

Black violence and the politics of representation: selected readings in the twentieth century American novel

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**BLACK VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICS OF
REPRESENTATION: SELECTED READINGS IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the representation of black violence in the twentieth century American novel is shaped by two principal rhetorical strategies, which I term denial and demonisation. Denial refers to modes of literary discourse which seek to refute the possibility of black violence, or to circumscribe it as an exclusively intraracial phenomenon. Demonisation denotes textual strategies which figure a racially determined form of violence as a natural element of black character. These strategies may appear antithetical, but they are rarely deployed in isolation. Rather, they appear in complex combinations in most representations of black violence in American literature, as I demonstrate using a range of novels by black and white authors which span the twentieth century. These strategies have their roots in racist ideologies which seek to obliterate any connection between the impact of racism upon African Americans and black violence. Hence they are most noticeable in literary texts which reflect and contribute to racist ideology. However, texts which seek to expose social and cultural causes of black violence are also unavoidably influenced by these modes of literary discourse, and this includes the work of African American authors. They have to negotiate the racist tropes and assumptions encoded within the language and literary forms of hegemonic American culture, because they have no alternative, completely separate resources for cultural production. External pressures experienced by any author representing black violence compound these difficulties. These include the demands of black community leaders and white liberals not to represent African Americans in ways which may hinder the cause of racial equality, and the demands of publishers to represent black violence in ways with proven commercial potential. Furthermore, despite the retreat of racism in modern America, certain images and fantasies of blackness retain a hold over the American cultural imaginary, and continue to influence literary discourse. As my thesis demonstrates, this ensures that denial and demonisation can still be detected in contemporary American novels.

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INTRODUCTION

Black violence, whether real or imagined, has always constituted one of the most controversial and emotive elements of racial politics in American culture. The twentieth century is pervaded by events which demonstrate this, from the lynching epidemic in the South at the start of the century, to the massive interest in the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson affairs in the final decade. The lynchings of the early decades were justified by a melodramatic rhetoric which located an extreme violence within the black male body, sweeping a new form of politician to power and ensuring the national predominance of segregation and black subjugation. The decision of an all-white jury to clear the police officers shown beating Rodney King in the infamous videotape of 1991 reveals that however else American racial attitudes changed during the twentieth century, the idea of black violence retained an extraordinary phobic power in the cultural Imaginary. As Linda Williams observes, this jury could only have regarded the brutal force used by these officers as reasonable because they interpreted the black male body displayed in this video as a perpetual violent threat, justifying any disciplinary measures.¹ The widespread nature of this fascination with black violence is indicated by the record television audience of one hundred and forty two million viewers who watched the verdict in the O. J. Simpson trial.² Black violence has not always maintained such an obvious hold on public consciousness throughout the century, but the revival of this issue at key moments of racial tension demonstrates how its power endured in latent form. The reasons for this enduring obsession involve the fears and fantasies white Americans invest in images of black violence. Attitudes to black violence are shaped by guilt and fear about the violent responses the history of racist oppression may produce. But white attitudes to black violence also demonstrate how desires and fantasies, which threaten the stability, consistency and authority of hegemonic models of selfhood, are projected onto the racial Other. Cultural images of black violence are therefore sexualised, because they are the locus of repressed white fantasies.

¹ L. Williams, *Playing the Race Card* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 266.

² L. Williams, *Playing*, p. 258.

However, it is not my intention to focus in detail on the social and psychological reasons why black violence provokes these reactions in this thesis.³ Instead, I want to concentrate specifically on the impact of this complex of fears and fantasies on twentieth century American literature. I argue two basic rhetorical strategies characterise the attempts of American authors to represent black violence: demonisation and denial. The former strategy figures violence as natural and inherent to black people, violence characterised by a special malevolence, savagery and bestiality. It interprets this violence as evidence of their racial difference and inferiority to white people. The latter strategy seeks to deny the very possibility, either of all forms of black violence, or of specific forms of violence which strike across interracial boundaries. It also seeks to occlude the possibility that racist oppression could ever provoke a violent response.⁴ This is usually achieved either by othering and exoticising black passivity as a racial trait beyond white comprehension, or by inscribing black subjectivity, particularly black masculinity, as inherently inferior to white humanity, making African Americans afraid to use violence directly against whites. Ostensibly, these two strategies appear antithetical and mutually exclusive, based on two opposing views of black character. However, the twisted logic of American racial ideology ensures in most American novels, denial and demonisation do not exist in a simple binary opposition but in complex combinations, which are no less powerful in ideological terms for containing internal contradictions. For example, although Thomas Dixon's novels are characterised by a stridently didactic use of demonisation, they also carefully circumscribe the potentialities of black violence. Similarly, the trope of the exotic primitive, combines demonisation and denial; black

³ This task has been the focus of a vast body of literature in America. The connections between fears and fantasies of black violence and the lynching epidemic in the early part of the century have attracted a particularly large amount of work. Texts which have been useful to this thesis include: J. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), G. E. Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) and R. Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Attitudes to black violence in the middle decades of the century are analysed perceptively by James Baldwin and Calvin Hernton. See: J. Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) and C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969). Useful work on more recent attitudes to black violence has been performed by the numerous recent studies of black masculinity, including David Marriott's *On Black Men* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) and Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham's volume, *Representing Black Men* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ Of course many novels which involve racial issues occlude black violence as a theme altogether, but in this thesis I focus on those novels which introduce the theme in some way, yet still deploy strategies of denial.

violence is figured as an innate, distinct racial characteristic, of greater savagery than white violence, yet somehow the possibility this violence could cross racial boundaries is totally circumscribed. More recent liberal white writers have often used strategies of denial to enable them to conceive of black characters as fully human, but the possibilities of black violence they repress tend to return in surprisingly traditional images of black demonisation.

These two strategies are most prominent in texts with an avowed racist ideological function, such as Thomas Dixon's propagandist novels. In such novels, the writers deliberately use denial and demonisation in ways designed to exploit the fantasies and anxieties of readers. However, I believe these rhetorical strategies are also discernible in novels with apparently anti-racist intentions, and this includes the work of African American writers. As I stated above, these literary strategies stem from a complex of fears and fantasies which shape the ideological conditions in which all Americans exist.⁵ The subjectivity and the perception of reality of writers both black and white are unavoidably shaped by hegemonic ideologies of black violence in American culture.⁶ Therefore, denial and demonisation are not always deliberately deployed; they often constitute unavoidable, unconscious influences on a writer. Furthermore, these strategies are embedded in the tropes and images of black violence within the heritage of American literature, and I believe this heritage is a major influence over subsequent literary production. My thesis contends that white and black literature influence each other in their representations of black violence. I demonstrate numerous resemblances and points of comparison between the novels I analyse which show how any new representation of

⁵ My concepts of fantasy and ideology derive from the Marxist theory of ideology formulated by Louis Althusser and the psychoanalytic theory of fantasy developed by Jacqueline Rose. For Althusser, ideology determines our "lived relation to the real," functioning at a preconscious level to determine how we perceive reality. L. Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 232-233. For Rose, fantasies are not purely private, individual phenomena, but shape and are shaped by the "contours of our political world," bridging the boundary between inner psychic space and external reality. J. Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 79 and pp. 3-4. Combining these theories suggests public ideology and individual fantasy exist in a dialectical relationship; each both reflects and contributes to the other, in forming the subjectivity of each individual and their perception of social reality. This means that in a culture suffused by racist ideology, no individual can completely escape the influence of racism.

⁶ Although African Americans possess their own cultural tradition, which insulates them to some extent from the racist images which pervade mainstream American culture, this is rarely a major influence on representations of black violence in African American literature.

black violence is influenced, whether directly or unconsciously, by previous approaches to the same theme.

Denial and demonisation also appear in all types of fiction because the powerful presence of this complex of fears and fantasies in American culture has made black violence one of the most controversial, emotive and difficult topics to represent. The psychological potency of images of black violence in American culture and the consistent presence of different political groups competing to determine their meaning ensures that literary representations of this violence are always semantically unstable. No matter how monolithic and didactic the literary structure in which they are embedded, representations of black violence take on an ambiguous and sometimes self-contradictory ideological significance. These immense difficulties with using representations of black violence ensure that although anxieties about black violence itself constitute the origins of denial and demonisation, anxieties about reproducing racist images of black violence contribute significantly to their endurance. Efforts to avoid or prevent racist interpretations of their work often lead writers to reproduce variants of denial. Conversely, efforts to expose the full horror of black violence, to force readers to recognise the appalling effects of racism and the degree of anger within African Americans, often lead writers to reproduce variants of demonisation.

My thesis therefore focuses on white and black novels. I begin by analysing some novels which have an unambiguously racist function. But I go on to consider the difficulties both black and white authors face in attempting to write about black violence in terms other than those determined by the fantasies and anxieties which suffuse their culture. As we shall see, most black authors struggle to represent black violence as a thoroughly human response to the effects of racist oppression, but this is an immensely difficult task when mainstream culture associates black violence so powerfully with savagery and bestiality. Many black writers found it easier to participate in strategies of denial and demonisation to make their writing commercially appealing to a white publishing industry and a largely white readership. The demands of publishers and readers constitute examples of external pressures upon authors who represent black violence, which also contribute to the use of denial and demonisation. For black writers, these pressures also include demands from intellectuals or political groups within their

own community to represent black violence in ways which will challenge racism. White authors are ostensibly less affected by these types of external pressure although, as we shall see, the fierce controversy surrounding *The Confessions of Nat Turner* demonstrates how the growth of black influence in mainstream American culture of recent decades has put new pressures on white writers. However, white writers usually find it more difficult to escape the internal influence of the cultural fears and fantasies which shape their subjectivity. The phrase “the politics of representation” in my title refers to all these pressures and influences upon literary production.

This thesis is not centrally concerned with novels which debate whether violence is or has been ethically justifiable or politically effective as a mode of resistance to white racism for African Americans. Other criticism has debated this question in considerable detail, perhaps most significantly in recent years, Jerry Bryant’s comprehensive study, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Most of the novels I consider do not depict black violence as planned revolutionary action. In large part, my thesis is a history of the development of representations of black male violence targeted against white women. This, I believe, is the most controversial, emotive and difficult form of black violence to represent, because it is the locus of the most cultural fears and fantasies about black violence. Many of the most interesting novels containing representations of black violence return almost compulsively to revising the tropes of this form of violence developed by earlier literature. Nevertheless, other forms of black violence also entail representational difficulties, and this thesis will also focus on them to some extent, including some depictions of intraracial violence. As my thesis progresses, the novels I examine become increasingly concerned with attempting to articulate the connection between the psychological effects of racism and black violence. In my analyses of these attempts, W. E. B. DuBois’s theory of “double-consciousness,” and Frantz Fanon’s ideas about the intrusion of racism into the constitution of the black self-image will be of particular use.⁷ In some cases these theories are clearly conscious influences on the novels I analyse, in others the author has simply represented an aetiology for black violence which can be best understood in the terms of these theories. I

⁷ See: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (London: Penguin, 1996) and F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by C. L. Markman, (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

will not privilege a particular theory as a metanarrative on the effects of racism, but use a variety of theoretical approaches to explicate how each author seeks to represent the causes of black violence. Although acts of white violence against African Americans are often depicted as key motives for black violence, I will not seek to analyse this white violence in detail. Analysis of this oppressive brutality has previously been performed by a vast body of criticism, and although the insights of this criticism prove useful to my task, I focus centrally on the black violence this racism can provoke, which has received less critical attention.⁸

My thesis follows a basically chronological trajectory through the moments in twentieth century history when black violence became a prominent political issue in American culture and fictional representations of black violence changed. The novels I have chosen to analyse are not evenly spaced through the twentieth century; in particular, there is a cluster of novels from the late sixties and early seventies period. This is because I believe black violence achieved a greater significance in the American cultural imagination, at this time than at any other point in American history for socio-political reasons. I believe many of the novels of this era reflect this and therefore merit greater attention than the fiction of other periods. However, in analysing the representation of violence in these novels, I will not be focussing centrally on how they articulate political debates of the time about the ethics and effectiveness of black violence in the struggle for racial equality. Instead, I will focus more on the political and aesthetic choices made by the authors in their actual representations of black violence, not their abstract theorising about it, and how these representations reflect the psychological anxieties of both black and white authors.

I begin with an analysis of the extraordinarily phobic figurations of blackness and violence in the novels of Thomas Dixon, which I believe have left an enduring impression on American literary discourse. They exemplify the link between racist fantasies and public forms of discourse on black violence, especially literature. Thomas Dixon did not invent the image of the Black Beast Rapist he deploys in his novels, but he

⁸ Of particular influence on this thesis is the recent work on how white racist violence traumatises African Americans in the novels of Toni Morrison. See for example: J. Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) and J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as its Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).

releases this trope into twentieth century American literature in a dramatically powerful way. It is easy for a modern critic to expose the contradictions, the unreality and the strong element of political expediency which underlie Dixon's figurations of blackness. But these images had extraordinary rhetorical power in their historical context, because they appealed to what people wanted to believe. I then briefly consider Charles Chesnutt's efforts to politicise images of black violence in diametrically opposed ways, to contest the discourse of scientific racism and the political rise of white supremacy, before showing how Dixon's influence was far stronger on other contemporary literature about black violence. Subsequent black and white authors have struggled to distinguish their figurations of blackness from Dixon's. No later white authors who I focus upon have used black violence in such blatantly racist, propagandist ways as Thomas Dixon. But they can rarely completely escape the influence and the unconscious, affective power of his tropes of black violence, even as they struggle to recognise the unreality of these tropes.

Chapter Two examines how Harlem Renaissance authors transformed the highly emotive, propagandist trope of the Black Beast into the exotic primitive, a depoliticised image for aesthetic enjoyment. I consider the historical circumstances behind this shift, and analyse how this trope produced new combinations of denial and demonisation in representations of black violence. I show how African American writers unsuccessfully attempted to use this trope to represent black violence more realistically in anti-racist terms. My next two chapters examine the most controversial representations of black violence by two of the most prominent writers on race in American literature: William Faulkner's *Light in August* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. These two novels were published at opposite ends of the Great Depression, and they articulate the renewed anxieties about black violence this economic crisis produced in American society. Chapter Three shows the anxiety and ambivalence which plagued Faulkner's efforts to confront and think through demonised stereotypes of black violence. Joe Christmas constitutes an extraordinary variant on strategies of denial, a white mask through which Faulkner interrogates a subject he could never confront directly. Faulkner struggles to articulate the origins of black violence outside racist discourse, but his own investments in hegemonic white ideology ultimately undermine his efforts. Chapter Four considers

how Richard Wright attempts to co-opt the central trope in strategies of demonisation, rape, and use it to express the terrible effects of racism upon the black psyche. *Native Son* interrogates, and attempts to refigure, demonised stereotypes, to produce a powerful but controversial and ambiguous argument against racism.

After briefly considering how black violence largely disappeared from American fiction in the fifties and early sixties, Chapter Five proceeds quickly to the era of black militancy, when black violence next became prominent in American culture as the site of political anxieties and desires.⁹ Although this thesis focuses predominantly on black violence depicted in twentieth century contexts, I focus here on two novels set during the antebellum era. The first is William Styron's highly controversial *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, because of its political and cultural importance in the history of representations of black violence in American literature. I demonstrate how Styron's alterations to historical evidence about Nat Turner form a consistent strategy of denial, exposing Styron's anxieties about contemporary racial tensions. The historical violence of Turner's rebellion, which Styron anxiously represses, returns in a minor character in demonised imagery, confirming the influence of racist fears and fantasies on his writing. I then briefly consider Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, because it represents an interesting response to Styron, and an attempt to produce different, empowering representations of slave violence. It typifies the approach of African American fiction to slave violence in the last decades of the twentieth century. Chapter Six returns to the era of black militancy, beginning by considering how militant writers responded to *The Confessions*. Black militant writers rejected their predecessors' methods of depicting black violence as a negative effect of racism, seeking instead to valorise it as a purely positive response to white oppression, a way of overcoming racism which raises blacks from their sense of inferiority. I briefly consider John A. Williams' *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, which exemplifies the problems which dogged attempts to transform racist tropes of black violence into empowering images of effective revolutionary heroes. I then consider white fictional responses by authors such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. Both writers

⁹ In this thesis I use the phrase "black militancy" to refer to all the political and artistic movements of the late sixties and early seventies which rejected the peaceful, integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement and advocated a range of violent or separatist routes to racial equality. These groups include the Black Power movement, the Black Panthers and the Black Arts Movement.

use images of black violence to critique the literature and philosophy of black militancy. But their attempts to expose what they perceive as the problems of these movements, often lapse into traditional demonised images of black violence, showing how black militancy reawakened racist anxieties. Finally, I consider John Edgar Wideman's *The Lynchers*, which satirises black militant fiction more accurately, but cannot find a way to articulate what it posits as the reality of black violence outside demonised stereotypes.

Chapter Seven focuses on a particular literary genre which exemplifies many of the difficulties of representing black violence: African American detective fiction. I begin by considering the difficulties which affected Chester Himes's attempt to adapt the hardboiled format to expose how racism causes black criminality and to represent African American detectives as heroic men of violence. I then focus on Walter Mosley's attempts to surmount these difficulties in his "Easy Rawlins" detective novels. I consider how he exposes black masculinity as a cultural construct which produces black violence, rather than attempting to make his detective a heroic man of violence according to hegemonic, patriarchal ideals of masculinity. I also show how the pressures of commercial demands for excitement and drama tempted both these writers into reproducing some demonised images of black violence. My final chapter focuses on a novel which extends this consideration of black masculinity as a construct which produces black violence: Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. I analyse the problems with Morrison's ambitious attempts to depict the whole history of American racism as a trauma, and to show how this trauma produces violence in African American men because of their attempts to fulfil patriarchal models of masculinity. I demonstrate how these problems create a tension between the form and the content of *Paradise*. I also briefly consider Morrison's problematic attempts to posit a way out of the cycle of trauma and violence she identifies in African American culture. I link the problems of this novel to recent controversies over representations of black male violence in African American women's fiction, and show how the strategies of denial and demonisation remain present in contemporary representations of black violence.

My thesis does not purport to be a comprehensive, exhaustive study of twentieth century American representations of black violence. Instead, I have sought to focus on key texts which exemplify representations of black violence within a particular era, and

were most influential on other fiction. However, inevitably, in a thesis covering such a broad historical period, there are numerous other novels I could have focussed on, which confront the problematic of representing black violence in interesting and revealing ways. My thesis deals chiefly with black violence as a phenomenon affecting the subjectivity of black and white men. Although I consider how black and white women are objectified in various ways by black violence, the texts I focus on say little about how this violence impacts on black or white female subjectivity. Even *Paradise* represents black violence as principally important in male subject formation, although Morrison does give some attention to how it affects black women subjectively. There is a long tradition within African American women's fiction, of representing domestic violence, rape and other forms of violence suffered by black women at the hands of black men. This goes back at least as far as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Some of these novels, such as Ann Petry's *The Street*, also depict black women using violence themselves to strike back against these abuses. During the last few decades, the efforts of black women writers to use representations of black violence to expose gender inequalities and abuses within African American society have generated considerable controversy, attracting accusations of reproducing demonised stereotypes of black men. This history of black female representations of black violence is probably the largest significant issue within this period I have not focussed on centrally. Although Chapter Eight touches on this theme, limitations of space prevent me from focussing on texts central to this controversy, such as Alice Walker or Gloria Naylor's novels. I could also have written much more on the extraordinary proliferation of detective fiction featuring black detectives during the nineties, such as the novels of James Sallis. I also could have considered street fiction; the novels of authors such as Donald Goines or Clarence Cooper, which usually base their plots around organised crime in black ghettos. However, this form of fiction focuses mainly on intraracial violence and usually contain little attempt to analyse the psychological origins of this violence, so it is not strictly relevant to the central themes of my thesis.

Because I have chosen to focus on the work of both white and African American authors over such a long historical period, my thesis does not fit neatly into any particular category of critical work currently being produced. Jerry H. Bryant has recently written

two important studies of representations of black violence which focus purely on African American fiction; the aforementioned *Victims and Heroes*, and a study of the history of violent black characters in African American fiction and folklore.¹⁰ Although the insights of this work are important to my thesis, I believe a full understanding of African American representations of black violence requires consideration of its relations to white literature. My thesis is also influenced by a wide range of recent critical work on issues of race and representation which has been at least partially concerned with analysing the significance of representations of black violence. This includes Sandra Gunning's study of representations of racial violence during the lynching era, and Robert E. Washington's sociological analysis of the political forces which shaped different schools of African American fiction.¹¹ In particular, the recent profusion of critical work which compares the novels of William Faulkner and Toni Morrison influenced my attempts to compare and contrast representations of black violence by black and white authors from very different socio-historical contexts.¹² Where my thesis differs from all this work, however, is in my specific focus on the issue of representing black violence, and in my attempt to develop my inferences into an overall theory of representations of black violence within twentieth century American literature.

¹⁰ J. H. Bryant, "Born in a Mighty Bad Land": The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

¹¹ S. Gunning, *Race, Rape and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and R. E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From The Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

¹² See for example: P. Weinstein, *What Else But Love?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and: C. A. Kolmerton, S. M. Ross and J. Bryant Wittenburg, eds, *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997).

CHAPTER ONE

“A BLACK HAND ON A WHITE WOMAN’S THROAT”: BLACK VIOLENCE AND WHITE FANTASY IN THE FICTION OF THOMAS DIXON

The past twenty years have witnessed a reawakening of critical interest in the fiction of Thomas Dixon. Critics such as Sandra Gunning and Joel Williamson have applied modern critical perspectives to his novels and acknowledged their importance as cultural documents which can augment our understanding of American attitudes to race at the beginning of the twentieth century. Two features of Dixon’s fiction make him particularly suitable as a point of departure for my investigation into the strategies of denial and demonisation which structure the representation of black violence in American literature. Firstly, his novels attained a degree of popularity unmatched by any contemporary author writing about racial issues. *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) both eventually sold over a million copies.¹ Joel Williamson goes so far as to claim that Dixon “probably did more to shape the lives of modern Americans than have some Presidents.”² Secondly, these novels display an unprecedented concentration on the theme of black violence, and its political and social meanings for America.³ The very similar plots of the two novels depict white male Southerners struggling to overthrow biracial state governments and assume the political power Dixon represents as their racial birthright. Their ultimate success is heavily dependent on outrageous acts of black male violence against white women, which turn public opinion against any form of racial equality.

Modern critics analysing Dixon’s fiction invariably condemn its literary qualities. Eric Sundquist calls his portrayals of black characters “leering” and “propagandist,”

¹ Figures taken from: J. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, p. 158 and p. 172. The film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which these novels inspired, was also seen by millions.

² J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 140.

³ Earlier writers began to represent the types of black violence which dominate Dixon’s novels towards the end of the nineteenth century. See for example Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1898), pp. 356-358, where a black character’s attempted rape of a white woman is described in bestial terms. However, passive, loyal “darky” figures were still the dominant type in white writers’ representations of African Americans, such as in Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1907). These authors frequently expressed concern about the post-emancipation generation of African Americans who were lacked the respect of ex-slaves for the racial customs of the South, but none focus so graphically on the consequences of this situation as Thomas Dixon does.

Sandra Gunning describes his representation of black violence as “lurid” and Joel Williamson declares: “In truth, his fiction descended almost to dime-novel story-telling, unashamedly melodramatic, undisciplined and oppressively didactic.”⁴ These verdicts are indisputable according to any conventional literary critical standards, but I want to suggest that if viewed in their historical context, many of the apparent literary weaknesses of these novels actually constitute rhetorical strengths. Narrative style, plot structure and characterisation all exploit the psychological power certain images of black violence held for contemporary readers. Dixon did not invent the tropes of black violence he uses to make his white supremacist case, but he contributed significantly to their development. He articulated in literary form much that had existed only in political rhetoric and the media of popular culture. His novels contributed to the development of a discourse with immense cultural capital in American society, supported by sociological studies and scientific treatises, which produced as the object of its knowledge the figure of the Black Beast Rapist. Dixon’s novels exemplify the many roles the idea of black violence is called on to perform in white supremacist ideology, to bolster the political and psychological consistency and authority of white hegemonic subjectivity. Hence, they demonstrate very clearly why subsequent authors have found it so difficult to disentangle representations of black violence from this web of ideological purposes.

To understand how Dixon imbues demonised images of black violence with so much power, it is first necessary to consider the link between the style of these novels and the historical context of their production. The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed economic crisis in the South. The price of cotton, the staple of the Southern economy, was steadily falling, and the vast agricultural work force was sinking into poverty. Populist politicians, determined to change the agricultural and economic structure of the South fundamentally, began to challenge the hegemony of the planter class, often by entering alliances with African Americans. In Dixon’s state, North Carolina, a biracial alliance of Populists and Republicans broke the white supremacist stranglehold on power. They won elections in the town of Wilmington in 1894 and 1896 and attained a majority in the State Legislature. In 1898, white supremacist Democrats

⁴ E. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 409. S. Gunning, *Race, Rape and Lynching*, p. 30. J. Williamson, *Crucible*, pp. 140-141.

regained power, on the wave of a political movement labelled “Radicalism” by historian Joel Williamson. Rather than confronting demands for systemic reform, Radicals attempted to redefine the popular perception of the economic and social problems the South was experiencing in its painful transition to modernity. As Joel Williamson has stated: “Unable ultimately to deal with the real world, Radical leadership opted to create in the life of the mind an unreal one.”⁵ In highly emotive and demagogic terms they sought to transform the paternalistic image of African Americans as docile children in need of white guidance into a malignant, bestial threat to white civilisation, and the source of all the South’s problems. They insisted black people were only retrogressing outside the discipline of slavery, and could never rise to white standards of behaviour. Hence they needed to be permanently and absolutely segregated from white society. Radicalism produced an ideology of blackness, which as I shall demonstrate, white people found easy to invest in emotionally, regardless of its basis in reality.

The Leopard’s Spots and *The Clansman* constitute key interventions in the development of this discourse. Although the Populist threat to white supremacy had receded by the time Dixon wrote these novels, both are clearly intended to warn Americans against further experiments with biracial politics. Their representations of black violence serve ideologies of segregation and white supremacy. Dixon enacts the strategies of Radical political discourse in literary form. Through their prefaces, Dixon presented these novels as historically accurate documents of Southern social and political experience. In the preface to *The Clansman*, he claims to have taken no “liberty with any essential historical fact,” before declaring that the Ku Klux Klan, who “saved the life of a people,” were “led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland.”⁶ This abrupt switch from realism to fantasy exemplifies the stylistic dynamics of both novels. Dixon switches abruptly from indications of realism to a hyperbolic tone of fantasy. A thin textual surface of social realism produced by the deployment of real people and supposedly real events and statistics, overlays a fundamental structure of melodrama and fantasy. These novels were designed to appeal not through the degree of their accuracy, but the extent to which they mirrored the dreamwork of a culture. When Dixon was

⁵ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 306.

challenged on the question of historical accuracy, he claimed that his work “expresses the passionate faith of the entire white population of the South.”⁷ He wanted readers to see their fantasies about race and blackness played out on the printed page as historical truth.

This historical context also explains the connection between Dixon’s portrayals of black characters and the power of his images of black violence. Judged on a realistic level, Dixon’s black characters are two-dimensional caricatures, but this air of unreality was the source of their power. Since the end of Reconstruction, the lived experience of black and white people in America had diverged increasingly. Southern state governments segregated all public spaces, from drinking fountains to trains, and excluded African Americans from every political and civic arena. African Americans now lived in separate neighbourhoods in most Southern towns, and had their own churches, schools and businesses. A similar, if de facto, apartheid existed in the few Northern cities with a black population, where African Americans were confined to ghettoised communities. These circumstances reduced African Americans to a shadowy presence on the margins of white culture. Sequestered and disempowered, they could not contest their reduction to fantasies and propagandist constructs within hegemonic discourses. W. E. B. Du Bois’s choice of the veil as the central metaphor in his seminal 1903 work on race-relations, *The Souls of Black Folks*, illustrates that segregation did not only create spatial divisions between black and white people. It also established barriers in perception which, like a veil, distorted and obscured each race’s view of the other. As the historian George M. Frederickson states:

The price of increasing social separation was a lack of knowledge about how blacks were living and what they were thinking that bred suspicion and fed fears that chaos, violence and disease would overflow from the black sector and “contaminate” or debase the white community.⁸

Dixon sought to achieve maximal exploitation of these white fears. He uses numerous metaphors of contamination and disease to describe the consequences of political, social

⁶ T. Dixon, *The Clansman* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 2. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁷ Quoted in: J. Staiger, “*The Birth of a Nation*: Reconsidering its Reception”, *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. by R. Lang, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 202.

⁸ G. M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 263.

or sexual activity which breaches the colour-line. Rather than attempt to penetrate the veil of the colour-line, and reveal black humanity through his characters, Dixon tries to confirm and exploit the white fears and suspicions this veil created. James Baldwin has described Dixon's black characters as "creatures in a nightmare *someone* is having."⁹ Dixon's novels exploit the extent to which this nightmare was a collective white experience in this historical context, reducing African Americans to phobic, psychologically opaque images who can easily intersect readers' darkest fantasies about blackness.

Consider the two characters who ultimately commit the most demonised acts of violence in each novel. Dick first appears in *The Leopard's Spots* as a child who has fled his parents after his father attempts to decapitate him with an axe.¹⁰ This exemplifies the kind of horrific violence Dixon depicts occurring within the black community to support his claims about retrogression.¹¹ From the start, Dick appears animalistic, and fundamentally different to his white playmate Charles Gaston. He lacks all human feeling and can be taught no morality, leading one character to declare: "I don't know whether he's got a soul. Certainly the very rudimentary foundations of morals seem lacking. I believe you could take a young ape and teach him quicker" (179). These words exemplify how Dixon reduces Dick to something subhuman, something impenetrable and incomprehensible to an authentic human – a white man. Dick is one of a number of examples of this novel's links with an earlier, enormously popular, intertext whose popularity fascinated and angered Dixon. Dick constitutes a revision of Topsy, the mischievous black girl in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who ultimately learns Christian virtue. As we shall see, Dixon devises a very different fate for his black child, which highlights the difference between his and Harriet Beecher Stowe's views of black character. Dixon was determined to create images of blackness which would impact on public perceptions of African Americans with equal power.

⁹ J. Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work", *The Price of the Ticket*, p. 586.

¹⁰ T. Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903), p. 99. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

¹¹ Dixon also describes a black mother killing her baby: "The mother had knocked him in the head and burned the body, in a drunken orgie with dissolute companions" (94).

The representation of Gus in *The Clansman* illustrates how Dixon's descriptions of black characters often intersect the discourse of scientific racism, but carry its tenets to new extremes. Consider the following description:

He had the short, heavy-set neck of the lower order of animals. His skin was coal black, his lips so thick they curled both ways up and down with crooked blood-marks across them. His nose was flat and his enormous nostrils seemed in perpetual dilation. The sinister bead-eyes, with brown splotches in their whites, were set wide apart and gleamed ape-like under his scant brows (216).

Typically of Dixon, this passage reads bestiality in black physiognomy. The black body is objectified as a text signifying black character traits, in a way which occludes any notion of subjectivity or historicity behind these features. The science of this reading is vague; Dixon makes no attempt to define the category "the lower order of animals" or explain his contention that they all have "short heavy-set necks." But this lack of intellectual rigour was typical of contemporary pseudo-scientific writing on race, which would have shaped many readers' expectations of descriptions of black character. The logic of scientific racism was predicated on simplistic moves from descriptions of supposedly universal features of black physiognomy to claims about the bestiality and inferiority these features signified.¹² Furthermore, Dixon did not want readers to dwell on such descriptions in rational, scientific terms, but to react instantly on an irrational, emotional level. The Negrophobic distortions and intimate details of this portrait – even "brown splotches" in the whites of Gus's eyes are visible from the narrator's perspective – are intended to give the reader an uncomfortable sense of proximity to Gus and induce physical disgust. Throughout both novels, Dixon makes repeated references to the ugliness and "nauseating odour" of black physicality, encouraging readers to perceive disgust as a natural reaction to African Americans (290). Such demonised descriptions prepare the reader to interpret black violence as originating in natural, bestial character traits, occluding any possibility of social, psychological origins, and to react to this violence on an emotional, irrational level. Furthermore, this erasure of African American

¹² For example, Edward Drinker Cope, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, claimed the sutures of Negro skulls grew up at fourteen, and posited this as proof black mental development was arrested in early adolescence. J. Williamson, *Crucible*, pp. 123-124.

subjectivity and historicity enables Dixon to use images of blackness as blank screens for the projection of repressed white desires and fantasies.

The nature of these fantasies is revealed by the overwhelmingly predominant motive for the violence Dixon represents black characters committing; an uncontrollable, instinctive lust for white women. The Radical era witnessed a dramatic increase in the South of newspaper reports, political claims and popular rumours about terrible sexual crimes committed by black men against white women. A book published at the onset of Radicalism in 1889 exemplifies the nature of these claims:

Rape, indescribably beastly and loathsome always, is marked, in the instance of its perpetration by a negro, by a diabolical persistence and a malignant atrocity of detail that have no reflection in the whole extent of the natural history of the most bestial and ferocious animals.¹³

The lurid, almost hysterical tone and the hyperbole of the final phrase exemplify the tone of Radical discourse on black male sexuality. This was a central element of the Radical strategy of encouraging white Southerners to focus the anger and frustration created by real political and economic difficulties on unreal images of African Americans. Historians have posited many social and psychological reasons for the effectiveness of this tactic. Joel Williamson links it to the South's ever more extreme cult of white womanhood which warped white male sexuality with guilt and repression. As he puts it: "White men were projecting extravagant sexual behaviour upon black men because they were denying ordinary sexual behaviour to themselves."¹⁴ White men may also have been projecting repressed feelings of guilt and self-revulsion about their own acts of sexual violence. Modern feminist historiography has demonstrated that the rape of black women was widely used to terrorise and subjugate African Americans in the postbellum South.¹⁵

Certainly, the sharp rise in the occurrence of lynchings and the emergence of a new form of lynching during the 1890s suggests the real origins of the desires white ideology insistently attributed to black men. Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale has demonstrated how Southerners transformed a secretive form of vigilante justice into "a

¹³ Philip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as Freeman* (New York: Putnam, 1889), p. 84.

¹⁴ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 54.

modern spectacle of enduring power.”¹⁶ “Spectacle Lynchings” were often advertised in advance on radio stations and in newspapers, and special trains were chartered to bring spectators to the event. They took place in public spaces such as town squares, where large crowds could gather to witness the event, often amidst a carnival atmosphere. The death of the victim was made as slow, painful and gruesome as possible.¹⁷ These events expose which social group was really taking pleasure from the acts of wounding, torture and murder. Radical ideology obsessively accused black men of committing against white women. Modern commentators such as Robyn Wiegman have noted that lynching rituals “enacted a grotesquely symbolic – if not literal – sexual encounter between the white mob and its victim.”¹⁸ Trudier Harris claims the structure of lynchings “made the sexual nature of the ritual explicit.” The gradual rise in tension during the pursuit and capture of the victim, the intimate mutilations, and finally the climactic release of the victim’s death, when the crowd would advance cheering with relief in pursuit of souvenirs.¹⁹ Evidently, the Beast figure was both phobia and fantasy. His construction as a hated, feared Other masked his intimate connection with the deepest recesses of white desire. Producing this fantasy enabled whites to project unacceptable desires *and* to satisfy these desires, under the guise of upholding the law and protecting white womanhood.

Dixon’s narrativisations of black rape exploit all the elements of this sexual pathology. He encourages the idolisation of white womanhood. Williamson cites as the origin of the white male sexual guilt which produced the Black Beast image, elevating white female characters to an almost sacred status. This also enables him to figure rape not just as an assault on a human being but as an act of sacrilege. One character describes the rape of Marion Lenoir in *The Clansman* as, “a priceless sacrifice on the altar of outraged civilisation” (325). Dixon could not represent rape directly without transgressing the publishing standards of this period, but he turns this limitation to his advantage through his shaping of the outlines of these spaces in his narratives. In the

¹⁵ See: G. Lerner, “The Rape of Black Women as a Weapon of Terror”, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. by G. Lerner (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 172-193.

¹⁶ G. E. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p. 201.

¹⁷ See: G. E. Hale, *Making*, pp. 199-227 for accounts of the most horrific lynchings during this period and an analysis of their popularity.

¹⁸ R. Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, p. 82.

¹⁹ T. Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indianapolis University Press, 1984), pp. 22-23.

“Historical Note” which prefaces *The Leopard’s Spots*, he declares, “it will be a century yet before people outside the South can be made to believe a literal statement of this history of those times” (vi). As Eric Sundquist observes, this statement is “calculated to arouse fantasy.”²⁰ It implies what follows is attenuated and sanitised to avoid offending public decency and exceeding the credibility of readers with no experience of the terrible truth of black violence. It instantly encourages readers to participate imaginatively to understand fully what is being represented. Joel Williamson has described the psychological process behind lynching: “In their frustration, white men projected their own worst thoughts onto black men, imagined them acted out in some specific incident, and symbolically killed these thoughts by lynching a hapless black man.”²¹ Through the carefully nuanced details he gives, Dixon guides readers to imagine such “specific incidents.” He understood that having erased African Americans as subjects in his writing, and reduced them to a blank space for the projection of Negrophobic fantasies, there was no limit to the monstrous forms they could assume in readers’ minds.

This rhetorical strategy is evident in *The Leopard’s Spots*, where the reader is guided to imagine the rape of Flora Camp through a description of its consequences:

Flora lay on the ground with her clothes torn to shreds and stained with blood. her beautiful yellow curls were matted across her forehead in a dark-red lump besides a wound where her skull had been crushed. The stone lay at her side, the crimson mark of her life showing on its jagged edges. [...] it was too plain, the terrible crime that had been committed (375).

Here, black violence is effectively demonised without the representation of a single blow. Dixon deploys Flora’s damaged body as a text upon which the proof of black bestiality is inscribed. Although he shrinks from even naming the “terrible crime” which has occurred, her “clothes torn to shreds” suggest a frenzied sexual assault. The crushing of her skull by a stone implies a hypermasculine, animalistic degree of strength in her assailant. The juxtaposition of Flora’s “beautiful yellow curls”, conventional sentimental symbols of innocence and beauty, with horrific wounds, which suggest violated virginity, underscore Dixon’s intention to outrage the reader. The descriptions of Flora’s behaviour

²⁰ E. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 83.

²¹ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 308.

after the attack heighten the sense her experience is too terrible for articulation. Every time she regains consciousness, she suffers a fit which re-opens her head wound, eventually causing her death (376-379). This rupturing of a blood-vessel in the brain suggests her experience is too traumatic to be contained in conscious memory. Her demise constitutes a literal demonstration of Dixon's repeated, hyperbolic claims that for white women, black rape represents a fate worse than death.

In *The Clansman*, Dixon gets closer to the acts of black violence which form the crux of his argument for white supremacy. He directly represents the scene building up to Gus's rape of Marion Lenoir, portraying the Black Beast advancing on his victim: "The girl uttered a cry, long, tremulous, heart-rending, piteous. A single tiger-spring, and the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat and she was still" (304). Here, the chapter ends and the narrative resumes after the rape. In these two lurid, melodramatic sentences, Dixon has supplied enough details to stimulate appropriate fantasies in the reader. Marion's innocence and fragility is emphasised, while Gus is transformed into a beast through animal metaphors which become literalised as he approaches his victim. However, Dixon later returns to this incident to exploit further its ideological power, through Gus's re-enactment of his crime under hypnosis, after the Ku Klux Klan captures him (322-323). This re-enactment underscores Dixon's preference for forms of black violence displaying a minimal degree of control by rational black agency. Gus is reduced to a passive performer, his violence fully controlled by whites. In this scene, his violence can outrage white readers in the manner Dixon desires, while remaining totally under white control. This level of white control is problematic, however, because it threatens to expose the Black Beast narrative Dixon is trying to present as historical reality as nothing more than a white fantasy. Gus's performance almost seems scripted by his white hypnotist, particularly given the manner in which Dr Cameron deduced Gus's guilt. He was described as "trembling with excitement," perceiving Gus's image ingrained on Mrs Lenoir's retina, and Ben Cameron even cautioned him: "I'm afraid the image is in your eye" (313-314). Perhaps to suppress this sense of white desires being projected, Dixon makes the Klansmen quickly stop Gus's performance, because they are too horrified to witness a re-enactment of the rape. This shows how images of black violence can undermine and deconstruct the arguments they are intended to support. Also, by

suggesting these acts are too horrific to be witnessed by civilised men, Dixon preserves the fantasmatic power of Gus's violence, maintaining the reader's role in fantasising what is omitted.

Dixon attempts to convince readers the rapes he depicts were a realistic and ubiquitous threat to white women throughout the South during the period. After the attack on Flora, he claims "scarcely a day passed in the South without the record of such an atrocity" (385). Modern historical research has revealed no evidence of such frequent attacks, but as historian Stephen Kantrowitz has shown, contemporary Southern newspapers obsessively reported every accusation or rumour of black rape, "creating a kind of journalistic feedback loop which disguised and distorted social reality."²² Dixon exploits this hysterical fear of an omnipresent black threat, not by actually representing rapes occurring daily, which may have exposed the gap between his novels and the reality experienced by his readers. Instead, he makes the threat of black rape appear omnipresent by conflating all demands for racial equality with rape. Any black activity which involves crossing the colour-line is figured as a form of violation, threatening and sometimes physically harmful to white women. Consider the reaction of Mrs Gaston in *The Leopard's Spots*, when black men arrive to view her house, which the corrupt authorities are forcing her to sell to pay exorbitant taxes:

When she saw a great herd of Negroes trampling down her flowers, laughing, cracking vulgar jokes, and swarming over the porches, she sank feebly into her chair [...]. The poor woman's head drooped and she fell to the floor in a dead swoon (139).

As a direct consequence of this experience, Mrs Gaston dies, leading Sandra Gunning to observe that: "The very act of black appraisers entering the house is figured as a fatal violation of the submissive maternal body."²³

Dixon frequently tropes the entire South as a prone, white female body, suffering the ravages not just of military defeat and the "carpetbaggers" of the Reconstruction regimes, but also of African Americans daring to assert their equality. In one of the most

²² S. Kantrowitz, "White Supremacist Justice and the Rule of Law: Lynching, Honor and the State in Ben Tillman's South Carolina", *Men and Violence*, ed. by P. Spierenburg (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 220.

fantastical incidents in *The Leopard's Spots*, immediately after the predominantly black Reconstruction regime takes power, a blizzard occurs, where "every snowdrop had in it a tiny red spot that looked like a drop of blood!" (97). The red spots suggest violation and pollution of the racial whiteness and female innocence connoted by the snow. Dixon also portrays the rape of white women as the ultimate, hidden aim of every black demand for equality, repeatedly reducing all racial issues to one question: "*Shall the future American be an Anglo-Saxon or a mulatto?*" (161). As Sandra Gunning notes, for Dixon, "the threat of blacks voting, working, buying property and therefore inevitably achieving full citizenship must be reimagined as, and thus contained by, the threat of black rape."²⁴ In this way, Dixon seeks to extend the horror he has evoked in readers towards the menace of black sexual violence to cover all moves towards racial equality.

Although the style and rhetorical strategies within these novels are heavily determined by Dixon's desire to exploit the sexual investments of white society in black violence, they also reveal the many other ideological purposes images of black violence performed in this historical context. Dixon exerts a less deliberate rhetorical control over these aspects of his narrativisations of black violence, and they frequently threaten to undermine his central ideology, or expose his images of black violence as nothing more than politically expedient constructs. Despite his obsession with the threat of black violence, Dixon carefully circumscribes the forms this violence can take, in the clearest example of the strategy of denial in these novels. He insistently occludes historical causes for black violence, such as the pressures of poverty and white racism, to avoid undermining his argument for stricter forms of segregation and subjugation. As Joel Williamson has observed, there is some evidence that black criminality increased during the 1890s in response to the increasingly harsh and violent nature of white racism, the very measures which Dixon is advocating to prevent black violence.²⁵ He invariably attributes incidents of black violence to innate black characteristics such as lust, greed and malignancy. Furthermore, these traits never permit black characters to use violence in rationally planned ways. Some forms of violence are essential to hegemonic notions of

²³ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 37.

²⁴ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 32.

the power and superiority of white masculinity, and have to be kept separate from demonised images of black violence to maintain hierarchical notions of racial difference. Thus Dixon's black characters never possess the courage and intelligence to challenge white men in open, premeditated conflict.

This explains Dr Cameron's extraordinary ability to hypnotise Gus in *The Clansman*. At one point, a company of black soldiers led by Gus attempt to arrest Dr Cameron at gunpoint. He responds by reducing Gus to a dead faint, using only his eyes, causing the other black soldiers to flee in terror. Eventually white soldiers have to perform the arrest (227-228). Similarly, in *The Leopard's Spots*, when a "gang of Negroes" attempt to burn Reverend Durham, Dixon emphasises that they are "led by a white scoundrel"(128). Both novels contain frequent claims that the inevitable result of attempts to achieve racial equality in the South will be race war. But Dixon is always careful to point out that the only possible victors in such a conflict will be white people. In *The Leopard's Spots*, he claims Anglo-Saxon fury will sweep its victims before it like chaff before a whirlwind" (386). This simile reduces blacks to a passive role in racial conflict, figuring all force and agency as white. Dixon's representations of wild, bestial black violence strain to mask a fundamental contradiction in his white supremacist ideology. The extreme practices of segregation and subjugation he advocates require the justification of a serious black threat to white civilisation. Yet the concept of absolute, natural white supremacy also demands that African Americans be utterly incapable of challenging white dominance.

In *The Leopard's Spots*, Dixon creates a character who threatens to expose this fault-line in his ideology. Tim Shelby, the leading figure in the fictional Reconstruction regime Dixon represents, is a "full-blooded Negro," yet combines violent intent towards white people with intelligence and rationality (88). He possesses the power of reasoning and the rhetorical skills to goad other blacks into acts of violence against white property to further his own political ends (92-93). The immediacy with which he is eliminated from the text when he shows signs of using his intelligence to plan personal acts of violence against white people shows how the possibility of such a figure disturbed Dixon.

²⁵ See: J. Williamson, *Crucible*, pp. 115-116 and p. 208, where he describes how one black man shot a white man because of paranoid fantasies about being lynched, provoked by the climate of fear and

He is lynched just for attempting to use a combination of cunning and force to compel a white woman to kiss him (151). Shelby exemplifies the ideological difficulties Dixon experienced representing black violence in a way which served his twin aims of promoting white supremacy and national unity. He wants to blame the problems of Reconstruction not on Civil War defeat or Northern political policy but centrally on African Americans. But in so doing he has to risk inscribing the masculine qualities which are the foundation of white supremacy in black characters. In *The Clansman*, which is generally less ideologically ambiguous than *The Leopard's Spots*, Dixon resolves this problem by making the leading black politician a mixed race character. Silas Lynch is pointedly described as possessing "the head of a Caesar and the eyes of the jungle" (93). Dixon blames his innate, black malignancy for the evils of his Reconstruction regime, while crediting the intelligence and leadership abilities which enable him to obtain political power to his white blood. Similar combinations of white and black characteristics are possessed by all mixed race characters in *The Clansman*, which enables them to be used in support of Dixon's argument against miscegenation.

Dixon's novels show black violence as crucial to the formation of hegemonic white male subjectivity, not just as an Other for the projection of unacceptable sexual desires, but also as the territory on which the power of authentic white masculinity is enacted. At one point in *The Clansman*, a black politician declares: "Here and now I serve notice on every white man that I am as good as he is." Dixon describes this as "the challenge of race against race to mortal combat," emphasising how his concept of white masculinity is reliant on superiority to a subjugated Other (275). He perceives racial equality as a "mortal" challenge to the white race because it would destroy what he regards as the basis of white identity. Both novels imply the white men who dominated the antebellum South have been feminised by Civil War defeat and Federal laws which give African Americans equal citizenship. Sandra Gunning describes the amputated leg of Tom Camp, father of the fatally violated Flora in *The Leopard's Spots*, as an obvious "dephallicization." She claims: "Camp epitomizes the disempowered white male, at a loss to control either the women or the blacks around him."²⁶ In *The Clansman*, before he

violence.

²⁶ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 39.

joins the Ku Klux Klan, Dr Cameron is rendered as an indecisive, impotent figure. He is unable to resist the tyrannical black Reconstruction officials who put him in chains and parade him through the town. Dixon uses this scene as a provocative indication of how Reconstruction has reversed the racial hierarchy which underpinned slavery; chains were a crucial symbol of the reduction of slaves to passive, feminised objects (231-234).

The structure of Dixon's narratives indicates that this lost masculinity can only be recuperated by restoring white male dominance over African Americans. The hypervirile qualities we have seen projected onto black men to preserve the stability and the moral authority of the white male ego must be mastered and reclaimed to prove white male superiority. As Sandra Gunning observes: "In novels such as Dixon's [...] white torture and dismemberment of the black male body allowed for the political reinvigoration of Southern masculinity through a transference of [...] the black males imagined hypermasculinity."²⁷ In *The Clansman*, Dr Cameron appears to regain his masculinity through orchestrating the lynching of Gus, which makes him manly enough to take on the Reconstruction regime. In both novels, the heroes achieve what Dixon figures as appropriate white masculine power by leading white society in fighting and destroying the Black Beast menace. The lynchings Dixon figures as the only effective response to this menace offer a return to what Robyn Wiegman describes as the illusion of "totalised mastery" over African Americans, which the structure of slave society made crucial to white male identity.²⁸ Black men must be feminised and divested of all white male rights; such as citizenship, freedom of employment and voting rights. This denial of the powers naturalised as male by the patriarchal ideology of American society to black men requires to justify it the figuration of black masculinity as defective; primitive, violent and perverse, which must be controlled and destroyed.

However, the demonised images of violence Dixon uses to justify the subjugation of African Americans also threaten to taint descriptions of white violence, undermining Dixon's efforts to use these images to support a notion of fixed, natural racial difference. Dixon does not represent the true processes through which white men recuperated their masculinity to avoid collapsing the rhetorical boundary between descriptions of white

²⁷ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 12.

²⁸ R. Wiegman, *American*, p. 100.

and black violence, which is so crucial to the white supremacist ideology of these novels. Consider the curious role he gives Charles Gaston in the lynching of Dick in *The Leopard's Spots*. Although Gaston is a fervent spokesman for white supremacy, he attempts to prevent the mob who capture Dick from burning him, saying: "Don't disgrace our [...] claims to humanity by this insane brutality. A beast wouldn't do this. You wouldn't kill a mad dog or a rattlesnake in such a way" (383). The terms of Gaston's objection show the nature of Dixon's anxieties. Gaston is not concerned about Dick's suffering, but with preserving the boundary between Dick, who the text has already reduced to a bestial, "mad dog" status, and the mob, who will be reduced to a similar bestial level by this method of killing. The lynching threatens to expose the existence of the violent, sadistic desires the white mob claim to be destroying within themselves. This explains why Dixon represses from his descriptions of lynching rituals, elements such as castration, which were so symbolic of the reinvigoration of white masculinity. He then contrives a way for Gaston to assume "natural" white male authority through other forms of violence which establish his dominance over black men. He leads a white mob in forcing the resignation of all black political officeholders, and in destroying the offices of a local black newspaper, whose editor has impugned white Southern women (413-418). These acts imbue Gaston with authentic white male power. He then makes a stirring, Negrophobic speech to the Democrat convention, which leads to his election as governor, with a mandate for absolute white supremacy (437-448).

In *The Clansman* Dixon finds a way to make this destruction of the Black Beast more central to empowering the white male subject through the ritualised violence of the Ku Klux Klan. When Gus is re-enacting his crime, the Klansmen attack him, "kicking, stamping cursing and crying like madmen." But Dr Cameron restrains them, shouting: "Men! Men! You must not kill him in this condition" (323-324). The ambiguity of "condition" here reflects Dixon's anxieties. It may denote Gus's hypnotised state, but it may also refer to the excited, vengeful condition of the Klansmen. Dr Cameron articulates Dixon's anxiety that white violence will collapse distinctions between the races. After this, Dr Cameron performs a ritual involving the blood of Marion Lenoir and a burning cross, giving his command to execute Gus a sacred, sanctified status (324-327). As Gunning observes: "Only in the highly ritualized, controlled executions performed by

the Ku Klux Klan does white male violence become a fully liberating, purifying experience that absolves the whites of guilt and restores the 'natural' order."²⁹ These rituals preserve the distinction between black and white violence, thus enabling the lynching of Gus to be depicted as a key moment in Ben Cameron's assumption of white male power. He subsequently leads a white mob in disarming the Negro regiment, destroying the power of the Reconstruction regime (337-341 and 373-374). Nevertheless, Dixon still suppresses any direct description of the lynching of Gus from the text. He still ostensibly disavows the crucial role of the Black Beast in white male subject formation even as the underlying structure of his narrative confirms it.

Dixon's novels also reflect how the Black Beast reinvigorated white masculinity by providing a new justification for absolute patriarchal authority over women. Significantly, all the women who fall victim to black violence in these novels have transgressed patriarchal authority somehow. In *The Leopard's Spots*, Annie Camp insists on marrying without her father's approval and is kidnapped by black soldiers on her wedding day, and Flora Camp disobeys her father's command to "run every time you see a nigger" shortly before she is attacked by Dick (126-127 and 369-375). In *The Clansman*, Marion Lenoir and her mother reject Ben Cameron's offer of protection on their first night in their remote farmhouse, and they are attacked by Gus and his cohorts (300-304). Kim Magowan claims this pattern shows any degree of independent female agency is problematic for Dixon.³⁰ Alive, women possess a troubling degree of alien subjectivity and mobile desire for Dixon, which may compromise his insistence on absolute white male supremacy. But in death, as Sandra Gunning observes, they become "tangible evidence of black criminality, the necessary sacred text required to validate white supremacist violence."³¹ At a time of growing feminist demands for greater independence in American society, these novels use images of black male violence to justify a rigid form of patriarchy which maintains absolute male authority over women.

Dixon's novels reflect how not just individual white subjectivity but also collective white identity became reliant on the Black Beast narrative. His representations

²⁹ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 41.

³⁰ K. Magowan, "Coming Between the 'Black Beast' and the White Virgin: The Pressures of Liminality in Thomas Dixon", *Studies in American Fiction*, 27:1 (1999), 77-102, pp. 96-97.

³¹ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 42.

of black violence provide a crucial foundation for a new era of national unity. Dixon's suggestion of the title *The Birth of a Nation* for the film inspired by these books demonstrates his understanding of the ideological work his images of black violence performed. Walter Benn Michaels has shown how Dixon recast the meaning of the Civil War and Emancipation, transforming them into necessary prerequisites of a new form of national unity. By eliminating all economic, political and sectional divisions, these events made national identity coterminous with racial identity.³² As I will show, the demonised representations of black violence in these novels are crucial to this unity.

In each novel, Dixon posits a new definition of American national identity. In *The Clansman*, Dr Cameron declares:

The Republic is great not by reason of the amount of dirt we possess, the size of our census roll, or our voting register – we are great because of the genius of the race of pioneer white freemen who settled this continent, dared the might of kings and made a wilderness the home of Freedom. Our future depends on the purity of this racial stock (291).

In his crucial speech in *The Leopard's Spots*, which convinces white society to overthrow the biracial regime and subjugate African Americans, Charles Gaston proclaims:

We are not free because we have a Constitution. We have a Constitution because our pioneer fathers who cleared the wilderness and dared the might of kings, were freemen. It was in their blood, the tutelage of generation on generation beyond the seas, the evolution of centuries of struggle and sacrifice (442).

Both these passages deploy the same rhetorical logic. They transform all the conventionally accepted causes of American greatness – the Constitution, democratic freedoms, the successful settlement of a vast, fertile area of land – into mere effects of the real cause: the “blood” of the men who forged these achievements. Dixon empties American identity of all other determinants and fetishises whiteness as the crucial characteristic. The inherent qualities of whiteness itself justify the use of any means to achieve white supremacy, no matter how radically they contradict the democratic

³² W. B. Michaels, “The Souls of White Folk”, *Literature and the Body*, ed. by E. Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 188.

principles of American identity. Throughout both novels, appeals to a mystical blood heritage guarantee the difference between black brutality and the forms of extra-judicial and anti-democratic violence white characters commit.

This racial ideology appealed to both Southern and Northern whites at the time Dixon was writing. Civil War defeat and the abolition of their principle economic institution left Southerners needing a new basis for the sense of superiority slavery had granted them, which was not based on their ignominious external, historical circumstances. In the North, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an industrial revolution which involved massive immigration, urbanisation and movement from agrarian to industrial modes of employment. These changes created a state of social flux, in which, as Grace E. Hale observes: “Americans of both regions shattered the old hierarchical structures of power, imagined as organic and divinely inspired, and used the fragments to erect more binary orderings, imagined as natural and physically grounded.”³³ The black-white binary became central to American national identity, especially in the 1890s, when the Southern disenfranchisement of African Americans coincided with the colonisation of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War in 1898. An ideology of natural white superiority was required to justify violating Constitutional principles by denying non-white people living in American territory full citizenship and democratic freedom.

However, making racial whiteness a fixed and absolute determinant of identity in this way has substantial social ramifications. Whiteness is not a culturally constructed constituent of identity, negotiated and developed by the community like democracy and the rule of law. It is an ontological, supposedly natural absolute, preceding any cultural, social activity. As a basis of group identity, it offers no scope for the expression of political and economic differences within white society. People can only identify absolutely with the fixed image of whiteness this ideology proffers. All other differences have to be subordinated to maintain the fiction that whiteness is the primary determinant of social identity. The Black Beast therefore became crucial as an external embodiment of chaos and an Other to project and release unconscious desires and social tensions on.

³³ G. E. Hale, *Making*, p. 5.

Dixon seeks to disguise the crucial role of the Black Beast mythos in the production of racial unity to avoid exposing that it is not naturally occurring. But its role is evident in the narrative dynamics of both novels. Dixon purports to idealise a feminised, model of black manhood, exemplified by Nelse in *The Leopard's Spots*. He remains doggishly loyal to his former masters, bringing the sword of Charles Gaston's father back from the Civil War to give to Gaston (9-14). He tries to assist the uninterrupted transmission of the phallic, patriarchal authority this sword symbolises to a new generation of white men, and takes a "mammy" role in Gaston's education as Sandra Gunning observes.³⁴ But such images of blackness are useless in producing the new forms of collective white identity Dixon advocates. To produce a rigid racial divide and an absolutely unified white community which believes in racial homogeneity as its most important bond, the Black Beast narrative is required. Consider the effects of the discovery of Flora's battered body upon white society in *The Leopard's Spots*:

In a moment the white race had fused into a homogenous mass of love, sympathy, hate and revenge. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the banker and the blacksmith, the great and the small, they were all one now. [...] But at the end of an hour there was not a Negro among them! By some subtle instinct they had recognised the secret feeling and fears of the crowd and had disappeared. Had they been beasts of the field the gulf between them would not have been deeper (372).

This polarisation of the races points up by contrast the lack of racial unity in the previous part of the novel. In the absence of the Black Beast, Southern society fractured along lines of class and gender.

Dixon attempts to mask class divisions through the rest of the text by foregrounding the highly sentimentalised friendship between Tom Camp and General Worth.³⁵ He posits their mutual love and admiration, despite their huge socio-economic differences, as the norm of white Southern class relations. But his desire to represent events in 1890s North Carolina as a warning against giving African Americans political power compels him to acknowledge the very different attitude of most poor-whites to the plantocracy. Poverty drove many white farmers into alliance with the Fusion party of

³⁴ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 36.

Republicans and Populists which dominated state politics until 1898. Dixon traduces all white politicians prepared to work with African Americans as scoundrels, motivated purely by self-interest, and ridicules their schemes for economic reform.³⁵ Yet he also has to show that this supposedly motley alliance drove the traditionally dominant, white supremacist Democrats from power (323). Only the emergence of the Black Beast threat in the narrative produces the type of white racial unity visible in the passage quoted above, which increases after a black regiment encamped in the town uses armed violence against white people. Only this galvanises whites to unite and fight for a white supremacist, racially segregated form of government (414-418). Furthermore, both novels insist that horrific black rapes also occurred during Reconstruction, yet *The Leopard's Spots* shows that less than twenty years later whites are prepared to consider biracial political co-operation as a solution to their economic problems. Dixon inadvertently exposes the Black Beast as a construct of white supremacist ideology, a figure in a drama which needs to be played out repeatedly to maintain white unity.

Dixon's novels demonstrate, then, how images of demonised black violence came to perform many crucial roles in the production of hegemonic white identity and of hegemonic white culture, its patriarchy and class structure. To reconsider black violence meant reconsidering the bonds which gave American society a sense of political unity, it risked exposing the class and regional differences black violence masked. It also meant reconsidering gender politics, sexuality and the very basis of white male subjectivity. The stability and consistency of the white male ego became reliant on a particular notion of black violence.

These circumstances perhaps explain the failure of an African American novel which perceptively dissected and exposed these images of black violence as ideological constructs. *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) by Charles W. Chesnutt was actually published a year before *The Leopard's Spots*, but it is clearly a response to the already-existing types of Radical rhetoric Dixon inscribes in literary form. Chesnutt challenges the Black Beast Rapist narrative in two key ways. He exposes the white supremacist political interests behind the distortions and fabrications which produced the image of the

³⁵ See: 64 and 378 for examples of their relationship.

³⁶ Dixon refers repeatedly to a plan to issue pumpkin leaves as currency (See: 243, 267 and 353-354).

Black Beast, and he attempts to articulate the types and causes of real black violence during this era outside the rhetoric of demonisation. Chesnutt literalises the idea of the Beast as a projection of white desire by depicting a white man assuming blackface to commit a crime. Although this crime is only robbery, which leads an old woman to fall and fatally injure herself, the taint of blackness leads to wild accusations from the white community. Through the discourse of scientific racism, in the form of Retrogression theory, the white community construes this crime as the product of a black man's "degraded ancestral instincts, [...] a rapid decline had culminated in robbery and murder – and who knew what other horror?"³⁷ Chesnutt understood as well as Dixon how apt contemporary Southerners were to imagine this "other horror," and he depicts an angry mob gathering to burn the accused black man. They interpret and articulate the crime in the same, melodramatic, emotive rhetoric Dixon would popularise as an accurate depiction of African American behaviour:

A white woman had been assaulted and murdered by a brutal negro. Neither advanced age, nor high social standing had been able to protect her from the ferocity of a black savage. Her sex, which should have been her shield and buckler had made her an easy mark for the villainy of a black brute. To take the time to try him would be a criminal waste of public money. To hang him would be too slight a punishment for so dastardly a crime. An example must be made (148).

Despite the absence of evidence to support their surmise, the inexorable logic of the Black Beast narrative leads the white community to fantasise a rape and devise what they consider the only appropriate punishment for it. When the black man is exonerated, the mob quickly realises the "absurdity" of the rape charge (159). Chesnutt displays an acute understanding of how political and media activity inculcated this logic in the public imagination. Media coverage instantly figures this crime within the Black Beast paradigm:

All over the United States the Associated Press had flashed the report of another dastardly outrage by a burly black brute – all black brutes it seems are burly – and

³⁷ C. Chesnutt, *Tradition* (London: The X Press, 1998), p. 121. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

of the impending lynching with its prospective horrors. This news, being highly sensational in its character had been displayed in large black type on the front pages of the daily papers. The dispatch that followed, to the effect that the accused had been found innocent [...] received slight attention, if any (160).

In an increasingly media-saturated American popular culture, African Americans only obtain visibility as criminals. Chesnutt also exposes the cynical political manipulation which helped form the Black Beast image. Like *The Leopard's Spots*, this novel offers a fictional version of the Wilmington Riot of 1898. Chesnutt shows how powerful white supremacist figures in the community exploit this crime to increase white support for their planned seizure of power (122-124).

Chesnutt also challenged the myth of the Black Beast through representing a violent black character outside the vocabulary of this fantasy. Josh Green seems destined to commit extreme violence from his first appearance in the text, when he bears the scars of a recent fight with a sailor. But this fight was caused by the sailor calling him a “damned low-down nigger” (74). This exemplifies how Chesnutt figures this character’s violence not as naturally, racially determined but as a product of the environmental, social factors which Dixon so insistently occludes. Chesnutt depicts this violence as honourable, “manly” resistance to the humiliation and oppression of white racism, rejecting the distinction between black and white masculinity Dixon encodes in his representations of black violence. A member of the Ku Klux Klan shot Green’s father, and he dedicates his life to taking revenge on the murderer. To emphasise the distinction between Green’s violence and the black brute of white fantasy, Chesnutt carefully humanises him, repeatedly referring to his concern for his elderly mother, which prevents him taking revenge and risking his life while she is alive.³⁸ When the white supremacist uprising begins, Green gathers a force of armed black men to protect the African American community. Chesnutt reverses the hegemonic distinctions Dixon will exploit between black and white violence. He portrays Green and his comrades as disciplined, brave men defending their community in a justifiable way. By contrast, he turns the strategies of demonisation conventionally used to figure black violence against the white mob, who are rendered as cowardly, criminal and governed by “primal passions” (217).

³⁸ See for example: 75.

They murder African Americans indiscriminately to satisfy these passions like a “wolf in a sheepfold” (208). Green finally dies leading a fatally brave charge against the white mob and killing his father’s murderer. This is represented in the heroic terms Dixon reserves for acts of white violence: “Some of the crowd paused in involuntary admiration for this black giant, [...] sweeping down on them, a smile upon his face, his eyes lit up with a rapt expression which seemed to take him out of mortal ken” (216). As we shall see, such representations of rebellious black violence would remain extremely rare in American literature for at least half a century after this. Green embodies a radical alternative to the Black Beast figure, but it is an alternative which would remain marginalised and devoid of cultural capital.

Chesnutt attempted to use his novel to combat the rise of the Radical discourse of black violence by sending copies to President Theodore Roosevelt and members of Congress when *The Leopard’s Spots* was published.³⁹ But this effort failed to challenge the growing cultural hegemony of the Black Beast fantasy. The images and rhetoric of black violence to which Dixon made such an important contribution began to dominate other discursive fields. In a speech to the U. S. Senate in 1906, Ben Tillman claimed “forty to a hundred Southern maidens were annually offered as a sacrifice to the African Minotaur.” He insisted he would rather find his daughter killed by “a tiger or a bear” than “robbed of the jewel of her maidenhood by a black fiend.”⁴⁰ As Eric Sundquist has observed, his demonisation of black men “tak[es] a page directly from Dixon.”⁴¹ Dunning School historians, as Grace E. Hale has observed, had a tendency to “sound surprisingly like Dixon.”⁴² Eric Foner’s summary of their representation of the freedpeople in the postbellum South shows Dixon’s influence: “Blacks appeared [...] as unthinking people whose ‘animal natures’ threatened the stability of civilized society.”⁴³ The Dunning School transformed Dixon’s fictional insistence on the black man as a constant threat to white womanhood into an accepted fact of American historiography. In a 1905 work, Philip Bruce claimed, with no detailed, factual evidence, that black rape had become a

³⁹ S. Gunning, *Race*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Cited in E. Sundquist, *Wake*, p. 409.

⁴¹ E. Sundquist, *Wake*, p. 409.

⁴² G. E. Hale, *Making*, pp. 80-81.

⁴³ E. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. xx.

daily occurrence in the South.⁴⁴ This myth would not be exploded by less tendentious historical research for over half a century.

Dixon also influenced many other authors of fiction, writing from diverse ideological and aesthetic positions. In *The Jungle* (1906), a naturalist novel about the mistreatment of immigrant workers in Chicago, socialist author Upton Sinclair describes strike-breaking African American workers as “human beasts”:

[Y]oung white country girls [were] rubbing elbows with big buck Negroes with daggers in their boots [...]. The ancestors of these people had been savages in Africa [...]. Now for the first time they were free – free to gratify every passion [...] and with the night there began a saturnalia of debauchery – scenes such as never before had been witnessed in America.⁴⁵

The description of black men as violent and violating, the insinuation of their uncontrolled sexuality and the sense of outrage at their proximity to white women all suggest the influence of Dixon. The mere presence of black men in the Northern metropolis is figured as invasive, a distinctly sexual threat to the racial purity of white urban society. Instead of extending his socialist sympathy for exploited workers to include African Americans, Sinclair demonises them as one of the problems suffered by white workers. They are irreducibly Other to white humanity. Sinclair defines his immigrant characters as human, and as deserving of better treatment through opposition to these demonised images of African Americans. It is their behaviour which is foreign to American values, which exceeds anything previously witnessed in America, because of their “savage” ancestry. Sinclair’s novel exemplifies how the concept of the Black Beast was crucial to formulating new racially-based, notions of American identity which encompassed ethnically diverse white immigrants. *The Jungle* also demonstrates how the Black Beast narrative shaped reactions to the black migrants entering Northern cities at this time, which would have profound implications for future cultural images of black violence, as we shall see later in the thesis. Although Dixon’s popularity soon waned dramatically, the tropes of black violence he formulated had become established in

⁴⁴ P. Bruce, *The Rise of the New South*, cited in E. Sundquist, *Wake*, p. 409.

⁴⁵ U. Sinclair, *The Jungle* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 328. Sandra Gunning also cites this passage to demonstrate the wide influence of Radical images of black violence. S. Gunning, *Race*, pp. 24-25.

American literary discourse. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, these tropes had an enduring impact on American literature, albeit as something to be reacted against and challenged.

CHAPTER TWO

REPRESENTING BLACK VIOLENCE IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: THE PROBLEM OF PRIMITIVISM

Harlem Renaissance representations of black violence reflect the changing racial ideology of American culture.¹ Joel Williamson claims that with the demise of Radicalism as a political ideology during the nineteen-tens and twenties, “went the death of the image of the Negro as beast.”² The black image in the white cultural Imaginary now assumed a role Williamson calls “neo-Sambo.” This figure, like his antebellum predecessor, was “docile, subordinate, pliable, conforming and loyal.”³ African Americans who refused this stereotype were rendered invisible by a culture which focussed purely on minstrelised comedy characters such as Stepin Fetchit. Increasingly, white Americans sought to deny the very possibility of black violence. In 1919 in Arkansas, black farmers’ fired on a posse of propertied whites who broke up their union meeting, killing one white man and sparking off racial conflict which left five whites and twenty blacks dead. The local white authorities blamed this violence entirely on outside white agitators, a claim *New York Times* reports on the incident endorsed.⁴ Williamson reads the 1915 Leo Frank lynching in Atlanta, where a Jew was blamed for killing a white girl despite a more obvious black suspect, as evidence of a new white determination “not to see a black beast rapist when they had one right before their eyes. They were rapidly losing the capacity to cope with the omnipresent threat, and they were determined to substitute menaces more manageable.”⁵ Conversely, I believe the very manageability of African Americans in this era, their total subjugation to white control, reduced the need for the Black Beast fantasy. The black population was growing in the North and South, in defiance of the predictions of Radical thinkers that African Americans would gradually die-out, but it remained completely dominated by white power. Although Northern blacks possessed more rights, the racial segregation of

¹ The Harlem Renaissance is usually understood to be approximately 1923-1933, although some later works by authors who were part of this movement are often also grouped under the same term.

² J. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, p. 460.

³ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 463.

⁴ See: H. Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 148-149 for a detailed account of this incident and see: A. D. Grimshaw, *Racial Violence in the United States* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), pp. 95-96 for the reports from the *New York Times*.

Northern, urban space and the political quietude of black communities ensured white society did not perceive them as any kind of threat. In Dixon's era, the memory of threats to white supremacy such as biracial political alliances was fresh, but now African Americans' subordinate position in the national body politic seemed fixed and unchangeable. This opened a space for new, less propagandist images of black violence to appear, which revealed white psychosexual investments in the idea of black violence in new ways.

Black violence was transformed from a political threat to a fascinating, exotic cultural phenomenon. White readers developed a taste for representations of the natural primitivism and exciting strangeness of black life, and they regarded violence as an essential element of this. This led to the formulation of the trope of the "exotic primitive" in both black and white literature. The trope of the exotic primitive combines within itself the strategies of denial and demonisation. It demonises violence as an inherent, racially determined trait of black character, while simultaneously circumscribing the potentialities of this violence as limited to intraracial expression. In this, it follows Dixon's insistence on the inability of black men to challenge white men, thus preserving the difference between white and black masculinity which is crucial to racist ideology. This enables black violence to be seen in a new light as aesthetically pleasing and fascinating. The Black Beast Rapist discourse served to reinforce the stifling straitjacket of Victorian patriarchal morality. But exotic primitivism enabled black violence to be used to offer liberating forms of transgressive sexual pleasure to whites without challenging the idea of violence as naturally black, or endangering the fixed, superior white male ego.

I acknowledge that many African American intellectuals conceived of the Harlem Renaissance in very different terms, as an opportunity to challenge hegemonic stereotypes, and produce more realistic literary images of black people.⁶ Violence was a

⁵ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 471. See pp. 468–472 for a full account of this case.

⁶ For example, Alain Locke confidently claimed in his 1925 essay "The New Negro" that American culture would now transcend stereotypes of blackness: "Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on [...]. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts." He regarded Harlem as the "laboratory of a great race-welding", giving African Americans their "first chances for group expression and self-determination" in a new environment of racial unity and freedom, unlike the fragmented, embattled black communities of the rural South. Locke felt these changes would have a beneficial effect upon the representation of blacks in literature: "the Negro is being carefully studied, not just talked about and discussed. In art and letters, instead of being wholly

serious social problem in Harlem at this time; most years, Harlem had a murder rate which was double or triple the New York average.⁷ The potential explanations for this violence involved numerous, complex, historical, cultural and psychological factors. Articulating these factors in literary discourse was an immensely difficult but, in the eyes of many black writers politically necessary, task, in order to challenge racist explanations of this violence. But new white attitudes towards blackness created heavy commercial pressures for very different, non-realistic images of black violence. Publishing, in almost every available form, was controlled by white people. White editors, authors and agents possessed the power to make or break the careers of African American writers.⁸ White readers were the largest market for any form of literature, and further pressures came from black intellectuals. Black Harlem Renaissance writers were caught in a double-bind Langston Hughes articulated well:

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "O be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites.⁹

He knew the difficulties of negotiating the demands of white patrons and an overwhelmingly white readership for entertainment, while satisfying the propagandist demands of the black middle-class. For many black intellectuals, who were so concerned about improving the official image of African Americans, there was almost no way of representing black violence which they did not find derogatory and contributory to white racism.

These circumstances demonstrate why representations of black violence in the literature of The Harlem Renaissance have always been politically controversial. Many subsequent African American writers have rejected the literary legacy of this movement, either ignoring it or explicitly reacting against it. Nevertheless, this chapter will argue

caricatured, he is being seriously portrayed and painted." A. Locke, "The New Negro", *Within the Circle*, ed. by A. Mitchell, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 23 -26.

⁷ J. de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.

⁸ See: R. E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature*, p. 53 for a useful explanation of the effects of this white control over all forms of publication on the Harlem Renaissance.

that this literature constitutes a crucial moment in the development of representations of black violence in Twentieth Century American literature. Black violence is rarely a central theme in Harlem Renaissance fiction, although it often pervades the setting of the novel. Thus I will focus briefly on a number of different texts, revealing the debates they articulate and inspire about the representation of black violence, which have remained important in subsequent American literature.

The first signs of the vogue for black primitivism which characterised the Harlem Renaissance appear in much earlier writing. Gertrude Stein published "Melanctha" in 1909, but the mode of depicting black violence this story employs foreshadows all the literature of this movement. Descriptions of James Herbert, Melanctha's father, appear to reprise Dixon's tropes of the violent black male. He is described as "a powerful, lose built, hard handed, black angry Negro." A "big black virile negro" who looks "very black and evil," and is "brutal and rough to his one daughter."¹⁰ Stein appears to be building to depictions of brutal, horrific violence, which didactically demonstrate black retrogression, savagery and inability to fit into civilised society. But when a razor fight breaks out between Herbert and the black man he believes is attempting to seduce Melanctha, Stein reassures the reader: "Razor fighting does not wound very deeply, but it makes a cut that looks most nasty, for it is so very bloody" (62-63). This describes perfectly the function of black violence in Stein's story. It provides a sensational, exciting display of black primitivism which is used primarily for entertainment purposes. It looks shocking but it is denied any depth or seriousness. Stein does not significantly alter the essential character traits Dixon attributed to black men, but she uses them very differently. She does not seek to create racist propaganda justifying the harsh oppression of African Americans, but to create an interesting and alien new figure in American literature: the exotic primitive. Her descriptions of the wider black community in this novel emphasise this new aesthetic function: "It was summer now and the colored people came out into the sunshine full blown with the flowers. And they shone in the streets and in the fields with their warm joy" (137). Stein's story marks the beginning of a new mode in American literature of figuring African Americans as a source of cultural energy and

⁹ L. Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *Within the Circle*, pp. 57-58.

vitality. In a manner resembling the European modernist interest in primitive cultures, manifested in the African masks of Picasso and the primitive rites of Stravinsky's ballets, African Americans began to be rendered as possessing a special bond with nature and instinct. They were represented as a special breed of humanity, not alienated from their instincts by the civilising process and the experience of urban, industrial life in the manner which had left white culture jaded and worn out.

One of the first Harlem Renaissance novels to reflect and contribute to these new tropes of blackness was Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). "Blood Burning Moon" depicts a struggle for sexual possession of a young black woman, Louisa, culminating in a murderous fight between her black and white lovers. The story initially appears politically radical; Toomer does not conform to the strategies of denial usually displayed by white formulations of the exotic primitive trope. He depicts extreme black violence which is not intraracial, but directed against a white man, and he depicts this violence as a product of white racism. Toomer does limit the politically controversial aspect of this violence by carefully delineating it as self-defence. The black man Tom only begins to fight when the white man Bob attacks him, and he uses Bob's own knife to slit his throat, after Bob tries to stab him. But this may have been done to prevent interpretations of Tom as a stereotypical black man, who is naturally violent without provocation. Towards the beginning of the story, Toomer enters the minds of both his protagonists and reveals briefly but tellingly the psychological origins of the impending violence, which are rooted in the racism of Southern culture. Tom is angered by his inability to fulfil the concept of masculinity idealised by hegemonic culture, in which the exertion of patriarchal ownership over a woman is an essential element. Because the racist structure of Southern society denies him the social status of manhood, he feels only able to prove his masculinity through violence, threatening the friends who taunt him with rumours about Louisa's white lover with a knife.¹¹ Bob feels frustrated and humiliated by his inability to fulfil an antebellum model of white manhood, the "totalised mastery" over African Americans we saw recuperated by lynching rituals in the previous chapter. He

¹⁰ G. Stein, "Melanctha", *Three Lives* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1970), p. 40, pp. 60-61. Subsequent references to this story appear in parentheses in the text.

¹¹ J. Toomer, *Cane* (London: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. 31. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

cannot maintain the kind of open and absolute control over black female sexuality, regardless of black male claims, exerted by masters over female slaves (33-34). Thus Toomer at least gestures towards the malign legacy of slavery with regard to racial relations in the contemporary South, even though he does not analyse these dysfunctions of black and white Southern masculinity in any detail.

In a groundbreaking essay, Barbara Foley has argued for a much stronger connection between *Cane* and the racial politics of its era than critics usually make. She demonstrates cogently how the stories of lynchings mentioned in the “Kabnis” section of the novel allude to some of the most horrific historical incidents of white racist violence from contemporary Georgia.¹² She reads all the references to lynching in *Cane* as a deliberate contestation of the hegemonic Southern narrative which invariably linked lynching with horrific sexual crimes against white women.¹³ All these incidents show black men lynched for reasons unconnected to the rape of white women. If “Blood Burning Moon” constitutes an element of this narrative strategy, we might read the violence in this story as an attempt to undermine and contest the stereotype of the Black Beast Rapist. This would align *Cane* with the very different, openly propagandist, anti-lynching novels produced by members of the NAACP at this time.¹⁴ However, even Foley accepts that Toomer only really engages with the issue of lynching on a political level in “Kabnis.” Toomer challenged the grounds of justification for white racist violence. But he was not prepared to attempt the more controversial, radical and difficult task of representing black violence in realistic, openly politicised terms. In the first two sections of *Cane*, which contain the only significant representations of black violence in the novel, “symbol and myth predominate over concrete historicity.”¹⁵

This use of symbol and myth make the aesthetics of the black violence in “Blood Burning Moon” politically problematic. The language and style of the descriptions of the violence at the climax of this tale severely detract from the sense it has historical, cultural causes. Jerry Bryant claims that Toomer’s use of natural symbols to portend this violence, most obviously the blood-red full moon of the title, elevates the violence to a

¹² B. Foley, “‘In the Land of Cotton’: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*”, *African American Review*, 32:2 (1998), 181-198.

¹³ B. Foley, “Land”, p. 188.

¹⁴ For example: Walter White’s *The Fire in the Flint*, (1924).

supernatural, archetypal status. It makes of the conflict between Tom and Bob a “cosmic disharmony,” destined to result in murderous violence, rather than focussing on its specific socio-historical context. Tom and Bob “submit to their roles and play out the fate written into their southern script. They move like characters in myth, not so much by conscious will as by instinct and feeling – love, jealousy, race pride, race fear.”¹⁶ The very sparse, concise terms in which their fight is described produce this sense of fate and instinct superseding conscious will. Toomer gives no sense of subjective motives behind the violence, usually describing only the violent movements themselves, without even any reference to a human agent performing these actions (35). As Bryant suggests in the above quotation, this might reveal how the actions of these men are determined by the coercive ideological scripts of their culture, which offer black and white men only absolutely fixed masculine identities. The insistent racism and patriarchy of their culture makes this interracial violence over a woman inevitable. But Toomer’s language only gives a sense of natural determinants, not political ones.

Although the story is told in a highly poetic tone, dense with symbolism and figurative language, the actual descriptions of violence use sparse, reportorial language, which does not shrink from describing the horror of Tom and Bob’s fight:

Blue flash, a steel blade slashed across Bob Stone’s throat. He had a sweetish sick feeling. Blood began to flow. Then he felt a sharp twitch of pain. He let his knife drop. He slapped one hand against his neck. He pressed the other on top of his head as if to hold it down. He groaned (35).

Despite this refusal to aestheticise the fight and the lynching in direct, conventional terms, however, this violence has an important contrastive function in producing the overall sense of poetic beauty within this tale. Any intention of representing violence realistically or making a political statement against white racism is ultimately subordinated to aestheticisation by the tale. As Jerry Bryant has observed, the philosophy which underlies this contrast between beauty and horror in the first section of *Cane* is explicitly stated at one point in the novel:

¹⁵ B. Foley, “Land”, p. 193.

¹⁶ J. H. Bryant, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 131-132.

Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death (62).¹⁷

This emphasises the pervasive sense within *Cane* that the violence and suffering of Southern black life are crucial to the beauty and vibrancy Toomer is revealing within it. The beauty of the Southern landscape and the black folk culture depicted in the first section of *Cane* seems to require this violence to give it its full aesthetic power. Edward Margolies summarises critical objections to this aspect of *Cane* by asking: “Is Toomer unconsciously saying that beauty resides in the pain and suffering of black men?”¹⁸

It is significant that, in contrast to his description of Bob’s fatal stabbing, Toomer does not describe Tom’s subjective experience of his even more horrific death. He describes him only from an external perspective: “His face, his eyes were set and stony. Except for irregular breathing one would have thought him already dead. [...] Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone” (36). As they suffer murderous violence, Bob is mobile and human, the reader can identify with his suffering sympathetically, but Tom is static, reduced to a horrific, but aesthetically powerful symbol. Like earlier white fiction, *Cane* insists on the superhuman endurance of the black male lynching victim, and uses his destroyed body as a symbol. Toomer himself corroborated this sense that black violence and suffering were essential to his aesthetic vision of the South after visiting Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. He complained that the black community had lost contact with their passionate, full-blooded ancestral folk culture, becoming bland and anaemic. He relates this decline to the lower degree of interracial hostility outside the Deep South: “Racial attitudes on both sides are ever so much more tolerant, even friendly. Oppression and ugly emotions seem nowhere in evidence. And there are no folk songs.”¹⁹

The contrast between depictions of black violence in this first, Southern, mythical section of *Cane* and the second, Northern, urban section, underscores the sense that black

¹⁷ See also: J. Bryant, *Victims*, p. 132.

¹⁸ E. Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), p. 40.

violence is primarily an aesthetic concern in *Cane*. Scenes such as the boxing match between the dwarves place focus centrally on how urban life has left African Americans cut off from their folk culture (67). Bourgeois notions of respectability compel them to repress the passions and instincts so vibrantly displayed in the South, and they return as grotesque, meaningless outbursts of violence. Some political significance can be detected, but this always seems subordinated to aesthetic considerations.²⁰ Furthermore, the suggestions that black violence is a product of atavistic, instinctive passions in African Americans threatens to completely deconstruct the novel's subtle, earlier attempts to situate black violence in specific political and cultural contexts. Toomer demonstrated that the violence of contemporary black life offered fertile material for dramatic and innovative forms of literary expression. However, although the primitivism he represented was rooted in the circumstances of a specific, rural folk culture, subsequent authors could easily detach his tropes from their context and use them to figure primitivism as the natural, ahistorical essence of blackness.²¹ Intentionally or not, he contributed to a demonising literary discourse which developed a new way of figuring violence as an innate element of black character, a discourse which achieves its most controversial expression in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

Nigger Heaven has polarised critical opinion ever since its publication. Many contemporary African American critics condemned the novel, most notably W. E. B. DuBois, whose objections many subsequent critics have endorsed.²² Bernard W. Bell claims: "Van Vechten reduced his black characters to tortured, often grotesque, amoral souls who inhabited a jungle of joy, in which the good life was symbolized by barbaric orgies, fights and jive talk."²³ Yet Nathan Huggins praises *Nigger Heaven* as the first generally read novel" which took "the Negro as its subject and abandoned the

¹⁹ Quoted in: J. Bryant, *Victims*, p. 134.

²⁰ For example, Roger Rosenblatt interprets the black audience's encouragement of the dwarves' violence as a sign of how they are perpetuating the "cycle of brutality," initiated by the impact of white racist oppression upon them, "in which each group seeks only to find solace or satisfaction in the humiliation of another." R. Rosenblatt, *Black Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 57. But Toomer makes no explicit link between the popularity of this violent spectacle and the effects of racism.

²¹ Toomer always denied he believed in natural racial difference, claiming he used tropes of race and blood only as metaphors. J. Toomer, "The Americans", *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*, ed. by F. L. Rusch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 109.

²² W. E. B. Du Bois, "Books", *Crisis*, 33:12 (December 1926), 2.

stereotype.”²⁴ These radically different verdicts may result from the inconsistencies within the text. Detractors tend to judge the entire novel by controversial yet relatively brief sections. As Huggins goes on to observe, there is a sharp contradiction between Van Vechten’s attempts to depict Harlem as a socially and intellectually diverse community, containing as wide a variety of human types as white society, and his tendency to portray “the Negro as a natural primitive” who can only preserve his “mental health” by avoiding “civilized artificiality.”²⁵

The contradictions within the representation of blackness reflect the inconsistencies of contemporary white racial ideology. The bulk of the narrative focuses on bourgeois, intellectual blacks who speak foreign languages, appreciate art and argue intellectually as intelligently as white people. But these are weak, insipid characters, often portrayed with surprisingly hostile satire. The novel only comes to life when Van Vechten switches his focus to the vivid “exotic primitive” characters on the textual margins, who deconstruct his efforts to refute essentialist views of black character. Van Vechten tries to show that his interest in African Americans stems from his liberal belief in their equality with white people, but some parts of the novel imply his interest actually stems from the fascinating differences he perceives in black character. One of Van Vechten’s sternest modern critics, David Levering Lewis, claims this contradiction reflects Van Vechten’s mixed motives for writing the novel. Although he felt a “patronizing sympathy” towards blacks, “[f]or the sake of sales”, he also “intended *Nigger Heaven* to create a sensation.”²⁶ Whether he unconsciously revealed his own psychosexual investments, or deliberately exploited those of his readership, the enormous commercial success of the novel certainly shows how well Van Vechten captured contemporary white attitudes to blackness. Although Huggins correctly argues that *Nigger Heaven* abandons traditional stereotypes of blackness, it was centrally involved in the formulation of the new trope of the exotic primitive.

By the nineteen-twenties, the attitude to blackness we noted in Stein had developed into a major cultural movement. The popularity of performers like Josephine

²³ B. W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 113.

²⁴ N. I. Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 103.

²⁵ N. I. Huggins, *Harlem*, pp. 102-103.

Baker and the flood of white visitors to Harlem clubs and cabarets revealed a new white fascination with African Americans as exotic and primitive. As Adam Lively has observed, the concept of blackness which underwrote this fascination bore little relation to the realities of black existence. Instead:

Negroes have become [...] figureheads of a late-flowering *fin-de siècle* decadence [...]. 'Primitivism' is no longer the return to or recovery of any actually existing society, but a phenomenon that belongs entirely within and with reference to modernised urban society, a lifestyle that embodies certain reactions to conventional values.²⁷

This quotation gestures towards a crucial difference between Toomer's and Van Vechten's use of primitivist tropes. Van Vechten does not link black characters to a specific folk culture. Their primitivism seems like a projection of his own desire to throw off the stifling restrictions of Victorian, bourgeois morality without compromising the superiority of the white male ego. This use of black characters severely undermines his attempt to render African American life realistically. For example, he depicts fights involving men and women as part of the colour and excitement of Harlem nightlife.²⁸ Yet he confessed in a letter to Langston Hughes that he never witnessed a fight in a black cabaret in twenty-five years.²⁹ However, like Thomas Dixon, Van Vechten masks the constructed, projected nature of his images of blackness with a tone of realism. His status as an expert on Harlem and the novel's overall claims to record the realities of black life carefully and objectively gave the violent excesses of characters like Lasca and the Scarlet Creeper an air of authenticity for contemporary readers. The tone of realism is considerably more predominant in *Nigger Heaven* and the images of blackness are less obviously racist, but the basic effect is undeniably similar.

Van Vechten was almost as opposed to the idea of innate racial difference as Toomer, stating in an afterword to *Nigger Heaven* that: "Negroes are treated by me exactly as if I were depicting white characters, for the very excellent reason that I do not

²⁶ D. L. Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 188.

²⁷ A. Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 210.

²⁸ See for example: C. Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 164 and pp. 247-248. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

believe there is much psychological difference between the races.”³⁰ Certainly, there are decadent characters in all Van Vechten’s fiction, who behave in sexually transgressive ways. However, there is a politically problematic undertone of racial determinism in the representations of black decadence in *Nigger Heaven*, and, as we shall see, an element of violence within this decadence. Some episodes in the narrative seem designed to contest essentialist views of black violence. Byron Kasson, the scholarly protagonist, is horrified to witness a dispute between Jewish and Italian street vendors, which culminates in the Italian stabbing the Jew’s horse:

Suddenly the Italian drew a long knife from his belt and plunged it to the hilt into the breast of the animal. The beast groaned sickishly and shuddered, but did not fall. The blood gushed out in a great red stream [...]. Blood! Blood! [...] A crowd collected. They were pounding the dago. [...] Byron [...] thought he was going to vomit. Blood and cruelty (230).

Byron, who has led a sheltered, middle-class existence, is repulsed by this display of lower-class urban violence. This scene makes no connection between his aversion and his partly white ancestry. This vignette also refuses to paint violence in nineteen-twenties New York as an exclusively black problem, making it a socio-cultural phenomenon. It gestures towards factors like overcrowding, poverty, a highly competitive commercial environment and the close proximity of numerous ethnic groups with no intercultural understanding.

However, after Byron begins his affair with Lasca, essentialist and sensational tonalities begin to dominate the narrative. The characterisation of Byron alters radically, revealing a primitivism beneath his civilised exterior which supports Addison Gayle’s claim that Van Vechten perceives an exotic primitive inside the skull of every black man: “half-man half-savage, existing in a world of sensuous pleasure.”³¹ Byron and Lasca’s decadent, passionate relationship descends into scenes of demonised violence:

²⁹ Cited in: M. V. Perkins, “The Achievement and Failure of *Nigger Heaven*: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance”, *College Language Association Journal*, 42:1 (1998), 1-23, p. 14.

³⁰ Quoted in B. Kellner, “‘Refined Racism’: White Patronage in the Harlem Renaissance”, *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined: A Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. by V. A. Kramer and R. A. Russ (Troy: Whitston, 1997), p. 130.

³¹ A. Gayle, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1975), p. 87.

I'd like to be cruel to you! [...] I'd like to cut your heart out!

Cut it out, Lasca my own! It belongs to you!

I'd like to gash you with a knife! [...] Beat you with a whip!

Lasca!

She drew her pointed nails across the back of his hand. The flesh came off in ribbons.

My baby! My baby! She sobbed, binding his bleeding hand with her handkerchief, kissing his lips (252-253).

Despite the obvious political and aesthetic differences, there are structural similarities between this representation of black violence and those we considered in Thomas Dixon's novels. For Van Vechten, blackness still embodies a hypersexual excess that spills over into violence, which he struggles to articulate in this ludicrous scene.

Dixon inscribed his construction of black sexual violence on the battered bodies of innocent, white female victims in a propagandist tone designed to make the reader feel outraged and threatened. The psychosexual investments we detected in these images were submerged beneath the surface of the text. But, through the lens of a modernist, decadent sensibility, Van Vechten transforms this concept of black sexual violence into images which are more obviously designed to fascinate and titillate, even if the quotient of projected white desire they contain is still disavowed. He does this by removing all possible threat to white people, circumscribing the potentialities of black violence through strategies of denial. He enables readers to contemplate black violence as a series of pleasurable aesthetic images from an uninvolved, unthreatened perspective. His descriptions of the character who epitomises exotic primitivism exemplify this. From his first appearance in the opening scene, the Scarlet Creeper embodies a violent, phallic excess which is not bestial and horrifying, but stylish, exciting and aesthetically pleasing (3). Representations of the Creeper circumscribe any potential threat to white women, or white society in general. Any link between his violence and the effects of white racism is also occluded. The narrative never enters his consciousness to consider the origins of his violence, it is depicted purely as entertainment. This trope of the exotic primitive combines denial with demonisation to exploit the commercial potential of a new image of

black violence. As Addison Gayle observes, the depoliticisation of these new images of African Americans was crucial to their popularity.³²

The background against which Lasca and Byron's relationship is played out is also highly revealing of Van Vechten's new mode of exploiting white fantasmatic investments in black violence. The drab life of the black bourgeoisie is exchanged for a world of parties and cabarets where white moral values are transgressed in numerous ways. Lasca and Byron embark upon a downward spiral of depravity which culminates in a visit to a nightclub called the "Black Mass", where violence is once again glimpsed at the heart of black primitivism. The wild dancing and "demoniac" wailing of the music produce a scene described as a "witches sabbath" and a "perverted Dies Irae" (254-255). Finally, to the beat of a tom-tom, a naked teenage girl who is "pure black, with savage African features" performs "evil rites": "The girl lifted a knife ... a woman shrieked. The knife ..." (255-256). The ellipses in this literally demonised description of black violence perform a similar function to the omitted descriptions of black rape we considered in Dixon's novels. They open a space for the reader to project fantasies about black violence which can be more terrible and more personally significant than anything Van Vechten can articulate. Like Dixon, he blurs the boundary between private fantasy and public ideology to powerful literary effect. The description of the girl as "pure black" and possessing "savage African features" suggests her actions reveal a violence which is the natural essence of blackness.

The implications that black women take sexual pleasure from violence detectable in this episode are underscored in another scene, when Byron responds violently to Lasca's insults and threats to break with him:

He caught her throat in his strong hands and shook her violently. [...] he flung her back on the chaise-longue [...]. She was gasping for breath, her tongue lolling out, but she lifted her arms feebly and beckoned him.

Kiss me Byron, she panted. I love you. You're so strong! I'm your slave, your own Nigger! Beat me! I'm yours to do with what you please! (259-260).

This scene not only demonstrate an increasingly prominent violent element within Byron's character as he becomes part of the black community, it also transfers

³² See: A. Gayle, *Way*, p. 89.

responsibility for the dysfunctional, violent model of masculinity predominant in Harlem away from any connection with the effects of racism and onto black women. The novel's conclusion reinforces this sense black violence is a product of intraracial problems and pathologies unrelated to white racism. Van Vechten deploys strategies of denial to ensure the violent denouement will excite and entertain readers without disturbing them. Ostensibly, the Scarlet Creeper shoots Randolph Pettijohn out of jealousy over a woman, but there is also a suggestion of class antagonism between these men. When the Creeper first meets Pettijohn in the novel we are told: "Unreasoningly, [he] hated him. [...] it irked the Creeper to realize that anyone else possessed power of whatever kind" (7). This implies the Creeper envies Pettijohn's business achievements, which have taken him from hot-dog vendor to numbers racket king. The ending therefore appears to support the claim of one character that other African Americans represent a greater obstacle to black progress in Harlem than white people do (119-120). Charles Scruggs reads the killing as an example of the "crab antics" which characterise relations between the different strata of black society in the novel, an illustration of Van Vechten's belief that, "the only time people from different classes come together in Harlem is to do each other ill."³³ However, I believe Van Vechten uses this apparently percipient focus on class tensions to mask links between white racism and black violence. Giving the most extreme act of violence in the novel a purely intraracial aetiology presents a distorted view of Harlem, ignoring the shaping influence of many forms of white oppression such as poverty and overcrowding. Van Vechten circumscribes these factors in his representation of Harlem to enable readers to enjoy this violence as pure entertainment.

The sense that connections with white racism are being repressed becomes even stronger in the representation of Byron's final act of violence. The image of a black man shooting a corpse might be read as a political symbol of the terrible futility of violence in Harlem, and its powerful tendency to reinforce black suffering. However, the context makes Byron's redundant violence seem more like a symbol of his personal impotence and divided psychological state. Although Byron has suffered from white discrimination during the novel, particularly in his efforts to find employment, his main problem always

³³ C. Scruggs, "Crab Antics and Jacob's Ladder: Aaron Douglas's Two Views of *Nigger Heaven*", *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*, p. 172 and p. 185.

seems to be his alienation from the “natural” selfhood and lifestyle of his race. At one point, he contemplates violence in direct response to white racism: “Groaning, he burned to summon up a mob to stamp out this proud, haughty white world. He yearned to tear New York apart, [...] to trample those white fiends under foot” (228). However, the context mutes the subversiveness of this fantasy. Byron has just proudly rejected the advice of a white editor, who seems to be a mouthpiece for Van Vechten’s own views, to focus on lower class Harlem life in his stories (222-227). This decision clearly stems from Byron’s haughty refusal to identify with the black masses. Thus his violent impulses are cast more as evidence of the inner turmoil created by his alienation from his true nature than as the effects of racism.

Byron’s final act of violence produces a similar impression. Seeing Pettijohn’s corpse, Byron goes towards it, fascinated by the blood:

Suddenly he stamped on the face with the heel of his boot.
 You Nigger bastard! he screamed.
 He drew his revolver and shot once, twice into the ugly black mass.
 Immediately his anger left him. The gun slipped from his fingers. His legs, shaking with terror refused to support him (283-284).

Calling Pettijohn a “Nigger bastard,” and the dehumanising perception of Pettijohn’s body as an “ugly black mass” reinforce the sense that self-hatred and alienation lie at the roots of Byron’s violence. His instant loss of aggression after firing his gun suggests the extent of the division within his self, which has been visible throughout the final pages, as he thirsts for revenge on Lasca and her new lover Pettijohn:

Governed by his rage, he clutched his revolver and cried aloud [...] like a dying animal [...] I’ll kill them both! But the revolver dropped from his relaxed fingers to the table, and his head followed. [...] God! he demanded imploringly, why haven’t I the strength to go through with it? (273).

It now appears clear that Byron possesses powerful natural violent impulses, but they are frustrated by the “white”, civilised persona formed by his middle class lifestyle, producing an agonising and paralysing internal conflict. Now his aversion to violence is implicitly racialised as a product of learnt, white behaviours, frustrating the natural

violent impulses which stem from his black origins. This is certainly how many of Van Vechten's white contemporaries interpreted the ending. Mabel Dodge believed it showed "the archaic *real* nigger being able to do the deed" [my italics] and the hero "spoiled for action by thought."³⁴ As we have seen, the Scarlet Creeper has been depicted as the epitome of authentic, primitive blackness. The contrast between his ability to commit violence and Byron's ineffectuality implies that violence comes naturally to "real" blacks. Thus the violence of the ending deconstructs the novel as a plea for the acceptance of African Americans as equals, revealing more powerful psychosexual investments in the idea of black difference beneath the surface of liberal ideology.

However dissimilar Van Vechten's politics were to Dixon's, *Nigger Heaven* repeats a number of narrative strategies deployed by Dixon to conceal white psychosexual investments in blackness. This confirms how the reliance of white male superiority on demonised images of black violence made it difficult to abandon completely his methods of representing black violence. Van Vechten allows readers to "play in the dark," as Richard Moreland puts it, without risking the moral authority and intellectual superiority predicated on their fixed white identities.³⁵ By making decadence, sexual perversity and violence essentially, naturally black, Van Vechten reaffirms the fundamental bases of white racial difference and superiority while still permitting readers to flirt pleasurably with these disavowed, projected desires. The appearance of *Nigger Heaven* and similar novels and plays led many African American intellectuals to challenge Locke's optimistic claims about the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on cultural images of blacks. W. E. B. Du Bois, in particular, was appalled by these new trends in representations of blackness. He wrote a trenchant article attacking primitivism as racist propaganda, and demanding that black authors challenge it with equally propagandist images which assert the equality and humanity of African Americans.³⁶

³⁴ Quoted in D. L. Lewis, *When*, p. 188.

³⁵ Moreland takes the phrase from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, where it refers to American literature's projection of fears, conflicts and desires which cannot be acknowledged within white subjectivity onto "bound" and "silenced" black bodies. This allows the investigation of these repressed feelings without compromising the stable superiority of whiteness. R. C. Moreland, *Learning From Difference: Teaching Morrison, Twain, Ellison and Eliot* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), pp. 29-30.

³⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art", *Within the Circle*, p. 66.

However, the next major Harlem Renaissance African American novel bears the mark of different pressures on black writing, illustrating the extent of white control over black literary production in this movement. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) was one of the first American novels to both represent and seek to understand the violence of Northern ghettos, but it does so in highly problematic ways. McKay does not contest the racial essentialism which underpins the discourse of black primitivism. Instead, he attempts to challenge the idea of violence as an innate element of the primitive character. This creates a number of inconsistencies within his novel, chiefly the discrepancy between the protagonist Jake and his society. Although Jake is portrayed as happy and at home in Harlem, and a paradigmatic primitive in all other aspects of his behaviour, he completely lacks the conventionally primitivist tendencies towards violence which pervade his milieu. As Nathan Irvin Huggins notes, Jake is "ashamed and sick on the two occasions when he is moved to violence."³⁷ McKay deploys a strategy of denial copied by much later American writing, as we shall see in later chapters, purging his focal character of violence to make him a viable, sympathetic hero for white readers. All the violence is projected onto characters who remain Other to the text, and manifests itself in a form many critics condemn as a commercially motivated imitation of white primitivism. One contemporary reviewer described it as "*Nigger Heaven* in a larger and more violent dose", and more recent critics such as Bernard W. Bell and Nathan Irvin Huggins have reached similar verdicts.³⁸ This discrepancy between the representation of Jake and his sensationalised society also deconstructs McKay's attempts to redefine the primitive characteristics of blacks as positive.

A fight between two minor characters, Zeddy and Nije, at a party exemplifies the representations of black violence in *Home to Harlem*:

Half-smiling and careless-like, he planted his boot upon Zeddy's toes. "Get off my feet," Zeddy barked. The answer was a hard blow in the face. Zeddy tasted blood in his mouth. He threw his muscular body upon the tall Nije and hugged him down to the floor. [...]

³⁷ N. I. Huggins, *Harlem*, p. 125.

³⁸ D. P. Jones, *The Chicago Defender*, March 17th, 1928, B. W. Bell, *Afro American*, p. 116 and N. I. Huggins, *Harlem*, p. 126.

His knee on Nije's chest, and a hand on his windpipe, Zeddy flashed the gleaming blade out of his pocket. The proprietress let loss a blood-curdling scream, but before Zeddy's hand could achieve its purpose, Jake aimed a swift kick at his elbow. The razor flew spinning upward and fell chopping through a glass of gin on the pianola.³⁹

Like many such scenes in Harlem Renaissance fiction, this passage focuses on the physical strength of the combatants and the drama of the spectacle. McKay combines the strategies of denial and demonisation in a manner typical of the discourse of exotic primitivism. His total occlusion of social and cultural causes inevitably demonises black violence as natural and innate. We are given little sense of the motives for this fight, beyond the fact that it involves an unpaid debt. The speed and ease with which these men enter into murderous violence can only undermine McKay's attempts, through the character of Jake, to refute the natural link between blacks and violence. Such figurations of black violence encourage readers not to regard African Americans as equal humans, and therefore to enjoy their violence without any sense that it involves serious human suffering. They support Jerry H. Bryant's assertion that in African American "primitivist" novels, violence forms part of the color of the folk world: knifings, shootings, razor fights between men, hair-pulling fights between women. Such violence was the yeast that vitalized the dancing, gaming, drinking and loving that went on among the carefree blacks.⁴⁰

In places, McKay does attempt to achieve a more serious, analytical perspective on violence and its causes. On the first occasion Jake commits violence, he is goaded into giving his girlfriend Rose "two savage slaps full in her face" (81). He then overhears her telling a friend:

My, my dear, but he did slap the daylights outta me. When I came to I wanted to kiss his feet, [...]. A hefty looking one like him, always acting so nice and proper. I almost thought he was getting sissy. But he's a *ma-an* all right (82).

³⁹ C. McKay, *Home to Harlem*, (London: The X Press, 2000), pp. 35-36. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴⁰ J. H. Bryant, *Victims*, p. 143.

This episode makes black women even more explicitly responsible for promoting a dysfunctional, violent model of black masculinity, which plagues Harlem throughout this novel, than the similar passage we considered in *Nigger Heaven*. No wonder Hazel Carby, who reads this novel as a narrative of urban “black masculinity in formation,” claims degenerate embodiments of the feminine are represented as the greatest obstacle to this process.⁴¹ Jake has to refuse the “pathological and distorted form of masculine power” Rose demands “to proceed on his journey” towards “wholesome masculinity.”⁴² As this reading implies, *Home to Harlem* makes very little attempt to connect Harlem’s violence to the various forms of oppression which shape African American life, even though it begins with Jake deserting the army because it offers black men only racist mistreatment. McKay repeats Van Vechten’s principal strategy of denial, dissociating black violence from white racism to ensure it will provide commercial entertainment for white readers.

A rare deviation from this strategy occurs early in the novel, when Jake accepts a job which involves breaking a strike by white workers. This produces incidents where black men are forced to fight for their lives against angry mobs of white pickets (30-33). However, the novel gives little consideration to how the racist, exclusionary policies of businesses and unions created this divisive economic situation. Jake quickly leaves the job, piously refusing to be a “scab,” and rejecting his friend Zeddy’s argument that black men have to take any employment available, when “white men done scabbed niggers outta all the jobs they used to hold down” (35). Apart from this, however, McKay tends to focus on black criminality and intraracial Harlem violence in isolation. The narrative subordinates serious analysis of this violence and criticism of white racism to the production of sensation, drama and comedy. For example, near the end of the novel, when Felice is worried about the violence which may result from her leaving Zeddy for Jake, she recalls a fight between two Caribbean women. This seems initially to be a critical, admonitory example of violence in Harlem society. But McKay is seduced by the opportunities for sensation this spectacle offers. He describes the women stripping naked, in accordance with an “old custom, perhaps a survival of African tribalism, [which] has

⁴¹ H. Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body”, *Critical Inquiry*, 18:4 (1992), 738-755, p. 749.

⁴² H. Carby, “Policing”, p. 750.

been imported from some remote West Indian hillside into a New York backyard” (215). Not only does this introduce an element of prurience and exoticism into the scene, it also implies this ritualised violence represents an ahistorical element of black character, further undermining the novels efforts to refute the link between black primitivism and violence. McKay goes on to make a dramatic spectacle of the fight, supplying vivid details of the women’s attempts to injure each other (215-216). Felice finishes her reminiscence on a note of pure entertainment, reflecting: “a hen-fight is more fun than a cock-fight, [...] hens pluck feathers, but they never wring necks like the cocks” (216-217).

McKay maintains a more serious tone in representing a fight in which a black man smashes a bottle in the face of a love rival. After witnessing this fight, Jake debates the problem of violence in Harlem with a friend, arguing that violence over women occurs everywhere, among all races (197). His friend counters that Harlem is worse than elsewhere because: “We’re too thick together in Harlem. We’re all just lumped together without a chance to choose and so we naturally hate one another” (197-198). The implied criticism of white racism in this statement provokes praise from James R. Giles. He claims this exonerates women for the violence of Harlem and enables the reader to “guess whose fault McKay thinks it is – the white society that has packed blacks together in Harlem so thickly that they cannot breathe easily.”⁴³ But the oblique nature of McKay’s criticism ensures that “guess” is all the reader can do. McKay does not articulate a direct link between racism and black violence, which reinforces the impression that commercial success was his primary concern in his representations of black violence in this novel.

Witnessing this fight convinces the pacifist Jake of the need to carry a gun, which he is forced to threaten Zeddy with, when he attacks him with a razor, over Felice. Once again, Jake is ashamed by his own violence, reflecting:

These miserable cock-fights, beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened, saddened, unmanned him. The wild shrieking mad woman that is sex seemed jeering at him. [...] he was infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the

⁴³ J. R. Giles, *Claude McKay* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 83.

entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women (228-229).

This passage adopts an interesting rhetorical strategy, throwing both the primary burden of responsibility for violence and the tropological associations with animalism from the hegemonic white discourse on black violence back onto the white world. But it is virtually unsupported by the bulk of the novel, which depicts and discusses only black violence in isolation. Jake claims to have witnessed white violence in various places during his nomadic life, but this is never directly represented to the reader. Also, there is another strong suggestion that women are ultimately responsible for violence in the personification of sex as a “wild shrieking mad woman”; this implies female responsibility for the violent disputes over sexual possession of them by men.

A passage in the final pages of the novel exemplifies many of the problems McKay faced trying to refigure the white discourse of primitivism into a positive form of black identity containing no racially determined element of violence. McKay describes a scene in a Harlem nightclub which typifies the background of the novel:

Haunting rhythm, now sheering over into mad riotous joy, now, like a jungle mask, strange, unfamiliar, disturbing, now plunging headlong into the far dim depths of profundity and rising out as suddenly with a simple, childish grin. And the white visitors laugh. They see the grin only. [...] That gorilla type wriggling there with his hands so strangely hugging his mate, may strangle her tonight. [...] Simple, raw emotions and real. They may frighten and repel refined souls, because they are too intensely real, just as a simple savage stands dismayed before nice emotions that he instantly perceives are false (234-235).

As James R. Giles states, this passage asserts that, “the black psyche is more complex than the superficial glimpses” the white world insistently limits itself to.⁴⁴ It also attempts to make primitive black emotions superior to false, civilised white ones. Yet it still repeats and reaffirms the idea of blacks as naturally and unpredictably violent which was part of this superficial white perspective. It also exemplifies the problem created by the animal imagery which McKay frequently employs to describe his black characters. Some critics interpret this as a positive refiguration of the white racist classification of blacks in

⁴⁴ J. R. Giles, *Claude*, p. 84.

animal terms. Roger Rosenblatt insists these animal associations “are never dehumanizing in the sense of suggesting the brutal.”⁴⁵ But the close association they often have with descriptions of black violence sometimes brings them perilously close to repeating the associations of blackness with bestiality from white racist discourse. For example in the fight between Zeddy and Jake, Zeddy was described as: “like a terrible bear with open razor” (227).

Despite his attempts to critique and refigure the white discourse of primitivism in ways which were positive and empowering for blacks, McKay could not transcend the essential elements of it in *Home to Harlem*. This inability to challenge white ideology fundamentally may be attributable to the total white control over access to the literary marketplace. Langston Hughes offended his patron by adopting a politically radical tone in his poetry. African American authors could only make coded, subtle hints about the origins of black violence if they were to achieve publication. Perhaps this explains why the Harlem Renaissance failed to produce depictions of black violence which genuinely contested the racism of hegemonic images. Certainly, one of the few novels to attempt this suffered low sales.

Wallace Thurman’s, *Infants of the Spring* (1932) is commonly read as a caustic satire on every aspect of the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁶ I believe it also satirises this movement’s representation of black violence, through a rarely discussed, minor character, Bull. The portrayal of Bull critiques the tendency to deploy black violence to create excitement, humour and vivid spectacle. Consider the scene where the protagonist Raymond discovers Bull fighting with the white character Stephen over his relationship with a black woman:

Stephen and Bull were locked together, wrestling. Both were quite drunk. [...] Tears were streaming down Bull’s virile, scarred face. [...] “The bastard’s trying to kill me.” Stephen was red-faced and panting. Bull was weak with rage. [...] As Raymond relaxed, Bull regained his strength, thrust Raymond aside, and with fists clenched, [...] turned upon the frightened Aline.

⁴⁵ R. Rosenblatt, *Black*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ See for example: D. Walden, “The Canker Galls... Or, The Short Promising Life of Wallace Thurman”, *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*, pp. 234-235.

“Y’hussy [...] Yer own race ain’t good enough? You want a white man? You goddamn bitch, I’ll kill you.” [...]

Aline, seeing him come toward her, struggled to her feet, [...] became entangled in the rug and fell heavily to the floor. Stephen snored in the chair. Raymond again threw himself into Bull’s way only to be sent crashing into the corner.⁴⁷

This chaotic scene reduces violence to a sordid, messy and drunken status. There is no graceful, athletic display of black physical strength, nor does the scene generate any tension or obvious comedy. Furthermore, in stark contrast to most other Harlem Renaissance fiction, Thurman figures Bull’s violence as a direct threat to white people. Indeed, the narrative contains suggestions that Stephen comes to Harlem out of an erotic fascination with blackness, making him a representative of the very kind of white readers who were excited by the violence of earlier Harlem Renaissance literature. This emphasises Thurman’s refusal to pander to commercial demands and produce representations of black violence which would entertain white readers. As one reviewer observed, this novel was “written with no weather eye on a possible white audience.”⁴⁸ Later an argument over a Langston Hughes poem about white rape of black women leads to another chaotic and drunken interracial melee (85-88). This implies that the interracial contact produced by the Harlem Renaissance could never lead to harmonious racial relations, based as it was on inaccurate racial stereotypes and latent white racism and sexual desires. Candid exchanges of opinion inevitably lead to violence.

Despite giving him an animal name, Thurman carefully dissociates Bull’s violence from the kind of essentialist explanations which shadowed earlier Renaissance representations of black violence. His resemblance to a bull is kept purely metaphorical. Thurman locates the origins of his violent bitterness and obsessive desire for vengeance on the entire white race in the lynching of an uncle who was falsely accused of raping a white woman (39-40). Bull explains his violent obsession as:

Havin’ ev’ry white woman I kin get, an’ by hurtin’ any white man I kin. I hates the bastards. I gets drunk so’s I can beat ‘em up an’ I likes to make their women

⁴⁷ W. Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (London: The X Press, 1998), pp. 35-36. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴⁸ M. Gruening, “Two Ways to Harlem”, *Saturday Review of Literature* (12th March, 1932), 585, p. 585.

suffer. But if I ever catch one of the sons of bitches messin' 'round one of my women, hell's doors won't open quick enuff to catch him (39-40).

In contrast to much earlier Harlem Renaissance fiction, this passage acknowledges the anger and bitterness white oppression creates in the black mind, and posits a very direct and powerful link between this and black violence. But Thurman refuses to ennoble or justify this violence in any way, perhaps fearing that he may still appear to be romanticising violence as part of the beauty of exotic primitivism. Furthermore, Thurman even undermines Bull's status as brave avenger and the extent of the threat he represents to white people by saying that he commits this violence out of fear. Raymond, who appears to be Thurman's mouthpiece, declares that Bull is "so afraid of the white man, [...] that his only recourse is to floor one at every opportunity and on any pretext. Should one suddenly turn the tables and smash him back he'd run away like a cowed dog" (89). Eventually, Bull disappears from the narrative after punching his girlfriend for becoming pregnant (165). Thus his violence is emphatically not depicted as the basis for a positive model of black masculinity; there is no sense fighting back against white oppression produces genuine black manhood, as later literature implies. Instead Bull's violence is shown to be dangerously indiscriminate and ultimately more likely to harm more vulnerable black victims than white oppressors. The harshness of the portrayal of Bull, like almost every other black character in *Infants of the Spring*, seems to reveal Thurman's self-hatred. Although he perceptively critiqued and exposed the excesses of this era's obsession with primitivism, his self-hatred prevented him from formulating a positive alternative form of African American identity and seeing any real positive or sympathetic element in rebellious black violence. Bull always remains marginal and Other to the text. It would be left to future authors to attempt to articulate the origins of black violence fully, by entering the minds of black characters who commit the most extreme violence.

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK VIOLENCE, WHITE MASK: RECONSIDERING RACIAL INDETERMINACY IN FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

William Faulkner is widely praised for perceptively exposing the psychic consequences of constructing a culture based on racial difference for white America. James Baldwin has written that “the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity that overtakes white men,” and, as Philip Weinstein observes, “Faulkner pursues and diagnoses that insanity with unequalled power.”¹ But Faulkner’s representation of African Americans themselves often elide black subjectivity and employ conventional, objectifying Southern tropes of blackness, such as the faithful, loving mammy or the comic, wily dandy. His fiction struggles to transcend these stereotypes and expose the humanity they mask with the same power and intensity which characterise his representations of white subjectivity. I believe this problem is bound up with another limitation. Toni Morrison has praised Faulkner for the “refusal-to-look-away approach” he adopted towards the extreme and horrifying forms of violence racial conflict produced, yet he struggled to maintain this approach when he attempted to represent black violence.² Richard Gray has described black characters as an “absent presence” in Faulkner’s fiction, a phrase which also seems highly appropriate to his depictions of black violence.³ He repeatedly introduces or gestures towards this theme, yet refuses to confront the full range of potential motives for and meanings of black violence. In particular, Faulkner always struggles to acknowledge the possibility of a direct relationship between this violence and the experience of racist oppression. His novels are structured by a tension between confronting the realities of black violence beneath the demonised tropes generated by racist fantasies, and denying this violence.

Light in August (1932), constitutes Faulkner’s most sustained, unflinching interrogation of Southern black experience. Although the protagonist of this novel is never established to be even partially black, many elements of Joe Christmas’s character

¹ J. Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *The Price of the Ticket*, p. 88. P. Weinstein, *What Else But Love?*, p. 39.

² Quoted in: D. Fowler and A. J. Abadie, eds, *Faulkner and Women: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 1985* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1986), p. 297.

³ R. Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 41.

ensure he constitutes Faulkner's most trenchant effort to anatomise the meaning of black violence. As Philip Weinstein observes, Faulkner "enter[s] blackness" in an unprecedented way in this novel, replacing the "surface tranquillity" which characterised his earlier representations of blackness with a view of "the unmasterable anguish that race can foment in black and white alike."⁴ Joe cannot be seen as a "black" character in an uncomplicated way. His total estrangement from black culture is well summarised by Weinstein: "Joe experiences blackness not as a cultural resource (a shared dimension of innumerable human beings, out of which they generate life narratives like and unlike everyone else's) but as a white man's intolerable secret."⁵ Joe lives exclusively on the white side of the colour-line until adulthood, which determines his perception of black people. When he lives with a black woman, rather than trying to know her as a subjective human being, he "tries to breath into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes."⁶ At one point he finds himself lost in the black area of Jefferson, and feels "surrounded by [...] invisible negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring talking laughing in a language not his" (114). He is excluded from the signifying economy of the black community and is no more able to perceive them as individual human beings than a normative white Southerner.

These aspects of Joe's characterisation have led many critics to regard him as almost psychologically white. Andre Bleikasten has written that his grandfather and McEachern almost completely determine his subjective development, teaching him "race hatred" and "the harsh virtues of white Protestant virility. He claims: "Mentally and emotionally he is indeed a white Southern male – or would be if he did not believe himself to be tainted by blackness."⁷ While there is ample textual evidence to support such interpretations, it is also possible to view Joe's character in a radically different way. Similarly, critics usually attribute Joe's violence to his racial indeterminacy. For some, such as Lee Jenkins and Andre Bleikasten, the horrific sensation of contamination by

⁴ P. Weinstein, *What*, pp. 39-40.

⁵ P. Weinstein, *What*, p. 40

⁶ W. Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 225-226. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁷ A. Bleikasten, "The Closed Society and its Subjects", *New Essays on Light in August*, ed. by M. Millgate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 84.

alien blood makes Joe violent.⁸ Others, such as Philip Weinstein, attribute Joe's violence to the mental turmoil he suffers because he cannot attain any coherent sense of self or agency in a society where identity is based on a racial binarism.⁹ Olga Vickery, Richard Gray and Michael Walchoz see Joe's violence as a deliberate strategy to undermine the racial binary which underpins identity in his culture by meeting any attempt to classify him as black or white with violence.¹⁰ All these interpretations are valid, because Faulkner has massively overdetermined Joe Christmas. Yet it is also possible to see Joe's racial indeterminacy as a masking device for the investigation of a form of violence which both fascinated and terrified Faulkner.

Joe's racial indeterminacy exposes a tension which pervades *Light in August* between shattering demonised stereotypes of black violence, and taking refuge in strategies of denial. As Juda Bennett observes, Joe's indeterminacy plants a "deconstructive seed of not knowing in the text."¹¹ It gives this novel the potential to "reread and even critique all past representations of blackness" which Joe intersects; exotic primitive, tragic mulatto, Black Beast Rapist and sacrificial lynching victim.¹² Joe exposes the discursive, constructed nature of human identity based on supposedly innate racial characteristics. Concomitantly, he forces readers to consider black violence as something other than the product of innate racial characteristics.¹³ He exposes the forms of black violence portrayed as historical reality by Thomas Dixon as constructs projected onto African Americans from within white minds. As Philip Weinstein observes: "Black may now appear transparently as a murderously projective state of the white mind when traditional markers of racial difference have lost their 'native' authority."¹⁴

⁸ L. Jenkins, *Faulkner and Black-White Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 64.

⁹ P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject A Cosmos No One Owns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 104-107.

¹⁰ See: O. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 69, R. Gray, *Life*, p. 185 and M. Walchoz, "Marginality and William Faulkner's *Light in August*", *Cultural Difference and the Literary Text*, ed. by W. Siemerling and K. Schwenk (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), p. 140.

¹¹ J. Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 100.

¹² J. Bennett, *Passing*, p. 104.

¹³ See: J. Bryant Wittenburg, "Race in *Light in August*: Wordsymbols and Obverse Reflections", *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. by P. Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), for the most detailed example of such a reading. R. Gray, *Life*, pp. 177-193 and P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's*, pp. 104-107, also interpret the novel in this way.

¹⁴ P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's*, p. 52.

However, Joe's racial indeterminacy also limits the text's deconstructive, subversive potential concerning stereotypes of black violence. Because Joe is never definitively shown to have black blood, and is so insistently isolated from the black community, Faulkner occludes the possibility his violence says something universal about the relation between white racism and black violence. Instead, his violence constitutes a special case, fundamentally different in terms of causes to normative black violence. In early drafts of the manuscript, when Joe Christmas definitely had black blood, Faulkner seems to have been wary of articulating his character offering only a few brief glimpses of his consciousness.¹⁵ The removal of any definite connection between Joe and blackness seems to allow Faulkner to get closer to his psychology, although, as we shall see, he maintains many gaps and ambiguities regarding Joe's motives for violence. It seems Faulkner was unwilling to consider the terrible suspicion which Joe's story raises; that white racism produces the same anguish and the same desire to commit violence it produces in Joe Christmas in all African Americans.

The historical lynching which seems to have inspired Joe Christmas's fate corroborates my theory. In 1908, Nelse Patton, a black bootlegger in Oxford, Mississippi, was arrested for slitting the throat of a white woman, almost severing her head from her body. She tried unsuccessfully to defend herself with a gun. He was later taken from Oxford jail and hanged from a telephone pole by a furious mob, not more than a thousand yards from Faulkner's childhood home.¹⁶ The similarities between this incident and *Light in August* lead Joel Williamson to claim: "Clearly, [...] he recalled the Patton affair."¹⁷ Faulkner appears to have been thinking about what could drive a black man to such terrible violence, but he could not accept the possibility that the roots of such violence lay in general political dissatisfaction among Mississippi's black population. Thus he could only allow a realistic conception of black anger and violence into his writing in a distorted form, disguised in whiteface.

The use of this disguise places *Light in August* in a long literary tradition of portraying white-looking African American characters as more human, intelligent and

¹⁵ R. Fadiman, *Faulkner's*, p. 196.

¹⁶ See: J. Williamson, *Faulkner and Southern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 157-162.

¹⁷ J. Williamson, *Faulkner*, p. 159.

sensitive than fully black characters. Ironically, one of the founding texts was the apparently anti-racist *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which represented slavery as a far more humiliating, agonising experience for the almost white George and Eliza Harris than for the darker Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima.¹⁸ Even early African American literature reproduced this ideology; authors like Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline E. Hopkins reduce dark-skinned characters to comic stereotypes, while the burden of racist oppression is only really suffered and understood by light-skinned protagonists.¹⁹ In the same way, Faulkner never explores whether racism causes normative African Americans the same mental agonies Joe Christmas suffers. As Judith Wittenburg observes, the few black characters are kept Other to the text because the reader's access to them is always doubly mediated.²⁰ They lack Joe's anger and dissatisfaction; they are reconciled to their situation in some inscrutable way Faulkner does not try to analyse. Joe's racial indeterminacy also suggests that, as Philip Weinstein puts it, Faulkner could only begin to focus properly on the experience of being black in his society, "by imagining himself as, impossibly, nightmarishly, one of them."²¹ Faulkner could not transcend the equation of whiteness with true humanity which was axiomatic in American literature.

Critics, including Philip Weinstein, often describe *Light in August* as Faulkner's most violent novel: "Its graphically detailed violence is unmatched elsewhere in Faulkner's work [...] There is more beating, more hands laid brutally upon bodies in *Light in August* than in any other of Faulkner's novels."²² What also marks out *Light in August* is the proportion of this violence which crosses the colour-line. As Scott Romine observes, this novel is highly unusual among Faulkner's novels in "lacking even a vestige of paternalistic rhetoric" and excluding the "benign stereotype" of the "good nigger."²³ These elements are replaced by Faulkner's clearest acknowledgement of the brutality inherent to the Southern racial order. Faulkner said later that during the writing of *Light*

¹⁸ H. Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1979).

¹⁹ See: P. E. Hopkins, *A Love Supreme* (London: The X Press, 1995) and F. E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

²⁰ J. Wittenburg, "Race", p. 161.

²¹ P. Weinstein, *What*, p. 40.

²² P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's*, pp. 50-51.

²³ S. Romine, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999)p. 150.

in August, he felt something “pushing inside him to get out.”²⁴ Eric Sundquist interprets this as the black element of Faulkner’s psyche in general, but I regard it as specifically his fascination with the anger and potential violence which he suspected lay beneath black acquiescence to Southern oppression.²⁵ The provenance and form of the novel support this view.

Light in August began as the story of Gail Hightower and Lena Burch, but as Faulkner worked on the manuscript, the story of Joe Christmas became central to the novel. He increased the focus on Joe’s consciousness, and the six chapter flashback on Joe’s childhood was the last major section of the novel to be written.²⁶ This suggests Faulkner became increasingly fascinated with the figure of Joe Christmas as he worked on the text. Many critics have noted the fierce tension within this narrative between a centrifugal force which threatens to tear the novel into dispersed fragments and an equally powerful centripetal force which holds the narrative structure together, “keeping the volatile materials of the novel just below the flashpoint.”²⁷ This centrifugal energy stems from the central act of black violence which this novel struggles to contain. The killing of Joanna constitutes the traumatic centre of *Light in August*, a moment the narrative revolves around but can never actually articulate, always shifting when it reaches this point. The centripetal energy stems from Faulkner’s desire to articulate this violence, which is shown by his repeated returns to it from different perspectives. The novel enters Jefferson after the killing has occurred, and chapter four contains an account from Byron Bunch of the incident which is at least third hand. The narrative then jumps back to the night of the killing in chapter five, but the chapter ends just before the crucial event occurs. Then, six chapters narrate Joe’s life history until, in chapter twelve, the

²⁴ Gwyn and J. Blotner, *Faulkner in the University* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 77.

²⁵ E. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 79.

²⁶ See: R. Gray, *Life*, pp. 77-78 and R. Fadiman, *Faulkner’s Light in August: A Description and Interpretation of the Revisions* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), pp. 64-67 and pp. 78-79.

²⁷ M. Kreiswerth, “Plots and Counterplots: The Structure of *Light in August*”, *New Essays on Light in August*, pp. 57-58. See also: S. Romine, *Narrative*, p. 151, and C. Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapawpha County* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, p. 52 and p. 69. Eric Sundquist interprets this tension as a consequence of the threat to the system of racial distinctions that underpins white Southern identity which the story of Joe Christmas produces. He claims this threat leads the novel to a “violent assertion of distinctions [...] tearing away from each other lives and stories as they threaten to become joined,” producing “a violent and alienating narrative form.” E. Sundquist, *Faulkner*, p. 91 and p.

narrative again reaches the night of Joanna's death. This is the closest we get to a narration of the actual event, but just before Joe kills Joanna, we jump forward to what happens afterwards.

The narrative voice of *Light in August* also suggests the difficulties Faulkner experienced articulating Joe's violence. Scott Romine describes it as the most "unstable feature of the novel's intricate design, [its] complex shifts in focalization and voice work to undermine whatever subjective stability it might seem to offer."²⁸ Although bigoted certainties are often posited as truth, the narrator also frequently employs the language of approximation, as Richard Godden notes.²⁹ These approximates are particularly prominent during attempts to articulate Joe's consciousness. As a child, Joe is described as preparing to be whipped by McEachern with "pride perhaps and despair" (149). When he first enters Joanna's house through the window, the narrator says: "Perhaps he thought of that other window which he had used to use and of the rope upon which he had had to rely; perhaps not" (230). Although the narrative is often focalised through Joe, and fleeting moments of his subjectivity are articulated in italics, the narrator never has total access to his thought process. This suggests Faulkner both desired and feared to articulate Joe's view of events. The narrative becomes most uncertain when attempting to describe Joe's motivations for violence. When Joe considers killing Lucas Burch the narrator states: "Perhaps thinking had already gone far enough to tell him *This is not the right one* Anyway he did not reach for the razor" (104). This uncertainty suggests the general epistemological instability of the narrative stems from Faulkner's anxiety about articulating the motives behind black violence. It reinforces the impression Faulkner was too troubled by the thought of what he may discover to undertake a genuine representation of black consciousness. However, Joe's Otherness does not make him a screen for the projection of repressed desires like Thomas Dixon's Black Beast figures. Joe's skin is repeatedly described as "parchment color[ed]," and, as we shall see, the

94. I believe this tension also results from the difficulty Faulkner experienced articulating and containing Joe's acts of violence within a novel.

²⁸ S. Romine, *Narrative*, p. 151.

²⁹ R. Godden, "Call Me Nigger!": Race and Speech in Faulkner's *Light in August*, *The Journal of American Studies*, 14:2 (1980), 235-248, p. 244.

attempts of white people to inscribe their notions of blackness upon him are explicitly analysed and exposed as misguided.³⁰

Faulkner's unprecedented concentration on black violence in *Light in August* was related to the historical moment of the novel's production. Although, as we saw in the previous chapter, the Black Beast image receded in American culture in the twenties, horrific "spectacle lynchings" still occurred in the South well into the thirties.³¹ The Black Beast fantasy may have become less prominent in the white mindset, but could still become operative again at times of crisis when a scapegoat was required. The onset of the Depression increased racial tensions in the South and produced new outbreaks of black violence. In Alabama in 1931, while Faulkner was writing *Light in August*, a sheriff was shot attempting to break up a black sharecroppers' union meeting, leading to a wave of repressive white violence in the state.³² Other similar incidents plagued the South during the 1930s, usually in response to the worsening economic conditions of black life.³³ Faulkner would never directly acknowledge systemic problems within his society as causes of black violence and Joe's violence bears little direct relation to the economic and political circumstances of Southern blacks. Nevertheless, there are signs within the novel Faulkner was deeply aware of how these circumstances were straining race relations in the South.³⁴

Furthermore, Joe Christmas embodies a racist fantasy from the moment of this novel's production as accurately as the Black Beast characters in Thomas Dixon's novels. Joel Williamson claims that as the Black Beast was "pushed below the threshold of consciousness," the wishful, fearful fantasies invested in this figure were displaced.³⁵ White Americans began "to fear hidden blackness, the blackness within seeming

³⁰ When Joe first appears his skin tone is described this way, (34) and almost every subsequent reference to his skin or flesh repeats this trope.

³¹ See: G. E. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, pp. 215-227 for details of how "spectacle lynchings" continued to occur, albeit with decreasing frequency, until 1934.

³² See: H. Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 226-229.

³³ See: H. Shapiro, *White*, pp. 231-3 and 289 for examples of other similar incidents from the 1930s.

³⁴ For example, consider the anger of the white workers at the planing mill, when Lucas Burch tells them: "Lay into it, you slaving bastards!" (45) These men have been compelled to take traditionally black jobs by the worsening economic conditions and they are paranoid about being identified as black. Such pressures lead to a more insistent and violent assertion of racial distinctions throughout Jefferson society.

³⁵ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, p. 464.

whiteness. They began to look with great suspicion on mulattoes who looked white.”³⁶ The socio-economic changes wrought by the Great Depression exacerbated this paranoia. In a nation which adhered to a “one-drop” theory of blackness, there was a need for knowledge of people’s racial lineage if the colour-line was to be policed effectively.³⁷ But declining cotton prices forced many black and white farmers and sharecroppers off the land to become itinerant strangers, like Joe Christmas, searching for work in towns and cities. As Philip Weinstein observes, in this environment “of untracked strangers and unknown genealogies, race distinctions take on a new anxiety, for *anyone* could turn out to be black.”³⁸ During this period, the literature of “passing” increasingly sought to exploit white anxieties about racial indeterminacy. James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which was initially published anonymously, purported to be a work of non-fiction by a man who really had adopted a white identity. Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) also implied that large numbers of African Americans were passing unnoticed into white society, and even marrying white men without provoking their suspicion.³⁹ George Schuyler chose to focus his 1930 satire on race relations on the proliferation of a scientific formula which whitens black skin, leading, to the horror of white society, to the dissolution of racial distinctions in America.⁴⁰ *Black No More* plays on the same white anxiety which Faulkner analyses in more serious terms.

However, the differences between Joe’s story and other passing narratives are highly significant. In novels like *The Autobiography of an ex-Colored Man*, *Passing* and *Black No More*, characters are aware of their true racial origins and adopt whiteness or blackness as conscious performance. The only novel which places its protagonist in a remotely similar situation to Joe Christmas is Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* (1947). But Neil Kingsblood only discovers his possible black ancestry as an adult. Although this is a profound experience for him, which radically alters his character and his perspective

³⁶ J. Williamson, *Crucible*, pp. 464-465.

³⁷ The 1930 US Census carried the following instruction: “A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood.” C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 86.

³⁸ P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's* p. 52.

³⁹ N. Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001).

⁴⁰ G. Schuyler, *Black No More* (London: The X Press, 1998).

on his society, being identified as black from a racist perspective never condemns him to the self-lacerating extremes which Joe suffers.⁴¹ Joe's putative blackness has to go deeper, it has to be a fundamental, pre-conscious part of his psyche to make him a suitable vehicle for the investigation of black violence. Yet at the same time, this blackness has to remain indeterminate because Faulkner would not properly acknowledge the relation between Joe's violence and the effects of racism on the wider black community. In *Joe Christmas*, Faulkner creates a unique mask to investigate black violence.

Joe's experiences suggest Faulkner did want, on one level, to understand and articulate the general relationship between racism and black violence. To understand this, it is first necessary to consider the general white attitude towards blacks in this novel. The white community in *Light in August* cannot perceive blacks as autonomous, subjective individuals. When the sheriff arrives at the crime scene after Joanna's death, he simply demands of his deputies: "Get me a nigger" (291). He proceeds to question this arbitrary "nigger" as if his blackness ensures he will know the details of this crime, committed by another member of his race, because he views blacks collectively. When Lucas Burch sends a black youth with a note for the sheriff, he perceives him in the following way:

Standing beside the porch now, materialised apparently from thin air, is a negro who may be either a grown imbecile or a hulking youth. His face is black, still, also quite inscrutable. They stand looking at one another. Or rather Brown [Burch's pseudonym] looks at the negro. He cannot tell if the negro is looking at him or not (435).

This encounter is immensely revealing. Burch is unable to perceiving the black man's age, intelligence or even to intercept his gaze, anticipating Ralph Ellison's concept of Invisibility. To be black before the gaze of this society is to be an object, a particular manifestation of the shadowy, amorphous Other which black people collectively constitute. This "Other" role is best demonstrated by a simile which is highly suggestive of the way whites define themselves as discrete, autonomous individuals in opposition to amorphous blackness. As Joe Christmas emerges from the darkness in the beam of car headlights, he watches: "his body grow white out of the darkness like a kodak print

⁴¹ S. Lewis, *Kingsblood Royal* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948).

emerging from the liquid” (108). As Patricia McKee observes, this image of photographic development implies that: “the white shape enters representation only in contrast to the black shapeless mass. [...] it is a means of development, a medium necessary before entry into media of representation.”⁴²

In this context, the connections between normative black experience and Joe’s experiences of racism become clear. Joe’s experiences of dissolving into a selfless, inhuman black mass may appear more extreme and unrelenting because he grows up under the full glare of white racism, without the mediation of black folk culture. However, his terrible psychological difficulties reflect problems which theorists of black psychology have identified as universal for blacks in a racist society. David Marriott has written that:

There is [...] a remarkable correlation between the imago – the fantasy – of black men in cultural life and black self-images. Behind those images [...] lurks a dark intruder, albeit framed by a black (and white) vision of black identity; an imago stalking a little black child through his memories and dreams.⁴³

Joe Christmas has no “black vision of black identity” to frame the “dark intruder” in his childhood “memories and dreams.” From his earliest interpellation, he is only offered a racist, phobic imago as the basis of self image.⁴⁴ The other children at the orphanage, probably motivated by Doc Hines, hail him as “nigger,” embedding this label as a traumatic insult in the structure of his self-image before he even discovers its specific implications. This gives the term “nigger” and the racist images it connotes great power over Joe, for as Faulkner repeatedly states: “Memory believes before knowing remembers” (119). Noel Polk unpacks this to mean: “Memory (the unconscious) believes (retains all of the trauma) before knowing (consciousness) remembers (brings it to the surface).”⁴⁵ At the age of five, Joe is hailed at a moment when he is absorbed in self-contemplation: “He was not hearing anything now. Very likely he would not have heard a

⁴² P. McKee, *Producing American Races* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 135.

⁴³ D. Marriott, *On Black Men*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ I use the terms “interpellation” and “hail” in Louis Althusser’s sense, to describe how a person enters society in a particular subject position. See: L. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by B. Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 127-186.

⁴⁵ N. Polk, *Children* p. 85.

gunshot [...]. He seemed to be turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of toothpaste into his mouth” (122). This moment of self-regard evokes the crucial Lacanian moment in subject formation when the child perceives a reflection of its body and introjects it as an imago of selfhood. For Joe, this moment is interrupted and fatally inflected by the dietitian calling him a “little nigger bastard!” (122). This moment dramatises an experience Frantz Fanon believed all blacks suffer; the replacement of the “corporeal schema” the child obtains through identification with its mirror image with a “historico-racial schema.”⁴⁶ The “historico-racial schema” refers to the dominant image of the black man constituted by the white racist culture in which he lives out of a “thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”⁴⁷ In Joe’s culture, these “stories” associate blacks with bestiality, uncontrollable sexuality and violence. Thus, his self-image is tainted by phobic images of blackness before he becomes a conscious subject, beginning a process of alienation from his body which contributes considerably to his violence.

After he is adopted by the McEacherns, Joe continues to suffer this sense of himself as a despised black object. As Lee Jenkins observes, Joe can only understand Mr McEachern’s obsessive, Calvinist view of him as predestined for sin and corruption as a reference to his status as “nigger,” even though McEachern is unaware of his possible black origins (79). Joe struggles to repress the effects of this treatment to an unconscious level and construct an ego based on a more positive self-image. He is severely hampered, however, by his total alienation from the black folk culture which could support such an image. As Richard Gray observes, he “cannot, even in his mind, step outside the terms of moral and social self-definition predicated in the word ‘nigger’ even though he instinctively knows them to be wrong.”⁴⁸ His ego is always extremely vulnerable to external confirmations of his unconscious self-image. He suffers self-fragmentation whenever he comes under the glare of white racism throughout his life; he is gradually destroyed, mentally and physically, by the pressure to perform the fantasies of white society. This situation may appear more extreme than normative black experience, but once again, there is a remarkable similarity with Fanon’s theories of black psychology.

⁴⁶ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ F. Fanon, *Black*, p. 112.

As David Marriott has written, for Fanon, “to be black is to be already interfered with, violated by a whiteness which comes from the inside out. A whiteness that not only distrusts but hates. But what to do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?”⁴⁹ The only answer Joe Christmas can discover is to externalise its agonising psychic effects in extreme violence.

Joe’s adult perceptions of his body emphasise the extent of his alienation and the influence of the white racist gaze over his bodily self-relation. During his relationship with Joanna he “began to see himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass” (260). In its context, this sensation appears to result from Joe’s moral outrage at the degraded nature of his relations with Joanna. However, it also suggests the effects of racism on his self-image. His tendency to perceive his body “from a distance” in poses of disintegration shows how racism has alienated him and dissipated his sense of self, evoking comparison with W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness. DuBois claims that America “yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁵⁰ Joe lacks a “true self-consciousness” and can only contemplate his body from an alienated, third person perspective, betraying the intrusion of the white racist gaze into his psyche. Philip Weinstein has written that at the root of Joe’s psychopathology lies his inability to “achieve individuation, [he] cannot bring into focus either his mind or his body.”⁵¹ He can only view his mind and body through the lens of a violently distorting white racist perspective. After he kills Joanna, he reflects on the white posse who are chasing him: “It seemed to him that he could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying for thirty years to drown him” (331). This may seem typical of his tendency to essentialise blackness as an amorphous substance which destroys individual selfhood. However, at this point, white society is working strenuously to force Joe into the role of Black Beast Rapist. The “black abyss” is not blackness as a physical substance, but the demeaning, amorphous status to which the white racist gaze reduces blacks. Therefore, this thought makes explicit the extent to

⁴⁸ R. Gray, *Life*, p. 186.

⁴⁹ D. Marriott, *Black*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls*, p. 5.

⁵¹ P. Weinstein, *What*, p. 171.

which Joe's problems of self-image and subject formation, his frequent sensations of dissolution and loss of self-control are a consequence of the pressure of being reshaped and dissolved by the white racist gaze.

The narrative of Joe's childhood offers many alternative explanations for his violence which obscure and distort the devastating effects of racism on subject-formation. This is the clearest example of the strategy of denial in *Light in August*. Joe's childhood is plagued by cruel and violent carers, particularly his foster father McEachern who beats him regularly, setting an example he clearly imitates. On one occasion, McEachern whips him with a strap: "It rose and fell, deliberate, numbered, with deliberate flat reports" (159). This is undeniably similar to Joe's beating of Lucas Burch "with those hard, slow, measured blows, as if he were meting them out by count" (103). Furthermore, these carers inculcate extreme attitudes towards religion, women and sexuality in Joe's mind which offer obvious explanations for much of his later violence. His affair with Bobbie Allen, where many of his sexual problems begin, was the last section added to the flashback on his childhood.⁵² This encourages the reader to attribute the violent breakdown of his relationship with Joanna to the same sexual problems. Joe also encounters violent criminals during this affair, who have a clear influence on him. He picks up the phrase "for sweet Jesus" from Max, encouraging the reader to attribute his later "hard-boiled" attitude towards violent criminality to Max's influence. Faulkner massively overdetermines Joe's psychology to conceal the disturbing implications of his story about the effects of the kind of racism Joe suffers on the wider black community.

Faulkner also heavily overdetermines Joe's acts of violence, but they nevertheless usually coincide with attempts by white people to fix him within a racist image of blackness. This violence is more than just the outrage of suffering the most grievous insult possible within that society, being labelled a "nigger," because of Joe's agonising suspicion that blackness is an internal constituent of his selfhood. The white racist gaze is always already internal as well as external for Joe. He spends his life fleeing from the demeaning, agonising effects of this gaze. But at moments when he is externally identified as black, his "white" unconscious overwhelms the fragile boundaries of his ego because its perspective is replicated by external reality. Joe is plagued by sensations of

⁵² See: R. Fadiman, *Faulkner's*, p. 93.

self-fragmentation and loss of individual agency, repeatedly thinking: “*Something is going to happen to me*” (118). Being identified as black causes him to lose his sense of self-integrity and agency. Only violence enables him to externalise his mental chaos and anguish and obtain temporary feelings of calm and self-control.

Joe first becomes violent in the novel when Lucas Burch explicitly attempts to fix him within the category of “nigger.” Burch tries to assert his superiority over Joe through reference to the normative Southern racial hierarchy, saying: “You’re a nigger, see? You said so yourself. [...] But I’m white. I’m a wh – ” (104). Joe violently cuts off this verbal demonstration of racial difference because he cannot tolerate being reduced to a degraded object, subordinate and inferior to the authentic humanity of white men; he even considers killing Burch. This explains Joe’s apparently motiveless attack on a black prostitute as a teenager. In the darkness of the sawmill shed, the black girl’s body takes on a formless, blurred quality from Joe’s perspective, symbolising everything he fears about blackness:

Then it seemed to him that he could see her – something, prone, abject; her eyes perhaps. Leaning, he seemed to look down into a black well and at the bottom saw two glints like reflections of dead stars. He was moving, because his foot touched her. [...] He kicked her hard, [...] hitting at her with wide, wild blows, [...] enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste (156-157).

The compound neologism “womanshenegro” sums up how blackness and female sexuality combine terrifyingly in this scene for Joe, threatening to swallow and destroy him. Joe perceives her eyes as “dead stars”; black holes threatening to draw him in and reduce him to black nothingness. Joe’s fears were made clearer in a manuscript version of the novel, where Joe hears “the falsetto voices of children” shouting “Nigger, nigger!” as he attacks the girl.⁵³ These are presumably the voices of his infant tormentors at the orphanage, confirms his violence stems from his fear of the psychological effects of being identified as black. But the published text veils Joe’s motives, claiming no one “knew why he had fought. And he could not have told them” (157). This has led many critics to interpret this attack as a result of the sexual neuroses and the fear of merging with feminine fluidity engendered in Joe’s mind by McEachern’s upbringing. But even in

its published form this attack still contains a significant racial element because it contrasts with Joe's later sexual encounters with white women. He can consummate these relations, even though they are strained by ambivalent feelings of desire, disgust and fear, without breaking down into violence. This exemplifies how Faulkner overdetermines Joe's violence to disguise its implications regarding the links between racism and black violence. However, Faulkner did not modify the text exclusively in ways designed to reduce the racial resonances of Joe's violence; he vacillated between disguising them and interrogating them more thoroughly in ways which suggest his ambivalence about this subject. The attack on Lucas Burch considered above was added to the manuscript quite late in the composition process.⁵⁴

Even occasions when Joe becomes violent in apparently racially innocent situations have connections with his fear of being identified as black. This emphasises Faulkner's tendency to investigate black violence in disguised ways. Consider McEachern's attack on the teenage Joe for secretly attending a dance: "perhaps it was not the face of that child [...] whom he had nurtured and sheltered and clothed" that he struck at, "since it was not that child's face which he was concerned with, but the face of Satan, which he knew as well" (204-205). Joe can only understand McEachern's perception of him as inherently sinful as a reference to his blackness. For McEachern to deny his humanity by reducing him to a manifestation of Satan is an intolerable, self-destroying experience for Joe. By striking back and felling McEachern with a chair, Joe externalises this intolerable sensation in physical violence and gains a new sense of individual agency and self-control. He exultantly declares: "I have done it! I have done it! I told them I would!" (207). This is strikingly similar to the manner in which Bigger Thomas gains a new sense of agency, a sense of control over his own life through violence in *Native Son*, as we shall see. However, by keeping this scene free of any racial element, Faulkner suppresses the disturbing possibilities it raises about the effects of committing violence for the wider black population.

One of the most potentially radical yet confused and ambiguous scenes of violence occurs when Joe enters a black church, attacking an elderly churchgoer and

⁵³ R. Fadiman, *Faulkner's*, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁴ R. Fadiman, *Faulkner's*, p. 144.

cursing both God and the congregation “with his hands raised like a preacher” (322-323). This violence may be an expression of Joe’s anger at the passivity and resignation of black Southern religion. He could be cursing the congregation for accepting the racist images of blackness as innately sinful which he has always associated with religion. However, during this extraordinary scene, the narrator is almost totally excluded from Joe’s consciousness, no attempt is made to articulate his motives, his thoughts or the words he says to the congregation. We only regain a direct perspective on his consciousness when he begins to passively accept his blackness. This reaffirms Faulkner’s ambivalence about representing black anger with the social order of the South. The black congregation believe Joe is white, so Roz Thompson’s attempt to attack Joe with a razor for knocking down his grandfather constitutes the one definite moment of black violence directed against a representative of white racism in the text. However, this subversive moment is immediately repressed when Roz is felled by one blow from Joe Christmas (323-325).

The one moment of serious violence which completely violates the paradigm I am tracing through the text occurs when Joe savagely attacks a Northern white prostitute for not caring about his possible black blood. Here, Joe appears to become violent not because he is perceived from a racist perspective in terms of a degrading stereotype, but because he is *not*. After this he is “sick” for two years, and he switches from fighting white men who dare to call him black, to fighting “the negro who called him white” (225). These incidents constitute another example of how Faulkner overdetermines Joe’s violence. They are narrated quickly and briefly in the last major section of the narrative to be written, and they are situated just before Faulkner returns to the narration of Joe and Joanna’s relationship. This suggests these incidents were a late addition to the text, designed to make Joe’s violence and its motives appear unique, not “black” in any normative way.

The central act of black violence in *Light in August* is always elided by the narrative, and becomes a contested site on which conflicting groups inside and outside the text attempt to impose meaning. Even the significance of omitting the actual act of violence from the narrative is debatable. Philip Weinstein claims “Faulkner deliberately leaves the physical event shrouded, so that its ideological repercussions (its alignment

within a racist discourse) can operate more visibly.”⁵⁵ This is one effect of omitting this event, but I believe the reasons for this omission must also involve Faulkner’s anxieties about representing black violence. Faulkner structured the novel in a way which offers a wealth of potential motives for this violence, placing the account of Joe’s childhood between the two attempts to narrate Joanna’s death, but he never pinpoints one of these motives as a definite cause. This may show Faulkner’s awareness of the impossibility of circumscribing extreme violence within any single linguistic act. However, it also enables Faulkner to avoid citing a specific connection between Joe’s experiences of racism and this violence. A close reading of the details about this killing that Faulkner does give us suggests his elision of this moment was not designed to promote the type of fantasies Thomas Dixon’s novels encouraged. Nevertheless, by omitting this act of violence, Faulkner leaves its meaning open to interpretation and increases the possibility that critics will read it as an attempt to reinforce racist stereotypes of black violence. For example, Myra Jehlen insists this story of a “New England old maid,” who is sexually fascinated by black men, being “murdered [...] in her bed by a razor-toting nigger,” is “so stereotypic an event [...] one wonders whether it might not be ironically intended to depict racism as a self-fulfilling white concoction.”⁵⁶ She rejects this possibility of ironic intention, however, claiming the rest of the novel participates in the definition of race as biological and essential, not cultural and arbitrary. This reading positions this novel in the tradition of Thomas Dixon’s fiction, an admonitory tale about the dangers of allowing sexually violent black men into contact with white women, but it lacks subtlety and attention to detail. The very fact of Joe’s racial indeterminacy prevents him being labelled a “razor-toting nigger” even though the white community struggles to force him into that role. Furthermore, to raise another point of critical controversy, Joe’s killing of Joanna cannot even be definitively labelled as murder.

As John N. Duvall notes, “nearly every critic in the political spectrum from Cleanth Brooks to the Marxian Myra Jehlen agrees that Joe *murders* Joanna.”⁵⁷ However, even though Byron Bunch, the white community and the narrator all label this act

⁵⁵ P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's*, p. 126.

⁵⁶ M. Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 88.

⁵⁷ J. N. Duvall, *Faulkner's Marginal Couple* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 19.

“murder,” the narration of the build up to it problematises the level of volition involved. Before killing Joanna, Joe reads a pulp fiction magazine “of that type whose covers bear either pictures of young women in underclothes or pictures of men in the act of shooting one another with pistols” (110). Although Joe appears to be thinking about Joanna, the description of how he reads suggests the language of this magazine is entering his mind at a deeper level: “He would not move, apparently arrested and held immobile by a single word which had perhaps not yet impacted, his whole being suspended by the single trivial combination of letters” (112). His lack of agency and autonomous selfhood makes him easily influenced by such language; he is always picking up phrases and performing roles inspired by others through the novel. This suggests Faulkner is emphasising black violence has cultural, not biological origins and that Joe’s violence is literally scripted by the influences of his culture. Thus, this act of violence foreshadows Bigger Thomas’s overdetermined killing of Mary in *Native Son*. Philip Weinstein supports such a reading, declaring that: “The body, overloaded with cultural tracking, is about to explode from abuse.”⁵⁸

However, Faulkner never directly explains Joe’s deadly violence, and the description of Joe’s motives for going to Joanna’s room with a razor are vague and ambiguous. As Scott Romine observes, the narrative’s general lack of stability and authority increases whenever “it begins to concern itself with questions of causation and motivation.”⁵⁹ Joe’s chiasmatic phrase before he kills Joanna: “*Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something,*” exemplifies this “problem of volition and agency” (104).⁶⁰ Faulkner’s attempt to articulate Joe’s thoughts at this moment is complex and convoluted: “he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe. He was saying to himself *I had to do it* already in the past tense; *I had to do it. She said so herself*” (280). These problems reflect Faulkner’s anxiety about admitting the possibility of a direct connection between the effects of white racism on the black psyche and black violence. He cannot directly and openly attribute Joe’s killing of Joanna to the effects of racism, because to do so would raise the possibility that all African Americans could react

⁵⁸ P. Weinstein, *Faulkner's*, p. 126.

⁵⁹ S. Romine, *Narrative*, p. 159.

similarly. His description of their relationship vacillates between exposing this connection between racism and black violence and disguising it.

In Joe's relationship with Joanna, her racist perception of him brings to crisis point his problems regarding his self-image. Joanna exemplifies the wishful, fearful complex of affects white Americans invested in their images of blackness at this time. David Marriott has written that existing on the "ground upon which phobia and fantasy meet" inevitably has "self-destructive, lacerating" consequences for the black man.⁶¹ Joanna compels Joe to exist on this ground during their relationship. During the conversation she has with Joe about her family history, Joanna explains that initially she regarded African Americans as things, like "rain, or furniture, or food, or sleep" (252). But her father's description of them as the "white race's doom and curse for its sins" caused her to revise her image of blackness into "a shadow in the shape of a cross," which white children are somehow both nailed to and suffocated by (253). This image reveals the pathological extent of her negrophobia. She never perceived blacks as genuine human subjects, then she reduced them from depersonalised, object status to an incorporeal, nightmarish, symbol of the evil whites commit and suffer. Not surprisingly, Joe is "sullen" and "brooding" after this, saying he "know[s]" why Joanna's father did not kill Sartoris after he shot her grandfather and her brother (253-254). What he knows is that Joanna's father blamed Sartoris's crimes upon black people, and that she has accepted his teaching that her "grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse God put on a whole race" (252).

Joe has suffered the effects of this theologically grounded association of blackness with evil and a divine curse through his whole life, from his earliest experiences of the religious extremism of Doc Hines and McEachern. It infuriates him to discover that Joanna also perceives him in such terms, and their relationship inevitably descends to ever more violent and mutually degrading levels after this conversation. I disagree with Laura Doyle who regards this conversation as having a unique "structure of hope rather than despair," because it is the one moment where characters stop performing ideological scripts which predestine their futures. Instead, she claims, they express

⁶⁰ S. Romine, *Narrative*, p. 157.

⁶¹ D. Marriott, *Black*, p. 13.

genuine thoughts and emotions which “open up other possible futures,” exemplified by Joe’s question, “when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?” (249). She sees this as an open dialogue which represents a “momentary purging of racial-sexual myth” from their relationship.⁶² In fact, however, Joanna’s contribution to this dialogue ensures racial myth will destroy their relationship. By displacing onto a single woman of Northern ancestry the Southern tendency to blame and despise African Americans for the effects of racism upon them, Faulkner finds a way to investigate the effects of Negrophobia upon the black psyche without implicating the white South. Although he acknowledges the general racism of white Southern society at other points in the text, he cannot do so at a moment when this racism is so obviously and closely linked to the production of violence in the black mind.

But Joanna also invests desire in her image of blackness, as her sexual behaviour demonstrates. *Light in August* is unusual for its time in making white female desire for the black male explicit, and more radical than the first published version of *Native Son*, as we shall see.⁶³ Joanna compels Joe to perform, to become the fulfilment of, her fantasies about black male sexuality. Initially, she makes him break into her house during the night and force her into intercourse in a performance of the Black Beast rape narrative. Joe reflects that: “Even after a year it was as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew” (234). Later, she makes him discover her hidden naked in the garden, and cries: “Negro! Negro! Negro! [whilst] in the wild throes of nymphomania” (259-260). This transference of sexuality from bedroom to garden betrays her association of black male sexuality with the primitive and bestial. Being perceived this way puts intolerable pressure on Joe’s body image: “In the less than half-light he appeared to be watching his body, seeming to watch it turning slow and lascivious in a whispering of gutter filth like a drowned corpse in a thick still black pool of more than water” (107). This passage evinces Joe’s sense of revulsion at Joanna’s feminine sexuality, betraying the puritanical, Calvinist influence of McEachern on his perceptions of women and sexuality. He has already visualised Joanna’s body in similar ways, seeing her as “two

⁶² L. Doyle, “Body”, pp. 353-354.

⁶³ This desire is not limited exclusively to the outcast Joanna; the white Southern women who come to the crime scene observe “with secret and passionate and glittering looks and with secret frustrated breasts” (290).

creatures that struggled in the one body [...] struggling drowning in alternate throes upon the surface of a black thick pool,” and imagining that beneath her “clean, austere garments” lies a “rotten richness ready to flow into putrefaction” (260 and 262).

However, this insistent figuring of Joanna in images of moral and sexual corruption when the narrative is focalised from Joe’s perspective feels false and strained. Joe has never experienced such intense moral or sexual revulsion in his previous relationships, most of which have been with prostitutes. During his affair with Bobbie, the only other relationship we receive a detailed account of, Joe is horrified by menstruation, but this does not lead him anywhere close to the kind of violence he ultimately inflicts on Joanna. It seems Faulkner introduces sexual problems in this relationship which, although clearly connected to the racial problems, also serve to disguise these racial problems and make Joe’s violence seem less like a response to racism. If we set aside these sexual implications, his sensation of bodily dissolution has powerful racial connotations. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes the experience of being perceived by the white phobic gaze as “an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood.”⁶⁴ He claims the phobic reactions of white people gave “my body [...] back to me, sprawled out, distorted, recolored.”⁶⁵ If we interpret the “black pool” of “more than water,” which Joe felt his body dissolving into as blood, then the similarity between his sensations of dissolution and Fanon’s experience is clear. For both men, the white phobic gaze produces a sensation of physical, bloody fragmentation into inchoate blackness. As I noted above, Fanon regards such experiences as evidence of the replacement of the “corporeal schema” which human selfhood is based on with a “historico-racial schema.”⁶⁶ Joe has struggled to repress this latter schema, but the pressure of Joanna’s racist perception of him causes the unconscious self-image he inculcated as a child to overwhelm his fragile ego, hence this disintegration of his bodily self-relation.

It is damaging enough for Joe to be compelled to perform certain black roles for Joanna because she perceives him as black. But it is completely intolerable when she

⁶⁴ F. Fanon, *Black*, p. 112.

⁶⁵ F. Fanon, *Black*, p. 113.

begins to demand that he actually *become* a black man in the eyes of the whole Southern society, and this leads quickly to their relationship's violent climax. Joe can no longer contain the lacerating effects of Joanna's racism in his mind, he has to externalise them in violence. Her demand that he become a black lawyer radically undermines his sense of agency. His mouth speaks independently of his mind's control. He can only reassert self-control through violence, telling his mouth, as he begins to hit Joanna: "Shut up that drivel. Let me talk" (277). This same problem of agency and self-control is hinted at in Joanna's death scene, when Joe's body responds to Joanna's command to light the lamp independently of his mind: "his body seemed to walk away from him. It went to the table and his hands laid the razor on the table and found the lamp and struck the match" (282). Critics often interpret such sensations as consequences of his racial indeterminacy. Philip Weinstein claims Joe lacks a coherent sense of self and self-control because his refusal to live as either black or white prevents him from taking up a subject position in the Symbolic Order of his society.⁶⁷ However, the fact that these sensations so often coincide with moments when Joe experiences a racist gaze supports my theory that they can also be attributed to the effects of being perceived in terms of racist images of blackness.

Joe is also unable to tolerate Joanna's attempts to pray over him, which cause an intense moment of subjective collapse. His mind becomes consumed by:

[V]oices, murmurs, whispers: [...] his own voice; other voices evocative of names, times and places – which he had been conscious of all his life without knowing it, which were his life, thinking *God perhaps and me not knowing that too* [...] *God loves me too* (105).

Joanna's praying recalls all the voices who have used religion to label Joe as evil, voices which shape his mind, "which were his life." For Lee Jenkins, it revives the sense of blackness as an inherent, inevitable sinfulness which Doc Hines and McEachern taught Joe to associate with people praying for him.⁶⁸ The repressed white racist gaze he internalised as a child returns to overwhelm his consciousness. Significantly, Joe's

⁶⁶ Fanon describes this experience as causing his "corporeal schema" to crumble, "its place taken by a "racial epidermal schema," a phrase which seems to have a similar meaning to "historico-racial schema." F. Fanon, *Black*, p. 112.

⁶⁷ P. Weinstein, *Subject*, pp. 104-107.

⁶⁸ L. Jenkins, *Faulkner*, p. 79.

attempt to resist these voices is articulated in italics which, I agree with Scott Romine, represent “non-reflective consciousness – that is, consciousness not yet articulated in language.”⁶⁹ Joe is struggling to resist these voices by thinking God loves him too, but his inability to articulate this in language shows the futility of this attempt. Ultimately, he can only overcome his sensations of self-collapse and mental anguish by projecting these sensations into extreme violence. Just before going to Joanna’s room, Joe says to himself, in his most explicit, direct comment about why he kills her: “It’s because she started praying over me” (105). In an earlier version of this scene the narrator also stated that: “It was because he believed that the love and prayers were on the black blood in him and not the man,” and Joe went on to think, “you prayed on the nigger.”⁷⁰ The removal of these crucial associations of prayer with racism reaffirms Faulkner’s refusal to posit direct links between Joe’s experiences of racism and his most extreme act of violence.

Joanna’s death scene, as Diane Roberts observes, is initially figured in conventional terms. Joanna is armed with a conventionally “white” weapon, a gun, and Joe is armed with a conventionally “black” weapon, a “straight razor [...] a street fighting or quiet murdering instrument.”⁷¹ These were the weapons Nelse Patton and his victim were armed with, reaffirming how that historical case influenced *Light in August*. The straight razor was the clichéd weapon of “bad niggers,” but, in every other respect, this scene revises established tropes of black violence. The associations of beastliness are made with Joanna, not her putatively black killer, in a reversal of Thomas Dixon’s tropes. The shadow of her arm and the gun upon the wall are described as “both monstrous, the cocked hammer monstrous, back-hooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake; it did not waver at all” (282). The association of Joanna with a predatory creature shows this scene is focalised through Joe; the imagery of the scene reflects his fears, not Joanna’s. This too contrasts with Dixon, who focalised such scenes from the terrified perspective of the white female victims, encouraging the reader to empathise with them. Olga Vickery interprets the shadowplay representation of the final moments of this scene as proof that these are “phantom weapons directed at phantom opponents. For each sees

⁶⁹ S. Romine, *Narrative*, p. 158.

⁷⁰ R. Fadiman, *Faulkner’s*, pp. 105-106.

⁷¹ D. Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 183.

embodied in the other that racial myth which has dominated their lives.”⁷² Joanna has always failed to perceive Joe as a human being because of his possible black blood. Meanwhile Joe perceives Joanna as the personification, the source of the demeaning gaze which plagues his self-image. This kind of inability to perceive the Other’s humanity is a central cause of black violence in many of the novels we will consider. Focussing on shadows of the action also places Faulkner at one remove from a scene too troubling to articulate directly.

In another departure from the mythos of black violence Thomas Dixon helped establish, Joanna’s dead body is not exploited as a text upon which the horrors of black violence are inscribed. Nevertheless, the grotesque description of her head as almost totally severed evokes the superhuman strength associated with Black Beast figures in white fantasy. Because Joe is never proven to be biologically black, the extremity of his violence could be interpreted simply as evidence of the power of the mental anguish racism produces, rather than the result of innate characteristics. However, this incident, combined with Joe’s fracturing of Roz Thompson’s skull and possible killing of McEachern with single blows, suggests Faulkner had an unconscious, irrational fear of black violence. He perceived it as a monstrously powerful force because he feared it would overwhelm and destroy the social order he invested in if it was ever unleashed. The condition of Joanna’s corpse echoes Edgar Allan Poe’s, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), where an orang-utan slashes a woman’s throat so violently with a razor, that when her corpse is picked up her head falls off.⁷³ Recent Poe criticism has demonstrated persuasively why antebellum readers would have associated the orang-utan with black men and how this story refracts antebellum fantasies about black violence.⁷⁴ Eric Sundquist interprets this resemblance as “an intentional mirror image,” but I believe it is an unconscious consequence of Faulkner’s anxieties about the power of black violence.⁷⁵ It illustrates how easy it is for any author to become entangled in the tropes

⁷² O. Vickery, *Novels* p. 72.

⁷³ E. A. Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, *Selected Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 113.

⁷⁴ See: L. Barrett, “Presence of Mind: Detection and Racialization in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’”, pp. 157-177, and E. Lemire, “ ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’: Amalgamation Discourses and the Race Riots of 1838 in Poe’s Philadelphia”, pp. 177-205, in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. by J. G. Kennedy and L. Weissberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷⁵ E. Sundquist, *Faulkner*, p. 87.

produced by previous racist fantasies when those tropes constitute the culturally dominant method of representing black violence.

In *The Sound and The Fury*, Quentin Compson observes that: “a nigger is not so much a person as a form of behaviour; a sort of obverse reflection of the people he lives among.”⁷⁶ This statement informs *Light in August*, particularly in the descriptions of Jefferson’s white community after the discovery of Joanna’s body. Faulkner shows how white society creates the violent black man, forcing him to perform certain scripts:

[They] believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew believed and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward (288).

In contrast to Thomas Dixon, Faulkner exposes deliberately, not inadvertently, how tensions, frustrations and conflicts within the white community are projected onto the fantasised image of a Black Beast Rapist. The transition from “a negro” to “Negro” reaffirms their denial of black individuality. They repeat the demonised stereotype Thomas Dixon represented as the truth of black male violence, but in this context, when we have already partially witnessed reality of Joanna’s death, it is exposed as fantasy. As Chapter One showed, the Black Beast Rapist played a crucial role in the formation of white identity and the maintenance of segregation. These men need to project the Black Beast fantasy onto the new phobic figure of the “white nigger” which Joe represents to maintain the taboo on sexual relations between black men and white women, and reinforce the colour-line against the threat of changing social conditions. The townspeople are already suspicious that Joanna and Joe were having a consensual sexual relationship, but this must be denied and replaced by a conventional narrative of black savagery violating white female purity. Joe must be caught and sacrificed in a way which reaffirms the colour-line and terrorises others who might cross it.

The depiction of Joe’s violent death highlights the tensions and ambivalences regarding the representation of black violence I have traced throughout the text, particularly the narrative of Joe’s behaviour which leads to his death. It appears Faulkner could only articulate such raging black violence in literary form while knowing it would

⁷⁶ W. Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Picador, 1993), p. 74.

ultimately turn on itself and ensure its own destruction. Significantly, this self-destructiveness emerges after Joe appears to accept that he is black while on the run. After eating with a black family, he reflects: “they were afraid. Of their brother afraid” (335). Joe then loses all inclination towards violence, allowing white men in Mottstown to capture and beat him (350). Then after escaping from the sheriff’s men, he allows Percy Grimm to kill him despite having a “loaded and unfired pistol in his hand” (449). The only subsequent act of violence he commits is to hit Hightower (464). Gavin Stevens articulates this wishful belief that self-destructiveness is a natural element of black violence in his explanation of Joe’s final actions. Initially, he conforms to the traditional stereotype of blacks as naturally violent, declaring: “it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it” (449). But he then also figures black blood as self-destructive:

It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfilment (449).

This convoluted, ambiguous sentence implies Joe’s black blood produced not only a desire to commit violence, but also a desire to suffer it. Stevens’s explanation is not a reliable articulation of Faulkner’s own views, but the climax of Joe’s story suggests that here Stevens is reflecting something Faulkner wanted to believe. Like Thomas Dixon, Faulkner could not fully accept the idea of blacks openly and directly targeting violence against the white power structure.

During Grimm’s pursuit and murder of Joe Christmas, Faulkner describes the actions of both characters as determined by “the Player” and “Fate” (460–464). These terms may show Faulkner is seeking to deny the cultural, historical causes of black violence. Faulkner elevates the relations between white racist fantasies, black violence and oppressive white violence which the whole novel has sought to interrogate, and which reach their climax in this scene, to an eternal, natural, unchangeable status. However, I believe this terminology ironically exposes how Grimm and Joe are playing out a culturally determined script which their culture has taught them to regard as divinely predestined. Richard Godden interprets this imagery as a symbol of the

community's passionate, deterministic faith in the Black Beast narrative: "A power as remorseless as "Fate" is released by the equation 'nigger' = 'rape' = 'lynch'."⁷⁷ Once they have labelled Joe as Beast, they have to fulfil the ritual through which they traditionally deal with such events.

But the Black Beast fantasy and the method of destroying this scapegoat figure as an embodiment of social tensions cannot be mapped onto Joe as the "white nigger." His refusal to behave according to Beast norms produces severe cognitive dissonance in the white community: "It was as if the very initial outrage of the murder carried in its wake and made of all subsequent actions something monstrous and paradoxical and wrong, in themselves against both reason and nature" (296). This sense of disorientation produces an almost hysterical anger:

That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too (350).

The community is desperate to force Joe into this "nigger murderer" role because violence is part of what they project onto the black Other to form their stable, civilised, self-image. They cannot allow Joe to blur the boundaries between black and white once they blame him for killing Joanna. Until Lucas Burch accuses Joe of being black, Burch himself is the sheriff's main suspect, and with good reason; much of the evidence incriminates him.⁷⁸ Yet after this, no one doubts either that Joe has black blood or that he killed Joanna. The novel exposes what Scott Romine calls the "socially essential meaning" of black blood as a "magical substance that contains violence" for this community. In different ways, the ranting of Doc Himes, the self righteous violence of Percy Grimm and the elegant theorising of Gavin Stevens all bear testimony to this. By the logic of what Romine calls "a kind of *post facto* causality," they try to interpret Joe's

⁷⁷ R. Godden, "Call", p. 243.

⁷⁸ See: S. E. Mears, "Who Killed Joanna Burden?", *Mississippi Quarterly*, 24 (1971), 271-277 for a summary of the textual evidence which makes Burch prime suspect.

violence as proof that he is black.⁷⁹ As the gossip of the community puts it: “He dont look any more like a nigger than I do. But it must have been the nigger blood in him” (349).

However, Joe’s death only undermines this willed connection between blackness and violence more forcefully. Faulkner’s portrayal of Percy Grimm collapses, with seemingly deliberate skill, the boundary between black and white violence Dixon struggled to maintain. Like the lynch mobs of Dixon’s novels, Grimm masks the pleasure he takes from inflicting extreme violence upon blacks by casting himself as a representative of law and order. He declares: “We got to preserve order, [...] We must let the law take its course” (451). Yet three times, during his pursuit of Joe, he is described as acting with a sense of “joy” (460-462). When Hightower attempts to provide an alibi for Joe, he immediately assumes they were having a sexual relationship, exclaiming: “Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?” (464). Grimm’s obsession with racial and sexual transgression betrays his projection of repressed sexual desire onto black people. His castration of the dying Joe Christmas shows how he satisfies these desires under the guise of eliminating them. This gratuitous act is savagely brutal and clearly motivated by enjoyment, and therefore indistinguishable from the kind of violence attributed to Black Beasts. Joe’s murder produces an aporia; the play of binary oppositions essential to language and culture breaks down. Blackness merges with whiteness, civility with barbarism, law and order with chaos. For Richard Gray, it is a moment:

When the vocabularies evolved by a group to enable them to conceive of and manage the world begin to disintegrate, dissolve into irrelevance. [...] The choked cry that one of the observes utters here is one of those moments of absolute inarticulacy that [...] seem to define the limits of vocal acts.⁸⁰

This is the opposite of the reaffirmation of crucial divisions which lynchings were intended to produce, through the elimination of a concentrated embodiment of the threat to these oppositions. The anxieties about the effects of lynching rituals on the white perpetrators in Thomas Dixon’s novels reaches a new, more serious level here.

⁷⁹ S. Romine, *Narrative*, pp. 194-5.

⁸⁰ R. Gray, *Life*, p. 187.

However, Faulkner circumscribes the radical import of this scene. He does not attempt a mimetic representation of the real painful and gruesome nature of Joe's death. As Patricia McKee observes, the "orgasmic" imagery of Joe's castration is "far removed from the experience of having genitals cut off."⁸¹ Instead, he elevates the scene to a symbolic level, culminating in a flight of Arcadian rhetoric, concealing the aporia of Joe's death aesthetically. It seems Faulkner understood the extent to which the figure of the violent black male underpinned Southern white identity and ideology, but he was not prepared to deconstruct that figure totally and risk dismantling these things. Furthermore, Faulkner exonerates the general community from responsibility for Grimm's violence. Although previously they were portrayed as a mob looking for someone to crucify, Faulkner radically changes his representation of them as the moment of Joe's death approaches, insisting on the "quiet square empty of people peacefully at suppertables about that peaceful town and that peaceful country" (454). He limits blame for Joe's murder to Percy Grimm and Doc Hines, who stand apart from the main community, even though they share its values in exaggerated form. Faulkner avoids completely dissolving the boundary between black and white violence. He maintains a difference between Grimm's fanatical violence and the standard methods of racial control and oppression used by the hegemonic forces in Southern society, which are never subjected to such a devastating critique.

In conclusion, then, I disagree with critics who interpret Joe's death as a successful sacrifice which restores the hierarchy, the binarisms essential to Jefferson's community.⁸² Only by forgetting what they have seen and learnt at this failed ritual can the people of Jefferson maintain faith in their society's crucial ideological norms. As Richard Godden observes, the narrative shows "Jefferson *will* 'lose'" what they witness when Joe dies:

Faulkner's Arcadian touch indicates how far the town will go to blind itself to Joe's lesson, especially when the twin institutions of Law and Education stand firm behind presently constituted categories. Gavin Stevens' precise blood

⁸¹ P. McKee, *Making*, p. 145.

⁸² These critics range from conservative New Critics to recent critics writing from radical theoretical perspectives. See: Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 71, J. Williamson, *Faulkner*, p. 413 and S. Romine, *Narrative*, pp. 191-192.

percentiles restore those black and white demarcations that make “nigger” meaningful. Faulkner records the conversation *before* letting readers into the kitchen. Moral? What is seen is soon forgotten.⁸³

The return of the narrative to the same comic, pastoral tone used to introduce Lena Grove’s story at the start suggests Faulkner himself participated in this forgetting, as his only way of concluding this story of black violence.

⁸³ R. Godden, “Call”, p. 243.

CHAPTER FOUR

“A SHADOW ATHWART OUR NATIONAL LIFE”: FANTASIES OF BLACK VIOLENCE IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON*

As the work of an African American author, set in a Northern, urban environment, *Native Son* (1940) is a very different novel to *Light in August*. But it too constitutes a key literary document of how the Depression affected American perceptions of black violence. In his essay on the composition of *Native Son*, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright wrote:

[W]e have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.¹

Recent scholarship has often linked images of blackness in nineteenth century writing to white perceptions of the African presence in America, most notably Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*.² But I believe this quotation shows Wright reaching towards a similar conclusion, recognising the power of fantasies about African Americans in American culture. For Wright it is not just the “oppression of the Negro” in itself which creates “a shadow athwart our national life,” but also the wishful, fearful and guilty fantasies this oppression creates in the white Imaginary, which manifest themselves in the “gloomy broodings” of Hawthorne and the “horror” of Poe. Thus in *Native Son*, he attempts to remove this “dense”, “heavy” shadow of oppression by first shattering these fantasies about African Americans. Dan McCall claims: “nineteenth century writers could erect fantasies in the head. Wright was trying to rid himself of the fantasy in his.”³ I believe Wright was principally attempting to rid his *society* of the fantasy gestured towards by nineteenth century literary images of blackness. In doing this, he had to negotiate a difficult path between denial and demonisation. He experienced pressure to deny black violence, describing a “mental censor – product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America,” which urged him to soften his portrayal of Bigger so it

¹ R. Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”, *Native Son* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), p. 462.

² See: T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992).

³ D. E. McCall, *The Example of Richard Wright* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), pp. 76-77.

could not support the prejudices of “reactionary whites.”⁴ But Wright defied this pressure, choosing instead to inhabit the images and tropes of demonisation in an attempt to undermine them. His principal method of doing this is to enter the mind of his most violent black character, to expose how racism produces the types of behaviour white ideology uses to demonise black masculinity.

Wright saw little value in the resources of African American folk culture in attempting this difficult task. Jerry H. Bryant has shown that many elements of the “bad nigger” tradition in African American folk culture inform the characterisation of Bigger, but for Wright this paradigm is merely a point of departure.⁵ It offers an image of black violence he co-opts and uses in completely new ways. Not only is interracial violence unusual within this tradition, the folk-tales and ballads about badmen contain none of the sociological and psychological analysis crucial to Wright’s novel, as Bryant acknowledges.⁶ Wright also rejected the ambiguous legacy of earlier African American literature, such as the Harlem Renaissance novels considered in Chapter Two. He regarded this tradition as inadequate for articulating the full horror of black violence, and the racism which motivates it, claiming it was incapable of penetrating “with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.”⁷ Wright chose instead to adapt the techniques and perceptions of white writers, which he claimed offered him a meaningful way to gauge the realities of black life in America.⁸ The naturalist, social protest fiction of authors like Theodore Dreiser and the modernist articulations of psychic extremes performed by authors such as Faulkner shaped his literary voice. But, as we have seen, the language and imagery of these literary traditions are freighted with racist fantasies and ideologies. To adapt them to his own purposes, Wright uses a strategy similar to signifying. Shadowing demonised images of black violence so closely carries risks which Jonathan Elmer has summarised well: “Wright’s text can never be entirely free of the suspicion that its representations are repetitions rather than revisions, contributions to

⁴ R. Wright, “Bigger”, p. 448.

⁵ J. H. Bryant, *“Born in a Mighty Bad Land”: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction*, pp. 64-66.

⁶ J. H. Bryant, *Born*, p. 64.

⁷ R. Wright, “Bigger”, p. 443.

⁸ R. Wright, “Bigger”, p. 443.

racial impasse and the violence of stereotype rather than exposés of them.”⁹ *Native Son* has often been criticised on these lines, most famously by James Baldwin, whose criticisms I consider during this chapter. But more recent African American writers, such as David Bradley and Percival Everett have also attacked this novel, illustrating how representations of black violence remain controversial in contemporary American culture.¹⁰

Wright’s first task in *Native Son* is to demonstrate how the lived experience of racist oppression shapes black subjectivity in ways which produce violence. The onset of the Depression, whose effects on Southern perceptions of black violence we saw in the previous chapter, also changed attitudes in Northern, urban culture. Whereas the economic prosperity and political stability of the twenties permitted the African American presence in Northern cities to be figured as exotic, entertaining and unthreatening, the crisis of the Depression revived images of blackness as a dangerous excess. African Americans had been encouraged to migrate to provide unskilled labour for an expanding industrial economy. Now, in a shrinking labour market, they suffered the worst effects of unemployment and poverty, creating white fears they would become a force for criminality and political unrest. When he first goes to the Dalton house, Bigger worries the police will interpret his presence in a white neighbourhood as an attempt “to rob or rape somebody.”¹¹ This shows how the Depression revived fears of the mere presence of African Americans in white urban space as violent and violating, which we saw in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* in Chapter One. Plainly, Wright understood how economic crisis revived rape as the shaping metaphor in white perceptions of black movements across the colour-line. As we shall see, he attempts to exploit this to his advantage in *Native Son*.

⁹ J. Elmer, “Spectacle and Event in *Native Son*”, *American Literature*, 70:4 (1998), 767-798, p. 772.

¹⁰ During the nineteen-eighties, David Bradley said he hated *Native Son* “with a passion,” accusing Wright of selling “his people down the river to make a buck.” (Quoted in H. Rowley, “The Shadow of the White Woman: Richard Wright and the Book-of-the-Month Club”, *Partisan Review*, 66:4 (1999), 625-634, p. 626.) In his recent novel, *erasure* (2002), Percival Everett imagines a scene in which Wright thanks D. W. Griffith for praising his novel. This suggests he believes *Native Son* reproduces the demonised stereotypes of blackness displayed in *Birth of a Nation*. (P. Everett, *erasure* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 218.

¹¹ R. Wright, *Native Son*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), p. 44. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

In this socio-historical context, Foucault's theory of the modern production of the criminal as a character type helps explain the racist power relations which structure Bigger's subjectivity. Foucault attributes the high rate of recidivism among offenders in modern societies to the penal system. Designed not to punish particular offences, but to produce delinquents as a specific class of "pathologized" subjects, who can be isolated from society and disciplined, it creates an illusion of mastery over the problem of crime.¹² Hence: "It is not crime that alienates an individual from society, but the fact that one is in society as an alien."¹³ This theory seems highly relevant to Bigger's superfluous position as a black man in Depression-era Chicago.¹⁴ As Max states at his trial: "*His very existence is a crime against the state!*" (400). The only useful, visible role Bigger can assume for white authority is that of delinquent, whose punishment frightens other African Americans into obedience and satisfies white desires for tough measures of crime-prevention. With no prospects of employment, he has already entered on the cycle of crime, imprisonment, release and re-offence, which characterises delinquency for Foucault, when the novel begins. He has spent time in Reform School for the theft of auto tyres. The files of the police and social services define him as pathologically criminal and in need of constant surveillance, shaping white perceptions of him, including that of Mr Dalton.¹⁵ Bigger feels constantly watched by the disciplinary gaze of white authority, symbolised by his encounter with a poster of State Attorney Buckley, whose eyes seem to watch him constantly (13). The gaze becomes an element of his own psyche. Hence his claim that white people do not live "across the 'line'," but "[r]ight down here in my stomach" (21).

This Foucauldian interpretation explains what Valerie Smith describes as "the relentless plottedness" of the novel.¹⁶ The many symbols and prophecies of Bigger's ultimate fate, emphasise how white society overdetermines his life and his violence for its own purposes. Thomas Dixon sought to disguise the crucial role of the Black Beast

¹² M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by A. Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 275-277.

¹³ M. Foucault, *Discipline*, pp. 275-276.

¹⁴ Virginia Whatley Smith also observes the relevance of Foucault's theory to Bigger's situation in: "Native Son as Depiction of a Carceral Society", *Approaches to Teaching Native Son*, ed. by J. A. Miller (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1997), pp. 95-102.

¹⁵ Mr Dalton tells Bigger the "relief people" have informed him about Bigger's past misdemeanours (49).

¹⁶ V. Smith, "Alienation and Creativity in the Fiction of Richard Wright", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, p. 434.

narrative in underwriting white supremacist ideology and maintaining white racial unity, but Wright deliberately exposes the crucial role Bigger's violence plays in maintaining the political order of his society. Bigger's lawyer Boris Max complains in his defence speech that Bigger's crimes have been used to whip up race hatred. Focussing public discontent on the scapegoat figure of a black criminal diverts and dissipates tensions generated by proletarian poverty and the oppression of trade unions (385-386). Max goes on to declare: "Maybe we *wanted* him to do it! Maybe we would have had no chance or justification to stage attacks against hundreds of thousands of people if he had acted sanely and normally!" (395). Bigger's violence enables him to function as a monstrous double of white society's worst fears and most unacceptable desires in a similar manner to Joe Christmas. His violence too is immediately incorporated into a Black Beast Rapist narrative, despite the absence of evidence. During the search for Bigger, two policemen discuss an attractive black girl, saying: "I wonder what on earth a nigger wants to kill a white woman for when he has such good-looking women in his own race" (352). Wright demonstrates that interracial sexual attraction and the conflation of sex with violence are taboo desires which white society projects onto black men. The same fantasy that such troubling desires can be eliminated through the destruction of one man overtakes Chicago as it did Jefferson, Mississippi. The mob hysteria, the demonisation of Bigger by the media and the wild accusations made in State Attorney Buckley's prosecution demonstrate that all the emotions of a Southern lynch mob are present under a thin veneer of disinterested justice.

But Wright sought to do more than depict the heinous social circumstances which overdetermine Bigger's violent fate. He also wanted to articulate the experience of this racism from Bigger's perspective, to show how it produces violence from within Bigger's mind. To achieve this, he employs a narrative perspective resembling that in *Light in August*. Events are focalised through Bigger, but the third person narrator can also penetrate beneath Bigger's consciousness and expose emotions Bigger cannot acknowledge. Faulkner fearfully drew a veil over many of Joe Christmas's thoughts and emotions, but Wright grants his narrator full access to Bigger's psyche. Like Faulkner, Wright is attempting to articulate experiences crucial to the formation of his protagonist's subjectivity, yet excluded from his protagonist's consciousness. Just as Joe Christmas

was unconscious of the formative, “primal scene” at the orphanage, Bigger represses the shameful but character-shaping details of his family’s existence:

He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fulness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held towards them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully ~~into his consciousness~~, he would either kill himself or someone else (10).

Bigger’s psyche is fissured by the need to repress the traumatic pain and anger created by the conditions of his life and keep his consciousness anaesthetised. At moments of crisis, he is overwhelmed by these powerful repressed emotions, and he has to project his mental turmoil into apparently gratuitous violence to restore his normal psychic state.

For example, Bigger’s repressed fear of white people threatens to overwhelm him when his gang are preparing to rob a white store. He therefore seizes on a trivial motive to attack Gus in the pool hall. Because of his unusual perspective, the narrator can tell us this constitutes a transference of Bigger’s fear and hatred of whites, despite the fact that Bigger “kept this knowledge [...] thrust firmly down in him” (42). Ralph Ellison argued in an essay published five years after *Native Son* that the physicality of black life is not evidence of primitive simplicity, but the manifestation of hysterical symptoms. African Americans, he claimed are trapped in “the reverse of a cataleptic trance”, where the body, rather than the mind, reacts to the pressures which the stultifying constrictions of racism “block off from the concept-creating activities of the brain. Acts of black violence which appear gratuitous and futile often represent the conversion of “thwarted ideational energy [...] into unsatisfactory pantomime.”¹⁷ *Native Son* anticipates this theory, showing how racism engenders pain and rage in the black psyche which cannot be expressed directly against white oppressors and is too traumatic to contain in consciousness. Outwardly, Bigger conforms to the stereotype of black men as usually docile and lethargic but occasionally and unpredictably violent: “These were the rhythms of his life; indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger” (29). But by entering Bigger’s mind, Wright exposes the

¹⁷ R. Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues”, *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, p. 139.

environmental and cultural pressures which produce this behaviour. This illustrates Wright's controversial strategy of signifying on demonised images of black violence by inhabiting and deconstructing them. James Baldwin accused Wright of depicting Bigger as: "that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash."¹⁸ As we shall see, Wright risks evoking this fantasy repeatedly, but, in contrast to Baldwin, I argue this is a deliberate strategy, designed to expose how racism creates the images of blackness these fantasies naturalise.

In seeking to highlight a gap between Bigger and demonised fantasies of black men, Wright does not attempt to evoke unambivalent sympathy in the reader. Admittedly, as Katherine Fishburn observes: "In limiting himself to Bigger's perspective, Wright is asking the reader to identify with his hero and to try to understand his motives and actions."¹⁹ But Wright did not want to repeat the "awfully naïve mistake" he believed he had made in *Uncle Tom's Children*, creating characters who "even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about."²⁰ He knew that pitiable, saintly protagonists, in the tradition of much earlier African American fiction, did not fully expose the effects of racist oppression.²¹ Only an unflinching representation of the appalling psychological consequences of racism could achieve this. In contrast to most American novels, Wright locates the most extreme black violence in a focal character without in any way understating or softening this violence. Some critics have interpreted Bigger as a conventional, sympathetic hero, such as Joyce Ann Joyce in *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*, but this entails modifying the details of his character. For example, Joyce claims Bigger flees to Bessie for companionship after Mary's bones are discovered in the furnace, but there is no indication of this in the text.²² The only motive offered is that Bessie has the money he stole from Mary's purse, which he needs to escape.

¹⁸ J. Baldwin, "Many Thousand's Gone", *The Price of the Ticket*, p. 71.

¹⁹ K. Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 12.

²⁰ R. Wright, "Bigger", p. 454.

²¹ The most obvious examples of such characters occur in nineteenth century black novels such as F. E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, but as we have seen in previous African American novels in this thesis, twentieth century writers remained wary of creating unsympathetic, violent black characters, fearing they would endorse racist stereotypes.

²² J. A. Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), pp. 68-69.

Readings which acknowledge Bigger is not a conventional hero are able to marshal more convincing textual evidence. Laurel J. Gardner claims: "Wright undercuts any sympathetic identification with Bigger that the reader may develop with deeper insights into Bigger's monstrosity."²³ He cites Bigger's continual fantasies about killing people who may become obstacles to his ransom plans, including his brother.²⁴ Wright's intention, in offering such intimate knowledge of Bigger's mental processes, was not to create sympathy or excuse his violence, but to shock readers into accepting the full horror of racism's psychological impact. Wright refuses even to use the murder of Bigger's father in a race riot, during his early childhood in the South, as a justification for his violence, or as a significant factor in his psychology. Although Bigger tersely reveals the fate of his father when questioned by Jan and Mary, he makes no other references to it, and the narrator never uses it to explain Bigger's violence (74-75). This contrasts sharply with Wright's strategy in his earlier short stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, where his black protagonists only become violent in response to extreme pressures. It shows Wright's new determination to create a violent character who is representative of all African Americans, and show that even the quotidian conditions of black life, the experience of normative forms of racism, could produce extreme violence. In "How Bigger Was Born", Wright states explicitly that Bigger's violence is simply a different expression of the same pain most African Americans cope with through alcohol, music or religion.²⁵

One of the most painful psychological problems racism inflicts upon Bigger constitutes a form of double-consciousness. As we have seen, a disciplinary white gaze has a shaping influence on Bigger's subjectivity, and he becomes obsessed with the image of himself reflected by this gaze. He develops an acute sense of white perceptions of him as a defence mechanism in an environment which is always potentially hostile. In encounters with white people, he transforms himself into what he believes they want to see, enacting the stereotype of the shuffling, subservient darky (48). He is so reliant on this Other perspective that when he meets the blind Mrs Dalton, he feels he is "talking to

²³ L. J. Gardner, "The Progression of Meaning in the Images of Violence in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*", *College Language Association Journal*, 38:4 (1994-1995), 420-440, p. 437.

²⁴ L. Gardner, "Progression", p. 437, and see: 110-111 in *Native Son*.

²⁵ R. Wright, "Bigger", p. 349.

someone who he himself could scarcely see" (61). But he is deeply traumatised by what Du Bois calls the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, [...] through the revelation of the other world."²⁶ Like Joe Christmas, he has suffered the intrusion of a white, phobic imago into his self-image. Having grown up within the black community, Bigger ought to possess the "black vision of black identity," which we saw Joe Christmas lacked, to oppose to this imago.²⁷ But, in keeping with his general devaluation of black folk culture, Wright portrays Bigger as gaining no sense of identity from his community. Bigger's only self-image is the one offered by white society, which has a profound influence on his violence. In Fanon's terms, a "historico-racial schema" has completely replaced Bigger's "corporeal schema."²⁸ Consider his reaction when State Attorney Buckley questions him in his prison cell: "White men were looking at him, waiting for his words, and all the feelings of his body vanished" (309). Like Joe Christmas, he suffers a painful alienation within his bodily self-relation, producing a disgust at his own blackness. When Mr Dalton interviews him, he feels that: "The man was gazing at him with an amused smile that made him conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (46). He becomes nervous and clumsy: "He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way?" (47).

Experiencing the racist gaze produces violent impulses in Bigger in a slightly different way to Joe Christmas. Not confirmations of the racist gaze he has internalised, but encounters with white people where he is unsure of their perspective upon him, cause his greatest inner turmoil. Bigger's reactions to driving in the car with Jan and Mary are exemplary:

He was very conscious of his black skin [...] Did not white people despise a black skin? [...] Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him [...]. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No-Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. [...] At that moment he felt towards Mary and Jan a dumb, cold and inarticulate hate. [...] Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the

²⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, p. 5.

²⁷ D. Marriott, *On Black Men*, p. 14.

²⁸ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 111.

strength of his body [...] and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out – with himself and them in it (67-70).

Jan and Mary's liberal transgressions of conventional interracial behavioural codes, their attempts to recognise Bigger's equal human subjectivity, painfully disorientate him, producing cognitive dissonance, and an even greater alienation from his own blackness.²⁹ He cannot accept they do not despise him in the way twenty years of American life have conditioned him to expect from white people. He becomes marooned in a "No-Man's Land" between the self-image he usually sees reflected in white behaviour and the indecipherable image created by their behaviour. He is so desperate to escape this inner turmoil and re-establish his usual anaesthetised mental state that he fantasises about extreme violence.

Despite creating such compelling moments, Wright seems to have remained anxious about whether he had represented the pain of racism as adequate motivation for Bigger's violence. Hence he attempts to co-opt the power of the most emotive image within the discourse of demonisation: rape. He attempts to reverse the paradigmatic role of rape in perceptions of black intrusions into white social space, to create a metaphor for intrusions of white power into black space and black psychology. Consider how Bigger expands the meaning of rape to express his experience of racism:

But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out [...]. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. [...] But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day (227-228).

Marlon B. Ross reads Wright's metaphorical use of rape as a consequence of the:

[S]carcity of language for representing "pains" of the mind and spirit. [...] Because endangerment to the psyche cannot be marked on or cut into the flesh

²⁹ Of course Jan and Mary do not completely transcend racist behaviour towards African Americans. Nevertheless, Wright creates a clear sense that within the racialised, oppressive structures of American society, attempts to reach across the racial border in friendship are almost impossible, and are actually *more* likely to produce black violence than conventional racist behaviour.

writers seek to narrate and thus to mark undetectable psychic wounds, with the explosive agency of rape.³⁰

There is a shortage of terminology to describe pain which leaves no mark, which is not caused by physical violence, yet produces physical suffering, particularly before the development of the types of trauma theory we will see assist Toni Morrison's efforts to articulate the effects of racism in *Paradise* in Chapter Eight. Rape offers a potent metaphor for violations of the psyche by the racist gaze. Wright attempts to change rape from a symbol of the inherent horror and violence within blackness, to a sign of the cruelty and brutality of racism's impact upon African Americans. He then also attempts to use the shocking power of the rape metaphor to emphasise the horror of black violent responses. As Abdul JanMohamed observes: "the deep, violent penetration of the black subject by racist discourses and the black violent response are represented as rape by Wright."³¹

However, this redefinition of rape threatens to erase the forms of physical, female suffering the novel also depicts. The narrative figures Bigger's violence principally as a metaphorical representation of black male pain and anger, which Wright feels unable to articulate in conventional psychological vocabulary. As Bigger puts it, his crimes constitute a way of flinging "into their faces his feeling of being black" (310). As we shall see, the physical suffering this violence inflicts on its female victims, particularly on Bessie, is only of secondary importance. Deploying rape as a metaphor for Bigger's painful experience of racism also threatens to reproduce racist stereotypes of black violence. Like Faulkner in *Light in August*, Wright chooses the most emotive and controversial form of black violence as the crucial expression of Bigger's psychology, a male attack upon a white woman. The stereotypical consequences of allowing black male-white female contact, according to racist ideology, are played out with a strong sense of inevitability. In both novels, this drama is open to interpretation as a

³⁰ M. B. Ross, "Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest", *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. by J. K. Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 309-311.

³¹ A. JanMohamed, "Sexuality on / of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality'", *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. by D. C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 109.

confirmation of racist fantasies about black violence.³² Like Faulkner, Wright struggles to articulate the social and cultural reasons for the inevitability of this violence. Bigger echoes Joe's sense of ineluctable doom: "Sometimes I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (20). He suffers a similar lack of independent, conscious agency to Joe, becoming violent not in a premeditated plan of rebellion, but because the psychological pressure of racism causes him to explode in violence.

The lack of conscious motive and sense of inevitability in Bigger's violence underlies John Reilly's explanation for Wright's use of such a stereotyped scene, as a form of signifying:

Through a strategy resembling jujitsu, Wright throws the weight of stereotype back upon its source to create a greater shock than the murders – the recognition that those very acts of violence are consequence of the social and linguistic events that created Bigger.³³

According to this reading, Bigger's killing of Mary demonstrates that the demonising discourse white Americans believed gave them the knowledge and power to understand and control the excessively lustful and violent black man actually created him. The cultural, political power of this discourse engenders the complex of fear, fascination and hatred Bigger feels towards Mary. It leads him to panic so desperately at the thought of being discovered in her bedroom that he kills her, his actions governed by the penetration of fear deep into his psyche, rather than by conscious calculation. This point is made most forcibly in a section of Max's defence speech omitted from the original publication:

What would a boy, free from the warping influences which have played so hard on Bigger Thomas, have done that night when he found himself alone with that drunk girl? He would have gone to Mr. or Mrs. Dalton and told them that their daughter was drunk. [...] There would have been no murder. But the way we have treated this boy made him do the *very* thing we did not want (395).

³² We saw Myra Jehlen interpret *Light in August* as a warning about the consequences of allowing black male contact with white women in the previous chapter. Some Southern reviewers interpreted *Native Son* in the same way.

³³ J. Reilly, "Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in *Native Son*", *New Essays on Native Son*, ed. by K. Kinnamon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 53.

As Bigger carries Mary to her room, Wright tells us: "He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting on a stage in front of a crowd of people" (84). Wright deliberately evokes the sense that the violent black man is performing a script created by white fantasy we saw inadvertently created by Dixon in his representation of Gus's hypnotised re-enactment of his crime. So completely has a phobic imago of blackness overwhelmed Bigger's psyche that his actions, or, perhaps more appropriately, his reactions, upon finding himself alone with a white woman, are determined by white fantasy.

Even allowing for this intention, however, Wright's use of the terminology and imagery of the discourse of demonisation to describe Bigger's violence is problematic. He uses highly sexualised language: "Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight." He describes Bigger growing "tight and full as though about to explode" (85). In the moment of violence, Bigger is transformed into what Jonathan Elmer calls the "fantasmatic phallus of the white supremacist fantasy," just as Dixon transformed Gus into a wild animal as he attacked Marion.³⁴ This suggests that like Faulkner, Wright could not entirely transcend the demonised tropes of black violence encoded within American literary discourse. Hegemonic ideologies of black violence, which are an inescapable influence on white American literature, also powerfully affect African American narratives of black violence. But I think Wright's use of this discourse is largely a deliberate strategy. He depicts the enactment of white readers' worst nightmare as the most powerful way to make them recognise the terrible effects of racism. As Jonathan Elmer has observed, the blind witnessing of this scene by Mrs Dalton symbolises the impossibility of perceiving this traumatic moment from a white perspective without projecting fantasies about black violence onto it.³⁵ Rather than engage in a futile attempt to exclude these fantasies by scrupulously avoiding sexual language, Wright seeks to turn these inescapable associations to his advantage by co-opting their emotive power. This is the central and most controversial element in his overall strategy of inhabiting demonised tropes in order to alter their meaning. He attempts to redefine rape as a metaphor for black violence

³⁴ J. Elmer, "Spectacle", p. 780.

³⁵ J. Elmer, "Spectacle", p. 790.

against white women to reveal not black bestiality, but the full horror of what racism does to black subjectivity.

However, to do this effectively Wright needs to open a gap between the paradigmatic Black Beast Rapist narrative and his own images. The alterations which he was compelled to make to this scene threaten to close this gap. The figuratively sexual language Wright uses to describe Bigger's inadvertent violence against Mary is accompanied by literal depictions of sexual arousal. The moment before Bigger becomes aware of Mrs Dalton's presence behind him, he lays the drunken Mary on her bed: "Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited [...]. He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him" (84-85). In isolation, these sentences imply Bigger is about to commit rape, encouraging readers to interpret the rape imagery in which Bigger's violence is figured according to conventional white ideologies of black violence. But Wright changed the sexual implications of this scene so *Native Son* would obtain selection by the white judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which offered immense commercial advantages.³⁶ Sentences describing Mary's overtly sexual response to Bigger's advances were cut: "He tightened his arms as his lips pressed tightly against hers and he felt her body moving strongly. [...] He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind" (84). This hardly constitutes an acceptable form of "consent" in modern legal discourse, but it crucially alters what Hazel Rowley calls the "delicate balance of desire, guilt and responsibility" in this scene: "Bigger has become the archetypal black beast pawing the sleeping beauty."³⁷ Closing the gap between Bigger and Mary and stereotyped roles in this rape drama heavily compromises Wright's subtle efforts to deconstruct the fantasy underpinning white perceptions of black violence. Mary is transformed from a woman whose sexualised perception of black men contributes to his sexual interest in her to a passive victim of black male sexual aggression.

Furthermore, Wright was also compelled to excise earlier scenes, which showed Bigger and his friends masturbating before watching a cinema newsreel. Prurient scenes

³⁶ See H. Rowley, "Shadow", for a full account of the changes Wright was persuaded to make. The original text was finally published by The Library of America in 1991. This version constitutes the source of all my quotations in this Chapter, except those which I specify come from the 1940 publication.

³⁷ H. Rowley, p. 631.

of Mary Dalton on a Florida beach with her boyfriend are accompanied by a voiceover declaring: “*Oh, boy, don’t you wish you were down here in Florida?*” When Bigger’s friend Jack comments: “Some babies [...] I’d like to be there”, Bigger replies: “You can, [...] but you’d be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas...” (32). This demonstrates how American culture’s simultaneous promotion of fetishised images of white female sexuality and prohibition of black male access on pain of death affects Bigger. The removal of these scenes reduces the sense that Bigger’s culture has pathologised his sexuality, making him react to white femininity with an explosive combination of desire and mortal terror. This detracts from Wright’s efforts to depict sexual violence as something other than a natural element of black masculinity through Mary’s death scene. Like Faulkner, Wright tries to depict the radical distortions racist ideology inflicts on black men and white women’s perceptions of each other as a major cause of black violence. But his alterations to the novel reduce the sense of how Mary’s sexualised perception of black men and Bigger’s pathological attitude to white female sexuality contribute to his violence.

The continual returns to the moment of Bigger’s violence strongly imply that Wright himself experienced anxieties about this scene. In *Light in August* the narrative circled round an act of violence Faulkner could not adequately articulate. In *Native Son*, the characters within the narrative repeatedly attempt to represent or re-enact the traumatic crux of Bigger’s violence, but they never succeed entirely. Like Joe Christmas’s killing of Joanna, Mary’s death becomes a contested site both inside the narrative, as characters attempt to project different ideological meanings onto it, and outside the narrative, where critics continue this process. Within the novel, many of these attempts are designed to critique the processes through which racist authority inscribes black violence in the discourse of demonisation. Various institutions of cultural and political power seek to fix the definition of this event within the terms of the Black Beast narrative, exposing their profound psychological need for black violence to perform a particular function. Newspaper reports describe Bigger as an archetypal Black Beast Rapist, before he has been tried and convicted (279-280). Police and newspaper photographers’ attempt to make Bigger re-enact his crime, seeking to create an image like Dixon’s description of Gus attacking Marion Lenoir in *The Clansman*, which will evoke

the projection of white phobias and repressed desires (335-336). State Attorney Buckley's prosecution speech operates in the same way. Like Dixon, he deliberately leaves spaces in his narrative of black violence designed to elicit particular responses from his audience, to evoke fantasies of black bestiality. He claims, "the facts of this evil crime are so fantastic and unbelievable, so utterly beastlike and foreign to our whole concept of life, that I feel incapable of communicating them to this court" (373). But even as he protests the inadequacy of words to articulate the savagery of Bigger's crimes, he is using words to shape his audience's perception of these crimes. He uses the lack of evidence of these crimes to make readers project fantastical elements onto them, suggesting Bigger burnt Mary's body to conceal "evidence of offences worse than rape," including teeth marks on her breasts (412). This insinuation of cannibalism encourages the jury to regard black male sexuality as savage and pathologically violent

However, it is the attempts to reiterate Bigger's violence outside this conventional discourse of demonisation which reveal Wright's anxieties about this scene. Jonathan Elmer claims Boris Max's defence speech reveals a compulsive need to recapitulate "action through explicit commentary."³⁸ Max attempts to define Bigger's violence within Marxist terms. He explicitly separates it from the Black Beast narrative, stating directly and with repetitious emphasis what Wright has sought to show through dramatic action in his depictions of Bigger's life. He argues that Bigger's violence is not racially determined, but a product of: "The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality" (400). This underscores Wright's doubts about his highly charged, ambiguous representation of Mary's death. *Native Son* displays an anxiety which, as Chapter Eight shows, is also visible in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. Both novels anxiously fix the meaning of the traumatic violence at their centre through explicit commentary. However, inscribing Bigger's violence in Max's Marxist discourse risks retreating into the strategies of denial Wright assiduously avoids in the early parts of *Native Son*. Although Max appears to acknowledge the extent of Bigger's rage, he then attempts to align it with white proletarian dissatisfaction with industrial capitalism. He claims "there are millions of others, Negro and white," whose lives have been reduced to

³⁸ J. Elmer, "Spectacle", p. 791.

a potentially violent craving for sensual satisfaction by the stultifying, impoverished conditions of urban life (402). He denies the particularity of black violence, the specific effects of racial oppression on black subjectivity, which all the earlier descriptions of Bigger's thoughts and actions have insisted upon.

Wright seems to have been aware of the limitations of Max's articulation of the meaning of Bigger's violence, even though he echoes its terms in "How 'Bigger' Was Born."³⁹ Despite the extreme limitations of Bigger's voice, Wright attempts to use it to articulate the meaning of his violence in different terms, which are racially specific. From immediately after his at least partially accidental killing of Mary, Bigger displays a complete willingness to embrace it as the quintessential expression of his humanity, of his feelings towards the world:

He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. [...] The hidden meaning of his life – a meaning which others did not see, and which he had always tried to hide – had spilled out (106).

Bigger endorses the sense we have already seen Wright attempting to create that his violence represents an objective correlative of his experience of racism, of what racism has done to him psychologically. The problem with Bigger's attempts to articulate the meaning of his violence is that they are intimately bound up with the new sense of self he obtains through killing. He believes lethal violence enables him to realise his own humanity, because it shatters the barriers we have seen fissure his psyche, ending the need for repression which reduced him to an anaesthetised automaton. Now he can acknowledge the true conditions of his existence and his feelings towards the world. As Jerry H. Bryant observes, Bigger's violence develops his awareness of his own intelligence. Concealing his crimes requires his talents for dissimulation, cunning and creativity to be used in ways his servile, constricted social position has previously prohibited.⁴⁰ Bigger feels he has at last become someone other than a product of white

³⁹ In this essay, Wright claims there are millions of Bigger Thomases in the world, white as well as black. See: R. Wright, "Bigger", p. 441. I interpret this as a further attempt to conform to communist ideology and avoid losing what, as we shall see, Wright felt was the only viable theory to explain the political situation of African Americans available to him.

⁴⁰ J. H. Bryant, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*, p. 201.

oppression. He now performs the shuffling darky role in front of white people as conscious deception.

However, despite these undeniable psychological developments, it is debatable whether Bigger has really escaped being in thrall to a white image of blackness. Arguably, this new subjective phase simply involves performing a different racist script. If Bigger embraces his violence as the meaning of his existence, the essence of his humanity, is he not just accepting demonising stereotypes which also define this violence as the essence of blackness? The text repeatedly forces us to consider this question, particularly when it reproduces media representations of Bigger's crimes. After killing Mary, Bigger remains heavily dependent upon white recognition of his humanity, continually seeking out newspaper reports about his crimes. He believes his violence will end his invisibility, compelling the press to recognise his humanity and print "*his story*," the feelings which have been "buried and burning in his own heart" through his whole life (222). But all he discovers is his inscription within the most powerful dehumanising trope of black masculinity, as a "Negro sex-slayer"(279). The newspapers refuse even to believe he was solely responsible for writing the ransom note (245). As in *The Marrow of Tradition*, a black man can only achieve visibility in the media of hegemonic culture as a demonised criminal. Although Wright intended Bigger's crimes to express his experience of racism, I do not believe he wanted such violence to be read as the sum, the essence of black humanity. Bigger is represented as misguided in believing this violence has made him human in the eyes of the world and, as we shall see, he later learns his humanity can only be realised in different ways. Perhaps the novel's most powerful indictment of the effects of racism is that Bigger can only rebel in terms defined by the white regime he is attempting to rebel against.

This reading offers an explanation for the disturbing role of Bigger's second act of lethal violence in the development of his new sense of self. Bigger claims that he kills Bessie because she represents a danger to his escape plans. Yet once Mary's bones have been discovered in the furnace, there is nothing significant she can tell the police about Bigger's crime they do not already know. Bigger's decision that, "he would have to kill her. It was his life against hers," seems to owe more to his need to confirm his new sense of his own humanity than the exigencies of his fugitive situation (236). Michel Fabre

claims this killing transforms Bigger from a naturalist character, overdetermined by his environment, to an existentialist hero, who chooses to kill as an act of self-creation.⁴¹ This aspect of the novel has always troubled feminist critics. Abdul JanMohamed typifies the strongest feminist criticisms: “The fundamental premise of *Native Son*, which Wright entirely fails to examine critically, is that the protagonist can become a ‘man’ through rape and murder and overcome the racialization of his subjectivity.”⁴² Bigger does not achieve self-realisation by violently asserting himself against the oppressors who deny his humanity, like Frederick Douglass in his fight with the slave-breaker Covey.⁴³ Instead, he mimics the process of violently subjugating a more vulnerable Other, through which whites construct their racial identity. His new sense of self conflates being authentically human with being a real man, and his understanding of genuine masculinity is learnt from patriarchal, racist culture as dominance over inferior others. Only over Bessie can Bigger achieve this mastery. As Farah Jasmine Griffith puts it: “he takes her violently because her body is the only space where he can enact unbridled agency and authority.”⁴⁴

The description of Bigger’s killing of Bessie is highly revealing:

He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow. Soon he seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton, of some damp substance whose only life was the jarring of the brick’s impact (237).

Like Byron Kasson in *Nigger Heaven*, Bigger violently projects the dehumanising, racist gaze he has internalised so painfully onto another black person, reducing Bessie to a “sodden mass,” just as Byron perceived Randolph Pettijohn as an “ugly black mass.” Through violence, Bigger appropriates the human selfhood he is struggling for, reducing Bessie’s “life” to an effect of his energy, his agency. Previously, Bessie has been a

⁴¹ M. Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. by I. Barzun, 2nd edn. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 171.

⁴² A. JanMohamed, “Sexuality”, p. 108.

⁴³ Although the importance Douglass gives this fight in the realisation of his humanity may endorse hegemonic notions of violence as essential to manhood, he does at least turn this violence back against his oppressors. See: F. Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass”, *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*, ed. by W. L. Andrews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 67-69.

⁴⁴ F. J. Griffith, “On Women, Teaching and *Native Son*”, *Approaches to Teaching Native Son*, p. 79.

constricting force, an obstacle to Bigger's new sense of masculinity, asking awkward questions and pointing out the realities of his desperate situation.⁴⁵ But by killing her, Bigger achieves the total dominance he had fantasised about earlier in the novel. He imagined violently destroying the independent, subjective Bessie, who is beyond his control, and putting her "some place deep inside him [...] keeping her there just to feel and know that she was his to have and hold whenever he wanted to" (140). After killing her, Bigger reflects on the desperation of his situation, yet still feels: "

[T]here remained to him a queer sense of power. *He* had done this. *He* had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply" (239).

From killing Bessie, Bigger obtains a sense of independent agency and power, qualities figured as properly masculine by hegemonic ideology, which he has never previously experienced. By showing Bigger undergoing mental growth through committing violence, Wright sacrifices female characters to male character development, establishing a pattern in African American fiction we will see Toni Morrison accused of repeating.

However, I believe Wright is maintaining a critical distance from Bigger's behaviour here, and offering further evidence of how racism has warped Bigger psychologically. He creates a subtle sense that Bigger's second deadly act of violence is as scripted by white ideology as his first was. Bigger describes his decision to kill Bessie as "handed down to him by some logic not his own, over which he had no control, but which he had to obey" (229). Just as white popular culture determined his reactions to Mary, it seems to determine this decision. As Ross Pudaloff notes, Bigger gleans his tenuous motives for killing Bessie from hard-boiled detective stories and gangster movies.⁴⁶ At one point Bigger reflects: "A woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away. He had read how men had been caught because of a woman" (142). Bigger is seeking to enact a hard-boiled concept of masculinity as absolute independence

⁴⁵ See for example 144-147, where Bessie asks many questions about Bigger's ransom scheme, and predicts he will inevitably be caught, and 227, where Bessie forces Bigger to recognise he will be accused of rape.

⁴⁶ R. Pudaloff, "Celebrity as Identity: *Native Son* and Mass Culture", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by H. L. Gates and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 163.

and violent control. The killing of Bessie resembles earlier moments where Bigger uses violence in ways he believes confirm his masculine strength, but the narrator clearly shows how fear and how white racism has warped him. Bigger's sense of manhood was also at stake in his pool hall attack on Gus, when he used intraracial violence against a more vulnerable other to externalise the feelings of fear and impotence which prevented him robbing a white store. As critics such as Abdul JanMohamed and Sabine Sielke have noted, Bigger's violence feminises Gus.⁴⁷ His threat to "slice your tonsils" and his forcing Gus to lick his knife symbolically castrates and rapes Gus (38-39). At moments of crisis, Bigger uses violence to bolster his embattled masculinity by projecting his fears onto a feminised Other, whose subjugation confirms his own masculine dominance and power. The rape and murder of Bessie constitute more extreme ways of combatting the terrifying sense of vulnerability Bigger feels as a black fugitive, wanted for the rape and murder of a white woman. As Sabine Sielke notes, he projects his fears onto Bessie, through rape and murder he externalises his sense of being disempowered and violated.⁴⁸

Despite the presence of this critical perspective upon Bigger's violence, Wright's description of the rape of Bessie almost participates in the erasure of her humanity and her suffering which Bigger performs through violence. This becomes particularly clear when we consider how Wright revised this scene while making the alterations demanded by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The original version described the rape in the following terms:

His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her. Yes. Bessie. Now. He had to now. *don't Bigger don't* He was sorry but he had to. He. He could not help it. [...] He was feeling bad about how she would feel but he could not help it now. Feeling. *Bessie. Now. [...] Bigger. Now. All. All. Now. All. Bigger...* (234).

In the version revised for publication, Wright substitutes this passage:

⁴⁷ A. JanMohamed, "Sexuality", p. 110 and S. Sielke, p. 109.

⁴⁸ S. Sielke, p. 113.

He had to now. Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind, *don't don't don't Bigger*. And then the wind became so strong that it lifted him high into the dark air, [...] faintly, [...] he heard *don't Bigger don't don't* At a moment he could not remember he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted.⁴⁹

In neither version does Wright achieve any representation of the physical reality of rape. His first attempt focuses solely upon the characters' thoughts and voices. His second attempt relies on an extended metaphor which has little relation to the act of rape and which inserts another level of mediation between the reader and the act, reducing the immediacy of our witnessing. This supports Sabine Sielke's claim that the rape of Bessie possesses no "signifying power."⁵⁰ Because of the way the text redefines rape, "what he does to her hardly qualifies as rape."⁵¹ The revised scene also reduces our sense of Bessie's suffering. Her already muted voice is represented less frequently, and she is metaphorically reduced to a formless, invisible substance, a "resisting wind," rather than articulated as a suffering human subject. Wright's redefinition of rape as a metaphor for the effects of racism prevents it also functioning as a form of misogynist abuse. Wright maintains the focus upon Bigger's suffering, upon how racism has warped his psyche, and permits no distractions from this theme through representations of black female suffering.

Despite this textual erasure of female suffering, Wright still does not endorse Bigger's use of misogynist violence to bolster his masculinity. The sense of empowerment Bigger gains from violence is short-lived, underscoring Wright's intention to make readers perceive it as illusory, a misguided route to self-realisation. As Sabine Sielke observes, the fears Bigger projects onto Bessie in raping her rebound upon him immediately after, particularly in the revised version of the text.⁵² Bigger is described as "fallen" and "spent," lying with "his lips parted" and "his legs wide apart."⁵³ He then goes to the greater extreme of killing her, but only a page after articulating the new sense

⁴⁹ R. Wright, *Native Son* (1940 text) (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 264.

⁵⁰ S. Sielke, *Reading*, p. 113.

⁵¹ S. Sielke, *Reading*, p. 107.

⁵² S. Sielke, *Reading*, pp. 112-113.

⁵³ R. Wright, *Native Son*, (1940 text) p. 264

of power and control I quoted above, he becomes unsure about what he has gained. He wonders:

But what was he after? What did he want? What did he love and what did he hate? He did not know [...] he did not want to make believe that it was solved, make believe that he was happy when he was not (240).

These doubts lead Bigger to imagine a different way of realising his humanity. He dreams of being able to “merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself” (240). Later, in prison he becomes convinced that human wholeness can only be achieved through intersubjective contact and recognition:

If he reached out [...] and touched other people [...] would there be a reply? [...] in that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity, there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life (362).

This suggests that Bigger, and indeed Wright, are searching for an alternative way to realise black humanity, but the only terms in which Wright can articulate this are highly problematic. The sense that misogynist violence and the subjugation of others represent a misguided route to selfhood is not matched by any clear or convincing narrativisation of an alternative, suggesting why critics such as Abdul Jan Mohamed have interpreted *Native Son* as an endorsement of this model of manhood.⁵⁴

Bigger has always rejected intersubjective contact with other African Americans as a route to self-realisation. While in prison, he remains convinced that only white society can offer meaningful recognition and validation of his humanity, and Wright seems to share this view. The reconciliation with his family which occurs seems unimportant to his character development.⁵⁵ Instead, in an often-criticised scene, Jan forgives Bigger for killing Mary and offers to help him. Bigger experiences an epiphany, an unprecedented recognition of humanity across the colour-line:

⁵⁴ A. JanMohamed, “Sexuality”, p. 108.

A particle of white rock had detached itself from the looming mountain of hate [...]. For the first time in his life a white man had become a human being to him; [...] He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation on his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face (289).

Bigger transcends the objectifying distortions of racist ideology. Stephen K. George interprets this as a pivotal moment in the novel, marking "a fundamental change in Bigger's perception of himself and others."⁵⁶ He claims this is Bigger's first genuine "face-to-face encounter" in the Levinasian sense, where the otherness of the other is recognised as exceeding egocentric expectations and ideological distortions and serves as an interdict against violence. Wright seems to posit this scene as the first step to resolving racial violence, but it is beset by problems. Not only Jan's forgiveness of Bigger, but also Bigger's ability to perceive Jan's humanity, feels forced and inadequately motivated. The changes Bigger has undergone in prison in his discussions with Boris Max seem too brief and minor to alter the deeply ingrained fear and hatred of whites which motivated Bigger's violence. James Baldwin was particularly critical of what he saw as a purely rhetorical redemption of Bigger, because it displays what I call the strategy of denial. Rather than resolving the problems which create black violence, it simply decides to ignore them:

[T]hough there are whites and blacks among us who hate each other we will not; there are those who are betrayed by greed, by guilt, by blood lust, but not we: we will set our faces against them and join hands and walk together into that dazzling future where there will be no white or black.⁵⁷

However, Wright seems to have sensed the inadequacies of this redemption, because it does not constitute his last word on Bigger's fate. The final scene illustrates Wright's acute ambivalence about the competing articulations of Bigger's violence within the novel. In a last attempt to inscribe the meaning of Bigger's violence within Marxist discourse, Max presents the Chicago skyline to Bigger as a socialist vision of community.

⁵⁵ In prison, Bigger acknowledges that: "His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit" (298). But he remains unable to communicate properly with them, and soon asks Max to stop them visiting him.

⁵⁶ S. K. George, "The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form Without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*", *African American Review*, 31:3 (1997), 497-504, p. 502.

He envisages a society where all people's strivings towards self-realisation through the production of artifacts, of which these buildings are examples, could be accommodated, if the capitalist stranglehold on wealth and resources was broken.⁵⁸ The energies Bigger was only able to express through violence, he implies, could easily be translated into productive forms through a change in the economic order of America. This view involves repeating the equation of racism with the oppression of the proletariat, denying the particularity of black rage. Max claims the capitalists, "say that black people are inferior," but, "they say that *all* people who work are inferior" (428). But Bigger rejects this diagnosis, responding with laughter. He insists on his violence as an expression of precisely what racism has made him, shouting: "what I killed for I *am!*" (428). Although Bigger's embrace of his murders as the essence of his self is not represented positively, Wright still intended his final outburst to be a legitimate and unavoidable expression of black anger. Max responds with fearful incomprehension: "Max's eyes were full of terror," he "groped for his hat like a blind man"(429). This return to the blindness motif connotes the limits of his understanding of black anger, his refusal to face it fully.

Bigger's inability to articulate what he senses is wrong with Max's Marxist vision reveals why Wright cannot totally reject Marxism in this scene. Bigger thinks: "He had lived outside of the lives of men. Their modes of communication, their symbols and images, had been denied him" (422). Similarly, Wright could not discover a symbolic mode adequate to articulate the black experience of racism. Because he rejected black folk culture and literary traditions, only communism offered a clear alternative, a discourse possessing cultural authority and white recognition, but it involved a degree of denial. In an essay, Wright claimed: "anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control."⁵⁹ This suggests a fear of rendering his writing impotent prevented Wright from definitively rejecting the communist discourse whose inadequacies he sensed. As we have seen, he feared his attempts to signify on the discourse of demonisation were inadequate and open to misinterpretation, and he was not prepared to leave his

⁵⁷ J. Baldwin, "Many", p. 78.

⁵⁸ My interpretation of Max's vision is indebted to C. Scruggs, *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 92-93.

representations of black violence floating outside any authoritative discourse, where they could easily be co-opted into racist interpretations. This difficulty with signifying effectively on demonised images of black violence perhaps explains why subsequent authors have rarely copied Wright's audacious strategy.

⁵⁹ R. Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing", *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. by M. Fabre and E. Wright (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 45.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THE HORROR, THE ACTUALITY OF OUR BLOODY PAST, AND POSSIBLE FUTURE”: (RE)WRITING THE VIOLENCE OF SLAVE REBELLION

After World War II, changed economic and political circumstances led to the demise of the naturalist, protest school of African American fiction. Black violence largely disappeared from the African American novel for a long period. The nineteen fifties witnessed the emergence of what Robert E. Washington calls the “moral-suasion” school of black literature.¹ Black authors sought to challenge racism not by frightening white readers with representations of the violent effects of racism, but by appealing to white Americans to live up to their own professed moral principles in their treatment of blacks. The canonical African American texts from this era exhibit clear strategies of denial. This is not to repeat Irving Howe’s assumption of the ability to set appropriate levels of anger and protest for African American literature, which Ellison famously criticised.² My sense that strategies of denial are at work in these texts stems from intriguing moments where repressed violence seems to erupt through the surface of the text. These moments strongly suggest violence is being repressed elsewhere to support the moral suasion ideology. For example, the focal character of *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison is largely free of violence. But moments such as his brutal attack on a white man who fails to perceive him in the introduction suggest violent anger is being repressed. Invisible man exhibits a degree of fury in this attack which is never adequately explained, and rarely matched, in his other descriptions of the experience of racial invisibility.³ Ellison’s admission that he wrote Ras the Exhorter / Destroyer’s passionate advocacy of violence in the fight against racism after personal experiences of

¹ See: R. E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature*, p. 233.

² Howe criticised the lack of political protest in *Invisible Man*, insisting a black man cannot “put pen to paper” in America without feeling “some impulsion to protest.” See: I. Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons”, *A World More Attractive* (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), p. 100 and pp. 111-115. Ellison attacked this presumptuous claim by a white man to understand African American experience and dictate the parameters of black fiction. See: R. Ellison, “The World and the Jug”, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, pp. 158-159.

³ See: R. Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 7-8.

discrimination is unsurprising.⁴ Yet when Ras does take violent action, it is represented comically from a satirical distance as futile and inappropriate. It seems this rejection of violence is necessary to enable the epilogue's expressions of faith in American democracy as offering peaceful solutions to the problems of racism.⁵

Another Country (1962) by James Baldwin also exhibits denial. It initially focuses on a character whose rage at American racism matches Bigger Thomas's, and who expresses his rage in scenes of sexual violence against a white woman. Baldwin seems to want Rufus's relationship with his white girlfriend Leona to express the complex, ambivalent combination of love and hatred his essays claim exists between the races in America, but Rufus's hatred and fury overwhelm any sense of other emotions.⁶ Consider the description of their first sexual encounter:

[S]hortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. [...] A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies.⁷

As in *Native Son*, the imagery of black rape is used in ways calculated to outrage whites, and to express black anger with maximal force. This scene depicts consensual sex, but later Rufus frequently beats Leona. However, as Robert E. Washington notes, the lack of explanation for Rufus's violence makes it appear "more the product of a personality disorder than of racial abuse."⁸ Thus Baldwin fails to challenge effectively the demonised stereotypes regarding black masculinity he accused Wright of reproducing in images of Bigger's violence. Furthermore, suicide eliminates Rufus from the text less than a quarter of the way through the novel. The rest of the narrative focuses more on white characters, except for the sister of Rufus, who lacks his rage at racism and establishes less antagonistic interracial relationships. This circumvents the need to represent black

⁴ See R. Ellison, *Invisible*, pp. 298-303 and L. B. Holland, "Ellison in Black and White: Confession, Violence and Rhetoric in *Invisible Man*", *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945*, ed. by A. R. Lee (London: Vision Press, 1980), p. 70.

⁵ See: R. Ellison, *Invisible*, pp. 461-469.

⁶ See for example: J. Baldwin, "Many Thousand's Gone", *The Price of the Ticket*, pp. 76-77, which I quote from below in discussing Styron's representations of sexualised black violence.

⁷ J. Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), pp. 28-29.

⁸ R. E. Washington, *Ideologies*, p. 259.

violence and enables the novel to endorse the peaceful, moral suasion attitude to race relations expressed in Baldwin's essays.

Black violence also virtually disappeared from white fiction during this era. It did not return until the very different political circumstances of the late sixties, in a novel which reaffirms the highly charged nature of all representations of black violence. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) by William Styron has generated a level of controversy comparable to Thomas Dixon's novels. The novel was publicly condemned in a volume entitled *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968). At the symposiums and conferences he attended to defend his novel, black militants accused Styron of misrepresenting a hero of African American history, to endorse white fantasies about black men.⁹ Eventually, Styron abandoned his efforts, leaving his novel "lodged in a kind of black *Index Expurgatorius* [...] along with such overtly racist novels as *The Clansman*."¹⁰ As I will show, the strategies of denial and demonisation characteristic of white American representations of black violence are on display in this novel, bound up with cultural anxieties provoked by contemporary racial tensions. When *The Confessions* was written, recent summers had witnessed massive riots in urban ghettos and the peaceful Civil Right's Movement was beginning to splinter into militant, often separatist fragments. These events brought black violence back to the fore of American public consciousness. The quotation in my chapter title comes from a note Styron wrote in his copy of William Drewry's *The Southampton Insurrection*, a history of Nat Turner's revolt. The difficulty of confronting the "horror" of racial violence in America's "bloody past and possible future" shaped Styron's version of the Nat Turner story, and contributed to making his novel so controversial.

Styron's militant critics often accused him of distorting the facts about Nat Turner's revolt out of fear of black violence. Addison Gayle claims *The Confessions* exemplifies white anxieties about black violence contemporaneous with the novel's production. He claims the development of the peaceful, integrationist Civil Rights movement into militant groups inspired by Fanon's theories of violent revolution, made it

⁹ See: "The Uses of History in Fiction", *Conversations with William Styron*, ed. by J. L. West, III (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985), pp. 114 -144, for examples of heated exchanges between Styron and his black critics.

inevitable that a book like *The Confessions* would “be written and adopted as the definitive commentary on black revolution and revolutionaries.”¹¹ Critiques of *The Confessions* by Black Arts critics, however, tended to identify its shortcomings through contrast with an ideal image of a heroic black revolutionary, simplistically proposed as the historical truth about Nat Turner. Styron was able to argue in response that he simply held a different view of slavery and rebellious slave activity, predicated on different evidence and rational inferences. But, through close analysis of the narrative, I expose the irrational anxieties which lie beneath Styron’s apparently rationally based decisions about the Nat Turner revolt. I am not arguing Styron intentionally wrote a racist novel, just reaffirming the limits of the white liberal imagination and the persistence of certain images of black violence in the American Imaginary. Because he could not transcend demonised imagery in his conceptions of black violence, Styron could only humanise Nat Turner in what he perceived as non-racist terms by occluding his historical violence.

The “Ten Black Writers” exaggerated the importance of Nat Turner as a hero in the African American folk tradition. Nevertheless, his status as a genuine historical figure ensures novelistic portrayal of him risks even greater controversy than purely fictional representations of black violence. As Ralph Ellison observed while participating in a debate on *The Confessions*, fictionalising historical black figures threatens the “valuable myth[s]” which nurture black cultural identity in the face of hegemonic racist denigration.¹² The difficulties attendant upon any representation of black violence are also increased by attempting to articulate the consciousness of a slave. As Frederick Jameson has observed, history “can only be approached by way of prior (re)textualization.”¹³ To understand slaves as subjects, our only real textual resource is the slave narratives, which often present complex problems of authorship. Nat Turner constitutes a particularly difficult case, because the only source articulating his perspective on his revolt is the original “The Confessions of Nat Turner”, a supposedly

¹⁰ W. Styron, “Nat Turner Revisited”, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House 1994), p. xxxiv.

¹¹ A. Gayle, *The Way of the New World*, p. 284.

¹² R. Ellison, W. Styron, R. Penn Warren, C. Van Woodward, “The Uses of History in Fiction”, *Conversations*, p. 142.

¹³ F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 82.

accurate transcription of an account of the rebellion Nat Turner gave to a white lawyer, Thomas Gray, while in prison.

Styron adhered to the basic details of the revolt in this document, but he made considerable alterations to the biographical information it supplies about Nat Turner. He justified his alterations by claiming he was faithfully representing the historical totality of slavery.¹⁴ However, all these alterations combine to create a clear strategy of denial of black violence. Styron relied heavily on Stanley Elkins' controversial book *Slavery* (1959). For Elkins, the overwhelming physical and mental brutality of slavery did not produce the kind of agonised psychic fragmentation and reactive violence racism produces in many black characters in this thesis. Instead, it reduced slaves to docile children who regarded their masters as fathers.¹⁵ Among Styron's slave characters, only Nat himself does not feel overwhelming humility and awe before whites. Styron gives Nat's exceptional rebelliousness predominantly white cultural origins, significantly altering historical evidence regarding Nat's family circumstances. Like Faulkner, Styron finds the idea that racism could provoke violence anywhere in black society impossible to contemplate; he can only conceive of such violence if it is in some way whitened. Thus he gives Nat's father no part in the formation of his subjectivity, but Nat's childhood regard for his master Samuel Turner is: "very close to the feeling one should bear only toward the Divinity."¹⁶ Styron justified these alterations as a reflection of the typical unimportance of the slave family and the perception of the master as "father-image" Elkins posited.¹⁷

Styron also contradicts historical evidence about antebellum Southampton County where the historical Nat Turner lived to isolate Nat's rebelliousness further from black culture. Southampton contained no large plantations; most slaveholders possessed only a few slaves.¹⁸ But Styron locates his Nat Turner on a large plantation, making social and psychological divisions between house and field slaves crucial to his subjective development. This denies him the contact with the black community which probably

¹⁴ See: G. Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by H. and S. Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1992), pp. 166-167, for the theory of the historical novel behind Styron's justification.

¹⁵ See: S. Elkins, *Slavery*, 3rd Edn. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976), p. 128-129.

¹⁶ W. Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House 1994), p. 126. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

¹⁷ S. Elkins, *Slavery*, p. 129-131.

nurtured the historical Nat Turner's rebellious spirit. Most recent African American literature depicts the survival of African elements in slave culture as an essential factor in slave rebelliousness. Sixo in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and Orion in *Damballah* by John Edgar Wideman find the strength to resist slavery through a sense of their African cultural origins. Similarly, Robert Hayden's poem, "The Ballad of Nat Turner," portrays Turner's revolutionary anger inspired by Ibo warriors hanging from trees.¹⁹ But Styron's Turner is alienated from all things African. He describes the speech of a freedman as: "unbearably halting and cumbersome with a wet gulping sound of Africa in it" (262).

In this way, Styron denied the existence of any tradition of subversive violence within African American culture, which enraged sixties black militants. Styron then represents the origins of Nat's exceptional violence in a way which almost negates the possibility of slave violence actually occurring. Even though Nat describes his family as his only educators in Gray's "Confessions," Styron depicts him becoming rebellious through white education (16). Nat's education enables him to perceive slavery as morally wrong and a contradiction of American values. It makes him deeply angered by the loss of his freedom and the denial of his humanity, and gives him the rational ability to plan a revolt against slavery. But this education also imbues Nat with a sense of humanist, Christian ethics which make him ultimately unable to employ murderous violence as a weapon against slavery. R.W.B. Lewis summarised this in an interview comment Styron agreed with, saying: "the kind of person who had the capacity to organise rebellion, would also have a sensibility which would forbid his carrying it through."²⁰

Perhaps because of his anxieties about contemporary racial tensions, Styron appears to have needed to imagine a Nat whose anger against his oppressors and desire for revenge was strictly limited. Consider the feature of Gray's "Confessions" Styron made central to his characterisation of Nat Turner: Nat's apparent failure to kill anyone except one girl during the rebellion. Styron interpreted Nat Turner's explanations for this as "patently an evasion," claiming he had a problem with the violence he initiated.²¹ While writing the novel Styron insisted this problem is historically accurate: "I think it's

¹⁸ J.W. West III, *William Styron: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 354.

¹⁹ R.E. Hayden, "The Ballad of Nat Turner", *The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy*, p. 94.

²⁰ C. Vann Woodward and R. W. B. Lewis, "The Confessions of William Styron", *Conversations*, p. 91.

unavoidable in an honest reading of Nat Turner's confessions that he himself was almost unable to grapple with violence, to carry it out successfully."²² Reaching this conclusion seems to have enabled Styron to conceive of Nat as a fully human character, but only at the cost of occluding all the other evidence about the historical Nat Turner in *The Confessions*. As the controversy developed Styron was forced to acknowledge how much he had altered his Nat. He stated in a 1974 interview: "I think the historical Nat Turner was an almost insanely motivated religious fanatic. I took the perfectly legitimate liberty of humanising this man, or monster, by giving him [...] a degree of rational intelligence."²³ On subsequent occasions, Styron has been even more candid about the gap between his character and the historical Nat Turner, and his inability to conceive of that figure as fully human. He has described him in the phobic terms of conventional white discourse on black violence, calling him a "demented ogre beset by bloody visions," and acknowledged, "I didn't want to write about a psychopathic monster."²⁴ He has also stated that splitting Nat's personality and displacing "the lineaments of crazed savagery" onto his henchman Will was "plainly essential in order to give him tragic stature."²⁵ I believe this process was actually essential for him to give Nat any kind of human stature. As I will show later, Will's violence reduces him to a barely human status.

The form of *The Confessions* also works to deny black violence. Styron declared during the composition of *The Confessions* that: "to come to *know* the Negro, has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner," and to fulfil this imperative, he chose to use Nat as a first person narrator.²⁶ This compelled him to represent the mental processes behind Nat's violent rebellion entirely in Nat's own voice, creating problems which go beyond just establishing an authentic sounding voice for a slave character. Languages encode cultural values and modes of thinking, making it debatable whether the violence of a rebellious slave can be represented within the vocabulary of the hegemonic discourse in American culture and yet outside racist paradigms. White language may seem

²¹ C. Vann Woodward and R. W. B. Lewis, "Confessions", p. 89.

²² R. Canzoneri and P. Stegner, "An Interview with William Styron", *Per/Se*, 1 (Summer 1966), 39, p. 39.

²³ B. Forkner and G. Schricker, "An Interview with William Styron", *Conversations with William Styron*, p. 193.

²⁴ W. Styron, "More Confessions", *Novel History*, ed. by M. C. Carnes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 222 and W. Styron, "Nat Turner Revisited", pp. xxv-xxvi.

²⁵ W. Styron, "More", p. 222.

inevitably to reduce Nat to nothing more than a white fantasy of black responses to racism. Styron's Nat sometimes uses black vernacular, such as in the speech he delivers to a large assembly of Southampton slaves on market day in Jerusalem (307-311). Here, the vocabulary and the biblical imagery are commensurate with the education received by the historical Nat Turner. This demonstrates Styron's ability to render African American speech without reducing the speaker to a Sambo stereotype. But Styron did not choose to narrate the whole novel in the biblical, African American voice of Nat's sermon. Most of Nat's narrative is couched in an elaborate, Latinate idiom which sounds more plausible as the voice of a white nineteenth century speaker. Thus, the subversive potential of biblical language to contribute to an African American discourse with some cultural authority in antebellum society in which slaves could justify rebellion, is largely lost.

A comparison with *Light in August* reveals further limitations inherent to Styron's method of narration. Styron wanted to penetrate the black consciousness more fully than Faulkner, "whose Negro characters" were always "meticulously *observed* rather than *lived*."²⁷ Yet using a first person narrator reduces *The Confessions* to a lower level of psychological realism than *Light in August*. Faulkner recognised Joe Christmas could not narrate his own story in coherent, comprehensible terms, because of the traumatic splitting racism inflicts upon his psyche. Like Wright in *Native Son*, Faulkner used a third person narrator who can penetrate beneath his protagonist's consciousness, and reveals his bizarre, fragmentary thoughts occasionally, without having to rely on his perspective to explain the entire narrative. Because Styron uses an exclusively first person perspective, he cannot permit Nat to be psychically fragmented if his narrative is to be comprehensible. Nat's narrative, although not totally linear, is nothing like the fragmented thoughts which swirl through Joe Christmas's mind; it suggests a unified, coherent, hegemonic white subject.

Occasionally, the language of Nat's narrative implies the psychic divisions slavery has inflicted upon him. When Nat describes the death of his mistress, Sarah Travis, during his insurgency, he claims: "I felt an honest wrench of regret at the sight of the blood gushing like a red sluiceway from her headless neck" (273). Here, the vivid,

²⁶ W. Styron, "This Quiet Dust", *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 14.

²⁷ W. Styron, "This Quiet Dust", p. 13.

almost lurid description of Sarah's demise contradicts the professed remorse. Gavin Cologne-Brooks claims this exemplifies Bakhtinian "double-voicedness," the idea that tone in written language, although obviously not audible, can be implied through diction and sentence structure. He claims a sarcastic tone is implied in the imagery of this sentence.²⁸ I would argue, however, that the underlying sarcasm and the outward sympathy towards Sarah Travis are held in tension, creating a tone which is neither definitively sarcastic nor sympathetic. This tension exemplifies both the conflicting mixture of love and hatred which characterises Turner's attitude towards whites, and the ambivalence Turner feels towards the violence of his rebellion. However, such sentences are unusual, and the overall style of the novel gives us little sense of Nat as, in Samuel Coale's words, a "character torn between irreconcilable voices."²⁹

The limitations of Styron's method of narration contribute to the problems regarding the representation of Nat and his motives for rebellion. The factors which provoke Turner's violence owe more to the predicament of the sixties educated African American than the situation of slaves. The most psychologically damaging experiences for Nat do not involve the brutality of slavery; he receives only one lash from a whip throughout the novel. Styron occluded the possibility that his violence was provoked by physical abuse. Gavin Cologne-Brooks claims Styron may have excluded physical brutality from Nat's experience of slavery to emphasise: the 'brutalizing effects' of even the best of slavery on master and slave.³⁰ Styron has corroborated this interpretation, stating: "the accounts of brutality fade into inconsequence against a backdrop in which the total dehumanization of a race took place."³¹ However, even these brutalising effects are not adequately articulated as motives for extreme violence. The central trauma of Nat's life, which convinces him he must rebel, is being sold to the Reverend Eppes. Eppes' attempts to abuse him sexually expose how slavery dehumanises and commodifies people. But this experience is traumatic principally because it represents Nat's betrayal by the master who promised him manumission. He is compelled to recognise that the white world, which his education has taught him to love and identify

²⁸ G. Cologne-Brooks, *The Novels of William Styron: From Harmony to History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 115-116.

²⁹ S. Coale, *William Styron Revisited* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991), p. 92.

³⁰ G. Cologne-Brooks, *Novels*, p. 138.

with, regards him only as property, not as human. This brings to the surface doubts about his own humanity which lurk traumatically in the depths of his mind. The effects of slavery upon Nat resemble DuBois' concept of double-consciousness and Fanon's ideas about the intrusion of the white gaze into colonial subjectivity. As we have seen these theories can be used to depict powerfully the impact of racism on twentieth century black psychology, but it is debatable whether they can be used to delineate the effects of racism upon slave subjectivity.

Through his extensive white education, Nat internalises a demeaning white gaze upon himself as a black person, emphasised by his use of phrases such as: "The life of a little nigger child is dull beyond recounting" (138). He recalls the effect of seeing the overseer who raped his mother, by saying: "I feel a sense of my weakness, my smallness, my defenselessness, my *niggerness* invading me like a wind to the marrow of my bones"(150). He is torn between the whites he admires yet hates and the blacks he is disgusted by yet feels a sense of kinship with. However, the tone of these expressions of self-hatred is too measured and distanced to give any impression of the psychological anguish the intrusion of a racist gaze provokes in characters such as Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas. Nat resembles Bigger Thomas in being driven to violence by the desire to be recognised as human by the white hegemonic culture, perceiving no value in the ethnic community from which he has become alienated. The denial of this recognition produces his most extreme moments of inner turmoil and fury. He becomes murderously angry when he reflects that Mrs. Whitehead regards him as a "miraculous wheelbarrow," thinking: "*Truly, that white flesh will soon be dead*" (328). Because of their complete dissociation from the specific brutalities of slavery and Styron's failure to render Nat as psychologically anguished, these moments of fury seem somewhat inadequately motivated and incongruous.

This failure to articulate adequately Nat's motives for rebellion emphasises Styron's anxieties about Nat's violence. Having imbued Nat with modern psychological problems, unconnected to the specific brutalities of slavery, Styron could not render him as a murderous fanatic without implying that modern forms of racism could produce such a reaction in all African Americans. This would contradict the novel's general strategy of

³¹ W. Styron, "Slave and Citizen", *This Quiet Dust*, p. 37.

denial, reducing the violence of slavery in order to downplay the possibility of contemporary black violence. Thus *The Confessions* makes Nat appear largely rational and psychically normal. Styron even depicts the religious visions the historical Nat Turner claimed to have experienced, potential evidence of how the traumas of slavery damaged him psychologically, as consequences of the somatic effects of fasting. Unlike many characters considered in this thesis, there is no sense trauma has loosened Nat's grip on present reality. Styron may have avoided this to make Nat appear human according to Western, humanist notions; a rational, coherent intelligent subject. In particular, Styron may have wanted to avoid reproducing the rhetorical strategy used in Gray's "Confessions" to erase Nat Turner's subjectivity. As Eric Sundquist notes, Gray is faced with the paradox that legally, Nat is defined as "at once property and yet capable of volitional acts." By holding him legally responsible for violations of the law, his free will is recognised, but this implies he possesses natural rights as a human, including the right to rebel against tyranny. Gray masks this deep contradiction within the American ideology of slavery "by feebly asserting that Turner was acted upon by ideas beyond his comprehension. As the object of ideas rather than their instigator, Turner [...] disappears as subject, or rather appears as subject only under the guise of [...] demonic possession."³² Perhaps, therefore, Styron eliminated evidence of fanaticism from his portrayal of Nat to emphasise he is a human agent. But he severely reduces the sense of the impact of racism on Nat, and fails to demonstrate adequate human motives for his violence. To take such extreme action as this murderous rebellion surely requires an extreme mental state and Styron gives us little sense of this. As Sundquist observes: "Styron [...] assumed that 'fanaticism' precluded 'rational' political intelligence. I take this to be a fundamental misunderstanding of Nat Turner."³³ It seems to me that for a black subject in particular, fanaticism precludes rational intelligence in Styron's imagination.

Nat's moments of murderous rage are also deeply problematic because they tend to consist of rape fantasies, which drew fierce criticism from all the "Ten Black Writers." Addison Gayle claims this element of the novel obscures the real issues at stake in Nat Turner's rebellion and endorses demonised stereotypes of black violence: "Blacks may

³² E. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 51.

³³ E. Sundquist, *Wake*, p. 51.

write of oppression, complain of social injustice [...]. These, however, are simply code words [...] which mask the real objectives. Revolution for blacks is based on nothing more tangible than a desire to seduce the master's daughter."³⁴ However, I believe Styron used these fantasies to symbolise the radical emotional ambivalence Nat experiences towards whites. Styron regarded this ambivalence as crucial to the structure of American race relations, an idea he developed from his readings of James Baldwin's essays:

It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a *blood* relationship, [...] and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love.³⁵

Styron attempts to depict not just hatred and exploitation producing racial violence, but also frustrated and distorted feelings of love and sympathy, which ultimately offer hope for a future without racism.

Nat's anger is never provoked purely by hatred, but by a combination of hatred and a confused sense of affective bonds with whites. He himself struggles to explain the emotional turmoil which overwhelms him while he is driving Margaret Whitehead to church:

I am filled with [...] the long hot desire to reach out and snap that white, slender, throbbing young neck [...] Yet – strange, I am aware of it – it is not hatred; it is something else. But what? What? I cannot place the emotion. It is closer to jealousy but it is not even that (92).

Throughout the novel, these moments of radical ambivalence bring Nat closest to violence, violence always described in sexualised terms. These fantasies may seem motivated by the trauma of having witnessed his mother's rape; an experience which has made rape the paradigmatic form of oppressive violence for Nat. But I believe Styron also regarded sexual violence as an objective correlative for the conflicting emotions Nat

³⁴ A. Gayle, *The Way of the New World* (Garden City: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1975), p. 236.

³⁵ J. Baldwin, "Many", p. 76-77. Styron quotes Baldwin approvingly, in a recent essay on *The Confessions*: "each of us 'contains the other – [...] white in black, black in white. We are part of each other.'" W. Styron, "Nat Turner Revisited", p. xxxix.

could not acknowledge in his narration.³⁶ The rape fantasy Nat experiences when a Northern white woman regards a freedman with an expression of pity seems to result from the same conflicting emotions which overwhelmed him while driving with Margaret (264).

Nat's emotional ambivalence is crucial to the depiction of his relationship with Margaret Whitehead. Like *Light in August* and *Native Son*, *The Confessions* uses an encounter between a black man and a white woman as the central element of its investigation into racial relations and violence. Most critics, whether they attack or defend Styron's representation of this relationship, misunderstand his reasons for making it central to *The Confessions*, which are best demonstrated by the representation of Nat killing Margaret. This act can be interpreted as the ultimate rebellion against the white social order, as Bigger Thomas comes to view his killing of Mary. Richard Gray argues that Nat's obsession with Margaret reveals that his inner world is as much a white-constructed prison as his outer world; evidence that the hegemony of white culture over Nat leads him to try to embrace its ideals.³⁷ But I believe Styron wanted the narrative of this relationship to reveal something other than how Nat's desire for revenge is shaped by his mental enslavement to white culture.

The language in which Nat describes killing Margaret suggests both Styron's desire to create a central symbol of Nat's emotional ambivalence, and the difficulties he experienced representing black violence:

Ah, how I want her, I thought [...] she tripped forward, bare arms still outthrust, as if to welcome someone beloved and long-unseen. [...] I heard for the first time her hurtful, ragged breathing, and it was with this sound in my ears that I plunged the sword into her side (413-414).

This stabbing fails to kill Margaret, and Nat has to bludgeon her with a fence rail, not so much to fulfil his murderous intent it seems, as to end her suffering; he does this weeping, in response to her plea: "Oh Nat please kill me I hurt so" (414). Her words recall an earlier incident when Nat killed an injured turtle because Margaret could not

³⁶ Perhaps because of the terrible betrayal he suffered from the one white person he dared to love, his master, Nat can never acknowledge his feelings of love towards whites, until his character changes at the end of the novel.

³⁷ R. Gray, *Literature*, p. 302.

bear to see the animal suffer (370). It makes the killing seem almost like an act of mercy and tenderness, reinforcing its symbolic importance in reflecting Nat's ambivalence towards whites. The sexual imagery we have witnessed in all representations of black male violence against white women is present here. However, uniquely, this imagery implies genuine and consensual romantic love rather than malignant, rapacious lust. Styron may have purged this scene of the vocabulary of the Black Beast narrative to avoid any racist implications, to emphasise he is using representations of interracial desire for a very different purpose. But the extraordinary discrepancy between the language and the action of this scene suggests Styron also experienced great difficulty representing Nat as both a human subject and violent. He almost denies Nat the capacity to feel any violent impulses towards whites in the act of committing violence. In Baldwin's attempt to represent sexual violence as symbolic of the ambivalence in interracial relations, images of violence and hatred overwhelmed any sense of love. But Styron's desire to deny black violence ensures that in a scene which is ostensibly far more violent, he only creates a sense of love. Styron does not omit the central scene of black male violence against a white woman in his novel like Faulkner in *Light in August*, nor does he make this violence consciously accidental, as Wright does in *Native Son*. Yet the scene is less powerful, less indicative of black anger than either of the two earlier scenes. It suggests black humanity and violence are incompatible in the white liberal imagination, as does the other key scene of violence in which Nat participates.

Styron begins his depiction of the rebellion by staging an unprecedented moment of white corporeal vulnerability to black violence in white American literature. Nat's master Travis is woken by a group of armed slaves in the middle of the night, unarmed and surprised, powerless to resist their murderous intentions. This scenario reflects white cultural anxieties about the unprecedented upsurge in black rebellious violence when the novel was written. What Styron calls the "nightmare possibility" of rebellious black violence which Nat believes Travis has always repressed seems to refer equally to Styron's own era (386). Here, a white author finally confronts the ultimate taboo in representations of black violence, depicting a black man using violence directly and murderously against a white man. But Nat himself is unable to commit this violence, because he is confronted by a realisation of his master's humanity:

[T]his was the first time [...] I had ever looked directly into his eyes. [...] It was as if by encountering those eyes I had found the torn and long missing fragment of a portrait of this far-off abstract being who possessed my body; his face was complete now and I had a final glimpse of who he truly might be. Whatever else he was, he was a man (387-388).

The problems of this scene strengthen the sense that black humanity and black violence were incompatible in Styron's imagination. The rebel who steps in to complete the killing Nat cannot commit is not limned as a human subject.

Nat recognises his master's humanity in a way his own has never been acknowledged by any white character in the novel; even his benevolent first master Samuel Turner ultimately regarded him as a commodity. This passage recalls Bigger Thomas's Levinasian encounter with Jan in prison in *Native Son*. For Levinas, such epiphanies compel us to acknowledge the humanity of the Other, and thus function as an ethical imperative against violence. Only when we totalise the other in ideological ways does violence become possible. Nat had previously obeyed the Southern custom that a slave should not look his master in the eye. This enabled him to perceive Travis as a "far-off abstract being," a symbol of the ideology of slavery rather than a human being. Now, looking directly into his master's face, Nat is compelled to recognise this ethical imperative against violence, and he is unable to strike accurately with his axe, or to kill any other white person without serious qualms. Like the equivalent moment in *Native Son*, this epiphany is unconvincing and feels unearned. Styron himself is compromising Nat's humanity at this very moment of intersubjective recognition, denying him the capacity to desire revenge so strongly suggested by the historical evidence. It is difficult not to perceive an element of wish fulfilment in the relation between this scene and the historical context, an authorial hope that black and white Americans will recognise each other's humanity and avert the apocalyptic violence which threatened in the sixties. One contemporary reviewer described this moment as an example of the "same hope of those white Americans today who fear some great violent act of Negro revenge: a hope that

guilt will stop the Negroes.”³⁸ This scene is a liberal fantasy of a space beyond ideology where black and white people can interrelate purely as human beings.

In contrast to Wright, Styron makes this weak interracial epiphany a pivotal moment in the plot and Nat’s moral growth as a character. Until this point, Nat has expressed a faith resembling black militant interpretations of Fanon in blacks’ ability to realise their humanity through violence. When Nat ponders how to make Hark cast off his Sambo persona and “behave with dignity,” he concludes he must be taught to: “gut a white man and gut him without a blink or a qualm” (57). He even declares that Henry, a rebel deafened by a blow from an overseer, will: “leap like a swallow straight up into the realm of hearing [...] the instant he spilled a white man’s blood” (333-334). But after the rebellion, Nat is forced to re-evaluate these beliefs by his own apparently human inability to commit violence. His earlier belief that to kill a white man, a slave must “know the object of his hatred,” not just regard whites as mere abstractions, is shattered (257-258). He now decides that only those who do regard whites as abstractions can kill them.

From this point on, *The Confessions* moves towards a clear rejection of violence as a path to fully realised human selfhood. Styron uses Nat’s moral development towards the end of the novel to posit reasons other than violence for his worthiness as a historical hero and protagonist of a novel. As Jane Flanders observes: “Nat Turner’s greatness, in Styron’s conception, lies not in his courage to kill, but in the courage to believe in his own dignity – for a slave an astonishing feat of imagination and self-creation.”³⁹ Nat’s experiences, particularly the crucial encounter with Travis, teach him to regard not just whites but also the fellow slaves he has struggled to love throughout the novel as human beings rather than abstractions. He goes from seeing Hark as an “experiment,” as Samuel Turner perceived him, to recognising his humanity (57). Nat’s last description of Hark, as he sees him carried away for execution, suggests he has learnt a new definition of human dignity: “Hark’s bound and seated shape, like the silhouette of some marvellous black potentate borne in stately procession toward his throne, passes slowly by my door” (427). Making Nat’s greatest triumph his final recognition of his own and Hark’s humanity steers the novel away from providing a historical endorsement for contemporary black

³⁸ Anonymous Reviewer, “Unslavish Fidelity”, *Times Literary Supplement* (9 May 1968), 480, p. 480.

³⁹ J. Flanders, “William Styron’s Southern Myth”, *The Achievement of William Styron*, p. 118.

militant violence. Styron claimed he was motivated by philosophical pessimism about revolutionary violence, saying he was drawn to the Nat Turner story because it exemplified the: “Tragic notion that men in revolutions destroy so much of the thing they love, namely, they destroy their own notions of humanity by committing acts of violence against humanity.”⁴⁰ This enraged black militant critics, who wanted the Nat Turner story to support their own revolutionary aims. However, even if we reject this politically motivated critique of *The Confessions*, there remains something unconvincing about Nat’s moral development.

Nat is portrayed after the rebellion as alienated from his religion and his deepest self. Like the historical Nat Turner, he denies he feels any guilt for his actions, yet his inability to pray, his sense that he has been “removed from the sight of God” strongly suggests unconscious guilt (398). The barriers between a modern author and the consciousness of a slave make it very difficult to map contemporary, hegemonic moral values onto a slave character in a convincing way. Making a slave character feel guilty about violence against representatives of a system which refused to recognise his capacity to make moral choices seems forced, especially as the historical Nat Turner seems to have adapted Christian morality to justify any violence against whites. Furthermore, unlike *Native Son*, which preserves the gap between Max and Bigger Thomas in its final scene, *The Confessions* uses Nat’s moral reformation as a basis for ending the novel with an image of successful racial reconciliation. Styron cannot reconcile Turner with a genuine white character in his prison cell, so instead it is a fantasised image of Margaret Whitehead which brings Turner back to God (426). But how can we be sure this vision is any different to Turner’s earlier fantasies? Samuel Coale complains that the ending suppresses the complex ambivalences which pervade the text “in a swift vision of reconciliation and spiritual-sexual fulfilment. [...] Turner’s redemption is too self-serving and too filled with ironies for us to buy it completely. And yet Styron wants us to.”⁴¹ The troubling ambiguities of this scene emphasise how difficult it is for any American novelist to achieve convincing racial reconciliation, particularly in the context of slavery, where any reconciliation is likely to appear false and sentimental.

⁴⁰ B. Forkner and G. Schriker, “Interview”, p. 193-194.

⁴¹ S. Coale, *William*, p. 98 and p. 102.

The representation of the character who commits most of the historical violence of Turner's rebellion increases the sense of something false and forced in Nat's moral rejection of violence and his ultimate fantasy of racial reconciliation. Everything Styron represses in his protagonist returns in phobic, demonised form in the character of Will. The characterisation of Will suggests Styron unconsciously sensed his attempt to understand slave violence was inadequate, and guiltily feared the black desire for vengeance was stronger than he had acknowledged. According to Gray's "Confessions," the historical Will explained his decision to join the rebellion by saying, "his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him."⁴² This statement suggests a person who chose violence rationally as the only path to liberation. But Styron makes Will a very different figure, displacing the savage violence which he occludes in Nat almost entirely onto him. During the account of the rebellion, almost all of the violence described directly, except Nat's aforementioned killing of Margaret, is committed by Will. But throughout this account he remains psychologically other to the text, seen only from Nat's fearful, uncomprehending perspective: "His insatiate appetite for blood was [...] awesome beyond understanding" (404). For Nat, Will's dark-skinned body signifies a terrifying combination of blackness and violence: "the muscles along his purplish black arms quivered and jumped with murderous power" (378). He describes him in animal metaphors: "Will's madness [...] has the frenzied, mindless quality of a wild boar hog cornered hopelessly in a thicket, snarling and snapping its brutish and unavailing rage" (102). Will also evokes biblical visions of a terrible, destructive beast in Nat (38 and 377). Nat's perceptions of Will echo Styron's own phobic anxieties about the historical Nat Turner. Black militant critics located Styron's portrayal of Will in the tradition of racist images of the black male as Beast. Mike Thelwell writes: "this portrait of an evolutionary marvel, half-nigger, half-beast, is surely familiar to anyone who knows such classics of southern literature as Dixon's *The Klansman*."⁴³ The crucial difference between Will and such conventional racist images is that Styron shows Will's savage state is the result of brutal mistreatment by his masters, not naturally occurring. But there is an even greater danger that the use of demonised imagery will conceal this difference

⁴² T. Gray, "Confessions", p. 417.

⁴³ M. Thelwell, "Back With The Wind: Mr Styron and the Reverend Turner", *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writer's Respond*, p. 88.

than in the representation of Bigger Thomas because we receive no representation of Will's subjectivity.

In contrast to Nat's murder of Margaret, Will's violence is described in vivid, grotesque terms which make absolutely clear that extreme violence is occurring. Consider the description of Will's decapitation of Travis:

His small black figure seemed to grow immense, somehow amorous, enveloping Travis's nightshirted figure in a brief embrace, almost as if he had joined him in a lascivious dance [...]. Travis's head, gushing blood from a matrix of pulpy crimson flesh, rolled from his neck and fell to the floor with a single bounce, then lay still. The headless body, nightshirted, slid down the wall with a faint hissing sound, and collapsed in a pile of skinny shanks, elbows, knobby knees. Blood deluged the room in a foaming sacrament (389-390).

Loyle Hairston condemns such passages for reducing the mission of an "authentic hero in mankind's struggle against tyranny" to "mere wanton savagery."⁴⁴ However, there can be no denying the extreme violence of Turner's rebellion, or the preponderance of female and young victims. Styron's stated pessimism about the effects of revolutionary violence offers a reasonable explanation why Nat Turner's rebellion is not represented as a heroic struggle. More problematical however, are the invariably sexualised terms in which Styron describes Will's violence, particularly when it involves female victims. This provoked outrage among black militant critics, because historical records show no evidence of rapes during the insurrection. Mike Thelwell claims this is an inevitable consequence of the Beast imagery through which Will is always depicted. From his first appearance in the novel, "we recognise his function: he will rape a white woman."⁴⁵

In fact, however, despite Nat's claim that Will "broods constantly upon rape, the despoliation of white women masters his dreams night and day," there is no clear indication in the text that rape occurs (102). Critics who claim this usually draw attention to one of two scenes. Charles Joyner cites the description of Will's murder of Miss Sarah: "as if by his embrace this scarred tortured little black man was consummating at last ten thousand old swollen moments of frantic and unappeasable desire. Between Miss Sarah's

⁴⁴ L. Hairston, "William Styron's Nat Turner – Rogue Nigger", *Ten Black Writers*, p. 70.

⁴⁵ M. Thelwell, "Back", p. 89.

thrashing naked thighs he lay in stiff elongate quest like a lover” (390).⁴⁶ Mike Thelwell cites the description of Will’s murder of Mrs Whitehead: “pressed urgently together against the door in a simulacrum of shattered oneness [...]. Then I saw Will draw back as if from a kiss and with a swift sideways motion nearly decapitate Mrs Whitehead” (412).⁴⁷ In both cases, however, the suggestions of rape are similes projected onto the violence by Nat’s narration, as the locutions “as if” and “like” demonstrate. Will only adopts positions which suggest rape to Nat to restrain his victims while he kills them. The desire for rape is within Nat’s mind, for reasons which, as we have seen, are not the conventional motives of the Black Beast. Nevertheless, representing Will’s violence in this way, having portrayed his character in the phobic vocabulary of the Black Beast narrative, brings him uncomfortably close to embodying a conventional white fantasy about black violence. His entire role in the novel suggests black violence could not achieve visibility in the white liberal imagination outside the conventional images of the Beast narrative.

It might be objected that some of the violence during the rebellion is committed by other black characters, such as Hark, who is represented in sympathetic, human terms as driven to violence by the sale of his family. However, this violence is only reported, not witnessed directly. Styron also fails to locate Will’s violence in the context of the appalling white brutality suffered by many slaves. Nat experiences almost no violence during his life, and although we hear reports of brutality to other slaves, we never witness such incidents directly in the kind of vivid language used to depict Will’s violence. Seeing the violence of Nat Turner’s rebellion isolated from the brutality of slavery threatens to make it appear like “mere wanton savagery.” In *The Confessions*, Styron sought to find a new way of portraying black violence, from a more internal perspective than Faulkner, which would not negate black humanity in racist stereotypes. But the powerful influence of contemporary cultural anxieties led him to reproduce strategies of denial and demonisation. It appears the white liberal acceptance of African Americans as equal human beings at this time could not encompass the possibility of black violence.

⁴⁶ C. Joyner, “Styron’s Choice: A Meditation on History, Literature and Moral Imperatives”, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. by K. S. Greenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 190.

⁴⁷ M. Thelwell, “Back”, p. 89.

The controversy surrounding *The Confessions* has made subsequent white authors reluctant to articulate a black perspective on racial violence in contemporary or historical America. However, numerous African American authors have attempted very different representations of slave violence. One of the most direct responses to *The Confessions* is *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, an unusual African American text in its representation of female involvement in violent insurgency.

As Haryette Mullen observes, Frederick Douglass's narrative initiated a tendency for male-authored texts to focus on heroic, "manly" acts of physical violence against racist oppression. Female-authored texts "focus instead on the oral expression of the fugitive thought and the resistant orality of the runaway tongue."⁴⁸ *Dessa Rose* shows a female slave resisting slavery through both "manly" violence and oral expression. Williams wanted to challenge the assumption that women were incapable of participating in violent resistance to slavery, which she felt the historical evidence of Herbert Aptheker and Angela Davis contradicted. Like Styron, Williams claims a kind of historical fidelity for her novel, although it is based on heavily modified historical incidents, because she believes it accurately reflects the totality of slavery. She too bases her understanding of slave violence largely on a single text, Angela Davis's essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." Davis argues slave women had a central role in subversive activities overlooked by sexist and racist historiography.⁴⁹ This picture of slavery is equally contentious to Elkins's thesis, relying not on direct evidence, but on the contention that there were many unrecorded acts of female rebellion, suppressed to avoid inciting other slaves or causing panic in white society.⁵⁰ This re-affirms how literary uses of historical black violence are inevitably subject to ideological distortion. Williams's desire to recover a lost tradition of subversion and rebellion to empower modern African Americans in their struggle against racism influences her depiction of slavery as powerfully as Styron's desire to deny the possibility of contemporary black violence. However, portraying a black woman committing violence liberates Williams

⁴⁸ H. Mullen, "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Our Nig*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved*", *The Culture of Sentiment*, ed. by S. Samuels (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 253.

⁴⁹ A. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves", *Words of Fire*, ed. by B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 205-207.

⁵⁰ A. Davis, "Reflections" p. 209.

from the often overwhelmingly potent history of racist tropes of black male violence in American literary discourse.

Unlike Styron, Williams does not locate the most extreme violence in characters who remain psychologically other to the text and are observed only from the outside as physical beings. Instead, she attempts to articulate the subjectivity of the character who commits this violence. Williams seeks to represent this violence not as something which negates or calls into question her protagonist's humanity, but as *proof* of that humanity. Because she is a complex, emotional, human being Dessa is deeply traumatised by the horrors of slavery, and her violence is an inevitable response. But throughout the novel this aim is contested by the efforts of slave "expert" Adam Nehemiah to inscribe Dessa's violence within the hegemonic discourse which figures black violence as evidence of bestiality. He attempts to reduce her to a violent figure beyond comprehension as a human subject, who can only be disciplined and restrained, labelling her "devil woman." He interprets her violence as proof of her "savagery," an innate element of her character, unconnected to her experiences of slavery and white brutality.⁵¹ By juxtaposing these discourses in contestatory positions throughout the text, Williams seeks to expose how easily certain assumptions about black violence are reproduced by the acts of writing and reading in American culture, and the gap between these assumptions and the human realities of black violence.

Williams depicts slave selfhood not as a discrete whole, according to hegemonic notions of bourgeois subjectivity, but as constituted by communal and emotional bonds, a network inherently dependent on others. Thus the death of her lover Kaine after a brutal beating by their master shatters Dessa's self: "She had lost Kaine, become a self she scarcely knew, lost to family and friends" (58). In contrast to Styron's Nat, Dessa does not narrate the entire novel. The traumas of slavery have inflicted too much damage on her consciousness for her to remember and articulate all her experiences coherently. The appalling punishments she suffered after she attacked her mistress constitute a trauma to which her memory compulsively returns, yet refuses to articulate: "Dessa came back to that moment again and again, recognising it as dead, knowing there was no way to

⁵¹ S. A. Williams, *Dessa Rose* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 21. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

change it, arriving at it from various directions, refusing to move beyond it” (58). Unlike Styron, Williams uses literary form to give us a powerful sense of how the traumas of slavery fragment the psyche, and how this fragmentation motivates violence. Consider Dessa’s attempt to explain how she reacted to Kaine’s death:

Kaine chosed me. [...] when Emmalina meet me that day, tell me Kaine done took a hoe at Masa and Masa done laid into him wid a shovel, bout bus in his head, I jes run [...]. Kaine jes laying ther on us’s pallet, head seeping blood, one eye closed one bout gone. Mamma Hattie sittin side him wipin the blood. “He be dead o’ sold. Dead o’ sold.” I guess that what she say then. She say it so many times afta that I guess she say it then too (20).

Dessa does not directly articulate either her emotions towards Kaine or her horror at his death in this utterance. But the structure and the rhythms of the passage bespeak her powerful, human love for Kaine and the emotional turmoil his death provoked, creating a credible motive for her violence. The fragmentary, staccato phrases and sentences, and her confused recollection of some details of this horrific incident mimetically reproduce the thought processes of her traumatised mind.

This attempt to formulate a narrative style that reflects the psychological effects of traumatic experiences mimetically contrasts sharply with the measured, regular rhythms of Nat’s narration. Dessa makes this statement in response to Nehemiah’s questioning about why she participated in a violent attack on slave traders. But he refuses to recognise the connection between the traumatic experiences which created this inner turmoil and Dessa’s violence, asking bluntly: “And what has that to do with you and the other slaves rising up against the trader and trying to kill white men?” (20). Dessa responds angrily: “I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can” (20). As Emma Waters Dawson observes: “Her response reveals more about the power of the slaveowner in a patriarchal society than it does about her ‘power’.”⁵² Dessa realises Nehemiah has misunderstood her explanation of how the excessive and tyrannical nature of white authority provokes black violence because he refuses to recognise black humanity. She can only make him acknowledge the appalling consequences of this

⁵² E. Waters-Dawson, “Psychic Rage and Response: The Enslaved and the Enslaver in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*”, *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*, ed by. J. Liddell and Y. B. Kemp (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), p. 19.

situation for the victims by inverting it, and describing a situation where blacks would treat white people with such untrammelled brutality. She also confronts him with the danger that white oppression will dehumanise slaves to the point where they really do become addicted to motiveless, indiscriminate vengeful violence. But like Styron, Nehemiah can only respond to such a possibility by retreating into phobic stereotypes of black violence. Upon hearing this utterance, he declares he can understand why a slave dealer described Dessa as possessing “devil eyes” and a “devil’s stare”(20).

Dessa’s scars function as a locus for the fiercest contestation of her status and the meaning of her violence within the novel. The places in which she has been whipped symbolise how slavery seeks to erase the humanity of slaves: “The wench’s loins looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would ever grow there again” (154). As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson observes, this permanent disfigurement of Dessa’s genitalia illustrates how oppressive violence functions as a crucial element of the hegemonic discourse which defines Dessa primarily as a commodity, reducing her human femininity to a secondary or even irrelevant status.⁵³ White brutality textualises Dessa’s body, inscribing signs which have clear significance in white discourse. Nehemiah refers to the scars caused by brutal whippings as “a history writ about [her] privates” which reveals the “darky’s mean streak” (21). He interprets these signs as further evidence of the inherent savagery he perceives in Dessa. But Williams’s representations of these scars transform their significance by locating them in a different discourse. Her descriptions of these scars bespeak the pain Dessa has suffered. They signify the agonising experiences which are too traumatic for Dessa to remember consciously, yet help explain the furious violence of her attack on white slave traders. This helps Williams to circumvent the problem of the absence of a vocabulary for articulating physical pain as an internal sensation which Elaine Scarry has noted.⁵⁴ As Carol E. Henderson has observed “the flesh becomes symbolic of what makes Dessa

⁵³ M. G. Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition”, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by H. L. Gates (London: Meridian, 1990), pp. 126-127.

⁵⁴ E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 15-16.

‘human.’ It is through her body that she ‘speaks’ the universal languages of pain, of fear, of love and of anger.”⁵⁵

Williams does not figure violence as incompatible with humanity in her black characters like Styron; she represents Dessa’s violence as a thoroughly human response to her suffering. But *Dessa Rose* does not offer an uncomplicated endorsement of violence as a route to the full constitution and expression of human selfhood. Although violence enables the central slave characters in *Dessa Rose* to begin their escape from slavery, their final escape from slave territory relies purely on shrewd subversion of the economic and social conventions of the slave system. Furthermore, Dessa does not realise her humanity purely through committing violence; her attempts to articulate her experience in her own words are depicted as far more important in reconstituting her shattered sense of self. Violence is depicted as an ambiguous force, helping African Americans to escape the oppression which denies their humanity but also threatening to overwhelm that humanity. Consider Dessa’s memory of her attack on her mistress:

The four red welts in the suddenly pallid face, the white spot at the base of the red neck filled Dessa with a terror and a glee so intense they were almost physical. Frightened at her own response, she was almost ashamed – not of the deed. No. Never that, but surely it was wrong to delight so deeply in anyone else’s pain (58).

Dessa recognises her violence as what Ann E. Trapasso calls a “deep affirmation of her self” and also a source of enjoyment. Her suffering leads her to delight in taking revenge against her oppressors. At the same time, however, she perceives dangers within violence, fearing that it destroys the humanity of the perpetrator as much as the victim, and that it can become a kind of addiction, relentless and indiscriminate. She later declares: “that feeling, that anger was like a bloodhound in my throat, a monster that didn’t seem to know enemy or friend, wouldn’t know the difference once it got loose” (184). This ability to recognise how violence affects their humanity makes Williams’s black characters superior to the white ones, who always project their sadistic enjoyment of violence onto the racial Other. They hold the slaves responsible for this violence. At one point, when Nehemiah strikes Dessa on a whim, he perceives his act not as a typical

⁵⁵ C. E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 77.

act of white oppression but a lapse in which he has lowered himself “to the same level of random violence that characterized the actions of the blacks among themselves” (30).

Like *The Confessions*, *Dessa Rose*, represents extreme violence as predicated on a denial of the victim’s humanity. White violence functions to erase the humanity of slaves, leaving marks on the black body which are interpreted as evidence of black savagery, thus creating its own justification. Similarly, Dessa is able to commit murderous violence against white people because her experiences of white brutality have left her unable to recognise them as human beings. She notes of her masters: “these wasn’t peoples in my book” (184). When she attempts to recall her attack on a slave trader during her escape from the coffle, she finds that, “she could not remember the trader as distinct from the other white men” (62). She regards whites as an abstract concept, an amorphous unitary mass, not as individual humans. In *Dessa Rose*, however, these misrecognitions of the other’s humanity can only be transcended after the dehumanising ideologies which underpin the master – slave relationship have been broken down through an extensive process of dialogue and experience of living outside the slave system. Only near the end of the novel can Dessa and Ruth recognise each other’s humanity:

“My name Ruth,” she say, “Ruth. I ain’t your mistress” [...] “Well if it come to that,” I told her, “my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain’t no O to it.” [...] I wanted to hug Ruth. I didn’t hold nothing against her, not “mistress,” not Nathan, not skin. Maybe we couldn’t speak but so honest without disagreement, but that didn’t change how I feel (232-233).

Here, intersubjective recognition triumphs over the system of (mis)naming which constitutes racist ideology. In other respects the ending of the novel moves into the genre of romantic adventure, but Williams insists on the limits of interracial understanding within a racist culture. Although *Dessa Rose* constitutes one of the most direct responses to *The Confessions*, there were many other novels from the same era as Styron’s novel which responded at least implicitly to his representations of black violence. It is to such a novel that I turn at the beginning of the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

REPRESENTING THE ERA OF BLACK MILITANCY IN BLACK AND WHITE

John A. Williams made one of the angriest contributions to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, and his next novel can be read as a revision of Styron's depiction of black rebellion. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969) exemplifies the new school of fiction which emerged in conjunction with militant black political movements which eschewed the non-violent tactics of earlier Civil Rights organisations. Williams attempts to represent the "horror" of our "possible future" which is an unspoken anxiety in *The Confessions*. In the context of an imaginary black revolt in the near future, he depicts a hero who embraces violence as a means of combating racism without the moral qualms of Styron's Nat Turner. But this burdened him with intensely difficult tasks. He had to find ways to represent black violence as heroic and justified, at a time when urban riots and the militancy of black activists were reawakening phobic stereotypes of blackness in anxious white minds. As James Baldwin observed in essays written during the sixties: "In the United States, violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks." "[W]hen white men rise up against oppression, they are heroes: when black men rise, they have reverted to their native savagery."¹ Williams also needed to find a way of showing black violence being used in politically effective forms against racist oppression.

Like *The Confessions*, however, *Sons of Darkness* does not make black characters who actually commit violence the central, focal figures in the novel. The black protagonist, Eugene Browning, is a previously peaceful Civil Rights activist and member of the black middle-class who has never used violence. He is driven to despair by the failure of non-violent activism to alter America's racial power structure fundamentally or to stop white racist violence against African Americans. He therefore hires an Israeli assassin, through a friend in the mafia, to assassinate a white policeman who killed a black boy, deciding that only a symbolic act of violence which will force whites to recognise they can no longer abuse blacks with impunity can bring about political change: "you had to obtain your goals by almost the same means *Chuck* obtained his,

[...] and Chuck did not get his with Freedom Now or Love Your Brother marches.”² This disillusionment with peaceful, intraracial activism pervades the novel. Large portions of the text use the Israeli assassin, Itzhak Hod, and a Mafia Don as centres of consciousness. The focus on these ethnic groups constitutes a rhetorical strategy designed to emphasise that the militant violence of this era was not evidence of natural black savagery, or of inherent black difference to other racial groups. Instead, it actually demonstrated the shared humanity of blacks and other ethnic groups, all of whom use violence to establish positions of freedom and power. In particular, the Israelis provide a textbook example of an ethnic group achieving political power through violence.

However, this reduces the space Williams has to delineate his violent black characters as human, and explain what drives them to violence. Williams fulfils the prescriptions of Styron’s black militant critics, creating black rebels who are uniformly, undeniably heroic, but he loses any sense of the complex humanity Styron problematically attempted to portray in *Nat Turner*. In particular, the two black revolutionary characters in the novel, Leonard Trotman and Morris Greene, who develop their own plans for more widespread violence against white authority, remain flat and distant from the reader. Their nobility and heroism makes them diametrically opposed to Styron’s representation of Will, but we gain no greater sense of them as subjective humans. These black men become a new kind of flat, inhuman stereotype, not fully realised characters possessed of an equal humanity to whites. Williams fails to delineate how racism has affected them psychologically. Although Trotman is driven to militancy by the murder of his sister, we obtain no subjective, internal perspective on the impact of this racist trauma. This typifies how writers influenced by the Black Arts movement rejected the complex dilemmas of double-consciousness, refusing to acknowledge the intrusions of white racism into the black psyche. Doing this risked acknowledging the deforming impact of racism upon the black psyche in ways which would compromise the heroism of these characters.

¹ J. Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time”, p. 357 and “Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White”, p. 428, *The Price of the Ticket*.

² J. A. Williams, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), pp. 11-12. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

Gilbert H. Muller also criticises Williams for failing to provide a “serious motivational background” for Browning’s decision to have a white policeman assassinated. However, I believe Williams intentionally omitted any personal motives of vengeance or hatred in his characterisation of Browning.³ He wanted Browning’s decision to use violence to be understood as philosophical, predicated on a rational calculation about the only way to end racist oppression. This also explains why he makes Browning an educated, middle class man, who has previously worked as a lecturer in political science and has long experience of peaceful civil rights activism. Everything about the character emphasises that his turn to violence is rational. As he declares at one point, intelligence does not necessarily make a person choose peaceful activism: “It can help him to rationalize away the use of violence, thinking about his own skin, but that same intelligence will tell him, finally, that he’s got no choice to be as tough as the next guy or tougher” (192).

Despite the novel’s insistence that black violence reveals the similarity between African Americans and other ethnic groups, it also posits a qualitative difference between white and black violence which may appear essentialist. Initially Williams posits a surprisingly conventional notion of this difference, through his protagonist. Browning rejects the idea African Americans should rise up personally against oppression because:

[T]hey wouldn’t be cool about it. [...] It would be left up to the wild kids, the ones who tipped their hand by walking into state legislatures with loaded guns; the ones running the streets with Molotov cocktails slopping in their pockets. [...] They wouldn’t be professional, and it would be too goddamned bad for everyone with a black skin (22).

The action of the narrative supports this perception of wildness within black violence, through the contrast between the assassination Browning arranges, and one of the few scenes which directly portrays a black character committing violence. Itzhak Hod assassinates the white policeman in a calm, professional manner. But when Leonard Trotman kills the white racist Southerner who murdered his sister he shoots the man repeatedly, saying: “That’s for my sister you white motherfucker. Trash. Garbage” (228). After committing this violence Trotman is described as glassy eyed and “rigid”, so

³ G. H. Muller, *John A. Williams* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 87.

stunned by anger and the violence he has committed that he seems disconnected from reality. This leads Hod, who witnesses the killing, to reflect that he is: "Not a killer, but everyone has to get a start somewhere" (228-229). Williams seeks to transform the racist trope of the savagery of black violence into a sign of black humanity; evidence African Americans are *more* human than whites who use murderous violence in a calm rational way. This ability does not make white people more civilised, it simply shows centuries of committing oppressive violence to maintain hegemony have left them inured to the horror of their own actions.

Although Williams refuses to show his black characters experiencing any degree of the guilt, or the loss of humanity Styron gave Nat Turner for committing violence, the novel is pervaded by an anxiety that deploying violence will reduce African Americans to a mirror image of their degraded white enemies. Yet this argument is contradicted by the uniformly more positive representation of men of violence to peaceful activists. We see a selfish, materialistic businessman, concerned primarily with maintaining good relations with the white community, and the head of the organisation for which Browning works is prepared to inform on the assassin to preserve his own institution. By contrast, the militant black characters are morally consistent, and spurn such compromises with the white power structure. Furthermore, Itzhak Hod is rendered as a noble, heroic, morally reliable figure throughout the novel, yet he has used violence all his life, first passionately as a committed fighter in the struggle to create and secure an Israeli state, and then coldly as a paid assassin.

Ultimately, the central problem with the novel is Williams's inability to represent black uprising realistically. Although he used the subtitle: *A Novel of Some Probability*, the scenes of outright racial warfare are the least convincing, realistic element of the narrative. Browning's plan breaks down as other African Americans start shooting policemen, leading off duty officers to begin attacking ghettos. Williams depicts the entire black community responding with whatever weapons are available:

Old men and old women, children, youths, adults of middle age. Zip guns, rifles, shotguns, automatics, revolvers. Lye rained down along with pots, pans, pieces of furniture, dishes glasses, lengths of iron, lead and zinc pipe; bricks from tottering chimneys, pots of boiling hot water, pans of cold water, knives, ice picks, broken

lamps; more than one number-10 cast iron skillet sung down from the darkened windows and into the milling cops. The Negroes fought in silence too this time, and they shot out as many streetlights as the cops who were trying to return fire. The police shot blindly upwards at the shapes of buildings (234).

So unlikely is the absolute racial unity in violence and the effectiveness of improvised weaponry in resisting state violence in these scenes, Gilbert H. Muller interprets them as comic.⁴ They expose the fantastical element which often lies at the heart of black militant fiction. Although these novels claimed to be grounded absolutely in hard political realities, they tend to become fantastical in their enthusiasm to enact scenes of violent vengeance upon white racists. They cannot realistically depict black uprisings succeeding. *Sons of Darkness* typifies the narrative strategy of black militant novels, which resembles that of Thomas Dixon's novels. Although they represent black violence in diametrically opposed ways, both types of novel project a fantasy of black violence onto a representation of historical reality in a way designed to make readers interpret this violence as a realistic possibility.

Williams avoids straying too far into fantasy by leaving the outcome of the black uprising undecided when the novel ends, rather than attempting to depict violent insurgency actually leading to racial equality. Throughout the novel, Browning has been adamant that general violent black uprisings could never achieve anything in America (166). By the end he is also forced to recognise that his own plan of strictly limited, symbolically potent violence cannot realise his aims. Thus although the novel is bitterly pessimistic, if not despairing, about the potential of peaceful activism to bring about genuine change to America's racist power structures, it ultimately implies that violent activism offers little more hope. Instead, Williams seeks primarily to demonstrate to whites the potential terrible consequences of their continued racism for all Americans. Although the black uprising he depicts has not succeeded in achieving genuine change when the novel ends, it is causing significant white casualties. Furthermore, Williams depicts the liberal white boyfriend of Browning's daughter choosing to join the Browning family in fighting the white racists who may attack them. Outright racial warfare, he suggests, has the potential to split and destroy American society. He intended his novel to

⁴ See: G. H. Muller, *John*, p. 95.

function as a warning to white society, not a realistic, achievable programme of black revolt.

As with *Native Son*, however, it is debatable whether this use of black violence as a warning was effective, or whether it simply exacerbated white racist anxieties. White fictional responses to the emergence of black militant literature suggest the latter. Novels such as *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970) by Saul Bellow and *The Tenants* (1971) by Bernard Malamud lack the ostensible optimism of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The phobic, guilty figurations of blackness Styron repressed to the margins of *The Confessions* are considerably more prominent. The hope that black violence can be avoided through interracial reconciliation recedes, emphasising how racial tensions had increased in the few years since *The Confessions*. Many critics sensed a fearful and hostile element in their representation of black character. Typically, Robert Alter suggests these novels reveal the “racial paranoia,” of white writers, their fear and “guilt” that black suffering “must issue in a destructive rage of unimaginable proportion and effect.”⁵ This suggests these novels represent a recuperation of the racist images of blackness in Thomas Dixon’s novels.

However, I believe the relation of these novels to their historical context is more complex than this. Modern critics often regard the radicalisation of the Civil Rights movement as precipitating a change in cultural attitudes to blackness. Andrea Levine has written that as Black Nationalism began to foreclose the possibility of biracial activism, “media representations of interracial relations [...] increasingly replaced idealised portrayals of African American male bodies with ambivalent and potentially hostile depictions.”⁶ I suggest these novels deliberately articulate the same cultural shift in their representations of blackness in order to explore the fantasies and anxieties which caused it. These novels feature white protagonists compelled to consider themselves from the perspective of the racial Other for the first time. Changing racial politics compel them to recognise their own specific, racialised, gendered identity as white men, rather than

⁵ R. Alter, “Updike, Malamud and the Fire This Time”, *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by D. Thorburn and H. Eiland (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 39 and p. 41.

⁶ A. Levine, “Sidney Poitier’s Civil Rights”, *American Literature*, 73:2 (June, 2001), p. 366

viewing themselves as a universal norm of humanity.⁷ These changes give them a new sense of corporeal vulnerability to black violence, which brings their unconscious fantasies and anxieties about race to the fore. These novels attempt to analyse these fantasies and anxieties, although, as we shall see, they sometimes only reproduce them.

Mr Sammler's Planet intersects what Levine calls the new “potentially hostile depictions” of “African American male bodies” in the scene where Mr Sammler is cornered by a black pickpocket:

He was never to hear the black man's voice. He no more spoke than a puma would. [...] The pickpocket unbuttoned himself. [...]. He was directed, silently, to look downward. The black man had [...] taken out his penis. It was displayed to Sammler with great oval testicles, a large tan-and-purple uncircumcised thing – a tube, a snake; [...] suggesting the fleshly mobility of an elephant's trunk, [...]. Over the forearm and fist that held him Sammler was required to gaze at this organ. No compulsion would have been necessary. He would in any case have looked.⁸

This description uses terms Thomas Dixon might have employed had such a scene been publishable in his time. Figuring the pickpocket's immense genitals in animal metaphors recalls Dixon's description of Gus's face we considered in Chapter One. Both descriptions force the reader into uncomfortable proximity with elements of black physicality whose distorted, excessive size suggests primitive, animalistic sensuality and violence. Like Gus's face in his soldier's uniform, the pickpocket's penis protrudes incongruously from his designer clothes, implying his inappropriateness in a civilised, Western context. These resemblances suggest a racial explanation for the pickpocket's criminality. Furthermore, like Dixon, Bellow conflates black sexuality with violence by depicting the black penis as a weapon, a symbol of black strength and menace. The repeated use of passive verb forms to describe the pickpocket's actions increases his shadowiness, his lack of clearly defined humanity; there is no clear sense of a human agent behind these actions, and no hint of what motivates them.

⁷ In both these novels, the protagonists are Jewish, which, as we shall see, affects how they become aware of their racial identity. However, other novels, featuring non-Jewish white protagonists, also displayed this new awareness of specific racial identity and vulnerability, such as John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971).

⁸ S. Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 49. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

Some critics, such as Adam Zachary Newton, condemn the “uncritical ethnic chauvinism” of this scene.⁹ Others, such as Emily Miller Budick, emphasise it is focalised through Sammler, and hold him solely responsible for the racism.¹⁰ Sammler admits, after first seeing the pickpocket at work that: “It was a powerful event and, illicitly, that is, against his own stable principles, he craved a repetition” (11). This suggests Sammler’s description of the pickpocket’s genitals is a consequence of the fantasies he projects onto blackness, not Bellow’s own racist view of black physicality. David Marriott has written that the fantasmatic white gaze on the black body exemplifies how, in fantasy, the process of looking involves the desire to devour.¹¹ He claims the racist white gaze mutilates and deforms the black self-image. This enables us to perceive aggression flowing in two directions in this scene. Sammler’s gaze is scopophilic, deforming and castrating the pickpocket in the act of looking. His bestial figuration of the pickpocket’s genitals betrays his projection of sexual and aggressive desires onto the black man. His compulsive looking betrays his unconscious desire to appropriate the virile, sexual power his conscious self professes to abhor. Other moments in the text reveal Sammler’s repressed desire for violence, such as when he remembers being a partisan during World War II:

To kill the man he ambushed in the snow had given him pleasure. Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy. [...] His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. [...] When he shot again it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss (140-141).

Sammler cannot reconcile the capacity to enjoy violence intensely he experienced, when reduced to a primordial struggle for survival in Nazi-occupied Poland, with the highly civilised, fastidious, intellectual self he has become. He resolves this tension by projecting such desires onto the African American inhabitants of New York he perceives as primitive, uncivilised and Other.

Of course, the pickpocket is complicit in, indeed initiates, his reduction to a fetishised object, which suggests living under the aggressive gaze of such white fantasies

⁹ A. Z. Newton, *Facing Black and Jew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 112.

¹⁰ E. M. Budick, *Blacks and Jew in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 152-153.

has deformed his self-image. Knowing white men fear and fetishise black genitals, yet socially disempowered in other respects, he bases his sense of self, of his manhood, purely upon his physical virility. Consider Sammler's description of his attitude during this scene: "The man's expression was not directly menacing but oddly, serenely masterful. The thing was shown with mystifying certitude. Lordliness" (50). This behaviour, combined with his flamboyant attire, suggests he perceives himself as the hypervirile, exotic primitive of white ideology; he is as much in thrall to a white fantasmatic image of blackness as Sammler. However, Bellow does not elucidate this relationship between white fantasy and the pickpocket's behaviour. Instead, he uses this scene solely to critique what he views as the misguided concept of manhood endorsed by black militant movements. As Stanley Crouch has argued, the pickpocket's behaviour alludes satirically "to the priapic version of black 'manhood' that slithered from behind the black power movement's fly and throughout the 'revolutionary black art.'"¹² Many black militant groups based their concept of empowered black manhood on an idea of black male sexual superiority which originated in racist ideology. However, with no attempt made to represent the historical circumstances which led black men towards such a reductive concept of their own masculinity, Bellow can only satirise a caricature of black militant philosophy.

Although Sammler needs the black man as Other, he does not blame the violence of his society exclusively on African Americans. In certain often-criticised passages, he does hold blacks responsible for what he perceives as the sexual problems of his society, lamenting the, "peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone" (32 and 162). But, when he thinks about violence, Sammler, frequently holds other groups responsible. He attacks the emergence of "the idea that one could recover, or establish, one's identity by killing, becoming equal thus to any, equal to the greatest" (145). This alludes critically to the interpretation of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* favoured by Black Nationalists.¹³

¹¹ See: D. Marriott, *On Black Men*, pp. 23-34.

¹² S. Crouch, "Barbarous on Either Side: The New York Blues of *Mr Sammler's Planet*", *Mr Sammler's Planet* (Introduction), pp. xxiv-xxv.

¹³ See: F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction, pp. 18-19. "When his [the colonised subject's] rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he himself creates his self. [...] to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time." This arguably over-simplistic

But Sammler traces this idea to the European middle classes, claiming they have preserved the pre-modern, aristocratic idea of violence as proof of worth and power because they lack a “spiritual life” and independent values of their own (145). The pessimism about the Enlightenment tradition of rationality and humanism, and the conservative faith in traditional social restraints on human behaviour Sammler expresses throughout the novel are motivated by a fear of the potential for barbarism latent in *all* human beings. Furthermore, as Ethan Goffman observes: “Since the Nazis represent both White purity and a barbaric force that eclipsed European civilization, the sign of blackness as applied in the novel virtually deconstructs itself.”¹⁴ However, it is not clear that Bellow, much less Sammler, appreciates this irony, and whenever he confronts black physicality, Sammler’s view of violence changes radically. A sexual fascination with black corporeality, evident when he saw the pickpocket’s penis, combined with his need to project aggressive desires, leads him to forget his theories. Displaying what Fanon calls “the prelogical,” or “paralogical,” “thought of the phobic,” he perceives the black body as the locus of a massive, animalistic strength, which makes violence seem like natural behaviour for African Americans.¹⁵ When Sammler sees the pickpocket robbing a man on the bus, he perceives his “huge body” and that: “Powerfully bent, the wide back concealed the victim from the other passengers” (46). Sammler’s account of this robbery gives a great impression of the pickpocket’s massive strength advantage over his victim, showing him toying contemptuously with the old man with the merest exertions of his hands and fingers (46-47). The fact that his victim is merely a weak old man implies Sammler has an exaggerated view of the pickpocket’s strength.

The final scene of violence involving the pickpocket suggests Sammler can transcend his phobic perception of blacks. Sammler witnesses him fighting, and is again fascinated by his strength: “his crouching, squeezing, intense, animal pressing-power, the terrific swelling of the neck and the tightness of the buttocks as he rose on his toes” (288). The pickpocket has the upper hand in this struggle, although not to the extent which Sammler’s perception of him as superhuman primitive would suggest, nor does he

summary of Fanon’s view of violence was favoured by many Black Nationalist thinkers and is clearly similar to Mr Sammler’s statement.

¹⁴ E. Goffman, *Imagining Each Other* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 126.

¹⁵ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 159.

display the level of brutality we might expect (286-290). Sammler is provoked to sympathy when his Israeli son in law, Eisen, steps in and fells the pickpocket with two brutal blows. Eisen exemplifies what Sander Gilman has called the “muscular Jew,” the Jew who fashions his self through identification with the military strength and success of Israel.¹⁶ His responsibility for the most brutal act of violence represented in the novel emphasises Bellow’s anxieties about this figure. It also suggests Bellow may be responding to a criticism of Jewish hypocrisy levelled by James Baldwin. In a 1967 essay, he attacked the way Israeli violence is “saluted as the most tremendous heroism” in America, while black violence is always condemned as a reversion to “native savagery.”¹⁷ Through this scene, Bellow implies that he regards all forms of violence as problematic, and that he does not endorse racist stereotypes through his representations of violence, even if his protagonist does. This hostility to all violence is emphasised by the horrific, grotesque depiction of the pickpocket’s crushed, bloody face, which also serves to reveal the pickpocket’s humanity to Sammler, apparently shattering his fantasmatic image of him as a superhuman primitive (290-291). Even now, however, Sammler does not sympathise with him as an equal human being, but as an exotic primitive who was “barbarous-majestical” (294).

To understand fully the limits of this moment of interracial sympathy, we need to return to an earlier incident of black violence described by Sammler’s nephew Wallace:

A kid [...] was surrounded by a black gang of fourteen-year olds. He begged them not to shoot, but they simply didn’t understand his words. Literally not the same language. Not the same feelings. No comprehension. No common concepts. Out of reach (188).

This provokes a suggestion of momentary identification with the black gang in Sammler, as he silently remembers he too “was begged” not to shoot by the man he killed in Poland (188). But Sammler only speaks of a scene in *War and Peace*, where a cruel French general spared the life of a Russian who is about to be executed after they “looked into each other’s eyes” and exchanged a “human look [...]. Tolstoy says you don’t kill

¹⁶ See: S. Gilman, *Jewish Self Hatred, Anti-Semitism and the Secret Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 373. Ethan Goffman makes the same association in *Imagining*, p. 135.

another human being with whom you have exchanged such a look” (188-189). Sammler refuses to believe in this form of “psychic unity” which serves as an ultimate interdict against murderous violence, and he never achieves a comparable recognition of common humanity in his encounters with the pickpocket. It is significant that the pickpocket is never shown without his sunglasses. They conceal the eyes which could exchange a “human look,” and during his fight with Feffer they are described as reflecting New York (288). Sammler cannot transcend his perception of the pickpocket as an embodiment of the energies he believes are destroying civilised values in this city.

This inability to conceptualise the possibility of healing racial divisions, particularly the Black-Jewish divide, may reflect the violent times in which this novel was written. However, I believe it also shows the difficulty Bellow experienced attempting to transcend racial stereotypes in his representations of blacks. In seeking to critique the aspects of black militancy and the socio-political changes of the sixties he dislikes, Bellow resorts to conventional demonised stereotypes of blackness; he is unable to find a way of writing about blacks that reveals their humanity. As Ethan Goffman observes: “A flattened version of Black nationalist assertiveness may serve as a new container for old stereotypes.”¹⁸ At one point in the novel, Sammler’s son in law Eisen asks him, “How can art hurt?” (171). Bellow provides an obvious answer when Eisen uses the medallions this question refers to in attacking the pickpocket. However, the text also inadvertently provides another answer. The phobic view of blackness it presents is never mediated by any obvious sense of irony or contrasted with efforts to realise the historical, subjective reality of the pickpocket. Thus the novel largely participates in the distortions and lacerations Sammler’s gaze inflicts on black violence and the black body. The pickpocket’s silence throughout the text keeps him totally Other, as Ethan Goffman observes, he is “an empty sign of blackness, a symbol that can only preserve conventional stereotypes. [...] an emblem of exotic excitement, of primeval fear and, finally, of Jewish guilt.”¹⁹

Bernard Malamud’s *The Tenants* displays white reactions to the rise of black militancy and the literary modes of representing black violence it produced in more

¹⁷ J. Baldwin, “Negroes”, p. 431 and p. 428.

¹⁸ E. Goffman, *Imagining*, p. 141.

detail. *The Tenants* stages an ultimately murderous confrontation between a black writer and a Jewish writer in an otherwise deserted tenement building in New York. It too begins with a white protagonist fascinated and frightened by the possibilities of black violence he perceives entering his existence. At the start of the novel, the Jewish author, Lesser, makes an immediate, fantasised association between blackness and violence, remembering a dream about an encounter in his apartment block:

Lesser reveries one [dream] touched with fear: Here's this stranger I meet on the stairs.

“who you looking for, brother?”

“Who you callin brother, mother?”

Exit intruder. Yesterday's prowler or already today's? Levenspiel in disguise? A thug he's hired to burn or blow up the joint?²⁰

Although the race of this “stranger” is not stated, his idiomatic similarity to the black writer who will later appear, and his hostility to being called “brother” by Lesser suggest Lesser imagines him as black. Like *Mr Sammler's Planet*, this novel's often hostile and anxious representations of black masculinity and violence are heavily influenced by contemporary events, but there is a more specific focus on the increasing hostility of black-Jewish relations. At one point, the Jewish protagonist Lesser imagines walking through Harlem. He recalls that “in the not-so-long-ago-past,” black passers-by would say: “Peace, brother, peace to you.” But now, he is either ignored, or subjected to “scornful jibes: / Show-off cracker. / Ofay spy. / Goldberg hisself.” This fantasy culminates in an image of a black man threatening Lesser with a switchblade (72).

Malamud's characterisation of the black author who enters the life of this white man, Willie, has been criticised as thin and stereotypical. Addison Gayle condemns Willie as nothing more than “a black man as seen through the eyes of a white man: crude, coarse, insulting.”²¹ Adam Lively counters that Willie is deliberately represented “as a conscious, ironic composite of stereotypes – some of them very old but given new and

¹⁹ E. Goffman, *Imagining*, p. 140.

²⁰ B. Malamud, *The Tenants* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 9. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

²¹ Quoted in L. Harap, *Dramatic Encounters: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Drama Poetry and Humor and the Black-Jewish Literary Relationship* (Westport: Greenwood, 1987), p. 27.

vivid forms by the end of the sixties.”²² Lively suggests Malamud deliberately makes Willie an almost typological combination of clichéd tropes of blackness in order to expose these stereotypes as “farce and absurdity.”²³ This may account for the parodic tone occasionally detectable in the representation of Willie. However, as the narrative develops and the level of violence increases, *The Tenants* appears to reproduce many of the anxieties usually invested in the demonised images of blackness it is supposedly undermining.

In one of the most compelling essays on this novel, Cynthia Ozick argues Malamud represents Willie as a racist stereotype to critique the bigotry of Black Nationalism: “Malamud did not make Willie. He borrowed him – he mimicked him – from the literature and the politics of the black movement. Willie is the black dream that is current in our world.”²⁴ He has to be “a stereotype devoid of any easy humanity,” because Malamud is seeking to show anti-Semitism as incompatible with genuine humanity.²⁵ However, I believe Willie is represented as a creation of white fantasy, as well as a critique of the Black Nationalist ideal. Consider the moment when Lesser sees Willie sitting naked at his writing desk, after criticising his work:

The black was sitting naked at his table, his head bent over his manuscript. [...] His bulky body, reflecting the ceiling light, looked like a monument cut out of rock. Lesser in astonishment asked himself: [...] Maybe he compares his flesh to his black creation on paper? Or is he mysteriously asserting the power of his blackness? (127).

If we trust Lesser’s words, this scene corroborates Ozick’s interpretation of Willie as a man who:

[F]reezes himself into the image of a totem, a ‘*black man*.’ [...] For a totem is an absolute politics: an object, an artifact, a *form* representing an entire people, together with its interests, its cult, its power, its history and fate. [...] Willie has turned the politics of a group into an object - himself, *black man*.²⁶

²² A. Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 273.

²³ A. Lively, *Masks*, p. 280.

²⁴ C. Ozick, “Literary Blacks and Jews”, *Bernard Malamud*, ed. by L. A. Field and J. W. Field (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 95.

²⁵ C. Ozick, “Literary”, p. 97.

²⁶ C. Ozick, “Literary”, p. 93.

Admittedly, this interpretation of Willie is based partly on his own words, his statements such as: “*I am art. Willie Spearmint, black man. My form is myself*” (61). However, as the scene quoted above shows, this reification and fetishisation of blackness is performed as much by Lesser as Willie. Lesser is responsible for perceiving Willie’s body as “a monument cut out of rock” and he speculates that Willie is “mysteriously asserting the power of his blackness” at this moment. Lesser’s earlier fearful fantasies about black violence have prepared us to expect fantasmatic distortions in his perceptions of black character. In a more deliberate and detailed manner than *Mr Sammler’s Planet*, this novel probes the increasing similarity between white fantasy and black self-image in sixties America.

Malamud first implies this similarity through his representation of a party in Lesser’s apartment. Willie and Lesser smoke cannabis and engage in a mutual fantasy about drifting down a river on a “floating island” (41). However, this scene problematises its own pronouncements of interracial love and harmony. Even at this stage, there is evidence Willie and Lesser’s friendship is predicated on a dangerous base of racial fantasy, rather than intersubjective understanding. Together they recite a revised version of William Blake’s “The Tyger”:

WILLIE

Nigger, Nigger, never die,
Shinin face and bulgin eye.

LESSER

Nigger, nigger, shining bright
In the forest of the night (43).

The very similarity of their attitude to blackness bodes trouble. Willie bases his self-image on blackness itself as a fetishised substance. Initially, Lesser is happy to concur, because his own fantasy of blackness is so similar. As Kathleen G. Ochshorn puts it: “Willie is absorbed by the fact of his blackness in a racist world, while Lesser is drawn to

Willie's blackness. Lesser sees Willie as powerful and mysterious."²⁷ It is also clear, even at this stage, from his paranoid anti-Semitic statements, that Willie perceives Jews in terms governed by racist fantasy. Initially, each man ignores the other's distorted image of him. But as the aesthetic and political implications of Willie's self-image become clearer, particularly his anti-Semitism, Lesser's attitude changes. It swings from fetishisation into phobia and hostility, always a latent presence in such fantasmatic perceptions of blackness. Meanwhile Willie's anti-Semitism leads him to blame Lesser's increasing hostility on his Jewishness. Malamud shows these fantasmatic distortions of each other lie at the root of the mutual misunderstandings which develop into violence.

However, even reading Willie as a critique of demonised white fantasies of blackness, as well as a critique of Black Nationalism, may be inadequate. Black writer James A. McPherson's claim that Malamud consulted him about the realism of the representation of this character suggests Malamud was also trying to make Willie a realistic and even sympathetic black character.²⁸ But he struggles to reveal any gap between Lesser's fantasmatic perceptions and the reality of Willie's character, despite the many different forms and modes he experiments with. At one point, while trying to explain his difficulty in finishing his novel to *Levenspiel*, Lesser claims: "I'm proceeding within a mystery to its revelation. By that I mean whatever is bothering me is on the verge of consciousness. Mine and the book's" (22). This also describes Willie's position in the structure of *The Tenants*. But revelation never occurs, he remains on the verge, on the margin of the consciousness of author and text. *The Tenants* enacts the same struggle to find a form adequate to represent black rage and violence, which it represents in Willie's writings. Willie's writing, which is frequently represented in the text, may seem to offer a way for Malamud to reveal Willie as a human subject who does not match Lesser's fantasmatic perceptions. But this is not easily compatible with Malamud's use of this writing to criticise the directions contemporary African American literature was taking, which as we shall see, he felt were exacerbating racial tensions.

Like Bellow's pickpocket, Willie bases his concept of black identity largely on sexual virility and a mysterious power inherent to black physicality. His descriptions of

²⁷ K. G. Ochshorn, *Heart's*, p. 211.

his girlfriend Irene suggest he believes she values him only as a sexual object. He claims Irene was a “nigger-struck chick” when he met her, but now she has more self-belief because she has seen how “I believed in my blackness” (79). He seems unconcerned that Irene fetishises him as the hypervirile black male rather than knowing him subjectively, perhaps because this correlates so closely to his own self-image. Basing his masculinity on physical virility creates a morbid and obsessive castration anxiety, noticeable from his first outburst of anti-Semitism. When Lesser first mentions the importance of art in his writing, saying: “Art is the glory and only a shmuck thinks otherwise,” Willie responds:

Lesser, don't bug me with that Jewword. [...] I know you trying to steal my manhood. I don't go for that circumcise shmuck stuff. The Jews got to keep us bloods staying weak so you can take everything for yourself. Jewgirls are the best whores and are trying to cut the bloods down by making us go get circumcise, and the Jewdoctors do the job because they are fraid if they don't we gon take over the whole goddamn country and wipe you out (43).

This unprovoked tirade exposes how Willie's paranoid castration anxiety is linked to his violent anti-Semitism. Later, Willie declares that when he has problems with his writing: “Not only does that raise up doubts if you really have a true book there; but even though you know you are well hung [...] you have these rat face doubts are you still a man” (121). He experiences any type of self-doubt as castration anxiety, and any criticism as an attempt to castrate him, to which violence is justified as a response. Malamud blames this self-image for exacerbating interracial hostility and producing black violence. After Lesser criticises his novel and reveals his affair with his Irene, Willie's black friends encourage him to burn Lesser's manuscript, because he: “Deprived you of your normal sex life and lifelong occupation [...]. Must feel like you been castrated, don't it? You got to take an eye for a ball it says in the Good Book” (135).

Malamud only once uses Willie's writings to probe the origins of his self-image in the effects of racism, and suggest a cultural history underlies Willie's castration anxiety. Lesser describes a passage in Willie's early, probably autobiographical writing it after reading it:

²⁸ See: J. A. McPherson, “To Blacks and Jews: Hab Rachmones”, *Tikkun*, 4:5 (Sept/Oct, 1989), 15-18, p. 15.

He finally has to face up to the self-hatred living in him like a sick dog in a cellar. This comes like a kick to his head after he beats half to her death his black bitch for no reason he is sure of. [...] What he has done to his broken faced [...] girl becomes terrifying awareness of something frightening in his nature. [...] “I thought if I looked in a mirror it would show I had turned white” (50-51).

This passage posits a direct relation between Willie’s aggression and the traumatising effect of racism upon his psyche. It suggests Willie’s self-image, his insistent but fragile pride in his blackness, is a reaction-formation against this traumatic self-hatred, this feeling of being invaded by whiteness. Thus, unlike Bellow’s pickpocket, he is delineated as something more than a dehumanised caricature of black militancy.

However, apart from this, Willie’s writing never represents black violence in ways which reveal his subjective experience of racism. Instead, Willie becomes increasingly obsessed with staging the vulnerability of white bodies to black violence. Malamud uses his writing to critique the centrality of this aim in contemporary black literature, which we saw in *Sons of Light, Sons of Darkness*, and which becomes even more prominent in Chester Himes’s later novels. At one point Willie tells Lesser that blacks ought “to kill whites till those who are alive vomit with pain at the thought of what wrongs they have done us, and better not try to do any more” (67). Willie seeks to perform this admonitory task through literature. In an early story, he portrays a black man killing a white man in order to taste his heart, but he is unable to find it, and the story ends with him butchering every part of the body in a vain effort to find this organ (53). Ethan Goffman reads this story as a symbolic failed attempt to incorporate the power of white society into blackness. The absent heart suggests whiteness has lost its vitality and power, and contains nothing worth taking for blacks (118). But I believe this story also has a more straightforward performative function, demonstrating to Lesser his own vulnerability. Another early story shows a black man, suggestively named “Harry,” who is painted white for betraying a black man to the police (53-54). This suggests a criticism by Willie of how Jews like Harry Lesser have become part of mainstream white society in America and forgotten their links with African Americans as oppressed minorities. Such stories certainly produce a greater awareness in Lesser of his own vulnerability. When he first heard Willie typing in his building, Lesser reassured himself: “a

typewriter” is “no lethal weapon” (26). But during the novel he becomes increasingly scared by the implications of Willie’s writing. After he first sleeps with Willie’s girlfriend, Irene, he dreams about Willie eating a white man’s leg, which seems to reflect the images of white bodily dismemberment and cannibalism in Willie’s stories (112). But this also shows the dangers inherent in this mode of writing. It provides disturbing images of black violence which merge too easily with white racist fantasies of blackness.

Malamud seems concerned that literature so focussed on enacting black revenge on whites will not scare them into treating African Americans better as Willie hopes, but simply encourage racism. This type of black literature cannot achieve the universality he sees as crucial to genuine art; it cannot express black rage in ways which enable ethnic groups to comprehend each other’s experience and perceive each other’s humanity. In a later story, which Lesser discovers in the bin, a group of blacks, comprising three old men and a Jamaican woman, murder a Jew slumlord: “ ‘Lets cut a piece off of him and taste what it tastes like,’ says the old man. / ‘He tastes Jewtaste, that don’t taste like nothing good,’ says the Jamaican woman” (153-154). As Ethan Goffman notes, this story shows that: “More so than the White body, the Jewish body is depicted as always already repulsive, [...] the Jewish body is saturated [...] with traditional anti-Semitic characteristics, is untouchable.”²⁹ This figuration of the Jewish body as repulsive and poisonous inverts conventional tropes of Negrophobia, casting them back onto a white body. Willie wants to stage his own fiercely desired revenge on white society and frighten Lesser, who he probably knows is reading the fragments he throws away. Lesser is forced to recognise how it feels to suffer racism, such as blacks have suffered. As Sally Robinson has observed, the political changes of this era reduced white masculinity from a universal norm to a specific “embodied” identity. This gave white men a new sense of corporeal vulnerability to the forms of persecution from which their hegemonic status in America had previously preserved them.³⁰ Willie tries to force this recognition upon Lesser through anti-Semitism, making him accept he is a racialised, gendered subject, part of an individual ethnic group. Early in the novel, in response to an anti-Semitic remark Lesser tells Willie: “If its news to you, I’m Jewish myself” (36). As Emily Miller

²⁹ E. Goffman, *Imagining*, p. 118.

Budick observes, “while this is likely not news to Willie, it is news to Harry [Lesser], who just a short time earlier did not respond to a similarly anti-Semitic statement.”³¹ But becoming aware of his own ethnic status does not augment Lesser’s understanding of African Americans. Instead he becomes increasingly racist and incapable of recognising black humanity. Towards the end of the novel, as he returns to his isolated top floor apartment, Lesser has “visions of a pack of rats, or wild dogs, or a horde of blacks descending as he tries to go up” (133). In his fearful fantasies, he no longer differentiates blacks from animals. Rather than helping them to comprehend each other’s experience, Willie’s representations of black violence drive a deeper wedge between blacks and Jews.

The ending of Willie’s story is also telling. In 1958, Malamud had imagined a scene of peaceful, mutually beneficial cultural syncretism and multiculturalism, depicting a group of black Jews studying the Talmud in “Angel Levine.”³² But in Willie’s story, this is displaced by a grotesque black appropriation of Jewish cultural materials. After killing the Jew, his black characters go to a synagogue. In one ending, they “put on yarmulkes and make Yid noises, praying” (154). In an alternate ending, they turn the synagogue into a mosque, and “dance hasidically” (154). This emphasises Malamud’s anxieties about what he perceives as the increasingly violent black desire to take the place of Jews in American culture. The epigraphs to *The Tenants* express tentatively the possibility of a continued peaceful cultural syncretism which would foster greater interracial understanding. The first epigraph, from the Attic orator Antiphon’s *Tetralogies*, represents the classical tradition of white European culture which Lesser champions. But its content alludes to Willie’s rage about the effects of white racism on black subjectivity: “Alive and with his eyes open he calls us his murderers” (7). This implies a hope that even the increasing rage against racism amongst African Americans at this time could be expressed through traditional white aesthetic forms, in ways white people could understand, but the rest of the novel gradually shatters this hope.

The overall novel compels the reader to wonder, however, if there is any mode of representing black rage and violence Malamud would accept as genuine art. Lesser’s

³⁰ S. Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 34.

³¹ E. M. Budick, *Blacks*, p. 15.

³² See: B. Malamud, “Angel Levine”, *The Magic Barrel* (New York: Vintage, 1958), pp. 52-54

problems with Willie's writing always focus on his transitions from representing black suffering to representing the violence this suffering produces in the black subject. Twice Lesser praises drafts on the appalling childhood of the autobiographical protagonist of Willie's novel: "It's well written and touches the heart" (83). But he criticises the draft which goes on to describe the long-term effects of this childhood:

[T]he chapter opened strongly with four pages of horrifying human misery, but the remaining thirty-six, to put straight the effect of her life and death in her son's mind, went badly off. [...] His rhetoric, though dealing with a boy's self-hatred and his blazing fantasies of sex and violence, became florid, false, [...] Part of Bill's trouble was that he was trying to foreshadow a revolutionary mentality, and it didn't always fit. [...] At best the boy was a zombie, incapable, except fitfully, of recognizable human emotion (124-125).

Lesser cannot accept the progression in Willie's writing from representations of black suffering, which evoke a pathos he feels is universal and therefore constitutes legitimate art, to representations of the disturbing anger this suffering produces. The boy is no longer recognisably human in Lesser's eyes as he takes on a revolutionary black anger. This might simply reflect Lesser's anxious refusal to recognise the human possibility of such extreme rage because of his fear of black violence, rather than Malamud's problems with the representation of black rage.

However, Malamud never discovers a way to represent black anger and violence which does more than reveal Lesser's increasingly pathological fears. He makes myriad efforts to articulate Willie's rage during the novel; through Lesser's dreams, reveries and real perceptions, and in the many different forms of representing himself Willie experiments with. Adam Lively interprets this as a "postmodern questioning of all forms of representation," which enables a "complete exorcism" of "racial stereotype."³³ But I think it also betrays Malamud's anxieties about representing black anger and violence adequately. The final pages of the novel contain ambiguous phrases like: "The writer was nauseated by not writing. He was nauseated when he wrote, by the words, by the thought of them" (172). Ostensibly, this refers to Lesser's intense difficulties in finishing his novel. However, the use of the ambiguous phrase, "[t]he writer" and the switch from

³³ A. Lively, *Masks*, p. 280.

third to first person narrative suggests this may also describe Malamud's difficulties. This passage precedes the violent climax of the novel, suggesting Malamud himself is disturbed and nauseated by trying to articulate black-Jewish conflict.

As his fear of black violence increases, and actual black violence enters his life, Lesser experiences difficulties distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted claims that as Lesser is overwhelmed by "anger and paranoia, his fantasies become hallucinations."³⁴ The form of the latter stages of the novel reflects this difficulty: "Direct dialogue is growing increasingly scarce; much of the action is internalized in Lesser's mind."³⁵ She argues that Malamud skilfully represents Lesser's paranoia through the increasing frequency of shifts in tense and person towards the end of the novel. Previously, such shifts had clearly demarcated the different modes of representation, the shifts from description of reality to fantasy, reverie or dream. Now, as these shifts become more "frequent and 'disorderly,'" such distinctions become impossible.³⁶ Thus the experience of the reader replicates Lesser's difficulties. The form of the novel enacts the psychological problems white fear of black violence creates.

The scene in which Lesser reveals his affair with Irene constitutes an interesting variation on an archetypal American trope identified by Leslie Fiedler. He claimed in a nineteen-fifties essay that white American literature reveals its guilt about racism by dramatising "as if compulsively the role of the colored man as victim." Willie is reduced to a total victim during *The Tenants*, losing his home, his girlfriend and his belief in his literary ability because of Lesser. His suffering may show that Malamud feels guilty that, like many Jews who have entered mainstream American culture, he has identified with the white racist political structure. When he wrote this essay, Fiedler claimed such literature always reassured that African Americans would forgive this mistreatment: "He will fold us in his arms, [...] he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real*."³⁷ *The Tenants*, however, radically revises this paradigm, emphasising the influence of changed historical circumstances. Willie does not forgive these offences, he responds with violence. Initially, this violence is self-

³⁴ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, "A Reading of Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*", *Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1975), 85-102, p. 93.

³⁵ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, "Reading", p. 97.

³⁶ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, "Reading", pp. 97-98.

destructive, as Willie bangs his head against the wall, and Malamud repeats Fiedler's pattern of staging black victimisation. In a shocking moment, however, as Lesser guiltily tries to stop this physical demonstration of the pain he has caused Willie, the violence switches round to be targeted directly against the white man. Willie grabs Lesser and smashes *his* head against the wall, before attempting to push him out of the window. Malamud shatters not only Fiedler's paradigm but also the tradition of reluctance to represent black violence being targeted directly against white men we have traced through twentieth century white American literature in this thesis. We have progressed to the diametric opposite of Thomas Dixon's absolute denial that African Americans could face white men in direct conflict, via Faulkner and Styron's anxious adumbrations of a possibility they struggled to acknowledge.

The fight is largely represented in realistic, mimetic terms, but there are some important symbolic elements: "The lamp fell, light rising eerily from below. They circled each other like lit shadows. [...] They grunted as they fought, uttering animal noises, [...] They broke, grabbed, and were once more locked together, head to bloodied head" (129). The image of the two men as "lit shadows" suggests this violence destroys their individuating, human characteristics. Both utter "animal noises," and as the fight progresses they are increasingly figured as mirror images; their actions become symmetrical and they both have bloodied heads. This doubling reflects Rene Girard's theories about how violence reduces antagonists to mirror images. This narrative strategy may appear to prevent any interpretation of violence as naturally, primarily black. Willie instigates this violence and is the more aggressive fighter, trying to push Lesser through the window while Lesser's violence is focussed on resistance. But this difference is accounted for by the racism Willie has suffered, not his blackness. However, because the fight is represented either from a third person perspective or focalised through Lesser, it is only his physical, visceral experience of violence which is communicated to the reader. Willie remains opaque. He communicates the anger which motivates his violence through direct speech, but we never see into his mind and understand how he experiences violence. This inevitably ensures that Lesser appears as a more human, subjective figure. As Cynthia Ozick observes:

³⁷ L. Fiedler, "Come", p. 150.

Now that Willie has stopped seeing Lesser as a more experienced writer and can think of him only as a Jew, Lesser too alters. He is rewriting his lost manuscript in fear and anguish, but the vision slips from him, he is in terror of Willie. [...] and Lesser, afraid for his life, turns as savage as Willie, with this difference, "... it sickened him deeply," he remains self-conscious.³⁸

Ozick's insistence on a qualitative difference between Lesser and Willie's attitude to violence stems largely from the fact that the narrative is focalised through Lesser. In fact, we never really discover Willie's attitude to violence, and assuming he commits violence unthinkingly, naturally, risks reproducing racist stereotypes of black violence.

The process of doubling in the characterisation of Lesser and Willie continues throughout the rest of the novel. Previously, they have appeared as mirror images, diametric opposites of each other, particularly in their attitude to writing. Towards the end, these oppositions begin to be merged or exchanged. As Brita Lindberg-Seyersted notes: "Lesser at the end has [...] adopted some of Willie's traits. He has grown a goatee and his language has stronger echoes of jive talk than earlier [...] And Willie too has changed: he looks thinner and taller than before."³⁹ Also, as Evelyn Gross Avery observes: "Willie changes from a passionate sensual being into a nervous frustrated writer who begins to look and sound like the Jew."⁴⁰ Sheldon Hershinow notes that it is in their increasingly violent hatred of each other that the two men are most obviously doubled: "Hatred breeds violence until the differences between victim and victimizer become blurred: they victimize each other."⁴¹ This doubling implies symbolically that each man is seeking to become the other, or rather to become what they have fantasised the other is throughout the novel. Lesser has always been fascinated by black sexuality and what he perceives as their intimate, passionate connection to the physical and emotional lifeworld from which he is so detached. Willie wants to usurp what he regards as Lesser's specifically Jewish literary talents. He envies what he sees as the powerful, even secretly dominant position of Jews in mainstream American culture, which they combine with the maintenance of a distinct cultural identity. As he tells Lesser in almost

³⁸ C. Ozick, "Literary", p. 96.

³⁹ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, "Reading", p. 89.

⁴⁰ E. G. Avery, *Rebels*, p. 104.

⁴¹ S. J. Hershinow, *Bernard Malamud* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980), p. 93.

his last words before the novel's violent finale: "You think you are the Chosen People. Well you are wrong on that. *We* are the Chosen People from as of now on" (169). For either to achieve their aim, they have to eliminate the other. These aggressive desires are played out in the novel's violent denouement. Through this, Malamud posits an explanation for black-Jewish hostility of this period: Black Nationalists want a role in American society so similar to what they perceive as the Jewish role, they are developing a desire simply to *be*, to replace violently, Jews in American culture.

This aspect of the novel supports Rene Girard's theory that violent conflict originates in the mimetic nature of human desire. Although a common object of desire usually appears to stimulate the conflict, in fact the real motives lie in the ultimate desire to *be* the rival, who is perceived to be more authentic, to possess some mysterious ontological superiority. As the conflict escalates and intensifies, the antagonists forget the object which supposedly provoked their conflict and imitate each other in ever more savage acts of retaliation, until ultimately they become indistinguishable doubles.⁴² Irene initially appears to be the desired object that motivates Lesser and Willie's conflict. Yet she becomes increasingly irrelevant after their relationship breaks down into violence. Lesser treats her exactly as Willie had done, devoting most of his time to writing and only seeing her at weekends, in a further example of the increasing similarity between these two men. Finally, Irene leaves for San Francisco.

In the final, murderous confrontation between Lesser and Willie, the grievous wounds they simultaneously inflict on each other are not realistic, but have enormous symbolic importance. As Ethan Goffman observes, each reduces the other to the "essentialist stereotype" their ethnic group harbours about the racial other. Lesser destroys Willie's brain, reducing him to the pure physicality white racists perceive in blackness. Willie castrates Lesser, slicing away "the site of physical pleasures absent in the mythic Jew" who is hated for his cunning mind (124). They literally commit the procrustean violence their racist fantasies have metaphorically inflicted on each other throughout the novel. These fantasies have gradually ascended from an unconscious level

⁴² See: P. Dumochel, *Violence and Truth: On the Work of Rene Girard* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 11 and: R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 47 and p. 79.

to dominate each man's perception of the other, as the insults they exchange emphasise: "Bloodsuckin Jew niggerhater" / "Anti-Semitic Ape" (173).

Furthermore, these acts of violence constitute a perfectly symmetrical revenge for what each man feels the other has done to him. As John Alexander Allen puts it:

Willie's conception of his manhood is inseparable from writing as a means to power and from his 'normal sex life' – courtesy of his 'sweet bitch.' Hence his mounting rage at Lesser who has cut him off from both, castrated him, as Willie sees it.⁴³

By castrating Lesser, Willie physically replicates what he feels Lesser has done to him psychologically and metaphorically. Meanwhile Lesser's identity is inseparable from his book; by burning his manuscript, Willie has almost destroyed his self. He too takes revenge with a physical version of what he feels Willie has done to him by cleaving through Willie's brain with an axe. This moment fails to produce the kind of recognition of the Other's humanity we witnessed in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Adam Zachary Newton observes that, because Levinas says the face expresses ethical answerability, "it makes perverse sense that [...] Lesser takes an ax to the black writer's head: what better site to commit murder than the very part of the person that expresses the interdict against murder."⁴⁴

The ending is both politically problematic and beset by internal contradictions and tensions. These problems begin with the setting. Like *Mr Sammler's Planet*, *The Tenants* has shown a tendency to associate black violence with the general social and physical decay affecting the novel's environment, which is frequently figured as a jungle. In this final confrontation the jungle where many of Lesser's fantasies are set, a primitive, African scene, seems to merge with the jungle of urban decay in his building. This may just show the extent of Lesser's racism, but it also suggests Malamud is unconsciously figuring black violence as primitive, natural and bestial in a traditionally racist way. This suggestion of authorial racism is eliminated if we read this scene as purely Lesser's fantasy, like critics such as Ben Siegel, who describes it as a "product only of Lesser's

⁴³ J. A. Allen, "The Promised End: Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*", *Bernard Malamud*, ed. by L. A. Field and J. W. Field, p. 105.

⁴⁴ A. Z. Newton, *Facing*, p. 139.

overwrought mind and imagination.”⁴⁵ This enables a more optimistic view of the novel’s conclusion. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted claims: “The novel ends not in real killing but in an imagined act of violence, which is perhaps meant to have a cathartic result, but, more importantly, which is intended as a reminder and a warning.”⁴⁶ Malamud himself has supported this view of the ending as a “warning” and complained of critics that “Some even read the ending as bleak, while I offer reconciliation before it is too late.”⁴⁷ However, his statements about this novel’s meaning are somewhat confused and contradictory, and his use of three different endings suggests he himself was dissatisfied with the degree of closure he achieves.⁴⁸ Furthermore, there is little textual evidence of the potential reconciliation he claims to offer.

This scene ends with the sentence: “Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other” (173). This suggests a degree of sympathy and empathy between the antagonists even at this extremity, but only if this scene is real, and not purely Lesser’s fantasy. Paradoxically, there is only any real, potentially redemptive interracial sympathy here if there is also real murderous violence. Thus Brita Lindberg-Seyersted argues that although a “kind of identification with the black is hinted at” in this scene, the phrase “the writer” can only really refer to Lesser or Malamud, because she reads this scene as imaginary: “It all takes place in the writer’s mind.”⁴⁹ Adam Zachary Newton suggests this sentence functions to assign an exact “mutual culpability” to the antagonists. He interprets it as a slight shift in focalisation, a movement from using only Lesser’s perspective to also articulating Willie’s thoughts. Therefore, it “allows the two characters (writer’s both) to inflict corresponding anguish with reciprocal barbarity – [...] for *each* is ‘the writer.’”⁵⁰ Clearly, the phrase “the writer” is deliberately ambiguous; it could refer to Malamud or either of the protagonists. However, as we have seen, the rest of the novel

⁴⁵ B. Siegel, “Through a Glass Darkly: Bernard Malamud’s Painful Views of the Self”, *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud*, ed. by R. Astro and J. J. Benson (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1977), p. 139.

⁴⁶ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, “Reading”, p. 100.

⁴⁷ Quoted in: L. Lasher, *Conversations with Bernard Malamud* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991) p. 33 and p. 147.

⁴⁸ In other interviews Malamud argues for a more pessimistic reading of this novel, acknowledging it represents his loss of faith in human nature, and suggesting the earlier “wedding” ending provides the only optimistic note. See: L. Lasher, *Conversations*, pp. 71-72.

⁴⁹ B. Lindberg-Seyersted, “Reading”, p. 101.

⁵⁰ A. Z. Newton, *Facing*, p. 124.

undermines this sense of mutual culpability, and this single sentence cannot completely alter that impression.

This sentence also feels incongruous and forced because it completely contradicts the strong sense that both were reducing the other to a subhuman racist stereotype which dominates the rest of the scene. The novel ultimately ends with Levenspiel's plea for "Mercy" repeated 115 times (173-174). But this plea also feels false and strained, and not only because it comes from the mouth of a character who has been revealed as a racist and a Harlem slumlord during the course of the novel. As Adam Lively observes, this plea "is purely religious, an invocation of some higher being's redeeming power over us humans. Willie and Lesser, the two humans, destroy each other. They do not change, they do not learn, they do not grow."⁵¹ Just as Faulkner lapsed into a poetic, aesthetic mode of discourse at the moment of Joe Christmas's murder in *Light in August*, Malamud seems tempted towards the supernatural, the religious in his representation of racial conflict. Neither author can propose genuinely human, political solutions. Mark Shechner makes the telling objection that "the ending simply contradicts everything that has come before and tries to rescue the book by magic from its own implacable conclusion."⁵²

African American authors also responded critically to the problems of black militant fiction, but in very different ways to white writers. John Edgar Wideman's 1973 novel *The Lynchers* constitutes a more accurate satire of black militant philosophy and writing than *The Tenants*. The narrative revolves around the plan formulated by four black men to lynch a white policeman in a symbolic act of revenge. The similarity of this plot to *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* suggests Wideman may be signifying directly on that novel. Even more than Eugene Browning, Littleman is convinced that a single, symbolic act of violence can completely change American society, can destroy a "total vision of reality."⁵³ Littleman thinks in simplistic Black Nationalist terms: "If we lynch the cop we will be declaring ourselves a nation. Only two reactions to our action are possible. They must attack us or back off and either way they must recognise our sovereignty" (495). Littleman speaks with open admiration about how Southern

⁵¹ A. Lively, *Masks*, p. 279.

⁵² M. Shechner, *The Conversion of the Jews and Other Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 89.

⁵³ J. E. Wideman, *The Lynchers, Identities: Three Novels* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 494.

Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

lynchings functioned as a display of white power and a channelling of the “raw fantasies” of a community into a symbolic, aesthetic form (439). He believes his own plan will operate in the same way, channelling black anger to force white society to accept a profound alteration in power relations.

However, in contrast to black militant authors, Wideman deliberately exposes the element of fantasy and wish-fulfilment in this belief in what violence alone can achieve for African Americans. Wideman’s plotters are not the heroes of black militant fiction, but complex human characters, whose subjectivity is revealed in far greater detail than John A. Williams attempted. Their desire for violent revenge is intimately bound up with self-hatred, double consciousness and traumatic racist experiences. Their leader is the stunted, crippled and revealingly named Littleman. Wideman creates repeated ironic contrasts between his plans and fantasies of extreme violence and his physical weakness, satirising the idea of superhuman, primitive black strength which John A. Williams endorsed.

By depicting Littleman’s plan as a symmetrical inversion of white racist violence, Wideman emphasises how black militants were held in thrall by the ideology of the system they sought to rebel against. One plotter, Saunders, feels justified in killing a black prostitute and blaming it on the policeman they will lynch because Littleman showed him: “she could not forfeit what she no longer owned. Since she functioned as a puppet in the oppressors system, taking her life would be a minor act of sabotage” (532). He repeats the devaluation of black life, the refusal to recognise the humanity of black victims we have witnessed in white racist violence. Wideman emphasises that the plotters’ devaluation of Sissie replicates her status in white ideology. As Saunders observes: “[t]en Sissies would have to die, cut down in some mad ripper’s crusade,” before the newspapers would report the crimes or the police would conduct a “rigorous investigation”

In contrast to *Sons of Darkness*, the planned revolt cannot be implemented and there is no black uprising. The plot collapses after Littleman is hospitalised by a police beating, which emphasises the enormous power imbalance between white authority and black revolutionaries, and one of the plotters shoots one of the others (499-500 and 619). Fear, paranoia and self-hatred, Wideman argues, cannot be channelled so simplistically

and easily into rebellion, attempts to do so only foment more intraracial violence. As the lynchers' plot drifts further from realisation towards the end of the novel, an incident Wideman seems to posit as the reality of black violence occurs. As Trudier Harris notes, the killing of a colleague in a drunken fight by Orin Wilkerson, the father of one of the plotters, demonstrates "the pathetic drama of reality, not the pageantry of a planned symbolic execution."⁵⁴ This chaotic, meaningless, intraracial violence confirms the failure of the plotters to channel black rage into new forms. In a media-saturated environment, the representations of white culture shape perceptions of black violence even more thoroughly than the newspaper reports we considered in *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Native Son*. Wideman emphasises this by introducing this incident through the mediation of a radio news bulletin, heard by Rice, rather than a description of the actual event. Rice responds by thinking angrily that Orin has "act[ed] a nigger," emphasising the impact of hegemonic ideology upon him (570). He perceives certain, negative forms of violence as inherently, naturally black.

When Orin eventually attempts to explain the fight his son, he cannot find words to articulate the violence: "I try to put it together, but it don't make sense. [...] I try to figure out what happened and nothing comes" (582). He cannot explain the motives of his work-mate, Childress, for attacking him. Even his attempt to describe how he actually killed Childress in a desperate move of self-defence lapses into garbled incoherence: "I was down when I got it out remember opening it with my teeth and pushing myself up and him on top of me I shoved with it in my hand and fell on him" (583). The events reported in this ungrammatical utterance can barely be comprehended. Orin's inability to explain the motives and actions in this fight creates a sense black violence is scripted by larger cultural forces, as in *Light in August* and *Native Son*, but Orin has no clear comprehension of this. He lacks the linguistic resources to contest the hospital staff's perception of him as "an ignorant, razor fighting nigger, stinking of sour wine," of which he is acutely aware (584). Ultimately, the most disturbing and pessimistic element of *The Lynchers* is not the failure of the lynching plan to reach fruition, but Wideman's inability to figure the realities of black violence outside hegemonic paradigms of natural black

⁵⁴ T. Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, p. 146

criminality. He satirises black militant ways of representing black violence, but cannot find effective alternatives.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INVESTIGATING BLACK VIOLENCE: THE PROBLEM OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN DETECTIVE IN THE NOVELS OF CHESTER HIMES AND WALTER MOSLEY

Walter Mosley's "Easy Rawlins" series of detective novels constitute investigations of black violence on both narrative and meta-narrative levels. While his detective protagonist, Easy Rawlins, conducts investigations into (what at least initially appear to be) crimes of black violence, Mosley uses the novels to investigate social and cultural aspects of black violence. In particular, he explores the ethical and aesthetic problems which arise when representing various forms of black violence within a conventional hardboiled narrative structure, and he attempts to uncover the social origins of these forms of black violence. However, before I analyse these investigations, I want to consider the detective novels of Chester Himes. His Harlem thrillers are among the most violent African American novels ever written, and they exemplify the problems which confront a black author attempting to represent African American detective heroes within a hardboiled format. I show how these problems contributed to the collapse of the detective plot structure in *The Harlem Cycle*, and then compare the different strategies Mosley deploys to adapt the hardboiled format to his political and aesthetic aims. In this chapter, rather than performing the kind of close readings of particular texts which have characterised this thesis, I will focus more broadly on a range of these authors' detective fiction. Although I believe both authors do attempt to comment seriously on the acts of black violence which drive their narratives, their conventionally hardboiled focus on complex, suspenseful plotting and dramatic action limits their ability to do this in any single text. Instead, their analysis of the social and psychological causes of black violence is submerged within the detective plots across the whole range of these novels.

The hardboiled format may appear eminently adaptable for African American writers seeking to expose the malign effects of racism upon American society. As Andrew Pepper has observed:

Unlike classical detective fiction [...] where the moral interventions of respectable middle-class investigators ensured a seamless restoration not just of law and order but the entire social structure, American novelists like Hammett

presented a world so corrupted, so endemically violent, that his detectives could ever hope to achieve [...] a flawed provisional justice.”¹

However, the idea that the capture and punishment of a single criminal can achieve even “a flawed provisional justice” while the racial structure of American society remains unchanged is deeply problematic, and it clearly troubled Chester Himes. He observes in his autobiography, that when writing detective novels was first suggested to him, he recalled: “I had started out to write a detective story” in *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, “but I couldn’t name the white man who was guilty because all white men were guilty.”² The need to apportion guilt for the violence of the ghetto strains the conventional detective form he attempts to deploy throughout *The Harlem Cycle* (originally published 1957-1969).³ There is a disturbing similarity between the conventional morphology of the detective story and the lynching narrative which structured Thomas Dixon’s novels, and was revised by Faulkner and Wright. Both narrative paradigms depict the discovery and elimination of a single figure, who is responsible for the violence and disorder threatening society, as restoring justice and harmony. Detective novels which unmask black criminals as the originator of the disorder which drives the plot risk endorsing racist ideologies, absolving white society of responsibility for the problems of the ghetto and reproducing racist notions of African Americans as a naturally criminal type. Himes struggles to resolve this problem in ways that change during *The Harlem Cycle*.

Another problem inherent to the hardboiled format for African American authors concerns the established methods of representing blackness within this genre. When it features in mainstream hardboiled fiction, the black ghetto is usually figured from a fearful, white perspective, as an alien, exotic, incomprehensible environment, pervaded by violence and criminality. Consider this passage from Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia*:

[S]outheast of downtown LA, 95 per cent slums, 95 per cent Negroes, all trouble. There were bottle gangs and crap games on every corner, liquor stores [...] and

¹ A. Pepper, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 113.

² C. Himes, *My Life of Absurdity* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1976), p. 102.

³ C. Himes, *The Harlem Cycle*, 3 Vols. (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996).

poolrooms on every block, code three calls to the station twenty-four hours a day. [...] Newton Street Division was a war zone.⁴

Clearly, this constitutes an apt setting ripe in a genre reliant on tension and excitement generated by scenes of extreme violence and criminal activity to attract readers. But figuring the ghetto as a war zone, without any explanation of the social and political origins of this criminality, threatens to reproduce demonised images of black violence as innate and uniquely savage. Chester Himes believed he could use depictions of the ghetto in this commercially successful way in a way which would defy these demonising stereotypes. He always adamantly rejected the strategy of denial in his representations of black violence, insisting that African American writers had a responsibility to represent the full, terrible effects of racism upon black people, without compromising with white desire to avoid facing their guilt about this situation.⁵ Thus, in his depiction of Harlem, he does not reduce the level of violence and criminality inscribed in conventional hardboiled tropes of the black ghetto. Instead, he signifies upon these demonised images of black violence, attempting to use them to reveal not the natural criminality of African Americans but the appalling ramifications of racism.

Himes was fiercely critical of conventional cultural images of violence, which he claimed understated its real consequences through a reliance on inadequate clichés:

Even when they just say “blown to pieces” that doesn’t describe what they look like blown to pieces. When a shell hits a man in a war, bits of him fly around, half of his liver is flying through the air, and his brains are dribbling off.⁶

He attempts to maintain a vivid, visceral focus on violence which eschews cliché throughout *The Harlem Cycle*. But this very determination to expose the full horror of black violence risks reproducing strategies I have grouped in the category of denial. Gary P. Storhoff has interpreted his repeated use of shocking images of violence as a sustained

⁴ J. Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia* (London: Arrow, 1993), pp. 299-300.

⁵ See: C. Himes, “The Dilemma of the Black Writer in America”, *The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 2, p. xiv.

⁶ J. A. Williams, “My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes”, *Amistad*, ed. by J. A. Williams and C. F. Harris (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 47.

assault on the detective form and the sensibilities of a middle class white readership.⁷ He claims Himes repeatedly interrupts the progress of his narratives towards conventional resolution with descriptions of outrageous violence to shock the reader into “involuntarily” recognising “the actual consequences of racism in America.”⁸ However, this interpretation cannot fully explain the comic tonalities Himes also repeatedly deploys in his descriptions of violence. Furthermore, as Andrew Pepper suggests, Storhoff may underestimate the extent to which readers can actually enjoy such scenes of violence.⁹

The Real Cool Killers begins with a scene in which a Harlem barman intervenes to stop a black customer attacking a white man with a knife. When the knifeman slashes his arm, the barman responds with an extraordinary escalation, attacking his opponent with an axe:

The blade met the knifeman’s arm in the middle of its stroke and cut it off just below the elbow [...].

The severed arm in its coat sleeve, still clutching the knife sailed through the air, sprinkling the nearby spectators with drops of blood [...].

The little knifeman landed on his feet, still making cutting motions with his half-arm. He was too drunk to realize the full impact. [...]

“Wait a minute, you big mother-raper, till Ah finds my arm!” he yelled, “It got my knife in his hand.” [...]

Blood spurted from his jerking stub as though from the nozzle of a hose.¹⁰

The violence in this scene is shocking and described in gruesome detail, but we get no insight into the subjectivity and motivation, or the suffering, of the combatants. Black bodies are objectified literally and figuratively by this scene; not only is the knifeman’s severed arm reduced to an object, Himes focuses purely on the gruesome physical consequences of this mutilation - the blood spurting from the stub as from the nozzle of a hose – with no reference to the pain involved. As often in *The Harlem Cycle*, the extremity of the violence approaches slapstick dimensions, and the tone is one of macabre comedy. These factors may lead readers to interpret black violence as not

⁷ G. P. Storhoff, “‘Aggravating the Reader’: The Harlem Detective Novels of Chester Himes”, *The Detective in American Fiction, Film and Television*, ed. by J. Delamater (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 45-46.

⁸ G. P. Storhoff, “Aggravating”, p. 50.

⁹ A. Pepper, *Contemporary*, pp. 116-117.

involving fully human victims, and therefore suitable to be enjoyed as pure entertainment. Despite his focus on the physical realities of black violence, Himes risks reproducing a similar form of denial, of the motives and origins of this violence, to many of the Harlem Renaissance novels I considered.

The tension between shocking and entertaining readers visible within Himes's depictions of black violence may reflect the mixed motives which led him into the hardboiled genre. Himes admitted in his autobiography that he began writing detective novels to make money.¹¹ In a letter to Carl Van Vechten he said his publishers wanted "an action packed funny story about Harlem," with "plenty of comedy in it."¹² Throughout *The Harlem Cycle*, violence constitutes the main source of this comedy and action, but the apparently comic focus on extreme, unmotivated acts of violence may also reflect other motives. Himes was attempting to dramatise the new perspective on American racial politics he had developed during his European expatriation, which he described in his autobiography: "Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims."¹³ I believe that for Himes, racism produces absurd behaviour in its victims by splitting mind from body. It compels African Americans to repress the traumatic pain and rage created by racism, which they cannot express in any form of direct retaliation, into acts of physical violence which appear motiveless and insane, and are frequently self-harming. Hence, Himes describes Harlem as "a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts."¹⁴ This concept resembles the theory of Ralph Ellison about the impact of racism upon black consciousness I used to explain the representation of black violence in *Native Son*.¹⁵ It produces a range of black characters as incapable of personally articulating their motives for violence as Bigger Thomas. However, rather than using a narrator who penetrates beneath the consciousness of his characters, like

¹⁰ C. Himes, *The Real Cool Killers, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 1, p. 184. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

¹¹ C. Himes, *Life*, pp. 101-105.

¹² Quoted in: G. H. Muller, *Chester Himes* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), p.105.

¹³ C. Himes, *Life*, p. 1.

¹⁴ C. Himes, *A Rage in Harlem, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 1, p. 102. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

¹⁵ R. Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues", *Collected Essays*, p. 139.

Faulkner or Wright, Himes relies purely on the depictions of violence themselves to express his theory.

Certain scenes of violence in *The Harlem Cycle* comment implicitly on how the psychological effects of racism produce absurd behaviour. Raymond Nelson cites two scenes in *All Shot Up* (1960) which depict “the continued function of bodies that have lost their essential humanity, their essential consciousness. They are grim parodies of the ‘mindless’ life.”¹⁶ In the first scene, a motorcyclist is decapitated by a speeding truck, but continues riding until the motorcycle crashes, spewing blood from his headless torso.¹⁷ In the second, a gangster is stabbed through the head with a large hunting knife, rendering him deaf and blind but not unconscious. He stumbles on down the street, mistaken for a drunkard by passers by (286-287). Both scenes graphically demonstrate the separation of consciousness and body racism inflicts. However, most of the violence does not possess this allegorical quality. Some is motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, stressing how the influence of white ideologies of competitive capitalism produce violence among people with no legal way to realise this materialistic version of the American Dream. But the possession of money and goods worth relatively little leads to extraordinary acts of brutality. Himes’s Harlemites repeatedly unleash fearsome violence upon each other, out of all proportion with the provocation or apparent motive. Himes relies on this gap between the apparent motive and the level of violence to expose the impact of racist oppression on black minds, suggesting the extent of the anger which can find no other form of expression. But adopting a strategy of implication rather than clearly explaining this shocking brutality also opens a space for interpretations based on demonising stereotypes of black violence. Thus Michael Denning argues that the early Harlem novels approach “a sort of violent minstrel show”, indicating that African Americans are violent “beyond ‘normal,’ that is, white, motivation.”¹⁸

Himes’s anxiety about the problems inherent within his representations of black violence is visible as early as the second novel in the series, *The Real Cool Killers*

¹⁶ R. Nelson, “Domestic Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes”, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 48:2 (1972), 260-276, p. 272.

¹⁷ C. Himes, *All Shot Up, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 2, pp. 242-244. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

¹⁸ M. Denning, “Topographies of Violence: Chester Himes’s Harlem Domestic Novels”, *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*, C. L. P. Silet (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 164.

(1959). Himes describes the newspapers going “hog wild” for the story of a white man gunned down by Harlem gangsters: “The copywriters used a book of adjectives to describe the bizarre aspect of the three-ring Harlem murder” (317-318). This adjectival excess is visible in the sensational headlines Himes quotes:

POLICE PUT HEAT ON REAL COOL MOSLEMS
DEATH IS THE KISS OFF FOR THRILL KILL
HARLEM MANIAC RUNS AMUCK

But already the story was a thing of the past, as dead as the four main characters.

“Kill it ordered the city editor of an afternoon paper. “Someone else has already been murdered somewhere else” (318).

This scene functions primarily to critique white America’s consumption of media images of ghetto violence as thrilling entertainment without considering their responsibility for it. But it also suggests Himes’s anxieties about his own sensationalistic representations of black violence. He fears readers will merely obtain a transitory thrill from these novels, without considering the origins of the continual violence

Later novels reveal this anxiety more clearly. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), a fight occurs between two attractive young black women, in a scene initially rendered in a tone of comedy and prurience. As the women fight, scratching and biting, the man they are fighting over struggles ineffectually to separate them, succeeding only in removing their scanty attire. Then, suddenly, one woman grabs a gun from the man’s hand, and shoots her antagonist dead.¹⁹ The abrupt change in the seriousness of the violence may be interpreted as part of the shock tactics Gary Storhoff claims structures all Himes’s scenes of violence. But it also implies Himes felt increasingly ambivalent about his use of black violence, an impression underscored by the tendency of the later novels to explain directly how white racist oppression produces the extraordinary violence of Harlem. In *The Heat’s On* (1961) Himes describes in graphic detail how the overcrowded, stiflingly hot, noisy and noisome Harlem environment produces a wave of violent petty crime on a

¹⁹ C. Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 3, pp. 91-92. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

midsummer night.²⁰ In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, he becomes even more explicit. Previously he has only used Ed and Digger's comments about the violence they investigate to reaffirm its absurdity and the absence of rational motives behind it, but here they begin to make political statements about the causes. At one point Lieutenant Anderson reads out a litany of violent crimes from his report sheet for the day, for which the perpetrators offered only ludicrously inadequate motives (14-15). Grave Digger explains the causes:

We've got the highest crime rate on earth among the colored people in Harlem. And there ain't but three things to do about it: Make the criminals pay for it – you don't want to do that; pay the people enough to live decently – you ain't going to do that; so all that's left is to let 'em eat one another up (14).

This exemplifies what one critic calls the “awkward sermons” Ed and Digger deliver on race in the later novels.²¹ The awkwardness exposes how Himes is struggling to make political points about black violence within a detective structure. It also exposes the immense difficulty of using Ed and Digger as politically radical figures, a difficulty which stems largely from the problematic role of their violence in these novels.

By choosing to make his detective heroes police officers, Himes makes it very difficult to depict their violence functioning in ways which do not reinforce the very forms of racist oppression these novels seek to expose and critique. Himes appears to be deeply ambivalent about the problematic status of his detectives throughout the series. Some scenes show Ed and Digger as heroic figures, who are genuinely concerned with the welfare of their community. Wendy Walters claims that Ed and Digger use their violence to protect the Harlem community from the less discriminating, less accurately targeted brutality of white officers. She argues cogently in the context of *The Real Cool Killers*, where the murder of a white man seems about to provoke a massive, indiscriminately brutal police response. Only the intervention of Ed and Digger, using extreme but carefully targeted violence, prevents this by unmasking the true criminals.²²

²⁰ C. Himes, *The Heat's On, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 2, pp 343-345. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

²¹ M. Denning, “Topographies”, p. 166.

²² W. W. Walters, “Limited Options: Strategic Maneuverings in Himes's Harlem”, *African American Review*, 28:4 (1994), 615-630, pp. 619-621.

There is compelling textual evidence to support this interpretation of Ed and Digger, but it is ultimately reliant on a partial and selective use of the novels. Viewing *The Harlem Cycle* as a totality reveals that the view of them as genuine African American heroes is beset by paradoxes and contradictions.

The hardboiled detective is conventionally a figure of action and violence, in whom Western, patriarchal ideals of masculine will and strength are writ large. He usually relies heavily on violence to conduct his investigations successfully. Himes does not question the natural, ideal status of the patriarchal concept of masculinity which underwrites this image of the hardboiled detective; he tries to portray his detectives as heroes through their fulfilment of this role. But adapting this figure into an African American detective presents obvious problems, given the denial of conventional masculine agency and power to black men we have witnessed throughout this thesis. Ed and Digger never demean themselves before white authority to retain favour; they defend their policing methods passionately and often criticise racism even before the highest officials. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that their status as men is thoroughly dependent upon and rigidly circumscribed by white authority. In one novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Ed has to show his police badge just to gain permission to use the telephone in a white bar (198). Only very rarely can they deploy their apparently enormous masculine strength to strike against racism, such as in *All Shot Up*, when Ed punches a white policeman to the ground for repeatedly using the word “nigger” (200). More often, their reactions to racism expose their actual powerlessness, such as in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, when they are outraged by the scenes of crime, poverty and family disintegration surrounding a Harlem bar:

“All I wish is that I was God for just one mother-raping second,” Grave-Digger said, his voice cotton-dry with rage.

“I know,” Coffin Ed said. “You’d concrete the face of the mother-raping earth and turn white folks into hogs.”

“But I ain’t God,” Grave Digger said (39).

Their belief that only God could alter the consequences of racial oppression confirms their actual weakness, despite their seeming strength, in the face of white racism, the severe limitations of their masculine power.

Himes attempts to compensate for these severe constrictions on his detectives' masculinity by exaggerating their physical strength. Ed and Digger possess a much greater strength advantage over their adversaries than such archetypal heroes of the genre as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. They can kill with single blows, strike terror into even the most hardened criminals and inspire a fearful respect in the entire Harlem community; their mere presence can even prevent riots.²³ But in figuring his black detectives as men in this way, Himes intersects demonised images of black masculinity, most obviously the trope of the superhuman primitive we have witnessed as a figure of white anxiety about black violence.²⁴ Furthermore, Himes's detectives can only enact this violent, dominating concept of masculinity by increasing the oppression suffered by the very people Himes is portraying as victims of racism.

Ed and Digger can only operate as effective, heroic detectives in the hardboiled mould, if they identify and isolate certain groups within Harlem who they have the power to define and control. They control these groups through uncompromising violence, which they justify by demonising these people, and insisting this is the only way to maintain order in Harlem. As Stephen Milliken observes, these justifications are:

[R]igidly authoritarian, if not totalitarian. [...] They believe that society's principle problem is a war against 'criminals or hoodlums,' members of a dangerous subgroup who are easily distinguishable from the 'innocent' [...] by their violent trouble making tendencies.²⁵

In *The Heat's On*, after a drug dealer they punched dies, Digger defends their methods, asking indignantly: "You think you can have a peaceful city letting criminals run loose?" (375). In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Digger reflects that: "These colored hoodlums had no respect for colored cops unless you beat it into them or blew them away" (34). These statements comes disturbingly close to reproducing the figuration of the black male as a naturally criminal type we saw critiqued in *Native Son*. In *The Harlem Cycle*, however,

²³ They kill men with single blows in *The Heat's On*, when a drug dealer dies after being punched by Ed, and in *Plan B* when Digger kills a man instantly with a pistol blow to the head (412). In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, their presence prevents a riot (135-136).

²⁴ For example, we saw how Faulkner's depiction of Joe Christmas as possessing the strength almost to decapitate Joanna Burden with a razor suggested his anxieties about black violence.

²⁵ S. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), pp. 236-237.

the narratives actually participate in this process, particularly in the representation of the central villains in each novel.

As we have seen, Himes attempts to represent the violence of Harlem as a product of the terrible pressures of racism upon the black psyche. But this tactic becomes particularly perilous in the portrayal of the monstrously evil and ruthlessly homicidal villains who lie behind the central crime within most of the novels. The lack of explicit explanation for their behaviour threatens to reproduce the associations of blackness with violence and evil which are naturalised by hegemonic white ideology. Such characters demonstrate the risks of mapping the trope of the conventional hardboiled villain onto an African American context. Himes's use of white master-villains in later novels in the series suggest his anxiety about this. Perhaps the most brutal villain in *The Harlem Cycle* is the white ringleader of the criminals in *All Shot Up*, who is described in terms which emphasise that primitive, bestial traits of violence are not limited to black criminals. This man looks like the "Missing Link", with a face which is "beetle browed and brutal." Even after he has been shot: "He was like a wounded tiger, silent, crippled, but still as dangerous a killer as the jungle ever saw" (308).²⁶ In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Himes uses a white Southerner called Colonel Calhoun as the central villain. As Raymond Nelson observes, this character is an unrealistic anachronism.²⁷ Himes portrays him both as a representative of Southern political and economic power, forces which contributed so heavily to making racism a central part of American society, yet somehow also a criminal involved in the Harlem underworld. This demonstrates how Himes was straining the detective form to show white racism, rather than demonised images of black criminality, as the real culprit behind the violence of Harlem.

However, it is not just black criminals, but also more vulnerable subsections of African American society who are demonised in the service of making Ed and Digger effective hardboiled heroes. Although much of Himes's writing shows he was painfully aware of the impossibility of a black man achieving normative masculine status in American society, his detective novels still tend to define Ed and Digger's manhood

²⁶ Interestingly, Jerry H. Bryant mistakenly attributes this description to the black politician this criminal's gang has been holding hostage, perhaps illustrating how easily readers associate bestial traits of violence with black men. See: J. H. Bryant, *"Born in a Mighty Bad Land": The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 112.

through contrasts with inferior others. Homosexuals are represented as homophobic caricatures, lascivious, effeminate creatures who are invariably involved with crime. They lack the physical or moral strength to behave in the honourable, “manly” way Ed and Digger exemplify by contrast. Female characters are frequently represented as femme fatales, possessing a sexual allure which threatens the stability of the social order unless it is mastered, if not destroyed by men. Some of the narratives are structured by a disturbing misogynist logic which resembles the pattern we detected in Harlem Renaissance novels such as *Home to Harlem*. In *A Rage in Harlem*, a white police lieutenant thinks of Imabelle that: “It’s these high yellow bitches like her that cause these black boys to commit so many crimes” (145). The opinions of white policemen on African Americans are rarely reliable in *The Harlem Cycle*, yet the novel largely supports this view. As Manthia Diawara observes, it is his love of Imabelle which causes the protagonist, Jackson, to get involved with criminals, leading to the mayhem which Ed and Digger seek to resolve in this novel.²⁸ Similarly, in *The Crazy Kill*, Dulcy provokes the murderous hostility between Chink Charlie and Johnny Perry. If women are identified as a central cause of the violence which plagues Harlem, then the brutal treatment Ed and Digger mete out to them is justified. Furthermore, black women constitute another group powerless enough for Ed and Digger to dominate with a conventional degree of masculine agency, an agency which eludes them if they take on white racism as the cause of Harlem’s violence.

The difficulties inherent to portraying Ed and Digger as heroic African American hardboiled detectives appear to have made Himes radically ambivalent about his characters, which the diverse range of critical responses reflects. In contrast to Wendy Walters, critics such as Gary Storhoff claim that Himes portrays Ed and Digger as villains as part of his strategy of shocking the reader into recognising the full effects of racism.²⁹ Some scenes do imply Ed and Digger are as much misshapen, brutalised products of racist culture as the gallery of violent grotesques they encounter during their investigations. Both men have been disfigured by black criminals. In *The Heat’s On*,

²⁷ R. Nelson, “Domestic”, p. 275.

²⁸ M. Diawara, “Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema”, *Shades of Noir*, ed. by J. Copjec (New York: Verso, 1996), p. 266.

²⁹ G. P. Storhoff, “Aggravating”, pp. 48-50.

Himes writes: "Grave Digger's face was full of lumps where felons had hit him from time to time with various weapons" (345). The scarring caused by the acid thrown in Ed's face in *A Rage in Harlem* is often described in suggestive terms, such as in *All Shot Up*:

The acid scars had been covered by skin grafted from his thigh. But the new skin was a shade or so lighter than his natural face skin and it had been grafted on in pieces. The result was that Coffin Ed's face looked as though it had been made up in Hollywood for the role of Frankenstein's monster (175).

The word "grafted" implies a concept of race as a social construct projected onto subjects by ideologies.³⁰ But like the construction of Frankenstein's monster, the American construction of blackness has produced a monstrously distorted facsimile of a human subject, a sutured patchwork of violently sundered fragments.

These physical descriptions suggest racism has fragmented Ed and Digger's subjectivity, most obviously because of their contradictory status as black men *and* agents of white oppression upon the black community. Peter J. Rabinowitz has posited this contradiction as "a partial explanation for the rage and violence that characterise their actions."³¹ Some of their violence is rendered as explosive rage resulting from the terrible pressure of seeking justice by working within a system which actually increases oppression. In *The Heat's On*, Ed ties up a woman and superficially slits her throat to make her reveal information crucial to his investigation. Himes writes: "He knew that he had gone beyond the line; that he had gone outside of human restraint; he knew that what he was doing was unforgivable. But he didn't want any more lies" (467). At such moments, Himes appears to acknowledge his detectives' violence is oppressive and unjustifiable, a symptom of the effects of racism upon the black community, rather than an effective way of bringing order to this community.

But Himes never decided wholeheartedly to portray his detectives as an intentional critique of the dysfunctional modes of black manhood the combination of racist oppression and dominating, patriarchal ideals of masculinity produce in America. His final novels still portray a model of individualist, heroic masculinity, not dissimilar to

³⁰ Wendy Walters makes a similar point about this word: "Strategic", pp. 625-626.

³¹ P. J. Rabinowitz, "Chandler Comes to Harlem: Racial Politics in the Thrillers of Chester Himes", *The Sleuth and the Scholar*, ed. by B. A. Rader and H. G. Zettler (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 24.

the hardboiled ideal, as the African American community's most potent weapon in the fight against racism. In these final two novels the pressures and strains I have traced through *The Harlem Cycle* shatter the conventional detective form. Himes abandons the conventional detective plot structure to make political arguments about racism more forcefully. *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), as Woody Haut notes, was the only novel Himes completed after "the spate of inner-city rebellions" which occurred during the sixties.³² These explosions of real black violence profoundly influenced Himes. Ed and Digger lose their heroic status, and their ability to control the violence of Harlem.³³ Moments of typical brutality towards suspects are now juxtaposed incongruously with suggestions of a new political sensitivity towards policing the ghetto. They reject the idea of apprehending a Black Moslem suspect by "burst[ing] into the mosque with force," even though "police officialdom" would connive at their violence, because: "It would be too much like taking advantage of their 'in' with whitey" (360). Yet all their violence throughout the series has relied on their "'in' with whitey."

The ending of this novel completely abandons the traditional detective form of plot resolution which is so problematic in an African American context. The reader is left in the middle of escalating crime and chaos, which Himes strongly implies is not the responsibility of a single criminal, black or white, but of the sociopolitical structure of American society. None of the three mysteries which structure the plot are resolved. Ed and Digger are unable to identify any single instigator of the riots they have been ordered to investigate, they can only offer their white superior Lieutenant Anderson the following information about the culprit:

"Some call him lack of respect for law and order, some lack of opportunity, [...] Some call him ignorance, some poverty, some rebellion. Me and Ed look at him with compassion . We're victims."

"Victims of what?" Anderson asked foolishly.

"Victims of your skin," Coffin Ed shouted brutally, his own patchwork of grafted black skin twitching with passion. [...]

"That's the mother-raper at the bottom of it," Grave Digger said. "That's what's making these people run rampage on the streets" (342).

³² W. Haut, *Neon Noir* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), p. 21.

³³ At one point, they are forced to retreat, bloody and battered, after struggling unsuccessfully to quell a riot with just their fists. See: C. Himes, *Blind Man With a Pistol, The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 3, pp. 293-294. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

This passage violates the standard method of resolving detective stories to draw a more direct link between black criminality and white racism. The novel closes not with the restoration of order, but with a scene which suggests black violence now possesses an all-engulfing, apocalyptic potential. Himes will no longer permit any possibility white readers will enjoy this violence as a depoliticised, exciting or comic performance. He defines this vignette in the "Preface," as an example of the "unorganized violence" which is a symptom of rage at racism but which he considers futile and counterproductive for African Americans (193). This also reveals Himes's new intention to use his novels to illustrate the forms of organised, revolutionary black violence he now advocated.

Himes takes these strategies a stage further in his final attempt at a detective novel, *Plan B*. His failure to complete this novel shows the immense difficulty of combining black militant ideology with the detective format.³⁴ Here, he concentrates on directly representing the forms of violence he believed African Americans should deploy to combat racism. Ed and Digger are marginalised in this novel, because of the impossibility of using agents of white authority to commit this kind of revolutionary violence. Himes's new militant perspective leads him to condemn unequivocally the characters he has previously depicted as heroes: "They had worked for the establishment as hatchet men on their race, had kissed the white man's ass."³⁵ He stages white corporeal vulnerability to black violence with what one critic aptly labels a "cataclysmic glee."³⁶ Previous novels had represented the vulnerability to black violence of individual whites foolish enough to seek pleasure in Harlem, but here Himes implies the entire white power structure is vulnerable to the emerging forms of revolutionary black violence. He depicts a lone black gunman hiding in a cathedral massacring a parade of policemen. He devotes over two pages to describing the resulting carnage:

³⁴ Himes worked on this novel during the late sixties and early seventies, both before and after writing *Blind Man With a Pistol*. His inability to finish the novel was partly due to a series of debilitating strokes. See Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner's "Introduction" in *The Harlem Cycle*, vol. 3, pp. 383-400 for a detailed history of the development of this manuscript.

³⁵ C. Himes, *Plan B, The Harlem Cycle*, vol. 3, p. 527. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

³⁶ G. H. Muller, *Chester*, p. 102. In her introduction to *The Harlem Cycle*, Vol. 3, Lesley Himes states that writing both *Plan B* and *Blind Man With a Pistol* caused frequent "incredible outbursts of mirth" from Himes. See: pp. xvi-xvii.

The two chiefs on the far side [...] caught the bullets in their teeth. [...] Bloodstained teeth flew through the air like exotic insects. [...] But the ultimate damage was that the heads were cut off just above the bottom jaws, which swung grotesquely from headless bodies like gory fountains. [...]

In a matter of seconds the streets were strewn with the carnage. [...] There were squashy bits of exploded viscera, stuffed intestines, lying in the gutters like unfinished sausages before knotting (515-517).

Rather than objectifying the black body, Himes now defamiliarises the fragmented components of the white body, in another sign of the influence of black militant political ideas upon these last novels. He emphasises the vulnerability of even the most powerful white men to the kind of grotesque, absurd objectification he has previously shown African Americans inflicting on each other. Clearly, this reversal of his previous strategy is intended to make such scenes frightening rather than entertaining for white readers. The didacticism regarding racial politics which marks Himes's later novels reaches new extremes here; as Gilbert H. Muller observes, Himes now "editorialize[s] almost like a revolutionary pamphleteer."³⁷ Himes is reduced to telling the reader about his political views because he can no longer find a way to dramatise them within the detective form. But, to quote Stephen Soitos, "his radical ideas [...] seem extreme and romanticized when viewed through his own words."³⁸ Through the consequences of this massacre, Himes suggests rather fancifully that such violence can bring down the international capitalist system which he blames for maintaining racism.³⁹ Like John A. Williams, Himes cannot devise a realistic way to represent black violence ending the hegemony of racism in American society.

Clearly, then, *The Harlem Cycle* exposes severe difficulties with using the hardboiled detective format for African American authors. The ultimate disintegration of the detective form in these novels has led subsequent African American detective writers to adapt this format in different ways. Probably the most commercially successful author

³⁷ G. H. Muller, *Chester*, p. 110.

³⁸ S. F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 170.

³⁹ Himes claims this massacre leads the stock market to crash and prominent capitalists to invest their money in the Communist east (519).

in this task has been Walter Mosley. Mosley has repudiated Himes as a major influence.⁴⁰ However, there are numerous points of comparison between their attempts to create a viable form of African American detective fiction, beginning with the compromise with commercial demands which led them into the genre. Mosley has described the first novel he wrote as “a psychological novel – two poor young basically uneducated black men thinking about their fathers.”⁴¹ But the manuscript was rejected by “fifteen literary agents” for its lack of commercial potential, so Mosley transferred his two protagonists into the “mystery genre.”⁴² Mosley denies this concession to the market involved compromising his political or aesthetic aims, instead claiming that:

In a sense the genre has made Easy stronger. [...] The genre may be mystery, but the underlying questions are moral and ethical, even existential. [...] I have tried to stay true to my characters while getting them a toehold in the world of publishing. I gave Easy a new suit, but his skin is still black.⁴³

Nevertheless, there are signs within the novels of the tensions produced by commercial demands to deny and demonise black violence in the ways traditionally most popular.

The “Easy Rawlins” novels display two major differences to Himes’s version of the detective format. Firstly, Mosley makes his detective an unofficial investigator rather than a policeman like Ed and Digger. Although Easy’s investigations often involve morally dubious compromises with law enforcement agencies, Mosley avoids representing his detective committing violence in direct support of a racist power structure. Secondly, Mosley makes his detective a first person narrator who agonises over the moral problems of using violence in pursuit of justice for the ghetto. This contrasts starkly with our exclusion from the minds of Ed and Digger, and their tendency to justify their violence absolutely as the only way of enforcing the law in the ghetto. Mosley’s novels never appear to endorse oppressive policing methods or black gangster violence, which are always explicitly questioned by Easy when he becomes involved with them.

⁴⁰ R. Maidment, “Walter Mosley”, *American Conversations* (London: Hodder and Stoughton / Open University Press, 1995), p. 71.

⁴¹ R. Maidment, “Walter”, p. 67.

⁴² W. Mosley, “The Black Dick,” *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*, ed. by P. Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 132.

⁴³ W. Mosley, “Black”, p. 133.

Before I consider the representation of Easy Rawlins's violence, however, I want to demonstrate how Mosley uses Easy's perspective to refigure conventional hardboiled tropes of the ghetto.

Mosley signals his intention to revise conventional hardboiled images of the ghetto from the start of his first novel. As a number of critics have noted, the opening scene of *Devil in a Blue Dress* signifies upon the start of Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* (1942).⁴⁴ Mosley depicts a white man entering a black bar from a black perspective, rather than the white perspective Chandler adopted, thus defamiliarising the white man rather than the bar as strange and Other. Using an African American who lives in this community and understands its inhabitants and its practices intimately as narrator enables Mosley to reveal the ghetto from the inside as a comprehensibly human environment. Unlike Himes, Mosley does not exaggerate the violence of the Watts ghetto where his novels are set. He presents a less dysfunctional version of African American culture in a sympathetic rather than satirical tone. Opposing critical reactions to this demonstrate the immense difficulty of negotiating a path between denial and demonisation. Liam Kennedy praises Mosley for avoiding demonisation, claiming he figures ghetto culture as "a normative system of behaviour and expression, attitudes and values. He is not interested in romanticising the poverty of Watts, nor in exoticising the violence which marks the lives of many of Easy's associates."⁴⁵ By contrast, Woody Haut accuses Mosley of deploying strategies I call denial. He claims Mosley confuses "the mean streets with memory lane."⁴⁶

I agree more with Kennedy; Mosley's use of a historical setting may appear to create an opportunity for nostalgia, and suggests a degree of trepidation about whether he could accurately represent a contemporary situation which profoundly depresses him without appearing either dishonestly optimistic, and thus denying black violence, or despairing about the ghetto, and thus demonising black violence.⁴⁷ However, his choice

⁴⁴ See for example: R. Berger, "The Black Dick": Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L. A. Novels of Walter Mosley", *African American Review*, 31:2 (1997), 281-294, pp. 283-285 and L. Kennedy, "Black Noir: Race and Urban Space in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction", *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. by P. Messent (London: Pluto Press, 1997), pp. 50-51.

⁴⁵ L. Kennedy, "Black Noir", p.51.

⁴⁶ W. Haut, *Neon*, pp. 105-106.

⁴⁷ In interviews, Mosley has claimed the hope he perceived for African Americans in Los Angeles, while growing up in the fifties and sixties, has disappeared. See: R. Maidment, *American*, pp. 72-73. Despite this

of a starting point which coincides with the beginnings of mass black migration to Los Angeles after World War II, suggests he believes this black community can only be accurately depicted by showing how it has evolved into its present form. His depictions of the poverty and the extreme forms of racist oppression of the past certainly suggest explanations for the violent criminality and despair of the present.

From the start of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Mosley seeks to avoid denying or demonising the violence of the ghetto. Easy's descriptions of the ghetto environment he traverses in pursuit of clues reveal the normative role of extralegal violence in all forms of business operation, legitimate or illicit. In Vernie's brothel, the presence of "fast and vicious" Huey Barnes "caused all business at Vernie's to run smoothly."⁴⁸ In Ernest's barbershop Easy notes:

One nice thing about barbers is that they have a dozen straight razors that they will use to keep order in their shop. [...] You had to be tough to be a barber, because your place was the center of business for a certain element in the community. [...] The barbershop was like a social club. And any social club had to have order to run smoothly (117-118).

And indeed, while Easy is there, Ernest has to threaten two customers with a razor to prevent a fight in his shop. But Mosley avoids presenting this pervasive violence as pure entertainment or as a consequence of racially determined black characteristics. He suggests a different explanation through references to the relation of the ghetto to white authority. Later, Easy reflects:

The police didn't care about crime among Negroes. I mean, some soft-hearted cops got upset if a man killed his wife, or did any such harm to a child. But the kind of violence Frank Green dished out, the business kind of violence, didn't get anybody worried (142).

pessimism, he has recently written two short story cycles located in the contemporary ghetto, featuring the ex-convict, Socrates Fortlow. These stories seek to humanise the inhabitants of this environment much like the "Easy Rawlins" novels.

⁴⁸ W. Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress, The Walter Mosley Omnibus* (London: Picador, 1996), p. 111.

This inconsistent attitude to black crime is emphasised throughout the series. In *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), Mouse is simply released without charge by the police after a brief, violent interrogation fails to make him confess to shooting Sweet William Doakes.

Mosley's aim, I believe, is not to show that inadequate policing leads African Americans to commit more violence because they can do so with impunity, but to show that it creates an environment where people have to rely on personal violence to protect their lives, their families and their businesses. In an interview, he has described the Los Angeles ghetto of this era as a place where: "You couldn't depend on the law to protect you, so of course guns and violence grew out of the frustration."⁴⁹ In his novels, Mosley demonstrates how this creates a volatile culture of honour, where people will maim and kill at the slightest provocation, and where the strong dominate the weak. Mosley never understates or sentimentalises the harmful consequences of this absence of a reliable legal system for African American society. Early in the first novel, *Easy* reflects that in his childhood in the ghetto of Houston, Texas, where the police gave even less attention to black-on-black crime, "men would kill over a dime wager or a rash word. And it was always the evil ones that would kill the good or the stupid" (31). As the series progresses, this description becomes increasingly applicable to the Watts ghetto, where violence escalates as the black population expands. Mosley frequently juxtaposes scenes of this violence with descriptions of the massive, mechanised slaughter *Easy* witnessed in World War II. *Easy* has a particular tendency to recall the horrors of Concentration Camps when reflecting on ghetto violence. After the trouble in Ernest's barbershop mentioned above, *Easy* recalls encountering Concentration Camp survivors (122). This could be interpreted as a natural process of mental association on *Easy*'s part. But I believe it is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, disrupting any complacent interpretation of violence as an exclusively or naturally black problem by reminding the reader that the most extreme violence of the twentieth century was committed by white people.

Like Himes, Mosley comments critically on other cultural representations of black violence. Throughout the series, he makes criticisms of the media such as "The papers hardly ever even reported a colored murder. And when they did it was way in the

back pages” (142). Or: “A black woman getting killed wasn’t photograph material for the newspapers in 1956.”⁵⁰ For Mosley, the hardboiled format becomes a means of recuperating and disseminating to a wide audience a history of black violence and suffering which is unrecorded by official historical discourse and would otherwise be lost to American cultural memory. As Julian Murphet observes, “Easy’s voice is claimed by an ethic of witnessing.”⁵¹ But there are also hints of the same anxiety we saw in Himes about whether using this form inevitably involves sensationalising black violence and providing whites with superficial entertainment. In *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy claims: “You had to kill someone white to get any kind of news splash in the sixties. Foreign blacks made the news, however. [...] To the white press, and many white Americans, black people were easier to see as exotic foreigners.”⁵² This statement suggests Mosley fears rendering African Americans in a hardboiled frame of reference performs the same function. The creation of extraordinary, violent mysteries and characters according to the conventions of the genre, exoticises black lives. Mosley offers the reader a temporal if not geographical distance from this violence, which may make it easier for white readers to consume these novels as entertainment. Roger A. Berger claims that: “one gets the distinct sense Mosley fully recognises that part of his success is attributable to a market strategy that exploits race to sell his ‘exotic’ detective novels.”⁵³ I will return to the question of Mosley’s possible exoticisation of black violence when we consider Mouse.

As I noted above, the conventional morphology of the hardboiled detective novel cannot be mapped onto an African American context without risking the endorsement of racist stereotypes about black criminality. Mosley shows his awareness of this problem by adopting an increasingly politicised perspective on the violent black criminals within his narratives. In his first novel, he maps the conventional trope of the hardboiled villain onto the central black criminal in a similar manner to Himes’s early detective novels.

⁴⁹ Quoted in: G. H. Muller, “Double Agent: The Los Angeles Crime Cycle of Walter Mosley”, *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays*, Revised Edn., ed. by D. Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p. 288.

⁵⁰ W. Mosley, *White Butterfly*, *The Walter Mosley Omnibus*, p. 431. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁵¹ J. Murphet, *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 64.

⁵² W. Mosley, *A Little Yellow Dog*, (London: Picador, 1997), pp. 135-136. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

⁵³ R. A. Berger, “Black”, p. 292.

Frank Green is a shadowy figure whose malevolent brutality is represented with little biographical or social context. But by the fifth novel in the series, Mosley has begun to explain the links between such violence and the experience of racism. Consider his description of the psychology of the most ruthless black gangster in this novel:

Sallie Monroe was a life-taker; a man who had a good mind and great strength of will and body – but nowhere legal to use them. [...] Sallie hated white people because, on the whole, they didn't respect his mind. He was a buck to them, suited only to tote and break under the weight of unrelenting labor.

Like most black men, Sallie took out his anger on other Negroes (74-75).

Mosley also adopts a more radical strategy to prevent the conventional hardboiled plot structure producing racism in his novels. Like Himes, he struggles with the difficulty of resolving his plots without blaming the violence of the ghetto entirely on black criminals. He often negotiates this problem not just by using a white villain, but by creating endings which reveal that white violence has been masquerading as black throughout the novel. Alternatively, rather than bringing white criminals into the ghetto in unlikely plots like some of Himes's novels, Mosley shows how white people can assert control over the ghetto from external positions. He exposes concealed white manipulation as responsible for violence which had appeared to be purely a consequence of black criminality. In *Black Betty*, white villains, including one policeman, are ultimately exposed as responsible for what appeared to be acts of black-on-black violence. In *A Red Death* (1991) and *White Butterfly* (1992), white men who hold powerful, respectable positions in society which place them beyond police suspicion deliberately disguise their violence as black. Through the revelation of their guilt, Mosley uses shock tactics in a more subtle and controlled way than Himes. He adapts an established trope of detective fiction – the climactic revelation of an unexpected villain – to shock the reader out of racist assumptions and expectations about violence.

In *A Red Death*, all the characters assume that the murders which occur during the narrative are being perpetrated by a black man. Even Easy initially deduces that the culprit is his business associate Mofass. Only in the final pages is the white tax inspector

Agent Lawrence exposed as the villain.⁵⁴ In *White Butterfly Easy* spends most of the novel pursuing a black serial killer who he believes murdered the woman referred to by the title. Only near the end does he discover that the woman's father faked the "MO" of the serial killer to conceal his murder of his daughter (648). Such plot resolutions expose not just the fallacy of white society's tendency to conceptualise violence as an exclusively black problem, but also how this attitude to violence is bound up with the work blackness performs in the construction of hegemonic white selfhood. These white characters project things which disturb their sense of stable, superior selfhood onto disempowered, silenced others and then seek to eliminate them through violence. They mask their attempts to control their own illicit desires as a necessary discipline, a vital imposition of law and order on a racial group who therefore have to be figured as violent, wild and primitive. Consider Agent Lawrence's incoherent efforts to explain, and to admit to himself, why he abused and finally murdered the black woman with whom he was having an affair: "And the bitch lived like a pig. [...] Filthy. And she acted like I could, could ever be like that..." (415). There is a part of his psyche so intolerable he cannot articulate it. Through violence, he sought to destroy the part of himself obsessed with black sexuality and maintain his self-image as an upholder of a rational, white supremacist legal system. Similarly, in *White Butterfly*, prosecuting attorney Vernon Garnett murdered his daughter in an attempt to destroy the intolerable shame of the fact that she has had a mixed-race baby (643). This critique of the violent processes through which white masculinity is constructed suggests Mosley regards masculine identity as a cultural construction, not a natural essence, and he maintains this attitude in his representations of black masculinity.

In a far more deliberate, self-conscious way than Himes, Mosley uses the characterisation of his detective to interrogate the link between black violence and masculinity. Instead of valorising the hegemonic, patriarchal white concept of masculinity as natural or desirable for black men, he undermines any idea of a natural, fixed way of being manly, revealing multiple masculinities on both sides of the colour-line. Instead of participating in the ways hegemonic masculine subjects define their

⁵⁴ W. Mosley, *A Red Death, The Walter Mosley Omnibus*, p. 415. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

superiority in opposition to inferior others, Mosley lays bare and critiques these processes, particularly through Easy's attitude towards women. The attempts of black male characters to fulfil hegemonic, patriarchal concepts of masculinity always end in frustration, and compound the damaging impact of racism on the black male psyche. Easy believes that through violence he can achieve a fixed, authentic masculinity, recognised by his society, but Mosley shows that masculinity is continually (re)constructed through performance. Violence only offers more temporary masks, in what Julian Murphet calls the continual "adaptive role play," which constitutes Easy's identity in these novels.⁵⁵

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, as Liam Kennedy observes, quoting Kobena Mercer, Easy's relationship with DeWitt Albright draws attention to "the racial dialectic of projection and internalisation through which white and black men have shaped their masks of masculinity."⁵⁶ Both men seem to feel a need to assert their masculine status, to have the other recognise it. Easy's desire to prove his masculinity to Albright seems related to his acute awareness of the political power which white men monopolise in his culture to grant or deny masculine status. During their first encounter, Easy states:

DeWitt Albright made me a little nervous. He was a big man and powerful by the look of him. [...] full of violence. But I was a big man too. And like most young men I never liked to admit I could be dissuaded by fear.

Whether he knew it or not, DeWitt Albright had me caught by my own pride (13).

Meanwhile Albright is the first in a series of white male characters who seek to subjugate and master Easy, as if to prove their authentically male power over the excessive, troubling hypervirility they project onto black men. DeWitt repeatedly questions Easy about his experiences of violence and his war record, asking him if he ever killed a man with his hands. He then tells him "some of us can kill with no more trouble than drinking a glass of bourbon" (21-22).

⁵⁵ J. Murphet, *Literature*, p. 70. He notes that Easy switches between "caring father, hardboiled machismo, shuffling 'darky', acquisitive *bourgeois* and so on" according to his situation.

⁵⁶ L. Kennedy, "Black Noir", p. 56 and K. Mercer and I. Julien, "Race", p. 99.

Throughout the series, Easy repeatedly participates in this dialectic. In a society which denies him access to social signifiers of masculine status, Easy relies on recognition of his physical strength and toughness from white men to confirm his sense of equality with them. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, he admits he joined the army during World War II “to prove to myself that I was a man” (42). Furthermore, when the non-combat duties assigned to African Americans provoked sneers from white soldiers about “Negro soldiers being “cowards,” he volunteered for combat (87-88). However, in contrast to Himes, Mosley does not participate in this attempt to assert the equality of black masculinity purely through physical strength. He repeatedly undermines the perception of violence as essential to genuine masculinity in the conventional hardboiled, macho rhetoric which shapes Easy’s narrative voice. Easy initially claims an equality with white men grounded in violence when he states that: “I was used to white people by 1948. [...] I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know they were just as afraid to die as I was” (3). But the degree of empty bravado in this statement is exposed by Easy’s second encounter with a white man in this novel. Easy is so gripped by fear that he empties his mind of everything in a reflex learnt during his Texas childhood, making him temporarily unable to talk. He reflects:

I hated myself for it, but I also hated white people, and colored people too, for making me that way. [...] I would have liked to have ripped the skin from his face, as I had once done to another white boy (14).

This reveals the real origins of Easy’s violent impulses in the psychologically disabling effects of racism. The fear and self-loathing generated by the white racist gaze produce a desperation in Easy to obliterate the mark of status, the white skin, which enables this man to terrify him. Easy’s desire for violence is not proof of his masculine equality to this man but of how racism makes him feel inferior. In an interview, Mosley has said that: “One of the interesting things about racism is that its not so much how it comes from the outside, you can deal with that, but the way it comes from the inside, that’s really the problem.”⁵⁷ Such scenes show his intention of using the detective format to investigate these internal ramifications of racism, which Himes was unable to articulate.

⁵⁷ R. Maidment, *American*, p. 72.

Unsurprisingly, then, on later occasions in the series when Easy actually does use violence against white men, it fails to secure his sense of his own manhood. At one point in *Black Betty*, he overpowers a white man, reducing him to a cringing, crying heap, after this man threatened him with a gun and called him “nigger:”

But I didn't enjoy it. One of the problems with so many oppressed people is that they don't have the stomach to give what they get. I hurt that simple white man because I was scared of him. If he'd called me boy or nigger one more time I might have started gibbering myself.⁵⁸

By showing Easy reacting in this way, Mosley implicitly rejects the black militant ideology Himes endorsed in his later novels, derived from Fanon, which valorises violence as a route to genuine manhood for oppressed peoples. Easy's traditional concept of masculinity makes him want to believe in such a theory, but in practice, he cannot do so. Subjugating a white man and obtaining respect for his physical strength does not secure his sense of manhood, it just confirms how racism has traumatised him.

Mosley also holds conventional ideologies of masculinity responsible for producing violence within black gender relations, particularly in *White Butterfly*. He refuses to deny the existence of black male misogynist violence or to demonise black men as naturally violent towards women. Easy's tendency towards misogynist violence is not figured as a natural male trait, black or white, instead it confirms how the combination of patriarchal ideology and racism have warped him psychologically. He seeks dominance over the women in his life because they are among the only people he can dominate in the manner patriarchal ideologies have convinced him is authentically manly. Easy initially believes women should be subservient and sexually willing. In *White Butterfly*, he rapes his wife, Regina, insisting to himself and the reader that she enjoys it (451). But unlike most of Himes's female characters, Regina is given a voice to contest Easy's perspective, accusing him of seeing her “the same way a dog be lookin' after raw meat” (529). As Andrew Pepper states, her protest contributes to “redressing previous gender stereotypes and rectifying a situation in which the voices of black

⁵⁸ W. Mosley, *Black Betty*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994), p. 37. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

women have been deliberately suppressed or silenced.”⁵⁹ In this way, Mosley succeeds in adapting conventional, hardboiled forms of violence to expose the effects of racism and recuperate a lost history of black suffering. During the novel, Regina and Easy argue repeatedly about the tough, secretive exterior he maintains. At one point they disagree revealingly about the traumatised silence maintained by Easy’s adoptive son, Jesus, who Easy rescued from a child abuser in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Easy advocates a conventional, individualist, masculine way for Jesus to cope with his past, saying: “How you handle your problems means what kind of man you gonna be” (447). For Easy, the formation of adult male identity conforms to Jonathan Rutherford’s description of the history of masculinity. It is all about overcoming and mastering the emotional part of the self and producing the body as an instrument of the will.⁶⁰ This is how Easy has coped with the traumas of his Texas childhood. But, as we have seen, this quest for absolute self control leads white male subjects to commit violence, especially when it involves projecting unconscionable elements of the self onto racial and sexual others. By contrast, Regina argues they have to find a way to communicate with Jesus about his past: “Jesus is just a little boy. I don’t know what kind of trouble he’s had, but I do know that it’s too much for him” (447). She argues that a collectively formed, interdependent model of identity offers the only way for oppressed people to overcome trauma, and to avoid repeating these traumas in new acts of violence.

As the novel progresses, Easy increasingly recognises the validity of Regina’s arguments, but cannot alter his own dominating, hostile attitude towards women. Mosley shows that this misogynist hostility is not evidence of masculine strength but a symptom of the traumatic impact of Easy’s Texas childhood upon him. Easy often reflects that his mode of masculinity stems from his experience of family disintegration under the pressures of racism, which left him to fend for himself in a lawless, poverty stricken environment (564-565). Tough, secretive individualism became ingrained in his character as a survival mechanism, so that the thought of revealing himself to Regina “brought out a cold sweat; the kind of sweat you get when your life is in mortal danger” (563). The idea of change is so threatening to Easy that he responds with impulses towards violence:

⁵⁹ A. Pepper, *Contemporary*, p. 134.

⁶⁰ J. Rutherford, “Who’s That Man?”, *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, pp. 26-27.

“hearing it from my wife made me want to tear her head off. I held my temper though. I knew I deserved her abuse” (531). Mosley avoids representing this misogynist violence as an exclusively black problem by juxtaposing it with similar white violence. He embeds this storyline about Easy’s marriage within a mystery plot concerning a white woman who has been murdered by a white man with an excessive concept of patriarchal authority. This emphasises that the modes of masculinity Mosley blames for misogynist violence originate in mainstream white culture.

Despite this clear critique of Easy’s misogyny, Mosley’s novels may appear to reproduce the misogynist logic regarding the origins of black violence we witnessed in *The Harlem Cycle*. A number of female characters appear whose powerful sexuality disturbs the social order and provokes extreme criminal violence. Thus critics such as Andrew Pepper and Roger A. Berger accuse Mosley of essentialising black sexuality, invoking “the stereotype of the black male’s voracious sexual appetite” and reducing women to “femme fatales or sexual objects who exude sexual attraction and desire.”⁶¹ Mosley does exploit the prurient entertainment such female characters can produce, perhaps showing the pressure of commercial demands on these novels, but he also questions and undermines the idea of African American women as femme fatales. Consider the representation of the titular character in *Black Betty*, who Pepper cites as typifying Mosley’s “duplicitous, aggressive women who use their powerful sexuality to ensnare men.”⁶² Certainly, as an awe-struck child and, initially, as an adult, Easy perceives Betty in these terms, as the following quotations demonstrate:

Betty was a great shark of a woman. Men died in her wake. [...] Many a night yesterday’s boyfriend went up against tonight’s man. Betty could draw blood three nights in a week and if it ever bothered her she never let it show. [...] Betty had [...] [a] look that was at once hungry and satisfied. Men communicated to Betty with their bodies and sex. She didn’t care about our words or our hearts (5-6 and 220-221).

For Roger A. Berger, such passages imply that Betty is “in a sense responsible” for being raped by her white boss, Albert Cain: “Her unchained sexuality in essence drove him to

⁶¹ R. A. Berger, “Black”, p. 288.

⁶² A. Pepper, *Contemporary*, p. 133.

it.”⁶³ This reading positions Betty as the origin of all the violence in the novel; her sexuality seduces Cain into leaving her his fortune, and thus provokes the desperate attempts of members of his family to wrest this inheritance from her. But this interpretation relies too heavily on Easy’s inadequate, distorting perspective on women, which Mosley undermines. When the novel ends in the prosecution of the men who have plotted and killed to steal this money, we are told: “The trial destroyed Betty . [...] They made her seem like a whore who had beguiled Albert Cain” (277). To interpret Betty as a conventional femme fatale is to accept the hegemonic racist perspective of judicial authority. But Mosley has supplied enough information by this stage to construct a different interpretation of Betty. He reveals that Betty silently submitted to Cain’s abuse to protect her brother and children, and that she had no role in Cain’s decision to leave her his fortune. Instead, she has been a pawn in the violent machinations of men who want to take this money from her (226-228). In this way, Mosley shows that in a racist, patriarchal society, black women are more likely to be abused and exploited by male violence than to cause and manipulate it through their sexuality.

We can see then, that Mosley critiques the idea of violence as crucial to authentic masculinity in numerous ways, exposing violence as a symptom of the pathology racism has engendered in white and black masculinity. Easy’s inability to use violence to confirm his manhood is closely linked to the ethical dilemmas which make any violent act problematic for him. As Liam Kennedy observes, Easy’s reflections on violence “illustrate his ambivalence about violent assertions of masculinity.”⁶⁴ In *A Red Death*, he claims he wants to use violence in a clear contest of good and evil: “Like most men, I wanted a war I could go down shooting in. Not this useless confusion of blood and innocence” (383). But Mosley will permit him no simple, absolute division of the world into good and evil. In contrast to Himes, he will not endorse the demonisation of a portion of the ghetto population in terms reminiscent of racist ideologies regarding black criminality to justify his detective’s violence. Because no one is demonised by absolute moral judgements in these novels, Easy can never use violence with an entirely clear conscience, even to strike back at white people, which he regards as a weakness of his

⁶³ R. A. Berger, “Black”, pp. 288-289.

⁶⁴ L. Kennedy, “Black Noir”, p. 56.

character. But for Mosley, this ability to feel guilt and reflect self-consciously makes Easy superior to the white men who mask their brutality as the upholding of law and order. It enables Mosley to use him to analyse the relations between racism, masculinity and violence, and focus a debate on the ethics of violence. In *Black Betty*, Easy laments the pervasive presence of violence in his life, from his Texas childhood to the mechanised slaughter of World War II. Now caught up in another violent situation in Los Angeles, he realises that: "I'd always be surrounded by violence and insanity. I saw it everywhere; [...] it was even in me. That feeling of anger wrapped tight under my skin, in my hands" (56).

However, although Mosley makes Easy central to the debate on the origins and the ethics of black violence which pervades these novels, he portrays Easy committing little serious violence himself. Mosley does not make the use of violence the source of Easy's greatest investigative achievements. Instead, as many critics have noted, Easy functions most effectively as a detective through the use of trickster techniques such as signifying and mask-wearing.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in a violent environment, violence remains essential for Easy to complete his investigations successfully and to preserve his life. Most of this violence is committed by his best friend and sidekick Raymond "Mouse" Alexander. It is here that commercial pressures tell most heavily on the Easy Rawlins series. The violent black male is conventionally a phobic, Other figure in American culture, as we have seen throughout this thesis. Mosley seems to have felt he could only make Easy a sympathetic character, whose moral dilemmas readers could identify with, by not making him the agent of most of the violence necessary to his investigations. As Jerry H. Bryant has noted, Easy constitutes the "solid ethical centre" of these novels because he opts for the "very best of middle class values," but his admirable, sympathetic character is achieved at the cost of portraying another character in disturbingly traditional images of demonisation.⁶⁶ The depictions of Mouse's violence threaten to undermine and deconstruct the attitude towards black violence developed through the characterisation of Easy. In a pattern we have often seen in this thesis, representations of black violence disrupt and undermine the main ideological thrust of the novels. As in *The Confessions of*

⁶⁵ See for example: H. Lock, "Invisible Detection: The Case of Walter Mosley", *MELUS*, 26:1 (2001), 77-89.

Nat Turner, the creation of a sympathetic, focal black character seems dependent on the projection of most of his violence onto a character who remains psychologically other to the text. Mouse is not figured in the same phobic tropes of black violence as Will, but his characterisation does reproduce some of the traditional strategies for making black violence commercially appealing used in hardboiled fiction. This undermines the attempt to reveal a complex of social and ideological motives behind black violence which I have traced in the characterisation of Easy. Mouse threatens to reproduce ideas of black violence as natural and instinctive. His otherness denies the reader any sense of the cultural origins of his violence.

Mouse may excite, amuse or horrify, but he is always psychologically other to the text, beyond the understanding of the narrator, Easy, and therefore incomprehensible to the reader. This opens a space to interpret his violence as essential and natural, rather than as a product of cultural, social circumstances, particularly when Easy often understands Mouse's violence as a natural, instinctive element of his being.⁶⁷ A scene from *Black Betty* exemplifies this problem. Easy picks up Mouse after his release from prison, and discovers that already Mouse wants to shoot two men he believes are laughing at him. Easy reflects:

Any other man, even the craziest killer, I could've talked sense to. I could have said that there were policemen in the station, that they'd throw him back in prison. But not Mouse. He was like an ancient pagan needing to celebrate and anoint his freedom with blood (58-59).

This reflection reinforces the sense that Mouse exists beyond reason, beyond the "normal" mental functioning which hegemonic American ideology always associates with whiteness. The final simile is particularly disturbing, linking Mouse's violent irrationality to images of exoticness and primitivism in a manner most African American authors have avoided since the controversies of the Harlem Renaissance. Mosley's own anxieties about this figuration of Mouse are suggested by the scene he places next. Easy recalls, in a brief, separate section of text, unrelated to the main plot, how Mouse once killed a Texas sheriff he knew was planning to beat him to death by biting through his

⁶⁶ J. H. Bryant, *Born*, pp. 152-153.

throat (59-60). This may appear to represent another example of the feral quality of Mouse's violence, but it also displays a rare emphasis on the role of white oppression in the formation of Mouse's homicidal character. Mosley emphasises that Mouse's violent masculinity is not an exotic, racially determined trait, but a social product of racist oppression, which has made killing essential to his survival.

It might be objected that Mouse is seen only from Easy's perspective. The terms in which he is portrayed may simply reflect Easy's fascination with violence, from which Mosley maintains a critical distance, and extend these novels' investigation of the ethics of black violence. Perhaps Mosley is simply trying to make us understand the mixture of admiration and dread with which African Americans contemplated "badmen" figures, to feel the radical ambivalence Easy experiences towards Mouse:

Raymond Alexander was the most perfect human being a black man could imagine. He was a lover and a killer and one of the best storytellers you ever heard. He wasn't afraid of white people in general, or the police in particular (237).

Easy admires Mouse, in spite of his moral qualms about his violence, because he appears to have achieved full masculinity, free from the strictures of racism. Some passages do seem designed to expose Easy's admiration for Mouse as reliant on a misconception. In *White Butterfly*, Easy declares:

He was the only black man I'd ever known who had never been chained, in his mind, by the white man. Mouse was brash and wild and free. He might have been insane, but any Negro who dared to believe in his own freedom in America had to be mad (536).

Easy fails to see that Mouse's madness – his psychopathic violence – is precisely the form in which white racism has intruded on Mouse's mind. He may not be downtrodden and servile, but his masculinity is still a dysfunctional reaction-formation to white racism. The feelings of guilt which always accompany Easy's idolisation of Mouse suggest his own underlying awareness that this violence is not glorious and manly but a further

⁶⁷ In *A Red Death*, Easy states that "killing satisfied some nerve he had somewhere" (405).

negative effect of racism on the black community. Throughout the series, he is haunted by memories of his involvement in Mouse's murder of his stepfather for money.

However, there is still a strong sense that Mosley relies on the style and excitement Easy perceives in Mouse's violence to make his novels commercially appealing. Unlike most of the violent black characters Easy encounters, Mouse's violence is permitted to maintain an exotic, fascinatingly alien quality. Mosley does not always figure Mouse's violence within the context of an ethical debate about the role of violence in African American life; sometimes, he seems to participate in Easy's valorisation of Mouse's violence. Mouse enables Mosley to use a mode of depicting black violence with a long pedigree of commercial success in American literature, which we saw in Carl Van Vechten's depiction of the Scarlet Creeper. From his first appearance, Mouse's fancy, exotic clothing is described in detail. He epitomises notions of style and cool in the black community, functioning as an expert joker and storyteller, and this sense of stylishness inevitably extends onto descriptions of his highly effective violence. Although Mosley generally rejects the absurd, slapstick tone Himes used to depict violence, Mouse's violence often functions to create humour and excitement, almost becoming an element of local colour within the depiction of the ghetto. In the most recent "Easy Rawlins" novel, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* (2002), Mouse is apparently dead, and does not appear in the narrative present. But Mosley still punctuates the text with Easy's recollections of Mouse's violence, which have little relevance to the plot, but add excitement and humour to the narrative.⁶⁸

Mosley's anxieties about his depiction of Mouse's violence are revealed at greater length by his continually shifting deployments of Mouse's role in Easy's investigations. In the first novel in the series, Easy tells Mouse he feels guilty about his involvement in Mouse's violence. Mouse replies: "Maybe you gonna show me how a poor man can live without blood" (136). But Easy never can find a way, nor can Mosley show the reader a way. Violence remains essential to Easy's survival and his achievements as an investigator. Easy is motivated as a detective by a desire to avert violence and promote a

⁶⁸ For example: W. Mosley, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2002), pp. 82-83. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

fairer form of justice in the ghetto.⁶⁹ Easy's separation from white authority makes this easier for Mosley to represent occurring than it was for Himes, but it also compels Easy to rely on other morally dubious forms of violence. The denouement of the first novel exemplifies the problems and contradictions this creates. Mouse arrives in the nick of time, like a conventionally heroic character, to save Easy's life and ensure that the case is resolved. But he then shoots a man tied to a chair, purely to frighten a woman into giving him money. The focus switches abruptly from the excitement and physical skill of Mouse's violence to a graphic concentration on the suffering of his victim:

He turned casually [...] and shot Joppy in the groin. Joppy's eyes opened wide and he started honking like a seal. He rocked back and forth trying to grab his wound [...]. After a few seconds Mouse levelled his pistol and shot Joppy in the head. One moment Joppy had two bulging eyes, then his left eye was just a bloody, ragged hole (177).

Because Easy is the narrator of this scene, critics such as Marilyn C. Wesley argue this abrupt change of tone is another deliberate reflection of his ambivalence about Mouse's violence. Yet there is a sense Mosley shares his protagonist's agonised ambivalence about the crucial yet morally indefensible role of Mouse's violence in Easy's investigations. Throughout the series, he vacillates between permitting Easy to portray Mouse as an exciting hero and using him to expose the full horror of ghetto violence, which suggests the tension between commercial demands for excitement and his desire to expose black violence as a negative effect of racism. As the series progresses, he repeatedly seeks ways to divorce Easy's achievements as a detective from Mouse's violence.

In the next novel, Mosley contrives a role for Mouse's violence in the investigation which removes the troubling sense that Mouse is contributing to suffering and injustice in the ghetto. At the climax of *A Red Death*, Mouse shoots Agent Lawrence, when he is about to shoot Easy (416). The scene seems explicitly designed to use Mouse's violence in a way which challenges and strikes back against racism. Agent

⁶⁹ Easy sometimes proudly describes his role in the ghetto as a source of extralegal justice, such as in *A Red Death*: "People would come to me if they had serious troubles but couldn't go to the police. [...] I settled disputes that would otherwise have come to bloodshed. I had a reputation for fairness and the strength of my convictions among the poor" (196)

Lawrence seeks to negate Easy's human selfhood ideologically as well as physically, calling him "nigger" as he aims his gun. But as he utters this word, Mouse shoots him. Scott McCracken claims: "The shot from Mouse's .41 is a moment of *jouissance*. It is a kind of ejaculation which shatters the oppressive social convention of racism and allows Easy to be reborn."⁷⁰ I believe the pleasure McCracken detects in this moment of violence stems from how Mosley has positioned it in the plot. By making Mouse intervene at the crucial moment in an exciting way, Mosley uses black violence to challenge white racism while simultaneously conforming to the dramatic conventions of detective fiction. However, Mosley appears to have recognised that he could not use Mouse's violence as an effective weapon against white racism without denying the political realities of his historical context and the social realities of the way men like Mouse used violence. In the next novel, *White Butterfly*, although Mouse still intervenes at crucial moments, his violence has a more marginal role and receives less direct representation. Then, in *Black Betty*, the representation of Mouse's violence becomes considerably darker and more disturbing. Easy is haunted by memories and dreams of Mouse shooting a man for refusing to honour a twenty-five cent bet, something which disturbs him more than any act of violence since his involvement in Mouse's killing of his stepfather. In the later part of the novel, when Mouse is released from prison for this crime, his violence takes the form of a desperate rage for vengeance against whoever informed on him to the police. This violence is completely divorced from Easy's efforts to solve his case; it is figured only as a destructive, chaotic force which cannot assist Easy's efforts to bring justice to the black community. Ultimately, however, Mosley finds a rather contrived way to defuse Mouse's murderous rage, when Easy persuades him the target for his vengeance is a man who wants to end his suffering from terminal illness (278). Even as he insists on the negative quality of Mouse's violence, Mosley still avoids making Mouse utterly abhorrent to the reader in a way which would compromise the commercial appeal he gives these novels.

For many critics, the sense that Easy and Mouse represent different elements of a single psyche on a symbolic level redeems Mosley from any accusations of racial

⁷⁰ S. McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 173.

stereotyping in his characterisation of Mouse.⁷¹ Scott McCracken claims Mouse does not constitute a realistic individual subjectivity. Instead, he and Easy represent together a range of possible black masculine identities under the pressure of racism. Mouse symbolises a side which Easy represses beneath his bourgeois, rational self, an unconscious so traumatised by racism that it wants to strike out with indiscriminate violence.⁷² There is ample evidence to support this interpretation, in particular, Easy's frequent claims that at moments of extreme pressure, a voice enters his consciousness advising him to commit lethal violence. However, this symbolic element in the figuration of these two characters only increases the sense that Mosley is resorting to strategies of denial and demonisation. Expressing the full impact of racism upon Easy's psyche through a separate character enables Mosley to maintain Easy's status as a sympathetic hero. Mosley's own dissatisfaction with his symbolic usage of his two protagonists becomes evident in the fifth "Easy Rawlins" novel, *A Little Yellow Dog*. Here, Mosley attempts both to humanise Mouse as a subjectively revealed, fully rounded character, and express the dark, violent side of Easy's character through Easy himself. In this novel, as William R. Nash has observed, Mouse retells a story he first told in *A Red Death* to amuse and entertain friends in a bar in a very different way.⁷³ The story concerns Mouse hitting a man with a bottle who discovered Mouse having sexual relations with his girlfriend (245). In its second telling, this story occurs in the context of an anguished attempt by Mouse to explain the feelings of guilt which he now experiences about his violent past. Mosley too is now using this story in a more serious way, to explore the psychological consequences of making homicidal violence a way of life, rather than just to entertain readers. This suggests his dissatisfaction with his previous tactic of Othering the most extreme violence in these novels. However, the change in Mouse is rendered in rather brief, superficial scenes, which still give the reader little sense of the workings of his mind. During one of Mouse's confused attempt to explain his new attitude towards violence, Easy reflects: "I didn't know what he was talking about" (222). The same barrier in comprehension limits the reader.

⁷¹ See, for example: R. A. Berger, "Black", p. 150 and J. H. Bryant, "Born", pp. 148-149.

⁷² S. McCracken, *Pulp*, p. 171.

Mosley also now attempts to render the kind of violence which has been the exclusive preserve of Mouse being committed by his focal character. This suggests a new ambition to show how racism produces violence in the black mind from an internal perspective. But Mosley encounters the difficulties which confronted most of the previous authors in this thesis who have attempted this task. The most powerful psychological effects of racism are too traumatic for Easy to articulate consciously. Easy cannot explain his new, stronger impulses towards violence, which usually take even him by surprise. As a number of critics have noted, he and Mouse seem to swap roles during his investigation, and this extends to the incomprehensibility of his violence. At one point, as they question two suspects, Easy becomes violent without warning:

“We ain’t goin’ –” Tony started saying.

But he didn’t finish his sentence because I grabbed him by his throat and pulled him across the table.

“Move your ass or I’ll do it for you,” I said in a voice so hoarse and deep that it surprised me (226).

Later, Easy is shown knocking on the door of a man he believes to be involved in the crime he is investigating. “The next thing I knew my shoulder was making kindling from the door. I stumbled into the house stunned by my own violence” (234). The first person narrative perspective which has enabled Mosley to demystify and humanise ghetto violence in so many ways now becomes a limitation. He cannot penetrate beneath Easy’s consciousness in the manner of authors such as Faulkner and Wright. Instead, he can only gesture towards motives for the change in Easy through the structure of the plot.

In this novel, Easy is working in a regular, full-time job, in a hierarchy dominated by white men, for the first time since the beginning of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Easy’s new, more powerful impulses towards violence seem to stem from the psychologically lacerating experience of the white racist gaze. Every day involves numerous petty incidents of humiliation and an imposed sense of inferiority. Easy has previously deployed his double-consciousness to his own advantage as a detective. It enables him to

⁷³ W. R. Nash, “ ‘Maybe I Killed My Own Blood’: Doppelgangers and the Death of Double-Consciousness in Walter Mosley’s *A Little Yellow Dog*”, *Multicultural Detective Fiction*, ed. by A. J. Gosselin (London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 311.

decode sign systems on either side of the colour-line, seeing the world from a dual, black and white perspective. But his detective work has also accustomed him to receiving a degree of respect from black and white people. Now, he cannot tolerate the inferior image of himself which his double-consciousness enables him to see reflected in the behaviour of white colleagues. At one point, when he is about to encounter a patronisingly racist colleague, he declares: "I found myself hoping he would start a fight with me. It would have given me no end of pleasure to inflict pain on someone who was trying to hurt me" (199). This suggestion of the kind of sadism which has been the exclusive preserve of Mouse suggests violence is the only release for the traumatic pressure created by the racist gaze. These motives are of course not dissimilar to those we traced in Easy's previous impulses towards violence, which he usually did not act upon. Now these impulses overwhelm the rational, peaceful, moral element of Easy's character. His violence culminates at the climax of the novel, when he and Sallie Monroe attempt to strangle each other, which marks a significant departure in Mosley's representation of his hero. For the first time, Easy takes personal responsibility for the homicidal violence necessary to save his life previously always committed by Mouse, and claims unequivocally to enjoy this violence.⁷⁴ But Mosley quickly draws back from the immense difficulties of portraying a black character so traumatised by racism he takes pleasure from extreme violence. Easy soon feels as remorseful about killing Monroe as he has previously felt about his complicity with Mouse's violence, describing it as a murder he regrets (264).

Furthermore, the most recent "Easy Rawlins" novel, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, reverses the trend towards increasing levels of violence previously displayed by the series, and Easy largely becomes his old self again. Of particular significance is the absence of any moment during his investigation where, without Mouse's protection, Easy would have to kill or be killed. Instead, Mosley effects a rather contrived revolution, where Easy can use relatively minor violence to save a man from prison and achieve a

⁷⁴ As we have seen, in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and *A Red Death*, Mouse intervenes at the climactic moment to kill the central villain of the novel and save Easy's life. In *White Butterfly*, Easy shrinks from killing both a convict who attempts to stab him in prison and Vernon Garnett, despite his rage when he discovers he killed his daughter (635 and 648). In *Black Betty*, Easy has to beat a man unconscious who is trying to shoot him, but does not kill him (268). Even within *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy relented and did not kill the first time he experienced a murderous fit of rage (237).

kind of justice, suggesting his anxiety about making his hero a killer (305-306). There are still moments where Easy appears to enjoy the violence which he has to commit, working alone, but not in the same disturbingly sadistic manner of the previous novel. At one point Easy discovers a white man beating a black man he needs to question, saying to him: “after I burn your ass, you won’t ever forget to pay anybody again”(117). Easy responds by punching the white man to the ground, and then:

I kicked him twice when he was down and out. I didn’t kick him out of revenge or rage, at least mostly those weren’t the reasons. [...] The impact of those body blows would slow him up even if he regained consciousness. [...] [A]nything having to do with ropes or fire when it comes to black-white relations was bound to set my teeth on edge (117-118).

Here, his violence becomes more limited, more rationally motivated, and much more closely linked to his fear and hatred of racism. Mosley makes Easy understand his own violent impulses more clearly in this novel, enabling him to draw an explicit link between these impulses and the traumatising effects of the racist violence he witnessed during his Texas childhood. The violent, extreme racism of Texas provides more obvious and easily acceptable grounds for Easy’s violent impulses than the more subtle, quotidian, racism of Los Angeles, which appeared to be responsible in the previous novel. This eliminates the possibility of readers interpreting Easy as naturally sadistic, but it also diminishes the seriousness of the psychological impact of this kind of Northern, urban racism, which Mosley has sought to insist upon through the rest of the series.

As a number of critics have observed, Easy “darkens his perspective as the cycle evolves,” and the transition from an epoch of absolute segregation to the dynamic uncertainties of the Civil Rights era increases levels of interracial hostility.⁷⁵ However, in stark contrast to Himes, Mosley never advocates violent rebellion as a viable route to racial equality. This may be a consequence of the different historical contexts in which the two men wrote their novels; the belief that violence can advance the cause of racial equality has far less currency in contemporary culture than during the Black Power era when Himes wrote his last novels. In interviews and essays, Mosley shows considerably fewer signs of the bitterness and rage about the impact of racism upon his life than

Himes. Perhaps as a consequence of this, Mosley does not seek to represent the corporeal vulnerability and destruction of white Americans with the same compulsive glee which Himes increasingly displayed. *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* approaches the era of black militancy represented in Himes's final detective novels. But the dynamics of the plot imply a very different attitude to the role of violence in Civil Rights activism. The chief advocate of black militancy is eventually revealed as a police *agent provocateur*, and many of his comrades as criminals acting purely out of greed. Furthermore, when one of the genuine, idealistic Civil Rights campaigners in the novel asks Easy why the police would go to such elaborate lengths to discredit her organisation, he replies: "To make it look like you're crazy killer criminals. To have people both black and white happy when you get run down like dogs and thrown into prison for the rest of your lives" (277). This suggests Mosley believes black violence is more likely to harm than help the struggle for racial equality. It also gives an impression of his increasing sensitivity to the cultural work images of black violence can perform, assisting hegemonic strategies of demonisation even when they were intended to function very differently. The slowing chronological progress of these novels supports this impression. *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* is set only a year after *A Little Yellow Dog*, in contrast to Mosley's previous habit of moving forward an average of three years in each novel.⁷⁶ This suggests Mosley's difficulty with confronting the Watts riots of 1965, a historical instance of extreme black violence, to which Easy's relation would be problematic. If he joined this extreme form of violent resistance to racism, it may alienate white reader sympathy.

In conclusion, Mosley is unable to completely resolve the question of how to represent extreme black violence in a hardboiled structure without reproducing elements of denial and demonisation. He obtains a critical perspective on the reactionary constructions of masculinity and gender politics which are conventional in this genre, in contrast to Himes. He also transforms the ethical problems inherent to representing the violence of a black detective into a subject for debate, rather than a tension which strains the form of his narratives. But the sympathetic characterisation of his hero relies on strategies of denial, and he still relies partially on the thrilling, sensational character of

⁷⁵ G. H. Muller, "Double", p. 291.

conventional images of ghetto violence to give his novels commercial appeal. Mosley has so far avoided shattering the detective format in his novels in the service of a politically motivated didacticism. However, his recent retreat from representing the most extreme forms of violence makes him more vulnerable to accusations that he adopts a nostalgic and blandly liberal perspective, denying the realities of black violence.

⁷⁶ The recently published collection of short stories, *Six Easy Pieces* (2003), featuring Easy and Mouse, also fails to move beyond the early sixties setting of the last two novels.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“SPECIFYING IT, PARTICULARIZING IT, NAILING ITS MEANING DOWN, WAS FUTILE”: RACIAL TRAUMA, BLACK VIOLENCE AND LITERARY FORM IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

The representation of black violence has always been a central element of Toni Morrison's fiction. All the novels in the trilogy completed by *Paradise* (1997) revolve around acts of extreme violence which the narrative struggles to articulate and comprehend. In each novel, Morrison represents the experience of racism as a trauma which is crucial to the aetiology of this violence. In *Paradise*, she extends and complicates her attempt to articulate the link between racism and black violence in unprecedented ways. She attempts to demonstrate how the totality of racism, as ideology and social praxis, traumatises African Americans as a cultural group, producing effects which are collective and transgenerational. This is an ambitious strategy which produces a narrative of great power and originality on the long-term consequences of racism. However, it also exacerbates the immense difficulties we have seen are attendant upon any representation of black violence throughout this thesis. This creates a number of anxieties visible within the narrative, anxieties first discernible in the setting of *Paradise*. It is disappointing that a novel which concludes a trilogy on black history avoids all consideration of the most common, controversial and widely debated form of black violence in contemporary American: the violence which plagues the ghettos of modern American cities. By focussing on a community which severed its links with America at the start of the Jim Crow era, Morrison ensures contemporary racial politics will only enter the novel indirectly.

Morrison may have shied away from contemporary, realistic forms of violence for aesthetic reasons. Her novels have always shown an acute awareness of the risks of representing violence in literary form, and, as we shall see, *Paradise* displays doubts about the adequacy of language to represent extreme violence. Barbara Johnson claims that by “choosing to aestheticize” such scenes as “a father's rape of his daughter in *The Bluest Eye*” and “the scars on a slave woman's back in *Beloved*, Morrison makes the

aesthetic inextricable from trauma, taboo and violation.”¹ Certainly, Morrison has always sought to deconstruct barriers between the aesthetic and the political, insisting that art is always political. But in seeking a literary mode to represent violence, Morrison is ambivalent about the effects of aestheticisation. In *Beloved*, the scars on Sethe’s back *are* aestheticised at one moment, when Paul D describes them as, “the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display.”² But, only a few pages later, he describes her back very differently as, “a revolting clump of scars.”³ This change in perception illustrates not only Paul D’s ambivalence towards Sethe, but also Morrison’s anxieties about whether describing violence in stylised, aesthetic terms detracts from its full horror. The narrator of *Jazz*, expands on this anxiety:

I break lives to prove I can mend them back again. And although the pain is theirs, I share it don’t I? Of course. [...] But [...] I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. What, I wonder, would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder?⁴

We should of course be wary of identifying this unreliable narrator too closely with the author. Nevertheless, these reflections are telling in the context of this metafictional novel, where the linguistic virtuosity of the narrator frequently seems to separate us from the violence and suffering of the characters. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes about the ending: “We will not weep for Dorcas, rather we are left spellbound by the narrator’s final aria.”⁵ As we shall see later, this contributes to making the gender politics of *Jazz* problematic.

However I believe the most important reasons for Morrison’s refusal to represent realistic contemporary forms of black violence involve anxieties about reproducing demonised stereotypes. The bulk of the narrative in *Paradise* is preoccupied with articulating the link between the brutal massacre of the Convent Women and the traumatic experiences of racism in the communal history of the men who attack them. To

¹ B. Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race and Gender* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 86-87.

² T. Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 17.

³ T. Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 21.

⁴ T. Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Picador, 1993), p. 219.

⁵ H. L. Gates, Jr., “Jazz”, *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. by H. L. Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p. 54.

do this, Morrison relies on recent developments in trauma theory, which offer a vocabulary for articulating the effects of racism on the black psyche, a vocabulary whose absence was a problem for earlier authors such as Richard Wright. The psychologist Laura Brown has defined “insidious trauma” as forms “of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well being at the given moment, but that do violence to the soul and spirit.”⁶ According to this theory, non-violent experiences of extreme shame and humiliation can cause identical psychological damage to conventional, violent forms of traumatic experience. Morrison has always taken a similar position in essays and interviews, arguing that racism as an ideology constitutes a trauma, for both racists and victims: “Everybody remembers the first time they were taught part of the human race is Other. That’s a trauma. It’s as though I told you your left hand is not part of your body.”⁷

However, Morrison has never used this form of trauma as the central motive for such brutal violence as the massacre in *Paradise*, and she risks readers misunderstanding the connection between these things. Although the violence of previous characters such as Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Joe Trace in *Jazz* was controversial, it was easily linked with these characters’ personal experiences of conventional, violent forms of racist trauma.⁸ By contrast, the killers of the Convent Women in *Paradise* have lived most of their lives in isolation from white racism. Furthermore, the inherited trauma Morrison makes central to their psychology involved no violence, or even any direct insult, and was perpetrated not by white racists but by other African Americans. The complaints of some reviewers that the massacre is inadequately motivated emphasise the risks of this strategy. Craig Raine claims that “nothing we are told about the murderers makes the outcome in any way probable – not even remotely. [...] This black hole where the motivation should be is the major weakness.”⁹ Similarly, Geoffrey Bent argues that *Paradise* constitutes the worst example of a problem he detects with all the violence in Morrison’s fiction: “the motivation never quite meshes with the mayhem.” He believes

⁶ L. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by C. Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 107.

⁷ B. Angelo, “The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison”, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by D. Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), p. 258.

⁸ Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter Pecola. See: T. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979) pp. 128-129. Joe Trace shoots his girlfriend Dorcas. See: T. Morrison, *Jazz*, pp. 192-193

the massacre violates the code of “machismo,” which would prevent the men killing a weaker foe in cold blood.¹⁰

I think both these interpretations misunderstand the effects of the Disallowing upon the killers, but they emphasise difficulties with representing these effects Morrison seems to have been acutely aware of while writing the novel. She goes to great lengths to emphasise the power of the Disallowing’s effects on her characters, using numerous images and metaphors of extreme violence describe its impact. It is described as having made the Old Fathers blood boil, before becoming a cold blooded obsession.”¹¹ The “shame threatened to crack open their bones”, and for their descendants, the experience is lodged like a “bullet in the brain,” or, it is like a “burn whose scar tissue” never becomes “numb” (95, 109 and 194). This repeats Richard Wright’s strategy of using metaphors of physical violence to emphasise the terrible psychological effects of racism, suggesting Morrison’s concerns about whether the trauma theory she uses will be understood. Authorial anxiety about the adequacy of the Disallowing as a motive for the massacre may also explain Morrison’s decision to represent a very similar event during the community’s second migration, from Haven to Ruby. The manner of Ruby Morgan’s death, after white hospitals refuse to treat her, is perfectly plausible in its historical context, but it appears carefully designed to recapitulate and emphasise how racism has affected these people. Ruby dies while a nurse tries to find a veterinarian who will see her, making this another obvious moment of dehumanising shame, like the Disallowing, which shapes the mindset of the community (113). It is particularly traumatic for her twin brothers, Deacon and Steward, who are leading figures in the massacre, and among the most violent and bigoted characters in the novel.

I suspect Morrison felt this need to emphasise the causes of the massacre because of anxieties about preventing interpretations of this violence in terms of demonised stereotypes. We have seen throughout this thesis that contentious political issues surround any representation of black violence, and the nineties context in which *Paradise* was written is no different. As Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham have observed,

⁹ C. Raine, “Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, *In Defence of T. S. Eliot* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 373-374.

¹⁰ G. Bent, “Less than Divine: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, *Southern Review*, 35:1 (1999), 145-149, pp. 146-147

although it was rejected by many when it was published, the Moynihan Report's "normative premises and prescriptions have insinuated themselves in contemporary racial discourse."¹² The supposed matriarchal dysfunction within the organisation of African American society has become a potent, if often unspoken element in modern explanations for black violence. Morrison emphatically rejects such theories, making Ruby an overwhelmingly patriarchal community, a mirror image of the white Southern society her migrants fled from in terms of gender roles. Ruby's official history is dominated by figures with names like "Big Daddy" and "Big Papa," and by two generations of men known as the "Old Fathers" and the "New Fathers." In the narrative present, almost every family in the town is controlled by a powerful father figure, and these men also possess hegemonic authority in the public sphere.

This assiduous avoidance of one contemporary stereotype of black violence, however, may lead Morrison to invoke another. Ruby initially appears to be free from the pressure of racism and closely modelled on white cultural norms, regarded by hegemonic ideology as the basis of peaceful civilisation. Readers may therefore conclude there is no way of explaining the atrocity committed by its leading male citizens except through demonised stereotypes of black men as naturally violent. The massacre is motivated by a complex mixture of desire and aggression; some of the killers have had relationships with women from the Convent. Representations of such black violence struggle to escape demonised stereotypes of black male sexuality as pathological. The controversies surrounding African American women's fiction at the time *Paradise* was published illustrate how such demonised images of blackness retain power in American culture. Black women authors have been accused of inadvertently recuperating these stereotypes. The sociologist Jonathan Rutherford argues powerful, unflinching representations of the suffering black male misogyny and violence inflicts upon women can support the denigration of "the black man" as "the unspoken devil of white sexual political discourse." Attempts to expose the oppression of black women can be appropriated by hegemonic ideology "to confirm racist stereotypes and the idea that black masculinity is

¹¹ T. Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 14. Subsequent references to this novel appear in parentheses in the text.

an inferior and defective copy of white masculinity."¹³ This is a particular danger when portraying black men committing such appalling violence while imitating the ideology and practices of white masculinity so closely. Similarly, bell hooks has criticised such novels for implying that "the most exploitative and oppressive force in the lives of black females is black men," thus liberating white society of "responsibility" for the "painful and brutal impact of racism."¹⁴ *Paradise* risks doing this in portraying black men inflicting violence on black women in a completely isolated black community.

Morrison has shown her acute awareness of the difficulties of avoiding racist paradigms in her critical work, *Playing in the Dark*. She claims the hegemony of racist ideology in American culture has enabled the inscription of black characters through an "[e]conomy of stereotype." Readers will quickly assume the import of an image of blackness, she argues, without the writer needing to supply "specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description."¹⁵ She describes the aim of her fiction as the liberation of words from the chains of stereotyped racial associations which bind their meaning.¹⁶ Perhaps it is her determination to achieve this aim in *Paradise* which leads Morrison to articulate a particular aetiology for the massacre rather insistently. She carefully occludes any sense that her black male characters are naturally violent or are exclusively responsible for black female suffering. Nevertheless, I believe she is giving black men responsibility for the massacre, but not according to the tenets of demonised discourse. Like Walter Mosley, Morrison represents the hegemonic ideal of masculinity as a discursive construct, not a natural form of identity, which produces violence when African Americans attempt to fulfil it. She is seeking to expose general problems within American ideals of masculinity, which impact upon African American men with particular force because of the effects of racism.

Morrison's insistent proscription of racist stereotypes in her representation of the causes of the massacre clashes somewhat with her aesthetic philosophy on the

¹² M. Blount and G. P. Cunningham, *Representing Black Men* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. xi. They give the example of a 1993 *Newsweek* article which traced the problems of ghetto society to the failure of black fathers to fulfil conventional patriarchal roles.

¹³ J. Rutherford, "Who's That Man?" *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. by R. Chapman and J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), p. 65.

¹⁴ b. hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround Press, 1991), p. 72.

¹⁵ T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (London: Picador, 1993), p. 67.

¹⁶ T. Morrison, *Playing*, p. xiii.

representation of violence, creating a tension between the form and the content of *Paradise*. The form appears to enact the position on representing extreme violence Morrison articulated in her Nobel Lecture: “Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach towards the ineffable.”¹⁷ Ostensibly, this statement refers to the inability of language to express fully the pain and suffering atrocities inflict, but it also implies that language cannot “pin down” the meaning of atrocities, it cannot definitively explain their causes and consequences. Hence *Paradise* begins with an account of the massacre of the Convent Women written in abrupt, staccato sentences which plunge the reader into the midst of this violence, with no explanatory information concerning character and setting. Here Morrison implies rather than explicitly states the causes of the massacre. By initially withholding the racial identity of the killers, she tempts the reader into identifying these men as a white lynch mob. They kill calmly and rationally, justifying their violence by describing their victims in terms I have shown to be conventionally part of the discourse of demonisation, such as: “venom”, “detritus” and “satanic” (4 and 7).¹⁸ By reversing the established tropes, Morrison makes the revelation of the killers’ blackness a jarring experience. She shocks readers into reconsidering preconceptions about race and violence, and thinking about how these African Americans have become a mirror image of the white bigots their ancestors sought to escape.

Morrison then inserts a vast section of retrospective narrative, before concluding the novel with a second representation of the massacre. This structure implies that all the intervening material will assist the reader in understanding this extraordinary scene when they witness it a second time. But Morrison focalises this narrative through a diverse range of characters, allowing contesting voices to offer varied accounts of the events which led to it. The third person narrator used throughout is not omniscient or empowered to provide a definitive account of the causes of the massacre. This fragmentary, polyphonic structure implies that acts of extreme violence are

¹⁷ T. Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. 21.

¹⁸ As we saw in Chapter One, the violence of white lynch mobs often *was* frenzied and sadistic, but the racial ideology Thomas Dixon’s novels contributed to repressed this beneath a façade of ritualised calm and control. Rather than deploying the supposed wildness of black violence as proof of black humanity like John A. Williams, in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, Morrison suggests that anyone possessed of a particular psychology can commit violence in this supposedly white way.

overdetermined and cannot be circumscribed within any individual utterance. To determine the truth of the massacre and its meaning, each reader has to participate creatively. This too conforms to Morrison's professed aesthetic philosophy; in an interview she claimed:

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and I think this is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just telling the story, it's about involving the reader, [...] we (you the reader and I the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience.¹⁹

A number of critics have contended that in reading *Paradise* the reader has to mediate between competing perspectives, creating their own version of the narrative from the differing accounts. Michael Wood claims that because the narrative is always focalised through the subjective perspectives of characters who have emotional investments in the town and its history, no single version of an event is entirely reliable.²⁰ This is true of the opinions voiced on most subjects we receive during the novel. For example, Patricia Best and the Reverend Misner argue about contemporary black political movements and the importance of Africa to African American identity without one view receiving clear authorial endorsement (207-209).

However, with regard to the massacre, once one has come to terms with the labyrinthine chronology and the bewildering frequency of changes of perspective, a surprisingly didactic tone becomes evident. Morrison emphatically privileges the views of certain characters throughout the multi-voiced narrative, particularly Reverend Misner, Lone Du Pres and Patricia Best. Their perspectives are not sufficient individually because of the limitations of their knowledge. Yet despite certain minor discrepancies, their views fit together to form a very consistent explanatory commentary on the causes of the massacre. Pat Best's attempt to write a history of the community helps give some clarity to the confusing and mysterious aspects of the past which hegemonic stories repress. But it also enables Morrison to emphasise the connection between the Disallowing and the massacre explicitly, when Pat makes statements such as: "Everything anybody wanted to

¹⁹ C. Tate, "Toni Morrison", *Conversations With Toni Morrison*, p. 164.

²⁰ M. Wood, "Sensations of Loss", *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison*, ed. by M. C. Conner (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), pp. 118-119.

know about the citizens of Haven and Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many” (189). Similarly, even without Morrison’s statement in an interview that Misner is the character “closest to my own sensibility about moral problems,” authorial sympathy for his views is evident.²¹ His status as the only outsider, exempt from the communal trauma of town history, signals his touchstone role, and he is given considerable textual space for reflecting on and explaining the events of the narrative. Other characters are not denied authorial sympathy. Morrison represents the relation between the terrible pressures of racism and their psychological state with understanding and compassion. But their views on any subject related to the massacre are always too self-serving or too obviously contradicted by events to be credible. Their thoughts and their actions just demonstrate rather schematically how they have been traumatised. This is notable even in the opening description of the massacre. During their search of the Convent, one of the killers reflects that “there wasn’t a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town,” and that women are both “free and protected” in Ruby because “[n]othing for ninety miles around thought she was prey” (11). Not only does this passage satirise this man’s patriarchal notions of female freedom through the limited range of activities he imagines women in Ruby are free to commit, there is also an obvious and monumental irony in his claiming that women are not prey in Ruby while attempting to kill a group of women.

By using the different narrative voices in this way, Morrison is able to provide a clear account of the model of masculinity she wants the reader to perceive as the root cause of the massacre. Prior to their migration, the Old Fathers typified the problematic relations African American men have experienced historically to hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Their nineteenth century society prized autonomy, agency, and power over self, family and environment, as the crucial components of manhood, and of Americanness itself.²² As Morrison has shown in *Playing in the Dark*, “the American as new, white and male” was constituted by “autonomy, authority, newness and difference,

²¹ Z. Jaffrey, “The Salon Interview – Toni Morrison”, http://dir.salon.com/books/int/1998/02/cou_si_02.int.html (20 December 2001)

²² See E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 3-4, for an explanation of how freedom from European hierarchies and socially defined identities led nineteenth century American white men to believe they possessed untrammelled will power.

absolute power.”²³ Crucial to this concept of masculine authority was the subjugation of African Americans; the masculinity of white men was confirmed by superiority to and mastery over racially Other men reduced to objects. This subjugation helps explain why Orlando Patterson characterises the experience of slavery as “social death.”²⁴ Unable to own property, or impose their wills on their environment or even their own bodies, slave men were totally unmanned according to American notions of masculinity. As officials in Reconstruction regimes, the Old Fathers were briefly able to escape this traumatic objectification and achieve hegemonic masculine status, obtaining respect and authority in the public sphere. But the return of white supremacy to the South stripped them of this status, reducing them to a shameful impotence which they repressed from consciousness. In defiance of social reality and experience, they maintained an increasingly rigid façade of masculine pride. They became “stiffer, prouder with each misfortune” (14). They behaved with a “dignified manner” and “studied speech” other African Americans interpreted as “arrogance” (302). Zechariah Morgan’s rejection of his twin brother Tea, for dancing for drunken white men who threaten otherwise to shoot him, exemplifies their denial of their actual, shameful loss of masculine power. As one character eventually recognises, Zechariah did this not merely out of disgust at his brother’s behaviour, but because seeing his brother became a reminder that “the shame” produced by such humiliating, emasculating experiences was also “in himself” (303).

For the Old Fathers, the wilderness of the Oklahoma Territory beyond white authority offered a unique opportunity to escape the humiliations of racism. But upon migrating there, they suffered a humiliation which threatened to shatter their already fragile, embattled masculinity: the Disallowing. This experience inflicted such devastating shame partly because the Old Fathers interpreted being classified as unworthy to enter a town populated by light-skinned African Americans as a dehumanising judgement on their dark skin. But Morrison also emphasises how it impacted upon these men’s masculinity. Consider the reflections of Steward Morgan, on

²³ T. Morrison, *Playing*, pp. 43–44.

²⁴ O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). See especially p. 13, where Patterson explains how “social death” was inflicted by stripping slave men of agency and honour, by quoting Frederick Douglass’s famous statement: “A man without force is without the essential dignity of a man.”

the inability of his ancestors to challenge their exclusion, or even provide food and shelter for their families:

It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones. [...] Even now in 1973, riding his own land, with free wind blowing Night's mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody (95-96).

This passage emphasises that the Disallowing was traumatic because it shattered the Old Father's sense of masculine control over their situation. It reduced them to an emasculated helplessness, unable even to provide the kind of protection for female relatives patriarchal culture deems an essential part of genuine manhood. Steward's reaction to this memory also makes clear the trauma has become transgenerational, and reveals the powerful desire men of his generation feel to externalise this inherited shame in violence.

I am not arguing *Paradise* represents women, black or white, as less susceptible to traumatic shame. The experiences of some of the Convent Women demonstrate how powerfully contempt and humiliation can impact upon women.²⁵ But the specific type of shame the Disallowing engenders is far more damaging to people who aspire to conventionally masculine forms of identity. Philip Weinstein has written that in the nineteenth century South, gaining the ability to exert the power of the will over the external world was crucial to the emergence of white male identity from the self-less impotence and confusion of infancy.²⁶ Thus an experience which abrogated the will, which denied a man any control over his circumstances, could shatter masculine selfhood: "to be essentially without such [will] power" was "to risk the loss of one's identity."²⁷ The images of violence and bodily disintegration Morrison uses to describe the effects of the Disallowing confirm that it possessed this power for the Old Fathers. Facing these self-shattering effects honestly would have required them to reconsider the

²⁵ See: J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), for a reading of *Paradise* which considers the importance of all forms of shame in this novel.

²⁶ P. Weinstein, *What Else But Love?*, p. 99.

²⁷ P. Weinstein, *What*, p. 105.

most fundamental elements of their masculine identity. To avoid this difficult task, they responded with what J. Brooks Bouson calls a “shame-rage” defence.²⁸ They aggressively denied the shame and self-hatred induced by this rejection by deflecting it onto a humiliated and excluded Other, establishing a mode of dealing with shame which is handed down through the generations. They repeated this trauma, even as they denied its effects, by “Disallowing” the rest of American society, demonising it as unworthy of inclusion in their superior community. Zechariah Morgan bolstered his threatened masculinity by assuming the role of a biblical patriarch who leads his people. His visions of an angelic messenger who leads the migrants to the site of Haven seem like desperate hallucinations to counter the shame of the Disallowing, enabling the people to believe they are divinely chosen (97-98).

The Old Fathers continued to react against the traumatic impact of the Disallowing through their construction of their own town. Steward Morgan explains how these men perceived the uncultivated land on which they established Haven:

To the Old Fathers it signalled luxury – an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders [...]. Here freedom was not [...] the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough he was king (99).

The migrants countered the shameful experience of inflicted impotence by conceptualising the town they carved out of the wilderness as a symbol of their “soul and stature,” irrefutable evidence that they possess the masculine strength of will the Disallowing abrogated. Morrison creates a strong resemblance between this perception of their land and the classically American concept of masculinity Philip Weinstein has traced to the philosophy of John Locke.

Locke rejected notions of human identity as defined through ancestry and class. Instead, as Weinstein puts it: “Our labor, the activation of our personal resources, the goods we individually gather [...] these are to be thought of [...] as our inalienable property, central to our unfettered, self-shaped identity.”²⁹ In Haven, the Old Fathers

²⁸ See: J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet*, pp. 199-200.

²⁹ P. Weinstein, *What*, p. 90.

believe they are finally free to realise their masculine identity through the products of their labour, the controlling and shaping of their environment. They believe they no longer need to consider the hostile white gaze of white American culture which refused to recognise them as men. Instead, by conquering nature and shaping it to their will they can construct themselves as “king[s].” The almost superhuman level of effort they put in and the hardships they endure to establish a self-sufficient town illustrate how desperately they need these achievements to counter the shame of their past. The townsmen also counter the shaming racism they perceived in the Disallowing by inverting the racial hierarchy of American society. They interpret the success of their town as proof of the purity and superiority of their “eight-rock” skin. Just as nineteenth century American white men fetishised pure white blood as crucial to authentic masculinity, these men make their blackness the mark of their manhood. They are secretly pleased when other African American towns in Oklahoma, inhabited by lighter-skinned people, fail, believing this confirms their superiority.

Morrison allows no possibility that readers will interpret this as a positive process of subjective development. She makes very clear that beneath the townspeople’s achievements, the consequences of the Disallowing persist in hidden but debilitating form, consequences passed on to every new generation. Narrative features such as the sterility of Steward and Dovey Morgan’s marriage, and the “damaged” Fleetwood children are obvious symbols of a serious dysfunction within the transmission of cultural identity. Morrison draws on ideas from contemporary trauma theory to demonstrate how this happens in a slightly schematic way. Trauma theorist Maria Root has argued that:

The effects of [...] trauma can be passed down transgenerationally through stories of atrocities [...]. Over time, the nature of this type of trauma manifests itself in one’s reactivity to certain types of environmental stimuli, as one carries not only one’s own direct experiences, but also the unresolved traumatic experiences of those who went before.³⁰

³⁰ M. Root, “Women of Color and Traumatic Stress in ‘Domestic Captivity’: Gender and Race as Disempowering Statuses”, *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues, Research and Clinical Applications*, ed. by A. J. Marsella et al (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1996), p. 374.

Morrison depicts the descendants of the Old Fathers as immersed from birth in the stories of community history used to transform the shame of the Disallowing into pride. These stories become a personal traumatic experience for every generation, which they compulsively commemorate and repeat. Reverend Misner summarises this fixation in very expository terms:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks. [...] Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by (161).

Evidently, these stories do not acknowledge and work through the shame of the Disallowing. Instead, like their forefathers, the modern townsmen compulsively transform “outrage” into evidence of positive masculine qualities. The poverty of their own lived experience, the lack of stories about themselves, reveals the specific way in which they are traumatised. They are totally self-alienated, because they cannot contemplate their own lives, their own selves, in ways which may reveal shame. Morrison clarifies the link between this ossified form of identity and violence through her description of Deacon’s reaction to the dispute over the Oven inscription. The anger and confusion caused by the of the young people “swole Deek’s neck and, on a weekday, had him blowing out the brains of quail to keep his own from exploding” (104). Any internal confusion has to be externalised in physical violence to avoid unsettling their rigid egos.

In modern Ruby, the focus of the townsmen on preserving their forefathers’ achievements prevents them having any personal accomplishments through which to define their masculinity. Instead, they define their identities purely through the wealth and possessions their forefathers’ achievements generate. The description of Deacon’s journey to work in his perfectly polished sedan exemplifies this:

The silliness of driving to where he could walk in less time than it takes to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment. [...] He laughed along with his friends at his vanity because he knew their delight at his

weakness went hand in hand with their awe: the magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory (107).

In Deacon's mind, his car symbolises, indeed almost embodies, all the admirable, manly qualities which his community recognises he possesses. This mode of defining masculinity in Ruby makes inner thoughts and desires irrelevant to male identity, potentially shameful things which are repressed. The men are haunted by an inner emptiness, a sense of loss which Morrison signals explicitly through Dovey's reflections on her husband Steward: "Almost always, [...] when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost. [...] Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses" (82).

Morrison represents a range of profound social problems resulting from the hegemony of this concept of masculinity in Ruby, which push the townspeople towards various forms of violent conflict that foreshadow the massacre. The "losses" Dovey refers to include the gradual erosion of all the values Morrison depicts as positive which enabled the original success of this community. Because possessions and social status have become so crucial to the formation of masculine identity, the modern townspeople are competitive and suspicious of each other, losing the communal bonds which were so crucial to their forefathers' achievements. Consider the dispute between the Fleetwoods and the Morgans, one of the central events in the narrative present. To achieve true manhood, the men of both families believe they must dominate the town, by monopolising the symbols of wealth and status which now determine masculine identity. For the Fleetwoods, their debts and their failure to exert enough control over their women to prevent Arnette's pregnancy are deeply shameful, unmanly failings. In keeping with their community's "shame-rage" mode of reacting to dishonour, they feel strongly inclined to externalise their sense of humiliation in violence. The Morgans are similarly incapable of acknowledging that their nephew K. D. has behaved in a shameful manner and bears responsibility for Arnette's pregnancy, relying on their wealth and political power to prevent them having to accept any disgrace. These attitudes bring the families to the verge of serious violence, causing incidents where "Jefferson Fleetwood pulled a gun on K. D." and where "Menus had to interrupt a pushing match between Steward and Arnold" (154).

Through such incidents, Morrison implies that instituting patriarchy will only exacerbate the dysfunctions which, according to Moynihan Report orthodoxy, produce violence within African American society. Men who feel insecure in their grasp on hegemonic forms of masculinity will turn quickly to violence to confirm their possession of the forms of strength and will power central to this identity. Because the men of Ruby have not been able to escape the shaming, racist gaze which denies black manhood, they use violence to compensate for repressed insecurities. Although they repudiate the American government as far as possible in every other respect, the townsmen are proud of the uniforms and medals awarded to them for military service. Like Molsey's Easy Rawlins, they believe these things provide recognition of their masculinity from white society, which they still secretly desire. Steward Morgan has his honourable discharge papers framed in his house (88). Jeff Fleetwood has a tendency to criticise "K. D., who had never served in the military" (156). According to Ruby's criteria, this is reason in itself for regarding K. D. as an inferior man. Violence becomes the basic way of proving you possess masculine will power over your environment. Morrison shows this method of enacting masculinity can easily turn to indiscriminate, desperate violence when the will is frustrated. Thus Jeff Fleetwood responds to the shame of his "damaged" children by wanting "to kill somebody. Since he couldn't kill the Veteran's Administration, others might just have to do" (58). Once again, Morrison provides an explicit portent of how this model of masculinity leads to the massacre.

The men of Ruby will permit no questioning or revision of their concept of male identity, to avoid consideration of the traumatic shame repressed beneath their rigid, idealised self-images. Men who transgress the narrow limits of this monolithic form of masculinity are either banished or forced to return to community norms. For example, Menus Harper is forced to give up the mixed-race "prostitute" he falls in love with during military service outside Ruby. Younger generations are forced to accept the transmission of a fixed form of masculine identity from father to son without revision. Morrison makes clear black manhood is not monolithic and ahistorical through stories which highlight how the values and practices of the townsmen have become diametrically opposed to those of their ancestors. The Old Fathers brought along outcasts they discovered during their migration, but their descendants exclude the vulnerable. The story of Elder

Morgan's defence of a socially stigmatised woman against male abuse contrasts sharply with how his younger brothers attack such women (95). The dominant men of modern Ruby can only mask such radical discontinuities and contradictions by insistently reading back their own concept of masculinity onto town history, and silencing dissenters with threats of violence. Consider the threat Steward Morgan uses to settle the dispute over the Oven inscription: "If you, any of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the word in the mouth of that oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood eye snake" (87).

It is through the townsmen's treatment of women that Morrison represents most powerfully and explicitly how white patriarchal modes of masculinity cause black violence. The idea learnt from white American culture that manhood involves mastery over an inferior Other leads the men of Ruby to seek total dominance over the only people more disempowered than themselves: the women of their community. Female independence is intolerable for these men, because women constitute the territory on which they enact and confirm their masculine authority. At the meeting about K. D. and Arnette, Arnold Fleetwood is infuriated by the Morgan's veiled insults about his financial and family problems, which compromise his masculine status in this community. He responds to Steward's suggestion that Arnette may decide her own future, by blustering: "I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind" (61). Women living under male control are denied any subjective independence. At her wedding, Arnette reflects that her fiancé, K. D., is "all she knew about her self – which is to say everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Delia, no-one had told her there was any other way to think of herself" (148). Only Billie Delia a marginal, ostracised figure, beyond the control of the hegemonic men, has grown up able to conceptualise her self outside subordinate relations to men. The men of Ruby also seek total control over women because their fetishisation of racial purity leads them to value women primarily as producers of new generations of "eight-rock" men. This leads them to seek total control over female sexuality. As Pat observes, "everything that worries them must come from women" (217).

Such attitudes to women make it inevitable that the Convent women, who exist beyond the townsmen's control on the margins of their community, will become the

target of the violence bubbling below the surface of Ruby society. The autonomy of the Convent community undermines the townsmen's sense of manhood. Because the Convent Women lack any public voice or power to determine their image in Ruby, they are easily moulded into a scapegoat for town problems the men cannot understand or control:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for V.D. shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. [...] the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent (11).

The rest of the narrative makes absolutely clear that most of these "outrages" can only be indirectly connected to the Convent Women, and that to perceive them as the cause of any of the problems requires grossly distorted logic. As we have seen, most of these problems involve intergenerational tensions which are created by the model of masculinity and the racist traumas the dominant men are responsible for. But because they cannot face these traumas or reconsider their concept of masculinity, the townsmen have to believe they can manage these problems through traditional assertions of masculine will power. The massacre is a response to an intolerably shameful sense of loss of control over the town and its citizens. Morrison describes the killers as "feeling so young and good" holding their guns during the massacre, because "guns are more than decoration, intimidation or comfort. They are meant" (285). The murderous finality of gun violence recuperates their sense of masculine authority. As Pat concludes, these men attacked the Convent not just because they perceived the women as "impure," but also because "they *could* – which was what being an eight rock meant to them" (297). The massacre constitutes a reassertion of the will power which is essential to their concept of racially pure, authentic masculinity.

The Convent women are also scapegoated because of the relationships many of the killers have had with them. Morrison shows the townsmen's insistence on total control over women is bound up with a belief in self-control, which is crucial to the

hegemonic concept of masculinity they attempt to copy. Jonathan Rutherford has summarised the classic masculine attitude to sexuality and femininity:

Flesh, sexuality, emotionality, these become seen as uncontrollable forces and a source of anxiety. [...] We learn to repress them because they are the antithesis of what it means to be masculine. It's a repression that we project onto others. Our struggle for self-control is acted out as mastery over others.³¹

The men of Ruby aspire to a particularly severe subjugation of desire and emotion to the rational, moral will, because of their continuing desire to prove their masculinity according to the Victorian values of the white society which rejected their ancestors. Their fierce battle for sexual self-control is acted out as control over female sexuality. The burden of sexual morality is projected entirely onto women, a fact best demonstrated by K. D.'s refusal to accept any responsibility for Arnette's pregnancy, because he believes she initiated and was solely responsible for their sexual activity (54).

During the novel, Deacon recalls a boyhood memory of a group of well-dressed, demure women posing for a photograph, which he has fixed in his mind as a feminine ideal: "His remembrance was pastel-colored and eternal" (110). For him they were purely visual objects of the male gaze, not mobile, desiring subjective human beings. They are an almost spiritual vision against which Deacon measures all other women. Deacon needs the women in his life to fulfil this ideal to confirm his own sense of moral perfection. The other men share this need for women to symbolise moral perfection; one blames the Convent Women for calling "into question the value of almost every woman he knew" (8). But rather than affirming male moral purity, the Convent Women outrage the townsmen by becoming reminders of their lack of total self-control. The men have developed relationships with them because of illicit desires and traumatic memories which are incompatible with their self-images, yet cannot be entirely mastered and repressed. They convince themselves they can eliminate this intolerable internal shame by killing the women onto whom they project it. Deacon Morgan is deeply ashamed of his adulterous affair with Connie, a product of desires which transgress the strict racial and moral codes of his community. He projects responsibility for these desires onto

³¹ J. Rutherford, "Who's That Man?", p. 26.

Connie, telling himself that she “tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things” (279).

The men convince themselves so fully the Convent Women are to blame for personal and community problems, that they figure the massacre as a righteous, morally justified act. This explains Morrison’s initially puzzling references to the Morgan twins’, possibly the most violent and bigoted men in Ruby, as “innocent.”³² This refers to the type of male innocence Morrison has always condemned in her novels. As Philip Weinstein has shown, innocence for Morrison refers not to a state of virtuous isolation from worldly evils, but a male fantasy of pure, intact selfhood, and sovereign will, untainted by the intrusion of shame.³³ This fantasy enables a denial of how one is inevitably, as a human being, involved and implicated in sin, and hence a belief in the absolute righteousness of one’s actions. It has often served to justify appalling violence in Morrison’s earlier novels, and it enables the killers in *Paradise* to justify their actions as morally necessary to the survival of their town. They commit this atrocity with the “odor of righteousness,” conceiving of the killings in the following terms: “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18).

In myriad ways, then, the middle section of narrative coaxes the reader towards accepting a particular explanation for the massacre. This need to determine meaning becomes more pronounced towards the end of the novel. Many critics have heaped uncritical praise on *Paradise* for conforming to contemporary trends in literary theory regarding linguistic ambiguity and textual openness. Philip Page claims: “Morrison’s construction of her novel values openness, multiplicity and creative interpretation. [...] Readers are thrown into the midst of a work in continual process, a work with many versions and endless interpretative possibilities.”³⁴ Similarly, Katrine Dalsgård describes Morrison’s narrative mode as: “Open-ended, fragmented, and multivoiced, it works in the service of collective and subjective memory and against the notion of a totalizing master

³² Both Morgan twins are described as having “wide innocent eyes” during the first depiction of the massacre, and Steward is later referred to again as having “innocent eyes” (12 and 156).

³³ See: P. Weinstein, *What*, pp. 130-131. Morrison condemns this form of innocence most forcefully in *Tar Baby*: “An innocent man is a sin before God. inhuman and therefore unworthy. No man should live without absorbing the sins of his kind, the foul air of his innocence.” T. Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Penguin / Plume, 1982), p. 243.

³⁴ P. Page, “Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, *African American Review*, 35:4 (2001), 637-648, p. 641 and p. 648.

narrative, [...] the story of the massacre emerges as intangible and not susceptible to one final meaning.”³⁵ But such eulogies ignore how certain elements of the novel consistently work to close down “endless interpretative possibilities” in ways which ultimately *do* give the massacre “one final meaning.” The reader’s interpretation of the massacre is ultimately determined by a one-way transmission of meaning between text and reader which makes the enormous complexity of the narrative structure seem almost redundant. The ending of the novel contradicts the explicit warnings within the text about the futility of attempts to fix meanings. For example, during the intergenerational dispute over the inscription on the communal Oven, Dovey Morgan decides that the inscription should be left in its current ambiguous condition: “Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the cross” (93). The crucifixion metaphor suggests meanings can only be fixed through violence, and, as we have seen, the meaning of the inscription is finally fixed by a violent threat. Yet Morrison does ultimately attempt to nail down the meaning of the massacre, in a process which begins in a scene just before the second representation of this atrocity.

Lone Du Pres is permitted to read the minds of the killers while they are plotting, explaining clearly to the reader the motives of each man. Obviously, these men cannot articulate the real reasons for their violence, which involve illicit desires and memories repressed from consciousness. But Morrison does not risk letting the readers deduce these motives from the action of the narrative. Menus Harper’s alcoholism and his painful drying out have been represented during the narrative. But Lone still explains exactly why Menus participates: “Getting rid of some unattached women who had wiped up after him, [...] listened to his curses as well as his sobs might convince him for a while that he was truly a man unpolluted” (278). Furthermore, the third person narrator is permitted a rare moment of absolute authority here, intervening to correct Lone’s views. Lone tells us that Deacon participates because he could not “put up with what he couldn’t control” (278-279). But the narrator then takes direct control of narration to explain how Deacon’s shame about his affair with Connie motivates him, and stating: “But she [Lone] could not

³⁵ K. Dalsgård, “The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, *African American Review*, 35:2

have fathomed his personal shame or understood how important it was to erase both the shame and the kind of woman he believed was its source" (279). Morrison spells out how these men are projecting personal shame onto the Convent Women to separate their violence definitively from demonised stereotypes of black masculinity.

This process continues in the short section of the text which succeeds the second account of the massacre, where the contradictions between narrative structure and content become most pronounced. Here Morrison becomes visibly concerned not only with clarifying the causes of the massacre, but also its consequences. Reverend Misner reflects on the massacre in terms which seem to nail down its meaning and impose closure on the apparently open-ended narrative:

Whether they be the first or the last, representing the oldest black families or the newest, [...] they had ended up betraying it all. They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children when in fact they are maiming them, and when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind, and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind (305-306).

This is far shorter than Max's trial speech, but like Richard Wright, Morrison returns to a scene of black violence she originally articulated with a shocking, traumatic immediacy, anxiously and insistently attempting to fix the terms of its interpretation. Not only does this verdict recapitulate the causes of the massacre in the clearest terms yet, telling us overtly that male behaviour in *Ruby* mirrors white masculinity, and that the massacre is a consequence of the traumatic effects of prejudice against dark skin, it also unambiguously condemns the massacre as destructive of all the aims and aspirations which led to the foundation of this community. It might be objected that this is just one of multiple versions of the massacre articulated in the final pages. Two "official" versions are circulated: one states that the men only went to the Convent to persuade the women to leave, who then disappeared. The other claims five men went to evict the women, followed by four anxious to prevent violence, and that the women attacked *them*, before

fleeing, except for the “old woman” who was killed by a man who “lost his head” (296-297). But Morrison’s direct depictions of the massacre invalidate both these stories, so they do not contribute to textual openness; they do not give the reader hermeneutic choice.

Morrison’s need to condemn the massacre so clearly and authoritatively suggests an anxiety that this violence will appear to have positive consequences. The plot dynamics of *Paradise* threaten to recuperate a disturbing paradigm in Morrison’s fiction, criticised by Trudier Harris in 1991: “Ultimately, the question of who has value in Toni Morrison’s novels comes down to a seemingly easy answer: men [...]. If most of the women are to be sacrificed to community or masculine growth, what does that suggest about a feminist perspective in Morrison’s work?”³⁶ This pattern is particularly noticeable in *Jazz*, where the plot structure posits a direct link between Dorcas’s murder and the potential for masculine growth offered by the ending. Dorcas’s death conveniently removes her as an obstacle in Joe and Violet’s marriage and seems to provoke character development in Joe.³⁷ In *Paradise* this pattern threatens to re-emerge, when the disappearance of the Convent Women after the raid seems to give Ruby a second chance, and the experience of the massacre precipitates subjective growth in at least one man: Deacon Morgan. The ending threatens to vindicate the townsmen’s belief that the elimination of the Convent Women was crucial to the future of Ruby. Morrison’s anxiety about this reading is noticeable when Pat considers, but quickly rejects the idea that the raid had positive consequences. Pat then explains in detail how it has failed to solve the personal and community problems the men projected onto the Convent Women (299). The only reliable character who does believe “God had given Ruby a second chance” by removing the bodies from the Convent, Lone, is described as having become “unhinged” (297-298). Even Deacon’s tentative character reformation is heavily counterbalanced by the unrepentant defiance of the other killers.

But if Morrison carefully eliminates the possibility the massacre has a positive effect upon its perpetrators, ironically, she almost implies it benefits its victims. The reappearance of the Convent Women in the final pages threatens to detract from the sense

³⁶ T. Harris, *Fiction and Folklore in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), pp. 188-189.

of seriousness the text has worked so hard to impart to representations of black violence. In trying to produce a degree of optimism in the potentially devastating conclusion of this narrative, Morrison introduces a form of denial into the text. She does not directly deny the existence of black violence itself, according to the pattern I have traced through most examples strategy of denial in this thesis. But by suggesting resolutions to the problem which underestimate its seriousness, she denies the seriousness of the effects of racism which it reveals. This criticism may appear inattentive to the differences between fiction and representations of historical reality. Michael Wood suggests that the imaginative quality of fiction, its distance from direct representation of reality, opens a space to explore political possibilities that “are often cancelled by the intractable real,” without diminishing the seriousness and pain of that reality.³⁸ Wood argues that *Paradise* demonstrates “the ability of fiction to engage with the very loss it cannot deny. [...] Fiction cannot restore our losses but it can get us beyond their helpless reenactment.”³⁹ This appears to be Morrison’s aim in her ending, to suggest ways of overcoming the “helpless reenactment” of the cycle of trauma and violence she believes racism has inflicted upon African American society. Although she rejects conventional, exclusionary paradises as either achievable or desirable in this novel, Morrison still wanted to make a statement about better forms of (African) American community, where the types of oppressive violence she depicts would not occur. In her Nobel Lecture, she spoke of her commitment to “a view of heaven as life,” the kind of heaven we could find at our feet if we took “the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives.”⁴⁰ The fictional mode of *Paradise* is plainly not social realism, and the ending is best understood as an imaginative, symbolic attempt to envisage alternative social formations, alternative modes of self-fashioning, to the ones which perpetuate traumatising and violence. However, it is not that the resurrection of the Convent Women is unrealistic that creates a sense Morrison is denying the seriousness of black violence. It is the inadequacies of the healing process leading to these final, symbolic scenes of hope and redemption which are problematic.

³⁷ See: T. Morrison, *Jazz*, particularly pp. 192-193.

³⁸ M. Wood, “Sensations”, p. 125.

³⁹ M. Wood, “Sensations”, p. 125.

⁴⁰ T. Morrison, *Nobel*, p. 21.

Shortly before the massacre, the Convent Women come to terms with the traumatic experiences which precipitated their flight to the Convent through a process Morrison calls "loud dreaming." The basic structure of this process and its aims fit logically into the argument of the novel. Morrison suggests the cycle of trauma and violence which has such devastating effects on Ruby can only be transcended by accepting the repressed, shameful Otherness within the self. Only through coming to terms with traumatic experiences can people overcome the compulsion to deny and project shame onto others. However, the depiction of loud dreaming is too brief and lacking in detail for it to be credible as an effective therapeutic process. As Patricia Storace noted in her review of *Paradise*: "the Convent rituals that heal and free them seem to resolve their overweening pain too late and too quickly."⁴¹ John Duvall has perceptively suggested that Morrison's authorial function is represented by two characters in *Paradise*: historian and social analyst Pat and the magical, healing figure Connie. He claims: "Morrison hopes that her writing performs the same healing that the gifts of Consolata enact, but simultaneously fears that her writing, like Pat Best's, may only be able to diagnose the disease of American racialized discourse."⁴² This fear is clearly evident in Morrison's depiction of the loud dreaming. The healing occurs predominately through non-linguistic expressive forms such as art and dancing, reducing the extent to which Morrison has to represent this process directly. Even the verbal elements are represented diegetically, not mimetically, in contrast to Morrison's previous depictions of characters coming to terms with traumas, such as *Beloved*'s extraordinary monologue.⁴³ Morrison writes: "In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek," suggesting proper words are hardly used in this process; what is happening is beyond linguistic articulation (264). The process is also heavily reliant on magic. The connections with Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian hybrid of Catholicism and African spirit worship, obscure and exoticise the process and seem designed to compensate for the inadequate, facile nature of the realistic elements. Although apparently magical events have often been used in Morrison's previous novels, they have never been relied on so heavily to resolve political problems which have proven intractable on a realistic level.

⁴¹ P. Storace, "The Scripture of Utopia", *New York Review of Books*, 11 June 1998, 64-69, p. 69.

⁴² J. Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 151.

These problems with the representation of the loud dreaming ensure that it feels inadequate to the seriousness of the problems of trauma and violence the novel has articulated so forcefully and in such detail. The final vision of the Convent Women in an earthly paradise feels more like a desperate attempt to conceal and compensate for the inadequacies of this novel's attempts to overcome violence than a triumphant transcendence of this violence. Morrison's need to explain the origins of black violence in precise detail, which I have traced through this chapter, and prevent interpretations which recuperate demonised stereotypes denies her the space to represent credible ways of overcoming this violence in adequate detail. These problems make *Paradise* a suitable place to end this thesis. It exemplifies the difficulties with representing black violence which still plague American literature. Like so many of the novels considered in this thesis, its attempts to posit solutions to the problems of black violence in America involve a retreat into denial.

This is not to deny the extraordinary changes and developments in the representation of black violence this thesis has traced through twentieth century American literature. There has been a general movement away from the propagandist demonisation of Dixon's novels, which reduces black humanity to white fantasy, towards attempts to understand the social and psychological causes of black violence. But racial tensions at the historical moment of production often lead authors to reproduce fantasies and anxieties about black violence. Even the careful, detailed attempts of modern authors like Mosley and Morrison to reveal the cultural causes of black violence cannot completely escape denial and demonisation. Representing black violence remains a controversial and difficult task, and a clear sign of how the presence of racism persists in American culture. The two basic literary strategies I identified in my introduction as governing the representation of black violence are still visible in contemporary fiction.

⁴³ See: T. Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 210-213.

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