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Heavy Things illustrates how African American writers redefine black manhood through metaphors of heaviness, figured primarily through their representation of material objects. Taking the literal and figurative weight the narrator's briefcase in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a starting point, this dissertation examines literary representations of material objects, including gifts, toys, keepsakes, historical documents, statues, and souvenirs as modes of critiquing the materialist foundations of manhood in the United States. Historically, materialism has facilitated white male domination over black men by associating property ownership with both whiteness and manhood. These writers not only reject materialism as a vehicle of oppression but also reveal alternative paths along which black men can thrive in a hostile American society.

Each chapter of my analysis is structured around specific kinds of "heavy" objects—gifts, artifacts, and memorials—that liberate black men from white definitions of manhood based in possessive materialism. In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, gifts reestablished ties between alienated black men and their communities. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong*, black sons attempt to reconcile their fraught relationships with their fathers through the recovery of historical artifacts. In Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter*, black men and women use commemorative objects such as monuments and memorials to reimagine black male abjection as a trope of healing. Finally, my conclusion applies my analysis of material

objects in literature to recent representations of Trayvon Martin's hoodie to understand how material objects operate as metaphors of black manhood in contemporary American popular culture.

HEAVY THINGS: MATERIALITY AND MASCULINITY
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE

by

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For Cristina, for everything.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: UNPACKING THE INVISIBLE MAN'S BRIEFCASE

At the end of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's unnamed narrator attempts to escape the Harlem riot provoked by fellow members of the Brotherhood. As he flees the scene, two white men armed with a baseball bat approach him and ask to see the contents of his briefcase. The initially "gleaming calfskin brief case" (32), which the narrator won for his high school graduation speech at the beginning of the novel, is now battered and filled with paraphernalia—his high school diploma, a broken leg-shackle, sunglasses, reference letters, a Sambo doll, and the pieces of a smashed, cast-iron bank—collected during his tribulations.¹ As the threatening white men advance, the narrator runs away and plunges down a manhole. When the men again demand to know the contents of his briefcase, the invisible man taunts them by replying, "'You. [...] What do you think of that? [...] 'All of you. [...] 'I've had you in my brief case all the time and you didn't know me then and can't see me now.'" (566). Enraged by the narrator's provocation, the two men seal the manhole, trapping him in the darkness.

At first glance, the invisible man's briefcase and its contents are most obviously emblems of his "illusions" about rendering himself visible in a racially hostile society. From his sunglasses that alter his perception to the racist caricatures of the Sambo Doll and the smashed bank that formerly had the figure of a "very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro" (319), the briefcase is full of objects that signify deception, distortion,

and betrayal. Clinging to the hope that it once contained, the narrator reluctantly opens the briefcase in a desperate search for things that he can burn to light his way out of the darkness. He begins by lighting his diploma, once a symbol of optimism for the young man. Now, he senses a “remote irony” when its “feeble light” briefly pushes “back the gloom” (567). One by one he burns the paper contents of his briefcase to light his way through the catacombs (568). Finally, once the narrator is “free” of his “illusions” (569), the briefcase disappears entirely from the text, inexplicably abandoned by both Ellison and the narrator.

Since *Invisible Man* “has become an urtext, the literary point of origin for questions regarding twentieth-century African American cultural discourse and the formation of black masculinity” (Leak 31), it would seem logical that contemporary African American writers might share Ellison’s distrust of materialism and its false promises of masculine self-determination. Whether fighting other men for imitation gold coins on an electrified rug or discovering that Dr. Bledsoe has betrayed him by writing defamatory reference letters, *Invisible Man* finds material objects complicit in constructing a dangerous world of illusions. Nonetheless, narratives by Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, Emily Raboteau, and Colson Whitehead share a profound interest in how materialism defines racialized manhood in the United States. These writers signify on *Invisible Man* by reconsidering Ellison’s depiction of illusory objects as obstacles to his narrator’s attempt to render himself visible. In a sense, they pull the invisible man’s abandoned briefcase from the ashes, dust it off, and reexamine its contents in their own narratives of black male self-actualization.

In *Heavy Things*, I argue that contemporary African American writers examine material objects, including gifts, toys, keepsakes, historical documents, statues, and souvenirs, to illustrate how American material culture defines the racial and gendered dimensions of manhood in the United States. Picking up where Ellison leaves off in *Invisible Man*, these writers interrogate the material basis of masculine identity. Historically, American material culture has facilitated white male domination over black men by associating property ownership with both whiteness and manhood. While Ellison's invisible man learns to read the ways that materiality circumscribes his identity, contemporary writers portray black men who learn not only to critique the relationship between materiality, racial identity, and gender but also to redefine their relationship with the material world to facilitate self-knowledge, self-determinacy, and socioeconomic viability. Taking the literal and figurative weight of the invisible man's briefcase as its central metaphor, *Heavy Things* illustrates how contemporary African American writers, like Ellison, not only reject materialism as a vehicle of oppression but also, unlike him, reinterpret material objects to reveal alternative paths along which black men can thrive in a hostile American society.

Heavy Things focuses on narratives published during the past half-century, a period that gender historian Michael Kimmel exposes deep anxieties about masculine identity in the United States. The widespread political activism of the 1960s inaugurated a period during which traditionally idealized models of manhood—the Self-Made Man, the breadwinning patriarch—came under intense public scrutiny. As Kimmel explains in *Manhood in America*, the Civil Rights, feminist, and gay rights movements exposed the

“masculine mystique” as a “fraud” the “impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero” (173). As a result, “the landscape on which American men have sought to test and prove their manhood” was “irreversibly transformed” (174). The concomitant critiques of white patriarchal manhood by this diverse political activism opened new possibilities for marginalized people to define themselves outside of narrowly-scripted racial and gender roles in the late twentieth century. The narratives examined in this study, I argue, are central to this contemporary reexamination of American masculinity.

Contemporary African American narratives directly engage the contemporary debates about racialized manhood in American society, but they also respond to earlier literary depictions of black manhood by writers such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. By signifying on their literary antecedents, contemporary writers illustrate how black manhood has been defined and redefined within a broader African American literary tradition. Along these lines, I follow Anthony Rotundo’s argument that manhood must be understood “in its historical dimension” precisely because “so many of our institutions have men’s needs and values built into their foundations” (9). Drawing attention to this historical dimension is especially important to my study because it reveals how African American writers adapt their projects to address the changing dynamics of gender and racial oppression over time. Such an approach exposes the continuities and divergences across each writer’s interrogation of “manhood” as well as how their texts collectively reveal black masculinity as an evolving cultural construct.

In the pages that follow, I maintain that materiality features significantly in African American writers' depictions of black men, and that investigating the material construction of both racial and gender identity is necessary to divest it of its power to oppress. Whether materialism among young black men in the twenty-first century only critique or perpetuates their historical oppression and exploitation by whites remains a subject of debate among cultural critics. Michael Eric Dyson, for example, argues that the apparent materialism and sexism of hip-hop culture actually occludes the way young black men indict "mainstream and black bourgeoisie institutions" ("Gangsta" 416).² In contrast, bell hooks argues that young black men have self-destructively embraced materialism and sexism. "Black male material survival" she explains, "will be ensured only as they turn away from fantasies of wealth and the notion that money will solve all problems and make everything better," and that "sharing resources, reconceptualizing work, and using leisure" are necessary for the "practice" of black male "self-actualization" (31-32). Following hooks, this dissertation illustrates how African American writers reject the materialist paradigms that define manhood in the dominant white culture and promote black male self-actualization by redefining their relationship with American material culture.

Why does Ellison's narrator collect objects in his briefcase throughout *Invisible Man*, and why does he invest so much hope in them? What can they tell us about how he sees himself? Ultimately, what does his attempt to purge himself of their weight say about an American culture that continues to view black men as both victims and perpetrators of America's contemporary social problems? These questions of how

material objects structure black masculinity raised by *Invisible Man* have special relevance in the twenty-first century. The United States is emerging from an industrial capitalist economy and a consumer-oriented culture that has defined masculinity primarily through a materialism which has invariably served the interests of white male domination over their black counterparts. African American writers not only render legible this materialist history of black male subordination but they also evince how black men learn to read and critique American materialism in their search for personal and collective liberation.

Materialism and the Self-Made Man

Before examining how and why contemporary African American writers explore masculinity through material objects, it is first necessary to understand how white men have historically used materialism as vehicle of socioeconomic domination over black men. When Ellison's narrator replies "All of you" to the two white men who ask him what is in his briefcase, he indicates that it contains objects that represent the deceptions and distortions their kind have imposed on him to affirm white manhood and obstruct his own.³ The invisible man's encounter with these men tacitly critiques the white ideal of self-made manhood, a model of masculinity that came to prominence in the nineteenth century. Historically, self-made manhood is inextricable from white male domination, since its materialist foundations, including the ability to own and accumulate property, stands in dialectal opposition to the objectification of black men as "chattel" in the American slave economy. White self-made manhood as a materially-based masculine

ideal limits black manhood because of this historical investment in white patriarchal power.

Although the self-made man ideal prevailed throughout the Eurocentric founding of the New World, it gained its literary prominence in works such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* during the late eighteenth century and culminated in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴ Far from an innocuous abstraction, the self-made man is deeply entrenched in American material culture, as evinced in the proliferation of narratives about class mobility, professionalization, property acquisition, and patriarchal authority.⁵ The materialist underpinnings of the self-made man are apparent in its idealization during the 1830s when the concentration of economic power in cities, coupled with a burgeoning industrial economy, dislodged the idea of "manhood" from its traditional moorings. As Kimmel explains, at the turn of the nineteenth century, "manhood" was virtually synonymous with "adulthood"; "to be manly was to accept adult responsibilities as provider, producer, and protector of a family" (*History* 38). Furthermore, the means through which one could affirm his "manhood" were rooted in fixed class structures: men among the "landed gentry" were figureheads of benevolent patriarchy on their estates, while the artisanal class expressed their manhood through "physical strength" and craftsmanship (38). The rise of market capitalism in the following decades, however, replaced these models of manhood, predicated on personal contentment and paternal responsibility, with an idea of manhood based on competitive individualism in a volatile marketplace. White men became "anxious" about their manhood under this paradigm

since it was always threatened by uncertainties of the market as well as by competition from other men (Kimmel 39).

Although the white ideal of self-made manhood remains prominent in American culture, it has met constant criticism since its inception. In *Democracy in America* (1835), the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville noted “something surprising in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance” (219),⁶ giving us an early indication that self-made manhood is shot-through with anxiety and uncertainty about whether men can attain this elusive ideal. As men sought to affirm their manhood within a burgeoning American industrial economy, its deleterious effects became more evident. As Henry David Thoreau explains in *Walden* (1854), striving toward an elusive, market-based manhood is a misguided and even self-defeating endeavor that transforms laboring men into incognizant machinery. In his own words:

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.... Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be any thing but a machine. (7)

Thoreau’s critique of the industrial version of self-made manhood is especially important because it makes explicit the fact that manhood, as defined in the nineteenth century, has more the distinction between men and things than it does with a gendered differentiation between masculinity and femininity. In other words, Thoreau conceives of emasculation not in terms of a man’s feminization, but his objectification. Rather than bringing men closer to attaining the ideal of self-made manhood, men become like things because deny

themselves social interactions with other men. Leisure and socialization, rather than work and individualized competition, provide the context for masculine self-affirmation. In Thoreau's reasoning, men anxious about their manhood avoid leisure because it devalues their labor, which according to the marketplace logic of self-made manhood, would also diminish their masculinity. For Thoreau, then, such abdication of manhood results not in their feminization but in their reification as insentient "machines."

In the context of American antebellum society, slavery exhibited the dehumanizing effects of this dialectic between men and things in plain sight. When Thoreau compares his (presumably white) laboring "machines" to slaves, he implicitly reinforces the racial distinction between white manhood and black "machines." Moreover, Thoreau finds the dehumanization of free laborers even more abhorrent than slavery because it is self-inflicted (8), illustrating how both manhood and racial identity were imagined through nineteenth-century economics and property relations. As a result, enslavement meant the emasculation of black men, since self-possession was a prerequisite for manhood. As Frederick Douglass succinctly puts in in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, their "manhood" was "lost in chattelhood" (175). The difference between Thoreau's "machines" and enslaved black men, however, was that the emasculation of enslaved black men was implicitly encoded and enforced by white male-created slave and property laws. When Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney writes in the majority opinion on the Dred Scott case that enslaved blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," he reasons that "the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery" because "he was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of

merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it” (*Dred Scott* 61). Taney defers to historical convention and popular opinion to support his argument for distinguishing between men and property along a racial axis. Scott cannot sue in court, he concludes, because according to both common law and statute, he is not a man but a commodity, a thing.

The most obvious implication of the *Dred Scott* case is that it codified the opposition between white and black men within a matrix of racialized property relations. In this way, self-made manhood is complicit with what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness,” wherein “the adjective *possessive*” stresses “the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society” as a means of “protecting the privileges of whites” and “denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility” (viii). Having “no rights which the white man was bound to respect” meant that Scott had no right to sue in court, but it also denied enslaved men the right to enter into contract, which is the foundation of individual property ownership. With the *Dred Scott* decision, whiteness, manhood, and property became inextricable in the antebellum United States.

Long after the *de jure* dissolution of slavery, the ideology of white self-made manhood engendered new racial antagonisms in the twentieth century, when white men feared competition from their free black counterparts who now jostled for power in the industrial labor force. Industrialists found a cheap and expendable labor in the black male descendants of ex-slaves who eagerly moved to thriving urban centers to find gainful employment during the Great Migration, as conflicts between labor unions and industrial

employers kindled racial hostilities among this new working class. When racially-exclusive labor unions picketed, their industrial bosses replaced them with black “strikebreakers” at a fraction of their wages, further increasing interracial competition for primacy in the workplace.⁷ As W.E.B. DuBois notes, “The net result of all this has been to convince the American Negro that his greatest enemy is not the employer who robs him, but his fellow white workingman” (quoted in Foner 126-127). No longer owned as property, many black men now ironically attempted to affirm their manhood by earning a living, meeting what white American society in general perceived to be their responsibility as husbands and fathers.

As an advocate for the black middle-class, DuBois embraced a paradoxical relationship materialism that suggests how black men strategically created a qualified form of self-made manhood at the turn of the twentieth century while they also rejected the crass materialism of their white counterparts.⁸ On the one hand, DuBois promoted his vision of an emerging black middle class through photographic exhibits of finely-dressed men and women, which he displayed to the world at the Paris Exhibition in 1900 as evidence of black American social progress.⁹ On the other hand, he warned African Americans against conspicuous consumption, which he saw prevalent among white Americans. In his speech “Criteria for Negro Art,” presented to the NAACP in Chicago in June 1926, he points out that white and black men experience materiality in fundamentally different ways:

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful; —what is it that you would

want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America. (18)

In this passage, DuBois's description of self-creation clearly echoes Thoreau's lament of an emasculated laboring class: hard work must be tempered by leisure, suffering by the enjoyment of self-cultivation. By framing his rhetorical questions about his audience's materialist ambitions within a hypothetical dissolution of the color-line, DuBois explicitly associates the display of wealth and property with whiteness. The disposition toward the "tawdry" and "flamboyant" of the "average white American," he reasons, is a materialist expression of racial differentiation between men grounded in the racialized history of property relations. Without moral and intellectual development, he concludes, black men would simply imitate their white counterparts.

Echoing DuBois's concern about destructive materialism, cultural critics including Dyson, hooks, among others, have drawn attention to the problem among contemporary African American men.¹⁰ In particular, materialism and sexism appear inextricable in contemporary representations of black men in popular culture, and

especially in the idealization of masculine materialism promoted in music, film, and television. As bell hooks argues, when African American men affirm their manhood through materialism, they are aligning themselves with the same exploitative American consumer culture that thrives on their exploitation. “By the late sixties and early seventies,” she claims, “most black men had made the choice to identify their well-being and their manhood with making money by any means necessary” (17). Furthermore, hooks finds that both “upwardly mobile educated black males from privileged class background” and “their poor and underclass counterparts” share “an obsession with money as the marker of successful manhood” that perpetuates sexism and ignores the systemic causes of oppression (23-24). While DuBoisian black men during the first half of the twentieth-century transformed their “unemployment” into an opportunity “to nurture creativity and self-awareness” and to “to rethink” the “investment in materialism,” hooks believes that young black men in recent decades have subscribed to self-destructive capitalist and patriarchal fantasies rather than thinking creatively and critically about their material surroundings.¹¹

Why Materiality?

An investigation into the material construction of black masculinity is necessary precisely because of this historical association between whiteness, manhood, and property, idealized in the archetype of the self-made man. Recognizing that materialism has been a vehicle of white male domination over black men, the African American writers examined here sort through this legacy of black male oppression to redefine the relationship between materiality and manhood. Their strategy of critique is especially

salient in a contemporary American culture characterized by the pervasive consumption and accumulation of objects. Yet, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us, in an obsessively object-oriented society, objects not only signify “affluence,” “poverty,” and “scarcity,” which describe the relationship between persons and things, but also “a relation between human beings” (*Consumer* 67). Examining materiality in African American narrative, then, allows for an investigation of human interaction, since characters’ relationships to objects fundamentally signal their relations with other people.

Those relations often involve negotiations of social identity and political power. If white men have exercised their power to define manhood through possessive materialism, then examining the materialist construction of masculinity is essential to disassembling structures of white male socioeconomic domination. This means that we have as much to gain from examining objects as we do voice, literacy, and other language-oriented modes of expression. As Arjun Appadurai has noted, the opposition between “words” and “things” in contemporary Western thought assumes that objects are “inert” and “mute” and privileges language as the means of negotiating knowledge and power. “Yet, in many historical societies, ” he reminds us, “things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to acts and the power of words to communicate” (4). Drawing on the anthropological research of Marcel Mauss and Annette Weiner, Appadurai shows us that the “social life of things” implies more than the exchange of inert commodities in an industrialist economy: objects have always transmitted ideas and mediated political struggles in ways not acknowledged or authorized by contemporary Western culture.

The question may be asked whether Appadurai's anthropological explanation of "social" objects apply to the representation of objects in literary texts as well. Extending Appadurai's argument about the social life of things into literary analysis, Bill Brown argues that "our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism," since we invest things with ideas about our histories, our futures, and ourselves that often have little or no relation to their use or exchange values (6). Literature, according to Brown, provides a way to understand these other forms of material relations. "Objects become figures of thought and speech" in literary texts that often structure narratives and inform their representations of human interaction. Furthermore, Brown reminds us that literary texts themselves "become objects of knowledge about physical objects" (17-18). In other words, literary depictions of material objects not only structure the social worlds within texts but also serve a pedagogical function for readers about how to read objects in the outside world. In the case of metafiction, texts can even "systematically and self-consciously" point out their "own status as an artifact (Waugh 2).¹² As such, both objects depicted within texts as well as texts as objects themselves function as sources of knowledge and understanding about our social relations.

Finally, affinities and antagonisms with material objects not only structure human relationships but also express the capacities and limitations of self-knowledge. As Barbara Johnson argues in *Persons and Things*, the story of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection in the pool is instructive on this point, since it illustrates how self-knowledge is a process of objectification. "A self-image can suffer all the distortions to which any

image is susceptible,” she argues, “but it can be known only as an object, not a subject. A subject can only cry out, ‘I am that!’—which does not at all imply that the subject can *be* that” (49). Whereas Appadurai insists that objects as well as language structure social identities and relations, Johnson goes even further by suggesting that we can only arrive at self-knowledge through a process of objectification, of imagining oneself as a thing. “The real self for the subject is the one in the mirror,” she continues, “the total form of a body standing erect and transcending all support. An idealization. A fiction. An object” (57). The reflecting pool of Narcissus makes explicit what is otherwise implicit in relationships between persons and things more generally: that who we are is really a fiction told through the objects that inhabit our world.

Heavy Things

If objects mediate social relations as well as self-knowledge, then we must account for the specific ways these two dynamics interact. In this study, I use the phrase “heavy things” to describe the unique relationship between black men and material objects as depicted in contemporary African American narratives. As noted above, the conventional paradigm of self-made manhood, predicated on narratives of wealth accumulation and upward mobility, is historically bound to white male social and economic domination, making it an inadequate model for the realization of black masculine self-determinacy. Contemporary African American narratives, I argue, reject this paradigm of self-made manhood by elucidating alternative ways that black men engage their material surroundings. To that end, they depict black men’s relations with “heavy things,” signifying objects laden with multiple meanings that simultaneously

recall the historical use of materiality in structuring white male domination as well as facilitating black men's ongoing struggle for self-affirmation.

In the first place, a "heavy thing" is an object that whites have historically used to subjugate African Americans in general, but for the purposes of my study, that specifically emasculates and dehumanizes black men. Their heaviness may derive from their overtly racist representations, such as in the case of the invisible man's bank, Sambo dolls, and lawn jockeys, all of which emerge during the Jim Crow era to perpetuate black social and economic subordination, as well as their seemingly more benign contemporary permutations such as the updated images of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima on food packaging. Heavy things are not only symbolic or representational objects, however, but also those things that systematically facilitate white social domination, including slave manifests, real estate titles, and virtually any other material entity used to encode and propagate white male power over black men. These objects are "heavy" not because of their individual power, however, but also their ubiquity: they weigh so heavily on black men because they are so pervasive in American consumer culture.

In the second place, a "heavy thing" is also an object that black men use not only to signify on the dominant white culture that emasculates them but also to claim their manhood outside of the strictures imposed on them by whites. Often such appropriations of heavy things stop at superficiality: exaggerated gold chains and shiny rims on cars mock the outward markers of wealth displayed by their white male counterparts, but they do not change the fundamental structures of social and material inequity between white and black men. Artists such as Glen Ligon and Michael Ray Charles, however, have

taken familiar heavy objects—runaway slave posters and sambo toys, respectively—to critique their racist legacy and evaluate the status of black men in contemporary American culture. These artists are doing visually what I argue African American writers since Ellison have done in narrative: that is, appropriate “heavy things” to both critique white impositions on black male identity and to generate creative avenues for black male self-actualization.

The invisible man’s briefcase and its contents are heavy things only in the first sense of the term. The literal and figurative weight of the briefcase indicates that narrator’s invisibility is inextricable from the material world in which he lives. Furthermore, his briefcase becomes a veritable museum of his experiences trying to render himself visible in a racist American society that refuses to recognize him. Like Narcissus staring into the pool, Ellison’s invisible man “is pursuing himself” (Johnson 57) through objects. Taken together, the Sambo doll given to him by his deceased friend, Tod Clifton, his “Rhinehart” sunglasses, his high-school diploma, the reference letters given to him by Dr. Bledsoe, Mary Rambo’s smashed, cast-iron bank, Brother Tarp’s broken leg shackle, and his Brotherhood identification card, encapsulate the existential labyrinth constructed by an American society designed to prevent black men from flourishing.¹³

The invisible man’s encounter with Mary Rambo’s bank is a particularly salient example of how materiality circumscribes his identity. He finds the bank near the door of his room in her boarding house, a “cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro,” grinning up at him from the floor. The bank is “a piece of early

Americana” that ingests coins at the flick of a lever, just one of a proliferation of objects depicting racist caricatures intended for display in whites’ homes (319). The narrator’s initial surprise at stumbling upon the bank quickly turns to revulsion as he contemplates why Mary, a matronly yet seemingly progressive black woman, would “keep such a self-mocking image around” (319). Enraged, the narrator grabs the bank, and imagining that the figure is not smiling but choking on the coins that fill its throat, finally smashes it against the radiator. Bits and pieces of the “kinky iron head” flake off until the bank crumbles in his hands and the coins rattle around the room on the floor. When Mary knocks at the door, he scrambles to collect the coins and “jagged fragments of painted iron” and wraps the debris in newspaper (320-321). Unable to hide the evidence of his outburst, he loads the remains into his briefcase, where it encumbers him for the rest of the novel.

Mary’s bank is not just a symbol of the invisible man’s psychological burden; it also exemplifies the role that material culture plays in facilitating racial domination in the first half of the twentieth century. During the Jim Crow era, racist caricatures such as the bank, designed by whites to promote their false sense of supremacy, proliferated in the form of common household decorations. Uncle Tom and mammy figurines, lawn jockey statues, Golliwog dolls, and countless other objects put racist imagery on private display in American homes.¹⁴ Such objects not only provided a nostalgic relationship with America’s slave-holding past but also a means of continuing black social subordination during a period of intense racial competition that threatened white social, political, and economic dominance. By purchasing, owning, trading, and displaying such objects, many

white Americans effectively reenacted the commodification of and control over black bodies that had characterized the bygone American slavery system. Mary Rambo's novelty bank is just one such example of how everyday objects became a prominent medium through which Americans negotiated the terms of racial representation, power, and self-determination through such objects, signified by its heaviness.

As much as the invisible man attempts to define himself through the objects accumulated in his briefcase, they ultimately impede his journey to self-actualization, as evinced when he becomes "free" of his "illusions" at the end of the novel. The briefcase becomes the central emblem of accumulated psychological and social burdens from which he must liberate himself. When fellow Brotherhood members tell the narrator to fill his briefcase with "loot" during the riot, he will not commit larceny but explains that his briefcase is already full. "And suddenly I knew why it was heavy," he thinks to himself, remembering the weight of Mary's bank and coins among the other paraphernalia he has collected along the way. Refusing his friends' demand to participate in the looting because he has "enough" in his briefcase "already" (540), the invisible man has at last acknowledged the burden of his attachments to the objects, which signify the psychological, social, and historical impediments to his flourishing, that he has collected along his journey.

Contemporary African American literature and culture, however, extend Ellison's critique of American material culture by exploring the *constructive* role that materiality can play in reimagining black manhood. In effect, they translate the "heaviness" experienced by Ellison's invisible man into a means of self-actualization. Objects become

“heavy” in this second sense when people develop affirmative relationships with them. This process involves a critical rereading of material objects and their historical and cultural weight. This second meaning of the phrase “heavy things” is frequently invoked as a metaphor of black men’s experience in contemporary African American art and popular culture. For example, in “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight,” a song by the rap group Gang Starr, rapper MC Guru disavows outward expressions of success such as luxury vehicles as “just material” in favor of “introspection” and solidarity. “Weight” in the song is a multivalent signifier. “Weight” implies that materialism not only inhibits self-actualization but also demands collective black male resistance to systematic oppression. Weight, then, means more than bearing the burden of racial oppression; it references the importance of communal solidarity in the larger project of black male self-determination. For example, he uses the familiar expression of “the weight of the world” to describe a “heavy” psychological burden, but he later uses “weight” in a call for solidarity when he asks: “Can we be the sole controllers of our fate? / Now who’s gonna take the weight?” Here, “weight” is not just a figurative social burden but an exhortation to engage in acts of political and cultural resistance. Unlike the invisible man’s individual struggle for self-definition, MC Guru suggests that masculine self-determinacy is a collective endeavor. Individuals cannot truly assert their masculinity through individualistic materialism, the song implies; they can only participate in fleeting popular trends or succumb to “envy.” In contrast, the “road less traveled” is one of empathy and solidarity along which its travelers share the weight of their collective struggle for self-realization.¹⁵

Gilbert Young's painting "The Burden" likewise depicts black masculine experience through a complex metaphor of heaviness. In this painting, an Atlas-like figure bears the weight of two enormous stones on his shoulders. The top stone, painted like the American flag, rests on another that is painted with the red, black, and green stripes of the pan-African flag. The painting suggests both the oppressive weight of the stones bearing down on the man as well as the inimitable strength required to hold them up. The weight of the United States appears to crush down upon the stone painted with the Pan-African colors, indicating the history of exploitation of black Africans by whites from the earliest days of the transatlantic slave trade through contemporary global markets. The depiction of Africa as the lower stone, however, implies that the continent has not only endured the burden of Western domination but that their shared history also weighs heavily on the black Atlas's shoulders. Ultimately, the painting captures the contingency of black manhood in a racist country, even while the United States has historically depended on black men for its material survival. Their fates are intertwined: can the Atlas, who stands in for the laboring blacks who built America, elevate both Africa and the United States? Does the burden of racism in the United States need to be removed for Africans and their American descendants before they can realize their collective potential? Or, will the crushing weight of their combined, inextricable histories eventually bring them all down?

Although Ellison, Gang Starr, and Gilbert Young explicitly deploy metaphors of heaviness to depict black men's experience, the heaviness of objects can also be implicit. Take, for example, David Pilgrim's discovery of a vast collection of racist memorabilia,

kept in the back room of an antique dealer's shop. Pilgrim, the curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University, describes his uncanny encounter with her collection:

If I live to be 100 I will never forget the feeling that I had when I saw her collection; it was sadness, a thick, cold sadness. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of objects, side-by-side, on shelves that reached to the ceiling. All four walls were covered with some of the most racist objects imaginable. I owned some of the objects, others I had seen in Black Memorabilia price guides, and others were so rare I have not seen them since. I was stunned. Sadness. It was as if I could hear the pieces talking, yowling. Every conceivable distortion of black people, our people, was on display. It was a chamber of horrors. She did not talk. She stared at me; I stared at the objects. One was a life-sized wooden figure of a black man, grotesquely caricatured. It was a testament to the creative energy that often lurks behind racism. On her walls was a material record of all the hurt and harm done to Africans and their American descendants. I wanted to cry. It was at that moment that I decided to create a museum.¹⁶

The enormous collection of racist objects Pilgrim encounters in the antique shop indicates that white racism infects every aspect of American cultural production, no matter how quotidian. Their figurative heaviness is multiplied in the sheer quantity of objects, rather than their literal, individual weight. Seeing distorted images reflected back to himself *ad infinitum* in the antique dealers' shop evokes a host of conflicting emotions in blacks that suggest the accumulation of psychic weight over time, the overwhelming and inescapable "hurt" and "harm" that accompany centuries of racist domination.

Pilgrim's decision to create the Jim Crow Museum exhibits precisely the kind of reevaluation of materiality that I find in contemporary African American narratives, translating "weight" from just a metaphor of oppression into one of self-reflection, cultural awareness, and black survival. In the museum, such objects no longer reenact whites' commodification of black people through the seemingly banal act of buying and

selling objects, euphemistically termed “collectibles” or “memorabilia.” Instead, Pilgrim’s exhibit wrestles control of these from white racists, using them not to harm but to initiate understanding of and healing from America’s racist legacy. Furthermore, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in the story of his own decision to collect racist objects: “the most important function of displaying and collecting this stuff is a didactic one: critique.”¹⁷ Whereas Ellison’s invisible man resolves to destroy and burn such artifacts, Gates and Pilgrim make it clear that understanding the American material culture’s historical role in perpetuating racism is a necessary step to dismantling its power in the present.

Critical Overview

The narratives examined in this study perform exactly the critique identified by Gates and Pilgrim. By putting objects on display, African American writers divest them from their oppressive power and use them instead as “figures of thought and speech,” to reiterate Brown, that aid black male characters in their paths to self-determinacy. By focusing on materiality, *Heavy Things* offers an alternative way of examining the representation of racialized manhood in this literature by illustrating how African American writers redefine the relationship between manhood and materialism to create avenues of black male self-actualization. Current scholarship on literary depictions of black men generally falls into two categories: those who focus on black male typologies such as the “bad nigger” and the “black beast,” and those who focus on black male authorship. My goal in this study is to proffer a materialist interpretation of black manhood in African American literature to shift the conversation toward the processes

through which the matrix of racial and gender identities of black men is created in both literature and American culture writ large.

By focusing on the material construction of racialized manhood in these texts, *Heavy Things* reevaluates the emphasis on the typologies of black manhood in literature that restrict notions of black manhood by making reference to “types” that are entrenched in American racism. Indeed, representations of black men often refer to familiar “types” promulgated by white and black writers alike. From Stowe’s complacent Uncle Tom to William Styron’s hypersexualized Nat Turner, from Frederick Douglass’s archetype of defiant manliness to Richard Wright’s critique of the “bad nigger” in *Native Son*, American literature is riddled with reiterations and rejections of familiar black male stereotypes. Today, representations of black men in American popular culture, literature, and visual culture still reprise these archetypes for contemporary audiences, often reinforcing the deprecating stereotypes they seek to reject.

Several literary critics have grappled with these typologies. Jeffrey Leak’s *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (2005), for example, offers a broad consideration of how African American writers respond to prominent myths about black male identity entrenched in American culture, including intellectual inferiority, impulsive sexuality, innate criminality, and cultural depravity. Other studies focus on specific stereotypes of black men. These include James W. Coleman’s *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban* (2001), which suggests that black male writers strive toward “liberation” and learn to “speak in an empowering voice” in an effort to overcome the tradition of black male silence symbolized by Caliban in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*.

Likewise, Andrew B. Leiter's *In the Shadow of the Black Beast: African American Masculinity in the Harlem and Southern Renaissances* (2010) examines early twentieth-century literary responses to the stereotype of black men as sexually insatiable animals that fueled the lynching fervor during the Jim Crow era. Overall, these studies reveal the complex ways in which African American writers have variously reproduced and challenged the prevailing mythologies of black manhood.

Without a doubt, the stereotypes and archetypes promulgated in literary texts and other forms of cultural production continue to hold sway over the American racial imagination, but critical responses must do more than account for the ways that literature affirms or rejects these typologies or posits a single alternative ideal. Several critics including Michael Awkward, W. Lawrence Hogue, Nathan Grant, Anna Pochmara, and Ronda C. Henry Anthony have already taken steps in this direction and have advanced the conversation beyond the typologies that have dominated the critical conversation so far.¹⁸ In general, these critics call for pluralizing definitions of black manhood to reflect the range of black men's experiences. Yet, as Maurice O. Wallace notes in his foundational study on black masculinity, simply abandoning notions of a single black masculine ideal or dismantling hegemonic notions of racial and gender identity in favor of a more pluralistic understanding of black masculinity is not enough. "Even the most plural conception of masculine formations, to greater or lesser degrees, risks the reconstitution of masculinity into smaller, subtler regimes of heteronormativity and patriarchal prerogatives in black contexts," he warns (15).

Following Wallace's imperative, then, *Heavy Things* focuses neither on the typologies of black masculinity nor on an alternative ideal (or ideals) to which black men ought to aspire. Instead, this study treats black masculinity as a *process* of identity formation mediated through material objects. Every object that circulates within these texts contributes another dimension to the representation of complex and dynamic configurations of black manhood that do not necessarily respond to preexisting typologies, nor do they construct various static ideals of black manhood. Instead, *Heavy Things* illustrates how black male characters affirm fluid, dynamic, and resilient identities by consistently redefining themselves through their engagement with the material world.

Secondly, by focusing on both fictional and nonfictional modes of narration, this study departs from the critical emphasis on black male authorship, which perpetuates gender segregation in African American literary scholarship. The critical impetus to focus on black male writers stems from the conspicuous absence of scholarship on black male writers until recent decades. Indeed, William L. Andrews notes that by the early 1990s, "no one has attempted to write a book on the Black male in American literature," a fact that he attributes to the "criticism's inability to confront, let alone comprehend, this topic" (60). Critics have since heeded his call for a closer examination of black male writers, complementing the theoretical work of black feminists and Womanists in the 1970s and 1980s to provide a fuller account of black male authorship and the construction of black masculine identity. Along these lines, John Christopher Cunningham's *Race-ing Masculinity: Identity in Contemporary U.S. Men's Writing* (2001), which offers a multiethnic approach to male writers' use of literature to theorize

their specific racial and gender identities. Other studies focusing exclusively on black male writers includes Keith Clark's edited volume *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama* (2001) and his monograph, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2002), W. Lawrence Hogue's *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference* (2003), and Daniel Y. Kim's *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005), which offers a comparative study of Ralph Ellison and the Chinese-American author Frank Chin.¹⁹

These studies elucidate the unique rhetorics and politics of black male authorship, but they also preclude sustained dialogue between black men and women writers. As such, *Heavy Things* considers what might be gained from considering literary treatments of black masculinity in texts authored by men and women alongside one another. Indeed, just as women characters such as Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Pamela Street in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* teach male characters different ways of engaging their material surroundings to understand black manhood, African American women writers have much to say to their male counterparts about black manhood through their work. This study brings both men and women writers' literary representations of black men into conversation and uses their shared interest in materiality as a nexus of inquiry.

In fact, extensive precedent for my focus on the material construction of racialized manhood can be found in the work of African American women writers. As Lori Merish argues, early African American women writers including Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Keckley, and Frances E.W. Harper engaged in critiques of

nineteenth-century sentimentalism and material culture. Slave narrators such as Jacobs and Truth, she explains, “demystify sentimental fictions of white male protection, sentimental ownership, and ‘civilized’ masculine authority” to redefine “black women’s political identifications” from chattel to full citizens (193). Furthermore, Merish argues that the rise of consumerism in the late nineteenth century denaturalized racial bodies, transforming them into cultural artifacts whose racial significations could be manipulated through dress and fashion (231). African American women writers such as Keckley and Harper “emphasized the display of the fashionable and commodified body as a form of political and racial contestation” to attain social and political recognition for black women (237).

Contemporary African American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker also use objects to both critique the deleterious effects of white American material culture on black women as well as to illustrate how material objects help create a coherent tradition of African American women’s cultural expression. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) represents a salient example of how such objects can be used as a mode of critique. Claudia systematically dismembers and disembowels the doll she receives for Christmas to discover why “all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” was what they imagined “every girl child treasured” (20), demonstrating her rejection of white standards of beauty propagated through ordinary consumer objects such as children’s toys. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973) illustrates how different valuations of ordinary household objects like a butter churn and quilts reflect oppositional cultural and political affinities. While Maggie and

her mother value these objects both for their practical uses and their place in familial history, Dee learns to value them as quaint artifacts of a primitive culture meant for display rather than use. Her perspective is informed by her experience going away to college, where she seems to have learned to view these familiar household objects with an anthropologist's eye. In sum, Maggie and Dee's competing interpretations of these objects reflect how they see themselves in relation to their shared history and culture.

By focusing on the specific material relations that structure black masculine identity in literary texts by both men and women authors, *Heavy Things* extends the critique of American material culture found in African American women's writing. Since whites have historically used materiality as a way to facilitate the subordination and emasculation black men, examining the construction of both racial and gender identities through material culture is necessary to identify the strategies through which black men cultivated their own definitions of manhood in defiance of white men who define their manhood through possessive materialism. How black male characters interact with and interpret the things that populate their world tell us much about how they see themselves and others in a materially-oriented society.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter in this study is organized around a particular kind of material object that informs the construction of black masculine identity. The study progresses from examining material relations in localized communities to elucidating how black men engage with objects such as historical artifacts and public art to situate themselves within broader temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts. The study also exhibits a general

chronological arch. Although my analysis focuses on African American narratives published after the 1960s, I establish precedent for my study with a consideration of earlier works, including Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. My analysis of contemporary African American writers culminates with a consideration of the contemporary debate over the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the cultural significance of his hooded sweatshirt as an paradoxical emblem of black male vulnerability and antiracist solidarity.

Chapter II, "The Spirit of Giving: Gift Exchange in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" examines gift-giving as a means of restoring ties between black men and their communities that were destroyed by white men whose institutionalized power is represented in figures such as Hugh Auld in Douglass's *Narrative* and Sheriff Guidry in Gaines's novel. Drawing on anthropological investigations of gift exchange and social reciprocity, I illustrate how gifts reestablish social connections between alienated black men and their communities. Gift-giving, I argue, operates as an alternative economy in which members of a community can resist the institutionalized forms of racism that socially and economically alienate black men and limits the idea of black manhood defined by whites.

Chapter III, "In Search of Our Father's Bones: Recovering Black Fatherhood in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong*, examines narratives in which black male characters embark on archaeological quests to suture their ruptured paternal ancestries. I contextualize my analysis in sociological debates about black fathers during the twentieth century, focusing on how African American writers

respond to sociological criticism of absent fathers in African American families.

Narratives about African American fathers are characterized by gaps and silences that haunt their sons. In these narratives, black male characters attempt to understand these silences by examining artifacts of their fathers' lives, although in the case of Wideman, the silences wrought by murder in his family history ultimately prove too painful to voice.

Chapter IV, "Monumental Manhood: Commemoration and Abjection in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter*" examines depictions of black male abjection within the history of monument-building in the United States. Whitehead and Raboteau's novels point out how public art such as statues and monuments reinscribe imagery of black men as victims, rather than authorizing their self-determination. Each of these works points out how monuments and memorials reinscribe black male abjection as a dominant cultural trope even while these objects attempt to commemorate and honor black men. These texts, I argue, offer a paradigm for interpreting public monuments and other objects commemorating black men, which I illustrate by applying their critiques to the debates surrounding the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in the National Mall. My analysis concludes by illustrating how the King memorial itself critiques the inextricable relationship between black male abjection and heroism in American cultural memory.

Chapter V, "Are We All Trayvon?" concludes my study by applying my analysis of materiality in literary texts to the circulation of Trayvon Martin's gray hooded sweatshirt, or "hoodie," in American popular media. After the 2012 shooting death of the

Florida teen, his gray hoodie appeared in viral images, ranging from white men dressing up as Trayvon for Halloween to a group of Howard University medical students wearing hoodies in solidarity to debunk stereotypes of young black men as criminals or delinquents. If literary texts “become objects of knowledge about physical objects,” as Bill Brown argues, then understanding how writers depict the material construction of black men in their narratives can help us critically read Trayvon Martin’s hoodie as a reflection of contemporary anxieties about black men within the hyper-connected digital society of the early twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Surprisingly, few critics have examined Ellison's treatment of American material culture in *Invisible Man*. For example, see Rosemary Hathaway's essay, "Painful Yet Precious Things" and Robert Stepto's "Literacy and Hibernation." My reading of materiality in *Invisible Man* departs especially from Hathaway's more favorable interpretation of the briefcase, its contents, and other objects circulating throughout the novel as constitutive of his revelation at the end of the novel.

² See Baker's critique of Dyson's valuation of hip-hop culture in *Betrayal* (80-97). Baker accuses Dyson of writing "pamphlets" that are more polemical than scholarly. He even retracts a blurb he wrote for his book, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (83), citing logical inconsistencies in Dyson's analysis of gangsta rap that he obscured with stylistic flourishes.

³ Ellison's intention to have the briefcase signify these competing notions of racialized manhood is evident in his response to a question following his lecture "On Initiation Rites and Power," Ellison delivered at West Point on March 26, 1969. A cadet asks him about the invisible man's response to the white men who chase him into the manhole when he says, "I still have you in this brief case." Ellison explains that he "wanted him" to say "that these men who were hurling racial epithets down at him were not aware that *their* fate was in this bag that he carried [...] that this contained a very important part of their history and of their lives. And I was trying to say, also, that you will have to become aware of the connection between what is in this bag [...] and the racist whites who looked upon him mainly as a buffoon and a victim" (61).

⁴ The first use of the term is generally attributed to U.S. Senator Henry Clay, who says in a speech to the U.S. Senate on February 2, 1832: “In Kentucky, almost every manufactory known to me, is in the hands of enterprising and self-made men, who have acquired whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor” (39).

⁵ In Chapter 3 of *National Manhood*, Dana D. Nelson draws particular attention to how the professionalization of medicine and science contributed to the racialization of manhood in the United States, citing the influence of Samuel Morton’s now debunked research into racial differentiation by cranial capacity as her primary example.

⁶ To clarify, Tocqueville did not interpret these anxieties as specific indicators of a crisis in manhood. He did, however, identify American materialism as a threat to democratic government. As he explains: “Materialism is, among all nations, a dangerous disease of the human mind; but it is more especially to be dreaded among a democratic people, because it readily amalgamates with that vice which is most familiar to the heart under such circumstances. Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification: this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in turn, hurries them back with mad impatience to these same delights: such is the fatal circle within which democratic nations are driven round. It were well that they should see the danger and hold back” (227).

⁷ For more on black men and turn-of-the-century labor movements, see Philip Sheldon Foner’s *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1691-1981* and Chapter 3,

“Black Labor in the Progressive Era” in Paul D. Moreno’s *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History*.

⁸ For the purposes of my analysis, I refer to DuBois because his emphasis on promoting an educated black middle-class is most relevant to my focus on materialism. DuBois, however, was not the only black male leader at the turn of the twentieth century to strategically appropriate the tropes of self-made manhood. For example, see Chapter 2, “A Spirit of Manliness” in Martin Summers’s *Manliness and Its Discontents*, which analyzes Marcus Garvey’s use of self-made manhood in his promotion of black nationalism.

⁹ Printed collections and explications of DuBois’s photographs can be found in David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis’s *A Small Nation of People* and Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture*.

¹⁰ The foundational critical study of black masculinity in contemporary American culture is Robert Staples’s *Black Masculinity: The Black Male’s Role in American Society* (1982). Several subsequent cultural studies have been published during the past three decades, including Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson’s influential *Cool Pose* (1992), David Marriot’s *On Black Men* (2000), Renford Reese’s *American Paradox* (2004), Bryant Keith Alexander’s *Performing Black Masculinity* (2006), Linda G. Tucker’s *Lockstep and Dance* (2007), and Mark Anthony Neal’s *New Black Man* (2005) and *Looking for Leroy* (2013). Edited volumes dedicated to representations of black men

in American culture include Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham's *Representing Black Men* (1996), Ronald L. Jackson II and Marc C. Hopson's *Masculinity in the Black Imagination* (2011), as well as Thelma Golden's edited essay collection in the catalog for the *Black Male* exhibit on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1994).

¹¹ In contrast to hooks, Michael Eric Dyson argues that focusing on the superficial materialism and sexism of hip-hop culture actually occludes the way young black men indict "mainstream and black bourgeoisie institutions" ("Gangsta" 416). Whereas hooks reads materialism in hip hop culture as evidence of young black men's complicity in their own oppression, Dyson views hip-hop's superficial materialism as an ironic critique of the middle class.

¹² Although they are not specifically covered in this study, metafictional texts such as Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988), John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (1996), and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) are excellent examples of metafictional texts focused on black male characters. Nonetheless, my study of John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong* in Chapter 4 does point toward the possibility of examining metafictional texts as objects.

¹³ More accurately, the invisible man exhibits what Lauren Berlant calls a relation of "cruel optimism." According to Berlant, this relation "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). By examining the process through which one maintains "an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24), Berlant

continues, we can understand the “practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people’s struggles to change” and “the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast” (27).

¹⁴ Such household items and memorabilia that depict racial caricatures remain popular collectors’ items and are cataloged in several guidebooks, including P.G. Gibbs, *Black Collectibles: Sold in America* (1987), Douglas Congdon-Martin, *Images in Black: 150 Years of Black Collectibles* (Schiffer, 1990), Jackie Young, *Black Collectibles: Mammy and Her Friends* (Schiffer, 1991), Dawn E. Reno, *The Encyclopedia of Black Collectibles: A Value and Identification Guide* (Wallace Homestead, 1996), and Kyle Husfloen, *Black Americana Price Guide* (Krause 2005). Critical studies of racist object and memorabilia include: Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1994), Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Indiana UP, 1994), Larry Vincent Buster and Alex Markovich, *The Art and History of Black Memorabilia* (C. Potter, 2000).

¹⁵ For another example of weight used as a metaphor of black manhood in hip-hop culture, see Kevin Powell’s autobiographical *Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?* Powell suggests that hip-hop provides men with a space where they can “have [their] own version of power,” although he cautions that black men often uncritically accept the materialist and misogynist logic through which they express that power (64).

¹⁶ David Pilgrim, “The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects.” *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Objects*. Feb 2005. Web.

¹⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Should Blacks Collect Racist Memorabilia?” *The Root*. 3 June 2013. Web.

¹⁸ Nathan Grant’s *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity* and Anna Pochmara’s *Making the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (2011) both provide accounts of how writers imagine alternative models of black masculine identities and sexualities that were excluded from the hegemonic gender norms of the Harlem Renaissance. In *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women’s Bodies* (2013), Ronda C. Henry Anthony engages a discussion across feminist, masculinist, and Womanist criticism in her study of how black male writers throughout the twentieth century attempted to construct “progressive black masculinities” via representations of women’s bodies. See also Aimé J. Ellis’s *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (2011).

¹⁹ Several anthologies of black men’s writing have been published at the same time that scholars have begun to examine black male authorship, and especially autobiography. These include Rebecca Carroll’s *Swing Low* (1995), Don Belton’s *Speak My Name* (1995), and Rudolph P Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Traps* (2001).

CHAPTER II

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING: GIFT EXCHANGE IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S *NARRATIVE* AND ERNEST J. GAINES'S *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

Masculinity is a prevalent theme throughout Ernest J. Gaines's fictional *oeuvre*.¹ Among the most explicit treatment of masculinity in his work can be found in *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), in which a teacher, Grant Wiggins, visits a young man named Jefferson who has been convicted of murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. Set in the fictional town of Bayonne, Louisiana and the nearby plantation quarters during the 1940s, the black men that inhabit Gaines's fictional world face constant challenges to their masculinity. Some of these challenges came in the form of segregationist laws that legitimized the exclusion of black men from meaningful work and political engagement, both of which functioned as hallmarks of masculine agency. At the same time, entrenched fears of black male sexuality and power, coupled with a biased legal system, disproportionately criminalized, incarcerated, and executed black men, if they were lucky enough that white vigilantes would not get to them first. Within this segregated social order, white men not only defined the parameters of manhood but also institutionalized ways of denying black men access to "manhood" as they defined it.

The best-known and most controversial literary commentary on the emasculating and dehumanizing effects of institutionalized racism in the United States during Jim Crow is most certainly Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son* (1940). In this novel, Wright allegorized the vilified black male in the figure of Bigger Thomas, whose quest for

meaningful work at the beginning of the novel quickly transforms into a narrative of survival and then, ultimately, a descent into violence and despair. By tracing Bigger's descent, Wright exacts a powerful critique of the socioeconomic factors that shaped black men's lives during this period, showing the inescapably fatal consequences of white racism and perceptions of black male inferiority. Its outlook is undeniably bleak, even nihilistic. As James Baldwin put it in his famous analysis, *Native Son* offers only a "rejection of life" because its main character absorbs the "theology" of the society that controls him. In short, Bigger becomes the beast that white readers of *Native Son*—and indeed, white Americans in general—expect him to be.

Published over fifty years after *Native Son*, *A Lesson Before Dying* reprises the Bigger Thomas archetype. Despite their disparate locations (*Lesson* takes place in rural Louisiana, while *Native Son* takes place in Chicago), their protagonists find themselves subjected to remarkably similar situations. Both Bigger and Jefferson feel trapped by circumstances that lead to their criminalization and imprisonment, and both novels suggest that the oppressive social conditions of Jim Crow America systematically alienate and persecute young black men. While *Native Son* treats Bigger's incarceration and execution as the inevitable conclusion to Bigger's troubled life, Gaines sets his story during the period of time that Jefferson waits in prison. As such, Gaines begins where Wright leaves off – at the nadir of their characters' lives. By focusing on this period of incarceration, Gaines attempts to breathe life into the proverbial "dead man walking" with which Wright concludes *Native Son*. While *Native Son* expresses a "rejection of

life” as it follows Bigger’s downfall, *A Lesson Before Dying* attempts to affirm the manhood of Jefferson, a reprisal of the “bad nigger” archetype made famous by Wright.

That *A Lesson Before Dying* attempts to affirm black manhood in the face of white racism has already been noted by several scholars. To date, however, criticism of *A Lesson Before Dying* tends to focus on masculinity as a discursive construction and identifies language as the means through which Gaines’s main characters reclaim their manhood. These readings generally neglect the historical and socioeconomic context of the story.² Language undeniably affirms masculinity in the novel, wherein black male characters attempt to redefine themselves through the acts of speaking and writing. Keith Clark’s description of the importance of language and voice in these transformations is representative of this vein of interpretation: “The key facets of this reconfigured black male subjectivity,” he explains, “are storytelling and story-listening; voicedness—reconstructing the self via language within a community of historically connected individuals” (77). As Clark and others have pointed out, both Grant and Jefferson develop a voice through which they redefine themselves in their final speech acts. While Jefferson affirms his manhood and his humanity in general through his journal, Grant finally begins to disavow masculine violence and self-interest, as evinced in the closing scene when he cries, humbled and emotionally vulnerable, in front of his students.

Although the novel resolves by affirming black manhood through language, the question of how these transformations take place in the two men remains unresolved. Through their focus on language, critics have taken for granted that Jefferson and Grant need only to affirm their manhood rather than fundamentally restructure the

socioeconomic order that affirms white manhood and emasculates black men. In effect, the critical consensus seems to be that Jefferson's statement, "tell them im strong tell them im a man," somehow brings around his existential transformation without respect to his surrounding community and environment (234). Such interpretations of *A Lesson Before Dying* seem to confuse the end with the means. Writing and speaking are certainly transformational activities in the text, but discourse alone is not enough to shake loose the feelings of imprisonment and helplessness that plague Jefferson and Grant throughout much of the novel. In fact, *Lesson* is about ineffective discourse as much as it is about speaking and storytelling, illustrated when Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose visit Jefferson in prison but cannot understand why he will not talk with them. They are equally perplexed when Grant begins to reach him when they cannot. If discourse alone is the means to transformation, then why does Jefferson refuse to speak with them throughout most of the novel? Alternatively, what is unique about Grant's relationship with Jefferson that facilitates their communication and restores the ruptured black communal ties imperative to defining their manhood?

This chapter addresses such questions by elucidating an often neglected feature of *A Lesson Before Dying*: namely, the exchange of gifts within the community and their role in Jefferson's transformation from "hog" to "man." In particular, the act of giving supplants the oppressive socioeconomic conditions that antagonize black life in the Quarters, physically and psychologically imprisoning Jefferson and Grant. Their confinement, like Bigger Thomas's, results from their having absorbed the "theology" of their surroundings: namely, their ostensible inferiority and inadequacy as black men

imposed on them by white definitions of manhood. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant and Jefferson do not break out of their psychological prisons through language alone; the exchange of gifts proves equally important to their liberation from the American myths of white manhood. Specifically, Gaines uses gift exchange to mend the communal bonds that are necessary for these men to redefine themselves. Through this materialist reevaluation of community, Gaines shifts definitions of manhood away from abstract notions of individual autonomy and patriarchal authority, both of which are entrenched in white social ideology, to a more communal way-of-being. Grant's interactions with Jefferson succeed where others fail precisely because the exchange of gifts in the prison cell reminds Jefferson that he is a member of a life-sustaining community, even as he is alienated by a racist patriarchal society that needs to emasculate, imprison, and condemn him. Through this analysis we can see that the restoration of Jefferson's manhood does not result from his discursive self-identification as a man by writing it in his journal, but instead from the creation of an alternative gift economy that heals rather than destroys bonds between black men and their communities.

The following analysis is divided into three sections. In the first part, I contextualize *A Lesson Before Dying* within sociological and anthropological theories of gift exchange. This critical context explains the social function of gift exchange and identifies the distinguishing features of gift economies in modern capitalistic societies. In particular, gift-giving plays a critical role in structuring social relations even within oppressive socioeconomic systems. The second section establishes precedent for my reading of *Lesson* by examining Sandy Jenkins's gift of a magical root in Frederick

Douglass's *Narrative* (1845). Although critics generally interpret Douglass's narrative as a reiteration of the individualist paradigm of the self-made man, I argue that Douglass implicitly constructs his manhood through a revived sense of community signified by Sandy's gift. I then illustrate how Gaines appropriates gift-giving from this foundational narrative of black masculine self-realization in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Ultimately, Jefferson can reclaim his masculine identity only because he has been enveloped in a resilient and resistant community formed through gift exchange. By drawing attention to the materialist underpinning of this community, we can see that Gaines ironically arrives at a representation of black manhood that is not merely discursive or performative but constituted by social relations mediated by gifted objects.

Gift Economies and Social Reciprocity

Gifts have significantly populated the American literary tradition since the earliest colonial narratives. In some cases, writers depict gift-giving as a utilitarian practice used to gain power and influence over others, while in other instances gifts create feelings of indebtedness and reciprocity that foster strong social relationships. African American depictions of gift exchange such as Douglass's and Gaines's embrace both of these tropes, wherein the reciprocating social relationships established by gift-giving facilitate communal modes of resistance to oppressive socioeconomic conditions. In other words, gifts become signifying objects that can both promote and resist social dominance.

This utilitarian function of gift-exchange appears in early American travel narratives, wherein explorers participate in gift-giving rituals to facilitate and disguise their imperialist missions. In the narratives of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, friendly

tribal leaders instruct the explorers on how to participate in customary gift exchange when visiting indigenous homes and villages (133-134). In contrast to Cabeza de Vaca's acceptance of native gifting rituals, Christopher Columbus, incomparably smitten with gold-lust, dismisses many of the gifts (cotton, beads, bits of glass) given to him by the Native Americans as worthless. He nonetheless recognizes the inherent value of gift-giving as a practice "well employed" in their quest for riches, and he participates in their custom by reciprocating with gifts of his own (129).³ In the *Generall Historie of Virginia*, John Smith also describes the exchange of gifts between colonists and Native Americans in utilitarian terms. Whereas Cabeza de Vaca and Columbus successfully placate indigenous peoples, the gifts bestowed upon Powhatan by Smith prove ineffectual. No matter how generous Smith and his fellow Englishmen are toward the "Salvages," Smith suggests, their ostensibly deceitful and violent nature cannot be tamed, leaving armed conflict as the only alternative. In each of these colonial narratives, defining the terms of exchange and expecting a reciprocating response from their recipients invariably establishes masculine domination over native populations. In effect, gift-giving determines the exploitative relationship between masculinized Western imperialists and their feminized colonial subjects.⁴ When indigenous peoples accept the gifts and capitulate to the explorers' powers, they are easily subordinated and, in the case of Columbus, explicitly feminized. In fact, Columbus even counts women among the gifts bestowed upon them, who serve as guides as they explore new territories and, implicitly, as sexual objects.

From these earliest encounters, gift-giving clearly plays a central role in North American configurations of masculine power, wherein gift-giving can foster cooperation as well as colonial domination. Other narratives, however, imbue gift exchange with transcendent and even spiritual significance. O’Henry’s short story “The Gift of the Magi” (1905), for example, depicts gift-giving as a spiritual act as well as a utilitarian practice. In the story, Jim and Della sell their most valued possessions—a pocket watch and long, flowing hair, respectively—so they can purchase items which they willingly and sacrificially give, expecting nothing in return. Nonetheless, the story bears a striking resemblance to the treatment of gift exchange in colonial narratives, in that the ritual of gift exchange always implies an expectation of reciprocity. Both Jim and Della give generously to please the other, but they ironically give items—a comb and a watch fob—meant to complement the possessions that the other had sold. Unlike the utilitarian value of gift-giving in exploration narratives, O. Henry suggests that the value of gifts is intangible. In this instance, gift exchange becomes spiritual and ritualistic reenactment of gift-giving at the Nativity, translating the Nativity story’s trope of divine sacrifice and human indebtedness into a narrative of mutual sacrifice and generosity.⁵

These narratives tell us that gift-giving is an expression of complex and often unpredictable relationships in the American literary tradition. Even in contemporary consumer culture, gifts can create profound and intimate connections between people. For example, the gift of a family heirloom or keepsake affirms family cohesion across generations. Some gifts, such as birthday or graduation presents, celebrate individuals and their achievements. Others, such as those given for a house-warming or baby shower,

promote a sense of community, either welcoming someone to the neighborhood or into a distinctive cultural status, such as “motherhood” or “retiree.” Gifts can be given to grease the wheels of an economy, such as when companies use the promise of “free gifts” to entice customers and promote consumer loyalty. Gift-giving during religious holidays, however commodified it has become in contemporary American consumer culture, is also grounded in ancient symbolic and ritualistic practices. Whether gift-giving is selfless or self-serving, practical, commercial, or spiritual, it is undeniably an entrenched element of American cultural identity that influences our sense of community and solidarity.

Notwithstanding the popular cultural significance of gifts, critical inquiries into gift exchange practices indicate that gifts are also ideological objects. For example, anthropological and sociological studies of gift exchange suggest many of the same thematic patterns of racial and gender domination, reciprocity, and spiritual indebtedness found in the American literary tradition. For our present purposes, understanding these ongoing debates about the social and economic function of gift-giving is important because it contextualizes central ideological tensions in *A Lesson Before Dying*: namely, between the socioeconomic forces that whites use to dehumanize and emasculate black men, and the alternative gift economy created by Grant and the surrounding community that empowers Jefferson to cope with this erosion of his manhood.

Anthropological studies of gift exchange reveal how it creates cohesive communal bonds in the absence of an established market economy. These interpretations echo the representation of gift-giving in the early colonial narratives of Cabeza de Vaca, Columbus, and Smith described above. Anthropologists likewise describe it as an archaic

ritual, albeit one that has since been supplanted by modern capitalist economies. This argument is most notably articulated by Marcel Mauss in *Essai sur le don* (1924, translated as *The Gift*), in which he examines gift-giving in several so-called “primitive” (i.e. nonindustrial, non-Western) societies. For Mauss, gift exchange predominates in societies where modern market economies have not yet developed. Gift-giving rituals such as the potlatch provide the structural foundations of these so-called “archaic” or “primitive” societies as members vie for social status.

Mauss’s work is most notable for his explanation of the “inalienability” of the gift, which implies that the reciprocating social relationships formed by gift exchange are not restricted by the rules of a market economy. Unlike commodities in Marx’s theory of production in which laborers are alienated from the things they produce, the gift retains “the spirit of the thing given” that cannot be separated from the person who gives it. Mauss derives this reciprocal model of gift-giving from the Maori concept of *hau*, the spirit of gifts that necessitate mutual relationships between givers and receivers. “The *hau* wants to return to the place of its birth,” he explains, and receivers of a gift are obligated to see that the spirit makes that voyage home (9). That is not to say that the receiver of a gift must immediately and directly reciprocate to the original giver; to the contrary, the “spirit” travels with the gift across any number of exchanges that connects its possessors to one another. Each exchange in this formulation gets the spirit of the gift closer to its home, a process which envelopes all members of the society in guiding the gift toward its destiny.

Notwithstanding Mauss's sketchy metaphysics in this conclusion, his analysis of the inalienability of gifts raises important questions about the fundamental differences between gift exchange and modern market economies. How, for example, do ostensibly inalienable gifts coexist and interact with commodities in modern industrial societies? Furthermore, if gift exchanges promote social cohesion and order, how are these social relationships different from those formed by market economies? Mauss points toward but does not answer these questions because he devalues gift exchange in modern social life. According to Mauss, gift exchange precedes modern markets that "turned man into an economic animal," and it exists today only within these isolated "primitive" societies and in entrenched rituals such as religious holidays and birthday celebrations (74). Gifts, insofar as they remain part of modern society, evoke different commitments between people in a society than those required by the exchange of commodities, but they do not constitute viable economies on their own. Despite these limitations, the chief contribution of Mauss's work for our purposes is recognizing that gifts are intimate expressions of indebtedness that are not bound to material debts (for example, repaying a loan) that are the basis of modern market economies.

More recently, sociologists have reevaluated Mauss's dismissal of gift-giving within developed market economies, concluding that gift exchange remains a vital part of modern social organization and even constitutes its own economic system. Although the question of whether gifts can be distinguished from commodities on the basis of their "inalienability" remains unresolved, sociologists have arrived at some consensus about the role of gift exchange in forming intimate social relationships, which we find reflected

in both Douglass's *Narrative* and Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*.⁶ For example, Pierre Bourdieu's account of the utilitarian function of gifts in generating "social capital" echoes the utilitarian uses of gifts described in the early exploration narratives while also showing how such uses form social bonds. As he explains, the exchange of objects is "consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable" (87). Whether the outlook is short or long-term, exchange transforms "contingent relations, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)" (87). In other words, the exchange of objects generates both obligatory and voluntary social relationships that do not depend on the market value of the things exchanged. The "consecration" of these relationships occurs when they are institutionalized and familiarized, for example, in kinship relations or recognizable socioeconomic statuses. Bourdieu identifies gifts as one form of exchange through which these relationships are "endlessly reproduced" (87). Ultimately, exchange promotes "mutual knowledge and recognition" among members of a society, transforming "things exchanged" into emblems of those mutual social relationships (87).

The most significant contribution of sociological inquiry into gift exchange for our purposes, however, is the notion that gift-giving itself constitutes a viable economic system even within an oppressive market economy. What differentiates gift economies from market economies, according to sociologist David Cheal, is that gift-giving is redundant (i.e. unnecessary) and is an expression of moral rather than market-based debt.

As Cheal explains, a gift economy is “a system of redundant transactions within a moral economy, which makes possible the extended reproduction of social relations” (19).

While market exchange presumes the need for some net benefit in a transaction, gift economies are “redundant” because they are voluntary and gratuitous. As a result, the feelings of obligation and indebtedness that result from gift exchange operate outside of the parameters of market rules and expectations. In other words, all reciprocating exchanges in gift economies are “redundant” because they are given “beyond” the expectations of “mere duty” (13). Furthermore, Cheal’s emphasis on redundancy suggests that perfunctory exchange of gifts is not gift-giving at all. To give under duress does not strengthen or create meaningful social relations; indeed, obligatory giving more likely exposes the erosion of social bonds and admits to the lack of desire to restore them. Even the hint that a gift is perfunctorily given diminishes its value *qua* gift, reducing it to the status of commodity.

What drives the gift economy, then, is not a sense of commercial indebtedness (the exchange of goods in a barter system or currency in a market economy) but a moral obligation. As Cheal explains, gift economies are intimate and communal expressions of friendship, love, and gratitude rather than the expectation of net gain. Unlike market economies which generate inequitable conditions through the inherent risks of profit and loss, gift economies are “moral” in that they arise out of inequitable conditions by restoring balance and social ties to promote voluntary and supportive social relationships. Moral economies, of which gift-giving is a feature, “exist alongside political economies” to foster trust, stability, and solidarity “used in the ritual construction of small social

worlds” (15-16). Unlike the alienating effects of the production and exchange of goods in market economies, gift economies are constructed within “twin systems of social organization” that Cheal identifies as “intimacy” and “community” (171-172). To give and receive a gift is to be welcomed into an intimate community and, Cheal suggests, to possibly reverse the isolation that results from our participation as laborers and consumers in modern market economies.

These sociological analyses of gift exchange help us reexamine their representation in the American literary tradition by drawing attention to their potential use not as a technique of imperial conquest, as described by the early explorers, but instead as a method of communal resistance to socioeconomic domination. Such implications have special significance for the literary depiction of black men whose racial subordination is also a function of their perceived emasculation. If white men continue the colonial tradition of predicating masculine ideals on their ability to subordinate and emasculate nonwhite men through economic practices, then gift exchange can serve as an alternative economy through which black men restore their right to self-determinacy. In both Douglass’s *Narrative* and Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, gift exchange creates “small social worlds” in which black men resist the emasculating effects of white domination.

Sandy’s Root in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

The potential of gifts to form these intimate communal relationships generate resistant and restorative representations of black masculinity in the African American literary tradition. An early example can be found in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the*

Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845). In this first incarnation of his autobiography, one gift in particular—a root given to him by a slave named Sandy Jenkins—proves essential to his escape and emancipation. While *Lesson* recalls the psychological imprisonment and social alienation experienced by Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, it also draws upon the trope of gift-giving from Douglass’s *Narrative* to help Grant and Jefferson surmount psychological and social obstacles that try to dehumanize and emasculate them. To show how Gaines rewrites Wright’s bleak depiction of Bigger Thomas through gift exchange, however, we must first reconsider conventional interpretations of Douglass’s *Narrative* as an iteration of the self-made man motif. Shifting focus away from Douglass’s brawl with the slave-breaker Edward Covey toward Sandy’s gift of a magic root as the turning point of Douglass’s narrative prompts a reevaluation of Douglass’s depiction of masculine agency. His self-assertion is not merely an act of individual empowerment but a product of communal resistance signaled by Sandy’s gift. We can then see how Gaines reaches back to this tradition of black manhood exemplified by Douglass’s *Narrative* to ground his own depiction of restored masculinity in acts of communal resistance.

The idea that Douglass’s manhood arises out of communal solidarity rather than individual will challenge decades of scholarship on Douglass’s autobiographical writings. In particular, critics often interpret Douglass’s *Narrative* as a reiteration of prominent nineteenth-century ideals of the “self-made man.”⁷ As noted in Chapter 1, one of the most influential early examples of self-made manhood can be found in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, in which he lauds industriousness and education as the means to self-

improvement. Douglass certainly follows Franklin in using the autobiographical tradition as a means of self-fashioning, a point emphasized through his acquisition of power not only through physical force but also through his autodidacticism: he teaches himself to read and write by manipulating his young slaveholder Thomas Auld, and he later uses that learning in his writing and speeches on issues ranging from abolition to women's suffrage.⁸ David Leverenz expresses this view clearly when he claims that Douglass's *Narrative* reflects a masculine "ideal of connecting manly self-reliance with power, and disconnecting manhood from feelings of need or vulnerability" (361). Indeed, Douglass's personal resilience and tenacity as a speaker is undeniable in his autobiographies, and especially in his expanded 1855 version, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Notwithstanding that Douglass's depictions of himself resonate with the ideals of independence and self-making that characterized nineteenth-century notions of manhood, his *Narrative* also suggests that his self-actualization ironically emerges from a rare admission of vulnerability and dependency. Rendering himself vulnerable, however temporarily, is necessary for Douglass to announce the restoration of his manhood in the second half of the narrative, famously declared in his chiasmus, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (389). To accept the conventional reading that Douglass's masculine self-definition is disconnected from his vulnerability is to miss the rhetorical impact of this statement as a mechanism through which Douglass structures the two parts of his narratives. This statement represents not only a turn from personal degradation to self-determination, but also a turn from alienation to communal solidarity.

That Douglass's vulnerability is a function of his alienation within the slaveholding economy of the plantation is apparent when he becomes severely ill. Douglass explains that he struggles through his work despite his illness and fatigue, realizing that "no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time" (389-390). Since none of the other slaves can aid him by fanning his share of the wheat, Douglass "nerved" himself "up" for an inevitable punishment (390). When Covey notices that his fan had stopped, he investigates the reason and finds Douglass resting near the fence, too weak to continue working. Douglass explains to Covey that he is sick, but Covey relentlessly kicks him and beats him with a slat of hickory wood. In contrast to earlier depictions of himself as iron-willed and insubordinate, Douglass simply succumbs to the abuse, "having made up" his "mind" to let Covey "do" his "worst" (390). Through this episode, Douglass inextricably links his submission to Covey to the alienating effects of the slave economy. Here, the absence of communal solidarity seems to accelerate his loss of personal will. Once irrepressible and defiant, Douglass now finds himself disaffected, weak, and alone.

The period between Douglass's nadir in this episode and his self-assertion during his fight with Covey is often overlooked, and yet it provides essential details about the role of community in facilitating his masculine restoration. Notably, Covey's beating of Douglass prompts him to seek help for the first time, which he recounts as a variation on the *Exodus* story of Moses crossing the Red Sea. After fleeing from Covey, walking seven miles through the wilderness, and collapsing several times from his injuries, Douglass reaches the store of his slaveholder, Thomas Auld, in St. Michaels. The error

here, of course, is that he puts stock in the compassion of a slave-holder. While Moses fled Egypt and encountered God in the form of a burning bush that inspires him to return to Egypt and emancipate the Israelite slaves, Douglass fled Covey to appeal to Auld who, God-like in his own mind, compels the forlorn slave to return to his brutal overseer.

Predictably, Auld dismisses Douglass's claims of abuse, at first explaining that he must have deserved such harsh treatment, and then suggesting that Covey is too reputable of a man to be so brutal. Douglass, like Moses, follows the instructions of his master, staying the night in St. Michaels and returning "wearied in body and broken in spirit" to Covey the next morning. Unlike the divine order received by Moses, however, Douglass obeys only to anticipate more abuse, or possibly death, by Covey's hand. By alluding to *Exodus*, Douglass points out the contradictions between scripture and his state of servitude, suggesting that Auld's dismissal of his appeal is not only unsympathetic but also hypocritical for a "Christian" slave-holder. God's commandment to Moses to return to Egypt and free the Israelites becomes a virtual death-sentence in Douglass's *Narrative*. Furthermore, contrasting his travails with this triumphant biblical story is an especially persuasive strategy to highlight the incongruities between scripture and the American slave-holding system for his pious readership.⁹ Douglass has no hope of attaining his personal freedom at this point, let alone leading enslaved men and women to the Promised Land.

The hope for emancipation in Douglass's rendition of *Exodus*, then, comes not in the form of a divine mandate from a burning bush but from a compassionate fellow slave and willing companion, Sandy Jenkins. That Douglass introduces Sandy Jenkins at this

moment when he is most despondent is significant because it subtly signals a moment of communal resistance against Covey and the slaveholding system at large, which Douglass must confront just as Moses faced the Pharaoh when he returned to Egypt to liberate the Israelites. Furthermore, it suggests that Douglass's restoration of manhood in the second half of the narrative is not disconnected from a sense of vulnerability and dependence, as Leverenz asserts. Instead, it emerges from the physical and psychological nourishment that he receives from Sandy. We see here that Douglass does not seek his liberation because of a divine mandate nor a sense of unbridled masculine strength, but because he feels empowered by the restorative companionship provided by Sandy and his wife, signified by Sandy's gift of a magic root.

An otherwise minor episode in the *Narrative*, Douglass references Sandy and his root repeatedly during his physical confrontation with Covey. These references suggest that Douglass attributes his ability to resist Covey physically to the restorative support received at Sandy's home, even while he questions the magical efficacy of the root itself. In the first place, Sandy becomes a sympathetic listener to Douglass's "circumstances" and provides him with shelter for the night when he otherwise would have been forced to return to Covey or perish in the wilderness alone. Douglass makes it clear that he is too "wearied in body and broken in spirit" to confront Covey on his own (392). When he approaches the house, Covey emerges enraged, and Douglass flees into the cornfield. That Douglass does not possess the personal strength or fortitude to confront Covey at this point is obvious when he explains his ultimatum: he can either "go home and be whipped to death," or "stay in the woods and be starved" (392). Douglass means these

fatal choices literally; he has already gone two days without nourishment, and given his “unaccountable” behavior, he is certain that Covey will show no mercy once he returns to the slaveholder.

Through his encounter with Sandy, then, Douglass restores his wearied body and broken spirit that empowers him to confront and eventually fight against Covey. When he meets Sandy who is walking the home of his wife, a freewoman who lives a few miles from Covey, Douglass subtly indicates that Sandy is not just a companion but also a shrewd strategist. Sandy recognizes that Douglass must follow Auld’s orders and return to Covey or risk dying in the wilderness, but he also knows that his return is perilous, especially in Douglass’s physically and emotionally weakened state. Whether the root has magical properties becomes a moot point if we consider how the root, as a gift, establishes a “small social world” between Douglass and Sandy within which Douglass can begin to resist his subordination. The root, Sandy explains, had protected him “for years,” during which time “he had never received a blow, and never expected to” as long as he wears the root on his right side. Although Sandy apparently believes in the root’s magic, he does not require that Douglass believe it as well for the root to become a source of protection. If the root “did no good” it would “do no harm,” either, Sandy explains (393). He likewise assures Douglass that neither Covey nor “any other white man” would whip him as long as he likewise carries the root. Although he is unconvinced, Douglass nonetheless takes the root “to please him” and “according to his direction,” carried it on his right side (393).

Even though Douglass is skeptical of the root's power, this exchange nonetheless illustrates how the act of gift exchange facilitates a reciprocal relationship between the vulnerable Douglass and the sagacious Sandy. The act of giving is an expression of a reciprocal bond between the two men, and a physical emblem of their shared strategies of survival. Douglass felt the alienating effects of the slavery economy when his fellow slaves were unable to help him by keeping his fan moving when he was too ill to work, but Sandy's gift, as an expression of solidarity, reverses Douglass's sense of alienation from the slave community. Sandy initiates the formation of this "small social world" that David Cheal explains is a function of gift-giving in an oppressive society, but Douglass's acceptance of the gift suggests his desire to reciprocate. What he offers Sandy in return is not a tangible reward, but an acknowledgement of his experience: taking the gift "to please" Sandy is a gesture of gratitude and respect, despite his skepticism of the root's efficacy. His acceptance of Sandy's gift, then, is a rhetorical strategy that allows him to reveal how slaves formed communities of resistance while still maneuvering within the expectations of his audience. Indeed, suggesting that he had been conspiring to overthrow his slaveholder rather than acting independently may have raised fears of rebellion among some of his readers, while others may have found any hint of believing in the root's power to be antithetical to his professed belief in Christianity.

If Douglass does not believe in the root's power, however, then why does he keep it with him during his return to Covey? Furthermore, if he wants to present his physical fight with the slave-breaker as an expression of masculine self-assertion, why does he consistently allude to the root instead of summarily dismissing it? Reading the root not

only as a magical object but also a gift helps us wrangle with his apparent ambivalence toward it, simultaneously embracing it in his desperation while also questioning its efficacy. In effect, Douglass tries to have it both ways by alternately suggesting and then questioning the root's power. "Had it been on any other day than Sunday," Douglass explains, he "could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root" (393). By rationalizing that Covey's kindness is a matter of religious propriety of not punishing slaves on the Sabbath, Douglass is able to keep readers guessing whether the root has any real power.

This ambiguity becomes instrumental in accounting for his physical resistance to Covey the following morning. When Douglass is feeding the horses, Covey ambushes him and attempts to bind him with a long rope, an episode that Douglass claims "truly tested" the "virtue of the *root*" (393). On the one hand, the root appears to have failed, since Covey clearly intends to whip Douglass, or worse. On the other hand, Covey never succeeds in whipping him, and Douglass never clearly separates his act of defiance from the root's "virtue." From where, however, does he summon the strength and willpower to fight Covey, who just two days before had nearly beaten him to death, and from whom he repeatedly fled for fear of being whipped again? The root's "virtue," it seems, does not depend on its magical properties alone, but its narrative function as a reminder of Sandy's compassionate tutelage. The only emotional and physical nourishment he has received for the previous two days came from Sandy and his wife, making his transformation from a sickly and frightened slave to a confident and defiant man all the more remarkable. The root does not need to possess any magical property to inspire his rejuvenation amid a

community of black men. As Paul Gilroy has argued, the root is primarily a symbol of African folk culture through which Douglass affirms his connection to his African cultural heritage.¹⁰ My reading of the root as a gift, however, also indicates how Douglass uses the root to promote solidarity between black male slaves Sandy's role as "old advisor" did not stop at telling him to simply return to the brutal slaveholder; Sandy also shares strategies of self-protection, knowing Douglass would have to return to Covey until the time would come to affect his own liberation.

That Douglass invokes Sandy's advice is made even clearer after he defeats Covey, when he reiterates Sandy's promise that neither Covey nor "any other white man" could whip him again. Here, Douglass confidently "let it be known" that "the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing" him. In this brazen passage, Douglass alludes to the protective power of Sandy's gift without directly admitting to its magical efficacy. Just as Sandy has proclaimed himself invulnerable to the slave-breaker's whip, so too had Douglass proclaimed his restored "self-confidence," "determination," and "manhood" (395). This expression of his resilience echoes Sandy's own boastful declaration about the root. Neither man, we are to understand, was whipped during the remainder of his enslavement, exactly as Sandy had promised. Sandy, then, is an idealized model of manhood for Douglass: he at once embodies a masculine self-confidence and illustrates how his form of manhood is rooted in cultural and communal ties. The gift of the root, then, emblemizes Sandy's sharing of manly self-confidence with Douglass, situating his self-restoration in the second half of the *Narrative* in a distinctive moment of communal solidarity.

Although the revision and expansion of his *Narrative in My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) even more brazenly casts Douglass as the hero of his own tale, his suggestion that masculine self-determination and communal solidarity are inextricable is also corroborated elsewhere. Not the least of these includes his essay entitled “Self-Made Men,” which he delivered dozens of times between its first reading in Philadelphia in 1859 and his death.¹¹ In the speech, Douglass analyzes the American concept of the “self-made man” and its most famous exemplars from Benjamin Banneker to Ralph Waldo Emerson, arguing not only for continuing their tradition of individual pursuits but also against the dangers of monomaniacal self-interest. Along these lines, he cautions against the seductive mythology of the self-made man, reminding readers that the term “implies an individual independence of the past and present” that, he insists, “can never exist” (549). Furthermore, he explains that all individual successes are indebted to the contributions of others. Whether we have “begged, borrowed or stolen,” he continues, “we have reaped where others have sown” (549). Ultimately, Douglass believes that the “self-made man” may rise above seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but the notion that he does so alone is misguided. “I believe in individuality,” he declares, “but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean” (549), distinctive and yet inseparable from their surroundings.¹²

Even though Douglass proclaims in his *Narrative* that he is “alone responsible” for his escape (417) and that he became his “own master” after finding gainful employment (428), his articulation of masculine self-determinacy is not incommensurate with the idea of Sandy’s root as an expression of solidarity among the two men. By

shifting emphasis from Douglass's fight with Covey to Sandy's gift as the "the turning-point" in his "career as a slave," we can see that his narrative of self-determination is also informed by a renewed sense of community and a rejection of the oppressive slaveholding economy in which both men live. While Douglass explains that the fight with Covey "rekindled" his "expiring embers of freedom" and "revived" his "sense" of "manhood," Sandy and his root provide Douglass with the confidence necessary to resist the slave-breaker. Sandy's gift not only challenges conventional readings of Douglass's supposed investment in masculine individualism but also reverses the trope of gift-giving found in early colonial narratives. Rather than depicting gifts as tools of conquest and oppression, Douglass figures gift exchange as an act of communal solidarity that facilitates his physical and psychological liberation.

Gift Giving and Community in *A Lesson Before Dying*

Although Ernest Gaines does not directly reference Douglass's *Narrative* in *A Lesson Before Dying*, his representation of gift exchange as a means of affirming black male community in the face of white male violence signifies on Douglass's depiction of the root as a gift from Sandy. In his *Narrative*, Douglass casts Sandy as an "old advisor," using the root to remind his readers of the role that Sandy played in rehabilitating his cultural and communal awareness, his resistance to Edward Covey, and his eventual self-realization and independence that characterized the nineteenth-century ideal of the "self-made" man. In *Lesson*, Gaines reimagines the "advisor" figure in his portrayal of Grant Wiggins, a teacher whom the community entrusts to reconstruct Jefferson's masculine identity. In both cases, the "advisor" uses gifts to instruct his pupil and to affirm his self-

confidence and personal agency. Yet we also find important differences in their treatment of gift-giving in restoring masculine identity. Douglass subtly suggests the communal underpinnings of his “self-made” manhood through gift-giving in a way that still allows his narrative to conform to his audiences’ belief in masculine self-determinacy. In contrast, Gaines uses gifts to resist such individualistic notions of manhood, which had acquired new meaning amid the industrial and demographic changes affecting black communities in the 1940s. Set during this time, *Lesson* extends Douglass’s portrayal of the root in his *Narrative*, depicting gift-giving as a strategy for redefining manhood in the twentieth century.

Critics of the novel have focused on the role of discourse in the novel’s treatment of manhood, but such interpretations have neglected the importance of the material conditions that shape its characters’ lives. The result has been an inexplicable disjuncture between idealized notions of manhood and the way that social and economic factors define and circumscribe them. For example, as Keith Clark puts it, Gaines’s “fictive machinery is ignited not by black men’s lack of money or even white perfidy but by a desire to articulate alternative vehicles for black male subjectivity, ones not rooted in financial exigency, misogyny, or patriarchal masculinity” (Clark 75). The critical lacuna evinced in such statements is determining how an “alternative” model of “black male subjectivity” manifests itself in a culture that is still controlled by white materialism, misogyny, and patriarchy. From where do alternative paradigms of masculinity arise, though, if not from the material conditions in which men live? Douglass hints at possible answers to this question by showing that his masculine agency emerges from spiritual

and communal resistance to America's slaveholding economy. For Douglass, that small community actuated by Sandy's gift helped Douglass reemerge from the psychologically and physically debilitating effects of slavery. For Gaines, however, gift-giving is not only a means of becoming a "self-made" man, as it is for Douglass, but an expression of future communal interdependence. *Lesson*, then, embraces Douglass's qualified version of self-made manhood while also critiquing it. Through his depiction of gift-giving, Gaines shows that community is not merely the conduit through which individual black manhood can be affirm, but that community fundamentally distinguishes black manhood from the individualistic models of white manhood that seek to destroy it.

Gift exchange restores the communal bonds through which these alternative masculine paradigms can be realized within materially and socially oppressive circumstances. To that end, Gaines signifies on the pecuniary language of "credit," translating it into an expression of communal rather than commercial indebtedness. At the beginning of the novel, "credit" draws attention to the social and economic disparities between the Creole and black inhabitants of the Bayonne community, establishing economic exchange, racial conflict, and masculine identity as interrelated themes. For example, when Brother and Bear find Jefferson walking to the White Rabbit Bar, they ask if he has any money. Jefferson responds that "he didn't have a solitary dime." His response is peculiar: how Jefferson plans to pay the bartender without any money is not evident, and readers can only assume that he was expecting to drink on a line of credit. That turns out to be exactly what Brother and Bear suggest they do when they try to buy wine at Alcee Gropé's liquor store. "Gropé should not mind crediting them a pint," they

reason, because he knows them. They explain that “the grinding season” is “coming soon,” so “they would be able to pay him back then” (4). Gropé, however, already distrusts Brother and Bear, so when he discovers that they do not have enough money to pay for their bottle of wine, he refuses to give it to them. Unwilling to accept Gropé’s decision, Bear, already intoxicated, walks behind the counter and approaches Gropé, who warns him to stop. Finally, Gropé pulls his revolver from the cash register and starts shooting.

This opening scene establishes the absence of communal reciprocity as a central problem in the text by refusing a relationship of indebtedness between men. While Bear and Brother insist that they will pay him back once “grinding” begins, Gropé reminds them that “money is slack everywhere” and doubts that they will be able to pay their debt (5). This lack of trust triggers an act of defiance when Bear walks behind the counter. By approaching Gropé, Bear transgresses the physical boundary that not only defines their roles as customer and storekeeper but also structures the community’s racial stratification: the space behind the counter is a locus of both economic power and racial domination controlled by the white Creole storekeeper. Gaines does not reveal Bear’s true intentions, however, only suggesting that the shoot-out results from latent racial animosity: Does he plan to rob Gropé, or merely intimidate him? Did he set out to kill, or was it a matter of circumstance? Gaines just tells us that Bear “started around the counter” and that he “continued” even after Gropé warned him to stop (5). The ambiguity here is strategic; Gropé interprets Bear’s movements as a threat and begins shooting,

indicating that reaction results from an entrenched fear of black male aggression that operates independently of Bear's intentions.

That this opening volley occurs as the result of a failed commercial exchange and entrenched racial antagonism is significant because it directly links racial violence and Jefferson's unwarranted incarceration to the established economic system of his community. When Gropé refuses to entertain Bear's alternative arrangement of an exchange based on "credit," which is fundamentally an arrangement of trust, he proposes an ultimatum: they can buy wine on his terms or leave the store. The men are currently unemployed and frustrated with a system that denies them stable incomes and meaningful labor, so when their request for "credit" is denied, they seek other ways to circumvent the shopkeeper's economic power. Bear's transgressive movement across the store's counter is a misguided but powerful attempt to assert authority that is sanctioned neither by their arrangement as customer and proprietor, nor by the racial hierarchy of Creole society. It threatens Gropé because it rejects the extant racial-economic order that he imposes on the men by refusing them credit. Gropé's distrust in the men, we learn, involves far more than skepticism that they will repay their debt. In addition to eyeing them suspiciously when they walk into the store, he refers to them as "boys," a significant choice of words that diminishes the men whose masculinity is already challenged by an inequitable local economy.

Furthermore, the shootout between Brother, Bear, and Gropé leaves Jefferson in a frightful and vulnerable situation, since he knows he will likely be implicated in the death of a white man. Jefferson drinks from a bottle of whisky and pockets some of the money

from the cash register. Just when he is ready to flee, “two white men walked into the store” and see him with pockets filled with money and holding a bottle of whisky while surrounded by carnage (6). In this instance, Gaines again indicates that racial antagonisms are intertwined with socioeconomic disparity, as well as stereotypes about black male criminality. It is clear that Jefferson has been taught to avoid criminal behavior such as that exhibited by his friends to maintain an air of respectability. “His nannan had told him never to steal,” he recalls, but he takes the money out of Gropé’s register anyway, in case he needs it for his getaway (6). Like Bigger Thomas, Jefferson commits his crime out of fear, a reaction to the entrenched reality that he will be criminalized no matter what. When the white interlopers see him with cash in his pockets and a bottle of whiskey in his hand, they predictably conclude that Jefferson must have killed Gropé in a premeditated robbery. Jefferson then simultaneously becomes villain and victim, embodying two familiar yet polarized stereotypes of black manhood in twentieth-century American culture.

Gaines goes even further to illustrate how Jefferson’s imprisonment results from both his racial and economic subordination in the Bayonne community during his trial scene. Here, Gaines makes it clear that social domination by whites systematically emasculates and dehumanizes black men. This is evident when the defense attorney attempts to exonerate his client by claiming that he has no more intellectual capacity than an ordinary “hog” to plan an armed robbery and murder. Here, Gaines uses the term “hog” for several reasons. In the first place, he invokes the opposition between chattelhood and manhood established in Douglass’s narrative, reminding readers that

despite the legal abolition of slavery, many features of the plantation economy that subordinated black men remain in-tact. Secondly, one of the major local industries is a “slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs” (25), which we learn immediately after Grant agrees to Jefferson in prison. From this description, we are to understand that Jefferson’s incarceration is part and parcel of the established local economy, wherein little distinction is made between the animal livestock fattened for slaughter and the black laborers whose work on the plantation only earns them basic sustenance.

In addition, Gaines’s use of “hog” invites an intertextual reading that suggests *Lesson* is indeed a narrative of resistance, in which the restoration of masculine agency involves not only discursive power but also social efficacy. Most obviously, it references the opening line of Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die,” in which the poet renounces dying “like hogs” in favor of a noble death fighting back against relentless oppression (1848: 1). Through this reference, Gaines signals that *A Lesson Before Dying* is not just a narrative of personal liberation but also of communal struggle. The diminution of Jefferson to the status of “hog” also alludes to one of Gaines’s earlier novels, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). In *Gathering*, Uncle Billy describes how Fix Boutan brutally beat his son, resulting in permanent brain damage. He illustrates the extent of his son’s intellectual damage by repeating that he could only eat the food they bring him “like a hog eating corn” (80), which Jefferson reenacts during his incarceration. In a sense, then, *Lesson* reimagines communal resistance not as a final act of revenge by an old man, as we see in *Gathering*, but a potentially restorative process for young men as well.

That *Lesson* speaks to the specific socioeconomic conditions of southern black communities during Jim Crow is also evident in Gaines's explanation about his choice of setting. Gaines chooses his setting carefully to explore not only the restoration of the victimized black male archetype embodied by Jefferson but also the quasi-heroic Grant amid the period's significant demographic changes. In his own words, Gaines chose this period to show how Grant is conflicted about his seemingly futile endeavors as a schoolteacher during this historical moment because "he knows there's a better world somewhere else" ("Writing" 774). Grant, like Gaines himself, has family ties in California and had left his Southern community to study. These patterns were familiar among Southern black communities during the "Great Migration," which created rifts between families rooted in the South and a new generation of strivers willing to try their luck and relocate to other parts of the United States. As a young, formally educated man, Grant has the opportunity to "run away" from Bayonne and his regional heritage, to break out of his proverbial Southern prison, and yet he chooses to stay. His girlfriend, Vivian, constantly questions his motives for staying. "Is it love or cowardice," she bluntly asks, raising the question with which Grant must wrestle throughout the novel (94). It turns out that it is neither, but instead a vague sense of commitment to his Bayonne community that lies behind his veneer of masculine independence.

What we find in *A Lesson Before Dying*, then, is that Gaines situates the central problem of restoring Jefferson's manhood within a matrix of economic and moral indebtedness. Gifts become the currency of masculine self-realization in *Lesson* because of their potential to subvert systematic oppression that defines Jefferson's life and that

Grant seeks to escape. While Douglass depicts Sandy's gift as the catalyst for his ostensibly "self-made" manhood, Gaines depicts gift-giving as a distinctive alternative economy through which members of the Bayonne community resist alienating notions of manhood. Instead, they generate a model of manhood that is both invested in and codependent upon community. To be a "man," the novel suggests, is to receive graciously and to give selflessly. Furthermore, *Lesson* indicates that communal notions of manhood have greater potential to transform oppressive socioeconomic conditions than the highly individualistic construction of the American "self-made" man, the "theology" which Douglass embraces in his own self-representation in the nineteenth century, and to which countless other black male characters – including Bigger Thomas and the invisible man – succumb in twentieth-century depictions of impeded masculine self-realization.

Gaines's depiction of gift-giving in the remainder of the novel allows him to carve out space for a communally-oriented black manhood that defies the soul-crushing power of white manhood. When Jefferson is imprisoned, *Lesson* introduces Sheriff Guidry as the exemplar of white masculine domination. Initially, Guidry perceives any exchange between Grant and Jefferson as a threat to his authority, as implied in his initial warning to Grant. "Don't bring anything up there you don't want taken away from you—knife, razor blade, anything made of glass," he explains. Although he doesn't "expect" that Grant would "do anything," he insists that "you can never be sure" (50). Here, Guidry imagines that any objects Grant would carry into the prison when visiting Jefferson would be dangerous. By reminding Grant that anything can be taken away from him, Guidry asserts his authority in both his professional capacity as Sheriff and in his *de*

facto authority as a white man. Furthermore, Guidry's warnings to Grant parallel Alcee Gropé's anxieties about Brother, Bear, and Jefferson when they enter his store. Both Guidry and Gropé feel threatened by the potential transgressions of authority within their respective spaces of the store and the prison. By crossing the prison threshold, Guidry knows that Grant's presence is disruptive. "I don't like it," Guidry announces, "Because I think the only thing you can do is just aggravate him, trying to put something in his head against his will. And I'd rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog. It would be better for everybody concerned" (49). To Guidry's mind, Grant's presence is a potential threat because he implicitly understands that it connects Jefferson to his community and therefore reminds him of his manhood. Just as Douglass shows in his narrative, the abdication of black manhood results from white men alienating black men from their communities. Jefferson can be controlled as a "hog" only as long as he is isolated.

Furthermore, Guidry attempts to control the terms of exchange in a manner similar to Gropé's fatal interaction with Bear, Brother, and Jefferson at the novel's opening. By inviting a comparison between Bear's crossing of the counter space in Gropé's store with Grant's crossing of the threshold into the prison, we see how both Creole men imagine black men as threats to their authority. Gropé's death arises from a failed economic exchange, but we find that a different economy emerges in the prison in the form of gift-giving. The failed arrangements of pecuniary credit and monetary exchange that led to Gropé's death and Jefferson's imprisonment transform into a relationship of moral indebtedness within the walls of the prison. As such, Guidry warns

against bringing objects into the prison not simply because they can be used as weapons but also because the exchange of these items between visitors and Jefferson operates outside the realm of his official and *de facto* authority in the racially stratified Bayonne community. His fear, Gaines suggests, is not that Jefferson will become an “aggravated” hog but that gifts, as expressions of communal support, will show him that he is not a hog at all.

Over time, these gifts received by Jefferson evolve from food and basic sustenance to objects that facilitate communal engagement and self-expression. Miss Emma is the first to bring a gift to Jefferson in the form of a home-cooked meal and clean clothes, two innocuous items that nonetheless undergo careful scrutiny before the sheriff will allow them into Jefferson’s cell. During these first few visits, Jefferson is unresponsive and even dismissive of his godmother. His refusal to acknowledge Emma’s gifts, let alone eat, results from his preoccupation with his impending execution. “When they go’n do it? Tomorrow?” he wonders. He even asks Grant whether he will be the one who will “jeck that switch” to the electric chair (73-74). Here, Jefferson has essentially acquiesced to his fate; neither food nor clothing nor company brings him any comfort from the looming reality of his execution. Jefferson refuses to interact with Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose throughout the novel, leaving them with little hope that he will walk to the electric chair “like a man” on “his own two feet” (13), dignified and prepared for the afterlife. Gaines is signifying on Christianity here: such spiritual promises, he implies, do not change the material facts of Jefferson’s life.

So why does Grant succeed in reaching Jefferson when all the others fail? One answer may be that Grant, unlike Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose, is more concerned with Jefferson's life than his death. For example, when Grant brings a Philco transistor radio to Jefferson, we find that his companions believe that it interferes with Jefferson's spiritual salvation. For Grant, material comforts are necessary to heal Jefferson's manhood. As he explains to Tante Lou, "that radio has nothing to do with turning Jefferson against God," but instead "is there to help him not think about death. He's locked up in that cage like an animal—and what else can he think about but that last day and the last hour? That radio makes it less painful" (182-183). Reverend Ambrose expresses the most vehement opposition to the radio, calling it a "sin box" that takes Jefferson's focus away from God and his salvation (181). What Ambrose and the others miss, however, is that focusing so much on death is precisely what interferes with Jefferson's ability to see himself as anything other than a "hog." As Grant explains, "the only thing that keeps him from thinking he is not a hog is that radio" (183). That the radio diverts his attention from his death is evident when Jefferson discusses his musical preferences with Grant. This exchange becomes the first sustained conversation that Jefferson has with any of his visitors. As Grant makes clear, the radio is essential to Jefferson's transformation from "hog" to "man," a fact which he uses to justify his gift-giving when he challenge Ambrose: "Take that radio away," he says, "and let's see what you can do for the soul of a hog" (183).

What is most important about the radio, though, is not its function as a communication device but the means through which Grant is able to procure the gift for

Jefferson. The radio is effectively a gift from the entire black community in Bayonne since Grant must collect the money necessary to purchase it. To raise the money, Grant first gives up his unflinchingly selfish ambitions. Initially he intends to borrow it from Vivian, a fact that tells readers that he is not yet willing to humble himself enough to ask other members of the community for help. To his surprise, however, he finds that members of the community are eager to contribute. When he tells Claiborne at the Rainbow Club about the radio, the barkeeper gathers “a couple of dollar bills and some change” donated by the bar’s patrons. In addition, Claiborne contributes five dollars of his own money, pulled “out of an old leather wallet that had once been light brown but had turned almost black over the many years” (172-173). Thelma, who runs the adjoining café, then kicks in ten dollars of her own, giving Grant enough to buy the radio.

The donors refuse repayment, but they still implicitly expect something of Grant: a personal commitment to the black community in Bayonne. Their expectations tell us that these members of the Bayonne community are circulating not only money but also a moral currency. For example, we see from Claiborne’s subtle smile when Grant promises to pay him back over the weekend that he does not expect to see the money again. The smile, however, is also an acknowledgement that Grant is in his debt. Thelma’s response is even more telling. When Grant says he’ll bring the money back tomorrow, she says, “I ain’t in no hurry” (174). “Here,” Thelma says when she gives him a wrinkled ten-dollar bill. In that single word, Grant infers that Thelma meant the money as a gift given “with a kind of love,” but also with expectations. Grant interprets Thelma’s “here” as a demand that he respond to pressing questions that define their community: “When will all this

end?” he imagines Thelma asking. “When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs ‘here’? When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man ‘here’?” (174). Each of these questions becomes a charge to Grant, in whom the black community has invested their hopes to break the patterns of socioeconomic subordination and racial violence through his rehabilitation of Jefferson.

That gift-giving constitutes a moral economy is also evident in the contributions of Grant’s schoolchildren. During the Christmas pageant, for example, “one lone gift” sits under the Christmas tree. Grant explains that “The children had contributed nickels, dimes, quarters—money they had made from picking pecans,” and that three of the older students had taken that money to Baton Rouge where they “bought a wool sweater and a pair of wool socks” (147). During the spring, the children continue to collect pecans and roasted peanuts to that Grant can take them to Jefferson. We can see from the gathering of communal resources culminating in these gifts that the concepts of “credit” and indebtedness in *Lesson* no longer describe a pecuniary arrangement but a mutual moral obligation. The gestures by the people who give Grant money to buy the radio suggest that their gifts possess the kind of inalienable properties that Mauss describes in the Maori concept of *hau*, or the “spirit” of the gift. By accepting the money, Grant becomes indebted to the same community toward which he has repeatedly insisted he feels no obligation. Furthermore, when Jefferson accepts the gifts brought to him by Grant, he takes on the responsibility of reciprocating back to the community that provided those gifts. His obligations are not only to those who provide money for the radio, but also the schoolchildren who collect pecans and roasted peanuts, his godmother who provides food

and clothing, and Grant, who brings him the radio, comic books, and a notebook and pencil so that he can record his thoughts before his execution.

We can see that Grant's success in helping Jefferson reject whites' definition of him as a "hog" and affirm himself as a black man is inextricable from his role in circulating gifts, since they bring Jefferson back into the community that he feels has abandoned him. What ultimately brings about this redefinition, then, is that Grant uses gift-giving to help both of them redefine black manhood from the prevailing model of self-made male individual to which Douglass aspires in his *Narrative* to a relational model defined in terms of communal reciprocity. Although Grant has striven to fulfill the ideals of self-made manhood through his education, both Grant and Jefferson have commonly rejected the notion that they have obligations to anyone other than themselves. While Grant expresses his investment in masculine individualism when he says that he wants to "live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else" (191), Jefferson believes that his impending demise is the result of his abandonment. Neither man feels dependent upon or invested in the community in which he was raised. "What people done done to please me?" he asks Grant (222), linking his perceived dehumanization to his sense of social isolation. Ultimately, a revised definition of black manhood depends on the ability to answer this question and understand that the fate of individual black men and their communities are co-dependent.

At this point it becomes clear that gift-giving operates as the fulcrum upon which a redefined black manhood in *A Lesson Before Dying* rests. The exchange of gifts is not merely a symbol of communal resistance and black manhood but the *means* through

which black characters achieve these outcomes. For Grant, gifts are effective pedagogical tools that expose Jefferson's isolation and dehumanization as a myth perpetuated by white men to consolidate and maintain their power. When he asks Jefferson if he knows why Sheriff Guidry "grins" when he brings the notebook and pencil, for example, Grant explains that the Sheriff believes "it was just a waste of time and money" because he cannot understand what "a hog can do with a pencil and paper" (192). In this case, the act of accepting the gift itself is an act of defiance, since it implies a rejection of the Sheriff's dehumanizing view of Jefferson as a "hog." The more Jefferson learns to accept the gifts of his black community, Gaines suggests, the more he learns to see himself through their eyes, rather than the Sheriff's, which allows him to finally declare his manhood.

The affirmation of Jefferson's manhood at the end of the novel is highly ironic, however, since it does him very little good. In the final analysis, then, gifts cannot save the condemned man; they can only hint at future social change. Both Jefferson and Grant admit as much in their final meetings. Grant makes it clear that he wants Jefferson to reciprocate the gifts given to him by Bayonne's black community, imploring him especially to "please" his "nannan" by telling her that he is a "man" and that he will "stand" when he walks to the electric chair. Furthermore, he explains that both he and the schoolchildren "need" and "want" Jefferson to "be better" (191-192). Jefferson is quite aware that affirming his manhood in these ways will not change his fate, and that Grant has placed an inordinate responsibility on him in the days before his execution. "Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing" (222), he says to Grant at their final meeting. Jefferson's statement, however, only makes sense in terms

defined by white members of his community, which absolutely denied him access to opportunities and resources that would allow him to meet their standards of manhood.

What makes Jefferson a “man” in the conclusion of the novel, then, is not only his ability to walk to the electric chair on his own two feet but also his understanding that “manhood” is defined by his community. We only learn that Jefferson has accepted this definition of manhood, taught to him by his black community through Grant, after his execution. Before Jefferson walk to the electric chair, he redistributes the gifts that he had received while in prison. First, he attempts to give his radio to the young deputy Paul Bonnin, but Paul rejects it, instead insisting that it be given to the other inmates. The radio, as noted earlier, had connected Jefferson to black culture, allowing him and the other prisoners to listen to blues music. Paul recognizes the importance of this cultural connection to the other men and rejects Jefferson’s offer, conceding some of his white male authority as a white man by allowing the other black prisoners to remain connected to their community. Instead, Paul only accepts the marble that Bok Lawrence had given to Jefferson just a few days before. Jefferson also returns the pearl-handled knife to Henri Pichot, which Henri gave him toward the end of his imprisonment so he could sharpen his pencil. Finally, he asks Paul to deliver his notebook to Grant, which contains the final evidence that Jefferson had died thinking of himself as a man.

When Jefferson redistributes these gifts, he begins to dismantle the system in which white men had both alienated him from his community and attempted to strip away his manhood. In particular, he denies the white authority figures—namely, Henri Pichot, the Sheriff, and the deputy, to dehumanize him anymore. If white manhood is defined by

the power to deny black men access to their communities withhold economic wealth, black manhood, *A Lesson Before Dying* proposes, is one of communal reciprocity and generosity. What is most important in the novel's conclusion, however, is not that Jefferson ultimately affirms his manhood before his death but that Grant and Paul, representatives of a new generation of black and white men, respectively, who have an opportunity to redefine their own manhood. By visiting Jefferson and tutoring him in lessons of communal reciprocity, Grant been forced to confront his own investment in the ideology of self-made manhood and admit to his own social codependency. Furthermore, Paul seems to abdicate his authority both as law enforcement officer and as a white man. By bearing "witness" to Jefferson's "transformation" (254), Paul cannot remain invested in the ideology of white supremacy, rooted in the fear of black manhood, which the Sheriff and other white members of the community continue to believe and practice.

Conclusion

Through gift exchange, Douglass and Gaines envision a communal definition of black manhood in opposition to the oppressive and alienating power of white self-made manhood. In this way, they define black manhood not through material wealth or individual acts of self-determination but through reciprocal communal relations. These communal ties are not antithetical to material culture, but instead subvert dominant socioeconomic practices through alternative modes of material exchange, evinced in the practice of gift-giving in both Douglass's *Narrative* and Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. By juxtaposing readings of gifts in these two texts, we can see that gift exchange generates communities of resistance within which black man can restore a sense of their

own masculine agency. Contrary to the nineteenth-century ideals of the “self-made” man and his twentieth-century descendants, both writers define masculinity in terms of a reciprocal process of giving and receiving within a community. While Douglass’s narrative implicitly critiques the “self-made” man paradigm by hinting at the communal source of his renewed strength, his narrative nonetheless reinforces the ideal of self-determining manhood, which Douglass leveraged to his personal advantage in subsequent revision of his autobiography in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as well as cultivating a persona defined by masculine self-determination through his writing and oratory.

By reviving the trope of gift-giving from the *Narrative*, Gaines goes even further than Douglass to illustrate how the ideals of the self-made man have failed black men amid the economic and demographic transformation occurring in the first half of the twentieth century. While the promise of upward mobility drew many black Americans to northern cities and to the west in search of work and educational opportunities, such changes destabilized and fractured traditional Southern communities that, as Douglass shows, had been necessary for survival within America’s slaveholding economy. By embracing communal foundations, Gaines suggests, black men can resist the dehumanizing and emasculating practices of white men. Within this context, we can read Jefferson’s transformation from “hog” to “man” not as individual pursuit but an act of subversive communal resistance to systemic oppression facilitated through the exchange of gifts.

Furthermore, *A Lesson Before Dying* provides an example of how African American writers in the late twentieth-century began to reevaluate the inherent distrust of

materialism found in earlier works such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. While the contents of the invisible man's briefcase, as discussed in Chapter 1, expresses a profound anxiety about black men's relationship with material culture, *A Lesson Before Dying* suggests that black men can productively manipulate their material worlds to both challenge prevailing definitions of racialized masculinity and to effect socioeconomic change. Gaines's depiction of gift exchange provides just one such example in which black men can engage material culture in ways that not only critiques the materialist paradigm of individualistic, self-made manhood as defined by white men but also positing how materiality can be used to redefine black manhood within constructive and affirming social relationships.

Notes

¹ Some important monographs on masculinity in African American literature that include Gaines's work are Keith Clark's *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2001), Jeffrey Leak's *Racial Myths and Masculinity* (2005), and Richie Richardson's *Black Masculinity in the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (2007).

² For example, Suzanne W. Jones, William T. Mallon, Philip Auger, and Herman Beavers focus on racial and gender identities as discursive formations in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Mallon draws on Bakhtin's analysis of the polyvocal or "dialogic" aspects of novelistic discourse to uncover black male voices in Gaines's explorations of masculinity in fiction published before *A Lesson Before Dying*. Auger offers a Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between language and power in the novel. Jones argues that *A Lesson Before Dying* revises narratives of masculinity from their focus on violence to a new emphasis on empathy and identification. Finally, Beavers argues that *Lesson* uses Christ's parable of the prodigal son to call for communal political engagement.

³ The Belgian engraver Theodor de Brys vividly depicts this indigenous custom in his copper etching "Columbus, as he first arrives in India, is received by the inhabitants and honored with the bestowing of many gifts" as prominent aspect of his New World explorations (1594).

⁴ This relationship is especially evident in the linguistic coding of gender in Columbus's Spanish writing. In her analysis of Columbus's gendered discourse, Margarita Zamora concludes that his *Diario* "inscribed" the "Indies" during "the

Columbian exchange” as a “feminized and ultimately eroticized sign” that was “intended for consumption in a cultural economy where discovery means gaining an advantage by uncovering a weakness, and femininity is synonymous with exploitability” (178-179).

⁵ At this point it should be noted that my use of “gift” refers exclusively to the exchange of material objects that may or may not have spiritual significance. Gifts may symbolize relations of spiritual gratitude or indebtedness, but these emblems are different from “spiritual gifts” endowed by God as described in I Corinthians and elsewhere in the Bible.

⁶ C.A. Gregory extends Mauss’s distinction between gifts and commodities by affirming the inalienability of the gift through essential differences in their production and circulation as they pertain to notions of kinship and communal belonging. Annette Weiner’s *Inalienable Possessions*, however, remains the most convincing account of the inalienability of the gift. Challenging the anthropological emphasis on reciprocity, Weiner asserts that the practice of “keeping-while-giving” characterizes gifts and other possessions whose value operates independent of their exchange (150). In *The Enigma of the Gift*, Maurice Godelier develops Weiner’s thesis by examining the sacred dimensions of gift-giving in which “keeping-while-giving” is practiced through the displacement and substitution of objects.

⁷ For historical accounts of how the “self-made man” emerged as a masculine ideal during the nineteenth century, see Chapter 1 in E. Anthony Rotundo’s *American*

Manhood and Chapter 1 in Michael S. Kimmel's *Manhood in America*. I discuss both of these works in my introduction.

⁸ Rafia Zafar's essay "Franklinian Douglass" identifies Douglass as a "representative" man who draws on Franklin's "self-made man" as well as Ralph Waldo Emerson's description of "representative men." *Representative Men* appeared in 1850, between the publication of Douglass's *Narrative* in 1845 and *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855. Emerson's essay, as David Leverenz points out, structures manhood around the ideals of an emerging middle-class (*Manhood* 88). Such associations between manhood and class can be seen in Douglass's revisions of his autobiography during this time. By 1855, Douglass has firmly established himself on the abolition lecture circuit and became more independent from William Lloyd Garrison, reflected in the expanded and unabashed depiction of his personal agency in *Bondage* than was found in his earlier *Narrative*.

⁹ On Douglass's rejection of Christianity in his *Narrative*, see Thomas Peyser, "the Attack on Christianity in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*," and Zachary McLeod Hutchins, "Rejecting the Root: The Liberating, Anti-Christ Theology of Douglass's *Narrative*." Hutchins's analysis is particularly salient in that it traces Douglass's anti-Christian abolitionism to the early 1840s; typically, he explains, scholars have dated his rejection of Christianity in the early 1850s, between the publication of his *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (294-295). For earlier analyses of Douglass's relationship with Christianity, see Donald B. Gibson's analysis of

his religious pragmatism in “Christianity and Individualism” and “Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy” as well as Gary S. Selby’s analysis of Douglass’s satirical take on Christianity in “Mocking the Sacred.”

¹⁰ In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy interprets the root as an African alternative to Douglass’s Christian-oriented worldview, which so far had failed to protect him from Covey’s wrath. Evidence for this interpretation is found more extensively in Douglass’s later iterations of his narrative, and most notably in *My Bondage, and My Freedom*, published in 1855 (61-62). Although I agree with Gilroy that Douglass appropriates the root as a folk-symbol, his reading does not explain why Douglass keeps the root even when rejects its power as superstition.

¹¹ The edition cited here comes from the last known delivery of this speech at the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, probably in 1893.

¹² For a fuller consideration of Douglass’s treatment of the social dimension of the “self-made” man, see Chapter 3 in Jack Turner’s *Awakening to Race*.

CHAPTER III

IN SEARCH OF OUR FATHER'S BONES: RECOVERING BLACK FATHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON* AND JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S *FATHERALONG*

In Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays," the speaker ponders his father's apparent ambivalence toward him as a child: "What did I know, what did I know / Of love's austere and lonely offices?" He asks this question retrospectively, having failed as a child to read his father's actions, including working six days a week and then stoking the fire in the "blueblack cold" early Sunday morning, as acts of paternal affection. In many ways, Hayden's poem is representative of depictions of black fathers in African American literature published during the past half-century. While the speaker remembers his father's actions as indicative of his emotional detachment as a child, he seems only to arrive at another understanding of his father in his absence. Indeed, contemporary African American literature is rife with examples of black sons seeking connections with their not only with their emotionally- but sometimes physically-absent fathers.

My aim in this chapter is to examine the paradoxical absent-presence of black fathers and their sons' attempts to communicate with them by recovering and interpreting the keepsakes and artifacts of their paternal ancestry to illustrate how "heavy things" mediate relationships across generations of black men. Whereas the previous chapter elucidates gift exchange as a method of reconnecting alienated black men with their

communities, this chapter focuses on how black men negotiate their relationships as fathers and sons through material objects. These objects, I argue, are “heavy things” because they indicate black men’s cultural heritage while they simultaneously critique how white patriarchal notions of patrimony and inheritance have ruptured relationships between black fathers and sons. As Hayden’s poem indicates, the emotional rifts between black fathers and sons often make it difficult—if not impossible—for them to communicate with one another directly, even if they are physically present. What are the modes and media through which estranged, deceased, or otherwise silenced fathers can still speak to their sons? Can fathers who are silenced—that is, denied the language necessary to tell their stories—transmit them in other ways? To what extent do fathers leave traces of their stories in the material record, waiting to be heard? Once found, will their sons even listen?

Although twentieth-century sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan have scrutinized the ostensible absence of fatherlessness and its effects on black families,¹ few literary scholars have directly addressed fatherlessness as a dominant trope in African American fiction. Such extant critical inquiries on fatherlessness focus almost exclusively on autobiography, paying little attention to its treatment in fictional narrative. In *Critical Memory* (2001), for example, Houston Baker describes the transmission of fear in black patrilineal narratives, recalling his father’s “memory of inadequacy and danger” from living in a segregated country and describing the sense of impending doom felt by black men of his generation, who “saw that their sons’ notions of the present and future were perhaps even bleaker than theirs had ever

been” (49). Autobiographical accounts of impeded communication between fathers and sons such as Baker’s attest to the sense of vulnerability that black sons inherit from their fathers in a racially hostile society. In contrast, Tara Green asserts in *A Fatherless Child* (2009) that in autobiographical narratives, “the black man learns how to navigate in the world partly based on how he perceived his father’s success or failure as a black man” even amid his absence (10). Autobiographical narratives by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Barack Obama, she claims, “compel us to consider how much any child can heal from fatherlessness to construct a positive self-image” (16).

This chapter extends existing scholarship on fatherlessness in black male autobiography by examining its representation in two works that blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction, as well as history and myth: Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and John Edgar Wideman’s fictionalized autobiography *Fatheralong*. As the chapter title implies, I borrow my theoretical model from the work of black feminist critics and writers who have rejected patriarchal domination by revealing how their foremothers created a distinctive and contiguous black cultural tradition through storytelling and artwork. Often these forms of cultural production lie outside the purview of artistic practice sanctioned by the dominant white patriarchal American culture, as Alice Walker famously argues in her essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Walker explains that oral storytelling, in addition to quilting and other handicrafts made from “the only materials she could afford” (407), exhibit the inventiveness and creativity of women who survived the mundane and frequently brutal conditions in which they lived. Her short story “Everyday Use,” published a year after “In Search of Our Mothers’

Gardens,” puts her theory into practice, using the objects of ordinary life—quilts, clothing, a butter churn—to negotiate the terms of propagating and interpreting black women’s cultural inheritance.

My argument complements Walker’s elucidation of black women’s cultural traditions by examining the distinctive ways that material artifacts can voice silenced black men’s cultural inheritance as well by mediating relationships between fathers and sons. The notion that black sons might use artifacts to seek out their fathers may appear to reinscribe white notions of patriarchal manhood and material possessiveness, but a closer look at literary representations of fatherlessness reveals that African American writers signify on the language of white patriarchy in their depictions of black fathers, using the tropes of property and inheritance to rewrite the script of black fatherhood. *Song of Solomon* and *Fatheralong* provide salient example of how African American writers reject the materialist paradigm of white patriarchal manhood, which they identify as a mechanism of racial domination. Morrison and Wideman accomplish this critique through the recurring motif of archaeological exploration, in which prodigal sons attempt to disinter their occluded paternal ancestries.²

My analysis charts how Morrison and Wideman reinterpret black fatherhood through the recovery and contemplation of material keepsakes and artifacts that signal the continuity of black paternal ancestry. In particular, they reject predominant sociological explanations of black fatherlessness by showing how black fathers retain a presence in their sons’ lives through artifacts, even when they are physically absent. In *Song of Solomon*, these include Pilate’s earring and the bones of Milkman’s grandfather, the first

Macon Dead.³ Through these objects, Milkman learns to reject his father's appropriation of white patriarchal masculinity and to embrace his black male cultural inheritance instead. *Fatheralong*, however, contemplates whether the material record can fill the silences in the story of black paternal ancestry and thereby mend the fissures between a son and an emotionally-distant father. In both cases, black male protagonists learn to reread material artifacts, exposing their black male cultural inheritance behind the veil of possessive materialism that white patriarchal culture has told them defines both black manhood and black fatherhood.

Absent Fathers, Native Sons: The Sociology of Black Fatherhood

Through these archaeological narratives, both writers reject the materialist prerogatives of white patriarchal manhood espoused in American sociological and popular discourse, culminating with the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), commonly known as the "Moynihan Report." Although the report led to federal initiatives addressing crime and poverty in black communities such as Lyndon B. Johnson's so-called "War on Poverty," it also popularized the image of the absent black father in American culture. The stereotype of the absent black father remains prominent. As Dorothy Roberts explains, to most Americans, "the absent *Black* father" still "epitomizes the male component of family breakdown and its deplorable condition" (145). Both Morrison and Wideman write against this popular perception of black fatherlessness, which originates in the white patriarchal structure of the plantation during slavery and is popularized as a social crisis by sociologists during the twentieth century.

Fatherlessness within black families has been central to these debates for over a century. Prominent black sociologists such as W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier responded to early racist studies of the social and economic causes of fatherlessness,⁴ and yet they share the common patriarchal assumption that fathers are necessary for economically- and socially-stable family life.⁵ Beginning with *The Negro American Family* (1908), DuBois rejected the idea that fatherlessness in modern black families was a natural outcome of innate biological differences between white and black men. By providing a sociological explanation for black fatherlessness rooted in the historical conditions of slavery, he argued that black men were not predisposed toward poverty and family disorganization; instead, he insisted they could rise from the “squalor” of slavery to achieve the idyllic image of a family living in a “civilized” home (48).

By arguing that these “civilized” family structures are within reach of black American families and that male dominance is both natural and necessary to familial stability, DuBois ironically reinscribes white patriarchal family structures. His objective, however, is not to argue for gender equality but to advance an image of upwardly-mobile black families and invalidate biological racism. In this way, he signifies on the discourse of patriarchal masculinity to make a claim for racial equality. “If the unit of society is not the individual, but the family,” he concludes, “the sweetness and delight of home are as possible in a plain Negro cabin as in the houses of brick or marble with all modern improvements, and that the flowers and fruits of good living are attainable where ever the disposition exists and a determined effort is made to have them.” This can only be

achieved, he reasons, when all men assume the responsibility to “revere womanhood and motherhood” by affirming the spiritual and social value of marriage (153).

E. Franklin Frazier’s monumental *The Negro in the United States* continued DuBois’s research by providing a comprehensive explanation of the influence of slavery and white social domination on the “disorganization” of black families in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶ While Frazier also reaffirms the dominant ideals of patriarchal manhood, his analysis provides a detailed historical explanation of how gender roles evolved in black families during the transition from slavery to freedom. He explains, “the mother was the most dependable and the most important member” of slave families (309). Frazier illustrates how this so-called “matriarchal” structure resulted not from black women’s supposedly innate propensity for domestic domination but as a way to cope with the likelihood that the “father might be sold and separated from his family” at any time (310). Furthermore, Frazier acknowledges that the “patriarchal character” of the white plantation also contributed to the maternal organization of slave families. White male slaveholders assumed the role of patriarch to all residents of the plantation, which culminated in “widespread concubinage and even polygyny on the part of the white masters” (308-310). As a result, children were almost always the offspring of rape and illicit relationships, since black fathers could not, and white fathers would not, lay legal claim to their children.

Frazier’s research shows that the maternally-oriented, extended network of kinship relationships among enslaved blacks nevertheless created supportive communities necessary for survival under the most dehumanizing conditions. After

emancipation, however, black families faced new challenges when they were expected to conform to the patriarchal, nuclear family structures that whites had denied to them under slavery. When the black father had to meet the social and economic demands of white patriarchal manhood rather than maintain a “purely sentimental or habitual” connection with their families (Frazier 314), he severely disrupted the gender roles cultivated within the extended, maternally-oriented kinship networks formed under slavery. This societal shift also caused many black men—sometimes with their families, sometimes alone—to migrate from the rural South in the hopes of finding gainful employment in northern urban factories. According to Frazier, this migration indicated not only a search for gainful employment but also an attempt to gain “masculine authority” in a dominant American culture that defined manhood according to economic success (315).

Taking cues from Frazier’s research, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the white sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor and Director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research for President Lyndon B. Johnson, sought to turn sociological research on black families into political action. Whereas DuBois and Frazier saw family “disorganization” as a symptom of historical oppression and stable patriarchal families as a goal to which black families ought to aspire, Moynihan shifted focus on black family structures as the source of social problems affecting black communities, culminating in his report which he presented to high-level federal administrators in the summer of 1965. Synthesizing Frazier’s research and drawing on new data, Moynihan identified fatherlessness, illegitimacy, and matriarchal authority as key factors contributing to high rates of poverty in black communities. His reasons for focusing on family were motivated

by political expediency: he wanted to define a concrete moral problem for to motivate Congress and the White House to act on issues of poverty in support of the ongoing civil rights struggle (Rainwater and Yancey 28-30, 34).

Although Moynihan includes an entire chapter on the historical influences that shaped black family structures leading up to the 1960s, this aspect of the report was virtually ignored when Moynihan's findings reached the public, in part because it was excised from abbreviated versions of his argument meant for public audiences.⁷ The occlusion of these historical factors gave the impression that Moynihan had set out to blame the victim by creating racist and sexist pathologies of black people. Although unintentional, there is no doubt that Moynihan unfairly blamed black women, for dominating—and thereby emasculating—black men (hooks, *We Real Cool* 12). In particular, he depicts matriarchy not only as a survival strategy for black mothers but a significant cause of black male emasculation:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (75)

Moynihan also draws on statements from his colleague Duncan M. MacIntyre, whom he quotes at length as further “testimony to the effects” of disorganized “patterns in Negro family structure” (79):

The Negro statistics are symptomatic of some old socioeconomic problems, not the least of which are underemployment among Negro men and compensating higher labor force propensity among Negro women. Both operate to enlarge the

mother's role, undercutting the status of the male and making many Negro families essentially matriarchal. (80)

Black women's "matriarchal" dominance in the family, he argues, discourages black men from assuming their patriarchal responsibilities. The "tangle of pathology" that characterizes black men and women's deviations from gender norms, he concludes, alienates black men from their families and their communities, leading to widespread poverty and crime (91).⁸

By pathologizing crime, fatherlessness, and unemployment as characteristics of black masculine identity, Moynihan generated popular stereotypes of black men and women, even as he advocated for social programs to alleviate the systemic socioeconomic oppression of black people. As Malinda Alaine Lindquist points out, the report "sidetracked the conversation" by diverting attention from the structures of racial suppression that negatively affected black communities (188).⁹ Moynihan's description of black paternal absenteeism and matriarchal dominance as social pathologies drew immediate criticism not only for oversimplifying the problem and creating a false homogeneous image of black families, but also specifically for indicting black mothers in the emasculation and alienation of black fathers. For example, the head of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, Mary Keyserling, disagreed with Moynihan's assertion that "the Negro mother" was "*over-employed*," while the civil rights activist Pauli Murray pointed out in a *Newsweek* article that black women struggled to work despite limited opportunities imposed on them in a racist and sexist workplace (Rainwater and Yancey 184-185). In their estimation, Moynihan had unfairly implicated

black mothers for exacerbating black male unemployment and fatherlessness, when it was clear that they were merely working to survive in a hostile society.

The influence of Moynihan's report on black families was not restricted to sociological research and federal policy; it also has direct implications on how black men and women were perceived in American culture more generally. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," one of the clearest indictments of Moynihan's racial and gender politics, Hortense Spillers argues that the *Report* reaffirms white patriarchal notions of property and inheritance that denies black women their own cultural legacy.¹⁰ According to Spillers, Moynihan "misnames" black mothers by describing them as domineering and emasculating figures who take the place of absent black fathers by taking on stereotypically masculine identities. "This stunning reversal of the castration thematic," she claims, degrades both men and women by ascribing to them white patriarchy's archetypal but inaccurate gender roles. "'Sapphire' enacts her 'Old Man' in drag," she argues, "just as her 'Old Man' becomes 'Sapphire' in outrageous caricature" (455). According to Spillers, Moynihan misrepresents black women by assigning "a matriarchist value where it does not belong," bestowing upon black women rights to property, kinship relations, and cultural inheritance that white paternalism over slave communities and the imposition of patriarchal prerogatives on black families in the twentieth century have in reality denied to them (479). Spillers's critique of Moynihan aims to "make a place" for white America's "monstrosity" of the black matriarch without regard to conventional gender configurations restricted by patriarchal domination (480).¹¹ As a

result, she concludes, critics must differentiate the experiences of black men from black women to restore black women's claims to their unique gendered experiences.

Although Spillers elucidates how Moynihan's report creates stereotypes of black women, her insistence that black fathers are generally absent from black families reinforces the gendered scripts of white patriarchal manhood that she critiques. The black mother becomes monstrous to whites, she argues, because when black fathers are absent from their families: "only the [black] female stands *in the flesh*" and outside "of the traditional [white] symbolics of female gender" (480). For Spillers, these gender roles in black families emerged during slavery, when the patriarchal structure of the plantation "set into motion" a "dual fatherhood" in which the white slaveholder symbolically (and often biologically) became the father of his slaves. In effect, "the captor father's mocking presence" replaced and "banished" the "name and body" of "the African fathers" (480). Under the white patriarchal assumptions of male authority, property ownership, and inheritance, slaveholders established an ideological framework for racial and gender domination on the plantation. By denying enslaved black men the right to property (including their own bodies) and their families, the "plantation patriarchy," to borrow bell hooks's term,¹² created a racially bifurcated definition of manhood that protected white masculine domination and invalidated alternative forms of familial and communal belonging.¹³ Black fathers have only been "banished," then, according to white paradigms of the patriarchal family structure, which, when imposed on black families, precludes other ways that black fathers sustain their presence, even if they are physically absent.

Whereas Spillers's black feminist critique of Moynihan takes black paternal absence for granted, Toni Morrison's literary response to sociologists such as Moynihan offers a more nuanced critique of the ways black fathers constitute an absent-presence in black family life. In an interview conducted while writing *Song of Solomon*, she explains that black men who leave their families and communities embark on a journey of discovery that is more than "the classic sort of fairy tale, going off to see where the money is." Although Morrison does not specifically name Moynihan, she indicts sociologists in general who believe that wandering is a "major failing of black men." Alternatively, Morrison views mobility as "one of the most attractive features about black male life" and admits that she "delights" in "the fact that they would split in a minute," even while she quips that she is "not suppose [sic] to say that" (Step 486-487). In contrast to Spillers, Morrison does not depict black fathers as irrevocably "banished." Morrison and Spillers both agree that black fatherlessness results not from the emasculating black matriarch, as Moynihan posits, but from white socioeconomic domination.¹⁴ Morrison, however, also recognizes that black fathers are not *really* banished: even if they are physically absent or emotionally detached from their families, they sustain a haunting presence.

Whereas the Moynihan Report identifies fatherlessness as one of the causes of crime and poverty in black communities, it misses the fact that black male wandering, manifesting itself in the figures of the absent black father and the searching black son, is also a cultural trope that critiques white patriarchy as mechanisms of racial oppression. In contrast, *Song of Solomon* implies fatherlessness is not only an inextricable part of black

historical and cultural experience, but that black fathers sustain relationships with their families even amid their absence. Furthermore, the novel suggests that black men who wander necessarily lost, but instead are attempting to locate themselves in their culture and their history through the recovery of their occluded paternal ancestry.

Collecting the Bones: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, departs from the women-centered narratives of her earlier novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973), by focusing on men and especially fraught relationships between fathers and sons. Although *Song of Solomon* is characteristic of Morrison's work in that women figure prominently in the transmission of African American culture through oral storytelling, it also represents Morrison's most thorough investigation into black men's relationship with their cultural heritage. The novel is structured around Macon "Milkman" Dead's odyssey-like quest for a sack of gold that he imagines will lead to his personal freedom.¹⁵ His search for the missing gold, however, eventually becomes a quest for cultural knowledge and self-discovery, as he collects and interprets stories about his paternal ancestry. These stories ultimately prompt Milkman to disassociate from his father's possessive materialism that invests him in the ideology of a perverted white patriarchal manhood.

As several critics have noted, the novel clearly indicts materialism and this patriarchal manhood as obstacles to self-knowledge and cultural understanding.¹⁶ Susan Neal Mayberry succinctly summarizes this critical consensus when she explains that Morrison's description of Macon Dead's green Packard as a "hearse" expresses "what Morrison thinks things are for": to envelop the already-dead (84). While these scholars

rightly argue that *Song of Solomon* deplores materialism—that is, the unfettered adoration of money and property—they do not account for the ways that material attachments also mediate intergenerational relationships in the novel. These objects, including Pilate’s earring containing the scrap of paper on which her father wrote her name, her green sack of human bones, and the unspecified “things” that Ruth keeps to remember her father, also allow for meaningful human interaction that provide positive posthumous connections with their paternal ancestry. Whereas Macon Dead attempts to *substitute* possessions for his deceased father and the lost family farm by adopting a “greedy obsession with owning things and people” (Furman 39), Pilate and Ruth attempt to *remember* their fathers through keepsakes and artifacts that allow the novel to simultaneously posit two competing philosophies of materiality and masculinity: one rooted in white patriarchal notions of property and patrimony embodied by Macon, and another of cultural contiguity taught to Milkman by Pilate.

This distinction is especially salient because of the novel’s clear engagement with twentieth-century sociological debates about black fatherhood, sensationalized in American culture following the publication of Moynihan’s report. As noted above, Morrison explained in an interview that the novel responds directly to sociological explanations of black male behavior. Her assertion is corroborated by the novel’s setting: beginning in 1931 and tracing the life of the Dead family over more than thirty years, *Song of Solomon* covers roughly the same period of time in which sociologists such as Frazier and Moynihan brought the so-called “disorganization” of black families into the forefront of American public consciousness. By casting the second Macon Dead as an

overbearing husband and father, full of “hatred” for his wife, Ruth, and “disappointment” in his daughters, Lena and Corinthians, the novel opens with a clear indictment of white patriarchal manhood (10). In addition, Macon’s association between materialism and masculine agency is immediately apparent: he relentlessly demands rent payment from his tenants, fondles his keys in his pocket, and projects his self-worth through outward expressions of his wealth, such as slowly driving his green Packard through town.¹⁷ He is, in short, a depiction of the perversity of patriarchal manhood advocated by Moynihan. Milkman’s quest narrative is set against this backdrop of his father’s attempts at economic and domestic dominance, locating conflicting gendered relationships with things—Macon’s materialism, Pilate’s and Ruth’s objects of remembrance—at the center of its critique of patriarchal manhood.

As the foundation for his perverse manhood, Macon’s materialism also provides the narrative exigency for Milkman’s quest, since Milkman initially believes his father’s maxim that “money is freedom” (163) and that the gold will allow him to escape his community and redefine himself as a man through white material values. As Michael Awkward notes, Milkman begins his quest “to avoid emotional commitment and familial responsibility” and “to gain freedom from obligation to others by taking possession of a familial treasure” (145). Nonetheless, Morrison also situates his quest within several stories of fatherlessness that expose patterns of conflict and loss between black fathers and their children. Father-loss in the novel results from several causes including lynching, illness, accident, and abandonment. For example, Macon and his sister, Pilate, witness their father’s murder when he attempted to protect his property, while Ruth Foster Dead

watches her father, a wealthy doctor, succumb to drug abuse and a disfiguring disease. In addition, Guitar Bains resents a white sawmill owner's attempt to compensate his family when his father is accidentally sawed in half.¹⁸ As a result, we can see that Macon's materialism and paternalism are attempts to insulate himself against these patterns of black male vulnerability by taking on the very characteristics of white manhood designed to subordinate black men.

The first narrative of father-loss recounts the death of Doctor Foster, Milkman's maternal grandfather. This story exposes the problem of telling and interpreting narratives of father-loss by juxtaposing two versions of Doctor Foster's death: one told by Macon Dead, who believes his wife had an incestuous relationship with her father, and the other told by Ruth, who represents her father's death as the result of male competitiveness for patriarchal power. These competing versions of Doctor Foster's death force Milkman to acknowledge and negotiate conflicting accounts of his family's past. When Macon explains that he found Ruth lying naked in bed with her dead father's fingers in her mouth, Milkman can only speculate why Macon shared this disturbing image of his mother. "What was he supposed to do with this new information his father had dumped on him?" he wonders. "Was it an effort to cop a plea? How was he supposed to feel about the two of them now? Was it *true*, first of all?" (76). Here, Milkman's suspicions about the veracity of the story and his father's motivations for telling it indicate one of his earliest attempts to challenge his father's authority. By questioning, Milkman leaves himself open to hearing other versions of his ancestry, as well as the possibility of rejecting his father's materialist definition of manhood.

One such instance comes when Milkman confronts his mother at the cemetery where Doctor Foster is buried. Ruth presents the story of her father's death as one of patriarchal competition and subterfuge, compelling Milkman to further question his father's version of the story. "I know he never told you that he killed my father and tried to kill you. Because both of you took my attention away from him," Ruth explains. "Macon took away his medicine and I just didn't know it, and I wouldn't have been able to save you except for Pilate. Pilate was the one brought you here in the first place" (124). Ruth's version of the story reveals how Macon imagines himself in competition with Ruth's father for recognition. Their shared status as patriarchs within an emerging bourgeoisie exposes an ironic commonality between Doctor Foster and Macon; after all, the doctor had reluctantly agreed to allow Macon to court and eventually marry Ruth only because he was "at twenty-five" already "a colored man of property" (23). Although the arrogance of Doctor Foster and Macon alienate both men from their communities, Doctor Foster at least provided a public service and displayed affection for his family. Macon, however, replaces the Doctor's benevolent patriarchy with an entirely oppressive one, predicated on possessive materialism. This contrast denaturalizes Milkman's perception of his father and his particular brand of masculinity.

By attempting to recover a paternal cultural legacy, however, *Song of Solomon* is also sensitive toward Macon Dead, representing his domineering behavior and materialist obsessions as a response to the trauma of losing his own father. Morrison neither vilifies nor apologizes for Macon, but she does insist that readers identify with his experience of father-loss and view his patriarchal dominance as an attempt to compensate for that loss.

This attempt at empathy is evident when Macon first conveys the story of his father's murder, which he conveys when Milkman presses him to explain why he should stay away from Pilate's house. After a moment of confusion, Macon recognizes that his son is experiencing the same "feeling what he himself had felt for his own father" at that age: namely, a desire for intimate father-son communication (50). Although Macon ironically cannot identify with Ruth's suffering at her own father's death, he momentarily understands the importance of communicating father stories to Milkman and its role in healing from his own loss. Remembering how he watched "the man he loved and admired" killed "protecting his property," Macon concludes that "maybe it was time to tell him things" (50-51). Rather than articulate his own pain, he vows to teach Milkman how to protect his own property and, consequently, perpetuate his own version of masculine self-determination.

In addition to creating empathy for Macon, his attempt to narrate his father's story also reveals how the violence and subordination of black men impedes communication between future generations of fathers and sons. Macon's meandering story begins with the declaration that he "worked right alongside [his] father" (234), an image of paternal intimacy that also suggests their shared association between manhood, labor, and property. As he talks, however, Macon finds it difficult to piece together the story, realizing that "he had not said any of this for years" (51). This impeded attempt to tell his story indicates that his fraught relationship with his son results, at least in part, from the silences wrought by the pain of father-loss. Macon fondly remembers his father and the farm, so much that he loses himself in nostalgic reverie and ignores Milkman's pointed

questions about the painful details of his grandfather's murder. Macon's reluctance to delve into the memories of his father indicates that the same acts of racial violence and subordination that kill or otherwise physically "banish" black fathers, as Spillers puts it, also impedes communication between fathers and sons, preventing them from sharing stories and thus from participating in the act of cultural transmission.

It is this failure of communication that prompts Macon to find an alternative way of reckoning with his paternal ancestry, albeit one that reinforces rather than challenges the dominant paradigm of patriarchal manhood. Instead of inviting Milkman to the experience of confronting their shared familial history, Macon resolves to teach Milkman how to work, attempting to reenact the bond he has with his own father. As such, Macon tries to compensate for his father's death by recreating "the land that was to have been his" when his father's murderers acquired his farm, sardonically named Lincoln's Heaven (52). He demands that Milkman "learn what's real," and insists that he stay away from Pilate who "can't teach you a thing you can use in this world." Here, Macon reasserts his masculine authority, associating the acquisition and control of property squarely in the realm of patriarchal manhood, while he relegates women's influence to the ethereal. For Macon, materialism is tantamount to reality, and controlling that reality is the primary expression of masculine self-determinacy: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. They you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how" (53).

Whereas the narratives of father-loss in the *nouveau riche* Dead and Foster families illustrate how class mobility ruptures ties between black men, their families, and their communities, the death of Guitar's father, a saw-mill worker, highlights the commodification of laboring black male bodies in an industrial economy. For Guitar, the experience engenders the resentment and anger that initially fuel his radical politics and eventually leads to his sociopathic obsession with keeping the "Balance" by joining the Seven Days (158), a vigilante group that responds to acts of violence against black people parallel attacks on whites. Speaking with Milkman, Guitar vividly recounts how his father was "sliced in half" and then "boxed backward, [...] cut side down, skin side up, in [his] coffin" (224). Witnessing the white sawmill owner offer his mother forty dollars and her children some candy in compensation for her husband's death exacerbates his resentment of white socioeconomic power. As Marianne Hirsch rightly points out, "what Guitar literally cannot swallow when he rejects the candy, is the father's unnatural death in the service of white capitalist patriarchal production and consumption and the intervention of the white industrialist who equates the black male with cash and candy" (81). Guitar's rejection of the candy is compounded with his misinterpretation of his mother's "smile" as a "willingness to love the man who was responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity" (224). Already entrenched in the ideologies of patriarchal manhood, Guitar cannot understand that his mother smiles and accepts the money not as an expression of love for the white mill owner but as a survival strategy.

In addition to establishing several genealogies marked by father-loss, these stories also introduce competing philosophies of materiality. On the one hand, Macon and the

white sawmill owner share the common belief not only that manhood and property are inextricable, but that possessions can substitute for lost human relationships. Whereas Macon internalizes white masculine ideals when he compensates for his father's death through his possessive materialism, Guitar rejects it when he interprets the forty dollars given by the mill owner to his mother as an economic measure of his father's worth. On the other hand, however, Guitar exposes his own complicity in patriarchal ideology by reading his mother's smile as a sincere expression of gratitude rather than a signifying ruse necessary for her family's survival under the circumstances. His misinterpretation of her mother's acceptance of the money projects an economic valuation of his father that ironically has more in common with the sawmill owner's pecuniary measure of black men's lives than his professed radical politics.

In contrast to Macon, Milkman, and Guitar who equate manhood with possessive materialism, women such as Pilate and Ruth view objects not as property but as artifacts that connect them to their paternal ancestry. Both Pilate and Ruth sustain "close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers" (*Song of Solomon* 139), and their keepsakes provide a mechanism for remembrance and cultural transmission. After her father's death, for example, Pilate commissions a box-like earring containing the piece of paper ripped from the family Bible on which her father wrote her name. Likewise, Ruth explains that she still dwells "among" her father's "things, the things he used, had touched" as a way to maintain that "cared-for feeling" he gave her (125). Neither Pilate nor Ruth relate to objects as commodities or expressions of economic power and status. Instead, their keepsakes empower them to transmit paternal knowledge

across genders and generations. Pilate's earring, we might say, contains not only her name but also encapsulates the experiences of black fathers like her own who succumb to racial violence: it testifies to the sustained presence of black fathers in African American consciousness, even when they are physically absent.

The gender differentiation revealed between men and women's unique relationship with material objects raises another question imperative to the novel's critique of patriarchal manhood: what constitutes one's "inheritance"? The stories of ruptured paternal relationships told by Macon, Ruth, Pilate, and Guitar suggest that paternal inheritance is an unreliable concept for black families. As noted above, Macon compensates for the lost inheritance of his father's farm by training Milkman to acquire and protect his property. As such, Macon's notion of inheritance is patrimonial, passing onto Milkman not only his property but also his patriarchal notion of masculine self-determinacy. If "money is the only real freedom there is," as Macon proclaims, then the material inheritance bestowed upon Milkman is tantamount to his masculine emancipation. For Macon, owning property is an act of masculine self-creation because it allows black men to break from the past.

Macon's materialist reasoning, however, begs the question: freedom from what? He seems to have gleaned from his father's murder that money insulates men from becoming victims of white socioeconomic domination and violence. His father attempted to protect his property, but he failed because he could neither read nor write, which the Butler family exploited to dupe him out of his farm and then murder him when he tried to prevent them from taking it. To Macon, then, protecting his wealth signifies survival; he

believes that if he protects his property, then he protects his life, which he mistakes for freedom from white socioeconomic oppression. To Milkman, however, his father's economic practices contradict his belief in the liberating potential of wealth. When Milkman tells his father that he wants to be on his own for a year, Macon retorts that it is too late to leave, that he needs him to take "care" and "handle" his business so that he can inherit it (163). By denying Milkman permission to get a job and live on his own, Macon effectively denies his son access to the conditions of patriarchal manhood to which he expects him to aspire. As such, Macon not only ventriloquizes the dominant gender ideologies of whites but also impedes Milkman's ability to access his own manhood within the dominant paradigm of patriarchal masculinity. In other words, Macon is an unwitting ally in his Milkman's subordination, predicating his own patriarchal authority on his ability to prevent from Milkman from embarking on his quest and defining his manhood in his own terms.

Whereas Macon defines his manhood according to his ability to control property and transmit wealth through patrimony, Pilate embraces a different kind of inheritance. In the first place, Pilate's absence of a navel indicates that *Song of Solomon* is unique in Morrison's *oeuvre* in that it symbolically disrupts maternal ancestry to create space for redefining the paternal. That is not to say that matrilineal inheritance is not important in the novel; indeed, Pilate, Circe, and Sarah Byrd all participate in oral forms of cultural transmission when they tell Milkman stories of his ancestry. As Hirsch points out, however, Pilate also "broke her interconnection" with her mother when she "birthed herself" and instead attempted to "incorporate the father's word" into "her flesh" by

piercing her ear with the earring that contains her name (81). As such, Pilate's androgyny allows her to perform the role of a maternal culture-bearer, such as that described Spillers and Walker, while also sustaining relationships with ostensibly "banished" black fathers. As Morrison puts it, Pilate is a "balance" of the "best" of the "female" and "male," a balance that the novel seeks to nurture: "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor [Pilate] that we are, in fact, lost" ("Rootedness" 344). As such, Pilate holds the key to Milkman's own journey of self-discovery and paternal knowledge: her stories of Milkman's grandfather fill in the gaps and fissures of Macon's narrative, and she provides the first hint to Milkman that other definitions of manhood exist beyond the patriarchal model provided by his father. Indeed, Milkman feels a sense of freedom at Pilate's house that "dissipated" once he returned to his father's home (49), and that he only feels again after he discovers his ancestral origins in Shalimar, Virginia.

If Pilate represents the "balance" of gendered experiences in the novel, the green sack hanging from the ceiling of her home is the symbolic nexus of conflict between women's and men's notions of property and inheritance. Although Macon convinces his son that the sack contains gold that Pilate supposedly stole from him, Pilate believes that it contains the bones of the white man that Macon killed while they hid in a cave shortly after their father was murdered. By calling it her "inheritance," Pilate mocks the patriarchal logic of her brother and expresses an ironic ambivalence toward the idea of "inheritance" more generally. A sack of white man's bones, she wryly implies, proves a pathetic substitute for her murdered father and his lost farm.

More importantly, however, the sack of bones functions as a cultural artifact in that it compels Milkman to contemplate his own definition of inheritance. Once he learns the bag does not contain gold but a man's bones, he cannot accept his father's idea of "inheritance" as a purely economic relation between fathers and sons. Instead, he grapples with the fact that inheritance involves complex relations of borrowing, appropriation, and signifying, as evidenced in his reflection on Pilate and her role in getting him out of jail:

Something like shame stuck to his skin [...] Shame at needing both his father and his aunt to get him off. Then more shame at seeing his father—with an accommodating 'we all understand how it is' smile—buckle before the policemen. But nothing was like the shame he felt as he watched and listened to Pilate. Not just her Aunt Jemima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it—for him. For the one who had just left her house carrying what he believed was her inheritance. It didn't matter that he had also believed that she had 'stolen' it... From whom? From a dead man? From his father, who was also stealing it? Then and now? He had stolen it too. (209)

Here, Milkman's meditation on his shame initiates the beginning of his masculine redefinition.¹⁹ The idea that his inheritance could be owned or stolen by an individual is characteristic of the materialistic paradigm of masculinity taught to him by his father, which he now must qualify. When Macon smiles at the white policeman, he capitulates to white male power, indicating to make that money does not, despite his father's tutelage, yield absolute freedom. Unlike Guitar's mother, Macon's smile does not signify while reluctantly garnering resources for his family; it merely betrays his son, ironically aligning Macon with the policeman as co-conspirators in white domination over black men. In contrast to Macon's unnecessary concession to the policeman, Pilate's "Aunt

Jemima” routine dupes the officer into releasing Guitar and Milkman. Even more revealing, however, is that Milkman learns from Pilate that their “inheritance” is not an individual birthright but a shared communal experience, expressed in her selfless signifying performance to free Milkman and Guitar from prison.

Of course, such a reading of Pilate’s bag of bones as an artifact of paternal and cultural “inheritance” is lost on the men in the novel. Macon insists that the sack must contain the missing gold and encourages Milkman to go find it when they discover the real contents of the green sack. Furthermore, Guitar interprets her declaration as evidence of her complicity in white social domination. He not only ridicules Macon for behaving like a white man in his business practices but also Pilate for going “back to get a cracker’s bones for some kind of crazy self-punishment” (224), seeing his attempt to restore “Balance” as the only viable means of retribution for his father’s death and his own ruptured paternal inheritance. Guitar had once sympathized with Pilate by saying that she and the Dead family got their names “the way they get every else—the best way they can” (88), even if like her father their names were assigned by a white officer at the Freedman’s Bureau. As Guitar covets the gold for his own political agenda, however, he loses sight of such nuances in their cultural history.

Only through Milkman’s quest, however, does he learn to reject his father’s notion of possessive materialism so that he can begin a process of masculine redefinition. The first begins to reevaluate his father’s definition of manhood during the early part of his trip in Danville, Pennsylvania. While visiting Reverend Cooper, he learns that the Butlers were responsible for killing his grandfather, which prompts him to reconsider his

father's story. When his Macon described working alongside his father at Lincoln's Heaven, Milkman had "thought" that he "was boasting of his manliness as a child." After hearing Reverend Cooper's version of the story, however, Milkman "knew" that Macon "had been saying" that "he loved his father" as well, and that "his father loved him, trusted him, and found him worthy of working 'right alongside' him" (234).

What Milkman learns from the older generations of black men that he meets on his quest, then, first in Danville and later in Shalimar, Virginia, is how to reread his father's materialism. In the first place, they teach him to disavow Macon's possessive materialism as an expression of manhood. For example, when Milkman explains to the men in Danville that his father buys "a new car every two years" and planned "to buy the Erie Lackawanna railway," he misinterprets their response, interpreting their laughter as congratulations for his father's success (236). At the same time, however, their laughter mocks Milkman, whose vanity prevents him from hearing the veiled criticism, rattling off a list of his father's accomplishments and ambitions as "he glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride" (236).²⁰ Their mockery dissociates Macon's materialism from his manhood, allow Milkman the conceptual space necessary to redefine his own manhood.

While the men in Danville pretend to celebrate Macon's financial success, the men in Shalimar offer no such pretensions. In fact, the narrator's description of their initial impressions of Milkman echoes Guitar's critique of Macon's wealth as an indicator of racial betrayal: "they knew he had the heart of [...] white men" when they first watch him step out of his car (266). While the young men echo Guitar's cynicism by provoking

a fight with Milkman, the older generation seeks to mentor him through a trial-by-fire in the form of a hunting expedition. His participation in the hunt marks his initiation into their community, making him feel “connected” to them and his past in ways he had never felt “back home” (293).²¹ The destruction of his three-piece suit, cut and soiled during his escapades with these men, indicates the erosion of the materialist trappings through which he had previously defined his manhood.

What is most profound about the conclusion to *Song of Solomon*, however, is not that Milkman rejects his father’s possessive materialism, but that he learns to interpret material attachments as expressions of human suffering. After the hunt, for example, he reflects that his father loved “things to excess because he loved his father to excess,” and that he “distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain,” as “a measure of his loss at his father’s death” (300). Similarly, by telling Pilate that she had been “carrying” her “father’s bones” and encouraging her to bury them on Solomon’s Leap, he relieves Pilate of her belief that she must atone for the death of the white man that Macon had stabbed at the cave. She had, albeit unwittingly, carried her true paternal “inheritance” all along. And yet Milkman takes up a new attachment—a box of Hagar’s hair—to atone for his for his own crime of failing to love Hagar, which leads to her death. Although too late to save Hagar, taking up the box of her hair suggests that Milkman has learned from Pilate and Ruth that people are not things to be “owned,” as his father taught him, but as women and older generations of black men have taught him, to be loved.

Reading the Bones: John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong*

Although Wideman published his autobiographical essay collection *Fatheralong* nearly two decades after *Song of Solomon*,²² they both reject the denigration of fatherlessness and black male wandering in twentieth-century American culture. In a description that recalls the graphic murders of black fathers in *Song of Solomon*, Wideman explains whites have “breached” and “usurped” communication between black men and their kin through “murder,” “mayhem,” and “misinformation” (64). Following Morrison, Wideman also uses artifacts to indict white social domination rather than accept gendered and racialized pathologies as the cause of fatherlessness in black communities. “Arrayed against the possibility of conversation between fathers and sons,” he continues, “is the country they inhabit, everywhere proclaiming the inadequacy of black fathers, their lack of manhood in almost every sense the term’s understood here in America. The power to speak, father to son, is mediated or withheld; white men, and the reality they subscribe to, stand in the way” (64-65). In *Fatheralong*, Wideman initially believes that this “power” is located in the withheld material record of black men’s history, imagining that documentation of his family’s southern origins would give voice to the silences that puncture his father’s stories about his family and their ancestry. Ultimately, however, *Fatheralong* remains ambivalent about the efficacy of material artifacts to voice these silences and instead insists that black fathers and sons must generate their own documentation of their experiences.

Storytelling is a recurrent theme in Wideman’s writing. Like Morrison, Wideman views history and mythmaking as inextricable modes of narration, each of which

contributes to the formation of a distinctively African American literary tradition. In this way, both writers exude a postmodern wariness of historical continuity and narrative cohesion.²³ A favorite expression of Wideman is that “all stories are true,” which not only serves as the title of a short story collection (1992) but also appears verbatim in his novel *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) and recurs implicitly throughout his work.²⁴ Several of these texts focus specifically on relationships between fathers and sons: chiefly *Fatheralong*, as well as two of his novels, *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) and *The Cattle Killing* (1996).²⁵ As Tracie Church Guzzio explains, these narratives exhibit Wideman’s unflinching belief “in the power of ‘the story’ to save us, himself, his family, his people—to gather each take in a world broken by the paradigms of race and devastating loss” (“All My Father’s Texts” 188).

In this way, Wideman’s meditations on fathers and sons resembles the fragmented narratives of father-loss that Macon, Ruth, Pilate, and Guitar communicate to Milkman, as well as the mythic ur-narrative of Solmon’s flight in *Song of Solomon*. While their stories attempt to reconcile with the literal death and abandonment of fathers, however, Wideman’s stories address their figurative absence, manifesting itself in the silences across generations of black men. Criticism on *Fatheralong* has focused almost exclusively on Wideman’s narrative technique as an expression of these fraught relationships.²⁶ Claude Fernand Yvon Julien, for example, calls the text “autofiction,” a kind of “creative biography” that describes the way it deploys conventions of narrative fiction—namely, its fragmented temporality and shifts in narrative voice—even while purporting to be a memoir. “The *son* telling the story is not a person but a character in his

own right” (20), Julien explains, allowing the text to present “a cogent whole” of Wideman’s experiences as a father and a son “based on existential memories but with fictionlike mechanics” (22). Elsewhere, Eric Sundquist notes that the “dissolution of the progressive family narrative is signaled in the dissolution of narrative order in the text” (25). Even though Wideman expresses his belief in the potential to transform relationships between fathers and sons, Sundquist concludes that *Fatheralong* “does not specify whether “he has the psychic fortitude or artistic intention to record anything but its failure” (28).

Indeed, he structures *Fatheralong* to reflect the incomplete journey to wholeness and healing of his characters in the face of personal loss, modulating between fictional and nonfictional genres and resisting chronological coherence. Although seemingly a memoir, *Fatheralong* is a *bricolage* of exposition and narrative, memoir and polemic, memorialization and fictionalization. Following “Common Ground,” the opening essay in which Wideman denounces the “paradigm of race,” a series of four interconnected and circuitous stories exemplify the “fictionlike mechanics” described by Julien. Although the “convoluted circularity” of these stories indicates the “unreliability of memory” in reconstructing his familial history (Julien 19-20), the novel’s central odyssey narrative, much like Milkman’s quest in *Song of Solomon*, structures Wideman’s attempt to understand his paternal heritage. Whereas Milkman combines the various stories about his father and grandfather passed down in the oral tradition to construct a coherent narrative of his ancestry, however, Wideman hears mostly the silences and elisions that puncture “father stories.”

To suggest that materiality is central to Wideman's meditations on fathers and sons in *Fatheralong* will at first appear anathema to these established critical perspectives. Notwithstanding their elucidation of Wideman's narrative technique, such emphasis on his discursive strategies dismiss *a priori* how Wideman's meditations on materiality structure his "father stories." Sundquist's analysis points to this lacuna in the critical consensus: namely, how is it possible to generate a coherent "family narrative" when Wideman's narrative techniques—fractured, partial, and multifarious—implicitly reject the idea that such coherence is possible? Whereas Sundquist attributes the narrative dissolution to a lack of authorial will, Wideman's depiction of his archaeological quest to his ancestral southern homeland suggests another interpretation: that narrative discourse is not the sole medium of communication between fathers and sons. To a degree, then, *Fatheralong* belies its own skepticism about materiality as Wideman searches for other conduits of transmitting the story of his paternal heritage.

For Wideman, storytelling is the primary means of black masculine self-realization, which at first glance establishes a diametric opposition between narrative discourse and materiality in the text. This is especially apparent in the title essay of *Fatheralong*. "Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons," he explains (65). It is this kind of paternal intimacy that children—Pilate, Macon, Ruther, and Guitar—lament losing in *Song of Solomon*. Furthermore, his observation that "every one of the ways we contrive to compensate for the lost father has its benefits and also potential to consign us to hell" recalls Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, who feels both empowered and entrapped by his

father's possessive materialism as his means of coping with his father's death (65).

Wideman explicitly rejects this predicament when he identifies possessive materialism as a mechanism of white social domination that alienates black fathers from their families:

"Whites own the country, run the country, and in this world where possessions count more than people, where laws value property more than person, the material reality speaks plainly to anyone who's paying attention, especially black boys who own nothing, whose fathers, relegated to the margins, are empty-handed ghosts" (Wideman 65).

While "Fatheralong" decries possessive materialism in favor of storytelling, the following essay, "Littleman," complicates this opposition between narrative discourse and materialism by describing how Wideman tracks down documentary evidence of his paternal ancestry in hopes of facilitating communication between his father and himself. As a child, Wideman's grandfather had implored him to visit their ancestral home in Promised Land, South Carolina, but Wideman feared visiting the South because it was "a place where they lynched black boys like Emmett Till" (16). In "Littleman," however, Wideman describes the trip to South Carolina that he finally decides to take, fulfilling his grandfather's wish. Although Wideman himself grew up in Pittsburgh and had no personal recollection of his family's southern roots, his father's fears about the South are rooted in his memory of living under segregation before he moved North in the 1940s. In this way, Wideman echoes Baker's explanation of how fears of white violence are transmitted across generations of black men.

The essay opens in a room at the Holiday Inn in Greenwood, South Carolina, where Littleman (his father's cousin, whose real name is James Harris) tells them stories

about their family's southern ancestry. Drawing on vague childhood memories, Littleman tells Wideman about his great-grandfather's funeral, about how they tied a string around his jaw to keep it shut during the wake, and how he nudged his way through the grieving crowd to look at the dead man. For Wideman, the cadence of Littleman's narration is as compelling as its content. He notes the "pauses between words" and the "half-moaned, softly chanted intros to words about to be spoken." "What's spoken," he reasons, is "always a compound of both said and unsaid," and the "silence" between words "a sweet marrow within the bones or flesh on the bones of his words" (90).

On the one hand, the silences and pauses in Littleman's orations indicate the distinctiveness of African American voice, a melding of the "southern" and "African" and "South Carolinian" that Wideman has neither experienced nor learned about in Pittsburgh (90). Like the stories the men in Danville, PA and the inhabitants of Shalimar, VA tell Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, Littleman's stories orient the prodigal son to his rediscovered paternal ancestry. On the other hand, however, Wideman cannot help wondering whether those silences also indicate the absence of something critical to their ancestral story that has been lost, forgotten, or stolen. "What else?" he asks himself. What is left unsaid, silent and forgotten about his history? Like Milkman, Wideman's attempt to understand his paternal history is frustrated by the fragmentary nature of its narration; the stories are scattered, circuitous, and incomplete. The concomitant images of his great-grandfather lying "still and gaping" on his deathbed and his jaw wired shut in his casket indicate that silence marks not only an absence but a presence: a black father's "silent scream" at the threshold between life and death, existence and oblivion (89).

Whereas Milkman learns to synthesize the multifarious and divergent stories of his paternal ancestry during his quest, Wideman sets out to interpellate the silences and gaps in the stories told to him by Littleman and his father, and to understand the conditions of silence between him and his own son, Jacob. Throughout the rest of his journey, Wideman poses the problem of accessing the unmediated stories of his paternal ancestors. He acknowledges that women, and especially his mother, help voice these silences through their own roles as storytellers and listeners. In this way, Wideman follows Morrison in rejecting the sociological construction of the domineering black matriarch and her ostensible obstruction of masculine self-realization. “I wound up explaining things to myself by explaining them to her,” Wideman recalls, “She was *there*, like the internal words and rhythm of consciousness are there.”²⁷ Once again, the very presence of the maternal figure (a role played by Pilate in *Song of Solomon*) is significant in the story of paternal absence.

Nonetheless, Wideman yearns for direct communication with his father. In contrast to his mother, his father “evoked boundaries”—both physical and discursive—that culminated in a final separation when he left their family to join the enigmatic world “out there” (85). As Keith Byerman explains in his analysis of Wideman’s “Homewood” novels,²⁸ Wideman differentiates between women as “keepers of the culture” and men’s roles as seekers “problematizes the role of fathers” (157-158). Furthermore, Byerman notes that black male characters in his work are often “collectors” of stories, taking those communicated by women in the “oral tradition” and presenting them “to the larger world” in “material” form (158).²⁹ In *Fatheralong*, Wideman himself assumes this

“collector” persona during his journey through South Carolina, gathering stories not only from the maternally-oriented oral tradition but also from the material record of his family’s past. Writing these stories down, then, constitutes a literary archaeology in which Wideman attempts to reconstruct his black paternity.

Wideman first depicts himself in this role as archaeologist on his way to visit a white historian named Bowie Lomax in Abbeville, South Carolina. Contemplating the southern landscape, he attempts to justify his desire to “consult the record,” to “learn the facts,” and to study “the official documentary evidence.” And yet he harbors skepticism about its efficacy, wondering where else his paternal story materializes itself.

“Simultaneously I must not neglect the many other ways the past speaks,” he muses.

“Through my father’s voice, for instance. His hands. His eyes. Me. Sooner or later I get to myself. Another way my father speaks. To me. Through me” (107).

The resonances between Wideman’s suggestion that his father’s body can serve as documentation of his paternal ancestry and Morrison’s use of Pilate’s green sack filled with her father’s bones as an artifact of her paternal inheritance in *Song of Solomon* are obvious: both writers rely on bodily metaphors to disentangle the racialization of paternity and inheritance in American cultural history. Whereas the revelation that Pilate’s sack contains her father’s bones signals the recovery of an occluded black paternal inheritance, however, Wideman extends the metaphor by depicting his father’s body as a text that can speak within the silences of his paternal ancestry. In other words, Wideman’s description of his father’s body does not merely symbolize his recovered paternal ancestry; instead, it attempts to read his body as a cultural artifact on which their

shared inheritance is inscribed and through which it is voiced. If silences constitute the “marrow” of his paternal ancestry, he now literalizes the metaphor by imagining his father’s body as the medium that transmits not just his biological but also cultural inheritance. His father’s body, he implies contains the secrets of his paternal inheritance that manifested themselves in the silences in Littleman’s story.

Wideman advances this association even further when he describes the experience of reading through the documentary archive with the historian, Bowie Lomax. In this scene, Wideman extends the metaphor of his father’s body as the vessel of silence stories by describing the historical record of his paternal ancestry as a figurative “body.” He establishes this association first by listing the documents contained in the “metal boxes” that are “stuffed with ancient wills, letters, bills of sale, itemized appraisals of real estate and personal property that were required to legally convey wealth from the dead hand to the living” (114). In *Song of Solomon*, these are exactly the kinds of documents signed by Macon’s illiterate father that leads to the usurpation of the Dead family inheritance. In *Fatheralong*, however, Wideman imagines them as extensions of his father that potentially allow him to reconnect with his ancestors. The materials uncovered in the archives, however, do not simply reveal the “facts” of his paternal inheritance; they also implicate themselves as mechanisms of racial subordination. They tell a version of Wideman’s paternal story, but one that can only admit to its complicity in silencing—even killing—his ancestors.

Upon this realization, Wideman begins to understand that the power to access and interpret this record also contributes to the silences between himself and father. Noting

that his father and Lomax are about the same age, he wonders why his father, who is “as smart, as curious and engaging” as the white historian “had been denied the prospects” and the “possibilities” that afforded Lomax the opportunity to control, examine, and interpret the historical record of his family’s history (114). Although Lomax enthusiastically helps Wideman locate documentation of his family’s past, he also assumes the role of cultural usurper as a function of his white privilege. As Wideman reasons:

Hadn’t the historian’s career been one more mode of appropriation and exploitation of my father’s bones. Didn’t mastery of Abbeville’s history, the power and privilege to tell my father’s story, follow from the original sin of slavery that stole, then silenced, my father’s voice. The professor was a bona fide expert. He’d earned a living studying, passing on, institutionalizing what he knew about us, including how we were bought and sold, how a region flourished based upon trafficking in human souls. Not only flourished, but attempted to legitimize and preserve its prerogatives for all the world to see with these crumbing pieces of paper we were disinterring. (114-115)

By indicating how the material record of their past legitimizes and preserves the “prerogatives” of racial subordination, Wideman begins to understand that the silences, pauses, and gaps in the stories told by Littleman are not voids to fill but are themselves part-and-parcel of his ancestral narrative. Furthermore, the “documents also confirmed how much the present, my father’s life, mine, yours, are still being determined by the presumption of white over black inscribed in them” (116), illustrating how these records continue to inscribe racialized and gendered constructions of power and authority in the present. Penned by white hands and accessed by a white historian, these documents belie

Wideman's superficial attempt at recovering his paternal ancestry, revealing instead his naivety in thinking that they would unlock his family's secret.

That Wideman's ancestral search is not merely a personal pursuit but a feature of contemporary African American culture more generally is evident in the penultimate essay, "Picking Up My Father at the Springfield Station." Here, Wideman describes how he visited a museum exhibition on his trip with his father, where a large crowd of "well-dressed African American visitors" gathered to discover the traces of their own family histories. Aside from a few exceptions, most of the attendees "come up empty, disappointed, disconcerted," unable to authenticate the exact identity of their ancestors from the array of pictures. "You could guess or imagine, argue or pretend a connection with this likeness or that telltale feature, but the sobering fact was that without names, the coffle of ancestors could not be claimed," he concludes (147). Like the historical archives, Wideman's trip to the museum provides more questions than answers, accentuating the silences in his history rather than filling them.

Despite these disappointments, Wideman insists that his archaeological quest yields some rewards in the recovery of his paternal ancestry. These discoveries cannot voice the silences between fathers and sons, but they can posit new networks of communication across generations. For example, he recovers the names of his forefathers, Tatum W. Wideman and Jordan Wideman. Furthermore, Wideman points out that he authenticates their identity when he finds Jordan's name on his son Tatum's death certificate. "Too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence," his niece shortly thereafter names her son Jordan (148), resurrecting their ancestral name among a new generation of

black sons. On this point, we can see how Wideman redefines his own relationship with his father through these artifacts. Wideman does not have to reject the paradigm of patriarchal manhood and the misguided quest for wealth and personal freedom that defines Milkman's young life, but he does have to learn to read the archival record of his ancestry, and through that reading arrive at another conclusion: that if black fathers and sons will ever be reconciled, they must record their own stories.

In this way, the text of *Fatheralong* itself functions as an artifact of paternal inheritance. By recording his own archaeological quest, Wideman shares his own story as a kind of gift to the next generation of black men in his family who, he suggests, are seeking answers to similar questions about their fathers as well as themselves. The final essay, "Father Stories," clearly illustrates this function of the text. Taking the form of a letter to Wideman's son, Jake, the essay expresses Wideman's yearning as a father for an intimate relationship with his son, whose imprisonment for murdering his roommate on a camping trip when he was sixteen perpetuates the cycles of disrupted communication that Wideman laments throughout the rest of *Fatheralong*.

In this way, *Fatheralong* never really aspires to narrative coherence, as Sundquist suggests; to do so would betray the historical truths told by the gaps in the record, in the "silent screams" of his ancestors. Instead, by engaging the historical record of his paternal ancestry, Wideman concludes that those silences cannot be filled by what already exists, but by what can be created. Such narrative creations, Wideman concludes, perpetuate the silences that are too difficult to voice, replacing them with fabrications that substitute for the truth. As he writes to his son: "For better or worse, cursed and blessed

by this ignorance so we invent, fit it, are born with the gift, the need, the weight of filling it with our imaginings. That somehow are as real as well are. Our mothers and fathers and children. Our stories” (192).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, then, both Morrison and Wideman write narratives of archaeological recovery that attempt to restore ancestral ties between black fathers and sons. This narrative trope is especially important because it posits that black men cannot simply affirm alternatives to the dominant paradigm of patriarchal manhood by forsaking materialism. Instead, these texts suggest, must redefine their relationships to the material world, recognizing the complex ways that material relations have circumscribed black men’s lives and occluded their paternal ancestry. Since the idealization of patriarchal manhood in the United States is inextricable from the nation’s history of white socioeconomic domination, aspiring to “own” things, as Macon Dead insists, only further alienates black fathers and sons from each other. And yet, as Wideman shows in *Fatheralong*, the process of recovering that heritage through the official historical record is also fraught with contradiction, since the stories that Wideman seeks are not only found in what has been written but also in what has been left out.

Although both writers insist that black fathers and sons must learn to tell their stories to one another, they cannot begin to communicate these stories until they redefine their relationship with the material world. In the case of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman learns to interpret material objects as artifacts of his paternal inheritance, rather than accept his father’s possessive materialism as an expression of individual manhood.

Wideman, however, learns through his archaeological quest that the material record of his paternal ancestry is corrupted by the white hands that created and control it, leaving him with more questions than answers. Herein we find that storytelling and materiality are themselves two sides of the same narrative coin, since the relationships between people and the objects they encounter—a sack of bones, an earring, a deed of sale, a museum exhibition—all demonstrate the complex ways that material artifacts help us “invent” our fathers’ stories amid their absence. For Milkman, this process involves disavowing his father’s possessive materialism and embracing a new relationship with material objects as media of remembrance and atonement. Wideman picks up where Morrison leaves off: undecieved by the illusion that wealth buys “freedom,” as Macon Dead insists, Wideman confronts the reality that the historical record cannot fill the silences and gaps in the story of his paternal ancestry. As such, both Morrison and Wideman ultimately assume the role not only as collectors but also as chroniclers, offering their texts—the materialized form of “father stories”—to a new generation of sons.

Notes

¹ Recent sociological research has approached fatherlessness in black families as a pervasive myth, illustrating how black fathers retain a presence in their children's lives outside of the conventions of the nuclear family structure still privileged by white Americans. For example, see Roberta L. Coles and Charles Green's anthology of essays, *The Myth of the Missing Black Father* (2010), as well as Michael E. Connor and Joseph White's anthology, *Black Fathers: An Invisible Presence in America*, 2nd edition (2011).

² In "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", Genevieve Fabre situates this archaeological trope within the tradition of black women's writing.

³ Since three characters have the name "Macon Dead" in the novel, some clarification is necessary. I will refer to the deceased Macon Dead, named "Jake" as a child, as the eldest. His son will simply be referred to as Macon Dead. The youngest will be identified by his nickname, Milkman.

⁴ Frazier explicitly takes on the research of white sociologists, such as Joseph Tillinghast's *The Negro in African and America* (1902) and Jerome Down's two-volume *The Negro Races: A Sociological Study* (1907) which attributed black family organization to biologically-ingrained "racial traits." See pages 624-627 in *The Negro in the United States*, for Frazier's critique of these scholars. Pierre Saint-Arnaud also discusses both sociologists in *African American Pioneers of Sociology: A Critical History* (30-31).

⁵ These assumptions reemerge in the “fatherhood movements” of the 1990s and early 2000s, which culminate in a litany of policies and programs designed to promote “responsible fatherhood” and stable, monogamous marriages. David Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America* (1995) is the foundational argument that presents American families in a state of crisis brought on by single-parent homes and high divorce rates. Herman A. Sanders’s *Daddy, We Need You Now!* (1996) presents a case for black paternal involvement as necessary for black children’s healthy psychological development, echoing Louis Farrakhan’s call for familial reconciliation in his speech at the Million Man March in Washington, DC, in October 1995. For more on the fatherhood movement, also see Wade F. Horn, David Blankenhorn, and Mitchell B. Pearlstein’s anthology *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action* (1999), Obie Clayton, Ronald B. Mincy, and David Bankenhorn’s edited collection, *Black Fathers in Contemporary American Society* (2003), and David Popenoe’s *Families Without Fathers* (1996, expanded 2009). The perceived crisis in fatherhood also resulted in several policies aimed at promoting fathers’ rights and heteronormative families headed by patriarchs. For example, see the Fathers Count Act (H.R. 3073, 1999) and the Responsible Fatherhood Act (H.R. 4671, 2000). Anna Gavanas provides a thorough analysis fatherhood policy and sociological research in *Fatherhood Politics in the United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race, and Marriage* (2004).

⁶ The study was originally published in 1949. I quote from the 1957 revised edition.

⁷ For example, he offered “no discussion of slavery and other historical factors” in a conference presentation of his argument given in May 1965 (Rainwater and Yancey 27).

⁸ Moynihan uses the phrase “tangle of pathology” as his title for Chapter 4 in the *Report* to suggest that the condition of black communities is quickly devolving into crisis as a result of the concomitant “pathologies” of absent black fathers and domineering black mothers.

⁹ Lindquist’s study is profoundly important to understanding the sociological history of black families. Her book is dedicated to shifting the conversation away from Moynihan in an effort to reevaluate the work of black sociologists was obscured by the popularity of his report, including not only Frazier but also Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Horace Cayton. Dorothy Roberts reaches a similar conclusion when she claims that “racial inequality—not fatherlessness—is the leading cause” of “poverty,” and that blaming “absent Black fathers provides a defense against addressing America’s institutionalized racism” (157).

¹⁰ Other refutations of the mythic black matriarchy following Moynihan’s *Report* can be found in Robert Staples, “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy” (1970) as well as Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979).

¹¹ Many critics accused womanist and black feminist writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison of misandric representations of black men. For example, see Philip Royster’s critique of *The Color Purple* in “In Search of Our Fathers’ Arms.”

¹² See Chapter 1 in *We Real Cool* for hooks's explanation about how the patriarchal structure of the plantation during slavery continues to delimit available definitions of manhood in the United States.

¹³ Responses to the patriarchal slaveholding system by male slave narrators vary widely. Venture Smith, for example, structures his entire *Narrative* (1798) around father-son relationships in which the loss, retention, and acquisition of property figure prominently. The narrative opens with Smith witnessing the torture and murder of his father, an African prince, who refuses to tell a marauding tribe the location of his amassed fortune. Later, his new slaveholder and the slaveholder's father conspire to test Smith's trustworthiness by entrusting him with a key to the chest that contains unspecified valuables. Smith's stalwart refusal to give the key to the slaveholder's father, despite threats of physical violence, locates white paternal bonds as part and parcel of Smith's subordination to his new "master." In the conclusion of his narrative, Smith affirms his own manhood through his acquisition of property. This conclusion simultaneously capitulates to Euramerican models of patriarchal manhood while also resurrecting and reclaiming the image of his father who died protecting his own property from the marauders. Nonetheless, his masculine self-fashioning is qualified by his inability to protect his children: "a father's lips are closed in silence and in grief," he explains, since his children had not "walked in the way of their father" (31 in the facsimile). In contrast, later slave narrators point out the hypocrisy of the plantation patriarchy by describing how their white fathers disowned them. In the opening of his

Narrative (1845), for example, Frederick Douglass states that his “father was a white man,” although he cannot confirm his exact identity. White children, Douglass explains, had the luxury of knowing their age and their parents, but slaves often can only piece together inferences from rumors and hearsay. Such rumors “admitted” that his father was white and even “whispered” that his master was his father (340), but he had no evidence to confirm or deny these claims. Likewise, in *Slave Days in Old Kentucky* (1901), Isaac Johnson bitterly recalls how his white father betrayed his black family by selling them at the behest of other white members of his community. Ultimately, his father’s betrayal becomes the impetus for his emerging racial pride: “I would rather be in my black skin than in [...] my father’s,” he writes (40), rejecting his white father so he could embrace a black consciousness.

¹⁴ In an interview with Robert Stepto about *Song of Solomon*, Morrison herself comments on the novelty of this idea: “I think everybody knows, deep down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that black women didn’t take any part in that.” And then: “Now I have to admit, however, that it’s a new idea to me—the emasculating black woman. It really is new—that is, in the last few years” (479).

¹⁵ Several scholars have examined Milkman’s journey of self-discovery within this narrative tradition. Gerry Brenner, for example, notes how Morrison rejects the “masculine monomyth” as a mode of black masculine self-actualization, mocking Milkman’s “discovery of his lineage” as “little more than an intoxicant to gratify his wish for some grandiose illusion—that in his gene pool lies the birdlike ability to soar” (119).

In contrast, Michael Awkward illustrates how she modernizes this traditional Western narrative within a contemporary African-American context. See also Valerie Smith's "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*."

¹⁶ Similarly, Jan Furman claims that Milkman learns to substitute "spiritual fulfillment" as an "alternative to the pursuit of material success" (35). Elsewhere, Jeffrey Leak explains that Milkman's revelations of communal and cultural belonging allow him "to view life beyond material possessions and certain legal, social, and political realities" (130).

¹⁷ As Jan Furman explains, "Family for Macon is just another category of personal wealth" (35). Jeffrey Leak similarly states that Macon Dead has a "commodity view of marriage," since Macon marries Ruth knowing that he would inherit her father's wealth (99). Also see Barbara Christian's "The Concept of Class in the Novels of Toni Morrison." Christian explains that Macon's materialism compels Milkman's quest, but that his class consciousness is primarily informed by women in the text: Ruth, who is the "quintessence of the ideal southern lady image carried to a grotesque extreme," and Pilate, who is the social outsider who guides Milkman "to essences beyond outward appearance or material things" (76-77).

¹⁸ Marianne Hirsch notes how this description of Guitar's father indicates how white men are responsible for the emasculation of black men: "the black man's parts never fit," Hirsch explains, "his body does not stay buried. And the black man's son or daughter needs to try to make sense of this puzzle" (82).

¹⁹ On the subject of shame in *Song of Solomon*, see Chapter 4 in J. Brooks Bouson, *Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*.

²⁰ On Milkman's pride, see Bouson, as well as Cynthia Willett, "Masculinity and Existential Freedom: Wright, Ellison, Morrison, and Nietzsche."

²¹ On the role of this scene in constructing Milkman's masculine identity, see Linda Krumholz, "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*."

²² Although I categorize *Fatheralong* as autobiography, Wideman notoriously blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction throughout his writing. Claude Fernand Yvon Julien suggests using the terms "autofiction" or "creative biography" to describe such works (18). Elsewhere, James W. Coleman uses the phrase "fictionalized auto/biography" (*Writing Blackness* 1).

²³ I suggest that Morrison and Wideman deploy techniques of postmodernism while also recognizing the fraught relationship between African American cultural production and Eurocentric postmodernism, beginning with an exchange between bell hooks and Cornel West in the late 1980s. Daryl B. Harris succinctly summarizes the problem of identifying black culture as "postmodern" when he says that "postmodern Blackness behaves as an impediment in the African American quest for freedom" by dismissing the need for a coherent black cultural and political identity (210). According to Harris, the "postmodern self" is "a more or less avant-garde and hyperactive individualist" motivated "toward self-interested ends," rather than communal solidarity

and collective uplift (213). As a result, Harris argues, advocates of postmodern Blackness dismiss a legacy of cultural unity that not only originates in African communitarianism, but also enabled blacks to survive the “holocaust of enslavement” and endure the legacy of violence and subjugation that followed (218-219). Notwithstanding this debate, Morrison and Wideman undeniably utilize postmodern techniques that resonate with their white American contemporaries that I see as a convergence of postmodern aesthetics and distinctively African American narrative strategies.

²⁴ Several scholars have identified the expression “all stories are true” as the unifying trope of his *oeuvre*. For example, see Kathie Birat, “‘All Stories Are True.’ Prophecy, History, and Story in *The Cattle Killing*,” and Tracie Guzzio’s *All Stories are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman*.

²⁵ *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) may also be considered among these works. The text is purportedly a memoir on his relationship with his brother, Robby, but as Jacqueline Berben-Masi points out, the narrative persona that conveys the “memoir” modulates between the “internal focalization” of a memoirist and the impersonal anonymous narrator that is more characteristic of narrative fiction. This narrative modulation allows Wideman to shift focus from his relationship with his brother to Robby’s fraught relationship with their father, Edgar, who refuses to visit Robby in prison (687).

²⁶ In an interview with Renée Olander, Wideman responds to criticism about the lack of narrative coherence in his work, explaining that he conceives of the “novel as a

kind of energy source. It's kind of a kit that the reader goes to and tries to make something out of, and a really good writer puts all sorts of materials in there, and also instructions on how to make things out of it, and that's the exchange that I think is central to fiction, that I want to participate in as a writer and reader" (169).

²⁷ Coleman says about this passage: "his mother is inseparable from the story that affirms his deepest self; she *is* the story, if he tells it or if it transpires in consciousness" (*Writing Blackness* 11).

²⁸ These novels include *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981), and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983).

²⁹ That is not to say that Wideman believes the written word is or has even been the exclusive domain of male writers, or that women do not play a critical role as culture-bearers; indeed, Wideman explains in an interview that the "household of women" who raised him were "models of eloquence that were most important" to him as a child, when he first learned how to read the coded vernaculars of his Homewood community (Silverblatt 161-162).

CHAPTER IV

MONUMENTAL MANHOOD: COMMEMORATION AND ABJECTION IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *JOHN HENRY DAYS* AND EMILY RABOTEAU'S *THE PROFESSOR'S DAUGHTER*

In a 1988 interview, Toni Morrison describes her recently published novel, *Beloved*, as a literary monument to slaves. Lamenting the absence of a public memorial as a place to reflect upon slavery and the experiences of those in bondage, she explains:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no three-hundred-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. (45)

In the conspicuous absence of a memorial to slaves, Morrison sought to create one out of words, commemorating those men and women whose stories have been rendered silent in dominant narratives of American history. Morrison's statement, of course, is an affirmation of the place of literature in reconstructing the past, but it is equally revealing about the central roles that monuments play in shaping American historical consciousness. For Morrison, the presence of commemorative objects—whether a “three-hundred-foot tower” or a “small bench” or a novel—is necessary for members of a society to engage in the process of remembering and healing. “I just have the hunger for a permanent place,” she explains at the end of her interview. “It doesn't have to be a huge,

monumental face cut into a mountain. It can be small, some place where you can go put your feet up. It can be a tree. It doesn't have to be a statue of liberty.” (Denard 50).

Morrison's desire for a small place that commemorates the lives of slaves speaks to the politics of commemorating African Americans in public monuments more generally. According to Morrison, the absence of slave memorials not only threatens the erasure of America's violent racial history from public memory but also prevents us from grappling with its legacy.¹ As philosopher Edward S. Casey explains, monuments and memorials invite a process of “resumption” by promoting “ongoing” public “interchange of ideas and thoughts, opinions and beliefs” about our complex histories (30). The term *Denkmal*, as described by art historian Alois Riegl in his groundbreaking study of monuments, encapsulates their social function: they are objects through which members of a society think (*denken*) about and reflect upon itself. In the absence of physical monuments, Morrison's *Beloved*, along with other “neo-slave narratives” such as Shirley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) have fulfilled this desire to commemorate the lives of their enslaved ancestors.²

Although slave memorials remain generally absent in the United States, several monuments and memorials commemorating other aspects of African American history have been constructed since the publication of Morrison's *Beloved*. These include monuments to individual cultural icons such as the Joe Louis “fist” sculpture in Detroit, dozens of monuments and memorials to political activists such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as installations commemorating collective black participation in major historical events.³ In the early twenty-first century, then, the problem is not the

absence of commemorative sites, as Morrison noted, but how the recent proliferation of monuments and memorials represent African American history.⁴ Given that men have overwhelmingly been the subjects of monuments in the United States, monumental representations of black men deserve special consideration.

As I argued in the previous two chapters, white men have defined their manhood in opposition to black men through possessive materialism, and African American writers have responded to this materialist definition of manhood by revealing the ways black men resist their emasculation by seeking out liberating interactions with material objects. Whereas gift-giving reestablishes communal ties for black men who have been alienated by white socioeconomic domination, and archaeological recovery of artifacts reconnects black men with their occluded paternity, this final chapter examines ways of reading representations of racialized manhood in public monuments and memorials that commemorate black men. This chapter, then, considers the way that African American writers critique American material culture's influence on public perceptions of black men through statuary and their attending implications for shaping America's racial consciousness in the twenty-first century.

African American writers such as Morrison, Williams, and Johnson have written literary monuments that commemorates a past that has been neglected in the dominant historical narrative told by physical monuments, but younger writers such as Colson Whitehead and Emily Raboteau have turned their attention toward the problem of commemorating African Americans in physical monuments, a medium that historically represents white men as powerful agents of history and black men in states of abjection.

Specifically, this chapter examines objects that commemorate black men in Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001) and Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005). In these novels, statues, gravestones, and other commemorative objects signify on public representations of black male abjection found in American monuments as well as in the public display of black male bodies in lynching rituals.⁵ Historically, white men have used these abject images to affirm their own manhood. These novels, I argue, not only reject whites' creation of these public images to dominate African American men but also reclaim them as sites of healing and self-affirmation.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section elucidates how monument-building in the United States created a dialectical opposition between white manhood and black abjection in public memory. Since Reconstruction, depictions of black male abjection in American monuments as well as lynching have served a common function of providing the racial backdrop for white male self-promotion. The second section examines how Whitehead's *John Henry Days* exposes the lasting psychological impact of these abject images in its protagonist, a hack journalist named J. Sutter, whose encounter with a monument to John Henry forces him to confront his entrenched fears of becoming a racial martyr. Ultimately his companion, Pamela Street, guides J. toward alternative sites of commemoration that aid rather than impede their path toward healing. The third section examines the depiction of black male abjection in Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* following the accidental death of the protagonist's brother. Whereas Whitehead seeks out alternative sites of commemoration to facilitate healing from the psychological entrenchment of abjection, Raboteau uses abjection facilitate the

self-actualization of her mixed-race female protagonist, Emma Boudreaux. In my conclusion, I indicate how these novels provide instruction for reading contemporary monuments dedicated to black men, focusing on the controversial Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., as an example of how black male abjection remains entrenched in American public consciousness.

Visualizing the Abject: Monuments, Memorials, and Lynching Rituals

In the United States, monuments historically facilitate white social domination by depicting white men as powerful agents of history against a backdrop of black male abjection. For psycholinguist Julia Kristeva, “abject” describes something—not a subject but also not an object, either—that provokes revulsion and the collapse of meaning. The abject is “not me” but also “‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (3). For example, cast-off things—corpses, excrement, and waste—are all abject because their proximity to and yet difference from a subject disrupts identity and social order: they are neither “self” nor “other.” “Abjection,” she continues, “is above all ambiguity” because “it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it” but “acknowledges” the subject “to be in perpetual danger” (9). Put another way, Judith Butler explains in her distinction between gender performance and the materiality of “sexed” bodies that “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection” that exists “outside” the subject as well as “‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (3).

Abjection as defined by Kristeva and Butler precisely describes the ambiguous role that black men occupied in white consciousness following the Civil War. White men felt threatened by the presence of black men as new members of the body politic, and

they expressed these fears through monumental representations of black male abjection. Under slavery, white manhood and black chattel stood in dialectical opposition: white men affirmed their manhood by owning blacks. Cultural representations of black male abjection served no purpose under slavery, since the law drew a clear line between subjects and objects, humans and chattel. Post-emancipation, however, monuments displayed black men as abject, paradoxically representing their inclusion into the American body politic while simultaneously expressing whites' fears that their ethno-national mythos was on the verge of collapse. The desire to commemorate the war abated by the end of the nineteenth-century, but white fears of black domination did not. By the 1880s, whites turned to lynching as another mode through which they displayed abject black male bodies to construct narratives of white manhood and nationhood.

Monuments were not always part of American cultural production. Prior to the antebellum period, Americans generally regarded the commissioning and display of monuments and other works of public art as anti-democratic, useless, and ostentatious expenditures (Savage, *Monument Wars* 1, 78). By the 1850s, when the Union was threatened by political sectarianism and regional antipathy, Americans began to construct monuments to preserve a semblance of unity. The first two significant monuments in the United States were equestrian statues of Andrew Jackson and George Washington, whose formidable images placed in city squares publically identified them as agents of American nation-building (Savage, *Monument Wars* 1-3).⁶ The construction of monuments depicting Washington and Jackson as bastions of national identity during the antebellum period was fraught with irony, however, since both men were also

slaveholders. Considering that the expansion of Southern slaveholding territory during Jackson's tenure as president substantially contributed to his personal wealth as a plantation-owner was especially ironic: he became a symbol of nationalism for the same reason that the nation was now on the brink of war. Furthermore, the location of Jackson's statue in Washington, D.C.'s Lafayette Square, is the site of a former slave market, a clear example of how monuments rewrote American history in public spaces.

It was only after the Civil War that Americans began to enthusiastically embrace monument-building as a strategy for shaping public memory of the war and emancipation. From the 1860s through the 1920s, Americans succumbed to "statue mania," a widespread cultural obsession with creating a unified and coherent national consciousness and coping with the "anxieties unleashed by the rapid advance of modernism, immigration, and mass culture" that characterized the period (Doss 27). This "mania" began as an effort to heal the wounds of a deeply divided nation by bringing closure to the Civil War and the recent assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Writing in 1866, a young William Dean Howells was dismayed at this initial frenzy to commemorate Lincoln and the recent war. In fact, Howells celebrated when plans to build a monument in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois fell apart; he felt relieved "that the fever-heat of their first intent [to commission a monument] exhausted itself in dreams of shafts and obelisks, groups and statues." The fever of monument-building, Howells believed, was residual of the war itself. He insisted that Americans wait for "cool moments of our convalescence from civil disorder" to think more clearly about how to artistically render the recent military conflict (647).

Despite Howells's attempt to quell his readers' passions for a war monument, Americans clamored for ways to publically commemorate the war and emancipation. The problem sculptors faced, however, was how to depict a war fought over slavery without undermining the association between nation unity and white manhood symbolized by men such as Washington and Jackson. Whites had little reason to depict African Americans in monuments prior to emancipation: by definition, enslaved people lived beyond the symbolic order of white American society. The few equestrian statues of "founding fathers" that dotted the American landscape before the war set precedent for narrating U.S. national history through the iconography of white manhood, a narrative in which black men existed not as agents of history but as chattel.⁷ Following Reconstruction, black and white men found themselves, at least theoretically, on equal political and social footing. For many white Americans, however, black men still remained beyond the pale of their national imagination.⁸

The embroiled debate surrounding the design and commissioning of the Freedmen's Memorial to Lincoln during the 1860s is perhaps the best illustration of how white manhood and black male abjection figured in the construction of a post-bellum American monument. Sponsors of the monument vetted several design proposals, each of which offered different configurations of racialized manhood. Some of these proposals represented black and white men as equal participants in the war. The most controversial of these was Harriet Hosmer's proposed sculpture cycle depicting black men as agents in their ascent from slaves to soldiers. As Kirk Savage explains, the final stage of her cycle depicts a black soldier "erect, intact, unwounded," and "alert," suggesting that he has

“acquired manhood” through a display of militaristic power on par with that of his white counterparts (*Standing* 98). In contrast, Clark Mills, who had designed the statue of Jackson in Washington, D.C., proposed an ostentatious design in which slaves sit in diminished postures at the feet of Lincoln, who sits at the statue’s apex. On the lower tiers, soldiers stand vigil around the statesmen working tirelessly in the emancipation effort. As Savage explains, Mills’s design “betrays an unshakable condescension toward the people it represents and supposedly commemorates” (105). These two designs, both rejected, represent exactly how polarizing the commemoration of emancipation had become.

The commission eventually went to Thomas Ball, whose statue depicts a benevolent Abraham Lincoln holding the Emancipation Proclamation in his right hand while standing over a kneeling male slave.⁹ Forsaking the overwrought designs of Hosmer and Mills, Ball’s statue was simple. Nonetheless, it was equally condescending toward slaves as Mills’s statue. At the unveiling of the Freedman’s Monument on April 14, 1876, Frederick Douglass delivered a keynote speech in which he subtly repudiates the statue’s representation of black men. First, he refuses to praise it, instead ambivalently describing it as a “highly interesting object” (584). Later, he explicitly critiques the monument by dissociating himself and other former slaves from his audience through a paternalistic metaphor. “We are at best only his [Lincoln’s] step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity. To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory, to multiply his statues, to hang his pictures high upon your walls, and commend his

example, for to you he was a great and glorious friend and benefactor” (589). Here, Douglass rejects the monument’s attempt to consolidate the historical narrative of emancipation by questioning its presumed universality and repudiating its representation of white male arrogance. The statue, he suggests, tells a story that can be championed only by whites—the “true” children of Lincoln—but not by his black “stepchildren,” for whom the statue only etches images of black male abjection more deeply into public memory.

The Freedman’s Monument is an explicit example of how white America affirmed white manhood through representations of black male abjection following the Civil War. Although the monument was intended to depict emancipation as a narrative in which black men became political equals to their white counterparts, “the monument cancel[s] its own presumed message” of emancipation in specifically gendered terms “by withholding the promise of a common masculinity” between white and black men (Savage, *Standing* 117). Monuments such as the Freedman’s Monument continued to depict white men as agents of history, but their portrayal of black men’s assent to political equality is decidedly abject—no longer objects to be owned, yet not quite subjects of their own history. Instead, the Freedman’s Monument had taught the American public to accept the memory Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator,” translating the antebellum master-slave relationship into a post-war relation of racial patronage—the “white man’s burden” cast in stone and bronze. By representing black men in shackles and tattered clothing as passive recipients of white magnanimity, Ball’s statue inaugurated a tradition of depicting black male abjection in public art.

Black male abjection figured prominently in subsequent Civil War monuments as well. Even the few monuments that depicted black soldiers represented them as subordinate to their white counterparts rather than as autonomous agents. For example, Levi Scofield's "Mortar Practice," which sits at the base of the Cuyahoga County Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Cleveland, Ohio, depicts a black soldier firing a mortar round with white members of the Union army. The monument departs from the iconic Freedman's Monument by representing African Americans as active participants in the war, suggesting that by the 1880s public audiences were somewhat less concerned with the notion that black men fought for their own emancipation than they were when Harriet Hosmer proposed her monument design in the 1860s. Nonetheless, the monument continues the dialectical representation of white manhood and black male abjection found in earlier monuments, particularly through their dress. The white soldiers wear clean and buttoned Union uniforms while they systematically fire the cannon. In contrast, the black soldier is nude from the waist up and stands apart from the white members of his unit. He is more a part of the artillery than the regiment. These artistic choices explicitly differentiate the black soldier from his white compatriots, making him at best ancillary to the monuments' portrayal of white masculine heroism.

Scofield's attempt to accurately represent black participation in the emancipation project may seem benign and perhaps even progressive in contrast to the Freedman's Monument. The critical reception of Scofield's monument, however, tells us that its viewers interpreted its representation of black male abjection as realistic. In other words, they lost sight of the monument as an *interpretation* of history and took it as *history itself*,

reading abjection as a defining characteristic of black manhood. The black art historian Freeman Henry Morris Murray defends the verisimilitude of “Mortar Practice,” explaining that “stalwart Negroes” such as that depicted by Scofield were characteristically stripped above the waist in combat, “especially when in strenuous action enveloped in death-laden battle-smoke.” He goes on to deflect criticism of these representations of black men by affirming their historical accuracy: “We may rest assured that the scantily attired Negroes in the sculptural groups which have been discussed are not inadvertent portrayals, nor are these portrayals half-disguised belittlement as some persons might suppose: they are ‘true to form’” (Freeman 80-81).

Murray’s interpretation of “Mortar Practice” as “true to form” testifies to the power that monuments held over shaping public perceptions of white and black men and their role in the historical narrative of emancipation. Recognizing the stakes, other African Americans lobbied for and sought creative control over other public monuments that would tell American history as they saw it. Women’s organizations were especially active in these initiatives. For example, in 1870 the Colored Women’s Lincoln Aid Society in Philadelphia argued for a monument dedicated to “those [black soldiers and sailors] who fell fighting to perpetuate our glorious Union” (quoted in Kachun, 156). The following decade would see several other monument proposals from prominent African Americans, most of which were aborted due to lack of funding and public support. In 1883, W. Calvin Chase, editor of the black newspaper *The Washington Bee*, insisted on the construction of a black Civil War monument in the capital “at government expense” (156-157), a dream that would not be realized until over a century later.¹⁰ Not

surprisingly, few of these proposals were ever commissioned and completed, despite a “burgeoning commercial monument industry” that produced thousands of war memorials during this period (Doss 24).¹¹

Although monuments commemorating emancipation and the Civil War monuments declined by the 1880s, monuments remained popular as a way to commemorate other constituent events and figures in American history, but they rarely included depictions of African Americans. One notable exception, however, was Crispus Attucks. As the reputed first casualty of the American Revolution, a statue commemorating Attucks was erected in Boston Commons in 1888. The monument no doubt marks a significant development toward honoring the nation’s “black founding fathers” through the practice of monument-building (Kachun 164), but at the same time it continues to associate black male abjection with national unity. While as the nation continued to heal from the wounds of the Civil War, Attucks, as “the first to defy, the first to die,”¹² nostalgically conjured up a prelapsarian image of national solidarity, narrated through the story of black male death. In the form of an obelisk, the statue does not explicitly depict Attucks’s death, but it is his death nonetheless that signals the historical significance of his life: he had to die so the nation could begin.

Monuments were not solely responsible for etching images of black male abjection into public memory during the turn of the twentieth century. Ritualized lynching and its dissemination through photography, film, and art also put abject images center-stage in performances of white masculine power.¹³ While monuments figured black male abjection through their ambiguous place in national history, whites displayed

black male corpses, often mutilated, castrated, and burned, to affirm their own manhood. In this regard, monuments and lynching operated under very similar logics. As Trudier Harris famously explains, whites (especially, although not exclusively in the South) ritualized public lynching in an effort to “exorcise blackness” from national consciousness. Under the rubric of abjection, this attempt to “exorcise” black men meant casting away the already-object; to restore pre-Civil War social order by restoring the opposition between subject and object, white manhood and black chattelhood, that characterized pre-emancipation American nationalism. In a sense, lynching transformed the deprecated bodies into monuments, however temporary, that sought to consolidate white masculine power in white collective consciousness.¹⁴ In fact, some whites even associated lynching with monument-building. As one woman reports following the lynching of Lloyd Clay in Vicksburg, Mississippi, a white man who had participated in the lynching describe tree from which Clay was hung and burned as “monument to the spirit of [white] manhood” (qtd. in Feimster 147).

In sum, then, the rise of monument-building, meant to commemorate the Civil War and emancipation, and lynching, meant to terrorize African Americans into subordination, found a strange affinity in their visual rhetorics of abjection. By publically displaying black male bodies, both monuments and lynching illustrate how white men at once defined themselves against a backdrop of black male abjection while also exposing their fears about competing with black men as political and social equals. As it became increasingly evident at the turn of the twentieth century that their social, political and sexual monopolies were coming to an end, whites replaced monuments depicting black

male abjection with lynching as a more violent, intense, and terrifying display of their power.

Confronting Abjection in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*

Using the legend of John Henry as its central motif, Colson Whitehead's novel *John Henry Days* illustrates how this history of representing black male abjection in monuments and lynching rituals continues to constrain black masculine identity in the early twenty-first century. John Henry memorabilia, souvenirs, and an abandoned cemetery populate the text, but a statue of John Henry in Talcott, West Virginia, serves as the geographical and psychological focus of the novel. Whitehead uses these commemorative objects to raise the question of whether black men can liberate themselves from white definitions of black manhood as abject. The novel's protagonist, a hack journalist ("junketeer") named J. Sutter, has already internalized these perceptions when he arrives in Talcott to cover the first annual John Henry Days festival. The John Henry legend and the representation of the folk hero in monuments and souvenirs force J. to confront his investment in white perceptions of black manhood, expressed in his uncritical acceptance of American consumerism as well as his entrenched fears of becoming a racial martyr. In contrast, a woman named Pamela Street confronts John Henry to reconcile her fraught relationship with her recently-deceased father, who had obsessively collected memorabilia of the folk hero. Ultimately, J. and Pamela learn to revise the narrative of black male abjection through their interpretation of commemorative objects: specifically, the John Henry monument, the Big Bend tunnel that John Henry purportedly cut when racing the steam drill, and the abandoned cemetery

where Pamela buries her father's ashes. Their engagement with these commemorative sites redefines abjection from an expression of racial terrorism to a mode of psychological healing.

Whitehead's use of materiality to explore black manhood in *John Henry Days* is not unique in his work; in fact, materialism is one of the defining characteristics of his fictional *oeuvre*. For example, in *The Intuitionist* (1999), Lila Mae Jenkins tracks down the missing notebooks of the founder of intuitionism, James Fulton. The notebooks contain his design plans for the revolutionary "Black Box," but they also reveal Lila's racial affinity with Fulton, whom she discovered had been passing for white. In *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), Whitehead turns his attention to consumerism, focusing especially on naming and branding in a commodity-saturated society. The unnamed narrator of *Apex* is a "nomenclature consultant" charged with renaming the historically black town of Winthrop. As he considers his task, he reflects on identifiable brand-names such as "Band-Aids" as the perfect confluence of signifier and signified, explaining "The name was the thing itself, and that was Holy Grail territory" (87). The narrator discovers, however, that accounting for the complexities of African American history in the town's name proves a far more difficult task than branding consumer products. *Sag Harbor* (2010) is a coming-of-age story about Benji Cooper, a "bourgie" black teen on summer vacation in the Hamptons. The novel explores the friendships and associations formed by Benji and his friends through their attachments to various consumer products including clothing, shoes, records, stereos, and bee-bee guns.¹⁵ Taken together, Whitehead's fiction

clearly represents a sustained critique of materialism and consumerism in contemporary American culture.

What makes *John Henry Days* unique among Whitehead's materialist-oriented fiction, however, is its emphasis on black manhood. To date, critics have neglected this aspect of the novel, focusing instead on its critique of American history. As William Ramsey argues, the novel rejects the "totalizing master narrative" of southern history as a social construction, defined by its legacy of racial oppression, in favor of "a vitally progressive potential" of plural historical interpretations (783). This disruption of historical coherence is most evident in its disjointed narrative structure, which oscillates between the main narrative that focuses on J. Sutter and the various iterations of the John Henry legend that comprise the rest of the text. At the same time, however, the novel remains invested in narratives of historical continuity. As Daniel Grausman argues, *John Henry Days*, along with Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), represent anxieties about transition from the twentieth century's "faith in print culture" to the twenty-first century information age (633-635). Although these readings of *John Henry Days* seem disparate, they reflect what I see as the novel's primary ontological concern: how black manhood is defined and redefined within competing historical narratives told through monuments.

It is clear from the beginning that J. has internalized aspects of white historical and cultural consciousness that affect his self-perception. This is especially apparent in Whitehead's psychological profile of his protagonist, which dominates the first half of the novel. In particular, J. harbors deep fears of becoming the victim of racial violence.

For example, when riding in the cab on the way to Talcott, he imagines that cannibals in remote shacks are waiting for an opportunity to devour him (21-22). Here, Whitehead alludes to the cannibalistic practices that often accompanied lynchings. As historian Philip Dray explains, “while the attendees at lynchings did not take away a plate of food, the experience of having witnessed the event was thought by many incomplete if one did not go home with some piece of cooked human being” (81). Through this allusion to lynching as a cannibalistic ritual, Whitehead shows how J.’s first trip to the South brings J.’s entrenched fears to the surface. In fact, during his trip to Talcott he has already fabricated a narrative of his own death: “If anything goes down in the cannibal region,” he thinks, Pamela “will send word, and the story of J’s martyrdom will live on in black fable” (50).¹⁶

Whitehead develops this psychological subtext when J. realizes that his career and attempt to break the “Record” for the longest junket parallels the story of John Henry. In short, both men compete in a race rigged against them. In the legend, the steel driver defeated the steam drill in a head-to-head race, but he collapses and dies immediately after his victory. While the story of John Henry is an allegory of man-versus-machine in a rapidly industrializing society, the folk hero’s inevitable death also suggests that he is a kind of blood sacrifice to the dawn of a new era. This association is corroborated by Whitehead’s allusion to Palmer Hayden’s painting “John Henry Died with a Hammer in His Hand,” which depicts John Henry lying prostrate on the ground with arms spread to his sides, recalling the crucifixion of Christ. This parallel was not lost on Whitehead,

whose depiction of John Henry as a sacrificial figure is clearly informed by Hayden's work: Pamela's father even owned an original Hayden painting of the folk hero (116).

Whereas John Henry's doomed race against the steam drill allegorizes the competition between man and machine at the onset of the American industrial revolution, J. futilely races against the acceleration of information at the dawn of the digital age. He first realizes that his attempt to break the "record" parallels the John Henry legend during the opening reception of the festival when a black teenaged boy performs a rendition of "The Ballad of John Henry." The song opens with a verse about John Henry's birth, when the infant steel-driver announces his own death in the refrain: "This hammer will be the death of me" (75). J. continues to eat as the boy sings, but he chokes on a piece of meat halfway through the song, nearly fulfilling his own premonition of death that he had when he first arrived in Talcott. The episode clearly parodies the John Henry myth, but it lambasts American consumerism as well. As Ramsey explains, it mocks the "governing trope" of ritualistic consumption that defines his career as a "junketeer" (781). While choking, his mind races from the absurdity of dying on assignment to childhood memories of reading the Luke Cage comics about a black ex-con superhero with bulletproof skin. As J. begins to lose consciousness, he thinks to himself: "This place will fucking kill him. He should have known better. A black man has no business here, there's too much rough shit, too much history gone down here. The Northern flight, right: we wanted to get the fuck out. That's what they want, they want us dead. It's like the song says" (78-79).

In addition to parodying the John Henry legend and consumerism, however, Whitehead also signifies on the spectacle of lynching as an affirmation of white manhood. As discussed above, white Americans defined white manhood in opposition to black male abjection in monuments as well as lynching rituals. J. realizes that he has become a figure of abjection to the other guests at the reception, whom he images as a lynching party: “Can’t these people see what’s going on?” “All these crackers looking up at me, looking up at the tree,” he thinks to himself. “Nobody doing nothing, just staring. They know how to watch a nigger die” (79). Here, Whitehead parodies the idea of white male heroism in two ways: first, the predominately white crowd appears cowardly (or at least callous) to J. as he chokes. Furthermore, Alphonse Miggs, the “hero” who arises from the crowd to save him, acts with ambivalence: he “jumped up to help” at the last minute, only once “he realized his indifference to whether the man lived or died” (134). Alphonse is a caricature of white heroism: he is not a heroic white male figured in American monuments but a sociopath who, we learn later, murders several people at the John Henry festival’s main event.

Although Miggs is a sociopath, his ambivalence toward black male death is actually characteristic of white men in the novel. This is evident when J.’s white colleagues meet in a hotel room to reminisce about their exploits, drawing comparisons between J.’s near-death experience and other black men who have died violently in public. In this scene, Whitehead makes it clear how white men structure their historical consciousness around spectacles of black male death. For example, Dave Brown explains how J.’s choking reminds him of the murder of a black teen during a Rolling Stones

performance at the Altamont Speedway in December 1969. The scene is abject in precisely the sense described by Kristeva: it signals chaos in the existing symbolic order, in this case represented in the turbulent counter-culture movement of the 1960s. “It was horrid and we watched it,” he explains. “All the negativity of the day, of all that year, came down to this violence that we witnessed. And those thousands at my back who weren’t right there and didn’t see it could feel it. The [Hell’s] Angels did what the people demanded, even if they didn’t know they demanded it. They were going with the flow” (99). Dave cannot remember the victim’s name (it was Meredith Hunter), but he is acutely aware that the young man’s death signals a ritualistic sacrifice that defines the era: “The Angels performed their sacrifice” in front of hundreds of thousands of people,” he explains, so that the “new thing” that the “kids” had brought into the world could “be paid for” (99). That J.’s white colleagues interpret Meredith Hunter’s death as just one instance in a long history of black male sacrifice is even more explicit when one of them proposes that “this guy is like the Crispus Attucks of the seventies” (99). Taken together, the death of Crispus Attucks, John Henry, and Meredith Hunter represent successive transitions in American cultural history marked by public displays of black male abjection: the American Revolution, the industrial revolution, and the counter-cultural revolution, respectively. J.’s fears of his impending death, then, are not unfounded: according to his white colleagues, he is next in a long list of sacrifices in the name of American historical progress.

Whereas J. brings these entrenched fears to bear on his encounter with the John Henry monument, Pamela harbors resentment for the folk hero that began during her

childhood. Her father had idolized “the steeldriver an ideal of black masculinity in a castrating country,” and she felt forced by her father’s obsession to live “every waking day” in his presence (189). Her childhood was saturated with images of John Henry; her father had even turned his Harlem apartment into a John Henry museum in which he displayed everything from statues and sledgehammers to records and piano scrolls. The first item, Pamela recalls, was a statue of John Henry he found in an antique shop standing amid assorted lawn jockey statues. “The figure of John Henry layin’ the line was surrounded on all sides by small men in red outfits hefting the strange burden of gold rings,” she remembers, conjuring an image of John Henry as an idealized alternative to the diminutive racist caricatures of the surrounding statues (115). That first statue rode home with her in the backseat of the car wrapped in her blanket, and she repeatedly found herself competing with John Henry who, like a petulant sibling, stole her father’s attention.

For Pamela, John Henry represents the hurt that she felt when her father sold his store and neglected his family to dedicate his life to his John Henry museum. When she confronts the John Henry monument, she is forced to confront not only her resentment of the folk hero but also her strained relationship with her father. Having grown up surrounded by John Henry, Pamela has learned various iterations of the legend that Whitehead conveys to readers throughout the novel, including documentary accounts of his race against the steam drill, several versions of the ballad, a novel by Roark Bradford, and Paul Robeson’s theatrical performance of John Henry based on Bradford’s book. Intuitively, she understands that the monument signifies not one but virtually limitless

possible interpretations, although she cannot yet articulate them. “How do you fit all that in?” Pamela wonders. “At the monument finally after all these years,” Pamela now feels “forced to erase the image suggested by her father’s stories,” and to “throw out what she draws from her hold of curdled perceptions” that she has formed throughout her childhood (262).

Pamela’s willingness to let go of her resentment for her father is the first step to reinterpreting the John Henry legend. Like her father, John Henry is an enigma to Pamela, but she uses her knowledge of the legend to read through the multiple significations of the statue and make sense of both men. At first she perceives the statue as a totalizing representation of the folk hero. “The artist who made this statue had a big job,” she reflects. “Thousands and millions of John Henrys driving steel in folk’s minds, and his is the one that climbs up on this stone pedestal and gets the plaque, the concession stand right there. She looks up at the eyes of the statue and they shelter penumbra too deep to comprehend” (262). Gradually, however, the statue’s ambiguity reveals other possible interpretations. She reads the “hard to define ratios” of the statue’s form appear “brutish” and animalistic, but later Pamela sees a confident physicality, and even sexuality. Standing with his “legs apart,” John Henry appears “well balanced,” perhaps a “boxer” or an emblem of black male virility, since he seems to be holding his hammer “kind of like a dick” (263).¹⁷ Her revelation is not a definitive interpretation of the statue but an understanding that his is a signifier *par excellence*: “She can’t fix him,” she finally admits. “He is open to interpretation. Talking out of both sides of his mouth” (263).

Pamela's desire to understand her father's fascination with John Henry also allows her to help J. confront his own demons. Along these lines, Pamela becomes J.'s tutor, pointing out how the monument embodies the familiar trope of black male abjection found through public representations of black men in the United States. As Pamela explains, the "dents on the statue" are the result of locals using "it for target practice." By shooting the statue, the "locals" (who are presumably white given that Whitehead describes Pamela and J. as two of the handful of black people at the festival) reenact the narratives of white violence against black men that J. had interiorized into his own self-consciousness. In addition to these depredations, Pamela explains that "one time they chained the statue to a pickup and dragged it off the pedestal down the road." The statue "fell off" the chain, and the vandals "drove off." The next day, they found the statue "just lying in the road" (265).¹⁸ This vandalizing clearly recalls J.'s entrenched fears of being lynched, but Whitehead's vivid description of this act of vandalism also reinforces the novel's point that J.'s fears are not the product of paranoia but an conditioned response to the historical and social realities of white violence against black men which, in this case, manifests itself in a symbolic reenactment of lynching.¹⁹

In addition to confronting his fears, J. must learn also to forsake his investment in American consumerism before he can begin his own process of healing. Indeed, even after Pamela teaches J. how to read through the statue's abjection, J. remains in a superficial world of consumerism that had defined his junketeering career. Like the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, J. clings to material objects—in this case, a statue of John Henry that he buys from the souvenir shop—that inhibits rather than facilitates his

self-actualization. Following Ellison's mode of critique, Whitehead parodies these material attachments. For example, J. appears absurd as he struggles to carry the hefty statue around the festival grounds: "he's the only jackass walking around in spy sunglasses and Hawaiian shirt with a John Henry under his arm." Also like Ellison's treatment of the invisible man's materialist attachments, however, is an undercurrent of tragedy: "John Henry is too heavy," J. admits, "He feels like he's been lugging him around for years" (313-314). In a sense, then, J. is the invisible man *redux*, carrying around a burdensome object that signals his internalization of white perceptions of black men.²⁰

Although Pamela's interpretation of the John Henry monument aids her and J. in their journeys toward healing and reconciliation, both the monument and its commercialized reproductions for sale at the souvenir shops are inextricable from the white cultural consciousness that produced them. As such, they prove ineffectual at guiding Pamela and J. toward constructing their own versions of John Henry. For this reason, Whitehead introduces other sites of commemoration that Pamela and J. can call their own. The first of these alternative memorials is the Big Bend tunnel that John Henry purportedly cut while racing the steam drill. Unlike the public statue and its attenuating commercialism, the tunnel is generally neglected. In a half-hearted renovation effort, the lettering has been repainted, but it only "forces the weather's violence" against the tunnel "to stand out in relief" (320). At the site of John Henry's death, J. begins to dissociate from his investment in American consumerism. At first he defaults to his characteristic irreverence that he had formerly used to mask his pain. For example, he sets the statue

down on the floor of the Big Bend tunnel to “make a puppet show of this scene,” a “diorama of the big day” that John Henry raced the steam drill. Noting the scalar difference between the statue and the tunnel, however, J.’s irreverent humor at last turns into self-reflection:

That’s how he feels now—small. Step in here and you leave it all behind, the bills, the hustle, the record, all that is receipts bleaching back there under the sun. What if this were your work? To best the mountain? Come to work every day, two, three years of work, into this death and murk, each day your progress measured by the extent to which you extend the darkness. How deep you dig your grave. He wins the contest. He defeats the Record.... How long does it take to forget a hole in your self. He wins the contest but then what? (321-322)

Why does the tunnel fulfill the commemorative function of a monument for J. in ways that the public statue could not? Given the statue’s role as a deliberate public monument, it participates in constructing a dominant American historical narrative predicated on representations of black male abjection.²¹ Pamela’s explanation of the monument’s depredations helps J. interpret it as a public expression of his internalized fears, just as her ability to read its multiple significations helps her forgive her father. That is as far as the monument can help, however: it is an object designed to affirm whiteness, as evinced by the predominantly white crowd that gathers around it as the focal point of the festival. The tunnel, however, is not beholden to the dominant public memory of black male martyrdom that has preoccupied J. on an unconscious level for most of his life. It is, to use the parlance of Alois Riegl, an “unintentional” monument whose commemorative value is not determined by the aesthetics or politics of its creators; instead, it is determined solely by the interpretive stance of its viewers (Riegl 72). For J. and Pamela,

then, the tunnel is a *tabula rasa* upon which they can inscribe their own interpretations of the legend without reference to its ideological and historical investment in whiteness.

The second site of commemoration that Pamela and J. explore away from the white crowd is the abandoned graveyard at the top of the hill, where John Henry is purportedly buried. It is at the graveyard where Pamela and J. reevaluate the legacy of black male abjection that permeates American culture, dislodging it from its role in constructing dominant white cultural narratives and instead using it as a mode for healing. It is a primal scene of death and renewal: as they dig a grave for Pamela's father with their bare hands, accumulating dirt beneath their fingernails, their conversation reveals how they reorient the narrative of black male abjection within black rather than white cultural history. Whereas the death of black men has historically served white domination, Pamela begins to think of her father's death and the story of John Henry as sacrifices for future generations of black Americans. For example, in her reinterpretation of the John Henry legend, Pamela speculates that the workers may have been "condemning" rather than "lamenting" John Henry for his arrogant and "foolish" fight against the machine. She wonders: wasn't his death necessary for the workers to know better, to keep their own hubris in check? Or, was it equally foolish for these workers to think that they were invulnerable to the forces that killed John Henry? Finally, Pamela explains her conclusion to J.: "His sacrifice enables you to endure without having to give your life to your struggle, whatever name you gave to it" (378). Although her second-person "you" implies that she is directing her observation toward J., its referent is

ambiguous, implying that she is also speaking to herself about her father, giving both of them a chance at beginning anew.

J. seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion: As he digs, he contemplates the “dead men” buried in the cemetery “did more back-breaking work in a day than he had done in his whole life” (377-378). This realization indicates a monumental shift in his thinking, suggesting that he is replacing his previous historical consciousness, invested in narratives of black male abjection fabricated by whites, with the cultural legacy forged by his black male ancestors. In a sense, then, the graveyard fulfills the commemorative function that Morrison laments in the interview quoted at the start of this essay. It is a place where Pamela and J. are able to “summon” a past that they can call their own as well as create a future in which “choices are possible” (388). It is not a place of abjection, but of psychological liberation.

Abjection and Self-Actualization in Emily Raboteau’s *The Professor’s Daughter*

Like Whitehead’s depiction of monuments in *John Henry Days*, the representation of commemorative objects in Emily Raboteau’s novel *The Professor’s Daughter* also explores the trope of black male abjection. The novel presents a family drama in which a young, mixed-race woman, Emma Boudreaux, feels incomplete in the shadow of her older brother, Bernie, who believes that he is the reincarnation of their lynched grandfather. Whereas Whitehead’s novel attempts to dissociate abjection from its historical role in creating narratives of white male domination to facilitate psychological healing primarily for its male protagonist, however, Raboteau’s novel focuses specifically on black male abjection as a generative site for a young woman. That Emma and Bernie

are “mixed-race” children of a black father and a white mother is important here, too. As noted earlier in this chapter, whites have consistently defined manhood and historical continuity through images of black male abjection. Raboteau, however, uses the image of Bernie’s body to signify on this tradition, questioning whether abjection can be used as a site for healing and female self-actualization. In response, the novel concludes with two divergent narratives of healing: for black men, it suggests, commemorative objects can heal psychological wounds of violence and loss. In contrast, self-actualization is possible for “mixed-race” people like Emma, but not within the dominant symbolic order of race and gender in the United States.

Unlike the other narratives covered in this study, *The Professor’s Daughter*, which is Raboteau’s first novel, focuses less on its black male characters than its female protagonist who narrates much of the story. The central narrative covers Emma’s experiences through her adolescence and young adulthood as she attempts to reconcile her identity as a “mixed-race” child of a black father, a respected professor at Princeton University, and a white mother.²² As such, one may ask whether black manhood is really a prominent concern in the novel. In fact, *The Professor’s Daughter* evinces a consistent preoccupation with black manhood as the backdrop of Emma’s journey toward self-knowledge. As Raboteau explains in an interview, Emma’s story was “a national story that started before she was born. It was her father’s story, and his father’s” (“What is ‘Real’” 73). Consequently, we find that Emma’s pursuit of self-knowledge has much to do with her relationship with men as it does with her mixed-race identity: blackness and manhood are closely aligned through the figures of her father, brother, and Professor

Lester. Likewise, whiteness and womanhood are associated together in the figures of her mother, her aunt, and her college roommate, Fran.²³ Her invisibility, then, derives from her ambiguous status in this matrix of racial and gender identity.

Raboteau's use of narrative dislocations and intertextual references also compels readers to focus on her critique of black manhood. First, like *John Henry Days*, the novel's structure is characterized by abrupt dislocations in both voice and time.²⁴ For example, Raboteau shifts from first-person, which conveys most of Emma's story, to third-person and stream-of-consciousness, through which Raboteau narrates the experiences of Emma's father as well as Bernie's thoughts after he becomes catatonic. More than an attempt to imitate postmodernist narrative acrobatics, these narrative disruptions give readers unmediated access to the definitive experiences of Raboteau's black male characters. Through these episodes, for example, readers learn about the lynching of Emma's grandfather, a talented baseball player, as well as the abuses that her father experiences as the first black student at a Catholic boarding school. As such, the fractured narrative structure of *The Professor's Daughter* does not merely reflect Emma's fractured sense of selfhood; it also contextualizes her experiences within a family history structured primarily around disjointed yet related narratives about black men.

The novel's intertextuality also suggests that Raboteau signifies on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, situating her novel within a tradition of black women writers who treat black manhood as a prominent theme. Most notably, the history of the Boudreaux family parallels that of the Dead family in Morrison's novel. In both works, the repetition of names (Macon Dead and Bernard Boudreaux, respectively)²⁵ across

three generations of men indicates that the *Professor's Daughter* takes up Morrison's project of exploring relationships between black fathers and sons. Furthermore, the lynching of the grandfather figures in each of these novels generates intergenerational conflicts similar to those in *Song of Solomon*. In each case, the sons of the lynched men attempt to mask their feelings of vulnerability by protecting their manhood and their children from the past. Whereas Macon Dead assumes and teaches his son that possessive materialism defines manhood, however, Bernard Boudreaux attempts to play the role of paternal protector when he "*marries a white woman*" so his "*children won't inherit*" his "*misery*" (220, italics in original). Both of these men also possess signs of vulnerability—manifested in the physical disability of a lame leg—which they attempt to conceal.

The Professor's Daughter also shares with Morrison's novel an interest in the spiritual connection across generations of black men. This spiritual aspect of the novel plays a critical role in dissociating Emma from her past, which is exclusively masculine. This marks a significant departure from *Song of Solomon*. Whereas Morrison uses Pilate as an intermediary between Milkman and his paternal ancestry, Raboteau creates a direct relationship between Bernie and his grandfather. For example, Bernie insists that he "remembers" the details of his grandfather's lynching, supposedly without having ever been told about it (26), and he believes that he communicates with his deceased grandfather through his walkie-talkie. Most importantly, however, Bernie tells Emma that is the reincarnation of his grandfather, sent to complete his unfinished life. "I got put here to finish something," he explains to Emma. "They got Bernard Number One," he continues, and "Bernard Number Two has failed in every respect 'cause he's blind" (26).

Like Milkman Dead, Bernie Boudreaux is a messianic figure who has learned to reject his father's definition of manhood by accessing a spiritual connection with his male ancestors.

Raboteau's novel also departs from *Song of Solomon*, however, by abruptly aborting Bernie's narrative of ascent with a tragic accident. By announcing Bernie's vegetative state early in the novel, Raboteau interrupts readers' expectations that Bernie will become a Milkman-like archetypal hero. To the contrary: it asks what place the familiar narrative of black male self-actualization leaves for women. To that end, Raboteau establishes an inextricable link between Bernie and Emma to show how their fates are intertwined. For example, as children, Bernie explains that Emma is an extension of himself. "I wasn't finished yet when I came," he explains. "I came too fast and I left some of me behind. That was you. So you came afterwards to finish me. I'm the he of you and you're the she of me" (26). For this reason, when Bernie becomes a "vegetable" (20) after accidentally electrocuting himself, Emma also finds herself in a state of suspension. At this moment, she realizes that her inextricable link with her brother has become an impediment to her own development. "I just sit there in the living room for hours watching that raceless, faceless thing in that bed, hoping it'll die already so I can start," she laments (27).

To be clear: Raboteau is not celebrating Bernie's death in this scene, but she is using the familiar trope of black male abjection to explore how her protagonists' self-definition is impeded by her connection with her past. In this scene, Bernie is a living corpse. He is virtually dead: maimed, disfigured, and unresponsive, even while readers

see in the “Respiration” chapter that he still retains a vague awareness of his surroundings (162-166). On this point, *The Professor's Daughter* complicates what Peter Schwenger, in his study of melancholy and objects, has identified as the “abjection” of corpses. Extending Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject in *Powers of Horror*, Schwenger argues that a corpse is a “border” between “subject and object,” since “it bears the imprint of residual subjectivity,” a trace of the conscious person that once inhabited it (157). “We cannot expel a corpse with the same indifference with which we leave behind the wastes of the body,” he continues, because “its fundamental relation to the subject, are too manifestly implicated in the spectacle before our eyes” (158). A corpse is “abject,” Schwenger argues, because “those living persons who look upon” the “contours” of a corpse see “a dark mirror of their own state” (158). It is because in his state of living-death that prevents Emma from becoming a subject, even while it suggests the possibility of her self-actualization. If Emma is the “she” of Bernie’s “me,” then she, too, lives in a suspended state.

We see here that Raboteau uses Bernie’s abject body to redirect the familiar narrative of black male self-determination from *Song of Solomon* toward her female protagonist. If Bernie was sent as the second-coming of his grandfather, his death would appear to have prevented him from fulfilling his destiny. However, by predicating her ability to “start” on Bernie’s death, Emma gives new meaning to his life as well as to their grandfather’s, reconceiving their intertwined destiny’s as sacrifices to her own self-actualization. It is through her confrontation with his abject body that Emma reaches this

conclusion, and that compels her to separate herself from her family's history in the rest of the novel.

Raboteau's depiction of commemorative objects plays a critical role in differentiating Emma's narrative of self-actualization from the cyclical narrative of black male abjection—her grandfather's lynching, her brother's accident and disfigurement—that defines her family's history. In the first place, echoing the closing scenes in *John Henry Days*, the novel suggests that commemorative objects facilitate psychological healing for black men by allowing them to confront the cycles of violence and subordination that have rendered them abject in the United States. This is most evident in the novel's conclusion when Bernard, Emma's father, travels back to his childhood home in Mississippi to receive his "inheritance," a sculpture left to him by Roland Favré, an artist he had met as a child. Favré has transformed the icehouse from which Bernard's father was kidnapped by a lynch mob into his studio. The sculpture is a bust of Bernard that Favré had made when he first moved into the icehouse (60-62), but when he picks it up from the executor of Favré's estate, he sees "a defiance" in it that he "recognized as his son's" (274).

Although Bernie's "defiance" manifested itself in a tragic recklessness that ultimately led to his death, his father now sees it as a mirror to his lynched father, who was killed for his own act of defiance by excelling in his baseball career. Having returned home, he uses the statue to reestablish ties between his father and his son that he had denied to Bernie every time he asked about his grandfather. Carrying the statue under his arm, he takes it to the St. Rose de Lima cemetery where his father is buried (275). The

scene resonates with Pamela's commemoration of her father at the graveyard on the hill near the Big Bend tunnel in *John Henry Days*, indicating that these small sites of commemoration provide an opportunity to redefine black male abjection as a trope of healing. To that end, Bernard places the sculpture at the foot of the grave and "found a small, sharp stone" and carves out the lettering of his father's name. Concluding to himself that "it was possible that a burden and a blessing were the same thing," he speaks to the sculpture, "Bernie... meet your grandfather" (275).

Although this scene suggests that commemorative objects can facilitate healing, *The Professor's Daughter* also points to its limitations. Here Emma's narrative of healing and self-actualization diverges from her father's. Like her brother's mutilated body, commemorative objects and places are illegible to Emma, often associated with disorder, disease, and confusion. They mark her separation from, rather than her connection to, her family's past. For example, when her father picks her up from the train station, he immediately notices that her rash, a recurring affliction throughout the novel, has reappeared. He accuses her of "messing with goofer dust" (124) which she had done when she gathered dirt from a graveyard to create a "vodun" (voodoo) charm after taking a Haitian anthropology class (120). While Emma believes that she had harmlessly dabbled in an alien folk tradition, her father warns her against "mess[ing] with a bigger power than yourself" that is directly tied to his cultural roots in the South. As he chastises her, he explains that he had also once had a rash like Emma's after he ate the goofer dust from his father's grave. For Bernard, knowledge of the folk tradition was passed to him by his godmother, Nanan Zanobia, who taught it to him when he was a child (125), but to

Emma, it is an academic topic, entirely disconnected from her personal history. Emma remains skeptical “whether or not” her father’s story “was true” (125) but it nonetheless reminds Emma of the gulf between her and her father, both of whom finish their drive in silence.

Although Raboteau uses the graveyard to illustrate the disjunction between Emma, her father, and her family history, she also suggests that such ruptures between the past and present are functions of a seismic shift in modes of commemoration at the turn of the twenty-first century. Raboteau marks this transition in a scene where Emma and Fran, her college roommate, visit “Ground Zero,” the site of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001. Ground Zero is the epitome of abjection in the novel; they visit the site when it is still smoldering, just weeks after the tragedy. Here, Emma articulates the inherent problem in commemorating scenes of terror and abjection. Although her room visits the site for a design class project in which she is supposed to “experience negative space” and “interpret and transform” into a drawing, she finds the “assignment” to be “ludicrous,” questioning its fundamental assumption that such as site can be “negative.” “Imagine you are having a normal conversation with someone when, all of a sudden, you blink and this person’s body disappears,” she ponders. “Now, imagine stepping into the spot where this person has just been. You would feel something, don’t you think?” (265).

Ground Zero, like Bernie’s mutilated body, is an enigma to Emma. In both sites of abjection, Emma realizes that her sense of incompleteness results not only from feeling invisible to her family but in American culture more generally. She finds this ironic after

having a dream in which Bernie wraps his arms around her when a “great cloud” engulfs them, kills Bernie, destroys their house, and levels her surroundings” (267). When she awakens, she looks at Fran, whom others have said has “classic American good looks,” and then reflects on herself: “Nobody has ever thought to say that of me, even though I wouldn’t have resulted anywhere else” (267). By merging these two object encounters into a single vision, Emma realizes that in order to define herself, she must leave the country: with little explanation, we find that she has moved to Brazil, where she admits in a letter to her father that “everybody ... looked like some permutation of her” (270). She is a uniquely American creation forged by its interracial past, but after confronting the abjection of both her brother’s death and the cataclysm of 9/11, Emma sees no place for herself in its future.

Ultimately, then, *The Professor’s Daughter* concludes with ambivalence about the efficacy of commemorative objects to heal the deep psychic wounds that America’s racial history has left on the Boudreaux family. Its ambivalence is most clearly expressed in the closing scene, when Emma’s father sends her the sculpture of Bernie’s head. Here, Bernard symbolically offers his deceased son as an act of contrition; he wants her to forgive him. Emma, however, seems unconcerned about guilt and forgiveness, which are rooted in the past. Instead, she explains that she has fallen in love with the Portuguese word “saudade,” which “loosely translated” means “missing” or “longing.” She tells her father that “you feel saudade for the haunting thing that has a hold on you, what blues everything you see. I ran away so you would have the saudade for me. So I could struggle into a name. So I could begin” (275-276). The word suggests that Emma is not concerned

with forgiving her father, and perhaps that there is nothing left to forgive. The question, however, is whether Bernard understands his daughter's need for healing and self-actualization. Even though Bernard wonders whether she knew "that was his wish" (276), his actions belie a fundamental misunderstanding of his daughter when he sends her the sculpture, as a monument commemorating her brother, for which she has little need. In the final analysis, then, her father's actions, although a gesture of love, only confirm Emma's need to "escape" (270), to seek an end to the narratives of manhood that preclude her from beginning.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* both use commemorative objects to critique the depiction of black male abjection upon which white America has defined white manhood and created its own narratives of historical progress. Through their critiques, they redefine the trope of black male abjection to create narratives of healing and self-actualization in their characters. Whereas *John Henry Days* suggests that alternative sites of commemoration provide opportunities to heal from the psychological wounds of America's violent racial history, the *Professor's Daughter* qualifies such claims by pointing out how the figure of black male abjection is inextricable from the matrix of racial and gender identity that render mixed-race persons like Emma Boudreaux invisible. In particular, her reference to the collective trauma of 9/11 has fundamentally redefined the modes of commemoration in the United States more generally.

I would like to conclude, then, by considering the implications of my reading of these two novels on the representation of black men in public monuments, focusing especially on the controversy surrounding the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C., which opened to the public in August 2011. The King memorial is just one of many monuments dedicated to black men in recent years as part of a broader revival of American monument-building in the early twenty-first century. While lynching still remains a generally taboo subject for public monuments, the representation of black male abjection is nonetheless prominent in the King memorial, as well as hundreds of others commemorating civil rights leaders such as King and Malcolm X, popular culture icons such as Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) and Tupac Shakur, and the slain teenager Trayvon Martin, all of whom died violent and highly-publicized deaths. The King memorial, I believe, represents a fundamental rewriting of the display of black male abjection. In particular, King's apparent incompleteness signals his ambiguous state neither as a subject nor object of history, but a wielding of abjection as power.

The construction of the national King memorial is not the first instance that has provoked rancorous debate about how he should be represented and remembered. As Erica Doss explains, arguments over whether to represent King "as a man of the people, dressed in a suit, or a man of faith, dressed in clerical robes" surface with virtually every attempt to commemorate the man. In addition, public monuments and memorials dedicated to King are often subject to vandalism and even widespread rejection by members of a community. Yet she also notes that debates about whether King should be remembered as "a passionate political radical are practically nonexistent," since his

“public image as the provocative leader of a civil rights revolutionary has been replaced by that of a nonthreatening political moderate.” Not surprisingly, several members of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial commission even insisted that the proposed depiction of King was too “confrontational,” resulting in design alterations to make him appear like a “softer, gentler American warrior” (318-319). In general, public commemorations have propagated exactly this image of King as a benign peacemaker.

Much of the criticism that has been levied against the national memorial emerges from this public perception of King. Comprised of three composite granite slabs, the monument literalizes one of its inscriptions, “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope,” paraphrased from King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.²⁶ When approaching the monument from the forecourt, one follows a pathway through the “Mountain of Despair,” which is formed by imposing granite walls on each side. King’s towering likeness emerges from the “Stone of Hope,” a 30-foot tall monolith that appears to be cut from the “Mountain of Despair” that marks the entrance. Encircling the statue from the north and west sides is a curved wall of polished marble engraved with passages from King’s speeches. With its back toward the inscriptions, the statue looks out across the Tidal Basin, with its back toward the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial across the water in the periphery of its gaze.

The most prolific criticism of the monument concerns the statue’s lack of verisimilitude to its subject—or at least the image of King that informs critics’ memories of him. For example, cultural critic Edward Rothstein laments that the figure’s body appears “like something not yet fully born” and that his “uncompromising” visage

“strains at the limits of resemblance” to the man.²⁷ In addition, Maya Angelou took umbrage at the paraphrase of King’s “The Drum Major Instinct” sermon etched into the north face of the “stone of hope.” The original inscription reads, “I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness,” which Angelou claims misrepresents King as a self-centered, “arrogant twit.” Indeed, in the context of the sermon, King considers whether their innate desire for recognition—their “drum major instinct”—stems from selfish or humanitarian ambitions, and he implores his congregation to use that instinct toward the latter. Furthermore, the inscription derives from the hypothetical eulogy that concludes his sermon. King explains that “if” he will be remembered as a drum major, he hopes that that it will be for his selflessness, so that his “living will not be in vain.” Angelou maintains that leaving out the conditional tense in the original passage “minimizes the man” as a mere “egotist,” an argument that has recently resulted in plans to permanently remove the inscription.²⁸ The selection of this quotation from the “Drum Major Instinct,” sermon, however, is just as important as the accuracy of the quotation in depicting King’s legacy. As Michael Eric Dyson explains in his book on King’s death, the sermon is the preeminent example of *automortology* in King’s rhetoric, “a genre of speech that looked past his death to tell the story of how he should be viewed once his life was over” (25). This rhetorical move, Dyson argues, “permits” King “to strike a solemn blow against death by delivering his eulogy in advance of the event” (29). By distorting the inscription, then, the monument not only misrepresents King, as Angelou maintains, but also undermines one of his most profound rhetorical subversions: using white Americans’ obsession with black male death to affirm his life.

Other critics have lamented the fact that an African American sculptor was not commissioned to design and build the monument. For example, the artist Gilbert Young, whose work I referenced in my introduction, created the “King is Ours” Foundation with his wife, Lea Winfrey, to protest the commission of Chinese artist Lei Yixin to sculpt the memorial. Lei is known primarily for his public monuments honoring Mao Zedong and his Communist regime, which has a long record of human rights abuses.²⁹ Young also criticizes the choice of materials and labor involved in constructing the monument. On the “King is Ours” website he states that “using granite that is quarried using slave labor from a country [China] with the worst human rights record in the world” flagrantly insults King and his legacy advocating for universal human rights. Despite support from the NAACP and the renowned black sculptor Ed Dwight, who himself had sculpted several figures of King, Young’s petition to have the memorial created by an African American artist from American materials ultimately did not persuade the commissioners to alter their choice of artist.

While these critics raise important concerns about the politics of representation and the ethics implications of the monument’s design and construction, they also tacitly reinforce the image of King as a paragon of black respectability and moderation that keeps in check the revolutionary potential of his memorial. What they miss is that the apparent sternness, or even egotism, of the memorial stages an affront to the surrounding iconography of white masculine power. As such, the King Memorial’s critical capacity cannot be discerned from the aesthetic choices of its creators alone, but must take into account its surroundings as part of its commemorative strategy. Along these lines, the

King monument is an example of what Judith Dupré calls a “compound monument.” Compound monuments, Dupré explains, “respond to the need to publically address divergent understanding of history and ways of private remembrance.” The design of compound monuments does not attempt to reconcile these divergent perspectives into a coherent historical narrative. Instead, they “synthesize elements from the existing urban fabric with newly constructed components” to engage these divergent historical interpretations and revel in the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the act of history-making (Dupré xvi).

The King memorial functions as a “compound monument” not only in its complex arrangement of several strategically arranged structures but also in its implicit commentary on the surrounding monuments. While the obelisk of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial enshrined by Doric columns seek to commemorate the past through the iconography of white manhood, the King Memorial appears to strain toward completion in the future, affirming black manhood while also illustrating its contingency in a persistently racist society. The very suggestion of its incompleteness that Rothstein condemns is precisely what makes King appear so defiant. His image insists that it cannot be contained by the historical narrative of white masculine power told by the surrounding structures and that has been shored up by the depictions of black male abjection in American public art. Instead, it represents King emerging from that history. That his body remains partially obscured by the “Stone of Hope” out of which his likeness is carved is not an indication of his incompleteness or a life cut short but a repudiation of white manhood. Situated among the pervasive whiteness of the

surrounding national monuments commemorating America's past white heroes, King stands poised to step into America's multiracial future.

Notes

¹ Public memory, Casey explains, is an “encircling horizon” that “delimits and organizes” the individual, group, and collective social memories of people within a society (25). The notion of “public,” however, is highly contested. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt distinguished between private and public spheres by noting the artificiality of the “public,” a division which she argues has been obscured by modern notions of the “social.” Jürgen Habermas, on the other hand, identifies the creation of the public sphere as an outgrowth of bourgeois society in which members of a society “debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor (27). As Michael Warner notes, however, Habermas’s definition of the public neglects how one’s “public relevance” is also a “strategy of distinction” that is “profoundly linked to education and to dominant forms of masculinity” (51). In the case of my analysis, those dominant forms of masculinity are racially coded as white as well.

² For an extended study of the “neo-slave narrative,” genre, see Ashraf H.D. Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* .

³ For example, the African American Civil War Memorial was installed in Washington, D.C. in 1997.

⁴ Art historians often use the terms “monument” and “memorial” are often used interchangeably. Monuments and memorials are similar in that they both serve as “memory aids: materialist modes of privileging particular histories and values.” (Doss *Memorial Mania* 38). Erika Doss distinguishes between the two by associating

“memorials” with contemporary public works that embrace social conflict and competing interpretations. In contrast, Doss describes “monuments” as structures produced until the early twentieth-century that “embodies a seemingly shared faith in a unified national history” (46-47). For my purposes, however, I use the term “monument” broadly to describe a structure that publically commemorates a person, group of people, or event.

⁵ For a reading of abjection in the context of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, see Dareick Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection*. Scott’s study takes a different approach by applying queer critiques to Fanon’s association between blackness and abjection to illustrate how abjection becomes empowering in narratives focusing on black male sexuality.

⁶ Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*, 1-3. Clark Mills’s statue of Andrew Jackson (1853), located in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., was the first equestrian monument in the United States. In 1856, Henry Kirke Brown’s statue of George Washington was unveiled in Union Square in New York.

⁷ Nineteenth-century monuments also depicted women, but the modes of gender representation served primarily to affirm masculinity in terms of historical and social agency and femininity in terms of abstract virtues. As such, monuments reproduced the nineteenth-century notions of “manhood” that, as discussed in Chapter 1, were largely predicated on the masculine defense of feminine “virtue.” By denying black men the opportunity to procure their freedom and defend the virtue of black women, black men

were denied access to contemporary ideals of masculinity. Monuments reproduced this gendered dialectic by depicting male figures typically memorialized deceased heroes—real people whose lives existed within specific historical and spatial parameters—while monuments depicting figures of women tended toward abstraction and allegory. Thomas Crawford’s “Statue of Freedom” (1863) and the Statue of Liberty (1886), for example, represented ideals and virtues to which Americans aspired. These differences in how monuments treated male and female subjects compelled their viewers to understand men as agents within their historical and social contexts, while women appeared to exist outside of time and place. The psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva has also noted difference in gendered representations of time. For Kristeva, “monumental time” expresses timelessness through myths of resurrection and renewal that are typically cast as feminine. “Monumental time” is related to “cyclical time,” which is not timeless but bound to the biological processes unique to women’s bodies. Linear or “cursive” time, however, is expressed primarily through masculine narratives of historical continuity and progress, eschewing the timelessness and cyclicity of “women’s time” (189-190).

⁸ These highly-contested politics of racial representation notwithstanding, the design, financing, and construction of monuments in the nineteenth century, were frequently points of public contention. As Kirk Savage explains, “In practical terms, the designers of public monuments—mostly sculptors, as it turns out—usually had to satisfy a committee of elite citizens who were themselves competing for popular approval with other philanthropic projects and even other monument proposals. The designer could not

impose an official version of history but could only propose one possible version, which then had to win a place in this peculiarly competitive public arena” (*Standing* 7).

⁹ Ball’s statue was completed in 1876 and is located in Washington D.C.’s Lincoln Park. A replica was erected in Boston’s Park Square in 1879.

¹⁰ The national African American Civil War memorial finally opened to the public in 1999.

¹¹ Among those few included the first public monument dedicated to an African American: a bust depicting the African Methodist Episcopal minister Richard Allen, which was displayed in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia’s Fairmont Park (Kachun 163-164). The bust was lost in 1877 until the African Methodist Episcopal Church located it at Wilberforce University in Ohio in 2010.

¹² This phrase is taken from John Boyle O’Reilly’s poem, “Crispus Attucks,” which he composed for the monument’s dedication ceremony in 1888.

¹³ Several scholars have documented the public presence of lynching in the United States. For example, see James Allen’s *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), Jonathan Markovitz’s *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (2004), Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Lynching Photographs* (2007), and Amy Louis Wood’s *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (2009).

¹⁴ Harry Sternberg’s lithograph “Southern Holiday” (1935) depicts a castrated man crucified on a classical column surrounded by a modern cityscape, making explicit

the association between public monuments in modern urban landscapes and the ritual of lynching. Few sculptors, however, took on the task of representing lynching. One example include Isamu Noguchi's "Death (Lynched Figure)" (1934). For an extensive treatment of artistic representations of lynching during this period, see Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*.

¹⁵ In the post-apocalyptic *Zone One* (2011), Whitehead also associates materialism with disease. In the novel, zombie-like "stragglers" infected by a mysterious plague "haunted what they knew" (52), which includes not only places but also quotidian objects including helium tanks, gavels, copier machines, and coffee makers.

¹⁶ The association between lynching and martyrdom has decidedly religious overtones as well. As Orlando Patterson notes, white Americans, especially in the South, "deliberately embraced the association of the crucified Christ with Negroes" and reenacted Christ's crucifixion through lynching (216-222).

¹⁷ This overt sexualization of John Henry is not unique to *John Henry Days*. Some renditions of the Ballad of John Henry directly associate John Henry's hammering with coitus. For examples and overview of sexualized interpretations of the legend, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 423-424.

¹⁸ Nelson and Olin argue that vandalizing a monument "threatens a society's sense of itself and its past" (3-4), but in this case, I am suggesting that the depredations affirm rather than threaten social to social and historical coherence that, as discussed above, have been imagined in terms of white masculine domination. It should be noted,

too, that the actual monument was moved from its roadside site to a park near the entrance to the Great Bend Tunnel in 2012. For details, see Sarah Plummer's article in *The Register Herald*.

¹⁹ Whitehead's description of the statue's vandalism suggests that the widely-publicized murder of James Byrd, who was dragged behind a pickup truck in Jasper, Texas, by two white men, in 1998, may have been a source for this scene.

²⁰ This scene could also be read as a parody of Roland Barthes's explanation of the "whole humble commerce" surrounding the Eiffel Tower that enables visitors to "dominate" even "the most sacred of constructions." According to Barthes, the ability to purchase souvenirs and memorabilia expresses "a kind of affectionate familiarity" with the monument, transforming the intimidating monumental structure into a "comfortable object" (16). Whereas Barthes views the commerce surrounding a monument as an act of containment and control, however, J. only struggles to carry the statue. In fact, he constantly "readjusts his grip" by dangling "John Henry upside down as J's fingers curl around his leg" (314).

²¹ As art historian Judith Dupré explains, monuments typically reflect the ideology of a socially-dominant group, "since what is selected to be preserved tells us everything about what is valued by the majority of the population at a given moment in history" (xvi). From its inception through its dedication, the construction of a monument depends upon wide public support.

²² Emily Raboteau's father, Arthur Raboteau, is also a professor at Princeton University, specializing in African and African Diaspora religion. Despite such clear autobiographical references, Raboteau has insisted that readers treat her novel as a work of fiction ("What is 'Real'" 72-73).

²³ In *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, Michele Elam reads Raboteau's novel next to Danzy Senna's *Symptomatic* as examples of an emergent "anti-bildungsroman" genre, in which mixed-race characters do not "come of age by coming into society" but instead "critique the racial and economic basis" of social incorporation by abandoning "the social contract altogether" (127). In *The Professor's Daughter*, Elam argues, this abandonment manifests itself in Emma's decision to move to Brazil at the end of the novel.

²⁴ No scholar has yet commented on the structure of *The Professor's Daughter*. Several reviewers, however, have found fault in its disjointedness. For example, see Denolyn Carroll's review "Girl Finds 'Self'" as well as Eleanor Bader's review in *Library Journal*.

²⁵ To avoid confusion, I will refer to the youngest Bernard Boudreaux as "Bernie" and his father as "Bernard." The eldest Bernard will be identified either as the grandfather of Emma and Bernie, or as Bernard's father.

²⁶ King's speech was delivered on August 28, 1963 as part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Popularly known as the "I Have a Dream Speech," King referred to it by at least two other names in various drafts: "Normalcy, Never Again" and "Normalcy."

²⁷ Edward Rothstein, “A Mirror of Greatness, Blurred.” *New York Times* 25 August, 2011. Web.

²⁸ The original passage reads: “if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter” (267). King delivered the sermon on February 4, 1968, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Further details surrounding the controversy and Angelou’s comments can be found in Gene Weingarten and Michael E. Ruane, “Maya Angelou Say the King Memorial Makes Him Look ‘Arrogant.’” The inscription has since been corrected.

²⁹ Nonetheless, Mao Zedong identified with King’s politics, aligning Chinese communism and civil rights movements in the United States against Western imperialism. Upon the assassination of King, Mao writes: “Some days ago, Martin Luther King, the Afro-American clergyman, was suddenly assassinated by the U.S. imperialists. Martin Luther King was an exponent of non-violence. Nevertheless, the U.S. imperialists did not on that account show any tolerance for him, but used Counterrevolutionary violence and killed him in cold blood. ... The Afro-American struggle is not only waged by the exploited and oppressed black people for freedom and emancipation, it is also a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people to fight against the barbarous rule of the monopoly capitalist class.” “Statement of Mao Tse-Tung, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist of China, in Support of the Afro-American Against Violence, April 16, 1968.” The statement appears in Yuan-li Wu and Hsien Chang Ling,

*As Peking Sees Us: The 'People's War' in the United States and Communist China's
American Policy, 73-75.*

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: ARE WE ALL TRAYVON?

This dissertation has examined African American writers' critique of the materialist foundations of racialized manhood in the United States, focusing especially on the representation of material objects in contemporary narratives of black male self-actualization. Generally these narratives affirm black manhood by rejecting the historical association between whiteness, manhood, and property found in conventional masculine ideals such as the "self-made man" and elucidating alternative ways that black men relate to their material surroundings in their quests for self-knowledge. At the same time, however, they also use material objects to explore how black masculine self-definition remains tenuous in contemporary American culture. This tenuousness, I have argued, is expressed through characters' relationships with "heavy things," objects which signify the complexities of defining the racialized and gendered parameters of black manhood in a white-dominated American society that depends on black emasculation. Through this analysis, I have not only exposed how American material culture circumscribe black men's lives but also identified how the relationship between American material culture, race, and gender might be redefined to liberate rather than constrain definitions of black manhood in the twenty-first century.

Each chapter exposes this dual significance of "heavy things" by pairing texts that focus on specific kinds of material relationships. My analysis of gift exchange in

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, for example, illustrates how gifts affirm black manhood by reestablishing ties between black men and their communities. In my chapter on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong*, I argued that black men attempt to reconcile fraught relationships between fathers and sons through archaeological narratives focused on the recovery of artifacts. Finally, Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* use commemorative objects such as monuments, memorials, and gravesites to redefine narratives of black male abjection for healing and self-actualization, offering a way to reread abject representations of black men in public monuments, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, as generative rather than destructive of black manhood. Each set of objects—gifts, artifacts, and monuments—express the dual significations of “heaviness” that, I have argued, characterize the material construction of black manhood in America.

The works examined in the previous chapters structure narratives of black male self-actualization around material objects, but what about objects that populate our world outside of these texts? At the onset of my study, I indicated that literary narratives serve a pedagogical function, offering reader strategies for interpreting the material conditions that continue to inform black masculinity in the twenty-first century. I have already gestured toward these implications at the end of the previous chapter, in which I argued that the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C. repudiates the dominant narratives of American history predicated on images of white manhood measured against images of black male abjection. If African American writers use “heavy things” to

construct their own narratives of black manhood, then it stands to reason that we should also consider how material objects help us think through perceptions and representations of black men outside of these texts. To conclude, then, I consider how these strategies operate in the representation of “hoodies” in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin in February, 2012. Trayvon’s hoodie, I argue, has become a ubiquitous “heavy thing” through which Americans continue to define black men and negotiate their place in the American cultural imagination.

Responses to Martin’s death were racially-charged from the beginning. Among African Americans, Martin’s killing rekindled deep fears about the security and safety of black men in an ostensibly post-racial era.¹ In the June 2012 issue of *Ebony* magazine, for example, Kevin Powell compares Martin’s death to the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and wonders “what kind of America” black men “will encounter” after Martin’s “tragic murder” (133). In that same issue, *Ebony*’s editor-in-chief, Amy DuBois Barnett, reflects on the implications of Martin’s killing for her own son, explaining:

I have felt a mixture of sadness, terror, and disbelief regarding the shooting and slow pace at which our legal system reacted to the situation. I look at the pictures flashing across my screen of Trayvon with his sweet baby face and think how much they look like my little boy and how precarious life is in this country for all our sons if this young man could be gunned down while on an errand to buy candy for his little brother. (16)

The concerns expressed by Powell and Barnett reverberated throughout the African American community. Almost overnight, Trayvon had become an allegory for the ongoing threats against black men and their families in an ostensibly post-racial America.

Six months later, the trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman rekindled the outrage. Disbelief at Zimmerman's acquittal was compounded by the fact that not only has Martin's killer been acquitted but also the jury that acquitted him was predominantly white.² As Marc Lamont Hill explains in an *Ebony* article following the verdict, "the prosecution had a nearly impossible task" of convincing "a jury that a Black male body was worthy of empathy, protection, and justice" (111). Hill's description of Trayvon Martin here as a "body" is strategic: he is signifying on white historical denial of black manhood through their objectification, implying that the trial was lost long before it ever began. According to the predominantly white jury, Hill suggests, Trayvon is no more entitled to rights than Dred Scott was determined to have in the landmark Supreme Court case a century and a half earlier that confirmed his status as "chattel."

Such rhetorical critiques of white attitudes toward black men were not reserved for the jury alone, however. In his statement on the verdict, President Obama reiterated his assertion that Trayvon Martin "could have been [his] son," a claim he made immediately after the shooting that drew ridicule from his racist conservative political opponents. Furthermore, it was clear that his double-voiced statement was designed to communicate different messages to his white and black constituents. "How the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida," he explains, is informed by "a historical context" of violence and inequity that is being elided in popular discourse and media punditry about the case. On the one hand, his attempt to describe the feelings African American men have when they are watched in department stores or when they walk down the street signals to his African American audience that he shares

with them a common experience of being racially profiled. On the other hand, his statement was also designed to instruct white Americans on why the verdict has evoked such “pain” and indignation among African Americans (Obama, “Remarks”). Obama’s double-voiced rhetoric here indicates the need for a discourse that bridges the gulf of understanding about the cultural and historical significance of Trayvon Martin’s death, especially across racial lines. Martin’s death resonated with both white and black Americans, but for African Americans, articulating why the case renews pain, fear, and distrust to white Americans is also a “nearly impossible task.”

Following the Zimmerman verdict, then, it became clear that the shaping the memory of Trayvon Martin the acquittal of his killer necessitates an effective discourse that would prevent whites from co-opting the narrative of these events in ways that perpetuate white social and cultural domination. In fact, white appropriations of Trayvon Martin’s story began immediately after his killing, when “the hoodie became a sign of criminality when draped over [Martin’s] body” (Hill 111). The most insidious of these appropriations came in a photograph that circulated through social media following the Zimmerman trial in the fall of 2013. In the image, two white men in Cape Coral, Florida—one dressed in blackface as Trayvon Martin and the other dressed as George Zimmerman wearing a shirt that reads “Neighborhood Watch” while shaping his fingers like a gun and pointing them at “Trayvon’s” head—went viral.

The rapid circulation of such images suggests that much remains at stake in the material construction of black manhood at the turn of the twenty-first century; this is especially true in an American culture that is steeped in consumerism and visual media

where such objects and their images can circulate at break-neck speed. As illustrated through this study, African American writers frequently depict material objects to reject the dominant narratives of black manhood constructed by white Americans to maintain their cultural and social dominance. On this point, these texts offer a paradigm for understanding the risks of allowing Trayvon's Martin's hoodie to become another mechanism of racist propaganda, as well as the potential to use the hoodie as a medium through which African Americans can resist such racist appropriations of the slain teen. The material artifact of the hoodie becomes a powerful symbol of domination in the hands of whites, not only perpetuating the stereotype of black male criminality but also authorizing white male violence toward and mockery of black men.

One proposal to remember Trayvon Martin through material objects has been to add his hoodie to the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture. The museum's director, Lonnie Bunch, reportedly attempted to acquire the hoodie for inclusion in the museum before it opens in 2015. In an article published in the *Washington Times*, Bunch explains that the hoodie has become "the symbolic way to talk about the Trayvon Martin case." Displaying the hoodie in the museum, he reasons, would provide Americans with a "way to talk about race in the age of Obama" in the absence of honest dialogue through other media and modes of communication. Bunch, then, shares an affinity with David Pilgrim and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to collect and interrogate objects as tools for understanding and transforming the contingent status of black Americans, and especially black men.

To display the hoodie in a museum, however, is also to take it out of the context of an ongoing cultural exchange in which it has assumed a life of its own. For example, in March 2012, just a month after Martin's killing, Representative Bobby Rush wore a hoodie on the House floor while giving a statement on racial profiling. He was promptly removed for violating House decorum rules, which paradoxically reinforced his point that white cultural norms have been designed to silence and subdue black men. Rush was not alone in publically making this point through Trayvon's hoodie: Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund circulated a picture of herself in a hoodie through social medial, while students of the Howard University Medical School and Law School both took group photos of themselves in hoodies while standing outside of their academic buildings. In the final analysis, these contemporary examples of how white and black Americans vie for control over the symbolic use of Trayvon's hoodie echo how African American writers since Ralph Ellison have attempted to dislodge the definition of manhood from its materialist foundations in white patriarchal domination in their in order to black manhood. The hoodie, then, is a "heavy thing" in that it is both a burden and a gift, an emblem of the violence against black men as well as communal affirmation of black manhood in the face of racist white Americans who seek to destroy it.

Perhaps the best illustration of how the hoodie has become a "heavy thing" through which Americans continue to negotiate definitions of black manhood, however, can be found in the proliferation of print media in the aftermath of the Zimmerman verdict. The covers of popular periodicals meant for a predominantly white general readership, such as the July 15, 2013 issue of the *New York Daily News* and the July 29,

2013 issue of *Time* feature images of Trayvon's hoodie that are empty and disembodied. These images signal both Trayvon's absence and the absence of justice on the Zimmerman decision, indicated especially in the tag line, "When will it end?" In the case of the *Daily News*, a list of young black men from Emmett Till to James Byrd, Jr. whose violent deaths have also been dismissed as collateral damage by the racist American culture that denied them life, also indicates an attempt to create empathy for Trayvon.

Two months later, however, *Ebony* magazine ran four different covers in a special "Save Our Sons" issue. One cover featured Trayvon Martin's family, while the other three featured prominent black men—the director Spike Lee, basketball star Dwayne Wade, and actor Boris Kodjoe—posing in hoodies with their sons over the caption, "We Are All Trayvon." The contrast between the general readership periodicals and the African American-oriented publication of *Ebony* throw the implications of examining black manhood through material objects is telling. Whereas the general publications imagine Trayvon Martin only through an object that has become inextricably associated with him, the *Ebony* covers affirm the men, fathers and sons, who inhabit them. In short, their contrasting depictions of Trayvon's hoodie put the thesis of this project into sharp relief: at the intersection of death and life, such things are always heavy.

Notes

¹ For a consideration of Trayvon Martin's death in the context of post-racial discourse, see Richard Purcell's essay, "Trayvon, Postblackness, and the Postrace Dilemma."

² As a child of a Peruvian mother and white father, George Zimmerman racial identity is complex, but he self-identifies and is generally regarded as white. The jury that acquitted him was comprised of five white women and a Hispanic woman (Juror B29) identified as "Maddy." In an interview on ABC's *Good Morning America* following the trial, "Maddy," who identifies herself as a "Black Hispanic," explains that she "stand[s] by the decision because of the law," but that if she stood by her decision "because of her heart, he would have been guilty."

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