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Toward a Progressive African Americanism: Africanism and Intraracial Class Conflict in Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century African American Literature

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by LaRonda Meeshay Sanders-Senu entitled "Toward a Progressive African Americanism: Africanism and Intraracial Class Conflict in Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century African American Literature." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Thomas Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Katy Chiles, Asafa Jalata, Josphat Ndigirigi

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Toward a Progressive African Americanism: Africanism
and Intraracial Class Conflict in Twentieth- and Early
Twenty-First-Century African American Literature

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

LaRonda Meeshay Sanders-Senu
May 2011

I dedicate this book to my babies big and small—LaBrea, Juaneya, Abria, Keilyn, Jada, Janiya, Bryson, B.J., and LaPrecious.

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ABSTRACT

In this work, I explore how African American authors and texts have contributed to or confronted what Toni Morrison calls "Africanism" in Playing in the Dark.   I argue that the construction of blackness by non-black people and its consequent racial stigma, imbuing skin color with mental and physical inferiority, functions in an intraracial context to obscure the solidarity of all African Americans irrespective of their socioeconomic status. My work spans the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, investigating representations of the middle class who seek to deny or ignore the impact that a Eurocentric value system has on their lives and the lives of the black majority. These texts also illustrate the struggle to reconcile social mobility and economic progress with the persistence of the cultural trauma of slavery and racial stigma, as well as the struggle between exclusionary claims of African American authenticity and more complicated middle-class and black majority constructions of African American identity. I correct claims that the tension between African American authenticity and educational and economic progress is a new phenomenon, demonstrating that this tension extends back to the beginning of the twentieth century and arguably even to the period of Reconstruction. My dissertation also reveals the mythical nature of the postracial ideal, suggesting that contemporary African American investment in postracial ideology is the product of a desire to reflect and obtain an elusive "Americanism" that has never been unreservedly available to African Americans.

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Introduction

  With increasing evidence of African American economic, social, and educational progress, the traditional African American narrative that is informed by America's racist history—beginning with slavery and continuing with Jim Crow—is being questioned by African American scholars and authors. African Americans are asking themselves: in what ways do racial consciousness and the vestiges of slavery impact the contemporary lives of African Americans? While some, such as author Charles Johnson in his *American Scholar* article "The End of the Black American Narrative" and many conservative African American critics such as John McWhorter and Shelby Steele, insist that it is time to focus on new narratives that reflect the social progress that America and African Americans have made, I contend that the lingering vestiges of American racism and the stigma that remains attached to the black body continues to be essential to any new African American narrative. I also contend that a look at African American literature throughout the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries illustrates the complex task of reconciling such a stigma with American social progress. In *The Anatomy of Racial Equality,* Glenn Loury aptly describes "the territory of *racial stigma* of dishonorable meanings socially inscribed on arbitrary bodily marks, of 'spoiled collective identities'" (59). Instead of focusing on the impact of America's white hegemonic ideology outside of the African American community, this work seeks to examine how racial stigma, which is the result of white hegemony, functions within the African American class structure. The literature that I will explore investigates the impact that a Eurocentric value system has on the lives of African Americans. Within my literary analysis, I will use Toni Morrison's *Playing*

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in the Dark and her discussion of Africanism as springboards from which I will explore these texts.

Let me clarify that I and Morrison use the term Africanism much differently from other scholars of Africa and the African Diaspora. The term Africa itself is a troubled term because, as V.Y. Mudimbe notes, it was taken from the Afri ethnic group in Northern Africa and then applied to the entire continent by the conquering Romans (*The Idea* 26-27). The idea of naming and being named has been an important topic for colonized Africans and African Americans who had their cultural and social identity stripped away. The naming of Africa by Europeans denotes a lack of subjectivity for the people of the continent and perpetuates the tendency of racial stereotyping that was accepted by missionaries, anthropologists, and colonizers alike. Such an attitude that allows one group to name and classify complex and diverse groups of people under one totalizing heading reflects the denigration of African culture, history, tradition, and capabilities that has taken place for centuries. Africanism was used simply as a term denoting knowledge of Africa and the people of Africa, even with a white hegemonic value system pervading such "knowledge" (Mudimbe, *The Idea* 38). African scholars like Mudimbe have reclaimed the power of definition and in so doing embraced Africanism as a positive recuperative term. Africanism, as he describes it, is the "task of teaching Africans how to read their otherness and of helping them formulate modalities that express their own being and their place in the world" (Mudimbe, *The Invention* 167). Despite the reclamation of Africanism, the negative characterization of the term remains, and it is from that context that I will examine Africanism in my analysis.

Africanism is "a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (Morrison, *Playing* 6-7). Though Morrison examines how "[t]hrough significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of the this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness," I will explore how African Americans' attempt to possess such a sense of Americanness means either an attempt to redefine oneself as not-Other to accept the Other-American duality, both of which impact their view of class (Morrison, *Playing* 6). In terms of Du Bois' double consciousness, Africanism is the acknowledgment that the image of themselves that African Americans see through the veil is valid and that a "flood of white Amercianism" is superior to any African identity (*Souls* 365). Morrison's work focuses on how conceptions of whiteness and blackness are constructed in literature by white Americans and what such constructions reveal about American literature and culture. I believe that the increasing degree of social and economic stratification within the African American community that has taken place necessitates a look at how African American authors confront and/or ingest what Morrison calls Africanism in their texts. Africanism exacerbates the class conflict that naturally exists in all social hierarchies. I posit that the texts that I will examine reveal both the complexity that arises as Africanist ideology infiltrates the African American class hierarchy and the necessity for a recuperative, positive, progressive *African Americanism* that reconciles the inherent contradiction of blackness and Americanness.

Any further discussion of Africanism within the African American class hierarchy first requires a clearer explanation of what I mean by the terms African American middle class and the black majority. Historically, most African Americans were members of the black majority and the socio-economic difference between the middle class and black majority was not great. However, the economic, educational, and social progress of African Americans has complicated class definition. In his 2008 work *Betrayal*, Houston Baker describes the black majority as

> those populations of African, African American, Negro, and colored descent in
> the United States who inhabit the most wretched states, spaces, and places of our
> national geography. . . . The black majority is the almost inevitably exposed,
> severely policed, desperately underresourced contingent of the African American
> population currently resident in the United States. The black majority is
> indubitably *the* majority of Afro-America at the present time. For we must also
> bring to the forefront as part of that majority, those black families of four who are
> considered by the census middle class when their annual, pretax income is as
> modest as fifty thousand dollars (7).

I accept Baker's use of the term black majority as a very inclusive term that includes the 24.5 percent of African Americans who were below the poverty line as of 2007, those who would consider themselves working class, and certainly all African American households that earn less than $50,233 per year, which was the median income of all households in 2007 (U.S Census Bureau "Poverty," Income of Households").[1] Like the federal government, which has a benchmark for poverty but no clear definition of working class, "middle class," or upper class, I have no specific definition of middle class that is clear within economic terms. The middle class

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[1] It is worth noting that the median household income for African Americans was $33,916 in 2007, which was the lowest median of all racial groups.

in my evaluation is marked by economic sufficiency, if not abundance. Its members are aware of

the social advantage of illuminating the distinction between themselves and the members of the

black majority; their choice to accept or reject this advantage marks the degree to which they

have internalized Africanism. However, one important element of my literary analysis is the fact

that the African American middle class is very vulnerable and always in flux. I contend, as does

Baker, that the African American middle class is extremely tenuous state, which leads me to also

include many African Americans whose median household income is in the middle range of

American incomes among the black majority.[2] In "The Emerging Black Middle Class,' Kris

Marsh and his fellow researches cite the difficulty that African Americans with children are

having reaching and maintaining middle-class status, especially single-parent households.

Increasingly, the black middle class is being comprised of single African Americans with no

children. They also note the factors that make the plight of the African American middle class

tenuous, such as fewer assets that can be passed down, lower levels of education than the white

middle class, a sense of responsibility for extended family, and living in areas that are in close

proximity to lower class African Americans (Marsh et. al 741). According to a May 2010 report

by the Brandeis Institute of Assets and Social policy, which did a study of the wealth disparity

among white Americans and African Americans between 1984 and 2007, in terms of assets, by

2007, "Middle-income white households. . . . had accumulated $74,000, whereas the average

high-income African American family owned only $18,000" (Brandise). Moreover, one out of

ten African Americans had at least $3,600 of debt, at least twenty-five percent of African

Americans have no assets at all, and the wealth gap between African Americans and White

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[2] The current economic downturn, which has evolved into one of the most significant recessions in American history, has only worsened the economic outlook of both the African American middle class and the black majority. The full impact of the recession can be better assessed upon the completion of the 2010 Census.

Americans is four times as high as it was in 1984, at $95,000 (Brandise). Though this data reflects information about America's contemporary population, and this work focuses on literature that spans the twentieth century, the data also reflects the historically thin line that has always existed between the African American middle class and the black majority.

Aside from the economic aspect of African American class structure, there are cultural markers that blur economic distinctions. Because of social networks that are increasingly stratified along economic lines, class structure within the African American community is not stable. Children, siblings, friends, and loved ones often stand on opposite sides of class dividing lines; therefore, the clothing choice, hair styles, speech patterns, and social patterns that have been socially coded as reflective of the black majority may also be evidenced within the African American middle class and vice versa. There is also great interchange between African American cultures and mainstream American cultures. Within this context, racial stigma may result in a desire to minimize difference from the white power structure. The black majority does not necessarily remain untouched by this ethos. Stifled under Africanism, many members of the black majority cultivate the middle-class ethos and long for upward mobility, which is often signified by choices about what social codes deserve validation or rejection and to what degree Africanism is valid. This desire to escape the effects of Africanism by assimilating to white culture is not new. In 1835 Alexis De Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America* that

> The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men
>
> who repulse him; he conforms to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their
>
> opinions, and hopes by imitating them to form a part of their community. Having
>
> been told from infancy that his race is naturally inferior to that of the whites, he

assents to the proposition, and is ashamed of his own nature. In each of his

features he discovers a trace of slavery, and, if it were in his power, he would

willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is. (364)

His observations of antebellum America are relevant within the African American class structure

of today.   In a nation where being American, human, intelligent, or significant is frequently

disassociated from blackness, social mobility—being middle class— often means embracing

whiteness. It is not my argument that the African American middle class is automatically mired

in the muck of Africanism, just by virtue of American success being defined primarily through

the lens of white hegemony. The fluctuating nature of African American class definitions means

that members of the middle class may have economic stability, while embracing or at least

respecting the social codes and behaviors that are different from those that are validated by white

society. Because African American social codes have been stigmatized along with black skin,

denigrating those codes confirms African American inferiority.

However, it is also true that many members of the middle class find this difficult and succumb to

notions of the cultural or social inferiority of African Americans, thereby electing to separate

themselves physically and socially from their black brethren.

The complex nature of African American class structure makes recognition of the

appropriation of Africanism in literature difficult, at times, to discern. The stigma that is

attached to African American characters, regardless of social status, is based on the idea of

"racial dishonor" or "an entrenched if inchoate presumption of inferiority, of moral inadequacy,

of unfitness for intimacy, of intellectual incapacity, harbored by observing agents when they

regard the race marked-subjects" (Loury, *Anatomy* 70). This stigma is inextricably tied to the

unalterable circumstance of skin color, as well as to characteristics that are representative of

black majority communities. Such characteristics, which include the use of African American

English or dialect, clothing and hair styles, and social activities, are frequently viewed negatively

by white society and members of the African American middle class who desire to escape the

stigma.   As Loury so aptly explains, "if a person is aware that others in society are inclined to

classify him on the basis of certain markers and if, in turn, this classification constitutes the basis

of differential actions affecting his welfare, then these markers will become important to him"

(*Anatomy* 22-23). In the case of some members of the African American middle class, they "will

attend to [the markers], become conscious (and I dare say, self-conscious) in regard to them.

[They] will, at some level understand and identify [themselves] as being 'raced' (Loury,

Anatomy 22-23).   The desire to escape racial stigma is not a negative aspiration. After all, my

examination of Africanism is an attempt to identify the impact of the stigma and to counter it.

However, conscious or unconscious acceptance of the validity of such stigma is destructive. The

acceptance of Africanism often expresses itself in the desire to be white. It is easy to see such

Africanism when characters articulate their desire to be white or when, much more frequently,

characters such as William Miller from Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* spend a

significant amount of time cataloguing the differences between his middle class existence and

that of his fellow citizens who are members of the black majority—insisting on his similarity to

respectable white citizens and noting the social and cultural deficiency of African American

society.

  However, it is much more difficult to identify internalized Africanism that is

unconscious. While cultural and social makers and choices that are reflective of white American

culture cannot in and of themselves represent an embrace of Africanism—after all, the increasing

cultural exchanges that are taking place as well as the heterogeneity of the African American

community emphasizes that there is no essential way for blacks or whites to feel, think, or

behave —they may function as recognizable expressions of the performance of whiteness or

more importantly superiority to blackness. However, middle-class African Americans and those

members of the black majority who aspire to the middle-class Africanist inspired ethos may

attempt to use these characteristic to mitigate racial stigma. Unconscious Africanism is most

often evident in the way that characters treat their fellow African Americans or how they view

cultural attributes that deviate from those accepted by white society. Such unconscious

Africanism is evident in works such as Percival Everett's *Erasure.* Monk Ellison, who on the

surface is a successful academic comfortable with his race and his class status, is disgusted and

embarrassed by Juanita Mae Jenkins's fictional rendering of the black majority and torn between

postracial individualism and the racism that still exists and informs the lives of the entire black

community.

Monk struggles with the stigma that applies to both the Jenkinses of the world—which

he also has accepted— and his own educated upper middle-class life. It is also evident in works

such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in which an African American community, with

members who are certainly not economically middle class, deposit and deflect their angst and

fear of their own racial and social inferiority onto the young Pecola Breedlove, whose dark skin,

poverty, and abusive family life make her an easy target. Africanism does not necessarily mean

worshiping at the altar of whiteness; when it is unconscious, it is evident in the acceptance of the

degeneracy of unchecked blackness or the desire to cling to class distinctions, reifying the racial

stigma less in terms of race and more in terms of class, labeling and judging the black majority accordingly. Thus, in this text I will argue that Africanism in African American literature is a central conflict for middle class African Americans and members of the black majority that result in significant identity dilemmas about the importance of race

In order to explore the impact of Africanism on the African American middle class-Black majority relationship, I must first explain why my interest in the impact of Africanism on class dynamics focuses on race rather than class. Inherently connected to each other, African Americans have a cultural ontology that greatly impacts their social interactions both inside and outside of the African American community. However, this cultural ontology is not a matter of cumulative biological distinctions that cast African Americans as a separate race or species, as has previously been posited by proponents of eugenics as well as many social and literary scholars, though visible blackness did contribute to its creation. I acknowledge other scholars' concerns about the exclusivity of essentialism which my notion of cultural ontology conjures. For example, Scott Romine agrees with Stuart Hall's conclusion that "essentialist gestures . . . are deployed to 'stabilize, fix or guarantee, an unchanging 'oneness' or cultural belongingness. . . we should 'accept that identities are never unified and . . . increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions'" (qtd. in Romine 107-108). Nonetheless, I posit that race is still an important phenomenon that cannot be dismissed. " 'Race, '" as Loury notes, "is all about embodied social signification. In this sense, it is a *social truth* that race is quite real, despite what may be the *biologic-taxonomic truth* of the claim that there are no races" (*Anatomy* 58). Despite the biological absurdity of racial difference, "the social meanings imputed to race-

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symbols have had profound, enduring, and all-too-real consequences due not to any race-dependent biological processes but rather to a system of race-dependent meanings, habitual social significations, that can be more difficult to 'move' than the proverbial, all-too-material mountain" (Loury, *Anatomy* 58). The erasure of culture, history, autonomy, and humanity—*somebodiness*—which occurred for black bodies during the slave trade has forever, or at least for the foreseeable future, marked the black body as at best commodifiable and at worst deviant. That distorted notions of blackness abound not just for African Americans, but throughout the African Diaspora, and in Africa itself, as the impact of colonization, is undeniable.

Considering the very real way that race—the visual signifier of difference illustrated first and foremost through skin color and more subjectively through cultural characteristics—continues to have an impact on the lives of African Americans, I argue that race, not class signification, is the primary impetus for the Africanism that abounds, making my exploration of Africanism within African American class structure even more important. As my literary analysis will demonstrate, though economic mobility and security have their advantages and all African Americans are not affected in the same way by Africanism, visual racial designation that carries a stigma is unalterable.

My privileging of race over class is not intended to ignore the real economic issues that face African Americans. Even though racism as we know it today developed slowly over time and was always implicated in the development of capitalism, the cornerstone of the European project during the Age of Discovery was ethnic nationalism and cultural hegemony. In his study of America's racial attitudes from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, Winthrop Jordan asserts, "Englishmen found the natives of Africa very different from themselves.

Negroes looked different; their religion was un-Christian; their manner of living was anything but English; they seemed to be a particularly libidinous sort of people. All these clusters of perceptions were related" and helped to inform perceptions of inferiority and superiority (4). Though the attitude toward race may not have been as codified as Americans would later make it, the idea that ethnic groups and nations—people with darker skin and exotic cultures—were somehow inferior to Europeans did exist. It is a generous assumption to accept that such racial structures that exist in American were (are) isolated or solely related to seeking capitalist advantage. A reflection on the literary tradition of the noble savage and the treatment of such characters as Othello and Oroonoko illustrates that though class and race are often intertwined, there is a need to remove the stigma from people of African descent—even those within the highest ranks of society—to make them more European or white. A more intriguing example of how the ingestion of Africanism by people of African descent validates race over class is Alexander Pushkin. As a premier Russian nobleman and author, his African heritage, as evidenced through his literature, was both a source of pride and discomfort for him, which was further compounded by his aristocratic beliefs. Though he is celebrated for his talent, his ambivalence toward his racial heritage, which is often less noted by Russian scholars, means that there was some degree of racial and cultural hegemony within Russian society. Neither his literary gifts nor the royal favor that he received could eradicate the racial stigma. Thus, even prior to the slave trade or in European nations where racial diversity was less pronounced than in the United States, the process of Othering, which was based on both culture and skin color, existed.

In the American context, the traumatic capitalist enterprise of chattel slavery, which developed strict racial codes, forever shifted the dynamics between class and race. Skin color remains the only constant in both white and black relationships to race. Africanism exists because a need to classify the black body exists. The cultural ontology that has and has had an impact on the literature of the twentieth and the beginning twenty-first centuries is due primarily to visual representations of blackness—skin color. Though I would argue that Africanism impacts Americans of all ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as all socio economic classes, it is dependent upon the visibility of African heritage. I want to make it clear that the black body comes in many shades and the inability to escape the stigma of blackness or to *erase* what Ron Eyerman calls the cultural memory that is engendered by the black body is central to my argument that race supersedes class in importance. As Jordan explains, "Englishmen actually described Negroes as black—an exaggerated term which in itself suggests that the Negro's complexion had powerful impact upon their perception" (5). This is very important for the eventual development of this nation because

> [i]n England perhaps more than in southern Europe, the concept of blackness was
> loaded with intense meaning. Long before they found that some men were black,
> Englishmen found in their idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their
> most ingrained values. No other color except white conveyed so much emotional
> impact. As described by the *Oxford English* Dictionary, the meaning of *black*
> before the sixteenth century included, "Deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirt, foul.
> . . . Having dark or deadly purpose, malignant; pertaining to or involving death,

deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister. . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible,

wicked. . . . Indicated disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc." (Jordan 7)

These negative associations with blackness, along with the assigning of the label black to

Africans after colonization had begun, clearly are the roots of racial stigma, which was

intensified with chattel slavery and which eclipses—because of its resilience—class as the

primary cause of Africanism. The stigma that is attached to skin color is not diminished by class

standing. Whether it is the project of racial uplift from early race men who accepted the "less

civilized" state of the black majority; the authors and activists during the 1930s and 1940s who

explored political and social structures such as communism in order to counteract Africanism;

the scholars during the Black Arts Movement who sought to mobilize and celebrate the black

majority, but whose middle-class existence negatively influenced their perception of the

intelligence of the black majority; or works from post-soul America that recognize the paradox

of economic progress and lingering racial stigma, authors have confronted the challenges of

using class to address real racial problems. Such reliance on class solutions only complicates any

coherent response to Africanism.   A focus on economics alone can never remove racial stigma.

Even if capitalism and the avaricious grab for land and money did exacerbate the racial or

cultural dynamics that already existed and became the impetus for strict racial hierarchies during

the slave trade, they did not create those hierarchies and the stigma that is primarily based on

skin color.

In light of my view of Africanism as primarily a construct that is based on race—which is

much less transient than class—I argue that it can be effectively countered through a progressive

African Americanism that divests it of power. In *Spiritual Interrogations,* Katherine Bassard

defines African Americanism as "not an exercise in psychical/discursive application but [as] represent[ing] the creative insistence of an African American theorizing heritage in which African writers in the Americas come to 'tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their texts'" (30). While Bassard too is defining her term within the context of Morrison's discussion of Africanism, I would like to expand on her definition. Bassard broadly considers her term, as she applies it to authors whose textual theorizing both contests and at times affirms Africanist ideologies. However, I posit that theorizing progressive African Americanism requires challenging Africanism; affirmation of Africanist ideologies, even if the theorizing is ambivalent, cannot be dismissed literarily, or socially, merely because it is within the work of African American authors.

By looking at African American literature and theorizing a progressive African Americanism, I am not attempting to make a statement about how larger American society should view and address Africanism. The social changes that have taken place within American society—especially the desire to claim racelessness as both an ultimate goal and for some as the current reality—have made discussions about this issue more complex and have deluded many young African Americans about the reality. Instead, I believe that a look at how certain African American authors and characters have addressed Africanism in both positive and negative ways can help the African American community recognize the stigma and cultural memory that binds them all. Through recognition of this collectivity, African Americans can confront the hegemonic nature of Africanism from within. Once African Americans change how they see each other, the divisive nature of Africanism, which helps perpetuate the seeming permanence of it, will diminish and African Americans can then look to larger American to make the

dismantling of Africanism complete. Africanism cannot be combated solely through violence, legislation, or revolution, for which many African Americans figures have called. Progressive African Americanism is an intellectual process that changes how African Americans see themselves, how they relate to each other, how they view African American communities, how they assesses African American cultures, and how they think about the African American relationship to America in general. It is the recognition that too much dependence on class structures in an Africanist context is dangerous to the wellbeing of all African Americans because the racial stigma does not respect class distinctions. Though it is an intellectual process, adherence to progressive African Americanism requires African Americans to act, first in their communities and then in the larger society, to point out and invalidate instances of Africanism at work.

Progressive African Americanism confronts Africanism using three principles. The first is that cultural trauma and racial stigma are collectivizing forces that pervade the African American hierarchy. The second principle asserts that African American cultural norms should not be evaluated according to their proximity to the norms of mainstream America. The third principle maintains that because there is an infinite number of African American communities and experiences, as long as the first two principles are embraced, African American differences—whether cultural, social, educational, or geographic—are immaterial to combating Africanism. When examining texts, I will ask questions such as: How does the accumulation of wealth figure into perceptions of Africanism in this work? How does this text manage the relationship between Africanism and postracial discourse? How does this text respond to

prescriptive claims of authenticity? And, how is the absence or presence of community

constructed in this text?

Central to my definition of African Americanism is the acceptance by African Americans

of the collectivity that is fostered by the cultural trauma of slavery and racial stigma. Eyerman's

discussion of cultural memory and cultural trauma describes a primal scene that is common to

people of African descent.   These forces frame the lives of all blacks in America, whether they

(or their ancestors) were slaves or felt an emotional or intellectual connection to Africa or not:

> Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an
>
> experience, a primal scene that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event,
>
> now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later
>
> generations who have had no experience of the "original" event, yet continue to
>
> be identified by it and to identify themselves through it. Because of its distance
>
> from the event and because its social circumstances have altered with time, each
>
> succeeding generation reinterprets and represents the collective memory around
>
> that event according to its needs and means. (Eyerman 15)

Cultural memory is the culmination of collective experiences that are the result of the

objectification of the black body. At each literary moment, authors—and their characters —

attempt to approach the legacy of cultural trauma that begets Africanism and to partake in or

manipulate an American system that either excludes them altogether or marginalizes them,

despite pursuit of social and political equality. I argue that African Americans should recognize

and appreciate, on some level, the collectivity that is engendered by the racial stigma and cultural

memory. Membership in such a cultural collective is beyond individual control; racial stigma is

inescapable for people visually of African ancestry and for those who are cognizant of such heritage—for example, people who are *passing*. The history of America means that all African Americans are always connected to the same primal scene, despite different social classes and life experiences.

Affirmation of cultural collectivity, however, is volitional, but essential to confronting hegemony as Africanist ideologies are ever present. Recognition of collectivity means acknowledging America's racist past, accepting that lingering vestiges of that past exist in each contemporary—and literary—moment for all people of African descent, and accepting that Africanism impacts how African Americans perceive themselves and others both within and outside of the African American community. Acknowledging the connection is good and essential on an intellectual level, but interacting with an African American community can be very recuperative. It is possible for individuals who are outside of African American communities to achieve positive African Americanism, but cultural collectivity is much more difficult for people who do not have an immediate community with whom they can interact. Such a community confronts and combats Africanist assertions that define blackness. Though individualism is important, Africanism survives in African American communities because it contaminates how they see themselves and each other. Cultural collectivity can recuperate such damaged psyches.

African Americanism also acknowledges that dismissing the validity of cultural expressions, behaviors, and traditions of African American cultures, by African Americans reflects an ingestion of Africansim. Privileging white American social and cultural expression or physical attributes above social and cultural expression that have their genesis in the African

American community—when such privileging is a derivative of racial stigma—reflects internalized Africanism.   The acceptance of racist notions about the aesthetic quality of the black body—whether it be skin color, hair type, facial features, etc—by African Americans is an act of self-deprecation. This privileging is often the means to achieving a sense of "Americanness" which is shrouded in concepts of white hegemony.   Houston Baker describes the literary pursuit of Americanness in *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance* as a choice of "mastery of form" or "deformation of mastery." Mastery of form, as Baker initially sees it, is the wearing of Dunbar's metaphorical mask, which signals outward compliance with or acceptance of white hegemonic ideology while maintaining a connection with the African American community and the recognition of Africanism as a mechanism that shapes perceptions of African American identity (15-17). Upon further examination, Baker rightly acknowledges, in his 2001 work *Turning South Again,* that compliance with Africanism, as in deformation of mastery, may lead to acceptance of it and desire for appropriation of whiteness. Since society often ignores how Africanism negatively impacts images of African Americans, such compliance perpetuates the myth that America is shifting to a post-racial society, which leads the African American middle class to ignore the denigration of blackness and participate in the objectification of the black majority.

On the other hand, Baker's discussion of deformation of mastery clearly reflects the principles that are central to progressive African Americanism.   Deformation of mastery requires an embrace of alternate forms of being—African American individuals who accept the influence of African American cultures and non-African American cultures, while subverting hegemonic paradigms of superiority (Baker, *Modernism* 50-52).   Deformation of mastery has

implications for literature that celebrates the long held tradition of the black badman. The

badman, who, John Roberts contends, is an extension of the trickster tradition, sought to

challenge white American legal, cultural, and social dominance that circumscribed the life of

African Americans (197-198); badmen do not feign compliance to social, legal, and cultural

systems that deny their ability as arbiters of culture or even humanity. Though he is gendered

masculine, which would seemingly preclude women from exercising such agency, his status as a

member of the black majority is instructive. Badmen are but one popular literary type that both

insists upon the validity of African American cultures and dismisses notions of cultural and

racial superiority. Many of the characters that I examine express the same need to insist on the

subjectivity of ways of knowing and being that are steeped in the African American community.

Let me make it clear that I do not intend for African Americans to exchange one form of

hegemony for another. Instead, progressive African Americanism requires recognizing that

cultures are assigned value according to standards established by cultures that dominate the

social, political, and economic domains.

Finally, in order to adequately confront Africanism, progressive African Americanism

must be a positive and inclusive philosophy that recognizes difference within collectivity. While

the degree to which European American values permeate American society raises the question of

whether all differences within the African American community, especially those that result

from class divisions, are byproducts of white oppression or at least colonization, the educational,

financial, and social changes that have increased the numbers of the middle class reveal that the

social and cultural exchanges and changes that occur are not all harmful. Such difference and

cultural hybridity are not necessarily bad and naturally arise with class stratification. This

difference becomes harmful to the African American community when individuals assign negative value to black bodies and cultures based on Africanist ideology. I intend my textual analyses in these texts to be instructive about how Africanism functions, impacting all African Americans regardless of gender, age, socioeconomic status, educational level, or cultural norms. My point is that despite differences among African Americans, racial stigma codes both how African Americans are perceived and, if appropriated, how they see themselves.   Therefore, in my analysis of literary texts, I remain mindful that African American authenticity is elusive and unnecessary in my effort to explore the Africanist presence in literature.

In the first chapter of this book, I will explore the works of Charles Chesnutt and Sutton Griggs, who produced texts that, while focusing primarily on the issues of racial injustice and the exclusivity of race consciousness, have as a subtext of problematic class constructions within the African American community. Both Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* provide insight into the post-Reconstruction notion of African American uplift in the United States and its relationship to Africanism. Using Bertram Wyatt-Brown's discussion of honor, I argue that the protagonists's attempt to appropriate this concept that was intended for white society and apply it to their middle-class African American context requires and is prompted by their acceptance of Africanism. Furthermore, I examine Chesnutt's ambivalent relationship with the black majority, which is evident in his treatment of Josh Green. Griggs, I contend, has an equally problematic relationship with the black majority, as even in his attempts to celebrate them he inadvertently subjects them to Africanist judgments.   In Chapter Two, I will look at George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him* Go, which present very opposed positions on class within the African American

community. These novels are representative of the post-Harlem Renaissance era, in which

protest novels and Marxist ideology abounded. In this chapter, I contend that both Schuyler and

Himes illustrate the inescapability of racial stigma. While Schuyler posits the accumulation of

wealth as the answer to Africanism, Himes is invested the American democratic ideal. *Black No*

More reveals choice, ingenuity, and action as the main vehicles to the success of African

American middle-class existence.   In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, on the other hand, Himes uses

determinism and creates circumstances that are beyond the protagonist's control, which nullify

characteristics such as intelligence, choice, and resolve; therefore, he portrays the middle class as

reveling in pretense. Moreover, in an attempt to show the arbitrary nature of race and the absence

of racialized cultural markers, Schuyler minimizes the Africanist reality of America.

Chapter Three of this text will focus on John Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* and

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* These two novels represent the Black Arts Movement, which

looked to nationalistic ideology to combat Africanism. Though I will use another Morrison novel

in Chapter Four, certain portions of *The Bluest Eye* provide interesting insight into the middle-

class ethos within the psyche of the black majority. In this chapter, I will explore the struggle of

Williams's protagonist to negotiate his middle-class lifestyle, his alignment of black authenticity

with the black majority, and his own relationship to Africanism. Conversely, I posit that

Morrison's reveals Africanism within both the black majority and middle as a means of

disrupting African American class hierarchies. Thus, I argue that these two novels demonstrate

the beginning stages of progressive African Americanism. In Chapter Four, I will examine Toni

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* as they both attempt to construct a

model of cultural and social collectivity. Morrison constructs her narrative comparatively,

revealing the opportunities and limitations both of African American folk culture and of the

African American middle class. I contend that Morrison's creation of a co-dependent

relationship between the black majority and the middle class, which moves within and outside of

Western discourses, emphasizes the necessity of progressive African Americanism. Naylor's

portrayal of the Linden Hills community also treats poverty and wealth comparatively.

However, her antagonist's blending of anti-Africanism, strategic individualism, folk culture, and

perverted community ethos, when compared with her young protagonist's hopeful idealism and

longing for the unification of his professional aspirations and cultural relationship, presents

African American communities at crossroads. Thus, I contend that both novelists see class

unification as of paramount importance. Chapter Five of this work examines Percival Everett's

Erasure and Alice Randall's *Rebell Yell*. Both novels present characters who acknowledge the

damaging effects of Africanism, and both explore the dangers of contemporary postracialism,

which enables Africanism to continue to exist. Everett critiques discourses of authenticity from

both white and black communities. His protagonist's psychological journey leads him to see his

total dismissal of racial constructs as unrealistic. Randall attempts to present positive and

negative versions of postracialism through her presentation of her protagonists Hope and Abel.

While she effectively illustrates the impact of a postracialism that eschews collectivity, her

presentation of positive postrcaialism inadequately addresses the racial realities for both the

black majority and the middle class. Nonetheless, these two texts reaffirm the continued

necessity for collectivity and individualism at our contemporary moment.

CHAPTER ONE
Class Consciousness and Honor: Africanist Appropriations in Chesnutt and Griggs

While the post-Reconstruction era can hardly be judged wholly according to contemporary standards of cultural and racial egalitarianism, a look at the African American literary landscape throughout the early twentieth century reveals the economic, social, racial, and moral transformations and upheavals that wrought a different America—and a New Negro—that shapes contemporary ways of examining these categories. The ideology of racial uplift was a dominant theme within novels of the first three decades of the twentieth century. The novels attempt to combat the "scientific" theories of eugenicists and racialized dichotomies of superiority and inferiority that were propagated through works such as Thomas Dixon's *Klan Trilogy*. African American writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois , and Booker T. Washington sought to correct the time-honored beliefs that " in memory [African Americans] are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior," as well as the common notions that African Americans are analogous to animals, as Thomas Jefferson so memorably articulates in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (265-266).

Because these artists and social activists insisted on the humanity and intellectual capacity of African Americans and because much attention has been paid—and continues to be paid—to the presence of and response to white hegemony, the critical lens can now explore the complexity of African American identities and the intraracial relationships that inform African American cultures and communities. Though I argue that African Diasporic Literature is always in conversation with the lingering ideology of white hegemony, in this chapter, as in this entire work, I will shift from exploring the external white gaze as a product of the hegemonic society,

to the internalized white gaze that informs African Americans' relationships with each other. In other words, how do African Americans view other African Americans? What is the legacy of white hegemony within African American psyches and African American texts that manifests itself both consciously and unconsciously? Because an internalized white gaze may manifest itself in many ways and because the multicultural experience that is America results in values and characteristics that reflect different cultural communities, the ingestion of hegemonic values can be difficult to identify. However, the internalized white gaze, for African Americans, is the intellectual acceptance that African Americans' cultures, physical characteristics, and sense of morality are inferior to that of whites. While the embrace of characteristics such as linguistic features, clothing, habits, or customs may or may not reflect an internalized racial and cultural hierarchy, the use of those characteristics as reflections of superior and inferior humanity by African Americans represents self-hatred. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* will be central to my analysis, for it explores the Africanism within white American texts that consists of "narrative gearshifts—metaphors; summoning; rhetorical gestures of triumph, despair, and closure dependent on the acceptance of the associative language of dread and love that accompanies blackness" (x). Because blackness, whether in the context of black bodies or other associations, has been historically viewed pejoratively, African American authors have themselves been inundated with hegemonic racial definitions. Thus, many African American texts, wrought in the same racial and social furnace as their white counterparts, exhibit similar stigmatized notions of blackness.

In this chapter, I will explore such Africanism within Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio,* as I see it mainly functioning within

intraracial class relationships between the African American middle class and the black majority. The intraracial class conflicts arise when African Americans articulate who they are as people and how they can best succeed in the United States, considering its racial history. Griggs's and Chesnutt's texts, published in 1899 and 1901 respectively, illuminate the tension that African Americans felt toward the "Old Negro," who represents the unintelligent, fawning, subservient image of African Americans, and the "New Negro." In *A New Negro For a New Century,* Booker T. Washington contends, "When the war came to a close in 1865 a large portion of the American people regarded the Afro-American people 'as less than man, yet more than brute.' They had no faith in the possibility of his mental or moral regeneration" (79). Therefore, figures like Washington, Chesnutt, and Griggs sought to erase the older image that defined what it meant to be an African American both to mainstream white America and within the African American community. Griggs articulates this best in *Imperium in Imperio*, noting that "The cringing, fawning, sniffling, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared, and a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand" (46). Often members of the middle class, who saw themselves as reflective of the "New Negro," viewed members of the black majority as Old Negroes. Though after World War I, Alain Locke would redefine the term "New Negro," designating Washington's assimilationist ideology and social paternalism, as reflective of the "Old Negro," at the dawn of the twentieth century the image of the "New Negro" insisted on the humanity and intellectual capacity of African Americans.

At the crux of the tension between the Old and New Negroes is the social stratification within the African American community that was based on education, occupation, and economics, which often led to the fetishization—or mimicry—of whiteness for the African

American middle class, as its members appropriated the destructive white gaze. Those same values, beliefs, and social customs that were elevated as socially correct and acceptable by white society and middle class African Americans became the standard by which African Americans, who are lower in the social hierarchy, are judged. Within Griggs's and Chesnutt's texts, Africanism reveals itself through an economy of honor that was originally reserved for southern white males. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown lists the important elements of honor as the following:

> (1) Honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the characters of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances. (*Southern* 34)

Though the "tragic flaws" of the code of honor "were essentially the stratified ascriptions of human inheritance: male over female, white over black (in the whites' world), age over youth—and the powerful over the helpless," both Griggs and Chesnutt adapted the concept of honor to fit the circumstances of their African American characters (Wyatt-Brown *Shaping* 303). African American demonstrations of honor naturally lend themselves to manifestations of internalized white hegemony. Thus, the ambiguity with which honor and the concept of the progressive "New Negro" are used within *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Imperium in Imperio* illuminate elements of Africanism.

What is a Black Man to Charles Chesnutt?

Within the *Marrow of Tradition,* Chesnutt crafts two very dissimilar African American figures whose status within the community, personal ideologies, and interaction with each other not only reflect divergent notions of honor, but also illuminate a degree of Africanism that complicates the desire for social uplift that both Chesnutt and his primary protagonist William Miller proclaim. In this novel, I argue that Chesnutt continues a pattern of ambivalence toward the black majority that is evident in his short story collections, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, and in his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars.* The relationship between Rena Walden and the doting laborer Frank in *The House Behind the Cedars*—which has similarities to the relationship between William Miller and Josh Green in *The Marrow of Tradition*—reflects a degree of Africanist class-consciousness. Therefore, examining this work through the lens of honor, I extend the argument of Addison Gayle, Eric Sundquist, Susan Danielson, and Gregory Rutledge, who all to varying degrees, assert that the treatment of Miller and Green in the novel illustrates a tension between Chesnutt's own class pretensions and sympathy for the plight of the black majority.[3] Despite this tension, I contend, that Chesnutt problematically privileges Africanism.

Though he is the son of a former slave turned tradesman, Miller's life choices are constructed according to several of Wyatt-Brown's tenets of southern honor. Though he is not

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[3] Addison Gayle argues that Chesnutt is attempting to establish the image of the New Negro, who moves away from the fawning subservient status of African Americans in the past. According to Gayle, Green most closely represents the New Negro, as he is willing to use "the tools of the oppressor" to combat oppression (56). Eric Sundquist traces the history of the cakewalk and discuses its emergence as both African American folkways and minstrelsy, which are significant as they relate to Chesnutt's own discomfort with African American folkways and white racism. Susan Danielson contends that despite Chesnutt's investment in assimilationism, he crafts Dr. Miller's middle-class attitudes as, in some ways, commensurate with Africanism. Gregory Rutledge maintains that Green signals Chesnutt's turn from the talented tenth idea to look at the black masses as an avenue for success.

particularly valorous, as his encounter with the vehemently racist Captain McBane on the train

and his refusal to join Josh Green's band during the riot reveal, he does attempt to defend male

integrity.   He is dedicated to his position as protector of his family, and he is a paternal figure to

his community, as his resolve to dissuade Josh Green from his plans to take revenge on McBane

and his efforts to save Sandy demonstrate. Furthermore, he takes an unspoken but clearly visible

oath, as with his talent he could have escaped the deep-seated racism of the South, but "his

people had needed him, and he had wished to help them, and sought by means of this institution

[his hospital] to contribute to their uplifting" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 51). Wyatt-Brown makes it

clear that honor depends on public conceptions of personal value, and the importance that Miller

places on the opinion of others and his reliance on "physical appearance" as "signs of inner

merit" are the most important aspects of Chesnutt's construction of Miller's honor that reveal the

protagonist's class consciousness and his acceptance of white America's standard of evaluating

nonwhite cultures (Wyatt-Brown, *Southern* 34).   Though on the surface honor may result in

positive or socially productive thoughts and actions, it is never an untroubled concept, for

individual honor depends on social hierarchies and perceptions of others that are always in flux.

Miller's concern for public perceptions of his character is not unnatural, but his dependence on

the opinions of whites—who will always see him as Other—makes honor a difficult concept.

For Miller, as an African American, the quest for honor is even more problematic because the

American incarnation of honor has as intrinsic to it racial and cultural signifiers of black

inferiority and white superiority. His blackness places him at the bottom of the honor hierarchy.

Therefore, Miller judges himself and other African Americans according to a standard that he

can approach but never attain, and he takes his approximation to this hegemonic standard as license to evaluate his fellow African Americans.

William Miller illustrates a desire to reconcile his social and professional status as a talented physician with white public opinion that functions within a worldview that relegates all African Americans to the status of an inferior. With this, he meets with mixed success. His fellow physicians, all of whom are white, seem to acknowledge his ability and good character, as do the gentlemanly Mr. Delamere and the members of the African American community. However, Major Carteret, who sees white honor as central to his being, dismisses Miller potentially at the peril of his only child in an early chapter of the novel because his race precludes him from Carteret's notion of honor or worth. Furthermore, all of the other doctors, with the exception of Dr. Burns, see his race as the last barrier to an unconditional professional relationship, which has implications for how they view his honor. These hegemonic ideas were central to white configurations of honor. As Eric Sundquist notes, "Converging with a national interest in the purity of racial stock and the ancestral sources of contemporary fitness to survive the Darwinian social struggle, southern worship of genealogy was driven specially by the need to recreate the aura of aristocratic greatness supposedly smashed by the Civil War" (Sundquist 408). However, instead of bloodlines, which were central to conferring honor in southern white communities, the idea of honor was modified in the African American community, as African ancestry would automatically preclude it. Instead, Chesnutt utilizes contemporary discussions of civilization— as a collection of attributes that are acquired such as education, class consciousness, or social mores— that are internalized and made part of an individual's very

being. These attributes must be visible from physical characteristics, discernible from behavior, and recognized by the community.

Civilization is a loaded concept that for Chesnutt and his contemporaries was very important in articulations of African American identity. Booker T. Washington perhaps has the most clear articulation of what it means to have civilization. In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, he discusses the process of inculcating this high ideal in his Tuskegee students. While education and religion were central to conceptions of civilization, Washington also explains how the teachers at his institution had to provide instruction on the rudiments of bathing, combing hair, choosing clothing to wear, and even how to sleep between the sheets of their beds. An individual's level of civilization was rooted in his or her most basic habits, hygiene, and preferences. Washington's premise functions under the assumptions that there is a proper way to engage in such basic activities. Washington's view of civilization is also echoed in Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" and *Dusk of Dawn.* Du Bois questions, "What under the present circumstance must a system of education do in order to raise the Negro as quickly as possible in the scale of civilization? The answer to this question seems to me clear: It must strengthen the Negro's character, increase his knowledge and teach him to earn a living" (853). Du Bois and Washington believe that African American's deficiency in civilization not only reveals itself in "poor" personal habits, but it is also evident in poor moral character and the lack of intellectual development. Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South* also explores the notion of civilization. Although she argues that "[t]he supremacy of one race,—the deposition of class or the tyranny of an individual cannot ultimately prevail on a continent held in equilibrium by such conflicting forces and by so many and such strong fibred races as there are struggling on this

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[American] soil," she also states and reiterates that European civilizations are superior to Asian civilization and posits that American civilization has the potential to surpass that of Europe (Cooper 167). She does not even mention African civilizations in her hierarchy. Moreover, most of her allusions to laudable characteristics of civilization come from European models. After disparaging Asian civilizations, Cooper insists, " it is pleasing to turn from this effete and immobile civilization to a society still fresh and vigorous, whose seed is in itself, and whose very name is synonymous with all that is progressive, elevating and inspiring, viz., the European bud and the American flower of modern civilization" (11). Furthermore, she makes allusions to Virgil, Homer, Milton, Chaucer, references literature about old Norse gods, and attributes the "high regard for woman" that "is bearing such rich and varied fruit" in Europe and America to feudalism (Cooper 13). Cooper's approach to civilization seems a bit ambivalent. She seems to at once accept cultural equality, while also investing in a hierarchy of "good" civilizations.[4] Pauline Hopkins also takes an ambivalent approach to civilization in her fiction.

The narrator of Hopkins's novel *Contending Forces* applauds the ability of segments of African Americans who are under financial constraints "to educate their children and give them a few of the refinements of living,—such as cultivating a musical talent, gratifying a penchant for languages, or for carving, or for any of the arts of a higher civilization, so common among the whites, but supposed to be beyond the reach of a race just released from a degrading bondage" (86). However, upon one of her characters mentioning the virtue of African women, one of her female protagonists, Dora, questions, "So we have sacrificed that attribute in order to acquire

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[4] Prior to modern critiques of the assumption of white racial dominance, culture and civilization were thought of in very different ways. The word culture, much like today, was assumed to be an identifying marker of all social, communal, and even racial groups. Every group had its own culture that was reflected through a community's behaviors, norms, and values. In contrast, civilization was something that not all social groups had attained. It was marked by a privileging of certain kinds of knowledge, behavior, aesthetic values, and standards that were thought to be primarily the domain of white Western European communities or nations.

civilization" (Hopkins 149). Hopkins's implication here is that there is value in African

civilization and that the African American's quest to become "civilized" according to white

standards may forfeit other qualities that are just as valid. Despite this glimmer of defense for

alternate visions of civilizations that are not European or white American, Hopkins's novel does

seem to accept the hierarchal version of civilization.

All these literary figures share conceptions of civilization as a quality that is either absent

in African American communities or inferior in quality. Though some of these figures see

slavery and its legacy as the culprits that deprive African Americans of civilization, they are at a

minimum ambivalent about and at most dismissive of any civilizations that do not have roots in

the West. Therefore, civilization seems to be something outside of the unrefined black body and

black communities. Thus, each of these literary texts seeks to inculcate a degree of civilization

within African Americans that whites will recognize. Thus not only does Chesnutt's protagonist

seem to acknowledge Booker T. Washington's notion that " no white American ever thinks that

any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man's clothes, eats the white man's

food, speaks the white man's language, and professes the white man's religion," he, like the

African Americans of the time, also seems to embrace such appropriation of whiteness (*Up From

Slavery* 68).

It is very important for Miller that his fellow citizens recognize his value and that he

distinguishes himself from other African Americans who have not attained such a high degree of

civilization. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha describes a process of colonial mimicry

which "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, [to function] *as a subject of a difference

that is almost the same, but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is

constructed around an *ambivalence*" (122). Moreover, "the authority of that mode of colonial discourse" Bhabha continues, "is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy" (122). Miller's mimicry of white social norms leaves him in such an indeterminate space. Chesnutt emphasizes this: as Miller muses, "when a colored man should demonstrate to the community in which he lived that he possessed character and power"— which he obviously argues that he has done within his community—"that community would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 65). Here, Chesnutt seems to be presenting Miller as an example of Washingtonian philosophy. Washingtonian ideology, which was pervaded with accommodationist sentiment toward whites, has as its main goal the inculcation of civilization within the black majority. Within his texts, including *Up From Slavery,* Washington emphasizes how the deprivations of slave*y* have deprived the black man of the ability to—and, for some, the desire to—live up to the dictates of civilization. As noted earlier, Washington argued that instruction in basic hygiene was necessary for African Americans to attain civilization, even insisting that the toothbrush is one of the most powerful "agencies of civilizations" (*Up From Slavery* 52). Therefore, a concept of civilization that is based on notions of white superiority invalidates behaviors, beliefs, clothing, and even habits from non-white cultures. Kelly Miller, a prominent Howard University professor, argued in his 1899 speech to the Alumni Association of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute: "The seeds of civilization will take root in any soil; but unless a people possess the inner qualification, it makes no difference where their lot is cast, they can only serve as 'dumb driven cattle,' and are a bilght [sic] to any land afflicted with their presence" (Kelly Miller 18). Though both Chesnutt and Kelly Miller, like Washington, Du Bois, Cooper, and Hopkins, attempt to remove the racial

components from their hierarchy of civilization in favor of consciously acquired values, there

still remains in their assertions an Africanist tinge. While blackness as a signifier has been

removed from their term of value, i.e. civilization, civilization remains a problematic term, as

naturally it implies that the infrastructure and cultural traditions of African American

communities and by extension African societies lack validity or significant value. It is not the

cultivation of the consciously acquired values in itself or the material reflections of those values

that is important: what is significant is the acceptance of black inferiority that is implied by such

consumption.

What Miller calls civilization is permeated with hegemonic principles about what makes

a culture or a group good or bad. William Miller asserts essentially that African Americans must

prove to whites that they are civilized, which illuminates the limits of African American

character in white estimations. Just as historically blackness signifies a void of character,

intelligence, beauty, even humanity, the need to prove civilization—which necessarily means

acquiring signifiers of whiteness—reveals a deficiency in the being of all African Americans.

Within the novel, Miller is uncomfortable with characters such as Josh Green who refuse to

accept his notion of civilization. Miller's seeking of public acknowledgment of his character by

whites is not negative in and of itself; it is the futility behind seeking such acknowledgment—

which only seems to bear fruit at the close of the novel with the Carterets' plea for help—and

judging others by a racist cultural hierarchy that is destructive. As an example of the civilized

"New Negro" who exhibits honor, Miller admits, "The qualities which in a white man would win

the applause of the world would in a negro be taken as the markers of savagery. So thoroughly

diseased was public opinion in matters of race that the negro who died for the common rights of

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humanity may look for no meed of admiration or glory" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 295-296). His need

to be accepted by the white community precludes physical valor in the riot or any assertion of a

determined will in relation to the racial disparities. He is even against the *Afro-American*

Banner's exposure of the false premise of many lynchings. Ultimately he does not want to

"endanger [the] truce and defeat the hope of a possible future friendship" between the racial

factions in his community (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 278). Honor, in this regard, means that he will

quietly guide his people toward civilization, serving as an African American example of

masculinity that is neither servile to whites nor visibly dangerous to their hegemonic way of life.

Hence, Miller's dependence on public opinion leaves him impotent and illuminates a failure of

Chesnutt to confront Africanism.

Many scholars including Eric Sundquist, Stephen Knadler, and SallyAnn Ferguson argue

that Chesnutt's project is designed to emphasize to whites that racial recognition is too arbitrary

and malleable a quality to assign values of worth. However, if, as Stephen Knadler posits in

"Untragic Mulatto," Chesnutt strives to "deprive [whites] the privilege of whiteness" and to

"expos[e] Anglo-Saxon identity as a rhetorical performance," in doing so his characters also

expose this performance as one in which African Americans should desire to participate (427,

429). The definition of Anglo-Saxon identity shifts according to the identity politics of the

person who defines it. Anglo-Saxon is a broad term that historically references all (white) people

whose lineage extends back to pre-Norman conquest Britain. Anglo-Saxon identity had an

ethnic component—originally referring to groups such as Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—and later a

religious component that focused on Protestantism. Though assimilation and increased

interaction with white immigrant groups eventually diffused tension between Anglo-Saxons and

other groups, at the turn of the century, Anglo-Saxon identity, to white Americans, often

excluded Irish immigrants as well as Jewish immigrants.   Often the Irish and the Jews were

caricatured in similar animalistic ways as African Americans.   Though much easier for these

excluded physically white groups, they also had to perform an Anglo-Saxon identity that

emphasized their difference from non-white ethnic groups. White supremacists of the time saw

Anglo-Saxon identity as the domain solely of whites. To African Americans such as Chesnutt,

Anglo-Saxon identity could be stripped of its racial component and acquired through proximity

and appropriation. Despite Miller's attempts to perform, his relationships with his immediate

white community evidence the difficulty that is inherent in removing skin color from Anglo-

Saxon identity. Though I think that Anglo-Saxon identity can exist without the hegemonic

implication of whiteness as indicative of cultural, social and racial superiority, the privilege of

whiteness remains central to conceptions of Anglo-Saxon identity; therefore, claiming an Anglo-

Saxon identity for African Americans means accepting the dynamics of superiority and

inferiority—and again the futility of never being able to fully represent such an identity.

Just as Miller has a deep concern for what other people think of him, which requires him

to conform to and perform whiteness as best he can, he has an equally troubling conviction that

individuals' physical appearance mirrors inner qualities of worth. This concept illustrates,

further, the problematic implications of his interest in white public opinion. It is not just that he

accepts the standards of Anglo-Saxon identity that inform how people talk, dress, think, and

behave; it is that those standards mark such expressions of identity as good or bad. While every

culture evaluates others, the social, political, educational, and fiscal dominance that accompanies

whiteness is negative.   The standards by which Miller judges himself and others are culturally

exclusive, invalidating all nonwhite cultures. Dr. Price notes Miller's merit, considering him "too much of a gentleman for the town in view of the restrictions with which he must inevitably be hampered. There was something melancholy, to a cultivated mind, about a sensitive, educated man who happened to be off color. Such a person was a sort of social misfit, an old quantity, educated out of his own social class, with no possible hope of entrance into that above it" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 75). With the first description of William Miller, the narrator remarks on his similarity to the more refined elements of white society. The narrator details a specific comparison between Miller and Dr. Burns, noting among other things that "both seemed from their faces and their manners to be of culture and accustomed to the society of cultivated people" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 49). This implies that Miller socializes frequently with middle class African Americans who share his values and perhaps with whites who represent the principles of civilization that are important to him. Miller's physical attributes are catalogued, from his clothes to his build to his teeth. Chesnutt's litany of attributes which are intended to show Miller's worth only serve as reminders of the slave auction block where black bodies were bought and sold based on what their physicality revealed about their capability and personality. This description is also reminiscent of eugenicists' quests to find scientific explanations that validate theories of racial difference according to physical traits.

Even more revealing, the narrator first makes a distinction of skin complexion, noting that Miller is not black—"more correctly speaking, [he is] brown; it was even a light brown" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 49). In the paragraph that follows, the narrator classifies this protagonist a "mulatto" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 49). The distinction between brown and black would initially seem arbitrary and unnecessary, but Chesnutt's discussion of skin color (which I will address

below) in his essays reveals that these descriptions are more important.   While this emphasis on

Miller's complexion could yield a greater discussion of miscegenation and passing that would

provide interesting commentary on Africanism within African American works, it not my focus

here. Yet, skin complexion is interesting in my discussion, as it reflects both Chesnutt's and his

character's effort to stress difference and stratification within the African American community,

which translate into the desire to move away from negative "blackness" toward the positive

position of whiteness as a means to attaining civilization and reflect honor. Charles Chesnutt

reflects this sentiment in his journal on March 16, 1880.   The author laments that "There is

something romantic, to the Northern mind, about the Southern negro, as commonplace and

vulgar as he seems to us who come in contact with him every day" (20). Here Chesnutt clearly

disassociates himself from many of his fellow African Americans, but he also seems to assert an

investment in the South, or at least in southern aristocratic class sensibility. Chesnutt's wish to

distance himself from the Southern Negro is less applicable to members of the African American

middle class in that region than to representatives of the black majority, who do not reflect the

proper level of civilization. Like other African Americans of the day, Chesnutt and his Dr.

Miller seem to on the one hand to argue that civilization as a precept of honor can be

cultivated—certainly the reprobates Captain McBane and Jerry the porter are examples of lack of

honor and civilization—yet the emphasis on skin complexion as a representation of value signals

that such qualities are in some measure dependent on skin color, which is unalterable and

natural.

Chesnutt seemingly confirms a privileging of whiteness in his May 30, 1889 essay "What

is a White Man?" in *The Independent.*   Chesnutt insists "there has arisen in the United States a

very large class of population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense, and whose children will be no nearer Negroes than themselves" ("White Man" 24-25). Such a statement leads to the question: why make such a distinction between the "genuine Negro," as he calls them, and those who are of visible mixed racial heritage (Chesnutt, "White Man" 25)?   Though Chesnutt's point in the essay is to explore how arbitrarily different states have applied legal definitions of blackness, these claims, coupled with the earlier statement from his journal, underscore the ambiguity of Chesnutt and his novel. Chesnutt sees his project as one of uplift, but he is uncomfortable with comparisons of people like himself, who have attained civilization, to other African Americans who have not. If Chesnutt is questioning the effectiveness of racial economies, he is not questioning the idea of cultural hierarchies.   Unlike Sally Ann Ferguson in her "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans," I would not argue that "Chesnutt, as his essay shows, is essentially a social and literary accommodationist who pointedly and repeatedly confines his reformist impulses to the 'colored people'—a term that he almost always applies either to color-line blacks or those of mixed races" (429). I would argue that Josh Green's presence in the narrative, and the sympathy that Miller expresses toward Green's revolutionary sentiments, would preclude such a determination. Furthermore, Chesnutt places Miller within an African American community, where the bulk of people whom he serves more closely resemble Green than himself. Yet, Chesnutt's classifications here are disturbing as they reveal his struggle to reconcile his notions of honor and civilization, which he sees as indicative of his own middle-class status and social mobility, with the stifling presence of Africanism. Thus, Dr. William Miller is a reflection of such a challenge.

In addition to the protagonist's desire to be identified according to what he believes his physical bearing demonstrates, he also classifies other African Americans according to the same hegemonic standard. According to Wyatt-Brown, "The greater the space along the moral and social continuum, the more the respect due the higher, the less the regard owed the lower. Being affable and condescending was required of the man with rank, but clearly the lower the subject of such attention was, the less solicitous one had to be" (*Southern* 63-64). With this in mind, it is clear that Miller sees both his education and financial status as evidence of his social superiority. As a representative of the African American middle class, whom one would gladly count as a member of the talented tenth, Miller resents undiscriminating social classifications that would automatically relegate him to the same social milieu as the African American masses. In *Black Skins White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes the position of the educated person of color: "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportions to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). Though Fanon's work utilizes examples from his homeland in the Antilles, his analysis is applicable to the colonized black experience everywhere. Though his work comes much later than Chesnutt's fiction, his theories are most applicable during Miller's journey back to the South. After the conductor expels him from the "white" train car and relegates him to the dirty car designated for African Americans, he muses, "it would be cheaper, and quite as considerate of their feelings to, to make negroes walk" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 56). Though not pleased with his accommodations, he becomes even more disconcerted when he is joined by the "noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty and malodorous" group of African American passengers (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 60). Initially, he watches "his people" "amused and pleased" by their behavior

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(Chesnutt, *Marrow* 60). His voyeurism further marks his distance from the African American masses. To him, they are like children to him whose behavior, though not destructive, is hardly up to the stands of maturity. Accepting the paternalistic role that whites have traditionally taken toward African Americans, Miller sees it as his duty to uplift his people. As Wyatt-Brown argues, as early as the eighteenth century, "[o]n the one hand there was a growing awareness of the differences in culture between [members of the upper ranks of the social hierarchy] and those far below; on the other there was a greater desire for involvement with the uplift of the poor" (67). Clearly nineteenth—and early twentieth—century notions of honor that were accepted by southern whites and appropriated by African Americans like Miller evolved from this appreciation for uplift. Mirroring Mr. Delamere's assertions of responsibility to all slaves who were raised by his family, Miller exhibits a similar responsibility when he builds his hospital, attempts to steer Josh Green from vice, and rushes to Sandy's aid when he is unjustly accused of murder. Though each of these paternalistic choices is positive for his community, they are indicative of his feelings of superiority that result from his civilization. This sense of superiority, which is not always evident in the acts themselves, is always evident in his treatment of and evaluation of members of the black majority.

Feelings of paternalism are mingled with unease as the social mixing gradually leads to Miller's feeling repulsed by his fellow passengers. He reflects, "[P]ersonally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train. Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon some more logical and considerate basis than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and, by the very nature of things, brutal drawing on the color-line" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 61). Miller's

feelings here highlight the extent of his ingestion of cultural and social hegemony. Just like the

train car in which segregation forces him to ride, Miller's fellow passengers are dirty and

uncouth, below his dignity. Miller has a more favorable reaction to the possibility that he would

share his car with a dog rather than his fellow African Americans. Again, Chesnutt's sentiment

is not novel for his historical moment, as Professor Kelly Miller echoes it in his speech:

"Civilization is a centrifugal and not a centripetal process. It cannot be injected hypodermically.

Healthy growth cannot be secured by feeding a child when he is not hungry, or by forcing upon

him a diet which he can neither digest nor assimilate" (Miller 9). Kelly Miller's analogy of a

child being force-fed resembles the common reference by white America to the childlike quality

of African Americans.   Like Chesnutt, Professor Miller believes that all African Americans

should desire and strive for civilization, which means that they should accept cultural

hierarchies. Though personal cultural hierarchies are in a sense inescapable—individuals always

believe that their way of life is superior to others—it does become problematic when one culture

controls the national infrastructure that impacts every facet of the lives of those groups that are

not in control. Dominance of cultural hierarchies is even more problematic when it is partially

predicated on biological physical difference. Kelly Miller's call to civilization is not a dispute of

white dominance; it is an attempt remove race, alone, from the power dynamics. Miller's fellow

passengers seem unconcerned about their lack of civilization. However, the lack of desire for

civilization, Kelly Miller suggests, is a sign of immaturity. Chesnutt is embracing the sentiment

if not the language of southern honor that perpetuates the same racial barriers that place true

honor out of reach. Therefore, there is irony when a poor white citizen who searches Miller's

person and property explains, "Sorry to have had to trouble you, doctuh, but them's the o'ders.

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It ain't men like you that we're after, but the vicious and criminal class of niggers" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 289). Though he knows that "he could have bought all the man owned for fifty dollars," and though the man does recognize Miller's exceptionalism, as he is a "man" while other African Americans are "niggers," Miller's appearance dictates his treatment just as the appearance and behavior of the train passengers dictate theirs (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 289).   Blackness, as William Miller finds, is more significant to whites than clear reflections of what white America and middle-class African Americans call civilization.   Despite his sense of his own honor, Miller is not at the top of the hierarchy by which he judges his fellow train car passengers and neighbors.

Despite the vast differences that would on the face of things separate William Miller from Josh Green, Green, like his counterpart, also embraces a concept of honor, although it is exhibited in different ways. Though Chesnutt first introduces Green as "the "dust-begrimed negro who had stolen a ride to Wellington on the trucks of a passenger car," his status as one of the poverty-stricken black masses does not preclude him from honor (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 109). Wyatt-Brown addresses African American honor in his book *The Shaping of Southern Culture,* in which he notes that the West African communities from which American slaves were taken were "honor and shame societies" like the society of the American South (11).   Though the characteristics of honor had to be adapted to the circumstances of American slavery and greatly depended on a slave's personality and his slave environment, many of its attributes were carried over to the American context. Even during slavery honor existed for some African Americans. Whether it was expressed through clothing, rebellion, sabotage, "[m]ale honor was richly prized in the quarters, and defense of it established rank among fellow slaves" (Wyatt-Brown, *Shaping* 26). If codes of honor can exist within the appalling circumstances of slavery, Josh Green's post-

Reconstruction honor-bound existence should not be surprising. Nonetheless, Chesnutt attempts

to temper Green's honor with a visual description emphasizing his size and appearance. The

narrator describes him as "good-natured, somewhat reckless, and pleasure-loving," which is in

line with Thomas Jefferson's opinion that for African American "existence appears to participate

more of sensation than reflection" among other references to the childlike, animalistic quality of

the race (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 59; Jefferson 265). Moreover, in every instance in which Green is

mentioned, the narrator or characters note either his large hulking body or his close relationship

to violence.   Both his stature and propensity for violence are reminiscent of the image of the

menacing and sexually potent big black "buck," who possesses brute strength and inexplicable

anger. Chesnutt comes dangerously close to Africanist images that racists such as Thomas

Dixon utilized. Despite such characterization, Green is not irreparably diminished in the text; he

unashamedly resembles the passengers on the train with Miller.

If "honor, as a matter of hierarchy, was related to the distribution of powers along class

lines," Green subverts such notions of honor, undermining the power of white hierarchies as well

as African American hierarchies that are dependent on the ideology of superior and inferior

cultures (Wyatt-Brown, *Southern* 35). I would reiterate that honor, in the West African context,

southern American context, and the American slave context, did depend on hierarchies, which in

and of itself complicates the veneer of positivity that exists in relation to honor and underscores

the inescapability of hierarchies.   However, Green's sense of honor does differ from Miller's

because he does not judge people by racist standards, nor does his honor depend on

acknowledgment by the white community from which he is automatically and irreparably

excluded. Green's existence, unlike that of his counterpart, is one of transgression. His first

action in the novel illustrates this. With his unlawful negotiation of transportation back to Wellington, Green unconsciously removes himself from the racist consumer and service economies that help to bolster hierarchies of wealth and poverty, superior and inferior, and refuses to participate in society's penchant for categorization that is based on arbitrary factors such as race, physical appearance, and economic status. Therefore, he functions outside of paradigms that classify people as white or colored, which society treats as essential to social interactions; classifications such as Miller's, which depend on one's degree of civilization, are also ignored. Green expresses little concern for the opinion of white society, as he is seemingly a notorious figure within that community. In contrast to the well-manicured visage and person of Miller, whose entire goal is to emphasize the sameness between him and his white fellow citizens, Green's presence in the novel argues that wholesale acceptance of white hegemony is not necessarily a prerequisite for racial uplift.

Despite the differences that mark his sense of honor, Green exhibits other qualities that are central to manifestations of southern honor. Green functions according to a resolute will that reveals an internal sense of justice and character. Chesnutt illustrates this when Sandy's lynching looms; Green remonstrates, "But look a-here, Mr. Watson,—Dr. Miller, is we-all jes' got ter set down here, widout openin' ou' mouths, an' let dese w'ite folks hange er bu'n a man w'at we *know* ain' guilty" Dat ain't no law, ner jestice, ner nothin'! Ef you-all won't he'p, I'll do somethin' myse'f! " (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 189). Though he hopes that Watson, the African American lawyer, and Miller, as representatives of African American civilization and progress, will share his imperative to act, his decision to do so is not dependent on them, whether he must work within or outside of the judicial system. The importance of oath taking is also present in the

character of Green. He explains to Miller, "Some lives fer one thing an' some fer another, but dat's my job" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 111). His "job" is to exact justice on Captain McBane for the lynching of his father and the insanity of his mother. Intertwined with this oath is his sense of the roles of masculinity. Wyatt-Brown also confirms this as an element of southern honor, noting, "Intimately related to brave conduct and a capacity for hatred was family protectiveness" *(Southern* 35). Chesnutt suggests this first when Green admits that he did not kill the sailor who hurled racial insults at him because "he might have somebody dependin' on 'im, an' I knows how dat 'd be ter dem" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 110). The idea of protecting femininity and familial dependents is a concept that Green values. He also has someone dependent upon him, so he cannot live up to his oath until his mother's death. Though Green's relationship with his mother, as well as his need to protect African Americans during the riot exhibit a degree of paternalism, his actions are not dependent on considerations of a racial hierarchy.

The riots mark both the realization of Green's oath and the capstone of his valorous existence. Here again, Chesnutt seems to confront and transform another hallmark of southern honor. Within the concept of southern honor,

> The use of physical force flourished at all levels of society. . . [there]was [a]
> social necessity for men of all ranks to preserve white manhood and personal
> status in the fraternity of the male tribe to which all belonged. Through violence a
> degree of proximate stability was created, the balance wheel of race, order, and
> rank maintained, and the values that Victor Turner has called *communitas* were
> upheld. (Wyatt-Brown, *Southern* 368-369)

Racial loyalty is central here. Therefore, Josh Green confronts white hegemony with black

collectivity when he gathers a band of armed African Americans during the riot, declaring, "De

w'ite foks are killin' de niggers, an' we ain' gwine ter stan' up an' be shot down like dogs.

We're gwine ter defen' ou' lives, an' we ain' gwine ter run away f'm no place where we've got a

right ter be" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 281). Whereas Miller seems to rule out African American

violence, even when provoked, as means to achieve racial uplift, believing that it would be only

"interpreted in terms of savagery," Green, like Southern whites, sees it as a viable option to

redress injustices (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 296). Here Chesnutt contradicts his message of

assimilation, which some critics see more strongly as a message of racial agglomeration.[5] Green

is asserting through his show of force a protective African American community ethos that

functions outside the stewardship of whites or, for that matter, of African American leaders who

derive their power from the appropriation of whiteness. In this way, it seems that Chesnutt

inadvertently confronts Africanist assertions of black masculinity that see black revolt as devoid

of rationality or intellectual potency. Thus, Josh Green's brand of honor insists on a new form of

African American subjectivity that counters Africanist presentations of African Americans as

well as emphasizing the limits of Miller's subjectivity, as his sense of himself as a subject is

dependent on whether white public opinion is able to see past his race.

       Chesnutt is clearly critical of blatant forms of Africanism that inform the "Old Negro"

images of fawning servants, whom he dismisses as remnants of slavery. Mammy Jane and Sandy

represent these figures, who derive satisfaction as well as status from their close association with

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[5]In his essay "The Future American," published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on August 18, 1900, Chesnutt declares that the racial makeup of America will be an agglomeration of the races that exist in its borders. Chesnutt makes it clear that there is no such thing as race purity, though white Americans would like to think that it does exist. He argues that the African American population, which is the only group that would make this process difficult, already contains a significant degree of racial mixture. By the third generation of intermarriage between African Americans and whites, the offspring would consider themselves white. This is significant because it reflects Chesnutt's desire to minimize difference.

whites who value southern honor. Chesnutt's treatment of them is commensurate with the place

that he feels they deserve. Jane, stern protector of Olivia Carteret and her progeny, keeper of

family secrets, and paragon of servility in the face of the "New Negro," begets the unscrupulous

Jerry, who trades all dignity for small rewards. In many ways, Jerry is then "The anti-New

Negro." Both Jerry and Jane are killed in a race riot started by their benefactors, Jane rushing to

care for the ailing Dodie Carteret and Jerry fleeing toward the mercy of the whites to whom he

has sold himself. Chesnutt treats Sandy more kindly, as he is only dispossessed of the protecting

hand of the Delamere clan after Mr. Delamere's death, as well of the modest financial

inheritance that his benefactor intends for him. Sandy is the only African American character

who expressly uses the word honor and describes his action in terms of such honor. Sandy is

willing to sacrifice his life "fer de sake of de fami'ly honuh" and in order to keep his oath to the

criminal Tom Delamere (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 162). Sandy reasons that "I wuz raise' by a

Delamere, suh, an' all de ole Delameres wuz gent'emen an' deir principles spread ter de niggers

'round 'em, such; an' ef I has ter die fer somethin' I did n' do, —I kin die, such like a

gent'eman!" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 208). Sandy's sense of honor is neither meant to show equality,

like Miller, nor to subvert dominant paradigms of racial inferiority, like Green. His sense of

honor is co-opted from the quality of his superiors rather than a tool that places him on equal

terms with those superiors. Therefore, Sandy represents the "Old Negro," who defines himself

according to Africanist constructions of black identity. Similarly, his employer's honor is a

remnant of southern honor that was in large measure perpetuated by the slave system from which

Sandy was emancipated. What Chesnutt posits through Sandy is that the older images of African

American character that lack a true realization of masculinity or femininity are defunct.

Marking an intermediate place between the "Old Negro" and the "New Negro" is the nameless young nurse who is informed of the privilege of serving the Carterets by Mammy Jane: "she had neither the picturesqueness of the slave, nor the unconscious dignity of those for whom freedom has been the immemorial birthright" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 42). Chesnutt dismisses her as being in the "chip-on-the-shoulder stage" of development because she sees little value in associations with whites other than in the reciprocal relationship of business—payment for service (*Marrow* 42). Though her presence in the novel is brief, she, like Green, views her personhood as independent of white society. The fact that Chesnutt would include the nurse, only in an effort to criticize her racial philosophy, serves as a critique of the Washingtonian philosophy of separate social spheres. It also emphasizes his view that racial isolationism and lingering African American resentment of past wrongs shows immaturity. Chesnutt clearly does not see either of these secondary characters as the representation of the twentieth century African American man. They are, however, ways for him to illuminate the Africanism that lurks in the texts of other authors. They are in stark contrast to both Miller and Green. Yet, Chesnutt's blatant confrontation of cultural hegemony in the characterization of Jane, Jerry, and Sandy only make his lapses of confrontation of such hegemony in the characterization in Miller and Green more glaring.

With the juxtaposition of William Miller and Josh Green, Chesnutt reveals interracial class conflict as well as an unselfconscious acceptance of a certain degree of Africanism within the text. Since Miller cannot escape the confines that blackness places on his personhood, his assertion of his class superiority—his advanced degree of civilization—is meaningless. Chesnutt approaches these two characters with a degree of ambivalence. Green is not the heroic

model of the "New Negro" that Chesnutt wants African Americans to follow. Chesnutt

champions the hero who is neither servile nor revolutionary, but more accommodationist.

Considering this, the value of Green's smiling death image is summed up with the Narrator's

lament, "One of the two [Green or McBane] died as a fool dieth. Which was it, or was it both?

'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord, and it had not been left to Him. But they that do violence

must expect to suffer violence" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 309). As both McBane and Green had lived

a life of violence and unbending—even malevolent, in McBane's case—will, they both seem to

be condemned equally. However, earlier in the text Miller observes, "When his race reached the

point where they would resent a wrong, there was hope that they might soon attain the stage

where they would try, and if need be, die, to defend a right" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 112). And

again, during the rio,t he is very sympathetic to Green's cause: "Very manly instinct urged him

to go forward and take up the cause of these leaderless people, and, if need be, to defend their

lives and their rights with his own" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 282). The contradiction between Green's

role in the novel and what the narrator portrays as an ignominious death becomes even more

curious in his essay "A Multitude of Counselors," in which Chesnutt condones Green's conduct

as well, maintaining that "[t]he colored people will instigate no race war. But when they are

attacked, they should defend themselves. When the Southern Negro reaches that high

conception of liberty that would make him rather die than submit to the lash, when he will meet

force with force, there will be an end to southern outrages" (Chesnutt 30). Thus, Miller's

reserved attraction to Green would seemingly be explained, except that the novel makes it clear

that Green should not be the example that African Americans should follow. On the surface, it

seems as if this ambiguity is a dispute between a gradualist approach to uplift and fiery

nationalism, but I argue that Chesnutt's dilemma is much more complex than that. I agree with

Marjorie George and Richard Pressman's contention that "the dark-complexioned Josh Green

might be seen as the nearly white William Miller's shadow—the dark emotional, angry, even

violent side of himself he would prefer not to acknowledge" (294). These two characters are

shadows of each other, but it is not just the emotional fury at the promises of America denied

that Miller wishes to hide in his shadow.

Houston Baker's definitions of "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" are

useful in the analysis of Chesnutt's message in *The Marrow of Tradition.* In his 1987 text

Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, Baker explores how figures such as Booker T.

Washington, Charles Chesnutt—in his earlier short fiction— and W.E.B. Du Bois represent

versions of African American modernism that subvert racist paradigms. Both Washington's and

Chesnutt's relationship to white America, Baker argues, represents a process called "mastery of

form," which involves embracing or aping the veneer of white culture in order to effect change

(Baker, *Modernism* 85-87).   In "mastery of form," African Americans appropriate the visual and

cultural representations of whiteness in order to subvert them for the people that whiteness

excludes. With mastery of form, an individual appears as the trickster or white-faced minstrel,

who performs whiteness or stereotypical blackness strategically.   Baker also advanced the idea

of "deformation of mastery."   Du Bois, unlike Washington and Chesnutt, exhibits a deformation

of mastery, that "refuses a master's *nonsense*. It returns—Often transmuting 'standard'

syllables—to the common sense of the tribe" (Baker, *Modernism 56*).   Deformation of mastery

allows African Americans to insist on subjectivity that is outside of racist concepts of African

American identity. Although Baker initially insisted that these two forms were equally valid, he

revises his position on "mastery of form" in his 2001 work *Turning South Again*. Baker

explains, "After one has been 'educated'—stripped of past habits, language, and modes of

being—and 'incorporated,' not *into* the body public, but *as* the assimilated, marginal, darkly in-

place *shadow of civilization*, one's consciousness will surely be whiter/yea whiter than snow.

Manner, performance, psychology, education conspire to produce disciplined 'colonized purity'"

(*Turning* 64). Therefore, "mastery of form" only allows a semblance of subjectivity and agency

that in reality is submission to intellectual white colonization.

Baker's conceptions of "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" shed new light

on Miller and Green. Chesnutt's text attempts to downplay cultural affiliation between the black

majority and the "New Negroes" of the middle class. Chesnutt is contending with the reality that

"White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation in the Negro"

(Fanon 14). Whereas "the idea everywhere suggests the dawning of a consciousness that looked

toward the new century as a time when the debilitating effects of slavery would at last be left

behind," between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1920s, the definition of the "New

Negro" leaves no room for the "Old Negro" or any image that either physically or

psychologically reflects him (Sundquist 336-337).[6] Green is clearly meant to represent the "Old

Negro," yet his resistance of white hegemony means that Chesnutt's character exhibits a

"deformation of mastery," especially in his confrontations with white society. He does not

attempt to mimic whiteness; instead, he chooses to "advertis[e] with certainty, his unabashed

badness" (Baker, *Modernism* 50). Baker's notion of badness as intrinsic to "deformation of

mastery" is significant. With this consideration, Chesnutt's characterization of him—his large

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[6] Sundquist argues that the concept of the "New Negro" was a "relatively fluid over at least a forty-year period"
(336). He acknowledges the differences between the early conception of the "New Negro" and that of the Harlem
Renaissance; the main consistent aspect was that they both were moving away from the subservient objectified
images of Blackness.

size, dark skin, and disheveled appearance, propensity for violence, which are usually negative

qualities in American culture—become the visual representation of what whites of his

community fear. Therefore, Josh Green subverts Africanist notions of deficiency in favor of

messages of strength. Green's sense of his honor is fueled by an embrace of his badness—his

willingness to confront physically whites, the ease with which he flouts laws and customs, his

unwillingness to endure silently racism. Green takes the negative image of the *bad* black man

and empowers it. By insisting on a different type of black masculinity that neither appropriates

white culture nor bows in submissiveness, Green's sense of honor remains intact. Thus, his

death does not simply represent the death of the "Old Negro;" it represents the complexity of the

"Old Negroes" who were not just caricatures of subservience, inferiority, or animality.

　　　Conversely, William Miller is a representation of the problematic "mastery of form."

Because he is neither accepted by the whites to whom he aspires nor eager to be connected to the

members of the black majority whom he wishes to uplift, he is a clear example of Baker's

revised conception of "mastery of form." Miller is the "New Negro" whose new life is very

much constrained.　Aside from exhibiting the moral high ground—which white supremacists

such as Carteret thought doubtful in African Americans—as he helps to save the child of the man

who has essentially killed his own son, Miller's life work, his hospital, is destroyed and his own

hope for carrying on his legacy of honor dies. Chesnutt imagines his plight at the end of the

novel, as little better than that of his counterpart. It is significant that Miller's last action in the

novel—going to save Dodie Carteret—is at the behest of the grieving Janet Miller. While Janet

has been on the periphery of the novel, her limited presence is in part due to the significance of

honor, which is both a masculine and a hierarchical ideal. By compelling Miller to act, asserting

that "a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her," she exerts a femininity that dethrones the dominance of masculine conceptions of honor (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 329). She becomes the most important actor in this scene, not her husband or the Carterets—who represent whiteness. Though, as Olivia Carteret insists, Janet and William Miller can have more children, perhaps Miller's future progeny can be the culmination of a New Negro, who prizes cultural equality above white hegemony and who is cautious of hierarchies, whether they be based on race or gender. Nevertheless, Chesnutt's unresolved ambiguity in these two characters demonstrate the meeting of African American progress and Africanism.

Griggs's Unconscious Appropriation

While published two years before Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition,* Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* attempts to confront consciously prevailing Africanist perceptions of blackness to which Chesnutt's text falls victim. Unlike Chesnutt, who had success early in his career publishing his short stories in major magazines like *Atlantic Monthly* and who was able to have *Marrow of Tradition* published by Houghton Mifflin, Griggs found less success as he published his own novel, selling it door-to-door to African American households. It is worth noting that Griggs's audience differed from Chesnutt's. While Chesnutt had a significant white readership, Sutton Griggs's readers were primarily African American. Therefore, plots of these novels differ somewhat in focus. Griggs, notes Fannie Coleman in *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy,* "was not shy in openly discussing the debilitating effects of intraracism on the spirit of [African American] communities. . . . [as] Intraracism had

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particularly deleterious effects because, in addition to the ignominy of being a self-inflicted wound, it built upon the moral and social decay fashioned by centuries of racism and slavery" (Coleman 81). Employing the language of patriotism, which for each of the protagonists subsumes many of Wyatt-Brown's elements of southern honor, Griggs explores the potential of the "New Negro," as he gives two different contingencies for the development of the twentieth-century African American man. Clearly Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, like Miller and Green, are in a sense each other's shadow. Their childhood, shaped both by different skin complexions and financial statuses, lead to disparate life experiences that make their pairing informative. However, I do not want to limit my inquiry to discussions only of the conflict between black militant nationalism and accommodationist black Americanism. Though Griggs unambiguously sided against militancy, it is more important in this work to look at how Griggs's portrayals of the lives of characters who espoused each of these ideologies are infused both with Africanist and anti-Africanist imagery and rhetoric.

Of the two portraits, Belton Piedmont's life is the most poignant in terms of reflecting the resilience of Africanism within the African American unconscious. The first chapter of the novel is launched with the words of the "poor, ignorant, Negro woman" Hannah Piedmont, who, speaking in African American dialect, exhorts her son to allow her to make him look "'spectabul" for his first day of school (Griggs, *Imperium* 7). Before Griggs shares the name of this woman, he describes in vivid detail the extreme poverty in which she and her five children live. Belton's humble beginnings are presented as representative of the beginnings of all New Negroes. This recognition is important because, as Gabriel Briggs explains, "By employing Hannah as representative of the Old Negro figure, Griggs signifies the importance of a slave past

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to the turn of century African Americans (New Negroes), preventing an often resented and much

maligned figure from becoming 'more myth than history'" (156).   With the emergence of the

New Negro, there were attempts to displace older images of African Americans with images that

less clearly reflected the slave past. Confronted with the proliferation of images of African

Americans as unintelligent and subservient, if not sullen, lazy or dangerous, "New Negroes"

attempt to diminish the significance of such "Old Negro" figures and distance themselves from

those images. The resentment toward characters like Hannah that Griggs mentions reveals both

a desire to displace the dominance of stereotypical figures and a fear that on some level, the

stereotypical images contain a measure of truth.   The attempt to create distance between the old

and new results in an erasure of a past that both breeds a distinct culture and provides the

foundation from which the New Negro springs. Moreover, the presence of the New Negro does

not mean the immediate death of the old one. It is Hannah's insistence on education that elevates

Belton from the five-year old who laments his inability to have chicken and biscuits, to the

graduate who pontificates on the "The Contribution of the Anglo-Saxon to the Cause of Human

Liberty," to the moving orator in the Imperium (Griggs, *Imperium* 27). Through Hannah, Griggs

makes it clear that African American advancement could not have happened without the Old

Negro. After all, he positions Hannah as the character whose actions "saved the sun of the

Nineteenth Century, proud and glorious, from passing through, near its setting, the blackest and

thickest and ugliest clouds of all its journey; saved it from ending the most brilliant of brilliant

careers by setting, with a shudder of horror, in a sea of human blood" (Griggs, *Imperium* 7). In

addition, through the emphasis on Hannah and Belton, Griggs confronts Africanist notions that

appearances—tattered clothing, non-standard English, dark skin—signal moral decay or intellectual deficiency.

Also significant in Griggs's presentation of Belton's childhood is his confrontation with the intraracism that was also a significant factor in rise of the New Negro. The parallel lives of the two protagonists in this novel illustrate the degree to which skin complexion dictates social reactions both within and outside of the African American community. The racist sentiments of whites are not surprising, as their behavior is representative not just of a literary convention, but also of a social dictum; it is not unexpected that Tiberius Gracchus Leonard shows little enthusiasm for the instruction of his African American pupils, or that he draws away in disgust as Belton and his mother pass him. However, Griggs further emphasizes his point, as the children in the school have so internalized white hegemony that even in play they reflect the position in which society has cast them. Assuming the role of Abe Lincoln, whom Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction African Americans considered the ultimate white hero, a student playfully chides his classmates with insults, including "black, nappy head rascal" and "black, cross-eyed little wench" that have been heaped upon them from white authority figures (Griggs, *Imperium* 12-13).   The children's ability to be entertained by such insults reflects the damage of internalized white hegemony. The comparison of Hannah Piedmont and Fairfax Belgrave also shows the extent of internalized Africanism. Hannah's blackness erases any significance that she may have for Leonard and seemingly erases all semblance of respect for black authority from his pupils. In the absence of their teacher, yet in the presence of Hannah, they not only jokingly mimic white authority, but they also implement a plan to embarrass their teacher. This is significant because this behavior seems discordant to the respect afforded to all

adults by children.   Conversely, when Fairfax enters the classroom, both the children and their

teacher are mesmerized. Leonard's treatment of Hannah informs the children's treatment of her.

Despite these significant confrontations with Africanism, Griggs also appropriates

Africanism in his presentation of Belton's mother. At times within this text, absence signals

significant commentary. Griggs describes Fairfax Belgrave in detail. She is

> a woman whose beauty was such as [Leonard] had never seen surpassed. . . . She
>
> was a mulatto woman, tall and graceful. Her hair was raven black and was
>
> combed away from as beautiful a forehead as nature could chisel. Her eyes were
>
> a brown hazel, large and intelligent, tinged with a slight look of melancholy. Her
>
> complexion was a rich olive, and seemed especially adapted to her face, that
>
> revealed not a flaw. (*Imperium* 14)

This rich and detailed description reflects the literary trope of the tragic mulatta, which would be

very familiar to Griggs's readers. Such characters, pursued by both white and African American

suitors, are often presented as paragons of feminine beauty and intelligence. In contrast, Hannah

Piedmont is described by her maternal-decision making and the things that she lacks. She lacks

education, financial stability, and civilization. There is no description of her physical features.

Resembling the mammy figure, an equally familiar trope, she is largely an asexual figure, despite

her five children. The big difference between these two characters and their respective tropes is

skin complexion. This issue arises again with Belton's cross-dressing adventures as a nurse in

order to study the minds of whites on the issue of African Americans. As a mammy figure, who

like Hannah Piedmont, is of a dark complexion, Belton's actions seem to reflect some slippage in

Griggs's conception of African American femininity. Like his mother, Belton as a female is

described in general terms. Also like his mother, who is used by Griggs as a device—an

object—to emphasize the evolution of the New Negro and the different incarnation of racism,

Belton in his feminine form is also objectified by his white employers, so much so that he can be

physically accosted.   Moreover, the flatness of the African American female characters—

including Belton's wife Antoinette, who is described vividly as beautiful and intelligent but

remains undeveloped, and Viola Martin, whom I shall confront later—reflects purpose-driven

roles in the text that (not only) impact their complexity but raise questions about Griggs's

perception of African American female subjectivity. Though I would concede that the presence

of such stereotypes and flat characters does not necessarily signal an acceptance of the negative

racial ideals that they generate, their presence, especially in texts that are geared toward African

American uplift, must be explored. Thus, Griggs appears either to accept hegemonic

conceptions of beauty and African American femininity or to view them as not worthy of

discussion.

Just as Griggs both confronts and succumbs to Africanism in the depiction of Belton's

early life, he exhibits an appreciation for paternalism simultaneously with an attraction to Black

Nationalism that also speaks to his ambiguity in regard to Africanism. Belton's young adulthood

seems to be compelled by a series of paternalistic acts by southern whites who see the benefit in

supporting African Americans.   However, these paternalistic acts are tainted not only because

they cast African Americans as subordinates—wards of white manhood—who must be raised to

the bar of civilization, but also because they are the result of ulterior motives. Mr. King, the

newspaper editor who sponsors Belton's education, does so because he is compelled by the voice

of God in a dream; God demands, "Parents, recognize your children. Children, be proud of the

parents from whom you spring" (Griggs, *Imperium* 35). African Americans are the children who should happily follow men and women who are superior in civilization. King's philanthropy is also a response to the fear that Booker T. Washington attempts to inculcate in his listeners when he insists, "My friends, there is no mistake; you must help us to raise the character of our civilization or yours will be lowered" (Washington, "Democracy" 60). This lowering, as King fears, could come as the result of racial violence perpetuated by the educated "New Negro." In addition to paying for his education, King entreats Belton to remember the goodness in both racist and nonracist whites throughout his life. King sees Belton as a potential cross-racial ally if conflict should arise.

Thanks to King, Belton is able to attend Stowe University. Named after the well-intentioned abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, the school proves to reflect the same paternalistic theme as her famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[7] Though the result of paternalistic efforts can be positive—as the hundreds of schools constructed by white philanthropists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate—the paternalistic relationship that reinforces African American inferiority or seeks to contain variations in African American identity is detrimental to the African American community. Belton's relationship with the school's principal, Dr. Lovejoy, is fraught with harmful paternalism. Belton meets Lovejoy, whose two notable deeds are initially refusing to accept the students' demands that the African American faculty member be allowed to eat with his white colleagues and warning Belton about allowing his emotions to govern his actions, as he seeks out his roommate whose trick was intended to embarrass him

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[7] Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is perhaps the most influential abolitionist text, in it Harriet Beecher Stowe formulates the characters in a way that idealizes blackness, relying on the rhetoric of primitivism and essentialism, and eschewing the realities of African American masculinity and dynamic humanity. Additionally, she appropriates the life narrative of Josiah Henson as the liberally manipulated plot of her text, which replicates the paternalistic relationship that abolitionists had with African Americans active in the freedom movement.

during his graduation speech. Lovejoy's warning of too much emotionalism is significant

because in his political work *The Guide to Racial Greatness*, Griggs uses Haitians as an example

of a group who are courageous but have "excitable natures" and lack the emotional control of the

British, which leads to their failure (183-184). Though this may seem to be unrelated, it should

be explained that this text, which is clearly meant to guide African Americans to the attainment

of civilization, does so implicitly, as he reveals his ideas through vague dictums that should

guide behavior and group relationships as well as comparisons to the animal world. When he

discusses the Haitians, he prefaces his commentary with "They [racial groups] are fundamentally

alike, but in one group the qualities are arranged in a certain order, producing poison, whereas in

another they are so arranged that a most beneficent result follows" (Griggs, *Guide 183).* He

clearly uses the Haitians to represent all people of African descent, while the British represent

whites whose civilizations, he believes, have prospered because of emotional control. Such

comparison, as well as Belton's intense reaction to the trick—he seeks to kill his offender—

reflects Griggs's acceptance of racial essentialism. Essentialism, in this form, was touted by

white supremacists as support for slavery, segregation, and white superiority. Lovejoy's chiding

of Belton emphasizes the need for white superiors in the shaping of African Americans.

Paternalism is again at work when Belton gets the job as a clerk for his loyalty to the Republican

Party. When Belton refused to support his boss the Postmaster's candidate for office, because

the candidate "was known to be prejudiced against colored people," he is fired from his post

(Griggs, *Imperium* 89). Belton finds that his white political connections only value him as long

as he behaves according to their judgment.   Despite all of the complications that come with

white paternalism, Belton " besought God to enable him and his people, as a mark of

appreciation of what had been done for the race, to rise to the full measure of just expectations and prove worthy of all the care bestowed" (Griggs, *Imperium 40*). He is grateful to the whites, as he sees them as his main method of improvement. Belton's sentiments are reflective of Sutton Griggs's own position. In the foreword to *The Guide to Racial Greatness*, Griggs explains, "But not all men as we find them in the world today are able to conduct a successful democracy. This is possible only where there is a sufficient preponderance of certain traits and the following out of certain principles."   Belton reflects Griggs's belief that African Americans had not yet acquired the degree of civilization to be beyond the guiding hand of whites.

This warm reception of white paternalism, which suggests African American insufficiency, seems incongruent with Belton's attraction to Black Nationalism. Brimming with black pride as he sees the only African American faculty member and thinks of the "immense army of young men and women" who are being prepared in the nation to uplift his race during his college experience, Griggs illustrates why the Imperium will be so important to Belton (Griggs, *Imperium 40*). For Belton, African American collectivity is a powerful tool that can, if needed, force a hegemonic society to recognize the subjectivity of that portion of their society that they objectify. Belton first exercises this power when he organizes his classmates in order to demand the integration of faculty dining. Following the success of that event, the narrator notes the rise of "a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand" (Griggs, *Imperium* 46). This inward look at the African American community takes for granted the intellectual capabilities of African Americans, as well as an equality in American citizenship that insists upon certain rights. The nationalism that informs Belton's future political ideology is itself shaped by Lovejoy's exhortation to " ' Be not a burrowing parasite, feasting

off of the world's raw blood. Let the world draw life from you. Use not the misfortunes of your people as stones of a monument erected to your name. If you do, the iron fist of time will knock it over on your grave to crumble your decaying bones to further dust'" (Griggs, *Imperium* 50-51). Lovejoy's speech is a call to duty that insists on responsibility to the race and to the country. Personal responsibility is central to Sutton Griggs's message to African Americans. In both *The Guide to Racial Greatness* and its predecessor *Wisdom's Call*, Griggs insists that African Americans desire to and should be allowed to pursue educational, economic, and social self-sufficiency. Ironically, in establishing this self-sufficiency and "negotiating White supremacy, one was forced to look inward not to determine whether or not [sic] one agreed or disagreed with White supremacist accusations, but to find and eliminate those traits and practices that 'held the race back' or that provided support for White supremacist claims regarding Black inferiority" (Coleman 73). Doing so, he suggests through Belton, makes blacks' Americanness—their valid citizenship and the rights and privileges that come with it—undeniable. Belton's support for nationalism is a positive affirmation of African American subjectivity that is in direct opposition to dependence on white authority figures. Yet, Griggs mixes them in vacillating directives that call for at once emotional and intellectual dependence and independence.

Griggs's presentation of the experiences of Belton's counterpart Bernard also contains Africanism. It is clear from the outset that Bernard is a tool intended to reflect the portions of Belton's character that are significant to Griggs's accommodationist message. From a childhood in which his every need is met, to his Ivy League education, to his legal and legislative career, to the millions of dollars that are his inheritance, Bernard's life is in stark contrast with

Belton's. Belton's blackness, Bernard's racial mixture, and all that each entails result in

illustrations of interracial and intraracial racism, as well as the disadvantages of poverty.

However, in describing Bernard's life, Griggs employs the economy of blood that was central to

southern constructions of honor and white supremacist rhetoric. Griggs contends:

> Written in the blood of the Anglo-Saxon race are those elements which have
>
> permitted the flowering of the great civilization of that race. This blood has
>
> proven susceptible of sustaining a civilization based upon love of country,
>
> reverence for woman, love of home, hatred of tyranny, freedom of the individual,
>
> the inviolability of the plighted word, the faculty for dropping all internal
>
> differences and presenting a united front to a common foe, a 'restless,
>
> discontented, burning, striving energy,' a profound regard for the young and for
>
> the unborn. (*Wisdom 89-90)*

Therefore, white blood provides a predisposition to civilization that dark-complexioned African

Americans like Belton must acquire through education and paternalism. It would also seem that

Bernard's white blood also accounts for his revolutionary sentiments in the Imperium. When

Bernard finally learns the truth about his and his mother's history, his father explains, "you both

are the direct descendants of a governor, and a long line of heroes whose names are ornaments to

our nation's history" (Griggs, *Imperium 64-65).* Though the taint of the black blood that flows

through Bernard's veins is so important that Bernard's prominent father would rather commit

suicide than recognize his legitimate marriage or the paternity of his son, the white blood renders

Bernard attractive to females and to his white Harvard classmates, and able to mingle with the

"better element of citizens" during his life in Virginia (Griggs, *Imperium* 69). Griggs implies that

his blood may account for both his intelligence and all of his life's successes. Once again, the plot of the novel reflects Griggs's political ideology that he establishes in his nonfiction. In *Wisdom's Call* he asserts, "It is absolutely clear that the inborn traits of a race play an important part in finally determining the lines along which the destiny of a people is to be wrought out. Moreover the adding of fresh blood to that of race serves to modify in some degree and in some direction the fundamental tendencies of that race" (Griggs, *Wisdom* 89). Griggs's claims here enable discourses of racial contamination and purity that that plague constructions of whiteness and blackness. Therefore, the economy of blood that he deploys problematically insists on the innate deficiency of African Americans.

Aside from Bernard's race, his relationship with Viola Martin also reflects inconsistent treatment of Africanism. Griggs attempts to confront Africanism with Viola's belief that miscegenation will result in the extinction of African Americans, as it makes the black offspring less viable. Though Griggs does not seem to accept her ideology, his presentation of it counters the one-drop rule that classified all people who had one drop of African blood as black.[8] Griggs strips whites of the fear of contamination and casts them as the contaminant. Through Viola, who would rather die than contribute to the contamination of her race, he confronts the same irrational fear in whites. Viola is a character who is also intended to subvert racist claims that blacks are physically unattractive. Thomas Jefferson reflects this idea when he questions, "Are

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[8] Though the idea of the one-drop rule is an ineffective mode of classification because of the arbitrary nature of race, I do posit that the visibility of racial heritage does matter in a society where race is central to quality of life. Griggs reveals this through his two protagonists's light and dark complexions. Moreover, classification as nonwhite—visible African American heritage—complicates an individual's ability to choose his or her cultural, social or "racial" identity, especially in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the choice becomes to seek acceptance by white communities that, as in the case of William Miller, will never totally accept you or embrace the community to which one is inextricably tied—the African American community. Race and a loose conception of the African American community become in a sense interchangeable because society ties racial definitions that are founded on physically visible racial heritage to racialized communities, whether individuals recognize that community as their own or not.

not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less

suffusions of colour in the [whites], preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the

countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race

[Africans]?" (Jefferson 264-265). He continues, "Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant

symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of

them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his

own species" (Jefferson 264-265).   Possessing the degree of civilization that Griggs values,

Viola also has dark skin and beauty to rival all women, no matter their color. Upon meeting her,

Bernard even remarks, "I really did not know that a dark woman could look so beautiful"

(Griggs, *Imperium* 70). Though that remark is telling, revealing the Africanism that informs

Bernard's view of other African Americans, it tells much more about Griggs. With her black

skin, Griggs adds "a luxuriant growth of hair," notes that she is "beautifully formed," and insists

on the expressiveness of her features, all per Jefferson's description of the beauty of whites

(Griggs, *Imperium* 69-70). However, he is vague about the specific facial features that are

dominant with African Americans; she has "a nose of the prettiest possible size and shape and a

chin that tapered with the most exquisite beauty"(Griggs, *Imperium* 69-70). While it is not clear

what such features would actually look like, they are so beautiful that her portrait is allowed to

hang in the white photography studios. This would lead me to believe that whatever her features,

they were hardly characteristic of most African Americans. Whites at this time would hardly

classify the African American phenotype as beautiful. Thus, Griggs presents her as

exceptional—so much so that he diminishes the effect of her dark skin. Africanism prevails in

this characterization.

Even considering Griggs's approaches toward Africanism in the earlier presentations of

Belton's and Bernard's lives, it is not until the closing chapters, when these two characters give

their speech at the Imperium, that their sense of honor is shown at its maturity and the reader gets

a full sense of how their honor informs the presence of Africanism, which ultimately

overshadows Griggs's intention in the novel. Just as with Chesnutt, the veneer of honor, which

in Griggs's case is tied to patriotism, is positive—surely loyalty to country or community is

commendable. However, it may also be destructive. True patriotism reflects total surrender to

ideologies or principles—such as total loyalty to a nation that allows Jim Crowism and systemic

racism to degrade and oppress a segment of its population —that preclude deviation. This is

particularly important for African Americans, as the challenge of containing the "two

unrecognized strivings" of blackness and Americanness is always pressing (Du Bois 364).

Griggs shows himself to be totally enmeshed in the ideology of Africanism, even though it seems

his life mission to confront it. Bernard's and Belton's sense of honor is based on two variations

of patriotism. They embrace the Jeffersonian ideas upon which the United States was founded,

but their embrace reveals the same ambivalence that Jefferson's own life and writing reflect.[9]

Both Belton and Bernard see themselves as honorable "New Negroes" whose lives serve as

examples of what the masses can attain. "Honor," explains Wyatt-Brown, "for all of its

variations . . . provided a means to restrict human choices, to point a way out of chaos. . . . It

established signposts of appropriate conduct. It staved off the danger of self-love and vainglory

and in the circles of the genteel, it elevated moderation and learnedness to virtues of self-

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[9] While in an earlier draft of *The Declaration of Independence* Thomas Jefferson included an antislavery provision, which both excoriated slavery and absolved Americans of the crime by implicating the British crown, he was also a slave owner. Similarly, in *Notes on The State of Virginia*, Jefferson attempts to explain the inferiority of African Americans, yet many contemporary historians believe that he had a long affair with one of his slaves named Sally Hemmings , which some suggest reflects a more complicated view of African Americans. *Notes on the State of Virginia* also includes argument that slaveholders are harmed by slavery.

disciplined community service" (*Southern* 114). Belton and Bernard sought to make order out of

a world that sanctioned violence and disenfranchisement for people of color. Nevertheless, the

order that they sought to institute or live up to had at its center a foundation of white hegemony.

Though Bernard's sense of honor is reflected through patriotism that accrues loyalty to

his racial group instead of his nation, in the end Africanism divests Bernard of the significance

that Griggs sought. Devotion to smaller, more local entities, which Bernard exhibits, is in sync

with white southerners' concept of honor. Notably, as Wyatt-Brown argues, "The Southern

concept of patriotism was constructed upon faithfulness to a particular place and people and their

past, not some abstract idea such as 'democracy' or 'freedom,' principles generating few sparks

in ordinary men's minds unless they were conceived as synonyms for personal and familial

security and self-regard" (Wyatt-Brown, *Southern* 112). Bernard is fighting for the well-being

of his racial group. Though the Imperium claims to base its principles upon Jeffersonian ideas,

Bernard extrapolates those principles to mean that he and his people should not be a nation or

group that waits on inalienable rights to be bestowed; they should wrest those rights from the

hands of whites by becoming a functioning entity aside from the national one. His life reflects a

series of oaths that should uplift his race. From his father's charge to right racial wrongs, to

Viola's deathbed command that he work to end miscegenation, to his promise in the Imperium to

serve and protect the African American population, he is valorously willing to accept and

confront death for his cause. Yet Griggs's use of blood, as previously discussed, puts Bernard's

actions in question. Griggs invokes Bernard's lineage as spurring him to his life's work. As

Wyatt-Brown explains, " 'Blood' was not an abstract concept but a determination that could so

type a child that a sense of unworthiness could well develop. Like horses, human beings were

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supposed to exhibit traits of lineage" (Wyatt-Brown, *Southern* 119). The message sent by

Griggs's fixation with blood can be interpreted in two different ways. It could be that Bernard's

insistence on the Imperium's violent confrontation with the United States government and

militaristic response to racism, according to Griggs's logic, is the result of his white blood.

Because he is predisposed to civilization and reflective of it, his blood rebels against the restraint

that society places on his black body. In this way, Bernard's response would be "natural."

However, such a path would not be acceptable to non-biracial African Americans. Since Griggs

finds Bernard's action destructive, it is more likely that his rashness is the result of the taint of

his black blood, which allows for emotionalism and is ill-prepared for independence. Both of

these analyses, which are reflective of Griggs's ideas, are troublesome because they presume

white superiority as well as essential traits within racial groups that stress difference. Thus, any

redeeming qualities in the character are overshadowed.

Similarly, Belton is projected as the novel's true hero, yet his heroism is steeped in an

enthusiastic embrace of significant white hegemony. Unlike Bernard, Belton expresses a

patriotism toward the United States and the South. When he is confronted with Bernard's plan,

he proudly proclaims "I love the Union and I love the South. Soaked as Old Glory is with my

people's tears and stained as it is with their warm blood, I could die as my forefathers did,

fighting for its honor and asking no greater boon than Old Glory for my shroud and native soil

for my grave" (Griggs, *Imperium* 168). Belton shows valor in his willingness to meet death

instead of violating his strong belief system. He does not see his loyalty to his race and his

nation as mutually exclusive, and he asserts his indomitable will, choosing not to betray his

country; he also essentially chooses not to betray the Imperium, as he could have—as Berl Trout

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does—by alerting the White world to the Imperium's plan. Despite his patriotism, the characterization of Belton is even more hampered by Africanist sentiments than Bernard's. Belton believes that African Americans lack civilization. If such a belief does not justify whites' treatment of African Americans, it certainly necessitates, at least for a time, childlike supplication to whites.   Belton illustrates this idea when he declares to the Imperium that African Americans "received that from the Anglo-Saxon which far outweighs in value all the gold coin on earth. He received instruction in the arts of civilization, a knowledge of the English language, and a conception of the one true God and his Christ" (Griggs, *Imperium* 155). Therefore, like William Miller from Chesnutt's text, Belton accepts the inferiority of African Americans. The sense of inferiority is even more pronounced with Griggs, especially in his presentation of Bernard, because he invokes the principle of blood, which is innate not acquired, as bestowing worth, while Chesnutt focuses on class and different circumstances that form individuals. Belton's honor means subordination to whites whose patriotism is steeped in white hegemony. This fixation with "civilization" results in too great a dependence on the opinion of whites and their view of African Americans.

At one point in the novel, Belton admits, "He felt the eyes of the North and of the civilized world were upon [African Americans] to see the fruits of the great labor and money spent upon them" (Griggs, *Imperium 40*). This explains the degree to which he is enamored of paternalism. He, and by extension all African Americans, must remake themselves in the images of their white benefactors. Part of this transformation means making physical representation of self reflect the civilization on the inside. Though scholars such as Gabriel Briggs, Stephen Knadler, and Adenike Davidson seem to see Belton as either Griggs's example of the anti-hero

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or as someone whose submission to the system is only strategic, Griggs presents Belton as a

character who approaches racism in a way that he finds acceptable.[10] The parallels between

Belton and the author's ideology in his political texts are unmistakable, for Griggs exhibits the

same attitude toward civilization that Belton replicates. In his *The Guide to Racial Greatness*,

Griggs maintains: "This is the reason why the likes and dislikes of men change so markedly

between savagery and civilization. We simply could not enjoy some of the things that brought

intense satisfaction to our early ancestors unless in some way we could be gradually trained

backward" (Griggs, *Guide 76).* Though Griggs is noting the natural changes and progress that

take place from generation to generation, his critique also has a cultural dimension that casts

many non-European American cultural differences as uncivilized. For Griggs, as for his hero

Belton, blackness in its natural state is inferior and regressive. Therefore, at the close of the

novel, though Belton's death is shrouded in the language of the martyr, Belton is not redeemable

from the Africanism to which he submits.

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[10] Gabriel Briggs's "*Imperium in Imperio:* Sutton Griggs and the New Negro of the South" argues that Griggs in his novel, non-fiction, and community activities sought to present an image of the "New Negro" who sees the "Old Negro" as a valuable starting point. He compares Belton to the trickster, arguing that he manipulates the paternalistic system for his own benefit. He also insists that Belton presents a model of passive resistance. Belton's death "proves hi[m] to be a genuine patriot, loyal to both his country and his cause" (Briggs 170). In "Sensationalizing Patriotism," Stephen Knadler argues that Griggs is attempting to critique insistence on African American devotion to country over racial affiliation, especially in the wake of the pervasive racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He notes that a great debate was occurring over African American patriotism. He argues that Griggs constructs Belton and his patriotic fervor as a comment on this issue, noting that "there is an almost farcical disparity between Belton's experiences and his patriotic devotion, as if Griggs wants to confront the reader with the shocking spectacle of the black citizen's slavish devotion to the flag" (Knadler, "Sensationalizing" 687). Adenike Davidson's "Double Leadership, Double Trouble" focuses on Griggs's use of double protagonists, who on their own are not sufficient heroic models. Of Belton, she notes that his "commitment to assimilation hardly seems honorable" (Davidson 135). She discusses the limits of Belton's reliance on education as the main tool for racial uplift. Each of these scholars presents Belton's submission to white authority, whether it be in the form of patriotism or as an acceptance of paternalism, as indicative of Griggs's approach to racial uplift, though they disagree on how Griggs envisions Belton. For Briggs, Belton does recognize the unfairness of his treatment but endures in order to use American ideals against the American system for his own benefit and the benefit of his fellow African Americans.   For Knadler and Davidson, his submission and assimilationism just represent a flawed character.

Imperium in Imperio is overrun with Africanist sentiment that diminishes the political purpose of the work. What is most distressing about the text is that for all of the discussion of Black Nationalism and all of the rhetoric about the uplift of the race, there is no real celebration of African American culture, traditions, or innovations. As Belton tries to get the Imperium to acknowledge, "Our grotesque dress, our broken language, our ignorant curiosity, and on the part of many our boorish manners, would have been nauseating in the extreme to men and women accustomed to refined association. . . . the polished among you have often been made ashamed at the uncouth antics of some ignorant Negroes, courting the attention of whites in their presence" (Griggs, *Imperium* 157). All things that would mark African Americans as different or unique are expelled from the text or presented negatively. The only African American characters who represent the black majority that Griggs includes are Belton, who works hard to become "civilized," and his mother, who, more like caterpillar than a butterfly, is insignificant in and of herself. Her only significance is that she is the evolutionary starting point of the "New Negro." Therefore, the details of her individuality are ignored. This absence renders the fight for African American uplift and equality only as a fight to be like the civilized. Africanism presupposes that there is nothing that is redeemable about blackness. It insists that all cultural, social and educational attainments must be steeped in white traditions and value systems.

Though cultural exchange in America may make it difficult to discern the difference between white values and traditions and the values and traditions of African Americans, it is not the values and traditions themselves that reflect Africanism. Every culture has values and traditions, and cultural exchange is not necessarily harmful. However, the exclusivity and hegemony that inform decisions of good and bad values and beliefs is negative when one group

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controls the means of progress for others, as the American case demonstrates. Belton's desire to reach the level of civilization of whites indicates that he believes there is either an absence of African American civilization or that he perceives a degree of inadequacy in the quality of African American civilization. Thus, if there is nothing culturally valuable within the African American community, the only reason for African American collectivity or Black Nationalism is either to insist on African American humanity, which should be self-evident, or to fight for the rights that the Constitution bequeaths to all citizens, which, though not necessarily bad, could essentially be done through interracial groups or as individuals. Griggs presents characters who exercise a" mastery of form" that is not subversive, but conducive to submission to white hegemony. Hence, Griggs's portrait of the New Negro simply results in dark white men.

What is both important when examining the novels of Chesnutt and Griggs and central to my project as a whole is the power that accompanies an embrace of Africanism , whether conscious or unconscious, and the quest for civilization or the appropriation of white culture. In the American cultural hierarchy, as well as the cultural hierarchies that fostered colonialism and slavery all over the world, the dominance of Anglo-Saxon identity—white culture— in the political sector, educational opportunity, acquisition of and access to material wealth, and social interactions makes such appropriation of white culture dangerous for black bodies. They are dangerous in an immediate sense because such feelings of superiority have led to violence against African Americans. It is even more dangerous because, as Chesnutt's and Griggs's texts make clear, many people within the African American community developed without a sense that the culture in which they were born and bred is valid. Therefore, they lack a full sense of their own subjectivity. They are unable to conceive of a masculinity or femininity that exists

independently of white acceptance or Anglo-Saxon identity. It becomes not a matter of choosing

an identity that best fits individual proclivities but a matter of having an identity thrust upon

individuals as seemingly the only path to achieving the promises that America offers. In this

way, white-dominated hierarchies are exclusive in that they deny African Americans, as well as

other people of color, the right to power.

William Miller's style of dress, manner of speech, and desire to distinguish himself from

his less civilized African American brethren, as well as Belton Piedmont's acceptance of and

desire to live up to the demands of white paternalism, are not necessarily condemnable

attributes. However, those attributes, they hope, are keys to the white power structure from

which they can evaluate the readiness of their fellow African Americans to have access to power,

just as whites do for African Americans. Their desire to appropriate white culture does not

preclude works that, though linked with Africanist motives, do good for their community. Yet it

does create a barrier between the African American middle class and the African American

underclass that hinders African Americans' ability to challenge effectively white dominance,

which is a problem that no amount of appropriation can eliminate. William Miller, Belton

Piedmont, and Bernard Belgrave also show that Africanism requires a certain degree of

"civilization" in order for African Americans to attain full United States citizenship. Griggs

seems to insist that although the Old Negroes should be recognized, they are unprepared for the

responsibility and privileges of citizenship. In some ways, this reflects Booker T. Washington's

ideology that argued for an initial limiting of African American civil liberties, until African

Americans were educated and prepared for the challenges of full citizenship. Similarly, Chesnutt

seems to argue that the lack of African American progress is due, in part, to the uncivilized

masses of African Americans who do not live up to the challenges of citizenship. What Griggs and Chesnutt miss is that it is possible to be both a citizen and to maintain a degree of cultural or group identity, once the power dynamics that allow white superiority to stand become less dominant. However, calls for African American collectivity that privilege cultural communities above national identities will remain as long as white hierarchies dominate every facet of African American life. These characters fail to confront the implications of cultural dominance, which, I insist, is central to a progressive African Americanism that embraces the differences within African American communities and insists on the equality of all cultures.

Collectively these two novels represent the resilience of Africanism even in African American texts that are politically motivated with racial uplift as the express goal. Honor within these texts becomes a way for the male protagonists to express masculinity and exert power within their black communities. However, the authors' construction of the power dynamics replicates, with some variations, white hegemonic power structures that render African Americans powerless and subordinate. The political motivation of these texts makes Alain Locke's incarnation of the "New Negro" significant in this analysis. According to Locke, the New Negro "scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. He resents being spoken of as a social ward, even by his own, and to being regarded as a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy" (11). These two novels represent the wide spectrum between the New Negro of Washington and the New Negro of Locke. Though these authors attempt to divorce African American images of inferiority from the American consciousness, they fail to achieve Locke's definition of African American manhood and womanhood, which insists on the valuation of both the African American middle

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class and the black majority outside of racist hierarchies. While the complications of hierarchal stratification within the African American community would be the natural result of the cultivation of the earlier version of the "New Negro" whose ultimate goals were to be illustrative of African American humanity and to insist upon recognition of African American intelligence and potential, the stratification that emerges utilizes the same hegemonic economies that allow the erasure of black significance. This creates a dichotomy within the African American community of good and bad, progressive and regressive. In essence, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Imperium in Imperio* pit the "New Negroes" against the black majority or white civilization against African American culture in a way that is counterproductive. The urge to become a "New Negro," in this conservative manifestation, results in the rhetoric that insists upon cultural sameness with white society. Thus, any manifestations of African American culture that transgress conformist white standards are stigmatized.

CHAPTER TWO
Beyond the Mirror Image: Dueling Race and Class in *Black No More* and *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

> Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles, dogs who do clever tricks.
>
> ******
> Today the question is: Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding [*sic*] the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?
>
> —Richard Wright "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

Though Richard Wright's question privileges the black majority as the locus for the new imperative for African American literature that he believes has the power to reshape the landscape of American social and economic relations, his assertions mark the rise of a more assertive African American identity as well as more vocal challenges both to the logic and effectiveness of uplift literature that were present in African American culture of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Though, as Chapter One demonstrates, African American assertiveness was not unheard of in literature prior to the 1930s—as exemplified in Josh Green and Bernard Belgrave—the assertiveness of such characters is often overshadowed by others who accepted a more accommodationist stance on the race question. Moreover, Charles Chesnutt and Sutton Griggs both saw their projects as ones of uplifting the masses of African Americans to the standard of civilization established by white society. Of uplift, Michael Eric Dyson insists,

> What I call here the black Afristocracy, the black aristocracy, [are] folks who, by
>
> virtue of birth or good fortune or God's grace, were able to climb the ladder of

upward mobility. But they had to prove to white people that they were worthy,

ironically enough, of citizenship, and prove they were human. Even to white

people who could not pass the very litmus test that these black aristocrats evoked

to themselves or to the black poor. But one of the ways they proved that they

were worthy of that consideration is to dis them [the black majority], is to degrade

them, or invite them to be integrated and assimilated into the larger circle of

American values and mores. ("Bill Paid" 362)

Dyson emphasizes the intraracial class dynamics in his discussion of the establishment of a

black, second-tier American bourgeoisie —first-tier being the white American middle class—

that exercises social and discursive power over the African American masses. Moreover, Wright

and Dyson correctly recognize that inherent in any plan of uplift is the acceptance of a position

of inferiority—the need to be improved, refined, or reconstituted in a form that the larger society

finds acceptable. I invoke Wright here because he is representative of the emergent view of the

competing interests of class consciousness and racial consciousness that African American

authors began to explore both during the Harlem Renaissance and in a large measure during and

after the Great Depression. These two competing interests were both marked by the idea that

either overt racial agitation or increased African American economic power was the path to

lifting African Americans up to the attainment of the American dream.

However, Wright's answer to the ideology of uplift literature is not untroubled. As his

assertions in " Blueprint for Negro Writing" illustrate, he too wants to reshape and refine the

black majority. While he believes in the unlimited potential of the black majority and is critical

of both the African American and white American middle class, he also dismisses the members

of the black majority, who are unconcerned with his political and economic vision, as having a

"peasant mentality" (Wright, *Black Boy* 252). Richard Wright's view of the black majority

raises interesting questions about the relationship between individuality and group identity.

While his Marxist approach to the race problem necessarily includes a sense of the collective, he

seems to want to move beyond racial collectivity, which would allow African Americans to be

viewed as individuals. The pervasiveness of Africanism—which allows for the evaluation of

individuals according to stereotypes— means that African American individuality is easily and

problematically overlooked, just as much as it means that the claiming of a collective identity

can help fight Africanism. Wright's concern for the "peasant" ways of the black majority does

not necessarily indicate an ingestion of Africanism, as he does not seem to be overtly invested in

white superiority. His view of the black majority focuses on economic and political concerns

rather than the unique cultural traits that may exist alongside poverty and oppression. Though

based on the idea that class creates the inferiority in African Americans rather than race, Wright

views racial collectivity and limited nationalism as a tool through which the black majority can

be shaped and educated, herded toward the goal of accepting the humanistic virtue of

universality and seeing class stratification as the most imminent social problem. For Wright,

African American culture exists, but for the most part, it has no material positive impact on the

lives of African Americans. Thus, he participates in the same devaluation of culture that is

evident in Africanism. Wright's position is even more complicated because he began as a

member of the black majority. Therefore, his rejection of "peasant" ways and his failure to

appreciate the cultural aspects of his community means a rejection of his friends, family, and

neighbors. Wright's troubling view of the masses and his simultaneous disdain for what he sees

as the injustices of the middle class and the capitalist system reveal the same ambiguity concerning race and class that many authors faced. African Americans began to ask if race and class, as social forces, are inextricably linked or if one of these forces has more significance in the lives of African Americans than the other.   They questioned whether oppression is simply the product of racism or the result of a capitalist system that African Americans—no doubt due to race prejudice and the economic system of slavery that helped build the country—were unprepared to manipulate adequately and in which their participation, for the majority, is confined to the lower levels of the system.

Sociologist Oliver Cox's discussion of the difference between race and caste is a useful way to explore the dynamics of race and class as they impact the African American community. Cox responds, in several essays, to prevailing thought among scholars of his contemporary moment, that slavery strongly established castes in the American South, which continue to impact African Americans throughout the country. Caste for African Americans is inescapable and determined by biological and phenotypical markers. In "Class and Caste: Definition and Distinction," Cox asserts that "the structure of a class is categorically different from that of the caste. If we think of a social class as status stratum consisting of individuals with heterogeneous economic, political and religious interests, then historically we have no instance in which a class became increasingly stable until at length it crystallized into a caste" (139). Here Cox contends that racial stigma has not, and likely will not, contribute to the formation of an African American caste.   In his essay "Race Relations," Cox cites discussions of miscegenation, the proliferation of African American color consciousness, the availability of opportunity according to skin complexion, and accesses to education or professionalization, which all may shift African

American economic and social dynamics, further illuminating his argument of the distinction between class and caste (146-148). Cox positions African American oppression as the natural result of unchecked capitalism, insisting, "it becomes, then, the immediate pecuniary interest of the capitalist, the bourgeoisie, not only to develop an ideology and world view which facilitate proletarianization, but also, when necessary, to use force to accomplish this end" ("Race and Class" 212).   These capitalists, Cox continues, "develop and exploit ethnocentrism and show by any irrational or logical means available that the working class of their own race or whole peoples of other races, whose labor they are bent upon exploiting, are something apart: (a) not human at all, (b) only part human, (c) inferior humans, and so on" ("Race and Class" 212). Therefore, Cox insists on the dominance of class over race, as African Americans moved from having bodies that are capital, not for their own benefit, in the system of slavery, to having their labor produce capital for the primary benefit of the bourgeoisie, both white and black, in the twentieth century. The economic and educational attributes that allow members of the African American middle class to move from a commodified position in the capitalist system also require that they maintain a level of distance from the members of their community who have not been able to escape their place in the black majority.

Cox's discussion of the exploitive nature of class is evident in the rise of socialism and communism, to which notable figures such as A. Phillip Randolph, W.E.B. Du Bois, George Schuyler, Richard Wright, Claude McKay, and Ralph Ellison subscribed at certain points in their careers. It is important to note that it is impossible to separate or to delineate clearly the difference between class and race, and many authors exhibited this difficulty in their work. For example, in literature that reflects social determinism such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*,

Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, and Ann Petry's *The Street,* there is a clear argument

that race and racism dominate the lives of the characters, no matter what their social class.

Clearly writers such as Himes and Wright, as their nonfiction shows, appreciated the impact of

capitalism in the lives of African Americans, yet their novels present race and class as either so

closely aligned that they are inseparable, or as hierarchically placed, with class subordinate to

race.

In this chapter I will use George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Chester Himes's *If He*

Hollers Let Him Go to examine the underlying question that Cox's discussion of caste and class

raises and that literary figures from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s sought to answer: Do economic

and class mobility allow African Americans to escape the position of Other to which skin color

relegates them? Unlike most of his contemporaries, Schuyler seems to answer this question

unambiguously in the affirmative. I argue that Schuyler posits that the American capitalist

system—which has as its underpinnings choice, ingenuity, and decisive action—is the way for

African Americans to escape racial oppression. Schuyler attempts to divest racial designations

of power. Himes, on the other hand, presents the economically secure African American middle

class, whose unwillingness to acknowledge the implications of the gross racial disparity is based

on a pretense of equality rather than reality. Moreover, he presents an image of a member of the

black majority, who is besieged by both racial and class impulses, but believes that the embrace

of class over race requires a forfeiture of personal dignity that he is reluctant to relinquish.

Schuyler's satiric work and Himes's novel, which have as their driving force social determinism,

are very different texts that seem to respond to each other in regard to their answer to this

question as well as in their statements about the feasibility of a postracial America. I contend

that Schuyler's attempt, which I posit is unsuccessful, to invalidate Africanist ideology by first invalidating racial consciousness and focusing on class and economics, is answered by Himes's efforts to show that Africanism, whether or not it is acknowledged, negatively impacts Americans throughout the class hierarchy.

Class and Capitalism in *Black No More*

Any analysis of George Schuyler's work is complicated by an oeuvre of fiction, political essays, and journalism that is as large as it is inconsistent. A look at his varying opinions reveals that he was in earnest when he informed his "Views and Reviews" reader that "there is no especial virtue in consistency, although, I do not recall any inconsistency in my recent statements. It seems to me that views and opinions should only be retained so long as they hold water. When new data is unearthed, one's views should be altered accordingly" (Schuyler, June 30, 1928 sec, 2:8). Though it is clear that by the publication of his 1966 autobiography *Black and Conservative* he is indisputably a social and political conservative, who rails against the Civil Rights Movement among other things, it is also clear that, as his regular column in *The Messenger* reveals, he began his career with at least a socialist sympathy and even evidences a degree of social agitation in his pieces in *The Pittsburg Courier* and *The American Mercury.* Therefore, it becomes quite important in my examination of *Black No More* that I do not conflate his more overtly conservative arguments that become clearer as his career progresses with his position in this novel, as Jeffery Ferguson and Jane Kuenz insist other scholars have done (Ferguson 218; Kuenz 171). Nonetheless, I posit that the seeds that would lead Schuyler of 1966 to insist that "Once we [African Americans] accept the fact that there is, and will always be, a color caste system in the United Sates, and stop crying about it, we can concentrate on how best

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to survive and prosper within that system" are not only present in *Black No More,* published in

1931*,* but also in his periodical literature prior to the publication of the novel (Schuyler, *Black*

and Conservative 122).[11]

Schuyler's satiric portrayal of both the African American and the white American

communities in *Black No More* attempts to destabilize the socially constructed foundations of

racial consciousness that inform both interracial and intraracial relations. Schuyler begins this

process by attacking the physical hallmarks of difference that have been the primary means of

marking otherness. Dr. Junius Crookman's invention of a scientific process that erases blackness

wrests the only unalterable reflections of African American Otherness and inferiority from white

hands. Simultaneously, it also frees African Americans from culturally ingested notions of

limited racial ability. Because of Crookman's machine, Africanist evaluations that categorize

groups based on physical appearance become inoperative. Crookman explains to his partners

that "there has been considerable exaggeration about the contrast between Caucasian and Negro

features" (Schuyler, *BNM* 15). He elaborates by noting that thick lips and broad noses are shared

among white and black racial and ethnic groups around the world. Here, Schuyler's emphasis

on racial similarity dismantles racial hierarchies and begins a systematic attack on white

superiority.

More locally, Schuyler attacks the idea of American racial purity. He universalizes

physical characteristics with Dr. Crookman's deconstruction of hegemonic notions that are based

on physical features. Crookman asserts that because "less than twenty per cent [*sic*] of our

Negroes are without Caucasian ancestry and that close to thirty per cent [*sic*] have American

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[11] Although Schuyler uses the term caste here, he does not seem to use the term in a strictly sociological sense. He
does not see the African American caste as inescapable. In fact, I believe that he would argue that both in his
personal life and professional career he moves well beyond the limits of caste and established himself as a member
of the middle class who was accepted by whites and blacks alike.

Indian ancestry, it is readily seen that there cannot be the wide differences in Caucasian and

Afro-American facial characteristics that most people imagine" (Schuyler, *BNM* 15).   The

sentiment, expressed by Crookman, is echoed by Dr. Samuel Buggerie's research, which finds

that even disregarding those produced by Black-No-More, " close to fifty million [visibly white]

American souls" have African American ancestry (Schuyler *Black No More* 142*).* It is

significant that the popularity of Crookman's invention creates a world where "[t]he real white

people were panic-stricken, especially in Dixie. There was no way, apparently, of telling a real

Caucasian from an imitation one" (Schuyler, *BNM* 88*).* Schuyler's point is that there is no such

thing as a "real" or "imitation" white man in America; such notions, he seems to argue, have

become more and more of a fiction since the interactions between colonials and Native

Americans and certainly since the introduction of slaves to the continent. In a world where

Americanness often assumes whiteness, Schuyler invalidates physical differences as indicators

of superiority or inferiority, thereby expanding what it means to be an American.   Schuyler also

explores this issue in his "Views and Reviews" column on December 8, 1928, asserting, "Even

today there is a world of difference between the American Nordic and the European variety, and

what is more significant is there is more in common in the appearance, speech, and mannerism

between white and black Americans than there is between white Americans and white

Europeans" (Schuyler, "V and R" sec. 2:8). He also contends that African Americans have more

in common with white Americans than they do with the people of Africa. Here Schuyler insists

upon the composite nature of all Americans, arguing that there is no validity in the notion of

static or pure racial types that are visible and quantifiable. Jeffery Ferguson contends in *The*

Sage of Sugar Hill that "Schuyler's *Black No More* puts forth creative engagement of a many-

sided and malleable racial reality as an alternative to reification, fetishization, and erasure—all of which it ridicules soundly" (216).   Therefore, citizens who worship at the altar of race, contending that physical differences signify differences of character, morality, intelligence, or psychological makeup, must find other ways to assert power.   Whites no longer exclusively own the valuable commodities of white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. The author complicates Anglo-Saxon attachment to history, heritage, and lineage. He enacts a cleavage between white America's European past and their inextricable relationship with African Americans in the United States.

In its treatment of racial makeup, the novel revisits the often tragic trope of African Americans passing that has marked African American literature from Ellen Craft's slave narrative, to William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, to Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, to James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man.*   Schuyler's black America, especially as represented through his protagonist Max Disher, embraces physical whiteness in a way that dispels the fear, ambivalence, and sense of incompleteness that often accompanies passing in literature. Passing, as others have used it, involves a privileging of a performed identity— wearing a white mask —while escaping an Other identity that is stigmatized. In an American context that is marked physically and culturally by elements of sameness, as Schuyler presents it, passing would be unnecessary. Schuyler implies that he would regard the idea of passing as a myth that insists upon innate racial differences among certain groups or accepting prescribed identities that are figments of the American imagination. Though miscegenation allows for the interchange of physical characteristics among racial groups, I would argue Schuyler's claim that skin color is the only physical feature that marks racial difference stretches credulity. Facial

features and hair texture may also serve as racial markers. I would also attribute the novel's

claim that changes in skin, eye, and hair color make the African Americans who embrace Black-

No-More unrecognizable to those that know them to the farcical nature of the text.   Nonetheless,

it is also clear that the whitening process in this novel is intended to confront directly the

Africanism that informs white notions of racial superiority.

Schuyler further destabilizes racial consciousness by presenting race as not only being

inconsequential because of biological cross fertilization, but because it is an attribute that can

now be attained artificially.   While the entire premise of *Black No More* is the artificial

acquisition of whiteness and white privilege through an economic system, which I will address

later, Schuyler also includes other slippages of the visual quality of race that can be put on and

taken off according to need or desire.   Schuyler further illuminates the transient nature of race

by invoking minstrelsy. In the short scene where Mr. Jack Albert, "America's premier black-

faced troubadour," performs, Schuyler manages to subvert the minstrel image, which is that of an

ineffectual, unintelligent, buffoon, by placing the minstrel in a position of indeterminacy (*BNM*

115).   Schuyler first introduces minstrelsy early in the novel when Max and Bunny are at the

club, frequented by white patrons, on New Year's Eve. While the minstrel is only mentioned in

passing, he functions in the minstrel's traditional role, as an image that allows whites to engage

in a voyeuristic process of fortifying their own whiteness; yet, later, Jack Albert's performance

serves in a much different way.

In *The Wages of Whiteness,* David Roediger argues that traditionally the black-faced

minstrel was a tool against which whites, especially immigrants and the working class, could

define their whiteness and reify their value (116-119).   The physical transformation from white

to black face allows the participants both to identify with their white audience and to denigrate what they imagined was black culture. If, as Roediger asserts, "the trajectory of minstrelsy was to create an ersatz whiteness and then to succumb to a mere emphasis on the 'vulgarity, grotesqueness, and stupidity' of the black characters it created," then Jack Albert's audience, whose values and need to bolster their status of whiteness are essential to the success of minstrelsy, is indeterminate (*Wages* 118). Though Albert invokes the language of the minstrel, using the stereotypical linguistic cues that mark Africanist expressions of African American culture—such as emphasizing that his song "has feeling and sentiment," which is a reference to the notion that African Americans were more emotional than rational—the effect of his performance shifts with the changes in population (Schuyler, *BNM* 115). The success of Crookman's invention results in a world where the African Americans against whom these whites have defined themselves are fast disappearing and the newly white African Americans may just be part of the audience for whom Albert is performing. Schuyler destabilizes what society initially thought were stable categories; he strips away the means through which working-class whites have to exercise power and assert their superiority. Though it is not clear whether Albert is actually in black face during this particular performance, the act of performing a minstrel show, which depends just as much on the visual image as the verbal expression, on the radio, symbolizes the insignificance of skin color as well as the potential disconnection between him and his new audience.

Minstrelsy arises a third time in the novel when Samuel Buggerie and Arthur Snobbcraft attempt to escape after it has been revealed nationally that they are of African ancestry. Though they perform blackness in a part of Mississippi that " discouraged blackamoors who sought the

hospitality of the place" by subjecting them to being "either hung or shot and then broiled,"

Buggerie's and Snobbcraft's performance of blackness, as they cover themselves in shoe polish,

signifies the inconsistency of race (Schuyler, *BNM* 165). Throughout the novel they go from

being the purest Anglo-Saxon, to having mixed racial heritage, to being indisputably black. It is

ironic that the blackness that leads to their death is not visible. They are able to wash off the

shoe polish that darkens their skin, but they cannot expunge the invisible black blood that

mortally Others them. Unaware of their heritage early in the novel, these two men steep

themselves in Anglo-Saxon identity. Nonetheless, they are heinously lynched by whites whose

only evidence of Buggerie's and Snobbcraft's "race" is claims in a newspaper. Schuyler's irony

here reveals what he sees as the socially constructed nature of race.

Another instance of Schuyler manipulating codes of whiteness and blackness occurs early

in the novel when Max Disher refers to Bunny and himself as "bucks" (Schuyler, *BNM* 3). The

pejorative buck stereotype, as we have come to know it, refers to a large African American man,

who is threatening and always interested in white women. Though Max only fits this description

in his initial skin color and longing for the "slim titian-haired [Helen] who had seemingly

stepped from heaven or from a cover of a magazine" and who would later become his wife, the

significance of Max as a "buck" is directly related to the history of the word. David Roediger

explains that

> *Buck* . . . was used to mean a 'dashing, young, virile man', presumably white, at
>
> the time of the American Revolution. As the nineteenth century wore on, buck
>
> came to signify a 'dandy' and a 'self-proclaimed fascinator of women. Only in
>
> 1835 does the first recorded usage of 'buck nigger' appear, and it is seven years

later before *buck* is unambiguously cited as used as a noun to refer to a Black

man. (*Wages* 99)

The shift in the meaning of the word "buck" is significant because it also illustrates Schuyler's

interest in emphasizing race and cultural similarity. Max is described as a "tall, dapper and

smooth coffee-brown. His negroid features had a slightly satanic cast and there was an insolent

nonchalance about his carriage. He wore his hat rakishly and faultless evening clothes

underneath his raccoon coat" (Schuyler, *BNM* 3). This description combines both the white and

black definitions of buck. While Max's size and the "satanic cast" may represent the African

American definition, his dapper clothing and aristocratic air are also in line with the dandyism of

the white definition (Schuyler, *BNM* 3). Moreover, Max's ambitious work to attain money and

power as a "white" man also reflect the social-climbing aspect of the dandy. Thus, Schuyler

shows that racial identity is just as unstable as the words that are used to modify race.

In *Black No More*, culture is characterized as largely monolithic, as Schuyler attempts to

dispel the notion that any subset of American culture is determined by racial identity. In fact,

Schuyler does not believe that different cultures have developed in America. In his 1930 essay

entitled "A Negro Looks Ahead," Schuyler declares, "After all, culture is more important than

color, and the blacks and whites here have a common culture and language. In other words, the

Aframerican is just a lamp-blackened Anglo-Saxon, with a society in which every detail is a

replica of the white society surrounding it" (217). The novel directly confronts any notion of

cultural difference within the United Sates. Therefore, Crookman explains away Charlie Foster's

question about "darky dialect" noting, "It is a well-known fact among informed persons that a

Negro from a given section speaks the same dialect as his white neighbors," and opining that

"the music, laughter, gaiety, jesting and abandon" that is characteristic of African American ghettos is cast as "European in atmosphere" (Schuyler, *BNM* 14; 63). Schuyler's collectivizing of both language and music is significant because these are two issues that have been linked to counterparts in Africa. Moreover, the importance of blues—which served as a cathartic artistic form for the black majority to express the frustrations, fears, and joys of their lives— and jazz during the 1920s certainly presents such claims as at least overstatements and as at most absurd. While on several occasions after Max Disher has crossed over to whiteness, he experiences moments of "a slight feeling of regret that he had left his people forever," his nostalgia always disappears at the thought of racial injustice (Schuyler, *BNM* 43). When standing in a crowd of African Americans clamoring to undergo Crookman's treatment, the narrator explains that Max "felt at home here among these black folk. Their jests, scraps of conversation and lusty laughter all seemed like heavenly music. Momentarily he felt a disposition to stay among them, to share again their troubles which they seemed always to bear with a lightness that was yet not indifference" (Schuyler, *BNM* 27). However, these occasions are not intended to reflect African American cultural connection, but to combat potential criticism that Max's crossing over stems from an acceptance of Africanist sentiments about African Americans. After all, Schuyler vehemently denounces acts that he argues reflect the internalization of Africanist sentiment by African Americans, such as the use of skin whiteners and hair straighteners. Therefore, Schuyler would like readers to assume that Max embraces whiteness because it leads to better opportunities, not because he accepts white superiority.

Schuyler attempts to naturalize his ideology of sameness in the novel as he also does in his journalism when he notes, "So-called Negros conformed to white standards in appearances

and behavior, not because they are intentionally trying to be like white civilization [*sic*], they must follow social laws. Black people in every country conform to the social and sartorial standards of their country just as white people do ("N and R" Jan. 21, 1928 sec. 2:8). Max's longings, then, are not born of cultural interconnectedness, but of an attachment to environment that is more European than African or distinctly African American. Schuyler not only posits conformity as natural, but he seems to demand it, which in a purely creative sense limits the avenues of expression allowed in society. Conformity would deprive the world of aesthetic contributions born out of cultural differences, thereby homogenizing cultural and social responses and making the world less rich. Despite the novel's attempt to rationalize the act of crossing over to whiteness as totally apart from any ingestion of Africanism, I contend that like Schuyler's criticism of cosmetic skin whiteners, hair straighteners, and even his disavowal of the capitalization of the word Negro, Max's and others' desire to cross over are simply "bouquets thrown at the feet of our [African American] well known Inferiority Complex" ("News and Reviews" Mar. 10, 1928 sec. 2:8). It is not the investment in a non-African American cultural identity that is problematic. Rather, it is the fact that if extrapolated to Schuyler's contemporary reality, it is only through the eradication of visual racial markers that African Americans can achieve the American Dream, which is only feasible in his fictional universe. Max has the right to embrace the culture of white mainstream America. However, Schuyler's notion that African Americans or other minorities have no identifiable culture apart from mainstream white America ultimately means not only that he privileges one culture over another—which, we all do on some level—but that he sees the cultural differences that do exist as inconsequential; they have no value, which I contend is tantamount to accepting cultural inferiority. Nonetheless, this

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disavowal of racialized cultural communities shows Schuyler's vast investment in a version of a postracial ideal. As Stacey Morgan asserts in "The Strange and wonderful Workings of Silence," "For Schuyler, then, the central problem of American race relations turns not on cultural difference, but on a refusal to acknowledge the profound cultural *interconnectedness* between white and black Americans" (Morgan 349). Racialized cultural identity threatens this sense of interconnectedness. Thus, the novel attacks both black and white leaders who use race as a path to personal wealth and power.

Although he attacks many leaders who form the African American intelligentsia, Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, who represents W.E.B. Du Bois, and Santop Licorice, who represents Marcus Garvey, are the two figures who are most subject to his ire. The novel calls Beard's racial consciousness into question, noting his desire to assert his superiority to African Americans that lies underneath a veneer of racial pride and loyalty. Schuyler comically presents Beard's preference for octoroons and his attempts to escape the stigma of blackness by affirming that he is "part-French, part-Russian, part-Indian, [as well as] part-Negro" (Schuyler, *BNM* 65). The description of Beard presents an interesting dilemma that arises from individual African Americans' acquisition of education and social mobility and their resulting relationship to the African American community, especially the black majority. Schuyler's depiction of Beard [Du Bois] reflects "the unavoidable element of fakery and betrayal implicit in his liminal positioning between exemplary blackness and symbolic whiteness, lowliness and aristocracy, distinction and democracy, action and contemplation, black potential and black limitation" (Ferguson, *Sage* 223). Though published nine years after *Black No More,* W.E.B. Du Bois's autobiographical work *Dusk of Dawn* reflects these contradictions. Du Bois speaks in some depth

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about the difficult position of middle-class African Americans—stuck in between a segregated

black world that views their difference as suspect and a white world that is reluctant to accept

them—the potential of the African American community, and his view of Africa as his

"fatherland" (Du Bois, *Dusk* 116). However, he also details his mixed-race middle-class family

and asserts that "most Negroes in the United States today occupy a low cultural status; both low

in itself and low as compared with the national average in the land" and that

> [t]he low social condition of the majority of Negros is not solely a problem of the
>
> whites; a question of historic guilt in slavery and labor exploitation and present
>
> discrimination; it is not merely a matter of the social uplifting of an alien group
>
> within their midst; a problem of social contact and political power. . . . No matter
>
> what the true reasons are, or where the blame lies, the fact remains that among
>
> twelve million American Negros, there are today poverty, ignorance, bad
>
> manners, disease, and crime. (Du Bois, *Dusk,* 179,180)

Du Bois's position is quite contradictory. Clearly, Du Bois sees himself as an exception to the

general degeneracy of the African American population, yet he also considers himself an

advocate for those members of the black majority. While the novel ignores these conflicts,

dismissing Beard as a man of misguided contradictions, Schuyler would say that Beard reflects

the futility and fallacy of racial categorization; however, Beard's predicament represents much

more. The distance that arises between him and other African Americans due to the political

need to emphasize sameness with whites while representing African Americans, many of whom

have different social and cultural experiences, is what makes the reality of very different cultural

Americas difficult to ignore. Nonetheless, in this novel, Beard is one of the "large staff of

officials" at the National Social Equality League who "are eager to end all oppression and persecution of the Negro, [but] they were never so happy and excited as when a Negro was barred from a theater or fried to a crisp" (Schuyler, *BNM* 64). Beard's racial consciousness, as Schuyler presents it, is little more than a scheme to ensure that he is able to get large offices and a "palatial" apartment (Schuyler, *BNM* 64).

The portrait of Santop Licorice is even more damaging because he is not even given the benefit of intellect. As the leader of the Back-To-Africa Society, he exploits members for cash and engages in ill-planned schemes in order to have financial security. His racial consciousness is so dubious that he collaborates with the Knights of Nordica in an attempt to maintain his standard of living, when Black-No-More dries his revenue stream.[12] Schuyler further nullifies both Beard's and Licorice's race consciousness as they both eventually pay to change their race, like millions of other African Americans. While Licorice devolves into poverty and criminality, burning down the Givens-Fisher homestead for profit, Beard becomes the head of the Down-With-White-Prejudice-League, continuing a cycle of insincere loyalty to the newly whitened negroes. While Schuyler allows many similarities between Max and his counterparts Beard and Licorice, he clearly celebrates Max and holds them to scorn. Though both Bead and Max gain financial security from manipulating racial constructs, Beard is also invested in constructions of white superiority. From his frequent announcements of his mixed ancestry to his "secre[t] admir[ation]" for Caucasians, Beard accepts Africanism (Schuyler, *BNM* 65). Conversely, Licorice's lack of intelligence or business acumen is fodder for satirical critique. Schuyler presents Max as psychologically free of Africanism, intelligent and resourcful.

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[12] Schuyler's indictment of Garvey through Licorice is even more stinging because, as Paul Gilroy notes in "Black Fascism," in 1922, Garvey met with a Ku Klux Klan leader, stating publically that he preferred the honesty of white supremacists above other whites who were sympathetic to their ideology but sought to hide it (72).

No African American character is presented as having racial loyalty in this novel. Though Crookman does not undergo his own treatment, his invention is less about racial loyalty than racial assimilation. He wants to solve the race problem, which, according to Schuyler, is an economic problem. He does not undergo his own treatment because his financial security makes it unnecessary. Similarly, Madeline Scranton, who would become Bunny's wife and whom he describes as a "race patriot, also chooses not to undergo the Black-No-More treatment (*BNM* 156); however, the fact that she loves Bunny, a charlatan who with Max is more invested in capitalism than the race question, casts her own race loyalty in doubt. Most people who are in a position to do so undergo Crookman's whitening procedure as soon as they can. Thus, black pride and racial loyalty are dismissed as either an economic scheme engaged in by political charlatans or protective posturing that allow African Americans who are economically and socially venerable to combat social injustices.

Schuyler also lampoons the racial consciousness of white leaders through Henry Givens, Imperial Grand Wizard of the Knights of Nordica. Givens, like Licorice, is not an intellectual, and he gains his wealth from robbing the very organization that was billed as the protector of the rights of white America—the fictionalized version of theKu Klux Klan. The narrative also makes it clear that the creation of the Knights of Nordica is the result of Givens's view of Black-No-More as an opportunity to make money. While the narrator declares after the Givens-Fisher family absconds to Mexico that "Givens was greatly depressed. . . . He had really believed all that he had preached about white supremacy, race purity and the menace of the aliens, the Catholic, the Modernist and the Jew," his racial loyalty was always secondary to his economic desires (Schuyler, *BNM* 156).   The discovery of Givens' African American ancestry means that

he is no longer able to define himself against the black body. As the tools by which he was able to fleece his fellow working class whites become inoperative, his ability to make money—though Max's ingenuity means that he hardly needs it—from the visibility of race difference also disappears. Hence the novel shows that race means little to even the people who are the loudest perpetuators of racial consciousness.

The novel's labored dismantling of both notions of interracial physical difference as well as culturally distinct African American and white American communities is problematic, for to argue that cultural differences do not exist among groups, based on social constructions of race, is to ignore hundreds of years of American history.   While Jeffery Fergurson contends that, "In *Black No More*, taking Crookman's formula is the act of a fool—not just because it involves an overinvestment in the value of skin color, but also for its implicit rejection of an alternative style of American life rich in flexible enhancement of human potential," the changing of skin color is not problematized based on Schuyler's investment in cultural multiplicity and alternate ways of being (217). Whiteness provides greater opportunity. As Schuyler asserts in his column on Feb 1, 1930, "Personally, I would prefer to see the Negro amalgamated and free rather than separate and enslaved. The Negros are already amalgamated with whites culturally and psychologically" ("V and R" sec.2:8). Black-No-More is foolish merely in that it only dismantles one category of prejudice, though many others exist or may well be created to take its place. Though his claims about racial intermixture that impacts physical features may have some validity—the differences in skin color among African Americans are one example of how different racial groups have intermingled—Schuyler's assertions about a generalized American culture that varies only a little according to regions or social environments are false. If his point about the generality of

culture were true, it would mean the preclusion of the cultural interchanges that have formed

America since its colonial beginnings. After all, since 1903 immigrants have been greeted by the

Statue of Liberty, which bears the call for nations to "Give me [America] your tired, your

poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," which welcomes Irish, Jewish, German,

and, albeit reluctantly, Asian immigrants in the early twentieth century, not to mention the

groups already present—the Native Americans and African Americans—to the nation dominated

by white Protestant Anglo-Saxons (Lazrus 1221). Each of these groups contributed uniquely to

the multi-vocal American aesthetic. Schuyler seems to be mandating a sense of sameness that is

mythical and culturally destructive.

  Shared cultural attributes among different racial groups do not supersede the impact of

racial stigma. I acknowledge that to deny that socioeconomic status and education impact

racialized cultural relationships is to deny the interrelatedness of class and race. While a poor

white and a poor African American may share many characteristics, perhaps much more than a

poor African American and a middle-class educated, African American, the two African

Americans, despite their socioeconomic statuses, share what Ron Eyerman calls a cultural

trauma or cultural memory that emerges from the racialized hierarchies of being that arise out of

slavery, oppress African Americans during the era of Jim Crow, and of which vestiges remain,

impacting the lives of African Americans today, whether they acknowledge it or not. Eyerman

explains that

> resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and
>
> collective memory. . . . Collective identity refers to a process of 'we' formation, a
>
> process both historically rooted and rooted in history. While this reconstructed

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common and collective past may have its origins in direct experience, its

recollection is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of

time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent

the past in the present. Whether or not they directly experienced slavery or even

had ancestors who did, blacks in the United States were identified with and came

to identify themselves through the memory and presentation of slavery (14).

Schuyler's attempt to have African Americans not identify themselves through this cultural

memory fails because the " new" white African Americans have still had that experience.

Black-No-More only masks cultural identities that still impact the way people perceive the

world. Matthew Fisher's success in the novel is Schuyler's attempt to show how immaterial

racial and cultural identification actually is. As the new white version of Max Disher, Matthew

is free of all identifying markers of both racial stigma and cultural trauma and he repudiates,

through Black-No-More, the victimization attendant to such identification. However, despite

his decision not to recognize this collective cultural trauma, he remains victimized. Though he is

physically white and is free of all of the legal and social oppression that other African Americans

face, psychologically, he is in liminal space, where he does not identify with African

Americans—aside from momentary laments for the sights and sounds of his former life, he is not

interested in the plight of other African Americans, which is particularly striking since he enters

the world of politics—and he is aware that his blackness, if ever discerned, would make him

unfit for white society. Fear of any telltale sign of racial stigma is never far from his

consciousness. From his concern that his interactions with Bunny, when unrestrained, could

indicate his difference, to fear of African American offspring, and to his use of Madame

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Blandine's tanning process at the end of the novel, he is attempting to escape whatever quality within him would signal his difference. Although he is content with the success of his exploits, he is still other. Though Schuyler labors to make African American otherness a reflection of the arbitrary nature of human classification, his novel makes it clear that no one really escapes it. There is a quality in African Americans—no matter how arbitrary or socially constructed— that makes whites always want to be distinct from them and that makes African Americans want to be less identified with that difference. Though all clear signs of this quality can be erased or unnamed, and though Schuyler may be correct in his assertion that race and racism are simply one of many hierarchies, racial sigma codified by slavery remains inescapable for African Americans, even rich white ones like Matthew Fisher.

Furthermore, his emphasis on agglomeration and the denial of culture inadvertently privileges whiteness. Even if his assessment of difference as a product of environment were true, the act of standardization, which implies accepting the notion that one type of language, beauty, religion, or knowledge is better than another, means that any divergent quality in Others reflects inferiority. While Schuyler does not explicitly label such qualities as inferior, his equation of agglomeration with "freedom" and the absence of it as "separat[ion]" and "enslave[ment]" means that he sees it as means of survival, which inadvertently concedes to the Africanist principle upon which agglomeration is based ("V and R" sec.2:8). Though it is human nature to classify other groups according to the standards of our in-group, such grouping becomes destructive when one group controls the means by which others may sustain their lives and families, not to mention achieve happiness and success. While it is true that Schuyler, like all African Americans, attempts to reformulate the impact of cultural trauma at his particular

contemporary moment, he attempts to resolve this trauma through the erasure of cultural difference and an insistence on the totally performative nature of race. In *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson concedes that racial identification does have a performative quality that is both constructed by Africanism and has been prescriptively defined and imposed at times by African Americans. However, he also rightly contends that African American identity "is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the 'living of blackness' becomes a material way of knowing [a way of knowing that impacts how one views and is viewed by the world]. No longer under the colonizer's scopophilic gaze, blackness resides in the liminal space of the psyche where its manifestation is neither solely volitional nor without agency" (Johnson 8). Johnson's assertion is not meant to insist upon some sense of authentic blackness—the inexpressible and undeniable connection between African Americans is based on the reverberations of racial stigma, not biology or some other inextricable quality. Rather, he emphasizes that visible black skin creates a way of knowing or experiencing the world that is difficult to ignore, and, I would add, ignored at one's peril. Thus, I assert that Schuyler rejects the proposition that black skin, racism, and oppression have caused African American communities to theorize their subjectivity in ways that vary greatly from that of their white counterparts who may encounter similar environmental factors.

Schuyler's treatment of culture and racial difference directly extends from his assertion that engagement in the American capitalist system—the achievement of economic power— allows African Americans to escape the impact of America's racial history. One of the unchanging ideas that come from Schuyler's "Views and Reviews" column and also seems to be reflective of Washingtonian uplift philosophy is the notion that "[t]he social position and welfare

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of any people anywhere is determined by the degree of economic power they yield and the amount of economic freedom they enjoy" (Schuyler, Oct 22, 1927 sec. 2:8). This ideology relates to his treatment of African American racial leaders such as Du Bois, as Beard, and Garvey, as Licorice in the novel. Even if their concern for the disenfranchisement of African Americans is legitimate, which he puts in doubt, their way of approaching the race question—aggressive agitation for the rights that America promises—he believes does little to materially improve the lives of African Americans. He expresses this frustration in his editorial on March 1, 1930, when he laments, "After visiting a few towns you find the Negro such a pathetic creature that you have to laugh to keep from crying. Here and there you will find glimmerings of intelligence and a trace of courage, but generally speaking the darkest brethren are frittering away their time at card games, club gatherings, dances and fruitless conferences over trivialities" (Schuyler, "V and R" 10). Because of the scarcity of capital within the African American community, Schuyler advocates for the creation of community cooperatives owned by several members in a community. He also calls for economic cooperation within communities that encourages African Americans to patronize African American business. While these economic ideas could be beneficial to African American communities, he uses economics to belie the importance of race. Schuyler most succinctly states his position in his autobiography when he declares, "While aware that I was physically different in appearance from my white neighbors, I have never felt inferior. Indeed, I strongly question the view of many psychologists and sociologists that most colored people regard themselves as inferior. They simply are aware that their socio-economic position is inferior, which is a different thing" (Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* 18*)*.

Therefore, Crookman's invention allows whiteness to be purchased for the reasonable sum of fifty dollars and the exchange leaves the "whitened" African American, seemingly, unencumbered by hegemonic social limitations. Skin color becomes just another item of exchange that aids in the comfort of African American lives. Though the desire for the product is high and the change in the lives of African American consumers is great—"one was leaving behind insult, ostracism, segregation and discrimination"—part of Schuyler's efforts to destabilize race consciousness is to minimize the idea of permanence of race or skin color by reducing it to a simple economic exchange (Schuyler, *BNM* 38); skin color becomes an incidental commodity, much like the purchase of an article of clothing that reflects social status. Social mobility, though desirable and aided by white skin, comes only to individuals who earnestly or intelligently engage in economic endeavors. He argues that the inability or unwillingness of African Americans to actively seek and exercise economic power, not the pervasiveness of racism within American culture, is the main issue that confronts African Americans. Schuyler's philosophy also explains his willingness to restructure race identity in economic terms.

The crux of Schuyler's endorsement of the accumulation of wealth as the answer to the race question is the novel's assertion that America functions with and against various hierarchies that are based on chauvinism. The novel reflects such chauvinism in regard to women, as most of the women, with the exception of Blandish, are marginalized and objectified. When the novel opens, Max has been dumped by his "yallah gal," who, like all women, is replaceable, not to mention expensive (Schuyler, *BNM* 4). Helen Fisher is important only as the impetus of Max Disher's crossing over. Though she exemplifies idyllic Anglo-Saxon beauty, Schuyler also

characterizes her as extremely unintelligent and racist. The insignificance of femininity in this novel is most prominent when Helen becomes pregnant and Max fears the consequences of having a visibly black child. In response to his fears, he contemplates abortion, celebrates one miscarriage and attempts to induce another one, and even considers deserting both mother and child. As his obsession with and eventual acquisition of Helen reveals, women in this novel, both white and black, function as status symbols. Most of these women are separated from the business world and seem to only enhance masculine profiles and are expendable in crisis. Schuyler also presents chauvinism in Arthur Snobbcraft's fight for "white racial integrity," as he desires the "sterilization of the unfit: meaning Negroes, aliens, Jews and other riff raff" and seeks the disenfranchisement of "all people of Negro or unknown ancestry" (Schuyler, *BNM* 120). While Snobbcraft's position on African Americans and Jews is not in itself novel, as they are historically marginalized and persecuted groups, his extension of disenfranchisement within the ranks of white society is significant, as he values only Anglo-Saxons.[13] Such categorizations— though Snobbcraft's position was informed by his concern for class differences— within this one racial group with little or no visible markers of difference further illustrate Schuyler's point that social stratification, whether due to physical difference, gender difference, or some other arbitrary notion of difference will always exist. The only sure way to escape the barriers of these various forms of bigotry is to successfully engage in the capitalistic system and gain economic power. Such power will not totally nullify bigotry or even make it disappear, Schuyler suggests, but it will eliminate the impact of that bigotry.

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[13] There is a long history of discriminating against both Jewish and Irish immigrants by other white Americans within the United Sates. While I acknowledge such discrimination against these white ethnic groups was at times vitriolic and very significant, they were still eventual inheritors to white privilege, which allowed them to be more quickly absorbed into American society.

Positing that economic power is essential to combating the collective disenfranchisement of African Americans, the novel celebrates African Americans characters who reflect choice, ingenuity, and action in their efforts to take advantage of all that America offers and to escape the limitations of race. Schuyler's satire removes the impediment of morality from his presentation of the workings of America and human nature. Max Disher's unscrupulous journey into the white world reflects most clearly Schuyler's position on the importance of economic stability. When considering going through Crookman's treatment, Disher notes the opportunities that will be available to him: "No more jim crow. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last" (Schuyler, *BNM* 10). Though Disher, as an employee of an insurance company, comes from the professional class of African Americans, he rises to new heights when his white skin allows him to morph into Matthew Fisher. As Sonnet Retman notes, "Whiteness will allow him [Max] to exercise fully the masculinist prerogatives of the abstract white citizen-subject" (Retman 1454-1455). While he acknowledges later that "being white . . . was no Open Sesame to employment," he finds a very profitable occupation, marries the white woman of his dreams, and objectifies and manipulates whites throughout the social hierarchy (Schuyler, *BNM* 43-44); all of these actions are directly linked to his self-insertion into the capitalist system. Engaging in "high strategy" at every turn, Disher manipulates every situation to his advantage, gaining economic stability and exercising power along the way (Schuyler, *BNM* 86). Disher's ability to take the capitalistic system that has disenfranchised African Americans economically and socially and invert the ideals that help to remove such a system from the grasp of the disenfranchised illustrates the height of Schuyler's satire.   Recognizing the opportunities that Black-No-More

offers, Disher notes, "Black-No-More treatment was more a menace to white business than to white labor. And not long afterward he became aware of the money-making possibilities involved in the present situation" (Schuyler, *BNM* 44). Exploiting the intensity of racial consciousness, which middle and upper class capitalists already know to be profitable, Disher pits poor whites, who see their position as tenuous, against the newly white African Americans, which ultimately harms whites economically and socially. Like the whites who have perpetuated the disenfranchisement and animosity between poor whites and African Americans, Disher uses poor whites' fears for his own gain, telling "them at the top of his voice what they believed: i.e., that a white skin was a sure indication of the possession of superior intellectual and moral qualities; that all Negros were inferior to them; that God had intended the United States to be a white man's country and that with His help they could keep it so" (Schuyler, *BNM* 55). For a time, he even encourages and financially supports the rivalry between the two African American political factions—Beard's and Licorice's— in order to distract Beard from his protest against Black-No-More, all in an effort to maintain the "status quo" (Schuyler, *BNM* 87). His mere presence as an African American, who not only controls the white poor but also yields so much power among white elites that he is able to choose presidential candidates, is a reversal of American power dynamics. Disher emerges from this tale unscathed—marriage intact, financially sound, and with a male heir— thanks to his theft of the Knights of Nordica, to his disregard for the subjugation of others.

Despite Disher's clear investment in capitalism, many scholars have argued that Schuyler's project is to impart a critique of capitalism. For example, Bernard Bell argues that

[a]lthough the industry and ingenuity of Dr. Crookman and the other characters

are debunked by the author-narrator's commentary and descriptions, the narrative

action dramatizes the successful manipulation of color prejudice and capitalism

by the Mephistophelian hero and his unscrupulous followers. In short, while the

ideological and moral disparity between the author-narrator and his characters

underscores Schuyler's sardonic rejection of racism and capitalism, and implicitly

prescribes socialism as the panacea for these ills, the plot reveals his ambivalence

toward the American Dream and gives an unintentional ambiguity to the novel.

(*Afro-American* 144)

While I agree that Schuyler acknowledges the competitive and at times predatory nature of

capitalism, he does not seem to be thoroughly rejecting it in the novel. Though Disher is less of

a hero in the narrative and more of an amoral opportunist, it is his business acumen, both legal

and illegal, that propels him to prominence. Even for the other characters, success depends on

their ability to clearly see the national market, assess human nature, and steer clear of emotional

or intellectual investment in racial or ethnic economies, which the novel casts as false. Jane

Kuenz echoes Bell's sentiment, contending:

What saves *Black No More* from being merely the latest broadside from a writer

well on his way to becoming one of America's most colorful black conservatives

is the novel's broader critique of capitalism . . . By recoding racial markers as

class signs and showing throughout the novel their structural instability *as* signs,

Schuyler situates both 'blackness' and 'whiteness' in relation to an industrial and

market economy increasingly willing and able to manipulate and finally obliterate

any semblance of culture, tradition, and individual identity, racial or otherwise,

among the people it needs to keep itself going. (Kuenz 171)

Schuyler is certainly invested in invalidating ideas about the autonomy of cultural, traditional,

and racial groups. He does not see those groupings as productive or necessary; capitalism,

however, seems to underscore how unimportant those ideas actually are to the author.   I posit

that his project is to show the possibility that the capitalist system offers, even for the

disenfranchised. Certainly, Disher is an extreme example of capitalist ambition who lays bare

the interworkings of American industry and politics; yet, Schuyler tempers Disher's example

with other examples of African American achievement that are less morally ambiguous. Hence,

Disher's presence further shows that economic engagement, even when it devolves into

economic opportunism, results in success.

Perhaps Max Disher's position is better viewed alongside the other characters whom

Schuyler seems to value. Dr. Crookman, who, as a "great lover of his race," invented Black-No-

More on the premise that "if there were no Negros, there could be no Negro problem," is a good

example (Schuyler, *BNM* 35). Though Disher is clearly the protagonist, Crookman is the most

perfect example of the impact of economic power. Interestingly, he does not undergo his own

treatment—remaining "a tall, black, distinguished-looking Negro"— yet his ingenuity and

efforts to solve the race problem impact the economic relations in the entire nation (Schuyler,

BNM 35). Aside from the limousines, private planes, and millions of dollars, his power is most

evident at the end of the novel, when his simple explanation of the difference between new and

old whites sets the world into turmoil again. Comfortable in the position of United States

Surgeon General, he is at the top of the political, social, and economic heap, even as a black man.

The only female character who has some depth, Madame Sisseretta Blandish, like Crookman, evidences creativity and ingenuity in her methods of engaging in capitalism. Even before the popularity of Black-No-More, she is a landlord and a business leader, who understands the power of economic stability. Blandish "liked her social position in Harlem. As a white woman she would have to start all over again" (Schuyler, *BNM* 40). Though much later in the text we learn that she does undergo the whitening process, "she [had] no illusions about the magic of white skin" despite having made her living "making Negroes appear as much like white folks as possible" (Schuyler, *BNM* 39;40). Her position as an arbiter of color-consciousness—even on the small scale of skin whiteners and hair straighteners—is important, as it gives her some standing in her community until her goods are replaced by a better product. Like Disher, she understands the power of racial consciousness, among whites and blacks, and manipulates it to her benefit. Becoming white for Blandish is not a submission to the ideology of white cultural or physical superiority, but an economic necessity as her client base quickly disappears. Capitalizing on the new fear of being too white, which seizes citizens at the end of the novel, Blandish, as Blandine, invents a "skin stain that would impart a long-wearing light – brown tinge to the pigment" (Schuyler, *BNM* 179). Furthermore, through Blandish, Schuyler further emphasizes that economic power determines race, through both the economic power that she exercises in her former life as well as the economic power that she yields as Mrs. Sari Blandine who also manipulates color consciousness in her white life. It is important to note that both Crookman's and Blandish's business enterprises are within the legal frameworks of the

country—though Crookman and his partners use bribery to keep racists from disrupting his business. Thus, Schuyler argues that the framework of America and the capitalist system that informs it transcends racial barriers when coupled with individual initiative.

However, Schuyler's championing of capitalism and class mobility as the most powerful means of addressing racial oppression miscalculates or disregards the impact of racial stigma. Despite the premise which focuses on the depletion of the ranks of the African American community due to Black-No-More, the black majority is ostensibly erased from this novel. While the African American community of Harlem and the migrants who were coming to cities to receive Crookman's treatment are mentioned, Schuyler universalizes them into an abstract African American community. No doubt this is due to his desire to stratify American society according to class rather than race. Therefore, the poor and working class whites become the surrogates for the black majority in this novel. Disher establishes the similarity between these groups when he muses, "He was amused because of the similarity of this meeting to the religious orgies of the more ignorant Negroes . . . He quickly saw that these people would believe anything that was shouted at them loudly and convincingly enough" (Schuyler, *BNM* 54). Economically disadvantaged citizens, it seems the novel argues, are so because of their gullibility, lack of intelligence, and dependence on others. This erasure of the black majority is interesting because it marks Schuyler's own class consciousness and discomfort with the difference that this segment of the African American population represents. Perhaps a portrait of the black majority, who represent cultural attributes that are significantly different from middle-class African Americans, who have to some degree assimilated into white culture, would complicate the premise of his novel. Moreover, Schuyler asserts that race is an arbitrary

challenge to African Americans that is only one in a long list of others that impact different segments of the American population. While the basis of such a premise is essentially true, it is also true that racial difference, when it is visible through skin color, cannot be hidden or changed, except in the world of *Black No More*. White privilege and racism impact the economic aspects of the African American community as well as the educational, social, and psychological aspects of the community. Though white privilege is discussed and established as Max Disher's motive for crossing over, an honest portrait of the black majority would deal more explicitly with the devastating effects of a racist society. Schuyler is clearly aware of this reality, as his treatment of Snobbcraft's and Buggerie's lynching demonstrates, but he downplays such a reality in service of his own proposition that economic prosperity can alleviate racial oppression.

Moreover, by emphasizing the conflicting interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Schuyler also attempts to posit racism as the result of a capitalist system in which the bourgeoisie pits minorities and poor and working-class whites against each other. This is evident in Disher's manipulation of the union and in both Disher's and Givens's profitable positions in the Knights of Nordica. They profit through racial conflict. The narrator notes this conflict as he explains that among the bourgeoisie "there was a feeling that there would shortly be widespread revolt against the existing medieval industrial conditions and resultant reduction of profits and dividends" and that "[b]ooted and starved by their industrial and agricultural feudal lords, the white masses derived their only consolation and happiness from the fact that they were the same color as their oppressors and consequently better than mudsill blacks"(Schuyler, *BNM* 103; 102). Capitalism may pit these groups against each other, but the stigma that is attached to blackness, both physical blackness and African American culture, preexisted these class conflicts. This

stigma, as Winthrop Jordan explains in *White Over Black*, was perpetuated by the early

impressions of Africans by Europeans and slowly became ingrained in American society by the

end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, resulting in the codification of

racial ideologies as we know it.[14] In Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 work *Democracy in America*,

he concludes that "the Negro transmits the eternal mark of his ignominy to all his descendants;

and although the law may abolish slavery [and earnest engagement with the capitalist system

may generate economic success and class mobility], God alone can obliterate the traces of

[igominy's] existence (388). Though I do not consider the stigma permanent, it comes not only

from the capitalist relationship between the proletariat, bourgeoisie, and slaves, but also from the

historic and contemporary positioning of African Americans as oppositional to an American

ethos of freedom and self-reliance.[15]   Thus, the fantasy of *Black No More,* which is intended as

a vehicle to show racial difference as subordinate to class, succeeds only in misrepresenting

America's racial reality.

Caste and Capitalism in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

　　　　Unlike *Black No More's* investment in America's capitalist impulse, *If He Hollers Let*

Him Go posits, instead, the breakdown of the ideology upon which America was founded and the

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[14] Though I agree with Winthrop's assertion that some degree of Africanism existed from the first contact between Africans and Europeans, other scholars such as Edmund Morgan and Theodore Allen disagree. Morgan argues that class was the dominant issue in the colonies, not race. He insists that the position of black and white servants was so similar that "the two despised groups initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament" (327). Racism, he contends, emerged from the anxiety of the increasing numbers of slave imports and the fear that slaves and poor whites would join together and threaten the social and governing structure. Thus, legal and social policies were enacted that emphasized racial difference.

[15] While I argue that slavery helped create a psychological climate of otherness that fostered notions of inferiority and superiority, the importation of African slaves into America was primarily a financial decision at the beginning of chattel slavery. While narratives of otherness did exist and continued to develop into the a more codified form over time, economic imperative of getting workers who could survive in different climates and plant and harvest crops was foremost in the minds of slavers.

inability of capitalism to adequately address the deep-seated reality of inferiority and superiority that pervades the American psyche. While George Schuyler asserts that "[a] person or group increases the respect in which it is held in direct ratio to achievement and possession of power, economic and otherwise," Chester Himes asks how real economic or social power can be achieved when all reflections of African American power throughout the American system are divested of any semblance of agency (Schuyler, "V &R" Mar. 10, 1928 sec. 2:8). Capitalism is very significant in my study of Africanism, as it has been cast as both the cause of and the cure for racial oppression in America. Though capitalism undoubtedly contributed to—not caused— the codification of Africanism within American society, it cannot eliminate it. Chester Himes's work reflects an angry, often vitriolic response to the inequities of the American system. Looking back in an interview in 1964, Himes declares, "My novel, . . . is a violent angry story. I meant for it to be a shock treatment, the same kind that Malcolm X wanted to inflict on the American public. *If He Hollers* expressed feelings that black people had always known, things that were always kept quiet, but are today exploding into the American consciousness" ("Interview" 15). Coupled with this shock is the lingering influence of racial determinism that hampers the life of the protagonist Bob Jones. Despite the claims of scholars such as James Sallis, who insists that Himes is not a protest writer because his works lack a "sense of meliorism of redemptive change," in *If He Hollers Let Him,* Himes and his protagonist express a deep investment in the ideals of America—equality, entitlement to legal redress, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that are clearly established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (128). For Himes, the tragedy for both white and black

Americans is whites' inability or unwillingness to live up to the ideals on which the nation was founded. In his essay "Democracy is for the Unafraid," Himes explains,

> With confidence in their [whites'] own democratic ideology, the thought could never occur to them that Negroes are not ready for democracy; it would be part of their unchangeable convictions that since the signing of the Declaration of Independence the simple fact of being born within the boundaries of the territory of the United States is all that insures any person—white or colored—his democratic rights and privileges. (Himes, "Democracy" 55)

Therefore, the circumstances that confine and proscribe the lives of the African Americans in his novel could be ameliorated by true adherence to the democratic principles that were generated during the founding of the nation, not the least of which is the concept that all people are born with inalienable rights that should not be violated.

Though Himes posits the democratic ideas upon which the nation is built as something that should be available to all Americans, despite ethnicity and racial designation, Toni Morrison explains that the ideals that formed the basis of American law and culture, including "individualism," "innocence," "difference," and "romantic , conquering 'heroism'" are in turn only "made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (*Playing* 44). While I agree with Morrison that the foundation of America required the presence of the Other—both in the form of the dangerous Native American and enslaved African—against which American colonists and later citizens could define themselves, and I also

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agree that the stigmatized image of these groups placed the exalted American ideals, especially equality, beyond the reach of African Americans, the concepts of democracy, individualism, and the right of self-determination, if removed from the racist and exclusionary context in which they were enshrined as the foundation of America, are principles that are laudable and certainly pertinent to any modern construction of African American identity. Thus, I contend that in *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* the racism and Africanism that is inherent to the American system configures race as caste, thereby emphasizing and constantly reflecting Africanism within the African American social hierarchy.

Wrapped up in stifling anxiety, the life of Bob Jones exposes the incongruity of systemic racism, patriotic idealism, and a repressive capitalist system. When Jones first migrates to Los Angeles from Cleveland, Ohio, he is filled with optimism about new opportunity and free of the bitterness that accompanies disenfranchisement, believing that "[r]ace was a handicap, sure, I'd reasoned. But hell, I didn't have to marry it. I went where I wanted and felt good about it" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 3). By the time our narrative begins, he has become so disillusioned with America that he thinks it better that Ella Mae, his landlord and former lover, commit infanticide rather than allow her child to mature in racist America. Bob's idealism is based on the inculcation of American egalitarianism throughout his childhood. The protagonist notes, "I'd learned the same jive that the white folks had learned. All that stuff about liberty and justice and equality . . . . All men are created equal . . . . Any person born in the United States is a citizen . . . . Learned it out the same books, in the same schools. Learned the song too: ' . . . o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave" (Himes*, IHHLHG* 151). Like Schuyler's attempts to affirm the Americanness of African Americans by emphasizing sameness, Himes also insists that

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the American narrative is not one that can be co-opted by white citizens alone. Extolling the virtue of African Americans who have fought in every war and helped to build the nation, Himes expresses this sentiment in his 1942 essay "Now is the Time, Here is the Place," insisting that "[t]here is no question of the Negro Americans' loyalty. We are loyal by any standard of comparison—more, we are the standard of loyalty—to the government and the nation of the United States of America" (Himes, "Now" 273). Himes continues by declaring that "the Negro Americans' fight for freedom is more than racial. It is a fight for justice, for an ideal, for a form of government in which people will be bound together, neither by race, nor creed, nor descent, but by common objectives and aims for the benefit of all. It is a fight to preserve in living force the spirit of the Declaration of Independence" (Himes, "Now" 273).[16] Bob Jones's move to Los Angeles, which is a site of migration for African Americans as well as some southern whites, and his naiveté in regard to the application of the American ideal along racial lines, illustrate the vulnerability of the democratic ideal to be obfuscated by racial hierarchies and the proliferation of Africanism within America.

In *Black No More* Schuyler contends that racial oppression is the result of the conflicting egalitarian and elitist impulses that are the foundation of our capitalist system and that create a society in which individuals are born both with equality and the desire to be superior—materially, intellectually, economically—to their neighbors. More importantly, Schuyler's novel seems to assert that successful engagement with the capitalist system, which the battle between elitism and egalitarianism perpetuates, can overcome Africanism. Conversely, in Bob Jones's

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[16] Here Himes desires a postracial America that allows all Americans equal protection and opportunity. It is necessary to note that Himes does not assert that such an America will exist in the near future. Himes's discussion of his desire for postracialism focuses on the government as an entity that is charged with enforcing and providing equal protection under the law. He does not seem to assert, nor do I believe, that a postracial nation that attempts to eliminate cultural, ethnic, and social differences is an ideal to be sought.

world in Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, egalitarianism as an ideal is easily dislodged by racial prejudice, which simultaneously places limitations on minority competitive aspirations, as their future is already proscribed. The tenuous nature of Jones's American identity is emphasized, more than anything else, by the plight of Japanese Americans. The Japanese, as represented by Little Rikki Oyana, who sing the same patriotic songs that Jones does and express the same degree of loyalty to their adoptive nation as the African American, are "tak[en] up by [their] roots and lock[ed] up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving [them] a chance to say one word" (Himes*, IHHLHG* 3). Jones is frightened by the interment of the Japanese during WWII because, as he explains, "I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn't tell the difference. 'A yeller-bellied Jap' coulda meant me too" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 4). The kinship that Bob is expressing with Japanese Americans is one that reflects the Othered position of all nonwhites in an America in which "America means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (Morrison, *Playing* 47). This also emphasizes the importance of visibility in racial constructs; nonwhite skin is imbued, despite variation, with a stigma. Blackness, or by extension Japanese heritage, is only significant as it can be determined either visibly or through constructed racial, cultural, or ethnic stereotypes that exist. As Jones's interaction with Alice and her colleagues later reveal, African American southern migrants have taken the place of the Japanese in Little Tokyo. There is an exchange of brown bodies between prison and poverty. Imprisonment looms for Jones near the end of the novel in the form of the actual penitentiary and conscription into the war, and it is a reality for the forcibly removed Japanese American citizens in internment camps. Moreover, the poverty in the Los Angeles slums that was shared by the

Japanese Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans is the result of the unequal

application of law.   Skin color, not citizenship or loyalty, is the basis upon which American law

and justice is applied.

Despite the continuing dislodging of the faith in American's most treasured ideals—

through systemic racism, variations on Jim Crowism, violence, and economic coercion— that

mark Jones's journey, he acknowledges that "[t]he white folks had drummed more into me than

they'd been able to scare out" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 152). Until the end of the novel when Jones is

beaten, falsely accused of rape, and subjected to a racist criminal justice system that treats black

bodies like commodities for the war effort, he believes in the promise of America. However,

Jones's experiences reflect the precarious predicament of the African American middle class and

black majority. Jones appeals to a sense of nationalism, bolstered by the war effort that

nominally considers African Americans citizens. Himes shows that any American national

consciousness that is perpetrated within a climate of systematic racial disenfranchisement is

fragmented and inherently fictitious for the disenfranchised, as it is culturally, ethnically, and

racially selective. Moreover, through Jones, Himes reveals how such a naive belief in the

American system of democracy and justice is not just misplaced but also dangerous to people

who think that they will be treated fairly.

Further exploring the relationship between the pursuit of economic power or insertion

into the capitalist system and African American progress, Himes portrait of Jones's professional

interactions reflect the ability of African Americans only to produce empty shows of power that

do not threaten the white power structures. The events of the novel mark four months since

Jones has been promoted to leaderman at Atlas shipyard, which holds American defense

contracts. While he is not actively engaged in the political system or the proprietor of a business like the successful African Americans in Schuyler's novel, he, like many African Americans across the nation, is an industrial worker whose labor provides the foundation of the American capitalist system. Jones is intelligent, has a partial college education, and feels "a certain responsibility about setting an example" to the crew that he leads (Himes, *IHHLHG* 18). His promotion to leaderman is the result of white fear of African American economic and social power. He was promoted to lead an all African American crew "to help . . . keep down trouble between white and coloured workers" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 29). Mr. MacDougal, his department superintendent, is afraid that racial conflict will decrease productivity. He is also concerned about potential grievances, which implies that the shipyard is not in compliance with President Roosevelt's executive order on fair employment. However, his concerns do not counter the racism that is rampant on the shipyard. Jones has no real authority or power. He is micromanaged by Kelly, his white supervisor, who does not think African Americans should be in supervisory roles and who vindictively tells a joke about exploiting black women in his hearing. White female subordinates refuse to work with his African American crew, and their superiors refuse to force their compliance. Jones's union representative is also reluctant to support him in his grievances with the company. Moreover, the threat of physical violence looms and erupts when a white co-worker, Johnny Stoddart, attacks him during a dice game. Of course, resentment at African American economic competition plays a large role in this particular conflict. Though Bob's position as leaderman gives him greater economic flexibility, which allows him to bet larger sums of money than his co-workers can cover, it also leads to a physical attack that demonstrates that his elevated position has little value to his white co-

workers. Ultimately, it becomes clear to the protagonist that MacDougal "didn't give a goddamn about the coloured workers, one way or the other" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 30).   Therefore, Jones is impotent in his position at the plant. Though he is above his fellow African American crewmen, he remains subject to the moods and whims of his white co-workers, whether they are his professional superiors or subordinates. As Robert Lee rightly contends, "In Himes' paradox, white capitalist power, in the triad of government, army and business, mechanizes human vitality to build ships which ostensibly will destroy external fascism while allowing the brute process of domestic racism which devour and cannibalize Bob Jones to pass unchecked, often willfully encouraged" (Lee 68). Jones's engagement with capitalism results in a reaffirmation of the inescapability of race and a shattered American ideal.

Bob Jones's impotence as an authority figure at Atlas results in empty shows of power, almost uncontrollable anger, and an intense anxiety. Though he is demoted and faces the threat of the revoking of his military deferment early in the novel, Bob Jones revels in the pretense of his office. Empowered by the connotation that his job imbues, he admits, "Something about my working clothes made me feel rugged, bigger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker—stronger even than an executive. Important too. It put me on my muscle. I felt a swagger in my stance when I stepped over to the dresser to get my keys and wallet, identification badge, handkerchief, cigarettes" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 9).   While his job at Atlas does everything to undermine such confidence, he can at least wear the costume of a man in power. This feeling of importance extends to his relationship to authority. For example, when he contemplates being stopped for speeding on his way to work, he shrugs off such fear, exclaiming, "to hell with them, I was a key man in a shipyard, as important as anybody now" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 10). Though it

is clear that an incident with the police would end up much like his and Alice's arrest for speeding later in the novel, if not worse, Bob likes to present a facade of power and to express his agency in any way possible. Though his demotion is looming, he mentions his leaderman position again when he begins to express his desire to sexually objectify Madge, a degraded image of southern white womanhood. Being a leaderman, even when it is slipping from his grasp, gives Jones a sense of himself as a subject; it allows him to bask, if only temporarily, in his masculine prerogative in the capitalist system.

During this era, most capitalist enterprises were dominated by males. Although more women entered the workforce during WWII, America was still very much a patriarchal society where men were partially judged on their ability to provide for their families as well as their level of professional success in regards to other men. The ability to control other men, or at least to meet them on equal terms, and certainly to control women reflected power. In many ways, a man's appraisal of his own masculinity was tied to his status within the capitalist system. While Bob cannot control how whites treat him, he can control the image that he projects. Another way that Bob exercises power is through his brand new 1942 Buick Roadmaster, which allows him to feel superior: "[E]very time I got behind the wheel and looked down over the broad, flat, mile-long hood I thought about how the rich white folks out in Beverly couldn't even buy a new car now and got a certain satisfaction" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 10). The car is a status symbol that normally accompanies capitalist success. Bob's excitement at having some item that many whites cannot afford is empty, because whites who are even lower than him in the economic hierarchy can still refuse to work with him and even effect his demotion. He can acquire some of the material goods that America offers that should reflect equal opportunity, though his

demotion to mechanic would hamper this somewhat, but he cannot receive the simple respect that his office warrants.

Race also complicates Bob's ability to engage in the white male patriarchal prerogative. Most scholars, including James Lundquist and Stephen Milliken, recognize the intensity of Bob Jones's emasculation at the hands of the racist society, which Himes makes explicit. However, less attention has been paid to his aborted attempts to dominate women—sexually, emotionally, and physically—in this text. Clearly, Bob uses sexual liaisons as a means to show his masculinity. Though his relationship with Alice is not yet sexual, he is confident in the fact that there are many other women who are available to him. His relationship with Alice is less than exclusive, and he flirts with every woman, white or black, who does not remind him of his socially imposed inferiority. However, unlike white men, who have dominated both black and white women's bodies and proscribed their behavior throughout history, Bob is unable to do so. Though all of the women whom he encounters in the novel seem to be attracted to him, the women have more agency in their interactions than he does. Both Veda and Madge, two white women with whom he has encounters, reflect his difficulty with interracial liaisons in the intense racial climate of Los Angeles. Although he is the one who seemingly rejects Veda, a waitress at the Rust Room, her angry dismissal of him as a "sad chickenshit nigger" trumps his upper hand and alters his mood (Himes, *IHHLHG* 73). After their encounter, he becomes "melancholy" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 74). Similarly, Madge controls him through racial privilege as well. Of Madge, he notes, "She had a sign up in front of her as big as Civic Centre—KEEP AWAY, NIGGERS, I'M WHITE! And without having to say one word she could keep all the white men in the world feeling they had to protect her from black rapists. That made her doubly dangerous

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because she thought about Negro men" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 125). He and Madge are attracted to each other for similar reasons, she wanting an adventurous encounter with a dangerous and sexually potent black buck, and he wanting to debase a sullied but no less powerful example of whiteness who could destroy him with one word. Her presence emasculates him on their worksite and in her hotel room. Even Madge's physical strength and aggressiveness match and surpass his own. In the week that the novel spans, Madge gets him demoted, dominates him sexually, gets him beaten by his co-workers, and ultimately causes him to be conscripted into the army. Whiteness allows both of these women, despite their lack of virtue and their sexual promiscuity—if not prostitution—to dominate African American male bodies.

Bob's relationship with African American women is no less complicated. While he is attracted to his landlord and former lover Ella Mae, their previous sexual relationship was the result of pity, an effort to soothe his anxiety about the racial climate of Los Angles and job discrimination. Though he always assumes a half-serious, half-teasing air with her, when she kisses him in an effort to rekindle the intimacy of their bond, he rebuffs her. His rebuff is only due to his perception that she is teasing him. Ella Mae seems to care deeply for Bob, but she only offers herself to him on her terms, which troubles Bob because he likes to be in control in his relationships with women. Similarly, his relationship with Alice is an exercise in his futile attempts to live up to her standards. Alice insults his intelligence, sense of style, dark skin, and overall life philosophy. Though she states that she loves him, she does not show that love through physical intimacy. The protagonist even fears that she is having both interracial and homosexual affairs. Bob's relationship with her amounts to clinging to her as an ideal of womanhood and longing for her to bolster his own patriarchal sense of his masculinity. After his

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fight with Alice over her potential homosexual affair, Bob considers what he wants from her: "Maybe I wanted her to lean on me and tell me I was strong and that she belonged to me; or to hold my head against her breast and let me get it all out. Maybe I wanted to give her a chance to fall on her knees and ask for my forgiveness" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 79). He wants Alice to submit to him as her superior. Nonetheless, neither his relationship with Alice nor any of his other relationships with women reinforce his sense of masculinity. As David Ikard's feminist approach to this novel contends, "It becomes evident . . . that Jones's understanding of his socioeconomic oppression is linked to his frustration at not being able fully to sexually dominate black and white women. As such, his project of black resistance to white racism is gendered in ways that reify rather than subvert white patriarchy" (Ikard 299). Without success, Bob tries to assert his own subjectivity by objectifying and exploiting femininity. Therefore, Bob's relationships with women only further contribute to his frustration and anger.

Because Bob is not so unintelligent as to be deluded about his professional and personal situation, beneath the surface of his calm and collected exterior is a significant degree of anger that impacts all of his interactions with people. In the novel, Himes emphasizes this anger during the scenes in the novel when he is driving. Speed and at times dangerous maneuvering are part of the way that Bob asserts power. He feels that he is in competition with white drivers and has violent urges to hit civilians. In moments when his anxiety is great, he sees racism in every face that looks at him. Race confines him in ways that he cannot effectively express on his job or in any way that would improve his life. Though Bob is not in search of a national answer to America's race problem—his concern for disenfranchisement seems more individual than

collective—his anger does arise out of his inability through his work or his intelligence to trump

race and effect change for himself.   His frustration and anxiety lead to his confession that

> if I'd been a white boy I might have enjoyed the scramble in the early morning
>
> sun, the tight competition for a twenty-foot lead on a thirty-mile highway. But to
>
> me it was racial. The huge industrial plants flanking the ribbon of road—
>
> shipyards, refineries, oil wells, steel mills, construction companies—the thousand
>
> rushing workers, the low-hanging barrage balloons, the close hard roar of Diesel
>
> trucks and the distant drone used to send me driving clear across Ohio on a sunny
>
> summer morning, and the snow-capped mountains the background, see them; all I
>
> wanted in the world was to push my Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's
>
> face. (Himes, *IHHLHG* 14)

The incompatibility of Bob's previous belief in equal opportunity with the industrial exploitation

of African Americans that he finds in Los Angles fuels his anger. The Roadmaster itself

represents empty economic power, as its purchase aids in the success of factories and industrial

enterprises that further emasculate Bob.   Bob's anxiety is also clear through his violent mood

swings. He goes from slapping his girlfriend Alice to desperately needing her. He also

vacillates between needing to kill his attacker Johnny Stoddart to wanting to sexually degrade

Madge. Bob is at peace when he finally decides to kill Stoddart; he declares, "I was going to kill

him if they hung me for it, I thought pleasantly. A white man, a supreme being. Just the thought

of it did something for me. Just contemplating it. All the tightness that had been in my body,

making my motions jerky keeping my muscles taut, left me and I felt relaxed, confident and

strong" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 38).   Similarly with Madge, he goes from requesting that the union

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force white women to work with African Americans, to wanting to physically kick Madge's teeth in, to accepting her address from a white co-worker in order to teach her a lesson through sexual exploitation.

In an interview with Francois Bott, Chester Himes describes the autobiographical origins of Bob's anger. When Himes migrated to Los Angeles, he explains, "There, racism became an inescapable fact of life for me. I'd been able to ignore segregation up until then, but now I couldn't. I felt I could 'see' racism, and it seemed to stick to me. It contaminated everything. It was like a disease I couldn't shake" (Himes, "Bott" 14). Coming from a relatively middle-class background, Himes explains to Bott that prior to his move to Los Angeles, "We always lived in the colored community, without any contact with white people" (Himes, "Bott"). In Los Angeles, avoidance of the white community is impossible. The influx of southern migrants, as well as the presence of southern soldiers who were preparing to enter World War II, makes Los Angeles's social climate resemble that of the segregated south. His exposure to such racism only exacerbated Himes's feelings of inadequacy at his inability to financially support his wife as well as adding to his disillusionment with the incongruence of the American ideal with the racist reality of African American lives. The autobiographical emotional turmoil that shapes the novel creates in Bob a caged volatility, which is in the form of an impotent rage—he never actually hurts anyone—that suggests questions about his reliability as a narrator. His anger seems to cloud his ability to reason. The lines in the novel are blurred. Are the motorist and pedestrians in the novel really reflecting the degree of racism that Bob perceives? Is his desire to harm and degrade Madge more a reflection of his desire for her, as grotesque as she might be? Is his real anger at Stoddart due to a desire to be in the white man's privileged position or his inability to

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actually exact revenge, not necessarily a revolt against the racism that informs Stoddart's position? Perhaps other desires, unconscious and conscious, motivate his behavior. Through the intensity of Bob's mood swings, the irrationality of his anger, especially while driving, the impulsiveness of his decision making —concerning Madge, Stoddart, and Alice— Himes seems to suggest that it does not matter whether his perceptions are as keen or true as he suggests. What is important is that the burden of racism is so great that it can distort the perceptions of a seemingly intelligent, very capable African American man. Bob Jones is infected with the same disease of racism from which Himes suffers. The very real instances when whites make him aware of his socially declared inferiority also make him cast racism as the foundation of every white-black relationship of which he is part, no matter how tangential. Africanism at its extreme seeks to infect every facet of African American lives. Therefore, he festers with unexpressed rage at the world.

The ineffectiveness of capitalism's ability to address African American disenfranchisement is not just made clear through Bob, for the Harrison family is the most effective representation of what such an ideology means. The Harrisons embrace aristocratic ideals that socially echo idyllic white society. Their investment in very light skin (which makes Bob's darker complexion a disappointment to Alice), a nice home and well-manicured lawn in an exclusive albeit segregated community, and their belief these qualities separate them from and signify their superiority to the black majority, illustrate the African American middle class's ingestion of Africanism. As African American professionals (just as in Schuyler's text), they see class mobility as a way to escape, for the most part, disenfranchisement. Himes has Tom Leighton, one of Alice's white communist sympathizer colleagues, articulate this ideology when

he informs Bob, during their combative exchange, "I think that you will discover that the best course for Negroes to take at this time is to participate and co-operate in the general uprising of the masses all over the world" (Himes, IHHLHG 89). Tom's espousal of such Marxism asserts class as the major issue that impacts African Americans, not race. Leighton's pronouncement is ironic here because Alice, her family, and her African American friends rather try to diminish their connection with the masses. Though they see their plight in economic terms, they wish to join the leagues of the oppressive bourgeoisie. It is also ironic that Leighton's ideology and his praise of Wright's *Native Son* as evidence of the expediency of his plan are brought up in the presence of African Americans whom Wright critiques in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" when he asserts:

> Somewhere in his writings Lenin makes the observation that oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes meaningful when it is recalled that oppressed minorities, and especially the petty bourgeois sections of oppressed minorities, strive to assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so, they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere. (Wright, "Blueprint" 38)

Here the complexity of Wright's position becomes evident. He is critical of the African American bourgeoisie's failure to seek leadership positions that would allow them to shape the black majority and lead them to confront the racism that he believes is perpetuated by the capitalist system. Instead, they assert their worth by insisting that physically and culturally they are the same as the white bourgeoisie. They also participate in the subjugation and denigration

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of the black majority, who fail to live up to white middle class standards.   Those coveted

virtues—such as making sure that they speak, dress, and act in ways that in no way reflect the

stereotypes that bolster racial stigma— that the oppressed seek to embrace are not only in regard

to the capitalist system but are also social and cultural values. Though Himes does not seem to

agree with Wright's or Leighton's position on class, he uses them to emphasize middle-class

African Americans' overwhelming interest in social mobility and power, which is very clear in

their view of the masses.

Alice and her colleagues' discussion of the plight of African American migrants who are

stuck in the slums also reflects their opinion of the masses. Cleo, the dark-skinned colleague who

will be exiled from any future gatherings because she is presumptuous enough to criticize black-

white unions, explains to Jones that the problem with the black majority "isn't just a problem of

race. . . . It's a ghetto problem involving a class of people with different cultures and traditions at

a different level of education" (Himes, IHHLHG 84). This sentiment sounds remarkably like

Schuyler's. Though he does not believe in cultural differences between races, he certainly is

invested in class differences—that are informed by education, drive, and intelligence—that

render some social classes unable to participate in the boon of capitalism. While Schuyler

chooses to leave the black majority on the periphery of his novel, Himes articulates his position

more clearly through the elitist pronouncement of Mrs. Harrison: "We got to show them [whites]

that we're good enough, we've got to prove it to them. You know yourself, Bob, a lot of our

people are just not worthy, they just don't deserve any more than they're getting. And they make

it so hard for the rest of us" (Himes, IHHLHG 52). Mrs. Harrison's discussion of her "people"

also reflects, in some ways, Wright's position on the black majority. Whereas Mrs. Harrison

condemns them because they fail to live up to or wholly recognize the standards established by white society, Wright sees them as "not worthy," or rather not ready intellectually to confront the capitalist system that oppresses them. They are ineffectual, stagnated within an economic system to which they acclimate instead of confronting. Alice and her middle-class community look at this group voyeuristically, detached from the human struggle that is their lives and interested only in how their behavior negatively reflects on their African American middle-class existence. Just as he recognizes Alice's desire to have him escort her to nightclubs frequented by the black majority as a voyeuristic excursion into the underbelly of Black society, Jones attempts to emphasize middle-class voyeuristic detachment in the group setting with his ironic modest proposal that they "ought to kill the coloured residents and eat them" thereby, "not only solv[ing] the race problem but alleviat[ing] the meat shortage as well" (Himes, IHHLHG 84). Most pressing with Alice and her ilk is the need to differentiate themselves from the black majority. However, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues, "When the black man, who has never felt as much a 'Negro' as he has under white domination, decides to prove his culture and act as a cultivated person, he realizes that history imposes on him a terrain already mapped out, that history sets him along a very precise path and that he is expected to demonstrate the existence of a 'Negro' culture" (*Wretched* 150). Fanon, as a colonized French subject—born in Martinique— was critical of the racism that is attendant to European and American nationalism. He expected the middle-class segments of colonized minorities to serve as leaders of their communities, in the same way that Du Bois believed that the African American talented tenth was necessary to uplift the masses. Such leadership, if it is to have any success, requires an appreciation for the cultural aspects of black majority communities. Alice and her middle-class community reject the duty of

presenting a coherent and valid African American culture that deviates at all from the culture of white America and any leadership role that could aid in actual uplift. Instead, they seem to accept that the ability to freely participate in America's consumer culture and subjugate others mitigates their own racial oppression.

Himes has Alice articulate the principles of her class consciousness, which he roundly critiques through her direct encounters with racism. She explains to Jones after her colleagues leave, "I want to be important in the world, I want a husband who is important and respected and wealthy enough so that I can avoid the major part of the discriminatory practices which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change. I don't want to be pulled down by a person who can't adjust himself to the limitations of his race" (Himes, IHHLHG 97). Later, when she and Jones are contemplating their future together, she insists, "We *are* Negroes and we can't change that. But *as* Negroes, we can accomplish many things, achieve success, live our own lives, own our own homes, and have happiness. There is no reason a Negro cannot control his own destiny within this pattern" (Himes, IHHLHG 168). Though Alice's desire to have a life that is as fulfilling as possible, despite the proliferation of Africanism, is positive, her acceptance of racial limitations—which is consonant with the African American middle-class fear that a fight to dismantle those limitations will only lead to social upheaval that might dislodge their comfortable position—means that any happiness that she achieves requires compliance with her own subjugation and is predicated upon the whims of the social forces within white society. While I agree that Alice's ideology is clearly problematic, I would not agree with Stephen Milken's contention that Alice requires Bob to "affirm, in his heart, with total conviction, that racism is not evil, that the people who maintain and support it are not evil, and that it does not

undermine the black victim in any very profound way, amounting at most to no more than a few barely noticeable limitations imposed on the range of his physical movements" (Miliken 80-81). This notion of total supplication before white authority and racism makes Himes's character too simplistic. As her attraction to Jones reflects, she is a more nuanced figure than that.

Just as Schuyler exposes racial consciousness to be a performance, Himes illustrates how pretension to American freedom and social equality, in a society saturated with white hegemony, is also a performance. Alice's assertions about accepting the limits of her blackness are in no way an admission of any acceptance of her own or her class's inferiority. Only the black majority are inferior. She is not even arguing that racism does not exist; in very candid moments she admits her recognition that her own power is circumscribed. She seems instead to subscribe to the ideal that African Americans should aspire to white middle-class values, ignoring racist encounters, for recognition of them only reminds them of white perceptions of African American inferiority and removes any actual agency or illusions thereof. Alice accuses Bob of failing to "try to adjust [his] way of thinking to the actual conditions of life and she urges him to pursue "some definite aim, a goal that [he] can attain within the segregated pattern in which [they] live" (IHHLHG 166, 168). Both Alice and her middle-class circle not only accept the limitations that Africanism creates for African Americans but also project those Africanist perceptions onto those who refuse to assimilate—mimicking the racially enforced standard of dress and speech, and approximating the social distance from African Americans that white society exercises within her own community. Though larger America treats her as if she is inferior, she will act as if her status is not in question. However, when confronted with situations where hegemonic notions of African American inferiority are inescapable, Alice's strategic approach to dealing

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with racism is found to be inadequate. Despite attempts to exude confidence during her date with Jones at the segregated and exclusive restaurant—which she has visited before passing as white—she becomes angry and resentful at Jones because his dark skin prevents her ability to pass. Though he intends the date as an opportunity to assert his own equality with whites, after his tumultuous day at work, and to use Alice's beauty and middle-class status to bolster his own self-esteem, the date instead reveals the limits of Alice's class consciousness. Similarly, when stopped by the cops for speeding, her and her family's prestige does not prevent her from being arrested, in effect for attempting to assert her class privilege in a racist society that places her securely in the negro caste. The same idealism is evident at the end of the novel when Jones, beaten and on the run for a crime he did not commit, calls her for help. She dismisses his urgency because her belief in the white middle-class American ethos does not allow her to understand the precariousness of Jones's situation or her own family's impotence in such situations. She is bound by ideals that are disproven at every turn in society, yet she clings to them, just as Jones does with his leaderman position, because it makes her feel less helpless. Thus, Jones's assertion early in the novel that "[a]nyone who wanted to could be nigger-rich, nigger-important, have their Jim Crow religion, and go to nigger heaven" is a reflection of the limitations of class, money, or acquisition of culture as a sufficient strategy to dismantle the stigma that is attached to black bodies (Himes, *IHHLHG* 38).

Bob Jones stands in an intermediate position in this novel, between the middle-class ethos that values economics above all else and the black majority, who are not able to delude themselves about the salience of racism. Though the novel is pervaded with aggressive hatred toward whiteness and white people, Jones does accept a certain degree of Africanist values. His

attraction to Alice for example, is partially due to her skin color and her aristocratic pretension. Her approximation to whiteness, though he is dubious of her life philosophy, elevates her in his estimation. He muses:

> It gave me a personal pride to have her for my girl. . . . Proud of the way she
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> looked, the appearance she made among white people; proud of what she
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> demanded from white people, and the credit they gave her; and her position and
>
> prestige among her own people. I could knock myself out just walking along the
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> street with her; and whenever we ran into any of the white shipyard workers
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> downtown somewhere I really felt like something. (Himes, *IHHLHG* 6)

While even she admits by the end of the novel that her strategy for approaching racism is limited and in some ways an illusion, Jones is cognizant of the benefits, or toleration, that she receives from whites because of her light skin and accommodationist attitude. His relationship with her, like his leaderman position, means that onlookers should accrue to him a level of value above that of black inferior. Alice's skin and attitude challenge notions of white superiority and, because they also contribute to her performance of whiteness, also reflect wholesale assimilation that at times Jones seems to accept and reject. Jones's Africanist investment in white skin is also illustrated through his retort to Ella Mae that "you sound like a black gal" when she criticizes his investment in whiteness, and later when he attributes Cleo's disgust at interracial marriage to her dark skin (Himes, *IHHLHG* 47).   While he rails against the white world that oppresses him because of his skin color, certainly he has the intelligence and charm to be very happy and successful otherwise. Yet, he inadvertently accepts the same notions of that superiority and inferiority that marginalize him.

Jones's investment in whiteness is also evident in his relationship with other members of the black majority. Though he could be classified as one of the members of the black majority, his education and his leaderman position make his class distinction a bit murky, as he both considers himself a member of and superior to the black majority, and the African American middle class does not accept him unconditionally. When riding through Central Avenue, the section of town inhabited by the black majority, he describes it as "a slick niggerish block— hustlers and pimps, gamblers and stooges. But it didn't ruffle me. Even the solid cats in their pancho conks didn't ruffle me. It wasn't as if I was locked up down there as I'd been just yesterday. I was free to go now; but I liked it with my folks" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 43). It is not clear if this freedom to go is the result of the release that he feels from his decision to kill Johnny Stoddart that at least temporary relieves his fear of whiteness. However, it is implied that before that day he resented being "locked up" with those people who represent the black majority. There is a sense here of being both attracted and repelled by the black majority. This same sentiment is evident in his relationship with the men of his crew. He seems to feel a connection to these men, but there is a level of distance between him and his crew, though it can in part be attributed to his supervisory role. He does not share in their signifying directly.[17] During their banter on their trips to work, Bob ignores them and concentrates on the pedestrians and motorists, with whom he feels he is in competition. On the actual job, he listens to their conversations silently, and accepts their pride in his leadership or reminds them of his position when some of them cater to the whites around them. Despite this distance, on the day that he

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[17] Signifying, which Henry Louis Gates explores extensively in *The Signifying Monkey* has various meanings. It involves the use of indirect and competitive verbal play among African Americans where meaning is often inverted and the language or mode of the play is hyperbolic. Signifying may simultaneously involve catharsis, bonding, and criticism within the African American community. This is clear in the novel during Bob's and his crew's car rides to work and during their mock stand against Jones's demotion.

returns to work after his demotion, he wakes up "scared to think about [his] gang," and when

they stage their mock protest, he muses, "I didn't look for 'em to climb any limbs for me; but it

made me feel good that they thought about it" (IHHLHG 101, 104). In many of the scenes with

his crew, his behavior is similar to that of Trebbel, the white worker who is taking his place,

watching them with a friendly, yet paternalistic eye. Despite the flattery of the sentiment, he

seems to largely regard their posturing and call for collective action when he is demoted, as

childish, whimsical, and ineffectual. While he allows them their small measure of rebellion—

refusing to work, destroying company property, and attempting to scare any whites in their

audience—he knows they lack the courage to really unite and demand fair treatment. He and

Ben, the other educated African American in the crew, dismiss them with the lighthearted

lament, "My People My People" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 111). The lament for their people, which

Bob initially expresses during his visit to Central Avenue, suggests both Angus Calder's

contention that Himes "diagnoses the black disease of feckless, happy-go-lucky indifference to

the true interest of black people" and David Ikard's correct assertion that "it is clear that Jones's

quarrel with the black working class stems from what he perceives as their willful participation

in their own subjugation" (Angus Calder 113; Ikard 301). Jones's consciousness is very much

based on the whiteness that envelops his life.

As with the implication of Schuyler's inclusion of "AND SO ON AND SO ON " near the

end of his novel, Himes insists that the lack of anger at and engagement with the oppressive

politics of America among African Americans signals an acceptance of such treatment and the

uninterrupted perpetuation of the system (Schuyler, *BNM* 176). Here Himes's emphasis echoes

the sentiment that compelled Richard Wright to establish his "Blueprint for Negro Writing" and

to criticize works such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* so harshly.[18]

Wright viewed behavior like that exhibited by Jones's crew as minstrelsy that contributes to the racial discrimination of African Americans. However, while Wright, Himes, and Himes's protagonist are almost consumed by the burden of racism and the political implication of every action, Bob's crew is concerned with actually living in such a world and trying not to define themselves by the confines of racism. They allow intraracial relationships to reinforce their conceptions of themselves as people, ignoring—because such conceptions are inherently based on their exclusion, and because the gang must concentrate on survival rather than the political implications of their every action—as best they can, the hegemonic standards of white behavior. The absence of survival as the primary concern for members of the black majority, I should make it clear, would not make signifying less meaningful. However, the surety that one's basic needs will be met may allow for consideration of how others may view the interactions that Bob regards as minstrelsy—which certainly does not mean that African American or white middle-class perceptions are any more valid than those of the black majority. Such surety also allows for more overt challenging of the Africanism that leaves the gang impotent.   Though I agree with Du Bois's contention that on some level all art or even African American behavior is propaganda and that a critical examination of such behavior can be useful, it matters a great deal from where the guidelines for judging such art and behavior come. Because signifying is a culturally unique phenomenon, that allows African Americans to relate to each other on their own terms using their own linguistic patters and narrative tropes, a dismissal of such behavior,

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[18] In a 1937 review of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Richard Wright dismissed Hurston's text as descending to the common trope of using African American degeneracy, ignorance, and minstrelsy to entertain whites. Wright also asserted that her portrait of the African American community minimized the effects and presences of racism. Hurston in response reviews Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and characterizes it as a "Book about hatreds" and dismisses his characters as "elemental and brutish" (912). Hurston's point is not just that Wright focuses too much on the ability of racism to define and constrict the lives of African Americans. She also implies that his bitterness at such racism seems to reflect his distance from the African American community.

either because the meaning is not clear—which is usually the case with Africanist constructions of African American image—or out of fear that whites will misunderstand it, serves the same propose as Africanism.

Himes tempers Jones's investment in an African American middle-class ethos and the distance that he sees between himself and the black majority with a keen awareness of the racial relations that education, financial stability, or even skin color cannot obfuscate. Bob explains, "I didn't want to be the biggest Negro who ever lived, neither Toussaint L'Ouverture nor Walter White. Because deep inside of me, where the white folks couldn't see, it didn't mean a thing" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 153). As one of the more lauded leaders of African descent, L'Ouverture is representative of nationalist action against colonialism and the Africanism that allows it to exist, into which Bob's abortive attempts at self-assertion could evolve. However, such a path is not acceptable to him, for "the social position of an average working-class white man—because he is without the stigma of color—is more desirable than that of a wealthy black professional" to Bob Jones (Ikard 306). Bob's desire to place merit over wealth is interesting because it speaks to Himes as a protest writer. John Landquist argues that the "style" of naturalist writers like Richard Wright "is unalleviated brutal realism and their characterization is sociological. As a main theme, they share the idea that the caste system breeds grotesques. And the purpose of much of their writing is to make white readers feel responsible for the protagonist and alter their racist attitudes" (James Lundquist 27). Though Himes's text is clearly a protest novel, his characters are not grotesques in the same way, since his "characters often seem obsessed with a desire to be ordinary (which, admittedly, may be grotesqueness of another sort), and they are always drawn individually enough, with sufficient potential control over their environment, that

the reader, black or white, is never led to feel directly responsible" (Lundquist 28). Himes seems to be protesting both America's failures and the failures of individuals like Jones.

The protagonist is no black revolutionary who is urged by his conscience to make things better for all African Americans, though he intelligently assesses the interconnected nexus of race, capitalism, and oppression. Instead of thinking in terms of collective action of African Americans to confront Africanism directly, Jones is interested in individualism and melding into society. He does not attempt to rouse his gang to fight discrimination in the shipyard and he vacillates on whether to utilize the union procedures to address the company's problems. Bob does not fail to recognize the cultural trauma that necessitates a racial collectivity, but he does fail to build relationships with his fellow African Americans that can form a recuperative network or dismantle the Africanism that infects the psyches of many African Americans. Happiness to Jones would be "if I could be a man, defined by Webster as a male human being. That's all I'd ever wanted—just to be accepted as a man—without ambition, without distinction, either of race, creed, or colour; just a simple Joe walking down an American street, going my simple way, without any other identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 153). This wish resembles Schuyler's use of the transient nature of race to reflect the universality of Americanness and humanity.

Jones wish also speaks to the impulse to long for a color-blind society. However, this wish is also a dangerous one. As James Baldwin asserts in his criticism of protest literature, "the aim of the protest novel becomes something very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missions to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and then into slavery. The aim has now become to reduce all Americans to the

compulsive, bloodless dimensions of a guy named Joe" (Baldwin, "Everybody" 20). Though

Baldwin's criticism also reflects his aesthetic concerns about the literary quality of protest

fiction, his metaphor is ripe for the nature of protest fiction, which uses monstrousness to elicit

from white society an understanding that African Americans, if treated fairly, can be just like

them; Jones's journey to nobodiness represents first and foremost his desire to strip himself of

racial stigma that impedes his access to his masculinist individualistic ethos. If he were not

hampered by race—he is after all partly educated and a capable leader—he could have a

successful career, dominate Alice, control Madge, and be free from his constant anxiety.

Therefore, he believes anonymity, not the erasure of subjectivity that is the result of black skin,

would afford him the humanity and Americanness that he desires. However, as Morrison

explains in *Playing in the Dark*, "The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a

racial act" that signals Africanism and a desire for assimilation; similarly, Himes posits Bob's

discourse of nobodiness as a longing for assimilaton, to which Bob is both drawn to and critical

of in Alice (Morrison, *Playing* 46). To be anonymous, lacking distinguishing marks in a

hegemonic society, means that you are conforming to the standards of that society. Jones's

efforts also reflect a disregard for African American cultures. The desire to disappear into

anonymity is ironic when examined with the invisibility that African Americans already face.

Though skin color marks difference, it also masks African American heterogeneity. Jones's

impression into World War II seems to suggest Himes insistence that the fruition of such a desire

is impossible and death or at least danger are the results of that desire.

 Each of the five days of the novel is framed by violent symbolic dreams that should

remind Bob of the precariousness of his journey and the futility of his quest to be ordinary. In

the first dream, he purchases a black dog that is bound by wire. Although the dog escapes, he is

returned by the seller. This implicates Bob's role in contributing to the oppression of his fellow

African Americans by inaction. That dream is immediately followed by a dream about police

attempting to frame African Americans for a crime; this foreshadows the protagonist's fate. On

the second night, he dreams that the president of Atlas shipyard instructs two of his white

subordinates to beat Bob with rubber hoses. An accommodationist African American couple

watches the beating, first with anger that it is taking place; then, accepting the president's claim

to want to protect Bob, they attempt to distance themselves from Bob, assuming that he is a

black degenerate who deserves his fate. This dream, along with the third dream that involves

Alice's death and transformation into a doll with sympathetic white female onlookers, criticizes

the African American middle class and their willingness to accept their status and the

paternalism of whites. In the final dream, Bob is ecstatic because he finally kills Johnny

Stoddart. He is pursued, then killed by a drunken white marine, representing the ills of white

society, who gleefully admits his many murders and rapes. These dreams reinforce the nature of

race as a caste. In these dreams, Himes emphasizes moments when whites decide when African

Americans are "among those present" (Himes, *IHHLHG* 131). Throughout the novel, Bob

ponders the nature of whiteness, at one point musing, "I began wondering when white people

started getting white—or rather, when they started losing it. And how it was you could take two

white guys from the same place—one would carry his whiteness like a loaded stick, ready to bop

everybody else in the head with it; and the other would just simply be white as if he didn't have

anything to do with it; and let it go at that (Himes, *IHHLHG* 41). White skin presents individuals

with the option of utilizing or not utilizing the tool of whiteness. White privilege, for Bob, is

unassailable, since it is not an option available to him. Thus, for Himes, Bob's desire to become invisible and his decision to conform to Alice's accommodationist position in the African American middle class are disappointing, as the pressure of racism consumes him. Bob's recognition of this and his anger at such a system results in a decision to ignore what he knows to be a reality. His concession that "I knew I'd have to give in to both Alice and the white folks; but I didn't mind that now. Because now I knew I had to duck or get my goddam brains knocked out" makes him an antihero of sorts (Himes, *IHHLHG* 163).

The broken spirit and body of the protagonist at the close of the novel are a reflection of Himes's stand that Bob's ultimate goal, which is to blend into a racist society, is a waste of African American potential. Unlike Bigger Thomas from Wright's *Native Son*, whom Bob is intended to combat, Bob is not mentally deficient or even one-dimensional. He is an intelligent, thinking man, who refuses the imperative that Himes argues would mark the African American leader who confronts the caste system. In Himes's 1944 essay "Negro Martyrs Needed," he assert that a revolution is needed that is led by an African American leader, who is "a person of integrity who loves freedom enough to make any sacrifice to attain it" (Himes, "Martyrs" 174) Himes's call for revolution is necessary, he insists, to "bring about the enforcement of the Constitution, democratic equality, and the acceptance of the democratic way of existence by all of the citizens of our nation" (159). Such a revolution does not require violence or even violation of American law. The Revolution depends on fervent belief in democracy that Himes hopes is shared by most Americans and the willingness of African American leaders to create incidents that reflect undemocratic behavior in order to galvanize the nation. A potential martyr "must be a Negro who will not compromise, and who does not mind embarrassing his white

liberal friends who believe sincerely that 'adaptation' or 'evolution' is the best policy for Negros to follow" (Himes, "Martyrs" 174). Bob Jones clearly falls short of the criteria. As John Lundquist rightly argues, "Bob comes on at times like a bomb about to go off, but he is a dud; he has been defused" (Lundquist 45). My estimation of Bob's failure lies also in the misuse of his potential. Progressive African Americanism requires recognition that all African Americans, regardless of class, have inherited the cultural trauma of racial stigma and slavery, which Bob does recognize and clearly articulate. However, his internal turmoil, which remains unresolved, is reflective of his inability to use the collectivity that cultural trauma engenders to participate in a supportive community that confronts the degenerative effect of Africanism on the African American psyche. Himes echoes the importance of community as revolution depends on the cooperative relationship of the black majority and African American middle class.

Confrontation of Africanism also requires a respect for difference within the community that is not based on codes of racial and cultural inferiority and superiority. Bob's own intermediate position seems to speak to such recognition. However, Bob both accepts and rejects the notions of inferiority and superiority when it comes to culture. For example, he revels in Alice's light skin, but is annoyed by her patronizing and dismissive view of the black majority. Thus, Bob does not effectively counter the Africanism that affects him; despite all of his awareness of the impact of Africanism, he fails to act. There are countless times in the novel when, facing racism, that he thinks of rejoinders that represent Himes's potential leader but fails to verbalize them. He is afraid to actually confront Johnny Stoddard, he is unable to articulate a coherent response to Tom Leighton's answer to the race problem, and he allows Madge's whiteness—both his attraction to it and his need to punish it— to affect him psychologically.

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Bob Jones is ruled by fear. His fear, coupled with the pressures of American society, results in total powerlessness for the potential hero.

Black No More and If He Hollers Let Him Go capture a period in African American literary history when international conflict, the Great Depression, slow racial progress, and the blight of Jim Crowism were all making artists enter the political fray. In their efforts to articulate the state of American race relations, both George Schuyler and Chester Himes confront Africanism as well as African American class stratification. These two works essentially deal with the complicated issue of agency in a society that is dominated by systemic racism and disenfranchisement. Schuyler's text positions capitalism and economic power as the only methods to escape oppression, while Himes sees racial oppression as only escapable with a revolution. I acknowledge the angst of many contemporary scholars, who lament what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "additive analyses of oppression" that are based upon ranked either/ or dichotomies, such as arguing that either race or class is more important (245). However both novels in this chapter demonstrate that continuing to ignore the durability of racial stigma, that is not erased by class mobility, obscures the real state of race relations in America and ensures that the issue will remain inadequately addressed (245). Schuyler's work argues that the similarity that exists between American racial groups makes Africanism inoperative. Africanism then is based on erroneous perceptions of difference and is not dissimilar from other modes of social stratification that exist in society. His narratives and characters seem to suggest that American progress is based on personal initiative and can only be ensured by economic power acquired through capitalism. However, such an approach to the challenge of racism and white hegemony does not actually deal with the problem. His approach to attacking Africanism is problematic

because in order to do so he must insist upon sameness where it does not necessarily exist. Schuyler's erasure of the black majority is symptomatic of his failure to address the prevalence of racism throughout the social hierarchy, as well as the real impact of Africanism, white hegemony, and oppression on the lives of the black majority.

Himes's novel perfectly complements *Black No More* because it shows what Schuyler chooses to ignore. Bob Jones's rage, disappointment with the application of the American ideal, and the ambivalence through which he approaches the black middle class reflect permanence of a racist system that cannot be repaired though class mobility or economic power. Economic power is only as significant, in a hegemonic society, as the people's willingness to recognize it. Alice's arrest and ornamental position as social worker supervisor as well as Bob Jones's education, leaderman position, and eventual conscription into the army attests to it as well. Bob's ability to think critically about African American oppression and his inadvertent ingestion of Africanism, and willingness, by the end of the novel, to submit to the African American ideology which is based on accepting white hegemony, suggest the degree of pressure that that racial oppression places on African American citizens as well the pervasiveness of Africanism within the African American community. Though Africanism is not inescapable, an escape requires sacrifices that are not easily made. Thus, Himes reveals how the desire to privilege class over caste, which both texts show, results in the ignoring of other conflicts that are inextricable from race and culture, often reflects submission to Africanism.

CHAPTER THREE
Power (Re)Possessed: Black Power and Class Conflict in *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *The Bluest Eye*

In 1926 W.E.B. Du Bois poignantly explained in "The Criteria of Negro Art" that "We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot" and asked, "seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?" (993). Du Boiss' dissatisfaction with the discordant relationship between the nation's ideals and the racial reality of the United States reverberated within the African American community, and in the 1960s and early 1970s his insistence on the propagandistic nature of all art takes on new meaning and is intensified with the rise of the Black Power Movement. The old calls during the first half of the twentieth century for African American uplift by mimicking and fetishizing artistic forms, cultural traits, and social behaviors that are characteristic of white America, as well as any notion of looking at African Americans as "lamp-blackened Anglo-Saxon[s]," were being questioned and discarded by many African American youth and activists (Schuyler, "A Negro Looks Ahead" 217).

Black Power for young African Americans like LeRoi Jones, who would later change his name to Amiri Baraka in order to escape the taint of colonization and oppression that was suggested by his former surname and to embrace what he considers his African heritage, was an acknowledgment that America had failed to live up to its promise and a call for an alternate America that empowered the marginalized black community. This sentiment is illustrated in Calvin Hernton's essay "Dynamite Growing Out of Their Skulls," which was publish the 1968 anthology *Black Fire*. Hernton asserts:

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Every time white men want Negroes to conform to these ethics [acquiescing to injustice], they call the non-violent Negroes to the scene. Check the record. . . . The non-violent Negroes are being used to deflect the Negro struggle away from the needs of the masses of the black people; they are being used to direct the struggle more along the lines of the black bourgeoisie, most of whom are sitting in their mortgaged homes in Negro suburbia, watching, over their twenty-one-inch TV screens, lower-class blacks being brutalized in the debris-laden streets of the ghettos. (Hernton 90)

Within Black Power ideology, the black middle class "represent, in every way permitted by white society, the attitudes, values and aspirations that are associated with the white-Protestant middle class in America" (Hernton 87). The middle class not only mimics and praises the values of white society, according to black nationalists, but also holds African Americans to an Africanist standard by which they judge themselves and are frightened, just like many of their white liberal allies, by the anger expressed by this new generation of African American leaders. The Black Power Movement ultimately looked within the African American community for relief from the racism that African Americans faced.

As the cultural sister of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement sought to use artistic expression to celebrate African and African American history, explicate the lives of the black majority, and elevate organic artistic and cultural expressions, thus de-stigmatizing blackness. Ron Karenga makes it clear that consideration of abstract artistic principles—which are often based on artistic principles that were developed and elevated according to Eurocentric models of thought— is secondary to the act of creating art that uplifts the community. He

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explains that "all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid, no matter how many lines and spaces are produced in proportion and symmetry and no matter how many sounds are boxed in or blown out and called music" (Karenga 31). Though scholars such as Madhu Dubey, James Edward Smethurst, and W.D. Wright lament the prescriptive nature of the aesthetic imperative, as well as the homophobia, anit-Semitism, and elevation of patriarchal social structures that were espoused by some figures in the movement, I assert that the Black Power Movement—which subsumes Black Art Ideology—has elements that are commensurate with my call for a progressive African Americanism.

While my notion of progressive African Americanism intersects with Black Power ideology, it differs from it first by insisting on the value of difference within the African American community. Certainly, the movement seeks to divest racial stigma and notions of cultural superiority of their power, by elevating African American history and folkways. However, the act of privileging the folk above the African American middle class, as the Black Power Movement does, is a divisive practice that fails to acknowledge, as W.D. Wright argues in *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and A Black Aesthetic,* that "Blacks have three ancestral parents, because they have three sources of their historical, cultural, and social development" (46). The recognition of these three ancestral parents─African, European American, and African American—necessitates the recognition of different and fluid African American cultures, though they may contain features that are unique to the black American experience, that inevitably evidence features embraced by white society. For example, many Protestant churches within the African American community reflect this hybridization. Within these churches, much

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emphasis is placed on the oral tradition, as is evident in the call and response method by which sermons, songs, and devotional services are shared. The oral transmission of culture and knowledge is linked to Africa. Also there is an embrace of spirituals and gospel music which are linked to American slave culture. Furthermore, Christianity is itself a belief system that was elevated by Western culture and helped shape the norms and values that are pervasive in the American landscape.

Another example of the interplay of these three ancestral parents is the process of code switching—the shifting between standard American English and Black American English that occurs daily as African Americans move between cultural communities. Black American English contains, though limitedly, grammatical patterns that can be traced to West African languages. Considering the interconnectedness of these three ancestral parents in the lives of African Americans, my sense of progressive African Americanism must contain what Wright calls "Blackcentrism," which is

> that knowledge and thought (analysis, interpretation) of the history, culture, and social life, and psychology of Black people in America and out of which a Blackcentric Perspective is created. The latter gives Black people a special perception of their own history and existence in America, as they occurred separately from Whites and others in America and as they interacted with Whites and others in America. The perspective gives Blacks a view of how they have contributed to the history, culture, and social life of Blacks (Wright, *Black Intellectuals* 46).

This is not to say that there is no truth to claims that middle-class African Americans might both accept Africanism—or what Wright calls "*ebonicism*"—and subject African Americans from the black majority to the stigma that is attendant to Africanism (16). However, it means that the assumption that the middle class is automatically guilty of Africanism because they embrace mainstream American culture is an unfair.

Thus in this chapter, I will explore how two novels of the Black Arts period confront the tensions between the black majority and the African American middle class—which center on questions of authenticity— and the Africanism that informs their relationship. John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am*, published in 1967, and Toni Morrison's 1970 work *The Bluest Eye* both look reflexively at African American class structure, noting the interconnected relationship of all African Americans as the result of cultural trauma. In *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Williams groups the experience of the black majority with that of the middle class, as the rambling life of Max Reddick serves as the main context through which the reader views the African American experience. Though discussion of extreme southern racism and injustice lingers around the periphery of the novel, Williams argues that Africanism in the lives of African Americans, whether middle class or of the black majority, expatriate or American resident, is pervasive. Similarly, Morrison presents an African American community where there exists a hierarchy with only small variations in socioeconomic difference, but an extensive acceptance of Africanism throughout even the most impoverished elements of society. What the rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement reveals and what both Williams and Morrison illustrate is that the cultural trauma of the construction of African American identity by nonblack people and the subsequent racial stigma that arises from it places African Americans in a culturally and socially

marginalized position, a position that many either wish to escape or to festishize . Thus, the

pairing of *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *The Bluest Eye* is even more informative as it also

reflects the complicated identity constructions of each of these groups. With the Black

Nationalist affirmation of the black majority abounding, Williams deftly illustrates the

complexity of the middle class's simultaneous angst about their privileged position—even in the

midst of Africanism—and conscious and unconscious subjugation of the marginalized.

Conversely, Morrison's text succumbs to inadvertent privileging of the black majority, even as

she validly crafts the degenerative and pervasive function of a middle-class ethos that replaces

the recuperative function of the community with a yearning for cultural markers of class

mobility.

Social Ambivalence and the African American Middle Class

Though a very productive writer during the Black Arts Movement, John A. Williams

expresses ambivalence toward Black Power ideas. He optimistically explains in his essay "The

Negro Middle Class" that "to blacks [Black Power] meant equality through political and then

economic and social means. To whites it meant the thrusting of black attitudes upon them

against their will. Black power means the uniting of all Negros of whatever class and I found

that today black Americans stand on the verge of being united as never before since being

brought here in 1526 [*sic*]" (Williams, "Negro Middle Class 165). However, in the same year,

1967, he seems to uphold the position of the Civil Rights establishment, disagreeing with Stokley

Carmichael's desire to seek African American rights without the help of whites and even

warning white Americans that "I may be one of the last American Negroes to ask for an

immediate and peaceful solution to our problems; those who come after will be in no mood to ask for anything" (Williams, "Postscript 385). That year he also published "Time and Tide: The Roots of Black Awareness," in which he asserts: "The black immigrant [African American] has settled, I think, into a pattern of cynicism out of which he has begun desperately to cope with his problems. He can't count on anyone else. Not anymore, I share this view; in fact, I help to promulgate it" (Williams, "Tide" 425).[19] Williams also insists that "because I am Negro and my characters for the most part were Negro, I wasn't necessarily writing about things that have no relationship to the whole of the human race" (Williams, "Time" 422). Williams's interest in the universal is particularly interesting, as Black Arts leaders such as Amiri Baraka and Addison Gayle viewed the call for universality in art as synonymous with assimilation. I posit that the contradictions both within his own ideas as well as within Black Arts rhetoric in his nonfiction signify angst about the dual impulse of the middle class that Williams works through in *The Man Who Cried I Am.* These competing impulses—to fetishize the black majority as the locus of authenticity and to embrace an Americanness that has historically required the acceptance of Africanism—are destructive. Thus, while he clearly articulates the pervasiveness of Africanism that impacts the material and psychological landscape of all African Americans, the presentation of middle-class characters, such as Max Riddick, Moses Boatwright, and Lillian—who all confront and succumb to Africanism—is an effort to show the challenges that the middle class faces as well as to legitimize the middle-class African American experience.

The King Alfred plot, which is the grand conspiracy by the white American power structure to enact an African American holocaust as a solution to the demand for Civil Rights, and the Alliance Blanc, which is essentially an international governing body that seeks to

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[19] In *Flashbacks: A Twenty-Year Diary of Article Writing*, John A. Williams clarifies that this article was published in 1971, though it had been written four years earlier.

monitor, control, and influence the behavior of Africans and the people of African descent,

though seemingly far-fetched concepts, reveal the extent of Africanism throughout the world

and the inclusiveness of it, as the plan is not just limited to the black majority.[20] As Robert

Fleming notes in his "Nightmare Level of *The Man Who Cried I Am,*"

> In one sense, black people have been systematically killed off in the United States
>
> since their first introduction to its shores. Malnutrition, disease, poverty,
>
> psychological conditioning, and spiritual starvation have been the tools, rather
>
> than military operations and gas chambers, but the result has often been the same.
>
> King Alfred is not only a prophetic warning of what might happen here but a
>
> fictional metaphor for what has been happening and is happening still. (195)

Such a metaphor is powerful in the Black Nationalist sense, as powerful as Amiri Baraka's

violent verse and drama, because there was a fear that progress was just an enigma afforded

temporarily to members of the African American middle class who accommodate the white

hegemonic society. In fact, the papers detailing the plan note that leaders of African American

organizations are being manipulated and controlled by the government, either through blackmail

or by the offering of government positions, which bind their allegiance and ensure for them a

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[20] While Williams's examination of the pervasiveness of Africanism spans three continents, I am focusing only on Africanism in the American context. This novel explores the African American expatriate community of the first half of the twentieth century who left the country in hopes of finding Europe more tolerant. Such famous expatriates include Chester Himes and Richard Wright, two writers of whom the character Harry Ames is a composite, and James Baldwin, who is fictionalized as Marion Dawes. I contend that the treatment of the African American writer in Europe only changes how Africanism is manifested. Such authors, much like other artists and entertainers, were fetishized sd "the latest American import" by European communities, in much the same way that liberal whites in America want them to create literature that reflects only certain African American realties (Williams, *TMWCIA*227). Racial stigma continues to exist and impact them, even though small black populations diminish the implied threat of African American masculinity. Most importantly, the world's complicity in the Alliance Blanc, which is the precursor of the King Alfred Plan, symbolizes the short distance between the Africanism of the United States and the Africanism of Europe. After all, both Max and Harry die in Europe. Thus, Europe is no real haven against Africanism.

middle-class lifestyle. Such control will allow them to manage the entire African American

population easily when it is time to enact the plan.

Williams makes this connection most clearly through two of the African American

intelligence agents—one of whom is Max's assassin—who help to cover up the existence of the

Alliance Blanc. Theodor Dallas, with his white wife, white skin, blue eyes, and knack for never

offending opposing sides and always saying the right thing, sees the exposure of the Alliance

Blanc, which both Harry and Max threaten to do, as having the potential to "wreck the country"

and destroy "all the little people that they said they cared about in their writing" (Williams,

TMWCIA 393.) Similarly, Alphonse "Edwards was a black Ivy Leaguer. Close-cropped hair for

he *wanted* Europeans to know that he was American. The other Negroes let their hair grow long

and bushy—nappy—in order to be mistaken for Africans. Not Edwards. American all the way.

Red white and black" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 13).   While the desire of African American

expatriates to be linked with Africa through cultural markers like hair styles is reflective of a

fictional imagining of Africa as a homeland and ironically ignores that they are irretrievably

American, Edwards's investment in the equally fictional—at least in the case of African

Americans—American ideal is also ironic. He is so indoctrinated by the ideals of America and

by the desire to protect the country that he believes murder and espionage, which essentially seek

to prevent any sustained effort to combat international Africanism, to be "jobs [that] protected

America in ways Americans were too childish to realize" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 396). Though

both men seem unaware of the extermination plot that is King Alfred, they are invested in

maintaining America's status quo against the instability that change might bring. Moreover,

Dallas's impending death—as he learns of King Alfred and is menacingly surrounded by his

white coworkers— which is also justifiable under such thought, Williams suggests, is the reward for middle-class African Americans who fail to manage the African American double-consciousness properly. In this instance, Dallas's choice is not between African American culture and mainstream American culture; there is nothing in the text that would indicate that his experiences as a black man in America involved prolonged interaction with cultural traditions that are unique to African American communities. He seems truly a member of the middle class whose cultural touchstones lie within mainstream [white] America. However, his consciousness is divided between investment in the American ideal and recognition of the cultural trauma that lies beneath the façade of America. He fails to recognize the ways in which America's history— and by extension the entire history of the slaving world—links all people of African descent. Dallas and Edwards embrace Americanness without critically examining it or acknowledging the cultural trauma that accompanies it.

The cultural trauma which has resulted in racial stigma and marginalization creates a level of vulnerability for African Americans. While I resist the use of the term "victimization," as it assumes a total absence of agency (especially in the way that contemporary social critics have used and castigated it), such marginalization and efforts of cultural erasure have indeed been victimizing. Certainly the growth of recuperative African American communities, the rise of Black Nationalism itself, and each of the literary challenges to Africanism that I have presented thus far in this work demonstrate African American agency and limit the impact of that victimization. The impulse to move from those margins—culturally, professionally, or socially—and achieve a measure of Americanness requires engagement with a cultural hierarchy that perpetuates Africanism and accepts racial stigma. Only Africanism—the view that African

Americans are not ready for or deserving of the fruition of civil rights and the elevation of patriotic fervor above the bestowal of inalienable rights—can be responsible for African American complicity with the plan. Thus, Dallas's death as well as the doom of all people of African descent, Williams posits, is an apt metaphor for the wages of failure to recognize the links that history has wrought.

Knowledge of the King Alfred Plan completes a shift in Max Riddick's thinking that has been occurring for decades and shows how Africanism affects him as a middle-class American. Though he wants to believe in civil rights ideals, his experiences as a writer, soldier, and presidential speech writer lead him to ponder the futility of his efforts. As authors, both Harry Ames and Max are at the mercy of white literary critics such as Bernard Zurkin and Granville Bryant, whose support means success, and a white reading public for whom, as Harry explains, "there has got to be something inherently horrible about having the sickness and weakness of the society described by a person who is a victim of them; for if he, the victim, is capable of describing what they have believed nonexistent, then they, the members of the majority, must choose between living the truth, which can be pretty grim, and the lie, which isn't much better" (Williams *TMWCIA* 49). Though he chooses not to succumb to submissive Africanism, early in his career, Max briefly asserts that "he wasn't going to spend the rest of his life like Harry— never knowing what the next phone call or mail delivery would or wouldn't bring; never knowing what life would hold for you at forty-nine or fifty-nine. No. He was going to apply himself; he was going to scheme and jive, dance in the sandbox, Tom, kiss behinds, and wind up managing editor of the *Democrat*" (*TMWCIA* 46-47). He is afraid that he will end up like Harry Ames, who bitterly regrets America's failure to properly recognize his talent. Harry flees the

country after he is denied the American Lyceum of Letters Award because he has a white wife. Max would like to avoid his fate.

The army, like his literary endeavors, is also impacted by Africanism.   In the army, Max is part of the historic Buffalo Soldiers of the ninety-second division, which is full of African Americans whose heroic exploits have been historically ignored. Max watches as white neglect of the division leads to many casualties and a disastrous incursion that results in an all-white panel of officers convicting the leaders of the ninety-second division of "Cowardice in the Face of the Enemy" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 81). Therefore, Max observes as whites make Africanism a self-fulfilling ideology; since whites do not support the division because they are black, their inevitable failure simply reaffirms black inferiority. One of the final disillusioning experiences comes during his short stint as a speech writer and African American liaison for a liberal United States president, who is a thinly veiled surrogate for John F. Kennedy. The president is willing to violate a recent Supreme Court decision by preventing a young African American, even more thinly disguised as James Meredith, from integrating the University of Mississippi because the race problem is not a priority.[21]   Each of these experiences creates in Max a justification for Black Power, as he explains that he "had come to know *really* know that to be oppressed was not enough to win ultimately; that to be in the right was not enough. You had to win the way they had won—with blood. Words, Petitions, laws, ideas, were not going to be enough. The common denominator was blood, white blood as much as black blood" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 208). Max's nationalistic epiphany about Africanism and power in America serves to invalidate measured approaches to civil rights that were common for middle-class African Americans like himself

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[21] Three years before his attack prompted the March Against Fear, James Meredith initiated a Supreme Court case that forced the University of Mississippi to integrate. Prior to winning his case, he was denied entrance into the school twice, despite the fact that he met the requirements. His attempts and ultimate success resulted in violence, protests, and even the Mississippi governor siding with the white protestors.

and to claim that the middle class is also subject to Africanism. Therefore the existence of the King Alfred Plan is only further evidence that Africanism is inescapable, even for a middle-class African American.

The pervasiveness of Africanism is also evident in Williams's treatment of Africa. Harry Ames's shifting view of the continent is significant here. Ames, like many people in the Black Power Movement, initially sees Africa as an oasis of possibility. Colonization seems to be in its death throes, and the African Americans who were previously "ashamed of Africa, rooting for Tarzan," were donning African dress and celebrating the triumphs of Kwame Nkrumah (Williams, *TMWCIA* 263). For African Americans who believed in black power, Africa was their cultural homeland, which, though impacted by colonists, still contained the truest essence of what it means to be African. Vincent Harding describes the plight of African Americans more clearly as he defines Black Power as "a search for roots in a land that had denied us both a past and a future" and declares that . . . the American Christ [and by extension Anglo American and European culture] who has blessed the denial earns nothing but scorn" (88). However, Williams astutely positions both Max's and Harry's disillusionment with Africa against the nationalist idea that viewed it as a recuperative space that could repair the damage that America and her Africanism have done. After Harry returns from the continent, he confides in Max that "that place crushed me" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 214). In addition, when Max gets the opportunity to establish a news desk on the continent, he regretfully acknowledges that "the whites were more receptive to his presence, his questions, than the blacks. This thought came scudding into full view now and he had to look directly at it. He had known it last year, if not by experience, by sense" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 333). This cultural disconnect is not just a matter of the need to

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recognize the three parents of African American identity—African, European American, and African American—but also an argument by Williams that Africanism, the Eurocentric view of black people, has also infiltrated the psyches of Africans themselves. This point is also emphasized by the reference to the "wig-wearing Bakongo girls" who when you "reached for what looked like a healthy hunk of African hair . . . you felt a gob of synthetics" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 331). These women are accepting Eurocentric notions of beauty, which Williams sees as unfortunate, for the implication is that their natural attributes are unacceptable. This is ironic, as unlike African Americans' three parents, the African women of Max's contemporary moments have only one parent, who had been temporarily usurped by a guardian with hegemonic ideals. The authenticity that they should naturally possess, according to many proponents of the Black Arts Movement, or even their ability to define themselves outside of a cultural hierarchy that has been imposed on them, is absent.

The behavior of Jaja Enzkwu, the licentious lover of white women and later First Minister to the Premier of Lagos, further emphasizes the dysfunction that results from Africanism and the lack of the communal ethos that should emanate from Africa to all people of African descent. Enzkwa is symbolic of many African political leaders who rose after the end of colonization with the opportunity to help their oppressed countrymen, but who helped themselves instead. His concern is purely individualistic, so much so that he finds out about both the Alliance Blanc and the King Alfred Plan, but attempts to use the information for his own political ascendency. Williams's depiction of Africa illustrates an appropriation of Africanism— by blacks themselves—that encourages the individualism, materialism, and cultural denial that

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allows an entity like the Alliance Blanc to form and reign.   Therefore Africa is not the answer to the psychological damage that America has wrought for African Americans.

As Wright explains, the conception of Africa held by African Americans was based on a faulty premise. The different cultural entities, tribes, and nations did not think of themselves historically as having a collective cultural identity. "An African identity," Wright notes, was only recognized "in retrospect, as an identity that had had long recognition, but which they had not known or recognized, but which they now seem headed to accepting as their own" (45). Traditionally, Africans saw themselves as distinct cultural groups, not as a continental collective. This is also important for African Americans, Wright maintains, because their quest to reclaim their identity is flawed: "The traits that survived [the middle passage] usually did so in a fragmented or diminished manner and meaning or were significantly transformed in form or meaning," in part due to the cultural diversity of African captives (Wright, *Black Intellectuals* 44). Williams, in his presentation of Africa, not only discounts essentialist rhetoric that relies on mythical ideas of authenticity, but also emphasizes that the cultural traits that did exist were negatively impacted by Africanism.   Williams rightly recognizes problematic seeking of identity. Though social traits and cultural traditions can be traced to specific communities and locations, they do not form some immutable element of identity. Recognition of these traits and traditions can be informative, as it leads to greater understanding of cultural history and cultural inheritances and because it may combat racist images of African American moral, intellectual, and cultural ineptitude. However, the notion that there is an essential element that can be reclaimed by an individual who by force or consent was removed from a cultural or ethnic community is erroneous. What is reclaimed is a myth that is constructed just as much by the

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person seeking reclamation as the community to which they seek shelter. In such instances, what should become most pressing is the alienation—the cultural cleavage that is exacerbated by cultural hegemony.

Williams's critical treatment of the pervasiveness of Africanism necessitates an examination of the complex position of the African American middle class within America. Williams's work deals primarily with the African American middle class, who within the Black Power framework cannot ignore Africanism—as the Harris family from *If He Hollers Let Him Go* do—but grapple materially and psychologically with the difference between themselves and the black majority. W.D. Wright argues that it must be recognized that "[t]he Black middle-class, a class that was not supposed to be in America, not only emerged and developed, but it mastered the American middle-class way of life, which was and remains an achievement. It is as hard a strike against White racism as Blacks have ever made in America" (Wright, *Black Intellectuals* 156). This blow against white racism is due to the hybridity within African American identity. This group has accepted colonized modernity by which they can participate in the American marketplace. Because African American identity may consist of cultural influences of European Americans among others, the African American middle class who look like, sound like, and share similar social and cultural values with mainstream white American disrupt the either/or duality that racism attempts to perpetuate. Therefore, the faulty logic of racism is increasingly exposed. This was the goal of African American figures who believed in uplift ideology during the first decades of the twentieth century. Though it is very difficult to define because it is always in flux, the African American middle-class lifestyle, because of the increased frequency of interracial interaction, may exhibit more clearly traits that white

Americans normalize. This includes the modes of dress and stylistic choices that mainstream America embraces. It also includes modes of speech that are not reflective of cultural communities. White Protestantism is prized, as well as the Protestant work ethic and the notion that capitalism and the American social and political system afford everyone the same opportunities for educational, political, and economic achievement. These values and traits have come to symbolize what it means to be an American, and those people who are different from what middle-class white America normalizes must work to appropriate—if they are not already part of their cultural make-up— these cultural traits or remain on the margins, which inherently calls their Americanness into question. This places the African American middle class in a very difficult position, either as too black—as blackness is stigmatized in mainstream America—or too white—as Black Arts rhetoric considers hybridized identity as cultural perfidy.

Too often the African American middle class is unfairly criticized and dismissed by cultural and social critics who seek to define a black aesthetic, simply because their lifestyle may more closely resemble that of the white middle class than the black majority. Calvin Hernton does this, explaining, "A great deal of stress is put on success, on exemplifying good manners, keeping their hair trim, dressing presentably, refraining from loudness and over-indulgence [in the black middle class]. Indeed, they are preoccupied with trying not to appear like plain ordinary black people, to whom they often refer in private as 'niggers'" (Hernton 87). It is clear that "Black aesthetic intellectuals cannot continue to ignore the Black middle class, because it is part of Black ethnicity and the Black ethnic community," but it is also possible to accept the validity of Hernton's criticism without applying it to the entire African American middle class population (Wright, *Black Intellectuals* 157). Though Hernton is attributing traits to the African

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American middle class with the implication that those traits are somehow inauthentic or disingenuous, his concern that for some such traits stem from an anxiety-riddled compulsion to appropriate cultural norms in order to be acceptable is legitimate. There are many different African American communities. It is unfair and exclusive to assert that African Americans who either from choice or because they are products of middle-class environments are somehow less "black." However, we must also consider the implications of the American middle-class lifestyle. Even if there is no one idea of African American identity that exists, racial stigma and Africanism exist for all people of African descent. How individuals from either class assess other African Americans depends upon the degree to which Africanism infiltrates their psyche. Members of the middle class are more vulnerable to such Africanism, as the norms that they accept are frequently based on Africanist assumptions. Africanism requires African Americans, in order to be fully considered American, to flee from the margins—to diminish as much as possible the cultural and physical qualities that mark them as different—and to embrace a middle-class ethos. The impulse to prove Americanness or to prove worthiness arises. Therefore a power dynamic arises that allows for the onslaught of destructive materialism, sexism, and homophobia in tandem with Africanism. I am not positing that Africanism is the cause of these phenomena, which have impacted every civilization. I am, however, positing that Africanism places African Americans in a vulnerable position where they must compensate for their own questionable Americanness; thus, marginalized African Americans may only exercise agency by subjugating others who are also marginalized. Within an intraracial context, the ability to subjugate others is often the offspring of their inability to live up to the prevailing notions of Americanness and Africanism.

Max's brief description of Roger Wilkinson's approximation to Black Power ideology

reflects the middle-class dilemma. He describes Roger in the following way: "As a Negro, he

hadn't suffered, hadn't Armied in the South, hadn't been hungry, and he had never gone south of

Manhattan. Roger's Negro anger was ersatz, but useful. If he hadn't been Negro, he would have

had no reason on earth to raise his voice, or to want to write" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 29). In a

sense, Williams presents Max as being uncomfortable with Roger's middle-class position,

fearing that it somehow makes him inauthentic. Furthermore, he makes suffering a prerequisite

for blackness and seems to establish the South as the locus of Black authenticity, ignoring his

own experiences with Africanism above the Mason-Dixon line. Similarly, the majority of the

novel deals with the middle-class segment of the African America.   Though I posit that

Williams is trying to suggest that all classes are comparatively affected by Africanism, he also

actively explores the uneasiness of the middle class as they are both subjected to it and

perpetuate it. One of the most important events in the protagonist Max Riddick's life is the death

of his girlfriend Lillian, from which he never fully recovers.   Pregnant with Max's child, Lillian

dies as the result of an illegal abortion. Despite love and her own job as a teacher, Lillian, is

disconcerted by the lack of financial security of Max's income as a writer and chooses abortion

over having a child that she is potentially unable to support or raising a child in an environment

less conducive to what she deems as success. Williams makes it clear that Lillian dies because

"[t]hey [white America] gave Lillian the photograph, the image of the American Family Group

but when she looked very, closely, she wasn't in it. . . . She was nothing and she was not to get

that little house surrounded by shrubbery and a white picket fence" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 116-

117).   Max accuses his dead lover of being "overwhelmed with [her blackness]" and explains

that "[o]ut of all the garbage they [whites] leave for you [African Americans], you produce, produce, produce, and scare the hell out of them, for if something can be made from garbage, why is it that they have only automobiles, Lillian?" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 117). The implication here is that Lillian's fears are short-sighted, as the ingenuity and perseverance that comes from African American communities—even in the midst of poverty and Africanism—is reason enough for the child's birth. He further chastises her, noting that her desire for security got her "so goddamn secure now that [she] don't have to worry about where the next *anything* is coming from" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 117). Williams seems to position Max's anger at Lillian as an indication of his overly romantic view of the black majority.

Max's response to the Lillian episode casts concern for economic security as a distraction. Max considers her decision to have an abortion as similar to Africanist notions about the potential of African Americans, especially those born into the black majority, and essentially accuses her of refusing to see the value of the black majority. However, Lillian is not presented as pretentious, materialistic, or even as someone who subjects other African Americans to an Africanist standard. Her love for Max, who is a college-educated journalist and author who chooses to linger in between the African American middle class and the black majority, reflects the flexibility of her class consciousness. Therefore, such a harsh treatment of her ignores the reality of the potential pitfalls of possible unwed motherhood and poverty, which Williams clearly recognizes through Max's frequent laments about the fickle nature of white employers and his insufficient diet of beans and ham hocks during his time of unemployment. Max's response to Lillian's death not only reflects the tinges of male chauvinism—his criticism of her desire to terminate her pregnancy reflects an insensitivity to her fears of the combination

of motherhood and poverty—but also reveals a sense that middle-class aspirations are misplaced, as they either require compromise, as in the case of Alphonse Edward, Theodore Dallas, and Roger Wilkinson, or are unattainable due to Africanism. Williams highlights the irony of Max's ideas, as those middle-class impulses that he condemns are also within him.

Williams further probes the dynamics between Africanism and middle-class status in his characterization of Moses Boatwright. As a Harvard-educated philosopher, Boatwright is in an intermediate space: his education and experiences place him in the world of white middle-class America, while his background and skin color limit his access to that world. He fits comfortably neither in the black majority or the middle class, and describes himself as "an abomination. Ugly, black, cutting back on [his] thoughts so [he] wouldn't embarrass people, being superbly brilliant for the right people" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 58). Realizing that his education would essentially be useless in a world dominated by Africanism and unable to return to the world of his janitor father, he chooses to become a murderer and a cannibal. Harry Ames sums up Boatwright's predicament best, explaining, " 'Here you have a kid for Negroes today, from a middle-class family. Good education. Bright. Stinking bright. But black, see. New pressures. New disappointments, frustrations. Hope, but after all, no hope' " (Williams, THWCIA 61).[22] But, is Boatwright's plight simply Williams's attempt to " mak[e] a significant statement about the no-man's land in which the black intellectual finds himself. . . . [through] exaggerated horror rather than a depiction of the disappointment and rebuffs common to black life" (Fleming 189)? I think he does much more.

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[22] Though Ames declares that Boatwright is from a middle-class family, it is important to note that middle class is a relative term. While we might hardly think of the Boatwright's father's occupation as janitor as middle-class, in the early to mid-twentieth century, African American middle class occupations included Pullman porters, hotel attendants, and some domestics. This does not mean that their income or lifestyle were drastically different from that of the black majority; it simply means that relatively speaking, they were in a better position than the large number of African Americans who were in deep poverty.

Boatwright is a walking contradiction in every way imaginable. As the narrator notes, "The name Moses Boatwright called up the image of a tall, rangy Negro farmer dressed in faded overalls, in the Deep South, standing astride a cotton patch, a shaggy felt hat pulled low on his head to beat back the sun," yet Max walks in to find a man who "appeared delicate and small, shy even, perhaps, tender" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 52). Therefore, he is not the physically robust figure mired in the images of the rural black majority that his name conjures, but his actual physical appearance seems at odds with common conceptions of masculinity as well. He is different—difficult to categorize or label. He studies the greatest ideas from the greatest minds of Western civilization, yet his choice to become a cannibal is ironic. Cannibalism is often attributed to the less "civilized" nations or ethnic groups including those found in Africa. Therefore, he is enlightened yet his method of protest—at least on the surface—harkens back to the primitive, two concepts that are at odds with each other. Such a contradiction makes him an enigma to whites and blacks alike. Moses's choice is very important here, as it is another illustration of "badness." Despite his engagement in murder and mutilation, he does not possess the brute strength and physical prowess that are important to the image of the black badman from African American folklore. Instead, he challenges Africanism intellectually by deconstructing familiar paradigms of black masculinity, intellectualism, and civilization. Whites use such acts to fuel their Africanist perceptions of all of black America, yet he does not make it easy for them to dismiss him, as he plays psychological games with those who examine him. Middle-class African Americans, as represented by the *Democrat,* which is the newspaper for which Max works for a time, avoid the Boatwright story for fear of society attributing his degeneracy to all

African Americans and because they are afraid that under closer scrutiny he will reflect the contradictions that undergird their middle-class professions of Americanness.

Moses Boatwright is the Bigger Thomas of the middle class, a comparison that Williams intends. It is clear that Harry Ames is intended to represent Richard Wright, and it is also clear that Max's interviews with Boatwright are reminiscent of the jailhouse interview between Bigger and his Communist attorney Boris A. Max. Unlike Bigger's, Moses's horrific crime is more thoughtful. It is a moral protest that reflects the at times untenable circumstance of being surrounded by Africanism, recognizing the plight of the black majority, and being aware of the unmistakably limited position of the African American middle class. Though John Reilly argues that "[p]art of the reason Max Reddick does not write a novel about the career of a premeditating, purposefully criminal Bigger Thomas from the middle class is that, as time passes, he sees how Boatwright's purgatory is dwarfed by historical evil"—and Max seems to confirm this by arguing that Boatwright's crimes were "no match for Hiroshima"—I posit that they are missing the point of Boatwright's crime (Reilly 31; Williams, *TMWCIA* 68). Because Africanism deprives him of the opportunity to control his life, he instead chooses to control his death, a death which, though at white hands, is beyond their understanding. Moses Boatwright chooses the role of the black badman. Though taking a very different road, he follows the tradition of Josh Green in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition,* and his choice of cannibalism is more drastic than Bob Jones's aborted fantasies of raping Madge in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. As a badman, Boatwright confronts racial stigma by inverting the meaning of his stigmatized act. For whites, his cannibalism is symbolic of the depravity of all African Americans; for Moses, it is a decisive action that allows him to take control of his own destiny. Moreover, as a product of

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Western civilization in general and the United States in particular, he is a symbolic figure who melds Western Civilization's seeming enlightenment with the atrocities that are committed both within and outside of the context of Africanism. Therefore, he is a reflection of white America. Thus, Williams uses Moses as an example of the pressure of marginalization that arises for members of the middle class in Africanist America. He also represents a member of the middle class whose estrangement from the black majority is a consequence of disparate experiences.

Max is also on the periphery both of black majority and middle-class communities, both of white and black America. Max is college-educated and thought of by at least Zurkin as "a bit petit bourgeois" (*TMWCIA* 120). He "never knew, except in passing through them and reporting on them, the horror of the ghettoes Ames had known. Nor had [he], except for his time in the Army, really known the oozing horror of being a Negro in the South" (*TMWCIA* 120). Again here, Williams brings to the forefront the assumption that Blackness should be aligned with suffering in a way that disqualifies members of the middle class and emphasizes Max's precarious middle-class status. His alienated position is also illustrated by Max's professional life. Clearly, Max has choices not available to many members of the black majority. Though there is a period in his life, after Lillian's death, when Max is mired in poverty—having to borrow money and eating very poorly—his lifestyle is less a condition of chance and more of a consequence of his career choice. His decision to be a writer, which does not guarantee constant revenue, especially when he is eligible for other jobs, means that he is in a markedly different position from members of the black majority who often have little choice in their occupation and whose need for survival trumps any creative impulses. He responds to Lillian's job suggestions with dread, thinking, "Teaching? Social work, who wanted to do that? That got you right next to

them again, the ones who hurt so damned much that they spilled over on you, like thick sap form

a tree in spring" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 103). Williams does not make it clear who *them* are. He

could be referencing the members of the black majority whose overwhelming struggle against

poverty and Africanism might call into question the usefulness of the roles of teacher or social

worker. For Max, such jobs are suffocating not just because of his writerly vocation but also

because they would force him to face the harsh realities of being black in America. Thus, he

fluctuates financially between the middle class and the black majority.

During his brief job as a presidential speech writer, Max explains to his coworkers that

the African American middle class is "vocal and seems to represent everybody, but it doesn't.

They're the people who with the breaks would become *upper* middle class, but the masses

probably would remain just as they are today" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 301). This sentiment

explains his partiality to Minister Q, the Islamic Black Nationalist modeled on Malcolm X who

is a child of the black majority, rather than to Paul Durell, the minister representing Martin

Luther King Jr., who is cast both as an opportunist and as member of the middle class. While

Durell "employed fanciful imagery and rhetoric," Minister Q "preached a message so harsh that

it hurt to listen to it" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 251). Despite Durell's influence with both the black

and the white community, Max chooses to pass the information about the Alliance Blanc along

to Minister Q instead, perhaps assuming that Durell is one of those leaders whom the

government is already influencing. This distrust of the middle class is also reflected in

Williams's article "A Pessimistic Postscript," in which he argues that the kids in black majority

neighborhoods see all people who "do not live in their neighborhood, . . . [as] a 'white man's

Negro' . . . [because] [e]very day on television and in newspaper ads, magazines and news

stories, the kids glimpse the only Negro who has really gained from the agitation of the movement, the one already in the middle class" (Williams, "Postscript" 387-388). In this article, he also asserts that though the middle class is the face of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, the "ghetto man . . . without benefit of police protection, gets out into the streets and does something about his condition—even if it means burning his surroundings to the ground. For if he doesn't go ahead and destroy his prison, who will?" (Williams, "Postscript 388). Max's characterization of the middle class is in line with Black Power ideology, and it casts the middle class as indeed more interested in self-preservation than in helping the black majority. Williams, on the other hand, directs a similar question to the middle class, yet his sympathy for the plight of black majority, when compared with his emphasis on how Africanism also impacts the middle-class population, as previously discussed, serves as a call for necessity of recognizing collective cultural trauma. Williams seems to insist that though Africanism impacts the black majority and middle class disparately, its impact on both is significant.

The ironic position of being critical of the community from which he arises is exacerbated by his longing to be part of the black majority. Early in his career, Max wonders, "Why can't *I* wear zoot suits, dance the Lindy better, until my nuts fall, laugh like hell instead of just smiling? Why can't I be loud and loose and drunker than I ever let myself get? Why am I the way I am? Mutant, freak, caprice, fluke. Maxwell Reddick" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 47). Max seems to be insisting that he lacks some essential element that would somehow make him black enough. The assertion here is that there is something restrained or unnatural in the position of the middle class, in which individuals must mask their true selves, that does not exist for the black majority. Perhaps there is an element of "badness" that Max covets. Those members of the black

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majority to whom he is attracted subvert mainstream America's cultural norms. They are

transgressive in that they accept their marginalized position and either embrace or ignore the

questionable nature of their Americaness. I contend that Max's attraction to performances of

black-majority identity is simply a response to the necessity that he perform the normalized

version of American middle-class identity. The activities and behaviors that he covets are not

physical incapabilities for him; however, to act in such a way is socially transgressive and he is

psychologically unable to do so. The same physical, cultural, and social markers that become

stigmatized and serve as fodder for Africanist rhetoric and thought are the things to which Max

clings. Max makes this clear with his comparison of downtown Manhattan, where the people

even "concealed their lights behind the curtain of trees to avoid exciting the natives," with

uptown Manhattan, where

> life flooded the streets. Horse drawn junk wagons, their drivers asleep, clip-
>
> clopped past them. . . . These were the streets that belonged to Sugar Ray, the
>
> Cutie, The Unscarred, and to a fat, balding Joe Louis and a bullet-headed Jersey
>
> Joe Walcott. The streets belonged to Wynonie Blues Harris whose voice was
>
> blasting into the streets from a loudspeaker fastened to the front of a record shop.
>
> . . . On the corners men stood loudly exchanging jokes and gossip. And the
>
> hustlers went by, little ones, big ones, ugly ones, attractive ones, with big tits and
>
> little tits, with big butts and no butts at all, and each of them seemed to say with
>
> their stride, I got the best that's going. (Williams, *TMWCIA* 98-99)

This description of the black majority represents a nostalgic and romanticized picture that is

consonant with Black Arts rhetoric. The black majority, even with its less than savory elements,

Williams's description suggests, contains a vitality that the middle-class ethos stifles. Moreover, two black-majority touchstones in the novel are his peripheral interactions with Ola Mae, the owner of a chili house in uptown Manhattan, and Police Sergeant Jenkins, who is tough on criminals.[23] The two characters are mentioned at three pivotal moments in his life: when he returns from the war, when he is dating Lillian, and just after he receives his job at *Pace*. Williams uses these characters to represent the nurturing and recuperative elements of the black majority.

However, despite Max's efforts, he never quite fits into the mold that Black Power ideology creates for the black majority. Sergeant Jenkins compares him with Boatwright and criticizes his position as an intellectual, insisting, "You cats is as queer as three dollar bills. If it ain't sex, it's in the fuckin' head. I seen all kinds, son, and all the noise you make don't help a junkie or a cat done messed over his wife good, one bit" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 172). Jenkins equates intellectualism with middle-class African American impotence. Max's characterization of a middle-class community that talks instead of acts supports that assumption. After Max is hired by *Pace*, which provides more financial security, he recognizes the incongruence of his black-majority aspirations and middle-class reality, noting that financial security "made him less Negro" to the black majority (Williams, *TMWCIA* 171). Max believes that "when they [the black majority] think you've made it, they're either afraid of you or put you down for being a Tom. What's worse than being black? Being black *and* lucky" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 171). Max Riddick's middle-class reality makes his longing to be part of the black majority an impossibility. His position as a journalist who observes and reports facts is fitting because he

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[23] In his essay "Tide and Time," Williams explains that the name Ola, which is his mother's name, has deep significance. He traces it back to Africa, where it has different meanings in different regions. He also discusses his mother in *This is My Country Too,* where his description of her reflects her ties to the black majority.

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can only exist as a voyeur in the black majority. He scrutinizes the degenerate Boatwright in order to discern his malady or understand his logic, he watches the zoot-suit wearing "Sharpie" who he could never be, walking down the street, and he observes the southern black community's unity while nurturing and protecting a young high school girl who integrates her school, cataloging the scene and watching a community from which he is isolated (Williams, *TMWCIA* 47). Such longing to be part of the black majority is also contradictory to John Williams's lament in the article "The Negro Middle Class" in which he contends, "Much pressure has been brought to bear on the middle class to deny anything that smacks of a comfortable relationship in white society" (165). Max faces such pressure when his friends ostracize him for his success. Williams's attention to Max's dilemma importantly speaks to the limitations of Black Arts rhetoric. Williams makes his protagonist middle class, as if to insist that the middle class is no less African American or authentic than any other segment of the African American community. Max's perceptions of the plight of the black majority, when coupled with his own middle-class existence, suggests an attempt to recuperate, somewhat, the image of the middle class and link it to the black majority.

Max's relationship with women in the novel suggests his embrace of patriarchy and chauvinism that is aligned with Africanism and reflects a desire to subjugate others. After his operation, Max hallucinates a visit from Granville Bryant, the homosexual literary agent who bolsters the careers of young African American male writers. Max is always wary of him because of his sexuality. In Max's hallucination, Bryant reveals the plot of a group of male homosexual aliens who want to take over and improve the earth by mating with Earth women and propagating their species. The plot of this alien group involves defeminizing women.

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Women will be "made nude, and the mystery of their bodies will exist no more. Or, if they are clothed, their breasts will be flattened, their hips square, their mouths and hair painted n outlandish colors" (*TMWCIA* 190). Though there is undeniable homophobic rhetoric both in this scene and throughout the novel, Max's hallucination speaks more to his disruptive relationship with women and the antifeminist rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement. Bryant concludes his story by telling Max, "Be tolerant. We too are outcasts. We have a natural empathy for your people. How well we understand your impatience" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 190). Interestingly, Bryant notes that these aliens have infiltrated every nation and race on Earth; thus, the racial component is removed from the dynamics of their relationship. Though Max denies his kinship with these aliens, Williams aligns this repressive subjugation of female bodies to the will of men with Max's unconscious need to use and control female bodies.

With the exception of Lillian and Margit, Max, like Bob Jones, treats women as expendable objects that require little emotional investment. Both his relationships with Mary, whom he dumps soon after he realizes that her clinginess is calculated, and with Regina, from whom he constantly borrows money and uses for sex, have little depth. The most egregious instances of Max's sexism come when he is in the Army and when he is in Africa. While in Italy the anxiety of military Africanism, the violence of war, and the onset of jaundice contribute to a state of extreme anxiety. In response, Max decides that what he "need[s] is a great big whopping piece of pussy. That might put [him] back on his feet" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 85). His choice of a receptacle for his sexual release is a frightened Italian woman who has clearly been forced into prostitution by war and poverty. Williams's tone of narration in this scene is clearly meant to dislodge the reader's early perception of Max. Williams's initial image of Max is that of a

seemingly good natured man who, even within his uncertainty about his beliefs, is well meaning. However, this scene leaves little doubt that Max harbors hostility toward women and seeks to assert himself by objectifying others. He calls her "fatso" and "bitch" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 85). He also scoffs at her attempt to ease her embarrassed discomfort by making it more intimate and requesting his name. Furthermore, Max is described as "cruel" and the act is reduced to "plung[ing] brutally into her" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 87). Here, Williams is criticizing Max's engagement with the patriarchal masculine prerogative of female objectification and dominance of which feminists have accused Black Nationalists.

Another extreme example of Max's objectification of women occurs when he meets Florence while in Lagos. Originally from a rural area, Florence is an inexperienced African prostitute when she meets Max. Though his encounter with her is far less violent than his encounter in Italy, Max objectifies her no less thoroughly. As in his previous encounter, he refuses to give her his real name, which makes it less personal. He also declares the he will "give" her a third "picken," which displays his disregard for both this woman, her body, as well as any child that might come from their sexual union (Williams, *TMWCIA* 325). This is all the more disturbing because she is clearly a product of poverty—to which another child would only add—and caught in the unstable aftermath of colonization. What is more disturbing is that his treatment of her mirrors historic treatment of the black female body as disposable and exotic. The sexual act is preceded by a ritual of paying off the hotel, of which the narrator explains, "The Portuguese and not the British brought the 'dash' to Nigeria. It is bothersome, infuriating and degrading to the giver and ultimately to the receiver—but, if you wish to bring a girl to your room, you have only to slip a ten shilling or pound note to the desk clerk when he gives you your

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key, and it is done with" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 326). Participating in a ritual started by Africanist

white colonizers reflects the problematic impulse, condemned by Black Power advocates, of

some members of the African American middle class, who subject members of the black

majority to Africanism, mimicking white society. Furthermore, he fetishizes her: "Max liked it

that she didn't wear Western dress; he liked the long, ankle-length skirt. He had become so

entranced with her childlike movements and soft laughter" (Williams, *TMWCIA* 326). She is

like a child to him, someone who would be submissive.

Like the line that has always been drawn between the femininity and civilization of

white women and the questionable femininity and civilization of black women, Florence's

clothes make her more exotic, just as her childishness can be linked to primitiveness. Instead of

fully embracing an Africanism that views blackness as dangerous, Max accepts the idea of

primitivism, the idea that Africans in their natural state are unmarred by civilization or the

knowledge that makes the Western world what it is. However, her body still must be washed

before he can perform the sexual act, as though it is polluted by the same exotic primitiveness

that attracts him. Max's treatment of her is no different from the sexual exploitation whites have

engaged in since slavery and colonization. As Madhu Dubey asserts:

> An analysis of black women's location in black nationalist discourse thus
>
> discloses the contradictory reversion to white middle-class masculine values in a
>
> presumably radical, gender-neutral racial discourse. The construction of black
>
> women belied not only the black nationalists' claim of absolute difference from
>
> the white middle class standard, but also their claim of liberating a new,
>
> revolutionary black consciousness. (19)

Despite the Africanism that abounds, Max is able to extend the black masculine control of black female bodies to white female bodies as well.   Within the context of Black Nationalism, patriarchy allowed African American men not only to hold white society responsible for their emasculation but to charge and subdue African American women whom they considered co-conspirators. They were able to resuscitate their questionable masculinity, which marginalized them in an Africanist, patriarchal society, and demand their inclusion in the masculine prerogative. Moreover, with Florence, Max's actions extend into Africanism as his sexual pleasure with her in part comes from reveling in her stigmatized black body.

Max's patriarchy is a representation of his Africanist middle-class ethos that reflects a desire for individuality at odds with his deep love for the black majority. Harry Ames describes it best, noting, " ' You're anal, man. I mean tight. Like you're determined to be the only cat surviving this whole mess" (Willaims, *TMWCIA* 229). Despite Max's brief interactions with the black majority, he only experiences them as an observer and his criticisms of the middle class means he rejects them as well.   Though Max does not seem to have an overt elitist sensibility and shows concern for the plight of African Americans in America's hegemonic society, he is truly only connected to Harry. Ironically, they are first attracted to the shared knowledge of linguistic performances associated with the urban black majority that each one is able to perform in a sea of whiteness, which overwhelms them in their literary circles. However, this linguistic sign of brotherhood is diminished by personal acts such as Max's sexual encounter with Harry's wife Charlotte and Harry's bequeathing information about the King Alfred plan, which he knows will end in Max's death.   In fact, his efforts to expose the King Alfred plan in the last hours of

his life are the only instances when Max actually acts in a way to help African Americans as a whole.

Williams's incorporation of the the King Alfred plot serves as the great equalizer that should remind both the African American middle class and the black majority that their fate is intertwined. Furthermore, Williams's contradictions—his partiality toward the black majority and his competing desire to insist upon the legitimacy of the African American middle class—demonstrate the ambivalence that he and many other authors feel toward the African American middle class. Williams's work is instructive because it illuminates the growing recognition during his contemporary moment by many members of the middle class that they are in a precarious position that leaves them on the periphery of both white and black communities. While they are subject to racial stigma and Africanism—much like their black majority brethren—they are forever chasing a sense of Americanness that subjugates all social and cultural differences to white norms, which may lead to the imposition of Africanism by them onto other African Americans. I contend that within *The Man Who Cried I Am,* Williams rightly acknowledges that the cultural and social hybrid that is African American culture cannot be minimized and contained according to ideologies that fail to acknowledge or respect either of the three ancestral parents, whether inspired by Africanism or Black Nationalism, just as much as he acknowledges that Africanism and its impact are present throughout the African American social hierarchy.

Africanist Middle-Class Ethos and *The Bluest Eye*

Like *The Man Who Cried I Am,* Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* also looks at the African

American class hierarchy through the lens of Black Power ideology. The novel, like other

feminist novels at the time, "seeks precisely to comprehend the 'creative function of

difference,'" to use Audre Lorde's phrasing, "in black women's literature, and to render this

literature readable in ways that both restructure and supplement the ideological program of black

cultural nationalism" (Dubey 1). Authors such as Morrison seek to explore the different ways

that African American women respond to an Africanist society, an exploration suppressed during

the Black Arts Era, which tended to privilege race over gender. In her article "Rootedness: The

Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison describes the function of literature as well as a brief history

of the novel as a genre: "My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or

the group that wrote it. The history of the novel as a form began when there was a new class, a

middle class, to read it; it was an art form that they needed. The lower classes didn't need novels

at that time because they had an art form already: they had songs, and dances, and ceremony, and

gossip, and celebrations" (57). During the Black Arts Movement, when Morrison was writing

this novel, artists sought to merge the needs of these two groups within the African American

community, as Black Nationalism and the social change that they hoped to gain through it

depended on the black majority and the African American middle class recognizing their

connection to each other. Because Morrison's work deals primarily with the black majority, with

only a couple of detailed examples of the black middle class, while Williams's work essentially

leaves the black majority on the periphery, I think these works instructively complement each

other. Therefore, I will conclude this chapter with a brief look at Morrison's novel, as its focus

on the Africanist middle-class ethos— as a point of aspiration— emphasizes pervasive

Africanism and contrasts with the complicated psychological orientation of the black middle

class in the novel that precedes it. Whereas Williams's middle-class focus reveals both the

ambivalence that accompanies middle-class status and the Africanism that impacts the class

hierarchy differently but in equally destructive ways, Morrison's portrait of a small Ohio

community reveals the impact of an Africanist middle-class ethos throughout the class hierarchy

as well as the degenerative effects of that ethos when a recuperative community is removed.[24]

The undisputed aim of *The Bluest Eye*, like that of the Black Power Movement itself, is

the destruction of the racial stigma that impacts every facet of African American lives. So deep is

the psychological trauma wrought by Africanism in the life of Morrison's protagonist that the

novel thoroughly dispels any suggestion that any other economic or sociological factor takes

precedence over the significance of Africanism in the lives of African Americans.   Though

scholars such as Doreatha Drummond Mbalia argue that "Morrison's level of consciousness

about the primary cause of the nature of the African's oppression in the United States as well as

in the rest of the world was considerably weak [in *The Bluest Eye*], for she not only subordinates

the role of economics to racism, but also neglects to show a casual relationship between them,

that an exploitative economic system gives rise to racist ideology," I assert that though there is

an undeniable relationship between economics and racism, because the cultural trauma of slavery

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[24] My scholarly appraisal of *The Bluest Eye,* like others, concedes Morrison's desire to problematize middle-class assimilationist ideology. In Christopher Douglass's critique of the use of African American texts as sociological texts, he acknowledges Morrison's criticism of the middle class, noting how Morrison is in conversation both with Black Arts ideology and the Chicago School of Sociology. Madhu Dubey focuses on the use of grotesques "as a means of satirizing white middle-class values" (35). Doreatha Mbalia explores the novel through a Marxist lens, noting that the African American middle class has "ruling class aspirations" (35). However, in my exploration, I focus on how Morrison's criticism of both the black majority and the middle class reveals her interest in collapsing what she sees as arbitrary class distinctions, as those distinctions obscure the prevalence of Africanism. Moreover, I see Morrison's depiction of the black majority as being in conversation with Williams's treatment of the middle class in this chapter. The juxtaposition is illustrative of the nuances of both works.

occurred primarily as a result of economic enterprise, Africanism exists independently of

economic considerations. It always provides the context for their initial identification. Though it

impacts African Americans who are on different rungs of the economic hierarchy differently, it

is irrecoverably linked to the racial stigma that is attached to skin color. Thus the novel's

emphasis on race over class is valid. Morrison places her characters on an economic spectrum—

from the Breedloves to Geraldine and her family—that illustrates a racial stigma so deep and

abiding that it is no respecter of socioeconomic status (Mbalia 32).   In her 1993 Afterword to the

novel, Morrison proclaims that the novel was inspired by the questions "Why, although reviled

by others, could [black] beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need

wide public articulation to exist?" Morrison's discussion of beauty here laments the devastation

of an Africanist aesthetic that not only privileges whiteness but prevents other aesthetics from

even existing.   Thus, in her focus on African American conceptions of beauty that are tainted by

racial stigma, she lays the groundwork for how an Africanist middle-class ethos can develop.

The novel traces the origins of Africanism and precisely describes how it seeps into African

American consciousness.

　　　Pecola Breedlove serves as perhaps Morrison's most vulnerable protagonist, and her

exchange with Mr. Yacobowski, a local store owner, most clearly highlights the permeation of

Africanism within Pecola's psyche. As she approaches the counter,

> He looks toward her. Somewhere between the retina and object, between vision
>
> and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time
>
> and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see
>
> her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white

immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind

honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by permanent

awareness of loss, *see* a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that

the feat was possible, not to say necessary. (Morrison, *Bluest* 36)

Though clearly in a more advantageous position than Pecola, Yacobowski's own cultural and

social situation creates a difference from mainstream American culture, which contributes to his

inability to see her. As a Catholic immigrant from presumably humble socioeconomic origins,

he is no stranger to racial and religious stigma. Perhaps she is invisible because he is engaged in

his own struggle to be seen. Yacobowski's response to Pecola represents the total erasure of her

being, solely on the basis of her skin color. His immigrant status is important here because the

unique social history of the United States breeds, even within its new white immigrants,

conceptions of the stigmatized black body. However, what is more important for my purposes is

that Pecola recognizes his "total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" and

attributes it to her own deficiency (Morrison, *Bluest* 36). Though Pecola's response to her

marginalization is extreme, Morrison shows the frequency of feelings of unworthiness, based on

the stigma attached to skin color.

　　The Bluest Eye exposes the hegemonic nature of an American media that perpetuates a

standard of beauty and worth impossible for African Americans to achieve. The portraits of

Pauline, Pecola, and Claudia all show the disastrous impact of the media's perpetuation of

Africanism. Pauline Breedlove, whose embrace of Africanism impacts even her position as a

mother, becomes enamored with films early in her married life. She explains that watching the

films are "the onliest time I be happy" (Morrison, *Bluest* 95).   Because early films relegated

African Americans to subordinate and often stereotypical roles, the images that she sees in the films are incongruent with her life economically and culturally, yet she becomes so engrossed that she attempts to make herself look like Jean Harlow, one of the white actresses. Pauline is experiencing a process that Laura Mulvey calls narcissistic scopophila. In this process, there is an interplay between viewer and film that allows individuals to begin to "misrecongize" the ideal as themselves (2184-2185). With Jean Harlow and the white couples that populate her cinematic domestic fantasies, Pauline begins to experience what I define as illusory scopophila— in which she develops a connection with the images of femininity and white middle-class domesticity that are disparate from her own experiences Pauline ingests these images until the precise moment when she loses a tooth and accepts her "ugliness" (Morrison, *Bluest* 96).

Because her loss of a tooth causes a psychological break that makes her acknowledge the physical difference, she settles into an ugliness that is so profound that she passes it along to her children. When the illusion is broken, Pauline must come to terms with the white gaze, which is now integral to the way that she sees herself. The narrator notes the purely psychological nature of Pauline's Africanist aesthetic. The Breedlove family's ugliness comes from "their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question" (Morrison, *Bluest* 28). The master is white culture which elevates white features, denigrates black features, and constantly reinforces Pecola's insignificance. Like beauty, ugliness is a social construction that fluctuates with both individuals and cultural groups. The power that ugliness has over the Breedloves is due to their acceptance of it, the absence of the psychological wherewithal to construct their own

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aesthetic. Worthiness, then, comes from white acceptance, that requires as close an approximation to white middle-class American norms as possible.

Morrison also explores how the malady of Africanist consumption begins in childhood. Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove explore the contours of Africanism in their disagreement over Shirley Temple. Like her mother, Pecola is enamored by the beauty that Shirley Temple symbolizes. Like the blue eyes that she craves, for which she would later trade her sanity, Pecola wants to internalize everything that Temple represents and make it part of herself. Therefore, to the dismay of Mrs. MacTeer, she greedily drinks milk from the Shirley Temple cup, just as she experiences "nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" as she devours the candy bearing a "[s]miling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (Morrison, *Bluest* 38). Mary Jane can have "petulant" and "mischievous" eyes and remain beautiful, but beauty is not applicable to Pecola's blackness (Morrison, *Bluest* 38). Claudia, on the other hand, takes a different route to white adoration. Initially, Claudia expresses a hatred of Shirley Temple and all items that share the same symbolic meaning—white baby dolls and white girls. Claudia seeks to deconstruct the myth of white superiority and "[t]o discover what eluded [her]: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww,' but not for [her]?" (Morrison, *Bluest* 15). However, her inquiries are not directed toward white society. Instead, Morrison has her look to the African American community around her. She contends that her dislike of Shirley Temple exists "[n]ot because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and clucking with me, instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks

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never slid down under their heels" (Morrison, *Bluest* 13). The same adults who treat her like a nonentity or even a burden are symbolically represented by Bojangles, who fawns on the white child, asserting her importance and reinforcing Claudia's unimportance. Such a disparity in the treatment of a black child and a white child by African American people further validates an aesthetic that discounts blackness. It is the acceptance of Africanism by African Americans that perpetuates it and assures its permanence.

Claudia's view of her white doll further illustrates this point. Claudia explains, "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. 'Here,' they said, 'this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it'" (Morrison, *Bluest* 14). She rebels against such a reaffirmation of her own inferiority by destroying the object of their affection and transferring that anger at symbolic whiteness to white girls like her neighbor, Rosemary Villanucci. Christopher Douglass correctly notes that "[w]hen *The Bluest Eye* describes both the psychological violence of white norms of beauty and cultural citizenship and a black resistance to that violence in the form of Claudia's angry response, it reveals its affinity to the Black Arts Movement that formed the novel's intellectual context" (Douglass 151). Yet, Morrison also reveals how Claudia's natural response to the codification of her own inferiority is later replaced by adoration of the white object. Claudia would later learn to love Shirley Temple, but, as Michael Awkward notes, "For Morrison, the Afro-American's humanity is not what is at stake, and 'fraudulent love' of whites, the ultimate result of the rejection of violence, is not better or more authentically human. It is only different, only 'adjustment' . . . 'without improvement'" ("Roadblocks" 61). Claudia's shift results in a "difference" that could eventually result in the

self-loathing that Pauline experiences. It may also result in the cyclical perpetuation of the oppressed subjecting others to the same oppression; Morrison symbolically represents this through Pecola's initial love followed by rejection of the dandelions that the world hunts and discards because they are "ugly." She must cast off what the world considers unworthy—despite her own rejection by the world—because society offers no other option. Thus, "black" becomes an insult that Bay Boy hurls with maximum impact and the "high-yellow dream child [Maureen Peal] with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" gets preferential treatment from teachers, students, and bullies alike (Morrison, *Bluest* 47).

I posit that Morrison's treatment of racial stigma marks an irony in Black Nationalist thought. W.D. Wright argues that throughout the twentieth century and into our contemporary moment, there has been "over-focus on race [that] had Black intellectuals and other Black people thinking that their race, their biology, was the source of their thought, or their cultural traits or construction, or their destiny in history" (138). This is clear in Black Power and Black Arts concepts that were invested—more so by some than by others—with essentialist rhetoric. However, their attempt to recuperate the Africanized black image only mirrors the investment in biology that fuels white supremacy and causes Pecola to crave blue eyes in order to attain any measure of self-worth. Morrison seems to recognize this irony, as her treatment of this black community focuses on the presence of cultural hierarchies—which are erroneously constructed along racial lines—illustrating how African Americans' investment in physical blackness as a marker of worth is dangerous. Thus, like Williams's attempt to reflect the extensive impact of Africanism, Morrison illustrates how it is perpetuated also by the African American community, which results in a destructive Africanist middle-class ethos.

While evidence of Africanism can be found in choices of consumption, such choices do not in themselves indicate an acceptance of Africanism. For example, though Maureen Peal does seem to harbor Africanist sentiment, her cultural touchstones and consumptive habits would naturally have more in common with middle-class white America than with Claudia and Frieda because she was born into the middle class. The same is true of Alice Harrison from *If He Hollers Let Him Go.* Not only is there a generational aspect—the children of individuals who have ascended to the middle class are immersed in middle-class culture—the acceptance of Africanism may also be evident when objects such as Bob Jones's car and Alice's style become ways to assert equality with white America and difference from black America. Because members of the black majority may also have this destructive ethos, it can also be discovered through how African Americans treat other African Americans, especially those from the black majority, and to what degree their adherence to white middle-class values is just an extension of their cultural socialization. When individuals consciously acknowledge that objects and behaviors are important because they mark a clear distance between themselves and the black majority—like Geraldine's conscious grooming of her home and son—Africanism informs their choices. Moreover, characters such as *The Man Who Cried I Am*'s Theodor Dallas, whose immersion in whiteness is not in itself negative, show a degree of unconscious Africanism when this immersion is combined with another factor such as his support of the Alliance Blanc, which confirms black inferiority. Thus, his clothing and choices then become potential outward symbols of internalized Africanism and a desire to escape racial stigma.

The novel's treatment of Geraldine, Soaphead Church, and Pauline Breedlove demonstrates the fluidity of the Africanist middle-class ethos throughout the African American

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class hierarchy, as well as how it negatively impacts the community. Instead of simply creating a picture of Geraldine, Morrison begins by painting a general picture of all the Geraldines of the world. These women are college-educated, mostly in the domestic arts, and financially stable, with neat orderly homes, and, as Morrison puts it, they strive for "[t]he careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (*Bluest* 64). The need to suppress "funkiness" is central to what Morrison views as so dangerous about the Africanist middle-class ethos. For Madhu Dubey, "funk evokes an open, receptive body marked by the materiality of life. The middle-class objectification of femininity, symbolized by the pristine, rigid body of a doll, is countered by a fluid imagery that celebrates the 'lower' natural functions of the body" (Dubey 41). Geraldine's entire existence is marked by restraint, the need or desire to use her body, her home, and her family to dispute racial stigma. This approach to dispelling the stigma is not geared toward the entire African American population. Geraldine, after all, teaches her son that "there is a difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison, *Bluest* 67). The racial stigma, in Geraldine's estimation, is only problematic when it stains all African Americans regardless of economic or social "progress." Therefore, the behaviors, beliefs, and lifestyle that are stigmatized should remain so, and the people who cling to it with it. Geraldine, in accordance with "the white norm of 1940s cultural citizenship . . . has largely assimilated into white society, assuming its waspy, middle-class trappings . . . . Her values, habits, and possessions signal a cultural membership that her race undercuts. She is, in other words, the incomplete solution to 'the negro problem' imagined by the

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University of Chicago's School of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s," which privileges assimilation over any celebration of a black aesthetic (Douglass 145).

Funkiness is at odds with the idea of assimilation and in line with the Black Arts Movement. For Douglass, Morrison sets up "a fundamental ambivalence . . . . [which] on the one hand locates funk as a species-wide quality; we all have, or once had, funk. On the other hand, this quality is understood to have been already lost by white people in a process that was either racial or cultural (perhaps this loss is what makes someone white)" (Douglass 141). However, I would assert that the novel does not present funk as a racially exclusive quality. One of Douglass' criticisms of the novel is that Morrison succumbs to essentialist rhetoric. I contend that there is no essentialist element to funkiness. Like Dubey, I see funk as being in part connected to the biological functions of the human body that get colonized or exorcised—as much as possible—in service of "civilization," social norms, or cultural standards. Thus, we are all born with funk. Within the American social context, funk is all of the cultural and social attributes that are outside of what middle-class white society normalizes. Therefore, the funkiness of the white middle class is no longer funk because it has become normal. It is the quality to which other groups must assimilate and conform. Funkiness is the set of culturally distinctive traits that mark minority communities and certain American sub-cultures. The process of American assimilation slowly strips funk from culturally distinct minority communities. The loss of funk requires a process of re-socialization for individuals who are moving from the black majority to the middle-class. Geraldine's formal educational experiences do not just inculcate domestic vocational skills; they validate racial sigma. Thus, Geraldine's

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bodily, social, and psychological restraint is the result of the strain of needing to live up to norms established and maintained by someone else.

This is not to say that all middle-class African Americans who adhere to white middle-class norms are repressed—though Morrison makes it very clear that Geraldine's life is unnatural. It is to say that self-consciousness—as evidenced by her need to look and act a certain way—signals repression of what is underneath her facade. It is the Africanist standard of beauty and worth that necessitates her facade. She "build[s] her nest stick by stick, mak[ing] it her own inviolable world, and stand[s] guard over its every plant, weed, and doily" ensuring that nothing will disturb the image that she creates (Morrison, *Bluest* 65). Geraldine values propriety over intimacy. Sexually, she is repressed; combating the myth of black promiscuity, she shares her body with her husband "sparingly and partially" (Morrison, *Bluest* 65). She reserves her emotions, choosing to bond with her cat over her family. Hence, when Pecola intrudes on her world—putting in plain view the stigmatized image that she is running from—all she sees is a "nasty little black bitch" (Morrison, *Bluest* 72). The Africanist middle-class ethos is destructive in the life of Geraldine, leaving her lonely and inhibited—unable to develop personal relationships and afraid of pleasure. It simultaneously prepares succeeding generations, represented by her son Junior, who is just as territorial and sadistic, to strive for the Africanist standard. Even as a victim of Africanism, Geraldine both strives to adhere to its standards and subjects others to it.

If on the surface Geraldine represents the African American middle class ideal, Soaphead Church represents both the financial and the psychological degradation of the African American middle class. Though his family history and education reflect a middle-class lifestyle, he is a

member of the black majority. He is different from Geraldine in that his presence does not

represent an active Africanist middle-class ethos, but rather the results of one. His life reflects

the ravages of Africanism. Soaphead specifically articulates his family's "Anglophilia," which

causes them for many generations "to separate [themselves] in body, mind, and spirit form all

that suggests Africa" (Morrison, *Bluest* 133). Descended from a white aristocratic ancestor, the

Whitcombs sought to embrace racial privilege—insisting on the mitigating whiteness of their

forefather— and escape racial stigma through education, career choices, and marrying only

people with light skin. Despite his familial history, Soaphead also recognizes the limitations of

his family's Africanist middle-class ethos, noting, "We in the colony took as our own the most

dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white master's characteristics, which were, of course,

their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most

gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain" (Morrison, *Bluest* 140). In contrast to

his family, he is a "frail," "sickly," and "melancholy" pedophile who is enamored with things—

not wealth—and who makes his living as a psychic (Morrison, *Bluest* 134). He seems to have

little interest in social propriety or in continuing to live up to any Africanist standard.

Yet the taint of his family's Anglophilia remains with him in the form of a fear of people.

The narrator explains, "Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him. The sight of dried matter in

the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin

crusts—all natural excretions and protections the body was capable of—disquieted him"

(Morrison, *Bluest* 132). It is as though the generations of fear that their bloodline would be

contaminated by people with visual African descent or that the culture of the black majority

would seep into their conscious results in a phobia of people and vulnerability that makes it

difficult for Soaphead to function in society. The irony of the culmination of Soaphead's family

legacy speaks to Morrison's emphasis on the mutability of the social construction of beauty and

ugliness. In spite of all of his family's efforts to cultivate what white society considers not only

beautiful but culturally valid, Soaphead's hypersensitive and perverted aesthetic results. To him,

natural bodily functions are revolting and a perverse attraction to the bodies of children is

beautiful.   Soaphead isolates himself from the world, relating sexually only to the less

contaminated bodies of female children and serving his clients' psychic needs. Soaphead's

pedophilia is significant not just in that it is one of the most reprehensible acts perpetrated on

children—symbolizing the moral, social, and physical decay that may arise from the embrace of

Africanism—but the impact of it parallels the Africanism that his presence rejects. Just as the

Whitcomb family always sought to approximate if not integrate into exclusionary white

American or European culture, his acts of sexual molestation continue to mirror their Africanist

devastation, as it is at least equally as destructive as the Africanism that has ravaged Pecola.

Moreover, Soaphead Church's degeneracy is also evident in his hubris in his letter to

God, in which he explains why he "helped" Pecola. He declares, "I did what You did not, could

not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her" (Morrison, *Bluest* 144).

Soaphead is aware that while Pecola will be able to see her new blue eyes, others will not.

Therefore, his pride in assisting her comes with the knowledge that he contributes to her insanity.

Soaphead seems to be positing not just God's absence from and lack of interest in the affairs of

man, which in itself is not a novel idea, but a sense of moral relativism, in which he is God's

equal. In this letter he defends his actions with little girls, noting that their return to him proves

that his pedophilia is not harmful; he even forgives God for the loss of his wife and the excesses

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of his father. His bestowal of blue eyes makes a statement that in a world where the only true authority allows harm to befall the guilty and innocent alike, insanity and desire are sufficient guides to human activity. Soaphead challenges the Africanist middle-class ethos, both by helping Pecola and by his lifestyle, which like Moses Boatwright's cannibalism, is a grotesque challenge to the validity of racial stigma. While I assert that his harangue and its preceding actions reflect a recognition of Africansim and the disastrous impact of it—more so than in any other character with the exception of perhaps Claudia—his behavior arises more from self-aggrandizement than benevolence. What is significant is that unlike Geraldine, who fails to recognize the social construction of her value system or the constrictiveness of it, Soaphead recognizes it, but is either unwilling or unable to change it.

Pauline Breedlove, unlike Soaphead Church or Geraldine, is a member of the black majority whose poverty leaves little room for escape. Though Cholly Breedlove initially alleviates the loneliness that she feels as a child, her move to Ohio leaves her more exposed to the Africanism that insists on black inferiority. She is rejected by the female members of her new community, who "were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying 'chil'ren') and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes" (Morrison, *Bluest* 92). Their rejection is based on stigmatized concepts of appropriateness. Pauline's southern mannerisms and natural hair are subject to scorn because they have been accepted as markers of inferiority. This sense of inferiority is compounded by her education by a Hollywood that casts African Americans as servants or buffoons, while white women are protected and cherished. In a world where Pauline's labor and delivery of her

children can be compared to a foaling cow, she does not develop a sense of her own value. She

begins to attribute her value to her association with white society. Pauline leads a double life.

Outside of the white world, she "considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened

with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish. (Cholly was beyond redemption, of

course, and redemption was hardly the point—Mrs. Breedlove was not interested in Christ the

Redeemer, but rather Christ the judge)" (Morrison, *Bluest* 31). As if to dispel notions of African

American shiftlessness, criminality, and sin, she uses religion to cover her own feelings of

inadequacy.   Where she cannot have material comfort or beauty, she can have the respectability

that in her mind is beyond reproach.

However, in her job as a domestic in the Fisher household, "[s]he became what is known

as an ideal servant for such a role filled practically all of her needs" (Morrison, *Bluest* 98). The

relative luxury of the Fisher home, where "Mrs. Breedlove's skin glowed like taffeta in the

reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware,"

makes Pauline's home in a former store seem irredeemable (Morrison, *Bluest* 83). Unlike

Geraldine, who works to make sure that her own home and family mimic white middle class

values as closely as possible, in order to avoid the stigma, "[m]ore and more [Pauline] neglected

her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the

early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the

Fishers lighter, a more delicate more lovely" (Morrison, *Bluest* 99). While she would like to

live the life of the Fishers, she settles for the pleasure that she gains through association with a

respectable middle-class white family, even though it is based upon and reinforces her own

inferiority. She is comforted by the fact that "[t]he creditors and service people who humiliated

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her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers" (Morrison, *Bluest* 99). The Fishers' home and floors become her home and floors. The Fishers' child becomes her "baby," while she calls Pecola a "crazy fool" (Morrison, *Bluest* 85,84). As a domestic worker, she is subject to the commands of a child who respects her so little that she is Polly rather than Mrs. Breedlove, which even her own children call her. The Fisher home is her sanctuary, where "she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise" (Morrison, *Bluest* 99). She gains the ability to be as close as she thinks is possible to the lives of the white heroines that she once loved, by serving them and committing herself to their comfort. For this, she trades a relationship with her family and any ability to see herself as a subject who can exist independent of crushingly exclusive standards of beauty and humanity.

Pauline, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church represent, for Morrison, the potential pitfalls for the African American middle-class ethos. Though Pauline is not from that class, her devotion to a white middle-class world that defines itself through Africanism and sees the African American community as objects against which they must define themselves illustrates her investment in the validity of the racial stigma that fuels the efforts of many African American middle-class communities. While Morrison vividly illustrates the degree to which Africanism bleeds into all rungs of the African American class hierarchy, she, like Williams, seems to privilege the black majority. Against the destructive black majority figures such as Cholly and Pauline, she posits Aunt Jimmy, Cholly's aunt, who raises him and is herself part of a rich and nurturing black community. The three prostitutes China, Poland, and Marie are also examples of nurturing members of the black majority. Not only do these "whores in whores' clothing" provide succor to Pecola from her destructive family environment, they also establish their own

code of ethics—a valuation of beauty and ugliness—that counters the middle-class American ethos (*Bluest* 43). However, there are no mitigating middle-class characters who reflect a more positive middle-class existence. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor published in 1985, Morrison laments her treatment of Maureen Peal. She explains, "I was not good with her. She was too easy a shot . . . . I mean we all know who she is. And everybody has one of those in his or her life, but I was unfair to her. I did not in that book look at anything from her point of view inside. I only showed the façade" (Naylor and Morrison 581). She continues, "I never got in her because I didn't want to go there. I didn't like her" (Naylor and Morrison 581). Thus, Maureen's Africanist psychology becomes a hindrance even in her creation. I would argue that a similar claim could be made about the other middle-class characters in the text. Though we understand the motives and hurts of characters like Geraldine and Soaphead, they are unredeemed, and there are no counter images present to effect any comparative redemption.

Despite her partiality to the black majority, Morrison is successful in emphasizing the interconnectedness of all African Americans and the results of a failed community. The episodic narrative format that shifts between Claudia, an omniscient narrator, and Pauline emphasizes the interconnection of this community. These characters know each other, some more intimately than others, and are enmeshed in each other's life stories. Therefore, the failure of the community in this novel is a collective one. Though they, for the most part, choose not to cultivate it, the fates of the members of the community are intertwined. They can either build each other up or destroy each other. Geraldine and Pauline are isolated and decaying psychologically and emotionally because they look around at their African American community and see others just as Mr. Yacobowski sees Pecola. They have not had a community that tells

them differently. Claudia indicts the entire community at the end of the novel for their failures to Pecola and each other. Thus, characters such as Pauline and Geraldine cannot escape the determinism of the middle-class Africanist ethos, and perhaps a future like Soaphead Church's awaits them.

Together *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *The Bluest Eye* complicate simplistic Black Power definitions of the middle class and the black majority. Williams shows that the middle class cannot be reduced to the simple materialistic, accommodationist clones of white society that was implied by Black Arts literature. Moreover, the limited use of the black majority in his novel attempts to correct the commonly held notion that the middle class, by virtue of their location at the intersection of African American folk culture and mainstream European American culture, have somehow lost the essence of blackness. Both Williams and Morrison reflect an investment in and revision of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, insisting that while there is no essence, there is culture that must be accepted as a valid alternative to European American culture. Williams's portrait of the middle class illustrates the moral dilemmas that arise, especially concerning Africanist subjugation by African Americans to African Americans. Morrison calls her reader's attention to what I call a destructive Africanist middle-class ethos that is evident throughout the African American social hierarchy. This ethos requires acceptance of the stigmatized image of Black America, which results in a desperate need to escape it. These novels serve, if only ambivalently, to warn against divesting the middle class of value or becoming overly invested in the black majority. They show that Africanism exists, as an inescapable entity within America, and that though it impacts people differently according to socioeconomic standing, its impact is equally as significant. Though Williams shows how a

deep investment in the black majority leads his middle-class protagonist to an identity crisis and Morrison demonstrates the fluidity of the destructive middle-class ethos that stifles natural inclination, they, in keeping with my own conception of progressive African Americanism, posit that Africanism creates a stigmatized image that can only be diminished through an aesthetic that counters white hegemony. Though I assert that the black aesthetic must be multifaceted enough to recognize different African American communities, such an aesthetic ensures some level of collectivity and may serve as a rallying point for all African Americans. When examined together, these novels call for a more inclusive form of the black aesthetic that accepts that the socioeconomic difference that arises does not necessarily mean an irrecoverable cleavage between African American cultures and European American culture, nor does it confine ingested Africanism to either segment of the African American class hierarchy. Thus, both the black majority and African American middle class can be viewed less romantically.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Ambivalent Path: Race, Materialism, and Conflicted African Americanism in Morrison and Naylor

In a 2001 interview, August Wilson explains that he crafted his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *A Piano Lesson* as a creative attempt to explore the questions raised by the relationship between valuing history, which subsumes an appreciation for African American cultures, and contemporary notions of self-actualization and American success. Though he was unsure whether his question about the dynamic between self-worth and history could ever be answered, the drama of the play culminates with his male protagonist Boy Willie being reminded by the ghost of his family's former slave owner of the power and value of his family's history. He is chastised for his willingness to sell his family legacy—in the form of a hand-sculpted piano that visually records the physical features and the slave history of his family—for a stake in the American capitalist enterprise of land ownership. Therefore, Wilson presents Boy Willie's self-worth as ersatz, as he allows his interest in economic success to supersede regard for familial struggle, sacrifice, and survival. However, the complicated nature of the triad between self-worth, history/culture, and progress cannot be easily resolved.[25]

Directly contradicting Wilson's stand on this question in his play, Toni Morrison, whose work elevates African American communities, folk traditions, African and African American history, cautions individuals both against romanticizing historical—read cultural—phenomena and against embracing the victimhood of the traumatic African American past. Morrison suggests that the individual must delineate spaces for history, community, and individuality, assigning a value to each that results in balance and wholeness. Both of these authors engage the

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[25] In this chapter I use the term progress, when unqualified, as a term that connotes change that that takes place over time. This term in my analysis is purely temporal; it is not necessarily intended to suggest any idea of improvement or to imply that traditions are defunct or regressive.

social legacy of the Black Arts Movement, which left an indelible mark on America, as it waged

a violent assault on the entrenched philosophy of white superiority and African American

inferiority, elevated and romanticized black history and culture, and established a collective,

anti-industrialist philosophy. They also respond to the contradictory civil rights discourse that at

once insisted on the generic nature of the African American community—seeking to convince

white America that "We are just like you"—while depending on unity within culturally distinct

African American communities for success. As the sun set on the Civil Rights Movement, many

middle-class African Americans were withdrawing from a public sense of collective struggle to

their own personal struggle to grab and maintain any small piece of America's offerings.

Thus, self-worth began to be linked with material acquisition, and the importance of

African American history and cultural collectivity was threatened. The collision of greater

educational and economic opportunity with the abrupt end to the mournfully incomplete civil

rights mandate during the 1970s and 1980s created an interesting space in which African

Americans were struggling to navigate multiple, conflicting elements of their American

existence, as both greater economic stratification and racial stigma existed simultaneously.[26]

The two poles of veneration of the past and total disregard for it make great fodder for intraracial

class conflict, which is reflected in the literature of the late 1970s and 1980s. If, as Chapter Two

demonstrates, *Black No More* and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* reveal the resilience of racial

stigma, even in the face of economic opportunity; and *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *The Bluest

Eye,* as revealed in Chapter Three, illuminate the tenuousness of African American class

stratification and the double dangers that impact pronouncements of middle-class African

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[26] The civil rights mandate of the 1950s and 1960s sought to end de jure segregation by engaging with all three branches of government. Also, the movement sought to impact de facto segregation by forcing middle America to witness and grapple with oppressive and frequently violent manifestations of racism in America.

American identity, then this chapter will use Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Gloria

Naylor's *Linden Hills* to assert that the task for the later twentieth century is to reconcile social,

economic, and educational progress with a culturally collectivistic ethos. By invoking the power

of ancestors and community—which both novelists posit as central to any sense of psychological

and emotional wholeness—Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, in two very distinct ways, insist

that these qualities must be made congruent with African Americans' new prosperity. Though I

assert that both Morrison and Naylor fail to present a clear example of how the blending of

tradition and progress can be achieved, they are certainly warning that a failure to do so imperils

the African American community.   Thus, I contend that these two novels provoke their readers

to exemplify and construct a fully integrative contemporary African American existence that

includes community, engagement with free enterprise, and history.

The Journey of the Deads: *Song of Solomon*

In 1976, Toni Morrison told Robert Stepto that she was writing a novel in which "the

main character makes friends with people in the kind of community that is described in *Sula*."

She adds that "it's a different social class, there is a leap, but I don't think that class problems

among black people are as great as the class problems among white people. I mean, there's just

no real problems with that in terms of language and how men relate to one another—black men

relate to one another whatever class they come from" ("Intimate" 482-483). This main character

would become Milkman Dead, who, both in his self-absorbed meanderings and his evolving

psychological growth, reveals the importance of community and illustrates Morrison's efforts to

minimize the significance of class stratification. While I think the complexity and social

distance within the African American class hierarchy are increasingly straining the relationship between the middle class and black majority, the existence of racial stigma creates a plane of shared experience that connects all people of African descent. Essentially, Morrison posits interracial class divisions in *Song of Solomon* as self-imposed distinctions—which, I would add, are often in service of assimilationist aspirations.

In light of Morrison's position on intraracial class dynamics, many scholars have explored the relationship between community ethos and class stratification in *Song of Solomon*. Kathleen O' Shaughness contends that "Morrison's purpose . . . goes beyond depicting the community as the sum of the sociological forces at work on her characters. Her ultimate aim is to reach a community of readers and involve her audience as participants" (125). Ralph Story, on the other hand, delves into the sociological forces that help to construct a collective ethos. Story argues that Morrison's complex depiction of the Seven Days reflects her approbation for the deep communal affection that compels them. Still, Marc Conner insists that the novel represents a failed attempt at reconciling a community ethos with individuality. Though some scholars such as Judith Fletcher, who explores Morrison's incorporation of classic western heroic narratives; and Gerry Brenner, who attacks Milkman's mythical heroic status, see the novel as engaging classical myth, others such as Gay Wilentz, Michael Awkward, and Cedric Gael Bryant see the novel as engaging African myths, African American folklore, and narrative approaches that originate outside of traditional American narrative discourses. Wilentz argues that "Morrison's use of African modes of storytelling and orature is a way of bridging gaps between the Black community's folk roots and the Black American literary tradition" (51). Bryant explores how Morrison disrupts Judeo-Christian narrative patterns in favor of "subversive

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closural practices" that arise from the African American narrative tradition (99,106). Moreover, in his examination of gender dynamics, Awkward argues that Morrison seeks "to preserve the traditional Afro-American folktales, folk wisdom, and general cultural beliefs" and "adapt to contemporary times and needs such traditional beliefs by infusing them with 'new information,' and to transmit the resultant amalgam of traditional and 'new' to succeeding generations" (Awkward, "Unruly" 483). In contradistinction to all of these readings, which tend to emphasize one element at the expense of others, I posit that *Song of Solomon* presents the dichotomy between a strong and recuperative community and the quest for American success— which requires a degree of individualism and necessarily includes materialism— as mutable and reconcilable. While Morrison presents the dangers of a materialistic and individualist ethos that leads to the exploitation of the black majority and the elevation of Africanist images, she also presents the power and limitations of African American history, culture, and community. Thus, I contend that the novel insists on a necessary integration of community ethos, respect for history, and socioeconomic fluidity, as they are required for wholeness in the changing social context of America.

Toni Morrison's portraits of Macon Dead and his wife Ruth reveal the potential of an Africanist informed, middle-class lifestyle to circumscribe lives. Macon's overly aggressive investment in the acquisition of material wealth and power isolates him. Investment in money transforms Macon from the "nice boy" and "real good friend" that Pilate remembers to the vengeful elderly man who must assure his son that "[he] is not a bad man" (Morrison, *Song* 40, 74). The trauma of his father's death creates in him a "numbness" that invades his personal relationships throughout his life (Morrison, *Song* 50). After his father's death, Macon struggles

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to approximate the greatness of the father whom he admired. However, he misconstrues the meaning of his father's legacy. Though his father died protecting his land, the land to him was more than mere financial and physical investments. His hard work and the land that he transformed signal to his community that "if I got a home you got one too!" and that he desires to "pass it on" (Morrison, *Song* 235). Lincoln's Heaven in and of itself was not all that the elder Macon wanted to create or did create. It was a symbol around which his community could unify, a visual reminder that African American aspiration could be fruitful. Nonetheless, Macon emerges from his father's murder viewing his father's role as proprietor as evidence of his greatness and his dispossession as motivation to acquire enough to replace all of which he had been deprived. Macon's devolution is most evident when he instructs Milkman, "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Morrison, *Song* 55). The desire to own people is disturbing, as it echoes the institution of chattel slavery, which we later learn results in his grandfather's flight and the severance of the Deads from the Solomons. It also signalizes Macon's own alienation from his community. As the landlord of homes and shacks, he controls people's ability to survive; this is clear in his interaction with Guitar's grandmother. Though she explains to him her financial difficulty— having to care for her grandchildren who have been deserted by their mother—he refuses to show leniency. His emotional numbness and wish to protect his own economic interest entail that when he sees Mrs. Baines, he "remember[s]—not the woman, but the circumstance" (Morrison, *Song* 21). All that matters to him is that the family is late with his rent.   Macon dehumanizes her in a way that is similar to Mr. Yacobowski's confirmation of Pecola Breedloves's insignificance in *The Bluest Eye*.

Instead of viewing his father's murder as an event that installs him as protector of his little sister Pilate, Macon allows an argument over money to expand into a rift that never heals. Pilate's insistence that they not take the money of the man whom they mistakenly believe they killed, as well as his desire to use that money to replicate his father's farm, illustrates the potentially disruptive nature of material wealth. When Macon and Pilate meet after the breach, he has been transformed, through his own avarice and attachment to possession, into a petty assimilationist, anxious about maintaining his image. He regrets "[h]ow far down she had slid since then. She had cut the last thread of propriety. At one time she had been the dearest thing in the world to him. Now she was odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt" (Morrison, *Song* 10). Pilate's unabashed relinquishing of mainstream American standards of behavior, whole-hearted embrace of African American folk culture, and lack of interest in money or material objects make her inscrutable both to Macon and to the whites before whom he is afraid of being made to "seem trashy" (Morrison, *Song* 24). He wants to deny their kinship to the white men to whom he must debase himself in order to enjoy his dominion over the black majority. With the exception of their grandfather's flight away from his family, the breach between Macon and Pilate is perhaps the most important familial break because this sister and brother represent the extreme ends on a spectrum that runs from reciprocal community relationships to total individuality. Pilate's lack of attachment to worldly possession means that Macon cannot control her. Her freedom makes her powerful, while her knowledge of Macon before his transformation and her embrace of power folk culture make her frightening to him.

This numbness also extends into his personal relationships with his family. His nice home, which should be an ornament to his success, is "more prison than palace," and the car that

he uses to display his wealth and his family is likened to a hearse by onlookers (Morrison, *Song* 10, 33). Within the Dead household, "Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparkled on every word that he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices" (Morrison, *Song* 10). He isolates his daughters, Magdalene and First Corinthians, in a cultural bubble, where they can be viewed but not touched by their community. In her grand dismissal of Milkman, Magdalene declares: "First [their father] displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins though Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon" (Morrison, *Song* 216). He precludes romantic relationships and friendship for them, as his standards for association are very exclusive. Their home on Not Doctor Street suffocates them, until they are middle-aged women whose ornamental status has kept them from experiencing the world.

Though Macon ascribes his hatred of his wife to a sexual impropriety that Morrison leaves ambiguous, part of this hatred is due to his feelings of inadequacy in relation to her father. Doctor Foster's dislike of the black majority and Macon's origins in it perpetuate great tension from the outset. He is only able to approach Dr. Foster and ask to court Ruth because he feels that his ownership of property elevates his status: "Without those keys he would have floated away at the doctor's first word 'Yes?' Or would he have melted like new wax under the heat of that pale eye" (Morrison, *Song* 22). Because Dr. Foster subscribes to the same stigmatized images of the black majority to which Macon will succumb, Macon feels inadequate and inferior. His home, which belonged to his father-in-law, and Ruth, who is devoted to her father, remind

him always of his humble beginnings. Macon's immersion in possessions reshapes and abstracts his identity; he begins to define himself by what he owns. Despite his success, his home and his family are not comforting and neither shield him nor or allow him to recuperate from the harshness of the world.

Morrison does not simply contend that Macon's materialism and Africanist philosophy are problematic because of his treatment of others. She also emphasizes the limits of his tenuous authority and casts his very conscious and at times tortured denial of his culture and community as personally destructive. Macon comes to believe that he has achieved a measure of the success, respect, and power that his father yielded in Danville. However, Milkman's blow in defense of his mother rocks Macon's confidence, for "[h]e had come to believe, after years of creating respect and fear wherever he put his foot down, after years of being the tallest man in every gathering, that he was impregnable" (Morrison, *Song* 67). Though Milkman's introspection later reveals this incident to be more self-serving than a defense of Ruth, it leads to Macon's desire to rehabilitate his image in the eyes of his son. His son shatters his perception of his physical power, a power which a gun-toting Macon exercises when Henry Porter's brief madness threatens to interrupt payment of his rent. However, the limits of his power and the fragility of his image are evident when Milkman is arrested for stealing the bones from Pilate's home. Though Milkman's theft is partially due to Macon's urging, his money is not able to rectify the situation, and his only feeble protection is an "accommodating, 'we all understand how it is' smile" (Morrison, *Song* 209). The task of rescuing his son is left up to Pilate, who, through manipulating the Africanist perceptions that whites and affluent African Americans have of her, defuses the situation. The "Aunt Jemima" mask that she wears, unlike Macon's illusion

of power over his community, wields real power (Morrison, *Song* 209). By recognizing and

strategically appropriating images of African American ignorance and servility, she experiences

power over the powerful whites, in a situation that could have been dangerous for her, Milkman,

and Guitar. Pilate's mask of servility is tricksterlike because she is not controlled or confined by

the rules of white society in the same way that her brother is. Morrison makes it clear that

Pilate's power lies in making the people at the police station project a socially constructed

identity onto a person who is impervious to such constructions. Macon's identity, however, is

always dependent on Africanist constructions. While he possesses power in his own small

African American community, his agency is dependent upon the good will of the white

community. Morrison posits those qualities as evidence of psychological and material weakness.

Macon is most weakened by his denial of the African American community. During his

first discussion about his childhood with his young son, Macon is temporarily transformed into

the man he could have been, had it not been for avarice and his definition of American success.

During this conversation, "His voice sounded different to Milkman. Less hard, and his speech

was different. More southern and comfortable and soft" (Morrison, *Song* 52). Though many

constructions of the black aesthetic have erroneously tried to establish African American

southern folk culture as the locus of authentic blackness, Africanism has cast the southern folk as

ignorant and primitive, an association that Macon attempts to escape linguistically. Macon sees

cutting himself off personally from a stigmatized community as a prerequisite for success. As he

ascended in social class and accumulated more money, he lost the time and interest in

"loung[ing] around the barbershop and swap[ping] stories with the men there (Morrison, *Song*

52). Storytelling, playing the dozens, and other types of signifying are ways that African

American males have exhibited their masculinity; they help to form and strengthen community relationships as well as to reduce the impact of culturally hegemonic America, which inscribes inferiority onto African Americans outside of those communities. Macon restrains the community ethos that that has been inculcated in him from his childhood. The same qualities that are evident in Pilate, Reverend Cooper, and the men from Shalimar represent backwardness, idleness, and impropriety to Macon. Yvonne Atkinson notes the egalitarian aspect of community that contributes to Macon's reservation: "Macon must participate or he is outside of the circle of his community. When he does not participate he is absenting himself form a ritual practice that allows all to be heard and all to listen, a practice that reaffirms the participants' membership in their community" (Atkinson 21-22). If Macon were to participate, he would destroy the wall that he has been at pains to construct his entire life. He would, in effect, be just like the people whom he wishes to own.

Nonetheless, Macon is attracted to these cultural features. Though he is repulsed and embarrassed by Pilate, after he retrieves his money from Porter, "he wanted just a bit of music-from the person who had been his first caring for" (Morrison, *Song* 28). "Surrendering to the sound," he hears Pilate, Reba, and Hagar sing and "wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (Morrison, *Song* 29). His sense of propriety and class hierarchy entails that he can only engage the fringes of community interaction covertly, denying, at least in the view of others, his early life, when he lived without regard for socially constructed images. Within his community, Macon cultivates an image of superiority, yet as he looks out over his houses at night, "they did not seem to belong to him at all—in fact he felt as though the houses

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were in league with one another to make him feel like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wander" (Morrison, *Song* 27). Though the people in these homes are less economically stable, they have a level of emotional security or at least a psychological haven that he lacks. Macon's emotional, social, and physical reservation means that he carries the social and cultural compulsions of white America into his home on No Doctor Street and wears them as he traverses the neighborhood. Therefore, Macon's materialism, greed, and installation of "ownership" as symbolic of self-worth leave him lonely and unhappy.

The fate of Ruth Foster Dead and her father Dr. Foster also illustrates the impact of gross materialism. As the "the biggest Negro in the city," Dr. Foster enjoys financial comfort and respect from his fellow African Americans. Part of this attention derives from his delight in his economic power. Both his home and his daughter serve as evidence of his success. As Macon laments, both Ruth and Dr. Foster " ' made sure [he] remembered whose house [he] was in where the china came from, how he sent to England for the Waterford bowl, and again for the table they put it on'" (Morrison, *Song* 71). Like Macon, Dr. Foster relies on the social distance between himself and his fellow African Americans, whom he regards as "cannibals," to reinforce a sense of inferiority (Morrison, *Song* 71). Dr. Foster cultivates, among members of his own small community, a sense of equality with whites that Macon exposes as a lie, for he is neither allowed to practice in white hospitals nor to be admitted to one. While African Americans name the street upon which his home and office lie "Dr. Street," white community leaders, in their "concern for appropriate names," insist that the street be recognized as Mains Avenue (Morrison, *Song* 4). Though the African American residents persistently dub the location Not Dr. Street, this process of naming, renaming, and power play simply reemphasizes Dr. Foster's

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insignificance to white society and the way in which the community that he dismisses with disdain honors him, if only for educational and professional achievements. Dr. Foster's death also reflects the wages of excess. The engorging of his body and subsequent death, which Macon attributes to his addiction to ether and Ruth attributes to murder, serve as a metaphor of a life of gross acquisition.

Dr. Foster's most enduring legacy is Ruth, a woman who "never laughs" and whose only comfort is "the cultivat[ion] of small life that would not hurt her if it died" (Morrison, *Song* 104, 10). Her father's class consciousness, which kept her isolated from her community and unable to have psychologically healthy relationships with her family, leads to walking death for Ruth. She attempts to explain what she calls her "smallness" to Milkman, confessing, "I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings" (Morrison, *Song* 124). Encased in a home where she was more dead than alive, she can only gain comfort through objects and through objectifying people. Her devotion to her father is a result of her loneliness and of his characterization of himself, though he later regrets it, as the only person who "cared whether and . . . cared how [she] lived" (Morrison, *Song* 124). Therefore, he becomes an object upon whom she can lavish attention. Though Morrison's characterization of Ruth indicates that she does not necessarily subscribe to his brand of Africanism—she describes him as "not a good man," "an arrogant man," and "often a foolish and destructive man"— her devotion to him, no doubt, contributes to her marriage to a man who shares his life philosophy (Morrison, *Song* 124). Ruth jealously views Dr. Foster's death "as though he had chosen a more interesting subject than life—a more provocative companion than

she was—and had deliberately followed death when it beckoned" (Morrison, *Song* 64). His

absence leaves her without love, only things. Furthermore, Macon's sexual and psychological

abandonment of his wife—whether attributed to his interest in Dr. Foster's money or to his

discernment of an incestuous relationship between father and daughter—leads to her

objectification and fetishizing of her own son. To Ruth, Milkman is the "one aggressive act

brought to royal completion" whose death would mean "the annihilation of the last occasion she

had been made to love" (Morrison, *Song* 133, 134).

If Macon, Ruth, and Dr. Foster represent the deleterious effects of gross materialism and

Africanist appropriation by the African American middle class, Pilate Dead's intense community

ethos, renunciation of material wealth, and inattention to constructions of acceptable conduct

represent a strong and recuperative African American folk culture. From her break with her

brother at twelve years old, Pilate, through several different locations, has always found herself

ensconced in the bosom of the black majority. Described as "a natural healer," who found

"encounters with Negroes who had established themselves in business or trades in those small

Midwestern towns . . . unpleasant," Pilate's very presence seems antithetical to notions of

American or African American socioeconomic progress (Morrison, *Song* 150*,* 144). Living in a

home without electricity, gas, or running water, she lacks the sense of degradation that often

accompanies poverty. Recognizing society's stigmatizing of people like Pilate, Milkman

marvels at the shift of power that takes place between him and his aunt. Though his comfortable

middle-class status and assimilationist upbringing should emphasize Pilate's inferiority,

"[i]nstead [with her self-assurance] she was making fun of his school, of his teachers, of him.

And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes

that should have confirmed it" (Morrison, *Song* 38). Pilate's self-possession and confidence in

her culture and folkways are more closely aligned with her father's community-centered success

than Macon's acquisition, as she sees herself as an extension of her community.

Moreover, her lack of material possessions seems like a conscious tradeoff. Though

Gerry Brenner argues that Pilate is "[n]o rural throwback who lives on the margins of modern

society" and that she "inherits our celebrated American tradition of individualism"—which

suggest that she "knows well the hazard of trying to teach others her values"—I assert that

though she does so unobtrusively, she is deeply invested in guiding others and mistrustful of total

surrender to an individualist ethos that has transformed her brother Macon (122). She values

people and a sense of freedom that accepting the demands of her contemporary world would

preclude. Pilate's communal ethos is first seen in her familial relationship when she and Macon

think that they have killed the man outside of the cave. Morrison notes, "The fact that she had

struck no blow was irrelevant. She was part of her brother's act, because, then, she and he were

one" (Morrison, *Song* 147). This interconnectedness speaks to a moral responsibility that links

their fates. This sense of moral responsibility is extended both to Milkman and to his mother

Ruth. She provides succor to Ruth, who has been emotionally and sexually abandoned by her

husband. She conjures a substance that, though only briefly, brings Macon to Ruth's bed. Most

importantly, she protects Milkman from his conception to his birth and guides him toward

greater awareness in his adulthood. Ruth tells her son that "Pilate was the one brought you here

in the first place," recalling Macon's attempts to terminate her pregnancy (Morrison, *Song* 124).

Not only is Pilate's skill at conjuring responsible for Milkman's presence, but her knowledge of

the ways of folk magic, in the form of a voodoo doll, frightens Macon and ends his attempts at

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abortion. Pilate is partially motivated by her belief that Macon "ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (Morrison, *Song* 125). Pilate's emphasis on masculinity here is interesting. A male child is not necessary in order to carry on the family surname—Pilate, Reba, Hagar, First Corinthians, and Magdalene all retain the name Dead. Because her brother runs away from his folk roots into an Africanist middle-class existence, perhaps she hopes that a male heir can bridge the gap between his familial past and their contemporary moment in a way that respects and continues her father's legacy.

Not only does she ensure his safe passage into the world, Pilate also acts as Milkman's guide. Both she and Guitar serve as his moral touchstones. He is drawn to her, and she introduces him to his family history, a history that Macon had failed to pass on. During the first moments of her meeting with Milkman and Guitar, she, in her direct yet unobtrusive way, gives the boys a subtle lesson in forthrightness. To Guitar's eager "Hi," she responds with the question "What kind of word is that" and concludes with the command "say what you mean" (Morrison, *Song* 36). Though this might seem like a minor incident, it foreshadows the fates of both of these young men. Milkman is emotionally truncated, so self-absorbed that he never intimately knows the people who are closes to him. Milkman drifts through life straddling the line between his father's middle-class life and that of the black majority. He is unable to say what he means because he is too intellectually lazy to examine himself; his privileged position as male heir and his peripheral position with the black majority require no introspection. Guitar's life, on the other hand, is shrouded in a secrecy that ensures that he is not what he seems. He is devastated by his mother's willingness to smile in the face of his father's employer, whose selfish economic interest results both in his father's death and a paltry payment of forty dollars to help the

bereaved family afterwards. Guitar's membership in the Seven Days ensures that he expose

himself to anyone, a circumstance that leads to his undoing. Pilate further regards the two boys

collectively, enlisting their help in making wine as she, Reba, and Hagar sing. This marks the

first instance when Milkman is made to interact with others in an activity of which he is not the

center, feeling a sense of comfort in this small communal circle. It also marks an instance when

Guitar experiences a sense of community and love that is not destructive or reactionary, as is his

work as a racial assassin for the Seven Days. Thus, Pilate is symbol of the possibilities of

community. She is the quintessential folk healer who eschews Africanist hierarchies. Pilate's

power of healing, discernment, and guidance is evidence that, as Gay Wilentz asserts, "within

communities, African cultural practices have remained even when the historicity of an age has

reflected an assimilationist stance" (Wilentz 62). Therefore, through Pilate, Morrison presents

Africanist-inspired assimilationism as destructive to self and community.

Even beyond familial relationships, a sense of inextricable interconnectivity always

surrounds Pilate. For example, as she wanders the country after her father's death, she is

embraced by the communities that she visits until her missing navel is noticed. Even right before

her death, she "blended into the population [of Shalimar] like a stick of butter in a churn"

(Morrison, *Song* 335). Pilate's "deep concern for and about human relationships" is also evident

in the instance when she stops one of Reba's paramours from beating her (Morrison, *Song* 149).

With a knife piercing his skin, she slowly and deliberately explains to the offender that she will

not kill him because she would not want to put another mother through the pain of having her

child mistreated. This incident is interesting, for it shows the brute strength of sixty-eight year

old Pilate, as well as her recognition of an emotional bond even with people whom she has not

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yet encountered. Whereas Macon is willing to kill or at least injure someone like Porter for a

rent payment, Pilate offers a compassionate reprieve for a man who beats her only child because

of a sense of responsibility to others.

The most vivid example of Pilate's sense of community is her singing about "Sugarman"

during Robert's Smith's suicide. This song has great significance as an oral history of her

family—a version of this song is sung by the children of Shalimar recounting her grandfather's

flight. Another version is also sung by Milkman at her death. There is no textual evidence that

Robert Smith and Pilate had any real personal relationship, yet he belongs to her community.

Smith's suicide, which is a consequence of a passionate love of community that becomes an

amalgam of love, revenge, and detachment, makes Pilate's singing all the more important, as his

impending death, like her grandfather's, marks an abandonment of the people to whom he is

responsible. Smith's love for his community results in his embrace of the Seven Days, for whom

violent revenge against white society becomes an expression of that love. Therefore, in order to

serve his community, he must be separate from them. Just prior to and just after Smith's suicide,

her song competes for the attention of the bystanders with First Corinthians' and Magdalene's

red flower petal cutouts. During this event, "[a] few of the half a hundred or so people gathered

there nudged each other and sniggered. Others listened as though it were the helpful and

defining piano music in a silent movie. They stood this way for some time, none of them crying

out to Mr. Smith, all of them preoccupied with one or the other of the minor events about them"

(Morrison, *Song* 6). Mr. Smith, who dedicates his life to expressing his love for his race through

the murder of whites, is a nonentity in his impending death as he was in life. By singing "O

Sugarman done fly away/Sugarman done gone/ Sugarman cut across the sky/ Sugarman gone

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home," Pilate insists upon the significance of this man who even in a dramatic death fails to capture the attention of his community (Morrison, *Song* 6). She heaps upon him the same honor of recognition inspired by her grandfather's flight back to Africa during slavery. This song is both a celebration of non-Western ways of knowing and being and an admonition of his desertion of his community.

Though it is clear that Pilate's song continues beyond what is presented, what Morrison does not reprint at this juncture is another stanza of the song: "O Sugarman don't leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/ O Sugarman don't leave me here/ Bukra's arms to yoke me . . ." (Morrison, *Song* 49). The implication of this stanza of the song is that even in rough circumstances and social invisibility, every member of the community is important and has a role, even if it is only helping to ease the suffering of one other person. Pilate's compassion for and acknowledgment of Robert Smith reflect her own dedication to her community. Morrison underscores this, as her final words are, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (Morrison, *Song* 336). Even in death, her concern is for what she could have offered others.

In *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, La Vinia Jennings explores Morrison's use of African religious and cultural traditions in her text. Jennings argues that in *Song of Solomon* "Morrison conflates the office of the living-dead ancestor with the living elder, converging and diverging their ontological boundaries to create a hybrid, an 'ancestral presence' that mediates the two socio-religious roles at the apex of eldership. The ancestor and the living elder act as a unity" (Jennings 10). Pilate is a living elder who guides her nephew and, at the very least, serves as an example of what pure cultural security beyond Africanism looks like. Ancestors are

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important because they "are capable of cursing or blessing their living descendants. Their benevolence largely depends on the proper reverence they receive" (Jennings 38-39). Though we never see any malevolent manifestation of an ancestor's power, we do see Pilate imbued with great strength as she threatens Reba's attacker; the ability to change shapes, as Milkman recalls she does in order to manipulate the police officers; and the ability to talk to the dead, all in service of cultivating or protecting familial relationships. Her father, the elder Macon Dead, also serves as an elder in the novel. Acknowledging the power of the ancestor, "she paid close attention to her mentor—the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things" (Morrison, *Song* 150). Because of her status as a living ancestor, she is both within the African American community and on its periphery. As Jennings explains, "The fictional depiction that Morrison provides of Jake's posthumous communications with Pilate exemplifies the ancestor-elder exchange that occurs in real life. Because those who survive the ancestors consult them as oracles with the aid of sacred specialists, ritual priests, and mediums, Pilate's role based on her ongoing exchange with Jake, extends to priestess as well" (Jennings 86). Of Pilate, Morrison explains, "since death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead), she knew there was nothing to fear. That plus her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequences of the knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (Morrison, *Song* 149). Pilate exhibits an inexplicable power that Morrison neither questions nor feels the need to explain.

This novel is replete with elements of magical realism, of which Pilate is the central and unifying element. Theo D'Haen argues that magical realism

create[s] an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality, and thus

. . . right[ing] the wrongs this 'reality' depends upon. [It] thus reveals itself as a

ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse[s]. It is a way for access to the

main body of 'Western' literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from

the perspective of, the privilege centers of this literature for reasons of language,

class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of

views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse. (195)

I maintain that to relegate these magical elements to a ruse ignores the point of many minority

magical realist authors, especially those writers in Africa and the African Diaspora. Such a claim

invalidates non-Western conceptions that such *magic* existed or, to some extent, continues to

exist. Such a claim maintains that the use of magical elements in a text is always a political act

that is defensively attacking Western and/or colonialist discourse. Morrison seems to be arguing

that these magical elements are simply part of the everyday reality of the community.

Nonetheless, I agree that characters like Pilate also challenge Western hegemonic discourse. The

magical features of the text imbue Pilate with a power that those outside of her world cannot

approach. By placing Pilate alongside Macon's visible economic prosperity, which is prized in

contemporary America, Morrison insists that there are forces in the world that are just as

powerful, if not more so, than those that money and education can purchase. However, magical

realism is beneficial because it does not, as D'Haen's position demonstrates, have to function on

the literal level for those readers who do not wish to engage in a discussion of fantasy versus

reality. Maggie Ann Bowers explains, "One of the unique features of magical realism is its

reliance upon the reader to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and

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magical perspectives of reality on the same level. It relies on the full acceptance of the veracity

of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to

the reader's non-reading experience" (4). Therefore, Morrison does not make the difference

between Macon and Pilate disruptive. Instead, it contributes to the naturalness of the character,

making her just as accurate a representation of African Americanness as Macon or others.

Despite Pilate's presence as a positive reflection of African and African American folk

culture in the novel, her almost mythical status separates her from her community. Pilate serves

as both an ancestor and priestess, which is reflected in her relationships in the novel. Many of her

exchanges set in motion other events, foreshadow the future, or emphasize the

interconnectedness of family and community. Circe describes Pilate as having "[b]orned

herself" (Morrison, *Song* 244). Pilate's "stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no

place interrupted by a navel" Morrison, *Song* 27). The absence of the navel is a physical

confirmation of her difference. Though she is nurtured by her father throughout her life and by

her brother at the beginning of her life, there is an aura of strength and power that no other

characters possess. While she melds into the communities that she joins, her lack of a navel

frightens people. They regard her as "something God never made" (Morrison, *Song* 144). In

this regard, even the communities most closely aligned with African American folk culture are

unable to cope with her as an element that stretches the barriers of Western credulity. Because

her community is discomforted by her, she is denied "partnership in marriage, confessional

friendship, and communal religion" (Morrison, *Song* 148). Pilate is ostracized, respected, but

feared. She lives a full life that is not based on self-denial, materialism, or the expectations of

others. She is self-possessed in a way that Morrison seems to posit as almost impossible in

contemporary times. She could survive without the plague of self-doubt and succumbing to Africanism outside of her community, but she feels her life would be less rich without people to love. Even though she does not seem necessarily to need the community to fortify her emotionally and psychology, she chooses to be part of the community. Therefore, even if she is somehow self-created, she still chooses to partake in community relationships.

Though Morrison establishes Pilate as the positive answer to Macon's materialism and emotional numbness, I also contend that she characterizes contemporary America as placing limits on the recuperative and protective powers of community and folk culture. While Macon's claim that "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world" is proven false by her relationship with Milkman, I would also argue that Morrison's portrait of Hagar insists that what Pilate offers is not sufficient as preparation for our contemporary world (Morrison, *Song* 55). In this novel, Hagar, like both Guitar and Milkman, marks a generation sufficiently removed from slavery and of a culture increasingly measured against mainstream American culture, which was increasingly (though begrudgingly) including African Americans. Hagar is caught between notions of progress, which were often displayed by material possessions, physical appearance, and assimilationism, and her family, who are the epitome of a distinct and psychologically sustaining African American culture. Both Pilate and Hagar's mother Reba are able to live contentedly apart from the demands of progress, but Hagar, even in her youngest years, seems to yearn for something else.

Unlike her maternal figures, "Hagar was prissy. She hated, even as a two-year-old, dirt and disorganization. At three she was already vain and beginning to be proud. She liked pretty clothes. Astonished as Pilate and Reba were by her wishes, they enjoyed trying to fulfill them.

They spoiled her, and she, as a favor to their indulgences, hid as best she could the fact that they embarrassed her" (Morrison, *Song* 151). Hagar's early desire for material objects foreshadows her insatiable appetite for possessions and her desire to conform to Africanist aesthetic values. Pilate's enjoyment in fulfilling Hagar's whims symbolizes her distance from the power of possession, as she does not realize how those possessions affect her granddaughter. Though I would contend that Hagar's immersion in Pilate's folk ways, which include the affirmation of oralilty, healing, and contentment with loving others who may or may not love you back, means that she was not totally divested from her lifestyle; it was not sufficient to satiate her long. Pilate realizes that in the contemporary world her way is not enough. Pilate relocates to Michigan because she believes that her brother Macon could help give her granddaughter what she could not; she reasons that "Hagar needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer, and if she remembered anything about Macon, he would be different. Prosperous, conventional, more like the things and people Hagar seemed to admire" (Morrison, *Song* 151). Macon's difference, if combined with Pilate's earthiness, would better prepare Hagar to live in the world from which Pilate chooses to separate herself. Unfortunately, Hagar is "[n]ot strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had" (Morrison, *Song* 307). Though Pilate is not sustained by her community, she has the potential to nurture in the community a reciprocal quality through which those people who are not able to sustain themselves can support each other.

When Hagar tells Pilate and Reba, "Some of my days were hungry ones," she gives voice to the consequences of an absent positive progressive African Americanism (Morrison, *Song* 48). Such progressive African Americanism is not represented by Macon, who is ashamed of his folk

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roots. It requires a reconciliation of one's Americanness and blackness not to be consumed by

Africanism. An insatiable hunger consumes Hagar; she acquires objects in order to make up for

what society says she lacks as an African American woman. Pilate and Reba cater to this hunger

without fully understanding it. Until her obsession with Milkman, Hagar's materialism is

external; she wields power over Milkman that would never come from acceptance of inferiority.

Just as Pilate has a dignity that is incongruent with poverty, young Hagar has a haughtiness and

confidence that is not dependent on possessions. The things she acquires do not define her, even

though they represent the absence of her ability to live in contemporary America. The

incongruence of expensive objects in a shack without electricity or running water emphasizes the

meaninglessness of both of her worlds if unreconciled. Milkman's middle-class assimilationist

mentality that positions Hagar as an expendable object to be discarded at his whim makes her see

material objects in a new way. The objects and images that mainstream America values, which

cast her and her family as unworthy, become what she believes will satiate her hunger.

Milkman, in his own selfishness, subjects her to an Africanist gaze that tells her she is

unworthy. Morrison laments the true impact of such materialism, as she explains in an interview

with Sheldon Hackney: "It really is a symbolic acquisition of 'I am this' in a country that, on the

one hand, offers wide, inconceivable freedoms, but at the same time seems to be training

consumers rather than citizens, so that we are asked to value ourselves, certainly in the media by

what one can accumulate or what one can show. In order to do that, one's interior life must be

hollow, truly frail" (Morrison, "People Who Sang" 135). Hagar is ill-prepared to reconcile her

immediate family's way of life with the outside world because Pilate's world of contentment

does not change. She may move to a different location, but, as she tells Milkman and Guitar

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when they are children, "I ain't the one with the wants" (Morrison, *Song* 37). Wholly accepting

Pilate's world means that Hagar can never be active outside of it. Therefore, she longs for "Silky

hair the color of a penny," a "thin nose," and "lemon-colored skin" as she begins to view herself

and her body through an Africanist lens (Morrison, *Song* 315, 316). They are the things that

America and Milkman's actions tell her are valuable. As the rain mars her new clothes, destroys

her makeup, and drenches her body, Hagar is not convinced of the mutability of these objects

and takes this as final confirmation that she will never be worthy. She dies feeling that there is

"[n]o wonder he [Milkman] didn't want [her]" (Morrison, *Song* 308). Within Hagar there is no

conception that the sense of beauty and wonder that Pilate sees in her can exist, though there is

much resistance outside in mainstream America. Therefore, when Pilate bursts through the

doors at Hagar's funeral proclaiming "I want mercy," perhaps she is seeking to appease her own

sense of guilt for not having the ability to prepare Hagar for the world outside of her own

(Morrison, *Song* 317).

Though he does not exhibit the same dedication to African American folk culture as

Pilate, Morrison uses Guitar Baines as an example of how an exclusive community ethos can be

destructive. Though Brenner proclaims that Guitar is the "vindictive" recipient of "Morrison's

scorn," Morrison, on the other hand, declares that she "love[s] the man more than anything,"

adding that she "was sorry about his little number!" (Brenner 117; Morrison "Brown" 470).

While he is a ruthless character whose membership in the Seven Days requires him to repay

white murder and violation in kind, he is also a loving friend, brother, grandson, and nephew. As

a member of the black majority, Guitar is resentful of whites who thrive on African American

inferiority and of middle-class African Americans like Macon who "behav[e] like a white man,

thin[k] like a white man" (Morrison, *Song* 223). Guitar's revolutionary Black Nationalism

makes simple categorization difficult. As Ralph Story maintains, "Morrison has focused her

vision on the community and its men—separate, distinct individuals who come together as a

collective entity yet remain complex, whole characters" (157). Guitar loves his middle-class

friend, while simultaneously developing a militant worldview. He does not succumb to a feeling

of hopelessness despite what his experiences teach him. Guitar's father is killed on his job, and

he is never able to forgive his mother's "willingness to love the [white] man who was

responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity" (Morrison, *Song* 224). He is raised by

a grandmother whom we first see outside of Mercy Hospital at Robert Smith's suicide, being

commanded by a white nurse and later being subjected to Macon Dead's demand for rent money.

Capitalism and materialism seem to objectify him and other members of the black majority,

fostering a bond between the members of his community.

      The people who gather at Mary's bar, Feather's poolroom, and Railroad Tommy's and

Hospital Tommy's barbershop find comfort in each other by sharing their joys and sorrow. But,

it is their sorrow that compels the Seven Days. In the wake of Emmitt Till's murder, " men

began to trade tales of atrocities . . . . A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned

sicklelike back to themselves as humor" (Morrison, *Song* 82). It is in such an atmosphere that

Guitar decides, "how I die or when doesn't interest me. What I die *for* does" (Morrison, *Song*

159). His love for his community prompts him to act. Though his actions are criminal, he sees

them as maintaining some sort of balance by destroying white generations—as one life could

produce up to eight generations—in proportion to the black generations destroyed by white

murder.   Guitar explains that when he and his fellow members commit these acts they are as

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"indifferent as rain," and he dehumanizes whites by declaring that they are "unnatural" people with a disease "in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (Morrison, *Song* 154, 156, 157). Such an attitude engages in the same dehumanizing process to which African Americans are subject. Moreover, as exhibited by Robert Smith's suicide and Porter's brief madness, acts such as rape and murder can only be committed with indifference if a disturbing form of pathology exists. Both men are unable to cope with their deeds. If only in those moments when they want to die, they understand that their actions are self-destructive, producing no material impact on the community that they love. Nonetheless, Guitar contends, "What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love" (Morrison, *Song* 159). The members of the Seven Days must isolate themselves from the community that they love in order to serve. They must hide who they really are and act in secrecy, eluding the civil authorities. Most importantly, these men can never have families or lasting relationships. Though these men consider their isolation a necessary sacrifice for what they consider justice, the unraveling of at least three members of the Seven Days reflects the cost of the sacrifice. Though they move among the people whom they love daily, they are not able to partake in the healing balm of close nurturing relationships.

Though he interacts with fellow members of the black majority every day, Guitar comes to believe that "[e]verybody wants the life of a black man" (Morrison, *Song* 222). Guitar's explanation of why whites want the lives of black men is consistent with his discussion of the inherently diseased nature of all whites, but his discussion of how African American women consume the lives of black men reveals much more about the impact of his isolation. His mission denies him the most intimate relationships and creates a troubled view of black females,

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who, he believes, constrict and stifle black men.   Because they require a level of intimacy that he is not willing to offer, he deems them dangerous. However, in answer to Milkman's question as to why the Seven Days also avenge the death of Du Bois, he exclaims,"Because she's mine" (Morrison, *Song* 222). This sense of ownership of black femininity is similar to the dehumanization of whites. He essentially argues that African American women are complicit in the oppression of African American men.   This argument is not novel, as it was part of the rhetoric of many Black Power organizations during the 1960s, when part of this novel is set. However, the oppression that he rails against is partially a product of the patriarchy that he appropriates.   Claiming power over life and death is unraveling Guitar.

Guitar's claim of ownership directly contradicts his advice to Hagar: "It's a bad word 'belong.' Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn't be like that" (Morrison, *Song* 306). Not only do Du Bois "belong" to him, so do black men and black children. Though one could argue that Pilate also considers part of her community as belonging to her—in the sense that community means reciprocity and interdependence both for emotional and sometimes physical support—there seems to be an element of interchange in her estimations that does not exist for Guitar. As he explains to Milkman, "some [people] are kickers and other people are kicked" (Morrison, *Song* 103). The majority of African Americans, Guitar implies, are victims, and the Seven Days are actors who avenge this victimization. He sees himself as recuperating the dearth of African American self-respect because he believes most members of his community are too weak to demand such respect in their daily lives. Therefore, he sees himself as a giver in the community from which he receives little.   Because his sense of love is perverted—based on hatred and devoid of reciprocity—it becomes a great burden that he is

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unable to handle. He loses the individual nature of his community; they become objects to be

protected rather than people to be loved individually. As Smith's suicide and what we can

assume is Porter's defection by the end of the novel show, reciprocity cannot exist in the Seven

Days. Even sharing their secret vocation with others, either in a romantic relationship or in

friendship, does not foster reciprocity. Though Guitar does share his secret with Milkman, his

friend's increasing self-examination and embrace of community invalidate his mission.

Milkman, Pilate, and the community of Shalimar show Guitar that there exists in the community

something beyond victimization, something that is powerful. Thus, he becomes so estranged

from the real meaning of community that he can even kill Milkman, who, although the person

closest to him, becomes just another obstacle to the protection of his community. Hence, just as

Hagar's decline and death illustrate that community and folk culture alone cannot sustain African

Americans, Morrison's depiction of Guitar reveals that an inability to see beyond the hurts of the

black majority and a love that collectivizes can be just as harmful as Africanism. Collectively,

the failure of Hagar and Guitar represent the limits of traditional African culture and the perils of

an unmediated, introverted view of the African American community.

Milkman Dead lies between the poles of complete and unrepentant assimilation, as

represented by his father, and complete immersion in African American folk culture, as

represented by his aunt Pilate. The opposition between of Macon and Pilate Dead creates a

twinning effect in which Macon's materialism and substitution of power for admirable manhood

are contrasted with Pilate's earthy representation of folk culture, love of community, and the

black majority. Unhappy because his possessions bring him no pleasure and what he perceives

as his ownership of people inadvertently leaves him ostracized, Macon's life is empty. Though

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imbued with supernatural power and capable of creating her own world in our contemporary one, Pilate is unable to prepare her subsequent generations fully to function in larger America. Macon and Pilate are incomplete puzzles that need some form of unification in order to live happily—or, in Pilate's case, to prepare others to live happily—in contemporary America.

Milkman (prior to his journey into his family's past) and Guitar are also foils of each other. Despite his membership in the Seven Days, Guitar is self-aware. Milkman, on the other hand, "wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amicably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all-consuming devotion" (Morrison, *Song* 180). Their class differences also contribute to their nature as foils. Guitar must cope both with poverty and maternal abandonment, while Milkman lives a life of ease. His financial comfort is compounded by his status as the center of his family. As Magdalene informs him, "Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you" (Morrison, *Song* 215). Alone, Milkman symbolizes the emptiness of materialism—he values himself above everything else, neither loving nor giving unfettered love—and his best friend engages in a blinding and suffocating love. Their friendship represents the continual battle between individualism and community, always inherent in discussions of class dynamics within the African American community. Milkman's selfishness is presented as the byproduct of socioeconomic progress and Guitar's stifling and intense community ethos represents the inability or unwillingness to see or strive for an integrated sense of African Americanism.

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Milkman recognizes his own inadequacy, as he peers "unimpressed with what he saw" in the mirror, thinking, "Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self" (Morrison, *Song* 69). Milkman's fragmentation is evident in his inability to relate to others. He does not really know his sisters or his father, and his mother is "too insubstantial, too shadowy for love" (Morrison, *Song* 77). He is adamant that he does not want to be privy to their sorrows or challenges. "He'd thrown [Hagar] away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone," with cash and a thank-you note despite their long-term relationship (Morrison, *Song* 277). He is even willing to rob and, if necessary, physically assault Pilate if she interrupts his robbery. His aloofness is evident in every place that he visits. In the wake of the Emmett Till murder, Milkman is so absorbed with his own angst about his mother's alleged perversion that he exclaims, "fuck Till, I'm the one in trouble" (Morrison, *Song* 88). Such an insensitive response to a heinous crime that reveals the precarious predicament of all African American males demonstrates his inability to contextualize himself both within and outside of the African American community. Similarly, in Shalimar, "He hadn't found [the men of the town] fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his" (Morrison, *Song* 266). In this scene, Milkman is confronted by his blindness to the plight of others, as he is attacked by one of the townspeople for his indifference. This indifference stems from his class position. Morrison clearly demonstrates that Milkman does not desire money or power. The disconnection from humanity that allowed slavery, empowered Jim Crowism, allowed Africanist images to develop and flourish, and created Macon, property owner, is what grows in Milkman. Milkman is one step removed from the acquisitiveness that perpetuated the disconnection. He is only interested in

self and apathetic about all else, as long as it does not cause him to re-evaluate his skewed perceptions of his world. In this sense, the money is not evil; it is the disparity of value between individual and community, self and environment that comes with it that is destructive.

Though his journey into his family's past is partly due to a search for Pilate's supposed treasure, he is equally propelled by Magdalene's warning that he has "pissed [his] last in this house" and by Pilate's oral rendering of her family's history (Morrison, *Song* 216). Magdalene brings Milkman's selfishness to the forefront, causing him to consider the impact that his very presence has on the lives of others, while Pilate's vivid descriptions of her history remind him that there is more than his psychologically cloistered world offers. His trip first to Danville, Pennsylvania and then to Shalimar, Virginia strips him of the security of his material comforts. He notes later while in Shalimar that "[t]here was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him" (Morrison, *Song* 277). In order to survive, he must examine himself. In Danville, he feels for the first time the exhilaration of being in a "strange town and find[ing] a stranger who knew your people" (Morrison, *Song* 229). However, Danville begins Milkman's processes of knowing his own people. The supernatural presence of Circe, who is well over a hundred years old and exacts some form of revenge on the family that killed his grandfather, finally reveals his grandmother's name, Sing, and supplements Pilate's and the men of Danville's descriptions of who his father was as a young man. Circe refers to Macon as "[m]y Macon" and describes Sing's "nervous love" of her husband (Morrison, *Song* 241, 243). This experience leaves him with an understanding of the interconnection of family, who pass down traits to generations, even to those who are unaware of their ancestors.

As he travels into Shalimar, he begins to reconsider his own conception of himself. Both the fight with the stranger—as Milkman's disregard for the town folk and interest in their women align him with the white world that oppresses them—and the hunting trip when the older men of the town render his money, class status, and bravado inoperative, asserting their own masculinity that relies on physical capability and social relationships, show Milkman his inadequacy. Judith Fletcher notes that "Milkman's quest for his true name in his story . . . becomes a process that involves considerable stripping away of his masculine ego and social identity, and renunciation of his father's solipsism and materialism" (Fletcher 409-410). During the hunting trip, Milkman begins to consider his treatment of his family and Hagar. He examines his own sense of entitlement, realizing that "he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance . . .and given what he wanted. And in return he would be . . . what? Pleasant? Generous?" (Morrison, *Song* 277). Morrison also signals the shift in Milkman by allowing him his first genuine act of affectionate reciprocity to another person. He offers to bathe Sweet, the young woman who offers him her home and her body during his visit to Shalimar, and he does so with tenderness. He also engages in household chores, showing reciprocity for the kindness that she shows him. Milkman begins to understand what a real community ethos feels like, acknowledging implicitly that mere proximity to a community does not make him part of one.

By the time he leaves Shalimar, Milkman has, in sleuthlike fashion, uncovered the family history that the elder Macon Dead denied by accepting a new name. Like Morrison's other works, *Song of Solomon* "address[es] the psychological and religious reality of what it means for African Americans in the New World to be cut off from their names, and from continuing their responsibility of reciprocity to them in the circle of life" (Jennings 83). Morrison uses

Milkman's journey backwards into his history to comment on the relationship between the past present, and future. During Milkman's childhood, the narrator notes, "It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there was no future to be had" (Morrison, *Song* 35). Milkman's backward-looking stance is ironic here because he does not know what is behind him. This is true both because he is too self-interested to care and because his grandfather's escape from his past, Pilate's ignorance of portions of it, and his father's silence about it ensures that he cannot know it. Therefore, his fear that he "was . . . flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been" is only partially true; he knows neither where he has been nor where he is going (Morrison, *Song* 33). Morrison seems to suggest that one of these elements is unknowable without the other. Milkman's fascination with flight makes his learning of his grandfather's journey back to Africa even more significant. Symbolically, flight is both a salute to African American folklore, which challenges Western ways of understanding and experiencing the world, and a way to move toward a future of one's own making.

The incorporation of flying Africans is a trope that has its foundation in African American history. In an interview, Morrison declares, "I'd always heard that black people could fly before they came to this country, and the spirituals and gospels are full of flying, and I decided not to treat them as some Western form of escape, and something more positive than escape" (Morrison,"Brown" 463). To say that such extraordinary flights are simply forms of escape is to reduce them to a defensive position. Morrison aims to recognize that there are cultural elements at work within cultures from the African Diaspora that exist independently of the Western context. Rawdon Wilson explains that "magical realism has been seen as reflecting

naïve superstition, left behind in sophisticated industrial societies. Magical realism can be enlisted in the analysis of postcolonial discourse as the mode of a conflicted consciousness, the cognitive map that discloses the antagonism between two views of culture, two views of history" (222). Morrison's consciousness is not conflicted. By accepting the history that had been passed down outside of Western discourse to her as a truth, she levels any pretensions to a cultural or intellectual hierarchy that insist on one notion of "truth." Whether or not Morrison believes literally in such flights is unimportant. It is important that she recognizes that some people do or did and that such a belief is valid. The fact that Africans can fly is neither a manifestation of cultural confusion nor an overt political statement about cultural imperialism; it is just a fact. In this sense, Solomon's flight serves a dual purpose that combines the past and the future and validates African American cultural traditions.

Milkman's journey toward a future that productively integrates his familial and cultural past progresses with incremental changes. One way to achieve such a future, the novel suggests, is to embrace community in the present. Milkman marvels at the fact that "[h]e didn't feel close to them [the people of Shalimar], but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shred. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody" (Morrison, *Song* 293). This sense of having a place where he belongs is only ever available to him in Pilate's home. Thus, Morrison establishes community as central to progress. Losing his sense of entitlement, he also gains a sense that in Shalimar "all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch—and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on" (Morrison, *Song* 277).

Nothing is important that is not earned; this includes respect as well as material wealth. Morrison's portrait of what is important does not preclude capitalism or material wealth and comfort. However, it does require staying in touch with what one produces both materially and psychologically. Wealth and power should not be the primary instruments by which individuals measure their worth, just as interpersonal relationship can both repair the damage caused by an Africanist society and remind individuals of how such a society dehumanizes those people who lack the socioeconomic means to protect themselves—all of these ideas that both Macon and Guitar ignore. Thus, by the end of the novel, Milkman understands these nuances and is on the cusp of achieving an integrated sense of how to navigate community and the demands of contemporary life.

Milkman's death or flight at the end of the novel, just as he serenades his dying aunt with the same song that she used to insist on Robert Smith's significance, calls into question the ability of an integrated sense of African American tradition and progress or the reconciliation of individuality and community to exist. More directly, Gerry Brenner contends that Milkman's flight is an act of "self-glorification" because his "discovery of his lineage is little more than an intoxicant to gratify his wish for some grandiose illusion—that in his gene pool lies the birdlike ability to soar" (118, 119). Such a view directly contrasts with Morrison's own view of her novel, which she regards as "a book of absolute triumph!" (Morrison, "Charles" 22). She explains that Milkman's journey is a success "[b]ecause a man learns the only important lesson there is to learn. And he wins himself. . . . And the quality of his life improves immeasurably. Whether its length improves or lengthens is irrelevant. And his friend knows he has improved. His friend knows that, and the two of them know it. I was thrilled with that" (Morrison,

"Charles" 22). Though she never explains exactly what he learns, his flight is evidence of his

newfound ability to "give up the shit that weights you down," as Guitar says (Morrison, *Song*

179). Morrison explains that in order to fly, "You would have to be able to surrender, give up all

of the weights, all of the vanities, all of the ignorances. And you'd have to trust and have faith in

the harmony of your body. You would also have to have perfect control" (Morrison, "Charles"

21). Neither Macon nor Guitar are able to transcend Africanism. Though as a member of the

black majority he is perhaps closer to traditional African American culture, Guitar is hampered

by racism, his construction of his noble mission as a member of the Seven Days, and his inability

to conceive of socioeconomic progress without embracing Africanism. Macon, as a reflection of

the middle class, is hampered by his feeling of inadequacy, his equation of worth with material

goods, and his surrender to Africanism. I agree that Morrison's portrait of Milkman at the close

of the novel is of an individual who understands the weights that obstruct the flight paths both of

the middle class and the black majority, but his failure to act on this knowledge leaves the novel

vulnerable to such criticism as Doreatha Drummond Mbalia offers. Mbalia argues that

"Milkman possesses the knowledge, the theory needed to help abolish the exploitation and

oppression of African people, needed to revolutionize their consciousness, but he chooses not to

use the knowledge as a weapon of change" (Mbalia 68). While I contend that Milkman's flight

means that the reader does not get to see progressive African Americanism in practice, I would

argue too that the fact of incorporating flight into the text as a material reality is a weapon

against established Africanism and the privileging of Western Civilization. Morrison answers

such criticism by emphasizing the hypocrisy in such thought, noting, Milkman's flight "also

symbolizes men leaving the nest, becoming complete humans. Ulysses left for twenty years,

returned, and then went again. When that happens, someone always gets left behind"
(Morrison,"Triumphant" 16). I do not find Ulysses's absence more redeemable than Milkman's,
but Pilate's assertion that "[p]eople die when they want to and if they want to. Don't nobody
have to die if they don't want to" establishes a sense of African American agency that transcends
Western conceptions of reality (Morrison, *Song* 140). Milkman's flight, though it may not
confirm expectations about his potential as a class unifier, argues that some things are
unknowable. It serves as a weapon against Africanism, though it may confound and disconcert
Western readers, because it says that this once selfish middle-class man can gain such an
understanding of himself and his African American folk roots that he not only believes he can
fly, but that he does so, whether we consider his flight physical or psychological.

I maintain that Morrison intentionally has her character thwart expectations. Marc
Conner accurately contends: "By surrendering to the air, Milkman may or may not achieve the
kind of transcendence his forefather achieved; regardless, the community he leaves behind
cannot follow him, and so the relationship between individual and community which the novel is
a such pains to construct is abandoned" (Conner 64). The memory of Solomon's flight, in which
he leaves many children and his distraught wife behind, irredeemably casts his flight as selfish.
In his flight away from his family, he leaves the elder Macon Dead orphaned, forever
disconnected from his family history. Therefore, he is willing to accept the name given to him
by a drunken Yankee. This loss of his name contributes to cultural losses of his son Macon and
his grandson Milkman. Solomon's flight also symbolizes an escape from responsibility for
others as well as an inability to cope with reality. Solomon leaves Rayna and his children with
"Cotton balls to choke" them, "Buckra's arms to yoke" them (Morrison, *Song* 49). Like Robert

Smith's suicide and Porter's suicidal madness as a result of the twisted notion of love, Solomon flies away or dies to escape the reality that is weighing him down. I assert that Morrison intentionally leaves Milkman's flight ambiguous. As previously noted, the flight in and of itself is an assertion of agency; however, the novel is framed around the posthumous elder Macon's assertion, "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (Morrison, *Song* 147). Solomon's flight ruptures his family. Macon's flight from his sister results in permanent estrangement from the one who knows him best and his decline into materialism, and Milkman's flight leaves his troubled family and Reba, for whom Pilate in her dying breath asks him to care. With death being a conscious choice, there is a possibility that Milkman can care for his family posthumously, as his grandfather communes with Pilate. However, Reba's simplicity—she lives "from one orgasm to another"—and the turmoil in his home imply that his loved ones lack the ability to see him as Pilate sees her father. After all, Macon leaves the fact that he sees his father after his death out of the story that he tells Milkman (Morrison, *Song* 150). Thus, Milkman's flight appears more individualist than collective. Though I acknowledge the power of validating African flight and establishing an alternate view of the world, Milkman's fails to establish what a progressive form of African Americanism looks like in practice and thus leaves many questions.

Despite the incompletion of Milkman's journey, Morrison's novel does call for a sustainable form of integrated African Americanism. From the navel-less Pilate, to the flight of the Solomon men, to Circe's ability to speak "out of [her] toothless mouth" with a "strong mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl," the instances of magical realism are rhetorical tools that equalize Western and non-Western cultures (Morrison, *Song* 240). Furthermore, they are rhetorical devices that bring African and African American folk traditions to the forefront of

contemporary experiences. However, I contend that the relationship of Porter and First

Corinthians illustrates the integration of change in a less abstract form. She moves from being

"ashamed of him" to splaying herself across the hood of his car in order to show her love of him

(Morrison, *Song* 194). Similarly, he progresses from his anti-middle class Black Nationalist

stance to "obvious adoration of her" and "compliments about her looks, her manners, her voice"

(Morrison, *Song* 194). Thus, what Morrison quietly leaves her readers with is the unification of

First Corinthians and Porter, who are living beyond Macon's controlling grasp. She overcomes

her shame of him, as her middle-class Africanist upbringing stigmatizes his black majority

presence, and he presumably renounces his isolationist position as member of the Seven Days.

Though Morrison offers no picture of their domestic life, the fact that they are together suggests

hope for an integrated sense of African Americanism. The relatively subdued manner in which

Morrison presents this couple does not diminish their significance. Her concentration on

Milkman's journey, I contend, is her grand challenge to the norms of Western society. I prefer to

see the Porter-First Corinthians union as a nod to the quiet negotiations within relationships that

are constantly occurring in the rapidly changing society.

Understanding What is Nedeed: Navigating the Class Structure in *Linden Hill*

Like Toni Morrison's text, which dismantles the false dichotomy of modernization and

traditional African American culture in favor of a more integrated sense of what the modern

African American can be, Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* delves into intraracial class

dynamics, insisting that an element of cultural collectively must be paired with any sense of

socioeconomic progress. Whereas appraisals of Morrison's work note greater nuance in her

depiction of the African American middle class, critics have accused Naylor of constructing her own multilayered intraracial inferno that judges inhabitants according to exclusive and essentialist standards. In his 1985 *New York Times* review of the novel, Mel Watkins candidly declares, "Simply stated, Miss Naylor's version of the *Inferno* suggests that blacks who aspire to the white world and material success are pawns of the Devil and will experience the torments of hell" (8). Sherley Anne Williams concurs in her review, noting, "One of the implicit messages of *Linden Hills* . . . is that the only *real* black is a poor black" (11). While her focus on an affluent African American neighborhood lends itself to criticism of the segment of the African American population who embrace American materialism and who have moved away from the roots of traditional African American cultures, Naylor acknowledges the positives of socioeconomic progress, and she begins to construct an image of the traits necessary for a positive and progressive form of African Americanism. *Linden Hills* should not be reduced to a salvo that asserts the perfidy of the African American middle class. Instead, I argue that Naylor's text does not simply assault the middle-class ethos. Its presentation of the world of Luther Nedeed, Lester Tilson, and Willie Mason insists that contemporary African Americans, without some acknowledgment of community, or the cultural trauma that helps inform that community, cannot fully function.

Though Naylor delves into to the world of magical realism with Luther Nedeed, her portrait of him is clearly unlike the positive presence of Pilate and Circe in Morrison's text. As the ultimate African American badman, who uses business acumen and manipulation rather than brute strength and threats of physical violence to establish his dominance and threaten white authority, Nedeed possesses an aura that clearly relates to African American folk traditions.

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There is something in his "short, squat body that stopped [white] men from treating him like a nigger—and something in his eyes that soon stopped them from even thinking the word" (Naylor, *Linden* 3).   Luther has a power that causes most of the people around him to cower. Because Luther's neighbors surmise that his "heathen E-jip mumm[y]" grin can spoil crops and because he is thought to have grown money by "sprinkl[ing] it with the dust he gathered from the graves of babies," his community is afraid of him (Naylor, *Linden* 3,9). Naylor makes the magical nature of Luther evident again in the mysterious presence of the fish heads that the narrator implies the Nedeeds place into the bodies that they prepare for burial. Although Watkins faults Naylor for not explaining such "strange ministrations," I instead argue that what Watkins sees as a failure is an intentional statement that frustrates the need for explanation (8). Though we can safely assume that this ritual is a conjuration to protect or extend the Nedeed legacy, Naylor's integration of it into the text in such an incidental fashion leads us to question what makes his burial applications more bizarre than our own and to remind the reader that there are some things that our Western culture leaves us ill-prepared to understand. So this, too, functions as an oblique sign of African Americans' disconnection from Africa. Therefore, the tradition, though it is seemingly used to help sustain needed power, insists upon its validity.

The ethereal agency of the Nedeed family is also evident in their ability to replicate themselves identically throughout five generations, with two generations existing at the same time. The Luther Nedeed who came to Linden Hills in 1820 is essentially the same man, physically—they share bulging eyes, dark skin, and bowlegs—as is the antagonist in the contemporary world. The twinning effect in this novel represents what Rawdon Wilson describes as the ability of "[m]agical realism to focu[s] the problem of fictional space. . . .by

suggesting a model of how different geometries, inscribing boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, can superimpose themselves upon one another" (210). Like Nedeed's ability to negate racial hierarchies with a simple look or to transform a useless plot of land, after a seven-day vigil at sunset, into the envy of African American and white communities alike, the repetition of the Nedeed men shifts conceptions of reality. All the Luther Nedeeds seem to be grounded in the magic of folk culture. To have successive generations who almost share the same consciousness and seemingly share the same physical bodies illustrates Naylor's desire to manipulate conceptions of linearity. The narrator explains, "when old Luther died in 1879, he hadn't died at all, especially when they spoke to his son and especially when they glanced at those puffed eyelids and around those bottomless eyes" (Naylor, *Linden* 4-5). The Nedeeds' twinning also represents the presence of the role of ancestor, which I have discussed in its positive form in *Song of Solomon*. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison argues that in "black" texts, "There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison "Rootedness" 61-62).[27] In African American folk culture and African traditional religion, reverence for elders and honoring of ancestors yield guidance from those "parents" and protection from harmful forces. As the depiction of Pilate reveals, the elder-ancestor dynamic can be agglomerated into living ancestors. In Naylor's novel, the Nedeed generations represent an interesting living ancestor dynamic. Though the elder in this text seems to be a corrupting influence, the

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[27] In this statement, Morrison does not qualify her claim. However, there are certainly texts that lack the presence of an elder. What is important here is that such an elder, when present, usually serves as a nurturing cultural touchstone.

successive Nedeed generations seek to honor their forefathers' legacy. Luther pays great attention to the journals and charts that his forefathers have left behind to guide his life.

Central to the perpetuation of the Nedeed legacy is the destruction of the Nedeed women and the cultivation of a new son. Sexual relationships with the Nedeed mothers are distant and businesslike. These mothers are not only chosen because of their light skin, but also for "the color of their spirits," which reflects an emptiness and longing that will allow them to more easily fade into the background after they bear another male Nedeed replica to continue the legacy (Naylor, *Linden* 19). These women define themselves through their relationship to the men in their lives. From the first Needed wife—who is a slave both prior to and during her marriage—to Willa—who marries out of fear of becoming an old maid—they all crave the love of their husbands and sons. Once their sons begin their Nedeed training, it becomes clear that the roles that they covet, wife and mother, are obsolete. Because of her son's difference, Willa has the love of her son, but her marriage is just as empty as the other Nedeed women's. Her husband, Evelyn Creton notes, "[e]nter[s] and leave[s] her body with the same quiet precision that she saw when he balanced his accounts, read his newspaper, or dissected his steak" (Naylor, *Linden* 148). These sexual encounters are calculated with mathematical precision: "There must be five days of penetration at the appearance of Aries, and the son is born when the sun has died" (Naylor, *Linden* 19). The men of this family are caught in a ritual from which deviation is considered perilous. Therefore, the birth of his light-skin son who nevertheless shares the "same squat bowlegs, the same protruding eyes and puffed lips, but [is] a ghostly presence that mocked everything his fathers had built," is devastating (Naylor, *Linden* 18). The Nedeed legacy is built on the idea that an African American could challenge white authority by achieving agency in as

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many ways as possible. This agency is evident in the Nedeeds' power in both white and black

communities. Their reproductive formula is also evidence of this. The fact that the child has

light skin reminds him that there are things that are beyond his control.   For Luther, Luke

Bouvier rightly maintains that "This white son had presented . . . an insoluble quandary, because

to name him 'Luther Nedeed' and accept him as his own would be virtually to contradict the

very premise on which the Nedeed family and Linden Hills were constructed, while any other

name would introduce an intolerable element of difference in the family history" (148). Despite

the five light-skinned women whose genes have contributed to this son, Luther convinces

himself that infidelity is the only possible cause of the deviation in color and that the death, or at

least the exile of his offending child, are the only solutions.

Willa Prescott Nedeed is right to consider her husband's behavior "unnatural"—not

because they transgress social codes with which she is familiar, but because they preclude

change and insist upon stagnation (Naylor, *Linden* 149). Though Luther "[l]ooked at this

whiteness and saw the destruction of five generations," this child represents change (Naylor,

Linden 18). He represents his foremothers, whom his forefathers have erased, as well as freedom

from a legacy that requires disconnection from and judgment of the community. The Nedeed

generations, until this point, have depended on replication without variation. "Unlike white

European culture, which emphasizes the continuity of repetition," Teresa Goddu asserts, "black

culture allows for a break—or a 'cut'—to occur in its cycles of repetition. For instance, the

trickster figure who is emblematic of black culture, works by 'signfiyin(g),' to use Henry Louis

Gates, Jr.'s term, against the sanctioned system 'repeat[ing] and simultaneously revers[ing] that

system 'in one deft, discursive act'" (216).   Naylor posits this child as a symbolic "cut" in the

Nedeed cycle of repetition. Despite Luther's strict adherence to his forefather's reproductive

formula, the child represents familiar difference to Luther. Although he shares the Nedeed

physical features, his skin color reflects change.   The child's short life is a missed opportunity

for positive change for Luther. He represents the importance of the maternal connection that the

Nedeed men try to suppress. The short glimpse of the child's relationship with his mother

suggests it is the absence of such relationships that contribute to the Nedeeds' single-minded and

destructive vision. Had he been allowed to live, this child, with both maternal and paternal

influence, could have reshaped the trajectory of Linden Hills by reevaluating the Nedeed legacy.

Naylor further illustrates this fear of variation with Nedeed's insistence that "[t]here must

always be Christmas and celebration" (Naylor, *Linden* 288). His steadfast fidelity in performing

each of his Christmas rituals, including making brandy punch and decorating his tree with family

treasures, represents his inability to accept change. Enlisting dark-skinned Willie, whose curious

observation of Linden Hills is at the center of the novel, and light-skinned Lester Tilson, who

reluctantly lives on the periphery of the neighborhood, to help him in his traditional Christmas

decoration allows him to continue a ritual in which "there would be three pairs of hands to

decorate [his tree], two dark and one fair. . . . He could spend the holiday in his chair and know

that at least one thing hadn't changed" (Naylor, *Linden* 287). His comfort in the presence of

Willie and Lester is artificial, as he does not require or desire their psychological presence. He

does not know or want to know these young men. This need to replicate without change, Naylor

suggests, can only end in death.   His fiery death, after Willie unknowingly frees his wife Willa

and he confusedly attempts to prevent what he perceives as an escape, signifies the wages of the

Nedeeds' failure to cultivate a community or to use his conjuring gifts to effect the psychological

betterment of his community. The Nedeeds bastardize the magic of folk culture. Though Pilate

is pushed to the periphery of her community because of her power and the fear that it provokes,

her power is constructive. Yet while the Nedeed men remain at the center of a dysfunctional

community, their presence is degenerative. P. Gabrielle Foreman explains that "[m]agical

realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the

traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected"

(Foreman 286). Though I believe that fabulist elements in the novel are more than a mere

rhetorical device that calls into question—in true postmodernist fashion—the dominance of

Western thought, on the textual level, Foreman's description means that the Nedeeds' use of folk

culture inadequately fulfills its promise. While he draws on cultural traditions that are grounded

in a community ethos, he does not seek to be part of or sustain a community; he destroys it.

Thus, Naylor demonstrates that folk traditions are powerful, that they can be extrapolated to our

contemporary context, and that if they are not used properly, they can be dangerous.

The mysticism that surrounds the Nedeeds also contributes to their unique relationship

with Africanism. The social structure of Linden Hills would imply that Luther Nedeed

resembles those characters I have examined who both embrace Africanism and subject others to

it. However, he does not believe in the white superiority that produces such Africanism. The

Nedeed men seem innately imbued with the ability to assess their value outside of white

hegemonic culture, and their magic emphasizes this. The development of Linden Hills is a

response to what Luther believes will be the future of America, in which "the white god . . .

would one day *own* that sky" (Naylor, *Linden* 8). While Goddu argues that "[i]nstead of

signifying against a white paradigm, Luther mindlessly borrows the terms of the white culture,"

(217) I contend that the Nedeed approach is not mindless; it is calculated. White dominance, Luther believes, is inevitable. Though he concedes that "he couldn't rule . . . he sure as hell could ruin. He could be a fly in the ointment, a spot on the bleached sheet, and Linden Hills would prove it" (Naylor, *Linden* 8). Neither economic prosperity nor education, Nedeed believes, can destroy Africanism. Any argument to the contrary is a self-delusion. Though they do not seek to change the society in which he was born, the Nedeed legacy is to be a constant reminder of the fallacy of racial superiority. As the narrator explains, "the fact that they had this land was a blister to the community, but to make that sore fester and pus over, Linden Hills had to be a showcase. He had to turn it into a jewel—an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County but reflected it black" (Naylor, *Linden* 9-10). Therefore, Linden Hills has no constructive purpose, in the sense that the Nedeeds seek to cultivate social uplift, any community ethos, or to have any lasting effect on race relations or American power dynamics.

Although I concede that Braithwaite's assessment that the Nedeed legacy, which is demonstrative of African American capability and possibility, is on the surface a result of "real black pride," it consumes the community that it wishes to validate (Naylor, *Linden* 260). Intertwined with Luther Nedeed's need to replicate without variation, his devotion to this legacy subordinates everything in his life to it. Though there is innuendo about his involvement in the slave trade and supplying weapons to the Confederate Army, as well as a suggestion that insider trading might have been the cause of the Nedeed prosperity during the Great Depression, it is clear that these men's moral code is self-serving; they are more than willing to sacrifice others for their needs or desires. For example, Luther forces Winston Alcott to relinquish his long-term homosexual relationship in favor of more conventional marriage, though he knows it will destroy

him. He also reinforces Laurel Dumont's recognition of her loss of self by dispossessing her of her home. In her look at the relationship between African culture and religion in the work of Toni Morrison, La Vinia Jennings argues that "[u]nderstanding West and Central African peoples' uniting of good and evil and the balancing fusion of constituent opposites, in large measure, is key to unlocking moral meaning throughout Morrison's literary canon" (Jennings 25). I contend that this is also important in Naylor's *Linden Hills*. Though scholars have attempted to align the Nedeeds with otherworldly evil, I contend that Naylor instead focuses on his flawed humanity. "Evil tendencies [in African culture]," Simon Bockie explains, "are considered an inescapable part of human nature, not something that can be completely eradicated. Such tendencies can only be integrated into the community and kept under control" (qtd. in Jennings 39). Though the Nedeeds lack the hope that their efforts could have a major impact on their society, their desire to exhibit black power, like the work of the Seven Days, is ill-conceived but understandable. However, just as Guitar's lack of balance leads to a loss of perspective and the death of Pilate, the Nedeeds' results in the moral degeneration of their entire community and the end of the Nedeed clan.

Luther Nedeed's psychological freedom from racial stigma means that he judges his tenants harshly for their acceptance of it. Braithwaite explains, "The first Luther Nedeed lived for this community, and he passed that spirit on to his children. That there was something to strive for, something to believe in, that we could make it in spite of what the world said" (Naylor, *Linden* 259-260). With greater detail, Luther, just prior to his death, ponders his forefathers' devotion as he looks at their pictures, noting, "This man had come to Linden Hills with only a cardboard suitcase and a dream. No one helped him to haul or smooth the logs for

the shack that stood on this very ground. He ate nothing but wild turnips and cornmeal biscuits for six years—six long years—because the price of brood hen was also the price of a load of bricks" (Naylor, *Linden* 285). Another of his forefathers "gambled every dime he had to keep the community afloat during the Depression," while a third "personally hauled coal for his tenants during the worst blizzard in forty years, losing two toes from frostbite" (Naylor, *Linden* 285-286). While vengeful validation is at the root of this devotion, the Nedeeds' efforts to ensure the survival of the community are both laudable and ironic. None of the Nedeed men are integrated into the community in the sense that they have personal relationships. Their community fears them and perhaps admires their achievement, but their relationship is based on economics. They are their undertakers, their landlords, and their guiders of their social and political future, but they are not their friends or moral compasses. Because his goal is to make Linden Hills a "showcase," it is inevitable that material wealth and professional accomplishment become the center of life in his neighborhood. The contemporary Luther regrets the current state of his community. He laments, "They didn't understand the importance of a family, of life. All those sacrifices to build them houses and they refused to build a history. Father, forgive me, Luther almost whispered aloud, but sometimes I wish you had left me another dream" (Naylor, *Linden* 286). The children of the "murders, root doctors, carpetbaggers, and bootleg preachers" to whom the Nedeeds were first able to rent homes "wanted nothing better than a way to forget and make the world forget their past" (Naylor, *Linden* 6, 10). For the Nedeeds, the history is just as important as the materialism that would dislodge, if only temporarily, white society's pretensions of superiority. To think that this group, who suffered under slavery, Jim Crow, and

institutionalized racism, could achieve such a visible and undeniable degree of success, the Nedeeds hope, would complicate America's assent to the "white" future.

Nedeed even commissions such a history to be recorded by Braithwaite. While the inescapability of acknowledging African American achievement or success is the end for the Nedeeds, their tenants' goal is material gain. The tenants fail to acknowledge to themselves the truth about their relationship to Africanism as well the reality of America's racial climate. They lie to themselves, and Nedeed cannot abide such self-deception. This becomes clear at Lycentia Parker's wake. Nedeed chastises community members for their assertion that their willingness to align with the racist Wayne County Citizens Alliance in order to prevent a low-income housing development is a matter of "civic duty" (Naylor, *Linden* 137). In this scene, Luther tells them that they could "[l]ie to everyone in this man's world if need be, but never lie to yourself, because that's the quickest road to destruction. The Wayne County Citizens Alliance is full of some of the most despicable racists on this side of the continent. And there isn't a soul in this room that doesn't know that" (Naylor, *Linden* 137). He further reminds them that they are not subject to the Alliance's direct racism because of their educational and professional attainment, adding that members of the black majority "don't have that saving grace, so the Alliance is free to engage in myths about inferior schools and deteriorating neighborhoods while all they're really fearing is the world *nigger*" (Naylor, *Linden* 137). Here, Luther dispels any illusions about any real distinction between the middle to upper-middle-class African Americans and the members of the black majority. Plucking them from these illusions, he reinserts them into America's racial reality.

Naylor thus reveals the flaw that will inevitably lead to the destruction of the Nedeed legacy. In order for this group of African Americans even briefly to complicate the ascent of white "ownership" of America, they must emphasize the external—material possessions, clothing, formal education, professional success. Yet, the Nedeeds' emphasis on building a history seems to require something else. The socioeconomic accomplishments of this community, which are continually being recorded for posterity, represent the construction of history. The final Luther Nedeed's dissatisfaction with that means that history for him must have an internal component. However, Naylor does not clarify what exactly makes the Nedeeds' history any different from their tenants', except that they ultimately see the futility of African American progress and refuse to ignore it. Though the Nedeeds seek to discredit Africanism and Africanist expectations, their focus on creating, maintaining, and displaying elements of refinement, culture, and achievement that exclude members of the black majority and that were originally established by whites, just for some sort of acknowledgment, means that in trying to escape Africanism, they become more enmeshed in it.

The paradox that the Nedeeds create means that the people who live in and hope to rise in social hierarchy of Linden Hills accept Africanism. Like the witches that traditional African communities recognize as "unconsciously and involuntarily visit[ing] dis-ease, death, and material misfortune on familial and communal members in close spatial proximity to them," the Nedeeds contaminate their community (Jennings 7). Though the Luther Nedeed who is the primary antagonist in the novel has come to recognize the impact of his legacy, his forefathers saw the goal as noble. Luke Bouvier contends that "the Nedeeds impose a (pseudo-) history of 'black' material success. . . .This vision of a successful, pure 'black' space once again finds its

essentialist illusions subverted, however. The 'history' of Linden Hills does not constitute a sustaining black heritage of success, but rather an alienated and alienating process of advancing commodification" (144). The Nedeed legacy is sustained through folk magic, rituals, and the willingness to subordinate everything to it. The legacy perpetuates "dis-ease" among the Linden Hills residents and also turns material fortune and progress into personal and emotional misfortune. The people of Linden Hills are afflicted with Africanism, but they are also increasingly ill at ease with themselves. Braithwaite explains that the members of the community have not sold "the silver mirror God propped up in [their] soul"; they have instead had "pieces of themselves . . . *taken* away" (Naylor, *Linden 260*). Braithwaite continues, "And if anyone was more disturbed about that, it was the Nedeeds. They slowly began to realize that people could live here, but . . . it was inevitable that they couldn't work here. So they had to keep going out and coming back with the resources to move down, but with less of themselves" (Naylor, *Linden* 260). Unlike the Nedeeds and characters such as Pilate who have the ability to define themselves outside of the stigmatized racial context, the residents of the Linden Hills are constantly molding themselves into an image consonant with the American notion of acceptability. Denigrating those who do not live up to those standards, they are appalled at the thought of the "dirty niggers" who might move in a new housing development near their neighborhood (Naylor, *Linden* 132). Like Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, the people of Linden Hills are stilted, lacking "spontaneity" (Naylor, *Linden* 83). They restrain themselves in service of materialism and socioeconomic progress, which has at its root Africanism.

Naylor symbolizes their materialism through their insatiable appetites. Willie is astounded by their gluttony for food, which matches their extravagant taste in material objects.

During the wedding of Winston Alcott, Willie observes that the guests "might look like birds of paradise, but they sure ate like vultures" (Naylor, *Linden* 84). Charles Toombs rightly attributes this to Naylor's "suggest[ion] that food consumption is a viable way of understanding some of the problematic of African American identity. For many of the characters in *Linden Hills*, certainly its middle-class representative healthy African-American identity is as vaporous as the whiff of scent remaining after the consumption of expensive caviar" (88). Just as these people can never be satiated in their diet, no amount of material goods or progress will ever quench that acquisitive nature because they are laboring under the notion that they are not good enough. On the way to his wedding, Winston and the members of the bridal party "were making the stilted movements of people who were afraid of the clothes they wore, dreading that the slightest imperfection would reveal that it wasn't their usual mode of dress" (Naylor, *Linden* 74). Similarly, during the wedding reception Willie notes, "He was actually watching them watch themselves having this type of affair" (Naylor, *Linden* 83). They are all aware of the roles that are acceptable and want to remove any room for criticism.

Though there are several characters in the novel, such as Xavier Donnell, who illustrate the way that the African American middle class subject others to Africanism, the most revealing examples of impact of a notion of progress that eschews relationships with others and accepts inferiority are Maxwell Smyth and Laurel Dumont. Naylor's treatment of Maxwell, more than any other character presented in this work, critiques the alignment of progress and colorblindness. Throughout his education and corporate experience, "Maxwell had discovered long ago that he doubled the odds of finishing first if he didn't carry the weight of that milligram of pigment in his skin" (Naylor, *Linden* 102). Maxwell has no intimate interior life. Deciding

when to smile and refraining from sexual relationships, everything is strategic with Maxwell, and emotions are dangerous. The narrator explains that "his entire life became a race against the natural—and he was winning" (Naylor, *Linden* 104). He seeks to even control his body functions: "Through a careful selection of solids and liquids, he was able to control not only the moment but the exact nature of the matter that had to bring him daily to" the bathroom (Naylor, *Linden* 105). Maxwell's embrace of colorblindness and assimilationist rhetoric are only harmful in that they serve as a veneer underneath which there is nothing. He lives constantly with the fear that "any break in his stride, any telltale mannerism or slip of the tongue might shatter the illusion he was standing behind" (Naylor, *Linden* 104). He is the sparkling "showcase" that the Nedeeds hoped to present to the white world. Naylor paints no portrait of him hiding from an African American cultural past; he is made and remade in response to the white gaze. Therefore, he dismisses Willie and Lester, leaving them with "the same feeling that you got talking to some white people," a feeling of invisibility (Naylor, *Linden* 113). He also has harsh words for the members of the black majority who insist on linking their poverty with race, all the while refusing to "take advantage of the process that's continually going on" (Naylor, *Linden* 114). He believes that it is as simple as will power. If he can will his blackness and excrement into a less offending form, why can't they? All of his extraordinary will power and restraint amount to tacit acceptance that any hint of individuality or cultural affinity signals inferiority.

If Maxwell represents the ability of the culturally and morally bankrupt to function, though destructively, Laurel Dumont represents the dissolution that occurs when individuals acknowledge the emptiness of their sense of progress. As a child, she is nurtured by her grandmother Roberta, whose humble backwoods Georgia life represents the black majority.

Laurel's different experiences in her high school, as a student at Berkeley, as an IBM executive, and as a wife of the district attorney lead her away from Roberta's world. Moreover, her socioeconomic ascendency also leads her away from examining and constructing her own identity. The narrator explains, "Perhaps, just once, if she had failed a course, missed a plane connection, or glittered less at Howard's parties, she might have had time to think about who she was and what she really wanted, but it never happened" (Naylor, *Linden* 228). As a result, her life unravels; she loses all interest in her job and her husband. The Laurel and Roberta dynamic is instructive about the ability of socioeconomic progress to connect with African American tradition. Roberta's home does represent a traditional sense of African American community. However, that home is not special only because Naylor is attempting to privilege the folk culture or the black majority. Roberta explains to her granddaughter that her home "was just a shack where you had learned to be at home with yourself" (Naylor, *Linden* 236). When Laurel returns to her grandmother seeking help with her identity, Roberta's gentle rebuff is intended to emphasize that home is something internal. While class stratification, especially the kind cultivated in Linden Hills, attempts to draw dividing lines, Naylor's portraits of Laurel and Roberta show how these lines are unnecessary. It is Roberta who sends Laurel to Berkeley, hoping that that an education will bring her greater opportunity. It is also Roberta who comes to Laurel's opulent home in the hope of steering her out of the psychological abyss of being lost in her possessions. Though Roberta admits that "'I'm plain folk, and I ain't educated," she is "willing to learn" (Naylor, *Linden* 237). Though in this instance the pretext of her and Laurel's conversation is music, the subtext clearly insists that she, as a symbol of the black majority and folk culture, is open to the contemporary world and all it offers. She teaches Laurel about one of

the most significant elements of folk culture, the blues. While Laurel is dismissive of both the

blues and blues artists, Roberta not only explains how the blues reaffirms African American

agency but also how it, as a medium that elicits and is a product of emotion, is not unlike the

classical music in which Laurel loses herself. To Laurel's dismissal, Roberta retorts,

> You think you done found a special music to match your misery. A misery you
>
> got somewhere in the head. No, you ain't never had to worry, like a lot of us did,
>
> about Jim Crow or finding your next meal, but if that's all you hear in them songs,
>
> then you don't know as much about music as you think you do. What they *say* is
>
> one thing, but what you supposed to hear is, 'I can' (Naylor, *Linden* 228).

Through Roberta's embrace of a connection between classical music and the blues, she shows

that the cultural differences that separate the black majority and middle class are immaterial. If

people are truly living, experiencing the world and are present emotionally and psychologically

in it, both poverty and wealth can be fulfilling. However without the ability to construct their

own identities and to have relationships with the people around them, they are lost.

While Roberta begins the process of helping Laurel find herself, ultimately the process of

"recapturing the magic" is unsuccessful (Naylor, *Linden* 236). Despite her grandmother's best

efforts, Laurel "was taking in the sight of an old woman, the sound of old stories, and the smells

of an old tradition with nothing inside her to connect up to them. The woman-child just wasn't

in there and neither was the woman" (Naylor, *Linden* 239). She is unable functionally to bridge

the gap between her childhood self, who was confident, and her adult self, who attempted to let

objects fill a psychological space that should have been occupied with self-examination.

Therefore, Luther Nedeed's eviction of her only makes her recognize "that I don't' exist. That *I*

don't live in this house" (Naylor, *Linden* 245). The implication is that Laurel would not be able

to live anywhere because she has lost herself in a sea of material success and social approbation.

When she finally decides that those things are of no value, she is unable to decide what actually

does have value. Through both Maxwell and Laurel, Naylor emphasizes how the Nedeed legacy

in reality represents the disappearance of African American into a generic conception of

Americanness. This requires making their bodies invisible. Maxwell sees his body as a

nuisance, so he controls it to an extent that his need for control replaces all emotions, bodily

functions, and interior life. Laurel has no face—literally after she plunges from her diving board

to her death, and figuratively during her successful education, career, and spiraling depression.

As Catherine Ward notes, the souls in Linden Hills "are damned not because they have offended

God or have violated a religious system but because they have offended themselves" (67). There

is the implication that they could be saved, if they had a recuperative community that allowed

them to acknowledge that recognition of cultural trauma and investment in social economic

progress can be integrated. Maxwell is alone. Though Laurel has Roberta, she also has Luther

Nedeed, who invalidates Roberta's efforts. Thus, these two promising young people are lost.

Against the backdrop of the Nedeeds are Lester Tilson and Willie Mason, who are aware

of the illusions that exist in Linden Hills. They are both cognizant of the Africanism that plagues

the community and constantly revaluate their relationship to it. Lester is a third-generation

resident of Linden Hills who seems to be saved from the community only by his grandmother,

who foresaw that the Nedeed legacy would lead to "giving up that part of you that lets you know

who you are" (Naylor, *Linden* 59). He witnesses his father's slow death due to multiple jobs in

order to live up to the standards of their community. Therefore, he is morally conflicted by his

relatively privileged position—his family lingers on the bottom of the Linden Hills hierarchy—as a member of the middle class. He rails against his mother's materialistic class consciousness and bristles under the façade of civility tinged with hostility in her treatment of Willie, whom she considers "scum" (Naylor, *Linden* 29). He is sickened by his sister's class consciousness and racial ideology, as she views an afro and black studies course "that supplied her with the statistical proof that black men were further behind white men than ever before, and that the gap would keep widening" as sufficient engagement with African American identity politics (Naylor, *Linden* 53). Nonetheless, he lives in a home with them, eats their food, takes their gifts. He attempts to explain away the contradiction of his participation in the lifestyle that he criticizes, rationalizing that his mother's and sister's generosity "ain't caring, White, that's showing off. See what we gave you? Now what you gonna give us, you no-good bum, you. They gave this stuff and prayed it would burn my ass every time I wore it" (Naylor, *Linden* 31). As Willie explains, "methinks the nigger doth protest too much" (Naylor, *Linden* 58). Though much of his criticism of his mother and sister is valid, he must constantly remind them and himself of their faults in order to justify his own dependence on them and his inability to break free of the corrupting culture of Linden Hills. When he and Willie are walking past the fenced-in school yard, Lester declares that the fence exists "[t]o get you used to the idea that what they have in there is different special. Something to be separated from the rest of the world. . . . Then when they've fenced you in . . . , they can let you out because you're ready to believe that what they they've given you up here, their version of life, is special. And you fence your own self in after protecting it from everybody else" (Naylor, *Linden* 45). The impact of those fences that he

laments continues to affect him. Though he realizes they are there and he consciously questions

their effect, he is unable to leave them.

He also forms his own fences that surround the members of the black majority to whom

he chooses to relate. Therefore, he can only see the residents of Linden Hills as victimizers. He

fails to see how Africanism makes them victims as well. Because of his experiences in Linden

Hills, Lester finds it difficult to understand how socioeconomic progress can coincide

successfully with a real community ethos and acknowledgment of the cultural trauma that has

informed all African American communities. Either communities have embraced cultural

trauma as an inextricable part of the African American experience that continues to influence

African American life, or they continually flee from it, as if acknowledgment of it perpetuates

racial stigma. Lester attempts to clarify his position when he tells Willie, "I never meant that

having an education and a comfortable life was wrong," but the residents of Linden Hills have

"lost all touch with what it is to be *them*. Because there's not a damned thing inside anymore to

let them know" (Naylor, *Linden* 59). Though Lester is more in touch with his identity than his

neighbors, he fails to separate the Africanist representation of the African American middle-class

from any sense that there are other African American middle-class communities who do not

solely identify themselves through their possessions and education. Though intellectually he

acknowledges that there are options, emotionally he equates the middle class with whites or

cultural perfidy. Thus, he fetishizes Malcolm X as the ultimate example of African American

masculinity, listens to his tapes, and hangs his poster in his room. A sexual experience in which

a white woman exclaims, "That was nice, so I can imagine how great it would have been if you

were really *black*," also haunts him (Naylor, *Linden* 86). If he is not black enough to fulfill fully

a white sexual fantasy, then what must his fellow African Americans—those from Putney

Wayne— think of him?

　　With Lester, Naylor is "insisting on 'race' [or more specifically culture] as a

performative, tractable, and malleable category . . . [that] redefine[s] 'race' as a significant,

controllable literary trope rather than a deterministic, essentializing categorization" (Favor 138).

In his look at Harlem Renaissance literature, Martin Favor contends that such insistence

> offer[s] multiple narratives on the complexity of blackness in the United States,
>
> suggesting ways in which , through imagining more diverse communities even
>
> within those communities of 'minority' status, we might move toward solving
>
> racism and its concomitant problems of homophobia, sexism, classism,
>
> regionalism, and colorism, all of which are expressions of essentialist thought in
>
> their own rights. (138)

This is not to say that Naylor is arguing that there are no foundational elements that have shaped

and continue to be important to African American communities; however, it is suggesting that

like the Nedeed legacy, failure to evolve—recognizing that variety exists alongside the cultural

trauma and racial stigma that binds all African Americans—could be disastrous.

　　As the African American middle class grows, so too does the population of African

American "cultural mulattos," to use Trey Ellis's term, who are exposed to and consider

themselves a product of a multiplicity of cultural and social experiences that inform their black

American experience.[28] For Lester, his experiences are marginally different from people like

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[28] I will borrow the term "mulatto" from both Trey Ellis and Houston Baker. In using the term "mulatto" I am not claiming that race exists as a "real" entity. Instead, "mulatto" reflects a cultural position that is valid in that it reflects the amalgamation of characteristics and values that have been associated with groups that are socially considered different races. Recognition of the culturally descriptive properties of the term "mulatto" does not imply an acceptance of the essential reality of race.

Willie; his family is lower middle class and they were anchored by his Grandmother Mamie

Tilson in the black majority. But more importantly, his economic reality—having sufficient food

and a comfortable home—is markedly different. Instead of embracing his identity as a middle-

class African American who is able to participate in multiple African American communities, he

is ashamed. Therefore, his affinity with the black majority of Putney Wayne and appropriations

of black nationalist rhetoric are performances in much the same way that his neighbors' devotion

to an image that counters the Africanist construction of what "black" is supposed be is a

performance—not necessarily a performance of whiteness but perhaps a performance of

identities that are impersonal and not organic.

Because of Lester's conflicted relationships with his community, Naylor allows the

reader to view Linden Hills through Willie Mason's eyes. Unlike his best friend's, Willie's life

is not one of economic privilege. He explains, "My mom got beat up every night after payday by

a man who couldn't bear the thought of bringing home a paycheck only large enough for three

people and making it stretch over eight people, so he drank up half of it . . . . She stayed because

a bruised face and half a paycheck was better than welfare" (Naylor, *Linden* 58). His life's

hardships allow him to be critical of Lester's wholesale condemnation of his community. He

recognizes that Lester condemns from a place of privilege. Therefore, he understands Mrs.

Tilson's desires for her son and is sympathetic to Xavier Donnell's discomfort with Maxwell's

pronouncements. To a degree, he is also envious and proud of the accomplishments of the

Linden Hills community. At the wedding of Winston Alcott, where Lester sees a "disgusting"

display of materialism and conspicuous consumption, "[h]e secretly felt a bit proud that someone

black could afford all this" (Naylor, *Linden* 82). However, his week-long journey through Linden

Hill tempers his admiration. Willie accepts that the problem with Linden Hills is "that nothing seemed to be what it really was" (Naylor, *Linden* 274). When Luther Nedeed relieves his tenants of the lie that their alignment with the racist Wayne County Citizens Alliance is noble or that it proves their superiority, Willie wants to applaud him (Naylor, *Linden* 138).

This linkage between Nedeed and Willie is not coincidental. I contend that Naylor presents Willie as Luther Nedeed's shadow. They are both linked by their connection to traditional African American culture. Nedeed, in his conjurations and supernatural presences, is able to shape an entire community. In a more positive role, Willie, with his six hundred sixty-five poems memorized, and his assertion that "[t]he written word dulls the mind, and since most of what's written is by white men, it's positively poisonous" is a product of the African American oral culture (Naylor, *Linden* 29). He tells the stories of the world in which he lives through poetry. Both Nedeed and Willie have no illusions about either the white world or the group of middle-class African Americans who occupy Linden Hills. Braithwaite even warns Willie, "You're bright. Ambitious. And now, up close I can smell the potential about you. You might think you're only passing through, but from someone like you, young man, this probably will be the last place on earth" (Naylor, *Linden* 265). Willie is clearly more like Nedeed than the other residents of the neighborhood. Unlike Laurel, who realizes the impact of her community only after she cannot retrieve or construct her identity; Reverend Hollis, who recognizes it but who remains impotent in relation to Nedeed; or Braithwaite, who is a voyeur chronicling the community and refusing to intervene, Willie has a clear understanding of impact of the community before becoming immersed in it.

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He has aspirations that would lead him beyond Putney Wayne. He admits that in his current status "he saw himself frozen in time never becoming a man just a very gray-haired boy" (Naylor, *Linden* 30). This reflects his fears about the life prospects of the men from the black majority. He seems to align masculinity partially with economic security. His father's violence and economic impotence, as well as his friend Norman's mental illness and frequent joblessness, contribute to his fears. Near the end of the novel Willie announces, "He wasn't going to stay in Putney Wayne, that much he knew. And he wasn't going to keep bagging groceries until he was fifty years old" (Naylor, *Linden* 275). Willie becomes symbolic of the beginning of the journey from tradition and/or black majority status to socioeconomic prosperity. He is warned of the possible conclusion of such a journey through his dreams. He dreams of being begged to "eat it" by hands that send him fleeing down the corridor (Naylor, *Linden* 145). Though this dream shows a connection to the revelations that Willa Nedeed is experiencing in the basement of the Nedeed home, this attempted force feeding also symbolizes the insatiable hunger for food and things that the people of Linden Hills represents. Again, in a dream a clerk refuses to sell him a camera, proclaiming, " 'You can't use my camera because you have no face'" (Naylor, *Linden* 211). Though this clearly foreshadows Laurel's suicide, it also represents his potential fate if he should choose unwisely.

The question remains: will Willie be able to integrate adequately the different parts of himself as he traverses the socioeconomic systems? Naylor emphasizes the need for this integrated identity early in the novel as Lester and Willie are walking through the school yard. Willie becomes engrossed in the plaques attached to the school. The first one says, "I am the way out of the city of woe/ I am the way to a prosperous people/ I am the way from eternal

sorrow" (Naylor, *Linden* 44). This would seem to relate to Lester's discussion of fences, the idea that education, both formal and cultural, is the only path to a good life. However, the second plaque complicates this view: "Sacred justice moved my architect/ I was raised here by divine omnipotence/Primordial love and ultimate intellect" (Naylor, *Linden* 44). This plaque casts education as an instrument of justice. This sense of justice could be extrapolated to the argument that education allows even the members of the black majority to rise. Also, it aligns love with intellect. Though the people of Linden Hills wear their intellect—or rather their formal education— as a banner, their sense of education lacks the emotion and compassion that is essential to self-love and love of the community. Furthermore, the idea of a love that are "primordial" is interesting, as this is not an idea that could easily be applied to Linden Hills. The community is not bound by love. Willie's contention that Luther Nedeed is complicit in Laurel Dumont's death, contrasting his actions with the residents of Putney Wayne who feel it is their responsibility to protect the members of their community—even from themselves if necessary— emphasizes the ways in which Nedeed and his tenants are not living up to promise of what an education can do. The final plaque proclaims, "Only the elements time cannot wear/ Were made before me, and beyond time I stand/ Abandon ignorance, ye who enter here" (Naylor, *Linden* 44). In this plaque, the alignment of love and intellect is elevated to a timeless and indestructible status. It would be ignorant to separate or compartmentalize this duality. The importance of these words is illustrated as the Linden Hills community silently witnesses the fiery destruction of the Nedeeds, without any attempt to help them. While "Willie's journey . . . reads against the socialized signs of Linden Hills and recuperates a black vernacular history. . . writ[ing] a history which allows for rupture," it remains to be seen if he will enact such a rupture (Goddu 220).

Though the novel closes with his utter devastation at the moral vacuum of the community, Naylor chooses not to make Willie's fate certain. Lester's pronouncement that "maybe there's a middle ground somewhere. . . . it doesn't have to be Linden Hills and it doesn't have to be nothing" hangs alongside Nedeed's insistence that he had "assessed [him] correctly" (Naylor, *Linden 283,* 214). Indeed, this is "an uncomfortable and dangerous book which pricks the conscience. It takes the reader on a perilous pilgrimage and forces him to consider the hidden cost of choices" (Ward 80). Hence, Naylor's depiction of Willie Mason shows a man who stands on the precipice, if he so chooses, of an integrated sense of contemporary African Americans.

In 1985, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison engaged in a conversation published in *Southern Review*, in which Morrison declares that "freedom is choosing your responsibility. It's not having no responsibilities; it's choosing the ones you want" (Naylor and Morrison 573). Though at that point in their conversation the women were discussing the different avenues that were opening to women, Morrison's assertion has greater implications. *Song of Solomon* and *Linden Hills* leave readers with choices about what responsibilities they would like to assume. Clearly the fact that both texts utilize African and African American cultural traditions means that these authors consider it their responsibility to respect those traditions. It is also clear that they do not consider those traditions antithetical to the ascendency of the African American middle class. Though choices exist, America's racial history means that the unwillingness to accept some responsibilities has reverberations for entire communities. Therefore, I assert that both Morrison and Naylor insist that the responsibility of the contemporary African American middle class and the black majority is to " negotiate[e] one's national past, one's cultural past,

one's personal past, and one's racial past" with contemporary engagement with the socioeconomic realities of America (Morrison, "Loose" 164).

However, Naylor and Morrison refrain from defining explicitly what the positive result of these negotiations will look like. They intentionally leave their readers hanging at the end of their texts. Barbra Christian asserts that "what [Willie] and others like him can do to empower their communities is not solved for us . . . For Naylor does not so much give us solutions as she uses her knowledge of Afro-American women's literature to show how complex the condition of powerless groups is" (119). Similarly, "[t]he end of *Song of Solomon* appears to be incongruent because it is compounded by 'gaps' or 'indeterminacies' created by our uncertainty about whether Milkman dies and what meaning can be assigned to his life or the manner of his departure from it" (Bryant 102). Instead of clear-cut answers, we are left with Willie, who is caught between the harshness of his poverty and the Porter-Corinthians union, of which the new dynamics are never presented. However, it is clear that their challenge is to reconcile the existence of cultural trauma and valuable African American culture with a desire for upward mobility, even as racial stigma looms. Though the challenge that these texts extend is great and the shape of the resolution unknown, the consequences for failure to accept this responsibility are dire.

CHAPTER FIVE
Validating the Myth or Simplifying Reality: Racism and Postracialism in *Erasure* and *Rebel Yell*

> There is the assumption of a kind of sense of community that sometimes on the one hand inspires us, but on the other hand, I think in certain kinds of ways, limits us because we can't acknowledge certain things. We can't acknowledge in mixed-racial circumstances that sometimes some black people get on our nerves. That sometimes some black people acting in certain kinds of ways that we understand, perhaps that sociologists are able to explain, that novelist are able to narrativise in a kind of way that they act in ways that we don't want to position ourselves in terms of, that we want to reject them. What do we do with that? How do we understand those impulses at a moment when we are also being told by people all over the place within black communities and outside of black communities that the impulse ought to be to embrace and to acknowledge and to love everyone?
> —Michael Awkward

During his October 5, 2009 discussion of his book *Burying Don Imus*, Michael Awkward delved into the tensions that pervade the African American community in terms of the images that segments of that population feel are appropriate. The often unarticulated anxiety that surrounds African American self-critique in an America where Africanism abounds has at its core the intraracial class difference that has been central to my project. In the face of cultural stigma that has been embedded into visible black skin, the impulse to foster collectivity, as either a social support system or as a member of alterative aesthetic values is normal. However, this impulse could also squelch all manifestations of individuality and deny the heterogeneity of the African American community. Therefore the idea of a homogenous community is fractured by difference in ways that make African American identity complicated. As my literary analysis

shows, there is individuality within both the black majority and the middle class, which have left characters ostracized and alienated. Awkward raises the provocative question: "What do you do with those acknowledgments that there is a kind of self-difference within the context of the race" without being subjected to claims of cultural perfidy, being accused of "pseudo-primitiv[ism]," or falling prey to Africanism (Awkward; Locke 10) ? These questions are not easily answered, but the psychological turmoil from which they arise makes it clear that any real progressive African Americanism must include a negotiation between individuality and collectivity.

Progressive African Americanism, as I define it, insists that all African Americans with visible African ancestry recognize that America's traumatic history has forever imparted to them a racial stigma that is attached to skin color and tinges conceptions of African American intellectual, moral, and cultural capacity. This collective cultural trauma creates an intractable relationship between African Americans and larger America that obscures the significance of socioeconomic difference. Along with the acknowledgment of cultural trauma, progressive African Americanism requires a degree of African American introspection that simultaneously resists pronouncements of black authenticity and accepts the validity of African American cultures. I grant that there has been a proliferation of "cultural mulattos" in both the African American middle-class and black majority whose lives serve as testaments to the importance of all three ancestral parents from whom African Americans have evolved (Ellis 235). This phenomenon, as well as social and economic progress, reinforces the notion that there is no one African American culture or authentic African American identity, but these changes are underscored by the reality that elements of African American culture that are not identified as emerging exclusively from the European American ancestral parent remain stigmatized. The

interplay between the absence of authenticity and the continuing significance of Africanism means that progressive African Americanism requires that within the collective space that has been created by racial stigma—and refashioned by many African Americans into rich cultural recuperative enclaves—there is room for a degree of individuality that accepts different African American cultural experiences.

Though in Chapter Four I argued that Morrison and Naylor posit incomplete visions of the integration of social and economic progress, acknowledgment of Africanism, and respect for African American cultures, their narratives also insist on the necessity of a progressive African Americanism. In this Chapter, I will explore how Percival Everett's *Erasure* and Alice Randall's *Rebel Yell* reflect the continuing literary shift toward progressive African Americanism and illustrate contemporary challenges that impact this shift. These two novels, published in 2001 and 2008 respectively, show members of the middle class who are not conflicted about their middle class position and who recognize the continued impact of Africanism. However, these protagonists struggle to reconcile their own sense of individuality with the collectivism that anti-Africanism requires. Everett's protagonist Monk Ellison, as a product of the African American upper middle class, insists upon the subjectivity of the middle-class position. As an individualist, he struggles with his ambivalent relationship with the black majority and African American collectivity and America's tendency to construct limiting Africanist notions of black authenticity. Randall constructs her narrative around the dynamic relationship of Abel and his ex-wife Hope. Abel chooses to embrace whiteness as a strategy to insulate himself from the impact of Africanism; he chooses a degree of individuality that destroys his personal relationships. Hope, on the other hand, attains both a sense of individuality and collectivity that

escapes her former husband. Both Monk and Abel embrace incarnations of postracialism that propose the fallacy that racial stigma is escapable. Postracialism, as it functions in these texts, requires an interesting intellectual schism between acknowledging that cultural trauma and racial stigma exists and denying the real impact of that trauma in the lives of the male protagonists. To ignore the way that racial identities contextualize and inform all African American experiences allows Africanism to continue, unchallenged. Furthermore, postracialism may also contribute to the perpetuation of Africanism, as whiteness becomes the cultural default and implicitly confirms the inferiority of minority cultures. Thus, these two novels use Africanism to deconstruct the idea of postracial America, and they demonstrate positive steps toward progressive African Americanism

Effacing Self in *Erasure*

Erasure examines the complicated interworkings of identity politics, Africanism, individualism, and community ethos all with a satiric candor that lays bare the state of race as political and cultural categories that impact interracial and intraracial relations in twenty-first century America. Of race, Everett notes, "I, with every anthropologist in the world since the beginning of the twentieth century, dismissed race as a category, it is a bogus yet r*eal* category that's perpetuated by the culture. By everyone in the culture, and I'd be stupid to ignore that" ("Uncategorizable 315).The idea of race being both "bogus" and "real" reflects not only the absurdity of racial categorization but also the power of cultural constructs that have turned fictionalized biological difference into clear material and psychological obstacles that impact how we see each other. Michael Omi and Howard Winant echo Everett's sentiments,

contending, "The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. . . . *race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*" (55). However despite the instability of race as a signifier, black bodies signify Africanist meanings that are stable in that they deny self-definition.

As a middle-class African American, visual artist, novelist, teacher, and equestrian, Everett illustrates the limits of Africanist constructed identity. Rejecting the claims of racial authenticity, *Erasure* and its author seem to posit a reflective individuality as enviable and necessary for psychological wholeness or coherence. Everett insists in an interview that he "can't represent African-Americans. No one can" and that he "doe[sn't] pretend to represent anyone but [him]self" (Everett, "Uncategorizable" 303). Despite this seeming privileging of individualism, Everett, in agreement with Du Bois's position in "Criteria of Negro Art," also recognizes the political nature of all African American art. He contends that "[w]riting is by its very nature subversive. As a disenfranchised people one of the legacies is that the subversion [*sic*] [of] our writing is political. Even when our work seeks to be something else, it is a reaction to the position in which we and our works have been placed" (Everett, "Signing" 11). Furthermore, this position also reflects his feeling of responsibility to an African American community. He declares, "Writing is not just the putting of words on paper, but also the getting of the works to a community. A community, not a public. The public is the nameless, sexless, raceless horde that the media tells us has a need to know" (Everett, "Signing" 11). Though the anonymous "horde" that is the public consumes, constructs, and perpetuates images that categorize and/or stigmatize groups or individuals that come under its scrutiny, Everett implies

that the public construction of identity should not be the main frame of reference of those

scrutinized. Here, Everett insists on a subjectivity that depends collectively on race, gender, and

selected identities, emphasizing the convergence of different elements of identification.

Moreover, his distinction between the public and a community suggests his belief that a

collectivity that serves to recognize and decry Africanism and that is subordinate to

individualism is important in the Africanist American context. Therefore, in his struggle to

reconcile his investment in postracial individualism with the imperative of collectivity that, I

would argue, blackness necessitates, Everett's protagonist is confronted by his unsuccessful

attempt to escape racial stigma by using individualism to disassociate himself from the reality of

race.

As a character who embodies elements of progressive African Americanism, Monk

examines and recognizes the intrusive presence of Africanism. Monk's publishing career and the

publication of Juanita Mae Jenkins's novel *We Lives in Da Ghetto* reveal the extent of

Africanism. Until he pens what he intends to be a satirical portrait of street fiction, *My Pafology,*

his only commercially successful novel, *My Second Failure,* is ashamedly mired in the discourse

of racial identities, while his works that refuse to treat racial identity are received less

enthusiastically. The culture of Africanism attempts to colonize him both psychologically as

well as artistically. Though "the only thing ostensibly African American [about his novels] was

[his] jacket photograph," both the publishing industry and American society as a whole seem to

resist his demand to be considered in a broader context (Everett, *Erasure* 28). His insistence on

creating artistic productions that do not directly engage with racial discourses is less marketable

and, both white society and black society tend to argue, less real. Therefore, the praise of Juanita

Mae Jenkins's novel as a text that enables its readers to "hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America" is a "real slap in the face. It was like strolling through an antique mall feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars" (Everett, *Erasure* 39, 29). As Howard Winant contends, "a key problem of racism, today as in the past, is its denial, or flattening, of difference within the categories it represents, in essentialist fashion. Members of racially defined subordinate groups have for a long time faced practices of exclusion, discrimination, and even of outright extermination" (22). The Africanism that is at play here fetisizhes a blackness different from the norms of mainstream white America. The sense of African American cultural and intellectual inferiority remains present, except that in this liberal version of Africanism, African Americans are not reviled; they are pitied, treated like social wards who have been victimized by the racism of the past and are unable to emerge psychologically unscathed.

Whites can read novels like Jenkins's and be sympathetic and voyeuristic, while not questioning the mutability of racial identity or their own cultural hierarchies. Everett declares that "[b]eing black in America, you're exotic in certain places and certain times" (Everett, Uncategorizable 298). Whites' willingness to embrace the images that Jenkins proposes is due to the ability of those images to be "easily commodifed," while they reject images of the middle class because "what's exotic about" a group who, absent black skin, could be them (Everett, Uncategorizable 299)? I am not suggesting that all whites engage in such facile readings of African American texts or that whites cannot interact with such texts outside of the Africanist context. However, because they are not subject to Africanism, their responses will be different.

I think the more important point for my discussion of progressive African Americanism is how African American audiences respond to such texts. Everett reveals that some middle-class African Americans engage in similar fetishization of the black majority. Therefore, the approbation of Jenkins and her novel reveals that segments of both black and white societies fail to accept his deviation from pattern.

The disparate reception of his and Jenkins's work solidifies for Monk the impact of Africanism. When contemplating his visceral reaction to Jenkins's novel, he "imagined [that his rejection of her rather than other stereotypical portrayals of racial identity] was because Tom Clancy was not trying to sell his book to [him] by suggesting that the crew of his high-tech submarine was a representation of his race (*however fitting a metaphor*). Nor was his publisher marketing it that way. If you didn't like Clancy's white people, you could go out and read about some others" (Everett, *Erasure* 214). His concern is a political one. Whether or not Jenkins intends for her work to fortify conceptions of black poverty, violence, and pathology as the furnace from which authentically black bodies spring, it does. Therefore, it offends Monk because the cultural marketplace allows a very limited space to African Americans and those spaces are dominated by stereotypical images; images like his own that do not conform to Africanist patterns are not only cast aside, but stripped of their blackness. In his essay "Signing to the Blind," Everett maintains that African American authors "are at the economic mercy of a market which seeks to affirm its beliefs about African-Americans. An army of liberal book-readers marched into stores and feeds on fad and trend and reads, but not too deeply, and so does to our work what the movies seek to do" (Everett, Signing" 10). Jenkins's book allows whites to read about the exotic ghetto experience, an experience that Everett suggests is just as much a

matter of imagination as reality. His position as an author reminds him that he will never be able to fully subordinate race as the most prominent construct from which he will be judged; society would never see him as an individual. Moreover, Everett's criticism that images of blackness are suppressed within the market suggests not that he "chooses in *Erasure* to erase or nullify his African American identity in his transgressive quest for freedom and wholeness as an artist," as Bernard Bell suggests, but that he is not so much nullifying his racial identity as insisting that the heterogeneity of African American cultures ("Rev" 475). Monk acknowledges that society wants to confine him to defined racial constructs. Because the evidence of Africanism is constantly visible, he too is invested in African American representation both in the publishing industry and beyond.

In addition to Monk's experiences with Africanism in the publishing world, he also confronts vestiges of Africanism that might exist within himself. Unlike Max Riddick, Monk does not think of the black majority as the locus of some ideal of blackness or freedom that he wants to attain. Moreover, he is also unlike Milkman Dead or Lester Tilson, who linger on the periphery of the black majority seeking refuge from their conflicted middle-class existence. Though there are times when he wishes he could "talk the talk" or be less awkward in social situations that require mastery of African American cultural norms that he is not adequately able to perform, he does not spend much time in his adult life lamenting his place in the middle class (Everett, *Erasure* 166). What is significant about Monk and what makes Everett's characterization of him so powerful is both his comfort in his middle-class position and his ability to recognize and confront Africanism as it seeps into his consciousness. Monk's discussion of his mother reveals the presence of internalized Africanism below the surface of the

Ellison household. His mother is a former member of the black majority whose education and marriage into an upper middle-class family make her "apologetic about her family" (Everett, *Erasure* 152). Contemplating his mother, Monk recalls a faint fear of inferiority that emanated from her. His mother's class ascendency seems to confirm to her that her familial origins are somehow inadequate. Everett only provides a brief glimpse of this during Lorraine's wedding. In the midst of her trusted maid's wedding celebration, Mrs. Ellison dismisses the groom's family as "thugs" and accuses Lorraine of being "only after money" and a "strumpet" (Ellison, *Erasure* 197, 196). Here she articulates the Africanist associations of African Americans with questionable morality, promiscuity, and criminality. Her class status and proximity to white American norms allow her to subject the black majority to Africanism. This event, though a result of an Alzheimer's episode, reveals that just below the surface Africanism lurks in intraracial class relationships.

It would stand to reason that as a child reared in class consciousness, Monk would retain evidence of it. However, he confronts it whenever it comes to his attention. Of his mother's family, he notes when he was a child,"[t]hey frightened me. Big-seeming people with big smells and big laughs. Had I known more of life then, I would have liked them, found them thriving and interesting, but as it was, I found them only startlingly different" (Everett, *Erasure* 151). While he recalls that their difference from him was initially disorienting, he does not dismiss them on class lines. In fact, it is their difference that makes them interesting to him. Monk's willingness to confront his own Africanist thinking is most evident in his exchange with one of his sister's clients. Sitting in a waiting room waiting on his sister, he has a conversation with a young African American woman with elaborately painted fingernails and a runny-nosed child

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who can also speak fluently about Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jean Toomer's *Cane.* Of this exchange he recalls, "I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one" (Everett, *Erasure* 21). According to Africanist images of the black majority, this young woman's culture—which is symbolized by her nails—and poverty should preclude intellectual exchanges like the one that they share.

I also contend that Everett is continuing his questioning of such assumptions during Monk's brief encounter with his half-sister. This sister was raised by her white mother. Gretchen is a foil to the woman with the blue fingernails. She lives in poverty, apparently has entered into a cycle of young, possibly unmarried, motherhood —she is already a grandmother in her mid-forties—and she expresses bitterness at her lot; yet, she does so in whiteface. All of these behaviors can be linked to criticism of the black majority. Like the white performers who would cosmetically darken their faces and parody stereotypical blackness, Gretchen looks white but is in some ways an ironic inversion of stereotypical versions of the black majority. However, racial categorization in Gretchen's case would fail because her African American ancestry is at best ambiguous and perhaps, for most people, invisible. The comparison of these two women serves to echo Monk's question to his agent: "[how] do they even know that I am black" (Everett, *Erasure* 43). Blackness, according to society, can be determined through skin color, cultural values and norms, intellectual capacity, and morality, among other things. Everett and his protagonist seem to insist that those distinctions are fluid, misleading, and unreliable indicators of identity.

The novel *My Pafology* is a continuation of Monk's critique of Africanism, as his example of metafiction exposes the latent Africanism in earlier and contemporary African American literature that have come before. He even changes the name of his novel to *Fuck,* allowing his use of flagrant profanity to mirror the exaggerated plots of protest fiction. Monk's intense reaction to the reception of Juanita Mae Jenkins's work and the subsequent creation of Van Go Jenkins, his fictional protagonist, hinges on the interpretation both of realist characterization and the stock portrayal of African American characters. Upon seeing Jenkins on television, he notes:

> The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet, fahvre*! And I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that.
>
> (Everett, *Erasure* 61-62)

The fact that he equates *Native Son* and *The Color Purple*, two award-winning examples of African American fiction with *Amos and Andy*, whose comedic portrayals of African Americans have been regarded by many as minstrelsy, illustrates the power of perception. The refrain that none of his family sounds like that, which is echoed when he asks his love interest Marilyn "have [you] ever known anybody who talks like that book" is ironic, because it is very likely that he does not intimately know anyone from the black majority (Everett, *Erasure* 188). However, his brief interaction with the young woman in the clinic reveals that there is both depth and

variety within the black majority that are frequently ignored by America. Moreover, the dissonance between the language and characterization and his own reality leads him to question the validity of his African American experiences. If the characters that Jenkins presents are authentically black, then he and everyone he knows are either not black or not black enough. Furthermore, because less attention is paid to the Monk Ellisons in the American media, it is easy for society to forget that they do exist.

Through *My Pafology*, Everett seems to be commenting on the validity of the African American protest novel as a tool—as represented by, for instance, *Native Son*— to address Africanism. Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas focuses on the psychological freedom of violently transgressing and challenging a society that allows oppression. In "How BIGGER" was Born," Wright explains, "I had also to show what oppression had done to Bigger's relationship with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against oppression" (xxvi). Van Go Jenkins's journey is an updated version of Bigger's transplanted into a twenty-first century context. Like Bigger, he defines his masculinity though physical prowess, but in a gesture to the contemporary issue of unwed parents and absentee fathers, he also defines himself through procreation. Though through a Darwinian lens Van Go's four children ensure that parts of him survive into the future, the state in which they survive is tenuous. If he is their model, his progeny lacks the ability to adapt and change and they are subject to endemic violence that could at anytime result in the end of his line. Van Go also dreams of robbing a neighboring store, and the climax of the story occurs when he commits a crime—though it is more intentional than Bigger's accidental killing

of Mary—against a wealthy family.   Though Wright intended his novel to "be so hard and so deep that [white readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears," Everett asserts through his satire that Wright contributes to the treatment of the black majority as exotic (Wright, "How Bigger" xxvii). Everett's exaggeration of the unique names found in the black majority (Van Go's children are named after pharmaceuticals and the Rexall drugstore chain), the proliferation of illegitimacy, what critics claim is the culture of anti-intellectualism in the African American community, and the nihilism present in hip hop culture, suggest that it is these elements of the black majority that critics use to support Africanism, stripping away the variety that is within the community.

Less demanding or discriminating readers, who are not exposed to images like Monk's, take such images as the hallmarks of African American identity. Everett concurs with James Baldwin's criticism of Wright that

> Bigger's [and by extension Van Go's] tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it (Baldwin, "Everybody's" 22-23)

Monk's novel insists that the Africanism that undergirds such depictions does not totally excuse personal responsibility. It is true, as Glen Loury notes, that "[The black majority's] purported criminality, sexual profligacy, and intellectual inadequacy are the frequent objects of public

derision. . . . [but] [i]t should not require enormous powers of perceptions to see how this degradation relates to the shameful story of black-white race relations in this country" (Loury, "Legacy" 19). However, Everett seems also to suggest that the recognition of the continuing influence of Africanism should not necessitate ignoring the impact of destructive behavior, even if that behavior is itself connected to Africanism. Everett approaches this behavior when he presents the discussion between the two doctors who own Lisa's clinic. When one doctor argues that they help the community, the other responds, "What the hell does that mean? We hand out birth control pills and condoms to girls who won't use them. We treat people who act like we owe it to them. What are we doing? Being role models? These kids laugh at us" (Everett, *Erasure* 55). Everett rightly suggests that such protest literature not only ignores the middle class, but also presents present sensationalized images of the black majority. For all of the Bigger Thomases and Van Go Jenkinses who become monsters because of oppression, there are many more who do not, and their stories are infrequently told.

My Pafology is also intended to critique the embrace of such literary portrayals by members of the African American middle class. Monk is so astonished by middle-class interest in Juanita Mae Jenkins's novel that he interrupts his sexual encounter with Marylyn Tilman, his neighbor during his vacation, in order to question her tastes in the novel. This criticism is even more evident in his text. In *My Pafology*, the white Daltons, who offer Bigger Thomas a job as a chauffeur in Wright's text, become African American. Mary Dalton becomes Penelope Dalton. Penelope forces Van Go into the same voyeuristic tour of his black majority life that Mary dmands; they drive through his neighborhood and eat at a local restaurant. Though Kimberly Eaton contends that Monk's treatment of Penelope "reveals a disassociation with race that he

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himself feels," I argue that he is critical of the middle-class's complicity with Africanism (227). By changing the race of these characters, he indicts the middle-class's Africanist treatment of the black majority, which is ironic, as they are also subject to Africanism. Penelope's boyfriend is steeped in class and racial serotypes. He is surprised that the homes in Van Go's neighborhood have yards and mockingly intimates that Van Go could get a scholarship if he could run or play basketball, invoking the stereotype that African Americans are less intellectual and more physical. Penelope's interest in him seems a mixture of excitement, paternalism, and dismissal. Van Go's economic impotence, accompanied by his dangerous physical prowess, makes him interesting to her. These characters are not at all treated favorably.

In his nonfiction, Everett asserts that "African-American readers as well . . . seek to fit our stories to an existent model. It is not seeking with 'white' eyes, it is seeking with 'American' eyes, with brainwashed, automatic, comfortable, and 'safe' perceptions of reality" (Everett, "Signing" 10). While I contend that Americanness has historically meant whiteness, Everett's separation of the two signifies the way that prescriptive images of people and by extension Africanist images have been normalized and become so accepted that the African American community employ them for interpretation.   Since he also claims that "Black people do not buy books," we can assume that his critique of African American literary consumption applies to the middle-class segment of the population (Everett, "Signing" 10).   These African Americans enjoy these novels because they confirm their difference. Everett suggests that when people from the middle class such as Marylyn approve of such images and accept them as some authentic portrayal of the black majority, they are not only validating a very limited and unrealistic view of the black majority, but also attempting to define themselves outside of that

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specific definition of authenticity. They, then, are different; it would be politically incorrect to say better, but the implication is clear. Therefore, Monk has Van Go rape Penelope; she does not suffer the accidental smothering of her white counterpart from Wright's text. Penelope's rape by this African American man reflects a circle of violence that African Americans perpetrate on themselves through their investment in Africanist images. This rape is symbolic of the psychic violence that is done to all African Americans when they accept images that insist that an overriding violent and destructive pathology plagues the African American community. Neither Everett nor I obscure the fact that pathology may exist within black majority communities; however, we are asserting that such pathology is not as pervasive as Stagg R. Leigh's text implies.

Monk's exploration of a collectivizing Africanism is paired with an abiding sense of himself as an individual.   Everett emphasizes the different ways in which Monk's individuality manifests itself throughout the novel.   Monk's individualism is first signaled by his name. Thelonious Monk was an innovative and nonconformist jazz musician and composer. Thelonious Monk's involvement with Jazz is interesting here because this musical art form though, a child of African American cultures, was also significantly influenced by Europe. Therefore, the musician's creative muses are varied, contributing to his individual and artistic uniqueness.   Monk's surname is reflective of Ralph Ellison, who was excoriated by black nationalists for his investment in individualism and universalism. In a 1955 interview, Ellison asserts, "All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance" ("Art"). While universalism would

hardly seem to be individualist, Ellison focuses on how each one of our particular circumstances produces difference with some degree of sameness that could help people better relate to each other.   In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison depicts an African American character's journey toward reconciling individualism with his own sense of social responsibility. What is significant here is that Monk is intended to represent an individualist who is aware of the continued racial stigma and the cultural trauma that ties him to others, even as he tries to escape it.

Furthermore, Monk possesses an awkwardness that makes interactions often uncomfortable, separating him from others. His position as favorite son in the Ellison household also confirms his uniqueness. His father tells him, "You're different . . . . You have a special mind" (Everett, *Erasure* 9). It is his ability to see both himself and others outside of social constructs that informs his idea of racial identity. Though I would argue that it is impossible to totally remove race as a contextual factor in all interactions, Monk's belief that he can do so enables him to be free—until Jenkins's novel makes him question himself—of African American constructions of authenticity and of the limiting influence of Africanist appropriation. Monk notes on the first two pages of the novel the social construction of race. He explains that, "the society in which I live tells me I am black" and that "Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom society calls white tell me the same thing" (Everett, *Erasure* 1, 2). His proclamations position those prescriptive images of blackness as external and not central to how he imagines himself. Monk catalogs the ways in which his existence contradicts stereotypical notions of what blackness is or should be. Therefore his inability to dance or play basketball and his love of Greek tragedies and Mahler seem both to contradict readymade black identity and to mark him as unfamiliar both to whites

and blacks who insist on singular cultural lenses of identification. However, his ability to look beyond the racial context becomes an issue when, in the name of individuality, he tries to downplay the significant impact that racial context has on his life.

Monk's struggle to assert his individuality is hampered by the collectivizing impact of race. On the one hand, Monk insists, "Meaning is internal, external, orbital, but still there is no such thing as propositional content. Language never really effaces its own presence, but creates the illusion that it does in cases where meaning presumes a first priority" (Everett, *Erasure* 44). This means that any context in which the black body is placed has racial meanings, including Africanist meanings that serve as referents. African Americans, therefore, cannot totally define themselves outside of race. However, Monk contradicts this by also maintaining, "I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. I don't believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that's just the way it is" (Everett, *Erasure* 2). Monk attempts to exist in a weird space where he acknowledges the potential dangers of race and Africanism while also claiming that it is possible for him to live without defining himself within the context of race. Everett makes the point that race is not all-encompassing for either his character or himself. Though he concedes the presence of racism, Everett maintains that "at the same time, when I wake up and I brush my teeth in the morning, my thought is not, 'Hey! I'm not white!' And I think that astounds a lot of white people. Race comes up sometimes. Sometimes it does not" (Everett, "Uncategorizable" 315). Both Monk and Everett lack interest in being "tragically colored," to use Hurston's term (827). However, Monk extrapolates

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Everett's point to extremes. Monk is conflicted by his racial identity. Race cannot be both a permanent contextual feature and an incidental irritant at the same time. Though color-blind and postracial ideology "ten[ds] to *reduce* race to a mere manifestation of other, supposed more fundamental social and political relationships such as ethnicity or class," Monk attempts to define a conflicted postracialim without identifying the "political relationship" to which Africanism can be ascribed (Omi and Winant 2). He casts racial identification as a discourse in which other people engage. His acknowledgement of the permanence of race as contextual factor and the pronouncement that he does not believe in race seem to imply that he alone can function outside of racial discourses, a proposition that is proven false by his reaction to Jenkins's novel.

The creation of Van Go Jenkins and his world precipitates a collision of Monk's postracial ideas with the reality of race in America. Though he fancies himself an individualist whose racial identity, except when emphasized by others, is only incidental, racial constructs are inescapable. The dynamic among Monk, Stagg R. Leigh, and Van Go Jenkins creates a conundrum in which he begins to negotiate his individualism with the collectivity that arises from Africanism. Stuart Hall argues that "[i]dentities are . . . constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same' . . . not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes' (Hall 4). Hall is essentially concurring with my claim that a degree of individualism can exist within the collective created by cultural trauma. Though there are as many different African American experiences as there are African

American people, skin color, nonetheless, remains a signifier of Africanist meanings that insist on a degree of sameness.

Stagg R. Leigh foregrounds the notions that identities shift and change in ways that reveal to individuals aspects of themselves that were previously unknown and that those shifts never change the importance of race as a signifier. He is named after the folkloric black badman who is known for his violence, excessive masculinity, and transgression of the norms of both black and white societies. Monk's version of Leigh is an example of fetishized blackness. He is an aloof, angry, antisocial, ex-convict who is tame enough to interact with and excite whites while maintaining his exotic and dangerous appeal. Leigh is stereotypical blackness personified. However, he becomes more than a performance. When Monk speaks to the publisher, it is clear that he is performing the character Stagg R. Leigh through the use of the first person pronoun *I*. However, during his book reading later in the novel, Leigh is described in third person. Again, on his flight to New York, Monk's journal reads "Thelonious and Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat" (Everett, *Erasure* 237). Everett never delineates the difference between Thelonious and Monk, but the difference between Monk and Leigh are clear. Monk is the unassuming character who wants his mere presence to subvert racial paradigms. Monk is very aware of the increasing ability of Leigh to be fully embodied. He wonders, "Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life? . . .Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing and so, it meant everything" (Everett, *Erasure* 248). His wish to destroy

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Leigh is also ironic, because there seems to be some slippage between these two identities. To say that his questions mean nothing is commentary on the fact that his struggle to delineate these two parts of himself has effectively been rendered impossible by American society because blackness has always been the same; all black bodies share racial stigma. He is both Monk and Stagg. His questioning of himself in these ways means everything because he is contemplating both destroying and coming to terms with parts of himself that unapologetically function within racial constructs; his collapsing of the two parts of himself would mean the destruction of his postracial ideal.

Though Leigh is initially a fiction, at the end of the novel, in the midst of his hallucinations, Monk sees Leigh's face in a mirror. This seems to suggest that Leigh is not simply a performed identity but a part of Monk that is suppressed. Stagg is bolder than him. Though Monk wants to be beyond social constructions and unrestrained by the pronouncements of society, he becomes increasingly self-conscious, having a burning desire to convince society of its folly. Stagg's behavior, on the other hand, does ignore society despite his being a social construction himself. Simultaneously, Leigh is an approximation of an Africanist image and free from anxiety about the racist implications of his image. While Monk writes a novel, rails against Africanist constructions to fellow scholars, and dissolves into a depression all out of a concern for how people see him, Stagg boldly renames his novel *Fuck* without psychological or material repercussions. The word *fuck* connotes black pathology in the context of the novel, but the meaning is far from simple. The term is not a cultural marker specific to the vocabulary of the black majority, which obscures the meaning in the context of Everett's work. It also thwarts definition. It is a verb that means sexual intercourse, which is appropriate for Van Go's interest

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in procreation, a verb that signifies the iniquitous handling of a person or thing—which could be in reference to Van Go's life, the publishing industry, or the plight of African Americans in general— and a angry interjection, which in itself is totally subjective. Therefore, it is not clear what he means by the title or to whom he is referring in it. He does not feel the need to explain it. Everett never makes it clear when the actual cleavage between the two men –Stagg and Monk—begins; he does make it clear that it is not a clean break.

The manifestation of Leigh is an affront to Monk's political sensibilities. He is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Leigh because he covets Leigh's attitude toward the world and because he is ashamed of the image that Leigh presents. Thus, Monk correctly concludes that he could not be a "Rinehart—the character from *Invisible Man* who is at once a minister, numbers runner, and womanizer. Though we only see Rinehart in drag, as the unnamed protagonist inadvertently assumes his identity as he is fleeing antagonists, we are not made aware of any overarching philosophical ideas that guide his multiple identities. According to the protagonist's epilogue in *Invisible Man*, Rinehart's lack of identity attachment is "chaos" (Ellison, *Invisible* 576). He also laments the "increasing passion to make men conform to pattern" and maintains that "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 576-577). Monk's rejection of Rinehart illustrates his growing awareness of the possibility of difference within racial identification and how his attempt to run from it leads to psychological and professional turmoil. Moreover, Everett's rendering of Monk's addled self-reflection and commentary on black and white society seemingly accepts the Invisible Man's proclamation that we should live up to the ideal of America, "to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed"

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(Ellison, *Invisible Man* 574). In absence of the elevation of the true American ideal, Ralph

Ellison suggests, the desire for conformity will continue to redefine Americanness. While

Ellison's criticism of conformity and embrace of difference are consonant with my discussion of

progressive African Americanism, his reverence for ideals that have been systematically

designed in a system that has attempted to erase the presence of agency of black bodies seems

idealistic and counterproductive, especially as Africanism abounds. Ellison and Everett, in his

presentation of Monk's self-examination, seem to be championing a postracial position that

privileges the ideal over reality, a proposition which Everett's own characterization of

Africanism and criticism of the publishing industry disprove. The call for conformity does

contribute to Africanism, so too does ignoring the Africanism that already exists.

Margaret Russett rightly notes that "The last third of *Erasure* is concerned with how

Monk reconciles his faith in art with his fame as a sell-out, and how his personality disintegrates

under the pressure of *performing* the black stereotype he intended to satirize" (359). However, I

would add that what the pressure of performance reveals is his own complicity in the system that

he condemns. When Monk accepts the first portion of the rather large check for *My Pafology*, he

fears that he has "misunderstood [his] experiment all along" and he considers himself a "sell-

out," all because he feels that not only has his satiric condemnation missed its mark, but also he

has been handsomely rewarded for it (Everett, *Erasure* 156; 160). He realizes that his novel's

embrace by both the public and publishing world means that he is simply reinforcing Africanist

stereotypes to certain groups. Because meaning is both internal and external, he, like everyone

else, will never be able to control subjective Africanist responses. He realizes that just like

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Baker's discussion of badness, to which I have alluded throughout this work, acts of resistance, which is the capacity in which *My Pafology* functions, are easily misrecognized.

However, not long after these reflections, he includes the fictional sketch "Àppropos de bottes" in which a character is allowed to be on the television game show *Virtute et Armis*. The game pits African American contestants against white contests, usually resulting in the victory of the white contestants. What is significant here is that that Monk's character, in this racially charged situation, manipulates constructs of black identity. As he is filling out forms, he chooses the name "Tom," which is generic enough to symbolize the lack of identity. It could also relate to the idea of "Uncle Toms," the derogatory names given to African Americans who transgress certain African American cultural norms. Also, he chooses the last name "Wahzetepe" instead of Himes because he "was afraid he would get into trouble" (Everett, *Erasure* 169). Though Wahzetepe is a Native American name, he proclaims that he will claim it as African if asked. The assumption is that people who are interested in prescribing identity do not know the difference; therefore, the identities that they prescribe are a fiction. Also, the character is in blackface of sorts; a great deal of makeup is used because he "ain't quite dark enough" for television (Everett, *Erasure* 173). The producer, whose last name happens to be Blanc, wants to impose an image on this character that his audience would expect and with which they can be satisfied. The last name Himes is a reference to novelist Chester Himes, and he is dangerous because he was vocal about Africanism. Monk's discourse with Himes continues with his portrait of Bob Jones, Himes's character from *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Jones attempts to confront racial stigma and prescriptive identity, and he is rewarded with conscription into the army. His fate is symbolized by his failure on the show and subsequent job as janitor at station.

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"Tom" goes on to win the game show, despite disappointment of the producer, host and audience.   This story is significant because it is juxtaposed with Monk's assumption of Stagg R. Leigh's identity for the first time in his phone conversation with his publisher. While the novel's favorable reception makes Monk doubt his course, the invention of Leigh makes him think, if only briefly, that he could make his point. Tom's experiences—manipulating the socially constructed identities in order to reflect the inaccuracy of those identities back onto the community that prescribed them—is symbolic of Leigh's role. However, this would all involve revealing Leigh as a fiction, and that becomes difficult as he becomes less of one.

When examining his work further, Monk discovers that his problem is not with the publishers and the people who fail to see him as an individual. As he explains it, "[he] was a victim of racism by virtue of [his] failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have [his] art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression" (Everett, *Erasure* 212). The manifestation of Leigh illustrates to him that while his criticism of the works of Juanita Mae Jenkins might be valid, he is not articulating it from a valid position. While such works might perpetuate racist images, those authors are not afraid to express their versions of black identity.   He constructs an "imaginary" line between himself and other African American writers that allows him to protest on political grounds Africanism and limits African American images, while claiming that his own art should not be judged through the same lens. When the novel begins, implicitly asserts that he wants to be known as a writer, not an African American writer. He realizes that while he has been railing against limited black images, he has contributed to that by claiming that he does not believe in race. As Du Bois right maintains, all art is propaganda and all art is subjective; this means that his

Greek tragedies make a statement about African American identity. In his efforts to condemn Jenkins and her ilk, he "had managed to take [him]self, then disintegrate [him]self, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere (Everett, *Erasure* 257). *My Pafology* castrates Monk. He declares, "I caught myself standing naked in front of the mirror and discovered that I had nothing to hide and that lack was exactly what forced me to turn away" (Everett, *Erasure* 257). By claiming that he was not an African American artist, he castrates himself and he renders himself "invisible" because the phenomenal success means that his satiric portrait will always be the image to which he and his work is compared (Everett, *Erasure* 219).

White Outs and Dead Ends: Postracialism in *Rebel Yell*

Like Percival Everett, Alice Randall seeks to explore how recognition of Africanism can coincide with the renunciation of racial constructs for African Americans in the twenty-first century. In *Rebel Yell*, Randall's two protagonists reflect the complexity of contemporary middle-class African America. The trials, tribulations, and choices of Abel and Hope stress the tension between socioeconomic progress and Africanism. In this novel, these protagonists choose and reject subject positions that relate both to class and race in ways that raise questions about the continued influence of Africanism and the importance of both individualism and collectivity. Randall's text extends from the dangerous racial realities of the Civil Rights Movement to the rise of a shadowy African American politician who is a thinly disguised portrait of Barack Obama. Within this context, Randall treats Abel and Hope comparatively in order to explore the misapplication of color-blind and postracial rhetoric, while also asserting a

more positive version of postracialism that is only possible in our contemporary moment. Though I agree that Abel's concept of postracialism is a reductive surrender to the Africanism that he abhors, I contend that the portrait of postracialism that Randall posits with Hope and the invocation of an Obamaesque vision of America's postracial future fall short.

As a child of the Civil Rights Era, Abel Jones III is born into an African American community that watches him expectantly. Big Abel's work as a civil rights attorney contributes to the hope that his son will be part of a generation of African Americans who are able to live fully the promise of America. At his birth, men give bonds, proudly proclaiming "[h]e is a citizen from whom I can prepare a future" (Randall, *Rebel* 16). This community, bonded both by culture and by the destructive presence of Africanism, expects this child not only to grow up to represent that community, but to continue the fight, if needed, against racial stigma. However, "The old black men who would stand at his grave with their ladies in the white cemetery . . . would cry almost as much because they were being called to stand in a white cemetery as because he was dead. . . . And they would know Abel had made the cry. They would know payback when they saw it" (Randall, *Rebel* 18). The Africanism against which this nurturing community coalesces is also the reason that Abel fails this community.

Abel grows up in a home that functions within two models of debilitating fear. His mother, "Antoinette[,] wished she had married a quiet man, an appeasing man, a man strong enough to play low, to play Tom, if that let the kids live" (Randall, *Rebel* 5). She resents Big Abel for his political agitation, associating his civil rights activities with a masculinist mandate that endangered African American lives. More importantly, Antoinette and her community of women see the movement as endangering the lives of African American children, whom the civil

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rights establishment encouraged to participate in protests. Randall reimagines the aftermath of

the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, narrativizing the

grief of Alpha Robertson who refused to participate in the joint funeral, presided over by Martin

Luther King, Jr., of the victims.   Her daughter Carole was the only victim to be buried privately.

The fictional Alpha tells young Abel "Don't you forget that these men, these black men, and

these big white Birmingham mules, these men. They used you children to fight the war. Negro

men were tired of what we all had to suffer and they sent our babies to die" (Randall, *Rebel* 10).

Randall offers an interesting perspective on the Civil Rights Movement. While there were

women who were very active in the movement, Alpha's accusation has some validity, as the

strategist and visible leaders of the movement were decidedly male. Both Alpha and Antoinette

illustrate the terror that was palpable as death and violence loomed during this time period.

Antoinette's unwillingness to confront terror is also evident in her failure to protect her son from

the terror that his father's fear visits upon him. Despite Big Abel's activism, he is afraid of the

danger of racial violence. Though bravado effectively masks his fear, he feels emasculated by

the power of white society. Abel uses harsh physical discipline because he "wanted his son to

grow immune to fear. He didn't want his son to feel when fully grown, what he was feeling, full

grown, too scared. He would teach his son to put fear behind him" (Randall, *Rebel* 3). Unlike

his wife, who is scared into acquiescing to Africanism, Big Abel's fear does not keep him from

activism. However, it does keep him from nurturing his son. Abel grows up just as terrified of

his father as he is of the dangerous racial climate of 1960s America.   In the Jones home, Randall

creates an environment of conflicting racial ideologies that leaves Abel ill-equipped to confront

Africanism.

The effect of the environment of fear that Big Abel and Antoinette create is that Abel never feels safe either within his home or outside of it. He grows to associate blackness with danger. Big Abel's attempt to make his son fear nothing compounds the cultural trauma that is inherent for all people of African descent. Big Abel's child rearing methods leave Abel unable to reconcile the African American community with physical and psychological safety. As a child participating in demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, he muses about the psychological and physical safety of whites, "realiz[ing], for the very first time, there were people who lived in safe places. He wanted to live in one too" (Randa, *Rebel Yell* 115). Randall presents Big Abel and Abel as "contagious to each other" (Randall, *Rebel* 361). Abel reflects his and his father's shame in Big Abel's inability to protect him. During his thirteenth birthday party, a cross burning in his yard, his subsequent embarrassment in front of his white friend, and the juxtaposition of the males in his community with the whites who arrive on the scene help to affirm his suspicion that "daddy wasn't powerful" (Randall, *Rebel* 298). To young Abel, "The white policemen looked so calm and unperturbed, so uninvolved yet powerful, that they appeared to Abel to be stronger than all of the men running around angry and agitated. Mistaking their disinterest for courage, he ran to stand in the sheltering space he imagined between their two bodies" (Randall, *Rebel* 297). Big Abel is a contagion because in his attempt to compensate for his inability to protect his son physically, he fails to protect him psychologically. His efforts to foster an African American identity that align the civil rights crusade with masculinity and fear with absolute impotence only reinforce the idea that blackness is a position of determined victimization. Thus, during their emotional meeting after Abel soils his pants at the sight of the cross and after Big Abel's

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acknowledgment that he and his son are "broken," there remains only a breach between father and son that is never healed (Randall, *Rebel* 297).

Because of Abel's relationship with his father, he comes to see whiteness as a tool to banish fear and weakness. James Baldwin, in his 1984 essay "On Being White . . . . and Other Lies" posits whiteness as "absolutely, a moral choice" (Baldwin, 137). Though his proclamation that "there are no white people" perhaps has more to do with the cultural and ethnic erasures that are necessitated by assimilation rather than the fact that biological racial difference is a fallacy, his condemnation of the implications of compulsory assimilation for and repudiation of cultural norms for minorities raise interesting questions about the relationship between whiteness, Americanness, and Africanism. Whiteness, Baldwin insists, "took generations, and a vast amount of coercion" and depends upon the subjugation of all people who are unfortunate enough to be nonwhite (Baldwin, "On Being" 136). I contend that Baldwin is establishing whiteness as a power position that has come to be associated with skin color and culture. People born with visibly white skin may choose whether or not they want to exercise the power of whiteness. Others whose physical whiteness is questionable may attempt to appropriate this power as well, though certainly for African Americans Africanism ensures that they will never be wholly successful. While such a position may seemingly establish nonwhitenness as a default position that is less morally problematic, it is still a position that leaves nonwhites vulnerable to the power of whites who are central to the American power structure. Unless they are able to define themselves outside of whiteness, insisting on the validity of their own cultural norms, as my call for progressive African Americanism does, they are indeed unfortunate. The educational, social, and economic vulnerability of nonwhites complicate such redefinition.

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Whiteness remains a position to be coveted, as it allows greater opportunity for socioeconomic security. Though Abel will never be physically white, he embraces the cultural norms of white society. Therefore, I argue that Abel emerges from his childhood unsatisfied with his nonwhite status, as it leaves him vulnerable to Africanism. Seeking the safety of whiteness, he consciously chooses to become white. This choice is a moral choice that, though not in the service of Africanism, responds to it.

Though his reflections in the moments leading to his death remind him of the inescapability of racial stigma, he initially muses that he "was dying white. It was a triumph" (Randall, *Rebel* 27). Whiteness is triumphant because it liberates his consciousness from the fear that he experiences as a child. He eschews middle-class African American cultural identity and chooses to identify with whiteness, as it affords him power. He revels in the fallacy that he can *choose* a racial identity, an act that is in itself powerful because whiteness, unlike blackness, offers a degree of freedom that is beneficial in both a national and international context. Therefore, he decides he is "over black people," not because he believes that the economically, politically, and socially constructed racial stigma is reflective of some innate inferiority or even valid cultural inferiority, but because the power of Africanism makes such a position less advantageous (Randall, *Rebel* 312). According to Abel's reasoning, African Americans will always be in a defensive posture. As Monk from *Erasure* laments, black subjectivity has been contested, while white is taken for granted. Whiteness is additive, while blackness is reductive.

Abel practices liberal post-racialism which function under two principles. According to Tim Wise,

The first is a presumption of racism's declining significance. . . .This argument

holds that much, perhaps even most of the inequality between whites and people

of color—especially blacks—in the United States, is no longer caused by racism

and race-based discrimination. Rather economic forces, and even ingrained

cultural factors within the African American community have overtaken the role

of racism in explaining the conditions of life faced by black and brown folks,

especially the urban poor (Wise 63-64).

Interestingly, Randall goes to great lengths to assert that Abel does internalize Africanism to the

degree that he denies the very real impact of it. This novel contains no cultural critique of the

black majority that relegates the harsh economic, educational, and social realities of the black

majority to the domain of pathology. Abel also understands the impact of Africanism that

extends to the middle class. Contemplating the future of his daughters upon his deathbed, he is

comforted, knowing, "A white-sounding name was good grease for anyone wishing to slip the

shackles of caste" (Randall, *Rebel* 27). His daughters' whiteness would protect them. He knows

that"[t]here would be little nurture, there would be no black folk or street knowledge, but there

would be money and white skins and maybe some I.Q. points. She would raise them white and

they would be all right" (Randall, *Rebel* 26). It is telling that Abel aligns *nurturing* with *black*

folk. The very people and sense of community that he scarifies to his own individualistic goal of

whiteness, he continues to value. His son Ajay, on the other hand, would have in Hope the

nurturing and community that his daughters lack, and Abel knows he will need it. He could also

"feel the whiteness in the paramedic's fingertips toughing the blackness of his skin" (Randall,

Rebel 30). These white paramedics consciously augment their care of him, in effect killing him,

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because they associate Abel with his deceased father's role in the fight for civil rights. The idea of physical—not visual—nature of race endows certain acts with whiteness. In the case of the paramedics, their Africanism is evident. Their touch reminds Abel that, despite his light skin and white identity, even the most remote indication of blackness is enough for racial stigma.

Abel also recognizes the irony of American racial dynamics. It is ironic that Abel, as the son of a civil rights crusader, marries a poor white woman with four white sons and lives with her in an antebellum farmhouse. The narrator notes, "Abel had been amused by the near squalor of his all but white family. Amused and embarrassed. Amused and embarrassed was a favorite Abel emotional cocktail" (Randall, *Rebel* 72). The fact the he is not only better educated than Sammie and accustomed to more economic comforts than she is less important than the fact that he as a black man has stewardship over young white men and that with them, Sammie let "let him do whatever the hell it was he wanted . . . from scare them straight to send them off to war" (Randall, *Rebel* 26). What Randall establishes here is that whiteness for people like Abel is considered an enviable fictional position because they believe it is the only position in which they have unfettered agency; such a position does not require excusing America's racial history or denying how race continues to be a factor in the present.

Although Randall has Abel challenge the first proposition of liberal postracialism, she has him succumb to the second principle. In addition to accepting the "declining significance" of race, "[t]he second presumption of post-racial liberalism and its proponents is that whether or not this first maxim is true . . . we must act as though it were, for the political reality is such that whites simply will not support, in any real measure, policies that seek to target opportunity specifically to people of color or address racial inequalities directly" (Wise 64). Postracial

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liberalism is a way for Abel to get "recognition," something "[h]e wanted . . . all the more

acutely for knowing this too was something his daddy didn't have, that his granddaddy hadn't

had" (Randall, *Rebel* 300). Whiteness allows him to embrace identities that were not

unreservedly available to him before. He sees his relationship with Hope during his time abroad

as an opportunity to "represent what it is was to be American, even if he had never felt fully

American in America" (Randall, *Rebel* 168). To have an African American couple define

Americanness is an opportunity to which Abel likely would not have access, had he followed his

father's path.

To be American, which has historically meant to be white, he believes opens for him

many new opportunities to be an "international man" and a "unhyphenated man" (Randall, *Rebel*

177). The juxtaposition of internationality with Americanness seems contradictory. Both the

longing to be unhyphenated and to claim Americanness inscribe definite boundaries of

allegiances, values, and culture that the ability to be an international man discards. In American

discourse, the hyphen during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was used to denote

immigrants; the hyphen marks what David Roediger would call their "inbetweenness" (Roediger

Working 123). Though used in a derogatory fashion, it denotes multiple identifications and

hybridized individuals and cultures. In regard to African Americans, the hyphen also reflects

double-consciousness. The hyphen that formerly separated *African* and *American* is less

frequently uses today than in the past. This practice is ironic because the same complications

that impacted black identity formerly remain operative. This demonstrates that whether the

hyphen exists or not, Americanness will continue to be illusive and elusive for Abel both

nationally as well as internationality. Abel's role as a spy would require him to be able to move

seamlessly among and between international communities, inventing as needed personas that fit his needs.   It seems that his desire to be both American and international amounts to his desire to have choice.

Whiteness not only gives Abel the power to choose and change identities according to his needs, it also leads to a fascination with power over others. He remarks that "one of the first things he truly loved about being inside the fortress of the storm: the complete privacy of the thing. No one knew him. He was an authority unto himself" (Randall, *Rebel* 179). This authority was also evident in his choice of women. Despite Hope's education and the economic security, she is submissive in her relationship with Abel. Until he threatens her vow to make sure that her son will "live and die without . . . knowing terror," he controls the terms of their relationship (Randall, *Rebel* 24). She deserts her career in service of his. He thinks of her as a "trophy wife of very particular persuasion. He loved having a stay-at-home wife, a woman with a Harvard degree, ironing his undershorts and his shirts; he loved having something his white northern peers would have never have because white Ivey-educated girls were past . . ., way past dreams of isolated homes as castles" (Randall, *Rebel* 165). She is an ornament to his masculine identity. Though this also seemed to be the case in the marriage of his parents, Big Abel's ability to commodify his wife is restricted to an African American social circle, while Abel's interaction with national and international communities allows evidence of his agency to reach much further. His marriage to Sammie reflects the same dynamics, only she allows him to have domain over his children and his step-sons alike. Even religion, for Abel was not about the belief in Christian doctrine, but about Jesus' ability to "fl[y] too close to the sun with wings that did not melt, and thereby [being able to] gai[n] the sky" (Randall, *Rebel* 158).

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In Abel's case, postracialism does not mean that race does not exist; it means that it is possible to choose the subject position with which he wants to be identified. He chooses to downplay any relationship with anything socially as connected with stereotypical black identity. In her nonfiction, Randall applauds postracialism. She argues "[a] post-racial America will not mean 'no racial difference.' It will mean that racial differences are framed by appropriate neutrality and/or with appreciation for the culture, in the most profound sense, out of which the difference arises" (Randall, "Barack" 207). Abel does not meet this definition because he does not approach blacks with neutrality, and the appreciation he has for African American culture is downplayed. His ideology is an individualist effort to assuage his childhood fears of Africanism. This is evident in how Randall describes his whiteness. Whiteness renders him not invisible, but monstrous. Hope would learn from her aunts, "You pass away, and it is a vanishing and an estrangement. You pass on and move into another realm. You pass for white and wear a mask of manners and skin. You march. You parade. You are present. You are seen. You pass. You are a zombie" (Randall, *Rebel* 31). Whiteness, then, is like death. To become a zombie is to have one all-consuming purpose: to maintain the power of white skin at all cost. Hope is most disturbed to learn that Abel was a lawyer involved in the Abu Ghraib Prison, where Iraqis were tortured (Randall, *Rebel* 29). His involvement with Abu Ghraib is symbolic of him engaging in similar terroristic acts as those people who so terrified his father and caused his own obsession with whiteness. Thus, Randall does not posit his passing as negative because he chooses not to be black, but because his choice is sparked by fear and illustrated by moral equivocations that allow him to maintain power. Whiteness is a moral decision, as Abel demonstrates, because it requires him to sacrifice all of his personal relationships in order to maintain it.

Randall contrasts Abel's whiteness with Hope by establishing her as the ideal of postracialism. Randall asserts Hope's variedness through both racial mixture and class shifts. Her racial mixture has several different levels. Her mother was born to an African American middle-class woman and an absent white father. Hope's father was a child of a melungeon mother and a white father.[29] She is proud of her family history, as she proclaims to Abel and their friend Nicholas: "I don't commit anything but drivel to paper. I have a more than excellent memory. I inherited it form my Melungeon great-grandfather, a famous moonshiner, who kept nary a note of recipe, still location, or accounts receivable" (Randall, *Rebel* 88). She grows in the home of her wealthy widowed father and in the bosom of a white West Virginia community. Upon her father's death, she goes to live with her African American aunts, who work as maids and caterers. Hope describes her identification with blackness as a choice. She waits to tell Abel about her white father because"[she] was just so newly black. [She] didn't want anything to mess it up" (Randall, *Rebel* 137). African American culture is not something that she is born into; she learns the norms and values of African American society through books and her relationship with her aunts. By casting blackness as a choice, Randall is allowing her fictional universe to offer opportunities that are not available to African Americans in the real world. Though culture depends on socialization and choice, race—black skin—is not a choice. Nonetheless, the Hope who reminisces throughout the novel is a bit of a cultural Everywoman. She is able to be comfortable in Manila as well as Rome; she moves fluidly in between small town, big city, white communities, and black communities. Her reflections on the black majority are nostalgic and loving. She expresses her individualism while remaining part of a community.

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[29] Melungeons are small mixed-racial groups of African, European, and Native American descent who live in the southeastern United States.

She is the example of not being bound by race but allowing multiple experiences to reinforcing the boundlessness of identity, which grows and changes.

Though Hope provides a positive balance to Abel, her experiences with race in the United States do not seem to address the problems with postracialism as an ideology. In fact, her characterization seems to stretch credulity. While Randall rightly critiques positions such as Abel's that arise out of fear, her attempt to make Hope a paragon of postracialism is hampered by the absence of Africanism within her life. Throughout this work, I have asserted that Africanism impacts all people of visible African descent. I have chronicled literary representations of internalized Africanism, to which middle-class African Americans have subjected the black majority. Randall's rendering of Hope does not adequately address how race impacts her life. While Africanism exists in the "Bougie Black" community who reject her during her time with her aunts, the reason that they reject her has more to do with her individuality than race (Randall, *Rebel* 276). Though her curly hair and different way of wearing clothes could be racialized, Randall chooses not to do so; Hope's difference is attributed to individuality, as the novel also presents her uniqueness even when she is living with her father. While the 'Bougie' crowd dismisses her partially because her aunts are members of the black majority, Hope is not a member of the black majority. She, like them, goes to the best schools and has great opportunities. She also has the economic power to buy a new home for her new family. Randall does include, in the narrative, Hope's brutal rape by her grandfather. Accusing her mother of promiscuity, he proclaims that she is not his granddaughter during the assault. While this violation could be related to Africanism—the notion of the sexually available and exotic black female body is frequently explored in terms of Africanism—Randall minimizes the

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event. The rape itself takes place in one short paragraph. Also, there are no overt references to the racial implications of this act. Therefore, I contend that either she wants to posit it as nonracial or she wants to critique the rhetoric of victimization that prevents postracialism. In "Barack in the Dirty, Dirty, South," Randall proclaims, "Wailing, whining, and singing the blues got harder after the Speech [candidate Barak Obama's "A More Perfect Union" Speech]. I only miss the wailing and the singing the blues. It's hard to mourn the heroes of the Moses generation without our sobs" (Randall, "Barack" 215). Within this context, Hope's response to this tragedy could be read as revision of "whining" victimization. Thus, Randall's portrait of Hope establishes postracialism as a choice that ignores Africanism, rather than dealing with it.

Randall closes the novel by invoking Barack Obama as a symbol of redeeming postricalism. On his deathbed "Abel, who had crossed over into the world of whiteness, was snatched back to black the second before his life on earth ended," but despite this seeming suddenness of this return to color, Abel's death is also cast as a suicidal sacrifice in order to save his son (Randall, *Rebel* 31). Upon seeing this senator from Illinois, "[a] man with a strange name and dark skin who didn't see everything in black and white, through the lens of being formerly enslaved. A man from the other end of Abel's universe," Abel begins to rethink his embrace of whiteness (Randall, *Rebel* 352). After watching this senator's inspiring speech on television, he understands that the "[t]he earth does not require [his] wretchedness" (Randall, *Rebel* 363). Realizing that "the identity he had adopted to afflict himself and his father was an identity that could defeat Ajay. That was the day the decided to go to the Rebel Yell" (Randall, *Rebel* 353). He goes to the Rebel Yell, filled with allergens, and dies, as his "body . . . refused to

be invaded anew" (Randall, *Rebel* 28). Unlike Monk, whose self-erasure is catastrophic, Abel's self-erasure is sacrificial and benevolent.

Randall's use of Obama in this way is ironic for two reasons. First, he has been accused of utilizing a degree of postracial liberalism that is evident in an examination of Abel. Wise explains:

> On the one hand, it was candidate Obama's use of the *rhetoric of racial transcendence* that made his victory possible, by assuaging white fears that he would focus on racial injustice, or seek to remedy the same, were he elected president. But on the other hand, it is that same avoidance of race issues that had now made it more difficult than ever to address ongoing racial bias, and has hamstrung the president's ability to push back against some of the opposition to his agenda, even when the opposition is framed in blatantly racist ways. (15)

The political marketplace often requires, for success in managing controversial topics such as Africanism, ignoring the problem, lest potential constituencies become alienated. It is also ironic because it offers no concrete answer to Africanism or the problem of prescribed identities.   In her essay about his speech, presumably the same speech that Abel watches on television, Randall reflects on the presidential candidate insisting that "the truth as he knows it, that we have moved beyond race, moved beyond distracting public passions, starts to become a reality. This is a victory for all the thoughtful, hardworking people willing to disagree without being disagreeable, able to renovate and complete our original errand into the wilderness" (Randall, "Barack" 223). This same sentiment in evident when Abel reflects upon "captur[ing] the full brightness of this man *of his own generation* who made radically different things of this world's realities"

(Randall, *Rebel* 353). Randall seems to ignore the immateriality of such lofty rhetoric. Through

Hope and Obama, Randall seems to suggest that African Americans "hope" Africanism away.

This novel demonstrates the limits of postracialism. Though there is an attempt to contrast the

postracial philosophy of Abel with that of Hope, they are similar in they both tend to minimize

the impact of Africanism.   Postracial constructions of identity fall short of progressive African

Americanism because they diminish the significance of cultural trauma to a degree which leaves

individuals ill-equipped to handle Africanism. Thus, neither Hope or Abel have unproblematic

postracial philosophies.

Conclusion

From Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* to Alice Randall's *Rebel Yell*, I have explored

the relationship between how characters and authors respond to Africanism and the dynamics

between the African American middle class and the black majority. Though class is an

important variable in any examination of the inequities that linger in America, I have attempted

to demonstrate that its importance does not supersede the significance of racial stigma. The

novels that I have included in this work are in a grand conversation that has implications for the

way that race, identity, and class are being negotiated in our contemporary moment. Chesnutt's

William Miller, Schuyler's Max Disher, Himes's Alice Harrison, Morrison's Macon Dead, and

Naylor's Linden Hills community all illustrate a pattern of subjugation of the black majority by

the African American middle class in African American literature that is in the service of

assimilationism. Conversely, Griggs, Williams, Naylor, and Everett all reveal the prescriptive

narrative of black authenticity that has often castigated the middle class. Moreover, my

examination of black authenticity corrects claims that the tension between African American authenticity and educational and socioeconomic progress is a new phenomenon by revealing literary evidence that those qualities have often rendered the blackness of individuals that attained them questionable.

Because I see a strong relationship between the middle class and black majority as central to any coherent challenge to Africanism, I have also constructed an evaluative model of progressive African Americanism that I hope can mend the fissure within the African American class hierarchy. Progressive African Americanism requires recognition of unresolved cultural trauma, revises prescriptive notions about African American authenticity, and eschews hegemonic cultural hierarchies. This model is also useful in critiquing contemporary clamoring for a postracial ideal. My analysis reflects the movement within literary history toward recognition that Africanism is a collectivizing force, which has to be countered collectively. Though this work offers no untroubled examples of my model, the acceptance of cultural trauma and the acceptance of the validity of African American cultural communities by the middle class that is evident in the last three chapters of this work reveal a progress that is far removed from the attitudes in Chapter One. There is much negotiation that still needs to take place between individuality and collectivity. However, this work leaves me confident that progressive African Americanism is both attainable and useful in literary analysis.

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