, the story contained the still taboo act of sex between a black man and a white woman and that this sex was dangerous. The

statutory rape charge that Williams pled guilty to added to the awful mystique. So deeply embedded was the ideology of race and sex in the collective consciousness of the media that young women who had sex with Williams who spoke of love were ignored. Love and the type of subjectivity that accompanies it did not fit into this story.

Within the narrative of Jamestown, Williams and the women he infected, HIV is written in as a metaphor for the destructive nature of black male sexuality. The image of the black man as a rapist, the despoiler of white women emerged during Reconstruction. Rape meant a possession, a way for the black man to mark the white female body as his own. For many whites this taking of the white female body by black men would have terrible effects upon white civilization. In the Williams case a public health official declared that Williams had “damaged hundreds of lives,” even though at the time there were only nine positive individuals associated with him and about half of those had been infected before Williams was told that he was infected. But HIV in this case articulates the threat of the black rapist. There is no doubt that the HIV severely impacted the young women and their families, however, the “hundreds” of lives is not merely an inflated figure. It speaks to the idea that Williams and many black men like him are a national problem.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting reading of the Williams case is JoAnn Wypijewski’s “The Secret Sharer; Sex, Race and Denial in an American Small Town.” *Harpers* (July 1998): 25-54; The New York Times offered a spate of articles about Williams: Susan Saulny “A Lothario With H.I.V.” *New York Times* (7 July 2001): 27. “Drifter Says He Had Sex With Up to 300.” *New York Times* (29 July 1999): B5; The Times carried a front-page article on Williams, complete with a photograph when the story broke. In two years the New York Time published 14 stories about Williams. This is significant since by the late nineties, the media and the New York Times included had all but forgotten the A.I.D.S. epidemic.

The image of the black male rapist is at the core of the construction of African-American maleness. This mythic image has prowled the American consciousness since the introduction of Africans to Europeans. During Reconstruction it produced in the U.S. such paranoia in whites that violence resulted. The figure has several post-modern incarnations, which include the now famous Willie Horton television ads during George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign. In the ads, Bush accused his opponent, the former Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, of paroling convicted rapists who while free commit rape again and again. Horton came to represent America's most horrific nightmare. There was also O.J. Simpson's retouched mug shot, which appeared on the cover of Newsweek at the height of the Brown-Goldman murder trial. Simpson, a brown-skinned man was darkened in this shot for a more "sinister" appearance. And in current U.S. discourse we are constantly reminded of Nushawn Williams, who clearly demonstrated that HIV contained in the body of a black subject, is not a virus but a lethal weapon. The staying power of these images can be attributed to their role in upholding a system of white patriarchal power.

In this dissertation I will examine certain black masculinities and how their construction informs 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses on citizenship and political rights in the US. Black masculine desire for social and political enfranchisement has been historically misread as a desire for the white woman. White men then use the body of the white woman to mediate the discourse of manhood and political rights between themselves and black men. Therefore black on white rape, we could argue, has little to do with the actual act of rape or sex; instead it underwrites a system of white male hegemonic power. Centuries old archetypes of the black male rapists, white female victims and avenging

white male are constantly manipulated, subverted as well as reified in order to address issues around black male agency. These issues are as diverse as citizenship, sexual agency and social equality. In order to create a black rapist, a fitting victim is required. In order to fill that role, white womanhood must be chaste, sexually passive, fragile and morally pure or constructed as such. This specific condition of white womanhood is as essential as the black rapist in maintaining the white male in a heroic role. Absent from this triangle is the black female. The power relations between white and black men serve to negate her and the sexual abuse she suffered during slavery. One could in fact argue that the symbolic black rapist is created to deny the power of the black woman and her historic agency. Since she was the victim of the white rapist, her image is denied or re-written as whore or baby-killer.

My study begins with World War I. The period following World War I begins the era of the New Negro who Alain Locke describes as “moving forward under the control largely of his own objectives.” Although the New Negro is the sum of his history, he is also forward looking and able to cast off the part of history that denies him true manhood. Locke’s call for agency encompasses a move away the limiting stereotypes that historically had denied full citizenship to blacks:

The days of “aunties,” “uncles,” and “mammies,” are equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the “Colonel” and “George” play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Locke. *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, reprint 1968):5

This emergence of a “New Negro” follows closely on the heels of the return of black men from fighting for democracy in Europe during World War I. It is this image of the enfranchised black man that forms Twentieth century ideals of black masculinity.

Black men, fresh from fighting the white enemy in Europe, returned home ready to fight for their rights. Although black Americans had participated in numerous wars before, they emerged from World War I with a sense of political agency and an urgency to see equal rights between the races realized. Their experience in Europe proved that democracy was not an abstraction but something tangible that could be won. As Moorfield Storey, former president of the American Bar Association and the President of the NAACP predicted at the War’s end, “The Negroes will come back feeling like men and not disposed to accept the treatment to which they have been subjected.”<sup>3</sup> In the May 1919 issue of the *Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois sounded a battle call like welcome for the returning Soldiers:

We return

We return from fighting

We return fighting!<sup>3</sup>

The battle cry for political rights was not contained within the black community. Throughout America the new Negro was heard, seen and felt. However, this vision of a politically empowered black man did not end the old order of racial violence. In fact, around the time when black men were returning home from the war, racial violence was

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<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. DuBois. “Returning Soldiers.” *The Crisis* (May 17, 1919): 13-14.

steadily rising. According to historian David Levering Lewis, in 1918 seventy-eight black Americans had been lynched and southern papers editorialized about the violent fate awaiting any black veteran daring to come home "uniformed, bemeddalled, and striding up Maine Street like a white man."<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter 1 of my dissertation I discuss the role World War I played in refiguring black masculinity for both black men and the prevailing culture. Established racial hierarchies were endangered by black participation in the military service. Black men wearing the same uniform as well as sharing the same rank as white men threatened to erase lines of difference between them. Even more terrifying to white America was the image of armed black men fresh from killing white men (even though they were German and the enemy, they were nonetheless white) and enjoying sexual liaisons with white European women. There was a sense of shock in the U.S. about the French, particularly, who seemed to lack the fear and the hatred that whites in the U.S. felt. They respected black culture. Adopted jazz as their own in the 1920's and were a part of the avant-garde. In the white racist mind, as during Reconstruction, black agency took on sexual and violent connotations.

In order to counter prevailing U.S. images of black manhood as dangerous and overly sexual, many black writers used a de-sexed, middle -class model of black manhood in their fiction. In Chapter 2 I discuss Jessie Fauset's novel *There is Confusion* (1924) and how Fauset constructs a specific ideal of black manhood that encompasses all of the ideals of the New Negro. Fauset worked diligently to keep her male characters

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<sup>4</sup> David Levering Lewis. *When Harlem Was In Vogue*. (New York: Penguin, 1979): 14.

free of the taint of rapist. In order to do this she created a strong patriarch, who was greatly admired for his ideals and the ways in which he personified Victorian ideals of manhood. The father's influence reaches beyond his immediate family and into the black community and shapes not only young men but women as well. Fauset's view of a black community gently guided by a loving, strong and intelligent patriarch dispels the notions of black male violence and lust for white women. Fauset creates a realm where black male desire can be freely expressed without repercussions and accusations of rape. Her characters move in a predominantly black middle-class world. News of racial violence comes from afar but it never threatens her characters. Fauset also viewed World War I as an essential part of the New Negro. In Fauset's novel the war acts as a vehicle for the most lost of her characters—the ones who find themselves alienated from New Negro ideals—to find themselves. The war served to tie up the loose ends of Fauset's plot and to re-figure race, gender and class.

Fauset's characters mirror Walter White's black middle-class in *The Fire in the Flint* (1924). White's protagonist Kenneth Harper is a young doctor, veteran of World War I, who returns to his southern town to set up a practice. Harper embodies all of the optimism of the New Negro. Yet it is this very optimism that sets him up for a tragedy. Despite Kenneth and his brother Bob's adherence to Victorian masculine ideals, they are ultimately the victims of a white lynch mob. In this chapter I use *Fire in the Flint* to demonstrate how the ghost of the black rapist can permeate even the most sexless and middle class of texts. Unlike Fauset who places her New Negroes within the solid support of a black community, White's Harper must navigate through a white racist power structure in order to practice as a doctor. Harper derives his optimism and strong

sense of self from his success at Harvard and his status as a veteran of the War. This propels him to demonstrate his “superior medical training” and openly compete with the town’s established doctors, one black and one white. Harper’s desire for enfranchisement within the white male professional community labels him a “rapist” and signifies his death.

Whereas Fauset and White use middle class mores in order to combat the image of the black rapist, Richard Wright confronts this ideal of black manhood head-on in *Native Son* (1940). In Chapter 3 I discuss Wright’s novel alongside the scandalous Scottsboro Case, in which nine African American youths were tried and convicted of the rape of two white women aboard a freight train in March of 1931. Not only is the Scottsboro story a narrative of the racist failings of the American legal system, it details the modes of power in force between white men, white women and black men. Like the women that Nushawn Williams allegedly infected with the AIDS virus, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates were poor, not of the class background that would merit “rescuing.” Yet several facts attest to how ineradicable the label “rapist” is when it denotes sex between a white woman and a black man. There is fact that Nushawn Williams’s medical confidentiality was violated and his face and HIV status were advertised and that the Scottsboro prosecution got convictions for all nine despite Ruby Bates’ retraction of the allegation of rape. *Native Son* offers another version of the triangle between white men, white women and black men. Brotherhood between white men and black men can replace the friction over the white woman’s body. Bigger Thomas and Jan, the young communist, bond over the dead body of Mary Dalton. Jan’s ability to love the man who murdered his beloved shows his commitment to social reform and his understanding of

race in America. But in the real Scottsboro narrative and *Native Son's* plot there are no happy endings. Bigger does begin to not only understand the world, but to image a place for himself in it at the point when he is condemned to die for Mary Dalton's death. The Scottsboro Nine spend most of their lives in prison. Those who were eventually freed were already too institutionalized to function in the world. Like Walter White's *Fire in the Flint*, these narratives tell of a problem, not of a viable solution.

My dissertation ends with a discussion of Margaret *Mitchell's Gone With the Wind* (1936) and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936). These works share more than a year of publication and a revisionist reading of the Civil War. Both works have more to do with the racial climate of the 1930s than with the Civil War and Reconstruction. Faulkner and Mitchell use non-biological constructions of blackness in order to mark outsiders. Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner's anti-hero, is a poor white who is instructed to use the back door by a black slave. After suffering this humiliation, Sutpen vows to be the one who determines who uses the front door. He becomes a member of the planter class, but has no attachments to the social rules of interaction that adhere to that class. Sexual, violent and with a total disregard for the white world and its values, Sutpen acts as the black rapist. Through him whiteness, blackness as well as male and female are delineated. Like Sutpen, Mitchell's Rhett Butler is also an outsider with little regard for the rules of white society. It is their white bodies that keep both Sutpen and Butler from a lynch mob. But it is their blackness that spells their tragedy. The systematic hierarchy that constructs American society is exposed by Faulkner and Mitchell's writing of the black rapist.

There are several scholars and critics to whose work I owe much. My reading of Scottsboro dialogues with William J. Maxwell's book, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (199). Maxwell's project is to examine the productive relationship between African-Americans literary culture and Communism in the 1920s and the 1930s. The Communists were greatly involved in the Scottsboro case. Maxwell claims that the ILD subverted the rape triangle in their particular brand of interracialism. White women conduct the alliance of white and black male proletarians who "function locally as integration's conduits rather than as segregation's tripwires."<sup>5</sup> My work with Wright's *Native Son* also holds this theory to be evident.

The primary issue that my dissertation confronts is how political, historical and aesthetic movements impact race and gender construction within literary texts. A black feminist work that has greatly influenced this project is Hazel Carby's *Race Men* (1998). The mission of *Race Men* is to challenge unexamined assumptions about black masculinity and leadership. Carby critiques definitions of black masculinity with American culture as well as its relationship with political, social and cultural aspects of both black and white societies. She also demonstrates how these definitions of black masculinity exclude women. As much as my project focuses on black male agency, I am interested in the space created by the absence of black women in these texts. Like Carby I believe that by dissecting the political and social configurations of the black male or "outsider," I can better understand why and how the black woman emerges and

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<sup>5</sup> William J. Maxwell. *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999):131.

disappears within certain texts. This is evident in Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion*.

Women are only present to reify black male power. Once that power is made clear, the black woman disappears.

Other feminist scholars have used masculinity as the focus of their reading of the rape triangle within American literature. A text that has been very important to my work is Sandra Gunning's *Race, Rape and Lynching: The Red Line of American Literature 1890-1912* (1996). Gunning's project focuses on how men and women, blacks and whites contributed, through literary texts, to a dialogue on racial violence from the 1890s through the early 1900s. Important to this dialogue are the analysis of the issues mediated by the figure of the black rapist and how these issues impacted white masculinity, white femininity, the black woman and the black family. Crucial to my project is the way Gunning brings together literature that has been kept separate by race, gender and canonical status. It is through bringing together this diverse literature that Gunning, as well as myself, can demonstrate how the trope of the black rapist "functions as a multi-layered metaphor to structure and articulate latent anxieties over black and white self construction in terms of gender, class and citizenship roles." However, Gunning's project and my own diverge in many places. She is concerned with "lynch" literature of the nineteenth century and how, within this literature, the black male body is criminalized and the site of white violence. Although the lynching motif does enter into my project, I am less concerned with reactions to white violence and more interested in how the black rapist/ outsider upholds social hierarchies and fixes identities within these hierarchies.

While Gunning offers a context for the reading of the rapist trope, Robyn Wiegman, in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995), uses the broad canvas of American culture to discuss gender, specifically masculinity. Wiegman's discussion of identity politics is centered on an analysis of biological and cultural basis of race and gender bias. Important to the highly theoretical analysis Wiegman provides is how the discourse of sexual difference defines hierarchies within the masculine. The chapter on lynching—"The Anatomy of a Lynching" goes beyond Gunning's discussion in that Wiegman deals with the performative functions of lynching and how this serves to maintain as well as create hierarchies within the construction of race and gender. Wiegman's reading of *Native Son* within this context informs not only my work but serves as the basis of my interest in the construction of the masculine.

My project is to confront the role black masculinity plays in the construction of race and gender in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. The range of culture, literature and historic events I use demonstrates that even within diverse elements of American culture, the black masculine remains the same. The violent sexualized image of blackness that Mitchell and Faulkner suggest in their texts is what haunts the novels of White and Fauset. Their black Victorians base their self-representation as oppositional to these specific images. The war black war heroes from World War I elicit the violence from the black rapist yet shed themselves of his criminality. Through this they gain fictional valor and fearlessness. The novels and historical events I have chosen to use interrogate, embrace and resist the ideology of race and gender that I have described here. This very ideology put a nation's eyes on a small town in upstate New York where young white women were under attack and heroic white men came to their rescue. A black man was

captured and laws were waived to bring him to justice. Nushawn Williams and his digressions against white womanhood are historical and seemingly forever stamped upon American civilization.

## Chapter I

### **“The Negro No Slacker,” Agency and the Call to Action: World War I and the Construction of New Negro Manhood**

The early years of the twentieth century quaked with the modernist impulse to create anew. For African Americans this meant renewed vigor in their struggle for equal rights. The struggle was not a rehash of past fights. It would not be until 1925 when Alain Locke would write of the “New Negro.” Yet even before his “official birth,” there were signs of the New Negro on the horizon. The migration of blacks into northern cities was one factor in his emergence. In 1910 there were 522,815 black workers in northern industry or about 10% of all working blacks. By 1920 the number had increased to 960,039.<sup>1</sup> Blacks were making more money in the North than they ever dreamed of making in the South. Yet it was not only the promise of gainful employment that lured the New Negro from the South. As Alain Locke wrote:

The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize even in the face of an exorbitant and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro

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<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson. *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930) :35.

becomes more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from the country side to city, but from medieval American to modern.<sup>2</sup>

In order to ensure his place in modernity the New Negro must begin to conspicuously create another history, in which he is no longer a victim and one in which he fights back as an American.

It was no coincidence that the New Negro emerged at the time of World War I. The participation of blacks in World War I would give the struggle for equal rights a newer and deeper meaning. The establishment of a black officer’s training camp was touted as “an epoch in American history and a new day for the Negro.”<sup>3</sup> Walter White recalls that for the first time in history the city of Atlanta permitted blacks to use the city auditorium when a flying squadron of young black men performed in a recruitment program.<sup>4</sup> Between 1917 and 1918 the pages of *The Crisis* were filled with pleas for black men to enlist and fight. In an editorial in *The Crisis*, George G. Bradford wrote:

If the colored citizens of the country seize this opportunity to emphasize their American citizenship by effective war activities, they will score tremendously. When men fight together and work together and save together, this foolishness of race prejudice disappears.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Locke. “The New Negro,” in *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins (NY: Oxford, 1995):49.

<sup>3</sup> Emmett J. Scott. *The American Negro in the World*. (Chicago: Homewood, 1919):90.

<sup>4</sup> Walter White. *A Man Called White*. 1948; (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 36.

<sup>5</sup> George T. Bradford, letter, *The Crisis* 16 (May 1918).

The hopes of many black leaders was that camaraderie, a natural impulse amongst soldiers, would provide a sense of equality between black and white men.

Yet the same conditions which caused the New Negro to feel optimistic also terrified white America. World War I was followed by violence against blacks that could only compare with Reconstruction in volume and brutality. Walter White reports that “there was a terrible succession of race riots and lynching by civilian mobs. Some of the lynching had been of Negro soldiers to demonstrate that Negroes must neither seek nor expect the ‘social equality’ which they experienced in France and other European countries.”<sup>6</sup> White America’s reaction to the freedom of black soldiers enjoyed abroad caused a race war at home. Among racists their prowess as soldiers only proved that they could and would kill white men. Also implied in this scenario was that these black men had been having sexual relations with white women. The figure of the uniformed black soldier was the personification of the assertion of equal rights and the reincarnation of the savage black rapist from the period of Reconstruction. It was true that the war had changed how blacks saw themselves. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote: “Make way for democracy! We saved it in France and by great Jehovah we will save it in the United States of America or know the reason why.”<sup>7</sup> The black veteran meant to be not only a symbol of valor and bravery, but also the downfall of white domination. The New Negro was an outsider, especially in the South. Whether he was from the North and therefore tainted

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<sup>6</sup> White, 308.

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* 17 (May 1919): 13-14.

with northern ideas about race or a decorated veteran, fresh from killing Germans and the beds of foreign white women, he was treated as a threat.

In this chapter I will examine the importance of World War I in shaping perceptions of black masculinity. Moral as well as political principles of the New Negro were formed in the black response to violence in the streets of American cities. The depiction of the black soldier in literature portrayed the contradictions of the time. Leslie Pickney Hill and Fenton Johnson use the image of the black soldier to foster a variety of ideals of black masculinity. While Johnson and Hill valorize the black soldier they also de-sex him. Yet he does embody white middle class ideals of true manhood. He is strong brave and most importantly full of self control and patriotism. I will not only examine fictional work in this chapter. The actual events that took place before during and after the war are important to my discussion. Fenton Johnson's fictitious character Garrison dialogues with real African American heroes and their stories. These stories reveal American notions of black masculinity.

### **WWI and a Closing of the Ranks**

In the July of 1918 edition of *The Crisis* W.E.B Du Bois wrote an editorial that would be one of his most controversial. Titled "Close Ranks" it was published at the height of American Mobilization during World War I. In it Du Bois called for black Americans to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills." For Du Bois and others like him, the war became an opportunity for equal

rights. In demonstrating their patriotism and allegiance with America, blacks could finally be recognized as citizens and given the same rights as all Americans. To fight and die for a country as well as for an ideal as great as democracy would at last show the world that the Negro was deserving of equality with whites. In an editorial a month before "Close Ranks" Du Bois wrote: "This War is an End, and also a Beginning. Never again will the darker people of the world occupy just the place they have before." Despite the optimism of Du Bois and others, African American participation in World War I did little for the struggle of social and political enfranchisement. Still "Close Ranks" captures a feeling of hope and exuberant patriotism among a faction of black American at wartime.

However "Close Ranks" was hotly critiqued at the time of its appearance as well as amongst historians. According to historian Mark Ellis, most historians have resisted evidence that points to the writing of "Close Ranks" as a way for Du Bois to secure a position in military intelligence. Ellis contends that Du Bois wrote "Close Ranks" at the request of white NAACP chairman Joel Springarn who was then serving as an intelligence officer. Du Bois was offered a commission following the publication of "Close Ranks." But he denied that the editorial and the commission were at all related.<sup>8</sup> Yet the controversy which surrounded the editorial and his commission deeply affected his reputation as a leader in the fight for equal rights.<sup>9</sup> At the time of World War I and

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Ellis. "'Close Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W.E.B. DuBois in World War I." *The Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992):96.

<sup>9</sup> For more about Du Bois and his actions during World War I see Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and the Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, MA: 1976) and

during the period immediately following it, the struggle for civil rights stood largely as one without any compromises. Du Bois' urging to "forget our special grievances" flies in direct opposition to the New Negro's assertion of manhood and citizenship.

"Close Ranks" also speaks to a movement within black political and social rights to mask the issues of race with virulent patriotism. Instead of fighting each other, blacks and whites could join together and fight a common enemy. Race riots across the United States at the time of the war brought race to the fore of American consciousness. Yet at a time when race and the issues around it were hyper-visible, some black leaders sought to quell racial antagonism by erasing racial difference. This was an act of futility since the presence of black men in the military heightened racial tensions. Isobel Field wrote:

There is a personage nearer to home that we must be prepared to lose. Mistah Johnson, the Darktown Coon. He is no more. Gradually there has appeared in his place a stern young American, trained and alert, musket in his hand. There is no hyphen to his name. His forefathers were Africans but he is loyal United States."<sup>10</sup>

To be rid of the hyphen in his name, yet to recognize his African past and to fully embrace his American citizenship involves a precarious balancing act. True agency could only be achieved in the integration of the New Negro's multiple identities. As he embraces unwavering patriotism with a musket in his hand, it is to kill in the war across the ocean, not in the race war at home.

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David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography of Race, 1868-1919*(New York: Henry Holt, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Isobel Field, quoted in Editorial. *The Crisis* 16 (August 18):179.

The pages of *The Crisis* as well as many other black publications bellowed with patriotic fever. Yet it is difficult to ascertain if all the patriotism was due to sincere political idealism or if it was due to the fact that during wartime criticism of the United States was deeply discouraged and penalized. From 1917-1920 any publication that challenged the status quo and depended upon access to the mails for its circulation could face stiff consequences. Under the Espionage Act of May 1918, the government secured over one thousand prosecutions, mostly of socialists and members of the left wing Industrial Workers of the World. The Post Office did much to suppress radical expression by denying second class mailing privileges to around one hundred journals under the provisions of the Espionage Act.<sup>11</sup>

For black Americans being pro war was not enough to insure protection against government surveillance. In the minds of white America, the question of black loyalty loomed large. Since blacks were not considered true citizens, how could they truly pledge loyalty? Also since blacks had been so poorly treated by whites, it was imagined that they could exact their revenge by becoming spies for the enemy. Walter White remembered being ejected from military service along with two other men who happened to be as light skinned as he was. “For some then unexplained reason we were asked to step aside, where we were scrutinized with non-too-friendly glances by several Army Officers.” Despite the fact that White and the other two men were in top physical shape, they were rejected while a dark skinned and frail young man was accepted. White was

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<sup>11</sup> William Preston, Jr. *Aliens and Dissenters—Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge:, 1989):87.

not puzzled for too long:

Wild rumors, born of guilty consciences no doubt, were sweeping the South that the "Huns" were industriously at work among Southern Negroes to spread unrest. These German agents and spies, so the tales ran, were capitalizing on Negro bitterness against lynching and race prejudice. Fantastic stories were believed that as soon as white soldiers went off to war, Negroes would rise up and massacre white people in their beds under the direction of the Kaiser's agents. Obviously, light skinned Negroes who could easily pass as white would be the kind the Kaiser would use!<sup>12</sup>

The idea of black German spies was not the only nightmare white America struggled with in terms of blacks in the military. Government restriction on speech did not end at anti-war opinions. All discussion of equal rights had to be finely tempered or eradicated entirely at wartime. The Military Intelligence Branch classified all incoming information on race under the heading "Negro Subversion" on the assumption that blacks were potentially disloyal and especially receptive to the propaganda of enemy agents. Intelligence on blacks was gathered by white officers who were hostile to the demand for equal rights. Any outspoken attempt to combat racial inequality was seen as subversive to the natural order of society in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

The atmosphere of nationalism kept many blacks from publicly attacking the U.S. government on how they were being treated as civilians as well as in the military. One of

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<sup>12</sup> Walter White. *A Man Called White*. Another theory was that many illiterate blacks were selected to serve because the white officers felt more at ease working with men who were not as empowered as educated men like White. There was also the belief among black leadership and some historians that illiterate black troops would fail and ultimately this is what many whites in the military wanted. For more on this topic see Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994)

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, 102.

the most glaring examples of racism in the armed forces was the treatment of Colonel Charles Young. Young had been the third black graduate of West Point and was the only one remaining in the service at the outbreak of World War I. Despite the racism that he had met with during his years in the military, Young was so dedicated, competent and so highly regarded as an officer that he managed to earn promotions. However, in 1917 Colonel Young was sixth on the promotion list of colonels. During wartime the military was growing so quickly that it was inevitable that Young would come up for a promotion to Brigadier General. This would make him eligible for a high post such as assistant divisional commander of a black division. This came at a time when the idea of arming black men to kill white men was terrifying to some. To put a black man in charge of these black soldiers would seem even more horrifying. Recommended by his Selection Board for a promotion, Young then went to military hospital at San Francisco for his physical examination. The doctors there reported that he was suffering from high blood pressure and he was retired from active service the day before many Colonels were advanced to brigadier. Young argued that he was not sick and his own physician stated that Young's blood pressure was normal for a middle-aged man. To prove his fitness Young rode on horseback from his home on the Chillicothe, Ohio to Washington, DC.<sup>14</sup>

Young was devoted to the military and a super patriot. Just two months before his unjust treatment by the army, Young was one of many black leaders sounding the charge for black men to forget their own plight, join up and fight for their country:

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<sup>14</sup> Barbeau and Henri, 67.

We Negroes must have a part—a glorious one—in the destiny of this country—our country. The one where our fathers wrought mightily in spite of handicaps most stupendous...hall we now join the face of danger that seems to loom largely before us or play the baby act and refuse our country's citizen's bounden duty? Every generous instinct of your heart will tell you no.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically Young would not serve his country during World War I. After the war when there was no chance of promotion to the rank of general, Young was reactivated and sent to Liberia. He suffered a recurrence of “black water fever” and died in 1922.<sup>16</sup>

Colonel Young's involuntary retirement sparked black protest across America. For the most part, the protest was often finely tempered as not to suggest black disloyalty. Z.W. Mitchell's letter to *The Crisis* is indicative of the type of protest that could get published at a time in which any critique of American policy was seen as bordering on treason. Mitchell begins his attack on the War department by calling the injustices committed upon the Negro by them as “incidental and not “intentional” because “intentional injustices toward colored soldiers is the poorest investment in this country can make just now.” He promises that despite the treatment of blacks by the War department “As Negroes we propose to fight for right, no matter what our treatment.” Mitchell then briefly discusses Colonel Young's situation without detailing the reasons

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<sup>15</sup> “Loyalty” Editorial, *The Crisis* 13 (May 1917):22.

<sup>16</sup> Not very much has been written about Young. However the following are resources of biographical information. Abraham Chew. *A Biography of Colonel Charles Young*. Washington, DC : R. L. Pendelton, 1923 and a more recent treatment of Young, Robert Ewell Greene, *Colonel Charles Young: Soldier and Diplomat*. Washington, DC: R.E. Greene, 1985.

behind his forced retirement. Yet Mitchell calls Colonel Young “imprisoned in Ohio on full pay with nothing to do.”

Despite Mitchell’s stated commitment of the black man to fight regardless of his treatment, his letter goes on to describe the poor training of Negro troops in the Ninety-Second Division. He attacks the military for not giving artillery training to these black troops. The most illiterate soldiers were recruited for this Division which made it bound to fail. But Mitchell’s most acerbic attack is on an incident reported in a military bulletin. According to the bulletin a black sergeant “precipitated trouble by making it possible to allege race discrimination in the seat he was given” in a local theater. The bulletin does state that the sergeant was within his legal rights to protest his treatment and acknowledges the wrongdoing on the part of the theater manager. However it goes on to remark that” “Nevertheless the sergeant is guilty of the greater wrong in doing *anything* no matter how legally correct that will provoke race animosity.” Mitchell questions the motives of General Ballou, the officer in charge of Camp Des Moines where the incident occurred and where the Ninety-Second Division was housed. “Can it be that General Ballou is not going to protect his colored officers in their simplest legal rights?” He further states that “the greater danger is not that they will carelessly bring on race antagonism or rather they will invite it by submitting to intolerable insult.”<sup>17</sup>

*The Crisis*, however, kept its accommodation tone by printing a reply from General Ballou in the next issue. Ballou does not address the major concerns of Mitchell’s letter. He does not discuss why his men were not given any artillery training

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<sup>17</sup> Z.W. Mitchell. Letter. *The Crisis* 16 (May 1918)

or if, in fact, most of the soldiers in his division were illiterate. Ballou's letter supports the image of the passive Negro, the one most eager to serve white interests and keep to the status quo. Ballou stresses the importance of his men readjusting to the standards of the surrounding community. More than anything, Ballou states, they had to "make friends." In a meeting with his men Ballou recalls that he told them that he "did not propose to have five percent of the students ruin the prospects of the other ninety-five percent; that our *mission* was the *attainment* of success in making *colored officers*, and that we were not going to lose sight of it and jeopardize that mission by getting tangled up in social or political issues." Ballou said that the men's response was to stand by him "like bricks." Within Ballou's metaphor lies the image of the black man most suitable to whites: mute and strong under the order of a stronger and more powerful white man. The violence that followed the black soldier in the US threatened this image and officers like Ballou believed that the white public's problem with the black soldier was the fault of the soldiers and black leaders who chose to make race a topic of war. But the riots that occurred during wartime clearly showed that the armed forces could not function unless race was addressed.

Black men from the North were often assigned to bases in the Deep South. Unfamiliar with Jim Crow, these soldiers often ran into trouble whenever they left the base. The riot in Houston was an example of the racial tensions brought on by the war. In August of 1917, Houston erupted into violence. Black soldiers of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Houston came from all over the country and as *The New York Times*

observed, they were not as passive as southern Negroes.<sup>18</sup> They angered southern whites by their disregard of Jim Crow laws. According to Captain L.S. Snow, who commanded the black battalion of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the riot began when a Houston officer arrested a black woman and in doing so slapped her face. A soldier of the 24<sup>th</sup>, who had allegedly been drinking, reproached the policeman. After the officer beat the soldier with the butt of his pistol, he arrested him. A black military police officer in full uniform, who was near the scene, asked the police officer about the scene. The police officer told him it was none of his business and then hit the military officer over the head with his pistol butt. The military police officer then ran up the street with the police officer firing after him. When he took refuge in a house, he was dragged out by the police officer and beaten.<sup>19</sup>

Although the Corporal was released later that evening, a rumor spread through the camp that he had been killed. When the soldiers back at camp heard the details of the violence done to their fellow soldiers, they became enraged. The official version of the story is that, early in the evening the black soldiers of the company stole ammunition and ran for town. As the group walked into the city they fired on some white men. This set off an alarm through the town. Police and some armed civilians intercepted the soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Shots were briefly exchanged and then the soldiers returned to camp. Two black soldiers and seventeen white men, including five police officers had been killed. The incident

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<sup>18</sup> *New York Times* 25 August 1917: p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

was referred to by the press and the military as the “Houston Mutiny”. Sixty-three soldiers were tried in civilian court. Thirteen were condemned to death, forty-one were sentenced to life imprisonment, four to shorter jail terms, and five were acquitted. For the thirteen condemned to death, the sentence was announced on Sunday, December 8<sup>th</sup>. The following Wednesday they were hung.<sup>21</sup> Later, six more men were sentenced to death. The rush to put the thirteen to death was cause for protest among black leaders. They were not tried in military court because the state of Texas demanded that they be tried in the state court for murder. In the end nineteen black men were put to death for the deaths of seventeen white men.<sup>22</sup>

The message sent by the actions of the government concerning the “Houston Mutiny” was that black men in the military had to be like General Ballou’s “bricks” if they wished to survive. Jim Crow and even violence against the black soldier would be tolerated but his retaliation would not be. Racial incidents were always the fault of the black soldier. He was responsible for how whites reacted to him. Within the South and in some northern cities as well, the figure of the black soldier provoked feelings of anger, terror and hatred. Senator Vardaman, an avowed racist, summed up the South’s feelings on the topic of blacks in the military: “Universal military service means that millions of

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Army, War College, *Colored Soldiers*, pt. 3, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*, 12 December 1917: 7.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the “Houston Mutiny” see James W. Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking, 1933):322-23; *The Crisis*, (October 1917):384-85; *The Crisis* (January 1918):114; *The New York Times* 20 February 1918:4-5.

Negroes who come under this measure will be armed. I know of no greater menace to the South than this.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite their treatment, black soldiers proved to be courageous in battle. There were a few all black battalions who saw battle; many were consigned to stevedore duties. However, many reports of black acts of bravery were reported. Among them was a victorious fight by two black soldiers against a dozen Germans. Two volunteers of the 15<sup>th</sup> New York infantry, Henry Johnson and Frank Roberts were first to meet a German attack. Wounded but surviving a volley of grenades, the two men still fought. Badly wounded and unable to rise, Roberts propped himself against the door of their dugout and threw grenades. However, Johnson was on his feet, with his rifle in hand ready to meet the German onslaught. But his rifle only carried a magazine of three cartridges. As he shot one, another German was close behind his fallen comrade. With no time to reload Johnson brought his rifle down on the head of an advancing German. When Johnson turned around to see how Roberts was doing, he saw his partner being carried away by two German soldiers as a prisoner. He then quickly sprang onto the soldiers of a German, unsheathed his bolo knife and plunged the blade into the head of the enemy.

But Johnson’s fight was far from over. The German he had hit in the head with the rifle was up and charging him, firing his Luger automatic pistol. Wounded by the gunfire, Johnson was soon up on his feet and met the charging German with his knife. Johnson was the first American to win the Croix de Guerre. His bravery made his

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<sup>23</sup> James K. Vardaman. *The Great American Race Problem and Its Relation to the Present War*. (n.p., 1917):7-8.

regiment famous. Many reporters flocked to see “les enfants perdus,” as Colonel Hayward called his men.<sup>24</sup> Irving S. Cobb was one of the many journalists impressed with the black soldiers. In response to the heroism of Johnson and Roberts, Cobb wrote, “n-i-g-g-e-r will merely be another way of spelling the word American.”<sup>25</sup> Yet racism towards black soldiers during and immediately following the war would prove that “nigger” would always spell trouble for blacks and intense hatred and paranoia for whites.

Although black soldiers had proven their bravery and continuously demonstrated their commitment to winning the war, they would still have far to go in gaining equal rights, even during wartime abroad. The ease with which black and French soldiers worked together made white American military officials uncomfortable. In a document called “Secret Information Concerning Black American troops,” Colonel Linard of AEF Headquarters detailed to the French how black American troops must be treated and why.<sup>26</sup> In this document Linard detailed why the French must be careful not to “qu’elles ne gâtent pas les négres”—not to spoil the Negroes. Linard explained that there was an

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur W. Little. *From Harlem to the Rhine* (New York: Coivici Friede, 1936):183-191; “Bush Germans Better Watch that Chocolate Front,” *Literary Digest* 57 (June 15, 1918):43-47; *The New York Times*, May 21, 1918, p. 6; *The New York Times* May 22, 1918, p.12; Barbeau and Henri, p.116-117.

<sup>25</sup> Irving S. Cobb. *Glory of the Coming* (New York: Doran, 1918):294-95.

<sup>26</sup> Carter G. Woodson. *The Negro in Our History* (New York: Doran, 1956):524; Herbert Aptheker. *Toward Negro Freedom* (New York: New Century, 1956):119; James W. Johnson. *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930)244-45.

important reason why blacks were treated the way they were in the US. The threat of race mongrelization kept whites and blacks separated. Since there were few blacks in France, the French could afford to treat them well since they posed no threat of polluting the race. However the French should avoid all intimacy beyond the necessary communications. And it was all right to recognize work well done by the blacks, but the French were warned not to lavish praise upon them especially in the presence of white Americans.<sup>27</sup>

Colonel Linard was not alone in his reproach of black soldiers. To prevent black soldiers from socializing with white women, the Ninety-second Division was confined to camp and subjected to hourly checks. Worse yet, the war's end brought even more humiliation to the black soldiers. Intent on hiding their contributions to the allied victory, American military officials forbade Negroes from participating in the victory parade down the Champ-Élysées. The black and brown troops of the British and French forces marched proudly in the parade. But the worst injustice dealt to the African American troops was the war Department's insistence that African American soldiers not be depicted in the heroic frieze displayed in France's Panthéon de la Guerre.

Negro soldiers were quickly removed from France at the War's end. But not before black culture and music made an indelible mark on Paris in the 20's. They were moved out of France as speedily as shipping was available. The work they had been doing was transferred to other units. In less than a year's time all the Negro soldiers still

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<sup>27</sup> Barbeau and Henri, p. 114-115.

in the US Army had been returned to the United States.<sup>28</sup> The reason for the government's expediency in the removal of black troops was simple. The longer that black soldiers remained in France, the more intolerable they would be of the ill treatment of whites back home. The U.S. officials were so fixated on how the Negro would respond to whites after being treated so well by the French that they had some black leaders go to France at the close of the war and counsel the soldiers on race in America. They urged soldiers to be tolerant of the American treatment of the negro and to accept the ill treatment that was awaiting them back home.<sup>29</sup>

The Negro soldier was destined to be buried in the back pages of military history. If their bravery and patriotism were fully acknowledged then their place as equals to white men would also have to be acknowledged. It had become fully apparent with the heroism demonstrated during the war that the stereotype of the shuffling, fearful Uncle Tom was just a fairy tale. The fantasy of black masculinity, which drove whites into the streets to riot and murder blacks, was in fact real. There was no imaginary "boogey man" who inhabited the dark, the closets and who lived under the bed. He was as real as the threat of his desire for political rights. Fresh from successfully destroying one enemy, white America was ready to take on another in the form of the New Negro. He was bemedaled, dressed in pressed khaki, and back from killing other white men. According to Senator Vardaman, they were "French-woman-ruined soldiers."

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<sup>28</sup> Rufus E. Clement. "Problems of Demobilization and Rehabilitation of the Negro Soldier After World War I and II," *Journal of Negro Education* (Summer 1943):534.

<sup>29</sup> Clement, p.536.

### The Call of the Patriot

In order to fit in with the hegemonic order of the US the black soldier had to be constructed as de-masculinized and dis-empowered. There are several examples in popular culture of the black soldier as a figure of ridicule, a buffoon whose attempts to mirror white masculinity are the punch line of a joke.<sup>30</sup> Yet this image was countered by more honest portrayals of the black soldier. Black intellectuals and writers created images of masculine strength and intelligence within their narratives. Private Walter E. Seward, a World War I veteran published his book of poems in 1919, *Negroes Call to the Colors and Soldier Camp-Life Poems*. Throughout this collection of poems are photographs and short biographies of black soldiers who served in the war. In his introduction to these poems, Seward clearly states the impetus behind the publication of these poems. According to Seward, these poems document black involvement in the war since “This book was written by an ex-soldier who served several months in the camp...” And these poems “a soldier gleaned from time to time in the everyday walks of military life.” These poems also attest to the flood of black patriotism since according to Seward blacks “were compelled along with others to lay aside the luxuries and necessities of life to help win the war from imposing nations on the other side” (6). Seward’s poetry is much the pro-war editorials that W.E.B. Du Bois published in *The Crisis*. Black men in

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, two popular novels of the time were *Two Black Crows in the AEF* (1928) by Charles Mack and *Colored Soldiers* (1923) by W. Irwin MacIntyre. In both novels the soldier is portrayed as a thieving weakling, terrified of going off to war. His mockery of the white soldier’s valor and manliness is comic relief. In Mack’s novel, the black soldier’s cowardice and stupidity is played against the intelligence and bravery of the white soldier.

answering the call to war are demonstrating their patriotism as well as proving to whites that they are willing to take the burden as well as the fruits of citizenship.

Within Seward's poems, black men emerge as strong, political and uncompromising in their quest for freedom abroad and at home. In his poem "The Negro no Slacker," he extols the bravery and combat prowess of the black soldier:

The Black and White were anxious  
 For to give the Huns a test.  
 And this test they could not stand,  
 It was too great a force;  
 They often thought the Negro was  
 A natural fighting ghost.  
 They said whenever they gassed them  
 They would just get black and blacker;  
 So you can judge for yourself  
 The Negro was no slacker.

These images of the black man as a fighting machine, able to supernaturally destroy those enemies of freedom are rife throughout Seward's work. But especially here, the image of the black man getting only "blacker" in the face of death threatening violence is remarkable. Both figuratively and literally blackness is equated with heroism and fierceness in battle.

Leslie Pinckney Hill's collection of poems *The Wings of Oppression* (1921) contains many references to military service and the efforts of blacks during World War I. "The Black Man's Bit," like the poetry of Seward, celebrates the achievements of black servicemen. He writes how the accomplishments of these servicemen have invigorated the race with pride:

O there's talk from school to pulpit, and  
 The barber's place is rife,



patriotism so prevalent before and during the war gave way to the tragedy inherent in the figure of the “New Negro.”

Post-war life for the New Negro was a period of great strides in the move for equal rights for blacks coupled with violence and deep racial hatred. The confident war veteran returned home to many problems. According to Rufus E. Clement, the black soldier returned home out of step with those friends and neighbors who remained at home during the war.<sup>31</sup> Many veterans had their vocational and educational training interrupted by the war yet the government did not offer aid to these soldiers. Only disabled veterans were given any assistance from the government. Despite encountering many of the same racial issues that existed for them before the war, many men held their uniformed identity very close to their hearts and minds. In the introduction to his book of poetry, Walter E. Seward encourages a sense of pride, which came from their participation in the war effort:

Boys keep the same old army count as you walk again thru the streets of civilian life and wind your way to a point so prominent so that people who suffered and did so much for you can see and rejoice over the effects of your goods works. Boys keep in touch with the old regulations, don't loose that sanitary training as you leave the service. All these little things are inclined to make you better men both mentally and physically. Be a soldier just the same, although you have your honorable discharge from the service. Deport yourself and stand firm for the right and freedom.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rufus E. Clement. “Problems of Demobilization and Rehabilitation of the Negro Soldier After World Wars I and II,” *Journal of Negro Education* (Summer 1943)534.

<sup>32</sup> Walter E. Seward. *Negroes Call to the Colors and Soldier's Camp-Life Poems* (Athens, GA: Know Institute Press,) :8

This militaristic ideal of black masculinity was in conflict with the racial reality facing many returning black men. This conflict is expressed in poet Fenton Johnson's "The Call of the Patriot" (1917). Although published many years before Alain Locke would coin the moniker "New Negro," Johnson's work nevertheless has at its center the very same construction of black masculinity and follows the tragedy inherent in this construction. Fenton's protagonist, Garrison, after being educated in the North, is compelled to return home to the South to work for the uplift of the common black folk. Despite the violence and racism in northern cities, it is his return to the South that marks his tragedy.

"The Call of the Patriot," was published in the February 1917 issue of *The Crisis*. A young boy, Garrison becomes obsessed with military history, namely the acts of other blacks. Johnson describes him as "a Negro child of the mulatto type with eager eyes and ears listens to his mother read him Wendell Phillips' eulogy of Toussaint L'Ouverature." Ouverature's heroism and his part in the Haitian revolution envelop the imaginative child. In his imaginings Garrison "saw the cruel orgies of the enraged slaves as they swept before them in their wrath their helpless taskmasters. He saw the old man of the mountains with his fiery eyes and his voice deep with the music of the Orient, turn them aside from a war of revenge to a war of righteousness" (170). Johnson's text is important to the discussion of the figure of the black soldier and his relationship to social equality because it successfully places black political consciousness within the arena of war. In doing so the figure of the soldier takes on revolutionary aspects representing the political action and change that comes about through violence. The young Garrison grows into a man who does not fight a war on foreign ground but instead fights the war of racial

equality in the US. Garrison, like other images of black maleness of the time serves to prove that intellectually, emotionally and physically the black man was prepared to take on the rigors of full citizenship.

Like other “New Negroes” Garrison had to first release himself from his father’s legacy in order to forge a new and more vital self. Johnson writes that both Garrison and his father share “a military temperament.” But while Garrison seeks out real patriots to read about and emulate, his father enjoys “the novels of Scott and Dumas with the vain idea that he might appease his longing in the conflict of story heroes.” Satisfied with fictional soldiers and their battles, Garrison’s father is described as “wearing out his life in the barber trade.” This is not the path for Garrison. After his family minister declares that “Great things shall come from this boy . . . He is destined to be a powerful factor in the redemption of the race. It would be a grave mistake if he should enter into his father’s profession” and “armed with the diploma granted him by black men,” he leaves Kentucky for the University of Chicago.

Once North, Garrison isolates himself from the surrounding black community as well as from his fellow students. It would seem ironic that a young man so bent on leading his people would shun them. However Johnson frames Garrison’s self imposed isolation as evidence of his passion for achievement and to demonstrate his utter purity and righteousness. Garrison eschews what he sees as the frivolity of the black community. “Their social life was brilliant, but Garrison was not destined for the ball room. He called such an existence vapid.” He looks down on the sights on State Street and is deeply disturbed by the “tawdry pleasures” found there. Garrison’s isolation from

the blacks on State Street speaks to his rigid sense of propriety as well as addresses class difference. His middle-class values segregate him from the working class masses and their pleasures. Johnson views this separation between blacks of different classes as lonely but necessary.

Garrison's asceticism, although based on Christian principals, is a part of his political idealism. When he was still a youngster he declared that he wished to be another Toussaint L'Ouverature and for him this declaration was "as sacred as the vow of a nun." The similarities to a nun do not end do not end at describing the seriousness of his vow, but like a nun Garrison denies himself all pleasures of the flesh in order to fully worship at the alter of Toussaint L'Ouverature. Garrison even denies himself the love of a good race woman. While at college he meets and falls in love with Medora, the respectable daughter of a prominent black physician. Soon after they proclaim their love for one another, Garrison confesses to her that despite his great love for her, "a greater duty" calls him. Upon graduation, Garrison plans to return to the south and work in the uplift of his people. Chastity, responsibility and the recognition of duty are the basis of the "New Negro masculinity. However, chastity should not be linked to emasculation or feminization in this context. By removing sex from his motivations, the black man's desire for political rights cannot be read, as it had been during Reconstruction, as a desire for the white woman.

The "New Negro" embraced Victorian masculine ideology. The middle class Victorian believed that men were naturally inclined to have powerful sexual desires. Allowing these desires to take over meant weakness: true manliness and strength were

shown in the ability to suppress these very natural but dangerous desires.<sup>33</sup> Garrison's denial of a sexual relationship even within the sanction of marriage provides space for his agenda of racial uplift. This asexuality is also a reaction to the image of the black male as having an uncontrollable sexual appetite that would lead to the rape of white women. Black men's inability to control their sexual desires made them inferior to white men. The stereotype of black male sexuality served to keep him out of the realm of civilization and most importantly citizenship. In 1918 Winfield Collins wrote:

The Negro's sexual laxity considered so immoral or even criminal in the white man's civilization may have been all but a virtue in the habitat of his origin. There nature developed in him intense sexual passions to offset his death rate.<sup>34</sup>

Because of the nature of his sexuality, the black man cannot be considered a citizen for his "foreign" desires keep him in Africa. Black men had to demonstrate that they too could be men in the Victorian definition of manhood. De-sexed, Garrison is better able to serve as an example of black manhood.

Still, women are vital to the construction of "New Negro" masculinity. They are required to act as living proof of the black man's sexual neutrality and to attest to their strength in character. When Garrison leaves Medora in order to work with blacks in the

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<sup>33</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988):178. See also Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* which also discusses this idea of sexual restraint as essential in constructing a true masculine.

<sup>34</sup> Winfield H. Collins. *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South (In Which the Author Pleads that the South Be Made Safe for the White Race)* (New York: Neale, 1918 ):54.

south, he is in essence proving his commitment to political action. But Medora's abandonment also demonstrates how black women are a liability on the battlefield. Garrison leaves Medora because she was "born in Michigan and carefully reared in Chicago," and would not "know of separate cars, log cabins tenant slavery, and the hundreds of other abuses in Dixie." Life in Jim Crow South, Garrison believes, would be too harsh for Medora. But Medora is also a weakness for Garrison. Since slavery, black women had been abused and raped without the impunity of the law. To defend the honor of a wife, sister or mother would put a black man in jeopardy. Interestingly enough, it is a black woman who ultimately leads Garrison to act out his destiny. He is defending a poor ignorant laundress against a lynch mob when he is murdered by that very mob.

While a teacher at Sinclair College, Garrison, with his progressive ideas about race, earns the him the wrath of the school administration and especially the ire of whites in the surrounding community who "plotted among themselves how to over come him." It is Hagar, a poor ignorant black "clothes girl" who "brought to them the longed for opportunity." Hagar argues with the daughter of "The Colonel" who refuses to pay her for her work. The argument turns physical when the white woman produces a cowhide and "angry to the boiling point Hagar seized a broom" and "in her blind fury" struck the other woman on the temple killing her. She then runs to the college seeking protection from Garrison. This incident starts a war. A white mob arrives shortly at the college looking to lynch Hagar. Garrison calls the students to arms and "they stand ready to defend their race and their lives." While Garrison "thought of Toussaint who some hundred years since had taken a stand against Napoleon's invading army." Amidst all

this bravery, Hagar, “quaking with fear, crouched behind a bush...” and “excitement only keeping her alive,” is a stark contrast to the black man’s unwavering courage.

Another woman, a white woman is also important to Johnson’s particular construction of black masculinity. While in Chicago, Elizabeth Selwyn, “born of the Southland and the bone and sinew of the aristocracy, gave more than a passing notice to this slender young Negro.” It is important to note here that Garrison does not notice Elizabeth. It is she who fixes her gaze upon him:

At first she felt the conflict of the races, but she soon learned that to be in the same classroom with such as Garrison did not mean social intimacy. There was so much of the barbaric splendor of by-gone days and the warm passionate dreaming of the Southland in this dark soul that she felt in spite of herself and her five generations of prejudice a secret admiration for him.”

The fear of miscegenation is diffused in this passage, as is the ideology that black men are the aggressors in relations with white women. Elizabeth does not return to the text until; the end, at the scene of Garrison’s death by the white mob. As he lies dying, she reveals to him how she had admired him when they were schoolmates. Elizabeth’s dramatic appearance at the end of the story is meant to dramatize Garrison’s place in history alongside other male heroes. Elizabeth tells Garrison that his role in the fight reminded her of Toussaint L’Ouverature. She adds: “Oh I wish I could love you, that no color line divided us!” When Garrison asks her why she loves him so she responds: “I have always dreamed of loving a super-man, a person superior to all others, but I never thought that such would be found in the race I was taught to despise.” After she proclaims her love for him he does not respond to her claim but dies in her arms. A truly

tragic hero, Garrison has no connection to the future: his death might not be in vain. His legacy of racial uplift is left to a member of the white southern aristocracy. Garrison is not alive to spread the message himself nor does he seem to inspire the blacks students who fought with him in the battle with the white mob after his death. Immediately after he is struck down they flee in fear. Hence Johnson's conclusion is problematic. Instead of a solid place within the future of American race relations, the New Negro is consigned to the past.

The problem of the black soldier of World War I is the problematic construction of manliness and citizenship within the American context. Garrison's story confronts racism but more importantly the violence that the black masculine body elicits. Both the school's black administrators and the whites of the town want to see Garrison dead. His monastic militaristic ideal of manhood threatens the tenuous relationship between blacks and whites in the southern town. Hagar, like the black woman who was the alleged cause of the "Houston Mutiny," disappears from the text. Voiceless and invisible, their presence would serve only to argue the point of chivalric custom. Instead of being constructed as men defending their, black men are seen as usurping white male power and the violence that ensues appears to be "deserved."

Remaking black masculinity at the time of World War I was an almost impossible feat. Yet black men did manage to assist in the war effort without being forced to be merely "bricks." Some, like Henry Johnson gained recognition for unsurpassed valor. Despite the American government's activities aimed at belittling the black man's war record in France and at home, the black soldier gained incredible fame. James Weldon

Johnson, writing for the *New York Age*, described the homecoming of the Fifteenth Regiment of New York's National Guard as they marched down Fifth Avenue:

The Fifteenth furnished the first sight that New York has had of seasoned soldiers in marching order. There was no militia smartness about their appearance; their "tin hats" were battered and rusty and the shiny newness worn off their bayonets, but they were men who had gone through the terrible hell of war and come back.<sup>35</sup>

The black soldier was a source of pride for many African Americans like Johnson. For New Negro modernists, the soldier was essential to constructing a new, more empowered form of black masculinity. In my next chapter I will explore how Jessie Fauset, the so called "mid-wife" of the Harlem Renaissance, aided in this reconstruction of black masculinity in her first novel, *There is Confusion* (1924). Fauset's ideal of black manhood is very much the image created by Walter E. Seward, Leslie Pinckney Hill and Fenton Johnson. But Fauset does not distance her characters from the past. Important to her idea of black masculinity is the creation of black patriarchy. The strongest characters in her novel are those who evolve from a strong black father. Joanna Marshall, the heroine of Fauset's story has a narrative that mirrors that of her father. Joanna must follow the example of her father first before she can be the mother and wife that her mother is. The black patriarch does not only influence his daughter, but through his guidance of her ideals, she in turn acts to influence the other men, a new generation of New Negro patriarchs.

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<sup>35</sup> James Weldon Johnson. "War and Come Back": *New York Age*, February 22, 1919.

World War I serves as an important figure in Fauset's novel. As I have discussed in this chapter, the war was important in giving birth to the New Negro. Although Fauset does use the war to tie up the loose ends of her somewhat incredible romantic plot, it is the mechanism used to instill true manhood and therefore citizenship in black men.

## Chapter II

### **“Her Preference For Her Father”: A New Black Patriarchy in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *There is Confusion***

World War I shaped New Negro masculinity by creating black heroes who adhered to typically American standards of manhood. The rash of racial violence surrounding the periods before and after the war demonstrated how the New Negro would be a magnet for violence. However, the New Negro would not be a mere victim. In the literature of the 1920s blacks took on a more important role different from the characters found in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. White modernist writers used black characters in their works specifically to reconstruct their own whiteness. Gertrude Stein rewrote her then unpublished story “Q.E.D” by using black characters instead of white middle class lesbians and called it “Melanctha.” Melanctha drew much critical acclaim. Although Stein’s portrayal of blacks and their dialect is problematic, she proved that blacks and portrayal of black life were of interest to a broad audience. Malcolm Cowley wrote, “One heard it said that Negroes had retained a direct virility that whites had lost through being over educated.”<sup>1</sup> However, white writers’ use of black characters did not always

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Cowley. *Exiles Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (NY: Norton, 1934): 230.

lead to portrayal of black life of which black intellectuals and writers of the time approved.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this emergence of black characters did serve to inspire some black writers. T.S. Stribling's race novel *Birthright* (1921) attracted much attention from mainstream critics as well as from notable black writers. Both Walter White and Jessie Fauset said that the novel was instrumental in their decision to pursue fiction writing. But *Birthright* did not inspire them because it set a good example of how black life should be written about. In fact it was the opposite. The novel depicts the return of a black man, fresh from Harvard to his southern hometown. He meets a predictably tragic end since the town holds no place for him. Of mixed race, the hero's black blood prevents him from achieving that which his white blood makes him aspire to. Despite Stribling's dependence upon negative stereotypes about blacks, some white readers and critics (especially from the south) condemned his book because they saw his view of blacks as inherently tragic as overly sympathetic. In a letter to *Century Magazine*, which ran the novel in serial form, a disgruntled reader wrote: "At best I am poorly educated and my vocabulary is small. However if it were a hundred times larger than it really is, I could never express the horrible thoughts I have about Mr. Stribling's story *Birthright*. Personally I think the author might be an octoroon himself." Another reader, in a

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<sup>2</sup> Black characters were often used to illustrate a white modernist preoccupation with literary primitivism. These eroticized portrayals of blacks included Carl Van Vetchen's *Nigger Heaven* (1926); Ronald Firbank's *The Prancing Nigger* (1924); and Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925) among others.

personal letter to Mr. Stribling wrote: "I am a staunch southerner—your motive is to help Negroes. Maybe you are a Negro yourself. Anyway your book is vile, rotten."<sup>3</sup>

Walter White's view of the book was not at all sympathetic. H.L. Mecken asked him what he thought of *Birthright*. White replied to Mencken that the novel had "courage in depicting Negroes as human beings instead of as menials and buffoons." And that "Stribling's depiction of Negroes as servants was not too bad." However, he asserted that Stribling "fell down badly in his portrayal of what educated Negroes feel and think." According to White, Mencken replied, "Why don't you do the right kind of novel?"<sup>4</sup> This is what White cites as the inspiration behind *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) his novel about a northern educated black man who returns to his southern hometown only to meet with tragedy.

Jessie Fauset, a contemporary of White's, also read *Birthright* and reviewed it for *The Crisis*. Her review was harsher than White's for she believed that the novel's only quality was that the author "clearly knows how to write an absorbing story." Like White Fauset criticized Stribling's portrayal of Peter Siner, the Harvard -educated black man. "Here is a boy brave and far visioned enough to pick himself up out of the muck and mire and to get away to the very best of intellectual and aesthetic life only to yield on his return to the worse features of it." Where White found the portrayal of lower class blacks acceptable, Fauset blasted Stribling's characterization of not only these blacks, but of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Thomas D. Jarett. "Stribling's Novels." *Phylon* (4<sup>th</sup> Qtr., 1943): 345.

<sup>4</sup> Walter White. *A Man Called White*. 1948 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 65.

black and white life: “One is struck forcibly by the meanness and shallowness of life in Hooker’s Bend and its menacing ‘Niggertown’—its sordid whites and shiftless Negroes.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet Fauset like White found some inspiration in *Birthright* for her own literary career. In a 1932 interview, she refers to the novel as the cause for her first novel as well as the novels of other blacks. “A number of us started writing at that time. Nella Larsen and Walter White for instance were just as affected as I was. We reasoned, “Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to present the truth than any white writer, try to do so.”<sup>6</sup> The “us” that Fauset speaks of is the black middle class, Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth.” The New Negro, in the vision of Harlem Renaissance stalwarts like Fauset, White and Locke, was educated, had financial means and was by no means willing to abide by what they deemed false portrayals whether they be literary or otherwise.

Fauset’s reworking of Stribling’s failed attempt at capturing modern black life was her first novel; *There is Confusion* (1924). The novel centers on the lives of middle class blacks in the period right before and directly following World War I. Critical to her version of the lives of middle-class blacks is the role of black men, most notably the father as the cultural, intellectual and spiritual leader of the community. Mary Jane Schenk aptly summed up Fauset’s project: “The modernism of Jessie Fauset is having captured a ‘politics of fulfillment’ which depends upon the new black male, who emerged

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<sup>5</sup> Jessie Fauset. “As to Books.” *The Crisis*. (June 1922): 67.

<sup>6</sup> Marion Starkey. “Jessie Fauset.” *Southern Workman* 61 (May 1932): 218.

from the Great War with his dignity intact and his horizons enlarged.”<sup>7</sup> *There is Confusion* begins as the story of Joanna Marshall, an ambitious New Woman, yet quickly her story becomes that of her father’s. Born to a middle-class black family, Fauset was qualified to tell the story of the Marshall family. In Fauset’s own life, her father, a Methodist Minister, played a great role in her intellectual development as well as being the source of her moral principles.

It was the early deaths of her mother and four of her siblings that strengthened the bond between Fauset and her father. Cheryl Wall writes that “Fauset attributed her literary talent to him, but throughout her life Fauset remained true to the ideals of service and uplift her father instilled. She remained likewise bound by his ethical precepts.”<sup>8</sup> These ethical precepts were conservative in nature and implanted within Fauset the true role for a black woman intellectual. In her essay published in *The Crisis*, “Sunday Afternoon,” Fauset wrote romantically about her memories of the Methodist parsonage of her father. As a child there were rules that she had to adhere to following the church service. “I might not sing songs, I might not play, I didn’t know how to write letters, it was wrong to even read fairy tales.” It was only later in the day when “after supper there was music—hymns, played on the organ; in summertime a gathering on the front steps, a general sense of good fellowship and reunion in which I joined gladly.” This asceticism of her youth, in fact remained a great part of her through her adulthood:

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Jane Schenk. “Jessie Fauset: The Politics of Fulfillment vs. The Lost Generation.” *South Atlantic Review* (Winter 2001): 121.

<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Wall. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 39.

Just to think, then, becomes for me a joy on Sunday afternoons. At first I used to save problems for that happy season. Now I relax and let the thoughts come to me. How the difficulties resolve themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course a woman of Fauset’s achievements could not only sit and “be.” A large part of her success could be attributed to her father’s unrelenting pressure on her to succeed. Ever the dutiful daughter, she followed her father’s passion for educational excellence. She won acceptance to the competitive Philadelphia High School for Girls and went on to Cornell University where she was elected Phi Beta Kappa. Fauset trained to be a teacher, the only safe, respectable career option for educated black women.<sup>10</sup> The Victorianism of Fauset’s father’s home made a strong imprint upon her and her work.

Fauset’s conservatism would also mark how her work would be critically received. In all of her novels, Fauset’s would draw upon what was thought of as white middle-class values. Just as her white contemporaries used blackness to refigure themselves as modern and cut off from their past, Fauset clung to Victorian constructions of femininity and masculinity in the same way Walter White and W.E.B. DuBois did in their fiction. Later, critics of Fauset’s work would skewer her for this. Fauset’s portrayal of black middle class life drew some harsh attacks on her work but her own class background was also a part of this critique. Blyden Jackson wrote: “for all the nobility of her intentions, because she is herself so naively philistine, so breathless with adoration for good-looking people Nordic style (even when they are tinted with the tar brush), good looking clothes, good-looking homes and country club ideas of *summa bona*, Jessie

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<sup>9</sup> Jessie Fauset. “Sunday Afternoon.” *The Crisis* (February 1922): 162-163.

<sup>10</sup> Wall, 40.

Fauset's defense of the Negro middle-class backfires into an indictment of her horrid copy catting of the wrong values."<sup>11</sup> Robert Bone calls her novels "trivial and dull." His greatest indictment though concerns Fauset's background, writing that she was "never able to transcend the narrow limits of this sheltered world."<sup>12</sup> Again, class is behind Sterling Brown's critique of her work. He labeled Fauset "an apologist." He dismisses her literary contributions writing that she "records a class in order to praise a race."<sup>13</sup> Mary White Ovington, one of Fauset's contemporaries wondered, "if this colored world Miss Fauset draws really existed."<sup>14</sup> Modern black feminist critics have also been slow to embrace Fauset. Hazel Carby, in her monumental book about black women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth century gave Fauset only a slight mention stating, "Ultimately the conservatism of Fauset's ideology dominates her text."<sup>15</sup>

Yet Fauset's novel was well received in its time and it was her portrayal of class which garnered the most positive reviews. Alain Locke wrote in *The Crisis* that *There is Confusion* was "The novel that the Negro intelligentsia have been clamoring for...a cross

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<sup>11</sup> Blyden Jackson. "A Golden Mean for the Negro Novel." *CLA Journal* (December 1959):85

<sup>12</sup> Robert Bone. *The Negro Novel in America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958): 101-102.

<sup>13</sup> Sterling Brown. *The Negro in American Fiction*. 1937. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968): 12

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Carolyn Wedin Sylvander. *Jessie Redmond Fauset, Black American Writer*. Troy: Whitston, 1981): 110.

<sup>15</sup> Hazel Carby. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 167.

section of the race higher up the social pyramid.”<sup>16</sup> Montgomery Gregory also praised the novel’s ability “in interpreting the better elements of our life to those who only know us as domestic servants, ‘uncles’ or criminals.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Messenger* George Schuyler’s review, although tepid, was supportive calling *There is Confusion* “not very engrossing as a work of fiction, it is of compelling interest as a picture of Northern Negro urban society, particularly the upper class.”<sup>18</sup> At the time of its publication Fauset’s view of the black middle class fit perfectly within the construction of the New Negro.

In *There is Confusion* the New Negro is portrayed as an achiever but Fauset sets specific guidelines for his success. The novel concerns itself with defining the essence of true success and how this new definition bolsters the New Negro’s economic and social status. Within Fauset’s definition of success the public and private sphere merge. Joanna Marshall, the heroine, wishes to be a success on stage, yet her ambition is eventually seen as vacuous. When her fiancé, Peter Bye, quits medical school to become a musician a near tragedy erupts. Even the great black patriarch, Joel Marshall, once saw his own success as one that would put him before the public eye. Public performance within Fauset’s text makes the New Negro into an object whose construction is dependent upon the gaze of others. Her characters triumph once they give up their public careers and then

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<sup>16</sup> Alain Locke. “The Younger Literary Movement.” *The Crisis* (February 1924): 162.

<sup>17</sup> Montgomery Gregory. “The Spirit of Phyllis Wheatley.” *Opportunity* (June 1924): 181.

<sup>18</sup> George S. Schuyler. “New Books.” *The Messenger* (May 1924):146

they thrive within the confines of private life.

Black men have a weighty role in Fauset's narrative of racial uplift. She adheres to specific Victorian ideals of manliness. The heroes are de-sexed in their relationships with women. This also fits the New Negro image of the chaste black woman. Marriages are not built upon passion but on a partnership that will uplift the race. Economic independence is essential to New Negro manhood. Men underwrite the consumerism that the novel endorses. While economic power is an asset in black men, in women it is de-feminizing. The most important role that black women play in the novel is that of the nurturer of black manhood. This of course is done behind the scenes, in private and this nurturing always carries the ideals of the black father.

World War I is of great importance to Fauset's characters as it was for all Afro-Americans, especially those subscribing to New Negro tenets. The Great War is not only a narrative device that brings together and resolves the many plot lines in the novel, but it is the proving ground for both black masculinity and black femininity. Just as World War I became the impetus for a new wave of racial change, in the novel it impacts characters enabling them to aspire to New Negroeness. In this chapter I will discuss how Fauset's view of modern black life is dependent on the refiguring of black masculinity which embodies, strength, chastity and independence. The novel's obsession with patrilineal descent is indicative of Fauset's desire to rewrite the past in order to insure a greater, richer future for the New Negro. Or to allow blacks to eliminate the white master-rapist from their past and their history. When Fauset creates a black paterfamilia, she kills off the white monster in the Black past.

### Performing the Father's Story

*There is Confusion* makes clear the inescapability of family history. Fauset's characters are trapped between the modernist instinct to "make it new" by releasing themselves from the shackles of the past and the Victorian ideology which values the path of the ancestor and doggedly sticks to that path. This struggle is demonstrated specifically in the construction of black manhood and generally in how Fauset's characters come to form themselves responsibly and with dignity within the public sphere. As William Faulkner wrote: "It is the dead that do the damage."<sup>19</sup> The mark that the ancestor leaves upon its scion is indelible, a constant reminder of not only where one has been, but just how far one has to go. *There is Confusion* is a novel obsessed with performance and the public space. This does not only encompass Joanna Marshall's ambition to perform on the stage, or her fiancé Peter Bye's career as a musician, but a performance that is trapped in history. In performing the ancestor's story, the struggle between Victorian and modern can at last find compromise and balance.

The novel opens with the merging of past into present. As a young child Joanna Marshall climbs into her father's lap and demands from him a story—"about somebody great, Daddy. Great like I'm goin to be when I get to be a big girl." This summons up in Joel memories of his own childhood. As a boy, born a slave in the south he "had felt that same impulse to greatness." He remembers telling his mother; "I'll be a great man someday, won't I." Joel's earlier dreams of greatness permit him to separate, at least ideologically, from his father, a man "broken and sickened by slavery." (100) Yet it is

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<sup>19</sup> William Faulkner. *Light in August*. 1932. (New York: Vintage, 1985) :190.

the death of his father and the subsequent burning down of the family home that forces him and his mother to move into the home of a wealthy family to work. It was here where Joel learned to be a chef, work that set him on his path to be a successful caterer.

Joel's success is meaningless to him. For "the kind of greatness he envisioned had been that which gets one before the public eye, which makes one a leader of causes, "a man among men." (10) Joel's idea of success does not come from his father, who was weakened by his circumstance but from, at first, white patriarchal icons such as Lincoln and Napoleon. Joel's break with his father is significant as well as necessary because it is a symbolic break from a past of slavery and degradation. Yet Joel's entrepreneurship serves as a model for his children as well as a conduit to their success. He has the financial means to send a son to Harvard and pay for expensive singing and dancing lessons for Joanna. Still Joel expresses dissatisfaction with how his life had turned out.

Joel's disappointment is figured in terms of his mother. Proud of her son's achievement, she views his success in strictly monetary terms. Joel desires to be a leader, not a cook, yet cooking is acceptable to his mother: "How wuz I to know he'd be a great caterer, feedin' bank presidents and everything? Once you know they had him fix a banquet for President Grant. Sent all the way to Richmond fur im ... yassuh my son is sure a great man." (9) Joel's mother's dialect sets her apart from her son and her grandchildren. She is no New Negro. Impressed with the greatness her son encounters as he serves others, she is unable to understand his quest to be one of those great men. His mother inadvertently seals Joel's fate when she becomes ill—"Joel shut his teeth and

put his frustrated plans behind him.” In order to pay his mother’s medical expenses he opens a lunch stand. His food is a sensation and he finds economic prosperity through his cooking. But Joel would never get the education he needed to pursue his real dreams. This Fauset blames on the mother, writing that Mrs. Marshall “never understood what her defection cost her son.” (11) Joel’s adoration for his mother would keep him from telling her as well and he is thus trapped in his parent’s legacy: the weak father whose death leads him to his career and the sick mother whose illness keeps him that career come between Joel and greatness.

However, Joel’s story casts a long shadow over his daughter, Joanna. Despite the fact that Chapter I introduces Joanna as the heroine at the center of *There is Confusion*, she is quickly silenced by her father’s story. When Joanna asks to hear the story of someone great, the reader hears Joel’s story. Even before we are privy to Joel’s past, Fauset makes it clear that Joanna’s relationship with her father is one of deep admiration but even more than that, she is in fact “a living echo out of his own forgotten past.” She reminds him of his younger self and for Joanna “her first consciousness of the close understanding that existed between herself and her father dated back to a time when she was very young.” (9) Like her father, she too has ambitions for greatness. Interestingly enough, Joanna opens the novel deeply mired in her father’s identity. At the novel’s close she is content finding greatness through her husband, Peter Bye. Beth McCoy views Joanna’s merge with her father and later with her husband as crucial to understanding Fauset’s project:

The relationship is the narrative’s unifying Alpha and Omega: Joanna begins her textual life within her biological father’s influence and ends it

within that of her husband, a surrogate father. More importantly however, Fauset also uses the father-daughter relationship as patriarchy's role in marshaling the shifting dynamics among race, gender, sexuality and art in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

Joanna's father assists her in her career in a fashion that his mother was unable to do for him. Despite how Joel feels about his own missed greatness, it is suggested in the text that Joanna received her drive from him and will in turn be the child that realizes his dream.

Joel views Joanna as the one of his children who will succeed on his terms. His other children are without his ambition. The first son, who "brought back the old keen longing" for success, "did not resemble his father in the least." Only "average" he lacks his father's drive and had "no determination to be a dark Napoleon or Frederick Douglas." His wife refuses to name their first born after his father because to her, "Joel" is "a stiff old-fashioned name." (12) Two more children come but it is not until the last child arrives that Joel will have his namesake. "She is like you Joel," his wife said and she had no objection to the name Joanna, a feminized version of Joel. Joanna, destined to act out her father's story, chose the stage as her vehicle for success. Just as her father desired a role in the public, Joanna also chooses to perform before the public. But that is where the similarity between their desires end. Joel wanted to be a leader, or a minister, a role that would give him authority. Joanna as a singer and dancer does not carry the authority in public that her father wants for her.

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<sup>20</sup> Beth A. McCoy. "'Is This Really What You Want Me To Be?': The Daughter's Distinction in Jessie Redmond Fauset's *There is Confusion*." *Modern Fiction Studies* (Spring 1994) :103.

Although Joel wanted his daughter involved in “a more serious form of endowment, he nonetheless “hoped to make her famous the country over.” (18-19) Joel gives his daughter interesting advice on her career and how she will find race significant in her quest for greatness:

“It might be different if you lived in some other part of the country, but here in this section it may not interfere much more than being poor, or having some slight deformity. I have often noticed,” said Joel, who used his powers of observation to no small advantage, “that having some natural drawback often pushes you forward. That is if you’ve got anything in you to start with. It might even happen,” he added, launched now on his favorite theme, “that your color would add to your success. Depend on it if you’ve got something which the white folks haven’t got, or can do something better than they can, they’ll call on you fast enough and your color will only make you more noticeable.” (19)

Although Joel may have New Negro sensibilities, his positioning of blackness along side “some slight deformity” places him outside of modernity. But what Joel offers his daughter here is a lesson on economics. Blackness, to Joel, is a commodity if marketed in the right way. For Joanna, performance becomes problematic, especially when race becomes a public performance. Joel suggests to his daughter that the visibility of race will draw the spectator’s gaze. I concur with Susan Levison’s interpretation of this passage. She notes that—

Fauset seems to suggest that race itself is a kind of performance; the pure visibility of racial identity means that racial color is a spectacle that draws the spectator’s gaze. Through this play with the verbal and adjectival form of a single word, Fauset reveals the problematic nature of Joanna’s goals and of the role that race plays in the performer/spectator relationship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Levison. “Performance and the ‘Strange Place’ of Jessie Redmond Fauset’s *There is Confusion*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* (2000):830.

Joel and Joanna do not at first notice the power that the spectator holds over the spectacle. As Joanna finds success on stage, her art becomes superficial and hollow. The more she was watched the less great she feels. Here performing, which had once brought her so much satisfaction and self importance, no longer thrills her-- "Joanna tasted the depths of ennui. She saw life as a ghastly skeleton and herself feverishly trying to cover up her bare bones with the garish trappings of her art, her lessons, her practice, her press clippings." It was her father's eyes she searched for when a great singer tells her that she "has a voice in ten thousand." It is her father whom she asks "Is this really what you want me to be?...Is this your idea of real greatness?" Passing his final judgment on Joanna's career choice "Joel, his voice half glad, half sad told her that he too had hoped for something different." (236)

Fauset suggests that the black body cannot withstand public scrutiny without suffering under that gaze. As a performer, Joanna loses all of her subjectivity. But this is within the context of the literal stage and the performance of her father's ambition. In order to become a subject Joanna must separate from her father and form her own ideas about greatness. Also, in Fauset's text gender roles are fully and meticulously dictated and framed. Joanna cannot be the son Joel wants to carry on his unfulfilled desires. Instead of being the son her fathers wants, Joanna finds true success when she marries the son her father wants. Although powerless to be the man out of her father's image, she can nurture and produce a man worthy of her father. Before Peter Bye becomes this man, he must also rectify the past in order to embrace his future.

Like Joanna, Peter Bye is introduced by way of his father (as well as his grand parents and great grandparents). Fauset writes, "it is impossible to understand the boy's character without some knowledge of those who had gone before him." (22) Peter is a part of a black family owned as slaves by a white Quaker family. The white Byes made their fortune through the labor of their slaves. The only legacy Peter received from his father is one of bitterness and cynicism and a hostile distrust of whites. Lacking New Negro optimism and the ability to look forward, Peter believes that because of the injustices done to his ancestors, the world owes him a living.

Fauset spends a great deal of text detailing the long and somewhat convoluted details of Peter's ancestry. He comes from Judy and Ceazer, slaves of Aaron Bye. Ceazer, brave and imperious like his Roman namesake was "a proud, surly, handsome individual, who refused to adopt the name of his master." (22) After they are freed, Judy refused to leave the Bye family. Aaron, who was flattered by her loyalty, offered Ceazer the position of coachman and "with his customary surliness accepted." But later, Ceazer would run away "vanishing into legend." Ceazer's story as well as his personality mirrors Peter. Both refuse to comply with the rules of racial interaction. Racism causes Peter to quite medical school; he will not stand for the comments and ill treatment he receives from whites. He is willing to sacrifice his dream to be a doctor in order to keep away from what he deems injustice. Yet Judy and Ceazer's son Joshua, who did not know slavery, differs from his father in that he is much more malleable and accepting of his position. Fauset points out that Joshua "had inherited his mother's blind invincible attachment for the Byes." (24)

Yet the legacy of Ceazer is visited upon Joshua's son Isiah. When one of Aaron Byes's sons, Meriwether boasts that he will be a great doctor someday, Isiah asks him what he would be. Meriwether tells him that because he comes from a lineage of servitude, he too shall be a good servant. Isiah runs from Merriwether as well as his prophecy. Like his great grandfather he develops a distrust of whites but this develops in Isiah's character "a sturdy independence and unyielding pride." (27) He opens a school for black youth in Philadelphia and passes onto his son, named Merriwether after the Bye who inadvertently set him on his road to success, the family story. Isiah tells his son of the white Byes and how they used the black Byes to make their fortune. Not only are the details of the family history passed on Meriwether, but also along with it is Ceazer's anger. Like his father whose rage fueled his desire for success, Meriwether's rage is self-destructive. The accumulation of generations of hatred, hostility and bitterness take root in Peter, "his grandfather's connection with white people resulted in pride, his father's shiftlessness; in Peter it took the form of a constant and increasing bitterness." (34)

Several factors contribute to Peter's redemption. There is the War, Joanna's love and most importantly, the startling secret about his past that is uncovered at the end of the novel. In a melodramatic plot twist, Peter meets Merriwether Bye, a white Bye who understands his family's past exploitation of slaves and is plagued by guilt because of it. Their friendship is brief, for Merriwether dies in Peter's arms on the battlefield. When Peter returns to the US, he sends a letter to Meriwether's grandfather telling him of his grandson's death. Finally the grandfather, who is the same Merriwether Bye who told Peter's grandfather that he would only be a servant, summons Peter. He tells him that the

black Byes and the white Byes are actually related. Peter and Joanna's son (also named Merriwether) is his only heir and he wishes to leave his fortune to him. When Peter in fact learns that he is related to the white Byes, he cites this as the reason for his failures. He tells Joanna "See dear, this is the source of all I used to be. My ingratitude, my inability to accept responsibility, my very irresoluteness comes from that strain of white Bye blood." (297) Fauset turns away from the mythologies that surrounded mixed blood persons in the early part of the twentieth century. In the case of T.S. Stribling's Peter Siner, the tragic hero of *Birthright*, it is his black blood that he must overcome and what will eventually bring him to his end. While in Peter Bye's case it is the white blood that he must conquer in order to escape the tragedy of his ancestors.

Peter's final confrontation with the Bye patriarch also insures for his son, that ancestors will not haunt him. Old Merriwether tells him that he wants to leave his estate to Peter and Joanna's son because he is the only remaining heir. When Peter asks him if this means there will be a public avowal of their relation, the old man answers no. Peter refuses the inheritance and in doing so further separates himself from the tainted white blood of the Byes and instead embraces the black patriarch, Joel Marshall.

Only by delving into then past can Fauset's characters move forward. In the New Negro context the past is to be examined with the viable parts kept and the rest thrown away. In order to establish a place for oneself in modernity, the past cannot be ignored, nor can it be allowed to envelop the present and the future. Peter Bye, because of his attachment to his ancestors and their suffering, was unable to achieve greatness. At the novel's end he understood the specific role the past played in his life. Thus he could

separate himself from his father's and great-great grandfather's "shiftlessness." At the same time he saves his father from notoriety. If it was the blood of the white Byes that corrupted him—it corrupted his father as well. Joanna opted to marry someone great instead of reaching for her own success. As a wife and mother she will nurture Peter and their son on to greatness. In this role, Joanna performs her father's dream in a way that reifies the black man's role in the community.

The role of the black woman in *There is Confusion* is not one that involves exceeding in the public sphere. The New Woman of the 1920s is not black, according to Fauset's text. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar comment on the role of the black woman: "Fauset sees the 20<sup>th</sup> century New Woman as a white woman, whose feminism the black woman must repudiate in order to reinvent the masculinity of black men."<sup>22</sup> Both Joanna and Peter equate her career with his "self indulgence." Taken out of the world of performance and put into the domesticity of life with Peter, Joanna "surprised herself by the pleasure that came to her out of what she had always considered the ordinary things of life." (290) Joanna's acceptance of domesticity is key to her happiness and most importantly, to the black community at large. There is no doubt that Joanna would give up her career for Peter. Susan Levison points to nuances in language to indicate how Joanna surrenders her career. Just before Peter asks Joanna to be engaged to him, Fauset wrote that "Joanna had recently been engaged as a soloist." (110) The fact

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<sup>22</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. "Ain't I a New Woman: Feminism and the Harlem Renaissance" *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century Volume 3: Letters from the Front* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994):135.

that Joanna has been engaged” for a musical appearance suggests that her performance will take precedence over her marriage. That she will perform as a “soloist” further separates her from the marital sphere that, obviously, demands two participants. Soon after Joanna does accept Peter’s proposal, “her voice breaking a little.” (111) When a singer’s voice breaks it is a sign of weakness, revealing her inability to hit a note cleanly. Levison further states that the characters themselves do not notice this explicitly yet the word play signals that Joanna must give up her career in order to marry.<sup>23</sup> This is not a decision that she is forced into, nor does she seem at all to all to be filled with regret. The allure of performance was already unsatisfying for her. Since performing was not a part of what her father imagined for her, she is free to marry and have children. This is significant since courtship and marriage are the vehicles for constructing the black masculine.

### **Conjuring Manhood**

Black manhood in *There is Confusion* embodies the attributes of masculinity valued by the Victorians. Fauset reconstructs the black masculine by eradicating all sense of sexuality and violence from him, yet endowing him with command and presence. The story of Peter Bye’s Aunt Susan’s family is indicative of how Fauset wishes to portray black manhood. Aunt Susan is a member of the Graves family of Gravestown, New Jersey. The family is not only well known to black people in that area but they are known throughout Pennsylvania. The Graves family began in the mid - eighteenth century when two white sisters fell in love with two of their father’s slaves.

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<sup>23</sup> Levison, 840.

Fauset hints that the two slaves might have been “African Princes.” Unable to get their father’s consent to marry, the two sisters ran away and married their lovers. Both sisters had many children. But when the children got to marrying age they were shunned by both the black and the white community so the cousins married each other. This practice was kept up for many generations. In later generations the intermarrying was not a point of necessity: “Graves married Graves not only as a matter of course, but as a matter of pride.”(37)

In this tale, seemingly peripheral to the main story lines, Fauset portrays black men as the objects of sexual attention. This is particularly stunning since the women are white. The myth of the black rapist is shattered here, since the sex between the white sisters and their black lovers is not only consensual, it is clearly stated that the sisters fell in love with them. Also the inference that the men may be “African Princes” speaks to the successive generations and how, like royalty, they intermarry. Unlike the mixed race children that come from the rape of black female slaves by white men, these offspring are vital and most importantly proud of their lineage. But Fauset states that the “white sisters...fell in love with two of their father’s black slaves.” This takes all agency from the black male slaves. They are merely the objects that the sisters are drawn to.

When Fauset begins the story of Joanna and Peter’s meeting she writes: “It was Joanna who first acquainted Peter with himself.” (40) Peter’s self-awareness does not take true form until Joanna takes an interest in him. The physical attraction that is felt between them is generated from Joanna: “It was Joanna’s love for beauty that made her consciously see Peter Bye.” (21) Like the Graves Sisters and their African Princes,

Fauset makes the woman the active pursuer and the black man the passive object. This is of course to dispute the popular stereotypes about black men's aggressiveness and sexual profligacy. But it also insures that the woman will have an important role in the conjuring of New Negro manhood.

Black women have to be careful as to not seem emasculating in their quest to empower the man. Joanna Marshall's charge is to remake Peter into a man like her father. He must be a man who can both be the son her father never had as well as the man that she cannot be. Her first line of attack is to instill ambition in Peter. But Peter, bitter about the past ills of his family, cannot care about ambition, for he believes that the world owes him a living. When Peter experiences racism in medical school his reaction is to quit. This counters Alain Locke's view of the New Negro: "The intelligent Negro of today is resolved not to make discrimination an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance, individual or collective; he is trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts."<sup>24</sup> Peter Bye is so steeped in the suffering of his ancestors that he cannot move forward on his own. The Great War serves to help Peter grow but it is Joanna Marshall who ultimately makes a man out of him.

Before he moves in with his Aunt Susan and attends the same school as Joanna, his life is unstable. He does not attend the same school for long because his father constantly moves. They manage to remain the longest at one boarding house, however

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<sup>24</sup> Alain Locke. "The New Negro." In *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Nathan Huggins. (New York: Oxford, 1995) :51.

because his father does not pay his bills, and the landlady refuses to let Peter leave the house for school until the father returns home. By the time he gets to Joanna's school he is bright but "lacked the fine precision," that Joanna, two years younger than he, possesses. (41) Still Peter's nascent brilliance draws Joanna in. She is able to see his potential and while establishing her own career as a performer; she still busies herself with Peter's redemption.

What sets Peter and Joanna apart is how they view their goals and themselves within the world. Peter feels nothing but disdain for whites. Every instance of racism he encounters in medical school is felt deeply. It is his ill treatment at the hands of whites that leads him to quit medical school. While Joanna is unbothered by the white girls who call her "nigger." She tosses off their comments: "That was sheer ill-breeding," she tells Peter and then recites a childhood rhyme "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." (155) Yet Peter cannot ignore the bad treatment and insults. He tells Joanna:

"I tell you Jan, I'm sick of the whole business, --college, my everlasting grind, my poverty, this confounded prejudice. If I want to get a chance to study a certain case and if it were in a white hospital you'd think I'd committed a crime. As though diseases picked out different races. I'm a good surgeon, I'll swear I am, but I've got so I don't care whether I get my degree or not. You can't imagine all the petty unfairness about me." (155-56)

Joanna can imagine the unfairness about him; she experiences similar trials as well. This is why Peter felt that he would find an understanding, compassionate listener in Joanna. Yet Joanna erupts in a rage at Peter and what she sees as his lack of courage. His confession is followed with his declaration of a new career—he wants to team up with

Joanna and become her accompanist or he can play music with Tom Mason. He adds “Why shouldn’t I pick the job that comes handiest, since the world owes me a living?”

Joanna’s reply is harsh: “That I don’t want a coward and a shirker for a husband.” She tells him that not all white people are like the ones he encountered and that they must struggle toward their goals. Joanna’s final indictment of Peter’s decision speaks to her role as an arbiter of black manhood: “Buck up, Peter, be a man. You’ve got to be one if you’re going to marry me.” (157) After this Peter trembles while trying to light a cigarette. In his dealings with Joanna, Peter is compliant or terrified. Although she is a performer, it is not a good enough position for her husband. At this point in the novel, Joanna begins to feel some discontent about her career. It is important to note that her discontent does not come from the racism that she encounters, but because the role of performer is deeply unsatisfying.

A career as a performer is not good enough for her husband. Joanna’s vision of herself and Peter as “gracious, shining, perfect,” evolves from the image of him as “the distinguished surgeon.” Although at this point of the narrative, Joanna does not wish to leave her career. It is because of the fame she envisions for herself that requires her to have a brilliant husband. When Peter asks to be her accompanist, it is in fact an alternative vision, one of mediocrity that he offers her. Joanna sees “herself standing glorious, resplendent in her stage clothes,” while Peter trails behind her, a mere accompanist. (147) She cannot begin to imagine how she could possibly endure a man who is a mere accessory to her own greatness.

Fauset is also interrogating the stereotype of the black woman as domineering and taking the role as the provider and head of the household. Although the New Woman of the 1920s held her own against men, Fauset's version of the New Negro woman held her own but not in any fashion as to overshadow the New Negro man. What Joanna desires is a man like her father and brother. Fauset writes: "Like a woman of strong and purposeful character, she hated a weak man. It followed then that the man who won Joanna must be even stronger, more determined than she." (145) Peter's desire to run away from his goals because of how he is treated infuriates Joanna because he is not only tampering with his future but with her plans as well. She breaks off their engagement. Although this saddens her, she does not suffer as much as Peter does.

Peter's fall is signified by both his career as a musician and his engagement to Maggie Ellersley, Joanna's foil. She has been a friend of the Marshall family, using their middle class example as a way to pull her self up from her impoverished background. There was the beginning of an attraction between Maggie and Joanna's brother Phillip. But Joanna believed that the working class Maggie was not good enough for her brother. She wrote Maggie a letter telling her so thus breaking up the relationship between Maggie and Phillip and unwittingly leaving Maggie open for the rejected Peter. Both Maggie and Joanna are marked by incredible amounts of determination. Peter states that "Joanna has the faith that moves mountains." (50) While Maggie's mother believes that "if there's a way to be found out, Maggie'll find it." (58) However, their class difference weighs heavily within the narrative. While Joanna toils for her own greatness, "Maggie found early that one avenue of escape lay through men." (58) The presence of a solid

father figure is the source of the differences between the two women. While Joanna is under the influence of the competent, successful Joel, Maggie has only her laundress mother, “a widow who considered herself fortunate to be one ...” (57) Fauset traces the blame for everything from Maggie’s class background to her ideas about men to her mother.

The parental influence that each young woman experiences speak to Fauset’s project of racial uplift through black male domination. Maternal dominance, a staple of the marriage plot, is absent from the narrative. When mothers are present, they are poor, ignorant like Joel’s mother or Mrs. Ellersley. They can also reify their husband’s social standing like Joanna’s mother, who is not given a first name. The only scene in the novel that focuses on her is one in which she is trying to select a dress for church from her ample wardrobe—a testament of Joel’s success. Maggie’s close association with her mother signifies her fall. Mrs. Ellersley’s friend Mis’ Sparrow, tells them of a “teeny slip of ole white gal,” who without family or money marries a rich man. Mrs. Ellersley wishes out loud for something of the kind to happen to her daughter. Maggie asks if the girl was in love. When Mis’ Sparrow tells her no, Maggie wonders why then would she marry if not for love. Mis’ Sparrow answers “Hm’m child, wouldn’t you do anything to get away f’um hard work, an’ ugly cloes and bills?” Maggie embraces this Cinderella story and views marriage as her conduit to a better life.

As the lone working class woman in a text that centers on the aspirations and life of the middle class, Maggie serves as the figure that Joanna measures herself against. She is also indicative of the real danger that black women encounter when they let

sentiment and fantasy rule their lives instead of the concrete purposefulness that Joanna lives by. Her story also serves to push forward New Negro doctrine. Nina Miller details the role of the working class woman in African-American fiction:

The working class woman has no regard for the public values of professional accomplishment and eugenicist heterosexuality—i.e., a marriage of social equals which moves the race forward, as much through the private exercise of rational living as through the public contribution of well-bred children and a high profile.<sup>25</sup>

Maggie cannot marry Philip, for unlike Joanna, she has no sense of how that marriage needs to perform in the ways of racial uplift. Only Peter Bye can marry up and out of his class because of his profession. It is her fate that Maggie ends up not marrying or having any children.

Maggie's life is chaotic and full of dangers. Once she cannot act out the role of Cinderella with Phillip, she hastily agrees to marry Henderson Neal, one of her mother's boarders. Unlike Peter, Phillip and other New Negroes, Neal embodies masculinity in all of its violence, weakness and criminality. Described as a "mysterious tall brown figure of a man," he is the only man in the novel who is actually given a physical description beyond hair type and color. While Peter is an object to be looked upon by Joanna, Neal is an active subject. Maggie's attention is "caught" and "held" by him. Although Neal appears to have some wealth, it is unlike Joel's, whose wealth is seen through his gentility and his children's accomplishments. Neal's wealth is—"a huge roll of bills."

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<sup>25</sup> Nina Miller. "Femininity, Publicity, and the Class Division of Cultural Labor: Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There is Confusion*." *African-American Review* (Summer 1996): 214-215.

Both men are entrepreneurs, however, it would be twenty more years before Neal's street savvy hustler would become an integral member of the black community.<sup>26</sup> He not only threatens Maggie's tenuous social standing but her life as well. He cannot offer Maggie the social standing she craves, only the material comforts—"but I can take care of you—you and your mother too, and I can dress you pretty, like you ought to be..." (90) In her brief marriage Maggie does not find the social acceptance she craved only isolation. A man who had been everything from "farmer to a chauffeur," Neal's current position is shrouded in secrecy.

Peter's engagement to Maggie marks a fall that he only recovers from through going to war and his marriage to Joanna. His time with Maggie also demonstrates the difference between the two women and how little Maggie understands the rhetoric of racial uplift. When Peter ponders his engagement to Maggie, he sums up Fauset's ideology of black women's participation in the construction of black manhood: "Five hours ago he had expected someday to be a physician and to marry Joanna Marshall. Now it seemed that he was going to be a musician and marry Maggie Neal." (171) His quick slide downward is facilitated by his association with Maggie. Unlike Joanna, Maggie does not nag him but enthusiastically accepts all of Peter's traits. He tells her, "Joanna makes you feel like you are in a strait-jacket all the time. I always feel ordinary when I am with you." Neither Peter nor Maggie noticed the slight inherent in the

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<sup>26</sup> During the forties and fifties Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes and Richard Wright would bring the street hustler into view in their works. Their hustlers act very much like traditional tricksters. They work their hustler in order to upend unfair economic systems. For Fauset, Hustlers like Henderson Neal are one-dimensional criminals with no redeeming value to the community.

compliment. But his engagement to Maggie will not only change his career, but also involve him in murder and suicide making his participation in the Great War his only path back to Joanna.

### **War and Redemption**

The intelligence that Joanna saw in Peter won't allow him to continue as a musician or as Maggie's fiancé. While making arrangements to play a party in Philadelphia, he once again confronts his past. Mrs. Lea, a rich white woman, hires Tom and Peter to play at her party. When she hears his last name she tells him of the Bryn Mawr Byes. "Probably your parents belonged to the Bryn Mawr Byes." Peter replies, "So my father told me." Mrs. Lea tells him that young Merriwether Bye will be attending her party and that "It's so in keeping with things that the grandson of the man who was slave to his grandfather should be his entertainer tonight." Peter tells her "I'm a medical student, not an entertainer." (184) He adds that he is only representing Tom Mason and that he would be sure to pass her instructions on to him. Peter's immediate change from entertainer to medical student signifies the first part of his transformation. Immediately following his decision, he receives a phone call from Maggie. Fauset states that Peter had forgotten about her. When he sees Maggie, he delays their marriage using his return to medical school as an excuse.

The final scene between Peter and Maggie, when he actually breaks their engagement is wrought with pathos. Fauset clearly demonstrates Maggie's need and dependence on Peter. Unlike Joanna, she begs and pleads for him to remain. When she tells him that his leaving "would mean my death," she is predicting the attack she will

suffer shortly from Neal. But she is also referring to the social death she will suffer. Maggie understands what takes Joanna the entire book to realize. Left with only a career, she fears the emptiness and isolation that single womanhood would bring. Yet without Joanna's ambition she cannot contribute to the politically sound marriage that Fauset endorses. Peter becomes further implicated in Maggie's unseemly world when he leaves his surgical instruments behind and Henderson Neal stabs Maggie with one of his knives. The stabbing is highly symbolic of the psychic wound Peter inflicts upon her. Whereas Neal's wound is physical since he could only administer to the physical objects that Maggie obsessed over. But it is Peter's name etched on the cold steel, now covered with Maggie's blood that represents the cruelest cut of all. His surgical knife, representative of middle class fulfillment literally cuts Maggie out of the picture.

Ignorant of the attack on Maggie, Peter makes plans to enlist. His motives are far from being patriotic. He tells his Aunt Susan that "America makes me sick...but darn it all, she is my country." His anti-American remarks are buffered by what his Aunt tells him. She says: "Your great grandfather fought in the revolution, Peter, and two of your uncles. My brothers were in the Civil War. If you enlist you'll only be following their example." (207-208) African American patriotism was important to establish at wartime because their participation was often seen as suspect. Why would men so poorly treated by their country, wish to defend it? There were many examples of blacks accused of working with the enemy and in some cases the Germans recruited blacks. When Aunt Susan cites the participation in American wars by Peter's ancestors, she sets up a long-standing example of patriotism and pride so Peter's earlier remarks seem insignificant.

Fauset uses of the War as a narrative device that brings together (although too melodramatically) the various plot lines as well as the destinies of Peter and Maggie, mirrors the true significance of the War for African-Americans. World War I represented many opportunities for the New Negro. African-Americans saw their participation as a gateway to acceptance as full citizens. In *There is Confusion*, the War is the medium for Peter's transformation into a true man worthy of Joanna. Through her work in the war effort, Maggie finds redemption as well as a place in uplifting the race. Just as many African Americans returned from Europe not willing to occupy the same designation as second-class citizens, Peter and Maggie return no longer content with what they had been before the war.

Almost immediately after being shipped out to France, Peter meets young Merriwether Bye. Their meeting accomplishes several aspects of Peter's change. Peter, who hates all whites, finally meets a white man who is compassionate and understanding of the history of blacks in American. He calls the Bye's exploitation of their slaves "barbarous." (242) He also listens to Peter when he talks of his meeting with Mrs. Lea. Merriwether Bye echoes the sentiments of many black leaders when he states, "I hope this war will teach us something." (241) When Bye predicts his own death, he sees it as a rectification of the sins of his fathers: "I see this war as the greatest gesture the world has ever made for Freedom. If I can give up my life in this cause I shall feel that I have paid my debt." (246) Merriwether Bye's participation in the war is his own search for redemption—not only for himself but also for the sins of his fathers. His insertion into the text at this time also gives Peter the opportunity to meet a white man whom he can

care about and to open the door to even more knowledge about his past. Peter's friendship with Bye proves that in the sins of the fathers there can still be redemption for the brothers.

Peter is greatly altered by his friendship with Bye and his death. Merriwether Bye's death acts to bring Peter closer to learning the truth about his past. He makes Peter promise to go to Bryn Mawr and see his grandfather. He also asks him to return a locket to his lover, Mrs. Lea. But his actual death scene foretells the secret that will finally set Peter free. The rescue workers find Merriwether Bye lying across Peter's knees. His face was "turned childwise toward Peter's breast." Peter's head hangs low over the still body of his friend. His black curly hair fell into the pool of blood on Meriwether's chest. The blood which seals them together seeps out of Merriwether and onto Peter. This scene of blood mixing, at first poignant, is then brought into the context of the times when one of the rescue workers states that the war has brought many strange sights but none as startling as the black man's hair "dabbin in the other fellow's blood." (253) When Peter returns to the US he will soon discover the true nature of his and Meriwether's mixed blood.

Maggie's participation in the war effort, like that of Merriwether Bye, is positioned as her own atonement for the tragedy that invades her life. She blames herself for Henderson Neal's suicide. To begin the process of atonement, she joins one of her mother's clubs that is engaged in providing support for the men overseas. As she becomes more involved with the war effort "her interest in life came creeping back with her strength." (256) Maggie participates in the YMCA's project to send black women to

work among the black men at the front. Fauset uses the real life experience of Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson who wrote of their experience on the front in *Two Colored Women With the American Expeditionary Forces*.<sup>27</sup> In her act of service Maggie learns about how important race work is and how fulfilling it is as well. Her tenure overseas also brings together two crucial elements of Fauset's narrative. Maggie sees both Philip and Peter while she is in France.

She finds Peter in a hospital bed, recovering from the wounds he received at the time of Meriwether's death. He is depressed and tells Maggie, "I hope I get killed in my next engagement." (261) Maggie takes on the responsibility for Peter's suicidal state. In order to ameliorate his sadness she tells him of her decision not to marry "anybody." Maggie 's experiences with the war have led her to seek out her own independence. She tells Peter that she wishes to be on her own. Further disentangling him from their past tragedy she adds, "You can't very well thank me and there's no use in pretending you're sorry. It was bad business, Peter, and I'm glad it's over." (261) This revelation causes "a slight lifting of the pall which hung over him, a loosening of the web." (261) Maggie's past ambition for marriage and respectability are gone. She ponders a future as a successful owner of hair salons and, most importantly, her friends would be those who truly care for her, and not merely stepping stones to class elevation.

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<sup>27</sup> Fauset could have gotten details about France in wartime (although she was a frequently traveler, she did not go to France during the war), black soldiers and the black women sent to support them from Hunton and Johnson. Fauset's descriptions of the muddy fields around Brest, clashes between black and white troops and the dispensing of hot chocolate to black soldiers are from Hunton and Johnson's text. Interestingly enough, Maggie's spontaneous enlistment mirror's Hunton's description of suddenly being in France.

This change in Maggie leaves her open to once again to find Phillip. They meet in a hospital where Phillip is recovering from being gassed. Sickly and not expected to live long, Phillip confesses his love for Maggie and Maggie not only reveals her love but that it was Joanna's letter that drove her away from him. Now that Maggie is no longer interested in a marriage of social convenience, a real marriage between them can take place. Maggie has enjoyed being his nurse for she see it as "her first chance to wait on him, to mother him, to pay back, instead of always taking, something of what the Marshall family had brought in her life." (264) Philip's illness gave Maggie the opportunity to relate to him as an equal. This is similar to the relationship of Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the novel Rochester is an imposing figure, and it is not until the end of the novel when he is blind that Jane and he can be joined in marriage. Rochester's blindness makes Jane his equal. This is also an inter-class marriage so in order for it to take place, the lower class bride is elevated, but not higher than her upper class groom. Despite Maggie's protest she and Phillip unite. Yet their union is short lived and childless.

Phillips death opens up a space within the father's narrative for both Peter and Maggie. Joel insists that Peter and Joanna move into his home after they are married. Fauset writes that Joel was "as proud of Peter as he had been of Joanna." (290) Occupying the place that Phillip could not, Peter now is the son Joel always wished he had. Maggie shares a similar connection to Joel. After Philip's death she decides to pursue her dream to open a string of black hair salons. Once fatherless, in our last glimpse of Maggie she is with Joel, "who she knew admired her ability: 'See if you can't

make me as great a success in business as you've been.” (289) With his new son and daughter, Joel is installed as patriarch, not only of his family, but also of an ever-broadening black community.

Jessie Redmon Fauset's important novel of manners connects the black domestic sphere with the public. Marriage and family become political weapons against racism. Joanna Marshall's middle class life as a doctor's wife will bring not only her and her family true “greatness,” but will impact an entire community. It is also significant that Maggie Ellersley remains unmarried, a widow like her mother. But unlike her mother, Maggie will also, through her role as capitalist, leave a mark on the black community. The common Maggie cannot contribute by way of children and social viability—still she makes a contribution. Both women make the most valuable offering to the cause of racial uplift and that is Peter Bye. He is the man he is at the novel's end due to the efforts of the two women. Of the significant black male characters in the novel, he is the one who survives. Philip, the weaker of the two must be sacrificed so that Peter can take his place in the patriarch's house. Henderson Neal dies, representing the death of the black man as criminal.

The message in *There is Confusion* seems to be overtly masculinist. However, women play a most important role in the construction of men. Fauset creates a power structure in which race is irrelevant and the discourse of power is motivated by class and gender. Yet within the novel, Fauset's black community is untouched by racial violence. The instances of racism are swept aside; their power is a lens through which we see the black man (Peter) or woman's (Joanna) strength. All of the racial violence that the novel

discusses occurs outside of the black community. There are clashes between black and white men in France. Vera Manning, a character who once passed for white for reasons of social elevation, now reports scenes of racism from the south. Passing as a white woman (just as Walter White passed for white to witness white violence in the south) she returns North to inform her friends of the injustices against blacks in the south. Yet racial violence does not touch Fauset's middle class black community directly. The south remains racist for several generations, while New Negroes in the North are blacks who are expected to act like men. *There is Confusion* enacts the problem of its title. It poses the question: What makes a man and what makes a woman in African-American culture. Fauset's work is more significant than critics have claimed. For she truly delineates the shifts and reversals by which the white culture allowed first the black woman, and then only through her agency, the black man, to find a tolerable gender identity.

Walter White's rewrite of *Birthright* does portray racial violence in ways that Fauset's project does not. Like Fauset, White is dependent on Victorian ideology of manhood. For White, also the black woman is significant in the construction of black masculinity. But the similarities in Fauset and White's novels end there. White's hero returns home from Harvard and the War to administer to the black community in his southern hometown. Despite his advances and those of his family, he cannot conquer the power structure that supports whites both economically and politically at the expense of blacks. Fauset's optimism of a great black patriarch leading the community to higher ground is in deep contrast to White's tale of tragedy. The New Negro, a fully masculinized war veteran still cannot conquer the great swell of racism.

### Chapter III

#### **Violence and the Struggle for Post- War Manhood: Walter White's *Fire in the Flint***

African-American soldiers returning home from the war found themselves in a land devoid of opportunities for them. Because the US had supplied its allies with millions of dollars in war goods and materials, few new industries could be built at home. With the war industries closed, the black ex -soldier had no job and very slim possibilities of landing one. The government did recognize the bleak situation for war veterans so it gave each soldier at the time he was honorably discharged from the Army a meager bonus that usually amounted to sixty dollars per man.<sup>1</sup> However, for the black ex-soldier, times were particularly tough. The French had treated those who were stationed abroad as equals. Even the soldiers who remained in the US and were given menial assignments felt a sense of pride in the American citizenship. Yet the post war US was filled with racial violence and anti-Negro sentiment.

Racial violence targeted at blacks did not stop at the Mason-Dixon Line. Bloody post war riots broke out all over the northern and western US. The competition for jobs accounted for much of the antagonism between blacks and whites. Herbert Seligmann of the NAACP noted that the abnormal expansion of the black population

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<sup>1</sup> *Laws Relating to Veterans Administration* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1948): 84 ff.

during the war years in northern cities raised issues that the North had to face. He wrote that "When colored people moved into white residential districts, there began to be talk of 'segregation' and white property owners associations indulged in incendiary meetings which were often secret. The influx of un-unionized colored men caused feeling among white unionists ... and the North found itself with an incipient race problem in organized labor."<sup>2</sup> The post war migration North of many thousands of southern blacks proved that there still existed the belief that the North was more progressive than the South and had many great opportunities to offer.

In 1918 when Walter White accepted the position of secretary for the NAACP in New York City, the agency at the time was at best fledgling. According to White, the NAACP had only 8,490 members distributed in its 76 branches. And in its main office "one never knew pay day to pay day whether salaries, rent, postage and printing bills could be paid."<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that his current position of salesman with Standard Life was better salaried and more secure White opted to join the NAACP. His decision to leave Atlanta received much support from his father. Also supportive was Dr. Louis T. Wright, a Harvard educated physician who, like Dr. Kenneth Harper of White's novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), returned to the South to practice medicine after meeting with much success in the North. According to White, Wright urged him to leave the south: "Go to New York by all means. Life will mean much more to you when you are fighting

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert J. Seligmann. "What is Behind the Negro Uprisings?" *Current Opinion* (September 19, 1919): 54.

<sup>3</sup> Walter White. *A Man Called White* (1948. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 35.

for a cause than it possibly can if you stay here to make more money. You'll stagnate and die mentally.<sup>4</sup>

The ironical pairing of anti-Negro violence and New Negro optimism is best portrayed in White's post war novel *The Fire in the Flint* (1924). White's tragic hero, Kenneth Harper is a war veteran and a northern educated doctor who returns home to his small town in Georgia to practice medicine. Lacking any political insight into the racial tensions of the South, Harper believes that his intelligence, superior training and his efforts at being a "good Negro" is all he needs to succeed. The novel is about Harper's political awakening and how that awakening is tied to notions of black manhood. This is similar to White's own political awakening at 13 during the Atlanta riots. For White the riots were a passage into manhood and his identity as a black man. The racial violence that marked the post war period in the US demonstrated that violence would play an important role in the shaping of black manhood throughout the nation. Using White and his novel as the basis of my discussion, I will demonstrate how the New Negro's optimism of the future and the futility of the moment collide. In this collision a new ideology of black masculinity is constructed.

### **A Prelude to Violence: Politics and Rapists**

Thirteen-year-old Walter White learned that despite his and his family's Caucasian appearance, they were not set apart from the injustice and violence that the black community in Atlanta would endure during the Atlanta Riots in 1906. The Whites' middle-class values and appearance, their beautiful home with its immaculate lawn and

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<sup>4</sup> White, 30.

white picket fence would only serve to antagonize the white mob that swarmed through black neighborhoods searching for blood. Yet it is during this time of intense Negrophobia and violence that White comes not only to discover who he is racially, but also to embrace that identity. The Atlanta Riots represented to White a passage into manhood that was deeply tied to his racial identity. Despite the ease with which the blonde blue-eyed White could pass, he refused to be like many light-skinned blacks who “disappeared” and according to White “whose absence cannot be explained by death or emigration ... men and women who have decried that they will be happier and more successful if they flee from proscription and humiliation which the American color line imposes on them.”<sup>5</sup> It is on a night when an angry white mob threatens his home and family that White decides not to pass: “I decided that I would infinitely rather be what I was than, through taking advantage of the way of escape that was open to me, be one of the race that had forced the decision upon me.”<sup>6</sup> On a warm night in September of 1906, White’s decision changed his life and the course of Civil Rights in America.

The Atlanta of White’s boyhood seemed at first an unlikely place for a race riot. At the turn of the century Atlanta was not only economically thriving, but also it was regarded as the gateway to the New South. Although blacks and whites were segregated and unequal, Atlanta was viewed as racially progressive. There was a sense of respect and cooperation between the races. Peach Tree Street was dotted with black owned businesses. At this time blacks had no political power but they continued to seek

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<sup>5</sup> White, 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> White, 5.

educational and economic gains despite mounting white opposition. The question of the validity of economic gain without political power is one that black Atlanta, pre riot, did not seem to torment itself over.<sup>7</sup> Yet it was a hotly debated topic among black leadership, and especially between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois rhapsodizes about Atlanta, comparing it to the mythic Atalanta, the beautiful swift maiden who would only marry one who could beat her in a foot race. Hippomenes, who laid three golden apples in her way finally defeated her. Pausing over the golden apples, Atalanta was caught by Hippomenes “and looking on each other, the blazing passion of their love profaned the sanctuary of Love and they were cursed.”<sup>8</sup> In this parable, Du Bois is not merely feminizing the city of Atlanta in his comparison with Atalanta, but he is feminizing the black folk and their drive toward material wealth as well. Hazel Carby has determined that Du Bois’s use of metaphoric and symbolic characteristics of Atalanta demonstrates how the female is not a symbol of hope for the future of the African American folk. Atalanta has no viable political, social, or intellectual future in Du Bois’s text.<sup>9</sup> I believe that DuBois uses highly gendered language here to sexualize racial oppression. In using

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the social and political life of turn of the century Atlanta the following works offer a rich and diverse understanding of Atlanta and its place in the history of race relations in America. Don H. Doyle’s *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile 1860-1910* (1990); Ronald D. Baylor, *Race and the Shape of Twentieth Century Atlanta* (1996); Fitzhugh W. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia* (1880-1930).

<sup>8</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903. New York: Signet, 1969): 111.

<sup>9</sup> Hazel Carby. *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998): 9-25.

Atalanta's attraction to the gold apples as a metaphor for black Atlantans fixation on wealth above all else, he emasculates black men who turn toward wage slavery for salvation. Not only is Atalanta complicit in her own rape, but she sees that rape as "love." In committing themselves to attaining wealth, blacks are, according to Du Bois, complicit in forging a new master/slave relationship with whites, yet call it progress—

"... wealth to employ the black serfs and the prospect of wealth to keep them working; wealth as the end and aim of politics, and as the legal tender for law and order."<sup>10</sup>

Du Bois's solution to the plight of blacks and especially those in Atlanta is also presented in highly gendered language. "The need of the south is knowledge and culture." This need is to be met in the manly manner of "broad busy abundance," and in the space of the public sphere—"the world of work." Not in "dainty limited quality." Predominant in Du Bois's plan to rescue blacks is education. "The wings of Atalanta are the coming universities of the south. They alone can bear the maiden past the temptation of the golden fruit. They will not guide her flying feet away from cotton and gold ... But they will guide her over and beyond them, and leave her kneeling in the Sanctuary of Truth and Freedom and broad Humanity, virgin and undefiled."<sup>11</sup> Education becomes the hero, Atalanta's masculine rescuer who will not only save her from Hippomenes's golden apples but will, most importantly, keep her chaste.

Du Bois believed that African Americans could achieve social equality if they would embrace education and knowledge first and above all else. The development of

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<sup>10</sup> Du Bois, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Du Bois, 117-118.

the mind would naturally bring blacks to a state of political autonomy. This countered Booker T. Washington's belief that if blacks worked hard and saved their money they would become a strong economic force and therefore enfranchisement would be theirs because "no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized." He also believed that "There is little race prejudice in the American dollar".<sup>12</sup> But by no means did economical stability even faintly resemble social equality. Du Bois's feminization of racial oppression mocks Washington's specific construction of black/ white relations. According to Washington black economic enfranchisement would mean for whites that blacks "will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields and run your factories."<sup>13</sup> Historian Mark Bauerlein summed up Washington's proposal as "a treaty that expelled politics from interracial affairs, that framed black-white relations as employer-employee, producer-consumer, landlord-tenant relations. The black man would be a loyal, diligent worker and family man, and the white man would respect his manhood, and both would profit from his industry."<sup>14</sup> In Washington's plan, the golden apples are well worth losing the race of social equality.

Du Bois and Washington advocated two different paths to manhood for blacks. Du Bois pushed for political agency. Blacks would not be dependent upon whites to

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<sup>12</sup> Booker T. Washington. *Up From Slavery*. (1901, New York: University Books, 1989): 223.

<sup>13</sup> Booker T. Washington. *The Negro in Business*. (1907, Chicago: Afro-Am Press, 1969): 14.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Bauerlein. *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta 1906*. (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001): 55.

define their identity within the American social and political scene. Washington's plan required the full participation of whites and depended upon white patronage. Black survival would be economically linked to whites. Atlanta in 1906 was Booker T. Washington's town, not Du Bois's. Washington's accommodation rhetoric did much to promote cooperation between blacks and whites in their daily interactions. It also did much for him as well. Politicians and community leaders often consulted with Washington on issues on race. Ray Stannard Baker hailed Washington as a "leader of men" and in comparison he saw Du Bois as a "scholar and an idealist."<sup>15</sup> Yet Washington's ideology of separate and unequal could not quell the virulent Negrophobia that would invade Atlanta in 1906.

There were many factors that brought on the excessive racism that would ignite Atlanta. Young Walter White read the scathing headlines during the summer of 1906 that reported daily brutal rapes and other attacks on white women by black men. In his autobiography he cites a passage from the *Atlanta Journal*, which appeared on August 1, 1906 "in heavy type, all capital letters", it read:

Political equality being thus preached to the Negro in the ring papers and on the stump, what wonder that he makes no distinction between political and social equality? He grows more bumptious on the street, more impudent in his dealings with white men, and then, when he cannot achieve social equality as he wishes, with the instinct of the barbarian to destroy what he cannot attain to, he lies in wait, as that dastardly brute did yesterday near this city, and assaults the fair young girlhood of the south..."

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<sup>15</sup> Ray Stannard Baker. "An Ostracized Race in Torment." *American Magazine* (May 1908): 66-67.

The reemergence of the black rapist at large is a result of many factors active in Atlanta at that time. However many historians would later cite two events as the main sources of the Negrophobia. One event was the many sold out performances of the dramatization of Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman* (1905). The other was the gubernatorial campaign of Hoke Smith and Clark Howell. Both of these events would summon the mythic black rapist in order to solidify white male hegemonic power and to silence any discussion of social equality between the races.

In the Howell and Smith gubernatorial campaign race became the primary issue and each candidate tried to top the other's racist rhetoric. But when Hoke Smith sought the endorsement of Tom Watson, Walter White claimed that "the two rabble rousers stumped the state screaming 'nigger, nigger, nigger'."<sup>16</sup> Watson had once led an agrarian movement in the South, which had allegiance with the agrarian west. This movement was so strong that it threatened the financial power of the East. Despite his advocacy of Jim Crow laws, Watson's movement united both black and white farmers with black and white industrial workers. Watson was also in favor of the enfranchisement of poor whites and to a limited degree, blacks as well. Because of his radical views and most importantly the threat his platform posed to big business, Watson's bid for national leadership in the presidential campaigns of 1896, 1904 and 1908 were met with failure. Publicly humiliated, Watson turned away from his ideal of race and class justice to one of blatant racism.<sup>17</sup> Still, he was greatly respected in the state of Georgia.

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<sup>16</sup> White, 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Although an interesting historical character there is unfortunately little written about Tom Watson, a man considered Jeffersonian in his beliefs as well as in his stature.

Clark Howell, like Hoke Smith and Tom Watson had once been a supporter of racial uplift in the past but during the campaign he too abandoned his support of blacks and replaced it with the advocacy of white supremacy. As the editor of the *Journal* Smith had once promoted the education of blacks, condemned lynching and publicly praised Booker T. Washington. But now in order to stay a contender in the gubernatorial race, he advocated an education qualification to “whiten” the ballot. The January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1906 edition of the *Atlanta Evening News* summed up Smith’s stand: “Disenfranchise the Negro is His Appeal; VIGOROUS APPEAL FOR WHITE SUPREMACY.” This made Howell’s assertion that the rights of Blacks should be repealed, but only by legal means, appear to be weak and ineffectual to the whites of Atlanta so pumped full of racial hatred.<sup>18</sup>

The headlines of newspapers screamed rape and it didn’t matter if a rape was ever proven to take place. In the heat of the summer, rumor turned to fact where the rape of a white woman by a black man was concerned. Any interaction, no matter how trivial or fleeting, between a white woman and a black man was deemed an assault. The alleged assaults were called “an epidemic.”<sup>19</sup> Tom Watson along with John Temple Graves wrote of “the black terror” and “the red death,” “the ordeal worse than death,” the “nightmare” which “our wives, mothers and daughters live every day.” They claimed to

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Two biographies exist: C. Vann Woodward’s *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford, 1963) and the more recent, *Henry Grady or Tom Watson? The Rhetorical Struggle for the New South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Bauerlein, 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> *Watson’s Magazine* (1906): 501-502; and *Watson’s Jeffersonian Magazine* (1907): 166-169.

hear “the agony and the pitiful cries of the defenseless white woman . . . crying out in pain from the awful . . . attacks, the shrieks of the poor victim of beastly lusts . . . the heart broken sobs . . . the blood stains in the earth.” For most, this wave of attacks on white women by black men was due to the collapse of the plantation and slavery. George Harvey alleged that the former “peculiar institution” which kept blacks in line and protected white women was replaced by the “War Amendments” which assumed “the absolute equality of the races” which naturally lead to “The inevitable corollary . . . of racial amalgamation.”<sup>20</sup> Again and again the point was made that the black man’s hunger for political and social enfranchisement would be realized on the body of the white woman. A character in Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) makes this point quite clear: “You cannot seek the Negro vote without asking him to your home sooner or later. If you ask him to your house, he will break bread with you at last. And if you seat him at your table, he has the right to ask your daughter’s hand in marriage.”<sup>21</sup>

Dixon’s dramatization of his novel, *The Clansmen* was produced in Atlanta and enjoyed a popular run. The images from the stage production also had a great influence on the racial hysteria. Like his novel, Dixon’s play showed whites as dispossessed during Reconstruction and ruled over by savage blacks, closer in appearance and intelligence to gorillas than to men. Most importantly, white Atlantans saw heroic white men avenge the violation of white women by black brutes. This spectacle played to a full house night after night. It would not be long before the fiction played out on the stage would merge

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<sup>20</sup> George Harvey. “The New Negro Crime.” *Harper’s weekly* (1903): 1577.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Dixon. *The Leopard’s Spots*. (New York: Doubleday, 1902):242.

tragically with the reality of daily life in Atlanta. Whites grew increasingly paranoid of potential black attacks. All black men were suspect and had the potential to be rapists. According to Charles Crowe, urban vagrancy drives took a sharp upward turn during the summer of 1906 as police in Macon, Savannah, Atlanta and elsewhere used the law with special severity. Employed blacks were arrested during their time off and homeowners were arrested in their homes. Crowe further adds that “white Georgians automatically classed black people not at work as vagrants, and the concept of a property-holding or leisure class among Negroes hardly penetrated the Southern imagination.”<sup>22</sup>

Closely associated with Negro vagrancy were the dives that catered to blacks. Like most major American cities at the beginning of the century, Atlanta had its section where both black and white men could indulge in drinking as well as sexual promiscuity. The anti-vice and prohibition advocates, however, gave credence to the white belief that blacks and vice went together in the same way that white women and virtue were inseparable. The drunkenness of black men became a cause for concern in the plight of white women. Nude white women often adorned the bottles from which they drank. In the minds of white reformers such as John Temple Graves, John F. White, the Baptist minister as well as Clark Howell and many others, the public display of the nude white female body was a danger to white civilization just as the black drunk was. As the base, animalistic Negro drank from the bottle he was being filled with alcohol as well as the

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Crowe. “Racial Violence and Social reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906.” *Journal of Negro History* (July 3, 1968): 247.

image of the nude white woman. The combination of the two would naturally send him off on a rampage of sexual frenzy.<sup>23</sup>

But the image of Negro male as a base animal held prisoner by his lower desires would often flip to an even more dangerous image; one created by white guilt over slavery. The Negro with the bowed head and shuffling gait had almost all but died out at this time. The house nigger, the sweet Uncle Tom who would put white life above his own and that of his family was increasingly becoming a fairy tale. According to John Temple Graves he was replaced by the surly black man who had “a spirit of revenge for the century of slavery in which he served the South.” Graves goes on to say, “The younger Negroes imbibe in their mother’s milk the sentiment of hostility and hatred toward the youth and adults of the white race, and this is manifested in their personal relations from the time they start school to the time they separate in the work and vocations of life.”<sup>24</sup> Black hostility toward whites was a great concern of white southerners. Whether black men ingested mother’s milk or gin, it fueled the same violent actions against whites.

The alleged attacks upon white women did not diminish as 1906 went by; they increased. The assaults were loosely defined as any contact between black men and white women. In a racially mixed city such as Atlanta attacks were as frequent as the

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<sup>23</sup> On Blacks, alcohol and rape see Will Irwin, “More About Nigger Gin,” *Colliers* (August 15, 1908): 115-117; Charles Daniel, editorial “The Lewd and the Nude,” *Atlanta New* 10 August 1906:8; and George Harvey. “The New Negro Crime.” *Harper’s Weekly* (1903): 1577.

<sup>24</sup> John Temple Graves. “The Tragedy at Atlanta From the Point of View of the Whites,” *The World Today* (1906): 1170.

casual meetings of white women and black man on the street. Whites believed that the only solution to the problem was lynching. From the years 1882-1927 there were a reported 549 people lynched in Georgia. Georgia was second only to only Mississippi in the number of people lynched during this period.<sup>25</sup> The Law was seen as ineffectual in the handling of the rapes. According to John Temple Graves the death penalty as a result of the law did not diminish the number of attacks on white women by black men because many of the accused were led to religion by ministers at the time of their death “and from the shadow of the gallows called on his friends to follow him to glory. So that the punishment lost to these emotional people much of its deterrent force.” But even worse than the repentant beast rising up to heaven was the role the victim had to play in legal proceedings. Graves continues “...the innocent victim, who, if she survived, as she rarely did, was already bowed to the earth by shame,” had to be called on “to relate in public the story of the assault—an ordeal which was worse than death.”<sup>26</sup> Lynching was therefore an effective way to silence both the rapist and the victim. With the public mood so dark, so full of vengeance and paranoia, the question was not what set the riots off, but why they were not set off sooner.

What exactly started the chain of violence that would become the Atlanta Riot is not known for sure. There are many versions of the events but since rumor and hearsay based on racial stereotypes created the atmosphere of racial antagonism and paranoia, it

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<sup>25</sup> Walter White. *Rope and Faggot* (1927, Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1992): 232-233.

<sup>26</sup> John Temple Graves. “The Lynching of Negroes—Its Causes and Its Prevention,” *The North American Review* (1904): 38.

could be said that these elements necessitated the riot itself. According to John Temple Graves “on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday preceding the riot there were three separate attempts of “extraordinary aggravation attempted within the limits of the city.” The “people breathed easier” when the papers reported no attacks on Friday. But on Saturday “there suddenly flashed upon the streets an extra announcing that four women had been assaulted within the hour and the indications were that the crimes were preconcerted and coordinately arranged.” Another paper “confirmed” the rumor and “by six o’clock the streets were swarming with an outraged and angry populace who, having exhausted every expedient of remedy and protection that genius, money and law could devise, felt themselves absolutely helpless before the fast multiplying criminals of a race who were seeking to destroy the women of the South.”<sup>27</sup>

However, in an article that followed the article by Graves, W.E.B. DuBois authored an essay titled “From the Point of View of the Blacks.” In it he countered Graves and claimed that Grave’s own newspaper, *The Georgian* claimed that of the violent acts reported on Saturday, “None was a real case of criminal assault.” DuBois goes on to detail the stories that the paper did acknowledge as true:

1. At 2 PM a Negro loafing in a back yard was ordered away and shot at.
2. At 7:00 o’clock a woman was knocked down by a man as she stepped out of her back door. He immediately ran away.
3. At 7:30 o’clock a similar occurrence in another part of the city.
4. An old lady living alone saw a black face looking through the window and was greatly frightened.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Temple Graves. “The Tragedy at Atlanta From the Point of View of the Whites,” *The World Today* (1906): 1171.

<sup>28</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois. “II—From the Point of View of the Negroes,” *The World Today* (1906): 1173.

These events seem so ironically inconsequential yet in this time of intense fear and hatred, the truth became bent and molded to suit the mood of the growing mob of white men gathering in the city.

The dives along Decatur Street were the site of the onset of violence. For the white reformers, the dives were the birthplace of the black rapist. It was here where he would become drunk on alcohol that flowed from bottles adorned with the bodies of naked white women. Clusters of white men gathered to discuss the attacks reported in the newspapers and to exchange rumors of a black uprising. Black men also gathered but to deny the attacks and the rumors of a black uprising. The fighting began by a few vocal members of the white mob pushing and taunting messengers and deliverymen trying desperately to go about their usual business. Rumor appeared again, and over the next few days it would rule the city. The shoving and name calling of the white mob would evolve into stories of terrible confrontations between blacks and whites. One story had a black man force a white woman from the sidewalk. In another version he had stolen her purse. In still yet another story a white man had assaulted a black woman who had insulted him. A scuffle between two men ensued and ended with a black man stabbing the white man.<sup>29</sup>

Kelly Miller, a black intellectual of the time and a professor at Howard University put specific blame for the riots on the newspapers who used the Negrophobia of the time to compete for readership among themselves. Miller cited one paper that “boldly offered a reward for a lynching bee in the capital of the Empire State of the South.” This pushes

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<sup>29</sup> *New York Times* 24 September 1906:2.

the angry white mob “into a furious flame ... Oglethorp’s colonists can no longer contain themselves. Like the Indian on the warpath, they must have a savage yell. ‘Kill the Negro Brutes!’ is the tocsin.” In attempting to denigrate and dehumanize the mob, Miller uses white racist terminology in order to debase them. This is similar to what the newspapers in Atlanta did to black people—strip them of humanity and therefore make them beyond rational action and thought. Miller describes the air as “filled with ghoulish yells, mingled with the shrieks and groans of the mangled and the dying.” In this nightmare of chaos the mob “joke with the mayor over the awful deeds of death, and cry out louder for blood.” The mob only stops when blacks go into hiding because “the fury of the mob ceases when it had nothing further to feed on.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Violence as a Rite of Passage**

In his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1927), Walter White described in vivid detail the brutal and the grotesque images of the riot. He was accompanying his father, a mailman on his route. White remembered seeing “little bands of sullen, evil looking men,” on street corners talking excitedly. Around another corner he sees a lame Negro bootblack who in vain attempts to outrun a white mob. He and his father witness “clubs and fists descending to the accompaniment of savage shouting and cursing.” As soon as the mob spies another Negro, they are off, leaving the bootblack in a pool of blood on the street. At this point, White is full of naïve excitement, not fear. He and his father are not attacked because they are in a U.S. government mail cart and both of them

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<sup>30</sup> Kelly Miller. “An Appeal to Reason on the Race Problem. An Open Letter to John Temple Graves Suggested By the Atlanta Riot,” in *Radicals and Conservatives and Other Essays on the Negro in America* 91908, New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 74-75.

have white skin. Not realizing what kind of terror has gripped the city, White, in his “childish excitement and ignorance” convinces his father to drive down into the heart of Atlanta’s business district. The noise is deafening. The bellows of the crowd and its victims are pierced by sounds of broken glass and gunshots. The Whites did not have to go deep into the business district to witness the violence of the mob:

No sooner had we turned into Marietta Street, however, than we saw careening toward us an undertaker’s barouche. Crouched in the rear of the vehicle were three Negroes clinging to the sides of the carriage as it lunged and swerved. On the driver’s seat crouched a white man, the reins held taut in his left hand. A huge whip was held in his right. Alternately he lashed the horses and without looking backwards, swung the whip in savage swoops in the faces of the members of the mob as they lunged at the carriage determined to seize the Negroes.

The barouche hit the White’s cart and almost capsized it. Although White’s father chose a route that took them away from the business district, they still heard a mob closing in. They saw an elderly black woman, a cook at a local hotel, running from a mob. White’s father heroically lifted her into the cart to safety.

Although the sounds of church bells could be heard in the morning “no one in Atlanta believed for a moment that the hatred and lust for blood had been appeased.” Macabre reminders of the night before appeared throughout the city. The hats and caps of victims of the night before hung on the hooks of telegraph poles. Blood congealed on sidewalks and in the street. White’s family and neighbors braced themselves for more rioting. The White’s home was on the way to what White Atlantans called “Darktown,” where the majority of Atlanta’s black population resided. Rumor had it that the white mob would be marching there that night. Before the riot there had never been a firearm in the White’s home. But at his mother’s insistence, White’s father armed himself for the

second night of rioting. As the mob approached blacks broke street lamps so that there was more darkness to hide in. Then the unthinkable happened: The Whites themselves became targets for the white mob. A voice they recognized as the son of a grocer with whom they had traded for years shouted out where the “nigger mail carrier” lives. He instructed the mob to burn down the White’s house because “it ‘s too nice for a nigger to live in.” As the mob began to descend upon their home, his father gave young Walter an order “in a voice as quiet as though he were asking me to pass him the sugar at the breakfast table, he said ‘Son don’t shoot until the first man put his foot on the lawn and then don’t you miss.” But the mob dispersed as other neighbors began a volley of fire.

White’s retelling of his brush with mob violence reads like an adventure tale, but full of suspense and terror. It is a story fueled by vile villains and courageous heroes. But this adventure tale is also a narrative of a rite of passage. Within the thirty-six hours of rioting, White’s life changed completely. When this story begins White’s boyish lust for thrills and excitement lead him and his father directly into the riot. At the end he is a young man standing along side his father armed and wondering what it would feel like to kill a man. Standing there, ready to defend his family, White has a cathartic moment: as he realizes what it is like to be a man, the blonde blue eyed White is also made aware what it is to be black.

In that instant there opened up within me a great awareness; I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority, a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the idiot as well as to the wise man and the genius.

White's self discovery is intrinsically linked to his newly found political awareness.

Within White's autobiography his first location of himself racially and politically is a significant moment. He believed "it was all just a feeling then, inarticulate and melancholy, yet reassuring in the way that death and sleep are reassuring, and I have clung to it for nearly half a century."<sup>31</sup> Although many blacks were victimized during the Atlanta riot it is momentous for young Walter White because the act of fighting back is what leads him to a heightened political consciousness and to his identity as a black man.

Later riots would surpass Atlanta in brutality and violence. The worst of these riots were in East St. Louis, Illinois; Chicago, Illinois; and Washington, DC. The summer of 1919 has been called the "Red Summer" because of all the blood that ran through the streets of American cities during the race riots. At least 38 clashes, which took place that year, could be classified as race riots.<sup>32</sup> Behind these riots were economic issues and a new infestation of Negrophobia. In the North the language of Negrophobia was slightly different from that employed in the South. The language of the south was the talk of black male brutality against white women, in the North and especially in Chicago words like "invasion of white residential districts by Negroes," began to permeate the public sphere.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that the language of the North is without direct reference to rape, sexual attack is implicit in the image of the passive white body in

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<sup>31</sup> Walter White. *A Man Called White*, 8-12.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri. *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I* (1974, New York: DaCapo Press, 1996): 31.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert J. Seligmann, 154.

the form of neighborhoods becoming “spoiled” by the intrusion of an active, progressing black body. Racial attitudes worsened nationally during and immediately following World War I. The lynching of Negroes in the United States jumped from 35 in 1917 to 60 in 1918 then to 76 in 1919.<sup>34</sup> Walter White cited the exposure to the violence of the war as a possible reason behind the increase in violence. “Blood lust and hatred cannot be shut off as simply as one turns off a faucet.”<sup>35</sup> The war weighed heavily on the tensions of black and white relationships. For blacks it was a time to collect on their patriotic fervor and assert their rights as citizens. For whites, blacks were becoming dangerously like them.

The violence of the Atlanta riot of 1906 and the numerous acts of white on black violence that Walter White would later witness served to aid him in writing two important works. His book, *Rope and Faggot* (1927) was an important study of lynching in the US. As secretary of the NAACP, White investigated lynchings throughout the US. His blonde hair and blue-eyed looks gave him the opportunity to interview both witnesses and lynchers. *Rope and Faggot* came about almost by accident. White went to France on a Guggenheim fellowship to write a novel about three generations of African-Americans. But the violence in America still managed to seep into his consciousness:

I had thought that, far away from the American scene, I would be able, in the absence of the daily fare of lynching and injustice with which the NAACP constantly dealt, to devote myself to the leisurely pursuit of belles lettres. But distance strangely enough, seemed to accentuate rather than diminish concern with what was happening back home to those who could do so little to help themselves. Perhaps it was due to the fact that in the

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<sup>34</sup> *Negro Yearbook*. Monroe N. Work Edition, Tuskegee Ala. 1937:156.

<sup>35</sup> White, 308.

midst of such idyllic beauty there was leisure to think about the content of letters from James Weldon Johnson and others in the Association about this lynching or that one . . . Or perhaps it was because the Nice and Paris newspapers, which then published only occasional items about the United States, invariably featured news of lynching and race riots.<sup>36</sup>

Before he would write *Rope and Faggot*, White would pen a post war novel about the race problem in the US. In *Fire in the Flint*, White would fictionalize some of the powerful events that he encountered in his investigations. Within White's text the idea of citizenship and masculinity would be problematic for black men. White America would, as in the case of the Atlanta riots, view the struggle for political rights to be a struggle over the possession of the white woman's body.

#### **New Negro Tragedy: The Fire in the Flint**

In Walter White's novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) the New Negro is constructed without a history on which to base his identity. White's protagonist, Dr. Kenneth Harper returns home to Georgia to follow in the footsteps of his father who was a "good nigger." In Harper's underdeveloped sense of racial justice "only bad Negroes get lynched." White deftly erects a towering minaret of misinformation and apathy from which Harper will fall. His upbringing as well as his own interactions with whites supports Harper's political and social naiveté. The belief that "all white folks weren't bad—there were some decent ones after all," is the basis of his delusions as well as his ultimate undoing. Harper was raised to believe that if blacks became employed and embraced middle-class values, the ballot and all other things denied him would fall into his lap. His father's words stay close to him: "any Negro can get along without trouble in

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<sup>36</sup> White, 5.

the south if he only attends to his own business.” These words eventually haunt him as Harper begins to realize just what his business as a black man is.

The pessimism and brutality that White describes in his novel evolves from his protagonist’s position as an apolitical, professional and demasculinized black man. Kenneth Harper is easily recognizable as one of DuBois’ “Talented Tenth.” Yet despite his bent toward being “the good Negro,” he meets with a tragic end at the hands of a white mob. White’s work with the NAACP as well as his extensive research into lynching shape his novel. He had first hand knowledge of white on black violence that he would detail in his book, *Rope and Faggot* (1927). In the mind of his critics, *Fire in the Flint* was more than a piece of good fiction. A review in *The Nation* noted that “Mr. White has poured all that he knows, all that he has observed in years, all that he has dreamed and all that he has experienced, interpreting everything with his own passion and leaving art to take care of itself.”<sup>37</sup> White’s credentials made the novel irresistible as a document of truth. But what is truly extraordinary about *Fire in the Flint* is how White constructs the evolution of a character’s political consciousness and how tightly that political consciousness is tied to his passage into manhood. This echoes White’s own transformation when he witnessed the Atlanta Race Riots. Like White, Harper’s rebirth is induced by racial violence.

White is careful in constructing black masculinity along the same lines as white Victorian masculinity. The overt signs of traditional masculinity are seen as negative in the novel. The white gangs that taunt young black women who enter the town’s general

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<sup>37</sup> Konrad Bercovici. “Almost White and Black.” *The Nation* (October 8, 1924): 388.

store are seen as base and ignorant, while Harper and his brother's ability to keep their sexual urges in control is seen as intelligent and cultivated. Harper consists of both male and female attributes. "His hands long fingered tapering to slender points, the hands of a pianist, an artist, whether of brush or chisel or scalpel hung over the sides in a languid fashion. His shirt sleeves were rolled back above his elbows, revealing strongly muscled dark brown arms." (13) The flow of feminine hands into manly arms points to the conflicts of black manhood as it is inscribed upon Bob Harper's body. Yet his physical description is in synch with his political consciousness at this point in the narrative. As his hands are unmarked by real labor, Harper himself is unmarked by the reality of racial injustice. In a deep contrast to his brother Bob who is described as "of a highly sensitized nature, more analytic of mind, more easily roused passion and anger," Kenneth is "of a tender and sympathetic nature, almost with the gentleness of a woman." (22) (149). Still Bob's passion is political not sexual.

The two brothers' differences are largely attributed to their experiences with the white world. Kenneth had not been south for some time. He attended medical school in the north and then was shipped off to France during the war as an army doctor. At the close of the war he remained in France, studying at the Sorbonne for several months before returning home to Central City. In the liberal climates of France and the Northeastern United States, Kenneth could enjoy some relief from the burdens of blackness. His brother Bob had to leave university when his father died and return home to act as the administrator of his father's estate. It was this experience that turned Bob into an angrier, more political black man than Kenneth. While attending to his father's affairs, Bob encountered fraud that was easily and often exercised on blacks in business

by whites—"The utter impotence he had felt in having no legal redress as a Negro had embittered him." (22) Many whites had insisted that their father, a man who kept all of his accounts current, had owed them money. Bob was forced to pay them knowing that no court would take the word of a black man over that of a white.

Despite White's claim that Bob's attitude was a recent change in character, there are still inborn differences between the two brothers that point to their divergent political ideologies. Kenneth was his father's favored son. He was "the natural pacifist—he never bothered trouble until trouble bothered him. Even then, if he could avoid it, he always did." (24) The most striking difference in their attitudes about the South and whether the North is a better place for blacks. Kenneth and Bob have a long exchange over the issue of money over quality of life. This echoes White's own dilemma about moving north that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Bob asks Kenneth why he would return to central City and before he can answer Bob states: "If I had your chances of studying up North and in France, and living where you don't have to be afraid of getting into trouble with Crackers all the time, I'd rather've done anything else than to come back to this rotten place to live the rest of my life." When Kenneth tells his brother that he came back to make money, Bob explodes "But that isn't the most important thing in life!" Bob is voicing White's and the concerns of other New Negroes who believed that respect and autonomy were of greater importance than wealth. Bob then reveals the specifics of the trouble he had been having in the town. Yet Kenneth remains unconvinced. He believes that as a physician with his training he would do much better in Central City than anywhere. There is a thriving black community and a serious dearth of black doctors with any serious medical training. The whites that actually run the town are the ones who

he believes want blacks to succeed and who would be behind him and his practice.

Bob's role within the novel is to demonstrate how far from a model of politicized black manhood Kenneth is.

Kenneth is unable to comprehend the immediacy of the race problem in Central City. He also cannot deconstruct the war and his experience there into something that would spur his own growth. White writes that during the war there was often a sense of "revolt" among servicemen because the pro-war propaganda had been so explicit in describing how enlistment could change not only one's life but the world in general. The daily onslaught of violence and brutality often left the men looking back on the pro-war optimism with some bitterness. Yet this revolt was "more deep-rooted . . . among Negro ex-service men. Many of them entered the army, not so much because they were fired with desire to fight for an abstract thing like world democracy, but, because they were of a race oppressed, they entertained very definite beliefs that service in France would mean a more decent regime in America, when the war was over, for themselves and all others who were classed as Negroes." Yet "Kenneth was of that class which thought of these things in a more detached, more abstract, more subconscious manner." (43-44) His experiences are without the weight of any deep analysis. He administers to the sick and wounded while in France without considering the larger context that the torn mangled bodies he treats have within the realm of history. He can easily forget the horrors of war, yet "It came back to him only in fitful memories as of some particularly horrible dream." (44)

In order to escape from nightmarish memories or the tedium of work Kenneth reads fiction. Kenneth's taste in literature is interesting in the light of his underdeveloped

consciousness. He enjoys D.H. Lawrence yet is frustrated at Lawrence's ambiguity. He adores Conrad because his novels satisfy his love for the sea. Lawrence and Conrad have been often cited for their often problematic view of race. Especially Conrad whose novels *The Nigger Narcissus* (1897) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902) have spurred heated debates on what some critics describe as the racist nature of these books. It could well be assumed that even in the early 1920s when White was writing this novel that Conrad's works were seen as racially problematic. It could well then be inferred that his mention here only solidifies Kenneth's oblivion concerning race.

White adds that Kenneth also enjoys reading the works of DuBois—"the fiery, burning philippics of one of his own race against the proscriptions of race prejudice." Although Kenneth intellectually finds DuBois appealing, his message of racial equality is lost upon Kenneth. He reads DuBois "with a sort of detachment—as being something which touched him in a more or less remote way but not as a factor in forming his own opinions as a Negro in a land where democracy often stopped dead at the color line." (46) Instead of a collective effort on the part of all blacks, joining together to fight for racial justice, Kenneth believes that if he can solve his own problems and if everyone else did the same then the race problem would be solved. Kenneth sees the problem of race as one where individual Negroes bring the problems on themselves.

Kenneth begins to alter his view when the issue of race is displaced by gender. Bob tells him that a gang of white boys who loiter in front of the town's only general store is harassing their sister Mamie and other young black women. The words of these young white men directed at black women make Bob "boil" with anger. However he is savvy enough to know that if he said something a fight would ensue and he would be

“beaten to death” if not killed. Kenneth’s reaction is to try to keep the girls off that street unless there was someone to walk with them. Bob points out that this plan won’t work because there is not always going to be someone to go downtown with them. Instead he wants to organize among the “better class of coloured people” in order to create a “Colored Protective League” in Central City. Kenneth’s belief that it is up to individuals to work on their own problems is what leads him to talk to the store’s owner rather than begin a large organization which would make whites uncomfortable.

The store’s owner, Bob Ewing is one of the white folks that Kenneth believes wants the blacks to succeed. It is Kenneth’s talk with Ewing that begins to spur his political consciousness. Ewing admits to hearing the rough talk of the boys and has even asked them to stop it. But he adds, “boys will be boys, and they haven’t done any harm to the girls.” Kenneth proceeds:

“But Mr. Ewing, Bob tells me that they say some pretty raw things. Suppose one of them said the same things to Mrs. Ewing, how would you feel then?”

Ewing flushed.

“That’s different. Mrs. Ewing is a white woman.”

“But can’t you see that we feel towards our women just as you feel towards yours? If one of those fellows ever spoke to my sister, there’d be trouble, and the Lord knows I want to get along with all the people here I can. If this thing called democracy that I helped fight for is worth anything at all, it ought to mean that we colored people should be protected like anybody else.” (68)

Kenneth has embraced an ideology similar to that of white men. He, as a man, has the same right to protect and honor his women as Ewing has. However, Ewing has clearly pointed out to Kenneth that their women are different and therefore warrant different treatment. As a white woman, Mrs. Ewing is privileged over the young black women who are verbally accosted by the mob outside his store. It is her privilege that gives him

the right to protect her honor while Kenneth has no rights here. Yet it is this delineation of race and gender that clarifies Kenneth's wartime experience and brings it into the reality of race and democracy. Still, Kenneth remains unconvinced in the futility of dependence on whites in town for justice. His frustration comes from the class difference between him and Ewing. "Here I am," he soliloquized, "with the best education money can buy. And yet Roy Ewing, who hasn't been further than high school, tells me I'd better submit to all this without protest." (72) Determined not to allow his prosperity to become the target of poor whites he vows to work hard to "cultivate the goodwill of those men like Roy Ewing and Judge Stevenson who would stand by him if there was a need."

But Kenneth cannot escape the specter of racial violence and once again it comes to him in the form of a woman. One of his patients, Bud Ware, lies dying from a shotgun wound. He finds out that Bud, a Pullman porter, found a white man with his wife when he came home from work. He had warned the man to stay away, but this white man was the brother of the sheriff. He promised to report Bud's illegal dealing of liquor to his brother, the sheriff, if he made an issue of his visitations with his wife. Bud's dying words echo the ones Kenneth spoke to Ewing. "Doc, whyn't dese white fo'ks—leave our women alone?—I ain't nevah bothered none—of their women.—An' now—I's done got—killed jus' 'cause—I—I—" Bud was killed because he dared to place the protection of his wife's virtue on par with that of a white woman and therefore his role as a man on that of a white man. Kenneth again misreads the codified rules of social interaction of the races in the South. When he goes to file the death certificate, the clerk is annoyed at having to file the death of yet another black. He tells Kenneth "Ev'ry time I turn 'round,

some nigger's gittin' carved up or shot or somepin." (100) When he asks how Bud died, Kenneth replies that he was shot. But when he asks if he knew who shot him, Kenneth replies that it was George Parker. Kenneth is reminded by the clerk that "They's lots of niggers been lynched for less'n you said this mornin'." Bud may be insignificant as far as the "better" colored community is concerned; yet his death is symbolic of the struggle that all blacks in Central City are met with despite their class background. It is his death that leads Kenneth away from his notions of individuality and the fight for racial justice.

In *Rope and Faggot* White wrote of a similar incident that occurred in South Carolina in 1925. A sheriff and three deputies in Aiken went to arrest a black man, who was suspected of selling whiskey, 13 miles from town. When they reached the house, the man in question, Sam Lowman was away at the mill having his corn ground into meal. His 27-year-old daughter and her mother were at home and when they saw the white men (who were without uniforms or any insignias) quickly went inside the house. They surrounded the house. The sheriff struck the daughter in the mouth with his fist and when her mother went to her rescue she was shot through the heart by one of the deputies. A son and a nephew, ploughing a nearby field rushed in to rescue the women when they heard shouts and shots. In the shooting that followed, a sheriff was killed and the daughter, her brother and cousin were seriously wounded. The deputies swore that none of the Negroes was in a position to shoot the sheriff. His death was most likely caused by one of his own men.

White reports that since the sheriff and his deputies were members of the Ku Klux Klan, the trial of the three was "farcical." The two men were sentenced to death and the

young woman to life imprisonment. A black lawyer from Columbia successfully appealed the case to the Supreme Court of South Carolina. The lower court ruling was reversed, a new trial ordered. The evidence was so flimsy against the three and their case so strong that a judge was “forced, fearing a reversal” to grant a motion of not guilty for one of the defendants. However he was re-arrested on a minor charge and sent back to jail. The three were then “taken” from the jail one night to a tourist camp at the edge of town. In front of two thousand people they were told to run and when they turned to run a volley of bullets struck them down.<sup>38</sup> The futility of the law is demonstrated in both of these instances. But importantly, these incidents show how chivalric law is limited in its application to white women. Therefore the right of action is limited to white men.

Kenneth realizes that the black farmers in Central City are suffering at the hands of whites. They are being cheated and are tied to their circumstances by a form of slavery. They pay outrageous rents on their land and are constantly in debt to their landlords. White’s description of sharecropping as a form of legalized slavery is lifted from his own real life investigations of racial injustice. In 1919 White wrote an article published in *The Nation* titled “Massacring Whites in Arkansas.” In the article, White details how a false report was spread through the country that blacks in Phillips county Arkansas had organized to massacre whites. A group of black farmers, members of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, were charged “with having plotted insurrection, with ‘night riding,’ with the intention to take over the land of the

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<sup>38</sup> Walter White. *Rope and Faggot*. (1927, Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Co., 1992): 29-31.

white men after the owners had been massacred.”<sup>39</sup> In reality the farmer’s Union had been organized to legally protest the high rents and the expensive supplies which bound farmers to their landlords. But a “Committee of Seven” which was composed of whites held hearings to determine the facts in the case. Blacks were tortured if they did not speak as freely as the “Committee” wanted them to. Blacks arrested in the “murder” plot were then bought to trial and despite the fact that blacks outnumbered whites four to one in Phillips County at that time, they were tried by an all white jury. The trial lasted less than a couple of weeks and in that time a total of twelve men were sentenced to death and eighty others were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to twenty-one years.<sup>40</sup>

The Phillips County farmer’s union no doubt served as a model for Central City’s own farmer’s cooperative. It is Kenneth’s love interest Jane who suggests the cooperative as a solution to the exploitation of black farmers. Like the Farmer’s Cooperative in Phillips County, Kenneth imagines that Central City’s would be like fraternal organizations with the members paying monthly dues. These dues would go to employing lawyers to help defend blacks who could not get a fair settlement with a landlord. Other, wealthier members of the community would give money to help get the farmers out of debt and start a collective where they would buy supplies from a distributor other than their landlord. Still naive about the South and the death grip it has on race, Kenneth believes that even if the farmers could not win in local courts they could always take their case to the Supreme Court where he is sure they would win. Despite his

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<sup>39</sup> Walter White. “‘Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” *The Nation* (December 6, 1919): 715.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 716.

new found political awareness, he is unable to see just how subversive his plan is and how it could threaten long established seats of power:

Kenneth walked home with his head whirling with the project's possibilities. He saw a new day coming when a man in the South would no longer be exploited and robbed just because he was black. And when that came, lynching and everything else like it would go too. He felt already like Matthew and Andrew and Peter and the other disciples when they started out to bring the good news to the whole world. For wasn't he a latter-day disciple bringing a new solution and a new hope to his people? (145)

This plan of action brings a change to Kenneth. He can now identify with other blacks and the humiliation and violence that they endured at the hands of the racist South. Important to this change is Jane, who spurs Kenneth's passion for both racial uplift and love.

The fictional tale of labor without compensation that White's Tom Tracy tells in *Fire in the Flint* mirrors a real incident that White includes in *Rope and Faggot*. Henry Lowry of Nodena Arkansas had been in "virtual peonage" for more than two years by a white landowner. In 1920 on Christmas day Lowry demanded payment of the wages owed him. The landlord cursed at him and struck him. The landlord's son then shot him. Lowry then in self-defense drew his own gun and shot the landlord and his daughter who was standing beside him. He escaped to Texas where he was arrested. The two Arkansas officers who were sent to pick him up ignored the Governor's orders to bring him back by the shortest available route. He was taken instead by way of New Orleans and Mississippi. In Sardis, Mississippi a crowd obviously foretold of the route "overpowered" the officers and took Lowry who was later lynched. Lowry's lynching

was much publicized and newspapers spoke of his slow death in headlines such as “Kill Negro By Inches.”<sup>41</sup>

*In Fire in the Flint*, black manhood is linked to political action. But because the construction of manhood is also linked to a specific construction of womanhood, women are the impetus behind all political action. Black manhood is modeled very closely to white manhood. Just as white manhood is dependent upon the construction of white womanhood as a magnet for black male violence and therefore an opportunity for white men to defend her, black manhood in this text exists for the defense of black womanhood. In subverting the rape triangle, established hierarchies of race and gender become unfixed. When Jane lectures Kenneth to “Be proud of your race and quit whining and cringing!” she is giving him a charge to his manhood. (139) In standing up for his race Kenneth will reenact gender roles that built the white male hierarchy that he and Jane are fighting against. He is also finally able to articulate the true meaning of his role as a soldier during the war. He rouses a crowd by shouting “You husbands and sons and brothers were called on to fight for liberty and justice and democracy! Are you getting it?” Kenneth, who once depended upon the actions of individuals to counter racial injustice now calls upon a group to move in mass: “I call on you here tonight to join this movement which shall in time strike from our hands and feet the shackles which bind them, that we may move on as a race together to that greater freedom which we have long desired and which so long has been denied us! Only slaves and cowards whine and beg!” (“79)

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<sup>41</sup> White. *Rope and Faggot*, 23-24.

Yet, this stronghold is not ready to tumble. In a series of tragic actions, Kenneth is shown that despite his refusal to cringe and back away, black men would never be allowed to defend their women and therefore their manhood in the same way that white men did. In attempting to re-write the rape triangle with black men and women as the key players, White creates a tragedy multitudinous in dimension. The tragedy unfolds as Kenneth's brother Bob happily prepares for his journey to Cambridge, Massachusetts where he will enroll at Harvard. While cheerfully making plans about his future, he hears horrible sobs. It is his sister Mamie who is telling her mother about an attack she suffered at the hands of the same white men who verbally harassed her in front of Ewing's store. Telling her mother how she was followed and then grabbed, Mamie screams out "My God! Why didn't they kill me?" This echoes the sentiment of many lynching advocates who would often state how a white woman was better off dead than surviving a rape by a black man. Before Mamie or her mother sees him standing there, Bob is out the door with Kenneth's revolver. He finds the crowd in front of the store with one of them retelling the story of Mamie's rape. The crowd scatters leaving the two perpetrators who Bob shoots and kills. His actions mimic lynch mob psychology; he silences Mamie's rapists in order to keep her from telling the story again. The retelling of the awful tale in public would mirror the act itself. So to keep his sister from another "rape," Bob silences the rapist and therefore silences Mamie. Also very similarly to the lynch mob, Bob does not see the rape for what it really is. While hiding he wonders, "Whyn't they take one of those girls that live in those houses on Butler Street? That's always running around after men? Why'd they bother a nice girl like Mamie?" (235) In privileging Mamie's body over that of other women, Bob demonstrates ideals similar to

the mob. He misreads the rape as lustful rather than as an act of violence and an assertion of political power.

Bob escapes to a barn on the outskirts of town. However the mob quickly closes in on him. Bob shoots back at the mob. They set fire to the barn, but instead of allowing them the pleasure of lynching him, Bob uses his last bullet on himself. When the mob finally enters the barn they find Bob dead yet “his face was peaceful. On it was a sardonic smile as though he laughed in death at cheating the howling pack of the satisfaction of killing him.” (236) Yet the mob will not be denied its due. Bob’s body must still be dismembered in order to excise whatever power as a man he was thought to have. As Robin Wiegman writes:

In the lynch scenario the stereotypical fascination and abhorrence for blackness is literalized as a competition for masculinity and seminal power. In severing the black man’s penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus and thereby reclaiming through dismemberment, the black man’s (masculine) potential for citizenship.<sup>42</sup>

The mob drags Bob’s body behind a pick up truck into town where kerosene is poured upon his body. After the flames have eaten away the flesh, onlookers rush in to grab charred pieces of bone. Pieces of Bob are spread throughout the white populace and so he is erased. Although Kenneth believes “Bob had been a man! He fought and died like a man!” Bob’s act of heroism is empty. Mamie is still “ruined” and he is dead. A representation of the New Negro, in death, Bob signifies the end of optimism.

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<sup>42</sup> Robyn Wiegman. *American Anatomies*. (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1992): 90.

Bob's murder and Mamie's rape plummet Kenneth into a nightmare of rage and vengeance. His exploding political consciousness has a maddening effect on him. Yet he heeds his mother's pleas to stay quiet because she needs him to protect her and Mamie. However, it is another female body that brings Kenneth to his end. Prior to Bob's death he saved the Ewing's daughter Mary. In the midst of Kenneth's rage her condition worsens and her mother phones Kenneth to come and help her. He is torn; he cannot reconcile the black man and the physician. The black man wishes the girl dead, while the physician wants to save her life. Finally he goes to the Ewing's home yet during his examination of Mary he toys with the idea of allowing her to die and how that death would be the Ewing's fault since they perpetrate the racism that brought tragedy to his family. Through the death of their daughter they could taste the grief he feels at his sister's rape and his brother's death. It is Kenneth the physician who saves Mary. But he is the black man who is seen going into the Ewing's house. Since Mr. Ewing is out of town the local Klan is given the opportunity they have been waiting for. Kenneth is marked for death because of his organization of the farmer's union, and now as the brother of a black murderer. The Klan moves in for the kill. They fashion a story that fits the discourse of race and power between black and white men: Kenneth is having an affair with Mrs. Ewing while her husband is out of town. While Kenneth labors to save the Ewing's sick daughter, a white mob awaits outside to lynch Kenneth.

The greater tragedy is detailed at the end with a newspaper article detailing the lynching of "Doc" Harper:

ANOTHER NEGRO LYNCHED IN GEORGIA  
CENTRAL CITY, Ga., Sept 15.—"Doc" Harper, a negro, was lynched here to-night, charged with attempted criminal assault on a white woman, the wife

of a prominent citizen of this city. The husband was away from the city on business at the time, his wife and young daughter, who is seriously ill, being alone in the house. Harper evidently became frightened before accomplishing his purpose and was caught as he ran from the house. He is said to have confessed before being put to death by a mob that numbered five thousand. He was burned at the stake.

This is the second lynching in Central City this week. On Thursday morning Bob Harper, a brother of the negro lynched today, was killed by a posse after he had run amuck and killed two young white men. No reason could be found for the murder at the hands of the negro, as they had always borne excellent reputations in the community. It is thought the negro became temporarily insane.

In a telegram to the governor to-day, Sheriff Parker reported that all was quiet in the city and he had anticipated no further trouble. (300)

The newspaper item ends White's novel. How this article "reconstructs" the events of Kenneth's death is interesting and in keeping with the triangular nature of power between white and black men. Mrs. Ewing, the alleged victim, is silenced. As a white woman she is merely a representation of white American culture. She holds no power. She is of course anonymous and nowhere in the article is she quoted. Since her words alone could condemn (or in this case exonerate) she is denied that power. Mamie and her rape are erased from the "facts." The violence that was done on her body is displaced upon the body of the white women and therefore justifies the illegal act of violence the mob enacts on Kenneth. Although the main subject of the item, Kenneth is also denigrated. His medical training is merely parenthetical. This serves to regulate him to the lower classes of Negro but to also disprove any legitimate reason he may have to visit the home of a sick girl and her mother.

Kenneth's death signifies a closing down of a political movement. Although Kenneth and his brother are of a class which both Du Bois and Booker T. Washington would cite as the basis of black political and cultural power, they both die as a result of

archetypes put into action. Their education and economical clout should have protected them from violence. By presenting these two men of intelligence and means as victims, White is demonstrating the stranglehold that racism had on American society. Even embracing middle class values and adhering to strict Victorian notions of manhood would not defeat the specter of the black rapist. Nor would the wearing of a uniform and all that service to one's country represents. Kenneth and Bob Harper are not tragic men; they are men living in tragic circumstances.

Walter White's transformation in the face of danger into a politically aware black man mocks his novel. Bob Harper's consciousness only manages to get him killed, while his brother Kenneth makes a change too late. Within White's novel, the doctrines of Washington and Du Bois do little to save these two black men. The bleak, desolate end of *The Fire in the Flint* speaks to the end of a hopeful generation. The Harpers, who once held so much promise, are not going into modernity. The two brothers are dead and Mamie is "ruined." Their only legacy is one of sorrow. White cannot dialogue with DuBois and Washington. His novel makes plain that the debate over how black people will overcome bondage is futile when black men and women are objects of violence and that very violence is sanctioned. White demonstrates that just as the archetypes of black rapist and white victim are relentless, so is the violence summoned to meet the rapist.

As the country moved into the Great Depression, there would be more opportunity for tragedies similar to the *Fire in the Flint*. The competition between blacks and whites for jobs during the Depression would summon more white on black violence. In Chapter 3 I discuss the Scottsboro case in which nine black youths were accused of raping two white women aboard a freight train and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1949).

Both Wright's novel and the Scottsboro case demonstrate how fixed the roles of black rapist, white victim and white hero are within American culture. In these texts the black Victorian is gone. Poverty and crime are the basis of the construction of black masculinity. Within this construction of black masculinity, the white woman becomes hyper visible while the black woman takes a lesser role. The hope that fueled New Negro progress is, within these works replaced by the bleak, relentless horror of racism.

## Chapter IV

### **Native Sons and White Prostitutes: Black Manhood, White Womanhood in Scottsboro and Richard Wright's *Native Son***

The New Negro stood on the brink of major political and social reforms for Blacks during the 1920s. Embracing Victorian ideals of manhood, the New Negro believed that once and for all he could defuse the myth of the black rapist—the black man as a slave to his lower sexual desires. If this myth could be stricken from black as well as white consciousness, then the black desire for equality could finally be viewed for what it really was and not as an attack on white women. The desire for full enfranchisement had always been read by whites as a usurping of white male power. By presenting himself as a nonsexual, yet male entity, the New Negro believed that full citizenship was within his grasp.

But as Walter White so deftly demonstrated in *The Fire in the Flint*, black male autonomy was terrifying to the status quo. His protagonist, Kenneth Harper's political work threatened to destroy the structure of race relations in Central City. His plan to organize sharecroppers who were being exploited by white landlords was revolutionary. Interestingly enough this plan mirrored similar ones that communist organizers in the south put forth. White would later become a critic of the communist presence in the

south.<sup>1</sup> Yet within the novel, Kenneth Harper's desire to assist the black farm workers evolves from his own need to help "his own" and establish a role for himself in the black community. The black workers appear to be the only viable examples of black manhood in the novel. They endure while Harper's brother Bob is killed for defending his sister who is raped by a group of white men. Kenneth is also a victim of a lynch mob. Although Kenneth is the personification of Victorian masculine ideology, he too becomes a rapist when the white mob needs an excuse to murder him. The southern chivalric custom is not founded to protect all womanhood, but to insure that white men have the power to enact violence in the name of white womanhood. The black rapist is therefore created so that race relations will be sustained and white male power upheld.

There is no more stunning example of the ideology of the black male rapist/white female victim than the Scottsboro case in which nine African American youths were indicted for the rape of two white women. The case, which began in March of 1931, was America's longest running race and sex show of all time. It did not end until 1976 when Governor George Wallace of Alabama pardoned Clarence Norris, the last living "Scottsboro Boy." This forty-five year long tragedy is a narrative of the racist failings of the American legal system. It also details modes of power operating between white men, passive white female victims and the bestial black rapist.

The details of what happened between black men, white men and the two white women who were riding the rails in search of work have been greatly debated. The

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter White, "The Negro and the Communists," *Harper's* (December 1931): 62-72

consensus in the northern press and in recent scholarly works on Scottsboro is that nine youths were falsely accused of raping two white women while aboard a boxcar. The defense alleged that what actually happened was that a fight broke out on the train between white and black men over who was entitled to ride the train. In the ensuing battle, the white men, beaten by the black men, reported the fight to the telegrapher at the nearest rail station, who wired ahead to have the blacks taken from the train. When the train arrived at Paint Rock, Alabama, a sheriff and his band of deputies boarded the train and arrested nine of the remaining men. It was suspected that the black men who were actually involved in the fight had long left the train.

The presence of the white women quickly changed the direction of the Scottsboro narrative. This was no longer a story about black men ejecting white men from a train. It was reconstructed as the story of a rape. In creating the rape narrative racial archetypes would seamlessly fall into place. It was a “known” fact that black men raped white women. It was up to white men to exact vengeance upon black men who would commit this transgression. This was not treated as an act against individual women but against white society itself. Within the rape narrative two significant acts are accomplished: the white man becomes the avenging hero and the black man is denigrated as less than human—not deserving of full citizenship. In the reconstruction of the events on the train, the rape narrative upholds white male authority better than what actually happened: a group of white men struggled with black men over space and were violently ejected from that space. The bodies of the two women aboard the train mediated the beating that the white men took at the hands of the black men. In that way, the white men could be

avenged by a lynching or in the case of Scottsboro, by “justice” itself. For white southerners, worse than the rape of the two white women was the communist supported defense of the black youths.

For many and especially for southerners, communism meant rampant interracialism and miscegenation. This was not entirely a misconception: the party had large numbers of white female and black male members. However, the sexual connotation of the word derived from stereotyped visions of nineteenth century communal societies that fixed concepts of “free love” on communal living. Even more repugnant to the South was the belief that communists intended to make white women public property, available to all, regardless of race.<sup>2</sup> Under such a system, existing hierarchies of race and gender would fall or at the very least be seriously altered. Also, once again, equal rights for black men become associated with their possession of white women. As shown in *The Fire in the Flint*, even the *idea* of black political autonomy threatened established configurations of race that upheld a corrupt economic and political order. Thus, the ILD’s support of the Scottsboro nine was met with terror and rage on the part of white southerners.

The proletarian model of the new Negro did not aspire to middle class affectations of Victorian manhood. According to William Maxwell, *The Crusader*, a black communist journal, supported “wholly masculinized ideologies of redeemed

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<sup>2</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley. *Hammer and Hoe*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990):79.

blackness.”<sup>3</sup> This masculine ideal re-articulated the “rape triangle.” The manly image of the black and white workers bonded over the body of the white woman but as brothers not enemies. As with the “traditional” rape triangle, black women are negated and the white women have to be de-classed. The hyper masculinity of black men associated with communism still seemed dependent upon the presence of white women. Despite the party’s rhetoric of an end to race and class distinctions, these very differences become more pronounced and more dangerous.

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) demonstrates how the communist party, in seeking to abolish these racist views of black masculinity, is met with tragic results. For Wright’s Bigger Thomas, black masculinity is by its very definition criminal. The violence of racism is internalized by Bigger. His self-definition, up until he murders, is constructed by the hate, terror and alienation he feels as a black man. Although Bigger’s body is condemned to death for his murder of Mary Dalton, it is his soul that is saved by his friendship with Mary’s communist boyfriend, Jan. Still it is a dead white woman over whom these two men bond. Like Scottsboro’s Bates and Price, Mary Dalton is a white woman who steps out of her place. Yet also like these other women, her violent encounter with a black man places her back within the confines of white patriarchy. Within the myth of the black rapist, the white woman’s body serves to unite and strengthen a white male politic. *Native Son* and Scottsboro share a dialogue about the black rapist. When Jan, the communist, asks Bigger if he had read about the Scottsboro

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<sup>3</sup> William Maxwell. *New Negro, Old Left*. New York: Columbia University Press (199):33.

Boys, it is for Jan's own affirmation as a communist. "Don't you think we did a good job in helping to keep 'em from killing those boys?" He asks Bigger. Jan hopes that the Scottsboro Boys would link him to Bigger, in the same way the party believed that their association with the case would bring them greater notoriety in the black community. In this chapter I will examine how *Native Son's* Bigger and the saga of the Scottsboro Nine prove how the figure of the black rapist can be co-opted to fit a range of socio-political ideologies. White women and alternative constructions of white womanhood are essential to the power struggle between white and black men as well as their unification.

### **Girls in Men's Clothing**

For Ruby Bates and Victoria Price the false narrative of their rape at the hands of nine black men had a transforming effect on them and their place within the white community. Poor mill workers and alleged to be prostitutes; they were far from being representations of idealized white womanhood. With their overalls, bobbed hair and base demeanor, they appeared to reject all the proper female attributes of southern culture at the time. Their poverty should have had a de-gendering effect on them. Victoria Bynum has written that poverty de-feminizes white women much as race de-feminized black women. Still their class left no impression on the men who would defend them. Melvin Hutson, the prosecuting attorney alleged that whether "in overalls or pearls," a woman was protected by the law of Alabama.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carlton Beals. "The Scottsboro Puppet Show." *The Nation* (February 5, 1936):150.

The “law” that Hutson cites is a subjective one not entirely legal in its definition. This “law” is referred to in a letter to *The Nation* from John Gould Fletcher of Little Rock, Arkansas concerning the coverage of Scottsboro in northern publications: “We believe than under our system the great majority of the race are leading happy and contented lives. But our system, we admit, has one defect. If a white woman is prepared to swear that a Negro either raped her or attempted to rape her, we see to it that the Negro is executed.”<sup>5</sup> This “defect” is essential to the maintenance of white male hegemonic power, which is dependent upon specific definitions of race and gender. Robin Wiegman has argued that through the white woman, white men establish themselves as protectors of civilization. In doing so he maintained a position of superiority over white women and black men—keeping them both in the place he has assigned them. Therefore the myth of the black rapist serves to engineer race and gender hierarchies.<sup>6</sup> The Scottsboro Nine’s alleged act of rape becomes a representational act of violence against white civilization. The bodies of Bates and Price need not be chaste to deserve the protection of law; all they need be is white and female and their attackers black and male.

These archetypes of race and gender do not only emanate from the south. The northern press and the Communists who defended the Scottsboro nine also proved to be guided by these archetypes. Just as the prosecution chose to ignore the sexual histories of the two women, the defense, the communists and the northern press focused entirely

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<sup>5</sup> John Gould Fletcher, Letter. *The Nation* 137 (1933): 734.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Weigman. *American Anatomies*. (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1992):94.

upon the women's lack of sexual "purity" as a way to prove that they could not have been raped. An article in *The New Republic* alleges that the two women had been in the habit of living in the Negro quarters and that one of them had not long before been arrested for "hugging" a Negro on the street. The article goes on to mention that Victoria Price had been married twice and that both women dipped snuff. In keeping with all reports on the case it of course mentioned that the two women were wearing overalls at the time of the rape.<sup>7</sup> Their style of dress is repeated often in connection to their character. Not mentioned is that women who hop trains would find more comfort in wearing overalls than dresses. Dorothy Van Doren wrote that "the fact that they had been bumming a ride in men's clothes would perhaps indicate, even without the subsequent information about them that came to light, that they were at least somewhat casual in their dealings with young men."<sup>8</sup> There is no mention of the obvious: overalls are work clothes and the women were, just like the young men, riding the rails in search of work. Prostitutes would most likely have dressed more "feminine."

Leftists were quick to challenge the facts of Scottsboro based on Bates and Price's backgrounds. Nancy Cunard's treatment of the case in *The Negro Anthology* (1934) builds a case against rape by pressing the point that Bates and Price were not capable of being raped. She cites evidence against the women, especially Victoria Price (who did not recant her testimony) that she "had bad reputations." An affidavit signed by her

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<sup>7</sup> "The Freight Car Case." *The New Republic* (August 26, 1931): 38.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Van Doren. "Eight Who Must Not Die." *The Nation* (June 3, 1931): 608.

neighbors for the I.L.D. emphasized her drunkenness and “vulgar” language and most of all her frequent associations with “Negro boys.” According to Price’s neighbors, she often sold her favors to black men calling this event “Nigger’s day.” The judge’s ruling that this information was non-pertinent to the case especially disturbed Cunard.<sup>9</sup>

It is ironic that a Negrophile such as Cunard would find it offensive that two white women socialized with blacks. But even more ironic is that the northern leftists were, in their gathering of information on the moral conduct of Bates and Price had constructed and opposing ideal of morality out of “The Cult of True Womanhood.”<sup>10</sup> Langston Hughes summed it up: “Who ever heard of raping a prostitute?” The information gathered on Bates and Price had countless references to sex, public drunkenness and intimate relations with blacks. The message that the left wanted to send to the jury was that if something did happen between the women and the youths on the freight train, it had to be consensual. There was more “evidence” revealed in the leftist press that pointed to the “unrapability” of Bates and Price than to the actual innocence of the Scottsboro nine. The myth of the black man as rapist was obviously as rife in the north as in the south. This is accompanied by the notion that only white women—truly “pure” white women could be raped. So the defense’s only avenue was to construct Bates and Price as not white and therefore unable to be raped.

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy Cunard. “Scottsboro and Other Scottsboros, “ in *Negro: An Anthology*. Ed. Nancy Cunard (New York 1934): 253.

<sup>10</sup> See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860.” *American Quarterly* (Summer 1966): 150-174.

It was these very principals which lead to both the NAACP and the communists to ignore another rape case at the time of Scottsboro. In May of 1932, a twelve-year-old black girl from Birmingham was hired by a white man to perform domestic chores. When she arrived at his home, he forced her into a wooded area and raped her at knifepoint. Despite the fact that witnesses came forward the police did not arrest the man and the case never went to trial.<sup>11</sup> Historian Robin D.G. Kelley cites what he calls the “conspicuous silence it evoked” from both the NAACP and the CIC. He believes the indifference to the case could be partly attributed to that “age old double standard” that portrays black women as promiscuous while white women are “pure.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that the NAACP and the communists both ignored this case, yet lent their names to other rape cases which involved black men as the perpetrators, and white women as the victims, demonstrates how these archetypes are so deeply embedded in the American consciousness.

Throughout the Scottsboro proceedings the bodies of Bates and Price became hotly contested sites of racial and sexual ideologies. When at one trial, defense attorney Samuel Leibowitz announced that he would prove Victoria Price had been arrested often for adultery and lewdness, District Attorney Knight then cried out: “I don’t care how often you prove she was convicted as long as you can’t prove she had anything to do with

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<sup>11</sup> *Negro World* (May 14, 1932)

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, 85.

niggers.”<sup>13</sup> To prove that any white woman had consensual sex with a black man would be a serious threat to the myth of the black rapist and the hierarchies of race and gender that it supports. To make them sexually available to black men would undercut white male superiority since the white female body is representational of white civilization; the consensual interracial sex act therefore becomes an act of treason on the part of the white woman.

Still it is interesting how Bates and Price were “forgiven” their past transgressions. The court ruled out all evidence bearing upon the past conduct of Victoria Price—her jail convictions, her various marriages, her actual relations with Jack Tiller, a married man. Also ruled out was her profligacy with two different men on the two nights proceeding the supposed rape.<sup>14</sup> But these supposed anomalies point to the “system” that John Gould Fletcher wrote of. It is this system that had the state’s attorney, in his summation to the jury, wave Victoria Price’s cotton underwear over his head while shouting a defense of Alabama’s “pure womanhood.” In a later trial the cotton underwear had become a silk panty.<sup>15</sup> It does not matter whether the underwear belonged to Victoria Price or that they changed from cotton to silk. Just as the Scottsboro Nine’s alleged rape of Bares and Price was a representational act of insurgence against all white

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<sup>13</sup> John Henry Hammond, Jr. “The South Speaks.” *The Nation* (April 26, 1933): 466.

<sup>14</sup> Beals, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Carlton Beals. “The Scottsboro Interview.” *The Nation* (February 12, 1936): 179.

womanhood, the often displayed underwear (which was not presented as evidence, only as a prop) was also a representation of exposed and defiled white womanhood.

Rape was believed to be a natural expression of black masculinity. Since Reconstruction, when manhood and citizenship was to be extended to black men, black male agency took on sexual connotations. As Franz Fanon has stated, “The Negro is situated at the genital.” As a phallicized body the black male is unable to participate in the realm of the intellectual, where the discourse of citizenship takes place. Only thirteen years before Olin Montgomery, Clarence Norris, Heywood Patterson, Ozzie Powell, Willie Robertson, Charlie Weems, Eugene Williams, Roy and Andy Wright had the misfortune of being on the same train as Bates and Price, Winfield Collins published a book entitled *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South (In Which the Author Pleads that the South Be Made Safe for the White Race)*. Collins Text not only meshes with the narrative concocted by Bates and Price but it illustrates how black men are politically and socially disenfranchised:

Two of the Negro’s most prominent characteristics are the utter lack of chastity and complete ignorance of veracity. The Negro’s sexual laxity, considered so immoral or even criminal in the white man’s civilization, may have been all but a virtue in the habitat of his origin. Their nature developed in him intense sexual passions to offset his death rate (54).

Collins’ scientific racism, no matter how bizarre it may seem, addresses the construction of the black rapist as well as the justifiable disenfranchisement of blacks. Just as the Scottsboro youths alleged acts contained savagery unknown to white civilization, black sexuality is steeped in “the habitat of his origin.” Collins statement addresses the issue of citizenship since according to him and those who share his point of view, the Negro is

connected to Africa, the place of his origin, not at all to America. Collins constructs black men as ungovernable savages. His ignorance of veracity makes it impossible for him to participate in a democracy. This negates the idea of shared political rights between black and white men. The issue of citizenship within the context of Scottsboro is especially significant since the reason the train was stopped in the first place was that black men had challenged white men for an important space.

It is the function of this particular construction of black masculinity to set black manhood apart from that of white manhood. As a foreign entity black men are so different from white men that to engage in the rhetoric of social equality seems at most, ridiculous. This is evident in the following passage from the *Chattanooga News* that appeared the day before the Scottsboro trial began:

How much further apart are the nine men who perpetrated these frightful deeds and a normal kindhearted man who guards his little family and toils through the day, going home to loved ones at night with a song in his heart. How is it possible that in the vesture of man can exist souls like those nine, while others in the vesture of man can dream such beauty as Keats dreamed, or paint as did Raphael? <sup>16</sup>

At this time the NAACP struggled to place African-Americans within white culture. If blacks could be viewed as having the same values as whites then the achievement of equal rights could be facilitated. This was seen in the drive among some black leaders to have black men enlist in the efforts of World War I. But just as the black effort in the

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Edmund Wilson, "The Freight-Car Case." *The New Republic* (August 26, 1931):38-43.

war was diminished and nearly erased from the consciousness of white America, within this passage the Scottsboro youths are excised from participation in the western canon.

The southern press played into these common cultural mythologies of blackness, maleness and sex. One newspaper reported that the “details of the crime coming from the lips of the two girls, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, are too revolting to be printed.” Another newspaper reported that Bates and Price were “in a terrible condition mentally and physically after their unspeakable experience at the hands of the black brutes.”<sup>17</sup> But the white people of Scottsboro did not need newspapers to tell them about racial and sexual ideologies. Carlton Beals, in a report on Scottsboro he wrote for *The Nation*, tells a disturbing story about a jury venireman who approached him during a recess. The man had just sworn in court that he had no racial prejudice. He began to tell Beal the story of the origin of the “nigger races.” He said, “Cain, it seemed, after killing Abel, went off to the land of Nod where he ‘knew a woman.’ Now most folks don’t think things out. The Bible never says sexual intercourse, it jus’ says a man knows a woman. But the Bible tells that there couldn’t be no human folk at that time in the land of Nod. Now jus’ put two and two together. Cain had offspring in the land of Nod, so he had him a female baboon or chimpanzee or somethin’ like that. An that’s how the nigger race started.”<sup>18</sup> Within the venireman’s story, the Negro is constructed as the offspring of a murderer and

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<sup>17</sup> James Goodman. *Stories of Scottsboro*. (New York: Vintage): 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Carlton Beals. “The Scottsboro Puppet Show.” *The Nation* (February 5, 1936): 150.

a beast. This belief, that the Negro is not human, is the reason why the Scottsboro nine were convicted without any evidence except the word of two known prostitutes.

The belief that the Negro evolved from beasts is the reason why the Scottsboro Nine was convicted of rape without any evidence except the word of two known prostitutes. The physical evidence was scant. It was shown that Victoria Price had participated in sexual intercourse at some time previous to the doctor's examination. "Great amounts " of semen was found in the vagina of Ruby Bates but all the semen found was immobile. There were no tears or lacerations in the women's genital areas. Also the doctor did find some bruises on Victoria Price he reported to be "minor" and did not match her description of how she was handled roughly by her attackers. In fact one of the alleged rapists, Willie Robertson, had such an acute case of syphilis and gonorrhea that any intercourse would be, according to the testimony of a medical doctor, "attended with some pain."<sup>19</sup> But the tale of rape fashioned by Victoria Price (Ruby Bates' account was vague and without details) was full of racist ideology about black men, their bestial natures and the politics of social equality.

Victoria Price spoke in detail of how one of the nine had held her legs while another held a knife to her throat and at the same time yet another man removed her overalls and tore off her "step ins." One by one she pointed out the six who raped her. The attack lasted for hours. They would not let her up "between times" to even spit snuff. Whenever she begged them to quit their only response was to tell her that they

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<sup>19</sup> Weems vs. Alabama 287 US 45 Tr. P. 27.

would take her and Ruby north and “make us their women.”<sup>20</sup> For the South the North was the land of racial corruption. If the actual rape was not bad enough, the idea that the rapists would kidnap “their women” and take them to the land where interracial sex was legitimate was a horror of nightmarish proportions. Even before the Scottsboro trial the North and the South were still at war. The South saw their labor force leave home in the tens of thousands for better opportunities north. These opportunities were not only financial in nature, but also the supposed racial liberalism of the north became a great myth in southern culture. Blacks visiting the South from the North were looked upon with suspicion by southern whites because of their alleged ideas about integration, miscegenation and social equality. According to James Goodman, Price’s testimony described black men who “knew exactly what they were doing, who were driven by a force more frightening than instinct. The Negroes they described wanted more than sexual satisfaction. They wanted possession.”<sup>21</sup>

The black man as a beast was a presiding image throughout the trial. *The Nation* reported that Haywood Patterson, who received a sentence of seventy-five years in his fourth trial, was apparently chosen by the prosecution to be tried first because he had the “blackest skin, the wickedest gleam in his eyes, and the meanest expression on his face. He is what is known in the south as a ‘bad nigger.’ This means he is willful, self

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<sup>20</sup> Weems vs. Alabama US 45. Tr. P.27.

<sup>21</sup> James Goodman. *Stories of Scottsboro*. (New York: Vintage, 1995): 23.

assertive, independent, not properly servile.”<sup>22</sup> A powerful will and a strong character were necessary components of Victorian manhood.<sup>23</sup> Yet these attributes, so noble and perfect in white men, were seen as degenerate in black men. The “bad nigger” is dangerous because he is in possession of the attributes of manliness. However, these attributes on the black male body become translated into violence, uncontrolled sexuality and criminality.

### **The Bad Nigger**

Richard Wright’s famous introduction to his novel, *Native Son* (1940), called “How Bigger was Born,” discusses the various “types” of Bigger or Bad Niggers. The many Bigger that Wright describes differ in their motives and actions yet all could be read as political rebels because their “bad nigger” behavior is a direct result of and a rebellion against a racist political system. One Bigger he describes as distinctly southern. “Bigger Number 2” did not direct his anger against the system toward blacks but “toward the whites who ruled the south.” He would buy supplies on credit from them and live in their shacks but would refuse to pay them what he owed. This Bigger believed that “the white folks had everything and he had nothing.” (507) His rebellion follows a socialist doctrine by opting out of a system that had the poorest folk indebted to the richest. Not

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<sup>22</sup> Carlton Beals. “The Scottsboro Interview. *The Nation* (February 12, 1936): 179.

<sup>23</sup> John Higham. “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s.” in *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1978): 79.

only was Bigger's socialist ideology in direct conflict with a capitalist economy but it was in violation of Jim Crow laws as well. According to Wright:

The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of then south and got away with it, at least for a brief spell. Eventually, the whites that restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, lynched and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken. (509-510)

Physically, emotionally and intellectually the "Bad Nigger" departed from the racist politic. Racist whites viewed their departure from the norm as a violent act; therefore they reciprocated with more violence to bring the "Bad Nigger" back into obeisance. Even if Haywood Patterson's guilt for the rape of Victoria Price and Ruby Bates was negligible, with his dark skin and that gleam in his eye Patterson was most definitely guilty of being a "Bad Nigger."

In Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, like the Scottsboro Nine, is accused of a heinous crime against white womanhood. Bigger is also defended by communists. Unlike the Scottsboro Nine, Bigger's author lets the reader know he is guilty. Bigger's masculinity is constructed through his guilt. As innocent victims of southern justice, the Scottsboro Nine were de-gendered. The moniker "Scottsboro Boys" speaks to how they were infantilized and left without agency of their own. In order to be truly innocent, they must be devoid of any hint of masculinity. Wright attacks this notion of black innocence in his construction of Bigger as both sexualized and sexual. He moves through a world in which the violence of everyday living shapes him. In *Native Son*, Wright subverts the rape triangle and in doing so he clearly illustrates how rape becomes a word used to suppress black resistance.

Recent literary criticism has challenged *Native Son* in relation to its violence, mysogynism and racism. However, when the novel first appeared, it received mostly enthusiastically rave reviews. Martin Rugoff found it “difficult to write temperately of a book which abounds in such excitement, in so much that is harrowing, and in so profound an understanding of human frailty.”<sup>24</sup> Charles Poore expresses admiration for Wright’s “command of the technique and resources of the novel.”<sup>25</sup> Many reviewers compared him to literary masters. Margaret Marshall noted some defects in style but thought *Native Son* superior to *The Grapes of Wrath* in its “maturity of thought and feeling.”<sup>26</sup> In the introduction to the 1940 edition, Dorothy Canfield Fisher compared Wright to Dostoevsky and praised his “genuine literary skill.” The reviews from the black community were mixed. The negative reviews were concerned with Bigger being read as a representation of all black males. A black minister said, “had such a book been written when Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, we would have remained in slavery.”<sup>27</sup> Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas share the commonality of being a part of a literary history. The gentle, religious Uncle Tom, who worships Little Eva was, up until *Native Son*, the prevailing literary image of black masculinity. Bigger, as his antithesis,

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<sup>24</sup> Milton Rugoff. “A Feverish Dramatic Intensity.” *New York Herald Tribune Books* (March 30, 1940): 5.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Poore. “Books of the Times.” (March 1, 1940): 13.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Marshall. “Black Native Son.” *The Nation*, March 16, 1940): 368.

<sup>27</sup> “Rev. Austin Preaches on Wright’s *Native Son*.” *Chicago Defender* (June 15, 1940):9.

is as filled with hate as Tom was filled with love and forgiveness toward his tormentors. Both Stowe and Wright's novels were best sellers, thus propelling these archetypes of black masculinity into the public conscious.

The triangle that is created by the black rapist, white victim and avenging white male is one in which masculine power relations are mediated over the body of the white woman. This triangle is what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses in *Between Men English: Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Although Sedgwick is focusing her theories on late renaissance literature, much of her discussion clearly describes Bigger's relationship to white male authority. She writes: "The homosociality of this world is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination."<sup>28</sup> Bigger's interactions with white authority is constantly presented in terms of sexual violence with Bigger as the victim. He is made to feel discomforted, claustrophobic and physically assaulted. For Bigger--

...rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in deep hate in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (263)

Bigger's daily life is sexually charged by the violence that he both participates in and is a victim of. What is interesting here is how Wright subverts the rape. In the rape triangle

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<sup>28</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 66.

the rape of the white woman becomes representative of an assault on white culture.

Within Wright's text the assault is refigured in terms of racial oppression. When Bigger states that the white folks "don't let us do nothing," he is discussing how whites limit opportunity for black men. And whenever he thinks about it, Bigger says, "I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat." (20) Violence and sodomy are paired in order to vividly represent the awful subjugation of racial oppression. According to Robin Wiegman, this "marks the extremity of hatred and violence that ushers the black male into the patriarchal province of the masculine."<sup>29</sup>

Although Bigger is conscious of the oppression that the black masculine elicits from whites, he also participates in the same oppression. His cruelty and sadistic traits are figured as a part of his masculinity. When Bigger kills a rat in his family's apartment, he holds it out to his sister until she grows hysterical and faints. He attacks his friend Gus and makes him lick the blade of the knife that he is threatening him with. This makes Bigger's body "tingle with elation." (43) Constantly posturing for a space ahead of the pack, Bigger's cruelty serves to maintain his status as the alpha male. When he comes up against white male authority, however, he feels emasculated, somewhat feminized and therefore unable to truly compete. This heightens the violence and cruelty he disperses to his family and friends. Even his murders show the same division. Although Mary's death can be viewed as accidental, Bessie, his girlfriend's death is a fierce and brutal death. She is raped, beaten and hurled down an airshaft while she is still

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Wiegman. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 103.

alive. In this way white oppression can be viewed as constructing black on black violence through its relentless oppression.

The imagery of rape and violence is elevated when Bigger is hunted down and captured for the murder of Mary Dalton. The entire city of Chicago collapses around Bigger as a “cordon of five thousand police, augmented by more than three thousand volunteers” close in on Chicago’s Black Belt. Trapped on a roof, Bigger’s capture is framed in terms of a rape that demonstrates the power of white men over black: “Then the water hit him, in the side; it was like the blow of a pile driver. He gasped his mouth open. The water left him; he lay gasping, spent...The icy water clutched again at his body like a giant hand; the chill of it squeezed him like the circling coils of a monstrous boa constrictor.” (311) The fire hoses that are turned on Bigger are phallic images that act to stop him. Robin Wiegman has written how “Wright reveals the sexualization of masculine relations underlying the rape mythos: in capturing Bigger, the white men have extended their own phallic reach beyond the confines of their bodies, laying claim to their property and paternity rights not merely by demonstrating ownership of white women but by forcing the black male to submit to their masculine sexual supremacy.”<sup>30</sup>

As demonstrated by Scottsboro, white male supremacy is dependent on specific constructions of blackness. The “heinous and unspeakable crime” that the Scottsboro Nine committed “savored of the jungle, the way back dark ages of meanest African corruption.”<sup>31</sup> The black man as a beast, as a foreign entity whose savagery delineates

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<sup>30</sup> Wiegman, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Goodman, 15.

him as separate from white civilization is reiterated in *Native Son*. In a newspaper article that Bigger reads about himself, a “terrified young white girl” who watched as the unconscious Bigger is loaded upon a stretcher says “He looks like exactly like an ape!” The article goes on describe Bigger’s features as simian:” He is about five feet nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast. His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees.” (322-23) But what is worse yet is how Bigger himself has ingested this image of blackness: “Maybe they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal.” (317) Wright proves here that the ideology of the prevailing culture, no matter how wrong, slips into the consciousness of blacks. Bigger’s behavior is indicative of one who truly believes himself to be less than human.

The newspaper description is not merely a melodramatic instance of Wright’s imagination. While Wright was at work on *Native Son* a case paralleling Biggers was in the headlines of Chicago newspapers. Robert Nixon and Earl Hicks were arrested for beating a Mrs. Florence Johnson to death with a brick. *The Chicago Tribune* reported on May 27, 1938 that Mrs. Johnson “was beaten to death with a brick by a colored sex criminal.” The fact that there was no evidence that a rape had taken place did not stop the *Tribune* from running sensationalistic articles that played up the sexual nature of the attack. Because of his darker skin and impassivity, Nixon was the target for the *Tribune*’s attack:

That charm is a mark of civilization, and so far as manner and appearance go, civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and cat-like tread all suggest the animal.

He is very black—almost pure negro. His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species. . . . These killings were accomplished with a ferocity suggestive of Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue”—the work of a giant ape.<sup>32</sup>

The newspaper article that Bigger reads in Book Three appeared to be lifted from the Tribune article on Robert Nixon. In “How Bigger was Born” Wright admits that many of the newspaper articles as well as the events themselves are but fictionalized versions of the Nixon case. Yet again, the references to black men as apes and as being outside of “civilization” are a part of the public discourse on race. It is obvious that Scottsboro and the Nixon case are not isolated instances of this type of racist ideology. But these images are so much a part of the culture at the time that there was little protest to their veracity.

The sensational newspaper headlines that the Scottsboro case elicited share this portrayal of the black man as a beast. Because these descriptions fit with the dominant culture’s stereotypes of black sexuality and criminality, they sold papers. The day after the nine youths were taken from the train, the *Jackson County Sentinel* ran on its front page the following in bold print:

NINE NEGRO MEN RAPE TWO WHITE GIRLS

THREW WHITE BOYS FROM FREIGHT TRAIN AND HELD WHITE GIRLS  
PRISONER UNTIL CAPTURED BY POSSE

ALL NEGROES POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED BY GIRLS AND ONE WHITE  
BOY  
WHO WAS HELD PRISONER WITH PISTOLS AND KNIVES WHILE NINE  
BLACK FIENDS COMMITTED REVOLTING CRIME

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Lequavelle. “Brick Slayer is likened to Jungle Beast.” *Chicago Sunday Tribune* (June 5, 1938): 6.

The appropriation of the white women's bodies by the black men in the presence of white men was an attack on white manhood. Such an attack could have easily summoned the white people of Scottsboro to lynching (the presence of the Alabama National Guard did help in deterring criminal action against the youths). The portrayal of the youths, like that of Robert Nixon clearly showed a willful attack against the codified laws of racial and sexual interactions. One reporter, while listening to the girls tell their stories claimed to have heard the Negroes in their cells telling "nasty jokes...laughing, joking, joking, unafraid of consequences." He wrote that they were "beasts unfit to be called human."<sup>33</sup>

The darker and more bestial the black rapist, the more white and pure he 'makes' his victim. This was demonstrated again and again during the Scottsboro proceedings. When Samuel Leibowitz cross-examined Victoria Price he tore her character to shreds citing her long police record and her imprisonment on adultery and vagrancy charges. Even her blatant lying on the stand could not be challenged because of her newly won status as a "lady." Under examination by the prosecution, Price denied that she and Ruby Bates had spent the night at a hobo camp the night before the alleged rapes. She stated that she and Bates had stayed at a Chattanooga boarding house on Seventh Street run by Mrs. Callie Brochie. Leibowitz had investigated Seventh Street in Chattanooga. There wasn't anything resembling a boarding house the length of the street. Yet the name Callie Brochie seemed terribly familiar to him. He asked Price "Do you know Florian Slapppy?" She responded no. He asked if she knew a lawyer named Evans Chew. She also responded that she did not. When the prosecution came to the rescue of his witness

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<sup>33</sup> Goodman, 13.

by saying that Leibowitz was bringing in irrelevant matters, Leibowitz announced that Florian Slappey and Evans Chew were, like Callie Brochie, characters out of the *Saturday Evening Post* stories. Yet this elicited from the jury, noxious glares in Leibowitz direction. They believed that this man was calling a southern lay a liar.<sup>34</sup> Mary Dalton, Bigger's white victim, is also transformed by her death at the hands of a black man. She was known to have publicly embraced communism yet her murder still draws thousands of white men to search for her killer and avenge her death.

Mary's attraction to communist doctrine pushes at the boundaries that delineate white male hegemony. Before he goes to work for the Daltons, Bigger saw a newsreel that showed Mary romping on the beach with her Communist boyfriend, Jan while a voice over states: "Mary Dalton, daughter of Chicago's Henry Dalton 4605 Drexel Boulevard, shocks society by spurning the boys of La Salle Street and the Gold Coast and accepting the attentions of a well known radical while on her recent winter vacation in Florida..." (35) Mary is seen kissing Jan. Then Mary is reduced to a pair of legs running down the beach being chased by a pair of male legs. The fragmentalization of her body into parts demonstrates how Mary is divided; first owned by her father the capitalist and then possessed by Jan the communist. Mary is a symbol of her father's wealth while at the same time her sexual self is connected to communism. The newsreel's voice over taunts Bigger: "Don't you wish you were down here in Florida?" The inference is that Mary is accessible to him. As a white woman, representative of

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<sup>34</sup> Quentin Reynolds. *Courtroom: The Story of Samuel S. Leibowitz*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1950): 269.

money and power, her availability is mythic just as the common myth of a free market that can make anyone rich. Bigger embraces this myth for shortly after viewing the newsreel, he decides to work for the Daltons.

Bigger equates Mary's accessibility to his own economic and social mobility. He believes that the Dalton job will offer him a way out of poverty through their daughter. He remembers a "story of a Negro chauffeur who had married a rich white girl and the girls family had shipped the couple out of the country and had supplied them with money." (37) However when Bigger actually meets Mary, he is uncomfortable with her and therefore objectifies her in the same way the newsreel did. As he watches her through the rear view mirror of the car he notes that "she looked like a doll in a shop window; black eyes, white face, red lips." (71) For Bigger, the objectified Mary is safe. But the flesh and blood Mary is not at all like the other white women he had met "there was always a sense of coldness and reserve, they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar." (47) In front of her father, she asks him directly if he belonged to a union. Her directness makes Bigger panic. Since Mary does not stick to her place it makes it impossible for Bigger to know his.

Mary asks Bigger to pick up her boyfriend Jan and it is Jan who further forces Mary and therefore Bigger, beyond the limits of their "place." He forces Bigger to shake his hand and places Mary in the front seat between himself and Bigger. A crucial part of the Communist party's agenda during the 1920s to the 1930s was to encourage social relations between the races. Jan tells Bigger that after "the revolution" "There'll be no white and no black; there'll be no rich and no poor." (78) Yet the erasure of these

categories leaves Bigger feeling more oppressed. “He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin.” (76) Mary and Jan’s constant attention on Bigger pushes him to more violent thoughts. “Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up ... and with one final blow blot it out.” (80) Jan’s utopian view of a raceless, classless world means more discomfort for Bigger. Wright, a member of the communist party himself, demonstrates how the codified laws of racial interaction are so deeply embedded within Bigger. And more importantly, how blind the radical Jan is to this very fact. Sondra Guttman sees this scene as the precursor to Bigger’s murders. When Jan violates the physical separations between classes and races by putting Bigger in direct contact with Mary, Bigger is without a place. Simultaneously, he also feels the need to rise up and create a true place for himself. Bigger expresses this in his need to destroy or “blot out” others.<sup>35</sup>

Before Bigger literally “blots” out Mary, their brief intimacy serves to break down the distinctions of race and class that Jan attempts but fails during their evening out together. Drunk, Mary must be carried from the car into her home. Just as she followed Jan’s lead throughout the evening, she now follows Bigger’s. He kisses her and her body moves closer to him. He kisses her again and he “felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind. Her mouth was open and her breath came slow and deep.”

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<sup>35</sup> Sandra Guttman. “What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (2001): 176.

(97) Mary does not resist yet her closed eyes and semi-conscious state makes her consent ambiguous. Bigger's arousal here is problematic: "He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him creaked." (97) Bigger's "stiffening" occurs not as a result of his fondling of Mary but at the moment he is about to be exposed. This is indicative of Bigger's relationship with white authority, which is always described in sexual terms.

Mrs. Dalton's entrance into this taboo scene is a function of placing both Bigger and Mary back within their ascribed places. A figure who denotes power and wealth (the Dalton family money comes from her not Mr. Dalton), she enters the room as to put both Bigger and Mary in their place. Her entrance of course has tragic consequences. The act of putting Bigger and Mary in their places becomes a scene of violence. Mary is murdered because Bigger resists his "assigned" place. Mrs. Dalton's presence spurs him into violence that is framed in sexual terms.

Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face in it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight. (97)

Wright's description invokes rape. Bigger's orgiastic plunge into violence, marks his shift into his place as the black rapist. Ironically, Bigger's resistance is what constructs him as an integral part of white hegemony that could not exist without this specific construct of black male. The use of sexual imagery in this passage points to how sexualized racial difference is. Bigger and Mary's crossing of these specific lines of

difference is marked by violence but not necessary Bigger's violence alone. The threat Bigger perceives in Mrs. Dalton is what leads to Mary's death.

Mary's death can be viewed as a result of her rejection of her role as a symbol of white wealth and power. She violates the boundaries that keep black and white rich and poor apart. Her brief sexual tryst with Bigger had the potential to be in the fore of the revolution that Jan spoke of. Mary pays for this serious transgression with her life. Yet in death Mary's transgressions are dismissed. In court her mother testifies that an earring, removed from her ashes is a family heirloom passed down through several generations of her family. She states that she had passed it own to her daughter. In the end, Mary is returned to her rightful place as a symbol of white wealth. What remains of her is a piece of jewelry—hard, cold, remote, a perfect representation of the prevailing ideology of white ladyhood.

Due to the brutal nature of the murder of the two women, *Native Son* has often been read as misogynistic.<sup>36</sup> I believe that the senseless, cruel murders of Mary and Bessie are demonstrative of the equally senseless and cruel struggles between black and

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<sup>36</sup> The following critics are among the many who have weighed in on the nature of Wright's writing of female characters: Trudier Harris, "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters," in *New Essays on Native Son*, Ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* (Winter 1984): 139-45; Alan W. France, "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's *Native Son*," in *Bigger Thomas*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990):151-60; Maria K. Mootry. "Bitches, Whores, and Women Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright*, Eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984); Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995): 63-82.

white men. Also, their murders fully illustrate the different places that black and white women held in 1930s America. Bessie's murder and rape by Bigger is only of importance to the prosecution to prove that he raped and murdered Mary Dalton. In fact Bigger is not charged with the murder of Bessie. The court, in order to evidence the destructive nature of that masculinity, now uses Bessie's body, once used by Bigger to foster his masculinity. Wright, in his construction of the crimes against the two women, subverts typical stereotypes about the sexuality of black and white women. While Mary responds willingly to Bigger's advances, Bessie resists. Bigger kisses her and finds that her lips are cold. She is described as "still, unresisting, without response," pleading "Bigger ... Don't." Bessie's behavior is more like what Bigger has come to expect from white women where "there was always a certain coldness and reserve," than Mary with her drunkenness and accessibility. (67) Yet just as in death Mary is returned to her proper place and so is Bessie. On display in the courtroom, her body is accessible to all. While Mary is a piece of jewelry, Bessie is all grotesque flesh—a hyperbolic picture of fetid black female sexuality.

Mary Dalton's dead body serves to bring together Bigger and her boyfriend Jan. In a subversion of the rape triangle, Bigger and Jan bond over Mary's death. Despite the fact that Bigger had previously stated to the police Jan's involvement in Mary's murder Jan understands why Bigger, a black man would lie to save himself. Jan's offer of friendship alters Bigger's view of the world:

Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him: a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping

still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man had become a human being to him... (33 3)

Bigger's act of murder has become an act of creation in that it had made Bigger acknowledge humanity in himself and others. Through his bonding with Jan, he can recognize what love is and actually feel it. He cannot feel this love with Bessie or with his family or his friends. Through his friendship with Jan, Bigger becomes aware of a greater humanity—the type of brotherhood that the communist spoke of. In Bigger and Jan's recognition of their bond as brothers the rape triangle becomes subverted. In this version black men and white men become bonded to each other rather than to the emotional object that they have in common—the white woman. Bigger's last words to his lawyer Max—"Tell... Mister... Tell Jan hello..." are his acknowledgment that he and Jan are equals.

### **Man to Man?**

The man to man bonding between black and white workers that Wright speaks of at the novel's end is the closest *Native Son* gets to the American homosocial ideal. Bigger does learn of true friendship but it is too late. When Jan places Mary's body between himself and Bigger, he is offering up the last barrier to their brotherhood. Instead of being that which separates the men, Mary is what brings them together. Although this pairing of black man and white man is situated in antagonism, it is still violent. After all, it is Mary's *dead* body that brings them together. In the sanctity of brotherhood there lies a white female body. But in Langston Hughes' poem "An Open

Letter to the South,” black and white brotherhood exists out of itself without the historical baggage linked to the presence of a white woman:

For me, no more the great migration to the North.  
 Instead: Migration into force and power—  
 Tuskegee with a red flag on the tower!  
 On every lynching tree, a poster crying FREE  
 Because, O poor white workers,  
 You have linked your hands with me.

The masculine strength that Hughes describes here—the “force and power” that the black man moves into because his fellow white worker has joined forces with him are independent of the heterosexual ties to white women. There is an absence of women in Hughes’ poem. Instead of the female figure that provokes violence and a separation between the men there is only a mention of a “sister.” Hughes writes, “You are my sister—now—today!” Sister is a part of Hughes’ diffusing of the sexual antagonism between white and black men. But “An Open Letter to the South” is not about heterosexual relations but about the power that comes when men unite:

We did not know we were brothers.

Now we know!

Out of that brotherhood

Let power grow!

Hughes ends his poem with—

White Worker,  
 Here is my hand.

Today,

We're man to man.<sup>37</sup>

Hughes' claim of equality is without the presence of white women (or black women for that matter). The bond between men is direct and without the mediation of women. In this way the bond is without the violence and sex associated with the rape triangle.

Hughes' homosocial imagery in this poem is indicative of similar imagery in his other poems. However, in his writings about Scottsboro, Hughes carefully constructs a white womanhood that makes the brotherhood of white and black men stronger. In his play about Scottsboro—*Scottsboro Limited* (1931), he has two white women representing Bates and Price. Hughes' stage direction has them first appear in overalls with heavily powdered faces. Before they stand trial they remove "their overalls, displaying cheap loud dresses underneath, and powder their faces tittering."<sup>38</sup> Hughes shows that the women are not corrupted by the black youths but instead by the judicial system. Still they sell themselves. When Ruby Bates changed her testimony, the defense accused her of being bought by the "Reds." White female sexuality has no place in Hughes' brotherhood, or in the traditional rape triangle. Thus it is portrayed as perverse. This leaves space for white and black men to unite as brothers and not as foes.

This homosocial bond between black and white men is shown in *Native Son*. After Mary's murder and Bigger's arrest, Jan and Bigger form a bond that they could

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<sup>37</sup> Langston Hughes. "An Open Letter to the South." *New Masses* (August 5, 1941): 13.

<sup>38</sup> Langston Hughes. *Scottsboro Limited: A One-Act Play*. *New Masses* (November 1931): 19.

never have if Mary was alive. When Jan sees Bigger in jail he is not there to exact revenge or to defend Mary. He is in fact there to show his support for Bigger. This is the same ideal that Richard Wright speaks to when Jan tells Bigger:

“Though this thing hurt me I got something out of it...It made me see things that I knew, but had forgotten...It taught me that it is your right to hate me, Bigger I see now that you couldn't do anything else but that; it was all you had...I'm not trying to make up to you, Bigger. I didn't come here to feel sorry for you...I'm here because I'm trying to live up to this thing as I see it. And it isn't easy, Bigger. I—I loved that girl you killed. I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. I thought that if they could stand it, then I ought to.” (332)

In the character of Jan, Wright voices a sharp critique, not only of The Communist Party and its line on race, but on the relationships between white liberals and the blacks they desire to uplift. According to Ralph Ellison, Wright sought to “reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the whites Wright encountered in the Communist Party, Jan comes to understand the true nature of racism and the role it plays in black and white relations: “Bigger, I've never done anything against you and your people in my life. But I'm a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you.” (331) Constance Webb believes that Jan “examines himself and discovers his own prejudices, that he has been an unconscious bigot despite Communist principle.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ralph Ellison. “Review of *Native Son* by Richard Wright.” *New Masses* (August 5, 1941): 13.

<sup>40</sup> Constance Webb. *Richard Wright: A Biography*. (New York: Putnam): 101.

Wright's critique of race and Communism does not end at Jan's conversion.

When Max, the Communist who defends Bigger, delivers his now famous speech, Wright reveals how the party was unable to see blacks as more than the rhetoric that underwrote their political stance. Bigger becomes many black boys in Max's speech. Just as Buckley, the district attorney, along with the newspapers, sought to make Bigger stand for all black criminals, Max seeks to depersonalize Bigger and his victims as well. In doing such, Max takes all responsibility for his actions away from Bigger while at the same time Bigger has grown to take responsibility for his actions. Max describes Bigger's murders as "an impulse stemming from deep down. We are dealing here not with how man acts toward man, but with how a man acts when he feels that he must defend himself against, or adapt himself to, the total natural world in which he lives." (461) Therefore, according to Max, Bigger's actions do not necessary reflect any agency of his own. Murder is an off shoot of being a black boy, living in a racist society. While, this may not be wrong, Max's belief in this ideology prevents him from having the human interaction that Bigger desires at the end of his life.

Amy E. Carreiro reads Max's preoccupation with class, as Wright's personal frustration with Marxism: "Max believes that the destruction of class barriers will save the Biggers of the United states. Max concludes that African-Americans suffer primarily from economic discrimination, and therefore, removing class distinctions is essential to alleviating racial tensions."<sup>41</sup> Yet when Max takes all responsibility of his actions from

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<sup>41</sup> Amy E. Carreiro. "The Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: 'Negrotarians' in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *The Journal of Negro History* (Summer 1999): 253.

Bigger and blames America, he was, according to Dan McCall “filtering Bigger through the party’s vision.”<sup>42</sup>

Bigger’s view of his actions are different. Condemned to death, Bigger has come to full realization of himself. In the last conversation he has with Max he is able to articulate his life story. He talks of who he is and how he became who he is with clarity and a confidence that he had been without up until this point in the novel. He states: “But what I killed for I *am* !” Max is horrified. Wright has Max about to touch Bigger but he cannot. “‘No; no; no ...Bigger, not that...’ Max pleaded despairingly.” (501) Bigger’s assertion of an identity, especially one of a murderer, terrifies Max. It is at this point in the novel where a great divide erupts between Max and Bigger. He does not look at Bigger. Wright shows Bigger’s self-knowledge and spiritual growth as antithetical to Max, “who groped for his hat like a blind man.” (501) The tragedy of *Native Son* is that Bigger is left alone with his personal breakthrough and as an outlaw, cannot be a part of society. He is left alone, cut off from the potential that lies in a great social arena.

Bigger’s position of aloneness echoes Wright’s own experience with the Communist Party that he writes of at the end of *American Hunger (1944)*. He is not only separated from the Communist Party, but all political ideologies leave him cold. For Wright, writing is comparable to the self-knowledge that Bigger had come to possess all too late. Like Bigger, Wright also felt remote from others due to his new consciousness:

Writing had to be done in loneliness and Communism had declared war upon human loneliness. Alone, they said, a man was weak; united with others he was

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<sup>42</sup> Dan McCall. “The Bad Nigger.” In *Richard Wright’s Native Son: Modern Critical Interpretations*. ed. Harold Bloom (New York: 1988): 21.

strong. Therefore they habitually feared a man who stood alone. Communism spelt the unity of human life, and when a Communist, newly risen from his oppressed isolation and feeling strange and lonely because of it, saw another man seeking seclusion, he became afraid of him.<sup>43</sup>

Bigger's assertion about the murders terrifies Max, because Bigger is embracing his identity. He is not the generic black boy of Max's speech. He is not a part of a larger mass; he is only a black man, alone in his cell awaiting his death.

Many of the young men indicted in the Scottsboro case suffered years in prison and ruined lives because they too posed a threat to a community's idea about itself. After many trials and many lies, the white community of Scottsboro could not turn away from the images that Victoria Price placed in their minds about that train ride. Many of the young men were barely into their teens when they were imprisoned. Many spent a great part of their lives incarcerated. Andy Wright, nineteen years old when he was first arrested in Scottsboro, was released on parole in 1944. In and out of jail for parole violations, he moved to Albany, New York in 1950. In 1951 he was arrested for the alleged rape of a thirteen- year- old girl, but was found innocent of the charges in 1951. His brother Roy did not fare better in life. Thirteen when he was arrested for the rape of Price and Bates, he stabbed his wife to death and then committed suicide in 1959. Haywood Patterson, who was eighteen, when he was found on the train, had a life spent in and out of prison. After many paroles and parole violations, he finally escaped from

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Wright. *American Hunger*. 1944. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): 123.

prison in 1948. However, later that year, he was found guilty of killing a man and was sentenced to 15-20 years in the Michigan state prison. In 1952 he died of lung cancer.

The inhabitants of that train were the poorest, most politically insignificant portions of humanity that ever existed. Yet what happened to them in that space which forced black and white, male and female together held a captive audience for many years. The contested space on that freight train stands as a metaphor for the larger sphere of citizenship. During the Depression it was not unusual for young men and women to ride the rails from town to town in search of work. The freight trains were a free and convenient conduit to possible employment and economic enfranchisement. The battle between impoverished whites and blacks aboard that train was deeply symbolic of daily battles among the poor for survival. Yet this fight was also one that would carry significant consequences for the black men aboard that train. The fight mirrored one that had been going on between black and white men over political agency. The ejection of white men from that space by black men was, to many whites at the time, an appropriation of white male hegemonic power. For a short time in that small space, black men had won the long and hotly contested battle for manhood rights.

The scarecrow figure black rapist is crucial to the formation of racial and sexual categories that impact social and political institutions in the U.S.. He upholds notions of white supremacy, which contribute to the political and economical disenfranchisement of African Americans. More than a cultural icon, the rapist, as demonstrated in Scottsboro, can even cause communities to dismiss accepted ideals of class and gender. In *Native*

*Son*, Wright reveals the complexities of the relations of power between men and women and blacks and whites. These archetypes are not just the ravings of white southern racists but appear to haunt the consciousness of Americans regardless of political or geographical affiliations. Lee Jenkins wrote of race:

The whites do not react to the black as a person; they react to him rather as to a concept, to the psychohistorical value of what black has come to imply in their minds, which is primarily experienced as the principal of negativity, limitation and defilement ... One's identity by race, then, confers upon one a social, psychological, and psychohistorical value that transcends mere racial difference and projects a mythic antipathy.<sup>44</sup>

Although Jenkins was writing about one of the most racially and sexually conflicted characters of all time, Faulkner's Joe Christmas, this passage is applicable to a variety of texts as well as historical occurrences. Jenkins's view of blackness and what race difference has come to represent best describes the next chapter in which I discuss race as a nonbiological entity. The bodies of Bigger Thomas and The Scottsboro Nine are racially marked. But what if the physical markings of race are absent and yet the cultural, psychological elements of blackness are present? What happens when white bodies are read as black? Using William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) I will demonstrate how the power relations between "white" men become racialized. Here the black rapist is a non- biological entity. Yet this does not weaken his ability to construct the race and gender of those around him.

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<sup>44</sup> Lee Jenkins. *Faulkner and Black and White Relations: A Psychoanalytical Approach* (New York: Columbia University, 1981):61.

## Chapter V

### **Revisions of War, Manhood and Blackness: Gone With the Wind and Absalom, Absalom!**

In the early part of the twentieth century racial oppression thrived within a system that relied upon clearly delineated boundaries of gender, race and class. Scottsboro demonstrated how archetypes of race and gender were deeply entrenched in American culture. The myth of the black rapist hung over the Scottsboro trials obscuring the actual events with well-worn ideologies of race and gender. It was a fact that black men desired white women: any assertion of equal rights on the part of blacks pointed to this very “fact.” In taking possession of the space on the train—the one free conduit to work and better living conditions—the Scottsboro Nine were in effect taking possession of the two white women who happened to be aboard the train that day. This was the story that led the all white jury to convict eight of the nine defendants after a fiercely biased trial. When an appellate court reversed the verdicts, the state of Alabama initiated another prosecution that lasted five years in various state and federal courts. Despite evidence that demonstrated the innocence of the nine young men, in 1937 a final decision freed four men and sentenced the other five to lengthy prison terms. The last of the prisoners

To be paroled left an Alabama penitentiary in 1950. Although the Nine apprehended youths were believed not to be involved in the fight between blacks and whites which alerted the authorities, they paid a heavy price for the insurrection of other blacks and their temporary triumph over the battle for the train.

That space on the train stood as a metaphor for greater American society during the Depression. As the one free conveyance to better economic opportunities, the battle between black and white men mirrored a larger struggle for survival among the poor. The depression would take a greater toll on blacks—especially in the south. In 1933 the head of the Atlanta School of Social Work described the seriousness of the situation to NAACP chief executive Walter White: “White men have taken over such positions as elevator operators, tradesmen, teamsters, expressmen, bill posting, city sanitation wagon drivers ... stewards, cooks, waiters, bell hops in hotels, hospital attendants, mechanics at filling stations, delivery boys from drugstores, and not frequently such domestic service employment as chauffeurs, maids, all around domestics.”<sup>1</sup> This observation clearly demonstrates how blacks suffered under the economic crisis of the depression. But this also shows how the economic decline impacted ideas of what was racially acceptable. Jobs that were typically marked for “blacks” were now taken over by whites. This phenomenon struck at archetypes of race while, at the same time, kept to notions of political, social and economic inequity between blacks and whites.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Aptheker. *Toward Negro Freedom*. (New York: New Century, 1956): 97.

The Depression did affect the system that upheld white supremacy. With the economic crisis in full tilt, it was somewhat difficult to adhere to hierarchical constructions of race, class and gender. As Allen Tate wrote in 1930 regarding the Post-Reconstruction South “Social structure depends on economic structure.” Without a strong economic base, the social structure could be weakened, even collapse entirely. This would not necessarily mean an end to race or class prejudice or discrimination. But as white men were seen publicly working at jobs that were identified as black, what was considered white manhood would undergo a serious shift.

At the same time the 1930’s saw much nostalgia for the old plantation south. There was a revival of interest in the southern states and the neo-Confederate cause. Helen Taylor cites President Roosevelt’s identification of the South as the nation’s primary economic problem as one of the many causes for national attention to be focused on that region. “This attention”, she writes, “came from different sources, such as social scientists (especially in the new center for regional studies at the University of North Carolina); from the documents, statistics and photographs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA).” She also cites a crop of films with southern settings or themes that were produced in the 1930s—*The Little Rebel* (Butler, 1935), *Jezebel* (Tyler, 1938), *Hallelujah!* (Vidor, 1938) and *Showboat* (Whale, 1936).<sup>2</sup> Whereas Dieter Meindl believes that the economic crisis apparently aroused a desire to embrace the past. He also

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Taylor. “*Gone With the Wind: The Mammy of Them All*,” In the *Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*. Ed. Jean Radford and Kegan Paul. (New York: Routledge, 1986): 119.

argues that at the same time this avoidance of the present lead to a reaffirmation of national identity that embraced the past.<sup>3</sup> This past was specifically antebellum South where manhood and race were crucial to national identity. The Civil War and reconstruction were a perfect metaphor for the 1930s. The narratives of the Great Depression and the Civil War both tell of the collapse of an economically based, long established social order that supported specific ideals of race gender and class. Outsiders who hold no reverence for the system threaten civilization, ruled over by a wealthy white male politic, only the legal tender needed to participate. Despite the fact that these outsiders are for the most part biologically determined as white, they are still racialized. The invisibility of race in relation to Civilization becomes problematic not only within the narratives of the war and depression, but within American society as well.

Lothrop Stoddard, in his racist tract *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920) stated that “Civilization of itself means nothing. It is merely an effect, whose cause is the creative urge of superior germ -plasm. Civilization is the body; the race is the soul. Let the soul vanish, and the body moulders into the inanimate dust from which it came.”<sup>4</sup> In removing race from marking the body, Stoddard appears to contributing to a similar debate opened with *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In some states the court

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<sup>3</sup> Dieter Meindl. “A Reappraisal of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*.” *Mississippi Quarterly* (1981): 415.

<sup>4</sup> Lothrop Stoddard. *The Rising Tide of Color Against the White World Supremacy* (New York: Scribners, 1920): 300.

wrote, “any visible admixture of black blood stamps the person as belong to the colored race.” Yet Homer Plessy had no visible signs that he had a mixture of Negro in him.<sup>5</sup> For Stoddard, Homer Plessy need not be physically marked as black in order to be black. Walter Benn Michaels has an interesting reading of Stoddard’s definition of race and civilization: “Civilization, defined first as a mere effect of the body (germ plasm) here becomes the body it was only an effect of, and the body that was a “cause” becomes a soul.”<sup>6</sup> In this context race is literally the spiritual basis of civilization. So when the white bodies of men were engaged in the work of black men during the depression, they were still white, that is unless their souls had been “darkened.”

This philosophy fits neatly into two novels of the 1930s. William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. Both novels ask the question what makes one white or black? In Faulkner’s work, white manhood is interrogated. Thomas Sutpen, a poor white who aspires to be a wealthy planter, may be white, but he exhibits the behavior that the whites at the time would consider “black.” Savage and boorish, he upsets every social convention in his climb to achieve his desires. Sutpen infiltrates the planter class, using people as if they were objects to do so. He knows that a son and a wife back in Haiti may have a trace of black blood and that would

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<sup>5</sup> Plessy vs. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 540-52 (1896), reprinted in *The South Since Reconstruction*. ed. Thomas D. Clark (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973): 167.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benn Michaels. “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Literature and the Body*. ed. Elaine Scarry. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1988): 201.

hinder his climb up the socio-economic ladder. So he leaves them, only for the son to return as a prospective bridegroom for his daughter. Charles Bon, interestingly enough has all the qualities of whiteness that were valued at the time. Unlike his father he is educated, mannered and an officer in the Confederate Army. He is one of the most compassionate, reverent characters in the novel, yet when he is deemed black and rejected by his father, a string of tragedies are unleashed and Sutpen and more importantly his dream of a dynasty are destroyed.

Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* is not as subtle in its approach to race. There is no chance that any of the characters maybe constructed as black, yet their "souls" are in question. Like Thomas Sutpen, Scarlet O'Hara will stop at nothing to get what she wants. She is willing, like Sutpen, to violate every rule of social interaction, not caring how immoral or illegal it is. She is unlike her love interest, Rhett Butler, who works the margins without any allegiance to a cause or, at times, to a people. Scarlet eschews all the trappings of ladyhood. She is more like the twentieth century "New Woman" than a nineteenth century Southern Belle. Still Scarlet is an insider. Her mother was the highborn Ellen Robillard and that alone gives her entry into the old guard south. While Rhett Butler is from a noble background as well, he is kicked out of Charleston, and instead rejects all that represents the southern gentry.

Both Rhett Butler and Thomas Sutpen are refigured as "the black rapist" within their prospective texts. They are seen as a transgressive force threatening the foundations of white patriarchy in the same way the black rapist did. Unlike the mythic black rapist,

the threat imposed by Sutpen and Butler is real. They have invaded the seat of power reserved to those “bred” to it and have full access to that power. This chapter will confront race as a non-biological entity. Although Faulkner and Mitchell used the Civil War as the backdrop of their narratives, these stories are more about the 1930s and how the collapse of an economic based social order leaves the ruling class open to outdid “invaders,” than they are about the Civil War and Reconstruction. Within these texts whiteness and blackness becomes refigured in order to confront issues of white male dominance. Stoddard’s theory that race is not marked upon the body but the soul, gets an interesting twist with these two works. What if the soul and the body are distinct and separate? Can the soul be black and exist within the white body of civilization? If so, what impact does that have on the strict delineations of race and gender that American society was built upon?

### **How Black was Rhett Butler?**

In an article entitled “How Black was Rhett Butler,” Joel Williamson posits that Margaret Mitchell’s great leading man Rhett Butler was black. Not, of course biologically determined black but black within a social construction that met the specifications of the prevailing culture at that time. Using autobiographical information from Mitchell’s own background and coupled with a close reading of *Gone With The Wind*, Williamson forms a strong argument for Butler’s blackness. He marks the fact that Mitchell was born into “a social universe that was so obsessed with blackness, and yet she wrote a novel that seemed so totally white,” as one of the most striking paradoxes in

American literature.<sup>7</sup> There are number of black characters in *Gone With The Wind*.

Many of them play major roles, yet they are without any agency. They exist only out of their servitude and loyalty to the major white characters. In fact, slavery, the driving force behind the Civil War is given a mere cursory mention. The O'Haras keep the same slaves after the war as they had before. Dilcey, Pork, Mammy, Uncle Peter and Big Sam all remain in slavery despite the War's outcome. But more importantly, Mitchell's "social universe" was dependent upon a black rapist to order hierarchies of race and gender. In this sense Rhett Butler fills the role.

*Gone With The Wind* is a part of a tradition of the southern romance novel.

Thomas Nelson Paige 's novel *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* published in 1895 was considered "the finest southern version of the era."<sup>8</sup> In Paige's novel political power is held by Jonathan Leech, a northern carpetbagger. Leech's power derives from his ability to manipulate the black masses politically. He spurs them on to violence against white southerners. But a more significant character is that of the freedman, Moses. Lacking the cowardice of Leech he actively seeks to overturn the mores of southern society. He boasts, "I'm as good as any white man and I'm goin' to show 'em so." He plans to do this by marrying "a white 'ooman and meck white folks wait on me"

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Williamson. "How Black was Rhett Butler," in *The Evolution of Southern Culture* ed. Numan V. Bartley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988): 201.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore L. Gross. *Thomas Nelson Paige* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967): 79.

(291). Mitchell erases the black threat of Reconstruction from her novel. Yet Mitchell herself was well aware of this aspect of the Southern romance novel. She held Thomas Dixon, master of the race-baiting novel, in the highest esteem. When Dixon sent her a letter praising her work she wrote him an adoring letter back, thanking him for his complements and gushed: “I was practically raised on your books and love them very much.”<sup>9</sup>

The South of Mitchell’s formative years was rife with black rapists. Joel Williamson writes that Mitchell was 6 at the time of the Atlanta Riots in 1906. He states that the riots are evidence of the type of south she grew up in. During the summer of 1906 Atlanta newspapers stirred the white public’s fear and rage with trumped up stories of black men raping white women. Yet, according to Williamson, a decade after the riots “white southerners seemed to flee, almost pell-mell, not merely from the recognition of the image of the black beast rapist, but even from the memory of the image. It was as if they were determine to forget the waves of lynching that swept over the South in and after 1889 and the riots that came in and after 1898.” He cites the murder of Mary Phagan, a child, and how black suspects were passed over “almost compulsively” in favor of Leo Frank. Jewish, northern, educated, Frank was the perfect replacement for the black rapist and, like a black rapist, he was lynched.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Harwell, ed. *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind Letters, 1936-1849* (New York: Macmillian, 1976): 52.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson, 92-92.

*Gone With the Wind* does also, “almost compulsively” overlook blacks as the villainous rapist. But the novel, through its “darkening” of Rhett Butler reveals the racial and sexual anxiety that the black rapist represents. The terror evoked by blacks asserting their newfound rights by taking possession of the white woman is evident in Rhett and Scarlett’s courtship. In order to accommodate her “black” lover, Scarlet eschews anything that slightly resembles white ladyhood. After the war, during the chaos of Reconstruction Scarlett “acts like a man” by running her own business—this too, like the power mad Negroes of Dixon’s *The Clansman*, is an effrontery to white male hegemony. As Scarlet struggles away from whiteness, Rhett struggles towards it, for the sake of their daughter, preferring for her, the white privileged ladyhood that Scarlet has discarded.

Butler is the perfect of equivalent of the black rapist. He is an outsider who has no respect for the rules of southern gentility. Without a family “name” to validate him or a wife to make him legitimate, Butler’s rootlessness is similar to what was thought of young black men at the beginning of the twentieth century. Whites looked upon young black men as dangerous, sexually free and too absorbed in his own pursuit of pleasure to work.<sup>11</sup> Butler, like these imagined blacks appears to live on his own, with only his pleasure to guide him. But like the wild loose black male, Butler is not content to leave white civilization alone. Unwelcome and as Scarlet believes “unreceived,” Butler insists upon intruding on the whiteness (103). He is first seen at a party where he is the only man to speak out against war with the North, citing Southern weakness as the reason. As

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<sup>11</sup> Joel Williamson. *The Crucible of Race* (New York: Oxford, 1984): 201-203.

an outsider, Butler is not blinded by the romanticism that has the men predicting a Southern victory. He is also not wedded to southern pride or mores.

Butler is able to see through the affects of white southern culture. The only other man to speak out against the war is Mr. McRae, a dottering old man who “is a reminder of a cruder era, like Grandma Fontaine and her embarrassingly loud belches, an era everyone would like to forget.” Mr. McRae, in his “crudeness” dares to bring the reality of the war to the crowd. “You think it’s riding a pretty horse and having girls throw flowers at you and coming home a hero.” (09) McRae tells them of the disease and hunger that accompany war. A veteran of the Seminole War, he knows more than those present do. Though it is Butler who demonstrates for the crowd not only their lack of knowledge about the war, but also how their parochialism works against southern victory:

“The trouble with most of us southerners...is that we either don’t travel enough or we don’t profit by our travels. Now, of course all you gentlemen are well traveled. But what have you seen? Europe and New York and Philadelphia and, of course, the ladies have been to Saratoga...You’ve seen the hotels and the museums and the balls and the gambling houses. And you have come home believing that there’s no place like the South...I have seen many things that you all have not seen. The thousands of immigrants who’d be glad to fight for the Yankees for food and a few dollars, the factories, the foundries, the ship yards, the iron and coal mines—all the things we haven’t got. Why all we have is cotton and slaves and arrogance. They’d lick us in a month.” (110-11)

Butler cuts through all the southern notions of domination. Instead of depending upon self-generated abstractions to support the notion of southern superiority, he cuts to the reality of the south’s place in the rest of the world.

Butler does not participate in the war. He in fact uses the war to his own enrichment. He claims that he killed a black man because he insulted a white woman. Yet the Yankees actually jail him because they want his Confederate gold. But Butler is freed when he threatens to reveal the fact that during the war he bought contraband goods for confederate use from high officials in Washington. Although he emerges from jail very rich, the Atlanta elite does not respect him at all. Butler acts as a white man by answering the call to defend a lady's honor but it is his outsider status that eventually enables him to be free. The elite of Atlanta, still fixated on their mores and pride, cannot fathom Butler's act of treason. But Butler acts the role of the trickster—as Joel Williamson describes him similar to Ralph Ellison's Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, working 'the gray zone to make his fortune.'<sup>12</sup>

Butler's blackness is used to construct identities of white characters within the text. His dark good looks are attributes of most heroic leading men. However his darkness offsets Ashley Wilkes blond aristocratic features. Ashley and Rhett are the two extremes of masculinity that Scarlett traverses through the novel. Mitchell describes Ashley as "sunnyhaired full of dignity, so utterly different from Rhett." (834) It is not only skin coloring that sets the two men apart. "For Ashley was born of a line of men who used their leisure for thinking, not doing... He moved in an inner world that was more beautiful than Georgia and came back to reality with reluctance." (26) While Rhett

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<sup>12</sup> Joel Williamson. "How Black was Rhett Butler," in *The Evolution of Southern Culture* ed. Numan V. Bartley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988): 99.

Butler's inner world is full of schemes and self promotion, Ashley is a true aristocrat who cares nothing of the realities of the world. His privileged position within the planter society allows him the freedom to distance himself from the dreary ugliness of the real world. Yet the Civil War is one reality Ashley cannot shut out. It leaves him not only physically weakened but emotionally jarred as well. Post-war he tells Scarlet that; "My inner world was gone, invaded by people whose thoughts were not my thoughts, whose actions were as alien as a Hottentots." ("30) The use of Hottentot here to denote the status of Ashley's inner life is an interesting contrast to his pre-war inner life. It is the image of the exotic African who shakes Ashley out of his torpor into reality or rather, into the world that Rhett Butler lives. Butler needs no such jolt.

Ashley's African inhabited thoughts are also telling because for Scarlet he came to represent the white masculine ideal. Twelve Oaks, Ashley's family's home is a symbol of the old South. "Scarlet loved Twelve Oaks even more than Tara, for it had a stately beauty, a mellowed dignity that Gerald's house did not possess." (94) Her father Gerald, an Irish immigrant, does not possess the history, the breeding the whiteness that Ashley's family home does. It is the ruined Twelve Oaks, that Scarlet sees after Sherman had come through that inspires her famous vow—"As God is my witness, as God is my witness, the Yankees aren't going to lick me. I'm going to live through this, and when it's over, I'm never going to be hungry again." (428) Although the wreck of Twelve Oaks inspires her to heights of financial success, she later realizes that Ashley, and the culture of the old south are a myth:

“He never really existed at all, except in my imagination,” she thought wearily. “I loved something I made up, something that’s just as dead as Melly is. I made a pretty suit of clothes and fell in love with it. And when Ashley came riding along, so handsome, so different, I put that suit on him and made him wear it whether it fitted him or not. And I wouldn’t see what he really was. I kept on loving the pretty clothes—and not him at all.” (1016)

Scarlett confronts her fantasy right at the time Ashley is at last to become hers. She has made Melanie a deathbed promise that she will divorce Rhett and marry Ashley. But the effete Ashley belongs to another time and Scarlet fears that he will simply be another child for her to care for.

Unlike a proper Victorian gentleman, Rhett is often seen by Scarlet as without emotional control. It is in these states of rage and sexual agitation that Butler is racialized. Scarlet describes him as being “black with anger.” (944) After Bonnie dies his bottomless grief creates the “swarthy sodden stranger disintegrating before her eyes (1004). Unlike Ashley with his pale, aloof coolness, Rhett’s dark emotional states entice Scarlet. These states best demonstrate the prevailing culture’s ideas of black sexuality, its violence and the lack of self control associated with it. The infamous rape scene between Rhett and Scarlett makes it clear that Rhett is acting as the black rapist. Scarlett flees him, as if “demons were upon her.” Butler is described as “running lightly as an Indian.” He catches her and after “crushing” her in his arms—

Up the stairs, he went in the utter darkness, up up, and she was wild with fear. He was a mad stranger and this was a black darkness she did not know, darker than death. He was like death, carrying her away in arms that hurt. She screamed, stifled against him and he stopped suddenly on the landing and, turning her swiftly in his arms, bent over her and

kissed her with a savagery and a completeness that wiped everything from her mind but the dark into which she was sinking and the lips on hers. He was shaking, as though he stood in a strong wind, and his lips, traveling from her mouth downward to where the wrapper fell from her body, fell on her soft flesh. He was muttering things she did not hear; his lips were evoking feelings never felt before. She was darkness and he was darkness and there had never been anything before this time, only darkness and his lips upon her. She tried to speak and his mouth was over hers again. Suddenly she had a wild thrill such as she had never known; joy, fear, madness, excitement, surrender to arms that were too strong, lips too bruising, fate that moved too fast. For the first time in her life she had met someone, something stronger than she, someone she could neither bully nor break, someone who was bullying and braking her. Somehow, her arms were around his neck and her lips trembling beneath his and they were going up, up into the darkness again, a darkness that was soft and swirling and all enveloping.” (939-940)

Scarlett’s rape brings her into a dark world of sexuality that in the end she embraces as she embraces Rhett’s neck. The morning after leaves Scarlett full of wonder at how much his actions prove that Rhett loves her. At the same moment she is aware of her love for him, she summons up a pre-War scene of racial violence. She had once thought of trapping him into loving her “so she could hold the whip over his insolent black head.” In Scarlett’s scenario she is the haughty white mistress while Butler plays the role of the insolent black slave. This loaded image displays how, for Scarlett, issues of power are so intertwined with racial ideology that she cannot separate her lover’s submission to her love from the submission required of black slaves. Many critics have read this scene as a representation of Reconstruction fear of black on white rape. I agree but I also believe it to demonstrate the fear of the corrupting power of the black phallus. Mitchell referred to

Scarlett as a "far from admirable woman."<sup>13</sup> However, Scarlett was the perfect heroine for the Depression era. Self sufficient and strong, she does more than merely survive by going outside of what was expected of a woman. She works. Mitchell's remark speaks to the rape scene and how the corrupted Scarlett, lies in bed, the morning after, relishing her passionate journey into the "darkness." Despite all the scandal Scarlett makes for herself in the novel, it is here in this rape scene, where she embraces and allows the darkness to envelop her, where she has her greatest fall. Yet in an earlier scene when Scarlett is nearly raped while going to her lumber mills the attack has little in common with Butler's. In fact Mitchell erases race from Scarlett's attack.

While Scarlet is returning home from her mill she comes upon a white man in the road. He asks her for money. When she refuses he grabs the horse's bridle and calls to a black man to "Grab her!" He adds "She's probably got her money in her bosom!" Scarlett fights the Negro "clawing at his face," and when she "felt his big hand at her throat and with a ripping noise her basque was torn open from neck to waist." Scarlett is gripped by terror when "the black hand fumbled between her breasts." She is saved from her attackers by one of Tara's former slaves, Big Sam. The white man, who orders the Negro to grab her, orchestrates the attack on Scarlett. These men are inhabitants of "Shantytown," the home of "outcast Negroes, black prostates and a scattering of poor whites of the lowest order." (777-778) Class, not race, is vital in the role of this attack.

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<sup>13</sup> Harwell, 53.

Scarlett's reaction to this attack also underscores race. She cries but not because of shame or sadness. She cries tears of rage because of her husband's seemingly indifference to her—"She wanted comforting, indignation, threats of vengeance. She would even have preferred him storming at her, saying that this was just what he warned her would happen—anything rather than have him take it all so casually and treat her danger as a matter of a small moment." (790) Earlier in the novel there is a rape of a white woman by a black man. Before he could be brought to trial the jail had been raided and he had been "quietly" hanged. According to Mitchell the Klan had acted to "save the as yet unnamed victim from having to testify in open court. Rather than have her appear and advertise her shame, her father and her brother would have shot her, so lynching the Negro seemed a sensible solution for the townspeople, in fact the only decent solution possible." (745) But Scarlett is impervious to shame and only looks at this attack as a way to elicit attention from her husband. In contrast, her rape by Rhett leaves her feeling "she should be ashamed, should shrink from the very memory of the hot swirling darkness! A lady, a real lady, could never hold up her head after such a night." (940)

Like the mythic black rapist whose attack on white womanhood is an act of possession, Rhett Butler's rape of Scarlett is an effort to take her away from Ashley. The attack at Shantytown was not one of possession. Nor was it one in which the perpetrators wished to usurp white male power. All of the darkness that is associated with Rhett's rape is gone from this scene. There is the disembodied "black hand." But it is without the force and agency of Rhett's "large brown hands" that could tear her to pieces. Furious

over Scarlett's infatuation with Ashley, he threatens to "put my hands, so, on each side of your head and I'll smash your skull between them like a walnut and that will block him (Ashley) out." (937) There is no comparison with the black hand that fumbles inside her blouse to the large skull crushing brown ones of Butlers. Like Thomas Nelson Paige's black rapist, Moses, who springs at his victim "like a wild best" (173), Scarlet describes the enraged Butler as a "drunken beast" (937).

After the birth of their daughter, Bonnie, Butler struggles against his "blackness." Unlike Scarlett's Irish immigrant father, Gerald and Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!*, who marry ladies in order to be accepted as gentlemen, Butler attains this status through his daughter. Scarlett despises maternity. She has little to do with her three children so this leaves space for Butler to take on the role of mother to Bonnie. But his mothering has more to do with status and rank than just nurturing alone. As an outsider Butler is well aware of the class distinctions and their importance. Since the War's end, Scarlett had been interesting in only making money and socializing with those who could further her business. She has given up her own social status in order to cultivate the favors of Yankee carpetbaggers. Scarlett has pushed aside the old guard of Atlanta, broke and somewhat shabby since the war, for, as Butler tells her the company of "Irishmen on the make, Yankees, white trash, Carpetbag parvenus" (902). These are not the people he wants his daughter associated with. His concern is with his daughter's future—which social circles she will be received in and who she will marry.

Unlike Scarlett Butler is willing to make sacrifices to insure his daughter's future. Butler, who like Scarlett, had up to this point been a self-seeker who ignored all the traditions of the South. In remaking himself into a white gentleman, he is more aware of what he must do to belong than his wife is—

“I'm going to cultivate every female dragon of the Old Guard in this town, especially Mrs. Merriwether, Mrs. Elsing, Mrs. Whiting and Mrs. Meade. If I have to crawl on my belly to every fat old cat who hates me, I'll do it. I'll be meek under their coldness and repentant of my evil ways. I'll contribute to their damned charities and I'll go to their damned churches. I'll admit and brag about my services to the Confederacy and if worst comes to worst, I'll join their damned Klan—though a merciful God could hardly lay so heavy a penance on my shoulders as that.” (903)

It is interesting that the Klan, which stood for upholding the safety of white ladies is where Butler must go in order to insure that his daughter be received as a white lady. Butler is willing to erase all blackness, all otherness from his public self in order to pass, to belong to a social group he has, before the birth of his daughter, held in contempt.

Except for his embrace of the Klan, Butler's highly public performance of whiteness is not typically masculine but maternal in nature. He is seen through town with his daughter. He solicits advice on child-rearing from the old guard ladies. This in turn sullies Scarlett's reputation as a mother while Butler's image soars. Yet Butler's whiteness is a direct result of his maternal actions. When he seeks advice about curing Bonnie's thumb sucking from Mrs. Merriwether, the last of the old guard to take his side, she curtly replies that “Scarlet ought to know ...She's had two other children.” He does not respond to her comment but continues to implore her for a cure. Later “She hated to admit to Mrs. Elsing that she had misjudged the man but she was an honest person and

she said there had to be something good about a man who loved his child. What a pity Scarlett took no interest in so pretty a creature as Bonnie! There was something pathetic about a man trying to raise a little girl all by himself! Rhett knew very well the pathos of the spectacle, and if it blackened Scarlett's reputation he did not care" (910). Butler's performance of white maternity may "blacken" Scarlett, but it may also win a place in the old guard for Bonnie.

Butler becomes obsessed with his daughter. He gives into her every desire no matter how outlandish. He refuses to discipline her and instead indulges her tantrums creating a very spoiled child. Bonnie has even taken Scarlett's place in her father's bedroom. She is terrified of the dark only Butler can trust himself to keep a lamp burning through the night. If the lamp were to go out, it is also only Butler who can comfort her. When it comes to what is and what is not proper for little girls, Mammy is the only voice of reason. He will only listen to Mammy when it comes to what is and what is not proper for little girls. Although black, "pure African," she was well acquainted with European standards having been "raised in the bedroom of Solange Robillard, Ellen O'Hara's mother, a dainty, cold, high nosed Frenchwoman, who spared neither her children nor her servants their just punishment for any infringement of decorum." (23) Through this connection, Mammy is made the arbiter of socially accepted behavior. It is Mammy, ever concerned about propriety, who points out to Butler how improper it is for Bonnie to ride astraddle his horse with her skirts riding up. Ever the dutiful father, Butler buys his

daughter a pony and a lovely sidesaddle to match. The pony proves tragic for the Butlers: Bonnie dies from a fall after jumping the pony.

With Bonnie's death, Butler's fixation on the child reaches new heights of pathology. He turns mad with grief, not allowing the girl's body to be buried and instead insists that it be taken to his room. He reveals that his obsession with Bonnie was in fact a desire for the times before the war. She replaced Scarlett as a receptacle of all the love he had for her. "But", he adds, "she wasn't like you—she loved me. It was a blessing that I could take the love you didn't want and give it to her ... When she went she took everything." (1031) Bonnie, unlike Scarlett, was untainted by the war and Reconstruction. War and poverty "ruined" Scarlett making her forget her true social class. Also, Bonnie represents the possibility of the old ways re-emerging. When Butler says that her death "took everything" it means that gentile world built upon firmly established ideals of race, class and gender. It was a world where Rhett Butler wished to live in again—as a white man.

Just as Bonnie's life impacted Butler, so does her death. It is her death that causes him to leave Scarlett. Despite his past unpredictable and often contumacious behavior, Butler comes to accept the fact that he is a true white southern gentleman at heart. Helen Taylor writes that "His last words on leaving Scarlett are legendary; but when he says he doesn't 'give a damn' what happens to her, he is rejecting more than one woman. For the reformed rake also tells her he is leaving Atlanta because it is 'too raw ... too new'—terms associated throughout the text with both Scarlett and that new cosmopolitan city

buoyed by Yankee capital and new immigration. New South and New Woman are equally repugnant.”<sup>14</sup>

Butler wrongly suspects that Scarlett is still infatuated with Ashley Wilkes, the paragon of whiteness. Unknown to Butler, Scarlett has seen her fixation on Ashley as “only a childish fancy, no more important really than her spoiled desire for the aquamarine earbobs she had coaxed out of Gerald” (1016). When Butler misreads Scarlett’s infatuation with Wilkes, it comes out of his own feelings of inadequacy. Butler knows that he will never be as white as Ashley will. Yet, when he tells Scarlet that what he desires now is “the utter boredom of respectability...the calm dignity life can have when it’s lived by gentle folks, the genial grace of days that are gone,” Scarlet is transported by Butler’s words “back in the windy orchard of Tara and there was the same look in Rhett’s eyes that had been in Ashley’s eyes that day. Ashley’s words were as clear in her ears as though he and not Rhett were speaking.” Right before Scarlett’s eyes Butler becomes a white gentleman, a mirror image of Ashley Wilkes. When she repeats Ashley’s exact words, Butler, surprised, asks her what she said before that had been exactly what he had been thinking. When she tells him that it reminded her of something Ashley said about the old days “the light went out of his eyes. ‘Always Ashley,’ he said and was silent for a moment.” (1034-1035) Refusing to see what Scarlett sees in himself, he returns to Charleston, to make up to his family and stay on the path of whiteness, never to bring the dark to Scarlett or any woman again.

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, 123.

Rhett Butler does not exist out of the same duality that Scarlett O'Hara does.

It is the fall of Atlanta that opens up for Scarlett a world that she feels more at home in than the one of Tara and strict social conventions. Scarlett can at once be in love with Ashley Wilkes, a paragon of aristocracy and the old world and rebel against the constraints of that world, whereas Butler can only play the outsider and when it suits his purpose, he can join in the social order. Scarlett believes that only money can make one a lady or a gentleman. Her view is best demonstrated when she attends a dance at the end of the war. The ladies and gentlemen of Atlanta put on the same airs, the same manners pre-war are in place. Despite their poverty, they “remained ladies and gentlemen, royalty in exile—bitter, aloof, incurious, kind to one another, diamond hard, as bright and as brittle as the crystals of the broken chandelier over their heads.” They are so unlike Scarlett who “knew she would never feel like a lady again until her table was weighted with silver and crystal and smoking with rich food...until black hands not white hands took the cotton from Tara” (608-609). For Butler, these are the accouterments of wealth that he has always had access to. It is the ability to live in exile and yet still know who you are that evades him up until the end of the novel. What makes Butler such a transgressive force is the fact that he penetrated the white upper class as an outsider. It his behavior, looks and connections to such a racially exotic places as New Orleans and the Caribbean are what served to darken him. Yet when he chooses to embrace the role of the white gentleman he is welcomed back in. By having him return to the folds of whiteness at the end of the novel, Mitchell leaves Butler unpunished for

his racial role-playing. Unlike Scarlett who sees whiteness as an economic attainment, for Butler is it a matter of embracing the past and going home.

William Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen, however is more like Scarlett than like Butler. Both do not care for southern tradition. They care only for what that tradition can do for them. Thomas Sutpen fights in the Civil War only to protect his investment. Like Scarlett he is not interested in overthrowing the Yankee government. Both need a government in place – any government so that they can keep their property and investments safe. However, Sutpen resembles Butler in that he plays the role of the black rapist. He and Butler, see -saw between constructions of the white masculine and the black masculine. Both men find the old guard southern hierarchy valid only as far as it serves them personally. For Butler it was first a gesture to make sure that his daughter's future would be one full of gentility and all that a southern lady is entitled to. At the novel's close, whiteness means a comfort and stability that he had turned away from in his youth, but now at the age of 45, he wishes for nothing else

#### **“Ambushed in Words”**

In a *New York Times Book Review* of *Absalom, Absalom!* In 1936, Harold Strauss complained of the complexity of Faulkner's prose. He believed that the novel was “a basically simple story,” which Faulkner unnecessarily bogged down by getting “inside the mind of a man called Quentin Compson, who went to Harvard in 1910 and who by accident was impelled slowly to piece the old story together.” Strauss' complaints of the novel being “uncommunicative,” full of “obscurity” and “page long sentences” misses

the point of the story and how such a story needs to be told. Quite simplistically Strauss further notes: "Now that, since "Pylon" and his Hollywood residence, he has abandoned his more shocking themes, he is compelled to distinguish himself from the generality of authors by employing one of the most complex, unreadable and uncommunicative prose styles ever to find its way into print." For all of this "Mr. Faulkner is ambushed in words."<sup>15</sup> Although Mr. Strauss was comparing *Absalom, Absalom!* With prior novels like *Sanctuary* (1931) in which an Ol' Miss debutante is raped by the criminal Popeye who used a corn husk for his deed. Even in his myopic view of the novel the shocking events cannot be ignored. *Absalom, Absalom!* Is about a man who sets out to become a wealthy planter and systematically acquires the people and the land he needs to do so. In the process of ruthlessly pursuing his "design," he fathers a son with a woman who has a small amount of "African blood" and when he realizes that it is the bit of African blood that may hinder his plans, he leaves the wife for a wife who has the perfect background to suit his "design." But his design does nothing but start a string of tragedies, one of them being the murder of one of his sons at the hand of another son. *Absalom, Absalom!* confronts race in ways that might be lost on even the most sophisticated reader in 1936. Unlike *Gone With the Wind*, there is no simple black and white reading of the text. Mr. Faulkner is not ambushed in words, but his text is an ambush of twentieth century ideology of race and manliness.

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<sup>15</sup> Harold Strauss. "Mr. Faulkner is Ambushed in Words," *The New York Times Book Review* 1 November 1936:7

Thomas Sutpen is an amalgamation of socially induced stigmas of gender race and class. A poor mountain white, he is made aware of the rigorous codes of social interaction which are dependent upon specific classifications of gender, class and race. He may be white, yet a wealthy man's slave holds power over him. Like his poor white flunkie, Wash Jones, who is taunted by blacks and who is not allowed to pass even through the kitchen door, Sutpen in fact occupied a position lower than that of a slave. It is this shame that impels him to follow his "design" so that neither he nor his children will ever be relegated to a back door ever. In essence, he must refigure whiteness so that he may be entitled to the privileges that accompany it. In his thinking, this means simply becoming the one that determines who uses the front door.

In Sutpen's struggle towards whiteness he is, interestingly enough constructed as the black rapist -- the outsider who uses his possession of women in order to gain entry into a realm of political and social power. When he is told to use the back door by a black servant, he is filled with rage at his own position as one who in essence was lower than a slave is. "So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have niggers and a fine house to combat them with." (297) Sutpen does not wish to change or challenge the system that marginalizes and debases him but to join it. In enlisting in this social hierarchy he will be sure that it is he who is the one with the power to marginalize and debase. He uses his own othering at the hands of that slave to erase others as well. His marginalization of his son Charles Bon is what causes his other son Henry to commit fratricide. Sutpen's tragedy is a powerful critique

of this system that values one human being over another and whose very existence is dependent upon the erasure of another human being.

For Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen is the very essence of evil. He is the despoiler of all, the rapist who takes white womanhood and denigrates it. In Rosa's version of the story of Sutpen's Hundred, she often uses animal references to describe Sutpen. She also sees him as one of his "wild niggers." Sutpen marries her sister Ellen because she suits his plan. Like Scarlet O'Hara's Irish immigrant father, Gerald, who, "with a ruthless singleness of purpose ... desired his own house, his own plantation, his own horses, his own slaves," Sutpen too needs things and people in order to make himself over. Essential to his emergence as a gentleman planter is the perfect woman. (45-46) For O'Hara this meant marrying Ellen Robillard, a well-born lady who epitomized white southern womanhood. For Sutpen, it is Ellen Coldfield. With her as mistress of Sutpen's Hundred and his wealth he gets the status he needs. At the heart of the myth of the black rapist was the belief that he would use white women to get the political power and social status he needed in order to become the equal of white men. Cleanth Brooks was accurate when he wrote that Sutpen treats Southern tradition as "not a way of life 'handed down' or 'transmitted' from the community" but as "an assortment of things to be possessed...to be gained by sheer ruthless efficiency."<sup>16</sup> This mirrors Rhett Butler's attempt at respectability on behalf of his daughter. For him the southern tradition is a means to an

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<sup>16</sup> Cleanth Brooks. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963): 298.

end. Yet at the end of the novel, Butler has much more faith in the system than Sutpen would ever have.

According to Rosa Coldfield his sister-in-law, Sutpen's design is a rape. He does not build a plantation but "Tore violently a plantation." He did not father his son and daughter but "Without gentleness begot." (5) Rosa states "He wasn't a gentleman." In fact Rosa indicts all the respectable gentlemen who supported him and made him one of their own. Sutpen's acceptance into planter society demonstrates, for Rosa at least, the failure of white men to protect white womanhood. Rosa Coldfield offers up a critique of the masculinist old south that would produce and nurture a Thomas Sutpen. Her narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* has been likened to "her roman à clef against the world that has marginalized her."<sup>17</sup> By his very construction, the black rapist does not have the power to marginalize. In this respect, Thomas Sutpen, for Rosa, is not merely a symbol of the black rapist. Her narrative endows him with a masculine force that all the other white men in the text are without. In several places in her narrative, Sutpen is likened physically to his wild Negroes. In one scene she sees the Sutpen family in a carriage—"Ellen's high white face within it and the two replicas of his face in miniature flanking her, and on the front seat the face and the teeth of the wild Negro who was driving and he, his face like the Negro's save for the teeth (this because of his beard doubtless)—all in a thunder and a fury of wild-eyed horses and of galloping dust." (16)

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<sup>17</sup> Diane Roberts. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994): 167.

Rosa relates another scene when Sutpen is fighting with his wild Negroes.

One night when Ellen walks into the stable she witnesses not the fighting of two Negroes but of her husband and one of his Negroes “and Ellen seeing not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another’s eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too.” This scene, all the more disturbing because Ellen believes the barbarism to have been witnessed by her daughter, Judith. She enters the barn to see her son, Henry “screaming and vomiting” at the sight he was forced to witness. Sutpen is savage. Faulkner makes this very clear and adds his children to this scene in order to signify how this very savagery sets out to corrupt their innocence. In the hay loft, above this scene, are two faces. One is of Judith and next to her a slave child—possibility a sibling since Sutpen did breed with his slaves. The mix of black and white, savage and innocent in this scene does create a horrifying vision. But more than that it offers up a critique of Southern race ideology.

When Thomas Sutpen comes to town he is an unknown without a family or past. Rosa Coldfield points out that despite this General Compson and Mr. Coldfield accept him. Quentin’s father tells him that “if it hadn’t been for your grandfather’s friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here” (8). It is through their help that Sutpen eventually becomes the biggest single landowner in the county. Yet he violates upsets every rule of social interaction. He lives with his wild Haitian slaves. When Sutpen comes to town he brings “two women deliberately” to breed with. Mr. Compson

adds “And he lived out there for almost five years before he had speaking acquaintance with any white woman in the county.” (48) Implicit here is that Sutpen was having sexual relations with his female slaves and did not even have the “decency” to use a white woman to cover up his actions. Sutpen bullies the town into accepting him as one of them. So he can be the black savage and his “fellow citizens” can suspect that he has a “nigger in the woodpile,” somewhere but he also can be a white planter—a gentleman.

(56)

Rosa Coldfield had been “embattled for forty-three years in the old insult” (9) which is the offense that Sutpen paid to her when he asked her to be his wife, but to first, before the marriage, mate with him. He needed to be sure that she could produce a son to carry on his legacy. In this proposition, Sutpen reduces Rosa to the same status as livestock and the black female slaves with whom he “breeds” with. For Quentin Compson and his father, Rosa Coldfield represents the epitome of white southern ladyhood. This very ladyhood is dragged down to the level of slaves and livestock. This is the “lowering” that Rosa speaks of when she describes Sutpen’s proposition:

*“Why he is mad. He will decree this marriage for tonight and perform his own ceremony, himself both groom and minister; pronounce his own wild benediction on it with the very bedward candle in his hand: and I mad too, for I will acquiesce, succumb; abet him and plunge down.”* (133)

Rosa’s seemingly willing corruption by Sutpen stays with her for the rest of her life. The plunge down here is sexual intercourse but it also speaks to what accompanies that act. Rosa, a jilted bride is forever brought low. Even Quentin’s roommate Shreve, lowers

Rosa when he mistakenly calls her “Aunt Rosa.” “Aunt,” in Southern culture is term reserved for black female domestic help. Now an old woman “in the eternal black” Rosa lives with an “air of impotent and static rage.” (3) A savage, somewhat brutal “dark” man also leaves Scarlett O’Hara, similarly to Rosa. Rosa Coldfield lacks Scarlett O’Hara’s optimism yet one wonders if Rosa Coldfield is what awaits Scarlett forty-three years later. If indeed the white woman represents white civilization, then the mark that these two dark men leave upon them reverberates into the future. While Scarlett’s daughter with Rhett is dead, Rosa has only the story of Sutpen’s Hundred to birth and to leave upon the world.

Rosa dies leaving the story to Quentin, his roommate Shreve and Mr. Compson. What this does in essence is “darken” Sutpen even further by leaving his story to be a part of the story of white men. In this respect, white patriarchy becomes reaffirmed as these men take over the authorship of Sutpen’s tale. Richard Pearce describes this reaffirmation of white male power:

Sutpen’s failure and the deauthorization of his story occur within the central, white male story line, which turns black people and women into marginal characters, which persists despite Rosa’s attempt to tell another story, and which must be told in the language of which Sutpen is the symbolic source. The discourse does contain the seeds of its own deauthorization, but it is nonetheless capable of marginalizing and co-opting voices that oppose it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Pearce. *The Politics of Narration: James Joyce, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolfe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991):124.

It is Quentin and his father who tell the story of Sutpen's death at the hands of Wash Jones. They piece together the narrative of Sutpen's death through the eye witness account of the black mid-wife who delivered Sutpen's last child—the girl he fathered with Milly Jones.

Sutpen's "madness" does not end at Rosa Coldfield or at her sister Ellen. He is truly ambushed when his son Charles Bon re-enters his life. Bon's return is further complicated by his deep friendship with Henry, Sutpen's son and with his daughter's Judith's romantic attraction to the young man. Sutpen's reject of his son is truly ironic, since, more than Henry, Bon is truly Sutpen's son. Like his father he arrives in town without any family or history. Faulkner describes Bon as if he is other worldly—springing up from nothing "a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix –like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere." (58) Sutpen is all savage body, yet his son resists the confines of physicality and in his resistance, forms an identity apart from that of his parents. In a world in which ones ability to succeed depends heavily on whom they are, Both Sutpen and his son gain success despite the fact that they are "nobodies.

It is Charles though who, true to his last name, earns his way through his own goodness. He is much admired by his peers at the university as well as in New Orleans. It is his competency and intelligence that makes him an officer in the army. Judith falls in love with him because he is he has such a strong character. He earns Henry's love and

admiration as well. Despite his education, intelligence and gentility, Bon cannot enter into his father's world. When Thomas Sutpen refuses to acknowledge him as his son and rightful heir, he is making his son suffer the same demoralizing defeat he felt many years prior when he was turned away from entering the big house through the front door. His engagement to Judith further complicates Sutpen's rejection of Bon. Kevin Railey points out that "Charles Bon knows exactly the makeup of his biological heritage, but he places no moral value or meaning on it. Bon wants to be judged based on his behaviors and actions reveal him to be. He implies that a different way to adjudicate merit and position in society needs to be found to replace one strictly defined by an ideology of race."<sup>19</sup>

When Quentin Compson is retelling the last confrontation between Henry and Charles, he claims that Bon, in response to Henry's claim that he is his brother, says "—*No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister.*" This phrase is most likely a construction of Quentin's since it was unlikely to be uttered in the South of 1865. But in the early part of the twentieth century, when Quentin is actually telling this story to Shreve, it was a cry against integration. Barbara Ladd suggests that within this line lies a very loaded view of race and sex in the modern south:

"In Quentin's South, growing more and more isolated from the rest of the country, the terms *black* and *brother* became, in the rhetoric of radical racism, which claimed that the black man wanted nothing so much as the white woman, just reconcilable enough, just possible enough to function as

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<sup>19</sup> Kevin Railey. *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the Production of William Faulkner* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999): 150-151.

the white southerner's ultimate nightmare of alienation. As African, a "black beast," as "the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister," and yet as brother nonetheless, Charles Bon represents all that the post-1890 white southerner most feared: the gradual usurpation of political, familial, and economic purity—that is legitimacy, recognition by the national body or father—by a mulatto brother or brother-in-law, a usurpation almost always associated with the denigration of a proud civilization into a "mongrel" future.<sup>20</sup>

When Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon have their confrontation at the gates of Sutpen's estate, Charles' murder would make it seem that white male hegemony would triumph. The one threat to Sutpen's empire is dead. There will be no marriage between Judith and Charles. The future is clear of any obstacles that would hinder Sutpen's triumph. Yet the murder of Bon offsets a series of tragedies that spell disaster for Sutpen's legacy. In the end all that is left of his dream is the "one nigger Sutpen left." It is Jim Bond who brings Sutpen into the future, with his disembodied howling in the woods that has no direction and is without any sense of place. That Jim Bond's howling cannot be traced and seems to have no origin is a direct acknowledgment of his grandfather and his father's lack of home.

Faulkner and Mitchell through Rhett Butler and Charles Sutpen form a dialogue about the South and its ideology of race. Each character undergoes a transformation that pushes to place them with a historical context that is dependent on notions of citizenship and identity. Butler goes home to Charleston, not to the more racially ambiguous New

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ladd. *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain and William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1996): 150-151.

Orleans where he had spent a great deal of his time. His embrace of whiteness is a surrender of his freedom. He wants to be tied down. Jaded and exhausted from his years of roaming, Butler wants “the clannishness of families, honor and security.” (1034) What that means is the protection of future bloodlines. Butler is reforming and going into service for his future scions. He is well aware of the value of bloodlines since it was he who pointed out to Scarlett that their daughter Bonnie was better than the commoners her mother brought around their home were. “My Bonnie with her Butler blood and her Robillard strain--.” Yet when Scarlett protests and wants the O’Hara’s included, Butler silences her with “The O’Hara’s might have been kings of Ireland once but your father was nothing but a smart Mick on the make.” (902) The “smart Mick on the make” managed to buy himself into upper class southern society much like Sutpen did and his legitimacy is just as questionable as Sutpen’s.

While Rhett Butler abandons his otherness in favor of a return to whiteness, Thomas Sutpen, the wild-eyed man, who fought like a black man with his wild Haitian slaves, is returned to the wilderness via Jim Bond. When he denied Charles Bon as his rightful heir, he was in essence denying his own rightfulness to the planter class. For if Charles Bon did not belong, neither did he. Unlike Butler, Sutpen becomes further separated from whiteness. Wash Jones murders him because he had taken his “design” too far. Desperate for a son, he impregnated Jones’ daughter Milly. Outraged at Sutpen’s actions, Jones murders him. Sutpen who had corrupted his wife and sister –in-law now turned to defile Milly Jones, a poor white. Because of his power and money, the

planter's class could possibly accept a child with Milly as its mother. Sutpen, with all of his relentless pursuit of his design, ignores delineations of class and race when it suited his purpose. Sutpen has no knowledge of or respect for the less tangible aspects of the planter's class or rather whiteness itself. He lacks the connection to these institutions that General Compson and Mr. Coldfield have. He in fact lacks their *soul*. But the civilization that Sutpen works so hard to become a part of appears to be without its central soul—which is an identity that is viable. When Quentin's roommate Shreve says that:

“the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African Kings.” (302)

Richard Godden states that “Shreve suggests that his and Quentin's heirs (like Bon's before them) will eventually descend from a great black father. His is a joke against white paternalism, which turns the novel upside down in a manner owing much to Sutpen's key recognition of 1820. Shreve, like the boy at the door, though with different emphasis, points out that white ‘comes’ from black: an insight that allows him to retell the Sutpen story, in its last and most minimal form, as a story of black paternity.”<sup>21</sup> For this whiteness is too dependent upon blackness to form an identity have its own.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Godden. “*Absalom, Absalom!* Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions,” *ELH* (1994): 15.

### Navigating the Rapist and the Victorian Gentlemen

Despite the similarities in how both novels construct and confront non-biological entities of blackness, they differ enormously in what this blackness ultimately represents. Within Faulkner, blackness possesses true subjectivity. Sutpen's strength and virility are directly attributed to his association with his wild Haitian slaves. His ability to rule over them is a sign of his own ferocity and power. While Mitchell's black slaves cower in fear from the poor white Archie, Sutpen's slaves taunt the poor white Wash Jones and ridicule him for his absence from fighting the war. For Mitchell, true blackness is only safe when affixed to a white male figure. In her view, biological blacks are only needed as scenery to her Civil War tableaux.

Mitchell's view held and still holds a great number of modern readers rapt. Late in 1936 *Publisher's Weekly* reported: "On December 15<sup>th</sup> Macmillan expects the 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> copy of *Gone With the Wind* to come from the presses. In the meantime, the firm is conducting an advertising campaign of renewed power, including several unusual features. A full-page ad in color appears in the *Saturday Evening Post* for December 5h; few if any, books have received such a promotion.<sup>22</sup> In *60 years of Bestsellers, 1895-1955*, the novel was estimated to have sold 5,000,000 copies and was listed in fifth place among American novels.<sup>23</sup> Whereas *Absalom, Absalom!* sold only about 7,000 copies

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<sup>22</sup> *The Publisher's Weekly* (December 5, 1936): 213.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Payne Hackett. *60 Years of Bestsellers, 1865-1955* (New York: RR Bowker Co., 1956): 12.

when it was first published. It would not be until much later, well into the fifties when Faulkner's early works were coming back into print did it begin to cultivate a sound readership.<sup>24</sup> The author's styles account for the large disparity in sales. Faulkner's book is not a readily accessible one. Mitchell's novel was made for mass consumption in that it had a simple straightforward narrative. It also contains images and ideas that are flush with prevailing ideas of race.

The two novels hold very different opinions about the Civil War and Reconstruction. While Mitchell wrote a southern romance, Faulkner wrote the anti romance. When Shreve remarks at the end how both he and Quentin will evolve from African Kings, he is voicing the fears of whites during Reconstruction as well as in the 1930s. The notion that the interracial Jim Bond would be multiplying and occupying positions of power is one that terrorized white American into some of the most insidious racial violence from Reconstruction into the twentieth century. His disembodied howling in the wilderness at the novel's end is appropriate for Bond may be invisible but his presence is still felt. His soul is not trapped inside the body of civilization, it is much larger and invasive. Faulkner offers, in his eerie conclusion, the inaccessibility of race in America.

When Rhett Butler states that he doesn't give a damn, it is because he is at the point where his soul and body mesh. He is back from the margins, ready to embrace the

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<sup>24</sup> James W. Matthews, "The Civil War of 1936: *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* *The Georgia Review* (1967):42.

old south and white civilization. Unlike Jim Bond, Butler is all white flesh and white soul. Mitchell constructs his de-blackening as heroic. His rejection of Scarlett is due to her rejecting of tradition and the values of the old guard. While Scarlett needs silver, chandeliers and silk dresses to be a lady, Butler need only to change his mind to become a gentleman. At the novel's end when Butler says to Scarlett: "No, I never intend to change more than my spots" it is Mitchell echoing the words of Senator John Daniel of Virginia in 1899—"You may change the leopard's spots but you will never change the different qualities of the races."<sup>25</sup>

If in fact, Butler only changes his "spots" and leaves, in essence, what he is in tact, he too has the potential to be another Jim Bond. Yet instead of haunting the racial landscape with his disembodied howling, Butler is in fact physically occupying space left for the white and privileged. What Mitchell leaves us here is with a threat—Butler will still be at large and acting as a transgressive force. Butler's outward actions will adhere to the codes of privilege, yet it will only be superficial. Despite the reactionary tone of *Gone With the Wind*, at the end, Butler promises only to pass as white. His true racial "qualities" will remain the same. This pairing of the black soul with a white body is revolutionary considering the texts that I have examined here. Walter White not only has his protagonist murdered, but the last we read of him is a newspaper article, which not only misrepresents the attack on Harper, but Harper as well. White does this to

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas F. Gusset. *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970): 337.

demonstrate the power that whites had, especially in the retelling of the tales of lynchings. Richard Wright's *Bigger* Thomas is left in his cell alone waiting to die. The Scottsboro Nine are never truly acquitted. Jessie Fauset's ideal of black manhood is class centered. There is no negotiable space between the rapist and the Victorian gentleman. Black masculinity within American culture is constructed narrowly within these strict confines. To refigure these ideals would disrupt a system of power that is dependent upon specific constructions of race, gender and class.

The figure of the black rapist stands to uphold a discourse of racism and sexism. He is evidence of how narrow the delineations of race and gender are within American culture. The black rapist is not only without his own subjectivity, but his very presence relieves the white woman of her subjectivity. The white male is then empowered to avenge the attack on white womanhood. The black woman is erased by these actions. It is no surprise that the number of black women that Nushawn Williams might have had sex with and passed on the AIDS virus on to is unknown. His presence within a black community is not included in the many newspaper articles that precede and followed his arrest. Like Faulkner's Jim Bond, Williams is without citizenship. Disembodied and disenfranchised, they both haunt a white landscape scared by history.

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