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The Son Will Shine Again:  
A Treatise at the Dawn of a Revolutionary Black Manhood

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion  
Person, Community, and Religious Life

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B.A., Felician College, 2004

M.Div., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2007

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An Abstract of

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Person, Community, and Religious Life

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## Abstract

### The Son Will Shine Again:

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This dissertation advances the claim that sonship has been devalued, if not rendered of no benefit at all, in our hyper-masculine sociopolitical orbit. However, so much is lost, namely, psychological and spiritual well-being, when a man, no matter the hue of his skin, is not aware of the succor that sonship provides. For black men, though, the acute effects of this loss are even more disturbing, particularly as many of these men cannot meet the mythological standards of normative patriarchal manhood. To substantiate this claim, the first two chapters of the dissertation critiques the sociopolitical formation of the patriarch during early-American history, with specific consideration given to the time preceding the Industrial Revolution, a time during which the patriarch loomed large within the familial milieu. The next two chapters are devoted to an extensive atomization of the near evisceration of sonship within black manhood. From the controversial “Moynihan Report” to the writings of such prominent black scholars as Na’im Akbar and Haki R. Madhubuti, one finds that, even when convincing prescriptives are put forth in regards to how best to address the problems of black manhood, such propositions are still suffuse with the verbiage of patriarchal discourse. In the three subsequent chapters, I employ a con-polar methodology, a new analytical tool that traces the mutual involvement of two categories that are in opposition, to examine the troubled sonship experiences of two con-polar African American males: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Wright. Their sonship stories are instructive in that the religious dimensions of sonship, and religious (from the Latin *religare*) is used here to mean “refasten” or “reconnect,” can be a means of bringing one in contact with a salubrious sense of selfhood, not to mention the added benefit of restoring a broken relationship between oneself and a lost love object. In the concluding chapter the revolutionary lynchpin of this dissertation comes to the fore by insisting that black men, throughout the life-cycle, must not avail themselves of sonship’s unabashed “Not-Yet” comportment. Using Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and theories of hope crafted by Jurgen Moltmann, Rubem Alves, and Ernst Bloch, the dissertation suggests that black men must uphold their discontinuity, that is, the perpetual development of their manhood, as not being at variance with but, rather, as a telling manifestation of the essence of their being, which participates in the processual development of all of creation. In sum, *The Son Will Shine Again* champions the view that the current problematics of black manhood must not only inspire but facilitate the emergence of the new, the innovative, and, dare I say, the avant-garde, a veritable sonship that can loose black men from the deforming shackles of patriarchal manhood.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I AM A MAN!

“He who has attained to only some degree of freedom of mind cannot feel other than a wanderer on earth—though not as a traveler to a final destination: for this destination does not exist. But he will watch and observe and keep his eyes open to see what is really going on in the world; for this reason he may not let his heart adhere too firmly to any individual thing; within him too there must be something wandering that takes pleasure in change and transience.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*



## **Ready for a Revolution**

Is this the dawn of a revolutionary black manhood? Some black men, especially those who are convinced of their manhood stature, due to their physical, psychological or economic prowess, would argue that the seditious acts of the revolutionary are no longer needed. No longer are we black men expected to obey, wholeheartedly, the every command of the plantation master nor are we left to endure the dehumanizing blows of the Klan functionary. Certainly even the most inveterate among us must admit that, yes, things have changed. So what does it mean to declare the dawn of a revolutionary black manhood in the midst of all this change? To wit, is such a vehemently radical declaration still relevant today? And given the manifold instances of revolutions instigated and enacted by African Americans, it does seem probable that we have heard this sort of rhetoric before?

Did not such revolutionaries as Frederick Douglas and David Walker foretell a day when black men would no longer have their hands and feet muddied by the blood-stained soil of the slave plantation? That day did come. Did not such revolutionaries as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner foretell a day when black men would release their venous, tattered hands from the plow and the hoe so that they could pick-up the hatchet and the ax, instead, to rebel against their oppressors? That day did come. Did not such revolutionaries as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois foretell a day when black men would have the individual fortitude, whether by the dint of their industriousness or by the profundity of their intellect, to be independent, Self-made men? That day did come. Did not such revolutionaries as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X foretell a day when the law would no longer give an ear to Jim Crow and would, therefore, no longer uphold the segregationist praxes that had emblazoned the terrifying phrase “WHITE ONLY” within the hearts and minds of black men? That day did come. Did not such

revolutionaries as Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton foretell a day when black men would possess power—BLACK (MAN)POWER—that would give them an entrée into the elite clan of hyper-patriarchal, super-macho, meta-masculine manhood? That day did come. And years later, did not such—*ahem*—“revolutionaries” as Tupac Amaru Shakur (a.k.a. 2 Pac) and Christopher George Latore Wallace (a.k.a. Biggie Smalls) foretell a day, using the captivating “rhymes” of hip-hop poetics, when black men, even the thugs and the hustlers, would be able to drink copious amounts of dom perignon, drive luxurious European sports cars, and live in palatial homes. That day did come.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there remains, even with the victories wrought throughout this *his*-story, an abiding unsettledness about black manhood. Do we possess—I mean in a way that truly makes it *ours*—manhood? Let’s be honest, neither the plantation rebel nor the antebellum abolitionists nor the civil rights activist nor, I dare say, the twentieth-century hip-hop icon has been gifted with the foresight to see the day when black men would be liberated, not just from slavery or segregation, poverty or ignorance, but from the often indiscernible albeit effectively limiting shackles of manhood itself. This kind of liberation calls for something more than the creation or emendation of laws, or the acquirement of monetary prosperity—no, we need a revolution in our manhood self-consciousness. Hence, it is a revolution that has the reformation of the noetic (derived from the Greek word *nous*, meaning to think or the mind) as its beginning and its end.

One thing is certain: Something *must* change. There have been voices that have uttered such warnings. For one, Black feminist/womanist scholars have long noted the corrosive ontology that so besets a black manhood that has ceased to evolve to higher forms of self-

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<sup>1</sup> I must also mention that I am aware of the feminine revolutionaries who have challenged these models of manhood. Such “rebellious” women as Ella Baker, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison, just to name a few, will be the focus of a following chapter, in which I will uphold their critique of Black manhood and also their contributions to my own thinking about a revolutionary black manhood.

awareness and self-affirmation. From Anna Julia Cooper to bell hooks, Sojourner Truth to Michele Wallace, Ida B. Wells to Patricia Hill Collins—these are but a few of the countless black women, including the lettered and the unlearned, the sophisticated and the uncouth, who have admonished black men, whether with a whispering plea or the hurling of an iron skillet, to flee the illusory superiority of patriarchal manhood. But now we are at a tipping point. Black men themselves are now lending their voices to this “New Black Man” chorus. *And why?* It seems all too obvious. No longer can black men be at peace with a manhood that has diminished, if not summarily eliminated, our peace. This distressing form of manhood has left us bereft of the precious inner resources, that robust hope, if you will, which serve as the ballast of a salubrious selfhood; in other words, a selfhood that can bear under and, when needed, respond to the onslaught of emasculating weaponry that has so besieged black manhood for centuries. But this was not always the case.

The historical record informs us that there was a time when black men had a hope that allowed them to look beyond the pain of the plantation, rebuke the deceptive religiosity of the slave master, and inveigh, with the pen and the pulpit, against the injustices of Jim Crow. Where is the faith that inspired a hope that enabled our forefathers to seek after a manhood that their eyes had not seen—but of which their spirit had heard? Or should we ask, instead, when did this hope become satiated with the manhood of the oppressor, believing that the attainment of Westernized patriarchal authority—or, to borrow historian Eugene Genovese’s nomenclature, plantation paternalism—was the exclusive *telos* of our manhood journey? No, this can’t be it...there *must* be something more.

The problematic of black manhood is as much a malady of the spirit as of the flesh, of the soul as of the body. In terms of the material challenges, sociologists provide the quantitative data that outline the black man's socio-economic challenges, some of which are:

- Education: Only 41% of black men graduate from high school in the United States; and in certain urban areas, for example, in Chicago, only 30% of black males graduate from high school.
- Incarceration: Blacks account for only 12% of the U.S. population, but 44% of all prisoners in the United States are black men.
- Economics: the average net worth of black families is \$6,100, whereas the net worth of White families is \$67,000. Currently, federal data shows that black men have the highest unemployment rate (14.1 percent) when compared with that of whites (7.2 percent), Hispanics (10.2 percent), and Asians (5.9 percent).<sup>2</sup>
- Political Involvement: 1.46 million black men out of a total voting population of 10.4 million have lost their right to vote due to felony convictions.<sup>3</sup>
- Family Structure: almost half of black children, both male and female, grow up in single parent or single-caregiver households in which women are the primary caregiver.<sup>4</sup> The marriage decline has become so dreadful that legal scholar Ralph Richard Banks wrote a book that asks a troubling question: "Is Marriage for White People?"<sup>5</sup>

This is but a small sample of the alarming statistical data that evinces the fractured state of black manhood. However, it is not my intention, as some might assume, to suggest that black men have made only a modicum of progress. After a recent series of articles, each containing in-depth

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<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/10/unemployment-rates-highest-amongst-black-and-latinos\\_n\\_1871453.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/10/unemployment-rates-highest-amongst-black-and-latinos_n_1871453.html) (accessed January 21, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.morehouse.edu/facstaff/bmarks/bmi.html> (accessed June 23, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.theroot.com/views/poor-state-black-families> (accessed September 5, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See Ralph Richard Banks' *Is Marriage for White People?: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*.

portraits of black men in the Washington D.C. area, the staff of the *Washington Post* published a book titled *Being a Black Man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril*. In the book, the contributors report that “the dueling realities of their history—steady progress and devastating setbacks—continue to burden many black men in ways that are sometimes difficult to explain.”<sup>6</sup> The inability to better understand this frustrating pattern of pyrrhic victories is not due to a lack of investigation, however. In fact, research has been plentiful, yes, even cultural and gender specific, as the authors contend, when they say, “[o]ver the past 100 years, perhaps, no slice of the U.S. population has been more studied, analyzed and dissected than black males.”<sup>7</sup> There have been federally funded commissions to analyze the problem, namely, the controversial 1965 *Negro Family: The Case for National Action* report (dubbed the Moynihan report); there have been intra-communal conferences held to discuss the problem, namely, the 1985 panel discussion held by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund; there have been religious-based rallies and marches to address the problem, namely, the well-known 1995 Million Man March. But despite these efforts, the problems of black manhood persist: High unemployment, inequitable incarceration numbers, frightening drop-out rates, and, most troubling, rampant fatherlessness. Though unsettling, this data pales in comparison to the clandestine ruination of the black man’s soul. In my view, this is *the* source of the pervasive hopelessness—a collective melancholia, if you will—that has created a disease of the soul that I have termed Hope Deficiency Syndrome (HDS).

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<sup>6</sup> The Staff of The Washington Post, *Being a Black Man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril* (New York: Perseus Books, 2007), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

Comparable with Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS),<sup>8</sup> Hope Deficiency Syndrome leaves the soul susceptible to a host of opportunistic infections<sup>9</sup>; however, rather than a bacterium or microorganism that leads to a somatic disease, these social pathogens weaken one's selfhood, leading to a slow and painful decay of the soul. Cornel West has observed that racism, poverty, and a host of other social pathogens have inculcated a "sense of worthlessness and self-loathing in black America."<sup>10</sup> The effects of this hopelessness—symptomatic of HDS—are staggering. Could it be that HDS has impeded the further development of black manhood? Has our manhood been so ravaged by this disease of the soul that it no longer has the inner strength to engage in the process of exploring new modes of manhood? The stringent avowal to the haggard manhood of the past, one founded on the myth of patriarchal domination, one that only provides the appearance of strength, one that is decaying because it has been self-made, cannot sustain the kind of labile, perpetually-maturing manhood that is required for black men to be better husbands, better fathers, better sons—in essence, better men.

I contend that HDS has become an intergenerational syndrome, passed on through the despair-laden emotional intercourse between fathers and sons. It is of the utmost importance, consequently, that this study consider the unique opportunity that is afforded within the father-son dyad to develop a revolutionary manhood, that is, a manhood that is fully engaged in the ongoing process of becoming, not the achieved status of being, a black man.

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<sup>8</sup> It has been well-documented that AIDS has been the primary medical concern within the African American community for more than twenty years, evident in the Center for Disease Control's report that black men account for 70% of the new HIV infections among all blacks.

<sup>9</sup> An opportunistic infection is caused by pathogens, especially opportunistic pathogens—those that take advantage of certain situations—such as bacterial, viral, fungal or protozoan infections that usually do not cause disease in a healthy person, that is, one with a healthy immune system. A compromised immune system, however, presents an "opportunity" for the pathogen to infect.

<sup>10</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 17.

Rudolph Byrd's perceptive essay "The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity" provides what I believe to be an apt rejoinder to the black manhood problematic. Byrd's palpable angst about the present condition of black manhood is expressed, both succinctly and poignantly, when he states that "it is imperative that we reclaim our progressive traditions, as well as imagine new and alternative modes of masculinity for Black men. It is time to move to the next level of difficulty and possibility [*italics added*]."<sup>11</sup> I interpret Byrd's appraisal as suggesting the need for a revolutionary black manhood. But what do I mean by "revolutionary"? Though the term connotes a multitude of personas and deployments, revolutionary, as defined by religion scholar Eugene Bianchi, brings to mind "men who radically challenge the structures and mores of the prevailing culture."<sup>12</sup> He also adds:

Of course, the revolutionary is not attempting to find or reconstruct an old order, as though all purposeful structures were already given in the world and need only be restored or rediscovered. He is, rather, forming a *novel structure*, a *new style* of societal interaction; he is not restoring a past coherence but creating a *new one*....Trusting human communication and acceptance lifts a person beyond his limited selfhood and tie him again ("religion" is related to the Latin *religare*: to refasten) to transcendent potentials for living . This implies religiousness in as much as the person is drawn beyond himself (self-transcendence) to experience more fully his real inner self, draw closer to other persons, and remain open to still-mysterious and unrealized values [*italics added*].<sup>13</sup>

By this, Bianchi conjoins the revolutionary and the religious in that person (or community of persons) for whom the mechanized, either/or (*a la* Manichean-esque) order of reality has become a hindrance to the actualization of freedom. Unimpressed with a *prima facie* view of reality, the

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<sup>11</sup> Rudolph P. Byrd, "The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity," in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds., Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy Sheftall, 9 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Eugene C. Bianchi, *The Religious Experience of Revolutionaries* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

revolutionary rightly perceives that there is something more—perhaps, new vistas of selfhood—to be explored.

The noted historian and theologian Gayraud Wilmore has noted that there was a strong tradition of elevation during the formative years of black religion in America. Inspired by the biblical narrative of Jacob's ladder, black slaves were inspired to better their circumstances through the notion of ascending towards higher levels of being. The effects of this image was profound on the slaves, Wilmore remarks, "[a]s humble as they [the slaves] were, they pictured themselves as climbing, one round at a time, out of their misery...climbing out of down troddenness, out of degradation...working for a better world for themselves and their children."<sup>14</sup> Hence, because this vivid image of the slave moving up Jacob's ladder proved so inspirational, to the point that men and women were galvanized to fight for a "better world," songs were written that reinforced this revolutionary idea. Wilmore notes that there were a number of songs, what he calls "slave poetry," of which "Jacob's Ladder" was the most prominent, that expressed an earnest desire to "be 'elevated' in body, mind, and spirit, above the vicissitudes and miseries of this life'."<sup>15</sup> Here are a few lines from this beloved spiritual.

We are climbing Jacob's ladder...  
Every round goes higher and higher...  
Soldiers of the Cross...

Those for whom this spiritual served as a rallying cry for change had faith in the dialectics of identity, that is, a process that is open to new modes of selfhood, as well as innovative modes of communal interaction. Maybe it is time that we start climbing Jacob's ladder again?

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<sup>14</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 262.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



This study hypothesizes a revolution in the very consciousness of black manhood by establishing sonship as a medium through which black men might be transported to innovative (or transcendent or elevated) dimensions of self-consciousness. There is, as this research claims, a long-standing history of filicide that evinces how sonship was sacrificed by the oppressive patriarchal social order and, in a more insidious manner, by black men themselves in their desire to procure patriarchal authority. Without question, the oppressive White patriarchal structure sought to suppress any glint of hope within black men; and because of this, deployed a bevy of ignominious social praxes to dispel the very notion of sonship being a favorable mode of self-identification. However, black men themselves have disavowed the value of sonship, believing it an albatross that signified their servile, dependent, child-like (read: Sambo) status. What will be made clear in this study is that, in such a threatening psychosocial environment, the radiance of sonship was never given a chance to shine within black manhood.

The Jim Crow era (ca. 1880s-1960s) is the primary focus of this study, for it was during this time that many black men affirmed their manhood status by declaring, “I AM A MAN!,” as seen on the posters carried by the Memphis sanitation workers during their 1968 strike. Such a statement was symbolic of the conviction that it was indeed a “turning point” in black manhood; for as education and developmental scholar Lawson Bush points out, “Black males...were now viewed by most of society as Black men for the first time.”<sup>16</sup> *Really?* This impassioned declaration, though giving the appearance of assuredness, bespeaks a sense of despair; it adduces an anxiety about one’s manhood not being affirmed by the other—therefore, viewed from this perspective, the emphasis moves from affirmation to uncertainty: not “I AM A MAN” but rather “I AM A MAN?” It should not be lost that this was also a time during which black manhood was

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<sup>16</sup> Lawson Bush. “Am I a Man?: A Literature Review Engaging the Sociohistorical Dynamics of Black Manhood in the United States” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23 (1999): 49-57.

still recovering from the terror of the lynching ritual. Without question, if the renowned sociologist Orlando Patterson is correct, it was not just manhood per se that was sacrificed on the lynching tree, but rather, as the lynch mob conjured Golgotha hill during the lynching ritual, it was the alchemizing of black manhood into the embodiment of the humble Christ that truly actuated the sacrifice of sonship.<sup>17</sup> Patterson writes:

The humbled Christ was dissociated from the triumphant Christ by virtue of being associated with the humbled, crucified Negro. Both were then discarded, leaving for contemplation only the triumphant Christ, the only god-figure befitting a chosen, superior “race.” With malevolent perfection, the burning cross distilled it all: sacrificed Negro joined by the torch with sacrificed Christ, burnt together and discarded, both *signas* and *signatum* consumed in the triumphant flame of the victorious, militaristic Christ rising above the flowing white robes and galloping white horses in a cloud of Euro-American supremacist glory.<sup>18</sup>

Suffice it to say, the black man symbolized the weakness, the dependency, the very “sonship,” if you will, of the humble Christ. The black man therefore became a socially-accepted/accessible scapegoat for the fear and shame that plagued Southern white manhood, particularly due to the anxieties—cultural, economic, religious and otherwise—that ensued after the Civil War. However, it should not be forgotten that, as literary scholar and historian Dana D. Nelson has noted, the superiority of whiteness as a supernal ontological category, which was then conceptualized as the quintessence of American manhood, did not begin with the Lost Cause of the Confederacy but can be traced back to the years during and those that followed the American Revolution.<sup>19</sup> The need for the white American male to formulate a coherent identity, especially in the midst of such socio-historical disarray, is best described by historian Carroll Smith-

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<sup>17</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 223.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 6.

Rosenberg, when she says, “[i]nternally fragmented subjectivities assume coherence when they have it not, by being juxtaposed to multiple others—especially negative (feared or hated) others.”<sup>20</sup> And so, because of the white male’s external/internal fragmentation, we see not just the establishment but the conscientious perpetuation of a cultural milieu in which black men are the *bête noire* of white manhood. By analyzing the historical material, we shall obtain a better understanding of how filicidal rituals, for instance, like lynching and various forms of paternal decapment have produced this current model of absolutized black manhood, one that still enacts the sacrifice of the sonship identity in order to palliate and reaffirm its patriarchal status. In the end, this study extends current discourse on black manhood by espousing a mode of masculinity that is restorative to the black man’s selfhood. It is time that we black men reclaim the prodigious worth of our sonship.

Why is this mode of manhood, a self-conscious manhood that can incorporate sonship, *in toto*, so important? I contend that as sonship is upheld as a genuine mode of manhood consciousness for black men, and the filicidal impulse of Westernized patriarchy is challenged, that the process of obtaining a more salubrious and, dare I say, protean form of black manhood will be inaugurated within the African American community.

This study will further challenge the current dialogue about black men by hypothesizing the sonship identity as a religious manhood, in the sense that the word religion—taken from the Latin word *re-ligare*: *re* (again) and *ligare* (connect)—means to reconnect, which suggests that this revolutionary black manhood endeavors to reconnect black men with that “something,” as

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<sup>20</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Dis-Covering the Subject of the ‘Great Constitutional Discussion.’ 1786-1789.” *The Journal of American History* 79 (Dec. 1992): 841-873.

philosopher William James suggests, “welling up in the inner reaches of their consciousness, by which such extreme sadness [melancholia/hopelessness] could be overcome.”<sup>21</sup>

My thesis is as follows: *The restoration of the sonship identity in black manhood is a means through which various emasculating Westernized patriarchal praxes and ideologies can be overcome. The subsequent function of this religious (or reconnector) process is that it restores a robust hope within black men that allows them to embrace the perpetual process of becoming, thereby creating a selfhood that is open to the future possibilities, the countless potentialities, and the unexplored terrains of black manhood.*

### **A Con-Polar Methodology**

Literary and autobiographical/biographical works either by or on Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Wright are the data for this study. One would be hard pressed to find two prominent figures that are more con-polar (a term that will soon be explained) than these two black men. King was a renowned Christian minister; Wright was an atheist (or agnostic at best). King was reared in a middle-class household; Wright suffered through abject poverty throughout his formative years. King was a man of letters; Wright was a brilliant autodidact. King’s father, Daddy King, was all too present throughout his life; Wright’s father decamped while Richard was yet a young boy. King was the lauded prophet of nonviolence; Wright was a literary figure whose characters were terribly violent (e.g., Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*). There are instances, however, when King’s supposed advantages turned out to be hindrances and Wright’s encumbrances proved beneficial. The polarized nature not only of the lives of King and Wright but of black manhood, itself, begs for a critical methodology that can rightly interpret this data. Cornel West, scholar of African American religion and philosophy, explains such a method,

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<sup>21</sup> William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1905; repr., New York: Elibron Classics, 2005), 190.

when he says, “Afro-American critical thought [seeks] to reshape the contours of Afro-American history and provide new self-understanding of the Afro-American experience which suggests guidelines for action in the present...It is an interpretive activity.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, my task in using this data on black manhood is not descriptive (e.g., “What is black manhood?”) but interpretive (e.g., “What is the meaning of black manhood?”) so that we may better understand what it means to be a black man today.

I concur with West’s explication of the foci of this culturally germane critical method. In its broadest sense, critical theory is defined “as seeing social and cultural imperfections as defects in rationality, and comparing them to an ideal to which the progress of reason...would ideally tend.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, African American critical thought *qua* critical theory endeavors to establish a perceptive self-consciousness that is pieced together in the struggle to form a progressive mode of either rationalization, logic, or thinking—which, to address our concerns, means developing innovative ways of thinking about black manhood, especially in terms of developing a vigorous critical perspective towards the normative forms of Westernized patriarchy. Though the definitions of critical theory are as varied as the diverse disciplines that employ this interpretive methodology, its liberationist substratum remains constant, a point made by philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer, when he shares that critical theory (or theories) seek to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.”<sup>24</sup> In another place, however, Horkheimer points out that, currently, such a critical stance is seldom found, “[t]he human types which prevail today,” he says, “are not educated to get at the roots of things, and

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<sup>22</sup> Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “critical theory.”

<sup>24</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: The Continuum Publishing, 1972), 244.

they mistake appearance for substance. They are unable to think critically....”<sup>25</sup> It does make one wonder: Maybe we have been guilty of the same error—that is, mistaking appearance for essence—that is, uncritical judgment—in our appraisal of black manhood. In order to move us from appearance to substance, a method is needed that brings us closer to the very essence of black manhood.

Therefore, I will utilize what I have termed a *con-polar* critical conceptual framework as a methodology that most befits this study. By combining the prefix *con-* (meaning “together” or “commingle”) with the word *polar* (meaning “opposite in character or action”) this neologism indicates, in essence, the mutual involvement of two categories that are in opposition or have distinct principles or tendencies. Notice that the con-polar methodology will be used to atomize my con-polar data: for example, fathers and sons, King and Wright. But such a methodology is also applicable to the interpretive methodologies used to analyze this data as well. In his article “Polarity: A Descriptive Hypothesis,” philosopher Archie J. Bahm remarks that “any two categories, both being essential to the nature of polarity, mutually involve each other.”<sup>26</sup> Bahm also adds that

[w]hen and insofar as two opposites function not merely as opposites but also as apposite [or appropriate] opposites, they function as not each other in some respect which they have in common. (E.g., “good” and “bad” both are, or have in common, “value” .... “Value” as that which they have in common constitutes their dimension, and this dimension includes or contains both of them.) Apposite opposites not only tend to continue to be what they are as posits but also what they are as apposite or sharers in a dimension. Each is prevented from extinguishing itself by being unable to complete or perfect its own nature merely by itself, since a part of its nature, as embodied in that dimension, is embodied in its opposite.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>26</sup> Archie J. Bahm, “Polarity: A Descriptive Hypothesis,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 21 (Mar. 1961): 347.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 355-356.

Con-polarity, then, finds the dimension wherein two opposing interpretive methodologies are appropriate for the analysis of a specific concern, which for this study is the limited state of black manhood. So what is the dimension wherein two polarized interpretive methodologies like, say, Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian phenomenology find their con-polarity?

The hermeneutical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur has noted that Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian phenomenology both seek a return to “true discourse.”<sup>28</sup> According to Ricoeur, Freud’s interpretive model is based on an “archeology,” a looking back within the subject’s history to discover the essence of his being; whereas, conversely, Hegel’s interpretive model (i.e., the phenomenology of self-consciousness) offers a teleology that suggests a looking forward to the future synthesis (a wholeness through alterity) of the subject’s inchoate self.<sup>29</sup> This led Ricoeur to conclude that he finds in “Freud an inverted image of Hegel.”<sup>30</sup> The con-polarity between these two hermeneutical methods is evident in that in their apposite opposition they seek to overcome the speciousness of a consciousness tethered to understanding; put another way, they share a common determination to look beyond those sensuous elements that give only the appearance of truth. Hence, when observers use a con-polar hermeneutic they are transferred from understanding (appearance) to reason (essence). Ricoeur explains the credulity of consciousness’s reliance of sensuous (or empirical) data, when he says:

The genesis of meaning does not proceed from consciousness; rather, there dwells in consciousness a movement that mediates it and raises its certitude to truth. Here too consciousness is intelligible to itself only if it allows itself to be set off-center. Spirit or *Geist* is

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University, 1970), 391.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 460-461.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

this movement, this dialectic of figures, which makes consciousness into “self-consciousness,” into “reason,” and which, with the help of the circular movement of the dialectic, finally reaffirms immediate consciousness, but in light of the complete process of mediation...<sup>31</sup>

He later comments that Freud’s psychoanalysis and Hegel’s phenomenology, although distinct, are also interrelated or, as I suggest, con-polar.

But we must go beyond this antithetic [i.e., antagonism between psychoanalysis and phenomenology]....The only way to avoid this caricature of dialectic is to show in each discipline of thought, considered in and for itself, the presence of its other. These two contrary disciplines are not external opposites but are intrinsically interrelated....To see Freud’s problematic in Hegel is to see that the emergence or positing of desire is central to the “spiritual” process of the reduplication of consciousness and that the satisfaction of desire is inherent in the recognition of self-consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

Here, the con-polarity that Ricoeur speaks of underscores the importance of having an interpretive methodology that can critically analyze the descriptive data that is derived solely from the understanding provided by consciousness. Because of this, we will move from the Westernized modes of understanding that purport a mode of consciousness that perceives an object as autonomous and unchanging. Rather, this study’s critical method upholds a mode of reasoning that, as sociologist and political theorist Herbert Marcuse shares, mistrusts the verity of appearances; and therefore, due to its “distinctly critical and polemical character [is] opposed to all ready acceptance of the given state of affairs,”<sup>33</sup> especially, as I argue, normative patriarchal manhood. Marcuse further explains the determinative nature of understanding, when he points out:

The operations of understanding yield the usual type of thinking that prevails in everyday life as well as in science. The world is taken as a multitude of determinate things, each of which is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 462.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert Marcuse. *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.



demarcated from the other. Each thing is a distinct delimited entity related as such to other likewise delimited entities. The concepts that are developed from these beginnings, and the judgments composed of these concepts, denote and deal with isolated things and fixed relations between such things...*childhood and manhood, eternally remain irreconcilable oppositions....*The system of isolated things in opposition, produced by the operations of understanding, must be recognized for what it is: a 'bad' form of reality, a realm of limitation and bondage [italics added].<sup>34</sup>

Only understood, then, the black man is perceived as the angry, abandoned, uneducated, oppressed *bête noire* of Westernized patriarchy. Nothing else. However, a critical approach, one grounded in a con-polar methodology, helps us recalibrate our reasoning about black manhood, so that we may see that black men are not a mechanized, delimited entity, but are still engaged in the process of forming higher, more synthesized, forms of manhood. Moreover, it is this process that bestows self-realization of one's Self; however it is, as philosopher Clark Butler relates, in his writing on Ricouer's Hegel and Freud comparison, a self-realization that is a return to the Self "with a difference." That is to say, it is a Self that can abide with its own alterity.<sup>35</sup>

To further substantiate the con-polarity of the psychoanalytic and phenomenological components of this study's interpretive analysis, I shall, throughout this study, focus on the con-polarity evident in the father-son dyad. Time and time again, it has been proven (and will be proven in what follows) that the status of the father is facilitated through the understood appearance of control and the domination of the other, particularly those persons within the familial milieu. Conversely, the other polarity is that of the son who is regaled to mature out of his "not-yet" manhood status. Because of this, the son and his experiences as son—that is, his sonship—is often devalued within the manhood orbit. In fact the process of sonship, its

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>35</sup> Clark Butler, "Hegel and Freud: A Comparison," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 36 (Summer 1976): 506-522.

discontinuities and the like, are in many ways deemed as weakening agents to the sturdy, immovable stature of patriarchal manhood. As already noted, the Jim Crow era was the historical context within which melancholic southern White men, mourning the shame of the Lost Cause, desired to sacrifice the sonship of black men in their attempt to restore honor, order, power—patriarchal manhood—within the South. Their chosen means of doing so was the lynching ritual. But this is not the only loss that needs to be considered. For what started by way of the lynching ritual was redounded within the father-son dyad in many black families, as the sacrifice of sonship was upheld as a necessary step to achieve patriarchal manhood. Hence, we see a devaluation of sonship among black men themselves, in that they rebuked anything that would be taken to signify that they were vulnerable, weak, or had not developed into the full stature of manhood. Because of this, some black fathers have denied their own and, in turn, their sons the requisite latitude to develop a veritable sonship self-consciousness. Therefore, our analysis must include the alarming lack of what Alan J. Hawkins and David C. Dollahite have termed “generative fathering”<sup>36 37</sup> that has left many black sons deeply melancholic, feeling as though there is a lacuna in their psyches and their souls, which, again, is symptomatic of the aforementioned Hope Deficiency Syndrome (HDS).

A number of Freud’s works, essays and texts, each of which explicates the psychological pains brought about by this kind of loss, which I have designated as the loss of sonship, will

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<sup>36</sup> See Alan J. Hawkins and David C. Dollahite. *Generative Fathering: Beyond Deficit Perspectives*.

<sup>37</sup> In a chapter titled “Fatherwork: A Conceptual Ethic of Fathering as Generative Work” Hawkins, Dollahite and Brotherson define generative fathering as “fathering that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them” (18). Likewise, in his book *Dimensions of a New Identity*, Erik Erikson shares that the mark of one’s transitioning from youth to adulthood is an awareness of one’s ethical responsibility to one’s progeny and community. “From the point of view of development,” Erikson remarks, “[i]n youth you find out what you care to do...[i]n adulthood, however, you learn to know what and whom, you can take care of” (124). He also adds that a generative perspective will help adults “to help each other not to burden the next generation with immaturities which they themselves inherited from previous generations” (125). We will explore the themes of generative fathering in greater depth in the chapter on the psychoanalysis of paternal loss.

assist my investigation of the psychological trauma engendered by such loss. Supplementary texts, the Freudian and the neo-Freudian, will include Michael Balint's *The Basic Fault*, Peter Blos's *Son and Father*, and Ian D. Suttie's *The Origins of Love and Hate*.

Contrapuntally, the phenomenology of the sonship self-consciousness, dialectically formed, will serve as a corrective to the loss of sonship outlined above, and it will be informed by such texts as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as part one of *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, also referred to as Hegel's *Logic*. However, beyond Hegelian philosophy proper there are some theologians and philosophers (or those who fancy themselves theologian-philosophers) for whom Hegel's work has proved beneficial to their own theorizations on the development of hope. Therefore, as a means of expounding on the ways in which sonship is grounded in while also reproducing hope, I shall utilize the theories of hope expounded in Jurgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, Rubem Alves' *A Theology of Human Hope*, and Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. In so doing, I intend to make a cogent claim that sonship is a mode of black manhood that is open to the process of becoming because it is subtended by a dynamic hope, a hope that elevates the self beyond the fixedness of one's absolutized but inescapably fragmented (i.e., understood) identity.

There is, I believe, a progressive mode of black manhood within which such hope flourishes, a hope that opens our eyes to new horizons of manhood—a manhood that knows the *son* will shine again.

## **Outline of Chapters**

The first chapter is devoted, in large part, to an analysis of the socio-historical conflation of fatherhood during the mid-eighteenth to late-nineteenth century. However, before doing so, I explore some classic literary texts, the sacred and the secular, that provide a glimpse into

vigorous psycho-social battles that are waged between father and son. Scholars have noted that besides Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* there are other texts within Western literature, such as Franz Kafka's *The Sons* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, that have depicted the patriarchal father as an indomitable figure. But what of the father in American lore? The early-American male, guided by Puritanical mores, sought a means of self-identification that elicited an indefatigable acquiescence to his authority, especially from those whom he lorded over in the micro-state, the home. Fatherhood provided such a means of self-identification. It was through his role as a father, as related by a number of historians, such as John Demos (see *Past, Present, Personal: The Family and Life Course in American History*) Stephen M. Frank (see *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth Century American North*), and Jay Fliegelman (see *Prodigals & pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority 1750-1800*), that the American male was required to prove his mettle as a "real" man through fatherhood. However, the structured roles, especially that of the provider, would soon begin to decay under the anxieties wrought by the Industrial Revolution, a time during which the father's influence in the home would wane. What effect did this, along with a host of other socio-political challenges, have on American fatherhood? This chapter will attend to this critical concern.

The second chapter moves from a socio-historical analysis of fatherhood to an extensive evaluation of the revolution against the ideation of manhood *qua* fatherhood. In a rather uncommon manner, I use Thomas Kuhn's monographs *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and *The Copernican Revolution* to make the argument that our unfounded notion that fatherhood is at the center of a man's orbit needs to be reconsidered. The advantages of such a shift are not just philosophical but psychological as well. How many men have been psychologically damaged because they had failed to live up to the Westernized standards of patriarchy? Certainly

for those men who experience such shame the damage done to their selfhood is immeasurable. Some of the texts that are used to assist in substantiating this chapter's claim are psychotherapist Melvin Lansky's *Fathers Who Fail* and noted developmental theorist Michael Lewis' *Shame: The Exposed Self*. By means of transitioning to the following chapter's discussion about black manhood, I end this chapter by bringing the story of John Head in to the discussion. More so than any other text I have come across, Head's *Standing in the Shadows* evinces the emotional pain a father endures as he struggles to deal with his own psychological turmoil, that is, the depression caused by the loss of his sonship, and how these challenges greatly diminished his own ability to father his sons. Head is of the opinion that his depression was spurred on by racism, which he also believes is the reason that many black men are often overcome with a saturnine disposition. But is there more to this than Head is *conscious* of? Head was abandoned by his father at an early age, and though he protests that this had little to no effect on him, one must wonder could this be the source, even more so than racism, of his depression—or melancholia. Like Head, many black men believe that the system has been set against them, that is, systemic racism has made it impossible for them to achieve their manhood status. But could it be that, also, like Head, these men have been psychologically damaged by the absence of a father whom they have never known and, by extension, the loss of a sonship they were not allowed to experience.

The third chapter considers a few examples of an *outré* manhood illustrated in black folklore figures like High John the Conqueror. The word “*outré*” signifies the unsettling peculiarity of the mode of manhood evinced in such figures, particularly in regards to how they interacted with and often confounded the patriarchal slave master in African American folk tales. In opposition to the *outré* manhood of a High John the Conqueror, I use the “limited” manhood

found in black literature in such figures as Harpo in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. It is Harpo's wife, Sofia, who discerns Harpo's limitations in terms of his not being able to break away or outgrow the restrictive paternalistic manhood of his patrimony. What she fears most is that this "limited" will be passed on to their new born son. But she will not allow this to be so. The discourse on "limited" manhood leads us into the section devoted to the multifarious visions of black manhood. In the chapter's concluding section, some of the more prominent monographs written about black manhood will be discussed. From Haki Madhubuti's *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* to Na'im Akbar's *Visions for Black Men*, one finds authors who, on the one hand, roundly excoriate the failed state of black manhood but, on the other, remain captivated by the allure of patriarchal strength and domination. In the end, these "visions" fail to develop a black manhood that can overcome its current limitations.

The fourth chapter begins with the report that has proved the most controversial in terms of its assessment of the unmanliness of black men: "The Moynihan Report." But Moynihan was not the only one who was of the opinion that slavery and urbanization has summarily emasculated the black male. One finds that such noted theorist as E. Franklin Frazier's, Kenneth Clark, and Stanley Elkins commiserated with this perspective. But there was another coterie of scholars whose work offered a remonstrance to the Moynihan hypothesis, by suggesting that, even in the ignominious environment of slavery, and the subsequent terrors of various oppressive socio-political programs, black men were able to form their own viable forms of manhood. Scholars such as Eugene Genovese's and Herbert G. Gutman's aptly describe the many ways in which black manhood was challenged during slavery but also the methods, i.e., trickster tales, rebellious religious syncretism, and the like that black men used to overcome their oppressor, all while maintain the sense of manhood. In addition, this chapter inspects the ways in which the

lynching ritual was became the choice means of emasculating black men during the Jim Crow era. It is here that such texts as W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* and Walter White's *Rope and Faggot* are truly instructive. However, to make a stronger correlation between the act of lynching and not only the intentional emasculation of black manhood but the use of the black male as a scapegoat for the white southern male's melancholia, I will utilize, among other texts, Orlando Patterson's *Ritual of Blood: The Consequence of Slavery in Two American Centuries* and James Cones' *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Through linking the cross and the lynching tree, as both of these texts do, one finds that what occurred during the lynching ritual was not the emasculation but rather the elevation of black manhood.

The fifth chapter gives an account of the relationship between Sigmund Freud and his father, Jacob Freud, and how the complexities of their relationship influenced Freud's theories of the human psyche. The primary text for this analysis will be Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for within its pages one discovers how dream thoughts often mask the dreamer's true feelings for a love object. For Freud, the dream theory abetted his attempt to learn of his true feelings for Jacob, who was himself a con-polar figure, both a strong patriarchal father and a weak Eastern European Jew. In the end, Freud attempts learn the truth about his father's con-polarity because he is convinced that this will tell him the truth about his own inner ambiguities.

By comparing and contrasting the childhood and adult experiences of King and Wright, the sixth and seventh chapters employ the con-polar methodology to examine the sonship travails of each man. These chapters delineate the historical events that enervated each man's sonship identity. In terms of the childhood events, Wright's *Black Boy* underscores the intense psychological and physical torment he experienced while growing up as a fatherless child in

Natchez, Mississippi; whereas King, conversely, as documented in a number of biographical works was nurtured within a family setting wherein his domineering father proved to be a perpetually tormenting presence. These childhood experiences, as we will learn, informed the manhood experiences of Wright and King in such a way that both lived their lives attempting to recover, although taking different paths, their sonship identities. Upon reading some of his later novels, however, one does learn of a Wright who was attempting to reconnect, albeit through fictional characters, with his father, Nathan Wright. On the other hand, King's most prominent sonship moment came during his kitchen table experience when he felt encountered *le point vierge*. The con-polar interpretive methodology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, is used to interpret this data so as to discover the patterns of paternal loss and restoration of sonship in the life stories of both men.

The conclusion endorses my view of the significance of the sonship self-consciousness in black manhood, and it advances the claim that such a self-consciousness is an irreducible part of a phenomenology of hope. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* and *In the End—the Beginning*, and Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*—are the primary texts used in this chapter to clarify the relationship between a phenomenology of hope and the dialectical process of becoming that inheres the sonship identity. In the end, this chapter corroborates my thesis that a black manhood grounded in sonship will, by extension, be a black manhood grounded in hope.



## CHAPTER ONE MANHOODS'S MOURNING

“Listen to two or three boys talking among themselves; their gabble is almost wholly made up of boasting—about their prowess at games, their successes in school, the wealth and animal vigor of their fathers, the elegance of their homes. And as with males of tender years, so with males of greater growth.”

— H.L. Mencken, “The Eternal Male”

## The Uncertainty of Manhood

I have been a man my entire life. Any sentient observer would deem such a statement an irrefutable truism. Seeing that I possess all the physical attributes of a man (e.g., a noticeable amount of facial hair, a serviceable muscular physique, and a run-of-the-mill baritone voice) one would readily assume, given this convincing data, that I have little to no consternation about my manhood status...but, at times, I do. Our current hyper-masculine, supra-sexualized sociocultural environment, makes requisite that we men must constantly prove our manhood. No matter our efforts to increase our score in the never-ending tests of manhood (and, even more troubling, no matter the risks we undertake to do so) it seems that many men fail to mull over why it is, exactly, they are sometimes willing to forfeit all—i.e., health, companionship, and even lucre—in order to avoid the shame of a *hypo*-masculinity. Anger, fear, narcissism—these are emotions that, for the most part, many men experience as they repeatedly fail to accomplish the (unreachable) standards of a quixotic manhood.

As the first chapter of this study, it is necessary to examine the manner in which fatherhood has become synonymous with manhood in America, particularly its sociogenesis during Early-American history. Foremost in our discussion, is that both fatherhood and manhood were subtended by patriarchal discursive acts. We begin, though, with an examination of the tempestuous *con-polar* relationship between fathers and sons in some of our most influential literary texts, from sacred texts like the Bible to classic secular works like Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* to modern novels written by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka. Through these writings we will find that the polarization between fathers and sons, especially in terms of the way in which the father was deemed as the most supernal paradigm of manhood, left many sons embittered against and fearful of their indomitable fathers. This will dovetail into our discussion

of fatherhood in American history, for the ostensible security of the fatherhood identity was the means by which men sought to shield themselves from the uncertainties and discontinuities of being a man in a world that was undergoing vast changes, whether socially, politically, or economically. But the conflation of manhood with fatherhood soon proved to lock men within a pattern of manhood, a veritable prison of limited masculinity, from which they could not escape, as the father role (identity or persona) began to subsume the American male's consciousness. There would be no place given to the other side of manhood, the side that was still in process—a man's sonship. Hence, the very idea of a con-polar manhood was refuted. Sons, instead, are forced to imbibe the patriarchal (or hyper-masculine) characteristics that have come to define manhood are expected to be evinced in a father's son, which means that a son is expected to emulate, to the tee, a father's limited manhood. Without question, fatherhood is the normative mode of American manhood. But this privilege also means that it is the father, overvalued as the most sublime expositor and embodiment of manhood, who defines the standards of "real" manhood and is the one who suffers most when this standard is not met. This chapter demonstrates that this putative authority, though, rather than leading to a manhood that is confident of its footing, creates an anxiety-laden manhood, an uncertain manhood, that is not truly certain of its place neither in the world nor, most troubling of all, in the home.

### **Classic Tales of Father-Son Discord**

If one wants to read about father-son discord—filicide and parricide, father-son rivalry, sacralized paternalism—the Bible is a good place to start. For one, we have tales that are not too well known, such as Absalom's rebellion against his father, King David (2 Samuel 13-15). But there are also the stories that we do know all too well. These stories are far more terrifying in that they tell of a father sacrificing an innocent son. A case in point is the story of Abraham, the man

whom God tested by sending him to Mt. Moriah to kill the son of promise, Isaac (Genesis 21-22).<sup>38</sup> And, of course, we need not be reminded of the Father's sacrifice of the Son on Golgotha hill, wherein the Son is left to feel a profound sense of abandonment, most evident when he cries out, "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27). There are also examples of fathers lording over their sons through a spiritualized paternalism. The Apostle Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church, for example, very much resembles that between a father and his children. Reidar Aasgaard, a scholar of early-Christian history, holds the view that Paul appropriated unto himself the status of *paterfamilias* to establish his position of authority, and therefore expected the full obedience of his spiritual children, especially his sons in the Gospel, like Timothy, who exhibited filial piety (or *pietas*, meaning "a considerable degree of subservience") by following in his footsteps (2 Timothy 3:10-17).<sup>39</sup>

Father-son discord is found in our secular texts as well. There is Sophocles' *The Three Theban Plays* (first performed around 442 B.C.), of which *Oedipus the King* is the most well-known of the plays. It presents the killing of the father as a "tragedy of fate," something that Freud later regarded as the necessary end-product of every rivalrous father-son dyad, the Oedipus complex. It is interesting that, unlike the "tragedies" of the Bible, there are no instances of the divine intervention in the play, that is, each man, the father and son, is left to fend for himself. We have here an early literary example of historian and literary critic Rene Girard's thesis of how mimetic desire—i.e., "the son seeks to take the father's place everywhere"—begets

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<sup>38</sup> Abraham's story is a tale of filicide on two accounts, for he rejects his first son, Ishmael, severing their relationship in order to see God's promise fulfilled through Isaac (Genesis 17). Though God says that Ishmael will be the progenitor of a great nation, one must wonder how damaging it must have been for Ishmael, psychologically, to live life being the son Abraham refused.

<sup>39</sup> Reidar Aasgaard, "Like a Child: Paul's Rhetorical Use of Childhood," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 265.

rivalry, which, in the end, begets violence.<sup>40</sup> What is most unique about *Oedipus the King* is that the plot focuses on man's will to power. Man is the primary protagonist and antagonist, not the divine, as in the Biblical accounts mentioned above, meaning that the preternatural is given little voice to influence the outcome of the story.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of more modern works within Westernized literature proper, one can certainly cite Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Dmitry Fyodorovich Karamazov, the eldest son of the novel's patriarchal (antagonistic) figure, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, is wrongly accused of murdering his vile father. According to literary scholar Joseph Frank, it was Dmitry's well-known defense attorney Fetyukovich who claims that, even if Dmitri had killed his father, he would be justified in doing so because Fyodor "had hated him [Dmitry] from his childhood."<sup>42</sup> Frank sees Dostoevsky using the novel to challenge the notions of an a priori basis for filial piety, which is often nothing more than filial affectation; in fact, he avers that this is the novel's moral-philosophical motif. Dostoevsky, via *The Brothers Karamazov*, roundly rejects the idealization of filial piety. Frank explains that

Fetyukovich treads on dangerous ground when he raises the question of whether the murder of such a reprehensible father as Feodor Pavlovich could be condemned. While insisting that Dmitry is innocent, he nonetheless argues that such a murder could well be justified.... "Filial love for an unworthy father," Fetyekovich insists, "is an absurdity, an impossibility. Love cannot be created from nothing....If fathers wish to be loved by their children, they should earn such love by their deeds" ....It should not derive from a "mystical meaning which I cannot comprehend with my intellect, but only accept by faith..."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 170.

<sup>41</sup> Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans., Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 134.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), 908.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 907

For Frank, Dostoevsky commiserates here with the patricidal impulses of a son for whom the pains of paternal abuse had become too much to bear. Fair and just (read: rationale) patricide, this is what Fetyukovich is arguing for in his defense of Dmitry. Now, one must remember that Dmitry did not kill his father (the sinister Pavel Fyodorovich Smerdyakov is guilty of that act)—“[b]ut if he *had* killed him ‘the murder of such a father...cannot be considered parricide...[it] can only be reckoned a patricide by prejudice.’”<sup>44</sup> Dostoevsky’s penchant for presenting his work with a psychological bent was not lost on Freud, who remarks in his essay “Dostoevsky and Parricide” that the perpetrator of the murderous act, parricide, is not what interests psychology but rather who “desired it emotionally and who welcomed it when it was done.”<sup>45</sup> Hence, the murderer of the father becomes something of a redeemer for the sons in that he takes on the sins of those who desired to see the father destroyed. Much of this, for Freud, was based on the events in Dostoevsky’s own life. His father, Mikhail Dostoevsky, a severely melancholic man who verbally abused his children, excessively,<sup>46</sup> died rather mysteriously in 1839; it was a tragic event that left his son psychologically traumatized. Although he disagrees with many parts of Freud’s analysis, such as the suggestion that this death triggered Dostoevsky’s epilepsy, Frank concurs with the observation that the source of the son’s trauma was his overwhelming patricidal guilt.<sup>47</sup> Dostoevsky was a son that wanted his father to die.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 908

<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Dostoevsky and Parricide,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 26 (1945): 5.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 49.

Franz Kafka, in his collection of filial jeremiads, *The Sons*, candidly shares his inability to form an affectionate bond with his authoritarian father, Hermann Kafka.<sup>48</sup> Kafka begins “Letter to His Father” saying,

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I try now to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you and because the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning.<sup>49</sup>

To demonstrate just how overpowering his father could be, Kafka shares a specific psychologically distressing incident.

There is only one episode in the early years of which I have direct memory. You may remember it, too. One night I kept on whimpering for water, not, I am certain, because I was thirsty, but probably partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After several vigorous threats had failed to have any effect, you took me out of bed, carried me out onto the *pavlatche* [Czech word for balcony] and left me there alone for a while in my nightshirt, outside the shut door. I am not going to say that this was wrong—perhaps there was really no other way of getting peace and quiet that night—but I mention it as typical of your methods of bringing up a child and their effect on me. I dare say that I was quite obedient afterward at that period, *but it did me inner harm* [italics added].<sup>50</sup>

Not to stray too far from our current discussion, but the second passage, in which Kafka appears to sympathize with—or may even find pleasure in—his father’s abusive behavior, is an germane

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<sup>48</sup> In his introductory remarks to Kafka’s *The Sons*, literary scholar Mark Anderson has it that in his penning the text, Kafka wanted to express the belief that one’s self-identification is grounded in one’s familial experiences, principally, as it proved for Kafka, in his identity as a son. Anderson writes: “Kafka’s title *The Sons* defines his protagonists in terms of their families, as children still largely controlled by familial and social relations. In fact, one might say that the true subject of these stories is not the individual subject at all but the family...through which the child first learns to define its own identity” (see Franz Kafka, *The Sons*, xi).

<sup>49</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Sons: The Judgment, The Stoker, The Metamorphoses, and Letter to His Father* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 115.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

illustration of what psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi calls “traumatic self-strangulation.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Ferenczi, when the self can no longer resist the oppression of an overwhelming opposing figure, it will, in a desperate act of self-preservation, begin to feel the “pleasure-gratification of the attacker.”<sup>52</sup> Ferenczi adds that

if all hope of help from a third person is abandoned, and if one feels that all one’s own powers of self-defense have been completely exhausted, then all one has to fall back on is hope for mercy from the attacker. If I submit to his will so completely that I cease to exist, thus if I do not oppose him, then perhaps he will spare my life; at least if I abstain from offering any resistance, I have a bit more hope that the attack will be less devastating.<sup>53</sup>

So then, rather than be eviscerated by his father, Kafka assents to his father’s filicidal deeds; but as the above quote makes clear, young Franz does so at the expense of great “inner harm.”<sup>54</sup> One would be wrong to suppose that Kafka’s acquiescence was due, in large part, to his being a “weakly, timid, hesitant, restless person.”<sup>55</sup> For even those regarded as the most puissant, the most contrarian, the most irascible of men, were victimized by tyrannical fathers. For example, Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, said the following about his reactions to his father’s beatings, “I ran away and felt ugly toward him....”<sup>56</sup> In his trenchant account of Luther’s psychosocial development, *Young Man Luther*, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson maintains that Hans Luder was able to control his son, effectively, by making him feel morally inferior, which left the

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Dupont, ed., *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*, trans. Michael Balint and Nicola Zarday Jackson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 102-106.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Sons: The Judgment, The Stoker, The Metamorphoses, and Letter to His Father* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 119.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), 64.



lad in a completely melancholic state.<sup>57</sup> A father who has fomented this kind of self-loathing within his son is, as social psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich observes, “a terror-striking figure, a bogy-man.”<sup>58</sup> And therefore unleashes within the son, as demonstrated in the *Brothers Karamazov*, for example, a flood of patricidal impulses.

It would stand to reason that if a father can be so damaging to a son’s selfhood, then the very notion of a good father, a salubrious fatherhood no less, would seem highly implausible. But this is not so. Rather, in our current neo-paternalistic cultural milieu, the era of the “new father,” so to speak, the many virtues of fatherhood are yet extolled as beneficial to both a father and his son. Moreover, fatherhood is still upheld as the most sublime expression of manhood.

### **Deconstructing a Structuralist Manhood**

Historians, sociologists, psychoanalysts/psychotherapists, as well as those whose feet do not trod the erudite environs of the academy (see Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*, Nick Flynn’s *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* and Michael Chabon’s *Manhood for Amateurs*), each uses a number of theoretical and methodological approaches to better understand a dominant part in the construction of manhood, the father. Though this study is subtended by this concern, this section shall endeavor to focus on the following question: What is the history of manhood, at least in its discursive, sociocultural construction? And, equally important, as the noted historian, literary critic, and social theorist Michel Foucault has underscored, what are the discontinuities, the conflicting authorial voices, within these structures that history has attempted to conceal

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society Without Father: A Contribution to Social Psychology*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harper Perennial), 151.

through the discursive praxes that inform the meta-narrative of Westernized manhood?<sup>59</sup> In a move from structuralism (wherein meaning was the product of shared systems of pre-determined significations) to post-structuralism (wherein there is a focus on localized meaning), Foucault—along with his post-structuralist compatriots, such as philosopher Jacques Derrida, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, to name a few—demonstrates that history, or *his*-story, has attempted to de-center the discontinuities that, in fact, rather than a liminal phenomenon, are what form the discursive *omphalos* (or linguistic center) of historical consciousness. Foucault explains that

[f]or history in its classical form, the discontinuous was both the given and the unthinkable the raw material of history, which presented itself in the form of dispersed events—decisions, accidents, initiatives, discoveries; the material, which, through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, effaced in order to reveal the continuity of events. Discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian’s task to move from history.<sup>60</sup>

Scholars for whom the historical development of and the historical discourse on American manhood are of great concern use Foucault’s analytical methodology in their research. For instance, in her book *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, historian Gail Baderman shares that because of Foucault’s work she is better able to discern how “the inherent inconsistencies within and between discourses allow people to bend them to their own purposes.”<sup>61</sup> One of the primary hegemonic discourses that had been formed throughout American history is that of the civilized white male being, as Baderman

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 4-5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>61</sup> Gail Baderman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 25.

notes, the “most manly [man] ever evolved.”<sup>62</sup> Needless to say, this supposedly coherent discourse, which purports the verity of the superior (and maybe even impeccable) white male, is also fraught with discontinuities. In fact, family studies and human development scholar Joseph Pleck has stated that the divergent social demands, which create sex role norms, brought about by this contradictory discourse make it “difficult, if not impossible, to conform to sex roles.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Pleck brings our attention to the way in which men become anxious whenever they are unable or unwilling to adapt to the inconsistent social expectations created by the male role.

Other scholars have also shed light on these contradictions. For instance, in his book *The Changing Definition of Masculinity*, which focuses on the divergent discursive trajectories of American manhood, sociologist Clyde W. Franklin points out that “there has not been a unitary meaning of masculinity in the United States since its beginning; and... a large portion of males in the United States only recently have been considered for inclusion in the masculine gender [i.e., into the discourse on American manhood].”<sup>64</sup> Franklin provides a useful list of “stereotypical traits” that congeal to form the *sin qua non* of Westernized manhood, some of which are as follows:

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Aggressive          | Adventurous                                    |
| Independent         | Makes decisions easily                         |
| Unemotional         | Acts as a leader                               |
| Competitive         | Self-Confident                                 |
| Worldly             | Not Dependent                                  |
| Skilled in Business | Thinks men are superior to women <sup>65</sup> |

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 142.

<sup>64</sup> Clyde W. Franklin, *Changing Definition of Masculinity* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5.

Franklin also adds that it is out of these characteristic that men come to form the “male self.” “The male self,” Franklin shares, “refers to the process whereby males, by taking the roles of others, view themselves and behave toward themselves as social objects.” Furthermore, he observes, “Out of this process comes self-knowledge, self-conceptions, self-esteem and the like.”<sup>66</sup> In sum, these roles are constructed to give the semblance of coherence. Like Franklin, I, too, am troubled by the way in which the discourse of Westernized manhood has been used to purport the idea of a superior (white) manhood that stands in opposition to that of the inferior, “unmanly” other, which, for the purposes of this study, is embodied in the black man.

To wit, scholars such as bell hooks (*Ain't I A Woman*), Michele Wallace (*Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*), Joseph Pleck (*The Myth of Masculinity*), Gail Bederman (*Manliness and Civilization*), Michael Kimmel (*Changing Men*), Dana D. Nelson (*National Manhood*), and Clyde W. Franklin (*The Changing Definition of Masculinity*), to name a few, can be counted among those whose writings seek to deconstruct the myth of Westernized male supremacy. In pointing out the inconsistencies in Westernized manhood, especially white patriarchally-inflected manhood, these scholars demonstrate their full support of a perspective that, as Foucault has it, challenges the notion that history should provide “a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness,” that is, a consciousness that has been informed by a dominant Other. We would do well to examine, if only for a moment, the ways this discourse has formed and informed American manhood, so that we can see that there were, indeed, inconsistencies or gaps in its development. These lacunae influenced not only the notion but the very praxis of manhood itself, principally in that dimension of identification that best proved the authenticity of a man’s manliness: his role as a father.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 64.

## **The Monkey can do It—*Why can't I?*: The Devolution of Paternal Care**

To engage in a discussion about the history of manhood *qua* fatherhood is analogous to one's embarking on a journey that traverses a very diverse and, at times, labyrinthine terrain. For one, there are differences of race, class, and even physique that have been used throughout history to create categories of manhood, something of a quasi-caste system. Notwithstanding these physical features, however, there are also a number of pivotal psychosocial demarcations that help to evaluate one's manhood status. Parental care—or, more to the point, generativity—is certainly highly regarded. And yet, this “fatherly feeling” is found only in a modicum of mammalian species. Social anthropologists Peter Gray and Kermyt Anderson point out that “in only 5% of species of mammals do males provide paternal care.”<sup>67</sup> The most caring among this cadre of “fatherly mammals” are the marmosets, tamarins, and small-bodied monkeys of South America, as well as other classes of primates.<sup>68</sup> As for human fathers, supposedly higher-up on the evolutionary/fatherly chain, there are some cross-cultural similarities in paternal care; however, Gray and Anderson are quick to point out that there is no one universal model for paternal involvement. Rather, it has been their observation that though there is evidence of continuity throughout divergent cultures—for example, in “the United States or Jamaica or South Africa or China”—there are equally observable variations in patterns of paternal care as well.<sup>69</sup> For example, when looking at the Aka of Africa, a group of hunter-gatherers in the Congo Basin rainforest, researchers have found that, because of the groups cooperative ethos, fathers are able

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<sup>67</sup> Peter B. Gray and Kermyt G. Anderson, *Fatherhood: Evolution and Human Paternal Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

to be more “indulgent with their young children.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, you have the fathers of Japan who have very limited interaction with their children, about twenty minutes a day, principally because of capitalist-driven socioeconomic expectations.<sup>71</sup>

To compare and contrast not only these but many other patterns of paternal care, the authors use an interdisciplinary approach comprised of cross-cultural and historical research, comparative research (that is, contrasts across species<sup>72</sup>), paleoanthropological research (that is, research based on hominid fossil records), and human genetics (that is, to better understand the *neural* basis of paternal care). The recent developments in the study of fatherhood, as outlined by Anderson and Gray, hold great promise for current and future research. However, our present concern is neither with the neural nor the hormonal, not even with the patterns of paternal care across species, but with the sociohistorical development of manhood *qua* fatherhood.

The social expectation is that men as fathers must exhibit some kind of paternal care, which is defined as “the time and resources given by a man to his children.”<sup>73</sup> Other theorists have chosen to use the terms paternal involvement, paternal investment, or, as Erik Erikson has termed it, generativity to describe the ways in which a father can either support or hinder the physical, psychological, and spiritual/moral development of his child. Beyond this, there is also the difference in the qualitative nature of the care itself. Fathers who are able to provide for, say,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>72</sup> For example, in a section titled “Our Founding Fathers,” the authors uphold the titi monkey as the poster child of fathering in the natural world. The male titi monkey has a very affectionate relationship with his wife, evident in their intertwining tails while perched in trees; in addition, the male also plays a pivotal role in the early care of its young. “A father may lug his little ones through the forest,” the authors share, “handing them to their mother for nursing, then putting them back on his shoulders.” They go on to add that “[i]n experiments with captive titi monkeys, offspring giving the choice of heading to their mother or their father will favor their fathers” (*Fatherhood: Evolution and Human Paternal Behavior*, 11).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 32

the child's financial well-being but are not physically present, may very well be *invested* but not *involved* fathers. This brings us to a further distinction, that of the difference between indirect and direct care. Whereas indirect care suggests a physical distance or "more-removed forms of aid," the latter, that is, direct care, refers to a proximal relationship evident in the father's "holding, carrying, and closely interacting with the child."<sup>74</sup> Direct care has long been established as the quintessence of paternal care. It is certainly the image that a man has when he awaits the birth of his first child, especially a son. This paternal imago, no matter its allure, belies the many socio-historical discontinuities—for instance, a man is to be a caring father and, at the same time, a stoic world-conqueror—that restrict a man's ability to offer this kind of direct care (or generativity) to his child. As I shall discuss in the next chapter, which focuses on the psychosocial development of the paternal imago, such discontinuities have a pernicious effect on the father's own self-perception, most notably during those times when he sees himself as failing to measure-up to these internalized images of manhood *qua* fatherhood. What is often ignored is that this mechanized paternal imago is often passed on to the next generation, creating an intergenerational pattern of underdeveloped manhood.

Research has been done that validates such a claim. To provide just one example, let us consider Catherine Emihovich, Eugene Gaier, and Noreen Cronin's study on the social expectations of fathers for their sons. Based on the information gathered in their interviewing one-hundred and nineteen white father-son pairs, the researchers discovered that "sons of fathers who held traditional beliefs and stereotypic expectation were not in conflict with their fathers, but instead, conformed closely to their fathers' expectations."<sup>75</sup> According to the researchers,

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>75</sup> Catherine Emihovich, et al., "Sex-Role Expectations Changes by Fathers for Their Sons," *Sex Roles* 11 (1984), 866.

these sons are unlikely to change their perspective on manhood; for, as they claim, “the fathers’ beliefs and expectations clearly influenced their sons’ beliefs, [and so] it is unlikely there will be a drastic change in adolescent boys sex role beliefs....”<sup>76</sup> Some of the questions asked during the study do but reflect the inconsistencies of the parental care imago. When fathers were asked, “What role behaviors do you feel are expected of you as a man?” the most common response was “economic provider” (68.1%). When fathers were asked, “What type of behaviors do you want your son to exhibit?” the top four response were “Desire to achieve” (95.8%), “Independence” (89.9%), “Self-Control” (89.9%), and “Self-defense” (65.6%).<sup>77</sup> Unlike the abovementioned list of male characteristics provided by Franklin (see section 3 of this chapter), which detailed how men view themselves as men, this list duly illustrates how fathers seek to instill these “manly characteristics” not only within themselves but their sons as well. Suffice it to say, these are not the characteristics that will abet the development of paternal care—but rather a distant, emotionally deficient pattern of fathering that produces a common (standardized) manhood.

### **In Defense of a “Common” Manhood**

Sociologist Michael Kimmel has produced two informative monographs—one as sole author, the other edited—that chart the sociocultural construction and subsequent deconstruction of American manhood. The longstanding notion of a history of American manhood, that is, that the founding fathers somehow set in stone the masculine ideals that have survived until now, is dispelled in the first words of his book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, when Kimmel

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 867.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 864.



states, “American men have no history.”<sup>78</sup> Is it not the case that the things that tell us of our nation’s past, from history books to treasured national song’s to the nation’s founding documents, such as the *Declaration of Independence* (e.g., “all *men* are created equal”), unabashedly proclaim that the story of national manhood has been conflated with the nation’s cultural identity? Kimmel offers an innovative analysis by investigating not just the lives of men *per se* (i.e., historical events) but, rather, the phenomenological (or experiential) development of manhood.

With this in mind, Kimmel offers a useful inquiry: “What does it mean, then, to write of men as men?”<sup>79</sup> Kimmel is of the opinion that researchers who endeavor to examine American manhood as a “historical” phenomenon will fail to do so if they do not rightly observe how this history was and is being shaped, in large part, by the various ways men negotiate their manhood through masculinist-sociopolitical discourse. Because he views the historical development of American manhood through a social-constructivist lens, Kimmel understands that there are various inconsistencies or, as Foucault would claim, “discontinuities” that denote that manhood, in this context, is an ever-changing mode of self-identification. Kimmel, therefore, seeks to challenge the static, inert image of ideal manhood that was eloquently categorized by sociologist Erving Goffman, who perceived that

[t]here is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of a *common value system in America*. Any male who fails to qualify in an of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior; at times, he is likely to pass and at times he is likely to find himself being apologetic or aggressive

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

concerning known-about aspects of himself he knows are probably seen as undesirable. The general identity values of a society may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living (emphasis added).<sup>80</sup>

Surely, in the case of those who maintain a position on the periphery (that liminal space, if you will) of society, their acquiring these characteristics of a “complete unblushing male” is arduous to say the least. These difficulties, however, could not hinder the formation of what Carol Smith-Rosenberg, a historian, calls a “new *homo nationalis*, a new *homo Americanus*.”<sup>81</sup> She, much like Goffman, attests that “[d]espite Americans’ racial, ethnic, class, and gender diversity, the new American subject was male, white, and, increasingly, middle-class. His parochial beginnings notwithstanding, he would come to dominate the national imagination.”<sup>82</sup>

In a similar vein, then, Kimmel’s thesis is that the putative history of American manhood is, in essence, a historical treatise written by and about the dominant patriarchal figure, embodied most expressively in the white-male-capitalist. The bifurcated foci of this history either details the white male’s speculative rationalization of his superior status or the oppressed struggling to achieve (or “acting” as if they have attained [i.e., Goffman’s dramaturgy]) this status.

Both histories, the defense of and the striving toward white manhood, are, as Kimmel has it, based on one prevailing myth: the Self-Made man. In his purporting the notion of being self-made, which developed a sense of being in control of one’s self and one’s environment, the American (white) male crafted a meta-narrative that authorized his place of privilege over the uncivilized other. Gail Bederman highlights this fact, when she says, “civilized white men were

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<sup>80</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963; repr., New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), 128.

<sup>81</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Dis-Covering the Subject of the ‘Great Constitutional Discussion,’ 1786-1789,” *The Journal of American History* 79 (Dec. 1992): 844.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

the most manly ever evolved—firm of character; self-control...[whereas] savage men were emotional and lacked a man’s ability to restrain their passions.”<sup>83</sup> But was this really about the arrogance of domination or, rather, the fear of being dominated? Kimmel has it that the construction of American (white) manhood was “less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power and control over us.”<sup>84</sup> Dana D. Nelson’s own research supports this claim when she states that “national manhood,” American (white) manhood, sought to “manage the potentially divisive effects of interpersonal, interclass, and interregional masculine competition by relocating them in a symbolically fraternal, reassuringly ‘common’ manhood.”<sup>85</sup> As the nation’s identity was beginning to change radically after the American Revolution war, in ways that forever altered the socioeconomic securities of the self-made man, white men made a unified attempt to create a “common” national manhood to separate themselves, physically, culturally, and ontologically, from the “threatening” other.

The new American male, in this newly liberated nation, needed a socially-approved role that would best embody his position of authority: hence the hyper-valorization of fatherhood. Therefore, we must examine the confluence of manhood and fatherhood in American history, especially the ways in which men carefully calibrated their patriarchal authority, until it reached the perfect manly form, within the early-American familial milieu. Now free from the tyranny and corruption of the British crown, the sociopolitical King/Father, the American man would be able to create for himself a liberated manhood. Pulitzer Prize winning historian Gordon S. Wood

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<sup>83</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>84</sup> Kimmel, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 37.

contends that the American Revolution was in every way a radical disavowal of the patriarchal authority of the British monarchy. However, the revolution was not simply about reforming governments (i.e., the establishment of a republic) but also bringing about a change in social relations as well. Though the Revolution never made this “equal” society a reality, Gordon is of the opinion that it “made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking.”<sup>86</sup> This would all change, though, when this onrush of social change created social disorder, which began to threaten the patriarchal authority of the male, particularly in the home. Anxious about this social disorder, the American man felt “there was no alternative except to return to something resembling the archaic doctrines of...divine right patriarchy.”<sup>87</sup> Fatherhood, then, amidst all this instability, provided the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century man with a stable self- and social-identity from which his potency could be easily recognized, readily demonstrated and perpetually reaffirmed—*but for how long?*

### **Early-American Manhood *qua* Fatherhood**

In addition to his aforementioned text *Manhood in America*, Kimmel also has an equally informative edited monograph *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, in which Joseph Pleck has an essay titled “American Fathering in Historical Perspective.” As the title suggests, the essay provides a historical analysis of fatherhood but with particular attention given to the early years of the American republic. To begin, Pleck analyzes the period ranging from the eighteenth to the early-nineteenth century, a time during which fathers were deemed, among other things, the moral/spiritual teachers in the household. The

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<sup>86</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 7.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

male's position as the moral exemplar in the home was based on a number of specious scientific presuppositions, foremost of which was that women were irrational and emotionally unstable, and, therefore, due to this inherent defect, incapable of instructing their children in, above all else, matters of rectitude. In discussing the lack of rationale in women, Pleck shares that "[m]en were thought to have superior reason, which made them less likely than women to be misled by the 'passions' and 'affections.'" In like manner, children were viewed as being in dire need of the father's instruction and, if needed, physical discipline, meted out by the "rod of correction."<sup>88</sup> The guiding attitude towards children was that "[they] were...inherently sinful, ruled by impulses as yet governed by intellect."<sup>89</sup>

During this time, a strict religious ethos, greatly influenced by the Reformation theology (e.g., Calvinism), guided much of the social interaction, especially within the household, of the early American colonies. In his essay titled "A Period of Ambivalence: Eighteenth-Century American Childhood," historian John F. Walzer reports that children were viewed as a means through which a father could prove his own piety. Walzer elaborates,

Children were hailed as carriers of the father's true religion, as perpetrators of the one life God smiled on. Children were said to "exonerate" their parents. They became a way of proving one's own worthiness in the world, of attaining salvation. John Barnard pointed out to his New England congregation in 1737, 'are not your children a part of yourselves.'<sup>90</sup>

In order to further galvanize the father's moral/spiritual instruction of his children, the father had to be wary of the ever-watchful tithingman, an emissary of the Puritan authorities, who was

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<sup>88</sup> "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the *rod of correction* will drive it far away" (Prov. 29:15; emphasis added).

<sup>89</sup> Joseph Pleck, "American Fathering in Historical Perspective," in Michael Kimmel (ed.), *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, 83-98 (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987), 85.

<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Walzer, "A Period of Ambivalence: Eighteenth-Century American Childhood," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd DeMause, 351-383 (New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974).

given the task of “policing...negligent heads to assure that family order was maintained,”<sup>91</sup> states historian Carole Shammas. To further explicate this person’s task, she explains, “a tithingman watched over ten to twelve families in a neighborhood and reported stubborn and disorderly children...[t]hese officers joined an already impressive array of church elders and local officials...whose duties included checking up on morals and manners.”<sup>92</sup>As the foregoing enunciates, the father’s belief that his children, particularly his son, were a reflection of his own selfhood (and salvation) made it necessary that he play a pivotal role in their moral/spiritual maturation. By way of example, let me offer a pithy account shared in Philip Greven’s *Protestant Temperament*, of the parenting methods employed by the influential Protestant theologian Jonathan Edwards. Greven writes,

careful and thorough in the government of his children; and, as a consequence of this, they revered, esteemed, and loved him. He took special care to begin his government of them in season. When they first discovered any considerable degree of will and stubbornness, he would attend to them till he had thoroughly subdued them and brought them to submit. And such prudent thorough discipline, exercised with greatest calmness, and commonly without striking a blow, being repeated once or twice, was generally sufficient for that child; and effectually established his parental authority, and produced a cheerful obedience ever after.<sup>93</sup>

No wonder Greven, after examining numerous stories telling of children being shamed into obedience,<sup>94</sup> is of the belief that, because of the father’s indomitable authority, “[o]bedience and submission were the only acceptable responses for children.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Carole Shammas, “Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (Jan. 1995): 117.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

<sup>93</sup> Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977), 32.

<sup>94</sup> In a later chapter, I will return to the theme of children being shamed into obedience, mainly by citing the work on child abuse done by Alice Miller (*The Drama of the Gifted Child*, *Thou Shalt Not be Aware*, and other works) and, in addition, to focus on the religious abuse of children, that of Donald Capps (*Child’s Song*).

## Bring Home the Bacon: The Insolvency of a Commoditized Manhood

In his instructive book *Past, Present and Personal: The Family and The Life Course in American History*, historian John Demos holds that it was of the utmost importance that fathers prepare their children for a life without them. “Death was an active presence in the lives of early Americans, old and young,” Demos shares, “and a father who did not prepare his child for such possibilities might well be considered negligent.”<sup>96</sup> Thus inclined, the father sought to instill within his children the requisite characteristics for a life of independence. Demos provides the following informative list of the father’s role(s) in the household.

- **Father as Pedagogue:** He was to impart the basic skills of reading and writing;
- **Father as Benefactor:** He played a role in choosing a mate for his son and daughter, and he was to make a sizable contribution to their financial stability;
- **Father as Controller:** Because of his influence, the father could easily withhold benefits from a child;
- **Father as Moral Overseer:** The child’s sinful nature required that its passions be curbed so as to not be given over, entirely, to the lust of the flesh;
- **Father as Psychologist:** His “superior” reasoning skills well-equipped the father to perceive and, when needed, remediate his children’s emotional well-being;
- **Father as Example:** He was to be the model of right behavior and good character;
- **Father as Progenitor:** The father saw his son as carrying on a legacy of esteemed manhood, of which he was to be viewed as the future progenitor of his own household;
- **Father as Companion:** From an early age girls and boys assisted their fathers in the labor of the farm; this proximal relationship helped fathers develop a certain bond with their children.<sup>97</sup>

The relationship between a father and his children was, for the most part, as the above sets forth, guided by not only a sense of patriarchal authority but patriarchal responsibility. To return to an

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and The Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 44-47.

earlier point regarding the salvific undertones of the father-child dyad, Demos claims, like Carole Shammas above, that a father's affection for his son was so intense that he would at times laud his male progeny as "my hope" and "my consolation."<sup>98</sup> Sons, therefore, were conscripted into the theatre of manhood, namely, to reenact, and to carry on, the model of manhood demonstrated by their ever-present, authoritative father. To do otherwise was deemed dishonorable—dare I say, it bespoke filial impiety. Even the noted Protestant reformer/rebel Martin Luther, a man well-acquainted with the oppression of a domineering paternal figure, whether secular (i.e., his father, Hans Luder) or sacred (i.e., the Pope), proclaimed that he would "rather have a dead son than a disobedient one."<sup>99</sup>

There were other models of fatherhood, less authoritarian ones, mind you, that were prevalent during the colonial period; for instance, there was "father as caregiver." Demos shares a number of stories—written in letters, diaries, local court records, and the like—of fathers who would sit through all hours of the night watching over an ill child; or, even more compassionate, there is the story of a father who "when his child was sick, and like to die...ran barefoot and barelegged, and with tears" to find medical help.<sup>100</sup> We see here that even during the eighteenth to early-nineteenth century, the period during which fatherhood was established as a metonym for manhood, and his "manly" authority was sanctioned within his household, a father was able to renegotiate his manhood to better care for the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of his children. But things were about to change. As America entered the middle of the nineteenth-century, the Industrial Revolution (ca. 1820-1870), which also saw the emergence of

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society Without Father: A Contribution to Social Psychology*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harper Perennial), 165.

<sup>100</sup> John Demos, *op. cit.*, 48.



a market-based, *laissez faire* economy, caused a fundamental change in the patriarchal structure of the American household. No longer would the father be expected to be the overseer, the pedagogue, the progenitor, the psychologist, or, more fondly, the companion. Those days were over. Rather, all of his former roles would be centralized into that of the breadwinner. According to Gail Bederman, the vast socio-economic transition brought about by the Industrial Revolution greatly diminished the self-assuredness of the self-made man. Instead of being confident that his labor could assure him the bare necessities of life, fathers now had to face the alarming prospect of their livelihoods being in the hands of the another domineering figure, the rapacious capitalist. Bederman explicates the effects of these changes on the American male's self-image by stating that

[b]y the 1890s, however, both "manliness" and middle class identity seemed to falter, partly because economic changes had rendered earlier ideologies of middle-class manhood less plausible. Middle-class manliness had been created in the context of a small-scale, competitive capitalism which has all but disappeared by 1910. Between 1870 and 1910, the proportion of middle-class men who were self-employed dropped from 67 percent to 37 percent....Moreover, between 1873 and 1896, a recurring round of severe economic depressions resulted in tens of thousands of bankruptcies and drove home the reality that even a successful, self-denying small business man might lose everything, unexpectedly and through no fault of his own. Under these conditions, the sons of the middle class faced the real possibility that traditional sources of male power and status would remain closed to them forever—*that they would become failures instead of self-made man* (emphasis added).<sup>101</sup>

"Where is Daddy?" was now the leitmotif of the nineteenth-century son. No longer afforded a companionship that allowed him to observe, first-hand, his father's doings, sons were left to fill their minds with fantasies—specious myths—about their father's extended absences from the home. We have it on good historical evidence that prior to the Industrial Revolution almost ninety-percent of American men were self-employed, which meant that fathers "dealt with

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<sup>101</sup> Bederman, *op. cit.*, 12.

objects in full view of their children.”<sup>102</sup> Afterwards, as procuring and maintaining a job became the means of supporting one’s family, being a responsible father required that a man be separated from his children in order that he might, to use an all too American coinage, “bring home the bacon.”<sup>103</sup> Sons were no longer allowed to see their fathers at work. *But what father would want his son to see him in his fallen state at work?*

At work his name is “employee number...”  
At work his discourse is that of a Yes Man.  
At work his body only percolates to the movement of the machines.  
At work his time is no longer his own.  
At work his self-worth is designated by his pay.  
At work his choicest raiment is the company uniform.  
At work his only inspiration is the company slogan.  
At work his mind fails to be quickened.  
At work his crestfallen countenance is considered strikingly handsome.  
At work his favorite conversation is about his hate of work.  
At work his best work day is when he repeats, exactly, the same thing he did the day before.  
At work his mournings are filled with thoughts of what he could have been.  
At work...at work...at work...<sup>104</sup>

This shameful existence was derided by Karl Marx as a wholly dehumanizing (or unmanning) experience. Marx’s observed that the manhood yielded through the exploitive labor of capitalism “converted the worker into a crippled monstrosity”<sup>105</sup> He would later quote Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, wherein Smith provides a vivid description of the laborer’s steady undoing.

The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations...has no occasion to exert his understanding...He generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become...The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his

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<sup>102</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society without Father: A Contribution to Social Psychology* (New York: Harper Collins), xv.

<sup>103</sup> Demos, *op. cit.*, 52.

<sup>104</sup> Jay-Paul Hinds, “Requiem for Fallen Man,” Unpublished poem.

<sup>105</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol.1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 481.

mind...It corrupts even the activity of his body and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigor and perseverance in any other employments that that to which he has been bred. His dexterity at his own particular trade seems in this manner to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and marital values. *But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the laboring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall* (emphasis added).<sup>106</sup>

Marx's trenchant analysis served to expose the dangerous path that *fin de siècle* European manhood was on; however, it is germane to the American context as well. More often than not, fathers were failing to make their mark in the world, that is, to be distinct (be seen) in the work place, a point also noted by Marx when he states that "all men are alike in the face of capital."<sup>107</sup>

The man *qua* father *qua* laborer now knew all too well that his place of authority in the household was vulnerable whenever he failed in his provisionary function. *What of the psychological state of the men themselves?* Well, it was not good. Toby Ditz, a historian, tells of a young eighteenth-century Philadelphia merchant who, after experiencing a number of financial setbacks, confides to his uncle that his financial insecurity had "wholly unmanned him."<sup>108</sup> Nowhere else was the "unmanning" of the American male more evident than when he found himself an insolvent debtor. "The blot, or stain, on that reputation [of not being able to pay ones debts]," Ritz writes, "threatens the core of the merchant's [i.e., the man's] identity as an equal among men of stature."<sup>109</sup> Seeing a crack in the armor, so to speak, sons soon believed that their fathers could be overthrown as authority figures, both in the home and, as was often

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<sup>106</sup> Marx, *op. cit.*, 483. Quote taken from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>108</sup> Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The Journal of American History* (June 1994): 51.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

demonstrated, in the world. It is from this that we see the emergence of, to use Demos's nomenclature, "father as rival."<sup>110</sup>

Suffice it to say, manhood *qua* fatherhood began to imbibe the socioeconomic expectations of the Industrial Revolution. Such adaptation need not be construed as a sign of progress, however. Alexander Mitscherlich is of the opinion that the Darwinian notion of evolution, taken to mean progress, is not an irrefutable hypothesis. Mitscherlich says, "[o]ur culture made significant advances in mastering the forces of nature," but he then asks, "but can it claim similar advances in knowledge of the natural forces inside ourselves?"<sup>111</sup> This is an especially important question as one considers Marx's remark that labor turned men into "crippled monsters." These bogeymen are emotionally disfigured, spiritually mangled beings who then, unknowingly one would hope, instill this image of manhood within their sons. *If men were made aware of this would they still bequeath such a terrible inheritance to their male progeny?*

Because men have conformed to such a hollowed (not hallowed) manhood, Mitscherlich asks: "What does a son really inherit from his father, apart from his physique, perhaps? What happens in emotional communication with him, and what social task is associated with this relationship?"<sup>112</sup> Scholars from diverse disciplines have sought answers to such questions in their attempt to discover why fathers remain important to their sons' psychosocial development. One could even dare the proposition that something of a movement has begun to restore the father's authority in the home.

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<sup>110</sup> Demos, *op. cit.*, 62.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Mitscherlich, *op. cit.*, 139.

## Daddy's Home: Lessons of Fathering from *The Odyssey*

Homer's notable epic *Odysseus* tells of a heroic figure who, during a ten-year journey, had braved a host of formidable circumstances in an attempt to return to his home, Ithaca. Odysseus is eager not only to reclaim his kingdom but, of even greater importance, to re-establish a relationship with his son, Telemachus, who will one day ascend to his father's throne. However, Odysseus' significance for Telemachus goes beyond the mere passing on of royal standing, for it is expected that as the father Odysseus will become "the initiating priest through whom the young being [his son] passes into the larger world."<sup>113</sup> Certainly, Telemachus has also been on his own journey, one that has allowed him to attain an estimable measure of manhood. Yet there is much of the world that he has yet to see, and it is for this reason that there is a void that can be filled only by his father, the conduit to the larger world. Similar to Homer, many scholars whose research focuses on the father's role in a child's development are now urging absent fathers to "return home" in order to reconnect with their sons, particularly after these fathers have undertaken the burdensome—sometimes life-long—journey to procure the elusive treasure of manhood "out-in-the-world." Disfigured by the workplace, scarred from the battles of making-it-in-the-world, disenchanted with the myth of the self-made man, these worldly-wise fathers are needed to teach their sons about the many snares and traps they will face in their own pursuit of manhood. However, according to these scholars, in particular those who are developmentally inclined, the lessons on manhood passed on from father to son need to be mutually critical and mutually beneficial. Suffice it to say, it is not only what fathers teach their sons that is important, but, of equal value, what sons teach their fathers. *What does this all mean?* It offers the illuminating hypothesis that, even after he had been away for years, traveling

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<sup>113</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), 136.

in his worldly travels, Odysseus had lacunae of “manly” wisdom within himself that only his son, the young Telemachus, could fill.

In *My Father Before Me: How Fathers and Sons Influence Each Other Throughout Their Lives*, Michael J. Diamond, a practicing psychologist and psychoanalyst, states that the development influence within the father-son dyad is reciprocal in that “each grows and develops in step with the other.”<sup>114</sup> Unlike their predecessors, who believed in the unilateral influence of the father, theorists of Diamond’s ilk recognize that sons have a pivotal role in informing, forming, and reforming their father’s own self-identities as men. Because development of one’s fathering capacity is fraught with inconsistencies, Diamond rejects the notion of an idealized father. Instead, using psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s “good enough mother” hypothesis as a guide, Diamond insists that the “good enough father” is one whom sons can depend on to maintain a psycho-emotional middle-path, thereby “helping them [the sons] regulate their emotions, achieve mastery, and take on the challenges of the world at large.”<sup>115</sup> When sons are bereft of the benefits of good enough fathering, they are cemented in a state of phallicism, thus suggesting that they uphold an exaggerated masculinity that is fixated on “invulnerability, freedom from dependency, strength, untrammelled growth, and masculine omnipotence.”<sup>116</sup> A dangerous manhood.

Samuel Osherson’s *Finding Our Fathers* is another informative text in terms of addressing the psychological trauma caused by father loss. Rather than focusing on the fathers themselves, as many researchers tend to do, Osherson examines the lived experiences of boys in

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<sup>114</sup> Michael J. Diamond, *Father Before Me: How Fathers and Sons Influence Each Other Throughout Their Lives* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

order to better understand how “father hunger,” to use James Herzog’s term, hinders their psychosocial development. Because of their physical absence from the home, due to their journey to make a living in the world, as detailed above, fathers have been “overlooked,” Osherson claims, “by their *own sons* as well as by psychologists and others analyzing the family (emphasis added).”<sup>117</sup> Far too many sons believe, at least on a conscious level, that their fathers are insignificant to their development or, if fathers do have a role, that their only contribution is to be the breadwinner. Such a myopic perspective of the father’s function limits the son’s appreciation of the many facets of fathering, which perpetuates the myth of the father’s place being not in the home—but in the world. Distance, then, not companionship, has become the governing expectation for the relationship between a father and his son. His overcoming this physical and psycho-emotional chasm is the challenge for the father who wants to return home. James Carrol, a historian and journalist, quoted by Osherson, writes that “the curse of fatherhood is *distance*, and good fathers spend their lives trying to overcome it (emphasis added).”<sup>118</sup> To create an emotional bridge that can ameliorate this distance, however, men, both fathers and sons, must reconstruct their image of the worldly (absent) father. If this is not done, then the father will forever remain the suspicious outsider whom the son never truly accepts back home.

Osherson has it that there is “a note of Greek tragedy in men’s relationship with their fathers.”<sup>119</sup> Hence, my mentioning of Homer’s *Odyssey* to begin this section. Rather than focusing on the Oedipus complex, the prototype of father-son conflict, Osherson looks to the *Odyssey* as an example of a father returning home after a ten-year journey to reconnect (not

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<sup>117</sup> Samuel Osherson, *Finding Our Fathers: How a Man’s Life is Shaped by His Relationship with His Father* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 5.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

castrate or destroy) his son. The scene that depicts Odysseus revealing himself to Telemachus is quite telling.

I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he....This is not princely to be swept away by wonder at your father's presence. No other Odysseus will ever come, for he and I are one, the same...Throwing his arms around this marvel of a father, Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears rose from the wells of longing in both men, and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering as those of the great taloned hawk, whose nestlings farmers take before they fly. So helplessly they cried pouring out tears, and might have gone of weeping till sundown.<sup>120</sup>

Homer's perspicacity is informative in that it shows Odysseus's recognition of the void (or wound) that his absence has caused his son. Psychoanalyst Richard Reichbart has pointed out that the *Odyssey* is unique in that Homer depicted heroic figures that wept openly. Such raw emotionality, especially crying, evinces that these men were able to experience loss or to fully mourn, something that goes against phallogocentric defense mechanisms that summarily dismiss crying as weak or womanly.<sup>121</sup> For Osherson, the father's absence means that "men carry around as adults a burden of vulnerability, dependency, or emptiness within themselves, still grieving, reliving a time when...they couldn't go to a father with the confusion, anger, or sadness they felt."<sup>122</sup> This is a feeling that Odysseus was sensitive to and that he endeavored to ameliorate. It is for this reason that Osherson charges that we need to move from a fixation on the Oedipal themes of fathering—castration anxiety, rivalry, and so forth— so that we may attend to those

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Reichbart, "On Men Crying: Lear's Agony." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 54 (2006): 1067-1098.

<sup>122</sup> Osherson, *op. cit.*, 10.



found in the Odyssey, which he says is “the wish to be like father, to find a father, a sturdy man we can rely on.”<sup>123</sup>

And yet, even though it provides a new perspective from which to appraise fatherhood, the Odysseus myth lends itself to the prevailing mythology of the hyper-masculine patriarchal figure, that is, a manhood that is evinced, exclusively, through strong heroic deeds. Yes, Odysseus is more sensitive to his son’s loss, but he remains a father who exemplifies “masculine strength,” a strength that oftentimes evades the common man. Thus, as sons enter their more mature years, they learn that their father’s heroic strength often belied their inner brokenness, which leaves them the task of reworking the introjected image of an idealized father, the phallic paternal figure. Osherson writes, “[n]aming your father—coming to terms with who he really is, stripped of the distortions of childhood—is a key to every man’s ability to allow a richer identity to emerge as he ages.”<sup>124</sup>

Developmental theorists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts have suggested that in order for the father to be rewoven into the tapestry of the home, he must reorient—and, if needed, forswear—his heroic persona. He can no longer be driven to obtain the “Big Impossible” out in the world, but must be content, instead, with tending to the simple albeit important tasks of being a viable companion to both his wife and children. After doing extensive research of the maturation of boys in diverse cultures, anthropologist David Gilmore, quoted in Frank Pittman’s *Man Enough*, discovered that the “Big Impossible” is, in essence, the journey to become a real man. Gilmore shares that “[m]anhood is a kind of male procreation; its heroic quality lies in its

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, 21.

self-direction and discipline, its absolute self-reliance.”<sup>125</sup> Such a stance is the reason that fathers are constantly torn between being a presence in the home and seeking to affirm (and reaffirm) their manhood in the world. Sociologists have taken note of this in their research, finding that, on the one hand, fathers do desire to become more involved in the home (attempting to re-establish those familial bonds) but, on the other, are still captivated by a life of manly adventure in the world. David Popenoe’s *Life Without Father* examines this paradox.

As a sociologist, Popenoe’s analysis, unlike that of, say, Diamond, seeks to underscore not only the psychological impact of father loss but the socioeconomic implications as well. It is his belief that fatherlessness is the primary reason behind what he calls “attention grabbing issues” or, put another way, the social ills of our day. Popenoe states:

Father absence is a major force lying behind...[c]rime and delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock teen births; deteriorating educational achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among teenagers; and the growing number of women and children in poverty. These issues all point to a profound deterioration in the well-being of children.<sup>126</sup>

If it is known that their absence has such deleterious effects on their children, why, then, are fathers not staying in the home? For Popenoe, there was a shift around 1960 to 1990 during which the rate of absent fathers doubled from 17% to 36% percent; also there was a significant change in men’s self-definition from the breadwinner-protector model (familial) to one that embraced an unfettered individualism (non-familial).<sup>127</sup> Unattached, self-reliant, narcissistic, the modern man is unable to form the kinds of bonds that are nourishing neither to his own selfhood

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<sup>125</sup> Frank Pittman, *Man Enough: Fathers, Sons, and the Search for Masculinity* (New York: Perigee Books, 1993), xiv.

<sup>126</sup> David Peponoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: Martin Kessler Books, 1996), 3.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

nor to that of his children, particularly his sons. Using the empirical data provided by a number of social scientists, Popenoe augments his claim of the damaging effects of father absence.

Children who grow up with one of their biological parents (nearly always the mother) are disadvantaged across a broad array of outcomes...they are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, and 1.4 times as likely to be idle—out of school and out of work—as children who grow up with both parents.

He later adds that

[l]oss of economic resources [due to one-parent household] accounts for about 50 percent of the disadvantages associated with single parent parenthood. Too little parental supervision and involvement and greater residential mobility account for most of the rest.

We have a brief synopsis here of the sociological detriments caused by a father's absence.

Popenoe is convinced that the greatest threat to a stable social environment is the unattached male for whom family life has become, not a part of the maturation process, but an albatross to his individuality.

While there are some sociologists who, like Popenoe, have attempted to demonstrate the socio-economic and psychological effects of the absent father, others, primarily social and developmental psychologists, have fashioned instruments to test the actual involvement of fathers who, although present in the home, may still be doing great harm to their children because of their *emotional* absence. Michael E. Lamb, a social and developmental psychologist, has divided parental involvement into three primary areas: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. First, engagement assesses the time a father spends in actual one-one-one interaction; second, accessibility is an account of the degree to which the father is physically and emotionally accessible to the child; and, third, responsibility examines “the extent to which the parent takes ultimate responsibility for the child's welfare and care.”<sup>128</sup> Using these categories,

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<sup>128</sup> Michael Lamb, “The History of Research on Father Involvement,” *Marriage and Family Review* 29 (2000): 23-32.

Lamb and his colleagues discovered that, surprisingly, “the average father spends about 20% to 25% as much time as the mother in direct interaction or engagement with his children, and about a third as much time being accessible to his children.”<sup>129</sup> However, when it came to being responsible—which includes activities such as knowing when the child needs to see the pediatrician or making child-care and baby-sitting arrangements—studies showed that “fathers showed essentially no responsibility.”<sup>130</sup> Though such data is instructive as to the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, it remains terribly difficult, as Lamb contends, to quantify the qualitative nature of this involvement. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, many researchers have tried to do so.

After finding “that 48% of the research publications examined the specific influence of mothers, whereas only 1% examined the specific influence of fathers,” Copenhaver and Eisler sought to remedy this scholarly inequity by contributing their Attitudes Towards Father Scale (ATFS). The results of the study, which included 195 participants, 89% of which were white,<sup>131</sup> led the researchers to believe that “a poor father-child relationship was significantly associated with general adjustment problems as well as with specific types of behavioral problems, including phobias, alcoholism, and gender stress in men.”<sup>132</sup> Soon after, Hawkins, et al., developed the Inventory of Father Involvement (IFI) to observe the multidimensional aspects of father involvement. These researchers wanted to move away from defining father involvement,

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> I am mentioning the race of the participants to reflect that these studies all help to reinforce the notion of a white-male focused model of fatherhood.

<sup>132</sup> Michael M. Copenhaver and Richard M. Eisler, “The Development and Validation of the Attitude Toward Father Scale: A Tool for Assessing the Father’s Role in Children’s Behavior Problems,” *Behavior Modification* 24 (2000): 740-750.

exclusively, as the time a father spends with his child in one-one-one interaction. They contend that father involvement “is a multidimensional construct that includes affective, cognitive, and ethical components...that includes indirect forms of involvement (e.g., providing, supporting mother).”<sup>133</sup>

Hawkins, et al., using a much larger sample than Copenhaver and Eisler, had 723 fathers answer a seven-page survey. The participants were between the ages of 22-59, and 91% were white. Each participant was asked to give himself a letter grade—the A thru F scale—in response to a number of questions, which included:

- Bringing up your children
- Providing for your children’s basic needs
- Providing moral guidance to your child
- Spending time with your children doing things they like to do
- Telling your child that you love them
- Knowing where your children go and what they do with their friends
- Setting roles and limits for your children’s behavior (Setting Limits)<sup>134</sup>

What the researchers found interesting was the ways in which the fathers were able to judge themselves according to an inter-involvement perspective, meaning that their involvement in one area did not necessarily lead them to believe they were being derelict in another. For example, one father gave himself high marks on the scale even though he was not as involved as he wished to be in his child’s school life. For this father, the long hours he needed to work hindered him from such participation, but he did view his role as a provider (i.e., indirect care) as an indication of his involvement. Hence, as advertised, the scale allows these fathers to assess their fathering

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<sup>133</sup>Alan J. Hawkins, Kay P. Bradford, Rob Palkovitz, and Shawn L. Christiansen, “The Inventory of Father Involvement: A Pilot Study of a New Measure in Father Involvement” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 10 (Winter 2002): 183-196.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 187

in a multidimensional manner, which allows them to see themselves as successful fathers in a variety of ways.

In his article “The Fatherhood Scale,” Gary L. Dick provides an instrument to evaluate better the father-son relationship during a man’s formative years. Dick sees two trends that are becoming more prevalent in the United States: “The first is the increasing number of children who will grow up without a father present in their lives, yet the second trend shows an increasing number of men who desire to be more actively involved fathers.”<sup>135</sup> The paradox continues. This unstable matrix—more involved verses more absent—within which modern fatherhood is now being evaluated has changed the expectations (or the perspective) regarding fatherhood, though the changes in “real-life” fatherhood practices have been much slower. Dick acknowledges the contributions made by Copenhaver and Eisler (i.e., ATFS scale) and Hawkins, et al. (i.e., IFI scale) but he is still of the belief that, because father involvement is changing, “it is important for social workers to have an instrument with which to measure paternal involvement.”<sup>136</sup> Dick, unlike the aforementioned researchers, is more sensitive to the various contexts within which fatherhood takes place. For certain, there are, as he suggests, “cultural and historical contexts; that there is a great diversity in how men carry out their role as a father” that greatly influence how men perceive and then perform their roles as fathers.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, rather than a mechanistic role, fatherhood is a dynamic, an ever-evolving process. However, each of these roles, no matter how diverse, demands that the father remain emotionally responsive to the child. In order to assess the father’s emotional responsiveness to his son, Dick employs the principles of self-

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<sup>135</sup> Gary L. Dick, “The Fatherhood Scale” *Research on Social Work Practices*, 14 (Spring 2004): 80-92.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

psychology, particularly the work of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, as the theoretical lynchpin of his fatherhood scale. By this, one can better evaluate the way in which the father's emotional involvement is helping to shape the child's psychological self-structure.<sup>138</sup> It is important to note that the fatherhood scale (FS) was not a measurement of the real relationship between a father and his child—rather, it is an assessment of the “*perceptions* of their relationships (emphasis added).”<sup>139</sup> This is the case because the interviewed sons were all in their adult years, an average age of 34, meaning that much of the information gathered during study was based on recollections or, better still, memories of their childhood father-son experience. Hence, the FS brings to light the internal sense that many men have of being emotionally disconnected from their fathers, although these fathers may have been physically present in their sons' lives.

The focus on the psychocultural image of the father moves us from the proper acts of the father in the sociopolitical sphere to the speculative valorization of fatherhood. “What is that men think, philosophically and psychologically, about their fathers and fatherhood?” is a question that will be addressed in the following chapter. It seems that the sluggish pace to achieve many of the agendas put forth by the “new fatherhood” movement is due, in large measure, to the inability of many men to renew their minds, so to speak, not just about the role of the fatherhood per se, but even more important, the rightful place of the father in the orbit of manhood. The conflation of manhood with patriarchy is all too problematic. For one, many men are overcome with shame when they are interpreted, by themselves and others, to have not measured up to the lofty ideals of patriarchal manhood. This is especially so, as we shall see later on, for black men whose “Being-in” fails to comport with the normative modes—or “facticity”—

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

of this unilateral manhood. That is, in Heidegger's phenomenology, that Being-in or Dasein has a facticity that is interpreted due to certain roles determined by its encountering other entities within its world.<sup>140</sup> Heidegger explains:

Dasein understands itself proximally and for the most part in terms of its world; and the Dasein-with of Others is often encountered in terms of what is ready-to-hand within-the-world, But even if Others become themes for study, as it were, in their own Dasein, they are not encountered as person-Things present at-hand: we meet them 'at work', that is, primarily in their Being-in-the-world. Even if we see the Other 'just standing around', he is never apprehended as a human-Thing present at hand, but his 'standing-around' is an existential mode of being...<sup>141</sup>

Attention must be paid to the way Heidegger uses "work" not in the sense of labor, but rather the way in which Dasein (or Being-in) connotes the way we interact with other entities in-the-world, such a mode of being is the hermeneutical data used to determine our Being-in relation to the Other. Such a perspective is educative in that it points to the way in which our Dasein is not all together subjectivist (individualist *in toto*) but is acquired through socially guided, dialogically constructed—furtively *other*-laden— self-identities. Philosopher Hubert L. Dreyfus does an admirable job explicating this, when he says,

Not only is Dasein's activity conditioned by cultural interpretation's of facts about its body, such as being male or female, but since Dasein must define itself in terms of *social roles* that require certain activities, and since its roles require certain equipment, Dasein is at the mercy of factual events and objects in its environment (emphasis added).<sup>142</sup>

Hence, a revolution in our manhood self-consciousness must begin by examining, as the next chapter attempts to do, the ontogenesis of the speculative overvaluation of the patriarchal

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<sup>140</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 82.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>142</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1991), 44.



manhood, per the next chapter, that has created the back-drop, or the social roles, if you will, against which black manhood is interpreted, which is done in the third chapter. We can then better understand what it means for the black man to feel himself an “I” located within a particular sociocultural field. Booker T. Washington may have had an insight to this, when he pondered,

*I was born on a slave plantation...I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at sometime (emphasis added).*<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1999), 3.

CHAPTER TWO  
SHAME AND ITS SONS

Eventually a man needs to throw of all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what is masculinity.

—Robert Bly, *Iron John*

## The Night I saw the Son

*Waaah! Waaaaaaah! Woosaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*

“Come on, Jay, get up...It’s your turn to—” shouted my wife from what was once *our* bedroom. Little did she know that I was already wide awake, unable to sleep because of the cacophony of shrill cries that emanated the edentulous mouth of our newborn son, Ellinton. If memory serves, we had just finished celebrating his first week of life earlier that night—these are the small celebratory acts that new parents often do to offset the stresses of new parenthood—and it seemed that our rather exciting jamboree had just enough action to tire out our new bundle of joy. “He should get a *good* night’s sleep,” we thought. If nothing else, we were worn-out. I had spent the prior week hustling back and forth from the hospital to our apartment, from our apartment to Babies “R” Us, from Babies “R” Us to the supermarket, from the supermarket to who knows where else, left me in a daze. “But who was I to complain?” asked my shoulder angel, rebuking my selfishness. It was, I had to admit, a valid point: in truth, had I suffered any *real* pain? My wife had endured far more over the prior nine months, not the least of which was the birth itself, a caesarian section no less, an unnerving surgical procedure that to my mind resembles some form of Visigoth torture. With her prior travails in mind, I had no choice but to respond in haste when she summoned me to investigate what was causing Ellinton so much angst. And so I slowly rose from our sofa (which had become my new place of rest) and began toddling towards *their* bedroom.

Upon entering the room, I immediately smelled the reason for this early-morning call to arms: Yes, as you have probably already figured out, little Ellinton had done *numero dos*. “Ah s—t!” I thought to myself, being cognizant of the fact that, despite some basic training, I was not yet proficient at changing soiled diapers. To be honest, these cleaning missions made me a bit

neurotic. I had a smock to protect my clothes, a pair of latex gloves to protect my hands, and a sturdy plastic bag into which I could quickly dispose of the noxious diaper. And then there was the cleaning itself: a box of baby wipes to remove the excrement, an abundance of baby powder to protect against moisture (We don't want the young lad to get a rash!), and, of no less importance, the careful application of Vaseline to help heal his circumcised *membrum virile*. After the successful completion of my mission, I took off my cleaning uniform and then began humming (because I had long forgotten the words) some bedtime tunes that I hoped would return Ellinton to the Land of Nod. However, my efforts to soothe him failed. "What's wrong, little guy?" I asked, but his only reply was an all too familiar response: *Woooooooooooooooooah!*

It was now nearing 12 a.m., and I feared there was a strong chance that, given a newborn's discordant sleeping patterns, he could either go to sleep in five minutes or remain awake until dawn. At present it is hard for me to recall how many songs I hummed or how many times I asked "What's wrong?" before he ceased his weeping. But what I will never forget, what will forever remain etched in my mind, is that when I finally realized that he attained some measure of repose, I looked down to see his refulgent eyes breaking through the early morning darkness. He was looking *at* something—but what?

Ellinton's gaze was intense. For certain, there was something in the room that I had failed to consider. Anxious, I turned my eyes to quickly survey our surroundings to make sure that the area was free of any unwelcomed visitors. The apartment was, as I recall, in a heavily wooded area, meaning that every now and then a reasonably large woodland insect would make its way indoors. But no such intruder could be found. What then of the pictures on the wall? The wall in his immediate field of vision was adorned with a number of family photos, some of which showed the now familiar visage of his mother. But his eyes were not honed in on any of these.

My consternation could no longer suffer these puerile attempts at a resolution. It was time, finally, to face an unsettling truth: Ellinton was looking at me.

As time passed on, and the intensity of Ellinton's stare persisted, I began to reformulate the prepositional focus of my inquiry: Hence "What is he looking *at*?" became "What is he looking *for*?"<sup>144</sup> And if the latter proved more precise, that is, if he was in fact looking for something from me, did I have what he was looking for?

This chapter considers the psychological trauma that many fathers experience when they cannot answer such a question in the affirmative. In truth, much of the angst concerning our manhood status, via fatherhood, has been due to the de-centering of patriarchal authority in a host of disciplines, ranging from philosophy to psychology. For example, the Copernican Revolution, although interpreted as being singularly concerned with cosmology, was also very much concerned with reorienting the way man viewed himself, his place in the universe, socio-politically and so on. The privileged place of patriarchal authority was no longer considered the mandate of nature. Because of this, the patriarchal authority was not a given—rather it had to be earned, recognized, and retested, over and over again by another person, the other. The *con-polarity* of the fathers own beingness and that of the father-son dyad itself, then, pulls the father into an ontological matrix wherein he must reconsider what it is within his *Self* that has drawn the attention of the inquisitive neophyte. *Could it be the son is attempting to connect with the very discontinuity and inconsistency—the sonship—that the father has tried to overcome?* But many a father is not yet ready for such a revolutionary contemplation. "Manhood, yes, manhood" this is the commonplace answer to what a son looks for in a father. But it is because fatherhood has been conflated with manhood that many fathers never teach their sons the value of a

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<sup>144</sup> For clarification, it is worth noting that one of the definitions given for the preposition "at" is that it is "used to indicate direction, goal, or objective (e.g., look at that...); whereas in the case of the preposition "for" one of the prevailing definitions states that it is "used in order to obtain, gain, or acquire." (Dictionary.com)

manhood grounded in sonship. Furthermore, if the father never fully develops his own sonship self-consciousness, he will indeed feel shame whenever he fails in his patriarchal duties, that is, at those times when he is not in control (or dominant), which is bound to be the case. In truth, I myself had wrestled with the concept of manhood for most of my life, not being able to reconcile the con-polarity of my own manhood, as have so many other men. I readily admit that I was still clinging to a patriarchal manhood, but it was a manhood that I had not attained. Fatherhood, then, more than anything else, makes a man aware of his limitations as a man. Oh, the shame.

### **The Psychopathology of Everyday Fatherhood**

In my diligent research for reliable sources, I came across a book titled *The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips, and Advice for Dads-To-Be*, written by self-designated fatherhood expert Armin A. Brott. The introductory section of the book begins with Brott's confessing that he, too, had experienced some anxiety about being a new father, noting that both he and his wife were ill-prepared for the many unforeseen challenges of parenthood. What I found most comforting about these introductory remarks was Brott's mentioning that there were few books, if any, that addressed the emotional tumult that many men feel in the months leading up to the birth of a child. He states that "until recently there had been precious little research on expectant fathers' emotional and psychological experiences..."<sup>145</sup> The recent upsurge in attention paid to fathering within the academy is the thesis of the essay "Trends in Academic Attention to Fathers, 1930-2006," in which Goldberg, Tan, and Thorsen underscore that academic publications—i.e., journals and the like—have increased the attention given to the many issues that concern fathers and fathering. The authors' state,

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<sup>145</sup> Armin A. Brott and Jennifer Ash, *Expectant Father: Facts, Tips and Advice for Dads-to-Be* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 12.

The last two decades of the twentieth century have been distinguished by the amount of attention from social scientists and policymakers to the roles that fathers play in the lives of their children.

They also add,

Fatherhood has been studied not only in relation to the parenting of minor children but also in terms of its place in men's own development and relations with others. *Studies and reviews of literature have examined the impact of the transition to fatherhood on men's psychological well-being, social connections, family relations, and work...the effect of multiple roles in relation to men's psychological distress...These studies reveal a wide range of ways that being a father influences men's well-being and their relationships with family members and others in their lives (emphasis added).*<sup>146</sup>

Blott is to be commended for bringing to the fore the emotional fatigue that is associated with “expectant” fatherhood; however, as the Goldberg, et al., article indicates, many theorists are now beginning to focus on the effects of these stressors on the father's own development, post-partum. One of the earliest academic investigations on the effects of fathering on the male psyche was done by psychiatrist William H. Wainwright. In his article “Fatherhood as a Precipitant of Mental Illness,” published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, he made the unsettling observation that “[p]sychopathological reactions to fatherhood probably occur with more frequency than is commonly recognized.”<sup>147</sup> I now had evidence that what I was feeling was in no way bizarre but, instead, far more common than I realized. Wainwright also mentions that there was something unique about the birth of a son that creates a psychological imbalance within a father; he remarks, “the birth of a boy triggered a more serious reaction with suicidal and homicidal overtones.”<sup>148</sup> Suicidal and homicidal overtones? When such moribund language

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<sup>146</sup> Wendy A. Goldberg, Edwin T. Tan, and Kara L. Thorsen, “Trends in Academic Attention to Fathers, 1930-2006” *Fathering* 7 (Spring 2009): 159-179.

<sup>147</sup> William H. Wainwright, “Fatherhood as a Precipitant of Mental Illness,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 123 (Summer 1966): 40-44.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

is used to describe a father's affective mood towards his son, one cannot help but be reminded of Sophocles' *Three Theban Plays*, wherein the filicidal King Laius is often overshadowed by the patricidal Oedipus Rex. From the seminal writings of Sigmund Freud to the more recent reflections of psychoanalyst John Munder Ross,<sup>149</sup> psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners have often focused their attention on the reserve of negative affect that existed between Laius, the father, and Oedipus, the son, as depicted in Sophocles' second play, *Oedipus the King*. But it is *Oedipus at Colonus*, the third Theban play that tells of Oedipus's interactions with his own sons, wherein one sees those "homicidal and suicidal overtones" that Wainwright highlighted. In one particularly poignant scene, Oedipus feels betrayed by his sons, Polynices and Eteolcles, believing they were indifferent to his suffering in Thebes.<sup>150</sup> Listen to Oedipus's lamentation:

When I, their own father, was drummed off native ground, disgraced, they didn't lift a finger, didn't defend me, no, they just looked on, they watched me driven from home, they heard the heralds call my sentence—exile!<sup>151</sup>

For this, judged as an act of filial impiety, Oedipus would have the much-feared Furies, the ferocious goddesses of paternal retribution, mete out the proper punishment to his sons.<sup>152</sup> Few fathers, if any, will have to deal with the pain of filial betrayal, abandonment, like that of an Oedipus. And yet, the emotional and psychological undertones of the play, which depict Oedipus wrestling with filicidal impulses, are germane to the psychological struggles of the modern day father. Without designating it as such, Wainwright's use of the words "homicidal" and

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<sup>149</sup> See Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and John Munder Ross's *What Men Want*.

<sup>150</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 309.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.



“suicidal” denote a condition that reaches beyond the psychological parameters of fatherhood to a bigger problem facing many men in our current sociocultural milieu: hopelessness. Wainwright’s observations inspired me to explore further if we men, as fathers, truly have what our sons are looking for; do we have a hope-full manhood to pass on. Psychoanalyst Melvin R. Lansky mentions that fathers who have failed to pass on a more salubrious manhood to their children, perpetuate a cycle of hopelessness, and, by extension, “complain of ‘voices’ of suicidality.”<sup>153</sup>

I will soon move on from Wainwright’s informative article, but before doing so, it is worth mentioning his taxonomy of a father’s psychological stressors.

1. THE CHILD MEANS ADDED RESPONSIBILITY TO THE FATHER.
2. THE BIRTH OF A MALE CHILD PRESENTS THE FATHER WITH THE THREATENING POSSIBILITY OF A LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH A DEPENDENT MALE.
3. THE NEW CHILD DIVERTS ATTENTION OF ITS MOTHER AWAY FROM THE DEPENDENT FATHER, WHO MAY REACH CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY BY INTENSE JEALOUSY OF THE CHILD.
4. THE REACTION OF THE MOTHER TO THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD MAY BE SO SEVERE AS TO UPSET A PREVIOUS HOMEOSTASIS IN THE HUSBAND-WIFE INTERRELATIONSHIP.
5. IN THE EXPERIENCE OF BECOMING A FATHER HIMSELF, THE INDIVIDUAL MAY BECOME INTENSELY AWARE OF HIS UNACCEPTABLE AMBIVALENT FEELINGS TOWARD HIS OWN PARENTS.
6. A HISTORY OF HEREDITARY DISEASE OF DEFECTS IN EITHER SIDE OF THE FAMILY LEADS TO A FEAR THAT THE NEWBORN CHILD WILL BE SIMILARLY AFFECTED.<sup>154</sup>

Though each classification points to an issue that, undoubtedly, reinforces the kind of negative affect that Wainwright mentions in the earlier part of his article, it is the sixth entry that, to my mind, highlights the fear that sparks the “suicidal” and “homicidal” reactions within a father. Let me explain: The fact that a father would be alarmed by the possibility of a hereditary “physical” disease being passed on to a child is indisputable—for instance, a family history of cancer, heart disease, or some physiological malady would certainly be cause for alarm. These overt diseases, however, though pernicious in their own right, are more readily observable than the maladies of

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<sup>153</sup> Melvin R. Lansky, *Fathers Who Fail: Shame and Psychopathology in the Family System* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1992), 8.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

the soul that are passed on from one generation to the next. This is why I find the words “suicide” and “homicide” to be suitable descriptors of a father’s reaction to a son whom he cannot protect because certain “psychological distresses,” to use Wainwright’s apt term, are not only ontogenetic but phylogenetic and sociogenetic to boot. *Is this not the challenge for the black father, for example, who must contend with the effects of race and racism on his ability to teach his sons the many doctrines and creeds of normative manhood?* A manhood that his son is not meant to attain. In *Black Skin White Masks*, the esteemed Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Franz Fanon makes an instructive assertion about the broken condition of the black man: “At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers,” Fanon insists, “I will say that the black man is not a man.”<sup>155</sup> Much of *Black Skin* is constructed with Freudian psychoanalytic and Hegelian phenomenological undertones, which speak to the unconscious (introjected) objects that color one’s self-realization and the dialectical interpersonal, interracial dyads that are needed for human flourishing. But when examined in its most distilled form, Fanon’s thesis can be summarized by two inquiries of man as a desiring subject:

“What does a man want?”

“What does a black man want?”<sup>156</sup>

### **Patriarchal Power and Mimetic Desire**

Rife with maddening conflicts and laden with unattainable expectations, the task of being a man is in and of itself an unmanly endeavor. These challenges were not lost on the ancients. They, too, were filled with anxiety about their manly deportment, and so men gifted with

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<sup>155</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (1952; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

perspicacity—most noticeably, the philosophers: the enlightened ones—crafted a blueprint of what characteristics constitute an authentic manhood. Such men were to be the exemplars of civility, the *ipso facto* heads of society. To this end, Western philosophy, from its inception, with its musings about the formation of a civilized, well-ordered society, was very much concerned not just with the ideation but also the concretization of a sovran manhood.

In *Politics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle writes of a manhood that would guide the polis, the Greek city-state in a patriarchal manner. On the macro-level, the city-state, the *pater patriae* (i.e., father of the fatherland) was the man who best evinced this supernal authority. On the micro-level, the household, this air of supremacy was the sole right of *paterfamilias* (i.e., the male head of the household). According to Aristotle's explication of the structure of the family within the *polis*, this micro-state within the state had three parts: the rule of the masters over the slaves, the rule of a father, and the rule of a husband.<sup>157</sup> From this we have textual evidence that Aristotle, along with other philosophers of old, tied the overall health of the state (the polis) to the rule of male leader, the patriarch, over his fellow man, his children, and his wife. Aristotle's unabashed defense of this notion is best expressed when he says,

A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rules differ, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature. But in most constitutional states the citizens rule and are ruled by turns, for the idea of a constitutional state implies that the natures of the citizens are equal, and do not differ at all. Nevertheless, when one rules and the other is ruled we endeavor to create a difference of outward forms and names and titles of respect...The relation of the male to the female is of this kind, but there the inequality is permanent. *The rule of a father over his children is royal, for he rules by virtue both*

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<sup>157</sup> Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1143.

*of love and of the respect to age, exercising a kind of royal power...such is the relation of elder and younger, of father and son (emphasis added).*<sup>158</sup>

This ethos of domination was passed down through the ages, leaving many men consumed by the desire for power. But there is, as one would expect, a great deal of danger when one's desire is satiated at the expense of another desiring subject.

Rene Girard, the noted literary critic and philosopher, brings our attention back to the story of Oedipus Rex to explicate the way in which the desiring subject recapitulates the desire of the dominant other. Girard terms this phenomenon "mimetic desire," meaning that as two individuals, say, a father and son, are drawn libidinally to the same object, per Freud's Oedipus complex, conflict is bound to arise, and this conflict then leads to violence.<sup>159</sup> Because the father-son dyad, as so aptly described by Aristotle, is inequitable by nature one can easily deduce that the son, even from a young age, becomes affixed on the father's superior status as the means by which he can overcome his subservience. This broadens the limited interpretation of the Freudian oedipal rivalry in that the son's desire is not just for the mother but to be the father ontically by taking "over the things that *belong* to the father (emphasis added)"<sup>160</sup>—such as his authority.<sup>161</sup> But rather than an apprenticeship, whereby the father would instruct his son in the ways of manhood, a rivalry ensues as the son must overthrow the father in order to procure his position of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 169.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>161</sup> Girard notes that he is taking care not to "put words" in Freud's mouth by bifurcating the son's desire "to be" like the father from the son's libidinal cathexis for the mother. The desire for the mother is a secondary process that reinforces his first-order desire to obtain the father's "things." Girard explain, "[a]fter identification with the father comes sexual cathexis toward the mother...These two forces act together and reinforce one another" (*Violence and the Sacred*, 171). Above all, the mother is included in the father's desiring orbit, so to speak, and therefore becomes an object of desire for the son. Girard is resolute in establishing the root of the son's mimetic desire as being his learning what to desire exclusively through his primary identification with the father.

superiority. Girard provides some clarification on the matter, when he says, “[i]n all the varieties of desire examined by us, we have encountered not only a subject and an object but a third presence as well: the rival.” The son, the desiring subject, is instructed by the father, the rival, as to what object(s)—i.e., his place of power—hold value in the economy of manhood; which is why Girard states that “the model, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regards to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.”<sup>162</sup> Hence, the denouement: “Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash.”<sup>163</sup> As was discussed earlier, Oedipus pronounces a curse on his sons only when he feels that they failed to assist him when his position of authority was threatened; it was, remember, their indifference to his plight that led him to his low status as a “beggar, an outcast, [and a] fugitive forever.”<sup>164</sup> *But should we be surprised?* If Girard is correct in his observation, and I believe he is, then Eteocles and Polynices, Oedipus’s sons, had to expel the rival from Colonus in order to obtain the valued object: patriarchal authority.<sup>165</sup> The Oedipus complex, then, is but the sons first taste of mimetic desideratum, namely, “I want the mother because the father wants the mother,” but this by no means satiates the son’s longing. Rather, the son, throughout the life-cycle, continues to seek after the “things” that fall under the father’s authority, such as one day having his own family (a micro-state) over which he can rule.

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<sup>162</sup> Girard, *Sacred and Violence*, 145

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 146

<sup>164</sup> Sophocles, *op.cit.*, 309.

<sup>165</sup> It is interesting that in his discussions on religion in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud discusses mimetic desire exclusively in terms of the desire for the father’s power, not in terms of the son’s desire for the mother. His most germane comment on this is found in his saying about totemism, “[n]o one was allowed to attain the father’s perfection or power, which was the thing they [the sons] had all sought. Thus the bitter feeling against the father which had incited to the deed could subside in the course of time, while the longing for him grew, and an ideal could arise having as a content the fullness of power and the freedom from restriction of the conquered primal father.” [*Totem and Taboo* in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 888-889.]

The desire to be power-full is the *sine qua non* of Westernized manhood. However, this does not have to be so. We have examples of many revolutions wherein the unquestioned and immovable authority of father had been challenged (one must keep in mind that for Girard the father is not determined by parentage but can connote those persons whom society designates as having patriarchal status). The Copernican Revolution is a case in point in that it challenged Aristotle's hypothesis not just of a man-centered (patriarchal) state but a man-centered (dare I say, patriarchal) universe. Copernicus, as Thomas Kuhn explains, led a revolt to de-center patriarchal authority by positing a sun-centered (or, as I like to think of it, *son*-centered) universe.

### **Cosmological Revolutions and a De-centered Patriarchy**

The speculative philosophical origin of the patriarchal polis can be found, as the foregoing section demonstrates, in the sociopolitical treatises of Aristotle. There is, however, another branch of epistemology that served to augment Aristotle's belief in a man- (or patriarchally-) centered universe: cosmology. Aristotle was a true polymath. His intellectual curiosity and his ability to absorb a diverse range of topics, including but not limited to physics, music, linguistics, zoology...provided him with a wealth of data, speculative and empirical, to argue rather convincingly that man was not only the center of the household and the state—but of the universe. Just as he had theorized that it was in man's nature (or *physis*) to lord over his household, so too he developed a cosmological schema to prove that it had been decreed by nature that the earth (i.e., man's planetary home) be the center of the universe. The language used to defend his theses concerning man's rightful place in the polis and the universe is almost identical. In *Politics* he states, "the male is by *nature* fitter for command than the female, just as

the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature (emphasis added).<sup>166</sup> Whereas in *On the Heavens*, his treatise on cosmology, he likewise argues, “the explanation of the earth’s immobility is also apparent...[i]t is the *nature* of earth, as observation shows, to move from any point to the centre” (emphasis added).<sup>167</sup> But he goes on to substantiate his claim by stating that the earth is in the center because there is “no force greater than itself to move it.”<sup>168</sup> Hence, like the patriarch in the *paterfamilias*, the earth cannot be moved from its position of authority, the center of the universe, because of its inherent supremacy, its immovability. Though, today, one would be roundly excoriated for upholding even the faintest belief in an earth-centered universe, it is apparent that men remain credulous in their faith in the equally misproven theories that propound the notion of a patriarchal-centered social structure.

The assertion of an earth-centered universe was challenged by many during Aristotle’s time, and he makes mention of such opponents in his own writings. The Pythagoreans, for example, held the view that a central fire was at the centre and, therefore, that the earth was just one of many mobile stars.<sup>169</sup> Aristotle, along with his philosophical and cosmological progeny refuted such claims on the basis that it was, indeed, the earth’s natural state to be drawn to the center and to be immovable. The immovability of the earth’s centered position gave rise to the conviction of the patriarch’s superior stature; this is, I believe, a move that contributes to a narcissism that is dangerous to intra-and interpersonal relationality. *Patriarchal entropy* is a neologism I have constructed that aptly describes the way in which a manhood that is fixed at the

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<sup>166</sup> McKeon, *op. cit.*, 1143.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 434-435.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

center—that is, a manhood that is unwilling to yield its position of authority—decays into a state of “inert uniformity.”<sup>170</sup> Manhood, then, in this entropic state, cannot meet the challenges of the times; it remains fixed in a state of inertia—the same manhood, patriarchal, over and over again.

The noted physicist and historian Thomas Kuhn has it that as Western Civilization underwent a revolution in its thinking about an earth-centered universe, an axiological shift occurred that forever changed not only cosmology but philosophy and theology as well. For Kuhn, the chief enunciator of this shift was the Renaissance mathematician and philosopher Nicolaus Copernicus. However, the Copernican Revolution is but one instance in a long line of scientific revolutions that have challenged man’s conceptions of his place in the universe.

Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* is a well-crafted analysis of the ways in which scientific crises lead to “fundamental paradigm shifts” in scientific theory.<sup>171</sup> Scientific revolutions, like those initiated by, say, Einstein and Newton, are the result of an anomaly in a previously held system of scientific belief. As noted above, paradigm is the nomenclature used by Kuhn to describe these scientific models that are, as he notes, “recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.”<sup>172</sup> The inherent problem within the paradigm is that, in order for it to hold its valence, it must be open to the possibility of an anomaly. In response to the anomaly or, as Kuhn put it, the “violation of expectation,” the paradigm must be pliable enough to allow for a shift in perspective and praxis that addresses the crisis (or crises) that has been caused by said

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<sup>170</sup> The germane definition that Merriam-Webster gives for entropy is “the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity.

<sup>171</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 89.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, x.



anomaly.<sup>173</sup> Kuhn is careful to underscore that, even when paradigms change, the new paradigm still makes use of “a great deal of the most concrete parts of past achievement.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, new paradigms are not created *ex nihilo*. Rather, it was sired by a previous paradigm that was apropos to a specific socio-historical milieu. For this reason, Kuhn believes that it is the task of the scientific historian to explain a former paradigm’s value to a current community of practitioners by placing it within its socio-historical location. Kuhn explains:

Rather than seeking the permanent contributions of an older science to our present vantage, they attempt to display the historical integrity of that science in its own time. They ask, for example, not about the relation of Galileo’s views to those of modern science, but rather about the relationship between his views and those of his group...Furthermore, they insist upon studying the opinions of that group and other similar ones from the viewpoint—usually very different from that of modern science—that gives those opinions the maximum internal coherence and the closest possible fit to nature.<sup>175</sup>

The paradigms of the past were applicable to the exigencies of a specific socio-cultural environment, and were constructed in accordance with, as Kuhn states, “the opinion of that group.”<sup>176</sup> Underlying the opinions that form the prevailing paradigms is an array of philosophical and theological tenets that are used to construct the group’s reality. But I believe that the scientific historian *qua* historian reports on not just the opinions of a group, but sheds light on the group’s consciousness. Social historian Marc Bloch best articulated the historian’s investigative ethos when he says that “it is human consciousness which is the subject matter of history. The interrelations, confusions, and infections of human consciousness are, for history,

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

reality itself.”<sup>177</sup> Though he mentions the historian’s interest in the “secret needs of the heart,” Bloch was convinced that the historian need only concern herself with an exploration of man’s consciousness, that is, surface awareness. But, as Kuhn argues, paradigm shifts are not simply about man’s scientific nature but with the beingness or essence, the hidden things of his existence. Such is the case when Kuhn analyzes the Copernican Revolution.

Copernicus’s theory of a sun-centered universe is often overlooked as a pivotal turning point in Western thought. Many are aware of reformers like Martin Luther and Karl Marx; scientific theorists like Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton; or even the ancients who laid the groundwork for our democracy like Plato and the abovementioned Aristotle. And yet there is something unique about the paradigm shift brought about by Copernicus’ cosmological theorizations. Kuhn, in his book *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*, begins by stating that “[t]he Copernican Revolution was a revolution in ideas, a transformation in man’s conception of the universe and of his own relation to it.”<sup>178</sup> As a scientific historian, Kuhn carefully places the import of Copernicus’ theory within its historical context. Crafted during the Renaissance period (14<sup>th</sup> thru 17<sup>th</sup> century), Copernicus’ tome *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Sphere* was representative of the cultural *zeitgeist*, a time “when rapid changes in political, economic, and intellectual life were preparing the basis of modern European and early-American civilization.”<sup>179</sup> As noted earlier, Aristotle was indefatigable in his defense of an earth-centered universe, which was a central philosophical

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<sup>177</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historians Craft: Reflections on the Nature and Uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of those Who Write It* (New York: Vintage Press, 1964), 151.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

tenet in his espousal of a patriarchal-centered polis. Aristotle's ideas remained popular within the Renaissance's scientific and philosophical community, even to the point that many still held the view that it was unreasonable to argue against the scientifically-proven fact of an earth-centered universe. Kuhn shares,

Aristotle, the greatest philosopher-scientist of antiquity, had declared the earth as immobile, and his word was taken with immense seriousness, for many of whom he became "the Philosopher," the first authority on all questions of science and cosmology.<sup>180</sup>

As the father of logic, so to speak, Aristotle's words had become authoritative on man's place in the universe. It was, therefore, inconceivable for an Aristotelian to harbor thoughts of the earth losing its status because such reasoning could subsequently lead to questions about the fixed place of, say, the patriarch in the familial orbit. The revolutionary tenor of Copernicus' work is not in the text itself. Furthermore, Kuhn confesses that the text is not without contradictions and faulty mathematical concepts; but he still considers it a *revolution-making* text in that it shifted scientific thought in a new direction.<sup>181</sup> *Why?* Copernicus developed a mathematical schema to prove that the sun was at the center of the universe. If this was so, the earth was just one of many planets that was not an immovable object but, instead, was dependent on the sun for its very existence. Such a proposition had an effect beyond cosmological science. As Kuhn explains,

Copernicanism was potentially destructive of an entire fabric of thought...The drama of Christian life and the morality that had been made dependent upon it would not readily adapt to a universe in which the earth was just one of a number of planets.<sup>182</sup>

The resultant attenuation of man's narcissism was not lost on later revolutionary theorists, particularly those who desired to prove that man's place of superiority was not as inert as first

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

thought. One such theorist was Sigmund Freud, who admired Copernicus's revolutionary text for de-centering man from his position of absolute authority. Ernst Jones, Freud's official biographer, relates that Freud listed three "heavy blows" that science—principally, in the areas of cosmology, biology, and psychology—made against man's self-love and narcissism. It was during one of their casual discussions that Freud said,

The first serious blow to wound man's pride came from the astronomers, and is linked with the name Copernicus. Hitherto despite a few suggestions from the ancient Greeks, particularly Aristarchus [of Samos], it had been taken for granted that our earthly home was the center of the universe around which the sun, moon, and stars revolved—as it were, in recognition of our importance. When it had to be recognized in the sixteenth century that we dwelled on a minute fragment of matter, one of a countless number that revolved, man suffered the first blow to his pride.<sup>183</sup>

Though it has been more than four centuries since Copernicus dealt a blow to man's narcissism, the philosophical undertones of an earth-centered, patriarchal dominated universe persist. Moreover, because these expectations persist, the men who do not fit the model of an immovable, patriarchally centered self-identification are perceived as cosmic failures.

### **Father Loss and Head's Trauma**

Living up to the myth of a patriarchally-centered manhood can be overwhelming. This is especially so for black men who for a number of reasons, not the least of which is structural racism, are not afforded the requisite tools—educationally, economically, or psychologically—to achieve the status of Westernized patriarchy. In *The Myth of Masculinity*, psychologist and social theorist Joseph Pleck shares that a male's sex role identity (MSRI), a set of restrictive ideals about sex roles, is derived from his relationship with his father. In the next chapter, I will discuss history of oppressive socio-psychological practices that have distorted the image of the black

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<sup>183</sup> Ernst Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, vol. 2, Years of Maturity, 1901-1919* (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 225.

man and, by extension, the black father; but, for now, it is sufficient to mention that, according to Pleck, “black males are particularly vulnerable to sex role identity problems.”<sup>184</sup> Failure to attain a normative sex role leads to what Pleck has termed the sex role strain (SRS), a psychological developmental response to the dominant patriarchal model. Pleck lists the propositions of SRS as:

1. SEX ROLES ARE OPERATIONALLY DEFINED BY SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES AND NORMS.
2. SEX ROLES ARE CONTRADICTORY AND INCONSISTENT.
3. THE PROPORTION OF INDIVIDUALS WHO VIOLATE SEX ROLES IS HIGH.
4. VIOLATING SEX ROLES LEADS TO SOCIAL CONDEMNATION (SHAMING).
5. VIOLATING SEX ROLES LEADS TO NEGATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES.
6. ACTUAL OR IMAGINED VIOLATION OF THE SEX ROLES LEADS INDIVIDUALS TO OVER CONFORM TO THEM.
7. VIOLATING SEX ROLES HAS MORE SEVERE CONSEQUENCES FOR MALES THAN FEMALES.
8. CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS PRESCRIBED BY SEX ROLES ARE PSYCHOLOGICALLY DYSFUNCTIONAL.
9. EACH SEX EXPERIENCES SEX ROLE STRAIN IN ITS PAID WORK AND FAMILY ROLES.
10. HISTORICAL CHANGE CAUSES SEX ROLE STRAIN.<sup>185</sup>

Many of things Pleck offers in the list above are instructive in terms of calling attention to the instability of normative sex roles themselves. When discussing how this hypothesis affects black men, Pleck shares that the debate often focused on race at the expense of interrogating “the construct of gender role identity itself.”<sup>186</sup> The impact of race, though, cannot be ignored; for as sociologist Doris Y. Wilkinson and Ronald L. Taylor note, “[t]he inferior role in which [the black man] was cast—docile, humble, and irresponsible—is alleged to have compromised and severely damaged his masculinity.”<sup>187</sup> Comparable to those Renaissance scientists for whom the earth-centered universe was an irrefutable prism through which they viewed their place in the

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<sup>184</sup> Pleck, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>187</sup> Doris Y. Wilkinson and Ronald L. Taylor, *The Black Male in America: Perspectives on His Status in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1977), 2.

world, black men are tethered to a model of Westernized manhood that is appraised chiefly by a man's identification as an (immovable) patriarch, all other identifications are of a secondary or a tertiary concern. It seems that, like the Copernican revolution, a paradigm shift is needed in terms of our views about manhood.

The story of journalist John Head is a case in point of the need for such a change. Head's book *Standing in the Shadows* details his downward spiral into the throngs of clinical depression. Head's story is similar to that of far too many black men who have been abandoned by limited fathers. However, Head overcomes this paternal lacuna, or so it seems, to the extent that he ascends to the highest levels of the journalism profession, which gives the appearance that he is a self-made man. But his success provides him no solace. For Head, it seems that much of his angst can be attributed to his suffering in silence as a black man living in a racist society that emasculates black men. Head explains, "[t]he internal pressure to adhere to this concept of masculinity only increases as we confront a society that historically has sought to deny us our manhood."<sup>188</sup> A pernicious message that has been inculcated into the minds of black men is that they are to be self-sufficient beings, that is, so independent they do not need the emotional nourishment provided by a caring other. This is especially so when it comes to black men and the fathers who have abandoned them. Certainly, mothers who are left to fill-in the paternal gap do their utmost to mask over or stand in for the loss of the paternal figure. Such an attempt was made by Head's mother, whom he says "gave [me] so much of herself that I don't ever recall feeling deprived of a father."<sup>189</sup> But can this be true? The damage done by the fathers who exhibit no sign of generative feeling towards their sons leaves a wound in the psyche that not

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<sup>188</sup> John Head, *Standing in the Shadows: Understanding and Overcoming Depression in Black Men* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 3.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

even a mother's unfailing love can efface. Abandoned sons do attempt to deny the significance of their fathers, though, claiming they have no feeling for this person who becomes a lost love object. Head says as much in the following statement: "My father was so completely out of my life...that I didn't go to his funeral when he died."<sup>190</sup>

Though his father had died, the specter of his persona hovered within Head's own household, particularly as he later became a father. As the father of two boys, Head began to repeat certain patterns of paternal abuse, displaying the same characteristics that he recalls seeing in the limited time spent with his own father—that is, verbal abuse, emotional distance—a pattern of behavior that led him to conclude that his presence was hurting his family. Head's decision to separate himself from his own sons is very telling. A more detailed psychoanalytic analysis of the melancholia caused by the loss of the father (or lost love object) will be offered in chapter six of this study when discussing Richard Wright's childhood experience, but, for now, it is worth mentioning that the inability to truly mourn the loss of the love object leads to the object being introjected in to the psyche, which is the first step to identification with the lost object.

This is, as psychoanalyst Ralph Greenson informs us, evident in depressive states when

a transformation of the self has occurred whereby the self has become similar to the external object. This is manifested by certain changes which have taken place in the self as a consequence of introjections, so that one can observe behavior, attitudes, feelings, posture, etc., which are now identical to those characteristics belonging to the external object...the entire self is involved.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>191</sup> Ralph R. Greenson, "The Struggle against Identification," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 2 (1954): 200-217.

No wonder that, upon considering the abandonment of his own children, Head immediately became, on his account, “guilt-ridden at becoming the kind of father my father had been.”<sup>192</sup> However, this guilt soon transforms into an overwhelming shame that drives him away from his sons.

The failure to father drives men to the depths of despair, a point emphasized by Melvin Lansky when he remarks that it is “one of the most mortifying human predicaments.”<sup>193</sup> The shame induced by this failure leads a father to develop, as was discussed earlier, a negative emotional relationship with himself and his children. Because Lansky evaluates the failure of the father from a systems theory perspective, he points to the intergenerational effect of shame on the father-son dyad. He therefore posits that whenever a father has not managed the loss of his own father in a healthy manner, i.e., not repressing but rightly contending with this loss, he turns the shame of this abandonment into rage towards his own sons. So we have fathers who are wounded sons, such as Head, who evince an abusive pattern of behavior because he identifies “with the [abandoning] father’s inner sense of inadequacy, weakness, and worthlessness.”<sup>194</sup> Such a perspective cannot reckon with the *con-polarity* of the paternal figure, neither within himself nor in his own father; that is to say, the manner in which weakness and power are found within the same person. For black men, addressing the pain of shame is further bollixed up by the specious admission on the part of the melancholic (or depressed) son who is not a father that, as Head attests, “I don’t ever recall feeling deprived of a father.”<sup>195</sup> Some of this is attributed by

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<sup>192</sup> Head, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>193</sup> Lansky, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>195</sup> Head, *op. cit.*, 5.



the love and affection of the mother or, as suggested in the controversial “Moynihan Report,” the matriarchal ethos of black culture; whatever the reason, Head was never allowed to emotionally metabolize his father’s abandonment. The devaluation of the paternal figure—his worthlessness—redounds within following generations, as fathers become as critical of themselves as they were of their own fathers. In sum, they are of the belief that if they are weak, they can in no way be fathers—or, simply stated, powerful patriarchs. Lansky states that many of the men who view themselves as failing fathers “made serious suicide attempts, and most of them exiled themselves after their attempts at intimidating control failed.”<sup>196</sup> It seems that Wertham (remember: “the birth of a boy triggered...suicidal and homicidal overtones”<sup>197</sup>) wasn’t crazy after all. But why does shame—and not other emotions like guilt—produce such a destructive fatherhood, especially for black men?

The research on shame done by psychiatrist Michael Lewis tells us that shame is categorized as “a total self failure vis-à-vis a standard.”<sup>198</sup> Guilt, for instance, is found when the person has been informed that a specific action violated some standard, such as when a young boy is disciplined for not washing his hands after using the bathroom. Shame, however, is when the entire self has violated a standard; such is the case when a man feels himself not meeting the criteria of normative manhood, which is taken as a negative evaluation of his total being. Lewis notes that the message changes from “Stop. What you are doing violates a rule or standard!” (i.e., guilt) to the far more demeaning: “Stop. You are no good!” (i.e., shame).<sup>199</sup> *When are these*

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<sup>196</sup> Lansky, *op. cit.*, 127.

<sup>197</sup> Wertham, *op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>198</sup> Michael Lewis, *Shame: The Exposed Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

*standards introduced?* According to Lewis, the neonate has not yet grown accustomed to life before he is introduced to the standards that, when unmet, will lead to shame. “From the moment the child enters into her social network,” says Lewis, “the rules, values, and standards of the primary caregiver, family, and culture start to be imposed.”<sup>200</sup> Shame is predetermined by certain behaviors—scripts or social roles—that are associated with our phenomenological experiences.<sup>201</sup> Lewis’s phenomenological approach to shame brings us back to Heidegger’s point about Being-in (or *Dasein*) as the interpretation of one’s meeting certain “social roles that require certain activities.”<sup>202</sup> But, again, the dominant standard against which black men and, by extension, black fathers have been judged is the empyrean status of the white patriarchal male’s normative manhood.

Nothing throughout American history would be more of a symbol of this shame—not being a man, that is—than the lynching tree. The fourth chapter will offer an analysis of the lynching ritual rescripting a metanarrative of black male primitivity and dependency (i.e., the Sambo) while at the same time doing likewise for the fantasy of Southern white male supremacy. But before doing so, it is necessary to consider the ways in which black men did indeed formulate their own viable and subversive forms of manhood in protest against Western patriarchy. What becomes apparent during such an evaluation is that there are not only patterns of revolution against but also acquiescence to a dominative paradigm of manhood.

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>202</sup> Dreyfus, *op. cit.*, 44.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE WORD ON BLACK MANHOOD

“For the black man in this country, it is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel it his own. Whereas the white man regards his manhood as an ordained right, the black man is engaged in a never-ending battle for its possession. For the black man, attaining any portion of manhood is an active process. He must penetrate barriers and overcome opposition in order to assume masculine posture. For the inner psychological obstacles to manhood are never so formidable as the impediments woven into American society. By contrast, for a white man in this country, the rudiments of manhood are settled at birth by the possession of a penis, and an identity as master is enough to ensure that, whatever his individual limitations, this society will not systematically erect obstructions to his achievement.”

—William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage*

## Word Power

“In the beginning was the Word.”<sup>203</sup> That’s what the Bible says. The Word was divine. The Word creates. The Word was made flesh. There are also mortal words that seem to have inverted the top-down trajectory of the Logos. Unlike the Word, these are terrene words that, though uttered by mere men, have been canonized as sacred descriptors. Yes, one could even argue that these words have over time become tinged with the divine, having the power to define a person’s reality. They have been so ingrained into our cultural psyche that, when attempting to categorize or describe the marginalized other, we speak unknown tongues without the use of such signifiers; or even better, our ability to describe certain people(s) is all together muted without these words. There remains a certain cadre in our society that is given to believe that the word “boy” still holds the same meaning it did during the reign of Jim Crow, that is, a boy *is* a black male. “Sambo,” a word that was formed to express the black man’s child-like dependence, is still used by those who still yearn for the blithesome days of plantation paternalism.

These same words, though, call to mind the adversative as well. The word “boy” cannot fall from one’s lips without, conjunctively, having an image of a man—a *real* man—affixed within one’s mind. Sambo? Well, if the writings of either psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, *The Psychology of Colonization*, or historian Stanley Elkins, *Slavery*, offer even a scintilla of truth, then the slave as perpetual child must also conjure the image of the powerful father, the slave master.<sup>204</sup> An argument can even be made that these words are also inconsistent, failed attempts

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<sup>203</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>204</sup> Though Mannoni does not use the word Sambo, he does explicate the psyche of the colonized, the Malagasy, especially, as one dependent in need of a parental figure (*Prospero and Caliban*, viii). This is very similar to the argument made by Stanley Elkins who finds similar traits in the Sambo figure in two socio-cultural locales: the American Slave system and the Third Reich concentration camp.

to encapsulate, definitively, the inscrutable essence of black people. Albert Murray, a literary scholar, novelist and essayist, observes:

In a general sense perhaps all statements are also counter-statements. Even the simplest pronouncements, for example, whether of measurable fact or of a point of view, are also assertions to contradict something that is assumed to be otherwise. Perhaps even the most objective descriptions, definitions, and formulations (as well as being implicit protestations against subjectivity, imprecision, and fantasy) are in effect counter-actions against the void of the undefined, and confusing.<sup>205</sup>

Murray's words are an alternate take on the Wittgensteinian word game—i.e., “From it *seeming* to me...to be so, it doesn't follow that it is so,”<sup>206</sup> says Wittgenstein—in that those in positions of power (the dominant Other) use these words as a defense mechanism against the mystery that enshrouds dominated other's being. While the dominated other sees this inscrutability as a weapon against being controlled by their others words. Murray latter adds, “while Negroes obviously enjoy making white people nervous, they much prefer to keep them guessing.”<sup>207</sup> If whites were kept ignorant (i.e., guessing) of the realities of black life, then there words were rendered powerless.

This chapter focuses on the various words on black manhood. What follows is by no means exhaustive of the immense literature on black manhood, yet it offers the word on black manhood given within notable texts written by such authors as Haki R. Madhubuti, Na'im Akbar, and Richard Majors, to name a few. And yet, the *con-polarity* of this word on black manhood—which speaks of its strength and its weakness—is found in the works of black womanist/feminist writers, primarily, who have pointed to the way in which black manhood,

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<sup>205</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 1.

<sup>206</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Major Works: Selected Philosophical Writings* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 320.

<sup>207</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, 31.

though avowing to inveigh against Westernized modes of patriarchal manhood, remains too paternalistic. Worst of all it constructs a limited manhood that, due to its *unipolar* comportment, pushes aside that necessary polarity within itself that facilitates its further development: its sonship. Again, the words on black manhood throughout this chapter enunciate the fear that black men have had, and do have, of being in any way associated with a mode of manhood that is rife with discontinuity, irony, or *con-polarity*. And so they seek the comfortable stasis of patriarchy to cement their identities. But such a stance fails to divulge the manifold complexities of the black experience, foremostly the uncanny ability to improvise ways of negating the negation of the oppressor, which entailed their negating the negation of their manhood. All of which has yielded a revolutionary black manhood—at least we are led to believe this is so.

So who is the black man? If he is not a dependent Sambo nor, as feminist scholar Michele Wallace suggests, the ever cocksure Black Macho nor, as the acclaimed novelist Norman Mailer suggests, the muse of the wayward Hipster, who, then, is he? Charles R. Johnson, a novelist and essayist, mentions that during a discussion about black manhood with one of his teaching colleagues, in African American studies no less, the colleague, whom Johnson describes as a “gentle and scholarly man,” said, “[p]eople don’t know who we [black men] are. Even we aren’t sure who we are.”<sup>208</sup> However, as the following shall demonstrate, maybe this is exactly the beauty of black manhood, a manhood whose true being is neither restricted nor defined by the word(s) that in the end encapsulate who he *was*, who he *is*, and who he *will be*. Literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. captures this (advantageous) dilemma, when he remarks:

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<sup>208</sup> Charles Johnson, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32 (2000): 599-614.

The black man was represented as singularly prone to wickedness, thus singularly in need of rehabilitation, and at the same time distinctively suited for the role of racial uplift: he was reprobate and redeemer in one.<sup>209</sup>

Gates goes on to add his metonymical response to the oft repeated DuBoisian problematic (i.e., “How does it feel to be a problem?”) by asking, “How does it feel to be a paradox?”<sup>210</sup> Paradox, for Gates, is not just a part of black manhood but, rather, is one facet metonymical ethos that inheres the black cultural matrix. Gates interprets “signifying,” for instance, as pointing to the numerous black discursive maneuvers that are in and of themselves ways of reversing “the received racist image in the Western imagination.”<sup>211</sup> While Gates sees signifying as gender-neutral, folklorist and cultural historian Roger D. Abrahams “interprets signifying as a fundamentally male ritual, whereby African American men reestablish their sense of manhood so often diminished by the psychological weight of oppression.”<sup>212</sup> Hence, we have folk heroes like High John the Conquerer, a truly con-polar black male figure, who cozenly assumes both/and (not either/or) the semblance of a rebellious figure and that of a naïve fool, thus he maintains a protean identity, remaining in a state of non-fixity. *Is this the black manhood that the lyncher sought to negate through the lynching ritual?* How threatened was the Southern white male by this *outré*<sup>213</sup> manhood that eddied against their patriarchal sensibilities that were so dependent on the immovability of their identities?

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<sup>209</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), xvi.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>211</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 236.

<sup>212</sup> William L. Andrews, Frances Foster-Smith, and Trudier Harris, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 665.

<sup>213</sup> The French word *outré* when translated to English is taken to mean highly unconventional or bizarre; however, etymologically in the French one of its meanings is to be beyond or to pass someone. So I am using *outré* to

## High John the Conqueror, an Outré Manhood

“The prevailing image of Black men in America is an overwhelmingly negative one.”<sup>214</sup> Surely the authors, Joseph L. White and James H. Cone III, two specialists in the area of black psychology, could have chosen a far less dispiriting way to begin their book *Black Man Emerging*. But in many ways this ominous declaration is apropos. For the image of the black man in America is indeed troubling. For example, to substantiate their claim, the authors mention that in 1991 the University of Chicago did a poll in which they found that “56% of Whites believed Blacks were likely to be less intelligent than Whites.”<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, the authors add that “it is generally acknowledged by researchers and racial experts that many Whites tend to associate Blacks with crime, homelessness, drugs, and AIDS.”<sup>216</sup> Yes, these studies were done more than twenty years ago, but the underlying message that they communicate, “the black man is America’s villain,”<sup>217</sup> remains legible within our cultural psyche, though attenuated to some degree.

There are some observers, conservatives and liberals alike, who are quick to note that we are living in a post-racial American. “After all,” they say, “don’t we have a black president?” Progress has been made, yes, but our nation is still beholden to a linear perspective of black manhood that was formulated on the plantation, reinforced by Jim Crow, and is now being

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demonstrate the way in which black men who were deemed to be the outside the parameters of Westernized patriarchy (i.e., the outer man) were instead the men who had moved beyond this confining paradigm of manhood to the innovative expressions of an *outré* manhood.

<sup>214</sup> Joseph L. White and James H. Cone III, *Black Man Emerging: Facing the Past and Seizing the Future* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



reconstituted by a sensationalist media machine. The ill-begotten narrative of the black man as a threat to society, the ominous black beast, is the discursive plot through which the modern black man is judged. Without saying a word, his very body stokes fear. And on the rare occasion that he should brazenly overstep the boundaries of place by, say, making a lewd remark or inhabiting a restricted space (e.g., walking in the wrong neighborhood), he is met with a lethal rebuke. So it is not shocking that some commentators see a firm parallel between the murder of Emmitt Till and the recent murder of Trayvon Martin. Sociologist Elijah Anderson makes such a case in his article “Emmett and Trayvon: How Racial Prejudice in America has changed in the Last Sixty Years.” Anderson wants to make clear that both murders were conducted in two different socio-cultural milieus: Emmett Till’s was due to a “virulent ideology of white racial superiority”; conversely, Trayvon Martin’s “was born of America’s painful legacy of slavery and segregation, and informed by those old concepts of racial order.”<sup>218</sup> No matter these nuanced differences, both Till and Martin were killed because the color of their skin signified something alarming about their personhood to the other. In the case of Martin, Anderson comments that his skin color and his gender elicits “stereotypes that all black people start from the inner-city ghetto and are therefore stigmatized by their association with putative amorality, danger, crime, and poverty.”<sup>219</sup> The act of vigilantism that Mr. Zimmerman, Martin’s murderer, enacted is, of course, an extreme example of the current attack on black manhood; yet, it does speak to a certain collective anxiety regarding black men that pervades American society.

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<sup>218</sup> Elijah Anderson, “Emmett and Trayvon: How Racial Prejudice in America has changed in the last Sixty Years,” *Washington Monthly*, February 2013, [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january\\_february\\_2013/features/emmett\\_and\\_trayvon042036.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january_february_2013/features/emmett_and_trayvon042036.php) (accessed May 10, 2013).

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

Wanton acts of violence are no longer the punishment *de jour* for the threatening, obstreperous black male. No, there have been other, more surreptitious, ways devised to keep black men in their place. Maurice O. Wallace, whose research encompasses African American literature and gender studies, has his pulse on the issue, when he inquires, “Who, after all, can deny the endless and unspeakable power of so many desperate white schemes as American slavery, Jim Crow, the lynch mob, urban dispossession, and, most recently, the prison industrial complex to unman...the African American male?”<sup>220</sup> Most troubling of all is the way in which such schemes reiterate the myth of the everywhere deficient black male. That there is one thing that this centuries-old attack on the black male image has made abundantly clear it is this: Black men have had to fight, at times to the death, to define themselves on their own terms. It is for this reason that I shall consider some of the most noted works, what Wallace divides into first wave and second wave texts,<sup>221</sup> that, though taking different methodological paths, are in agreement that innovative modes of black manhood must be either (re)discovered or created.

In the introduction to this study, I made mention of Rudolph Byrd’s essay “The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity.” My terse remarks at the time did not convey the profundity of Byrd’s thesis, however. Unlike other scholars who have culled data from the more quantitatively-inclined social sciences—primarily, psychology and sociology—to offer an assessment of the black manhood problematic, Byrd, like Gates, seeks to broaden or “thicken” our understanding of black manhood by interpreting the signifying practices of trickster figures and folk heroes in African American literature. The inspiration for these figures was borne out of the need for survival in the midst of immense suffering. According to John W. Roberts, folklore

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<sup>220</sup> Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and folklife scholar, “folk heroic literature offers a conception of attributes and actions that a group perceives as the most advantageous for maintaining and protecting its identity in the face of a threat...”<sup>222</sup> Thus, the trickster figures as hero was unique in that they were viewed as upstanding persons (or figures) whose actions were not bereft of but rather suffuse with deviousness and, sometimes, malevolence. Slaves commiserated with the trickster’s mendacity, claiming that, given the harshness of their daily experiences, they were also forced to act immorally in order to survive. Robert Falls, an ex-slave, once confessed, “Those whites made us lie... *We had to lie to live* (emphasis added).”<sup>223</sup> But, again, survival, not rectitude, was the *sine qua non* to tricksters oppressed condition. “Gotta do what I gotta do to survive!” and “By any means necessary!” were the rallying cries for these heroic figures. Though Roberts contends that the trickster tales did not inspire slaves to engage in overt rebellion against the status quo, he is convinced that such tales did inspire “mischievous” modes of resistance that gave the supposedly timorous slave a sense of empowerment.

James C. Scott, a political scientist and sociologist, expounds on the seditious function of the trickster tales, when he remarks, “at one level these [tales] are nothing but innocent stories about animals [or men]; at another level they appear to celebrate the cunning wiles and vengeful spirit of the weak as they triumph over the strong.”<sup>224</sup> For Scott, the oppressed often use what he terms “hidden transcripts” which are, “those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears” in one’s public discourse or, as he terms it, the

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<sup>222</sup> John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>224</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 19.

public transcript.<sup>225</sup> There are numerous trickster tales that give credence to Scott's hypothesis, but there are a particular few that serve as especially forceful examples of the coded subversion of the trickster. The tales of Br'er Rabbit are expository of this tradition; one such tale is as follows:

Once upon a time Brother Rabbit and Brother Wolf decided to buy a cow together. And they bought the cow. So Ber Rabbit tell Ber Wolf that he must go and fetch a knife to butcher the cow with. After Ber Wolf was gone, Ber Rabbit kill the cow, and stuck the tail and horns and feet up in the mud. And begin to cry, "O Ber Wolf! the cow gone down in the mud!" And Ber Wolf run in. And he begin to pull on the cow's horn, and the horn fling him yonder. He pull on the tail, but the tail fling him yonder. And poor Ber Wolf look so pitiful! And Brother Rabbit said the cow gone down in the mud fast as he pull.<sup>226</sup>

Besides Br'er Rabbit, the other trickster tale that was shared throughout the slave community was that of High John the Conqueror. As shared in *Mules and Men*, a compendium of African American folklore collected by noted folklorist, anthropologist, and ethnographer Zora Neal Hurston, the stories of John and Old Master show the former often winning an endless game of wits. According to Roberts, these intellectual games were "reflective of real-life situations," in which he goes on to say, "enslaved Africans continued...to accept trickster-like behaviors as the most advantageous for securing their interests within the slave system."<sup>227</sup> In his interpretation of trickster tales, such as "High John De Conqueror," Rudolph Byrd sees not only a wily rebel who seeks to procure material benefits through his trickery, but also a model for a progressive mode of black manhood.

*What is so different about John, the man?* For Byrd, High John the Conqueror symbolizes the unending possibilities of black manhood. Heretofore, it has been demonstrated that black

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

manhood has been characterized as a problem because, in the main, black men have contorted their manhood to fit within a restrictive ideological model. Failing to see beyond these constraining paradigms, black men have become tendentious zealots who grow indignant whenever they themselves or another black male fails to live up to the normative model of patriarchal manhood. At times, the remarks directed at those who do not measure up to these ideals can be terribly disturbing. Such vile utterances are often directed towards the emblematic un-man, the one with the most insufferable “sickness” in the black community: the homosexual.<sup>228</sup> It was the one-time Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver who derided the black homosexual with this scathing remark:

The white man has deprived him [the black homosexual] of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his love as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on “whiteness” all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against “blackness”—upon himself, while he is, and all those who look at him, remind him of himself.<sup>229</sup>

Cleaver’s conflation of homosexuality with unmanliness and (racial) self-hatred is deeply troubling to say the least. And yet, this is precisely the mindset that Byrd has in mind when he summons the power of John the Conqueror. John was an improvisational man. A man gifted with *savoir faire*. A man who did not have to use only force to overcome Old Master; no, he had other tools of subversion at his disposal, such as “mother wit, laughter, and song.”<sup>230</sup> Byrd describes him as a “bottom fish”; he was well-schooled in “the values of knowledge, truth, and wisdom,

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<sup>228</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 128.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> Rudolph P. Byrd, “The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity,” in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds., Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy Sheftall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.

thereby gaining knowledge of the powers of process and improvisation.<sup>231</sup> It is because of these traits that, for Byrd, John represents “a mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the abolition of emasculating forms of masculinity; a mode of masculinity for Black men who are committed to the abolition of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideological traps.”<sup>232</sup> Though Byrd offers no conjectures on the ameliorative influence that an African American folktale like High John the Conqueror might have on specific relationships between black men, for example, the father-son dyad, he rightly underscores the need for black men to be diligent in their choosing of the models that most inform their masculinity. “Such a mode of masculinity,” says Byrd, “is an affirmation and reclamation of a set of extant radical values and traditions that should inform the choices and actions of African American men in our struggle among ourselves and in coalition with others against emasculating forms of masculinity.”<sup>233</sup> Byrd knows all too well, as the preceding quote makes clear, that black men must first overcome the struggle amongst themselves to be liberated from threadbare modes of black manhood. Needless to say, Byrd’s perspectival meditation on the potential of black manhood is, indeed, unique in that, while he summons progressive modes of masculine expression, other black scholars, some of whom are held in high regard, have hurriedly surmised models of black manhood that are far too conservative, that is, they simply conform to the patriarchal paradigms of the past.

Black Womanist and feminist scholars have been valiant in their attempts to bring awareness to the many dangers of hegemonic masculinity. According to Athena Mutua, a black feminist legal scholar and critical race theorist, a progressive black manhood would “personally

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<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

and actively stand against domination and, on the other, value, validate, and empower black humanity in all its variety....”<sup>234</sup> By way of personal testimony and sound historical evidence, we have it that black men often sought the actualization of their own empowered manhood through maintaining inequitable relationships with black women. The desire for patriarchal power left many men with a distorted sense of authority that often led to the fracturing of the black family. Due to this, we have many examples of black women who rejected in word and deed the servile image of the comforting black mammy to call out the manifest (plantation) paternalistic mindset of black men. The lack of freedom evidenced by the black man’s hegemonic comportment, specifically in the household, is what proved most troubling. Black women soon noticed that those black men who had become enthralled by and had clung to Westernized patriarchal power were not—and would never be—free to be the men that could truly love themselves, their wives, and their children, particularly their sons who often emulated, unvaryingly, the example of manhood put forth by their fathers. We have such an example in Sofia, the sassy, rotund, strong black woman found in Alice Walker’s *Color Purple*. Nevertheless, Sofia is but a literary instantiation of the profound existential history of the strong black woman who had (and still has) the discernment to observe that the black man’s liberation is an inchoate accomplishment if the liberation of the black woman is not a principal concern as well.

### **Sofia’s Provision: Discerning the Dangers of a “Limited” Black Manhood**

Dr. Mary Fair Burks—ever heard the name before? Probably not. Her name, like that of far too many other black women, has been elided from the roll call of dignitaries who have been upheld as the leaders of the civil rights movement. But this patriarchally-focused history can in

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<sup>234</sup> Athena D. Mutua, “Theorizing Progressive Masculinities,” in *Progressive Black Masculinities*, ed. Athena Mutua, 7 (New York: Routledge Press, 2006).

no way diminish the influence Dr. Burks had on the lives of black women in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1946 she founded the Women's Political Council (WPC), an organization that provided women with a safe space and a needed platform to voice their aspirations for "woman power."<sup>235</sup> The empowerment of women, however, was not the sole focus of the group. Rather, they believed that such empowerment could only be obtained through the upliftment of the entire community.

The WPC was formed for the purpose of inspiring Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their thinking, to fight juvenile and adult delinquency, to register and vote, and in general to improve their status as a group. We were...organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect.<sup>236</sup>

At that time black Montgomerians were becoming increasingly displeased with the segregationist policies of the Montgomery Bus Line. Traveling to and fro, from their jobs and to do their daily errands, became an experience of public disgrace for many black Montgomerians. Sitting at the back of the bus was disreputable in itself, but to have to give up one's seat, one's place, to a white passenger, involuntarily, was a strident illustration of the insecure position blacks held in Montgomery and, more broadly, in the Jim Crow South. Because of a series of complaints that had been filed with the WPC, beginning around 1953, the group set in motion a strategy to protest the bus company's ill-treatment of blacks. After much deliberation, the group settled that their chosen form of protest would be a boycott of the bus company. Many within the black community, especially amongst its male leadership, believed the idea too radical. Garrow notes that such trepidation was warranted given that the Montgomery's civil leadership would not tolerate such insurrectionary protestation.

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<sup>235</sup> David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 23.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*



In 1955 Montgomery, no one was brazen enough to announce publicly that black people might boycott city buses for the specific purposes of integrating those buses. Just to say that minorities wanted “better seating arrangements” was bad enough. That was the term the two sides, black and white, always used later in discussing the boycott. The word “integration” never came up. Certainly all blacks knew not to use that word while riding on the bus. To admit that black Americans were seeking to integrate would have been too much; there probably would’ve been much bloodshed.<sup>237</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the threat of being castigated by whites, and by those blacks who were inured to the system, Dr. Burks stood firm in her conviction that “one day, when human beings had taken all they could digest, the fight would begin.”<sup>238</sup>

The Montgomery Bus boycott was to be the first salvo of the civil rights movement. Quite startlingly, though, in the end, the movement ceased to be a “movement” at all. What began as a struggle to uplift the race soon became an exclusively male enterprise, led by men for men, to procure patriarchal status. Many black women within the movement were quick to point out the growing lack of concern for the rights of women, particularly as the movement gained national attention. Such was the opinion of civil rights leader Ella Baker, who cautioned members of her organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to maintain their independence from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference because it “reflected the male-dominated, hierarchical structure of the black church.”<sup>239</sup> As the media spotlight focused on the male leaders of these patriarchal organizations (e.g., SCLC and The Nation of Islam), these men soon became the sole enunciators of the manifold exigencies that plagued black life. bell hooks is of the opinion that it was and is because of America’s sexist-

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>239</sup> Estes, *op. cit.*, 64.

racist ideology that the idea of protest had to be portrayed as being a masculinist<sup>240</sup> endeavor, for it is only men, so it was believed, who possessed the strength (or desire) to fight for their rights. And so the camera began to focus on those leading men who exhibited a certain intestinal (or testicular) fortitude. Unfortunately, this focus pushed the work of women (that is, their fighting in the battle) to the margins, if not extirpated their efforts all together. This did not sit well with a number of women who believed they were equally entitled to the recognition given to their male counterparts. Many of the women who were stalwart in their conviction were deemed too subversive, too strong, or too masculine. But this was nothing new. Far before the Emancipation Proclamation freed black people to seek a better life for themselves, independent of the paternalistic slave master, black women had overstepped the boundaries of what was considered feminine or womanly to bemoan their second-class status within the black community.

Sojourner Truth was “the person most responsible during the nineteenth century for linking abolition with women’s rights,” says black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftal.<sup>241</sup> Truth was unrelenting in her pursuit of equality for black women, especially on the issue of black women gaining the right to vote, which was afforded to black men via the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868. The attainment of the franchise was deemed a sign of one’s being civilized, even more so than one’s citizenship, and therefore Truth held that women, so as to have their humanity ratified, had an equal right to the humanizing benefits bestowed by the amendment. For Truth, the gendered hierarchy that existed within the black community, whereby men felt it their natural (and even godly) duty to dominate black women, had to be remediated

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<sup>240</sup> Estes interprets masculinism as a doctrine that “embraces the notions that men are more powerful than women, that they should have control over their own lives and authority over others.

<sup>241</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftal, “Sojourner Truth,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed., Beverly Guy-Sheftal, 35 (New York: The New Press, 1995), 35.

before black men would obtain the boons of an equitable national manhood. In her speech “When Woman gets Her Rights Man will be Right,” she reveals the inequity that exists within the black community itself, when she says, “Men have got their rights, and women has not got their rights. That is the trouble.”<sup>242</sup> Truth’s discernment concerning the ill-treatment of black women went further than the franchise, however. In the same speech she calls her listeners to cogitate on the insufficient remuneration that women receive for their labor. While laboring on the slave plantation, Truth saw men and women joined in the toil of the plantation, but she cottoned that the selfsame labor was not valued the same in that at the end of the day men got “twice as much pay.”<sup>243</sup> It was because men were given the lion’s share of the money that women had to remain dependent on men for their material well-being. This dependency greatly troubled Truth, who believed it very much resembled the relationship between the slave master and the slave. She explains it thusly:

When we get our rights, we shall not have to come to you for money, for then we shall have money enough of our own. It is a good consolation to know that when we have got this we shall not be coming to you anymore. You have been having our right so long, that you think, like a slaveholder, that you own us.<sup>244</sup>

The black man’s patriarchal mentality, Truth observed, had relegated black women to a role of dependency from which they were not to break free. As with the slave, black women were expected to relish their position of subservience, wanting nothing more than to seek the perpetual gratification of their men. But what of those black women, like Truth, who desired their own sense of selfhood, who wanted to be independent? Such women were designated as unruly,

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 38.

uncivilized, unrefined, and unladylike. Again, Truth offers some educative words about such an existence—the existence of what is now referred to as the “strong black woman.”

Truth decries her ill-treatment by those men who refuse to affirm her womanhood simply because she desires the same rights as those accorded to men. She says, “nobody eber helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gibs me any best place.” And then she asks, “Aint I a woman?”<sup>245</sup> *But why wasn't she recognized as a woman?*

Truth bared her breast to a group of white men and women at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana so as to prove her biological womanhood. This empirical proof of her womanhood, however, would in no way change the opinion of many onlookers who deemed womanhood as more than a female possessing the physiological significations that marked her as a woman. Judith Butler's feminist philosophy anatomizes the plight of women using post-structuralist theory, which leads her to suggest that “gender is a cultural construction...gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex.”<sup>246</sup> Post-structuralism, which rails against abstracted meta-structures, points to the way in which womanhood, one's being recognized as a woman, intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and economic discursively produced identities. The womanhood that Truth exhibited was unsettling for men, black and white, hooks says, “in a patriarchal society [who] fear and resent women who do not assume traditional passive roles.”<sup>247</sup> These were men whose socio-cultural location would not allow them to affirm Truth's womanhood. For hooks, black men have been conditioned to believe that a black woman who does not assert such a passive role is a threat to their masculinity. Hence, we have the myth of

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>246</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

<sup>247</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 79.

the emasculating black matriarchy—the central hypothesis of the Moynihan report—that posits that it is the black woman’s strength that keeps the black man from truly being a man.

Perhaps no other expository medium has rightly observed the drama of the strong black woman more so than African American literature. Trudier Harris’ *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* gives a detailed account of how the strong black woman theme contributed to their further oppression of black women. The black woman was physically strong, which Harris notes was best demonstrated in her ability to do manly work (e.g., picking 300 pounds of cotton a day) and to endure manly pain (e.g., being whipped). For Trudier, this display of physical prowess, rather than leading to the black woman’s equality, augmented the de-feminization (if not all together dehumanization) of black women. Such was the status not only of those black women who were “field hands” or the laborers, but also those who were afforded the opportunity to work in the slave master’s quarters, the big house, especially those who were entrusted as the primary caregivers of the slave master’s children. Just as she had proved her strength in the field, the strong black woman was also to prove her strength by performing the enormous task of rearing the slave master’s children. Beyond physical care—breastfeeding, cleaning, supervision, and so forth—the black woman was to always have a “motherly” comportment towards the child as well, no matter her own physical or psychological well-being. Harris explains,

The constructed belief that black women were more nurturing, indeed natural nurturers, also highlighted the extrahuman quality attached to them and placed them in the realm of those animals who cared unconditionally for their offspring....Therefore, whether in the fields or in the big house, black women were perceived as working beyond endurance, always giving, and capable of protecting others, but never themselves needing protection.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2001), 4.

Early American literature further concretized this image within the cultural psyche as widely-read novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn*, and Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia*, to name a few, each cast black women into the stereotypical role of the all-loving black "Mammy." Of course, the mammy motif was later brought to life on the big screen during the early nineteenth-century in movies such as *Gone with the Wind*, in which Hattie McDaniel, whose character name was Mammy, was depicted as the strong black woman whose womanhood (or lack thereof) was held in contradistinction to that of her sublimely womanly white co-star Vivien Leigh.<sup>249</sup> All of these, the books and the movies, illustrated the con-polarity of the strong black woman—i.e., always strong yet always subservient; however, they failed to bring attention to just how much this conundrum was prevalent in the black females own home, that is to say, much of the same, if not even more so, was demanded of her by black men in the family orbit.

Anna Julia Cooper, a pioneering black feminist, author, and educator, whom bell hooks refers to as "one of the most outstanding" advocates for women's equality,<sup>250</sup> gave voice to the double-oppression of black women by observing they were "confronted by both a woman question and a race problem."<sup>251</sup> Moreover, Cooper reported as fact that the black woman's oppressed status was exacerbated by the lack of support she received from black men. Unlike white women, whom Cooper believed were allowed a certain latitude to "enter upon the work they feel by nature appointed to do," black women's aspirations were restricted and, in many instances, waylaid by black men who were found oftentimes more conservative (more

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<sup>249</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 146.

<sup>250</sup> hooks (1981), *op. cit.*, 166.

<sup>251</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 135.

patriarchal) than their white counterparts. *Were there liberal-minded black men who believed black women should be equals?* Yes. Frederick Douglass certainly comes to mind. However, for Cooper, the “average” black man was by no means willing to have a black woman lend her voice to matters of social and economic importance, issues which impacted the daily lives of black people on the whole. Cooper testifies to this, when she says,

But as far as my experience goes with the average man of our race is less frequently ready to admit the actual need among the sturdier forces of the world for women’s help or influence. That great social and economic questions await her interference, that she could throw any light on problems of national import, that her intermeddling could improve the management of school systems, or humanize and sanctify the far reaching influence of prisons and reformatories...that she has a word worth hearing....<sup>252</sup>

Silenced in their home, and in the black community at large, black women began to realize that many black men were simply reenacting a pattern of patriarchal manhood that validated its prowess through the oppression of others. There were many black women, far too many to name here, but some of whom have been discussed in this section, who would not sit in silence. They resisted wholly the patriarchal power of black men, pointing out that this distorted sense of power was another form of enslavement that restricted black men from attaining a more salubrious sense of selfhood. And so, with this in mind, we see a sharp turn in African American literature in that many authors began to create plots wherein black women had *the* voice in challenging the putative superiority of black men. Furthermore, these women often revealed the ways in which black men could be liberated from their imprisonment in limited models of manhood.

Harris rightly notes that the physical strength of black women repeatedly overshadowed the complexities of their personas. Therefore, in such works as Toni Morrison’s *Song of*

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

Solomon, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, and Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* we read of strong black women whose prowess "repeatedly overshadowed their tenderness, overshadowed their softness, overshadowed the complexity of their femininity and their humanity."<sup>253</sup> But there is another side to these women that Harris believes the "strong black woman" mythology obfuscates: Their uncanny ability to see and to nurture the inconsistencies and discontinuities of black manhood. In the abovementioned novels black women were an example of how rebellion against traditional paradigms of selfhood can be beneficial to one's own self-consciousness, thereby illustrating for black men new modes of self-realization. Harris summons Lauren Olamina, the female protagonist of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, as a telling instantiation of this informative strong black womanhood. The novel is set in the future, the years between 2024 and 2037 to be exact, and tells the story of a young black woman who resided within a small, walled-off community in a dystopian California. Lauren's father is a Baptist preacher who desires that his daughter be converted to the faith; however, for Lauren the rigid (patriarchal) God of her father is an undesirable deity. Rather, she embraces a theological framework purporting the tenet that "God is change."<sup>254</sup> In commenting on Lauren's peculiar perspective, Harris says, "and if change is the only constant in the world, then traditional morality becomes increasingly flexible."<sup>255</sup> It is all too obvious that her willingness to observe the malleability of traditional standards includes her reappraisal of the normative modes of gender as well. Lauren's role as a leader, a person looked to for protection by both men and women, makes her a very uncommon woman. The most estimable quality that

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<sup>253</sup> Harris (2001), *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*



Lauren possesses, beyond her physical strength, and manly physique, however, is her hyper-empathy syndrome, a condition that allows her to experience the pain of others, even against her own volition.<sup>256</sup> Because the environment outside of the city's walls is so toxic—physically, psychologically, and spiritually—Lauren's gift forces her to use her impressive physical strength and equally impressive emotional acuity to protect and nurture those within her community. Harris is aware that the different socio-historical milieus between *Parable of the Sower* and that of the strong black women noted in early African American literature makes it appear as though Lauren has broken all ties with the traditional strong black female. After all, she is afforded the social space to create an identity for herself, to be a leader no less, which is an opportunity denied many black women within the African American literary canon. And yet, many of these black women did so despite the public opprobrium. Although Harris only mentions her briefly in her text, Sofia of Alice Walker's *Color Purple* is depicted as a strong black woman who had both physical prowess and an insight into the pain of others, especially in regards to her husband, Harpo, whom she desired to be free of his father's patriarchal oppression.

Since its release in 1982, *The Color Purple*, written by Womanist-activist Alice Walker, has remained a controversial novel. Critics of Walker's epistolary work have critiqued its disparaging portrayal of black life in the rural South, particularly its negative portrayal of black men. As a Womanist, Walker wanted to explore not only the inequitable relationships between black men and black women but also how patriarchal manhood is, itself, detrimental to the overall vitality of the black family. Many have made acquaintance with the novel by way of the movie that was released in 1985; however, as is the case with many novels that have been adapted to film, there are many formative and informative elements that are found within the pages of Walker's text that are absent from the movie. Of course, in the movie we see Celie

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

developing a self-consciousness that gives her the strength to overcome the oppression of her husband, a man referred to as Mr.\_\_\_\_\_. Of course, in the movie we see Celie playing with and even stepping over the boundaries of normative gender identities as she explores her sexuality with Shug Avery, a ribald blues singer who is Mr.\_\_\_\_\_’s paramour. But what the movie fails to portray in all its complexities is what I consider the novel’s most important insight concerning black manhood: It had failed to develop to the point that black men could bequeath a progressive manhood to their sons. Letter seventeen of the novel focuses on Harpo’s limited manhood and his wife’s revelatory pronouncement that he must be free from this limitation in order to be husband and, most important, a father to their new born son.

The letter begins with Celie describing the difficult relationship that Harpo has with his love-interest, Sofia. Sofia is very much the antithesis of Celie, in that the former is portrayed as “pretty...Bright...[and] Smart”<sup>257</sup> whereas the latter is defamed throughout the novel as a ugly, dark, and dumb woman. Another mark of difference between the two is that Sofia is big, not only in physical stature but in her persona as well. This causes a great deal of friction between Harpo and Sofia. She is just too big to be controlled. She is too big to be silenced. She is too big to be ignored. In many ways, she is bigger than Harpo. We read of Sofia’s stature (i.e., her bigness) when, in the seventeenth letter, as Sophia is going to meet Harpo’s father, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, for the first time, Celie shares that, as they are approaching the house, Sophia is “in front a little.”<sup>258</sup> This, to me, suggests that Sofia is too big to follow Harpo, that is, to be deferential to him just because he is a man. Besides this, though, the letter tells of Harpo’s diminutive stance in the presence of Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, who is not at all pleased that his son has taken a liking to such a big (read:

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<sup>257</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 29.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

uncontrollable) woman. Celie notices that Harpo is silent the entire time that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is critiquing Sofia's bigness. Earlier in the novel we read that Harpo is as "big as his daddy," and that he is "strong in body but weak in will."<sup>259</sup> Celie, the wife, and Harpo, the son, maintain the same phenomenological space of being mere pawns of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s egotistical will, used to authenticate his patriarchal status. Celie testifies to the similarity of their plight, when she says,

Me and him [Harpo] out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I'm roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of chimney. His eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face begin to look like a woman face.

Why you don't work no more? he ast his daddy.

No reason for me to. His daddy say. You here, aint you?

He say this nasty. Harpos feeling be hurt.<sup>260</sup>

As long as Harpo stays "here" in this emasculative environment, under the aegis of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, he remains tethered to this limited model of manhood. In her book *The Will to Change*, bell hooks attests that patriarchy has "denied [black] males access to full emotional well-being."<sup>261</sup> Black fathers, like Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, are so "nasty," Celie's depiction of how Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ spoke to Harpo, towards their own sons because they are of the opinion that this is what builds manly character. Yet, in truth, such fatherly *mis*-care only limits their sons' development—more than anything else it stunts their psychosocial growth.

In addition, in the seventeenth letter, Celie witnesses, first-hand, that Sofia's strength (or bigness) is not just a matter of her physical prowess but is connotative of her ability to peer into the future, if you will, to observe how destructive Harpo's limited masculinity (mind you his own father states that Harpo is "limited"<sup>262</sup>) will be for their first child, a boy. After Mr. \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 31.

<sup>262</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 31.

roundly excoriates Sofia for attempting to “put anything over”<sup>263</sup> or sexually manipulate his limited son, Sofia grows angry not only at Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s reproof but even more so at the manner in which Harpo, the father of their baby son, remains painfully reticent—suspiciously dumb—in the presence of his father. In the end, Sofia leaves politely, and Harpo attempts to follow her—but she refuses to have him be a part of their new family if he is only going to mimic his father’s patriarchal stance. She refuses to have Harpo do to his son (whose birth signifies a new beginning) what his father has done to him, which would be to make their son a “limited” man. And so Sophia stops Harpo from *following* her, saying, “Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting.” I know of no better declaration concerning the confined state of black manhood. “When you free,” is the adverbial injunction that speaks for the countless black women who have waited and are still waiting for black men to free themselves to be generative fathers who will nurture their sons’ psychosocial development.

This was Sofia’s provision: To protect her son, as best she could, from Harpo’s “limited” manhood.

The dialogical nature of the black novel, like Walker’s *Color Purple*, which tends to the many contradictions of black life, renders such texts an accurate purveyor of black history (and *her-story*) even more so than legitimate history (or *his-story*) itself. For black feminist author Michelle Wallace the literary enterprise necessarily entails one’s reckoning with one’s family history, primarily the gendered discursive assumptions that informed the development of one’s selfhood. While writing her own story, Wallace discovered that the “relationships between men and women, and between mothers and daughters, in the ‘black community’ were plagued by the

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

intimidating shadow of normal ‘white’ American life.”<sup>264</sup> But, as has been demonstrated throughout this study, this shadow of white normativity hovers over the appraisal of black fathers as well. Wallace confesses that she often chose to suppress the reality about her father, a drug-addicted musician whom she never knew, for a myth that told of man who gave her a childhood filled with white middle-class proprieties. She could never love, by her own admission, a man who had failed to meet the standards of the American white patriarchal male. On the other hand, however, she had a stepfather named Birdie, a model patriarch, who had a good job that allowed him to take care of his family financially, but he was, nonetheless, a drunken-tyrant. He ruled his household with an iron-fist, quickly dispensing punishment to anyone who dared not meet his rules and regulations.<sup>265</sup> Coming to terms with the limited manhood evinced by both her father and stepfather was not easy for Wallace, who in some ways commiserated with the inability of these men (and many other black men) to obtain normative patriarchal manhood in an oppressive society. However, in her observation, black men did, indeed, attempt to attain patriarchal power through mimetic reenactment of the same patterns of hegemonic relationality demonstrated by their white oppressors. According to Wallace, the black man’s failure to obtain manhood is due to the fact “that he [the black man] has accepted a definition of black manhood that is destructive to himself and that negates the best efforts of his past.”<sup>266</sup>

But what of revolutionary black men, many of whom are part of the black intelligentsia, many of whom have developed black-centered (or Afrocentric) definitions of black manhood, many of whom were inspired by the insuppressible manhood enunciated by the Black Power

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<sup>264</sup> Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso), xxx.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

movement? Black men like Leroi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton and many others provided a foretaste of what a new self-defined black manhood could be. These were men whose veins were filled with the lifeblood of the Black Macho—strong men, articulate men, possessing an enviable equipoise, never rattled, never unnerved. Wallace, however, like many other black feminist and Womanist, looked beyond and, in some cases, through all of the Black Machoism to see that black men remained imprisoned in an “outmoded manhood that mocks their powerlessness.”<sup>267</sup> Suffice to say, many of the formative texts that have been written about the proper constitution of black manhood invalidate their own cause by rehashing old forms of manhood that only impedes the liberation of black men.

### **Multifarious Visions of Black Manhood**

*What is a woman?* Surely it seems odd that, as I endeavor to scrutinize a few of the outdated models of black manhood that have been put forth by various (esteemed) black scholars, I should begin by lifting a quote from the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*. Early on in the text, de Beauvoir takes her time to parse out the differences between the physiological make-up of a female and the ever-shifting categorization of woman, noting that the latter greatly depends upon the socio-cultural definition on the feminine. It is because of this that she avers, “not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity.”<sup>268</sup> She then gives a statement on the ephemeral nature of femininity, that is, the way in which it so easily slips through the fingers of those women for whom it is a requisite mode of self-identification: “Although some women

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>268</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila-Malovany-Chevallier (1949; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 3.

zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented.”<sup>269</sup> The heretofore nomenclature that has so defined black manhood brings to bear similar concerns. Like de Beauvoir, black scholars who have been the primary voices in the dialogue on black manhood have been confounded by the “mysterious and endangered reality known as”<sup>270</sup> black manhood. Such scholars, therefore, construct their own *deus ex machina*, hoping to have solved the black manhood problematic. Hence, we find models that conform, which de Beauvoir believes it is in a man’s nature to do anyway, primarily because it is far too much work to be original.<sup>271</sup> But even with these contrived solutions—slightly modified models—to the difficulties of black manhood, the question remains: What is a black man?

In their article “Constructing Gender: An Exploration of Afro-American Men’s Conceptualization of Manhood,” Andrea Hunter and James Davis, human development and family studies scholars, highlight the complexities that inhere any discussion about black manhood. On the negative side, they mention that the “patterns of violence, crime, and school failure...tend to promote definitions of masculinity and manhood that are maladaptive.”<sup>272</sup> Racism and discrimination, as Hunter and Davis observe in their article, have a role in the patterns of violence, as well as other derelict behaviors, which have led to a conceptualization of black manhood that has damaged the black male’s self image. Such images are the focus of Earl Ofari Hutchinson’s text *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, wherein he points out that the negative images of black manhood are not just the production of European domination nor of

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 724.

<sup>272</sup> Andrea G. Hunter and James Earl Davis, “Constructing Gender: An Exploration of African-American Men’s Conceptualization of Manhood” *Gender and Society* 6 (Fall 1992): 464-479.

the xenophobic conservatism of, say, the bombastic Rush Limbaugh, but is also a manifestation of the glorified thug-imagery put forth in immensely popular black films like *Boyz n the Hood* and thug-poetics spouted by gangsta rap groups like NWA (Niggas With an Attitude). Hutchinson has some rather scathing comments about the mendacious quality of these images, when he says, “[t]he image of the malevolent black male is based on a durable and time resistant bedrock of myths, half-truths, and lies.”<sup>273</sup> Many of which remain vibrant within the black community. The task of outlining the various researchers and texts that have documented the socio-historical construction and destruction of the black male image will be dealt with in greater detail later. At this point, however, it is worth my mentioning that thirty-two black men were interviewed during Hunter and Davis’s study, from whom the authors learned that black manhood, although multidimensional, did have a few core concepts: (1) self-determinism and accountability, (2) family, (3) pride, and (4) spirituality and humanism.<sup>274</sup> Suffice to say, many of the characteristics listed in the study’s Q-Sort Cluster ratings<sup>275</sup> are in accordance with those of Westernized patriarchal manhood, characteristics that have been delineated throughout this study.<sup>276</sup> The top fifteen items chosen by participants were:

#### Sense of Self

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<sup>273</sup> Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 14.

<sup>274</sup> Hunter and Davis, *op. cit.*, 471.

<sup>275</sup> The Q-sort technique is derived from the traditional Q-sort method used in social and psychological research. It was developed by psychologist William Stephenson as a means to assess how people think about at topic. According to the researchers, “the unstructured Q-sort technique differs from conventional Q-sort methods because items are not forced into symmetrical normal distributions. Men were asked to rate 96 attributes according to their importance to manhood. The items were derived from research literature on manhood and masculinity and the results of informal focus groups with Afro American men.” Hence, the items selected by the men in this research group give us a better understanding of the subjective ideas that guide these men in their conceptualization of black manhood.

<sup>276</sup> See chapter 2 of this study where I discuss American manhood *qua* fatherhood.



Resourcefulness  
**Parenting and family**  
Goal-Oriented  
**Provider**  
Humanism  
Education  
Spiritual and religious  
**Risk-taking**  
**Respect**  
**Authority**  
**Manliness**  
**Ownership**  
Sexuality  
**Power**<sup>277</sup>

There are several items that I have chosen to place in boldface because they are, I believe, germane to the black man's longing for patriarchal status in American society. But there is a negative side to this. Because these points of measure have not been attained—i.e., a sense of self, manliness, power, respect, authority, and even parenting and family—educational theorist Lawson Bush V, asks, “[h]ave black males gained their manhood?”<sup>278</sup> Bush refuses to answer his question in the affirmative because of the nagging reliance of what he refers to as the “Western paradigm” of manhood. He is convinced that scholars who claim that black men gained their manhood through the hyper-masculine rhetoric and praxes of Black Power Movement of the 1960s are guilty of concluding “that Black males did not become men until they exhibited characteristics of Western manhood.”<sup>279</sup> The black man was only a man when he had power—the fact that it was black power makes little difference, being that power denotes domination, and to dominate necessitates the subservience of the other. *Haven't we seen this kind of manhood*

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<sup>277</sup> Hunter and Davis, op. cit., 474.

<sup>278</sup> Lawson Bush V, “Am I a Man?: Literature Review Engaging the Sociohistorical Dynamics of Black Manhood in the United States,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23 (1999): 49-54.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

*before?* This leads one to pose some other inquiries: If black men haven't gained their own manhood, what must they do to attain it? And, even more pressing, is the image that they are pressing for truly *their* manhood, that is, a manhood formed and annealed intra-communally? Or is it simply, as Bush claims, a frail counterfeit of Westernized patriarchal manhood?

Some of other influential scholars who have addressed this problematic are mentioned in Maurice O. Wallace's aforementioned text *Constructing the Black Masculine*. He credits such scholars as Robert Staples (*The Black Male's Role in American Society*), Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (*Cool Pose*), Haki R. Madhubuti (*Black Men*), and John Edgar Wideman (*Fatherlong*) as the ones moving the discourse by and about black men from the periphery to the center of America's formulations about black manhood.<sup>280</sup> And yet, though these scholars must be lauded for their contributions, several of the texts mentioned above remained focused on the safe critique of the racist social systems that have been damaging to black men. Not that this should not be of concern, but it keeps the dialogue from moving towards the more pressing issue of revolutionizing our concepts about black manhood itself. Moreover, when reading through these texts, one also notices that there are a number of suspicious occurrences—maybe Freudian slips?—of patriarchal discourse in these texts, moments when the words “manliness,” “authority,” and “power” are still touted as being the prevailing characteristics of black manhood. To prove this point, I use a few monographs that are regarded as exemplary meditations on black manhood: Madhubuti's *Black Men*, Majors and Billson's *Cool Pose*, and, a text that Wallace fails to mention, Naim Akbar's *Visions for Black Men*. Wideman's *Fatherlong* is set-apart from the others because it offers a foretaste of an *outré* black manhood, a manhood

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<sup>280</sup> Wallace, *op. cit.*, 3.

that is permeated with the poetic, rapt in metaphor, and therefore cannot be discerned through a literalist hermeneutic.

Haki Madhubuti has long been admired within African American intelligentsia for both his poetry and non-fiction works. However, it is within his *Black Men* text that he does his utmost to offer “workable solutions for improving the status of Black people.”<sup>281</sup> As a poet, his chief mode of self-identification,<sup>282</sup> Madhubuti is well aware how words can form and reform one’s thinking; and it is for this reason that he takes great care to craft what he avers as the defining characteristics of black manhood. He begins as with the revolutionary. A black man is to be a “challenger of the known and the unknown...always and always in the process of growth...and to be creative father.”<sup>283</sup> These are indeed progressive ways of (re)defining black manhood. But his radical tone soon becomes conservative, stating that black men are to be “direction giver[s]” and to be “organized and organizer” and to be “a winner,” and though a “creative father,” an emphasis is placed on the privilege of being a father nonetheless.<sup>284</sup> So sad...he started off so well.

If taken as is, much of what is provided in Madhubuti’s definitional poetic seems to stand in contradistinction to the conservative (and conformist) models of black manhood, yet there is, upon further inspection, a surreptitious alliance to Westernized patriarchal masculinity. In fact, one finds that Madhubuti fails to adhere to his own teachings about being a “challenger of the known,” particularly when he cogitates on the role of black men in the family.

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<sup>281</sup> Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: The Afrikan American Family in Transition: Essays in Discovery, Solution, and Hope* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), i.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

In a patriarchal society, Black men must be able to offer their families a measurement of protection and, at a minimum, basic life-giving needs, such as clothing, shelter, food, education and security. The West and most of the world define manhood as the ability to protect and provide for one's family. If a man doesn't do that, according to most cultures, he is incomplete (i.e., not a man)...For conscious men, none of this should be new. However, in this *war* situation that we [Black men] live in, the circumstances demand that Black men rise to the *challenge* (italics in original).<sup>285</sup>

As a poet, one who is supposed to find multiple ways of describing the contingency and the irony or our humanity, Madhubuti seems to yield too readily to the incontrovertible authority of "patriarchal society." Rather than challenge the very notion of such a society, which extols protection and provision as the true signs of manhood, he chooses to admonish black men to "rise to the challenge" (i.e., *Gird Up Your Loins!*) in preparation for this "war" to defend our manhood.<sup>286</sup> It is also worth noting another paradox: the "nonviolent" father is expected, as detailed in Madhubuti's "Home Rules (for children)," a set of guidelines for childrearing, to teach his children the self-defense tactics of martial arts and even, and I want to make sure I quote the text accurately, to "become competent with firearms."<sup>287</sup> Is it not comforting to know that if black men fail at being providers and protectors, in the normative mode, they can certainly display a semblance of manhood by teaching their children either ninjutsu or having them become able shooters—by the way, the comment about guns seems especially out of place given that firearms are used to murder countless blacks every year. For example in 2008 and 2009, black children and teenagers made up only 15% of the U.S. population yet accounted for 45% of

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>286</sup> To further his claim that Black men need to meet the challenges of patriarchal society, Madhubuti provides three guidelines titled "Afrikan American Father's Pledge" and "Madhubuti's Home Rules (for children)." The fathers pledge prevails upon Black men to forswear domestic violence and substance abuse while also imploring Black men to be more involved in their children's lives. Whereas the home rules outline a strategy of child rearing that includes home chores (ironing, cooking, cleaning, etc.), religion (a knowledge of world religions), defense (martial arts and firearms), and even outdoor skills (e.g., fire building).

<sup>287</sup> Madhubuti, *op. cit.* 196.

young people killed, whether intentionally or accidentally, by guns.<sup>288</sup> Can we, in good conscience, as black men, consider guns (a very present weapon of mass destruction) as having any relevance to the instruction our children? I shall forgo commenting on this further, because the answer, to me, seems all too obvious. But I will close my discussion of Madhubuti's text with a brief observation: His *Black Men* text is but one instance in a stream of literature that has claimed to be revolutionary but, in truth, keeps black men tethered to the patriarchal of the past, only in a different color. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson's *Cool Pose* is a reiteration of this tradition.

To fully understand cool pose as pose, that is, the existential need to give the appearance of potency, Majors and Billson say, “[b]eing male and black has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated.”<sup>289</sup> In other words, because of their inability to “meet the challenge,” to hearken back to Madhubuti's term, of attaining the patriarchal virtues of manhood, black men have become embittered to the point that they have turned away from these normative modes, creating their own way of expressing masculinity. The cool pose, then, is deemed an indigenous expression—a new idiom, so to speak—of manhood. According to the authors, cool pose is exhibited in black male celebrities and political figures like Eddie Murphy, Miles Davis, and Adam Clayton Powell. These black men most embody what it is to be cool. But what, exactly, is cool pose? How do Majors and Billson, coming from different academic backgrounds, psychology and sociology, respectively, choose to define the term?

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<sup>288</sup> DeWayne Wickham, “Gun Violence Threatens Young Blacks,” *USA Today*, February 11, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/02/11/dewayne-wickham-on-blacks-and-gun-violence/1906819/> (accessed March 14, 2013).

<sup>289</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 1.

By cool we mean the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control. Black males who use cool pose are often chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation of audience. They manage the impression they communicate to others through the use of an imposing array of masks, acts, and facades.<sup>290</sup>

As one would expect, I have a number of concerns about Majors and Billson's hypothesis. For one, black manhood becomes so tied to this façade of masculinity that it never truly develops a true core, a ballast, if you will, of self-identification. The mask becomes all consuming. Even Majors warns of this, when he remarks, "if it [the cool pose] fails, masculinity fails. Coolness and manhood are so intricately intertwined that letting the cool mask fall...feels threatening."<sup>291</sup>

This is what Erving Goffman speaks of in his insightful monograph *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, when he says, "one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality."<sup>292</sup>

Therefore, the mask of pride, strength, and control becomes a mechanized means of interaction, even in those more intimate environments in which humility, weakness, and, dare I say, chaos might prove befitting to that given situation. This leads us to the second problem with Majors' cool pose hypothesis: It has the potential to cause great harm within the familial milieu.

Unfortunately, black families are often the testing grounds for the efficacy of the cool pose. Within the family environment, the place wherein black men should be able to relax from the rigidity of the cool pose, far too many black men build a solid emotional wall that even those

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<sup>290</sup> Majors and Billson, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>292</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 17.

persons closest to them cannot penetrate. This is not only the case for adult males, but also for those male children who, as Majors and Billson confess, “learned early to suppress their natural feelings of fear, hatred, or confusion.”<sup>293</sup> The cool pose, then, becomes a devolutionary coping mechanism that father’s pass on to the next generation, whereby sons are taught to overvalue (and are even praised for) their lack of rapport with those from whom they should receive psychosocial sustenance.<sup>294</sup> For Majors and Billson, this devolutionary heirloom is a part of the black man’s cultural heritage; he holds that “[t]his is a performance that runs in the family; it was passed down through generations who lived in traditional Africa during the times when *ashe* (cool pride) was a noble quality.”<sup>295</sup> Such damaging performativity, the act of being cool while suppressing ones true self, deteriorates the family structure because the black male in his fatherly role has not developed the skills to be emotionally conversant with nor available for his children, especially his sons. Though there are myriad negative psychosocial ailments that are derived from such an environment, wherein black males are never succored because they fail to express their vulnerability, depression is one of the more common maladies that is found among black men who have become adept at masking their feelings. According to psychologist Diane Robinson Brown’s “Depression Among Blacks: An Epidemiologic Perspective,” vulnerability and depression among Black males can be combated, effectively, if “social support

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<sup>293</sup> Majors, *op. cit.*, 60.

<sup>294</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. so impressed his father, Daddy King, with his ability to mask (or repress) his emotions. Historians have reported that when Daddy King would beat Martin, sometimes brutally, the young King would never utter a sound, even when feeling intense physical pain. Later on, during the Movement, as reported in Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross* and Oates’ *Let the Trumpet Sound*, Martin is lauded by his compatriots for displaying remarkable poise (or cool) in the face of immense danger, but he often confessed that the performance of appearing strong often left him emotionally drained, even depressed. We will return to an assessment of this in chapter six of this study.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

includes...emotional assurance or appraisal by family member, friends...and others.”<sup>296</sup> But as Majors and Billson’s text makes clear, the cool pose obstructs such assistance because black men have been taught to suppress their genuine selves (at times a vulnerable, incoherent self) in order to portray a sense of “balance, stability, confidence, and a sense of masculinity.”<sup>297</sup> The mechanization of the cool pose—i.e., a fixed mode of Black manhood—is what causes it to change from a tool of sedition (e.g., the trickster hero in African American folklore) into a delusional means of self-identification: The black man is *always* strong, even when he is weak; the black man is *always* in control, even when he is out of control, the black man is *always* at peace, even when he is in emotional turmoil. Another noted black scholar who approaches the black manhood dilemma by using Afrocentric psychology and psychotherapy is psychologist Na’im Akbar.

Akbar excoriates the Eurocentric models of manhood that have only emasculated black men and hindered their psychological development. To militate against these Eurocentric paradigms, he upholds what are, for him, culturally germane models of manhood in his text *Visions for Black Men*. Akbar’s psychological assessment of black manhood is different from that of Majors and Billson in that he addressed the problem using Afrocentric psychology. It was during the 1970s that a group of black psychologists began to consider how African philosophy could be used to better understand and, also, re-inform the black psyche.<sup>298</sup> What is the value of African philosophy to Black psychology? The Kenyan-born philosopher John Mbiti, quoted in

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<sup>296</sup> Diane Robinson Brown, “Depression among Blacks: An Epidemiologic Perspective,” in *Handbook of Mental Health and Mental Disorder among Black Americans*, ed. Dorothy S. Ruiz, 86 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

<sup>297</sup> Majors and Billson, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>298</sup> Faye Z. Belgrave and Kevin W. Allison, *African American Psychology: From African to America*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 22.



Wade Nobles' *African Philosophy: Foundation for Black Psychology*, underscores the “spiritual consciousness” and “collective consciousness” that forms the ethos of African philosophy.

Within the Africentric psychology movement, such noted scholars as Wade Nobles, Asa Hilliard, Linda James Myers, Joseph L. White, and Joseph Baldwin endeavored to “develop, out of the authentic experience of black people in this country, an accurate workable theory of Black psychology.”<sup>299</sup> Studying the unique characteristic of the black family is important for Africentric psychologists who believe that Eurocentric family structures “leads us to an essentially inappropriate and unsound analysis [of black families].”<sup>300</sup> Rather, they prefer “[a] comprehensive theory of Black psychology [that] will have to explain in much greater detail the dynamics of the Black home, family, hero, role models, language systems, work and time management, and the nature of suspiciousness.”<sup>301</sup> At the center of this pushback against Eurocentric models is the ongoing debate about the black family being ineffective because it is not patriarchal but, instead, all too matriarchal, and therefore structurally disorganized. I will delve into the finer points of this argument—i.e., the debates surrounding the controversial *Moynihan Report*—in the following section; however, for now, it is instructive to examine the ways in which Africentric psychologists envision the black man’s role in his family. Could it be that, even as Africentric psychologists pronounce the formation of a conscious black man, a liberated black man, an Africentric black man there remains a black man who is still clinging to the domineering mannerisms and philosophies of Westernized patriarchy?

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<sup>299</sup> Joseph L. White, “Toward a Black Psychology,” in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald L. Jones, 5, (Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry, 2004).

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

The task of remedying the problems of black manhood is the central thesis of Akbar's *Visions for Black Men*. As a faithful adherent of African philosophy, he shares that the African view of selfhood is one that allows for fluidity, not the rigidity and mechanization that so defines Westernized selfhood: "Our ancient scholars of classical African civilization," Akbar remarks, "identified the nature of the human being as one in a continuous state of change or evolution."<sup>302</sup> Unfortunately, like Madhubuti, the progressive tone of this statement belies the mechanized trajectory of manhood consciousness that, as Akbar has it, should move a black man from "maleness to boyhood to manness."<sup>303</sup> This linear development, wherein the status of one's manliness, strength and authority, is the apogee of manhood, leaves no latitude for the perpetual process that engenders new modes of becoming. One does find Akbar stating that fathering provides black men with an opportunity to "stimulate" their growth; it is through fathering that a man learns to meet the challenges of not only today but tomorrow as well. Being a father teaches a man to "understand responsibility, learn to think bigger than just [himself]..."<sup>304</sup> Like a rite of passage, fathering brings a man into the community of manliness, which overtly signifies not only to himself but also to his community that he has left the childish vagaries of boyhood. Upon reaching this status, a man is now expected to rule his kingdom.

Preparation for manhood [through fathering] prepares us for leadership. You are prepared to lead a big community when you learn to lead a little community. You have got to learn to lead your personal community. You must first be a king in your personal kingdom. If you can't rule the kingdom on your feet, you can't lead a bigger kingdom.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Naim Akbar, *Visions for Black Men* (Tallahassee: Mind Productions, 1991), 2.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

A man is supposed to rule!?! (Haven't we heard this before?) Furthermore, it is the task of the man *qua* father *qua* king/ruler to teach his male subjects, his sons, to "understand what it means to be in charge"<sup>306</sup>—that is, to offer instruction as to the ways to rule their own personal kingdom: the family. Akbar further explicates the differences between a male and a boy and a man when he states that "[a] male is a biological creature, a boy is a creature in transition, and a man is something that had arrived to a purpose and a destiny."<sup>307</sup> Manhood is not a journey but a telos, an end to be attained. There goes all of the African philosophical rhetoric about "continuous state of change" and "evolution."

It is with this ethos in mind—manhood as a purpose, a destiny, a status—that Akbar provides a group of incontrovertible models of Africentric Black manhood. These are men of strong convictions and character, such as the "courage" of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the "defiance" of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad; the "economic strategy" of Booker T. Washington; the "uncompromising integrity" of Paul Robeson; and the "scholarship of self-definition" of Cheikh Anta Diop. "They are," Akbar proclaims, "African-American and they are men."<sup>308</sup>

But what of the black men who either lack or choose not to evince these characteristics? Aren't they men, too? Should it not be the case that the Africentric mind, because it is not beholden to Eurocentric standards, be found more open-minded in its evaluation of those black men who do not exhibit the normative patriarchal characteristics of manly prowess? What of black men like Baynard Rustin and James Baldwin? No. They were gay. Malcolm X? No. He

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

was, as many within the Nation of Islam still believe, a turncoat, an avaricious son who turned against his (spiritual) father, Elijah Muhammad. How about the quick-tempered Richard Wright? No. Rather than stay and fight the battle of racial equality on U.S. soil, he ran away to France. None of these men made Akbar's the list. Though Akbar claims that he does not intend to offer "perfect" models, in terms of their rectitude, he nonetheless feeds into the notion that any vision for black men cannot allow for the discontinuities and the ironies that are a part of a black manhood that is open to new possibilities. Hence, you have the following observation by Andrea G. Hunter and James Davis: "The remedy, some argue, is to develop Africentric models of manhood....But the image of manhood either unfulfilled or gone awry continues to dominate."<sup>309</sup> Alas, neither the rhetoric of the Black Power macho nor of the Africentric king-man has yet to speak a language that has changed, for the better I should add, the discourse on black manhood. It could be that we need to look elsewhere for a renewed vision of black manhood. Or, it could be that we must look inward to reconnect with a mode of manhood that is all too quotidian? Such a place is discussed in John Edgar Wideman's filial meditation *Fatheralong*.

"ALWAYS MORE TO US THAN MEETS THE EYE. OUR EYES or the eyes of others who don't want to know what the more might be, who expend a lot of energy pretending there isn't more, insisting there must not be more."<sup>310</sup> John Edgar Wideman, a virtuoso of prose, completes our venture into the circuitous analysis of black manhood by bringing us to the reflections of a poet. His book *Fatheralong*, unlike those of Madhubuti, Majors and Billson, and Akbar, abjures the notion that our pieces of our puzzling identities can be collected in to a fixed

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<sup>309</sup> Andrea G. Hunter and James Earl Davis, "Hidden Voices of Black Men: The Meaning, Structure, and Complexity of Manhood" *Journal of Black Studies* 25 (Fall 1994): 20-40.

<sup>310</sup> John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), x.

whole. Such attempts to solve the mystery of our identities are futile. Wideman demonstrates that our identities cannot be appraised by delimiting gender expectations—e.g. “Be a Man!” Rather, we must realize that in our male relationships, for example, especially those between a father and a son, there must be a hallowed space, set apart, where the masculine-self that is in progress, the masculine-self that is under construction, the masculine-self that might fail but is valued as a man nonetheless, is allowed to experience “the funk of maleness.”<sup>311</sup> Such a space is necessary if black men are to recover from the emasculating machinations of hegemonic patriarchy. Gay L. Byron, a New Testament scholar who has searched for progressive images of black manhood in the Pauline epistles, concurs with this perspective,

Seldom, if ever, are African American males given the space to acknowledge the ways they have fallen short of their own expectations, of the expectations of others, or of the expectations of God. In a society where only the strong survive, it is virtually impossible to find the courage or the words for acknowledging weakness and limitations.<sup>312</sup>

What is it about weakness and limitations that make black men shudder in fear? Why is it that we, as black men, lack the courage to see manhood—real manhood—even in those times of weakness and limitations? Wideman evinces such valor in *Fatheralong* because he acknowledges that these inconsistencies are part of his manly patrimony: “Pungent nastiness I envied and feared because it defined something about my person too, something he’d passed on to me...a source when I was alone of bottomless curiosity.”<sup>313</sup> It is the often ignored and terribly undervalued inheritance of the father’s discontinuities, contingencies, and ironies that is not

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>312</sup> Gay Byron, “Images of Masculinity in the Pauline Epistles: Resources for Constructing Progressive Black Masculinities, or Not?” in *Progressive Black Masculinities*, ed. Athena D. Mutua, 112 (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>313</sup> Wideman, *op. cit.*, 43

bracketed off but, rather, in a truly improvisational manner, is interpreted as formational to Wideman's manhood.

That Wideman could adhere to a protean perspective regarding his father is even more commendable given that the elder Wideman was by no means an exemplary father figure. Wideman shares that he would sometimes find his father in the "bars or poolroom or sitting on the porch steps of a houseful of pretty women or standing on the corner working out schemes..."<sup>314</sup> And yet, Wideman believed there was more to this man, his father, than his carnality. Because he had attended some of his father's lewd haunts (e.g., the local cathouse), Wideman could see beyond notions that these offensive experiences defined a person's selfhood. With this in mind, Wideman knew that there was, in fact, something estimable, something informative, something that contradicted what his eyes and ears and his community were telling him about his father. The young Wideman didn't see his father as a failure, but as a complex man who was multifaceted. But here is the real problem: The father does not see this in himself. Black men have been taught to be ashamed of the pain, the failures, the discontinuities that are a part of their stories. Wideman holds that this tendentious perspective is due to a "Western mindset...disposed to conquer by dividing, apprehending the world in polarized terms of either/or."<sup>315</sup> Black sons must contend with this absolutized version of their father's sooner or later, because it redounds within their own self-identification. There is, indeed, a specular quality, a mirroring, so to speak, that takes place in a son's identification with his father, that is, in seeing the father, the son has a link to his own ontological DNA. Wideman explains:

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 68.

You are your son's biological link to past and future. Are you also his burden. To claim you, say yes to you, must he also accept the stigma of race. Does your dark face doom him to be an outsider, force him to address one way or another the lives of his father's...Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't. If he denies you, he doesn't need to look any farther than the nose on his face, the skin on the back of his hands, to realize he's denying himself. Saying no to himself. No to the power within himself to achieve what no one can give him: freedom and equality...Are you [as a son] the proof he's less than a man because you're not able to give him what white men give to their sons at birth: full, unquestioned, unconditional citizenship.<sup>316</sup>

I would contend that the underlying tone of what Wideman is speaking of when he mentions "unconditional citizenship" is what the aforementioned historian Dana T. Nelson classifies as citizenship within narrative of national manhood, a fraternity of masculine identification that has been the exclusive preserve of White patriarchal manhood. Nelson expounds on this by sharing,

This nationally authorized manhood did not emerge *sui generis* but appealed generally to an assemblage of older cultural patterns, practices, and fears. It promised redress for men's various anxieties in a nostalgically configured fantasy of powerful manhood, revived and certified through its attachment to national strength, unity, and economic expansion. National manhood gained support precisely by mobilizing, generalizing, and guaranteeing manhood in a way that would shortly find ritual expression in "universal" white manhood suffrage...what is new in this reorganization of manhood is its appeal to and nationalization of *whiteness*. The Constitutional period marks the beginning of an experimental reorganization and extension of whiteness to manhood....<sup>317</sup>

black men were not a part of the national manhood schema, and so are relegated to the status of the perpetual noncitizen, the outsider, the other. No wonder black fathers have difficulty bequeathing hope to their sons, many of whom will never attain a true sense of (national) manhood. It is for this reason that Wideman states, "the paradigm of race works to create distance between sons and fathers," because, as he observes, "we [Black men] don't talk or can't

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>317</sup> Nelson, *op. cit.*, 37.

talk father to son, son to father.”<sup>318</sup> Race robs authorial privilege from the oppressed, and due to this, the variegated plots of black life, the strengths and weaknesses, are often stricken from black consciousness. In the end, it becomes hard for a son to see his father as a man in process, that is, becoming more than what you see, not a man whose entire identity has been adumbrated by his race.

Wideman finds that Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* provides an apt portrayal of the distance that race and racism can create between a father and son. In fact, in his reading of *Black Boy* Wideman has it that Wright willfully participates in the destruction of his father because of the way his father’s whole Being-in communicated the racist ideologies that defined black life. Wright could in no way accept the terrifying truth that in seeing his father’s mangled selfhood, he was also seeing something about himself as well. Therefore the father, as representative non-citizen, outsider, and other had to be either killed or displaced, at least within Wright’s psyche. In the seventh chapter of this study, I will go in to greater detail regarding not just the patricidal but the redemptive elements of Wright’s work. Wright’s work is also instructive in that his formative years were spent in a matriarchal family structure. As stated earlier, there are commentators who aver that black men have failed in their roles as fathers not because of race, but because of the overwhelming influence of the black matriarch. The following section will examine the debate about the presence of black fathers in the family throughout early American history and the subsequent dissolution of the black father’s status during the alleged reign of the black matriarchal. At the center of the debate concerning the matriarchal ethos of the black family is

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<sup>318</sup> Wideman, *op. cit.*, 71.



the controversial Moynihan Report. Moynihan holds the view that it is the black man's failed manhood, his inability to "strut," that, above all else, makes him an inadequate father.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 16.

## CHAPTER FOUR STRUTTING SAMBO ON THE VIA DOLOROSA

“The South is crucifying Christ again  
By all the laws of ancient rote and rule:  
The ribald cries of ‘Save yourself’ and ‘fool’  
Din in his ear, the thorns grope for his brain,  
And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain  
His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule  
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool  
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.  
Christ's awful wrong is that he's dark of hue,  
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;  
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire,  
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,  
And while he burns, good men, and women too,  
Shout, battling for black and brittle bones.”

—Countee Cullen, “Christ Recrucified”

“I saw a bleeding brownish boy...  
The lariat lynch-wish I deplored.  
The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.”

—Gwendolyn Brooks,  
“The Chicago Defender Sends a  
Man to Little Rock”

## **The Experts' Omission**

The previous three chapters anticipate this chapter's discourse on the effects of slavery and lynching on black manhood. If successful, they should have explicated the historical, philosophical, and psychological tenets that have created the patriarchal ethos that has greatly informed and formed a black manhood desirous of patriarchal power. In the first chapter, we discussed the unsettling sociopolitical environs in early-American history, a time when alterity was being woven in to the nation's tapestry, which contributed to the myth of a putative self-made, self-sufficient manhood that roundly rejected the contingencies, discontinuities, and ironies that are a part of a manhood reflective of sonship. The second chapter considered the damaging effects that shame has on a man who fails to live up to the rigorous (and unreachable) standards of patriarchy, especially in the father-son dyad. And in the third chapter, we shifted the discourse to the evidence that speaks to black manhood's rebellion against—but, in many ways, conformity to—the limited paradigms of Westernized patriarchy. It is now fitting that we provide an extensive overview of the experts report on the way in which slavery and racial oppression created black manhood's emasculated status, particularly within the familial milieu. Such a shift will bring us from the unipolarity (or absolutization) of the patriarchal figure to presence of a *con-polar* black manhood in slavery and the lynching era. This chapter explores the con-polarity of black manhood in the acts of resistance that railed against the paternalism not only of the slave master but, most evidently, in negating the negation of the most strident form of emasculation: the lynching ritual. As the white male southerner sought to cement his status as a self-made patriarch, black men on the lynching tree proved that there is something about black manhood that is beyond the unipolarity of patriarchal manhood.

## The Report on the Unmanliness of Black Men

The policy of the United States is to bring the Negro to full and equal sharing in the responsibilities and rewards of citizenship. To this end, the programs of the Federal government bearing on this objective shall be designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro family.<sup>320</sup>

It's the 1930s. New York City is alive. In Harlem, Uptown, the Cotton Club was becoming a palace for jazz royalty, a place where patrons could have their ears caressed by the seductive sounds of Duke Ellington's spellbinding band. Downtown, construction workers were reaching new heights in their building of heaven-reaching skyscrapers, which would be steady members of Manhattan's inimitable skyline. Even an outer borough like the Bronx was abuzz with testimonials about the glorious feats of a group of legendary ballplayers—dubbed “Murderers' Row” by baseball aficionados—for the New York Yankees.<sup>321</sup> It was a great time to be in New York.

It was within this environment of unrestrained hustle-and-bustle that a young boy would soon experience a deafening silence. When he was six-years-old, his family moved from Tulsa, Oklahoma to Manhattan because his father, John, was hired as an advertising copywriter.<sup>322</sup> The enticements of the big city proved too great for John; for not only did it supply him with a steady flow of booze—due in large measure to the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment that ended Prohibition in 1933—which only furthered his dispomania, but also a bevy of attractive citified women, which often caught the attention of his roving eyes. Whether the marriage between John and Margaret, the boy's mother, was dismantled by the father's alcoholism or

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<sup>320</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 48.

<sup>321</sup> Baseball aficionados believe this group the greatest in baseball history. The members included such notable players as Earle Combs, Mark Koenig, and Bob Meusel, and such legendary players as Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

<sup>322</sup> James T. Patterson, *Freedom is not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3.

infidelity is uncertain, but what is known is that in 1937 John abandoned his family, suddenly, moving to California where he started his life anew. The boy never saw his father again. Though the loss of his father created a void within the boy that would never be filled, it was the socioeconomic instability that this loss foisted upon his family that proved most troubling. The moving from place to place, the wily strategies that had to be developed to procure the next meal, the pressure of having to “be *a* man” and /or “be *the* man” far too early—these all made the boy sensitive to the plight of not only the poor but, particularly, the poor whose manly sensibilities had been felled by the abandonment of a father.

Who is the boy described above in this adumbrated biography? Many rush to conclude that he must be one of many young black men left to suffer a life of illimitable poverty because of a disorganized family structure. There is no way—*no way*—the story could be otherwise. Such race-biased, inchoate reasoning is due to our culture’s entanglement in what historian Stephanie Coontz calls a “nostalgia trap.” Coontz’s *The Way We Never Were* argues that a savvy coterie of family reformers, ranging from conservative public officials to puritanical clergymen, avow that America must once again return to the glory days of the traditional family. From this, Coontz argues, we have “bestsellers urging us to reaffirm traditional family values”; however, it is Coontz’s contention that the “complexity of our [family] history... gets buried under the weight of an idealized image.”<sup>323</sup> This idealized image blinds our eyes to the unsettling evidence that the traditional American family, the white family led by the redoubtable patriarch, was, is, and will forever be a myth. “Families have always been in flux and often in crisis,” Coontz says, “...they have never lived up to nostalgic notions about ‘the way things used to be.’”<sup>324</sup> During

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<sup>323</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

the 1930s, for example, social theorists from the Chicago School, which trained notable scholars like E. Franklin Frazier, author of the influential text *The Negro Family in the United States*, were of the belief that “immigration and urbanization had weakened the traditional family by destroying kinship and community networks.”<sup>325</sup> Not to mention the role that public policy played in enervating the economic viability of the family structure, such as in 1939 when the amended Social Security Act required that women receive benefits through their husbands only.<sup>326</sup> There were a host of other “wage-based welfare measures” that ensured government assistance was filtered through the breadwinner’s—i.e., the father’s—participation in the workforce.<sup>327</sup> Therefore, the absence of a husband left many families in financial ruin. This was the instability all American families feared and many experienced. Family life, even for white Americans, according to Coontz, has always been in crisis, and one need only look at the life of that young boy mentioned above, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the same Moynihan of the controversial Moynihan report.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, or Pat as he was often called, was revered—and also reviled—as a political figure during his decades of service as Assistant Secretary of Labor, an US Ambassador, and, most notably, a U.S. Senator. In a 1966 *New York Times* piece, penned by writer Thomas Meehan, Moynihan is described as a “scholar-politician” whose life-story is likened to that of “an inspirational novel by some contemporary Horatio Alger, Jr.”<sup>328 329</sup> One’s

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Thomas Meehan, “Moynihan of the Moynihan Report,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1966, *New York Times*, Moynihan of the Moynihan Report” <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/moynihan-report.html> (accessed April 7, 2013).

heart is certainly moved by the rags-to-riches story of Pat growing up in the concrete jungle of New York City's infamous Hell's Kitchen—that chthonic abode where, especially in the 1930s, Satan's earthly minions rejoiced in a number of vices—a place out of which only a real man, a self-made man, a heroic man, the man that Pat believed himself to be, could escape. Moynihan never shared the full extent of the psychosocial trauma caused not by the poverty of his childhood, which some biographers argue was not as dire as he claimed, but the loss of his father. Publicly pronouncing his father as derelict in his fatherly/manly duties would sully the idealized image of the normative patriarch, the white male. Pat could not do that. So, instead, Pat projects the pain of his own abandonment on a socially and quasi-scientifically acceptable scapegoat as he pathologizes the status of the black male, the non-citizen, in the Negro family. Thus, you have the psychogenesis of “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” or the eponymous “Moynihan Report.”

Academic interest in the nature and structure of the black family is no new phenomenon. For decades, going back to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists, psychologists, and educators, alike, have attempted to form a comprehensive theory of the black family. But to date no such theory exists. Robert Staples and Leonor Johnson, two prominent sociologists in the area of black family studies, have noted that in their field “no family sociologist has integrated the separate theories into a general theory of the black family.”<sup>330</sup> The danger of developing a general theory to assess black family life is that such a theory can become a dominant theoretical model that truncates the diversity of experiences within the black family. But there are a number of theories that are used by sociologists to better understand the black family. First, in response

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<sup>329</sup> Alger, Jr. was a 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist whose works told the story of an impoverished boy who, through self-determination, had risen to obtain for himself a comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

<sup>330</sup> Robert Staples and Leonor Boulin Johnson, *Black Families at the Cross Roads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1993), 22.

to the prevalence of structuralist theorizations, Staples and Johnson mention the development of the abovementioned Afrocentric theoretical model to study black family that “liberates the study of Afro-American families from the domination of White referents in the study of Black life.”<sup>331</sup> Second, Black Feminist theory has had a noticeable role in contributing relevant theoretical models for the study of black families, particularly by giving voice and value to the role of women. Third, Staples and Johnson mention the “culture of poverty theory,” a modification of the cultural deprivation theory, which “assumes that Black culture is a pathological version of the general American culture.”<sup>332</sup> Theorists beholden to this model often refer to the black family with pejorative terms like “disorganized” and “matriarchal,” all of which serve to further classify black families as non-normative. Fourth, exchange theory holds that people will continue to participate in those patterns of action they find most rewarding. In the case of marriage, for instance, “exchange theory,” the authors contend, “suggests that a person will not want to remain in a relationship where the rewards provided seem relatively meager compared to what the person knows or perceived about other relationships.”<sup>333</sup> The relational algorithms that inform exchange theory must also take into account the socio-structural and economic conditions that, as the authors share, “help to give rise to dissonance between Black family ideology and actual family arrangements.”<sup>334</sup> Fifth, historical materialism emphasizes the ways in which political and economic forces influence the black family structure. Philosophically similar to the culture of poverty model, historical materialism posits that the pressures of economic stability strain

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*



familial relationships; however, unlike the culture of poverty model, historical materialism fails to account for the influences of race and racism in the economic oppression and exploitation of the underclass. Last, internal colonialism serves as a riposte to the insufficiencies of historical materialism by honing in on the use of racism for political and economic hegemony. Pivotal to this final theoretical model is the manner in which white familial values were imposed on the black family structure in such a way that indigenous African family system structures and values were censured, if not totally destroyed.<sup>335</sup>

My reason for offering this (extensive) overview of the conceptual models that guide black family studies is that each can be further demarcated as either an affirmation of or rejoinder to the aforementioned Moynihan Report.

The document was intended to be an intra-governmental—which is why, upon release, it was labeled “For Official Use Only”—report on the disorganized state of the black family.<sup>336</sup> However, once leaked to the public, it immediately stirred a great deal of controversy, stirring up the American sociopolitical landscape. Moynihan’s family history, as detailed above, greatly influenced his theoretical perspective on the Black family. Only a few months after the release of the troublesome report, Moynihan reiterates its central thesis in a piece that he wrote for the Jesuit magazine *America*, stating,

[T]here is one unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows large numbers of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationships to *male authority* never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder...are not only to be expected, they are very near inevitable. And they are richly deserved (emphasis added).<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>336</sup> Meehan, *op. cit.*

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

Here, again, we encounter the same patriarchal ethos that conjoins the health of the family structure to the presence and prominence of a male authority figure. Assimilation to the prevailing patriarchal structure, then, is the locus of the problem for black families.

Tracing the impact of race and racism on the Negro family (and I am and will for the remainder of this section intentionally use the moniker Negro in keeping with the research discussed) was not always the area of research that so bestirred Moynihan. He earned his theoretical and research chops, so to speak, during the mid-1950s to early-1960s working as the director of the New York State Government Research Project at Syracuse University. Oddly enough, a more academic Pat, having earned his Ph.D. in sociology in 1961, started his foray into social analysis with an essay titled “Epidemic on the Highways.” According to historian James T. Patterson, the essay “criticized the automobile industry for failing to improve the safety of cars, and urged tougher regulation by the government.”<sup>338</sup> As fate would have it, Moynihan’s knack for rigorous research and clearly-written, well-argued prose drew the attention of Irving Kristol, the former editor of *The Reporter*, a magazine praising the virtues of American liberalism and free-market (Friedman-*esque*) capitalism, and the man who would commission Moynihan to write essays and articles on a range of pressing social issues. The most pivotal role that Kristol played, though, was in his orchestrating the union between Moynihan and fellow sociologist Nathan Glazer. At the time, Glazer was completing a book about ethnicity in New York City, which focused on five ethnic groups: the Jews, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Italians, and Irish. Due to their scholarly kinship, Glazer allowed Moynihan to write the book’s concluding chapter, which focused on the Irish. Patterson reports that the book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, the namesake of Moynihan’s concluding chapter, “was a widely praised addition to ethnic studies,

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<sup>338</sup> James Patterson, *op. cit.*, 9.

thereby endowing Moynihan with very useful scholarly credentials.”<sup>339</sup> The theoretical substratum of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which posited that the full assimilation of ethnic groups into American culture did not happen, especially in terms of race and religion, later served to inform Moynihan’s scholarship as he sought to discover how the government had failed to improve the life of the group who had the most difficulty assimilating to the American familial structure: the Negro family. Nevertheless, whether intentional or not, the Moynihan report became a sociopolitical diagnostic manual that, as historian Daryl Michael Scott observes, “placed black life, culture, and personality in an unfavorable light,” thus perpetuating the notion of the Negro family’s pathological disorganization, which damaged the psyche and, by extension, hindered the personality development of its members.<sup>340</sup>

The debate concerning the disorganization of the Negro family has two primary factions, each of which hold different views about the historical role of the black father in the Negro family: On one side, there is the cadre of scholars—most notably, E. Franklin Frazier, Stanley Elkins, and Kenneth Clark—for whom the Negro family’s pathology could be traced to the (complete) emasculation of the patriarchal figure; on the other, you have a more non-traditional group of scholars—including Herbert G. Gutman, Eugene Genovese, and, more recently, Arthur Billingsley—each of whom has found voluminous data that reveals the ways in which black men often fought, at times to the death, to be an integral part of their families, even displaying what would be considered very patriarchal characteristics. While producing his report, Moynihan leaned on the research of Frazier, Elkins, and Clark, which is why he makes what we now know to be tendentious claims such as “A *fundamental fact* of Negro American family life is the often

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 41.

reversed roles of husband and wife (emphasis added).”<sup>341</sup> These alleged fundamental facts were purported in many of the texts cited in the report itself. The following overview of the key researchers that influenced Moynihan’s report reveals that the reasons for Negro family’s pathology was attributed to the dominant image of the impaired black father who had failed in his patriarchal duties.

Moynihan’s analysis of the origins of the black man’s inefficiencies is found in a section titled “The Root of the Problem.” Here, Moynihan introduces the reader to the work of two major figures in the formative years of black family studies, each of whom focuses on a particular sociopolitical exigency: E. Franklin Frazier’s work on the effects of urbanization on the black family and Stanley Elkin’s on that of slavery.

Frazier was, and still remains, a formidable figure in sociological study of the black family. There are some scholars, however, that argue that his greatest work, *The Negro Family in the United States*, is often misinterpreted as a tome supporting the Negro pathology thesis purported by Moynihan and likeminded scholars. Needless to say, Frazier was a far more complex scholar than we are given to believe. Upon Frazier’s death, writer Arthur P. Davis penned a posthumous profile of the lauded scholar, wherein he writes, “Frazier spent a great part of his life fighting three things: American racial injustice, the Negro’s reluctance to measure up to national standards; and the shallowness, pretensions, and false ideals of the black middle class.”<sup>342</sup> It is this “reluctance to measure up to national standards” that comes forth most forcefully in his book on the black family. For Frazier, it was the social conditions under which the Negro family was made to exist that created these fragmentary patterns and structures. In

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<sup>341</sup> Frazier, *op. cit.*, 31.

<sup>342</sup> Arthur P. Davis, “E. Franklin Frazier (1894-1962): A Profile.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 4 (Autumn 1962): 429-435.

moving from slavery to Reconstruction, then Reconstruction to urbanization the Negro family was unable to develop a steady familial pattern in America's ever-changing social landscape, much like the early American family after the Revolution. Nevertheless, Frazier is of the opinion that, after emancipation, there was an epoch of stability during which black men were, in fact, fathers. But this stability was based solely on the father's patriarchal authority, established via his economic viability; as Frazier notes:

Here we have a well-organized family under the authority of the father starting out after emancipation as tenants, then later undertaking to purchase land, and finally becoming small independent farmers. The transition from slavery to freedom was made with little interruption of the habits acquired during slavery. The schooling which the father had received as responsible person on the plantation enabled him to assume the responsibilities and duties of a free man....the families that had achieved a fair degree of organization during slavery made the transition [into freedom] without much disturbance to the routine of living. In these families the authority of the father was firmly established, and the woman in the role of mother and wife fitted into the pattern of the patriarchal household.<sup>343</sup>

Elsewhere, Frazier shares the story of a newly freed slave who expresses the psychological benefits of this feeling of authority: "In my humble place on a hill in the woods beneath the shade of towering pines and sturdy oaks," the man says, "I felt as a king whose supreme commands were 'law and gospel' to my subjects."<sup>344</sup> To which Frazier responds,

Whether or not these reflections...were a true representation of the feelings of a Negro husband suddenly possessed of undisputed authority in his household, they, nevertheless, describe the condition under which male ascendancy very often became established in the family. In this family, as in other families in which we have been able to trace the process by which the Negro man acquired a permanent interest in his family and assumed a position of authority, it appears that the subordination of women in the economic organization of the family played an important part.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Frazier, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

There were lessons, then, if Frazier is correct, that the slave male learned during his enslavement that taught him to be an effective patriarch. Such lessons were put to the test, though, when the Negro family encountered a challenge that proved more complex than the shift from slavery to emancipation: urbanization.<sup>346</sup>

The enjoyments of the well-knit family, something of a micro-state in which the father's manly prowess was given free reign, were assailed as the black family migrated from the pastoral countryside to the harsh landscape of the city. Moynihan believed this radical shift in a family's living conditions had a dire effect on its stability, evident in the following remark, "[w]hen this shift [from the country to the city] occurs suddenly, drastically, in one or two generations, the effect is immensely disruptive of traditional social patterns."<sup>347</sup> Making such a claim could not be based on rhetoric alone, no, to substantiate his claim, Moynihan amassed data, the putative facts, that illustrated the way in which city life weakens, not strengthens, traditional familial patterns. Patriarchal familial structures, for instance, were more prevalent among Negro families in the city than those in the country: Urban Northeast 24.2%, Rural Farm Northeast 4.3%; South Urban 24.2%, South Rural Farm 11.2%.<sup>348</sup> Much of what Moynihan speaks of in terms of urbanization was culled from the work of Frazier, who, as early as 1932, with the publication of *The Negro Family in Chicago*, began to develop a thesis that explored the Negro family's divergent experience in the country and the city. By the time *The Negro Family in the United States* was published in 1939 Franklin had become resolute in his findings, leading him to assert,

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<sup>346</sup> St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Clayton's *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* is a much cited text that details the effects of urbanization as well.

<sup>347</sup> Frazier, *op. cit.*, 17.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

In many cases these broken families were once well adjusted to the simple rural southern community, where the sympathetic relationships existing between members of the family were supported by the church, the lodge, and the customs of the community. But in the city, with its many attractions and conflicting standards of behavior, divergent interests are developed and individualistic wishes become dominant.<sup>349</sup>

He also adds that

Family desertion among Negroes in cities appears, then, to be one of the inevitable consequences of the impact of urban life on the simple family organization and folk culture which the Negro has evolved in the rural South.<sup>350</sup>

Like Moynihan, Frazier supplies substantial statistical evidence to support his claim. For instance, using data supplied by the Charity Organization Society in New York City—an organization, originally founded in England, that provided economic relief to the urban poor—Frazier stresses that during the 1930-1931 fiscal year “three-fifths...of the cases handled by the Charity Organization Society represented migrants who had come to New York City during and subsequent to the first World War.”<sup>351</sup> Many of these migrants, Frazier surmised, were of southern birth. Decampment by the once ever-present patriarchal authority figure, although not unique to the urban life, was certainly exacerbated in these socially, economically, and psychologically unstable environments.

No other sociologists captured the essence of the urbanization hypothesis and black family disorganization more so than the noted black psychologist Kenneth B. Clark. His scholarly noir *Dark Ghetto* holds the view that familial disorganization, discussed in texts like Frazier’s, was not simply a stage or an era through which Negro families were passing; rather, they were entrenched within a “tangle of pathology,” Clark’s terminology, that had become the

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

ignominious hallmark of Negro urban life. In accord with Frazier's and Moynihan's research, Clark declared that the matriarchal familial structure, prevalent in urban settings, had proved an affront to the black man's authority, rendering him, among many other things, psychologically damaged. The matriarch made it so that "[p]sychologically, the Negro male could not support his normal desire for dominance."<sup>352</sup> The almost complete demoralization and emasculation of the Negro paternal figure, however, did not begin nor was it most evident in the ghetto, as Clark would have us believe. No, the strategic unmaning of the black male has its roots in slavery and, as shall be discussed in the following section, was sacralized during the lynching rituals that plagued the South from 1890 to 1940.

If either Clark's or Moynihan's work maintained a psychological tenor (and certainly Clark did because he was a psychologist), then one will find that historian Stanley Elkins', *Slavery*, offers the most glaringly psychological assessment of the black man in slavery. Though his name is only mentioned once in the Moynihan report, Elkins' theory and, to some extent, his methodology—that is, wedding psychoanalytic theory with social analysis—had an enduring influence of Moynihan's own work. Nothing within the pages of Elkins' *Slavery* buttressed the hypotheses put forth by Clark and Moynihan more so than his observation that slavery engendered the creation of a new personality type within the slave system: the Sambo. The defamatory language that Elkins uses to describe the Sambo's characteristics are alarming on their own; and yet, they simply gave, especially during the mid-twentieth century, what some would dare say "academic credence" to the pervasive notion that black men were inherently inferior. Elkins' vituperative rhetoric is all too evident as he states the following:

The characteristics that have been claimed for the type come principally from Southern lore. Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but

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<sup>352</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1965), 70.



chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being. Although the merest hint of the Sambo's "manhood" might fill the Southern breast with scorn, the child, "in his place," could be both exasperating and loveable.<sup>353</sup>

In his necessary work the *Arrogance of Race*, George H. Frederickson, whose scholarship has focused on the vortex of race and racism in America, regards Elkins' Sambo figure as further support for a "new racism."<sup>354</sup> By this, Frederickson makes Elkins the representative of a stream of scholarship that instead of focusing on the biological inferiority of black people insisted that they did exhibit, rather pronouncedly, a pattern of psychosocial inferiority. In like manner, historian R.H. King argues that Elkins' Sambo figure fits well within the "damage school" theoretical camp, which includes figures who played an important role in the struggle for racial justice, such as Malcolm X, Addison Gayle, and Richard Wright, each of whom believed that the extended psychological pains of the slave plantation had done immeasurable and, maybe even, irreversible damage to the black psyche. What made the plantation system unique in its ability to create such a dependent personality, the Sambo, was that it was, to use Elkins' phraseology, a "closed system" in which the slave was given no opportunity to exhibit any estimable personality traits. The only thing that the slave could be was a Sambo, which also meant that the slave master judged the slave's personhood through this personality type, exclusively. The Sambo defined the Negro *in toto*.

The infantile and dependent nature of the Sambo was largely crafted from the bedrock tenets of classical psychoanalytic theory. Names like Alfred Adler, Bruno Bettelheim, Anna and Sigmund Freud are found within the pages of Elkins' text. And he uses their theories to

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<sup>353</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 82.

<sup>354</sup> George M. Frederickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 114.

demonstrate that the dependent personality is an expected derivative of the slave's relationship with a dominant paternal figure, the slave master. "Absolute power for him [the slave master] meant absolute dependency for the slave," Elkins states, "the dependency not of the developing child but of the perpetual child."<sup>355</sup> Because the child, due to its docile nature, is unable to overcome the powerful paternal figure, the slave master, it is forced to, and this is where Elkins' use of classical psychoanalytic theory is most vigorous, identify with the aggressor as a means of self-preservation. In a footnote, Elkins provides an explanatory citation taken from Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defense*, wherein she says of this mode of defensive identification that "[i]t was a means of defense of a rather paradoxical nature: survival through surrender; protection again (*sic*) the fear of the enemy—by becoming part of him; overcoming helplessness—by regressing to childish dependence."<sup>356</sup> It was because he was perpetually childish, stuck in a state of developmental retardation, that the black male, the choice image of the Sambo personality, could never, himself, be deemed a viable paternal figure. The closed system of the plantation that so restricted the malleability of the black man's self-identification, making him a Sambo and nothing else, had been so effective that

[f]or the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image than the plantation master. The "real" father was virtually without authority over his child...the slave father could not even protect the mother of his children except by appealing directly to the master....It [slavery] removed even the honorific attributes of fatherhood from the Negro male.<sup>357</sup>

Responding to much of what Elkins writes in his text, Orlando Patterson remarks that, because the Sambo was by no means to be viewed as having paternal authority, the Sambo "is the total

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<sup>355</sup> Elkins, *op. cit.*, 130.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

absence of any hint of ‘manhood.’”<sup>358</sup> I will return to Patterson’s musings on the relationship between the Sambo/unmanly black male and the lynching ritual in the following section. But before doing so I shall share the counterargument to Elkins’ thesis found in the work of Eugene Genovese, who argues that the Sambo figure was only one part of the “dialectical personality” of the black male in slavery.<sup>359</sup>

An antipodal argument to aforementioned pathological black family diagnosis and, more pointedly, the Sambo figure put forth in Elkins’ *Slavery* text is offered by a number of scholars. Though the research done by these authors was written after Moynihan’s report—and decades after the monograph of, say, a Franklin Frazier—the controversy surrounding the report was still fresh in their minds. Evidence supporting the existence of an identifiable black familial structure, that existed within the institution of slavery, had to be established, first, so as to dispel the myth that there was a legacy of black family disorganization. It is to Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* that one might turn to read the first salvo fired to inveigh against this myth. Blassingame’s analysis of the black family during slavery begins with a bevy of statistical data that compares and contrasts the sex ratios between the slaves of the South against those of slaves in Latin America. This data demonstrated, for Blassingame, that in the South the sex ratio suggests that there was an environment, in terms of the availability of partners, that supported monogamous relationships: For example, in 1860 Missouri slaves had 109 male slaves for every 100 female slaves.<sup>360</sup> Certainly, Blassingame could be charged with analytical insouciance in his

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<sup>358</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 96.

<sup>359</sup> Richard H. King, “Domination and Fabrication: Re-thinking Stanley Elkins’s Slavery,” *Slavery and Abolition* 22 (2001): 1-28.

<sup>360</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 150.

interpretation of the data, but what he offers does suggest that the equal number of male to female slaves would, theoretically, mean that a monogamous familial environment would be the accepted pattern. Being that the family was somewhat stable because of these monogamous family patterns, Blassingame goes on to suggest that the stability of the family was “one of the most important survival mechanisms for the slave.”<sup>361</sup> He later provides a more detailed account of such mechanisms, especially in terms of how they helped the slave father, when he states,

In his family he [the slave father] found companionship, love, sexual gratification, sympathetic understanding of his sufferings; he learned how to avoid punishment, to cooperate with other blacks, and to maintain his self-esteem. However frequently the family was broken, it was primarily responsible for the slave’s ability to survive on the plantation without becoming totally dependent on and submissive to his master. The important thing was not that the family was not recognized legally or that masters frequently encouraged monogamous mating arrangements in the quarters only when it was convenient to do so, but rather that some form of family life did exist among slaves.<sup>362</sup>

It is worth noting that Blassingame pushes back, rather convincingly, against the notion of a broken or, to use the more accepted coinage, “disorganized” black familial structure. But he does even more than that by duly noting psychological benefits found within the black family.

Because the black family offered a safe space within which the slave could have his pains assuaged by the soothing balms of “companionship, love, and sexual gratification,” it can be surmised that the slave was not in reality the Sambo figure depicted in Elkins’ text. The familial environment saw the slave as something more, meaning that he was not totally dependent on the master for his identification. He could, in fact, even be a father, a real father, to his children.

Blassingame adds that

[w]hile the form of family life in the quarters differed radically from that among free Negroes and whites, this does not mean that it failed to perform many of the *traditional functions* of the

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

family—the rearing of children being one of the most important of these functions. Since slave parents were primarily responsible for training their children, they could cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than the master (emphasis added).<sup>363</sup>

Even in slavery, the black father was to show his children, particularly his sons, that the black male's manhood had to be defined on its own terms, namely, as being beyond (*outré*) the derogatory classifications put forth by the master class, especially if black men were to survive the ignoble environs of the slave plantation.

Eugene Genovese's exemplary monograph chronicles the many ways that Black fathers strove to procure a pattern of manhood that could overcome the tyrannical paternalism of the slave master. Before proceeding to Genovese's text, I would do well to reemphasize an earlier point: he is not alone in excoriating the use of the cant phrases of the "pathology school," those who maintain that slavery (and later urbanization) rendered the Black family disorganized.

Herbert Gutman, a social historian who, like Genovese would later do, observed the historical data through a Marxist hermeneutic, which made him terribly sensitive to the life stories of the "common" slave, found that the one-sided view of slave life, drawn from the stories of those in power (i.e., the ruling class), had summarily dismissed the slave's prolific adaptive capacities. He duly notes the scholarly contributions of researchers like Frazier, Elkins, and Moynihan, realizing that their works, especially Moynihan's, were essentially a reflection of a theoretical paradigm that had become inescapably normative. Gutman, though, was still troubled by their inchoate hypothesis: the "tangle of pathology" of black family disorganized. And being so troubled, he set out to discover if, indeed, there was a strain of fatherlessness and matrifocality that had been passed on within the black family from one generation to the next. Gutman states,

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

Our objective was simple: if enslavement caused the widespread development among Afro-Americans of “a fatherless matrifocal family” sufficiently strong to be transmitted from generation to generation, thereby affecting the beliefs and behavior of descendants of eighteenth century African slaves who lived in mid-twentieth-century northern urban ghettos, such a condition should have been even more common among urban Afro-Americans close in time to slavery. The “tangle of pathology” should have been as severe (if not more severe) in 1850 and 1860 as it was in 1950 and 1960.<sup>364</sup>

Gifted with the ability to compile large amounts of relevant statistical data, Gutman provides a bevy of information to refute the claim that the black family had a long history of pathological disorganization. For example, to dispel the myth that there was a lack of marriage stability among common slaves, Gutman examined the 1866 marriage registers from several Virginia counties. For instance, Gutman found that in Rockbridge and Nelson counties a little more than half of the couples were in marriages that lasted for at least ten years.<sup>365</sup> To begin, this data revealed that many black slaves had long-lasting, monogamous marriages and, second, that most of these marriages were found among common slaves, that is, the farm laborers and field hands. Furthermore, it suggests that a stable familial structure was not the exclusive preserve of the “elite” slave, that is, the house servants and artisans. Needless to say, the stubborn refusal to realize a noticeable pattern of familial stability during slavery is, according to Gutman, the result of “misconceptions of slave socialization and slave culture.”<sup>366</sup> The slaves did have their own ways of creating identities of their own on the plantation, which included adaptive familial structures. They often did so by refashioning and reinterpreting, or signifying, the familial structures demonstrated by the slave owner. For Gutman, this was not to be interpreted as a sign of disorganization, but, rather, as evincing the ingenuity of the slave. Gutman underscores the

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<sup>364</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), xviii.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

presence of the slave family's adaptivity, when he professes, "the developing Afro-American culture had at its core common adaptive slave domestic arrangements and kin networks that enlarged slave communities."<sup>367</sup> The adaptability of the slave's familial milieu yielded a pliable perspective on the black man's status not only as a man but also as a father. Given the perpetual affront on the black male slave's masculine identity of the plantation, this had to be the case. What, then, were the characteristics of the black man during slavery? If not in reality a dependent Sambo, how did he challenge and, at times, overcome the emasculating effects of the slave master's paternalism? What were the cultural inoculants that protected his sense of manhood from destruction? Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* offers some insights about such concerns.

In terms of deconstructing the dominant discourse regarding the black man as Sambo, no scholarly work stands in opposition to such claims more so than Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. It is, in my estimation, the most glaring assault on the specious claims of an everywhere dependent, broken, ineffective black manhood, claims made not only in the "Moynihan Report" but, also, and even more pointedly, as noted above, in Elkin's *Slavery* text, the latter of which Genovese offers an unequivocal response to in his essay entitled "Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave: A Critique of the Elkins Thesis." The essay, much like *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, offers a view of the slave personality that stands in opposition to Elkins' Sambo figure. Genovese was most disturbed by Elkins' insouciant reliance on Freudian psychoanalytical theory, which Elkins used to support the prevailing thesis that the growth of the slave's personality was completely dependent on the presence of a father figure, the slave master.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>368</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, "Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave: A Critique of the Elkins Thesis," in *The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics*, ed. Ann J. Lane, 45 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

Elkins' partial interpretation of the Freudian theoretical canon is most glaring in his failure to mention that the father-son relationship is one in which the son is not dependent on the father but feels, instead, a great deal of ambivalence towards the father-figure. *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Totem and Taboo* are two of the more well-known texts that illustrate Freud's own conviction that sons, via their oedipal impulses, do, in fact, rebel against their fathers—thus, a more accurate interpretation of Freud suggests that unrequited devotion (or absolute dependence) is found neither in the father-son nor the master-slave relationship. Freud's own words, taken from *Totem and Taboo*, belie Elkins' unilateral view of the slave master *qua* father's power over the slave *qua* son, when he explains,

we need only assume that the group of brothers banded to together were dominated by the same contradictory feelings towards the father which we can demonstrate as the content of ambivalence of the father complex in all our children and in neurotics. They hated the father who stood so powerfully in the way of their sexual demands and their desire for power, but they also loved and admired him.<sup>369</sup>

When discussing the power of the father, he goes on to say,

No one could or was allowed to attain the father's perfection of power, which was the thing they [the sons] had all sought. Thus the bitter feeling against the father which had incited to the deed [the killing of the father] could subside in the course of time, while the longing for him grew, and an ideal could rise having as a content the fullness of power and the freedom from restriction of the conquered primal father....<sup>370</sup>

Power, this is what the master had and what the slave, viewed by the master as the perpetual dependent child, so desired.<sup>371</sup> However, unlike Elkins, who believed that the closed system of

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<sup>369</sup> A.A. Brill, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 884.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 888.

<sup>371</sup> Freud's *Totem and Taboo* has long been criticized for containing elements of racist personality development typecasting. His most controversial statement reads as follows: "a comparison of the psychology primitive races as taught by folklore, with the psychology of the neurotic as it has become known through psychoanalysis, will reveal numerous points of correspondence and throw light on subjects that are more or less familiar to us."



the Southern plantation afforded no latitude for resistance, Genovese asserts that the slaves did, more often than not, create a space for themselves within plantation life which allowed them to create and fortify insurrectionist modes of selfhood. Therefore, rebelliousness was an often ignored but crucial part of the Sambo personality type, as was the case with slave rebellions in Haiti and Brazil, for example, places where the Sambo is also referenced in historical record. If the slave did not exhibit or was feared to have possessed an insurrectionary personality type, why was it reported, then, that many slave masters were fearful of their slaves? “If Sambo were merely Sambo,” Genovese ponders, “then Elkins must explain how an overseer could publicly defend his class, without challenge, for having ‘to punish and keep in order negroes, at risk of his life.’”<sup>372</sup> *What was it about the slave that was so threatening to the slave master?*

One must remember that more than anything else the plantation was a paternalistic system. It was for all intents and purposes a distorted familial environment: The slave master, the all-powerful father; the slaves, the subservient children. The master, drunk with power, thought himself a benevolent father in the treatment of his infantile dependents. Genovese even claims that there were slave masters who wanted to free themselves of the “burden” of being the primary protector of and caretaker for their slaves. One particularly delusional slave owner lamented that “the trouble and the responsibility of properly taking care of our negroes, you may judge from what you see yourself here, is anything but enviable...I am satisfied, too, that our slaves are better off, as they are, than the majority of your free laboring at the North.”<sup>373</sup> The slave master as caring father, a completely nonsensical notion, is justly derided by Genovese, who regarded this as a telling sign of the master’s own guilt regarding the ill-treatment of his

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<sup>372</sup> Genovese, *op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>373</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 79.

slaves. Let me explain: If the slave master believed himself a tyrannical father figure, a father who was being unjustly abusive towards his children, he would then have to admit that his slaves (*qua* children) would resent his malignant behavior, possibly to the point of being inspired to dethrone the slave master from his position of authority.

But many slave masters were confident that they were not derelict in their paternal duties for two reasons: First, the slaves, at least in the slave master's estimation, regarded the plantation patriarch as a benevolent father; second, there was a firm belief that the male slaves had been so emasculated by the closed system of slavery that they would never develop the will to overthrow the slave master. It is the latter, the view of Black man as dependent son (i.e., Sambo), that poet Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) scrutinizes so eloquently in the following passage:

Manhood is deemed the ability to oppress by the white man. At least, one is more of a man in the sense of being self-sufficient, able to provide for yourself and your family....The black man in America has always been expected to function as less than a man; this was taken for granted, and was the ugliest weight of his enslavement....<sup>374</sup>

Black men during slavery did not exhibit patterns of paternalism, a fatherly air, on the plantation, and so he was considered unmanly, a zero of a man. And yet, black men still forged their own modes of manhood within the purportedly closed slave system. Genovese mentions that even though black men could not “play all the roles that whites could” they innovatively constructed their own ways of expressing masculinity, which were drawn from “powerful inner resources.”<sup>375</sup> A “fresh look,” to quote Genovese, at black men during slavery reveals that they used their progressive religious beliefs to forge identities that “taught them to love and value each other, to take a critical view of their masters, and to reject the ideological rationales for their

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<sup>374</sup> Leroi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashi Classics, 1966), 245.

<sup>375</sup> Genovese (1972), op. cit., 491.

own enslavement.”<sup>376</sup> This critical (theoretical) view of their condition, the ability to look beyond the constrictions of their present reality, allowed the black male slave to see himself as a man, even as he was denied access to the paternalistic authority of the slave master. For instance, Genovese verifies that the status of fatherhood was to be found in the slave quarters, as explicated in stories told by children who testified to the presence of a loving father in the home, which suggests that “[s]lave children usually did have an image of a strong black man before them.”<sup>377</sup> Such a claim, though, proves just as misleading as the Sambo image. For we are still appraising the value of the black man’s manhood against that of the paternalistic slave master, that is, manhood is best exemplified through patriarchy.

It seems that we need another way of ascribing worth to black manhood that goes beyond the normative models of plantation paternalism. *But where can this innovative mode of manhood be found?* I propose that it is found within an uncommon religious spectacle, a spectacle filled with purgative fervor, during which the sins of a crestfallen mass of men, those mourning the Lost Cause, were washed away by the precious blood of a strange fruit hanging from a sacred tree. There is an invaluable lesson about black manhood to be learned from the lynching ritual.

### **The Crypto-Ascension of the Lynched Son**

Few scholars, if any, have offered a more comprehensive account of the pernicious social effects of slavery and the incongruous inter-racial power relations derived from it than sociologist Orlando Patterson. His text *Slavery and Social Death* is necessary reading for anyone, academics and non-academics alike, who wishes to become better informed as to the sociopolitical apparatuses that were used to dehumanize the slave. Readers of Patterson’s work,

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 493.

however, might be startled by his alliance with the pathology school of research, most notably the scholarship of E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Patrick Moynihan. James T. Patterson's view of this is that Orlando Patterson "forcefully denounced the 'ethnic chauvinism' of Moynihan's detractors and highlighted the point that Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and others had made concerning the 'catastrophic' impact of slavery on black family life."<sup>378</sup> The use of the term "ethnic chauvinism" needs to be unpacked. It is taken from Orlando Patterson's books *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse*, in which he states that black scholars are quick to criticize those white's within the academy who dare to give a negative appraisal of some element of black life. These scholars, in Patterson's view, will glorify, rather than give an honest evaluation of, the many social issues that are confronting the black community.

Black American ethnicity has encouraged the intellectual reinforcement of some of the worst sociological problems of the group and an incapacity to distinguish the things that are worthwhile in black life from those that are just plain rotten. The "street culture" of petty crime, drug addiction, paternal irresponsibility, whoring...all of which damage and destroy only fellow blacks—instead of being condemned by black ethnic leaders has, until recently been hailed as the embodiment of black "soul."<sup>379</sup>

This chauvinism is what, in Patterson's opinion, led many scholars to denounce Moynihan as a racist while ignoring that the same observations about the matrifocal family were made by stalwart black scholars like Du Bois and Frazier. Not all of the critics of Moynihan, though, believed him a racist—they felt that his views on black life and black manhood were far too myopic. And in some respects the same could be said about Patterson. Daryl Michael Scott, in his comments on the relationship between the neoconservative and left-leaning perspectives on the black family, shares that even a liberal sociologist like Patterson

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<sup>378</sup> Patterson, *op. cit.*, 130.

<sup>379</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 155-156.

has sought to persuade his readers that slavery bequeathed to black people pathological gender relationships. Black men, especially the black middle class, have an overweening desire to be patriarchs, and lower-class black men are misogynists, as evidenced by the trope “motherfucker.” For their part, black feminists, he [Patterson] argues, have overstated the victimization of black women and ignored the role of black mothers in producing pathological black men.<sup>380</sup>

According to Scott, Patterson draws a firm line in the sand when he challenges those researchers who propose that the black family was resilient or strong. Scott lifts a quote from Patterson’s essay “Blacklash: The Crisis of Gender Relations among African Americans,” which reads, “[i]t is perhaps over defensive and counterproductive ...to emphasize the ‘resilience’ and ‘strength’ of the black family and gender relations.” For Patterson, familial stability and strength were by no means the norm for the black slave family but, rather, social death.

“If the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what was he?” asks Patterson. To answer these exigent questions, Patterson mines the scholarship of neo-Marxist economist and anthropologist Claude Meillassoux. Their structuralist analysis of slavery served Patterson well as he sought to discover the transitional processes that resulted in the slave’s social death. The process of social death begins by uprooting the slave from this milieu, that is, creating a radical shift in his social environment; but this is simply the external/materialist phase of enslavement. Second, in a move that makes enslavement more of a psycho-existential phenomenon, the slave is introduced into an alien community, that of the slave master; however, he is brought into the community as a nonbeing. In describing the slave’s ontological vacuity within the plantation community, Patterson quotes Meillassoux, who wrote,

The captive always appears therefore as marked by an original, indelible defect that weighs, endlessly upon his destiny. This is...a kind of social death. He can never be brought to life again

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<sup>380</sup> Scott, *op. cit.*, 196.

as such since, in spite of some specious examples...of fictive rebirth, the slave will remain forever an unborn being....<sup>381</sup>

Patterson takes the structuralist views of Meillassoux to analyze the selfsame elements of social death that can be seen in slave holding cultures throughout the ages. Patterson provides a few examples of this, which are:

The idea of social death was also given direct legal expression in Roman law. The slave was *pro nullo*. We learn, too, from the comedies of Plautus and Terence that the slave was one who recognized no father and no fatherland....<sup>382</sup>

To the [ancient] Egyptians this status amounted to social and legal death....And it was into this status that captives who were enslaved were assimilated. Significantly, the Egyptian word for captive, literally translated, meant “living dead.”<sup>383</sup>

In Korea during the Koryo period slavery has a “moral...connotation”; slaves were persons from whom heaven had withdrawn its favor. In 1300 King Chungnyol of Korea responded in alarm to a draft of a plan...to reform the system of slavery. The king explained thus: “Our ancestors have instructed us that these servile elements are of a different race and therefore it is not possible for them to become common people—to oppose the instruction of our ancestors is to endanger our social order.”<sup>384</sup>

More so than any other ancient society, it was the politically savvy and helplessly plutocratic Romans who invented the “legal fiction of *dominium* or absolute ownership.”<sup>385</sup> Through this was born a pattern of Westernized hegemony over those categorized as non-beings—socially dead—that sought to obtain, not just a physical, but an “inner power over things beyond mere control.”<sup>386</sup> Social death, then, moves one from a Marxist analysis of slavery, that is, a materialist

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<sup>381</sup> Patterson (1982), *op. cit.*, 38.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

analysis focused on the means by which the slave's labor was exploited for economic production to the wanton mishandling of their psychological and, I dare say, spiritual resources as well.

One finds that the enforcement of social death continued after manumission, as the bitter sons of former slave master's remained affixed to the ideals of *dominium*. They still held the view that the former slave could be used, due to their socially dead status, to bolster their sense of selfhood. This was especially the case in relation to the late-eighteenth to early-twentieth century white male southerner. Filled with anxiety about his status as a man, both in the home and in society at large, the white male southerner needed the black male Sambo-type to provide him with self-assurance as to his status as a virtuous man and an upstanding patriarch—to wit, the sublime symbol of national manhood.

The ill-begotten moral architecture of the lynching ritual was forged during an era when the “unity” of the United States was very much in question. In particular, there was much unsettledness concerning the nation's identity. Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 was, if nothing else, a psychological shock to former slave masters, along with those who profited mightily from the slave system, who now had to contend with the troubling notion that their former dependents—i.e., their children—were, by law, freedmen. In order to acclimate the freed slaves to their new socio-cultural environment, the government, led by the Radical Republicans, imposed a number of legislative measures to uphold the idea that blacks were to be recognized, by all, as independent human beings. Needless to say, many if not all of the Southern Democrats, galvanized by their constituents, roundly rejected the underlying philosophies of Reconstruction, believing that “[t]he childlike black...[was] unprepared for freedom and incapable of properly exercising the political rights

Northerners had thrust upon them.”<sup>387</sup> In his perceptive response to the manifold failures of Radical Reconstruction (1867-1877), a period during which the Radicals were intent on prevailing the notions of black suffrage on the defeated Southerners, W.E.B. Du Bois observed that it was the thought that freed black men might have to be invited into their manhood fraternity, more so than economic or political concerns, that most troubled the white male southerner. Du Bois wrote, “[o]ne fact and one fact alone explains the attitude of most recent [white] writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men.”<sup>388</sup> A concerted effort by numerous terroristic groups soon followed, beginning as early as 1865, to restore right order, plantation paternalism that is, in the South. Historian Eric Foner relates the following concerning the groups that were formed during this era: “By 1870, the Ku Klux Klan and kindred organizations like the Knights of the White Camelia and the White Brotherhood had become deeply entrenched in nearly every Southern state.”<sup>389</sup> These were the groups that wanted to make amends for their greatest sin: the failed rebellion of the Civil War, the Lost Cause.

Lynching proved an especially effective means of suppressing the notion of freedom within black southerners, especially black men. The nearly supreme efficacy of this method of manhood suppression, whereby black men were forcefully occluded from the status of patriarchy, was not lost on Patrick Moynihan, who commented in his report that

Unquestionably, these events worked against the emergence of a strong father figure [i.e., patriarch]. The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star

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<sup>387</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Perennial Modern Classics, 2002), xviii.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.



general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, a particular type of male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The “sassy nigger” was lynched.<sup>390</sup>

Again, the historical epoch within which Moynihan locates the emergence of a “particular type of male boastfulness” is quite telling, for it was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the South, in reaction to the Force Acts instituted by the government, crafted a new set of legislative measures to renege on the promise made by the Emancipation Proclamation. Hence, the Jim Crow laws, enacted between 1876 and 1965, became the social contract *de rigueur* throughout the South.

The segregationist praxes initiated by these laws re-inscribed the doctrine of black male inferiority within the black psyche. No act idealized white male boastfulness and, at the same time, black male emasculation more so than the lynching ritual. Amy Louise Wood, a historian, says of the lynching ritual that it “was more than a white prerogative; it was a patriarchal duty through which white man restored their masculine dominance.”<sup>391</sup> There was more to this, however, than manhood redemption, so to speak, for it seems that the failures of the Civil War, the Lost Cause, had diminished the white male southerner’s sense of being sanctified, set a part, to rule over the uncivilized other, the slave. Charles Reagan Wilson, a historian, has it that the Civil War demonstrated “the height of Southern virtue... a moral crusade against the atheistic North.”<sup>392</sup> Such a backwards syllogism inferred that civil disorder (or disorganization) that plagued the South after emancipation—most exemplified in the liberation of former dependents—meant that the Southern male, as he himself judged, had not only failed as a man but, even more disturbing, had fallen into sin. The Lost Cause was a sign of divine wrath. And

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<sup>390</sup> Frazier, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>391</sup> Wood, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>392</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 8.

the Southern male needed a sacrifice to appease a disappointed God, the supernal patriarch. *Who would serve as this sacrifice?*

The restoration of Southern honor was to be a cultural, not a political, enterprise. Wilson contends that during the period between the Civil War and World War I there was a tying together of Christian churches and Southern culture, out of which a Southern civil religion was conceived.<sup>393</sup> Wilson notes that the pains of the Lost Cause were assuaged by a civil religion that “offered confused and suffering Southerners a sense of meaning, an identity in a precarious and distinct culture.”<sup>394</sup> The sons of this New South, guided by their civil religion, would be taught the necessary tactics to regain and forever secure white superiority. In her essay “Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings,” Kris Durocher, a social and cultural historian, speaks to the pedagogical elements of the lynching ritual, when she says, “[c]oncerns about the future of white supremacy prompted white male southerners to show the next generation the need to maintain white superiority through ritualized aggression against African Americans.”<sup>395</sup> But, again, according to DuRocher, the import of manhood, as the primary means through which racial superiority was sacralized, cannot be ignored; she explains that “the lynching ceremony, a public ritual of physical brutality, functioned as a space in which white southerners defined and defended white male supremacy.”<sup>396</sup> We have, therefore, the historical record informing us of stories depicting such lessons in Southern manhood, passed on from one generation of men to the next, which read as follows:

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<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>395</sup> Kris Douchet, “Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings,” in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend, 46 (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009).

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

At the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, one father, when questioned about the propriety of holding his young son on his shoulder so he could get a good view of the mob that kicked, stabbed, castrated, and incinerated Washington [the lynchee], replied: “My son can’t learn too young the proper way to treat a nigger.”<sup>397</sup>

The lessons of the “proper way” were not just for white sons—no, many black sons were made aware, whether through first-hand account or ghastly tales, of these horrific events. It is frightening to consider what effect such lessons had on these sons who were made to watch black men (some of whom had sons of their own) suffer the terror of the lynching tree.

The earliest writings on the lynching ritual often ignored the ritualistic elements of the event itself, focusing instead on the physical and even psychological effects of the act. Walter White’s *Rope and Faggot* serves as a case in point of this analytical approach. White held the view that what he termed “lynching-psychology” was derived in part from the human desire for excitation; thereby suggesting that, above all, in the absence of, say, a theatre, symphony hall, or merry-go-round, the lynching spectacle provided entertainment for southerners who had grown tired of “drab working-hours and more drab home-life.”<sup>398</sup> In addition, the lynching-psychology was also, argues White, the result of the white male southerner’s unwillingness to overcome his puerile affixation on the halcyon days of the South. White categorized this as the inability to “form new ideas.”<sup>399</sup> Though such insights are instructive, White never seeks to uncover the religious undertones that came to the fore during the lynching ritual. It cannot be forgotten that during this period, between 1890 and 1940, the apex of the lynching ritual, many Southerners were still indoctrinated with a Puritan, Calvinist theology that emphasized the need to punish

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>398</sup> Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 9.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 10.

sinner for their iniquitous behavior. And the most condemned enmity that had to be uprooted out of a community, the thing that most endangered white male southerner's communal stability, was unmanliness—the very weakness that had brought about the shame of the Lost Cause.

The acceptable target for this weakness is aptly described by historian C. Van Woodward, who says, “[t]here had to be a scapegoat. And all along the line signals were going up to indicate that the Negro was an approved object of aggression.”<sup>400</sup> And so the Negro would, in fact, become a suitable sacrifice for the sins of the white South. Manumission had allowed the Sambo to rebel against his former master, the paternal figure. If you recall, it was Patrick Moynihan who remarked that the “sassy” Negro was lynched. This was especially the case for the male Negro who stepped out of his assigned place. More so than anything else, it was this sassiness (or insolence), the refusal to acquiesce completely to the South's system of exploitation and oppression, that so troubled the white male southerner. *How could the Sambo develop his own sense of selfhood? How could these dependent, infantilized men dare go against their fathers? What was it that gave them the strength to resist?* Patterson maintains that “the Afro-American had refused to go under spiritually, had resisted nobly in the face of inordinate cultural pressure.”<sup>401</sup> He goes on to add, “[t]his was a contradiction and an embarrassment for Euro-Americans, a people who considered themselves...a triumphant, superior race....”<sup>402</sup> Because whites, as a self-designated superior race, believed themselves a splitting image of the divine imago, they sought to create “a master civilization built in the militaristic, honorific image of a

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<sup>400</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 81.

<sup>401</sup> Patterson (1998), *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

chivalric, conquering ‘white’ Christ.”<sup>403</sup> A manly Jesus. A kick-ass Christ. A Jesus who was more like his choleric Old Testament father. This is the God that could restore Southern order, a closed system, if you will, in which black men maintained their place as a dependent, servile Sambo.

But what of the humble Christ? What of the Jesus who ministered to the social outcasts of his day? What of the Jesus who uttered words of love and peace during his Sermon on the Mount? What of the Jesus who endured the suffering of the cross without calling heaven’s army to his defense? He was discarded. Rejected. Despised. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”<sup>404</sup> Patterson gives an eloquent account of this, when he states,

The humbled Christ was dissociated from the triumphant Christ by virtue of being associated with the humbled, crucified Negro. Both were then discarded, leaving for contemplation only the triumphant Christ, the only god-figure befitting a chosen, superior “race.” With malevolent perfection, the burning cross distilled it all: sacrificed Negro joined by the torch with sacrificed Christ, burn together and discarded, both *signas* and *signatum* consumed in the triumphant flame of the victorious, militaristic Christ rising above the flowing white robes and galloping white horses in a cloud of Euro-American supremacist glory.<sup>405</sup>

Choosing an apt candidate to fill the role of the scapegoat was important. Donald G. Matthews, a historian, notes that a suitable scapegoat had to be a person who maintained a place of marginality within the community.<sup>406</sup> In using the work of the aforementioned Rene Girard, whose analysis of the relationship between violence and the sacred was mentioned in the second chapter, Matthews has it that in their choosing such persons (i.e., the socially dead), the lynchers could perform their ritual without fear of reprisal. It was because, in effect, the Black man was

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> John 1:11 (NIV).

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Donald G. Matthews, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” *Journal of Southern Religion* (2000).

regarded as having no social status—i.e., Patterson’s “social death”— that the sins of a shamed community, the white South, could be heaped upon him. Through this act of what Matthews calls “collective transference,” the black man was transformed into a much-needed anodyne for the white male southerner’s melancholia.<sup>407</sup> It was to the lynchee that this melancholy was projected upon in such a way that the lynched black male body became an iconographic embodiment of the very baseness—the b(l)ackside—of manhood.

(Parenthetically, it is to Freud’s *The Ego and the Id* that Paul Ricouer looks to when he suggests that in melancholia, the ego is caught between the rage of the id and the “tyrannical and punishing” conscience of the superego, the latter of which is the endopsychic abode of the father imago; and feeling so tormented by this fractious psychological state, the ego turns its own self-aggression towards the other, so as to save himself from self-annihilation.<sup>408</sup> The sadism of the superego is on full display in those instances of what historian Richard H. King calls “aberrant cultural situations,” which are times of social unsettledness when the guilt of the community’s sociopolitical disorganization educes a “cultural melancholia” that then leads “death-dealing.”<sup>409</sup> The melancholic in order to preserve his selfhood needed to solidify an image of a guilty other towards whom this rage, once inflicted upon the melancholic’s self, could be directed. Lynching photography supplied such images.)

Lynching photography supplied the images that reinforced the ideation of a totally unmanned black manhood. Many have noted the use of photographs to create and re-create, for

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<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>408</sup> Ricouer, *op. cit.*, 299.

<sup>409</sup> Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 17.

further enjoyment, the religious fervor and overall fantastical (almost orgiastic) nature of the lynching ritual itself. Wood asserts that

[t]hrough their graphic realism, they [photographs] came to alter people's perceptions of truth and their apprehension of the world around them. In other words, because photographic...images ultimately blurred distinctions between reality and representation, spectators received them as transparent and truthful reflections of the objective world and, in turn, came to measure their own realities against them.<sup>410</sup>

Therefore, the image of the defiled black body, elevated for all to see, became the means by which black manhood would be appraised by white onlookers. These images, moreover, were the brick and mortar of the white male southerner's superiority complex; for, as Wood notes, "it was through this power that photographs...of lynching...came to affirm and authenticate white supremacy," an arrogated supremacy fully grounded in patriarchy.<sup>411</sup> Providing a quick, seemingly all-encompassing, view of reality is what makes photography so appealing. It was writer and filmmaker Susan Sontag who remarked that "the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it."<sup>412</sup> The photograph provided racists with empirical evidence to reaffirm their puerile conceptions of blacks; they could now say, "Yes, I got it, I can *see* what black men are really like...." Photography, however, so much as it captures reality or "claims to represent exactly what was before the camera's lens," is, in truth, nothing more than a frame; there is much that exists outside of its borders. Which Sontag believes negates the comprehensiveness of the photograph's presentation, because "to frame is to exclude."<sup>413</sup> Suffice it to say, many observers refused to consider what might reside beyond the

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<sup>410</sup> Wood, op. cit.,10.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 22.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 46.

picture of the strung-up or, photographically, *framed-up* black man, choosing instead to gaze upon, as literary scholar Maurice O. Wallace contends, “black male images narrowly within a restricted representational field,” thereby “reproducing certain ‘idees fixes’ [fixed ideas] about the nature of black male otherness.”<sup>414</sup> Photography and the structure of Southern patriarchy were thus aligned in the lynching ritual.

The lynching ritual restored the religious-psychocultural structure of southern manhood—one based on the image of a militaristic, patriarchal Christ—while at the same time, pushing black manhood back to its normative place of liminality.<sup>415</sup> The renowned anthropologist Victor Turner has verily established that it is those persons occupying that liminal space who form what he terms “communitas.”<sup>416</sup> Space will not allow me to go into the finer points of Turner’s masterful work *The Ritual Process*; nonetheless, it is worth noting that in his remarks about communitas he states that “[it] breaks through the interstices of structure...it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships.”<sup>417</sup> Unlike those lynchers who worshipped at the foot of the lynching tree in order to become affixed in their patriarchal status, the lynchee’s liminality, conversely, rendered him the anti-patriarch, a figure who represented anti-structure (read: *disorganization*). Liminality gave the lynchee the freedom to be in process, to remain in a state wherein his identity could not be summarily defined by the other. Through the ritual, it is liminality that makes “transition...a permanent

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<sup>414</sup> Wallace, op. cit., 6.

<sup>415</sup> **Liminality**—is taken from the Latin word *limen*, meaning a threshold. Turner says, “liminal entities are neither here or there; they are betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law.” [*The Ritual Process*, 95]

<sup>416</sup> **Communitas**—an unstructured community of equals rooted in a modality of social relationships, evident in the changing of positions.

<sup>417</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; repr., New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2009), 129



condition”<sup>418</sup> Hence the lynchee is to be deemed as person in transition, not someone who is fixed in a state, as the lynching photograph would leave many to believe. Patterson fails to underscore the ways that the lynching tree, in being linked with the cross, became not only a symbol of despair but a strident sign of this contradiction. He chooses, instead, to lean on the reflections of noted black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, and the poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, all of whom had a myopic view of the lynching ritual: it represented the complete unmaning of black manhood, nothing else. Because of the ocular trauma rendered by the horrific images and blood-curdling stories disseminated about lynchings these noted black intellectuals could not remove their gaze from facticity of the black man’s broken body on the lynching tree—moreover, they also had to contend with what this physical brokenness signified about the black man’s selfhood. Their inability to see beyond the negativizing effect of the lynching tree was furthered by the unnerving fact that such injustices were wrought upon a people who believed in a God of justice. *How could a God of love allow such things to happen?* This theological-deontological conundrum boggled up the religious lives of many within the black intelligentsia, from the sociologist to the philosopher to the poet, some of whom abandoned a life of faith all together. They were too disappointed in and, more vehemently stated, angered with a God who had failed to deliver his chosen people from their oppressors.<sup>419</sup> Patterson commiserates with this sentiment. However, we find a more protean meditation on the lynching ritual, particularly in terms of its mimetically restating the paradox of the Cross, in James Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>419</sup> Literary scholar Qiana J. Whitted shows that there was a strong tradition of anti-religious rhetoric among twentieth century African American literary figures. In the text she discusses Cullen’s work in terms of him making a clear correlation between the lynching tree and the cross, most pointedly in designating white racist Christians as “crucifiers.” (see *A God of Justice: The Problem of Evil in Twentieth Century Black Literature*, 36.)

Cone's credentials as a black theologian, a black liberation theologian more precisely, make him well qualified to comment on the relationship between the central symbol of Christian suffering, the cross, and that of black oppression, the lynching tree. Patterson, as has been noted, interpreted the lynching tree as a mechanism that tethered black men, perpetually, to the image of a humble crucified Christ. However, Cone's theological prism provides him with another perspective. He insists that the cross, rather than just a symbol of defeat and degradation, "is a paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word..."<sup>420</sup> At the basis of Cone's hypothesis is his conviction that, as Genovese suggested earlier in terms of the slave system, the fecund spiritual lives of black people enabled them to abjure the dehumanizing machinations of the lynching ritual. Herein lies the roots of resistance. The inversion of the world's value systems seems particularly apropos to Patterson's observation that white male southerners enacted the lynching ritual to restore patriarchal structure in the South. Cone's interpretation of the lynching tree, however, suggests that the lynching ritual did not restore power to those white males who yearned for patriarchy, but demonstrated, instead, the power of the one who hung on the lynching tree, the one likened to Son of God, who was nailed to the cross. Cone's radical interpretation of the linkage between the lynching tree and the cross harkens back to his earlier theorization, found in texts like *A Black Theology of Liberation* and *God of the Oppressed*, that Jesus, the Son, was black. This holds an important lesson for black men. Foremost of which is that this revolutionary manhood is reflective of the contradictory and transformative ideals best evinced in what philosopher Cornel West locates in prophetic Christianity. West observes that

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<sup>420</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 2.

[c]ontradiction and transformation are at the heart of the Christian gospel...For Christians this “what is” and these “prevailing realities” are products of fallen, finite creatures, products that bear the stamp of imperfection. *This dialectic of imperfect products and transformative practice, of prevailing realities and negation, of human depravity and human dignity, of what is and the not-yet constitutes the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history* (emphasis in original).<sup>421</sup>

Negating the ossifying mores of a patriarchal psychocultural structure, whereby black men were positioned as the *bête noire* of white manhood, is, for me, the most radicalizing aspect of the lynching ritual. The conjoining of the black male lynchee with the crucified black Christ became a strident means of negating the lynching tree’s imposition of a monolithic view of black manhood—it was, in essence, negating the negation of the oppressor, the most dynamic form of sassing, a means of smashing-to-bits the inveterate boundaries that had long defined (and restricted) black manhood. It was a prophetic rebuttal that declared to white male lynchers, and the many participant-observers, that black manhood could not be defined, summarily, by neither the paternalism of the slave master nor the tortured, emasculated body that dangled from the lynching tree. The black man was something more. A man in transition. A man moving-on, moving-up to new horizons of self-consciousness. It was, in truth, an *outré* manhood.

The parallel(s) between the cross and the lynching tree are most evident in this regard: both were intended to publicly shame the victim. Religious historian Martin Hengel attests that the crucifixion was not “any kind of death,” but rather “an utterly offensive affair.”<sup>422</sup> In another place he remarks, so as to further describe the public shaming associated with the event, “it was a matter of subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity.”<sup>423</sup> But as was the case in Cone’s

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<sup>421</sup> West, op. cit., 17.

<sup>422</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 22.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

reinterpretation of the lynching tree, the cross came to be viewed, not only in Christian lore, but in other traditions as well, as a means of elevation, even “social” elevation. Joel Marcus, a New Testament and religious origins scholar, has written an insightful article wittfully entitled *Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation*, wherein he locates the etiology of this idea of elevation in the Greek etymology associated with crucifixion used in John’s gospel, particularly the words “to raise, lift” found in John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34.<sup>424</sup> The Johannine take on the crucifixion suggests, given the scriptural evidence, that there was an “unusual twist” provided by the crucifixion, one that bestowed a measure of honor on the crucified.<sup>425</sup> The prevalence of this elevation verbiage in John’s gospel notwithstanding, Marcus also finds such language being used by such figures as Artemidorus Daldianus, who surmised in his most known work *Oneirocritica*, a book on dream interpretation, that the presence of crucifixion in one’s dreams portended one’s social elevation.

It is also auspicious for a poor person [to dream of crucifixion]. For a crucified person is raised high...and nourishes...many....But it [a dream of crucifixion] means exposure of secrets. For a crucified person is readily visible....It means freedom for slaves, since the crucified are no longer subject to any person....To dream that one has been crucified in a city signifies that one will exercise rule...over the place where the cross has been set up.<sup>426</sup>

Conceiving the crucifixion as an oneiric aspirant of the poor seems a bit much to Marcus.

Whereas for someone like Justin Meggitt, a researcher of the origins of Christianity and religion in antiquity, a Artemidorusian (*a la* Freudian) interpretation of the crucifixion through dreams suggests that the existential fear of crucifixion could be reversed during the dream state. Hence, Meggitt remarks that “[i]n sleep, the symbol of oppression that dominated most people’s waking

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<sup>424</sup> Joel Marcus, “Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1 (2006): 73-87.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

lives was ironically transformed into one of liberation.”<sup>427</sup> Whether or not the poor or the ruling class originated this mode of thought is a secondary, if not tertiary, concern for us here. What is noteworthy is the way in which elevation became thematized before, during, and after the crucifixion.

We have already discussed the process itself—being “hung-up” or “elevated” on the cross—but what of the person prior to the event? What had they done to warrant such punishment? Marcus has it that it was the rebellious slave, “or slaves who had insulted their masters” who had more so than anything else been found guilty of “self-elevation” getting “above” themselves, such persons had eddied against the restrictions of place assigned to them. This was a terrible act of insubordination. A similar disdain was held for blacks who dared believe themselves beyond their masters. Unfortunately, as the following part of this study shall bear out, there were black fathers who began to feel the same way about their sons. These were sons who had grown weary of their father’s paternalism and desired to create manhood of their own.

It would be all together glorious if the history of black manhood, from the era of the lynching tree (ca. 1890 -1940) onward, reflected a firm faith in the inversion of the patriarchal value system. Alas, this is not so. Patriarchy remained the prevailing sociopolitical zeitgeist for much of the early- to mid-twentieth century, and still remains so to this day. With this in mind, we find that the restorative praxes of the lynching ritual, though no longer a social phenomenon, have become a surreptitious psychosocial means of keeping black men in their place. No longer, though, is it a mechanism of control used by white male southerners, no, it has become far more pervasive, especially as numerous black men seek to remove any signs of weakness from both themselves and, in particular, their sons. We find this *psychosocial lynching* taking place in

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

numerous accounts of fractious father-son relationships, as told by black men. Unfortunately, black men associated manhood with the dominance of the Westernized patriarch; and in the case that they could not emulate this form of manhood within their familial environs, they either overcompensated, becoming emotionally and physically violent, or decamped, unable to bear the shame of not achieving the status of a patriarch, a real man. In the end, we see an intergenerational phenomena in which the idea of the black man being a weak son—that is, not demonstrating the characteristics of patriarchal manhood—was roundly rejected by many black men. I submit that such was the plight of the two black men whose childhood stories will serve as the data for this study: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Wright.

King was born into a steady, middle-class black family that, upon one's initial appraisal, would seem to have provided him with an indomitable sense of selfhood. And yet, despite these noticeable advantages, we find a King that wrestles constantly with feelings of inadequacy, a sense that he is not measuring up as a man, a tenuous ipseity. From this, one encounters a King who, at times, overcompensates, giving the air of a man's man, a man who fancies himself somewhat of a modern-day Don Juan by engaging in irresponsible sexual escapades (some of which were recorded while he was under surveillance by the FBI). This cavalier behavior, bordering on narcissistic nonchalance, is all the more surprising to those who knew him and even those who read of these actions today, not just because King was a prophet of righteousness, but also because King had a father—a strong father—Daddy King, a man of estimable moral rectitude, after whom he could pattern his own masculine behavior. Daddy King's manhood, however, may have proved far too powerful, as we shall discover, for his deeply sensitive son. Even so, King was able to have a ground-breaking moment of sonship when he encountered *le point vierge*.

Richard Wright's manhood journey, conversely, was devoid of those benefits afforded King. Wright was born and reared in abject poverty. Hunger was to be the signpost of his formative years. His soul, waylaid by despair, was never succored by the living bread—the Word—preached in the black church. He was of little faith. If King was the prophet of love, Wright was the ostensible messenger of a deep-seated hate. He hated whites for what they had done to blacks. Lynching, more so than anything else deeply troubled Wright, who once lamented that the inequitable, often oppressive, relationship between blacks and whites made him “conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings.”<sup>428</sup> He hated blacks for allowing whites to circumscribe their sense of selfhood—to the point that black life had become far too dependent on the white man's vision of what black life should be. But most of all he hated his father, Nathan Wright. Nathan was, for Richard, the most terrifying symbol of what Patterson referred to earlier as socially dead. However, as he aged, Wright began to inveigh against this tendentious image of his father, and all black men for that matter, particularly through his literary works. Wright used his literary craftsmanship to create a model of black manhood that reflects both the brokenness and the beauty, that is, the inconsistencies that inheres our humanity.

The next chapter of the study, however, will serve to bring Freud's perturbations about the role of the father to the fore, particularly how his own anxieties about an unheroic manhood, which he believed was found in his father, Jacob Freud, greatly influenced his theories of the mind. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* began a quest to reveal the hidden (or unconscious) wishes that tell of our authentic feelings for a love object. What is most important about the theory, and what we shall see is most germane to both King and Wright, is that the manifest

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<sup>428</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1944; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 74.

feelings that we have for an object are oftentimes a ruse for repressed desires. This being the case, we see in Freud's own life how manifest affection for a paternal figure masks an inner displeasure with which the conscious mind does not want to reckon. Freud, however, the valiant man of science that he was, knew that these inner motives held the answer to all manner of psychological maladies, not only for his patients but for him as well.



CHAPTER FIVE  
A FATHER'S SECRET REVEALED

"A hero is a man who stands up manfully against his father and in the end victoriously overcomes [or surpasses] him."

—Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

## Sigmund's Unheroic Patrimony

The tumultuous affective relationship between Sigmund Freud and his father, Jacob Freud, illustrates how childhood trauma produces the kind of psychological chicanery that he, the progenitor of psychoanalysis, speaks of in his dream text, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Of particular significance is how, in Freud's estimation, the psyche manipulates its content so as to not bring to light anything that may be offensive to the conscious mind (the readable psyche), especially those unconscious thoughts that might reveal one's negative affect, *hate* that is, towards an authority figure—such as the patriarchal state or its most specific representative: the authoritative father. This chapter delves into the way in which a son peers behind the veil of patriarchal mystique to discover a father's secret; meaning, the truth about the father's *con-polar* manhood, the myriad discontinuities that lie behind the appearance (or consciousness) of authority, self-control and stasis. The obverse psychoanalytic evaluation of the Freud father-son dyad will bring the one polarity of the *con-polar* interpretive methodology to the fore, in that much of this chapter will attend to impact of Freud's relationship with his father on the development of (classical) psychoanalytic theory. Foremost of which was that, for Sigmund Freud, as an Eastern European Jewish male, his father had bequeathed to him a puerile form of manhood that he, the son, needed to overcome. However, what Sigmund discovers is that the overcoming of the father is the *raison d'être* of every son, per the Oedipus complex, which as we shall discover in the two chapters that follow, is also the case in the sonship experiences of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Wright. But in the overcoming of his father, the son must first recognize that his own vulnerabilities, his sonship qualities, are to be found in the father as well. The father cannot be deemed the immovable, insurmountable patriarch if he is to be challenged. Thus, we see Freud working out much of this in the aforementioned *The*

*Interpretation of Dreams*, which, as a psycho-autobiographical text, is a first-hand account of a wounded son searching out his feelings towards his unheroic father.

It was upon the death of his father, on 23 October 1896, that Freud was stricken by an emotional crisis, one which required him to begin a period of rigorous self-analysis to discover the etiology—or unconscious source—of his mental anguish. In her introductory remarks to Freud’s dream text, Joyce Crick, a translator of Freud’s works, confirms that it was during this self-analysis that Freud, who fancied himself an archeologist of the mind, unearthed a few precious psychological relics.

Freud worked through his illness by probing his own past. He recollected his sexual arousal in infancy by his nurse; he remembered seeing his mother naked during a train journey when he was two and a half; and *he acknowledged hostility towards his father* (emphasis added).<sup>429</sup>

*But why did Freud believe his hostility towards his father needed to be repressed? Why was he not allowed to express these feelings?* Such questions necessitate an assessment of the socio-cultural milieu within which Freud had this mid-life crisis. Upon investigation, one finds that race and racism greatly influenced how Freud felt about his father, namely that Jacob Freud was far too acquiescent to the Anti-Semitic sociopolitical powers of that era. We see this in the well-known story that Jacob tells Sigmund about a time when he, the father, reacted in an all too timorous manner when a Christian passerby knocks his hat off of his head.<sup>430</sup> Freud’s reaction to his father’s spineless behavior is quite informative: “That did not seem to me very heroic of the big, strong man who was leading me by the hand.”<sup>431</sup> In another translation of the story, rendered in French by Didier Anzieu, we have a more austere response, “This struck me as unheroic

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<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>430</sup> Louis Breger, *Freud: Darkness in the Midst of Vision* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 27.

<sup>431</sup> Freud, *op. cit.*, 151.

conduct...<sup>432</sup> Unheroic? Did he really mean unmanly? This instance of public humiliation made an indelible impression on Sigmund, who not only from this but other shame-filled events as well, believed, as Freud biographer Louis Breger observes, his father “incompetent” and “weak.”<sup>433</sup> Freud was also troubled by what his father’s liminal status, and his timid response to it, implied about his own manhood. Lydia Flem, a psychoanalyst and a Freud (intellectual) biographer, makes such a connection in her mentioning how Jacob’s shaming, his unheroic/unmanly behavior, was also an indictment against his son. Flem puts it this way:

The child Schlomo/Sigmund cannot forgive this resignation so wounding to the omnipotence he has ascribed to his father and to his own narcissism. He makes up his mind to counter meek obedience with a visible vengeance. His father’s humiliation and the desire for revenge that it arouses will narrate and organize his imaginative life and his biographical reality.<sup>434</sup>

Freud sets out on a quest to avenge his father’s and, by extension, his own sense of heroic manhood. As a physician, he would restore men to health through his medical discoveries; as a scholar, he would write groundbreaking texts that unlocked the mysteries of the psyche; and as a man, he would seek to “lay down his life for one great moment in history.”<sup>435</sup> His manhood would be different from—in many ways, superior to—that of his unheroic father.

But Jacob was not unheroic (read: unmanly) *in toto*. He was, after all, notwithstanding Sigmund’s feelings about his effete manhood, a father, a patriarch; and if nothing else, this afforded him a certain sense of superiority over his son. Psychoanalyst Peter Newton speaks to the familial authority of the Jewish father, saying, “he [Jacob] was still a Jewish father with

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<sup>432</sup> Lydia Flem, *Freud the Man Freud: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 1991), 52.

<sup>433</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, 26-27.

<sup>434</sup> Flem, *op. cit.*, 52.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

millennia of paternal authority on his side and of an age to command considerable respect.”<sup>436</sup>

Marianne Krull, a Freud biographer, also adds about Jacob that “[h]e was the patriarch of the family and his was invariably the last word.”<sup>437</sup> *The Interpretation of Dreams* documents Freud’s efforts to come to grips with his father’s con-polarity; that is to say, his father was rejected as unmanly by fin de siècle European society and, yet, the father possessed patriarchal power within the family. Jacob was, in essence, a con-polar figure. The text allows us to unearth another much ignored relic from Freud’s past, that Jacob Freud felt guilty for having opposed his father’s orthodox Jewishness, along with its moral codes (i.e., against masturbation perhaps), a strident disavowal of a sacred commandment “to honor one’s father and do his bidding.”<sup>438</sup> And, therefore, Jacob feared that his son would oppose him, in some regard, as well. However, Jacob actively denied Sigmund any means of doing so, chiefly by disallowing his son access to his past indiscretions—that is, keeping hidden his own rejection of the orthodox Jewish ways of his rabbi father, Schlomo Freud, Sigmund’s grandfather, which is what Krull calls “the ‘Old Man’s’ [Jacob’s] *secret* (emphasis added).”<sup>439</sup>

### Discovering the “Secret of Dreams”

Do you think that one day there will be a marble tablet on this house, saying:  
In this House on July 24, 1895 the Secret of Dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigmund Freud.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Peter M. Newton, *Freud: From Youthful Dream to Mid-life Crisis*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>437</sup> Marianne Krull, *Freud and His Father*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 110.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>440</sup> Ernst L. Freud, ed., *The Letters of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 240.

On June 12, 1900, Sigmund Freud penned a letter, from which the above epigraph has been lifted, to his then friend but later enemy the ear, nose, and throat specialist Wilhelm Fleiss. At the time, Freud was going through what Peter N. Newton categorizes as the final phase of his mid-life transition.<sup>441</sup> He was beginning to come to terms with, while also seeking to move away from, his overreliance on the burdensome opinions of mentors—i.e., father surrogates—such as Jean Martin Charcot, Ernst Wilhelm von Brucke, Josef Bruer, and even the abovementioned Fleiss, being that he wanted to claim his own territory as a man of science. In his seeking to establish this new independence, the now forty-four-year-old Freud makes known his desire to separate himself by becoming a great discoverer, a person who would reveal “the secret of dreams.”<sup>442</sup> Freud had long been captivated by eye-opening, groundbreaking, world changing theories, especially those put forth by renowned figures like Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, so much so that he labored, quite diligently, to make a discovery that would be received in like manner within the Western European clerisy.

Freud’s discovery, however, unlike those put forth by the men (and I am intentionally using men here as a gender exclusive term) he most admired, would have little to do with nature or with the physiology of man but would, instead, reveal the topography, the structure, the drives, and the nettlesome contradictions of the human psyche. His well-documented passion for antiques was, in fact, a tangible means of having some contact with an earlier time, an era of origins; it was this desire that galvanized his journey into the mind so as to find those endopsychic relics, if you will, that allowed him and his patients to better understand how past trauma impaired the psyche. For Freud, these precious psychic artifacts within the inner, often hidden, regions of the mind were the primary source of various psychological disorders (or

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<sup>441</sup> Newton, *op. cit.*, 217.

<sup>442</sup> Ernst L. Freud, *op. cit.*, 240.

neuroses). His willingness to come in contact with those frightening elements of the past, so that they may shed light on the present, was ever present within Freud's daily milieu. For example, Lydia Flem offers the following description of Freud's work environment.

Each morning as he comes into his office, Freud waves a friendly greeting to the statue of a Chinese sage with slightly inclined head and a beatific smile on his lips. At his side Imhotep, an Egyptian deity of knowledge and medicine, holding a papyrus scroll on his knees, welcomes him. On his desk or behind his couch, everywhere his gaze falls, Freud converses with traces of the past.

One and the same search for origins, a patient and the infinite quest for archaic history, links his archeological collection and his psychoanalytic approach. As in the night of the unconscious, yesterday and today overlap, what was dead returns to life, memory prevails over the pain of forgetfulness, the invisible finds face.<sup>443</sup>

Freud was able to see the past in the present, particularly in terms of how the past is educative about one's present selfhood. His form of scopophilia—from Greek *skopeo* (to view) and *philia* (affection for)—was not simply for nude bodies and such, that would be far too commonplace; rather, Freud's love of looking was directed towards the undraped psyche, *in puris naturalibus*, whereby he could examine and even commune with the true Self, whether his own or that of his patients'.

Though he began his medical career as a physiologist, a stalwart empiricist, Freud would later be of the opinion that the true cause—the secret origins—of neuroses was found in those unconscious conflicts that “evoke anxiety and lead to the use of defense mechanisms that ultimately produce the observed symptoms.”<sup>444</sup> Thus, Freud's primary focus was to create not a glimpse but an expansive portrait of the influence of the unconscious mind. We are swayed hither and yon, emotionally, from bliss to despair due to our ability to see and to reckon with the

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<sup>443</sup> Flem, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>444</sup> *Penguin Reference Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “neurosis,” 465.

workings of the unconscious. It is for this reason that Freud, much like Newton, Darwin, and the abovementioned Copernicus, has been designated as a prophet of human progress, a man whose theories abetted the enervation of mankind's self-aggrandizement by showing, quite convincingly, that "the rational mind is not master in its own house, but subject to unconscious forces."<sup>445</sup> *But how is it that we can observe the unconscious?* According to Freud, the unconscious mind is most accessible through dreams. Dream interpretation, then, became the chief means (buttressed by his use of free association during dream analysis<sup>446</sup>) by which Freud examined the unconscious; for it was his patients' dreams that allowed him to discover their concealed thoughts, that is, their secrets. Freud's own self-analysis, via dream interpretation, enabled him to observe certain secrets about himself and, of equal importance, his father as well. His journey to the depths the psyche is documented in his dream theory text, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

In *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, noted historian and Freud biographer Peter Gay has it that even in his later years Freud considered the dream interpretation text his most significant work. "It contains," Freud proclaimed enthusiastically in his prefatory remarks, "even to my present-day judgment, the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make....Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime."<sup>447</sup> Freud hoped the public would receive the book as a veritable tour de force, because its contents contained *the* roadmap that guided its readers to the true meaning of dreams. Much like his views on the psychogenetic workings of the mind, Freud was of the opinion that dreams, too, could not be interpreted

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<sup>445</sup> Peter D. Kramer, *Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 12.

<sup>446</sup> J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 169.

<sup>447</sup> Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York; W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 4.



without rightly observing their complex formation. The dream could not be received *prima facie*. There was, indeed, if one excavated enough, a well-buried secret that lay hidden beneath the surface of the dream's manifest content,<sup>448</sup> which is the extant, easily observed, all too discernible—but altogether mendacious—dream material. The central argument put forth in Freud's text, according to Gay, along with a host of other Freud biographers, is that “wishes, rejected by the ‘higher mental authorities,’ resort to the ‘mental underworld (i.e., the unconscious) to secure their aim.’”<sup>449</sup> Simply stated, the dream's manifest content mutes the dreamer's authentic wish, that is, his repressed desire because he would risk self-castigation from his superego, the psyche's authoritative/paternal agency, as developed in Freud's second theory of the mind, if these hidden thoughts were ever allowed in to the conscious mind. Self-recrimination, however, is only a secondary concern for the dreamer, for he is even more fearful of the public humiliation or, dare I say, public castration (the latter is more Freudian) that would occur if these secret (oftentimes nefarious) desires were exposed. Freud termed this endopsychic operation the “dream work,” a process whereby unconscious wishes (i.e., repressed desires) are transformed into acceptable content which is then allowed to appear in a dream. The mind's ability to re-work its content, per the dream, can neither be ignored nor underestimated, especially when the dream is loaded with an abundance of affective material.

Freud's theory of displacement is also of great help in understanding the dream work—it further explicates the dream's surreptitious duplicity. The theory of displacement (what Freud also categorized as conversion) is part of psychoanalysis' “economic point of view,” as Laplanche and Pontalis have it, and as such is used to describe the ebb and flow of energy within

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<sup>448</sup> Manifest Content—the content of a dream or fantasy as it is experienced and remembered, and in which the latent content is disguised and distorted by various mechanisms.

<sup>449</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, 4.

the psyche.<sup>450</sup> Displacement “acts first to reduce the intensity of the passions bursting to express themselves, and then to transform them.”<sup>451</sup> This reduction of intense passions leads into Louis Berger’s characterization of dreams as an “attempt to master the disruptive emotions associated with traumatic and other threatening and distressing events.”<sup>452</sup> For example, a child who experiences the anxiety of being overwhelmed by a authoritative parental figure or sibling might, as Freud remarks in *On Dreams*, published in 1901 as an abridged version of his dream interpretation text, have a dream about being big, physically, as a means of expressing their desire to be empowered, but this desire also masks the child’s fear of and displeasure with the dominating other. We see much of this in Freud’s own dreams.

Freud’s “uncle with the yellow beard” dream evinces the manifold ways in which the dream’s manifest content manipulates negative affect. Though the dream is informative on many levels, it speaks, above all, to Freud’s anxieties about his Jewishness, in particular those Eastern Jewish characteristics—e.g., neurotic, black, excluded<sup>453</sup>—from which he had worked so hard to disassociate himself. In the dream, Freud has “affection” for his friend R., but, in truth, as the latent content reveals, he felt a deep sense of animosity for not only his friend but his Uncle Josef (the yellow bearded man) as well. Many have noted the underlying issues that make the “uncle with the yellow beard” dream so compelling: For one, we now know that Freud had little to no

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<sup>450</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *op. cit.*, 127.

<sup>451</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, 115.

<sup>452</sup> Breger, *op. cit.*, 144

<sup>453</sup> Sander Gilman’s *Freud, Race, and Gender* and *Jewish Self-Hatred*, both, offer an insightful appraisal of the role of race in Freud’s development as a theorist. What is most compelling about these texts is that Gilman gives credence to the idea that the Jew during Freud’s time was very much viewed as being the racialized other because of his blackness. Gilman shows that, for Freud and the rest of Western European Jewry, there was a concerted effort to place this notion of Jewish blackness or Jewish otherness on the Eastern European Jew, of which his Galician-born (Eastern European) father was a haunting representative.

regard for his Uncle Josef, primarily because of his uncle's penchant for deviance. Freud's dislike for his uncle, however, was not due solely to the well-documented counterfeiting incident that brought the Freud family such anguish; but rather was an intense reaction to his uncle's primitive Eastern Jewishness. However, credit must be given to Lydia Flem for looking past this common interpretation and offering a rather perceptive one in which she claims that the "uncle with the yellow beard [dream], conceal[s] Jacob."<sup>454</sup> Therefore, the dream is Freud's way of dealing with his disappointment not with uncle Josef but with his father, Kallamon Jacob Freud.

In her commenting about the presence of Jacob Freud throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Marianne Krull states that the text was the "upshot" of Freud wanting to come to terms with the ambivalent relationship between he and Jacob.<sup>455</sup> What proved most troubling for Freud was that there were certain things about his father that he was never allowed to see. Worse of all, Freud's ignorance regarding these secretive elements of his father's past was deemed, per Jewish custom, as a sign of filial piety. Sons were not to learn of their father's secrets. He would have to suspend his propensity for looking, for being nosy—his scophophilia—in order to demonstrate that he was a good son. The fact that Freud was ever mindful of his father's desire that his son maintain the biblical injunction to "honor your father" is encapsulated in a dream about Jacob, soon after his death, that he shared with Fleiss.

I must tell you about a nice dream I had the night after the funeral. I was in a place where I read a sign:

*You are requested to close your eyes.*

I immediately recognized the location as the barbershop I visit every day. On the day of the funeral I was kept waiting and therefore arrived a little late at the house of mourning. At that

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<sup>454</sup> Flem, *op. cit.*, 67.

<sup>455</sup> Krull, *op. cit.*, 4.

time my family was displeased with me because I had arranged for the funeral to be quiet and simple, which they later agreed was quite justified. They were also somewhat offended by my lateness. The sentence on the sign has a double meaning: one should do one's duty to the dead....The dream thus stems from the inclination to self-reproach that regularly sets in among survivors (emphasis added).<sup>456</sup>

Again, given what we have already discussed about the dream work, the sign that reads “you are requested to close your eyes” is a reworking of Freud's unconscious wish (his desire) to open his eyes so that he could peer into his father's past. But the sign, although of great investigational value, as shall be discussed later on, is only part of the story. For we also learn that Freud arrived “a little late at the house of mourning.”<sup>457</sup> Why would he arrive late to his father's funeral? Was this intentional? Or was there was something else that was keeping him away? Whatever his reason(s), this was surely, as Freud's family was well aware—i.e., “they were...offended by [his] lateness”<sup>458</sup>—a strident expression of filial impiety.

The house of mourning would have been an unsettling place for Freud if he, indeed, intended to maintain a libidinal connection with his father. In his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud describes the work of mourning as when “reality testing has revealed that the beloved object no longer exists, and demands that he libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object.”<sup>459</sup> In another place Freud shares that in order for the ego to sever its relationship with the lost object it “loosens the [ego's] fixation of the libido upon the object by devaluing,

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<sup>456</sup> Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss, 1887-1904* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 202.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>459</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips, 311 (New York: Penguin Books, 2006a).

disparaging...it.”<sup>460</sup> In this devaluation of the lost object, which for Freud would be his father, the mourner must believe himself superior to the lost object, so much so that the lost object is deemed unworthy of the mourner’s libidinal investment. The lost object becomes worthless. The mourner, though, is reinvigorated by the reintegration of libidinal energy, thereby “acknowledging itself to be the better of the two [i.e., the survivor and the deceased], and superior to the object.”<sup>461</sup> Much like the injunction to close his eyes, Freud’s trepidation for attending the house of mourning was for him an existential signpost, writ large, that the relationship between he and his father was over, physically and psychologically. However, Freud also recognized, quite ingeniously, that the house of mourning means that the lost object, though honored through all manner of ceremony, must be devalued within the unconscious in order for the survivors to move on. Freud did not want to move on, however. He could not let go. He was not ready to mourn. There was too much that Jacob had to teach him. And so he kept dreaming about his father as a means of keeping Jacob alive, at least within his psyche.

It has been well-established that Jacob Freud’s death motivated his son to begin a long period of intense self-analysis. His father’s death notwithstanding, these were trying times for Freud as a medical professional as well. His most treasured theoretical hypothesis, the seduction theory, was coming apart at the seams.

At a meeting of the local Society for Psychiatry and Neurology Freud presented a paper entitled “The Etiology of Hysteria,” during which he laid out the seduction theory before a group of choice medical colleagues. The event was a complete disaster. One observer, an Austrian psychiatrist named Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, openly lambasted the theory, saying, “It

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

[the theory] sounds like a scientific fairy tale.”<sup>462</sup> Freud, however, despite such harsh criticism from those within the intelligentsia, became even more determined to prove the scientific verity of his theory, and because of this examined his own childhood trauma. The efficacy of this task hinged on Freud’s capacity to open his eyes and look within his own past, particularly his childhood relationship with his father, to discover the source of his angst. His dreams would serve as the data for his analysis. Childhood experiences are, Freud said, the “essential ingredients” from which the dreamer’s dream is formed.<sup>463</sup> For Freud, and we will see later that the same held true for King, childhood proved to be a time of great emotional distress, which is why he believed that any interpretation of his own dreams (or the dreams of his patients) must begin with an analysis of the influential events that occurred during those formative years. Let us turn now to an examination of the childhood years of Sigismund Schlomo Freud.

### **Remembering from Whence He Came: The Freuds of Eastern Europe**

Biographers have managed to piece together a few details about Freud’s family history. One of the more agreed upon facts is that his familial predecessors had “lived for a time on the Rhine (in Cologne)” but “fled east as a result of a persecution of the Jews in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.”<sup>464</sup> The reason given for this persecution was the ruling power’s intent to form a coherent, monolithic society. Such a society required that the Jew’s cultural idiosyncrasies—foremost of which were their language and their religion—would be superseded by the alleged civilized ways of the modernized European. David Vital, a historian of European history,

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<sup>462</sup> Newton, *op. cit.*, 171.

<sup>463</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, 111.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

explicates how it was that the Jews, whether through their own volition or by force, acquiesced to the dominant social order. Vital states,

From the end of the eighteenth century, the tendency in all the major continental states of Europe was to aspire to a powerfully centralizing, rationalized, internal ordering of society. One largely incidental consequence was to encourage government to take a fresh look at its country's Jewish population. The purpose, typically, was to formulate an attitude, even a policy towards the Jews that was in keeping with whatever were considered to be the broad and binding principles on which government and the social order as a whole ought properly to be based. While the specific rules and considerations thought applicable in each case varied, the central underlying intention was everywhere much the same. All strove for coherence. The one social value none were prepared to eschew was order...underlying the old insistence on the truth of Christianity and the corresponding errors of Judaism was the secular, socio-political conviction that the Jews could no longer be allowed—for their own good, but more specifically for the good of society at large—to continue in their set and ancient manner.<sup>465</sup>

The vociferous exaltation of the European sociopolitical ethos created a cultural hegemony in which anything deemed anachronistic (or backwards) was swiftly condemned as a cancerous element that would, if left to metastasize, enervate European culture. The specter of anti-Semitism persisted into the late eighteenth-century as Emperor Joseph II, the king of Germany, implemented a number of programs to modernize his territory, along with its inhabitants. These measures included softening the state's hostile stance towards the Jews, but only insofar as they were made serviceable (read: *servile*) tools of the state. This quasi-integrated status created a new nomenclature whereby serviceable Jews would come to be designated as tolerated Jews. Some of the benefits derived from their more esteemed status were that under certain circumstances they would “be allowed to send their children to Christian schools,” be given “free entry to universities...,” and “[a]ll sorts of crafts and trades would be learned from Christian masters.”<sup>466</sup> Obviously, though these new liberties offered Jews some level of reprieve, this was

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<sup>465</sup> David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe, 1789-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

not emancipation. Moreover, the derisive moniker “tolerated Jew” caused a divide within the Jewish community between those Jews who were viewed as being “improvable” (or redeemable) and those who were wholly other, that is, the primitive who was unable to be reformed. Though Jacob Freud reveled in the idea that he was a tolerated Jew, his son found him emblematic of that specific cadre of Jews who never assimilated, entirely, to Western European culture.

Born in 1815 in the Polish town of Tysmenitz, Jacob Freud grew up during a time of great sociopolitical upheaval, a revolutionary epoch, so to speak, when the very notion of what constituted a viable Jewish identity was being questioned. Krull best describes the zeitgeist of the age, when she says, “the old traditions, and hence the organization of the Jewish community, were being fundamentally challenged...the Jews were being presented with unprecedented opportunities.”<sup>467</sup> Jacob was one such Jew who wanted to flee the confining lifestyle of the Galician *shtetl* (a small Jewish village common in Eastern Europe) so that he could have a life that was radically different from that of his parents, most specifically his father, Rabbi Scholomo Freud. It was because of Jacob’s liberal, non-Orthodox leanings that he was “tolerated,” and therefore he was allowed to earn a living as a wool merchant. Needless to say, Jacob was not inclined to preserve his Jewishness, because he identified himself with a “generation in transition, people who were beginning to think of themselves as Austrian and Germans as much as Jews, who moved away from Orthodox religious practices....”<sup>468</sup> The following excerpt is Breger’s enlightening account of Jacob’s assimilation.

Where his ancestors spoke Yiddish and wrote in Hebrew, Jacob—who knew these languages—conducted his business in German. By the time he married Amalia, his new family was set on

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<sup>467</sup> Krull, *op. cit.*, 78.

<sup>468</sup> Breger, *op. cit.*, 8.



this assimilated path: they continued to celebrate the traditional Jewish holidays of Purim and Passover, but more as festive events; the Orthodox practices of their forebearers' were gone and the new family was raised as culturally but not religiously Jewish.<sup>469</sup>

It is useful to scrutinize Breger's use of the adjective "cultural" to describe Jacob's Jewishness. Evidently, it indicates that no level of assimilation could completely efface Jacob's Jewish identity; moreover, being a cultural Jew meant that Jacob, and the many others who were a part of this "generation in transition," still experienced Anti-Semitism, no matter their efforts to become acculturated Europeans.

Still, with all the new freedom and assimilation, memories of persecution hovered in the air: there were many reminders in daily life of their position as Jews; the effect of centuries of mistreatment, and the possibility of new violence, could not be erased from their minds. They were, after all, a tiny minority in Feinberg, surrounded by people who did not share their history or religion.<sup>470</sup>

In many ways, Jacob became somewhat accustomed to the racist environs in which he lived. But, alas, his milquetoast disposition towards such ill-treatment would be a source of disappointment and, ultimately, rage for Sigmund, the first-born son of his second marriage.

Jacob's story of being openly shamed by a group of Christian men was shared earlier. At the time, I noted that Freud believed his father "unheroic" in his response to the perpetrators' insolent behavior. Bewildered by his father's "impassive reply," Freud looked to the Carthaginian general Hannibal—whose father, Hamilcar Barca, made him pledge vengeance against the Romans—as a model for exacting revenge against an adversarial sociopolitical force. Freud's revenge, however, would not be through the sword, but the mind. Through his attainment of the status of a high culture scientist, Freud would separate himself from the ignominy that had become so associated with Eastern Jewry of his past.

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 9.

## High Culture as the Cure for the Jewish Problem

At the age of three, Jacob Freud moved his family from the adverse yet friendly confines of Frieberg, his birthplace, located in northeastern Moravia (at one time part of the Austro-Hungarian empire), to the slums of Leopoldstadt, Vienna. The move was traumatic for young Sigmund. He had lost so much during the transition to Vienna. He lost the relationships that had been established with a number of family members. He lost a sense of permanency, as his family became awfully peripatetic, moving from house to house, during their first few years in Vienna. Most traumatic of all, it was in Vienna, the promising West, that he lost a great deal of affection for his noticeably Eastern European father.

Jacob was having a hard time adjusting to the city as well. Economically, his skills as a wool merchant were not providing enough income to meet the family's material needs. Krull has it that Jacob's failures as a provider reduced him, in the eyes of his son, "from a more than life size patriarch [which he had been in Frieberg] to a humble petitioner."<sup>471</sup> (By way of comparison—yes, the eras and the locales were different, 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe versus 20<sup>th</sup> century America—Jacob did fall victim to the emasculative forces of urbanization, or "ghetto-life," as outlined by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others. One needn't be reminded, I hope, that the word "ghetto," which has now become the sole means of describing the squalid inner-city dwellings of African Americans, was coined to describe urban Jewish settlements in Europe.) Seeing his father so debased throughout his youthful years stirred-up within Sigmund an inner drive, an incendiary ambition to become a success. His fiery ambition would be quelled, though, as he soon recognized that his being the son of a Jew, an Eastern Jew no less, meant that he would

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<sup>471</sup> Krull, *op. cit.*, 154.

have to overcome a great deal of opposition—namely, sociopolitical anti-Semitism—in order to be the man, or the hero, that his father never was.

Freud's awareness of and sensitivity to the Jews' subjugated status in fin de siècle Europe greatly influenced his writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the book that, he hoped, would garner him recognition as a great discoverer. Within the text, one finds that his vivid dreams were suffused with the sociopolitical issues of his day, both the "yellow beard dream" and the "Count Thun dream" are apt examples. These two dreams are but a small sample of the vigorous antiauthoritarian, counterpolitical, revolutionary elements that are thematized by Freud in the dream text. Dreams, however, though suffuse with subversive elements, would not allay Freud's revolutionary fervor. Psychoanalysis would become a means through which Freud could see these sentiments more substantively; in fact, Carl E. Schorske, a cultural historian, claims that psychoanalysis, in its etiology, contained some "counterpolitical ingredient[s]."<sup>472</sup> Freud's personal stake in this rejection of authority had much to do with the radical political shifts that had taken place in Vienna during the last five years of the nineteenth century. In 1895, Vienna fell to Karl Lueger, who, as the cofounder of the Austrian Social Party, an unabashedly nationalist political party, ushered in a period of anti-Semitism that was a threat—physically, economically, and otherwise—to Viennese liberal Jews like the quasi-assimilated Freuds. Schorske reports that "[t]he forces of racial prejudice and national hatred, which they had thought dispelled by the light of reason and the rule of law, reemerged in terrifying forces as the 'century of progress' breathed its last."<sup>473</sup> Neither the political leadership nor its functionaries in fin de siècle Vienna permitted the faintest sign of rebellion, and those who dared confront the

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<sup>472</sup> Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 183.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

anti-Semitic state, lead by the reactionary New Right, were penalized for doing so. It was the state's quieting of defiant persons that very much reminded Freud of how the conscious mind seeks to mute ungovernable unconscious material. In order to explicate this point, he likens the censorship operable in the dream work to that of a political writer who must invent surreptitious ways to criticize the political order. Schorske explains that

the principle of distortion which he [Freud] found to govern the Uncle [with the yellow beard] Dream, with its latent political wish, Freud appropriately introduces political analogies. The dream-thought, he suggested, confronts the same problem in the psyche of the dreamer as 'the political writer who has disagreeable truths to tell those in authority.' If the censor is strong, the writer must 'conceal his objectionable pronouncement beneath some apparently innocent disguise'.<sup>474</sup>

The "political analogies" are but another example of Freud masking a more troubling unconscious desire. For as Schorske makes clear, it is the Count Thun dream, dubbed the "Revolutionary" dream, that best demonstrates Freud's vengeance against not the political order, but his father.<sup>475</sup> Freud discloses that in the dream he has a rather strange encounter with an older man, whose image had replaced that of the political figure Count Thun.

I am again in front of the railway station, but in the company of an older man....He is pretending to be blind, at least in one eye, and I am holding out a male urine-bottle to him (which he had to buy, or have bought, in the city). I am his male nurse, then, and have to give him the bottle because he is blind....<sup>476</sup>

Without knowledge of the childhood memories that have provided the material for this dream, one would readily assume that this is simply psycho-babble. Freud's recollections, however, inform us that at the age of seven he made the unforgivable mistake of urinating in front of his

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<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>476</sup> Freud (1999), *op. cit.*, 163.

parents. Jacob Freud was so angered by his son's insolence that he remarked, "Nothing will come of the boy."<sup>477</sup> This testimony allows us to surmise that Freud was engaging in a bit of role-reversal in the Count Thun dream, for it is the old man in the dream, Jacob Freud, who is now in the embarrassing position of needing to urinate in a public space. The old man's age, how old we do not know, is what requires him to seek help from his male nurse, an older Sigmund Freud, to protect him from public humiliation. In his summary of the interpretive trajectory of the dream, Schorske puts it best when he says, "[t]he Revolutionary Dream, miraculously, contained this conclusion in its very scenario: from political encounter, through flight into academia, to the conquest of the father who has replaced Count Thun.... Patricide replaces regicide."<sup>478</sup> Freud wanted badly to show that he had in some way bested his father in life, that he had refuted his father's damning declaration, i.e., "Nothing will come of the boy," and the dream provides evidence of his wish to do so. For in his final remarks about the dream, as he realizes that the "older man [is] plainly my father," he boldly says to Jacob, "You see, something did come of me."<sup>479</sup>

Becoming "something"—a man of science—meant everything to Freud. But it was his Jewishness, something that he could not get away from, that proved the greatest obstacle to Freud's achieving this status. Marthe Robert, an expert of German literature and psychoanalysis, has observed that Freud's anxiety about his burdensome patrimony, his racial identity. "Born a Jew by his father's fault," states Robert, "Sigmund finds himself in a situation of perpetual material and moral insecurity." In another place she remarks, "Jakob... by begetting Sigmund, has put him

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<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>478</sup> Schorske, *op. cit.*, 210.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

in a position of *inferiority for life*” (emphasis added).<sup>480</sup> His sense of being segregated, so to speak, particularly within the scientific and academic community, came to the fore when he was denied advancement to the position of *professor extraordinarius*<sup>481</sup> in the spring of 1897. The administration’s inability to recognize his accomplishments as a scientist more so than his racial identity greatly angered Freud. In two informative monographs, *Freud, Race, and Gender* and *Jewish Self-Hatred*, cultural and literary historian Sander L. Gilman details how Freud had hoped that, as a promising young scientist, he could transcend the stricture of his race. And yet, nowhere else was Freud more exposed to the racist ideologies of fin de siècle Europe than in the scientific community itself. Science was, much to his dismay, *the* field within which the Aryan mythology of race superiority was constructed and disseminated. The caricature of the diseased Jew, which was held in contradistinction to that of the uncontaminated Aryan, troubled Freud, leading him to question how he “could both be at risk for certain diseases, especially specific forms of psychopathology, and simultaneously study and treat these illnesses....”<sup>482</sup> Hence, Freud’s personal con-polarity: How could Freud view himself as a healer and, at same time, still be the embodiment of deprivation and disease? Being born of sloven Eastern Jews, how could he become a meticulous Western scientist?<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud Jewish Identity*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 100.

<sup>481</sup> *Professor extraordinarius*, according to Crick, was designated “a professor who is not among the established professors (‘Ordinarien’) and does not share their administrative and supervisory duties.”

<sup>482</sup> Sander Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>483</sup> The most documented example of Freud not being able to find fault with himself nor with those he admired who were also of the same racial heritage is the case of Emma Eckstein. Eckstein came to Freud because she suffered from hysteria and bloody excretions from her nose. Freud recommended that she see Wilhelm Fleiss to remedy the problem with her nose. Needless to say, Fleiss made her condition worse. After an operation on her nose, performed by Fleiss, Eckstein suffered bleeding from the nose and the mouth, becoming so physically ill that she lost consciousness. Rather than call his friend out as having committed medical malpractice, he asserted that it had been some kind of medical anomaly.

As a scientist who was trained in the West, Freud was all too aware of the numerous biological differences that were purported by the scientific community as the factual reasons for the subjugation of the Jewish race. These racially skewed scientific theorizations were “found not only in the ‘crackpot’ pamphlet literature of the time, but [were] present in virtually all discussion of pathology published from 1880 to 1930...in the serious medical literature, the literature Freud knew.”<sup>484</sup> This pernicious form of race-based science permeated Viennese society, and was very much a part of the “high culture of science” to which Freud aspired. One of the more well-circulated theories purported during this time, even among Jewish scientist, was that the male European Jew was a hysteric. Maurice Fishberg, a Jewish anthropologist who wrote *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment*, reports that “it is not all Jews who are hysterics, but Eastern Jews, and primarily Eastern male Jews.”<sup>485</sup> But it was Fishberg’s hypothesis of the transmission of neurosis that further intensified Freud’s patricidal impulses. In his remarks about the passing on of the hysteric gene, Fishberg says that “[o]rganic as well as functional derangements of the nervous system are transmitted hereditarily from one generation to another.”<sup>486</sup> This meant that Freud, born of an Eastern, Jew had inherited this hysteria.

Language was the primary means by which the Jew was identified as a hysteric. Gilman notes that Jacob Freud, being a Galician Jew, would have maintained an accent that would be a telling sign of his Eastern Jewishness. For Freud, Jacob’s inability to master the language of the West made him an all too present “model of the persecuted Jew.”<sup>487</sup> The persecuted Jew was,

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 264.

therefore, relegated to a second-class citizenship because of this inability to master civilized discourse. Sociologist John Murray Cuddihy, as quoted in Gilman's text *Jewish Self-Hatred*, states that "all of modern Jewish identity...is the result of the drive to accept 'civilized' behavior and the need to reject 'uncivilized' behavior."<sup>488</sup> The marks of civilized society were not just speaking the language, but the writing and reading of texts as well. Again Jacob's uncivilized ways would become apparent as Sigmund, who from a young age had showed his penchant for high-cultured ways by translating the works of John Stuart Mill and Jean-Martin Charcot, respectively, along with publishing a number of his own theories on pathology, had surpassed his father who was "ignorant from the standpoint of Gentile [civilized] society." The only text that Jacob was known to have enjoyed was the Bible.<sup>489</sup> We find Freud expressing his distaste for his father's philistine intellect and mannerisms, namely, in the aforementioned "uncle with the yellow beard" dream. The dream is short, but full it is of affective material.

- I. My friend R. is my uncle.—I feel great affection for him.
- II. I see his face before me, rather altered. It is as though elongated; a yellow beard framing it is emphasized with particular clarity.<sup>490</sup>

The genius of Freud's dream theory is in its ability to glean a wealth of information from the seemingly trite elements of a dream. From this process Freud obtained valuable information about the inner workings of the dreamer's psyche.

At first glance, there is nothing in Freud's "uncle with the yellow beard" that is overly intriguing; in fact, it reads rather humdrum: "My friend R. is my uncle—I feel great affection for

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<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>489</sup> Robert, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>490</sup> Freud (1999), *op. cit.*, 109.



him.” There is, however, upon further inspection, a great deal to be learned from this terse account about how Freud’s own mind dealt with hate. The images in the dream—My friend R. is my uncle—I feel great affection for him—are the dream’s manifest content; however, his dream theory “does not rest on a consideration of the manifest content of the dream, but refers to the thought-content [latent content] which the work of interpretation enables us to recognize behind the dream.”<sup>491</sup> *So what was the thought-content behind this dream?*

It is the first image that warrants further investigation, because in the dream, his friend R. is depicted as his uncle. There is, as recognized by later interpreters of the dream, such as the aforementioned Lydia Flem and Marianne Krull, a distinct correlation among his friend R., his uncle Josef, and, ultimately, the person whom Freud fails to mention in the dream itself, his father, Jacob: the charade of affection. His friend R. was believed to be a sycophant who had, as Freud put it, “the habit of appearing at the offices of the ministry from time to time in order to advance his case.”<sup>492</sup> His uncle, the substitute for his friend R. in the dream, was categorized as a numbskull for being involved in a counterfeit money scheme, which had shamed the Freud family, so much so that his brother Jacob’s “hair turned grey with grief” upon hearing the news of his transgression.<sup>493</sup> It was Jacob Freud who had believed his brother a numbskull for being involved in the scheme. However, in her explanatory notes to the text, Crick mentions that Jacob Freud could have been implicated in the crime as well. Historical evidence does suggest that prior to moving his family to Vienna, Jacob was failing as a merchant and was under immense financial strain to provide for his family, a possible reason for his involvement in the

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<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

counterfeiting scheme, if not directly than indirectly, by receiving financial support from his brother.<sup>494</sup> Could this, a criminal act, have been the turning point that signaled for Jacob that he had strayed far away from the orthodoxy of his own father, the Rabbi Schlomo Freud. Would this not be sufficient reason for Sigmund to dream, upon his father death no less, that he was “requested to close [his] eyes”? So as to suggest that he should never discover his father’s shameful secret, which was that Jacob was as much a numbskull (an embarrassment to his family) if not even more so than his brother Josef. Whatever his secret, and there a number of theories as to what *the* secret was,<sup>495</sup> Jacob wanted to block his son from obtaining the kind of evidence—that is, knowledge of the secret—that would move Sigmund to renege on his promise of filial piety. Jacob would not allow this, though. Sigmund would not live with the guilt of being a subversive son, or so Jacob had hoped (remember, he had rejected his father’s orthodox Judaism), a point underscored by Krull, who says, “[b]y becoming the kind of son his father wanted him to be, Freud helped Jacob to assuage his guilt toward his own father.”<sup>496</sup> Freud, however, would not close his eyes, but would allow them to take in everything, even those well-hidden secrets, that Jacob did not want him to discover. The unearthing of these artifacts from Jacob’s past, although contradicting the image of a titan patriarch that he put forth, did fuel Sigmund’s desire for success, an unyielding pursuit to move beyond his father.

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<sup>494</sup> In Newton’s account of this period, he has it that Freud’s older half-brothers, Phillip and Emmanuel, may have been involved in the counterfeit money scheme, which would explain their haste departure to Manchester at the same time that Jacob moved his family to Vienna. Furthermore, as I have suggested, Newton notes that “there is no record of Jacob’s doing any work to support the family in Vienna,” meaning that he may have been reliant on his brother for financial support, even if the money that allowed such support was procured through unethical means (see Peter M. Newton, *Freud: From Youthful Dream to Mid-life Crisis*, 42).

<sup>495</sup> Krull has suggested that Jacob’s great secret was masturbation. She relates that masturbation is considered a grave sin in Jewish custom. But again, this was not as pivotal as his breaking away from his Jewish heritage by rejecting his father’s Orthodox Jewishness. It was this breach that most filled Jacob “with deep guilt, especially of times of crisis or misfortune (see Krull, *Freud and His Father*, 100).

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

It is quite telling that upon visiting the Acropolis, a trip that marked his arrival as a man of the West, Freud begins to recall how “the essence of success was to have got further than one’s father.”<sup>497</sup> Freud had moved beyond Jacob by becoming a high-culture scientist, but his gaiety over this accomplishment is short-lived, as he recognizes that “to excel one’s father [is] still something forbidden.”<sup>498</sup> Sigmund had become a more acculturated person than his father—a better man to be more exact—and this, in the eyes of the son, was unacceptable. Such feelings would be deemed as “crossing” his father, something that Jacob would never stand for. He was always to be looked upon as the authoritative patriarch, never to be dethroned. Peter M. Newton shares a story about Jacob that corroborates this point.

However...eupeptic Jacob might have been, he was still a Jewish father with millennia of paternal authority on his side and of age to command respect....A contemporary of young [Sigmund] Freud’s named Rosenthal told of arguing with his own father in the street when Jacob came along. “What,” Jacob exclaimed, “are you contradicting your father? My Sigmund’s little toe is cleverer than my head, *but he would never dare to contradict me!*”<sup>499</sup>

Jacob’s consternation—evident in his response: *What!?*—is like that of many fathers who believe that sons are never to be found “contradicting” or going against or moving beyond their fathers, even as many of these same fathers are themselves guilty of breaking this most hallowed commandment.

In the following chapter, I shall endeavor to examine the presence of this mode of paternal authority in the tempestuous relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr. and his father, Daddy King. Much like Jacob Freud, Daddy King also has a secret, one that he attempted to veil from the eyes of his sons. But King, too, much like Freud, had a dream foretelling of affection

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<sup>497</sup> Sigmund Freud, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941): 93-101.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>499</sup> Newton, *op. cit.*, 43.

and harmony. But was this, given what we have learned from Freud's dream theory, a ruse that hid his inner rage?

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE PROPHET'S WISH

“Nonviolent resistance also provides a creative force through which men can channelize their discontent. It does not require that they abandon their discontent. This discontent is sound and healthy. Nonviolence saves it from degenerating into morbid bitterness and hatred. Hate is always tragic. It is as injurious to the hater as it is to the hated. It distorts the personality and scars the soul. Psychiatrists are telling us now that many of the inner conflicts and strange things that happen in the subconscious are rooted in hate. So they are now saying, ‘Love or perish.’”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., Address Before the National Press Club (1962)

## Fear and Regicide

### The Dream:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

*I have a dream* that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

*I have a dream* that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

*I have a dream* that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

*I have a dream* that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

*I have a dream* today.

*I have a dream* that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

*I have a dream* today.

*I have a dream* that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.<sup>500</sup>

How long had he waited for this moment? The eyes of an expansive crowd were fixated on his every impassioned gesture. The ears of the nation listened attentively to the melodious phrasing of his every word. The hearts of a once indifferent world were ready to be moved by a message of human brotherhood. Would words dare fail him now? *Not now!* Too many people, an estimated crowd of 250, 000, had gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on that hot August day, many of whom came to hear a word—maybe the Word—that might encourage them to keep striding towards freedom.

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<sup>500</sup> James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 217.

Prior to King's ascent to the podium, the crowd had heard a list of eloquent orators, including such well-known figures as Walter Reuther, Josephine Baker, Floyd McKissick and (the fiery) John Lewis. But they were all received, no matter their admirable efforts, as the previews before the main attraction. Martin's close friend Andrew Young best describes the crowd's response, when he says, "[t]he speeches [before Martin's] droned on."<sup>501</sup> This crowd came to see and to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And, finally, it was his time to speak.

What would the prophet say? The crowd stood in anticipation, waiting for the healing balm of his words to assuage their anxiety. And they waited...and waited...and waited. Some patiently, others impatiently, they stood—but no word from on high had descended upon them. It seemed as though this doyen of inspirational sermonology had failed to prepare for this his most anticipated moment. Even those who were his most ardent supporters, many of whom surrounded him that day, noticed that the once hope-filled crowd soon became disengaged, losing interest in King's somnolent oratory exercise. There were some that offered the lucid observation that "he had not yet truly connected with his audience."<sup>502</sup> As if to inspire him to pull himself together, the soul-stirring gospel singer Mahalia Jackson shouted, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin!" She, too, felt that Martin's words had just titillated the intellect of the crowd. He had not yet been able to have his words, as he had done so often before, grip the audience's soul. And so he acquiesced to the songstress's command. He knew that if he was going to reach this throng, yes, he would have to tell them about the dream.

As he moved adroitly from his prepared text, in which he was scripted to focus on the "bad check" metaphor, King harkened back to one of his past sermons. Two weeks prior to the

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<sup>501</sup> Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: Harpers Collins, 1996), 272.

<sup>502</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 15.

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, King gave the “Dream” speech in Detroit. But for the Washington event, he feared the time constraints put on the speakers by Baynard Rustin, the event’s primary organizer, would not allow him to provide a comprehensive account of the dream motif. Looking beyond these restrictions, though, King felt the time, the place, and the overall spirit of the event demanded that he share his dream. King begins, “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.”<sup>503</sup> King was now bringing the crowd into his inner world of hope; a safe space, if you will, wherein he could be shielded from the countless lawless lynchings, racial slurs, and baleful glances that he and many other blacks faced on a daily basis. Now something was starting to happen...the crowd was becoming more animated. In the end, King’s dream had so captivated the audience that his wife, Coretta, stated that “the breath of God thunder[ed] through him.”<sup>504</sup> Even those onlookers, for whom the event was not particularly relevant—for instance, people from across the pond—professed their appreciation for the speech: “It was,” a British journalist confessed, “the most moving and magnificent public address I have ever heard.”<sup>505</sup> All of the accolades that have been heaped upon the “Dream” speech belie the fact that it has not been scrutinized in such a way that unearths the latent content behind the dream itself.

This chapter attempts such an analysis. King himself was all too aware of his own con-polarity, these two sides of himself that, on his view, could not be reconciled. Of course, many biographers hurriedly assume this con-polarity was only in regards to his secret foibles, extra-marital affairs and such. But I submit that King’s *con-polarity* went to the very essence of his manhood. What did it mean for this great leader, the leading man of the civil rights movement, to

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<sup>503</sup> Washington, *op. cit.*, 219.

<sup>504</sup> Sundquist, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>505</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 262.



be the symbol of strength and yet experience such intense vulnerability? Would King, by some miracle, learn to value this sonship, this underdeveloped side of his con-polar selfhood, in such a way that he could recognize it, not only in the white oppressor, but in himself as well? Before doing so, however, he would have to anatomize his secret wish, that is, his hate for his oppressor(s), those persons who made him ashamed of and even manipulated this vulnerability, his sonship. This is the King, however, that has been sanitized so that he could become the prophet of American progress. But what if these wishes were revealed? Would they prove far too troubling for those of us beholden to a puerile view of this (self-confessed) deeply complex man? What would happen if this other side(s) of King was known?

*The monument, would it still stand?*

*The holiday, would it still be observed?*

*The speech, would it still be received as gospel?*

Michael Eric Dyson, a King scholar, says that it is we, the modern analysts of both the dream and the dreamer, whose naiveté will continue if we fail to construct a more diverse view of King. “[W]e must make sure, in the interest of truth, to include the parts of King’s vision [or dream] that disturb us,” says Dyson.<sup>506</sup> Coming to terms with these disturbing facets of King’s message and persona is something with which some scholars are beginning to reckon. For example, in an article posted on CNN.com, John Blake, a writer and producer for CNN’s Belief Blog, delves into the etiology of King’s anger, as made clear by the article’s title, “How MLK became an angry black man.” Setting aside the issue of casting King within the stereotypical typology of the angry black man, one finds Blake’s investigation insufficient in that he finds King at his angriest in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Certainly, as Blake notes, the letter is

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<sup>506</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 2000), 7.

“an American epistle...considered a classic defense of civil disobedience.”<sup>507</sup> But, it was also “one of the most intimate snapshots of a King most people don’t know: An angry black man who once hated white people and...was more dangerous than Malcolm X...”<sup>508</sup> Similar to Henry David Thoreau’s prison experience, shared in his influential essay *Civil Disobedience*, wherein he tells of hearing things in his surroundings that were once mute to him, King, too, would begin to hear things, not from his environment per se, but from the depths of his psyche. It seems plausible that King’s time in the solitary confinement, a place intended to produce a madness derived from an deafening silence, would bring out those inner demons—most notably, the anger—that he had long suppressed; but it is all together false to assume that it was during his confinement that such emotions first surfaced. Blake, like any scholar who wants to discover “how King became an angry black man,” must dig deeper to unearth the earliest sources of his rage. For it was during his childhood years, the age of six to be exact, that King recalls, “I was determined to hate...”<sup>509</sup>

Hate. It is such a strong word. Hate. It speaks of a uniquely virulent human emotion. Who deserves to be hated? But anger—we can empathize with anger. Anger is understandable. Anger is a natural response to a slight. For example, someone jumps in front of you in line, and you feel anger towards this sign of flagrant disregard. Hate, however, according to Webster’s definition, is not just a response to a slight or a sense of injury, but is an “aversion usually deriving from fear.”<sup>510</sup> In his instructive monograph on divergent human affectation, *The Origins of Love and*

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<sup>507</sup> John Blake, “How MLK became an angry black man,” *CNN.com*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/16/us/king-birmingham-jail-letter-anniversary> (accessed April 21, 2013).

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>509</sup> Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 7.

<sup>510</sup> Webster’s dictionary online.

*Hate*, psychoanalyst Ian D. Suttie outlines the manner in which love, when threatened, turns into anxiety and then turns into hate. As a forerunner in the object relations school of psychoanalytic theory, the field in which such figures as Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott, and John Bowlby would become prominent, Suttie believed that this “love threatened” was the result of failed relationships in one’s psychosocial environment, not the result of insolated, independent instinctual drives as posited in Classical Freudian theory.<sup>511</sup> Suttie explains,

Thus “love threatened” becomes anxious, that is to say partly transformed into anxiety. So far as it is denied it is transformed to hate....In the same way its rejection—the conclusive refusal by the love object either to accept or return it—converts into despair; the feeling of unworthiness of a lesser degree makes it guilt or shame.<sup>512</sup>

From this, Suttie concluded that hate is not an independent endopsychic phenomenon (a la Freud’s death instinct) but is grounded in and is a derivate of the ambivalent existential relationship between a young child and a (threatening) love object. A broken primal bond (i.e., a fracture in, say, the mother-child dyad), then, is what creates hate. The hate, however, serves as a signal that the child desires for this fissure in the relationship to be repaired, thus castigating the notion that hate subserves the Freudian death instinct.

Hate, I [Suttie] regard not as a primal independent instinct...but as a development of intensification of separation-anxiety which in turn is roused by a threat against love. It is the maximal ultimate appeal in the child’s power—the most difficult for the adult to ignore. Its purpose is not death-seeking or death-dealing, but the preservation of the self from the isolation which is death and the restoration of the love relationship.<sup>513</sup>

We must remember that Freud’s death instinct terminates libidinal tensions by bringing the living being to an inorganic state. In doing so, it becomes an aggressive and destructive attitude

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<sup>511</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *op. cit.*, 278

<sup>512</sup> Ian D. Suttie, *The Origins of Love and Hate* (London: Free Associations Books, 1988), 60.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

towards the self and, subsequently, the outside world. Suttie does not believe this is the telos of hate. As stated above in the quote, hate is a reparative affect in that it signals to the love object the need for a restructuring of a broken emotional relationship. Suttie, like many object relation theorists, was convinced that it was the mother, not the father, who had the “first formed and directed” emotional relationship with the child.<sup>514</sup> This was a direct challenge to Freud’s structural model of the mind, wherein the father was introjected in to the psyche, becoming its most judgmental apparatus, the superego. Provided that, on one hand, psychoanalytic theory was becoming more abreast of the significant role of the mother in child development—e.g., Winnicott’s “good enough mother” theory—it had, on the other, fallen upon some theorists to reconsider the unique function of the father in the male personality’s accretion of negative affect.

A central figure in this movement to reappraise the value of the father in the male’s life-cycle has been psychoanalyst Peter Blos. In *Son and Father*, an exemplary monograph about male object relations, Blos makes the simple but revolutionary observation that every father’s parental acumen is shaped by his own sonship experience. For many men, the recollections of sonship are filled with the pains of being neglected and rejected by emotionally unresponsive and/or abusive fathers. Blos’ own description of this phenomena is that “the manifest and remembered son-father relationship had usually been distant or *hateful...governed by a fear of rejection* or grudgeful with a sense of gnawing disappointment (emphasis added).”<sup>515</sup> The two end products of the son’s hate towards the father are either a “self-image of depressing inadequacy [e.g., melancholia] or aggressive self-sufficiency [e.g., hyper-masculinity]”<sup>516</sup> Both

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<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*

of these evince a perpetual fixation on the father that has triggered within the son the ego-dystonic (i.e., feelings that are unpleasant to the ego) of father hunger. Moreover, Blos attests that throughout a man's life cycle there is a part of the male personality that is beholden to an infantile idealization of the father. Because of this, a confrontation with the father is never sought, that is, "the father remains unassailable."<sup>517</sup> This jejune perspective yields an overly reverential disposition towards the father that lasts throughout the life course in that, even in adulthood, the son remains fearful of the immense stature—physical, psychological, and otherwise—of his father. According to Blos, "[t]he fear is a permanent part of the relationship which ultimately is channeled into the organization of the superego, while the wish for the father's protective care and power remains a never fulfilled craving which stands in conflict with the wish for autonomy and selfhood."<sup>518</sup> How tormenting it is for a man to realize that no matter the "apparent" sturdiness of his ipseity, there remains a part of his selfhood that is yet a deprived son whose hate is the accumulative effect of his fearing the loss of his father's love. This is an embittered sonship. Nevertheless, this type of sonship was a damaging intergenerational heirloom, passed down from father to son, within the King legacy.

### **The Maladjusted Prophet**

As a twentieth-century prophet, King was expected to be, much like the prophets of old, a fierce defender of the weak, a voice for justice that would not be silenced. Furthermore, and in an even more existential sense, the true prophet not only communicated a message of justice but engaged in materialized acts of protest. According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who in 1964 joined King for a march in Selma, Alabama, a prophet "is a person who suffers from a profound

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<sup>517</sup> Peter Blos, *Son and Father: Before and Beyond the Oedipus Complex* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

maladjustment to the spirit of society, with its conventional lies....”<sup>519</sup> Unlike the clinical madness classified in psychological texts, the prophet suffers from, or is blessed with (depending on one’s perspective), a moral madness that is marked by his seeing things “in a way totally removed from normal perception.”<sup>520</sup> *Crazy*. This is the word often used to describe prophets, especially by those who are recipients of their revelatory yet confounding utterances. Moreover, prophets are always on the frontline, engaged in what seems to be an unending war against systems of oppression. Though Heschel acknowledges a relationship between madness and prophecy, he refuses to give full support to what he terms “psychoanalysis by distance.”<sup>521</sup> That is to say, in our using psychoanalysis to scrutinize the prophets of the past, we do so based upon preset personality types—e.g., hysteric, neurotic, manic-depressive, and so on—that castigate rather than value how essential their madness was to their prophetic consciousness.<sup>522</sup> Cast upon the midden of psychopathology, the prophet is perceived by some, not all, as not possessing the requisite mental faculties (i.e., a sound mind) to be a moral authority; and his message, which is replete with themes of redemption (or setting things in their right order), is discredited and, finally, repudiated. It is for this reason that Heschel sought to dissuade an exclusively psychoanalytic diagnosis of the prophet’s mental state, because such a diagnosis would assure that we would not “take prophetic inspiration seriously.”<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1962), 188.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>522</sup> Heschel offers his own observations of the biblical prophets but does so while keeping in mind that there is something indescribable with the prophetic office, which he believes psychology would not do. A psychological appraisal of the prophet would, in his opinion, seek to offer a full explanation of prophecy, and, hence, would not honor the mystery (the taking over by the wholly/holy Other) that occurs during the ecstatic prophetic moment (p. 189).

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

Psychoanalysis, however, as Freud's dream theory instructs, does provide a responsible investigator with a helpful tool to mine the unconscious wish, the hidden motive, that so galvanizes the prophet to speak, with such vigor and confidence, to persons (e.g., the father) and sociopolitical structures (e.g., paternalistic systems: Jim Crow) of power that rule through domination, even if this rebellion is disclosed through the rather innocuous medium of a dream. It is worth noting that King himself was no stranger to the efficacy of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung and John B. Watson; repression, inferiority complex, collective unconscious, and behaviorism—he was well acquainted with the names and the theories. In *Strength to Love*, a collection of his most outstanding sermons delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, there is a sermon titled “Antidotes for Fear,” wherein he gives some glowing remarks about psychoanalysis.

Many of our abnormal fears can be dealt with by the skills of psychiatry, a relatively new discipline pioneered by Sigmund Freud, which investigates the subconscious drives of men and seeks to discover how and why fundamental energies are diverted into neurotic channels. Psychiatry helps us to look candidly at our inner selves and to search out the causes of our failures and fears.<sup>524</sup>

With this knowledge, King, like Freud, would tread the tortuous road of self-analysis to discover the truth about himself and the role that his father played in shaping his identity. However, unlike Freud, King never shared the particulars of what he discovered on this journey inward. And he never openly expressed any displeasure with his patrimony, which was an outwardly stalwart but inwardly ailing (black) manhood, it illustrated the very discontinuity of a con-polar selfhood.

While attending Boston University, King was formally introduced to psychoanalytic theory in a psychology of religion course taught by a Dr. L. Harold DeWolf. King's initial

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<sup>524</sup> Washington, *op. cit.*, 515.

impression of psychoanalysis was that it did not rightly consider the impact that the spirit and the divine can have on man's psychological health. And yet, even with these concerns, he was able to appreciate the way in which psychoanalysis might provide one an entrée into the concealed self. In Stephen B. Oates' biography of King, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, one learns of a King who throughout his life, but even more so in later years, subjected himself to a series of painstaking self-analyses. He was obsessed with his inner duality. Oates writes,

That individual [King], so celebrated in public, was paying a heavy price indeed for his fame and his cause. He suffered from stomach aches and insomnia—symptoms of the guilt he felt and the stress he was under—and took sleeping pills a New York physician and friend gave to him....To face the tribulations of life, he subjected himself to painful self-analysis and attempts at self-purification.<sup>525</sup>

What was King trying to purify? What was he trying to keep suppressed, hidden away from the eye of the public? David Garrow, a noted King biographer, has written of the psychological pressure heaped upon King due to the extensive surveillance program that had him under the careful watch of the FBI. What started in the winter of 1961 as an effort to monitor King's alleged affiliation with the Communist Party—specifically, his relationship with Stanley Levison, a white New York lawyer—soon became an invasive operation that peered within the most intimate areas of King's life. The investigation sought to expose King's indiscretion in three areas: Communism, financial misconduct, and sexual deviancy.<sup>526</sup> For instance, during his trip to Europe to receive the Nobel Prize, members of King's entourage had complained to others back home in America about some raucous (maybe even salacious) behavior by King and some of his closest colleagues. After hearing these complaints, via wiretapped phone lines, the FBI put

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<sup>525</sup> Oates, *op. cit.*, 284.

<sup>526</sup> David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 362.



together a dossier entitled “Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Personal Conduct” and sent it to several governmental agencies in Washington D.C., including the White House, the secretaries of state and defense, and the CIA.<sup>527</sup> But they did not stop there. The FBI sent another dossier to King’s home in January of 1965, and it carried a condemnatory letter<sup>528</sup> and a recording of one of King’s extra-marital trysts. His wife, Coretta Scott King, accidentally opened the tin box holding these materials, believing it contained one of King’s speeches. She was shocked by what she read in letter and heard on the recordings. The FBI had crossed the line. To shame King in the eye of the public was one thing, but to make him look like a deviant in the eyes his family was something else all together. Eventually, King began to succumb to the pressure, as he shared with one close friend, “[t]hey are out to get me, harass me, break my spirit.”<sup>529</sup> But he was also cognizant of the fact that it was he, the p.k. (preacher’s kid), who had committed these acts. It was he that had fell into sin, over and over again. How could he act so irresponsibly? How could he put the movement at risk? What made him walk this path of self-destruction? Such questions motivated King to peruse his psyche through self-analysis.

Looking within himself was painful for King. Nevertheless, he was not ashamed to tell trusted others—that is, his close friends and, also, his congregation—about this very private battle. One finds an especially revealing instance of this in a sermon titled “Mastering Our Evil Selves,” which demonstrates that King, even at an early stage in his ministry (he preached the

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<sup>527</sup> David J. Garrow, *The F.B.I. and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From Solo to Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 133.

<sup>528</sup> An excerpt from the letter reads as follows: “King look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to all Negroes. White people in this country have enough frauds of their own but I am sure they don’t have one at this time that is anywhere near your equal. You are no clergy man and you know it. I repeat you are a colossal fraud an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in God....(Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 373).

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

sermon whilst attending Crozier Seminary), was cognizant of his inner inconsistencies; he said that

we must go through a process of self-analyzation. In this process we must ascertain what our weaknesses are. No one can ever make improvements unless he knows the points at which he is weakest. Before the wise physician gives a patient medicine he finds out where the sickness lies. This process of self analyzation is of primary importance, for it the open door which leads to the room of improvement (sic).<sup>530</sup>

Later in the sermon, King goes on to state that “we never get rid of our weaknesses by repressing them,” a point that begs the following three questions: First, how did King repress the hate that was an understandable response to his being so fearful of the dominant Other? Second, how did this repression allow him to maintain his “cool (pose)” in the face of such wanton maltreatment? And, third, what impact did this repression have on the formation of his dream? Many will conclude that King was first encouraged to restrain his authentic emotions when he came against the dominant other *qua* the racist white southerner, particularly during his childhood years in Atlanta. Certainly, there were a number of instances that would substantiate this claim, such as the time when he, as an eight-year-old child, was slapped in the face by a white woman for unintentionally stepping on her shoes; the bruise left by the strike, however, was soon surpassed by the wound left to his selfhood by the woman’s cold remark, “You are that nigger that stepped on my foot.”<sup>531</sup> How did King respond? “Of course I didn’t retaliate at any point,” he says, “I wouldn’t dare retaliate when a white person was involved.”<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Clayborne Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 6, *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>531</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*

By King's account, his childhood predilection for acquiescence to authority was especially reserved for whites, the *de facto* dominant Other. But this is not the dominant other that I have in mind. Rather, I contend that the etiology of King's mastery of repression can be traced back to his relationship with what I term the principally-feared object—his father, Daddy King.

One's parsing the relationship between the King, Sr. and King, Jr. is made difficult by the lack of forthright first-hand data about their interactions, particularly in terms of the younger King's recalling of his father's abusive behavior. It is instructive to see that in the same autobiography that King tells of the physical chastisement he suffered at the hands of whites (e.g., the abovementioned slapping incident), he never divulges the brutal beatings meted out by his father. Furthermore, he refuses to discuss his personal fear of his father, insisting that it was others who would quiver in the presence of Daddy King, many of whom expressed this sentiment by stating, "I'm scared to death of your dad."<sup>533</sup> Those who knew Martin best often confessed that Daddy King could be terribly autocratic. It is Andy Young, a person who maintained a close (quasi father-son) relationship with Daddy King, even after Martin's death, who remarks that "Martin had developed *interesting coping skills from his childhood* under this strong-willed, even domineering man (emphasis added)."<sup>534</sup> A great part of Daddy King's mythopoetic persona was due to his inspiring life story. He was, in many ways, the quintessential self-made, self-sufficient man. A man who had forsworn the pidgin of Georgia's backwoods to become an able articulator of the King's English. Ah, but alas, comparable to Jacob Freud, there was a side of Daddy King that Martin, in his self-analysis, could not observe: the Mike King

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<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>534</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, 286.

(Daddy King's birth name) who rejected and, in the end, overcame his father, James Albert King. Daddy King describes his father as a man who was a "lean, tough little fellow, very wiry and strong," but James Albert was also a man who had been deeply impaired, physically and psychologically, by the ways of the South, so much so that he turned to alcohol—the preferred nostrum of the melancholic—to ameliorate his greatest pain, which was that, in the eyes of the racist southerner, he was not seen as a man...but a dependent boy, the Sambo.<sup>535</sup> The physical and psychological challenges notwithstanding, there were also the financial misappropriations that resulted from the black male's being relegated to boyhood status. Whites believed that it was the Negro male's boyishness, evinced by his lack of reasoning skills, that made him an easy target for a number of nefarious wage-robbing schemes. As one farm owner boasted, "[c]heatin' a nigger ain't really doin' nothin' wrong. It's like playin' a game, 'cause most times they's too dumb to know the difference anyhow."<sup>536</sup> There was one particular incident when Daddy King watched how his father's deficient ratiocination made him an ill-equipped participant in the white man's "cheatin' a nigger" game. Daddy King would never forget seeing his father being totally unmanned. There is much to gain from taking account of Daddy King's relationship with his father; for, if nothing else, it provides some clarification as to why he was so determined to fashion himself into a man, a *real* man, a patriarch more pointedly, who his sons (particularly the precocious young Martin) would never oppose.

### **A King Ascends to the Throne**

Martin Luther King, Sr. (or Mike) was born on December 19, 1899 in the small, pastoral town of Stockbridge, Georgia. Life in Stockbridge was wearisome. Many of the city's black

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<sup>535</sup> Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 23.

<sup>536</sup> King, Sr., *op. cit.*, 24.

residents spent their time doing menial jobs, such as sharecropping or working in the homes of local whites. Besides the monotony of their daily work, blacks also had to contend with the racism of Stockbridge's white population. In terms of racial violence, Mike had seen it all in Stockbridge: from beatings to hangings to seeing his father being cheated out of his wages, all of these left an array of horrific images within Mike's psyche. In fact, he was so angered by the way blacks were being treated that he vowed "to hate white people until the day he died."<sup>537</sup>

Certainly, some of his personal experiences with racism, not just what he saw or heard about others, fueled his rage. For instance, there was the time that he refused a white man's brusque request for water—"Say, boy...run get a bucket of water..."—because he was busy running errands for his mother. The white man became so incensed by this refusal of service that that he kicked Mike in the head and then proceeded to punch him in the mouth. Bloodied, dazed, and worse of all, unprotected, he was in the end rescued by his mother who served as his avenger by besting the cocksure white man in fisticuffs.<sup>538</sup> Another incident that greatly angered Mike was when, as mentioned earlier, his father was being cheated out of his sharecropping wages. When Mike told his father what the boss, named Old Man Graves or "Settle Up," was doing, the boss shouted, "You better get that sassy little nigger outta here, Jim [Daddy King's father]...fore I kick his little but!"<sup>539</sup> Even more disturbing than this threat was Mike's realizing that his father was so dependent on this boss that, rather than offer a scathing rebuttal to this statement, James Albert King assented to this request, commanding his son to keep quiet, so as to not offend the this powerful (patriarchal) landowner. But it was too late. The son had pleaded his father's case

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<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

successfully. The landowner did pay Mike's father his proper wage, his protestation had worked, but the landowner was so embarrassed at having his nefarious scheme—"cheating a nigger"—exposed that he threw the King family off his land. James, in like manner, was not at all pleased with his son's stepping out of place, that is, his going beyond his father and challenging Old Man Graves.

The relationship between Mike and his father deteriorated soon afterwards. When speaking about his father's increasingly unkind disposition towards him, Mike says, "[e]veryday, Papa found some reason to yell at me, get on me no matter how much I tried to help out."<sup>540</sup> His father's unpleasantness would soon be directed towards his mother as well. After a night of drinking at the local dive, James Albert came home and loosed his rage on his wife. Remembering how his mother had defended him in the past, Mike leapt up and restrained his father from raining blows on his mother. The kitchen area of their small cabin was transformed into wrestling ring, as the two engaged in a rugged tussle. Though drunk, James Albert mustered enough coordination to become a formidable opponent. But Mike, coming into his own manly strength, soon wore him down, disposing of him handily. Defeated, all James could do was hurl threats at his son. "I'll kill you, kill you, I'll do it, damn you...!" he shouted. Mike did not take his father's words lightly, however. He knew that his father's ways, his failings as a father, were, indeed, killing him...insidiously. Moreover, he was convinced that, if he was to overcome the restraints of life in Stockbridge, he would have to surpass his father not only in a physical confrontation (*a fait accompli*) but even more so in his stature as a man.

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<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Seeking out his own manhood, though, proved a difficult task for Mike, who confessed that his father desired that “he be just like him in on almost every point.”<sup>541</sup> But Mike, whose heart was being drawn to the ministry, would leave Stockbridge to seek a better life in a land where a new black manhood was being born: Atlanta, Georgia.

In the years that marked the dawn of the twentieth century, Atlanta was a city attempting to reconcile its deep divisions. Much of the city’s inner discord had to do with the dramatic (and rather swift) demographic changes that occurred between 1890 and 1905. The most noticeable and troubling aspect of this change was the influx of black residents who migrated to the city from Georgia’s more bucolic towns. These black men and women were quickly woven into Atlanta’s economic fabric by working in the city’s burgeoning commercial and manufacturing industries. It would not be long before these men and women, once regarded as dependents, formed a viable middle-class, the black bourgeoisie, thus forcing the city’s white establishment to reconsider racial identities and boundaries. Many white Atlantans, especially the upper crust, were not conciliatory to such reconsiderations. Historian David Fort Godshalk speaks of the anxiety of that day, when he says, “growing wage work among...dependents appeared to threaten white fathers’ and husbands’ social status and patriarchal authority.”<sup>542</sup> Fearing that their position of authority was no longer on firm footing, the patriarchs created reactionary laws, Jim Crow, to keep things like they were in the past—that is, the good ol’ days on the plantation. But blacks had tasted the honey of the Promised Land, and they were not going back to the bondage of Egypt. And so, the two sides became more entrenched in their positions. On the one hand, the city’s white elites devised a number of machinations to maintain economic and

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>542</sup> David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 14.

political power over the city's burgeoning black middle class. Conversely, the city's black population was beginning to assert itself as a viable part of the Atlanta citizenry, particularly the cadre of black male citizens that had taken on the moniker "New Black Man." The two sides would, in the end, engage in a clash that ensued on Saturday, 22 September 1906, beginning what would be referred to, thereafter, as the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. It was an outright catastrophe.

"We're going to kill all the niggers tonight."<sup>543</sup> A declaration such as this, though hyperbolic (i.e., *all* the niggers), certifies the perverse mindset of the men who descended on Atlanta's downtown area, principally along Decatur and Marietta Streets, on the first night of the riot. With their minds ablazed with rage, a disorderly white mob began to attacks blacks, using an array of weaponry that included everything from a simple brick to firearms. "Bloodletting" is the word that best describes the horror of that night. No black person was safe. From public transportation to makeshift sanctuaries (e.g., a local skating rink or barbershop) mobs broke down doors and proceeded to beat black victims, either to the point on unconsciousness or, in some cases, to death. The blood flowed until September 26, three days later, when the rioters had grown tired of this feast of violence. According to Godshalk, the "official" number of fatalities issued by city officials—three to twelve deaths—greatly undercounted the amount of lives that were lost. Unofficially, however, the number of murders was believed to be in the hundreds; or, more accurately, as one journalist contends, about 250.<sup>544</sup> In truth, most historians hold the number to be about twenty-five, with hundreds more wounded.<sup>545</sup> It was not just the loss of life

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<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>545</sup> Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2002), 21.



but the psychological wounds of the riot itself that greatly damaged Atlanta's black community. Many black residents left the city, fearing that an aftershock of violence could break out without warning. For a time thereafter, the downtown area, Five Points, that had been the scene where most of the mob violence had occurred, was re-territorialized as the white man's land, the well-guarded terrain of the patriarch.

[T]he violence in Five Points was partly an attempt by whites to cordon off the center city as their own. For a brief period white rioters established their unquestioned dominance over an area where conflicts had previously open-ended and where blacks had at least occasionally gained the upper hand. This display of white men's power represented the imposition of the utter white male supremacy....And it constituted an attempt among white men to claim the physical territory of downtown Atlanta as their own space.<sup>546</sup>

Downtown Atlanta was simply the epicenter of a more expansive program instituted after the riot "to show black residents that they had no claim on public space and no legitimate place in the city's economy except as the dependent employees of paternalistic and exploitive white employers."<sup>547</sup> Blacks were disposed to the margins of Atlanta civic life, but this did not stop them from forming a vibrant selfhood within this liminal space, which was often paralleled to that found in white society. Thus one sees black men declaring that they, too, were to have their own authority, their own patriarchal status, and would eagerly see to it that this desire was actualized.

And so, the discursive formation of the New Black Man became more vociferous "behind the veil," to borrow Du Bois' oft quoted phrase, of racial oppression. W.E.B. Du Bois demanded that black men be vested with all of the powers of a self-assertive manhood. In fact, in 1906, at a meeting convened in Macon, Georgia, called the Georgia Equal Rights Convention, Du Bois was

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<sup>546</sup> Godshalk, *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

one of the seventeen signees of a document that protested “the invasion of our [speaking of black men] manhood rights. . . .”<sup>548</sup> A few months later, the need for the procurement of such rights became ever more pressing as Du Bois returned to Atlanta in the midst of the riot and was so displeased with what he saw that he penned his “Litany of Atlanta,” a jeremiad on racial injustice. Du Bois, however, did more than express his militancy through his writing—he enacted the manliest Constitutional Amendment, the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, as he “bought a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot.”<sup>549</sup> As Godshalk observes, it was because “white rioter’s attacks had targeted both the bodies and the masculine identities of black men” that Dubois, along with countless other black men, began to use more potent measures to reaffirm their manhood.<sup>550</sup> Ultimately, Du Bois spearheaded a movement to inculcate within the minds of black men that they “must refuse to bend to white injustice and intimidation, even if such resistance meant certain death, [it] exemplified black manliness and prompted long term racial progress.”<sup>551</sup> Comparable to the white men who had marked their territory during and after the 1906 Riot, Du Bois replicated a paternalistic manhood that catered to an elite chosen few, the Talented Tenth, a black aristocracy, at the expense of the many unlearned (read: uncivilized) black men.

In his essay “The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address,” DuBois remarks that the moniker “The Talented Tenth” means “leadership of the Negro race in America by a trained few.”<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Jack C. Knight, “Reckoning with Violence: W.E.B. Du Bois and the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot,” *The Journal of Southern History* 62 (1996): 727-766.

<sup>549</sup> Godshalk, *op. cit.*, 110.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>552</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader* (New York: Owl Book, 1995), 347.

During the restructuring of the black populace after the race riot, the men who most represented this lionized “trained few” were found amongst the city’s black clergy. Black pastors were held in such high regard because they were the leaders of the black community’s most cherished institution, the one that was the center of black life, the Black church. Ferguson notes, “almost every black Atlantan had some kind of connection at some point to the most important institution in black Atlanta and black America—the Black church.”<sup>553</sup> It was the church that served as the community’s primary social gathering place, a viable social welfare agency, and also the institution that either galvanized or withheld the black citizenry’s desire for political empowerment. The black church, supported by other groups like social clubs and fraternity organizations, was the principal grassroots organization that helped to establish the “schools and businesses that made Atlanta’s black community one of the most prosperous in the South.”<sup>554</sup> Therefore, to be a pastor of one of the more esteemed churches in Atlanta, such as Friendship Baptist Church, Big Bethel AME, or Ebenezer Baptist, meant to be an influential figure not only in matters of church polity and liturgy, but to have a voice of authority in matters of local commerce and politics as well. The position made a black man a person of authority, a true patriarchal figure, both within and outside of the black community. Power like this is what Mike King, still in his teenage years, thirsted for as he left Stockbridge and headed for Atlanta to cement himself as one of God’s choice men.

Mike soon learned that he would have to refine his ministerial skills if he wanted to be a successful preacher in Atlanta. His first experience with the black church in big city came through a courtship that he had started with a woman named Bertha Chaney, who was the daughter of a Methodist minister, a Reverend Wilson Chaney. Needless to say, Reverend Chaney

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<sup>553</sup> Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

was not at all pleased that his daughter has taken a liking to a Baptist preacher, who was still enrapt in his “country bumbkin” ways, foremost of which was his unpleasant mishandling of the King’s English. Bertha, however, was hooked on the young Mike King. She began to talk about getting married, having kids, and living a long life together, but Mike was not as fervent about their relationship. Rather, he was focused on making his way in the ministry, becoming a man of God like Reverend Chaney, whom he described as an “educated, very stately man.”<sup>555</sup> Mike began to sit at the feet, so to speak, of Reverend Chaney, taking in all that he had to say about life and, more important, the ministry. After a while, the reverend’s icy deportment towards the young man, Bertha’s beloved, began to thaw, so much so that he had offered him an invitation to preach a sermon at a Saturday night Methodist retreat. Surprised by this sign of ecclesial affection, Mike hastily assented to an opportunity for which he was not at all prepared. And Reverend Chaney knew this. His magnanimous gesture was a ruse, used to shame his daughter’s unqualified inamorato. His “smirking triumphantly” during King’s homiletic fiasco signaled his true intent.<sup>556</sup>

Simply put, the sermon was an all out failure. To quote King directly: “It turned out to be the most disastrous [sermon] I’d ever had.”<sup>557</sup> Everyone within earshot was ashamed to hear him use such primitive language to describe the Via Dolorosa—e.g., “Caintcha see him totin’ it [the cross]?”—which Mike believed served only to remind these city-folk of the country life they had left behind. It was not just the sermon that was troubling, but King himself who was viewed as the picturesque incarnation of the Sambo figure, yes, a black man who was still an uncivilized

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<sup>555</sup> King, Sr., *op. cit.*, 55.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*

boy. Mike's own analysis of the crowd's reception (or rejection) of him, their disquieting gaze, is quite telling.

They must have considered me a clown, a comical country bumpkin. Words like "totin'" didn't fit in an Atlanta vocabulary, not among the Methodists, anyway, among those who'd escaped the country life I was just emerging from. They didn't need any reminders from preachers or anybody else, of what they'd left behind. I was that kind of reminder, with my dusty, uncreased clothes, my rough country style of speaking, my whole uneducated, green, farm boy personality. *I was nothing to them, almost the way I'd been nothing to the white men back in the country, when I'd just been just another one of somebody's niggers* (emphasis added).<sup>558</sup>

Let me take some time to unpack what the above quote means in terms of Mike's patricidal impulses. It was mentioned earlier that Mike believed that his father wanted his first-born son "to follow [him] in all of his footsteps"<sup>559</sup> which, in all likelihood, meant his being conscripted to a life of dependency as a sharecropper. But Mike rejected not just the penury of sharecropping per se but, most of all, what this livelihood most represented: a weak manhood. In an attempt to distance himself from this impotent masculinity, he leaves the restrictive environs of Stockbridge, after a victorious clash with his father no less, which was to signal that he had overcome his father's dominion, and was independent enough to pursue his own manhood in Atlanta. But he finds that the city's elite, those who would have to affirm his manhood status, force him back into his father's patrimony, that is, their ocular (i.e., his "dusty and uncreased clothes) and aural (i.e., words like "totin'") appraisal place him in a continuum of primitive black manhood in which he and his father were one and the same. In terms of the crowd's gaze, it is worth injecting the wisdom of Katja Silverman, who remarks that "[w]hen we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically 'framed.'"<sup>560</sup> The gaze, then, affixes one into a

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>560</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 135.

sclerotic ontology—it declares, “This is who you (really) are...because we have seen where (and *who*) you come from!” Hence, without having to voice the findings of their analysis, the attendees at the Saturday retreat service let it be known, through their unresponsiveness and cold looks, that Mike’s greatest fear was coming to fruition: he would, if nothing changed, “be just like him [his father, James Albert King] on almost every point.”<sup>561</sup>

To avoid such a tragedy, Mike knew that he had to conquer his father not only physically (via another tussle), but at a deeper level, his manhood consciousness had to change, he had to become a New Black Man. But for now, there was not much he could do to change his status; he was so embarrassed by the sermon debacle that he cut-off his relationship with Bertha and left Atlanta to return to Stockbridge. Bertha was furious. “Oh, Mike King, you’ve got a lot to learn!” shouted Bertha as he made his way out of town. Her words were especially hurtful because he knew she was right. He did have a lot to learn, but such lessons would never be given in Stockbridge, where progress moved at a glacial pace, if at all. And yet, with no place else to go, he had to return home. Things would be as they once were; his hands would no longer caress his pristine leather-bound Bible but be pricked by the splinters of a rugged wooden hoe, his spirits no longer elated by the prestige of the pulpit but would be sullied by the shame of the sharecropping farm. He wasn’t sure when it would happen—but the next time he stepped foot in Atlanta...things would be different.

Three years passed before Mike King entreated his mother to allow him to return to Atlanta. He was now eighteen, almost a full grown man, and therefore wanted to endeavor, again, to make it on his own. The relationship between him and his father had not improved over this time. Mike believed that his father wanted to “keep [him] down in the country...That was

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<sup>561</sup> King, Sr. *op. cit.*, 26.

his victory, small as it was.”<sup>562</sup> James King had been so emasculated by the castrating practices of the Jim Crow South that he could not see a new day of manhood for himself or for his son. Over the three years back in Stockbridge, Mike would begin to learn of his father hopelessness, evinced when he remarks,

I knew that James King was a man who wanted more that he could ever have. And what he wanted wasn't really that much—a decent home for his family, a day's pay for a day's work, the freedom to be judged as a human being and not a beast, a nigger, a nightmare in the white mind. But for him these things were never to happen. Maybe tomorrow, just maybe—Papa must have thought that so many, many times. And everytime he did, it had to cut through his soul...he would not live to see, to feel, to *be* part of that new day (emphasis in original).<sup>563</sup>

Mike had seen the new day, the Promised Land, so to speak, during his stay in Atlanta. Black men like Reverend Chaney gave the young King hope that he, too, could be made anew, be part of the new era of black manhood. He set off for Atlanta, again, but this time with the knowledge that to be an effective preacher (and to avoid embarrassing himself) he needed to get an education. This was a humbling experience for Mike, who had to begin his education as a fifth grade student at the Bryant School. With little reading skills and no writing skills, he spent his nights working under the luminous glow of the midnight oil, trying to put together the perplexing puzzle of English grammar. As his reading aptitude improved, King was able to discern the signs of the times even better. Following the advice of a Mr. Charles Clayton, one of King's teachers at Bryant School, he became interested in working to change the inequitable treatment of blacks in the South; he was particularly interested in the continued disfranchisement of blacks in the South. Blacks were given the right to vote in national elections, via the Fifteenth Amendment ratified, back in 1870, but a number of states in the South, including Georgia, enforced a number of tactics (e.g., the poll tax) to dissuade blacks from participating in the voting process. Mike

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<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

himself would endure this rigmarole to obtain his right to vote, a much needed victory as he struggled with his education. Things were getting better for Mike. But one day his past would come looking for him, seeking to drag him back to Stockbridge.

James Albert King entered the doors of the Bryant School looking for his son. He complained that the work on the farm had become too arduous for him, and that he needed his son's help to keep the sharecropping business solvent. It was hard for Mike to refuse his father's request, but he did, choosing to say and make his own way in Atlanta. He wanted to be free of Stockbridge and all it represented, the puerile manhood, the hopelessness, all of it. Knowing that he would never "follow him [his father] anywhere again" Mike now had the freedom to achieve his status as a self-made man. Now he was ready to attempt another entrance into Atlanta's black church community.

A few blocks away from the Bryant school, on Auburn Avenue, lived Alberta Williams, affectionately referred to as Bunch. She was the daughter of A.D. Williams, the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Alberta stirred up feelings within Mike that he had never felt for a woman before; he was smitten by her Southern charm and reassuring smile, so much so that he asked her if she would consider courting. She agreed. As the relationship between the two began to flourish, Mike also took an ecclesial interest in her father. Reverend Williams, unlike Reverend Chaney, was not one of those supercilious ministers found in the Methodist tradition; rather, he was something of a common man, who was given to the same foibles as Mike. For one, according to King, Jr. biographer David Levering Lewis, Reverend Williams "spoke the broken English of the people he served, as much out of pride in his rough origins as from inability to master sinuous rules of grammar in adult life."<sup>564</sup> His personal difficulties with

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<sup>564</sup> David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 4.



mastering the language of the oppressor did not mean that he would allow his daughter to marry a man that was uneducated, though. Having attended Morehouse College for a time, obtaining a few credits in the theology department, Reverend Williams steered Mike towards furthering his education at this institution so that he would become a man, a Morehouse man. But Morehouse would not welcome him with open arms. Instead, upon taking a few exams to begin studies there, he was told by an official in the registrar's office, "You're just not college material, Reverend King."<sup>565</sup> His dogged determination—for example, having a personal impromptu meeting with then President John Hope—allowed him to force his way into Morehouse, and, ultimately, with the constant prodding of Alberta, procured him a college diploma. Now an educated man, there was one thing left for Mike to accomplish: He needed to lead a church, being a pastor would make him a man's man, in the community.

Mike and Alberta married on November 25, 1926. Now officially a part of the Williams family, Mike would see his ministerial career enter a new stratosphere. Reverend Williams saw to it that his son-in-law was well acquainted with the Atlanta's black ecclesial elite, and in doing so, assured that, upon his retirement, Mike would ascend to the Ebenezer throne. The newlywed couple resided with the Williams family, and it was during this time that Reverend Williams prevailed upon his son the intricacies of the ministry. For instance, "a minister, in his calling, chose to lead the people of his church not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the practical world in which they found themselves struggling."<sup>566</sup> Moreover, the reverend's practical wisdom had provided him with a rather comfortable lifestyle. Lewis notes, "[a]s one of the rare people in the black community who was financially secure and independent of whites, [Reverend

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<sup>565</sup> King, Sr. *op. cit.*, 75.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Williams] was able to play an important role in race relations.”<sup>567</sup> He was one of those special men who was a leader both in the church and in the community. Reports of Williams political activities include his leading a boycott of an Atlanta newspaper named *The Guardian* when its editorial board used racial epithets in their criticism of the city building Booker T. Washington High School, Atlanta’s first secondary school catering to an all-black student body. Mike would follow in William’s impressive footsteps by joining a number of civic organizations, such as the Atlanta Voter’s League. His preparation would soon prove necessary. Reverend Williams died of a heart attack in the spring of 1931. Soon after, Mike King was called to the pastorate of Ebenezer. The new appointment marked King’s coronation and granted him membership within Atlanta’s black aristocracy. His dream had come true. He was now *the* leader of one of the city’s most recognized congregations. He was a New Black Man. And he let everyone know it. Taylor Branch, a King biographer, says of King’s self-promotion, “[h]e boasted openly of the number of loans he had secured, the number of votes he controlled, the amount of money he had brought into the church building fund....He was simply Mike King...making himself the center of attention in any room.”<sup>568</sup>

A couple of years after the death of his spiritual father, Reverend Williams, Mike would have to endure the loss of his earthly father. Before transitioning, however, James King requested that his son change his name to Martin Luther, each part of name coming from one of James’ brothers. Seeing his father’s rapidly deteriorating condition, Mike believed this last sign

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<sup>567</sup> Lewis, op. cit., 5.

<sup>568</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 43.

of filial piety a doable parting gift. And so he agreed to his father's death (bed) wish<sup>569</sup> *Maybe he felt guilty for how much he had rejected his father (his ways, his manhood) in the past?* The obverse belies Mike's unconscious desire, though. As his father lay their slowly passing away, the younger King was surreptitiously performing the funerary rights for himself, Mike King, the son. He was now ready to assume the role of the patriarch, and the birth of his first child cemented his status as such. Mike now knew how hard it was for a father to separate his own manly aspirations, his manhood ideals, from those of his sons. Willie Christine would be the first child born to Mike and Alberta, but she would escape much of Mike's overly domineering ways. His sons, however, M.L. was born on January 15, 1929 and Alfred Daniel Alfred was born on July 30, 1930, would be vulnerable to their father's delirium of power, especially as Ebenezer grew in number and influence under the senior King's stewardship. Daddy King, Reverend King's nickname, admits that parenthood proved challenging for him. He had to change in order to be a father: *"I remained accustomed to thinking of myself as a son long after I'd left my father's house. And as my children grew, I became more familiar with what Mama and Papa had been talking about when they'd seemed a little harsh with us (emphasis added)."*<sup>570</sup> For Daddy King, being a son was incongruent with and even damaging to his self-identity as a father. Sonship had to be abandoned so that he could be the patriarch he believed his children needed, particularly his two sons. Being so disposed to this unilateral, avowedly patriarchal, mode of parenting, Daddy King became terribly rigid and authoritarian in interactions with his children.

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<sup>569</sup> Taylor Branch discusses the name change as a sign of a new beginning. Hence the death (bed) wish was in one way James Albert's last attempt to exert control over his son (the name controlled identity); however, on the other hand, it became, for King, a means of laying to rest his former self, Mike King. It was for King a symbol that he would no longer be under the auspices of his father. He found evidence of this in the biblical characters whose name changed marked a change in status as well.

<sup>570</sup> King, Sr., *op. cit.*, 95.

The power that he exhibit in the pulpit began to leak into the King household, in that his every word was to be obeyed as if spoken *ex cathedra*, his punishment was to be endured without an aught of contestation. Unfortunately, Daddy King was constructing a paradigm of black manhood that his sons would come to abhor.

Yes, he was educated. Yes, he was recognized a leader in the community. Yes, he had ecclesial and political status. But now, as the *paterfamilias*, something was different; he had lost the hope that he had when he was a son; he stopped striving towards new horizons of masculinity. Like his own father's edict, Daddy King demanded that his sons "follow in all of his footsteps, be like him on almost every point."<sup>571</sup> The same manhood foisted upon the following generation. An inherited manhood like this greatly impacts a son's ability to dream of a more salubrious and everywhere protean (dare I say, revolutionary) manhood.

### **Babbitts and Kings**

Who was Martin Luther King, Jr.? Many have tried to find out. Reporters interviewed him, F.B.I. officials spied on him, paramours laid with him—each using their specific skill set to discover not just the secret of his strength but that of his weakness as well. Even now, fifty years after being felled by an assassin's bullet, he remains a captivating figure. But so much about King, the man, remains a mystery. If biographers have rightly observed something about him, it is this: just as there was much that even those closest to him did not know, so too were there things about himself that he was unaware of. He was an enigma unto himself. Knowing his deep divisions, King engaged in what he referred to as "self-analyzation."<sup>572</sup> This was part of the human condition, he believed, and he placed his own narrative of "conflict" alongside that of a

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<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>572</sup> Carson (2007), *op. cit.*, 96.

number of men whom history had accorded much honor. This was the thesis of “Mastering Our Evil Selves, Mastering Ourselves,” a sermon he delivered on June 5, 1949. An excerpt of the sermon’s manuscript reads as follows:

Plato...speaking figuratively, described the personality as a charioteer driving two head-strong steeds, each wanting to in different directions. Listen to Ovid the Latin poet, “I see and approve the better things of life but the evil things I follow.” Goethe once said there was enough material in him to make both a rogue and a gentleman....“The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not that I do.” This is Apostle writing in his epistle to the Romans. Whether Paul was speaking here of a conflict that had [come] in his personal experience we do not know. But we do know that this is a paradigm of life.<sup>573</sup>

Though M.L. knew that inner conflict was a “paradigm of life,” he was well aware that there were many, especially within his ecclesial milieu, who held a more conservative view of man’s ontological constitution. Leery of being exposed as a charlatan, King erected a façade of panache that hid what sociologist Jonathan Rieder calls the “chameleon King.”<sup>574</sup> His feeling of being “watched” began long before the era of FBI activity noted earlier; and it was not their wiretapping—which documented phone conversations with alleged Communist functionaries and orgiastic soirees—that was the apparatus that he believed would catch him in the act. Rather, the watchful eye that he caused him the greatest dread, the one that had perused his consciousness since youth, was that of Daddy King.

In the summer of 1944, Mike, Jr. (as he was still referred to despite the legal name change) worked as a laborer on a Connecticut tobacco farm. David Levering Lewis has it that King, along with several fellow high school students, made the temporary migration up north, not out of “economic necessity,” but “a spirit of adolescent wanderlust and Puritan desire to

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>574</sup> Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me, The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2.

inure themselves to the rigors of physical hardship.”<sup>575</sup> In true Weberian fashion, Mike viewed hard work as something that shaped character, that is, molded one into a person with a firm moral stature. It was Weber who said of work that

[i]t is in particular, the specific protection against all those temptations which for Puritanism compromise the concept of the “unclean life”—and its role should not be underestimated....Above and beyond this, however, work is the end and purpose of life commanded by God....Unwillingness to work is a symptom of the absence of the state of grace.<sup>576</sup>

Besides shaping his moral character, allegedly, King’s time in Connecticut had the added benefit of opening his eyes to a new cultural environment, one in which blacks were not forced behind the veil of racial segregation. This newfound latitude was a revelation for King, who found the “freedom of movement, the casual sociability of Northern whites, and the cultural offerings of Hartford exhilarating.”<sup>577</sup> Being that this was his first extended stay away from home, M.L. penned a letter to Daddy King to tell of his Connecticut experience. It is worth quoting the letter in its entirety.<sup>578</sup>

Dear father:

I am very sorry I am so long about writing but I have been working most of the time. We are really having a fine time here and the work is very easy. We have to get up every day at 6:00. We have very good food. And I am working kitchen so you see I get better food.

We have service here every Sunday about 8:00 and I am the religious leader we have a Boys choir here and we are going to sing on the air soon. Sunday I went to church in Simsbury it was a white church. I could not go to Hartford [to church] but I am going next week. On our way here we say some things I had never anticipated to see. After we passed Washington the was no

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<sup>575</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>576</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 107.

<sup>577</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 17.

<sup>578</sup> Absent the underlined final sentence, the letter is rendered as it appears in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Please excuse the grammatical errors.

discrimination at all the white people here are very nice. We go to any place we want to and sit any where we want to.

Tell everybody I said hello and I am still thinking if the church and reading my bible. And I am not doing anything that I would not do in front of you.

Your Son

[signed] M.L. Jr.<sup>579</sup>

King wrote the letter on June 15, 1944; it would be the only letter on record that he wrote to his father during this “summer of freedom.” It is interesting that Daddy King received the first but only letter from Martin, Jr. in light of the fact that he would later write three letters—dated June 18th, August 5<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>—to his mother, none of which included a guarantee of rectitude like we have in the closing remarks of the letter to his father. He even starts the letter to his father in a penitential tone: “I am *very sorry* I am so long about writing... (emphasis added).”<sup>580</sup> Yes, King asserts that he is at work “most of the time,” keeping him quarantined from temptation one would suppose. But could this be true? What was he doing the rest of the time? Had his freedom in Connecticut led him to engage in certain activities that his father would denounce? Evidence has yet to surface to quench our inquisitiveness about such things. What is known, though, is that King greatly feared his father’s retribution. He was well aware that his time on the Connecticut tobacco farm would come to an end, eventually he would have to go back home, to the South, to “the omnipresent, routine inhumanity of Southern segregation.”<sup>581</sup> There was also the anxiety of his returning home to another omnipresent and, at times, inhumane entity that greatly restricted his freedom...and it was not the white South...it was Daddy King. *What were those early years like in the King home?*

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<sup>579</sup> Carson (2007), *op. cit.*, 112.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>581</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 17.

In his autobiography, Martin Luther King, Jr. describes the early years of his life as “very comfortable years.”<sup>582</sup> In terms of his material well-being, this very much seemed to be the case. James Cone has it on historical account that, during the nadir of the Great Depression, the King’s enjoyed a life style that differed greatly from that of many black Atlantans. Cone says, [y]oung Martin grew up in a community during the 1930s in which nearly 65 percent of African Americans were on public relief, but not the King family. They always had plenty of food and suitable attire.”<sup>583</sup> The King’s were “blessed” with these material advantages because Daddy King took full advantage of his position as the “central leader” of Ebenezer Baptist Church.<sup>584</sup> His power was due in large measure to the manner in which he had rescued Ebenezer itself from fiscal calamity. While other black churches anxiously watched their membership numbers wane, Ebenezer’s grew at a rapid pace, from two hundred to four thousand, to be exact.<sup>585</sup> According to Taylor Branch, King was so beloved by the saints of Ebenezer that they made him “the highest-paid Negro minister in Atlanta at the end of his first year.”<sup>586</sup> The ultimate sign of the church’s appreciation came when, in the summer of 1934, in the midst of the Depression no less, they sent him on a summer-long tour of Europe, Africa, and the Holy Land. “It was at trip,” Branch says, “that the richest of people might have envied in those hard times.”<sup>587</sup> Stephen Oates relates that Daddy King also became president/director of a Negro bank while also being involved in other business dealings as well, thus signifying, in Oates’ opinion, that he was “attracted to wealth and

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<sup>582</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>583</sup> James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 23.

<sup>584</sup> Branch, *op. cit.*, 43.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



power.”<sup>588</sup> These reported extravagances very much contradict the picture of “humility” painted by M.L., who says of his father, “[he] never made more than an ordinary salary”<sup>589</sup> Similar to the members of Ebenezer, the residents of the King household were expected to coddle Daddy King with gifts as well—however, not soft currency like trips and various monetary offerings that don’t hold value, no, he preferred they please him with the hard currency of piety (*pietas*: subservience to authority). And he was especially desirous that his sons develop a disposition of filial piety, something that he recognized was a lacuna within his own character.<sup>590</sup>

Daddy King forcefully inculcated the lessons of filial piety within his sons at a very early age. Stephen Oates provides a rather unflattering depiction of Daddy King’s persona within the King home, when he remarks, “Reverend King ruled his home like a fierce Old Testament patriarch, certain that he alone knew what was best for them [his children].”<sup>591</sup> If for some reason, one of his children dared contradict him in some manner—e.g., sassiness—their disobedience was met with swift physical punishment. “When the children broke a rule...Daddy King took a strap to them,”<sup>592</sup> says Oates. But there was something different about Martin when his father rebuked him with the rod: he refused to voice his agony —yes, a cascade of emotion would be strewn across his cheeks, but no words, no sounds. Only silence. Oates refers to this as

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<sup>588</sup> Oates, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>589</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>590</sup> In his autobiography, Daddy King confesses, rather forthrightly, that he lacked patience with children, which is why he often resorted to physical punishment to persuade them to see things his way. However, such punishment was usually reserved for his two sons with whom a “switch was usually quicker and more persuasive.” Christine, his first daughter, never needed to be bent to conform; she was, in Daddy King’s words, “the exceptionally well-behaved, and studious member of the trio.” (See *Daddy King*, 130).

<sup>591</sup> Oates, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*

M.L.'s "mute suffering."<sup>593</sup> Even Daddy King marveled at his son's remarkable self-control. But M.L.'s stoic disposition belied the torrent of emotions that swelled within him. "M.L. was an extremely sensitive boy," Oates points out, "and it hurt him deeply to be whipped by his awesome father."<sup>594</sup> It was the 1930s, mind you, a time when those in authority, such as parents and teachers, upheld the value of physical punishment as a matter of course in shaping of a child's character. And yet, Daddy King's beatings seemed excessive. M.L.'s grandmother, Jennie Williams, was so distraught at the sight of Daddy King thrashing her grandson that she would "go off to another room and sob uncontrollably."<sup>595</sup> It must have been terrifying for her to sit in her room and hear only the sound of the Daddy King's chastisement, as he whipped and chided his son.

*Didn't I tell you to...[Wap]...*

*Why can't you learn to...[Thwack]...*

*You know better than to...[Whop]...*

*If you do this again, I'm going to...[Crack]...*

All she heard was Daddy King—M.L. didn't make a sound. The "mute suffering," Oates's term, that he was made to endure resulted in some very bizarre emotional explosions or paroxysms, evinced in two particular incidents involving his grandmother—first, her being injured in an accidental collision with his brother; and second, her dying of a heart attack—each after which M.L. attempted to commit suicide, reportedly, by jumping out a window located on the second

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<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

floor of the King's home.<sup>596</sup> Although his hysteric response to the first event remains inscrutable, friends, family members, and biographers have all formulated a reasonable hypothesis as to his anguishing over Jennie Williams' death. The dominant interpretation (based on the manifest content), is that he was guilt-ridden for sneaking off to see a downtown parade when he was supposed to be home studying. Daddy's King offer such an interpretation, when he says, "M.L. thought God was punishing the family for his 'sin' of having gone out of the house without telling anyone."<sup>597</sup> For days thereafter, M.L. shut himself in his room, isolated, going without sleep and eating very little food. *Was he spending his time fretting over how life would be in the King household without his beloved grandmother?* After all, it was Jennie, called "Mama," who was "warm and sympathetic and never hurt him," serving as an emotional buffer between him and his indomitable father. Soon after his father's scourging "aroused such guilt in him, such anger," it was his grandmother who would be the one to restore an inner quietude. Now that she was gone, M.L.'s guilt and rage was left unharnessed; in fact, these negative emotions continued to grow as his father continued to beat and chide him until he left home, at the age of fifteen, to attend Morehouse College. By then, unfortunately, he had already shown signs of what Erik Erikson termed a "negative identity," that is, "an identity which has been warned not to become." In the case of M.L., he was never to *become* an impious son who rebelled against strictures of his father—but this would soon change.

M.L. entered Morehouse intending to become a doctor or a lawyer, not a minister. The pressure at home to join the ministry was great, however. For one, there was Daddy King, who believed that it was befitting of a preacher's son to want to follow in his father's footsteps, that

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<sup>596</sup> It has been debated as to whether this was an actual attempt at suicide. Allison Davis, in *Leadership, Love, and Aggression*, disagrees with this interpretation, but three prominent King biographers hold this view: see Lewis, *op. cit.*, 13; Oates, *op. cit.*, 9; and Branch, *op. cit.*, 48

<sup>597</sup> King, Sr., *op. cit.*, 109.

is, to be heir to the Ebenezer throne (or pulpit), or what Lewis calls “dynastic succession.”<sup>598</sup> But Martin was not attracted to his father’s style of preaching. He found it uncivilized, the lack of grammatical elocution; he believed it demonstrated a lack of self-control, the whooping and hollering, foot-stomping and fist-pounding; he deemed it devoid of theological-philosophical depth, the desultory dogmatism corroborated by repetitive proof texting. The primitiveness that his father displayed in the pulpit reminded M.L. of his father’s lack of sophistication in their home. Unlike his wife who had “love and respect for the [children’s] *feelings*,” proving her emotional intelligence, Daddy King had a temper that “made it very hard for [him] to sit down with the boys and quietly explain [or articulate] to them the way [he] wanted things done (emphasis added).” A further indication of how his temperament in the pulpit was transferred into his home was that he gave no warrant for his authority, that is, there was no rationale as to why his children should be obedient to his commands. It was all too autocratic: Daddy King said it...so it must be done. Morehouse, though, allowed King to distance himself from his father.

The physical distance gave him the opportunity to engage in a number of early adult frivolities, nothing too serious, but acts, nonetheless, that he would never, as he had claimed in the Connecticut letter noted earlier, do in his father’s presence. Returning to Connecticut, and the tobacco farm, King let his new freedom get the best of him, as he was “accosted,” Branch reports, by a local policeman for what seemed to be a night of carousing.<sup>599</sup> Fearing his father’s response, Martin believed he could soften the blow (literally) by telling his father he had been called to the ministry. Daddy King, who Lewis dubs “a grand impresario for all his children,” was elated to hear that his plan for M.L.—the only plan that really mattered—was taking

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<sup>598</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>599</sup> Branch, *op. cit.*, 65.

shape.<sup>600</sup> Branch's account of King's "call" to the ministry makes it appear that it was far more a matter of M.L.'s own volition than of inspiration—simply put, a means of appeasing his father. And such a claim holds some valence. M.L. himself, mentions his father's import to his decision, when he confesses, "I guess the influence of my father had a great deal to do with my going into the ministry."<sup>601</sup> By M.L.'s joining the ministry, whether by the bidding of his father or the Father, Daddy King was now assured that his son would remain with him, physically, for some time. But his thirst for liberation had not yet been satiated. M.L. had already tasted freedom, and though his physical liberation was now over, he would not stop rebelling. Rather, he chose to contradict his father on a higher plane: the intellect.

King's last year at Morehouse was challenging on many fronts. He was serving as the assistant pastor at his father's church, which meant that he had taken "a step or two back under his father's control."<sup>602</sup> His need to exemplify the moral excellence of a church leader meant that his failings were not just an embarrassment to his father but to the Ebenezer community as well. For example, when he was caught at a local YWCA dance, Daddy King made M.L. apologize to the entire congregation for this indiscretion. The congregation was more than forgiving, far more than Daddy King perhaps, primarily because the young man showed such promise as a preacher. During his trial sermon, many observers remarked that, though he did not have the imposing presence of his father in the pulpit, "he already spoke with an authority that made people forget his small stature."<sup>603</sup> One of the things that caught the attention of the listeners was his use of big

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<sup>600</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>601</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>602</sup> Branch, *op. cit.*, 67.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

words. This was nothing new, for even at a young age M.L. had fancied himself something of a wordsmith. We have on reliable historical account that he once said to his parents, “You just wait and see...[w]hen I grow up I’m going to get some big words.”<sup>604</sup> Words, for M.L., were a reflection of one’s status; they marked one’s place within the social caste system. Many viewed his disdain for lexical ignorance, which he held as philistinism, as a sign of his arrogance, which was the opinion of a minister who supervised one of his early preaching internships. The minister’s assessment was that M.L. had “an attitude of aloofness, disdain and possible snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people.”<sup>605</sup> But King didn’t give an ear to such criticism. He refused to accept prevailing wisdom suggesting that to be an effective preacher he would have to rely on the loosed emotionalism that his father displayed in Ebenezer’s pulpit. According to Jonathan Rieder, King couldn’t stand to see his father “walk the bench” (this would happen when the preacher would dance up and down the pews when the sermon got particularly ecstatic) which he felt was “the most vaudevillian, primitive aspect of his heritage.”<sup>606</sup> Behavior such as this was *the* source of the caricatures that many whites in the South had of blacks. King soon believed that this intimidating man who had gave an air of superiority was in actuality very weak, unable to shake off the backwards ways of his “country bumpkin” past. This was the secret that revealed another side of Daddy King to M.L. All his wealth and prestige, his Puritanical ways, his bluster was an attempt to divert M.L. eyes from seeing the shameful fact that underneath his father’s Herculean façade was a narrow-minded, undeveloped, and, in many ways, childish (or boyish) man.

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<sup>604</sup> Oates, op. cit., 9.

<sup>605</sup> Rieder, op. cit., 93.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid.

M.L. had to get away from it all. In another attempt to separate himself from his father's backwards ways, King would leave it all behind, the South, Atlanta, Ebenezer, and, most of all, Daddy King, to further his education, all in an attempt to cement his status as a well-cultured man.

The maturation and transformation of M.L. during his time at Crozer Seminary and, subsequently, Boston University, where he did his doctoral studies, was due in large part to his learning the language of the Western intelligentsia. These years of rigorous academic studies equipped him to speak on a host of learned issues because he had read and, more important, understood the works by prominent figures in a wide array of fields. He knew the classic philosophers, Plato and Aristotle; he knew the German idealist, Goethe and Hegel; he knew modern existentialist theorist, Heidegger and Camus; he knew Christian ethicists, Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr; he knew theologians, Barth and Tillich; he knew economists, Marx and (Adam) Smith; and, most influential of all, he knew the central proponents of nonviolent resistance, Tolstoy and Gandhi. After leaving Boston University, he was not at all willing, certainly after being a part of a group like the "Dialectical Society" (or in King's manner of speaking, extending a word almost to its breaking point: Di-aaah-lec-teeee-caaahl...[*pause*]...Sooo-si-eeeh-teeeeah), to return to Ebenezer where he would be part of a jejune ecclesial environment that had "too much religion in its feet."<sup>607</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, a church known for being snooty and a "big shots church," whose members were restrained, attentive listeners, desirous of well-thought out exhortation, was to be Martin's first full-time pastorate.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Rieder, *op. cit.*, 93.

<sup>608</sup> Garrow (1986), *op. cit.*, 48.

Martin felt a great sense of independence whilst at Dexter. Physically, he was miles away from the direct influence of Daddy King. But even more important, intellectually, he had overcome many of his father's primitive ways, developing a preaching style that captivated his congregation, not with emotional showmanship, but with scholarly pyrotechnics. His longtime friend Joseph Lowery rather lightheartedly recalls that King's syncretic homiletic style was unique in that "he was a preacher who could whoop Kierkegaard."<sup>609</sup> Sure, many of his sermons sometimes seemed more like professorial perorations, but that didn't matter; he was making a name for himself in Montgomery, Alabama. No longer would he be known only as the son of a prominent pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, he was now his own man.

However, some of his father's authoritarian ways, especially in terms of church leadership, proved effective. For instance, upon his arrival at Dexter, he crafted a document in which he admonished his congregation to accept that he was to be "respected and accepted as the central figure around which programs and policies of the church revolved."<sup>610</sup> King wanted to ensure that he would be able to steer the church in whichever direction he deemed appropriate. The timing of his arrival and his decision to become an "active part in current social problems" seems providential in that the winds of change were about to gust through Montgomery. December 1, 1955 marked the first salvo indicating that the city's black citizens would no longer accept second class citizenship. In an act of defiance that was humble but strident, Rosa Parks, a secretary for the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, refused to give up her seat, a row behind the "official" white section of the bus, to a white passenger. J.P. Blake, the bus driver, must have been aware of the several previous incidents involving black passengers not wanting to vacate

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<sup>609</sup> Rieder, *op. cit.*, 88.

<sup>610</sup> Garrow (1986), *op. cit.*, 50.



their seats to white customers—a Reverend Johns (a year prior), Claudette Colvin (in May), and Mary Louise Smith (in October)—and therefore did all he could to thwart what was becoming a pattern of Negro defiance by requesting that Parks be arrested. News of Parks’s arrest swept through the community. Many black Montgomerians could not believe that Parks would be the one to cross the line, so to speak, and challenge Jim Crow. She was an upstanding citizen and an outstanding representative of her race, a woman described as “dignified enough in manner, speech, and dress to command the respect of the leading class.”<sup>611</sup> If anyone could be the poster-child for the tyranny of the South’s segregationist laws and practices, that is to say, how these barbaric measures attempted to snatch the dignity from blacks, it was Rosa Parks. Hence, some activists within Montgomery’s black community believed Park’s arrest an opportunity for reform. “This is the case,” shouted E.D. Nixon, the former head of the Montgomery’s NAACP chapter, believing this could change the tides of race relations in Montgomery and maybe—with God’s help—the country.<sup>612</sup> And so plans were put in place to start a movement. Branch notes that the exact origins of the Montgomery boycott are still debated to this day, but he believes credit should be given, equally, to E.D. Nixon and the Women’s Political Council (WPC).<sup>613</sup> A group of local black political leaders gathered in the basement of King’s church to devise a plan as to how they would cripple the Montgomery Bus Line. Initially, the plan of attack was that none of the city’s black residents would ride the bus on the coming Monday. All attendants were agreeable to this. Just a few hours later, the group reconvened to discuss the formation of a political action organization (not a legal organization like the NAACP) during which the MIA

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<sup>611</sup> Branch, *op. cit.*, 130.

<sup>612</sup> Garrow (1986), *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>613</sup> Branch, *op. cit.*, 133.

(Montgomery Improvement Association) was formed—and Martin Luther King, Jr. was designated, via a perfunctory vote, as its leader.

Preaching at Dexter for the past several months had allowed King to hone both his intellectual and rhetorical skills. While captivating his congregation with sermons such as “The Three Dimensions of Complete Life” and “Religion of Doing,” King was also solidifying himself as a preacher who was committed to the social gospel. All of this training would come to the fore “as the white community focused upon King as the effort’s principal spokesman.”<sup>614</sup> As the leader of the movement, King was the one whose voice was most prominent whenever a group of MIA officials met with city and Montgomery Bus Line officials. But it was not enough that King’s public addresses displayed his rhetorical skill or that he confounded the locales whites with his erudition—no, as the leader he had to be a tough man. It is well-known that a “tough masculine culture flourished” within the SCLS (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), founded in 1957 by Ella Baker and Baynard Rustin. Though the SCLC would become the organization that King would be most associated with, the one that most represented God’s manly army of freedom fighters, it was the MIA that was started with a haranguing call to manhood.<sup>615</sup> At a meeting during the bus boycott, for which the exact date is not known, E.D. Nixon chastised some of the local black ministers for not supporting the boycott; he said,

We are acting like little boys...and if were afraid, we might as well just fold up right now. We must also be men enough to discuss this in the open....We’d better decide if we’re going to be fearless men or scared boys.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> Garrow (1986), 51.

<sup>615</sup> Rieder, *op. cit.*, 64.

<sup>616</sup> Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

Whether or not King was present for Nixon's call to manhood is unknown, but he was certainly aware of such sentiments. In fact, he had wrestled with his own feelings of masculine inadequacy since childhood. Physically, he was slight of stature; emotionally, he was terribly sensitive. Moreover, he still had childhood memories of the way Daddy King would affirm his own manhood status by undervaluing that of his son. Such was the case when a white police officer pulled Daddy King over and called him a "boy," to which Daddy King snapped, "Do you see this child here," pointing to his son, "That's a boy. I'm a man."<sup>617</sup> But this was not the time for M.L.'s insecurities to surface, because the movement needed him to be strong. His strength and, by extension, his manhood would soon be put to the test, especially as he, the movement's spokesman, was viewed by the white community as "the chief stumbling block to a real solution to the protest."<sup>618</sup> Thus, in the eyes of Montgomery's racist white citizens, King was public enemy number one. Dexter's new pastor was now the most visible and, yes, the most hated black man in town.

### **Fulfillment of "The Dream": King Encounters *Le Point Vierge***

*Rrrriiiiiiiinnng! Rrrriiiiiiiinnng! Rrrriiiiiiiinnng!*

On the night of January 27, 1956 Martin Luther King, Jr. received an alarming phone call. When he picked up the phone, he was immediately threatened by the voice of a man who warned, "Listen nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery."<sup>619</sup> King hung up the phone and returned to bed, but he could not go to sleep. *What if something happens to me? What if something happens to either Coretta or*

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>618</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 70.

<sup>619</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 77.

*Yolanda (their first child)? Why did I decide to pastor as church in Montgomery, Alabama? Why did I agree to lead this movement?* These insolvable questions reverberated within his mind.

He needed to clear his head. So he went in the kitchen and made a cup of coffee. While sitting at the table, a plan of retreat was beginning to take form. He would leave the movement immediately. Yes, that's it, focus on being a pastor, and leave all of this political stuff to someone else. But he needed to do so while saving face. By no means could he give rise to the idea that he was a coward, not a real man. But at this moment, at the kitchen table, he was faltering. He was not feeling like the strong leader, a modern-day Moses, who was guiding Montgomery's black citizens to the Promised Land and its men, particularly, to the attainment of their "manhood" rights. "I was weak," King says. His fear had pushed him the point where he was in need of inner succor. Oh if Mama, his grandmother Jennie Williams, was still around, she would be the one to hum a song of faith in his ear, maybe "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round," giving him the strength to go on. Unfortunately, for King, she was gone. He then thought about contacting the most powerful man he had known throughout his life, Daddy King. In the early pages of his autobiography, King says, "[i]f I had a problem I could always call Daddy.... Things were solved."<sup>620</sup> Much of what was discussed in the previous section contradicts this claim, however. *Would Daddy King empathize with son's suffering in this time of emotional crisis? More to the point, did this man of strength possess the emotional acuity to understand his son's weakness?* By his own admission, Daddy King revealed that it was his wife, not he, who had "respect for [the children's] feelings."<sup>621</sup> And so King finally had to admit to himself that this was not a battle in which his father's (in)human(e) forcefulness would have

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<sup>620</sup> Carson (1998)., *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>621</sup> King, Sr., *op. cit.*, 130.

any efficacy, “You can’t call on Daddy now,” he thought to himself.<sup>622</sup> He needed someone—RIGHT NOW—who could deal with what psychoanalyst Michael Balint terms the *basic fault*.

The weakness that King faced on the night of the “kitchen table experience” was something he had experienced, from time to time, throughout his life. The accounts given of his childhood interactions between him and Daddy King illustrate that the father’s physical and psychological maltreatment aroused a great deal of fear and anger within the younger King.<sup>623</sup> For Balint, this would indicate that there was an incongruous emotional relationship between M.L. and Daddy King in that the latter was insensitive to how his abuse was damaging his son’s self-identity. Balint explains:

In my view the origin of the basic fault may be traced back to a considerable discrepancy in the early formative phases of the individual between his bio-psychological needs and the material and psychological care, attention, and affection available during the relevant time. This creates a state of deficiency whose consequences and after-effects appear to be only partly reversible.<sup>624</sup>

This early, maybe even pre-oedipal (meaning absent of triangulation, that is, purely dyadic), incongruity—i.e., the *weak* son in relation to the *strong* father—fixed within Martin’s psyche the distorted ideation that he, the son, was weak in the presence of the powerful Other. Conversely, Daddy King, the father, was everywhere and always strong. Hence, we have at the kitchen table, via the phone call, whereby he was made to feel vulnerable in the face of a threatening Other, a reenactment, a *re-presenting*, if you will, of the interactions between Martin and his father that occurred in the King home during his childhood. The event, and King’s retelling of it, bespeaks an episode of psychological regression.

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<sup>622</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 77.

<sup>623</sup> See pg. 233.

<sup>624</sup> Michael Balint, *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 22.

Regression is a term that has become the more accepted nomenclature for identifying one's returning to an earlier phase of psychosocial development. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, the term denotes "the bringing back into play of what has been 'inscribed'" within the psyche.<sup>625</sup> These endopsychic inscriptions, or traces, within the psyche become something of a palimpsest in that they remain legible to the superego, the fatherliest (i.e., judgmental and censorial) agency of the psychical apparatus.<sup>626</sup> Unfortunately, the inscription itself is not effaceable, because it is the basic fault, which means it is a fixed part of the person's identity. *But what, exactly, is the basic fault?* First, the "fault" is something that one feels is an inner problematic that must be corrected; second, the "fault" is believed to be the result of one's being failed by a person in one's primary environment. All of this is of great importance in terms of the goal of regression, for Balint believes that there is a regression that seeks recognition. He says of this "regression for the sake of recognition" that it "presupposes an environment that accepts and consents to sustain and carry the patient...."<sup>627</sup> Because he views such reparation as taking place in the patient-analyst dyad, Balint says that what the patient, who has regressed because of the basic fault, is seeking from the analyst is not action (that is, fix the basic fault) but understanding and tolerance, not censoring, about the patient's weakness. There is much insight to be gained from Balint's basic fault hypothesis, for it does seem that King's various pleas for help were an attempt to call attention to a "fault" (i.e., his weakness) that needed to be understood and tolerated. Nevertheless, as noted, Balint reserves the "regression for the sake of recognition" for

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<sup>625</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *op. cit.*, 388.

<sup>626</sup> It is worth noting that in Freud's second theory of the mind, the structural model, he theorizes that the superego is responsible for conscience (morality), self-observation, and formation of ideals (*Language of Psychoanalysis*, 435).

<sup>627</sup> Balint, *op. cit.*, 145.

the clinical environment, that is, to be enacted between a patient and an analyst. But no such environment was available to King. He was at the kitchen table alone. *Who, then, would recognize King's basic fault?*

King's lamentation persisted. "With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud," he recalls in his autobiography.<sup>628</sup> The words of anguish, however, kept pouring out: "I am afraid...I can't let the people see me like this...I have nothing left...I'm weak now" ....<sup>629</sup>

King soon heard what he describes as a the "quiet assurance of an inner voice" that neither overlooked nor rebuked his weakness but rather beheld and affirmed it, letting him know that he was not alone in his moment of anguish. Albert J. Raboteau, scholar of African/African American religion, avers that it was at this moment that King encountered *le point vierge* or "the point of origin," the place where one encounters the divine.<sup>630</sup> The phrase *le point vierge* was taken from the renowned Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who in his book *Conjectures*, says of this place of inner sustenance,

At the center of our being is a *point of nothingness* which is untouched by sin and by illusion a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This *little point of nothingness* and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. *It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship.* It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.<sup>631</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 77.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>630</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones: Reflection on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 176.

<sup>631</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1965), 155.

Merton's description almost seems to belittle this Being who offers such ameliorative assistance. "Little point of nothingness" and "absolute poverty"—these words contradict the awesomeness of a God who can swoop in and rescue his people from harm. It fails to call to mind the prowess of God the Father, who is swift with in His wrath and instruction, but such a God would not be able to commiserate with the unsettledness of our humanity. This greatly contradicts the hypotheses put forth by Freud on the origins of religious experiences. For Freud, as explicated in texts like *Future of an Illusion* and *Moses and Monotheism*, for example, we are drawn to entreaty the divine for assistance because our "infantile helplessness arouse[s] the need for protection" by a powerful paternal figure.<sup>632</sup> King's kitchen table experience, however, undermines Freud's theory in that it is not protection from that *le point vierge* provided but an abiding with that one needs "in the face of life life's dangers."<sup>633</sup> This is not the expected role of the Father. Rather, the descriptives employed for the *le point vierge* remind one of the characteristics of the Son, the humble servant, who hung on the cross, the ultimate sign of disrepute. It is the very weakness of the *le point vierge* (i.e., the Son) that gives it the strength to recognize—sustain and tolerate, to borrow Balint's terms—"our poverty...our dependence...*our sonship* (emphasis added)."

Let us return to kitchen table for a moment.

Following his experience with this "quiet...inner voice," King said he had the (inner) strength to lead the movement's fight for equality, because he was assured this presence "would not leave [him] alone."<sup>634</sup> James Cone rightly observes that the kitchen table event made King

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<sup>632</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1928), trans. W.D. Robson-Scott (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 52.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Carson (1998), *op. cit.*, 78.



realize that the cross, a symbol of weakness, was a source of strength. More than that, though, the cross helped to affirm the value of something that he was denied in his childhood: the vulnerability of his sonship. Let us recall that Martin endured what Oates referred to as “mute suffering” while he was a child. He felt he could not express his weakness in the presence of his domineering father, choosing instead to remain silent in the face of his threatening power. The fear and trembling induced by these encounters led Martin to conclude that his dependency as a son was a mode of manhood that was to be forsworn. However, it is plausible to conclude that at his weakest moment, it was his sonship (i.e., vulnerability) that most attracted the validating presence of *le point vierge*. Martin now knew, firsthand, what (divine) love really was, the kind of love that accepted one in all of one’s inconsistencies and frailties. *How different Daddy King would have been if he knew there was nothing wrong with being weak? How different would the racist white Southerner act towards blacks if they knew the dependence and weakness they saw in the other resided, selfsame, within themselves?* With this, Martin could begin to love his enemies through the strength of his weakness, that is, his sonship. This was the kind of love that Martin dreamed about. A love that recognizes that all men are created equal. *Every man has a basic fault. Every man experiences weakness. Every man is a son.*

But what of those black men who never encounter *le point vierge*, more specifically the ones who do not believe that such religiosity holds any currency? What hope do they have of experiencing, if only for a moment, the restoration of their sonship? Such would be the case for Richard Wright. As a young man, Wright never knew the worth of being son. It was because of his father’s decampment that he was forced to be the man of the house whilst a young boy. So for him the notion of sonship, that is, a manhood that does not reject but upholds its inconsistencies and discontinuities, held no currency. In fact, he came to detest the very

unmanliness, the anti-patriarchal stance, the weakness, that had become the topos of the narrative of black manhood, falling to the myth that to be a man one had to be everywhere and always strong, the patriarch. And to his mind, his father, Nathan Wright, was the most unmanly of all men. Wright scholars hasten to emphasize that he hated his father Nathan, a man who was a perpetual black boy, a Sambo. There is another side to the Nathan's manhood, however, one which Richard Wright sought to fashion through his literary imagination. In doing so, as the next chapter shall make clear, Richard Wright, in his filial wisdom, was able to reclaim his sonship through redeeming the manhood of his father.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
RICHARD WRIGHT'S REDEMPTIVE PROSE

“I’m a man  
Spell M-A child-N  
That represents a man  
No B-O child-Y  
That mean mannish boy”

—Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”

## NEWSFLASH: *Run, The Biggers are Coming*

The pages that comprise Richard Wright's impressive oeuvre are filled with disturbing acts of violence. Whether it is the emasculating specter of the lynching tree or the snatched innocence of a rape victim, the harsh physical beatings handed out by so-called caregivers or the delirium induced by living in a racist society, many, if not all, of Wright's protagonists struggle to bear an existence laden with sorrow. None of Wright's literary works, whether fiction or nonfiction, document this nightmarish existence more so than his first novel, *Native Son*; and none of his characters represent the end-product of this experience more so than the novel's main character, Bigger Thomas.

Bigger is hopeless. His existence is estranged. His life is so devoid of emotional and psychological nourishment that he cannot fight off the numerous socio-cultural malignancies that seek to enervate his selfhood. He is absolutized negativity. In her essay "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd," Esther Merle Jackson, a scholar of African American literature and black drama, rightly diagnosed Bigger's warped *raison d'être* by observing that "he elects violence, crime, and vengeance as the signs of life."<sup>635</sup> Bigger is a person who finds meaning only through acts of violence; this is evident in the brutal murder and disposal of his white employer's daughter, Mary Dalton, and the equally horrific slaying of his girlfriend, Bessie Mears. It is alarming to realize that these murderous acts are the only two events that give his life rootedness, an identifiable place in his topsy-turvy existence. Wright affirms this point by sharing the following:

And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him [Bigger] a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all of this

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<sup>635</sup> Esther Merle Jackson, "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer, 132 (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall, 1984).

about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him.<sup>636</sup>

Surely one can rest assured that Bigger is just a literary anomaly, a fictionalized lost soul that only existed in the mind of Richard Wright. *But can one be so certain?* Wright gathered much of the information for *Native Son* from the news reports telling of the gruesome murder of Florence Johnson, who was “beaten to death with a brick by a colored sex criminal” named Robert Nixon.<sup>637</sup> For Wright, what proved to be just as scandalous as the murder itself was the brazen racist language—e.g., “brick moron,” “rapist slayer,” “jungle beast,” “sex moron”<sup>638</sup>—used to describe the murderer. This kind of racist phrasing sought to strip away the very humanity of Mr. Nixon; however, Wright used his acumen as a writer to inveigh against these attempts to dehumanize the perpetrator by arguing that it was a racist society, not inherent human defections, that created such a violent person.

Since it is known that Bigger’s real life correlate was Robert Nixon, could one now rest assured knowing that the inspiration for Wright’s tormented protagonist was derived from the lived experience of just *one* individual? Well...not really. Wright confirms our greatest fear by revealing that “[t]here was not just one Bigger but many of them, more than I could count and *more than you suspect* (emphasis added).”<sup>639</sup> Is it not the case that each of us, if we are honest with ourselves, has at one time or another encountered Bigger? How often have we shuddered in fear as we see a Bigger walking our way? How hastily do we lock our car doors and tightly grip our valued belongings whenever we enter a neighborhood that is reputed to be populated with

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<sup>636</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1945; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 239.

<sup>637</sup> Kenneth Kinnamon, “Native Son: The Personal, Social, and Political Background,” in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer, 90 (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall, 1984).

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>639</sup> Wright (1940), *op. cit.*, 434.

Biggers? How often do our television screens inundate our minds with images (e.g., on nightly news telecasts) of the treacherous Bigger? All of this enlightening “information” seems to be sending an alarming message: “*Run*, the Biggers are coming...and they’re going to—”.

Even I, no matter my advanced degrees and polished demeanor, feel the demeaning gaze that tracks my every move in certain environments, because I am interpreted through the metanarrative of a Bigger. Alas, I know all too well the affliction of being a darker hue. But what would happen if Bigger, or the myriad of Biggers, could re-author his defiled story? What would he write? Or, more to the point, for *whom* would he write?

This chapter contends that the alteration of Wright’s manhood narrative, his tale of being a neglected black boy in his bildungsroman *Black Boy*, demonstrates the ways in which the redemption of his manhood entailed the re-authoring of his father’s manhood as well. His father, Nathan Wright, had come to symbolize, for Richard, much of the hopelessness that was found in Bigger Thomas, the inability to articulate a hope in something beyond his downtrodden manhood. But as with Bigger, Wright wanted to find something redemptive about his father, an element within his selfhood that he negated the emasculated black man that society had deemed him to be. Wright’s con-polar hermeneutic necessitated that if his father was perceived as weak or “socially dead,” to borrow Orlando Patterson’s term, then there was also another side of Nathan that was yet alive, a side that needed to be redeemed. Hence, in redeeming the part of Nathan that had salutary qualities, Wright could reconstitute his father as a veritable *con-polar* figure.

### **The Patricidal Urtext in the (W)right Hands**

The acclaimed black novelist Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* also explores the issues of self-identification, insists that in writing *Native Son* “Wright had to force into Bigger’s

consciousness concepts and ideas which his intellect could not formulate.”<sup>640</sup> From this, one could posit that Wright redeems Bigger’s consciousness by returning to him the “authorial control,” as literature scholar Robert Stepto would characterize it, to create and to share his own story. Scholar of African American literature Valerie Smith agrees that there is, indeed, a noticeable redemptive theme that sheds some light within this dark novel; she states that “Bigger Thomas learning to tell his own story gives him a measure of control over his life and releases him from feelings of isolation”<sup>641</sup> An isolating experience that resurfaces throughout the Wright compendium is that of the fractured father-son dyad. Again and again, when reading these novels, we find that many if not all of Wright’s male characters experience a strong patricidal impulse—or oedipal rage—because they have been abandoned, whether physically or emotionally, by their fathers. These are fathers who then become, as Freud puts it in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” lost love objects. However, it is through the process of writing what I term “redemptive prose” that Wright seeks to re-author the patricidal urtext that has scripted these abandoned sons for a life of patricidal fixation.

Urtext is a “German term for an original version of a text. The prefix ‘Ur’ denotes ‘first’ or ‘original’ . . . . It is likely to denote a version of a text that is lost but which may be reconstructed.”<sup>642</sup> Here we see the speciousness of the patricidal urtext in that it is purported to be the unalterable narrative about one’s filial experience; however, it is an original but not final document that is open to emendation or, in cases of extreme distress, to being re-authored. There are, however, a number of obstacles that impede the re-authoring of the urtext. First, there is the

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<sup>640</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1945; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 89.

<sup>641</sup> Valerie Smith, *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>642</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, s.v. “urtext.”

shame in recognizing that one has indeed been living according to a narrative written by someone else (i.e., the false self). Second, there is the problem of excavating the urtext that has been repressed or lost within the psyche. Last, there is the challenge of obtaining the literacy skills that will enable one to read critically the ways in which one's urtext has been influenced by a number of oppressive socio-economic, psychological, and religious forces.

I shall be concerned primarily with Richard Wright's literary efforts to work through the trauma of his past by re-authoring his own urtext, as evident in his novel's *Black Boy* and *The Long Dream*. Claudia Tate, a scholar of African American literature, has classified *The Long Dream* as "a novel of mourning,"<sup>643</sup> holding the view that the novel helped Wright work through his childhood trauma. The new perspective that Tate provides will be addressed in greater detail later; but for now, I simply want to underscore that if *The Long Dream* is, in fact, a book of mourning, could it be the case that *Black Boy* is Wright's book of melancholia—its pages are filled with loss. The questions then must be asked: What occurs within the pages of *The Long Dream* that moves Wright from melancholia to mourning? Moreover, what "Old Connection" was he seeking to redeem (or restore) that would allow him to work through the loss documented in *Black Boy*?

In reading these two novels it becomes clear that Wright's re-authoring endeavors were not simply for the redemption of his own urtext but for that of his father, Nathan Wright, as well. In *Black Boy*, his novel of melancholia, the young Wright relegates his abandoning father to an endopsychic tomb, categorizing Nathan as "a zero," a nonentity.<sup>644</sup> However, as Freud's shares in "Mourning and Melancholia," the abandoning love object is never dead within the

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<sup>643</sup> Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 109.

<sup>644</sup> George E. Kent, "Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall, 1984), 96



endopsychic milieu. This was certainly the case for Wright who did continue to wrestle with the specter of his father throughout his life, although he claimed that his father was dead to him, both physically and psychologically. Nathan Wright's haunting presence throughout his son's novels leads me to concur with Stepto's assessment that Wright "does not so much slay his father as bury him *alive* (emphasis added)." <sup>645</sup> Stepto's phrase "bury him alive" brings to mind a point of emphasis in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," wherein Freud describes the ways in which the lost love object becomes a parasitical presence that receives its sustenance by depleting the melancholic's ego structure. <sup>646</sup> Freud later adds that there is a "possibility" for the torment of melancholia to end if the "object has been abandoned as worthless," <sup>647</sup> which is another way of declaring it a "zero" or dead. However, unlike Freud's insistence that the lost love object must be declared worthless in order to move from melancholia to mourning, I hypothesize that Wright's mourning text, *The Long Dream*, neither disparages nor kills but rather *resurrects* and *preserves* Nathan, the lost love object. In doing so, Wright was able to re-author his own patricidal urtext with such care that he was also then able to reestablish a relationship, albeit a fictional one, with his father. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Wright as an African American author produced work that was in keeping with the African American protest literature tradition. And for him, nothing needed to be protested more than the harm done to black children, particularly black boys, not only by the systems of racism and oppression but also within the black family.

### **African American Protest Literature: An Alarming Tradition**

*Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!*

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<sup>645</sup> Robert Stepto, *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 138.

<sup>646</sup> Sigmund Freud (2006a), *op. cit.*, 312-313.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

Richard Wright begins his first novel, *Native Son*, with the jarring sound of an alarm clock. This began what would become a prevailing habit throughout his literary career in that Wright used each of his five novels, written from 1939 to 1958, to shake America's racist white citizens from their blissful repose, a sign of their apathy for the suffering of African Americans. Literary scholars have placed Wright's compendium within the canon of African American "protest literature," thereby giving him an esteemed place alongside other black writers for whom "the need to challenge conditions confronting all African Americans" was the *sin qua non* of their literature.<sup>648</sup> The literary lineage that produced Wright's jolting prose can be traced back to the years of the American Revolution, a time when such noted "protestors" as Phillis Wheatly began to use the power of the poetic to inveigh against human inequality. Benjamin Banneker furthered the tradition by writing a letter of protest to Thomas Jefferson—the supposed prophet of equality—imploping the man who would later become President to hold fast to those ideals—i.e., "[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—that would be emblazoned on the nation's most hallowed document, *The Declaration of Independence*. The vociferousness of this protest literature, particularly during the antebellum period, began to overwhelm the specious ideology of the slave system, inspiring protest writers to increase the militant tone of their literary attacks. David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* was an articulate treatise explicating that the cause of the Abolitionist movement was conjoined with and not opposed to the biblical message declaring that God desires the full liberation of the oppressed. As Walker contends,

What right, then, has one of us to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his color, which none, but the God who made it can alter? Can there be a greater absurdity in nature, and particularly in a free republican country? But the Americans, having introduced

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<sup>648</sup> William L. Andrews, Frances Foster-Smith, and Trudier Harris, *op. cit.*, 601.

slavery among them, their hearts have become almost seared, as with an hot iron, and God has nearly given them up to believe a life in the preference of the truth!!!<sup>649</sup>

As time moved on, the waters of protest continued to flow from the narratives of prominent figures such as Josiah Henson and Ellen Craft. However, the most prominent figure during this epoch of protest literature was Frederick Douglass, whose autobiographies *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) are now regarded not only as protest literature but as literary classics as well.

It was during the Reconstruction Era (ca. 1863-1867) that the rage-filled verbiage of protest literature began to become common coin. Much of the angst that had dominated the antebellum period had abated, to some degree, due to the hope ushered in by the victories wrought by the Civil War. The newly freed men and women, with their hands now released from the ignominious labor of working the plow and hoe on the slave plantation, could now use their hands to write about their ascendancy to the American bourgeoisie; and, in doing so, tell of the many benefits of being a part, albeit an inchoate part, of American society. But the promise of full-citizenship, documented in the *Emancipation Proclamation* (1863), would soon ring hollow as the American Dream, while becoming a reality for the *chosen* few, remained nothing but an ephemeral and elusive *call* for far too many African Americans. It is for this reason that the years leading to the culmination of the Reconstruction Era (ca. mid-1890s) found many black writers again filling countless pages with the confrontational language of protest.

Some writers within this cadre of protest authors conveyed their message through fiction, which, as literary scholar Henry Louis Gates observes, allowed them to use a bevy of literary

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<sup>649</sup> David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles* (1829; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 43.

tropes (or significations) to further develop their message of protest.<sup>650</sup> Hence, as discussed in chapter three of this study, the black novelist's figurative tactics created the "trickster hero," a re-fashioning (or signification) of the hero characters in Westernized literature, a trope used to address the contextualized concerns of the African American reader. So we see in Sutton Griggs' (1901) *Overshadowed* and Charles Chestnutt's (1905) *The Colonel's Dream* an infusion of "blackness into the fiction of American literature. Still other protest writers maintained the tradition of protest through non-fictional and autobiographical forms of literary expression. In this vein, themes of self-determination abound in such lauded protest literature as Booker T. Washington's (1902) *Up From Slavery*, Du Bois' (1903) *Souls of Black Folk*, and, even later, James Weldon Johnson's (1912) *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Du Bois, whose significant compendium includes novels, essays, poetry, and a diverse group of non-fiction genres is most revered for his soul-stirring and soul-searching text, the aforementioned *Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois moves the tradition from an exploration of the socio-political constrictions of race and racism to a more existential analysis of the "double-consciousness" that was afflicting so many African Americans.<sup>651</sup> Who among us, regardless of race or religion, possesses a heart so obdurate that it is not moved by Du Bois' ruminations on the torment of double-consciousness?

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of

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<sup>650</sup> Henry L. Gates, "Criticism in the Jungle," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry L. Gates, 6 (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>651</sup> DuBois, *op. cit.*, 9.

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>652</sup>

Protest writers of the early to mid-1900s began to formulate a means not only of documenting the past (i.e., writer as historian), explicating cultural practices (i.e., writer as anthropologists), and providing a nomenclature for the social forces that fashioned black life (i.e., writer as sociologists), but began to use writing as the means through which the African American community could obtain the critical literacy skills to read and a lucid language to communicate the uniqueness of its experience. It is within this intellectual tributary that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) contribute to the history of protest literature by challenging the white citizenry's fantasy of racial superiority. But neither Ellison nor Baldwin—for whom Wright served as a literary paternal figure—plumbed the depths of the black psyche or explored the roots of the black man's "beingness" with as much perspicacity, or genuineness and ingenuity, as Richard Wright. However, the task of dealing so openly and honestly with this cultural trauma in his fiction was not without a cost; for as Wright's friend Allison Davis, whose evaluation of King's psyche was discussed in the previous chapter, remarks, "Richard Wright was the angriest and yet the most influential of all black writers."<sup>653</sup> Davis uses substantial textual evidence to trace the etiology of Wright's anger not to the usual suspect, namely, the Jim Crow south (although this did cause a great deal of psychological and physical trauma). Rather, the source of his rage was far more proximal: "Wright considered his family," says Davis, "the *primary source* of his anger and hatred (emphasis added)."<sup>654</sup> To further investigate the veracity of Davis's claim, one need only thumb

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> David, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

through the pages of Wright's autobiographical novel to learn of the dysfunctional cultural and familial environment that produced this angry black boy.

### **Who on earth? : The Politics of Place in Richard Wright's World**

Richard Wright penned *Black Boy* in 1945, only five years after his frightening masterpiece *Native Son* was unleashed on the public. The reasons for Wright's willingness to share the pains of his childhood can be gleaned through the research of biographers and literary analysts, along with the testimony of a few noted friends, who have attempted to probe his labyrinthine psyche. Margaret Walker, Wright's friend and biographer, suggests that "Wright felt deep within himself a kind of malaise, a disturbing, disquieting angst, which he felt was deep in his psyche and went back to the terrible psychic wound of racism inflicted upon him in his youth"<sup>655</sup> Had the more mature Wright—in his mid-thirties when writing *Black Boy*—come to the point where he could now face his painful childhood? Had his flight to the North, as part of the Great Migration (ca. 1910-1930), helped to lessen, say, his fear of Jim Crow lynch violence that plagued the South throughout his childhood years? Such questions have yet to be answered. However, if Wright scholars, biographers and literary theorists alike, do agree on one point it is that at the time of writing *Black Boy* he was still troubled by a host of traumatic experiences from his childhood. In order to get as much as one can from Wright's *Record of Childhood and Youth*, as the autobiography's subtitle so aptly puts it, one must interrogate the many ways that place, that is, an assigned mode of beingness, impinged on the lived experience of black people in the South. To neglect to do so warrants an inchoate reading of *Black Boy* (or, for that matter, any other work produced during this era); for it is not the geographical place per se that is important

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<sup>655</sup> Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, *Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 165.

(e.g., the South) but the protagonist's assigned place (e.g., as a segregated citizen) within this place that speaks to the existential angst that Wright explores in this novel, as well as throughout his other literary works. In his essay "On Knowing Our Place," literary scholar Houston Baker finds that a feeling of being placeless is the result of having one's place defined by the dominant Other. Baker explains that

For place to be recognized by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one's own place is, from the perspective of human agency, placeless.<sup>656</sup> (p. 201)

Wright's familial history is filled with persons who had been tethered to or restricted within an ignominious place. Baker also mentions that place entails an urtext or prescriptive narrative that is used to detail the acceptable way that marginalized persons are to operate within their assigned orbit. *Black Boy*, then, is a bildungsroman, that is, a record of the moral and psychological development of the main character; but it is more than this due to how it brings to the fore a family's, a community's, and a culture's attempt to overcome the restrictions of place. Furthermore, so as to further thicken the analysis, the novel shows Wright's efforts to resist the racialized urtext that is used to inform and re-inform both he and his communities existence. Because of this, one cannot fully understand Richard Wright's angst about place without also being made aware of the many ways that his family had throughout its history not only succumbed to but had also become full representatives of the South's deleterious doctrine of place.

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<sup>656</sup> Houston Baker, "On Knowing Our Place," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, eds. Henry L. Gates and Kenneth A. Appiah, 201 (New York: Amistad, 1993).

Wright's progenitors, both on his mother's and father's side, had a long history of maintaining a place of shame in the South. To begin, his grandparents, on his mother's side, were slaves during the most productive years of the cotton trade in Natchez, Mississippi. During this time, the wealth generated by the cotton industry in Natchez made it a city that possessed "more wealth...than any American city outside New York."<sup>657</sup> Born of unknown parentage on March 21, 1847, Wright's maternal grandfather, Richard Wilson, was raised on a slave plantation but later freed himself from its shackles; and after doing so, headed north, to join the Union troops in the fight against slavery. The antipodal emotions of Northern victory and Southern defeat that resulted from the Civil War created a tectonic shift in America's cultural landscape. Newly freed black men and women believed that their liberated status would allow them to walk from the pains of plantation to the pleasures of full American citizenship. It was with this hope-filled disposition that Richard Wilson had decided that, after serving in the army, he would return to Mississippi to settle down and later marry an eighteen-year-old "rebellious, intelligent—but illiterate" young woman, Margaret "Maggie" Bolden.<sup>658</sup> Prior to marriage Maggie's assigned place was that of a house slave in Woodville, Mississippi, where she labored under a slave owner named Bolden.<sup>659</sup> More so than any of her immediate family members, Margaret displayed an unusually strict, almost malignant, disposition toward her children and grandchildren, which according to E. Franklin Frazier, is a mimetic behavioral pattern of the house slave who had spent most of their time in proximal (spatial) relationship with the slave master. "Those slaves who had lived," claims Frazier, "in close association with the whites tended to identify

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<sup>657</sup> Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>659</sup> Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1968), 13.



themselves with their masters.”<sup>660</sup> Therefore, it was Maggie, or “Granny,” as Wright would refer to her, possessing a near-white skin tone that buttressed her master-*esque* persona, who ran her house like a slave plantation. It was, indeed, a place where the inhabitants were expected to live according to her religious ideologies; and it was known that, whenever one of her family members chose to not do so, she would hand out an abounding measure of physical and verbal abuse to ensure that the transgressor would be repentant for their impious behavior. Unfortunately, this oppressive tradition of place would be handed down to each of Richard and Maggie’s nine children, very much becoming a doctrine that their daughter Ella Wilson, born in 1883, would embrace fully and, in turn, hand down to her own children, most notably her peculiar son, Richard Wright.

Ella, along with her brothers and sisters, was among the first generation of free-born African Americans who, although nominally free, began to see their socio-political and communal place(s) segregated by the Jim Crow laws that governed the South from 1876 to 1965. Signage displaying the words “White only” and “Colored only” reflected the hateful ethos that, on one hand, forbade black Southerners from entering geographical places (at certain times) such as movie theaters, restaurants, buses, public toilets and so on. While, on the other hand, these signs became even more damaging as they became the means by which many African American’s begin to adjudicate their self-worth, which, of course, had a deleterious effect on the culture’s self-consciousness. Wright biographer Hazel Rowley provides a telling description of this environment, as she remarks,

Blacks had to act humble, deferential, and cheerful about [their status]. They knew never to contradict a white person—even if they knew that person was wrong. If a black man did not

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<sup>660</sup> Frazier, *op. cit.*, 28.

“know his place” [emphasis added]—if he came over as “sassy” or “biggity”—he would endanger his own life and put others in the black community at risk.<sup>661</sup>

One of the more poignant scenes in *Black Boy* is when Wright tells a white co-worker that he desires to become a writer. This was a confession of hope to which the woman responds derisively: “You’ll never be a writer . . . Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?”<sup>662</sup> The woman’s bewilderment at Wright’s ascendant hope is evident in her insistence that his desire to be a writer could not have been authored (or authorized) by an earthly authority—i.e., the dominant other—therefore such aspirations are deemed an unacceptable usurpation of the boundaries of his assigned place. Much like her son, Ella would also be taught the hard lesson that, despite her intelligence, she had to maintain a second-class existence. Wright biographer Constance Webb shares that

No one could say that Ella was not unusually intelligent, but then that was not a quality that her mother praised—it could lead too easily to trouble in the South, where a sense of one’s place was paramount.<sup>663</sup>

These challenges to her intellectual development notwithstanding, Ella was still able to use her intelligence to become a teacher. Teaching was one of the few professions, besides the ministry, in which black Southerners, even those who possessed rudimentary literary skills, could become a part of the fledgling black bourgeoisie. As time went on, Ella, being of age, and possessing some status in her community as a teacher (she taught spelling, arithmetic, and geography), desired to be a wife. She would soon have her wishes granted as a passionate courtship ensued with Nathan Wright. *Who was Nathan Wright?* Nathan was a care-free, handsome, worldly-wise

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<sup>661</sup> Rowley, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>662</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>663</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, 17.

man of the soil. But, alas, he was also a son of the South, a descendant of Mississippi slaves who had become ensnared in the South's exploitive sharecropping economy.

The courtship between the two did have, as one would expect, moments of external and internal conflict. Besides this, there was the influence of Ella's mother, Margaret, who believed her daughter too first-class to marry someone of Nathan's impecunious stock. Webb reports that Margaret voiced her displeasure of Nathan by noting the socioeconomic differences between he and her daughter; Margaret would chide Ella by saying, "[h]e's not our kind."<sup>664</sup> She would also claim that the denominational differences between the two were equally troubling, underscoring that Ella would be punished for absconding her Adventist faith by marrying into the Methodist tradition.<sup>665</sup> *Was Margaret right in her assessment?* Nathan's illiteracy certainly meant that their prospects for future social advancement would be limited at best, if not thwarted entirely. Nathan's only means of earning money was sharecropping, a feudal system of economic exploitation that conscripted many black families to a life on penury and perpetual indebtedness. But he did have hope—a hope that he would someday be imbued with a sense of divinely-consecrated somebodiness, a hope that could only be satisfied through the call to be one of God's chosen servants. In the previous chapter, when discussing Daddy King's desire to enter the ministry, it was pointed out how being a preacher was often seen as a means of attaining status in the black community. Nathan wanted the kind of manly stature that was accorded to the black preacher. This poignant yearning to hear the call—that is, the call from “up yonder”—that would reinvigorate his tattered body, lighten his crestfallen countenance, and lift his burdened soul would remain a frustration throughout Nathan's life. His anguish would not (and could not) be

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<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

ignored by young Richard who in an early draft of *Black Boy* writes about his father's agonizing prayers to God. Wright, says,

He prayed and brooded, indulged in gloomy monologues that were the despair of my mother and cowed me and my brother to silence...The anxiety that came into my mother's face whenever he complained about his not being "called" made me conceive of it as something dreadful, an event that would leave me and my mother and brother alone in the world.<sup>666</sup>

According to literary critic Addison Gayle, Nathan's "true ambition seemed to lay . . . in the ministry, and he waited in vain for the sign, the call, that would ordain him as one of the chosen."<sup>667</sup> But, alas, hearing no call to be among the chosen few, Nathan seemed to be condemned to a life of answering only the call of Mississippi's avaricious landowners. No matter his many flaws, though, save for his roving eyes that would from time to time glance at an attractive woman, Nathan could depend on Ella's steadfast love and support.

Disavowing her mother's chastisement, Ella would marry Nathan on March 19, 1908. The rush to the altar may have been precipitated more so by exigent circumstances than just the blithe nature of the courtship, being that she was already with child (to be exact, she was three-months pregnant). Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908. By all accounts Richard was a healthy young boy whose family enjoyed its life on the same sharecropping plantation that for generations had been home to Nathan's family. For a time, all was well in the Wright household; that is, until we come to the phase of Richard's life depicted in *Black Boy: A Record Childhood and Youth*, a quintessentially melancholic testimony of loss.

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<sup>666</sup> Rowley, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>667</sup> Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright, Ordeal of a Native Son* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1980), 5.

## Richard Wright's *Black Boy*: Can't forget those Memphis Blues

One winter morning in the long-ago, four-year-old days of my life I [emphasis in original] found myself standing before a fireplace, warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals, listening to the wind whistle past the house outside.<sup>668</sup>

The lyrical quality of this epigraph provides a rich description of Wright's seemingly placid childhood environment. One can almost feel the luminous embers of the fireplace returning warmth to his almost gelid hands. The euphonious silence that pervades this reposeful setting is only disturbed by the faint "whistle" of the crisp winter air. Blissful. Serene. Winsome. *Is it all too good to be true?* Wright soon awakens us from our quiescence when he tells of a transgression that would change, henceforth, his relationship with his family. After burning some curtains in his Grandmother's home, an impish prank that almost sets the entire house aflame, his mother gives him a beating that was so brutal, so inhumane, that the pain can only be described in full detail by the thrashed victim. Wright shares:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called—I was afterwards told—and he ordered that I be kept abed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended on it.<sup>669</sup>

This near-death experience began a pattern of harsh physical abuse, accompanied by equally vituperative verbal lashings, handed out by his caregivers whenever Richard not only committed devious acts, such as the curtain burning fiasco, but even when he sought to express himself as an individual. Though the thrashing rendered for the curtain incident would prove damaging to Wright's psycho-social development, instilling within him an abiding fear of his mother's deadly rage, these kinds of severe beatings were absent during his toddler years. Rather, the Wright household was a loving environment for Richard and his younger brother, Leon. Nathan is

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<sup>668</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

reported to have had an affectionate relationship with Richard, evident in such acts as picking him up and (lovingly) throwing him into the air and showering with the filial affirmation “that’s my boy!”<sup>670</sup> However, Nathan began to change as his heart had grown weary of not hearing “the call,” and his hands and feet had become decrepit from working the cruel Natchez soil. He needed a change. And so, stepping aboard the *Kate Adams*, an old-fashioned steamboat that traversed the Mississippi River, the Wrights headed up North for the big city: Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>671</sup>

Memphis’s is widely regarded as birthplace of the blues, a musical genre that is an offshoot of the slave spirituals or the sorrow songs. Ironically, it would be in Memphis that Nathan’s life began to be overwhelmed by a sense of despair—the blues. In *Trouble in Mind* (1998), historian Leon F. Litwack observes that “[a]s a feeling, the blues is capable of tearing a person apart inside.”<sup>672</sup> An anonymous Memphis bluesman provides an apt musical explanation of the feeling of the blues, singing:

I feel my hell a-risin’; a-risin’ everyday;  
I feel my hell a-risin’; a-risin’ everyday;  
Someday it’ll burst this levee and wash the whole wide world away.<sup>673</sup>

Separated from the people and the land to which he had been so accustomed, Nathan turned inward, making bedfellows with his pains and sorrows. Young Richard would also learn the blues in this new environment, saddened by its barren landscapes, filthy streets, and dilapidated buildings. The city seemed to lack life, possessing neither the lush herbage that blanketed nor the

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<sup>670</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>671</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>672</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 455.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

placid streams that veined the Natchez countryside. Wright provides a vivid description of the city's unattractive urban landscape, when he says, "[t]he stone buildings and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead."<sup>674</sup> But beyond the stark texture of the family's new locale, Richard also noticed that his father's warmth towards him was beginning to wane; Nathan was being hardened, and irreparably so, by the death-like quality of life in Memphis. Wright has it that "it was in this tenement [their Memphis home] that the personality of my father first came fully into the orbit of my concern."<sup>675</sup> In what Webb describes as a "total change of personality" Nathan Wright's presence in the Wright household was like that of an ominous cloud out of which a deluge of negative affect would emanate.<sup>676</sup> Both his work as a night porter and the family's confined living space were plausible reasons for his personality change—but there was something more, something deeper, that was troubling him, and it was pulling him into a psychological abyss. A plausible source of his angst: He had failed to be a sufficient provider for his family by not procuring a profit as a sharecropper in Natchez, Mississippi; and now, in Memphis, Tennessee, the place that held so much promise, he continued what proved a losing battle against his unyielding poverty. Things were getting worse instead of better...*Dem's what I call de bloos.*

The Wright family's time in Memphis is not dealt with extensively in *Black Boy*; but of the little that is shared, one learns that Richard had grown weary of his father's saturnine presence. In the end, the emotional distance between Nathan and his family became too great, and so he decides, like far too many broken men, to abandon his family. As a young child, who had not yet developed the emotional skills to deal with this loss in a less vitriolic manner,

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<sup>674</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>676</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, 27.

Richard could not resist his growing anger, an anger that would later turn into a patricidal rage.

Nathan's abandonment left young Richard so emotionally malnourished that the only fitting comparison was to that of hunger—a poignant, visceral, all-consuming hunger.

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow...but now I began to wake up at nights to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly...This new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent (emphasis added).<sup>677</sup>

*Hunger . . . Hunger . . . Hunger . . .* This is the leitmotif that permeates the rest of *Black Boy*. As though the pain of being abandoned by his father—what psychiatrist and psychoanalyst James Herzog terms “father hunger”—was not enough, Richard also had to contend with an equally devastating loss: the emotional death of his mother. There were numerous mornings when Richard and his brother were left home alone as Ella worked menial jobs to provide their daily bread; unfortunately, she would often return during the late-evening hours empty-handed, emotionally broken, “tired and dispirited,” resting her head on a pillow that was soaked with tears of remorse.<sup>678</sup> Ella soon realized that she alone could no longer bear the burden of raising her two young sons. And so, with the heart-wrenching cries of “*NO . . . NO, Momma . . . NO...*” reverberating in the background, she dragged Richard and his brother, Leon, through the doors of Settlement Home, a Memphis orphanage supported by the local C.M.E. church. Webb hints that Richard may have been sexually abused by the orphanage's director, Miss Simon. But besides his displeasure with Ms. Simon's alleged illicit advances, Richard also had to contend with the “hunger and fear” that gripped the other children who were left to seek refuge, and some form of care, at Settlement Home.<sup>679</sup> Too often, though, the orphanage's lack of food and lack of love

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<sup>677</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>679</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, 32.



and lack of protection meant that it failed to meet the urgent needs of these children. The orphanage had become a haunt for the hopeless.

Hunger continued to be the prevailing theme of Richard's narrative when his mother takes her two sons to visit their grandmother in Jackson, Mississippi. It was at his grandmother's house that Richard would become aware of a hunger that went beyond the physical—this was an existentially malignant hunger that led to a malnourished selfhood.

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories.<sup>680</sup>

While in Mississippi, Wright began to realize that, much like his forbearers, he had been made to act out an urtext of despair, a racialized script of limited human-*beingness* that would seek to rob his individuality.

Living in Margaret Wilson's home brought Richard face-to-face with the noxious admixture of race and religion in the Jim Crow South. Grandma Wilson was a practicing Seventh-day Adventist, an ultra-orthodox brand of marginalized Christianity that beseeches its practitioners to forsake the world so that they can devote themselves fully to Christian devotion and service. Michel Fabre, a Wright biographer and literary scholar, reports that Grandma Wilson's religious fervor was most evident in her repeated efforts to expunge every tinge of the world from her household; for example, her exorcising activities included burning "worldly" books and smashing records that featured the hymns of Beelzebub. (One was always to keep in mind that she viewed herself as an example of faith-*full* Adventist Christian praxis, evinced in

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<sup>680</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 37.

her daily devotions that included reciting Bible verses and singing church hymns.<sup>681</sup>) There was, however, nothing more perplexing for Richard than his grandmother's disapproval of his book reading. Though Grandma Wilson often castigated his reading material, calling it "the Devil's work," these same books lifted Richard beyond his restrictive surroundings.<sup>682</sup> As he became more adept at allowing his readings to educate him about the limits of his place, Richard could better interpret the ways in which his Grandmother's religious values reinforced the racist ideology of the Jim Crow South. Ralph Ellison believed the authors of the South's racist ideology used the family as the chief medium through which their deleterious message of racial inferiority could be instilled within minds of African American's. Ellison remarks:

And it is the task of the Negro family to adjust the child to the Southern milieu; through it the currents, tensions and impulses generated within the human organism by the flux and flow of events are given their distribution . . . . [The family's] function is dual to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undifferentiated mass of his people into the unknown...and to protect him from those unknown forces within himself which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have.<sup>683</sup>

In *Prisoners of Childhood*, psychoanalyst Alice Miller exposes the manipulative ways that parents (along with or in lieu of other caregivers) seek to conform a child to a pre-fashioned mold of selfhood, which also creates a "substitute for [the parents] missing structures."<sup>684</sup> So then, the child is simply taught to conform in order to make the parents feel more at ease with their own capitulation to oppressive regimes. Donald Capps extends the reach of Miller's analysis to grasp the ways in which religion—its institutions and its doctrines—can be used to

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<sup>681</sup> Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 34.

<sup>682</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>683</sup> Ellison, *op. cit.*, 90.

<sup>684</sup> Alice Miller, *Prisoners of Childhood: The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for the True Self*, trans. R. Ward (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 14.

legitimize child abuse (p. ix).<sup>685</sup> Capps believes that religiously-oriented parents are beholden to deleterious doctrines that purport the inherent sinfulness of the child. For Capps, such teachings, which are in keeping with Freud's thinking about the innate sexuality and aggressiveness of children (i.e., the seduction theory and death instinct), "throw a protective shield over abusive or negligent parents by viewing the child as the instigator of aggression and sexual perversity." Evident in her insistence that Richard surrender to the God of the Adventist church, Margaret Wilson wanted to use Richard's conversion experience as a means to reaffirm the verity of her own religious zealotry. Wright, however, would yield his selfhood neither to an other-worldly religiosity nor to the hallow "sanctified" existence exhibited by his family members; and for such obstinance, he would pay dearly, suffering years of physical abuse and emotional neglect.

As he entered his more mature years (ca. mid-to-late 1930s), and became more attuned to the ways of the world, Richard better understood that a dangerous admixture of race and religion, one that did more to restrict than to liberate, proved detrimental not only to his psychological well-being but to that of Nathan Wright as well. It would be almost twenty-five years before Richard's eyes would again gaze upon his father's weathered visage. During this time, Richard had written a number of short stories and poems, of which *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas* (1938) would be the most prominent, earning him a reputation as a gifted writer. He had also made a series of moves, from Jackson to Memphis, from Memphis to Chicago, and then from Chicago to New York, that took him further away from the segregated environs of the Jim Crow South. His voracious reading, as documented in *American Hunger* (1977), the sequel to *Black Boy*, had introduced him to the wit of H.L. Mencken, the naturalism of Dreiser, the existentialism of Dostoevsky and, above all, the inimitable creativity of Marcel Proust. By all accounts, he was

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<sup>685</sup> Donald Capps, *The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), ix.

a self-educated man, an exemplary autodidact, who had made something of himself despite his distressing past. Richard had some successes through these years; Nathan, however, was still mired in mediocrity. Upon his return to Mississippi, Wright was shocked to see his father ambling about, at what seemed like a bovine-like pace, the same old Natchez plantation. Wright shares:

I was to see him . . . standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands...he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection.<sup>686</sup>

No words of remorse seemed to ruminate within Nathan's hoary head, no confessions of grief emanated from his edentulous mouth; there was only a troubling silence. If no words of remorse, what then of a confession of hope? After all, didn't Nathan have *any* good news? As if the mound of red clay upon which he stood had become a pulpit and his ragged overalls a clergyman's robe, Nathan would now be given an opportunity to preach his gospel; but, as his son stood like an eager congregant waiting for the Word, he remained an uncalled messenger. The only preaching that day was done by an uncomfortable silence that sermonized the depths of Nathan's despair. Richard noticed that his father's physical demise was on par with, if not exceeded by, the hopelessness that enshrouded his presence. Critical theorist Abdul JanMohamed points out that it was this re-encounter with his father that causes Wright to deem him a "death-bound-subject," that is, a man "virtually reduced to the status of an animal and ruled by the rhythms of an unconscious tethered to the cycle of the natural seasons."<sup>687</sup> Nathan's dehumanized state is further explored by literary scholar Trudier Harris who submits that the

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<sup>686</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 35.

<sup>687</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 165.

novel's title, *Black Boy*, is ascribed not to Richard but rather to Nathan. She explains that "[i]f the black man is indeed a boy, then he can be easily controlled in everyday affairs."<sup>688</sup> Therefore, being a black boy is not relegated to the period of time that comprises one's childhood; rather it indicates that, regardless of age, a man's life can be defined and controlled by others. This hearkens us back to psychological constitution of the always dependent Sambo figure discussed in chapter four of this study. From this new perspective, one now can observe that *Black Boy* is more than a documentation of Wright's childhood turmoil—it is a critical analysis of the lived experience of the numerous black men for whom the designation "boy" had become a permanent moniker.

Richard's final trip to Natchez would be the last time he would see Nathan. The emotional pain of the trip, that is, seeing Nathan in such a forlorn state, led Richard to declare his father dead, thereby enacting the script of the patricidal urtext—the son had killed the father. It would take more than ten years before Richard braved another encounter with Nathan, although this time it would be through writing his novel *The Long Dream* (1958). In this novel, Wright begins to mourn not only the losses of his childhood per se, but seeks to reconnect with his father and, in doing so, as I shall argue, redeem him from the patricidal urtext that had scripted him for death.

### ***The Long Dream: A Book of Mourning teaches Filial Wisdom***

*The Long Dream* was Richard Wright's final complete novel. And though his previous novels were hailed as masterpieces of American literature, *The Long Dream* was lambasted by the American press as the product of a writer whose literary skills had diminished. In his review of the novel, written for the *College Language Association Journal*, Nick Aaron Ford minced no

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<sup>688</sup> Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1984), 23.

words when he said that the book was a “colossal disappointment.”<sup>689</sup> Saunders Redding’s equally disparaging review of the book, written for the *New York Times*, claims that Wright’s literary imagination was weakened by his self-imposed Parisian exile. An excerpt of Redding’s review reads as follows:

“The Long Dream” proves that Wright has been away too long. Severing his cruel intimacy with the American environment, he has cut the emotional umbilical cord through which his art was fed, and all that remains for it to feed on is the memory [emphasis added], fading, of righteous love and anger. Come back, Dick Wright, to life again!<sup>690</sup>

But what if Wright’s intent was to work through the “memory” of his past? Sigmund Freud’s “The Creative Writer and Daydreaming” explicates how current conflicts reawaken the memory of earlier trauma, which creative writers are then able to work through in their fiction. Freud explains that

A potent experience in the present awakens in the writer the memory of an earlier experience, usually belonging to his childhood; from there proceeds the desire that finds its fulfillment in the literary work; the work itself exhibits both the recent occasion and the old memory.<sup>691</sup>

Almost thirteen years after the ink had dried on the pages of his autobiographies *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, Wright still wrestled with the memory of his father’s abandonment. But was there something that could help him deal with this painful memory?

His long-time friend Margaret Walker reports that over the years Wright had developed a great interest in psychoanalytic theory, viewing it as means to better understand “the psychology

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<sup>689</sup> Nick Aaron Ford, “The Long Dream (1958),” in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, eds. Henry L. Gates and Kenneth A. Appiah, 59 (New York: Amistad, 1993).

<sup>690</sup> Saunders Redding, “New York Time Book Review,” in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, eds. Henry L. Gates and Kenneth A. Appiah, 60 (New York: Amistad, 1993).

<sup>691</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Creative Writer and Daydreaming* (1908), trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 32.

of oppressed peoples and the creative depths of the unconscious mind.”<sup>692</sup> Michel Fabre corroborates Walker’s claim by noting that Wright’s personal library shelved a number of Freud’s texts, including but not limited to *The Future of an Illusion*, *Moses and Monotheism*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*.<sup>693</sup> Wright’s insatiable interest in psychoanalytic theory was so strong that it brought him to lie on the couch, so to speak, to be analyzed by Freudian psychoanalyst Frederic Wertham—the results of which were reported, albeit fragmentarily, in an essay Wertham wrote titled “An Unconscious Determinant in “Native Son.” According to Fabre, the results of Wertham’s analysis provide a classical Freudian “sexual interpretation” of Wright’s creation of Bigger Thomas. But there was more. During these sessions, Wright also shared a number of his dreams and daydreams, revealing that his childhood trauma had been so devastating that he was “never able to tell whether he had imagined or had actually experienced certain events.”<sup>694</sup> That is, he could not properly judge between what traumatic events were based on fantasy or reality. And yet, though many of the dreams and daydreams shared in those sessions will never be known, we do know that Wright used his knowledge of and experience with psychoanalysis, its theory and praxis, to work through his childhood memories in what would become his novel of mourning, *The Long Dream*.

In her book *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, literary scholar Claudia Tate lays the groundwork for a new interpretive method that scholars can use to analyze black literature. Tate believes that too many African American scholars are beholden to the *manifest content* of an author’s literary canon, an investigative blind spot that leads them to ignore the more

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<sup>692</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>693</sup> See Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright; Books and Writers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990).

<sup>694</sup> Fabre (1993), *op. cit.*, 293.

intellectually titillating material that can be accessed by exploring the *latent content* that resides in the author's noncanonical texts. Freud's dream theory manifesto, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is, quite obviously, the theoretical basis from which Tate develops the schema for her hypothesis. Though an overview of the text's thesis was given in the previous chapter, a quick refresher may be in order. Freud's dream theory posits that the manifest content of a dream is simply a worked over production of the repressed material within the unconscious; whereas, conversely, the latent content is the actual intrapsychic stuff used to create the dream's manifest content. The dream work, the process by which the refashioning of dream material occurs, insures that the unsuitable material within the psyche—in essence, the thoughts and desires and wishes that can never be made public—is not able to enter the conscious mind.<sup>695</sup> Building on Freud's dream theory model, Tate proposes that we can move from an exclusively racial interpretation of black novels (i.e., the manifest content) to a more protean assessment of the many underlying dilemmas (i.e., the latent content) that black writer's sought to address in their literature. "Moreover, I contend," says Tate, "that we can illuminate the manifest racial meanings of prominent texts by canonical black writers by probing the latent content in the corresponding noncanonical works."<sup>696</sup>

Because a black critical perspective has been sensitive only to the effects of racial oppression, the surplus content [i.e., latent content] has generally remained blurred or buried. For this reason...I de-center racial oppression in order to locate this other content. My method does not mean that race is unimportant but simply that it is not the only site of conflict. Race is one important element of an individual's social character and personality. But there are others that are not so easily discerned.<sup>697</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Freud (1999), *op. cit.*, 114-115.

<sup>696</sup> Tate, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



An often ignored facet of the human experience that Tate seeks to excavate in the latent content embedded in these noncanonical texts is the author's "personal authorial longing".<sup>698</sup> For many African American writers, no matter the literary genre or the era, there exists a need to use literature as a means of sharing one's personal struggle to achieve a better sense of personhood. From this one could posit that the thematized racial content of Wright's canonical *Black Boy* was used as a means of distorting the latent content hidden within his noncanonical text *The Long Dream*. What hidden desires or, as Freud would put it, "wishes" was Wright attempting to hide in *The Long Dream*? I propose that he was not, as Tate would aver, seeking to deal simply with America's racism—he had already done so in his canonical works *Native Son*, *American Hunger*, and *Black Boy*—rather, it now seems that he is ready to re-author the patricidal urtext. Such an act of filial love redeems his dead father and, of no lesser value, enables him to establish a new, more nuanced connection with a revived Nathan Wright.

Literary scholars who offer a critical analysis of *The Long Dream* agree that it is a book about a father, Tyree Tucker, initiating his son, Rex "Fishbelly" Tucker, into manhood, an initiatory process for which the son feels a great deal of ambivalence. (It should not be overlooked that Fishbelly's first name, Rex, brings to mind the central figure of Freud's Oedipus theory.) Earle V. Bryant, a scholar of African American literature, focuses his analysis of *The Long Dream* on Fishbelly's sexual initiation; for as Bryant states, "[a] vital part of Tyree's function in the novel . . . is to initiate Fish—to school him sexually."<sup>699</sup> Of course, because the novel's setting is in Clintonville, a fictional Southern city, these sexual rites of passage are filled with themes of racial injustice and oppression. "What should be kept in mind," asserts Bryant,

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<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>699</sup> Earle V. Bryant, "Sexual Initiation and Survival in *The Long Dream*," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, eds. Henry L. Gates and Kenneth A. Appiah, 424 (New York: Amistad, 1993).

“is that *The Long Dream* is in large measure approaching the issue of race from the perspective of sex.”<sup>700</sup> Such a myopic reading of *The Long Dream*, however, if Tate’s interpretive theory holds true, simply repeats the same race motif that dominates a critical reading of Wright’s canonical work *Black Boy*. Wright seems to be dealing with something more in the novel. And though I agree with Tate’s assessment that *The Long Dream* is a novel of mourning, I would like to submit that the analytical depth of Tate’s hypothesis can be improved by introducing Freud’s seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” as a means of addressing the overwhelming loss that Wright suffered in his novel of melancholia, *Black Boy*. This “thickened” analysis allows us to better understand that *The Long Dream* is Wright’s literary attempt to mourn the loss that he experienced in *Black Boy*.

Wright’s *Black Boy* is, as detailed above, a veritable book of loss. There was the loss of a sense of home, for example, as was the case when Nathan moved the family from Natchez to Tennessee (p. 10).<sup>701</sup> There was the loss of his mother, which had been a result of her slow physical decline after suffering a series of strokes (pp. 84-85). There was a loss of faith, particularly as his grandmother had attempted to conscript him into a religious lifestyle that he had rejected wholeheartedly.<sup>702</sup> None of these losses, though, were more damaging than when his father left the family, leaving young Richard to contend with a life-long sense of abandonment. Even more telling than the abandonment itself is Richard’s reaction to the event. Soon after his father leaves the family, Richard claims, quite boastfully, that “[t]hough I had not known why he

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<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>701</sup> Wright (2006), *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-119.

was absent, I had been glad that he was not there.”<sup>703</sup> In another place Wright shares that, even when his mother would beg him to ask his now estranged father for money to supply food for the family, he would refuse, stating that “[he] did not want to see him [his father].”<sup>704</sup> Wright seems to be basking in the glow of a resounding oedipal triumph. He had ascended to his father’s throne. He had become the man of the house. He had become, whether he liked it or not, the one whom Ella would seek for comfort. “I don’t need my father!” seems to be the domineering thought that guided Richard’s feelings about Nathan. JanMohamed highlights the significance of Wright’s supposed victory when he states that Wright had managed, even at a young age, to accomplish “a complete and total, if not final, symbolic assassination of the father.”<sup>705</sup>

Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” however, dissuades one from making such conclusive assertions about the success of Richard’s patricidal impulses. In the essay, Freud begins by delineating the differences between what he terms “the normal affect of mourning” and the more deleterious response to loss, that being melancholia.<sup>706</sup> Mourning is, by Freud’s estimation, “the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on.”<sup>707</sup> He goes on to add that mourning is established by an existential event that certifies that the love object has, in fact, died. Freud observes,

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<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>705</sup> JanMohamed, *op. cit.*, 143.

<sup>706</sup> Freud (2006a), *op. cit.*, 310.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid.*

I do not think I am stretching the point if I present it in the following manner: reality-testing has revealed that the beloved object no longer exists, and demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object.<sup>708</sup>

Melancholia, on the other hand, becomes a consuming form of mourning that depletes one's selfhood, as Freud points out,

Melancholia is characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment.<sup>709</sup>

The true genius of the essay, though, is in Freud's exposition of the ways in which the lost love object is introjected into the psyche of the melancholic, becoming a part—a psychologically parasitic part—of the melancholic's ego structure. Therefore, the negative affect that a melancholic has for an abandoning parent, such as Nathan Wright, to make this relevant to our current dialogue, is then turned inward on one's self; this occurs when the “shadow of the object,” has become so affixed within the ego that the melancholic can no longer discern the difference between the self and the introjected lost love object. It is worth quoting Freud at length on this point, when he states,

If we listen patiently to the many and various self-reproaches of the melancholic, we will be unable to avoid a sense that the most intense among them often have little to do with the patient himself, but may with slight modifications be adapted to another person whom the patient loves, has loved or is supposed to love...An object choice had occurred, a bond had been formed between the libido and a particular person; through the influence of a real slight or disappointment on the part of the beloved person, that object-relation has been subjected to a shock. The result of this was not the normal one of the withdrawal of the libido from this object and its displacement of to a new one, but another, which seems to require a number of different conditions in order to come into being. Investment in objects proved not to be very

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<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*

resistant, and was suspended. The free libido was not, however, displaced on to another object, but instead drawn back into the ego.<sup>710</sup>

It is worth returning to the earlier noted observation of Robert Stepto who stated that “Wright’s persona does not so much slay the father as bury him alive.”<sup>711</sup> Stepto’s insight leads me to posit that, though many scholars attempt to highlight Wright’s oedipal success, Nathan Wright was never truly “dead” to his son. To the contrary, he had managed to maintain a presence within his son’s unconscious. Allison Davis comments on Nathan’s presence within Wright’s endopsychic milieu, when he says, “[Wright] was a man in conflict, a suffering man. *He never was able to resolve the conflict in his feelings for his father* (emphasis added).”<sup>712</sup> It is for this reason that *The Long Dream* serves as Wright’s earnest attempt to confront his melancholia by creating a fictional father-son dyadic relationship.

*The Long Dream* is somewhat formulaic in that it has all of the tensile racial relationships that one finds in any number of black novels written during the apex of the Civil Rights Era. Though he has managed to lift himself above the poverty that had so gripped many African Americans, Tyree has done so by amassing most of his wealth off of the misery of Clintonville’s black residents. First, he is the owner of the town’s only funeral parlor that will bury black bodies; he therefore profits from the tortured bodies of the victims of lynch mob violence or other forms of unjust justice.<sup>713</sup> Second, Tyree is also the owner of a well-known local brothel, a place of unbridled lasciviousness, wherein men can find a number of buxom, statuesque women who, though possessing physical pulchritude, are inwardly barren. Third, he is the landlord of a

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<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-316.

<sup>711</sup> Stepto, *op. cit.*, 138.

<sup>712</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, 171.

<sup>713</sup> Richard Wright, *The Long Dream* (1958; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 49.

number of the city's slum buildings, whose inhabitants often complain about their having to live in an environment that feels like an expansive sepulcher. As part of his initiation into manhood, Fishbelly is brought into Tyree's underworld—filled with covetous hookers, free-flowing liquor, and dirty money—a world that he is promised to be full heir if he is able to endure Tyree's rites of passage. Needless to say, Fishbelly soon learns that his father was a man who was living a version of the American dream that seemed more like a nightmare.

If we read Tyree's story as an individuated narrative one could definitely conclude that *The Long Dream* simply repeats the race theme that is found throughout the protest literature of the past. Tyree seems to be trapped within a system of racial exploitation, of which he is just another controlled pawn. However, when reading *The Long Dream* as a text of relationality, an interpretation offered by excavating the text's latent content, one finds that this deeply complex novel deals not only with race but with Fishbelly's filial bond with his father. Tate believes that this noncanonical text was used by Wright to "create a father—whom Fishbelly, the protagonist, can love."<sup>714</sup> In an act that would allow him to move from melancholia to mourning, Wright draws Nathan from his unconscious through the creation of Tyree Tucker. Wright, through this act, is then able to have the kind of relationship with Tyree (i.e., the Nathan surrogate) that he was not able to have during his youth with his father. The genuineness of the relationship is evident in the ambivalence that Fishbelly feels towards his father. Fishbelly is ashamed of his father's acquiescence to the local white establishment, especially as Tyree attempts to put forth the image that it is he who is in control, not the city's white establishment. Valerie Smith discusses Fishbelly's ambivalence towards his father, when she says, "Fishbelly finds the socialization process limiting . . . [he] is certainly contemptuous of the methods his father

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<sup>714</sup> Tate, *op. cit.*, 117.

employs to remain in the good graces of the white establishment.”<sup>715</sup> And yet, regardless of his unease with his father’s servile behavior, Fishbelly does have a great deal of affection for his father, which, then, also leads one to speculate about Wright’s affection for his own father, Nathan. So as to reject the patricidal urtext of his own past Wright, as Tate claims, Richard self-identifies with a “protagonist [who] kills no one” choosing instead to “create a father—whom Fishbelly, the protagonist, can love.”<sup>716</sup> The novel therefore, in all of its complexities, presents Fishbelly’s relationship with his father as not being guided by a fixed emotional state (i.e., it is not about only the cathexis of Oedipal rage), but rather presents it as mode of relationality that ebbs and flows between negative and positive affect. This movement is similar to a dialectical process. Philosophers, from Plato to Kant to Hegel, have defined dialectic as the achievement of truth through the process of synthesizing contradictory elements. Richard Wright, in working through his trauma in *The Long Dream*, partakes in what I have termed the *dialectical process of filial wisdom* in that he no longer views Nathan as just an abandoning love object, but has obtained a renewed knowledge, that is, an insight that allows him to perceive some redemptive qualities in his father as well. Nathan, via Tyree Tucker, becomes a father that is a synthesized (i.e., good and bad) love object, not just a bifurcated either/or paternal figure.

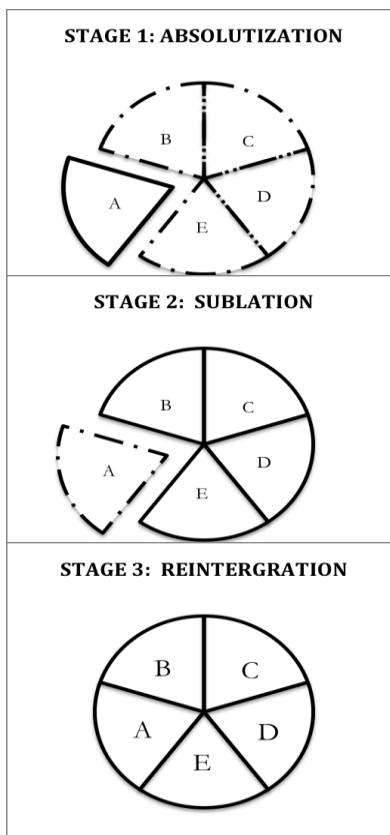
This dialectical process is a requisite part of the re-authoring of the patricidal urtext in that in order for the son to obtain a fuller knowledge (i.e., filial wisdom) of himself, he must first overcome the patricidal tendency to declare the father dead, such a shift in perspective nuances the patricidal urtext’s limited script. In doing so, as is the case in the Hegelian dialectical schema (e.g., the master-slave dialectic), the son can then improve his own knowledge in terms of how to relate to the father, while also redeeming the father from his own absolutized self-knowledge.

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<sup>715</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 69.

<sup>716</sup> Tate, *op. cit.*, 117.

Hence, as the son’s filial wisdom increases, the father’s own self-knowledge will be redeemed as well, because he no longer views himself exclusively as an abandoning figure. Philosopher Clark Butler shares that the dialectical method is a process that “lifts up” an absolutized object to which the libido has been attached to at a lower level. What he calls the “absolutization of something” is when one takes a partial characteristic (e.g., the abandoning father) of an object as representative of the entire entity. For example, the son who has been abandoned by a father believes that this abandoning evinces the sum total of the father’s personhood. Butler explains that the dialectical process cancels “a past absolutization of something by raising it to the level of being a temporary stage in the construction of larger concrete whole.”<sup>717</sup> The following diagram provides an ocular portrayal of the three stages of filial wisdom.



<sup>717</sup> Clark Butler, *The Dialectical Method: A Treatise Hegel Never Wrote* (New York; Humanity Books, 2012), 210.



Again, just as Wright attempted to do in creating Tyree, the Nathan surrogate, an abandoned son suspends his negative affect for an “absolutized something”—(A) Stage 2—that the lost love object possesses until he is able to reintegrate this negated part back in to a con-polar love object—(A) Stage 3—that has been constructed via filial wisdom. If the son relents from doing so, he remains affixed, perpetually if the dialectical process of filial wisdom is not initiated, to an absolutized object—(A) Stage 1—that occludes his vision of the abandoning object’s other characteristics; simply put, he will, according to the above diagram, be ignorant of the father being A and B, C and D, and so on. Some of these neglected polarities might reveal an admirable characteristic that the abandoning object possesses or, more important, might be instructive as to the traumas (shame and the like) that contributed to the object’s abandoning ways. With this in mind, one can better understand Tate when she remarks that “*The Long Dream* is a novel about filial love, guilt, and reparations.”<sup>718</sup> It is a story of a son finding that his father is more than one absolutized thing—his is a con-polar manhood that has at the same time the good and the bad, the high and the low, the strong and the weak. A son learns to love his father; a father is provided with an opportunity to overcome the guilt of his act of abandonment; and, in the final act, a father-son relationship is repaired. What a story!

I believe that if abandoned African American sons were given the psychological and emotional literacy to read the patricidal urtext in their own lives, they would seek to create new stories not only about themselves but about their fathers as well. Think about it: Who would have ever believed that Richard Wright, with his heart and mind teeming with patricidal rage, could be an exemplar of this kind of redemptive act? To this day, even after the numerous irascible writers of the civil rights and the Black Power movements, Wright is still considered the most violent

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<sup>718</sup> Tate, *op. cit.*, 118.

black writer of the twentieth century, a man for whom the pen truly became a sword. Whenever Wright perceived an act of injustice, he would draw his pen from its sheath and begin to attack the perpetrator with a barrage of carefully crafted prose. Wright's pen, however, was not only a means of dismantling his oppressors but was also, as we have learned, recalibrated to be a tool for redeeming significant others. Yes, I know, his prose was violent— but it was also redemptive. It is, I believe, *con-polar* literature. When an older and, maybe, wise Richard could no longer bear the pain of the loss of his father, he would again reach for his pen and with each stroke let the ink redeem Nathan Wright. This time, the ink would not destroy, as it had done in the past, but create moments when Richard could hear Nathan say, "I love you." The ink would make Nathan anew, that is, into a father to whom Richard could finally respond, "I love you too." And so, as we reflect on innovative models of care for African American men, models that inspire their liberation and models that abet their continual survival, models that inspire progressive modes of black manhood, let us pause to consider the filial wisdom articulated in the redemptive prose of Richard Wright.

CONCLUSION  
THE DAWN OF A REVOLUTIONARY BLACK MANHOOD

“The American ideal, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.”

—James Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood”

## Hegel's Dialectical Phenomenology and Negating the Master's Manhood

It is fitting that the conclusion of this study moves us to Hegelian dialectic phenomenology, which posits that at the end of one's development one encounters the new. Up to this point, the language of psychoanalysis, that of Freudian and neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, to be precise, has dominated the hermeneutical discourse of this study. It has more than proved its utility by bringing to light those unconscious (or latent) materials that are distressing to the conscious psyche. But this unipolar psychoanalytic focus appears to go against the *con-polar* analytical methodology that I explicated in the introduction to this study. Yes, psychoanalysis has allowed me to give an account of the many losses of manhood, which, at the same time, is its greatest flaw, because it interprets all of one's experiences through the lens of past traumas. If this is our only means of interpreting black manhood, then the focus would be on the loss of the past, whether slavery or the lynching ritual or a host of other traumas, without rightly observing those elements in our experience that give hope for a better future. Therefore, my analysis is based upon a con-polar methodology that observes not only the trauma of the past but gives evidence of the in breaking of the new in the midst of this trauma. And the "new" is the telos of Hegel's dialectical phenomenology. And so, what has been presented in this study—for example, the sonship *experiences* of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Wright—has been phenomenological in the sense that it has focused upon not only the losses of black manhood but also the many ways in which black men sought to create a new manhood for themselves that could attend to their discontinuity.

The word "phenomenology" is defined as the way in which the self experiences itself and its objects. However this definition fails to divulge the immense variations that the concept of phenomenology has had within the history of philosophy, particularly continental philosophy.

Going through the florid history of phenomenological philosophy, a history that includes names like Plato, Aristotle, Emmanuel Kant, Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and Jean-Paul Sartre, is something that even the most meticulous philosopher-academician finds exasperating. And so I, a lay philosopher at best, will choose the wiser path by foregoing such a labyrinthine enterprise. However, knowledge of the more prominent variances within the history of phenomenological philosophy is instructive. Differences amongst, say, the phenomenology of the German Idealists philosophers themselves (e.g., Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) are worth noting. This will only better our understanding of the unique significance of Hegel's phenomenology to this study, especially in recognizing our con-polarity as the very essence of our self-consciousness.

Hegel's most widely-read work is *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Quite surprisingly, though, the *Phenomenology* was to become, at least in the author's view, particularly as he progressed in his philosophical ruminations, his most disposable treatise. Philosopher J.N. Findlay has it that Hegel opined that much of what was within the pages of the *Phenomenology* was to be discarded once "the student, through deep immersion in its contents, [had] advanced through confusions and misunderstanding to the properly philosophical point of view."<sup>719</sup> Hegel considered the *Phenomenology* not just as a book that brought the reader to the right philosophical point of view in terms of the self's apotheosis, but as the fore piece of what he perceived as the consummation of German idealism, a fecund period of revolutionary philosophical formulations which dovetailed with the European Age of Revolutions (1789-1848). During this period, Immanuel Kant proposed the revolutionary speculative concept that the mind is not subject to the order of nature; rather, it is the mind that imposes order on nature. The philosopher and historian Leszek Kolakowski says of Kant that he "opted for the

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<sup>719</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), v.

sovereignty of human reason as against belief in a natural order of which reason is a part or a manifestation.”<sup>720</sup> In his seminal work *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant critiqued those philosophical concepts suggesting that man through his reason could gain knowledge of the essence of the natural world. For Kant, what we are able to understand about an object is based on the necessary *a priori* principles—that is, the structures—that we impose upon it. Such structures do not give us access to the essence of the object, however. Kant’s insistence that the mind does not and cannot bridge the gap between subject and the object greatly troubled his philosophical progeny, most notably Hegel. Hegel would offer a corrective to Kant’s philosophical misstep by positing a view of the self wherein the subject and the object could be unified due to what philosopher and political theorist Herbert Marcuse terms an “identical structure of movement that...runs through the entire realm of being.”<sup>721</sup> It should be noted that in viewing his philosophical system as the consummation of German idealism, Hegel negated and then synthesized, dialectically, the philosophical concepts put forth by Kant, Johann Fichte, and Friedrich Schelling.

Philosopher Robert C. Solomon describes Fichte as a “radical firebrand” who was a one-time member of the insurrectionary Jacobin club.<sup>722</sup> The most notable offering that Fichte made to Hegel’s own philosophical development was that there are alternative forms of categories that guide our lives, not a monadic universal category as Kant proposed, and that such categories are contextually contingent. However, it was Friedrich Schelling’s philosophical ruminations that

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<sup>720</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown* (1975), trans. P.S. Falla (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 38

<sup>721</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

<sup>722</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 49.

most influenced Hegel, most notably the idea that the Absolute is itself in the process of becoming a perfected essence. Solomon says of Schelling's philosophy that "what [he] proposes is a vision of the Absolute as One, as a single multi-faceted, self-creating, continuously developing cosmos of which nature's one aspect, the human mind another."<sup>723</sup> The ongoing development of a monadic Absolute constructed through alterity has been categorized as the dialectic—and it is the "central ideal of Hegel's philosophy."<sup>724</sup>

In the previous chapter, I provided a rather adumbrated sketch of Hegel's dialectic (see diagram on page 308) in my postulating that Richard Wright overcame the absolutized image of his father, that is, as an abandoning love object, through the dialectic process of filial wisdom. It was my intent to underscore that Nathan's abandonment summarily defined him, making him an absolutized object. But through the second stage of the process, this prevailing characteristic is sublated, that is, held in suspension so that his Richard could perceive his father's other attributes. In the final stage, reintegration, the sublated characteristic is reintegrated in to a more variegated whole that could then recognize, in an empathic manner, Nathan's con-polarity. I am convinced that it is worth returning to Hegel's central idea, because it forces us to rightly observe that recognition of one's own con-polarity and that of the Other is requisite to the development of one's self-consciousness. Philosopher Robert B. Pippin speaks to the revolutionary aspects of this dialectically formed self-consciousness, when he says, "it is that self-consciousness finds its satisfaction...in another self-consciousness," or, more to the point, "that a self-consciousness can actually *be* self-conscious *only* in 'being recognized (emphasis in original).'"<sup>725</sup> Thus, the Self in

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<sup>723</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>725</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 60.

Hegel's phenomenological schema is formed through relationality. We have a telling example of this in the *Phenomenology* as Hegel explores the master-slave dialectic.

Alexandre Kojève's monograph *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* is widely considered a good starting point for one's deciphering Hegel's rather inscrutable *Phenomenology* text. And in terms of parsing out the intricacies of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Kojève's chapter "The Dialectic of the Real and the Phenomenological Method in Hegel" is truly instructive. According to Kojève, the development of Hegel's philosophical system depended on the negation of those prior systems that were found lacking. However, in its replacing those insufficient systems, the new system must preserve, via sublation and reintegration, what has been negated. Kojève notes that the dialectical development of philosophy is possible only because it is a reflection "of the dialectical movement of [the] *real* history of the Real."<sup>726</sup> Just as philosophical concepts about reality are found lacking and, therefore, are overcome by more accurate speculative formulations, so too must self-consciousness itself, the "I," develop into higher forms of consciousness by stripping away false identities. Beyond anything else that must be overcome in the historical development of self-consciousness is the tenuous assuredness of the Self's identity, its apparent cohesiveness. Hegel believed that the existential con-polar relationship between the master and the slave was paradigmatic of the dialectical negation that takes place during the development of one's self-consciousness. In a section of the *Phenomenology* titled "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," Hegel says,

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<sup>726</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (1949), trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 185.



The presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that is not attached to life. This presentation is a twofold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in so doing, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life. Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears (emphasis in original)....<sup>727</sup>

Hegel is emphasizing here the way in which the dialectical process strips away the false assuredness of appearance, which are those “immediate form(s)” in the Kantian *a priori* philosophical system that inform our perception of reality. Kojève is of the opinion, however, that the dialectical process negates the verity of such immediate forms, which he refers to as *Identity*. These appearances “correspond to an eternal ‘idea’ of a fixed and stable ‘nature,’” but by no means divulge the con-polar essence of the other.<sup>728</sup> Hegel was of the opinion that it is man's desire for recognition that creates oppressive relationships whereby the master, who has the appearance of being all-powerful, lords over the slave who remains unrecognized in perpetuity. *But are these fixed positions? Can the slave improve his position? Can the con-polarity of their relationship be reconciled?* Kojève interprets the Hegelian dialectic as confirming that, even though man is born “either Master or Slave,” the slave can, through self-sacrifice, negate his Identity, that is, create himself anew. And in so doing alter the condition assigned to him by nature.<sup>729</sup>

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<sup>727</sup> Hegel, *op.cit.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>728</sup> Kojève, *op. cit.*, 203.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

Hegel rejected Aristotle's postulation that the master-slave dialectic was a fixed position. In Aristotle's view, man was born either a master or a slave, and could in now no way, no matter his efforts, overcome his natural position. In *Politics*, Aristotle offers the following reflection on the master-slave relationship.

Hence we see that it is the nature and office of the slave; he who is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be another's man who, being a human being, is also a possession. And a possession may be defined as an instrument of action....For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, other for rule.<sup>730</sup>

Given over to a subservient existence by nature, the slave in Aristotle's *Politics* has no hope of freeing himself from abject servitude. Most troubling of all is that his existence is negated by a lack of recognition, being that he is nothing more than a possession of the master. Hegel's take on the matter is completely different, in that he does not consider the incongruities of the master-slave dyad to be fixed or static, but rather sees them as contingent identities (or appearances) that can be overcome through the dialectical process of self-consciousness. Before proceeding to the aim of the slave's dialectical process, which is the attainment of self-consciousness, it is worth remarking that the master-slave dialectic is but one example of a number of inequitable relationships purported as being established by nature. For instance, the master-slave dialectic could be replaced by the father-son dialectic. Many interpreters of Hegel's work, including Kojève, have overlooked the importance that the family played in Hegel's own ruminations about dialectical self-consciousness. However, philosopher David V. Ciavatta remarks that "in

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<sup>730</sup> Mckeon, *op. cit.*, 1133

the *Phenomenology of Spirit*...Hegel is concerned to present the family as unique among other institutions in the wider social sphere....<sup>731</sup>

Unlike the state, wherein one's selfhood is abstracted so that it can be recognized as being in accord with universal principles, the family tends to focus on the singular characteristics of the individual in relation to the family milieu. Therefore, a family member can be recognized within the state (or in the world) but still feel an unsettling sense of loss or melancholy because he has not been recognized within the familial sphere. Hegel, in speaking of the ethical significance of one's Self being recognized within the family, states,

It seems, then, that the ethical principle must be placed in the relation of the individual member of the Family to the whole Family as the Substance, so that the End and content of what he does and actually is, is solely the Family. But the conscious End motivating the action of this whole, so far as it is directed towards that whole, is itself the individual. The acquisition and maintenance of power and wealth is in part concerned only with needs and belongs to the sphere of appetite; in part, they become their higher determination something that is only mediated. This determination does not fall within the Family itself, but bears on what is truly universal, the community; it has, rather, a negative relation to the Family, and consists in expelling the individual from the Family, subduing the natural aspect and separateness of his existence, and training him to be virtuous, to a life in and for the universal.<sup>732</sup>

Ciavatta provides an apt illustration of how a son, for example, although assimilated into the universal, still needs his father to recognize his authentic selfhood.

[C]onsider the case of a son who is successful in his career, winning wide recognition in the larger civil sphere, but who finds that he cannot take pleasure in any of these successes...because he constantly carries around with him the shadow of his father's disparaging and reproachful gaze. His very identity, insofar as it is still fundamentally drawn from the world of his family of origin, is premised upon treating the recognition of his father—the recognition of this particular self—as though it had an incomparable status and authority in his experience of what matters most in life, an authority that can even trump the community's universal forms of recognition....It is only once the father approves his success that they can actually count, for

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<sup>731</sup> David V. Ciavatta, *Spirit, the Family, and the Unconscious in Hegel's Philosophy* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2009), 57.

<sup>732</sup> Hegel, *op. cit.*, 268.

him, as successes, it must be that his father's recognition holds for him the ultimate standard of worth, the ultimate standard by which "being a self" is defined....<sup>733</sup>

What is most important here is that the son is never recognized (or affirmed) by the father within the familial sphere. Was this not the case for Martin Luther King, Jr. He was garnering national recognition for his efforts as a burgeoning civil rights leader when he had his crisis at the kitchen table. At his weakest moment, he yearned for someone to affirm the con-polarity of his manhood, that is, his sonship, his vulnerability. Remember, it was the recognition of his sonship, via *le point vierge*, that inspired King to continue to fight against racial injustice, despite his con-polarity. It is for this reason that Ciavatti mentions that though the scenario, detailed in the quote above, "exemplifies a tragic failure of familial recognition," it nonetheless "point[s] to what seems to be a basic potentiality of our existence as intersubjective beings."<sup>734</sup> But this lack of recognition within this father-son dialectic is soon remedied as the son, as is the case in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, develops a "want to be 'recognized'...[a] want to be accepted as a positive 'value'" in the eyes of the father.<sup>735</sup> Hence, the fight for recognition between the father *qua* master, who withholds recognition, and the son *qua* slave ensues as the son engages in the struggle for self-consciousness.

Within the dialectical development of self-consciousness, the son *qua* slave has certain advantages over the father *qua* master. For one, as the alienated (or unrecognized) part of the dialectic, the son *qua* slave is motivated to change his limited status through his negation of the negative effects of his natural condition. Gavin Rae, a philosopher, mentions that "alienation is crucial to this process [of self-consciousness] because for Hegel, consciousness does not simply

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<sup>733</sup> Ciavatti, *op. cit.*, 58.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>735</sup> Kojève, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226.

know itself with certainty....”<sup>736</sup> However, it is the master, not the slave, who claims that he is certain of his position of autonomy, chiefly due to the slave’s recognition of his prowess, but such recognition is coerced, and in the end inauthentic. The slave, on the other hand, soon discovers that his lack of recognition affords him the needed latitude to do the hard work of developing his selfhood in such a way that he liberates himself from his natural dependence. “Work” in the Hegelian dialectic is not simply the production of goods for the consumption of the master—no, it entails the slave’s ability to negate his lack of recognition by using his reason to create things which do not yet exist, the new. In the end, the master recognizes that it is he who is truly dependent on the slave, for it is the slave who, through his work, has evinced true courage in overcoming the negativity of his condition. Rae points out the importance of this, when he states, “[t]his is perhaps one of the most original, forceful and too often over-looked insights of Hegel’s analysis: the experience of the negative can enhance consciousness’s existence. Consciousness learns more about itself through struggle than if it easily attains its ends.”<sup>737</sup> The negative—the contingencies, discontinuities, ironies, and the like—is what develops authentic self-consciousness, not the assuredness of the Absolute. But the master’s fixed status does not allow him to engage in such a process. Clark Butler identifies this as the prevailing ethos of the patriarch, the all-powerful father.

Patriarchy in the human career, father power, lies in a will to mastery....The abstract understanding of patriarchal power hardens in the master’s negation of nature. Instead of negating the negation of nature, it fixedly identifies with the all-inclusive absolute even in

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<sup>736</sup> Gavin Rae, “Hegel, Alienation, and the Phenomenological Development of Consciousness,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20 (2012): 23-42.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

standing above nature. It pursues a practical struggle to conquer nature, subjecting it to its will.<sup>738</sup>

Rather than engage in the unsettling process of developing self-consciousness, the master chooses to control these contingencies through domination. According to political theorist Judith Shklar, the master (*qua* father) becomes a self-sufficient albeit inchoate self, a “pure consumer...[who] need not concern himself in any way with work or creation.”<sup>739</sup> As consumer the master only sees the product of the slave’s labor, but he does so without knowledge of the work, the process, the negating of nature, that the slave had to partake of in order to produce the objects for the master’s enjoyment. But in the end, the master realizes that he is dependent on the slave because the very object that he is consuming has the imprint of the slave’s creativity and courage—which evince the slaves burgeoning independence. In his recognition of the slave, the master now knows that he too must risk his life, the security of his *Identity*, in order to attain a dialectically formed self-consciousness. Hegel explains,

The presentation of itself, however, as pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode [as master], or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life. This presentation is a twofold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life. Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not

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<sup>738</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, 157.

<sup>739</sup> Judith Shklar, “Self-Sufficient Man: Dominion and Bondage,” in *Hegel’s Dialectic of Desire and Recognition: Texts and Commentary*, ed. John O’Neill, 289-305 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment...<sup>740</sup>

Hence, the slave recognizes that the master is not at all an absolutized, self-sufficient being but is also an individual who, like himself, must struggle through the negation of nature's given to achieve self-consciousness. Moreover, the slave recognizes the master's con-polarity, that he, too, is in the process of becoming. The dialectical process gradually strips away abstractions, the immediate forms of appearances, thus allowing both the slave and the master to recognize the essence of their beingness. *But what is the essence? Is the essence found to be without inconsistencies?* Hegel provides an answer to such questions in the first installment of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the *Logic*.

The *Logic* was Hegel's attempt later on in his career to form a system that would explain the structure of reality. During that time, he was still attempting to overcome the Kantian notion that there is an unbridgeable gap between the subject and its object. According to Hegel's friend Friedrich Holderlin, there was an inherent unity within our reasoning that was broken-up by our needing to understand the divergent objects that appear to our conscious mind. Hegel concurred with Holderlin's notion of the unity of thought, but as Pinkard explains, he proceeded to consider that

[i]t was implicit in the nature of itself that our effort to think about it [i.e., our reasoning] exposed those internal tensions in the thought itself....What for Holderlin had been a sense of 'oneness' that is always and eternally there framing the essential discordances of our conscious life was shown by Hegel to be not so harmonious, to be itself riddled with tensions that required us to undertake further judgmental commitments in order to make sense of the kinds of basic judgments that were required for us to be judging agents at all.<sup>741</sup>

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<sup>740</sup> Hegel, *op. cit.*, 113.

<sup>741</sup> Pinkard, *op. cit.*, 344.

Human thought, then, was surfeit with con-polarity because the essence itself was con-polar (remember, he borrowed this from Schelling). The essence, the ground of man's consciousness, is itself still in the process of becoming because it only recognizes itself through the dialectical development of man's self-consciousness. Such a revolutionary proposition challenged the attainment of a unipolar truth which had been purported as the aim of philosophical ratiocination. Thus, the best that the philosopher can do is perceive a synthesized truth, because the essence is itself surfeit with alterity. Hegel offers the following description of the essence:

The Absolute is the Essence. This is the same definition as the previous one that the Absolute is Being, is so far as Being likewise is simple self-relation. But it is at the same time higher, because Essence is Being that has gone into itself: that is to say, the simple self-relation (in Being) is expressly put as negation of the negative, as immanent self-mediation. Unfortunately when the Absolute is defined to be the Essence, the negativity which this implies is often taken to mean the withdrawal of all immediate predicates. This negative action of withdrawal of abstraction thus falls outside of the Essence—which is thus left as mere result apart from its premises....But as this negativity, instead of being external to Being, is its own dialectic, the truth of the latter, viz. Essence, will be Being as retired within itself—immanent Being. That reflection, or light thrown into itself, constitutes the distinction between Essence and immediate Being, and is the peculiar characteristic of Essence itself....

The problem of the aim of philosophy is often represented as the ascertainment of the essence of things: a phrase which only means that things, instead of being left in their immediacy, must be shown to be mediated by, or based upon, something else. The immediate Being of things is thus conceived under the image of a...curtain behind which the Essence lies hidden.<sup>742</sup>

This educative but somewhat circuitous quote evinces the indistinguishable underlying ontological structure that forms the essence of the Absolute and the essence of the existential world of objects: con-polarity. One must take care to fully understand that the Essence is indeed the ontological locale out of which a *new* con-polarity emerges. The new con-polarity serves to bestir within the subject the desire for further development, a new (even more protean) mode of

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<sup>742</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), trans. William Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 162-163.



self-consciousness.<sup>743</sup> Suffice it to say, without hope one will not be able to look beyond the fixidity of one's identity. Hope, however, is found in those persons who are most committed to the process of forming new modes of self-consciousness. *But for black men, in what mode of manhood is such hope to be found?* I contend that sonship, in all of its con-polarity, its unsettledness, is the custodian of hope for black men.

### **The Hope of the Rising Son**

In the introduction to this study, I made mention of Hope Deficiency Syndrome (HDS), which I described as the black man's being fettered to limited modes of manhood. I was especially concerned with the fact that such a stilted manhood is passed on from one generation to the next as fathers teach their sons to conform to the manhood of the past. The damage wrought by HDS is immeasurable. We will never know how many black men have died in hopelessness, unable to see beyond the power of patriarchal manhood. But this is not the whole story. Hope, the hope of sonship, is an effective inoculant against this ailment of the soul. Being that hope is an integral part of the dialectical development of sonship, it seems that we need to be apprised of its most rudimentary characteristics. For one, does one have to be involved in an identifiable religious community of some sort—meaning a church, a synagogue or a mosque—in order to experience hope? And if not, what does it mean to hope outside of the parameters of a faith community? And last, whether in its secular or sacred permutations, what is the aim (or *telos*) of hope in terms of the renewal of man's existential condition in the here and now? Interrogating hope in such a manner will better facilitate our understanding of how it might have a noticeable effect on the self-consciousness of black men.

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<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

Many a man has been tempted by the power, the security, and the prestige of patriarchal manhood. The temptations of patriarchy promise to free one of the processes of development, to give one the promises of manhood far too early. In Goethe's *Faust*, one reads of Mephistopheles making the following promise to the protagonist: "I'll give you what no man has seen before."<sup>744</sup> Faust first claims that he should not succumb to "smug complacency," but in the end, he cannot resist the promise of unparalleled knowledge and worldly pleasure.<sup>745</sup> He forfeits the process so as to procure the security of apparent power. On the other hand, the Bible provides us with the example of a hope-filled son, the Son, who, while on a sojourn of self-awareness in the desert, was tempted, like Faust, to give up hope and accept the immediacy of a specious kingdom.<sup>746</sup> However, the Son had reasoned that what he was to become was beyond what the tempter had to offer. He knew that his process had to be fulfilled so that he could negate the ultimate negation: Death. The apparent promise so tantalizes many a man that he settles for patriarchal control, rather than courageously endure the unsettling process of sonship. The noted systematic theologian Jurgen Moltmann, in his commenting on the relationship between hope and temptation, states that "temptation then consists not so much in the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us."<sup>747</sup> Moltmann's *telos* for the hoping subject, as well as the hoping community, is the breaking-in of the Christ figure in human history, a time when God's final triumph over all evil and suffering will become a reality, the eschaton. The etiology for such hope, the ground from which this hope

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<sup>744</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy* (1820). trans., Walter Arndt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 45.

<sup>745</sup> Ibid.

<sup>746</sup> Matthew 4:1-11.

<sup>747</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (1965), trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 22.

emanates, so to speak, is the inscrutable contradictoriness, the con-polarity, of Christ on the cross. In Moltmann's theological system the cross and the resurrection are not understood as polar opposites, as they would appear to consciousness, but rather are interpreted as maintaining a con-polar relationship whereby God created continuity (or unity) by way of a radical discontinuity. However, the resurrection of Christ does not *save* the church from the discontinuities of history, but only provides a model of processual liberation, the gradual emergence of the new through struggle. From this the church is given hope that it, too, if faithful to the process, can negate the negations of the world. For Moltmann, such hope is needed most of all in states of crises; those times when "it becomes obvious that the future can no longer arise automatically out of the past, that it can no longer be the continuation of the past, but that something new must be found in it."<sup>748</sup> In a shift that aligns Moltmann's thinking more so with Marx's dialectical materialism than Hegel's phenomenology of self-consciousness, but remains dialectical nonetheless, the hoping subject must pursue the new not only noetically but in the fight to establish the new in history. Our present historical conditions often do not and, if hope is truly operative, should not disclose the possibilities of the new; in fact, the new is "something which by the standard of present experience appears impossible."<sup>749</sup> But, despite the perceived folly of this promised new, hope is still illustrated in one's determination not to fall victim to what Moltmann calls "the worst of all utopias—the utopia of the status quo."<sup>750</sup> Like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, who must protest the position assigned to him by nature, the hoping

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<sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>749</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

subject in Moltmann's theological schema must negate the negation of his existentially estranged existence.

The confluence between Moltmann's theology of hope and the Hegelian dialectical schema speaks to the great influence that Hegel's philosophy had on Moltmann's theological theorizations. Richard Bauckham, a scholar of historical theology and New Testament studies, shares that "in the early 1970s, he [Moltmann] took up important concepts from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School."<sup>751</sup> The key members of the Frankfurt School—Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Lowenthal—desired that the concerns of the German idealist (i.e., the nature of reason and the like), especially those of Hegel, remain at the fore; however, they decided that history, not the transcendent, needed to be at the center of their approach. They were not only concerned with the establishment of rational minds but how such minds created rational institutions as well. Even though Moltmann is believed to have been greatly influenced by the critical theoretical postulations of the Frankfurt School, he is criticized, nonetheless, particularly by liberation theologians in Latin America, for not considering how his theology of hope might be operational in certain *real* political movements.<sup>752</sup>

A critic of Moltmann's theology of hope is the Latin American theologian Rubem Alves, who in his text *A Theology of Human Hope* postulates that man, sans the transcendent, has the agency to effectuate historical change. Alves critiques Moltmann's theology of hope as being grounded in the transcendent promise of God, which he believed neglects the way in which hope

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<sup>751</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (New York: T&T Clark, 1995), 2.

<sup>752</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

is born out of the exigencies of contextual historical situations—situations that are to be addressed by a humanist hope. Alves remarks,

The basic conflict between the language of political humanism and the language of hope suggested by Moltmann is that the former understands negation, hope, and the creation of the new future as starting basically from the condition of man in his insertion in to history, his ‘incarnation.’ The latter, on the contrary, sees this situation as profane, without possibilities. The only possibility becomes real when man is confronted with a non-historical and transcendent reality that does not have any dimension in the present, being only mediated by the word. The conflict is between those, on the one hand, who have accepted the secular as their frame of reference and “who do not seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice, but who sacrifice themselves for the earth,” and on the other hand, those who become historical only when they look behind the stars and are then set in motion by eros.<sup>753</sup>

Alves’s notion that a humanist hope is born out of a secular, not a transcendental, frame of reference is what renders Moltmann’s theology of hope insufficient for the slave in history, “the consciousness of history,”<sup>754</sup> who “draws from his bondage the will to freedom.”<sup>755</sup> It is because the masters want to preserve their life “now...in history” that Alves upholds that a humanist hope must grasp the latent possibilities for the slave’s overcoming the master’s oppression “now...in history” as well, not in the promised eschaton.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch completely secularizes this desire for a new world in his philosophical system of humanistic hope. Inspired by Hegel and Marx, he interpreted the concept of dialectical development, outlined in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Logic*, as a heuristic that explicated how “new meaning” and “fresh synthetic combinations” are, indeed, discovered in existential social conditions. In his masterful three-volume compendium *The Principle of Hope*, originally titled *Dreams of a Better Life*, he provides an extensive account of the rather

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<sup>753</sup> Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969), 68.

<sup>754</sup> Alves is making reference to the slave’s position in the Hegelian dialectical schema, in that it is the slave, not the master, who is truly conscious of his place in history, and who does the necessary work to move from consciousness to self-consciousness.

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

prosaic manifestations of hope in everyday life, from sports to music to art. The telos for Bloch does not exist in a pre-existing programmatic state, per Moltmann, but is, instead, self-creative which is humanity's laboring to create for themselves (or their Self) a more salubrious self-consciousness. Bloch disavowed the transcendent promise of the Christian eschaton, preferring to put his hope in a utopia that, given his Marxist inclinations, was a real and possible historical state that could be achieved politically. Further separating himself from Moltmann, who held that it is *only* the messianic Christ who can come and reclaim history for the church, Bloch has it that it is the task of man to humanize the world in such a way that it becomes a veritable home for all of humanity. Man is galvanized to make such a home through the revolutionary innovations of creative thinkers whose intellectual creations—that is, their creating the new through their *work*—bestir within man the desire to venture beyond the limitations of his immediate existence.

Bloch mentions that

[n]othing would circulate inwardly either if the outward were completely solid. Outside, however, life is just as little finished as in the ego [the self] which is working on this outside. No thing could be altered in accordance with wishes if the world were closed, full of fixed, even perfected facts. Instead of these there are simply processes, i.e., dynamic relationships in which the Become has not completely triumphed. The Real is process; the latter is the widely ramified mediation between present, unfinished past, and above all: possible future. Indeed everything real passes over into Possible at its processual Front, and possible is everything that is only partially conditioned, that has not yet been fully or conclusively determined.<sup>756</sup>

It is the “Not-Yet” that drives man to hope for and participate in the actualization of a more homely world for all of mankind. Finding the psychoanalytic unconscious lacking, which was far too focused on the loss of the past, so much so that it never proposed any propositions for future restoration, Bloch hypothesized the “Not-Yet-Conscious” as that latent possibility within man

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<sup>756</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1959), vol. 1., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 196.

which anticipates the full manifestation of potentialities. The Not-Yet-Conscious is the “birthplace of the New...the mode of consciousness of something coming closer...here the subject scents no musty cellar, but morning air.”<sup>757</sup> *But through whom is the not-yet-conscious revealed?*

Bloch demarcates the period of youth as *the* time during which the Not-Yet-Conscious “potentiates itself in creative work.”<sup>758</sup> Harkening back to Hegel’s dialectical schema, Bloch perceives that the processual change and creative negation found in our youth stands diametrically opposed to the rigidity and stasis of the adult world. Here we have the master-slave dialectic recast in the schema of adult-youth. Similar to the slave, the young person, Bloch claims, “feels some hidden power within him knows what this [hope] means, the dawning, the expected, the voice of tomorrow. He feels called to something that is going on inside him, that is moving in his own freshness and overhauling what has previously become, the adult world.”<sup>759</sup> With respect to the overhauling of the adult world, the status quo, so as to make room for the new, it should be kept in mind that Bloch is not beholden to the Christian theological concept of the telos being the all-embracing utopia effectuated through the eschaton. Rather, it is his view that there are innumerable (partial) utopias, each of which upholds a unique ideal as its goal. Therefore, there are musical utopias (e.g., the works of Beethoven or Mozart), geographical utopias (e.g., the Garden of Eden), medical utopias (e.g., vaccines and such), and, as one would imagine, sociocultural utopias like, say, the utopian manhood, that is, one that rightly accounts for the con-polarity, the very discontinuities, of a man’s self-consciousness.

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<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Throughout this study I have argued that the utopia of patriarchal authority does not facilitate hope for men, especially black men. Because patriarchal manhood often acquiesces to the temptations of the status quo, it fails to do the work needed for the realization of innovative modes of manhood. Hence, the utopia for black manhood must allow black men to develop a manhood self-consciousness that can tend to new modes of manhood. Bloch's humanist hope rightly posits that the hope of youth is not found in one's being beholden to the natural order. Rather, this kind of hope is seen in the process of establishing a home for mankind, a place where one's con-polarity is affirmed. I submit that this kind of hope should in no way be the exclusive preserve of a man's youth but should be evident in the life-long development of his sonship self-consciousness.

The hope of sonship is the focus of James Dittes's monograph *Driven by Hope*. Dittes, a scholar of pastoral theology and psychology, maintains that a man's willingness to be accepting of the discontinuities—the con-polarity—of manhood is denotative of sonship. "A full term of sonship is the right of every male....A man needs this time of expectancy and hope, a term of unsettledness, not in command," says Dittes.<sup>760</sup> According to Dittes, the son is a father in training, a man who is able to be at peace with the Not-Yet disposition, an attitude of chosen, not forced, reverence in the presence of the father's "grandeur."<sup>761</sup> But this lack of patriarchal prowess must not be deemed a limitation for the son. The honor of sonship is that it facilitates a man's rebellion against the "patriarchal obsession with achievement."<sup>762</sup> As patriarch, a man's selfhood is subsumed in the external accoutrements of his stature and status. The son,

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<sup>760</sup> James E. Dittes, *Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 123.

<sup>761</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



conversely, is graced with a hope that embraces “the savor of the mystery, the beyondness, the otherness of what life affords him.” Dittes’s unique valuation of sonship is a clarion call for a mode of manhood that seeks to overthrow patriarchal authority—or so it seems. Under closer scrutiny, one finds that even Dittes, though declaring the efficacy of sonship, is yet beholden to the notion that sonship is restricted to “a time,” an epoch, if you will, for the son to experience the discontinuities of manhood albeit with the intent that he will, in the end, develop into an “expectant father.”<sup>763</sup> The “moreness” of fatherhood is still touted as something for which the son is being groomed. Hence, sonship, even for Dittes, is a “component of [our] masculine heritage.”<sup>764</sup> But for black men sonship must be more than just a component of our manhood—it must be the very essence of our manhood self-consciousness. The idea that sonship is reserved for a particular time of a man’s life speaks to the prevailing ethos that sonship, whether rushed through or patiently endured, is but a stage of a man’s development that, ultimately, is to be passed over. As the essence of manhood, sonship not only embraces the life-long process of attaining new modes of manhood but has as its utopia, the fulfillment of its hope, the perfection of this sonship, not the attainment of a patriarchal status.

This is important, for in order for a father to be recognized by his son, dialectically, he must father through his sonship. It is because sonship is the mediating essence, the ground that is itself rife with discontinuities, that these two figures, father and son, can be bound together in their con-polarity. Let us consider the two fractious father-son dyads that served as the data for this study.

Daddy King readily sacrificed his sonship (i.e., stopped hoping in the further development of his manhood consciousness) upon the death of his father, so that he could

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<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>764</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

become a self-sufficient patriarch. By virtue of this act, though, Daddy King also obfuscated his sonship from the purview of his own sons, particularly M.L., who never knew that vulnerability could be an essential part of manhood. M.L.'s encounter with *le point vierge* provided King with the perspicacity to see the sonship within himself but in Daddy King and his enemies as well. On the other hand, Nathan Wright lost hope as he relegated his selfhood to that of the perpetual black boy who never developed beyond his limited manhood. For Richard, his father only represented vulnerability, loss, brokenness, making him what JanMohammed denominates as the *death-bound-subject*.<sup>765</sup> As with Daddy King, there was an absence of sonship in Nathan Wright, that is, an absence of the kind of hope that would keep him engaged in the process of becoming. He surrendered to the condition that nature had assigned to him. In the end, what both King and Wright realized was that their fathers' sonships, their hope to be more than what the status quo assigned them to be, had been thwarted, if not destroyed, by the filicidal impulses of Westernized patriarchal manhood.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek's explication of the anxiety-laden rationale within Hegelian dialectic is instructive here. For Zizek, the Hegelian dialectic illustrates that the master in despairing over his own "self-contradiction" projects this onto the other who is characterized as the enemy. However, the master makes a great mistake, in that, as Zizek says, "what the subject engaged in a struggle perceives as the enemy, the external obstacle he has to overcome, is the materialization of the subjects immanent inconsistency."<sup>766</sup> In sum, "the struggling subject needs the figure of the enemy to sustain the illusion of his own consistency." According to Zizek, this delusional notion of consistency leads to fascist sociopolitical states wherein it is purported that

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<sup>765</sup> JanMohamed, *op. cit.*, 144.

<sup>766</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 200.

in order for structure to be restored the “inconsistent” enemy must either be removed or destroyed. Zizek sees the occurrence of this in the Third Reich (or the utopian Aryan state) in the “anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, the foreign intruder who disturbs and corrupts the harmony of the social order....”<sup>767</sup> Of course, the selfsame was manifest in the lynching ritual as discussed in chapter four of this study. One would do well to take what Zizek has suggested above and distill it so that it is applicable not just in terms of interracial, interethnic strife but also to the xenophobia that can occur within the self, that is, a self that cannot reckon with its own con-polarity. It is because the racial oppression of black men in American has been so intense (and so wanton) over the centuries that many black men find solace in the false “consistency” of patriarchy rather than the “inconsistencies” of sonship. Because of this, many black men castigate the son within themselves far before they neglect, abuse, and even reject the son who is the other. But in their rejection of the inconsistent self (the con-polar self), thereby sundering the dialectical process of development, they are doing great harm to the essence of their own being. But this does not have to be so.

The hope of sonship shines forth when times appear to be at their worst. By all accounts, black manhood has never been in a worse place. In fact, there is a bevy of statistical data to substantiate such a claim.<sup>768</sup> However, we must remain mindful that the negative is what will force us as black men to do the work to form new modes of black manhood, to further develop our manhood self-consciousness. This study suggests that sonship is a mode of black manhood that can open new vistas of manhood to black men. It is a manhood that can be generative in the sense that it attends to not just the inconsistencies within one’s self, as one engages in this processual development of self-consciousness, but also facilitates one’s empathy for other black

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>768</sup> See the introduction to this study.

men, especially black sons, who are engaged in the process as well. This is but the first-stage, however, in what will be a long journey to discover all it is that we as black men can truly become. For now, let us as black men take hold to sonship, a revolutionary mode of black manhood. Let us as black men have hope that the son will shine again.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

### **The Art of an El Anatsui-esque Manhood**

*How would this sonship mode of manhood look to an observer?* I submit that it would be akin to a splendid work of art. Now, I am not an art aficionado. I cannot discern the difference between the emotions of Baroque painting and the imaginative juxtapositions of a Surrealist drawing. My heart is not moved to flights of ecstasy at the mere mentioning of a da Vinci or Dada, Bacon or Botticelli, Picasso or Pollock. I would (probably) fail even the most rudimentary examination on art concepts: Implied line? *Uh*. Split-complimentary colors? *Huh*. Tactile value? *Duh...I don't know*. Besides an obligatory art class (or two) during my undergraduate years, I have made no attempt to become more enlightened about the world of art. Much of this intentional nescience has to do with my own social angst, believing that if I give in to this supposed symbol of high culture, I would undergo a complete metamorphosis, changing into one of those people who critiqued a piece of art while patiently imbibing a glass of sauterne and carefully listening to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Art is, however, by no means the exclusive preserve of the elite class; but, instead, as I have learned, it is one of the means through which people—including marginalized, oppressed, silenced people(s)—vehemently articulate their desire to change the world. John Dewey informs us that art “is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development.”<sup>769</sup> I owe much to Dewey's description of the pragmatic value of art. It is, in many ways, if Dewey is correct, another form of documenting and expressing the human condition.

My budding understanding of and appreciation for this medium of chronicling the human story has led me to take a liking to the art of Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui. The grandeur and

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<sup>769</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 339.

complexity of El Anatsui's work has made him one of the world's most sought after artists. Art critics have attested that to behold one of his awe-inspiring pieces is to be drawn into an "aesthetic epiphany."<sup>770</sup> Inspired by an African world view that rightly extols the virtue of fluidity, El Anatsui mindfully constructs his artistic pieces to stand in contradistinction to Westernized notions of aesthetical form and function. In describing his work El Anatsui confesses that "[it] has been about change, the non-fixity of things."<sup>771</sup> The non-fixity of his artistic creations can be seen in such exhibitions as *Man's Cloth*, a sculpture, constructed out of discarded bottle caps, that has no customary format for being displayed, because the material used to fashion it is so pliable, so flexible, so adaptable that it becomes a multivalent art work. A sculpture (usually static and intractable) that constantly changes forms—How can this be?—no wonder El Anatsui's work is as perplexing as it is alluring. There is, I would like to submit, a correlation that can be made between El Anatsui's artistic depiction of the need for human change and the developmental processes necessary for a more creative mode of Black manhood. This manhood has become very much a sculpture that has been fashioned with the stern materials of anger, self-sufficiency, stoicism, and the like; it is an unyielding manhood, entrapping many Black men within a masculinity that has lost its imaginary impetus. It is the same manhood—over...and over...and over...an over again.

This study has challenged the Westernized ethos that is beholden to the aesthetic of this "fixed" manhood by fashioning a creative mode of Black masculinity. By using the undervalued materials of a man's selfhood—that is, those discarded modes of self-identification that have been denigrated as being "unmanly" or "feminine"—I have hypothesized a mode of manhood,

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<sup>770</sup> Alexi Worth, "El Anatsui," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/style/tmagazine/22nigeria.html> (accessed July 15, 2012).

<sup>771</sup> PBS Documentary: *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, "Change," episode 1, April 14, 2012.

sonship, that is non-replicable. A manhood in the process of becoming. A manhood open to the flow of change. A manhood analogous to a *sui generis* work of art.

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