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Black Men Who Betray Their Race: 20TH Century Literary Representations of the Black Male Race Traitor

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Black American Men Who Betray Their Race:
20TH Century Literary Representations of the Black Male Race Traitor

A Dissertation Presented

by

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English Department

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DEDICATION

To my loving parents Gregory and Marian.

"Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another."

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

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much more, I am eternally grateful to you and will continue to lift others as I continue to climb.

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ABSTRACT

BLACK AMERICAN MEN WHO BETRAY THEIR RACE:
20TH CENTURY LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS
OF THE BLACK MALE RACE TRAITOR

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This dissertation gathers a literary archive in order to identify and introduce the "race traitor" as a heretofore unrecognized yet important trope within 20th century African-American Literature. In addition to coping with the burden of racism, African Americans have had to put considerable energy toward negotiating the possibility of being perceived as race traitors by others within the African American community. This study tracks the possibilities and perils of black group identity in literary representations of black men, neither privileging opposition to the white world, nor celebrating black unity beyond it. Focusing on literary works by five African-American male authors--Sutton Griggs, Ralph Ellison, Charles Gordone, John Edgar Wideman, and Paul Beatty--my archive provides a diachronic examination of the race traitor to show how his numerous permutations and appearances across periods and genres speak to the ever-shifting politics of black identity. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) brings into focus the intersections between anti-African emigration sentiment and black identity. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) calls attention to the double agency of black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and the subversiveness of their black tokenism. Gordone's *No Place to be Somebody* (1969)

stages the trauma of being called a race traitor, reminding us that the discourse of Black

Power identity, while affirming, is also fraught with psychological danger. Wideman's

Brothers and Keepers (1984) introduces the notion of compartmentalization as the

internal process which enables the race traitor to mask his feelings of guilt over his flight

from the black community, showing us not only how compartmentalization actually feels,

but also how it is undone—how it can actually be healed. And lastly, Beatty's *The White

Boy Shuffle* (1996) explores, against a backdrop of the rising black public intellectualism

at the close of the 20th century, what it looks like for the race traitor to return home and

reassume responsibility for *and* to black community. Ultimately, *Black Men Who Betray

Their Race* invites us to reconsider Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness from a

fresh perspective, enabling us to reflect on the tension between individuality and

collectivity as lived, represented, and performed across the 20th century.

PREFACE

When I tell people that I am working on a book about black masculine race traitors, they always end up asking me the same question: "So what is the story behind you and race traitors?" To be clear, they never actually come right out and ask this question, at least not to my face and definitely not this explicitly. With the more tactful person it might take the form of an indirect question, asked casually so as not to arouse suspicion: "So how did you become interested in the topic?" With the less subtle person it might look like a more pointed question, much like the one a colleague recently posed to me over late night drinks: "What about your own experience—are you trying to work through or solve something by writing about this topic?" The implication in both instances being that my interest in the topic stems from my supposed status as a race traitor. To their credit, I openly identify as a black American man, so this assumption is understandable. Because I too am aware of this possibility, I am always ready, if not relieved, to offer the rejoinder: "I have never been accused nor found guilty of being a race traitor." Again, this is not actually stated this explicitly. Rather, it is implied in the much rehearsed narrative I relate, of how during the early stages of preparation for my qualifying exams I noticed that I had repeatedly underlined the phrase "race traitor" in several of the texts on my reading list. But if I am being completely honest, my interest in the topic began many years prior to this project (or my qualifying exams) when I was first introduced to the black masculine race traitor figure by my mother.

A child of the 1960s and 70s, my mom grew up with a strong sense of black pride and commitment to black solidarity. Even after her family moved from their

predominantly black neighborhood to an exclusively white neighborhood when she was in the eighth grade, my mom boasts that she never failed to identify with the other members of her race who lived just across the tracks. She would later work to instill in me and my siblings the same sense of pride and solidarity. In fact one of my earliest memories of encountering racism is that of the neighbor children commenting on how they could not watch a television program because the characters were black. Our mother's children, my sister and I stood up and proudly declared that we too were black. With eyes newly opened to the blackness in their midst, the children hurriedly left. So you could imagine my mother's surprise when I nearly broke black solidarity following a conflict between two of my peers from school, one white and the other black.

I cannot remember what sparked the conflict but what I do remember is that all of my friends were beginning to divide along racial lines. Everyone expected me to pick a side as well, but I did not necessarily agree that what my white friend had done warranted such a response. While my mom had raised us to be proud of our race, she also raised us to be fair, outspoken, independent thinkers. So as the pressure mounted from both groups for me to publicly declare which side I was on, I knew that eventually I would have to weigh in. I decided that the next day at school I would tell them my personal thoughts on the matter. I could not wait to tell my mom how I was upholding the values she raised me with. I assumed that she would applaud my decision, but instead she expressed her concern at the thought that I might be perceived as breaking black solidarity. "I don't want you to be a 'Clarence Thomas,'" she said worriedly. Even though I had no real understanding of who Clarence Thomas was, from the context of our conversation I understood fully what it was he had done. Further, I knew it was not that she did not want

me to be a "Clarence Thomas" for the shame that it would reflect on her. Rather, her

concern came from a place of fear over what might happen to me if I were labeled a race

traitor. She didn't have to explain anything to me. Somehow her tone conveyed the sense

of urgency and concern for my wellbeing.

> "So what am I supposed to do? Not say anything, even if I disagree with what is going on," I asked.
>
> "No, that is not what I am saying," she reassured me. "All I am saying is that you must find a way to disagree without throwing the other black kids under the bus. You have to be cautious how you word things, especially in front of white people as some of them may try and use what you say as ammunition against your own people."

The next day I went to school and managed, somehow, to help my friends work towards a

resolution without my ever having to pick a side or break black solidarity. I never forgot

my mother's lesson.

Since then, I have continued to work very hard at not being perceived as a race

traitor. I keep my opinions to myself (mostly), but should a potential interracial conflict

ever rise, I stay ready to handle myself with (I hope) the diplomacy of a seasoned

politician. I have my mother to thank for this. But while this has undoubtedly spared me

from the pain of reprisal which comes with the territory of being a race traitor, it has left

me wondering who exactly is this figure everyone despises so much, and who my mother

feared my becoming?

Of course, this dynamic touches every person in some way, and in particular

black men and women living in our divided American society. My experience with this

thus far is valid. Now, let us examine some others.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

BLACK MEN WHO BETRAY THEIR RACE

The sketch "Phone Call" by comedic duo "Key and Peele" imagines what would happen if two black men encountered one another in public, while talking on their cell phones. It opens on a city street corner where we see a black man (Keegan-Michael Key) pacing back and forth while talking on his cell phone with his wife. Key is a tall, slender, light-skinned brother who is dressed casually in a red sweat jacket and jeans. He excitedly shares the news that he is going to purchase theatre tickets for his wife, explaining that "[he] loves [her] and it's [her] birthday." While he is in the middle of describing to her which seats are still available, Key notices a black man (Jordan Peele) walking up from behind. Aware that Peele might overhear him, Key deflects by saying that the seats are located "in the dresser." Key proceeds to change the way he speaks and acts: he speaks more loudly and with more bass in his voice; he uses "Ebonics" and slang; and he gesticulates more dramatically. Peele quickly passes by Key, but is forced to join him on the corner as he waits for the crossing signal to change.

At this point we get a closer look at Peele, who is short, stocky, and considerably darker than Key. He is also dressed casually in baggy jeans, a black hoodie and an oversized vest. While waiting, Peele receives a phone call from a friend, which he answers: "Sup dog, I'm about five minutes away." This seems to inspire Key to try and sell his performance even more, as he shouts: "yeah, ok, yeah, cool, no dey are all good singers, dey all good singers." At the same time, we witness Peele visibly growing more

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and more agitated as he reassures his friend who is trying to rush him: "come on, now you know I'm almost there a'ight." Again, Key tries to match performances, exclaiming to his wife: "now I'ma pick yo ass up at 6:30." This seems to cause Peele to look back at Key and they exchange a head nod—a gesture which signifies a mutual sense of recognition and respect between men within many communities—just before he darts out into the street. Once he is out of earshot, Peele undergoes a similar transformation as Key did moments before, only his tone of voice becomes considerably higher and he affects a slight lisp. The sketch ends with Peele leaning into his phone and whining: "Oh my God Christian, I almost totally just got robbed right now," as Key continues to pace and talk on his phone in the background.

Fig. 1. : Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele in "Phone Call"

"Phone Call" serves as a commentary on the anxiety some Black males feel concerning their racial belonging. This anxiety stems from the fact that those who emulate aspects of white middle-class masculine identity are often socially sanctioned for what, to many, equates to racial treason. Therefore, black men who cross over into white middle-class society must learn to perform their racial and gender identity on cue,

enacting popular tropes of black masculine identity when before a black social audience. Key and Peele exhibit this kind of behavior as they change the ways they speak and act for fear of what the other might think or do to him if his performance does not measure up.

We see this play out with Key, who starts out talking about the theater and speaking in a manner which could be described as "proper" (read white and middle-class). However, once he notices Peele, Key's performance instantly falls in line with popular notions of "authentic" blackness.

First, we see him change as he tries to cover up the fact that he is knowledgeable about the theater and classical music by giving the impression that he is actually talking about a group of R&B singers. The issue is not so much that he is going to the theater, but rather his appreciation and knowledge of the classical music genre. Revealing that he possesses this knowledge could serve to mark him as being part of the middle class.

Next, we see him change as he seeks to identify with Peele through his linguistic performance as his voice gets deeper and louder, he begins speaking in a stereotypical exaggeration of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and he gesticulates more enthusiastically. Again, the issue here is his performance of middle-class identity. Because the middle class is often marked as white, black Americans who adopt the values of middle-class society are perceived by other black people as trying to "act white."[1] Key wants to avoid being read this way, and so he adopts a performance which trades on the trope of the urban black male.

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[1] In *Acting White*: *The Curious History of a Racial Slur*, Political and legal analyst Ron Christie defines acting white as a phrase which refers to a black person who refuses "to accept the conventional wisdom of how they are supposed to think, act, and dress" (*Acting White* 2). He asserts that the term evolves from the belief that properly educating a black person was dangerous as it would lead the individual to be

Finally, we see that his gender performance changes in terms of how he relates to his wife as he goes from being attentive and expressive with her, to being discourteous and "cool" (i.e. when he says he will "pick her ass up").

In the same ways, Peele adjusts his linguistic and embodied performances; which (in light of the fact that he speaks in a manner which some would consider to be effeminate) takes on a more gendered rather than racial significance. Not only does he lower his tone of voice and elide his lisp, but he also tries to come across as hard, fearless, reserved—in other words masculine—as he stands there with a slight "gangsta" lean and expressionless face. Although it is not clear, we could read Peele's lisp and tone as markers of queer identity. This is because, as linguist Vershawn Young argues, "language is seen as a means to perform race and is at the same time understood as a performance of gender" (*Average* 5). Young points to the example of critic Phillip Bryan Harper who writing of himself explains that "his 'own [linguistic] performance...sets [him] up to be targeted as too white-identified or too effete (or both) to be a 'real' black man in certain contexts'," (*Average* 5). Similar to Harper, Young shares the experience of being read as white-identified, which in turn many black people take as a sign that he is gay. The problem here is the association between whiteness and queerness. First, in that queerness is still read as a mark against your blackness. But also because queerness is

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"successful, intellectual, influential--in other words, that they would act equally as whites--while being black" (17). However, Black Americans would later reinterpret this behavior to mean that the individual was trying to distance themselves from the other members of the race and earn the approval of whites (22). Following the ascendency of the Black Panthers, blacks were discouraged from aspiring to imitate whites, being "expressly encouraged to explore and cultivate their own distinct self-identification as powerful, militant and proudly black" (123). Christie concludes that "the attributes necessary for success in America (applied learning in school, conservative dress and demeanor, hard work ethic) were the very activities deemed to be 'establishment' behavior that would lead a black person to charges of being less than authentically black and of acting white" (124).

linked directly to whiteness. Therefore black males who want to avoid being read as queer, will often avoid things which are designated as white. In the end, whether or not the audience reads Peele's raising his voice and revealing his lisp as a sign that he is queer depends on where they are coming from; but at the very least we must recognize that Peele doesn't want to be read as white-identified. Although Key (and to a lesser degree, Peele) manages to pull off this kind of performance, the reality is that not all black men are able or willing to do so.

"Phone Call" also hints at the fact that black men must also negotiate the expectations of white society. Those who refuse to conform to these expectations are often barred entry into white social spaces or worse. The punch line of the sketch is that Peele's character is also performing because he mistakes Key for a thug and fears for his life. However, that black males who conform to the stereotype are feared by most of society (including other black men) is no laughing matter, especially when we consider the fatal shootings of unarmed black men—and black women and children—by individuals who claimed they "feared for their lives."[2] Thus, we are left wondering why Key would perform the stereotype in public if it would put him at risk of being viewed as a threat.

As I suspect, they don't want to be perceived by the other person as being a race traitor. Broadly defined, a race traitor is someone who breaks solidarity with the other members of his or her community. In his helpful text *We Who Are Dark: The*

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[2] The list of black men is constantly growing and therefore can never be complete. However, for a partial list of black men killed by police in recent years, see Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Likewise, for a more inclusive list of the names of black men, **women and children** who have been killed by police since 2015, see the Washington Post's *Fatal Force* digital database.

Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity, philosopher Tommie Shelby explains that group solidarity is generally defined as a feeling or sentiment of unity; however, he clarifies that solidarity necessarily entails normative constraints which members are expected to honor (*We Who Are Dark* 68). By "normative constraints," Shelby means that because "I feel solidarity with group X, I ought to do this or that for or on behalf of fellow members of group X" (68). He identifies five core normative constraints which need to be present for any group to maintain a "robust" solidarity. These characteristics include: "the tendency of group members to identify, both subjectively and publicly, with each other or the group as a whole" (68); "...a kind of special concern, in particular a disposition to assist and comfort those with whom one identifies" (68); "...a shared set of values or goals which provide a sense that fellow group members are committed to these" (68-69); "...loyalty or faithfulness to the group's values, principles, and ideals, and a willingness to exert extra effort to help members of the group and to advance the group's interests" (69); and finally, "that members trust one another to some significant degree" (70). As Shelby points out, group solidarity carries with it the potential to be an effective resource for bringing about collective action as its normative constraints result in members working together to overcome common issues they face, which in the case of black Americans is racial prejudice, or what is more formally known as the color line. Therefore, by violating one or more of these normative constraints the race traitor ultimately threatens the collective action of the group to overcome the limitations imposed by racial prejudice. But what do black Americans imagine it looks like for one of their own to break solidarity?

In black America what it looks like to be a race traitor has largely been understood in terms of those behaviors associated with the figure of the "Uncle Tom." This can be observed with the frequency with which blacks use the phrase "Uncle Tom" to characterize those they (black people) deem as race traitors. Some examples include academy award winner Hattie McDaniel, jazz legends Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., novelist Ralph Ellison, baseball legend Jackie Robinson, Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, basketball player Grant Hill, former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, presidential hopefuls Herman Cain and Ben Carson, and more recently reality TV personality and President Trump's former political aide Omarosa Manigault. Founder and curator of the Jim Crow Museum David Pilgrim identifies two variants of this figure in the black popular imagination.

The first variant is a person who is "a docile, loyal, religious, contented servant who accommodates himself to a lowly status" ("The Tom Caricature" 3). This variant coincides broadly with the trope of the "good negro" (or as he is affectionately known, the "white man's negro"), the kind of black person that whites approve of because he knows his place and is careful to keep it.

In the past, being a "good negro" looked like the person who, often, but not always, worked for whites in a menial job; the black person who showed deference to whites by using formal titles like "Sir" and "Mam," shuffling, grinning, and laughing while in the presence of whites; and, the black person who depended on whites for protection and provision, much like a slave depended on his or her master during slavery. Because of the reciprocal nature of his or her relationship with whites, black Americans came to regard the "good negro" as a sort of modern day version of the "house negro."

7

As Malcolm X explained, much like his or her enslaved predecessor, this "twentieth-century-type of house [n]egro" identifies with whites to such a degree that he mistakenly believes that his wellbeing is intertwined with their fate (speech, Michigan State University).

Huey P. Newton, on the other hand, argued that this was no mistake, as the "good negro" knew full well that he stood to gain more by helping to maintain the white power structure than he or she would gain by trying to help overthrow it (Huey Newton Talks).

Indeed, sociologist Gunnar Myrdal confirms that in some instances, the "good negro" was known to serve as an informant or as a mouthpiece for whites, allowing for them to gain influence over the blacks and limit their progress[3] *(An American Dilemma* 541).

While he may look somewhat different, not much has changed with regard to the "good negro" of 2019. Instead of gaining close proximity to whites through his role as a servant, the modern "good negro" gains proximity to whites by virtue of where he lives, where he works, and where he goes to school. Likewise, no longer is he expected to be deferential when interacting with whites, rather he is now expected to be respectable. Despite these changes, one thing remains the same: he does not dare openly critique the white power structure. To paraphrase blogger Jarrod Brown (in his post entitled "The

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[3] This trope was probably best embodied by Booker T. Washington, the black leader who seemingly endorsed segregation and disenfranchisement with his speech known as "The Atlanta Compromise" (1895). Washington put whites at ease with his non-threatening demeanor and obsequious behavior. Ever the embodiment of pragmatism, patience, and passivism, he made it known that he did not want any "trouble" with whites. Not only did he refuse to directly challenge the status quo until just before his death but he also encouraged other blacks to do the same. Instead, he was convinced that change ought to be a gradual progress, the end result of dedication, perseverance, personal responsibility, hard work, and self-help training in morality, religion, cleanliness, and industrial education on the part of blacks. On the surface, everything about him communicated that he knew and accepted his place in society and that he had no plans of breaking out of it apart from what was permitted, earning him the support and approval of the white leaders of his day.

Good Negro," from his blog called *A Fresh Voice*), the good negro of today looks like the black person who does not speak up with regard to racial matters and who parrots the perspective of many whites on matters of race (i.e. racism doesn't exist, all protests are riots, and people should practice colorblindness) ("The Good Negro").

The second variant Pilgrim identifies is "the ambitious black person who subordinates himself in order to achieve a more favorable status in the dominant society" ("The Tom Caricature"). No doubt, this variant evokes the popular trope of the "sellout" as used by black Americans. The sellout subordinates himself by allowing whites to use him to impede other blacks' progress. As legal scholar Randall Kennedy explains in *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal*, this trope has been used as an epithet by black Americans to refer to blacks who, "knowingly or with gross negligence act against the interest of the race as a whole" (5). He goes on to identify a number of different ways that black people can be sellouts.

The first of these is passing, which is when you attempt to pass for a white person in everyday life by concealing or denying the fact that you are black. Along these same lines is claiming to be "mixed," which is when you identify yourself as being multiracial in an attempt to pass yourself off as something other than just plain old black. (This is often the sentiment behind the familiar refrain: "I've got Indian in me!"). Next, there is "acting white," where you dress, walk, talk, dance, etc., like a white person. Acting white can also look like getting good grades in school. It is important to distinguish passing, which has more to do with your physical features (typically one's complexion, hair texture and length, nose shape, etc.) resembling those of a white person, from acting white, which has to do with conforming to white social expectations. If acting white has

to do with what is going on on the outside, then being an "oreo" has to do with what is going on on the inside.

Simply defined, it is when you look black but think white. This can include behaviors such as identifying as a Republican or opposing policies like affirmative action. Closely related is "acting boojie," which is when you come from the lower class, but after arriving at the middle-upper class, no longer want to identify with the other people of your original class. As Vershawn Young explains: "To be boojie…is to ape the dominant bourgeoisie; boojie is black comprador performance for money and rewards" (46). One of the ways folks acting boojie demonstrate this is by moving out of majority black neighborhoods. Those who act boojie are often accused of "forgetting their roots." Then there is sleeping white, which is when you, as its name suggests, sleep with or marry a white person. And lastly, there is the "Darden Dilemma" which emerged during the tail end of the 20th century.

Named for Christopher Darden, the young black deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County who gained national attention for his role in the O.J Simpson trial (1995), this form of selling out was coined to describe the experience of those black professionals who, by the very nature of their job, are positioned at odds with the other members of the race. This category can include black professionals such as journalists who, in doing their job, uncover and publish incriminating information about a beloved black public figure. However, it consists primarily of those who work as a police officer or as an attorney for either the prosecution, or an elite private practice, and enforce the law against other blacks.

As Pilgrim suggests and as we can see, there is a consistent theme present in the ways black Americans conceive of the "Uncle Tom," which is that he or she overly identifies with whites. At its best, the "Uncle Tom's" over-identification with whites means that he or she is no longer someone who can be counted on to act on behalf of the race because he or she cannot relate to its suffering. And at its worst, it means that the "Uncle Tom" is someone who consciously aligns himself or herself with the white power structure, and in so doing has positioned himself or herself as an enemy of the race.

Regardless, of what the case may be, over-identification with whites threatens black solidarity in that it violates all five of the normative constraints outlined by Shelby. The "good negro" violates the first constraint by subjectively and publicly identifying with white people instead of fellow blacks. The "good negro's" identification with whites is critical as it leads him or her to violate the other normative constraints. If the "good negro" does not identify with other blacks, how can he or she be expected to show the necessary special concern for the other group members? Would not his special concern be for those with whom he identifies? Along these same lines, if the "good negro" identifies with whites then would it not be safe to assume that he also shares their same values and goals? Why would he share the values and goals of a group with which he does not identify? Further, how can the "good negro" demonstrate loyalty to a set of values or goals he does not share? Furthermore, without evidence of loyalty on his or her part, how can the other group members ever develop a mutual sense of sense of trust with the "good negro"? Therefore, black Americans have enforced the normative constraints of black solidarity by racially policing those who over-identify with whites.

I suggest that Key and Peele take the risk they do to avoid being racially policed by one another. Racial policing is the act of monitoring and exacting fidelity from other members of your race through the use of coercion. When monitoring someone, members of the group will look at how they perform their black identity in order to gauge their level of commitment to black solidarity. With regard to monitoring, Randall Kennedy notes that many Black Americans will even scrutinize one another with a kind of "obsessive attentiveness" for signs of racial treason, which breeds suspicion and anxiety (*Sellout* 58). Coercion involves getting someone to perform certain behaviors through the use of threats and punishments. Although coercion can take many forms for black Americans, including physical violence, public confrontations, boycotts, protests, parodies, and disavowals, it most often takes the form of racial epithets which are used to stigmatize those suspected race traitors. Some of these epithets include "acting white," "sell out," "Uncle Tom," "Oreo," "handkerchief head," "white man's negro." Further, those who are stigmatized with one of these epithets face the potential of being publicly shamed, having their blackness questioned, or even having their blackness revoked—all of which can be quite painful.

Proof that being stigmatized as a race traitor can be painful is evident in the numerous examples of black public figures have been driven to make public statements regarding their blackness after having been racially policed. Probably the most famous example is Michael Jackson. By the early 1990's Jackson had firmly crossed over from R&B into Pop music, earning him the title "King of Pop." He also underwent what some saw as a troubling physical transformation: his skin literally went from black to white. It was highly speculated that Jackson had been bleaching his skin and surgically

augmenting his features in order to appear more like a white person. His supposed racial confusion became the subject of numerous tabloids, punchlines, and public conversations.

For instance, literary and cultural critic Joseph Vogel remembers the common joke, originally credited to white comedian Red Buttons, that "[o]nly in America can a poor black boy grow up to be a rich white woman" ("Black and White"). I personally remember the parody which the black sketch comedy television series *In Living Color* did of Jackson's music video "Black or White," released the year prior to the airing of their sketch.[4] As the parody reveals, his appearance was not the only thing that people were concerned about. Jackson's gender and sexual performance were also areas of concern.[5]

On February 10, 1993, Jackson appeared in a live interview with Oprah Winfrey to set the record straight. When Winfrey asked him if the rumor were true that he tried to a hire a little white boy to play a younger version of him in a Pepsi commercial, he declared: "Why would I want a white child to play me? I am a black American. I am proud to be a black American. I am proud of my race. I am proud of who I am. I have a lot of pride in who I am, and dignity." Further, when Winfrey pointedly asked if his skin was noticeably lighter because he "didn't like being black," Jackson, holding back tears,

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[4] In the sketch which first aired in 1992, Michael Jackson (played by Tommy Davidson) asks the audience "tell me am I black or white?" suggesting that he is confused about his racial identity. The sketch ends with Jackson dancing and vandalizing a car, much like in the original music video. However, this time a white police officer interrupts him. Jackson hops off of the car and asks the police officer does he think Jackson is black or white? In response, the officer places him under arrest to which Jackson says to the audience: "so, I guess I am black."
[5] In the second verse of the parody, Jackson sings:
      I'm still a virgin and I'm 33, even Madonna won't have sex with me
      I play with little animals and hang out with Macaulay all night
      And if that's not strange enough I don't know whether I'm black or white ("Am I Black or White?")

replied: "This is the situation. I have a skin disorder that destroys the pigmentation of the skin, it is something that I cannot help. Okay, but when people make up stories that I don't want to be who I am it hurts me" (Jackson). As literary scholar and cultural critic Phillip Brian Harper points out, Jackson's declaration of racial pride was clearly intended to address concerns that his appearance was too white, but it also served to address concerns that his demeanor was too feminine (*Are We Not Men* ix). Discussing the relationship of black identity and masculinity, Harper explains that, "since the dominant view holds prideful self-respect as the very essence of healthy [black] identity, it also considers such identity to be fundamentally weakened whenever masculinity appears to be compromised." Thus by forcefully declaring his racial pride on live television, Jackson was in effect reassuring viewers that his masculinity had not been compromised, which is to say he still possessed a healthy black identity despite physical evidence to the contrary. In this way, for African-American men, masculinity and national pride are often coupled and reinforced as linked positive attributes by a large subsection of the African-American community.

Another famous example is that of Whitney Houston. If Jackson was considered the King of Pop, then Houston was most certainly its Princess.[6] However, unlike Jackson, Houston did not crossover from R&B. From the very start of her professional career, Houston was groomed by producer Clive Davis to appeal to mainstream white audiences. According to former Arista Records head of promotions Kenneth Reynolds, Davis had finally found in Houston the perfect "vehicle" to help him carry out his vision for a black

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[6] Houston's career was marked by unparalleled success as she was the first and only pop artist to have seven consecutive number one hits, breaking the record formerly held by the Beatles and the Bee Gees.

female pop artist. In a previously unreleased interview featured in Nick Broomfield's documentary "Whitney: Can I Be Me?" Reynold's discusses Davis' vision, explaining: "He tried to do it with Dionne [Warwick] and Aretha [Franklin], but they were far too established in their career as to who they were. Along comes Whitney, who was so moldable."

Although she was signed in 1983, Houston would not release her debut album until 1985. During that time, Davis brought in some of the best songwriters and producers to help "mold" Houston's sound so as to fall squarely within the realm of pop music (*The Soundtrack of My Life*, 310). Thinking back on this period, Reynolds recalls that "anything that was too 'black sounding' was sent back to the studio." Therefore, it should have been no surprise when Houston drew considerable criticism from the black community for what they observed as her lack of soul. For instance, black disc jockeys often refused to play her music citing the fact that she lacked soul. Even Reverend Al Sharpton led a similar boycott of her music, dubbing her "Whitney 'Whitey' Houston."

Probably the most memorable incident occurred when she was booed at the 1989 Soul Train Awards as her name was called during the list of nominees for Best R&B Urban Contemporary Single by a female. Likewise, a couple of years later she found herself the subject of a sketch on *In Living Color*, which, although a parody of Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation," took aim at Houston and her racial performance.[7] Those who knew Huston recall how deeply she was affected by such criticism, leading many to suspect that it even played a factor in her untimely demise.

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[7] In the sketch entitled "Rhythmless Nation" which aired in 1990, after admitting that she cannot sing or dance, a tone-deaf and uncoordinated Houston (played by veteran comedian Kim Wayans) states: "If you look close you'll see, I'm sure that you'll agree I am a part of the Rhythmless Nation"—the implication being, that she is part of white America.

Around the same time the sketch premiered, Houston was featured in a spread for *Ebony Magazine*. During her interview with journalist Lynn Norment she took the time to respond to her critics, specifically those at *In Living Color*, explaining: "How could I come from where I've come [from] and not have rhythm?...And don't say that I don't have soul or what you consider 'blackness.' I know what my color is. I was raised in a black community with black people...Yet I've gotten flak about being a pop success, but that doesn't mean that I'm white" (112). Thus by pointing to her hometown—Newark, New Jersey—Houston was signaling to black audiences that she knew her black cultural roots and that no amount of pop success could ever delude her into thinking she could forget them. In fact, Houston would soon put those roots on display with her third studio album, "I'm Your Baby Tonight," which had a definite R&B sound. She would even go as far as to incorporate some dancing, or "jamming" as she referred to it, into her music videos and promotional concert tour for the album.

As the examples of Jackson and Houston illustrate, stigmatization is an effective form of coercion as it involves publicly humiliating the race traitor to the point of despair. More than this, what makes stigmatization such an effective form of coercion is its ability to control the broader group by making an example out of the race traitor. For example, Brando Simeo Starkey explains that when a person is suspected or found guilty of racial treason and is called an "Uncle Tom," "[t]his signals to the rest of the black community to conform or else face punishment" (*In Defense of Uncle Tom* 3). Stigmatizing someone as an "Uncle Tom" is not about preventing him or her from breaking the norms of group solidarity. By the time he or she has been stigmatized it is too late—racial treason has already occurred, the damage has already been done. The most the group can hope for

once stigmatization has occurred is that the "Uncle Tom" will make amends (possibly on a public scale) and then quietly fade from view. No, the real power of such terms like "Uncle Tom" lies in their ability to demarcate for the other members of the group where the boundaries of black identity lie and to deter anyone else from making the same mistake of trying to cross said boundaries. This is why stigmatization often needs to take place in the public sphere, and why it needs to reach the broadest audience possible. But who gets to determine what the contours of "black identity" are in the first place? More importantly, which understanding (and there are many) of black identity is the one which members of the black community are expected to uphold?

I am using a nation metaphor here in order to underscore how the discourse of black identity has functioned as an alternative national space for black Americans. While many black Americans hold the sentiment that collectively black people in the United States form a nation,[8] there are real limits to this perception. As Rodney Carlisle succinctly puts it: "Viewed either as a nation or an oppressed minority, blacks have generally lacked power to effect fundamental change" (*The Roots of Black Nationalism* 4). This is due in part to the fact that black Americans lack a territory of their own in which they can exercise the freedom of self-determination, and not for lack of trying. There have been many attempts by black leaders (such as Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey) to bring about what Tommie Shelby defines as a strong black nationalism: "The political program of solidarity and voluntary separation under conditions of equality and self-determination" (*We Who Are Dark* 27). As there has

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[8] For examples of how black Americans who have expressed this sentiment that black people in the United States form a nation please see W.E.B. Du Bois' *A Negro Nation within the Nation* and John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*.

yet to be a program of strong black nationalism which has fully materialized, black

Americans have often had to settle for what Shelby calls weak black nationalism: "the

political program of black solidarity and group self-organization [which] functions as

means to create greater freedom and social equality for blacks" (27). Shelby clarifies that

while weak black nationalism does not necessarily exclude the possibility of the

formation of an independent or autonomous territory, the main difference is that weak

black nationalism is aimed at merely "lift[ing] or resist[ing] oppression" (28). One of the

main ways black Americans have pursued weak black nationalism has been through self-

identification.

Historically, white Americans have constructed blackness in ways which serve to

bolster the national manhood (read white hegemonic masculinity), while at the same time

restricting access for black men and women to full recognition as U.S. citizens, which for

formerly enslaved blacks and their descendants has served as the ultimate expression of

freedom. In particular they have defined blackness in terms which depict black

Americans as being unfit for citizenship. (For instance, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the

State of Virginia* and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*). In *Manliness and Its

Discontents* (2004), Martin Summers offers the following definition of citizenship:

"Defined primarily by the right to vote and the ability to participate in party politics,

citizenship, by the 1830s, signified access not only to the levers of government, but also

to the status of manhood, for white men of all classes" (2). While Summer does

acknowledge the efforts of women (such as the suffragists) to challenge the gender-

exclusive definition of citizenship, he reminds us that: "Even with the female assault on

exclusively male domains, however, turn-of-the-century Americans still imagined the

public citizen within a masculinist paradigm" (2). Therefore, by calling on black Americans to collectively redefine black identity in terms which emphasize if not entirely center the legitimacy and strength of black men within a masculinist paradigm, some black leaders have tried to challenge perceptions that black Americans were unfit for citizenship.

By using a masculine gendered trope, I am not implying that blackness is necessarily masculine. However, I do think that an examination of this male gendered figure tells us important things about black identity at certain historical moments. The reason, I suspect, that the race traitor has the broad explanatory force, which I suggest it has, is because racial identity in the United States--black identity in particular--has been constructed in relationship to masculinity (read white hegemonic masculinity). As Maurice O. Wallace observes in *Constructing the Black Masculine*: "[a]t no point in the New World...has race *not* constituted a defining feature of our national manhood" (2). Therefore, if race has played a role in the construction of masculinity, then has masculinity not also played a role in the construction of race? The history of Jim Crow law, economic discrimination, and segregation which restricted black people's ability to freely and equally participate as citizens in the public sphere all attest to how masculinity served to construct race.[9] Thus, the reason that this trope has the explanatory force which it does is because of how blackness and masculinity have been mutually constructing.

Continuing with the analogy of stigmatization as a territorial boundary, just as the borders of some nations have been contested and redrawn with the rise and fall of political regimes, so too have the lines for understanding what constitutes racial treason

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[9] For a discussion of how each of these practices was an intentional assault on the masculinity of black men, please see Martin Summers's *Manliness and Its Discontents* (3).

been influenced by the shifting politics of black identity. By "the politics of black identity" I am referring to the various agendas, policies, conflicts, debates, exigencies, and activities which individual black leaders, communities, organizations, and movements have deployed in an effort to govern black identity, and as such the border of racial treason. While the fact that "black America" is comprised of multiple black communities means there can never truly be a single definition of black identity, this does not mean, that there have not been periods where one community has dominated the discourse more than others. One of the ways which the arbiters of black identity for a particular period gained and maintained control of the discourse was by employing the rhetoric of black authenticity. As E. Patrick Johnson asserts, "When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda which has excluded more voices then it has included" (*Appropriating Blackness* 3). Here Johnson is alluding to the "exclusion of black gays and lesbians from the circle of blacks who are authorized to speak on the black community's behalf" (315).[10]

However, Johnson's statement can be used to refer to the range of black voices which have been excluded at various historical moments—in other words, any one deemed to be a race traitor. It is the narratives of these voices which have traditionally been excluded which interest me the most, hence my fascination with the figure of the black male race traitor.

Black Men Who Betray the Race is a literary archive which chronicles the narratives of five fictional race traitors from 1899 to 1996. These narratives include

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[10] His comments call to mind Bayard Rustin who was not allowed to speak at the 1963 March on Washington because he was gay, despite the fact that he was one of the major organizers.

Sutton E. Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody*, John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. Although narratives in which the race traitor figure appears are fairly common in African-American Literature, what makes these particular narratives so significant is that each of the protagonists self-identifies as a race traitor. In other words, these texts move the race traitor from the periphery to the center of each narrative.

I found this curious considering my own fear of being labeled a black male race traitor, not to mention that of Key and Peele from "Phone Call." If I and others would go to such lengths to not be perceived as race traitors why would these characters so readily claim this identity? I knew for certain that it was not for lack of consequences, as all of the men faced either emotional, physical, or psychological harm as a result.

Further, I began to wonder: If the race traitor is one of the most stigmatized figures in black culture, why would these authors venture to write from his perspective? Were they not running the risk of alienating black readers by inviting them—requiring them, even—to identify with men with whom they would never dare or wish to associate in real life? The significance of this perspective was further underscored by the sheer scope of my archive (it spans nearly the entire 20th century). How was it possible that five different black male authors, from five different historical periods, writing within different genres, were all employing the same writing maneuver? Thus, the chapters which follow are an attempt to make sense of some of my initial reactions to, and questions about, these texts.

Black Men Who Betray the Race began with a seemingly simple question: How have black American authors depicted the race traitor? However, as I began to research and read texts containing representations of the race traitor figure, my "simple" question quickly morphed into a more complicated one, as I started to notice a pattern emerging from within the texts which would later comprise my archive. I like to humor myself by imagining that my archive revealed itself to me. However, I recognize that the texts which seemingly found their way into my archive were there because I contrived the archive to include these texts while excluding others. Texts such as: Mark Davis's *Race Traitors* (2005), a self-published novel which follows two black police officers on a quest to solve a murder (and catch the real race traitors of Detroit: the drug dealers in the black community); or Sterling Anthony's *Cookie Cutter* (1999), which tells the story of a biracial serial killer who murders race traitors—those who he feels have squandered the blackness he desperately wishes that he had; or Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015), a fabulous novel which considers what it would look like for a black man to resegregate a predominantly black community in modern-day Southern California. Also, James Weldon Johnson's the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), both of which are narratives in which the protagonists struggle with feelings of guilt over cutting their ties to the black community in order to pass for white in mainstream society.

As there was no shortage of texts for me to select from, this begs the question: Why did I select the archive which I did? The criteria which I used was that the text be written from the perspective of the race traitor. As I have already mentioned, while it is common to find texts written about the race traitor, it is much rarer to find texts written

from the perspective of the race traitor. That these narratives were all written from the first person perspective is notable as this serves to link the five texts formally despite their different genres and historical contexts. I also chose to focus on texts in which the race traitor self-identified. Admittedly, this decision was motivated by personal interest.

As I have already shared, I am deeply fascinated by the figure of the race traitor and the question of why anyone would want to become, yet alone imagine themselves to be, a race traitor. By focusing on these texts, I am trying to understand the societal significance of the self-identifying race-traitors, and the role or effect these characters were intended to have on others, in respect to the works in which they appear. I concede that some might argue that my focus is an instance of critical myopia. I would counter that if you focus on the political conjunction of the race-traitor figure and take a diachronic look at him, we see how he produces a lens through which we can look at the historicized and historically evolving politics of black identity.

When looking at the authors and titles which represent my archive, two questions quickly emerge. Why are there no black women authors? And why are there no titles which address issues of gender and sexual identity difference? The answer to the first question is quite simple. As it relates to my criteria, I could not locate any texts written by black women in which a black female character (or black male character for that matter) self-identifies as a race traitor. Even as I considered *Plum Bun*, while the protagonist Angela Murray struggles with the guilt she feels for passing, she never refers to herself explicitly as being a race traitor. Other texts I considered were Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. But again, there was not sufficient evidence to support that Sula, Pilot or Milkman viewed themselves as race traitors. I even turned to several

colleagues including Ajuan Mance and Rachel Jessica Daniel who specialize in 19th, 20th

and 21st century black American women's literature and they too were unable to think of

any texts which fit my criteria. One explanation, Ajuan offered, was that it was possible

that the absence of these narratives was a reflection of the degree to which black women

were committed to black solidarity. To clarify, by sharing this anecdote I am not

suggesting that black women do not wrestle with questions racial treason.[11] Rather, I am

suggesting that black female writers do not use the specific language of "race traitor" in

their writing, nor do their black female protagonists think of themselves in these terms.

To answer the second question, two important works which did not make it into

the final version of my archive were *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) by Ishmael Reed and

Traitor to the Race (1996) by Dariek Scott, and regretfully so. I ultimately eliminated

these texts because they were written using multiple third-person perspectives. Thus a

substantial portion of the text focuses on characters besides the race traitor. *Reckless*

Eyeballing tells the story of the struggling black male playwright Ian Ball who must

pander to the cultural power brokers of the New York theater scene by writing an all-

female play in which the bones of a deceased black man stand trial for the rape of a white

woman.

However provocative, this is only the backdrop to the storyline of the "Flower

Phantom"—the anonymous prowler who breaks into the homes of the leading black

female dramatists and shaves their heads for what he perceives as their collaborating with

white feminists to destroy black men. His reason for shaving their heads: "this is what the

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[11] For example, Irene from Nella Larsen's *Passing* wrestles with questions of guilt around whether or not to warn her friend Clare (who is passing for white) that Clare's husband Jack (who is white) has become aware of his wife's true racial identity.

French Resistance did to those women who collaborated with the Nazis" (*Reckless Eyeballing* 4).

Also set in the New York theater world, *Traitor to the Race* follows Kenneth, an unemployed black actor who struggles with being in an interracial relationship, as well as being torn between his allegiances to the black and queer communities when he is forced to decide whether or not to out his cousin Hammet posthumously. Hammet is beaten, raped and murdered in Central Park after he stumbles upon a group of white men assaulting a woman. Kenneth feels guilty because moments before Hammet is killed he spots Kenneth and Kenneth's boyfriend Evan walking in the park. (Kenneth realizes he must have ignored Hammet as he was too caught up in the fantasy role-playing scenario he and Evan were acting out). Because Hammet is closeted, the newspapers assume that he was attacked for being black. However, once Kenneth reveals to some of his friends who are queer activists that his cousin was gay they want him to go public with this information. He struggles with the idea that he is betraying his cousin by outing him, as this would change how he is viewed by his family and other members of the black community. Likewise, he wonders if by outing his cousin he is also betraying the black community as it might recast his murder as being motivated by homophobia as opposed to racism.

I point to both of these texts because they call attention to the fact that straight black men are not the only ones who have been depicted as race traitors. Black women and queer black people have also been depicted as race traitors within black literature, and black culture more broadly. In *Gender, Race, and Nationalism in Contemporary Black Politics* (2007), Nikol Alexander-Floyd discusses the origin and development of

the black female race traitor which she refers to as the "Black Malinche."[12] Similar to her namesake, the black female race traitor is the stuff of myth, born from two of the most pervasive caricatures of black women in American culture: the matriarch, and the whore (113). As implied by her name, the "Black Malinche" is perceived to be a collaborator with whites in the oppression of black people in general, and black men in particular. First, in her role as the matriarch the "Black Malinche" "displaces the black man from his rightful role as patriarch and takes on typically masculine characteristics" (113). Second, in her role as the whore or "Jezebel," the "Black Malinche" is "not only hypersexual, but strategic in [her] use of sex in order to influence male behavior" (115). Alexander-Floyd notes that the "Black Malinche" figure evolved as part of the battle between black nationalism and feminism. As feminism "developed and opened legal and political space for addressing sexism, the trope of the Black woman as traitor became a key rhetorical device for countering such claims within Black political discourse" (115). For instance, this trope was projected on to black women (such as Anita Hill, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Michelle Wallace) who attempted to publicly address sexism within the black community.

However, at the same time that there is a history of black men using this trope to render black women silent and invisible, black women have also used the race traitor trope to marginalize black lesbians. In "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic Silence," Evelynn Hammonds addressed the ways in which black women's participation in the "politics of silence" concerning their sexuality had largely

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[12] Her use of the name Malinche is a clear nod to the "traditional Mexican belief that La Malinche—Aztec interpreter and mistress of Cortés—betrayed her own people in exchange for a new life" (Gaspar de Alba, 4)

served to negatively impact black women's lives. By the "politics of silence" Hammonds is referring to historian Evelyn Higginbotham's term, which she used to describe the strategy developed by black women reformers of the early 20th century, in which they promoted a public silence about sexuality in conjunction with Victorian morality as a means to combat the negative representations of black female sexuality of the time.

While somewhat dated and perhaps biased toward heterosexuality, Hammond's observation that early black feminist work around black female sexuality was largely focused on heterosexuality is astute. This was not because black lesbian women were not engaged in conversations about black sexuality. Rather, as she suggests, because they feared the consequences of what would happen if they "outed' themselves, they did not put up more of a fight to see issues related to lesbian identity included in the contemporary conversation on black female sexuality. Hammonds asserts "if we accept the 'politics of silence' as a historical legacy shared by all black women, then certain expressions of black female sexuality will be rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity" (101). She then goes on to make what I find to be one of her most compelling observations: "It follows then, that the culture of dissemblance makes it acceptable for some heterosexual black women to cast black lesbians as proverbial traitors to the race" (101). In other words, the "politics of silence" empowers some black women to employ the race traitor trope in order to silence and render invisible black lesbians and those sympathetic to them. She concludes the framing of black lesbian sexuality as "deviant within an already existent deviant sexuality" by discouraging them from outing themselves, an action which she points out could result in the loss of community (101-102).

Black gay men have faced a similar dilemma. In his poem "Loyalty" (1992),

openly gay poet and activist Essex Hemphill takes the black community to task for the

ways in which it forces black gay men to choose between silence and invisibility or racial

treason. Hemphill evokes this silence by employing those euphemisms and tropes which

the black community uses to identify black gay men without actually having to publicly

acknowledge their sexuality: "We constitute the invisible brothers in our communities,

those of us who live 'in the life'; the choir boys harboring secrets, the uncle living in an

impeccable flat with a roommate who sleeps down the hall when family visits, men of

power and humble pedantry, reduced to silence and invisibility for the safety they

proceed from these constructions" (*Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* 69). The safety to

which he refers is community belonging. But do they actually belong, if they are not able

to fully participate as themselves and still be embraced as members? In a radical turn,

Hemphill flips the heterosexist-masculinist discourse of black identity on its head (like

Hammonds he views this discourse as a symptom of black-middle class respectability

politics). He asserts that it is not his sexuality, but the silence and invisibility which the

black community imposes on him which is the source of his emasculation. He then

evokes war imagery to recast gay black men as loyal patriots to the race: "I speak for

thousands of troops and of men who love and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to

speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race" (*Ceremonies: Prose

and Poetry* 70). However, he explains, the time has come for this to end. Having grown

fed up with being a part of a community which demands that white society treat its

members as whole people while it refuses to see him as a whole person, Hemphill

declares "But these scared constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will

not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home" (71). The implication

being that black gay men are returning home from the frontlines either as race patriots

whose sexual identities will be fully recognized by the black community, or as race

traitors who refuse to be rendered silent and invisible any longer.

The critical intersections between racial treason, gender and sexual identity, and

black identity politics is a topic which must be explored in more depth. As I hope to have

demonstrated here, there is much work to be done on how black American authors have

represented the race traitor. As the aforementioned novels and literature on the topic

illustrate, black women and queer black people have been impacted by the discourse of

racial treason, right along with straight black men. However, as these particular texts did

not fit my criteria (first-person narratives of self-professed race traitors) I was unable to

include them within my archive, as I have already indicated above. Which raises the

question: Why is it important to demonstrate cohesion between the types of narratives?

Or to frame it another way, how does showing cohesion within my archive contribute to

our understanding of the topic?

Simply put, showing the cohesion or inter-connectedness of the works in my

archive allows us to see how, when viewed as a whole, these particular narratives

represent a literary tradition of the black male race traitor. Further, this cohesion calls

attention to the ways in which this figure has operated as a formerly unrecognized literary

trope which black male authors have employed at various times. While the identities and

circumstances surrounding how these men become race traitors change with each text,

their function as characters remains much the same: To occupy the position at the

margins of black society in order to grant the black community a different perspective of

itself. This is a perspective which is not often valued. It is a perspective which calls attention to the complexity of black identity, and thus underscores the myth of a single black community. As Hammonds and Hemphill point out, narratives by black men and women across the identity spectrum who have betrayed norms of group solidarity (read black identity) have historically been ignored if not lost. By moving to the margins, and by creating characters who exist on the margins, these black male authors are able to see and say things about the community which they would not necessarily be able to if they were occupying the "center." While the texts within this archive were not necessarily received as race traitor narratives by black reading audiences, reframing them as such opens up the possibility of re-examining the black literary canon for other traces of this figure. More importantly, the texts in this archive encapsulate the politics of black identity at a given historical moment. Thus we arrive at my thesis: when taken together, this archive reveals how the male race traitor trope serves as a metaphor for the ever-shifting politics of black identity over the 20th century.

A note on gendered language: I recognize that framing a metaphor for black identity around a masculine-gendered trope is necessarily tricky. I further recognize the tension inherent in this move. However, there is something to be said about these particular works and how they keep producing the same trope. We can take this tension as an opportunity to reflect on the larger conversation about black identity and questions surrounding the figure of the race traitor, and accepted norms of gender and sexuality. In particular, we are called by this tension to examine ways in which the discourse within the black community about blackness, more often than not, has privileged masculine identity to the exclusion of black women and children.

Methodologically *Black Men Who Betray the Race* works to achieve two seemingly disparate aims. First, I aim to underscore the cohesion of these texts as a literary tradition by demonstrating the commonality between them. Through a series of close readings, I identify a major theme for each text as it relates to black male racial treason, and then place that theme in conversation with the theme of the subsequent text. The end result is a broader narrative which helps to map the trajectory of the black male race traitor as a consistent presence within black American literature over time.

Second, I aim to uncover the particularities of each incident of racial treason within the texts in order to narrativize the way in which the politics of black identity changed. By situating the theme of each narrative within the appropriate historical and social context of the corresponding race traitor figure, we are able to gain a clearer image of what the politics of black identity were for a particular period. Thus, it is the differences among these images which tells the story of the progression of politics of black identity throughout the 20th century.

To achieve my aims I draw on a range of theories including literary history, biographical history, critical race theory, performance studies, and contemporary psychology to analyze the contours and stakes of race traitorship in each text. That said, the theoretical approach to each text varies depending on the genre and date of publication of the text. Chapter 2, "Patriotism and the Race Traitor," examines Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* alongside the 19th century notion of race patriotism which emerged out of the debate between African-emigrationist and anti-emigrationist leaders. In that chapter I illustrate how by serving as a double-agent—which is to say a race traitor—the narrator Berl Trout believes that he is working towards the benefit of the

race. Chapter 3, "Double Agency and the Race Traitor," highlights the intersections between black tokenism and the legacy of Booker T. Washington's own double agency as represented in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. By elucidating how Invisible Man's tokenism is (mis)perceived by the community, Ellison reveals how double agency is a risky if not traumatizing experience. Chapter 4, "Trauma and the Race Traitor," approaches the traumatic nature of racial treason from the perspective of the race traitor in *No Place to Be Somebody*. By theatricalizing the narrator's fixation on a childhood experience with racial treason and racial policing and placing it in conversation with representations of the race traitor in plays by contemporary Black Art's playwrights, Gordone challenges the assumption that race traitors are emotionless, conscienceless monsters. Chapter 5, "Compartmentalization and the Race Traitor" considers the internal process which the race traitor must undergo in order to temporarily cope with his actions and how this is ultimately emotionally and mentally damaging. Thus, through *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman offers his own journey to unlearn this process and claim responsibility for his actions, as well as those whom he hurt, as a template for healing for black men in general. Finally, Chapter 6, "Responsibility and the Race Traitor," continues with the notion of responsibility to imagine what it would look like for the race traitor to hold himself accountable to the community. The narrator of Paul Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle* ultimately recognizes that he is not willing to die for the race to win the right to be treated with civility by white people. Having determined that he is not fit to lead the race, the narrator eschews his role as the next black public intellectual star in order to remain responsible to his black community. In the end, he leads a mass

exodus of blacks to his urban community in Los Angeles, where the race finally obtains the territory, self-determination, and freedom it has been fighting for all along.

In addition to being motivated by the desire to try and answer many of the larger questions I have raised, I was also motivated by a desire to confront my own aversion to being viewed as a race traitor. As a black male scholar there is a particular anxiety I experience around my work which is directly related to my fear of being perceived as a race traitor. That black scholars (especially those who work in subject matter in the general field of black studies) can get called out for being race traitors is fairly common. I think of the ongoing conflict between public intellectual Cornel West and his former protégé Michael Eric Dyson (West called Dyson a bootlicker, implying he was a sycophant in the cult of neoliberalism, and Dyson responded by writing a lengthy op-ed in which he critiqued West as an opportunist and "fallen" academic over his calculated endorsements of Obama and lack of recent published scholarship).

In fact, each of the authors who comprise this archive were at some point during their careers called a race traitor. Griggs was considered a race traitor by the black people of Memphis for encouraging blacks to abandon the Republican Party, cease denouncing the white South and cooperate with the wealthy white elite. Despite the success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison was often shunned by black students at HBCUs because they felt that in striving to tell a version of the "American story" his novel did not speak to them. Gordone, as I touch on in my chapter, was considered delusional by Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and other radical black playwrights such that even though he was the first black American playwright to win a Pulitzer he is largely unknown. John Edgar Wideman also faced criticism from black cultural nationalists who felt that his early novels lacked an

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authentic black voice. And finally, black satirist extraordinaire Paul Beatty, was called a "race traitor" for using the picture of a bite-ridden watermelon rind as the cover image for *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor*. Each of these authors reminds me that occupying the margins to say or do something which the group might not approve of is always dangerous work. But if that is what I believe scholarship is all about should not I just learn to accept and face my fear? Thus, as much as my project is about understanding the critical role which this figure has played in the black American literary tradition, it is also about me working through and accepting the possibility of my own potential for racial treachery.

CHAPTER 2

PATRIOTISM AND THE RACE TRAITOR:

SUTTON E. GRIGGS'S IMPERIUM IN IMPERIO

Berl Trout, the narrator and fictional author of *Imperium in Imperio (1899)*,

presents a paradox for readers in that he describes himself as being both a traitor and a

patriot. Most critics take this to mean that he is a patriot of the United States and a traitor

to his race as represented by the Imperium in Imperio, an all black shadow government

operating within North America. When Bernard Belgrave, the vengeful President of the

Imperium convinces the other members to pass a resolution to seize the state of Texas

and establish a separate nation for black Americans within its borders, it appears as

though Berl is forced to choose between remaining loyal to his race or loyal to his nation.

Describing his vision of the impending race war which would erupt should Imperium be

allowed to proceed with its plans to secede from the Union, Berl writes:

> I felt that beneath the South a mine had been dug and filled with dynamite, and
> that lighted fuses were lying around in careless profusion, where any irresponsible
> hand might reach them and ignite the dynamite. I fancied that I saw a man do this
> very thing in a sudden fit of uncontrollable rage. There was a dull roar as of
> distant rumbling thunder. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion and houses,
> fences, trees, pavement stones, and all things on earth were hurled high into the
> air to come back a mass of ruins such as man never before had seen. The only
> sound to be heard was a universal groan; those who had not been killed were too
> badly wounded to cry out (176).

The dynamite and fuses Berl envisions are symbolic of black America, in

particular, the members of the Imperium, and the latent anger which they feel over the

numerous injustices they have been made to suffer under the color line. As Bernard

outlines during his presidential address which he delivers to the Imperium's Congress,

these include labor restrictions, loss of civil rights, unequal education and unequal participation in the courts, lack of protection under the law from lynch mobs, and disenfranchisement.

Because the injustices blacks have suffered are so numerous and interrelated, all it would take to "set off" a major upheaval by black America would be for someone to exploit a single racial incident by using it to tap into that anger. Bernard does precisely this when he uses the recent lynching of Felix A. Cook, one of the Imperium's beloved cabinet members, to introduce a motion to go to war with white America. While Bernard's plan has been delayed temporarily, Berl knows that it is only a matter of time before he successfully manipulates the Imperium into going to war (Berl only becomes aware of Bernard's true intentions after he overhears him vow to get vengeance for the deaths of both his lover Viola and best-friend Belton by destroying the Anglo-Saxon race). Thus, Bernard emerges as the man with uncontrollable anger who is hell-bent on destroying the South along with the rest of Western civilization. Unable to witness the U.S., not to mention the rest of the world, literally divide against itself, Berl ultimately decides to reveal the existence of the Imperium, and its goal of statehood, "that it might be broken up or watched" (176).

As Adenike Davidson suggests in her article "Double Leadership, Double Trouble," the dilemma in which Berl finds himself is an illustration of double-consciousness and racial uplift. In his classic literary analysis of the black experience in America, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois used the analogy of double-consciousness to explain for white readers the simultaneous, yet conflicting experience of being black and American: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two

souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 3).[13] Du Bois goes on to argue that by uplifting the race "to an assured and self-sustaining place in the body politic and economic, blacks could prove themselves worthy of full inclusion as citizens within American society" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 27). However, Davidson explains that "whereas Du Bois claims that racial uplift unites both the African American's divided consciousness and the nation, Grigg's novel shows that racial uplift demands the repression (or killing) of the 'other' self" (131-132). Because Bernard 's plan of racial uplift involves secession from and conspiracy against the United States, it is seemingly impossible for Berl to participate without effectively having to choose between his racial and national identities.[14]

Despite there having been some recent debate among scholars about when precisely Berl informs on the Imperium concerning the publication of his book, critics agree that he does so in order to demonstrate his devotion to his country. There has been no question that Berl Trout is a patriot of the United States (that we are presently reading the text in the unified U.S. shows that his efforts to stop Bernard were successful). However, I would suggest might he also be deemed a race patriot.

I believe Berl informs on the Imperio by giving his story to Sutton Griggs, who tells us he publishes it on Berl's behalf. (While scholars have generally accepted this as the way in which Berl betrays the Imperium, it has recently come under some scrutiny,

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[13] While this is most associated with *Souls*, the term double-consciousness was first used by Du Bois in 1897. In his article for Atlantic Monthly Du Bois published a version of what would eventually become his Introduction to *Souls*.

[14] One could argue that Bernard exploits the double-consciousness of the men of Imperium to get them to go to war.

for instance, by John Gruesser, who raises a series of interesting—yet ultimately

unconvincing—objections to this interpretation.)[15] Regardless of whether or not Berl

informs before the publication of the novel, the fact remains that its pages contain secret

information which once released to the public would make it impossible for the Imperium

to continue to operate and to carry out its plan without detection. These secrets include

the existence of the Imperium, a description of its history, an estimate of its membership

figures and resources, the name, identity and personal history of its President, the location

of its headquarters, details of its proceedings, and most importantly, its plans for

conspiracy. Further, as I will explain, the way in which Berl reveals this information is

significant in that it draws on many of the traditional forms of communication that were

both part of the AME Zion print culture (from which the term "race patriot" emerged)

and but also the broader tradition of black print culture by which early emigrationists

sought to develop public interest.

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[15] In his chapter "Empires at Home and Abroad in Sutton E. Griggs's Imperium in Imperio" (2013), Gruesser raises doubt that Berl's giving his story to Griggs is why he is executed. As Gruesser explains, this act does not necessarily warrant such severe punishment considering that the members of the Imperium initially voted to reveal their existence. Likewise, he questions the timeline leading up to his death. Specifically, he wonders how if the text is published after Berl is dead, can his informing be the cause of his death? Alternatively, Gruesser proposes that Berl has "(already) specifically exposed [Bernard's] plan to make war on the United States" (61). While he does raise some interesting points, there are many considerations he overlooks. For instance, if Berl does, in fact, confess before the publication of the text, how could the Imperium execute him without the authorities intervening? Would not the authorities to whom he informs want to protect him as he is an asset? Further, there is the matter of the Imperium's network of security and surveillance. When Bernard is first recruited to the Imperium, he asks how it is possible that he never knew the organization existed. Belton explains that the group had been monitoring him for some time to determine his relationship to the Anglo-Saxon race. Only after Viola dies and he is radicalized does it become advisable to let him join. All of this to say, if the Imperium has spies who can closely monitor potential members, would it not also have spies monitoring the activities of its members, watching for the first signs of treason?

Race Patriotism

"Race patriotism" was a term coined by minister and politician Henry McNeal Turner in the late 19th century. He used it to describe the quality of having self-respect for one's race, specifically as it pertained to the debate over how best to uplift the race. Turner also used the term to draw a contrast between himself and his detractors who had written letters to discredit him as an authority figure both within the AME Zion Church and within the race more broadly over his position in favor of what was commonly known as the African Question. The African Question concerned whether or not black Americans should emigrate from the U.S. to establish a separate nation for themselves in an African territory (typically Liberia), as a way to achieve racial uplift and overcome the color line.[16]

It is important to note that while it was called the African Question, this also included the prospect of emigration to a region within the U.S. which could be used to establish a separate nation for blacks in North America. As Turner explains in his op-ed "The African Question Again" (1883), the color line was not only disempowering but also dangerous in that it served to "develop in the Negro mean, sordid, selfish, treacherous, deceitful and cranksided characteristics," (*Christian Recorder* 1). Turner and his rivals, would have attributed the exclusion of black Americans from society to the fact that they were perceived to be a problem by white America. The notion of being a problem is what Du Bois alludes to in the opening lines of *Souls* when he writes: "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some

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[16] Africa was not the only territory black leaders considered as potential locations for a black nation. They also considered "unsettled" parts of the Caribbean or Latin America as viable options.

through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it...How does it feel to be a problem?" (2). White Southerners, as well as many Northerners, argued that because of the years they spent in slavery, black Americans were unprepared, if not altogether unfit to fully participate as American citizens. Black leaders reasoned that if the race could develop within themselves those qualities associated with citizenship and then demonstrate those to whites, then they could prove themselves worthy of inclusion in American society.[17]

One of the ways black leaders sought to cultivate a positive image of the race was through the use of print culture. Print culture refers to various forms of printed visual communication, more specifically periodicals and pamphlets. One of the earliest examples of black print culture was the pamphlet which Absalom Jones and Richard Allen produced in response to claims that blacks had vandalized and burglarized the homes of whites during the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic. When the white press failed to rebut these claims, they published their pamphlet which reported that blacks had done no such thing. To the contrary, blacks had played an instrumental role in helping their white neighbors (Bailey 1). As Dexter B. Gordon demonstrates in *Black Identity Rhetoric, Ideology and Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism* (2003), early print culture enabled black nationalists like McNeal Turner to engage in the processes of "ideological debate and identity formation" (161). For instance, he notes that they used the press to take on the national discourse which defined blacks as non-human and non-citizens

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[17] This is essentially what Du Bois argues when he explains that the reason it seems that blacks have made little progress since emancipation is because they have been laboring under double aims. If this were not the case then they could contribute all of their talents towards the building up of civilization. Griggs uses the Imperium as a metaphor to illustrate this point: That the men ability to build up a separate nation, replete with its own government, is impressive and gestures towards the potential of the race.

(124). In addition to using the press for self-representation, race leaders also used the press to educate the masses with the expressed goal of unifying the race. By publishing their sermons, debates, editorials, committee findings, and the like, black leaders were able to provide instruction on a range of topics. These topics included everything from how they should behave to what leaders believed the position of the race should be on specific social and political issues. While this meant black leaders could reach the broadest audience possible, it also meant that anyone with access to a press could negatively influence the race. This is why race leaders also used print culture to alert the masses as to who had authority to speak for the race.

Because the color line ultimately fostered such negative characteristics in blacks as would only serve to disqualify them further from inclusion within society, Turner felt that it was detrimental, in both the immediate and long term, to solely pursue racial uplift within the United States.[18] Further, the plan of remaining in the U.S. entailed fighting the color line through strategies such as education or legislation which required time to execute, prolonging black's demoralization under the color line. Of these strategies, amalgamation or the process of intermarrying with the white race so as to be phenotypically diluted, was most certainly the worst strategy, as it revealed a lack of self-respect for the race. By contrast, the idea of African emigration which Turner advocated involved "building up a government of a half million civilized Christian [black] people upon the continent of Africa, where we could have our own high officials, dignitaries, artisans, mechanics, corporations, railroads, telegraphs, commerce, colleges, churches"

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[18] Contrary to the way his critics present him, Turner did not support an agenda of full emigration; rather he supported partial emigration. Bailey asserts that most anti-emigrationists and emigrationists held nuanced positions.

which would bring "glory" to the whole race (*Christian Recorder* 1). Thus, Turner

implies that race patriots were those, such as himself, who had enough self-respect for the

race to support the strategy which was not only feasible but also did not require further

degradation on the part of blacks.

By suggesting that his detractors lacked "race patriotism," Turner was in effect

questioning their authority to speak for and to the race while at the same time reasserting

his own. Although Turner was the only one who used this term explicitly, he was not the

only one to trade on this sentiment. In *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the*

A.M.E. Church (2012), Julius Bailey describes how precisely who was considered to be a

race patriot continued to shift with the changing position of black leaders concerning the

issue. For instance, he notes that in the 1870s grassroots emigrationist campaigns were

popular among poor blacks in the rural south as evidenced by early black print culture.

By the late 1880s, anti-emigrationist sentiment would increase, with numerous reports of

opportunists scamming people. Therefore, the African Question emerges as one of the

earliest examples of the politics (i.e., the activities, individuals and debates) surrounding

black identity. By the time Griggs writes and publishes *Imperium*, race patriots were

understood to be those who opposed emigration to Africa. And yet I want to suggest there

is a way that Berl's act can itself be considered a different form of race patriotism—this

despite the fact that he informs on other black people and describes his own act as

treason. To see why this is, it will help to consider a longer history of informing within

black communities.

Informants Under Slavery

Traditionally, in black American culture, the act of informing on the other members of the race, or "snitching" as it is more colloquially known, has been regarded as an act of betrayal. As Andrea L. Dennis points out in her study on the subject, "A Snitch in Time: An Historical Sketch of Black Informing During Slavery" (2013), informing dates back to slavery when it was used by slave masters to "protect personal and communal interests as well as to preserve the institution of slavery" (289). By this she means that whites relied on slaves, and in some instances free-blacks, to gather and report back information such as the whereabouts of a runaway slave or the details surrounding a potential insurrection. The reason slave masters needed black informants was due to the social restrictions that were in place which dictated that the races remain separate.

In *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (1944), Myrdal traces the origins of this racial caste system back to slavery, where "in most relations, a fairly complete social separation of the Negro was enforced as a matter of policy and routine" (578). In general, white slave owners strictly controlled the lives of enslaved Blacks "in the interest of exploiting their labor and hindering their escape" (578). However, Myrdal notes that in the years leading up to the Civil War, the restrictiveness of whites increased in relation to "the rising fear of slave revolts, the spread of abolitionism in the North and the actual escape of many Negro slaves along the 'underground railroad'" (578). As a result, enslaved blacks had little to no contact with whites who were not slave owners. Outside of their regular contact with overseers and the occasional interaction with the master and his family, blacks were socially alienated from

whites. They lived in separate quarters, enjoyed separate recreations, and attended

separate religious services. Myrdal observes that even in those rare instances when they

were permitted to attend the same service as whites, they were still seated in a separate

part of the church. The two races were not permitted to intermarry even though interracial

sexual relations were common. Subsequently, the same held true for free blacks who

lived in the South. Despite their status, free blacks lived in social isolation, as "white

people did not, and could not in a slave society, accept them as equals" (578). While

these restrictions no doubt served to create the sort of division between the races whites

desired, it also made it extremely difficult if not impossible for them to know what

enslaved blacks were doing at all times. Therefore, masters turned to informants who

could provide them with some much-needed access to the inner workings of slave

communities.

Dennis organizes slaves into two categories: passive and active informants.

Whereas passive informants merely provided much-coveted information to inquiring

whites, active informants "went a step further and actively assisted in uncovering or

rectifying slave misconduct" (296). In exchange for their cooperation, informants were

often rewarded by their masters or other whites. Because informants could gain access to

critical information which whites could not otherwise have come by, they were

considered extremely valuable, if not a necessity. For instance, slave owner Martha L.

Nelson appealed to her Governor on behalf of her slave after an insurrection which was

discovered among the slaves in her town left him at risk of being sent away. Nelson

argued that her slave, who was a known informant, should not be punished for without

him her life was in danger. "I am almost a maniac from the loss of sleep, now in the

dept[h] of night I write, beseeching you to pardon my servant . . . such a servant ought

not to be sent away particularly in these perilous times of insurrection" (291). In addition

to being pardoned, informants sometimes received monetary compensation and even

manumission.

Incentivization also played a factor in many cases of informing; however, this was

not the only reason slaves were motivated to betray the secrets of their fellow bondsmen.

Other motivations included devotion to an owner, and the desire to obtain favor with

whites. Dennis observes that it was not uncommon for slaves to perceive their own well-

being as being directly tied to that of their master. This strong sense of identification was

what Malcolm X was getting at when he famously described the difference between the

house Negro and the field Negro: "When the master would be sick, the house Negro

identified himself so much with his master he'd say, 'What's the matter boss, we sick?'

His master's pain was his pain. And it hurt him more for his master to be sick than for

him to be sick himself" (X). Thus by protecting the master's interests, whether they be

his property or his life, from the slave's perspective, it was if he were protecting his own.

Along these same lines, some slaves informed as a way to curry favor with whites. As

Dennis explains, some blacks possessed such a poor self-image that they were willing to

inform on other blacks in an attempt to earn the recognition and respect of whites.

Informants After Emancipation

Following emancipation, Southern whites would continue to rely on informants,

or "white man's niggers," in order to maintain control over black communities. Southern

whites, refusing to accept Blacks as equals, were quick to maintain the social separation

of the races by instituting laws which divided the races into distinct groups. Known more commonly as Jim Crow, these laws served to separate the races "in schools, on railroad cars, and on street cars, in hotels and restaurants, in parks and playgrounds, in theaters and public meeting places" (579). Aware that blacks were not content to live as second-class citizens, whites were always on the lookout for the slightest sign that blacks might be preparing to protest or riot. However, because of their limited contact with blacks, whites had to enlist the help of black informants once again to obtain the information they needed.

For example, this is how the white men in the fictional town of Cadeville, Louisiana, are able to regain control over the black citizens, even though the whites are in the minority. After Belton delivers a speech encouraging the young black men of the community to vote, he is immediately visited by a concerned parent. The man explains to Belton that during Reconstruction the black people of the region had political control as they far outnumbered whites. Refusing to accept black control, the white men of Cadeville armed themselves, causing the black men to subsequently arm themselves. He and several of the other men were prepared to stand their ground. So, the whites enlisted the help of an informant. Tragically, he turns out to be the man's brother.

As he explains: "My older brother is a very cowardly and sycophantic man. The white people made a spy and traitor out of him" (101). Devastated at the news of his betrayal the other men grow demoralized, which the informant promptly shares with his whites. This report gives the white men the courage they need to regain control. Belton's visitor concludes: "They carry on elections. We stay in our fields all day long on election day and scarcely know what is going on" (101). Thus, by using an informant the white

men of Cadesville were able to effectively disenfranchise black men, allowing for whites to maintain political control of the region.

Myrdal notes that in the South it was customary for whites "to use servants, ex-servants, and other lower-class Negroes as reporters and stool pigeons in the Negro community." However, blacks knew that they were not above using "a businessman, a landowner, a school principal or a college president." In such instances, whites appointed him to be a leader of the race (683). Moreover, although informants were typically a feature in the South, they were not entirely uncommon in the North. For instance, Northern whites often relied on black politicians, ministers, and other influential leaders to surveil and limit the activities and aspirations of blacks.

As part of their role, Black informants were expected to both spy and report on the activities of the other members in the black community. In addition to this, black informants were also expected to act as messengers for whites. Myrdal further explains that whites regularly used black informants "to 'let it be known' in an informal way what the whites want and expect" (730). In this way informants allowed whites to maintain direct access and control over blacks. Similar to his antebellum predecessors, the postbellum informant was motivated by personal interest and prestige. In *Townways of Kent* (2008), Richard C. Patrick explains that black informants earned the privilege to claim the white people he helped as "his folks." Ultimately, this privilege allowed him to call on them for many favors, which included physical protection from resentful Blacks; hand-me-downs; small personal loans which did not necessarily have to be paid back; assistance during "crises" like sickness, a death in the family, or incarceration for minor crimes; and access to luxuries such as borrowing a car, a dress or a suit for special

occasions (*Townways* 153). Because his whites provided him not only with employment but also numerous privileges, it was in the best interest of the black informant to help protect their whites' own interests. Blacks naturally came to assume that those who helped whites did so for personal gain. To this point, Myrdal observes that "In the Negro community there is no fuss about [the informant's] motives: they are simply assumed to be the selfish ones of attempting to benefit from playing up to whites" (682). Besides employment and numerous privileges, the black informant also earned prestige in exchange for his services. Because of their favor with whites, black informants often emerged as the natural "leaders" of their race. Myrdal notes that the prestige of informants was so well known that pragmatic blacks would often rely on them to use their clout among whites in order to get things accomplished.

Berl's "Patriotic" Motivations

This account of the many means of (and motives for) black informing suggests a way to read Berl's act as other than simply racial treason. Taking as a given that Berl's informing on the Imperium is an act of betrayal, I would like to shift the focus to why and how he informs. In the discussion which follows, I closely examine Grigg's novel, illustrating how the ways in which and the reasons why Berl informs on Imperium are tied to notions of race patriotism. While on the surface his actions seem to be purely motivated by a devotion to America and Western-white civilization, I suggest, however, that when we consider the broader context of the late nineteenth-early 20th century debate over the African Question, his actions are also motivated by a desire to prevent blacks from emigrating out of the nation. Thus, in a mode similar to one employed black leaders

such as Turner, Berl draws on the discourse of "race patriotism" in his confession to

signal to readers that it is he, and not Bernard, who has self-respect for the race, and

thereby the authority to speak to it. Further, the way in which he informs can also be

considered an act of loyalty. By giving his manuscript to Griggs for publication, Berl is

participating in the print culture of the day. This is significant because, as I will

demonstrate, the black print culture was a central space in which race leaders waged

battle over who and what defined black identity. Therefore, as he critiques and counters

Bernard's plan of emigration, Berl not only positions himself as an authority but more

importantly promotes a particular agenda of black identity.

Initially, Berl was among those of the Imperium who voted in favor of Bernard's

plan to emigrate. How then are we to account for his drastic choice to seemingly break

with the race and protest its relocation to Texas, especially when we consider that this is a

move which he knew would ultimately cost him his life? As the death of Belton

demonstrates, choosing to protest the Imperium was no small matter. Because members

were sworn in for life, there was no way to effectively distance oneself from the group or

its policies apart from death. Therefore, when Belton asks to resign from the Imperium

Berl equates this to his asking to be executed by a firing squad (126). Berl meets a similar

fate over his decision to inform on the Imperium, however, with two major differences:

First, he is shot to death by a single executioner; and second, he is denied a proper funeral

and headstone (5-6). Coincidentally, it is while attending Belton's execution and funeral

that he begins to reconsider his involvement.

Belton is lead out to a grassy knoll where he is shot to death and then wrapped in

an American flag in preparation for burial as per his request. Berl observes that Bernard

is so grief-stricken at the sight of his friend that instead of crying, he lets out a "fearful, wicked laugh like unto that of a maniac" and then makes the following pronouncement:

> Float on proud flag, while yet you may. Rejoice, oh! Ye Anglo-Saxons, yet a little while. Make *my* father ashamed to own *me*, his lawful son; call *me* a bastard child; look upon *my* pure mother as a harlot; laugh at Viola in the grave of a self-murderer; exhume Belton's body if you like and tear your flag from around him to keep him from polluting it! Yes, stuff your vile stomachs full of all these horrors. You shall be richer food for the buzzards to whom I have solemnly vowed to give your flesh. (176, emphasis added)

At first, we are led to believe that Bernard's grief is the result of his fallen comrade's death. However, please notice that only towards the end does he mention Belton. All of the injustices he lists are profoundly personal and revolve mostly around his parentage. Bernard's father is a rising Southern aristocrat and his mother, Fairfax, is a bastard slave-child. In order to protect his father's political future, his parents are married in Canada where interracial marriage is permitted by law. Initially, Fairfax is prepared to bear the social stigma of being an adulteress. However, under the weight of public shame and the fear that her son might also believe her to be an adulteress, Fairfax decides to raise Bernard elsewhere, concealing from him the identity of his father. It is not until after he becomes a national black figure (he attends Harvard where he graduates as class president and valedictorian), Bernard's father establishes contact with him and finally reveals his identity. Even then, his father, who has risen to the ranks of State Senator and Government Committee Chairman, insists that they must maintain their separation and the secret of their connection. Lamenting the fact that they can never be a family, his father explains: "This infernal race prejudice has been the curse of my life. Think of my pure-headed, noble-minded wife, branded as a harlot, and you, my son, stigmatized as a bastard, because it would be suicide for me to let the world know that you both are mine"

(64). Sympathizing with his father, Bernard comes to blame the white race for the injustices he and his parents have been forced to endure.

In the same way that Bernard internalizes his father's feelings of injustice, he projects his feelings onto Viola and Belton. Part of what influences Bernard to join the Imperium is the suicide of his lover Viola Martin. After courting Viola for some time, Bernard finally proposes. He is shocked to discover that Viola cannot marry him as she believes it is immoral to marry outside of the race. She comes to believe this after reading a book which suggests that amalgamation is one of the strategies by which the white race is attempting to destroy the black race. Its author claims that: "the intermingling of races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating it" (118). In the same ways that white supremacists argued that black blood tainted the individual, so too does the author argue that white blood was weakening the race. Thus, by rejecting mulattos and forcing them upon the black race which gladly accepts them, whites are slowly destroying the race.

Upon reading this Viola vows to God that she will never marry a mulatto man. Aware that her resolve to refuse Bernard's advances has weakened over time, Viola kills herself in a final act of desperation to keep her oath. However, this is not before she pens a suicide note to Bernard explaining her actions. Imploring Bernard to continue this work in her memory, she asks him to read the book she has mentioned and to study the issue. If he finds that amalgamation really is destroying the race, she then tells him to "dedicate your soul to the work of separating the white and colored races. Do not let them intermingle. Erect moral barriers to separate them. If you fail in this, make the separation physical; lead our people forth from this accursed land" (119). Viola's plea ultimately

serves to radicalize Bernard, who until this point had been working to find a way to bring the races together.

Bernard believes that a great injustice has been committed against her by the white race because they cannot be together. He imagines that, despite Viola having the noblest intentions, the white race will laugh mockingly at Viola for having taken her own life. He believes that Viola, like his mother, has been forced into a position of shame as a result of white racists. Viola gladly gives her life to keep her oath, a sacrifice for which she has no regrets. She can rest easy knowing that by refusing to marry Bernard and ending her life, she is doing her part to ensure that she keeps her promise to do all she can to advance the race and its cause of racial uplift. Thus Bernard projects a sense that Viola is suffering, when in fact it is he who suffers because she has committed suicide.

In the same way that he projects his feelings of injustice onto Viola, Bernard also projects his feelings onto Belton. Although Belton is the person who is responsible for recruiting Bernard to the Imperium, he does not share the same radical beliefs as his friend. The Imperium's founding members had no intention of emigrating out of the United States. To the contrary, their mission was to help secure the freedom and civil rights of blacks living within the continental United States, and eventually the world over. Similar to the Imperium's founding members, he believe that the goal should be to secure the rights of blacks *within* the United States. Bernard is also of the mindset that not all whites are bad and that only through racial cooperation can both blacks and whites overcome the color line. He comes to believe this as a result of his white benefactor Mr. King. Mr. King agrees to pay for Belton's college education under the condition that he remembers that there was a "good side" to even the worst among the white race and to

"always seek for and appeal to that side of their nature" (37). Belton takes this to heart and seeks to honor this promise when he counters Bernard's initial resolution that the Imperium go to war. Instead, he proposes that they appeal to whites' humanity by revealing the Imperium's existence and determination for freedom. If whites remain unconvinced and unwilling to accept them, only then should they consider moving to Texas where they could live in separation while remaining a part of the United States.

Initially, Belton garners the full support of the Imperium, allowing him to temporarily avert what would have certainly been a major national crisis; however, unbeknownst to Belton, Bernard convinces the other members to pass his resolution to emigrate and establish a separate black nation. Much like Viola, Belton, being far outnumbered and having no way to repeal the resolution, chooses suicide rather than violate his beliefs. Suicide is not the only similarity the two of them share. Belton also has no regrets over his decision to die. Even when he is given an opportunity to rescind his resignation in order to be reunited with his family, he remains determined. As he explains to Bernard and his executioners: "I loved the race to which I belonged and the flag that floated over me; and, being unable to see these objects of my love in mortal combat, I went to my God, and now look down upon both from my home in the skies to bless them with my spirit" (173-174).

Despite there being no reason for the white race to question Belton's loyalty to the United States, Bernard imagines them disinterring Belton's body, and removing it from the flag in which it is wrapped due to their racism. However, this imagined scenario reveals less about what may happen to Belton's corpse and more about what has already happened to Bernard. Like the flag whites wrest from Belton's body, Bernard has had

many things he loves taken from him due to racism: his father's acknowledgment, his mother's honor, and Viola's hand in marriage. Once again he projects a sense of suffering onto someone else which he and not the other person has experienced.

Ultimately, Berl comes to realize that Bernard's motivations for emigrating are selfish, especially when compared with those of Belton. Belton is motivated to oppose the Imperium's plan by a desire to see the race improve its public image. He is of the mindset that if the white race could only see that "he has a New Negro on his hands," then they would have no choice but to acknowledge the humanity of blacks and give them the civil rights which they are due. That Belton is thinking in terms of the race's public image becomes even clearer when we consider his use of the phrase "New Negro." As Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains in his essay "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" (1988), the phrase New Negro can be traced back to an 1895 editorial for *Cleveland Gazette* where the author used it to describe an emergent group of blacks who possessed education, refinement, money, and property. As Gates points out, the list of traits associated with the New Negro served to replace the image of the "Old Negro" from slavery. That this New Negro possessed property spoke to the fact that he was not afraid to demand his property rights.

That he possessed education and refinement also spoke to that he was worthy of those rights which he demanded (136). To put it another way, Belton wanted to "pull back the veil" so that America could see blacks as they truly were, not as they appeared to be. The notion that blacks were hidden behind a veil was, a central theme of *Souls* by Du Bois. He argued that whites were ignorant of the experience of black folk as blacks tended to mask their thoughts and feelings. Thus, Du Bois took it upon himself to pull

back the veil for white America by presenting the race in a more positive light. By contrast, Bernard shows no such concern for the image of the race; rather, he is motivated purely by a desire to get revenge for himself, his family, and Viola, at any cost. It is at this point that Berl is motivated to inform on Bernard as he recognizes that Bernard's plan is manipulative, impractical, and to the detriment of the race.

Berl alludes to the manipulative nature of Bernard's plan when he states that "With Belton gone and this man at our head, our well-organized, thoroughly equipped Imperium was a serious menace to the peace of the world" (176). It is significant that Belton is gone, as he was the only other member of the Imperium besides Bernard who had enough influence to persuade the group either to go or not to go to war. In the end, only by telling several Cabinet members in advance that he had already secured Belton's vote was he able to secure the votes he needed to pass his resolution. However, this is not to discount the degree of influence which he held over the group. Even before Belton's death, Bernard was regarded as a man of unprecedented influence. For instance, when Bernard is first recruited to join the Imperium, Belton informs Bernard that he has been selected to serve as the President of the Imperium well before he has agreed to join. He goes on to explain that this is significant, as in the past the group had struggled to agree upon a candidate. Not until Bernard is nominated are they able to reach a unanimous decision (134).

Not only does Berl compare and contrast the degree of influence which each man wields, but more importantly the kind of impact their influence has on the race. In the final chapter we discover that in addition to informing, Berl is also one of the men responsible for executing Belton. It is as if at the moment Belton dies, Berl is better able

to appreciate the impact of Belton's influence over the race. Describing Belton's impact as a leader, he writes: "His influence, which alone had snatched us from the edge or the precipice of internecine war, from whose steep, heights we had, in our rage, decided to leap into the dark gulf beneath, was now gone; his restraining hand was to be felt no more" (175).

From his description, we see that Belton's influence is calming or "restraining." Earlier in the novel, Berl uses similar language to convey this sense of calm when he describes him as the "storm's master": "The waves of the sea were now calm, the fierce winds had been abated, there was a great rift in the dark clouds. The ship of the state was sailing placidly on the bosom of the erstwhile troubled sea, and Belton was at the helm" (165). Not only is his influence calming, but it is also protective. Berl equates the initial plan of going to war with jumping off a precipice into a deep, dark gulf. While this would have certainly enabled blacks to inflict harm upon whites, it would have also come at a cost to themselves. Perceiving all of this, Belton uses his influence to protect the race by convincing them not to go to war. Finally, his influence is constructive. By restraining and protecting the race from going to war, he ultimately ensures that it can continue to build itself up.

Bernard's influence, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. Remember, the storm which Belton calms was actually caused by Bernard's speech in which he details nearly every major injustice blacks have experienced under the color line. Shortly before opening the floor for discussion, Bernard reminds the men that revolution has traditionally been achieved by two different methods: the shield and spear, or the ballot. However, because the ballot has been denied to them, blacks were left with only the other

option. Berl likens his speech to uncovering a powder magazine in all their bosoms (151). He rouses the anger of the men, and it does not take long for one among them to fall prey to his influence, motioning that they go to war. Likewise, Bernard's influence is risky.

What makes Bernard's plan so risky is not that he fails to consider the potential dangers of going to war. Instead, it is that he knows these risks and still encourages the race to do so (148). Finally, his influence is deconstructive. Returning to Berl's original vision, Bernard's plan revolves around the destruction of the United States, in particular, the South. While one might hope that the U.S. would willingly surrender Texas, Bernard and Berl know that this will likely never happen. There is no way for the Imperium to enact its plan without it being mutually destructive. Despite his negative influence over them, the people of Imperium exhibit a blind devotion to Bernard which Berl knows he can now exploit with Belton now out of the way. As a result, Berl comes to view Bernard as being manipulative for taking advantage of the people's trust, support, and emotional state. Further, he is manipulative for getting them to go against their better judgment and do something which will most likely lead to their demise.

Berl also alludes to the impracticality of Bernard's plan. The people believe that they will be able to relocate to Texas without altercation successfully. He finds this impractical because the amended resolution (which Bernard outlined) calls for the Imperium to infiltrate the U.S. Navy and hold it hostage as leverage. Only if the U.S. refuses to surrender this territory willingly will they have to go to war. From the way his resolution sounds, it seems like he is counting on the U.S. to surrender. However, Bernard's pronouncement makes it clear that he anticipates that they will not surrender quietly, giving him the perfect opportunity to instigate the war he so desperately wants.

He has no intention of letting things end peacefully, as his plan seems to suggest. Further, Berl knows Bernard's plan is impractical as the odds are that they will go to war well before the Imperium has the chance to put all of the pieces of its plan in place. All it would take is another injustice like the murder of Felix Cook for Bernard to have the fuel he needs to ignite the fuses of the people once again.

Anti-emigrationsit Motivations

Similar to Berl, those leaders within the AME Zion Church c. 1900 who considered themselves "race patriots" were also motivated to speak to out against black emigration because of the manipulation and impracticality they observed. As already mentioned, by the beginning of the 20th century, those who opposed black emigration outside of the U.S. considered themselves to be race patriots. Subsequently, they considered those who showed support for emigration to be race traitors. Bailey asserts that anti-emigration advocates often expressed the sentiment that emigration advocates were manipulating the black masses. Some leaders claimed that advocates were working for whites who were trying to trick blacks into leaving the country. Beginning as early as 1877, race leaders began raising concerns over what they saw as the exploitation of the black masses concerning the emigration question (87). Because the majority of the black masses were stuck in the South where the color line was more strictly enforced, they were desperate to relocate. Therefore, as rumors of plans for mass migration to Africa began to circulate, naturally they looked to the leaders of the race for direction. Thus, anti-emigrationist leaders felt it was their responsibility to protect the people from what they perceived as a movement which carried with it the potential not only to lead to the

extermination of the race, but also to give rise to a feudal system of labor under which those who remained would be forced to suffer (87).

They argued that if the more intelligent members of the race had already examined the issue and found such an endeavor to be too dangerous, then those influencing the masses to emigrate must be outsiders doing so for personal gain. Further, as the masses lacked the level of education to evaluate such an endeavor properly, those who advocated for emigration were taking advantage of their ignorance. Anti-emigrationists argued that if nothing else, emigrationists were manipulating the masses financially. Such was their position on the newly formed Liberian Exodus Association and Joint Stock Steamship Company, which advertised its transport services. Anti-emigrationists at the New Jersey Conference of the AME Church suggested that it was the"field agents" who were to blame for the growing interest among the masses for emigration. The Conference leaders questioned the sales tactics of the field agents who encouraged people to sell their possessions below market price in order to become shareholders in the company, which they claimed had already issued thirty thousand shares of stock at ten dollars per shares. While this investment did secure one's passage to Liberia, it was only under the condition that you could support yourself for several months once you arrived. The Conference leaders also questioned the legitimacy of such an offer, as they recognized the majority of those who would invest would not have enough resources remaining to support themselves. Thus, they decried those who supported what they viewed as a scheme to misdirect the masses from strategies which could improve their situation, labeling them "would-be leaders" and con-artists (87).

Bailey notes that while investor fraud was not very common, anti-emigrationists regularly played up rumors of individuals who had been conned out of their life's savings in order to further malign organizers and supporters. One popular story was that the victim, typically a poor southerner or mid-westerner, had sold all of their property and possessions in order to raise funds for their travel to New York or some other major city port, as well as their passage to Africa. However, upon arriving at the prearranged location, they were shocked to discover that the ship had already left without them or no such arrangements had been made on their behalf (102-103).

Some leaders even presented investor fraud as a growing epidemic. Growing fed up, several leading personalities of the AME Zion church, such as Bishop C.S. Smith and editor for the *Christian Recorder* H.T. Johnson would publish letters and editorials calling on their peers to stop what they saw as a "suicidal" strategy (103). In his editorial, "At it Again," Johnson would even go as far as to call for "the arrest of these race enemies" (103). While he does not use the specific language of "race traitor," Johnson's comment is a prime example of how this sentiment was used to stigmatize those who not only permitted but also encouraged what he considered to be injurious to the race. Recognizing that any intervention they would make would require unity, the church adopted an official position of anti-emigration. Henceforth, "editorials warned that those advocating emigration should be viewed with suspicion" (Bailey 104).

Another sentiment expressed by anti-emigrationists about the African emigration movement was that it was impractical. Bailey explains that anti-emigrationist leaders publicly "questioned the viability of particular sites like Liberia for holding the future of the race" (87). Some of their concerns included funding, the climate, the limited

availability of resources, illness, lack of schools, and the absence of military protection. If they did survive, other leaders raised concerns that black Americans would be at a disadvantage when it came to physical labor. The problem was that because they were not used to the climate, "African Americans would come up short in the competition with the 'native labor,' who were 'strong and hardy,'" (88). Probably one of the most influential anti-emigrationists to weigh in on the subject was Frederick Douglass. While he agreed that cost and transportation were a concern, he felt that it would be impossible for blacks to find a place where white influence would not be felt. Further, he felt that even if blacks were to try to create a separate nation for themselves within the U.S., it would be impossible to maintain the peace. Douglass, ever the pragmatist, reasoned that "If the North and South could not live separately in peace, and without bloody and barbarous border wars, the white and black cannot" (Bailey 101). The point Douglass raises is essentially the same point Berl makes when he describes the vision which he has after he overhears Bernard swear his revenge oath.

The connection between Berl's motivations and those of the anti-emigrationst lies not only in their mutual concern for the people but also in their similar responses to what they view as a threat to the survival of the race. Similar to how the anti-emigrationist felt compelled to eventually take more extreme countermeasures to stop what they viewed as a suicide mission, so too does Berl feel he must do something drastic to put an end to Bernard's plan. The drive to prevent the people from embarking on a suicide mission is not the only connection they share. In addition to sharing some of the same motivations for opposing emigration, Berl and the anti-emigrationists also employ the same method of intervention. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the anti-emigrationists informed on

the opposition. Instead, I am suggesting that the form which Berl's informing takes

resembles closely the various types of printed communication which the anti-

emigrationists used to dissuade the black masses and discredit the opposition.

AME Zion Print Culture and Berl's "Patriotic" Method of Intervention

Bailey observes that the national growth which the AME Zion church experienced

over the latter portion of the 19th century was reflected in the rise in visibility and

prominence of the *Christian Recorder*. He estimates that within the span of about fifty

years, the *Christian Recorder* would go from being "a regional Philadelphia periodical to

one of the most influential black presses in the country" (17). Similar to other race

leaders, the editors and contributors of the AME Zion press (much like those of the

Christian Recorder) felt that it was their "responsibility to not only disseminate

information and world news to the growing AME Church membership and African

Americans across the country but also to help them interpret the implications of those

events" (17). Further, AME Zion leaders used print culture to "discuss and debate how to

best uplift the race" (17). In addition to editorials, AME Zion periodicals also reproduced

speeches, sermons, letters, personal narratives, meeting findings, and debates.

Griggs alludes to these various forms of print culture in multiple places, such as

when the speech Belton delivers during his school's closing exercises is published in the

fictional *Richmond Daily Temps*. Alternatively, there is the moment when Belton's

harrowing story of how he survived a lynching is "telegraph broadcast," "arous[ing]

sympathetic interest everywhere" (108). Other examples include the book Viola and

Bernard read, the speeches which Bernard and Belton give to the Imperium, the meeting

findings of the Imperium's emigration debate, and Berl's personal letters to the public.

Not only does Griggs replicate the form but also how it appears on the page. For instance,

Berl reproduces the initial findings of the Imperium using the following format:

> Be it *Resolved*: That the hour from wreaking vengeance for our multiplied wrongs
> has come. *Resolved* secondly: That we at once proceed to war for the purpose of
> accomplishing the end just named, and for the purpose of obtaining all our rights
> due as men. *Resolved* thirdly: That no soldier of the Imperium leave the field of
> battle until the ends for which this war was inaugurated are fully achieved. (152)

Compare this with the following excerpt of the meeting findings published by the

Preacher's Meeting of the AME Zion Church of Philadelphia to correct the public

perception that there was widespread support for emigration among the leadership:

> *Resolved*, that we declare our unfaltering opposition to [emigration] knowing that
> if we could endure the hardships in the years of slavery...we can contend with the
> remaining prejudices...*Resolved*, That all such movements not only serve to
> unsettle and distress our people, but encourage the hope in our
> enemies...*Resolved*, That they who live and labor to perpetuate such
> movement...had better show their faith by their works in going to that land, and
> staying there until they accomplish and tell us from experience that it is a good
> land...*Resolved*, That until some such proof is given, we recognize all such efforts
> as coming from selfish motives, for causes unknown to us. (Bailey 84-85)

The similarities between both texts are startling.[19] Both writers demarcate their

findings using the term "Resolved" in italics. Second, they list all resolutions in

descending order. Finally, that they both employ the rhetoric of "authenticity" to establish

who does and does not belong within their respective organizations, which is to say who

does and does not possess the authority to speak for the race, is also noteworthy.

While Griggs himself was not a member of the AME Zion church, as an editor

and pamphleteer he would have still been familiar with its print culture. He served as the

editor of the *Virginia Baptist* from 1894-1898, his tenure with the periodical ending the

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[19] I should note that this form was commonly used by race leaders who were not affiliated with the AME
Zion Church. For additional examples please see *Black Identity* (111-112).

year before he published *Imperium* (*Jim Crow Literature* 4). He also published five long

pamphlets in addition to several others which were published as part of his later novels.

Eric M. Curry asserts that Griggs's career as a pamphleteer may have begun with the

publication of *Imperium* as it, "politically and organizationally, strives to function like an

early African American pamphlet" (12). Griggs was so familiar with the AME Church's

efforts that he once debated fellow editor John Mitchell Jr. of the *Richmond Planet* over

his declaration that the AME Church was "the grandest Negro religious organization in

the world" (4). Chakkalakal and Warren explain that this sentiment arose from the fact

that the black Baptist church continued its relationship with white Baptist organizations

(4). Therefore, it was the opinion of Mitchell that the black Baptist church was permitting

whites to take advantage of the race. It is interesting that even here we see the notion of

race patriotism being evoked, although subtly.

It is quite possible that this experience served as some of the inspiration behind

the novel, in particular the multiple public debates which take place. As Robert Payne

asserts in "Griggs and Corrothers: Historical Reality and Black Fiction" (1988), "the

persuasiveness and strength of Griggs's [novel], especially its imaginative concluding

section, derive to significant degree from Griggs's adept use of immediate historical

contextual materials" (3). Payne then goes on to cite several real-life events Griggs uses

as inspiration. For instance, the murder of Felix Cook was based on reports of the

lynching of black postmaster Frazier B. Baker (3). Others include the attack on the U.S.

Maine, the Spanish American War, and the assertion of Clifford H. Plummer that blacks

were ready to revolt, all of which were discussed in black print culture. I am suggesting

that in the same ways he trades on the historical context of these other events, Griggs also

does the same concerning the AME Zion print culture and the debate over the African Question.

Ultimately, it is by situating Berl's confession within the historical context of the AME Zion print culture and its debate over the African Question that we can see how Berl is a race patriot at the same time that he is a race traitor. If we consider how Berl's informing on the Imperium prevents it from emigrating out of the U.S., then from the perspective of anti-emigrationists it would also be considered an act of race patriotism. In this way, Berl gives new meaning to the term "double-agent." Through this single act, Berl manages to demonstrate loyalty to both his nation and his race. Griggs succeeds in presenting an image of how racial uplift can effectively help to merge black Americans' competing identities. However, while Berl does manage to uplift his race, we must not forget that, at the moment, it costs him the respect of his community, not to mention his life. As we shall see, Ellison would examine the strategy of double agency and the limitations it holds for black leaders in the 20th century in his novel *Invisible Man*. Still, the fact remains that by employing many popular forms of visual print communication, Berl can challenge Bernard's racial self-respect while at the same time underscoring his own. More significantly, viewing Berl as both a patriot and traitor forces us to reconsider Davidson's assertion: that racial uplift requires of every black American that he or she suppress a vital part of themselves, either the race patriot or the national patriot. Rather, Berl demonstrates that racial uplift is achievable, and that the choice between being a patriot and a race traitor, at least in his case, is a false one.

CHAPTER 3

DOUBLE AGENCY AND THE RACE TRAITOR:

RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

Eric Foner in his review of Herbert Aptheker's book *The Correspondence of WEB Du Bois, Vol. 3* (1978), uses the term "invisible man" to characterize Du Bois's social status during the Second Red Scare of the 1950s. Elaborating on the degree to which respectable black and white Americans distanced themselves from the communist Du Bois, Foner explains: "Just how invisible [Du Bois had become] was made clear during his 1951 trial, at age 83, as an unregistered foreign agent. Not only did the American Civil Liberties Union decline to become involved in the case, but the silence from the black leadership was especially painful" ("Invisible Man" 13). On one level, Foner's use of the phrase "invisible man" is an obvious reference to the kind of public censorship and disavowal Du Bois and other black public figures experienced over their endorsement of communism. For instance, Foner points to an exchange between Du Bois and a New York publisher in which he comments on how "even Langston Hughes agreed to omit Robeson from his book 'Famous Negro Music Makers' to insure that libraries would purchase the volume" ("Invisible Man" 13). Du Bois experienced a similar kind of censorship as "black universities withdrew invitations for Du Bois to speak and no publisher expressed interest in bringing out a 50th anniversary edition of 'The Souls of Black Folk'" ("Invisible Man" 13). On a more subtle level, however, Foner's characterization of Du Bois as an "invisible man" can also be viewed as a reference to his identity as a suspected foreign agent. In *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph*

Ellison's Invisible Man, Barbara Foley explains that by 1952 Americans had come to accept the notion that communists were subversives, spies, and invaders of American society who had been sent here by the Russian government to destroy the U.S. from within. For example, she points to the publication *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (1950) by the U.S. government, "with its signature icon of a red-gloved hand brandishing a microphone, warned Americans of the omnipresence of Russian spy faces and voices in mass media" (9). Thus, we can think of an "invisible man" as a foreign agent: a person who infiltrates and influences a society on behalf of a foreign power.

Although published nearly 30 years before Foner's book review, Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), depicts the narrator in terms of this second understanding of the phrase "invisible man," as observed when he is recruited by the white leaders of the "Brotherhood" to help them infiltrate and influence the black community of Harlem, New York, so that they can advance their own agenda (*Invisible Man* 379). That Ellison engages with the notion of foreign agency, specifically as it pertains to communism, should not be surprising considering his identity as a supporter-turned-critic of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). In *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* Arnold Rampersad traces Ellison's involvement with Marxism and the Communist Party from 1938 when he became a contributing writer for several communist publications, through 1943 when he formally parted ways with the party by refusing to contribute to *The People's Voice* magazine. Rampersad notes that even as other prominent black public figures would part ways with the Communist Party over policies—for instance, the insistence of communist leaders on presenting a united front over Stalin's non-aggression

pact with Hitler—, Ellison remained committed to the cause. It was not until it was

abundantly clear that the Communist Party had deprioritized the struggle against Jim

Crow racism did he grow disillusioned, gradually moving from the left towards the center

politically. Ellison joined the ranks of friend and fellow writer Richard Wright, as well as

countless others who came to view the Communist Party as harmful to the black

community. This perspective was probably best articulated in Wilson Record's *The*

Negro and the Communist Party which was published a year before *Invisible Man*.

Summarizing Record's view, Mark Naison explains that his book presented "the

Party as the arm of an international conspiracy, an alien tendency within black protest

which used the legitimate grievances of blacks as a 'front for the expansion of world

communism'" (*Communists in Harlem During the Depression* xv). Further, this

perception extended to black participants who had played an instrumental role in helping

the foreign movement gain traction domestically among black Americans. "In Record's

analysis blacks involved with the Party were either naive idealists deceived by the Party's

rhetoric, or cynical servants of Soviet power, since the movement they were part of had

no indigenous roots" (*Communists in Harlem During the Depression* xv). In other words,

anti-communist blacks involved with the Party had, whether unwittingly or intentionally,

served as foreign agents of the Soviet Union, a nation run by white people who exploited

the support of the black masses with empty promises of racial equality.

Although he starts out working for the Brotherhood as a "foreign agent," Invisible

Man eventually becomes a double agent (*Invisible Man* 387). Double agents were foreign

agents who pretend to act as spies for their home nation, when in fact they were spying

for the enemy nation. In the case of Invisible Man, he turns double agent once he

discovers that the Brotherhood is planning to betray the black people of Harlem. While his betrayal of the Brotherhood is no doubt an expression of repudiation of communism, the problem is that the nature of double agency necessitates secrecy on the part of the double agent. Therefore he cannot afford to risk revealing his true motives to the "enemy" nation—black Harlem—which he is really working for without also risking his cover being blown, and with it his influence within the foreign power for which he is pretending to work (*Invisible Man* 386-387). Invisible Man attempts to play the role of double agent in an effort to help undermine the Brotherhood's plan which hinges on the sacrifice of the black people of Harlem. Although his plan to recover information which could be used to warn Ras and the other black leaders of Harlem seems like a good idea, its practical application presents a major problem for the narrator—it requires that he continue to let the black community think that he is working for the Brotherhood. In particular, he continues to play the role of token black spokesman.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, many prominent black figures attempted to use double agency as a strategy to overcome the color line. They believed that they could use their token status to influence whites for the betterment of the race. In their minds they saw themselves as merely pretending to be race traitors for the sake of their communities, while never becoming race traitors. Invisible Man attempts to do the same, with negative results. When he attempts to explain that he is a double agent the people do not believe him. It is in this moment he realizes that by pretending to be a token he actually became one, or as he puts it: "[b]y pretending to agree I had indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death" (553).

Thus, Ellison begs the question: at what point does the double agent cease to be a "token" for the sake of appearances and actually become a race traitor? In this way, *Invisible Man* invites readers to consider the limitations of double agency as a strategy for racial uplift.

The basis of this chapter is my assertion that tokenism represents a kind of role which black leaders play as part of their function as double agents. I draw this assertion from Invisible Man's decision to utilize "Rinehart's methods"—a reference to the Harlem confidence man who is a numbers runner, gambler, briber, lover, and reverend all at the same time—to infiltrate the Brotherhood in hopes of finding "some channel of intelligence through which I could learn what actually guided their operations" (*Invisible Man* 512). Further, he plans to use Rinehart's methods of subterfuge in order to con the Brotherhood into thinking they are in still in control of Harlem—when in fact they are not—with the hope that black people will grow angry and revolt against them. As Invisible Man articulates his plan: "I would remain and become a well-disciplined optimist, and help them to go merrily to hell. If I couldn't help them to see the reality of our lives I would help them to ignore it until it exploded in their faces" (*Invisible Man* 512).

That the kind of role-playing and masking exhibited by Rinehart could be a source of power for Invisible Man and other black men has been widely addressed by literary scholars. In his essay "The Politics of Ellison's Booker: 'Invisible Man' as Symbolic History" (1967), Richard Kostelanetz points to Trueblood the incestuous sharecropper, and Bledsoe the self-regarding president of the narrator's college, as models of how masking can be a source of power. Both Bledsoe and Trueblood profit off of their ability to effectively lie to white people by telling white people what they want to

hear. Bledsoe profits in that he is the president of a leading black college, and therefore

has an ear with white people. As he explains to the narrator "You're nobody, son. You

don't exist—can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think—except men

like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know

about" (143). Trueblood profits more directly as he gains food, drink, tobacco, celebrity,

and work in exchange for telling whites the sordid details of his incestuous activities. By

wearing the masks of "immoral savagery" and the "second class man," respectively,

Trueblood and Bledsoe are able to transform what should be disempowering into a source

of empowerment.

Along these same lines, Joseph F. Trimmer in "The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph

Ellison's Invisible Man" (1978), similarly points to Trueblood and Bledsoe as examples

of masking as a strategy of sedition which can be used against white America in the

larger battle for humanity. Looking to the riddle which the narrator's grandfather shares

on his deathbed, Trimmer discusses the possibilities which masking presents as a strategy

for survival and resistance to white dehumanization. "[O]ur life is a war and I have been

a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country...Live with your head in the lion's

mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to

death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16).

Trimmer observes that within the context of the grandfather's riddle the strategy

of masking, "seems more like sedition than open conflict. Living with one's head in the

lion's mouth counsels constant confrontation with the enemy, but the method of that

confrontation seems to indicate the actions of a spy: the enemy is to be overcome,

undermined and destroyed with "yea-saying," not guns" (46). Trimmer goes on to

reiterate Kostelanetz's reading that Trueblood and Bledsoe wear different versions of the "yea-saying mask" in order to curry favor with whites. "Trueblood enacts the role of black man as sexual beast, while Bledsoe plays the role of the obsequious 'good nigger'" (47). While he agrees that masking is empowering insofar as it affords each man certain kinds of influence, Trimmer suggests that it comes at the larger cost of their humanity. As he explains, while it may seem that each man is merely playing along by "yesing" white people, his yes actually requires the denial of his humanity. "Trueblood seems to exchange his dignity for a few groceries and a hundred dollar bill, while Bledsoe's quest for power means that 'I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am at'" (47). In addition to the grandfather, Trimmer also introduces the advice of the black veteran as a departure from the kind of masking which Trueblood and Bledsoe embody. "Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it...Play the game, but play it your own way—part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate" (153-154). As Trimmer explains, with his advice the veteran introduces for Invisible Man the possibility of the self-definition which masking affords, quite apart from the series of stereotypes he is expected to play for white people (47). Thus, masking can be empowering for black men as long as they maintain the distinction between their external role and internal identity.

More recently, in "Race Man, Organization Man, *Invisible Man*" (2010), Andrew Hoberek discusses the motif of role-playing as empowerment strategy. Beginning with Dr. Bledsoe, the self-regarding president of Invisible Man's college, Hobereck traces the

motif of role-playing through some of the other black male figures from the novel, including the narrator's grandfather, the young black veteran the narrator encounters at the Golden Day and train station, Trueblood the incestuous sharecropper, and, most notably, Rinehart. As Hoberek illustrates, each of these men employs one or more masks in their interaction with whites as a strategy for self-empowerment (33). For example, he cites the moment Bledsoe puts on the mask of "anger" before meeting with Mr. Norton to discuss Invisible Man's failure to protect the trustee while in his care as a critic. "As we approached a mirror Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed an angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion that I had seen only a moment before" (33). Like Trimmer, Hoberek is concerned with how masking or role playing, while empowering, can not only influence one's identity but actually becomes the center of a new identity—the role playing identity which he compares to the organization man identity that requires that the individual sacrifice individuality for the common good of the organization.

While my reading of Invisible Man's double agency is in the vein of Kostelanetz, Trimmer, and Hoberek in their discussion of role-playing, I depart from them in two critical ways. First, in that I am interested in how Invisible Man's role-playing as a double agent is motivated by group-interest as opposed to self-interest. While his decision to turn double agent is certainly motivated, to a degree, by a desire to uncover the truth of the Brotherhood (which we can read as a kind of power), his main motivation is to protect his fellow black Harlemites from being sacrificed. Second, I depart from Kostelanetz, Trimmer, and Hoberek in that I submit that tokenism is not just a product of role playing, but represents its own role or mask which black men can play. This role

involves more than obsequiousness. As we observe with Invisible Man, it necessarily

involves enacting one's social distance from the black community through embodied

behaviors. For instance, Invisible Man enacts his tokenism by moving out of Harlem to a

mostly Latino and White community.

Defining Tokenism

Tokenism is the process by which whites allow a limited number of blacks to rise

to positions of authority or affluence within society in order to give the impression of

equality. But as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds readers, tokenism was not the same

as equality. In *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), King uses the metaphor of a bus token to

illustrate the shortcomings and short-sightedness of tokenism, in particular the pupil

placement laws. Pupil placement laws were policies which allowed southern states to

circumvent the Supreme Court's ruling on Brown vs. Board of Education by allowing

special state boards to limit the number of black students who could transfer into white

schools. Discussing the meaning of this policy in terms of tangible outcomes for the

black community, King states:

> It meant that Negroes could be handed the litter of metal symbolizing the true
> coin, and authorizing a short-trip toward democracy. But he who sells the token
> instead of the coin always retains the power to revoke its worth, and to command
> you to get off the bus before you have reached your destination. Tokenism is a
> promise to pay. Democracy, in its finest sense, is payment. (*Why We Can't Wait*
> 17)

King uses the metaphor to underscore the way in which tokenism was precisely

that: a token, a symbol, and placeholder for the promise of equality it symbolized. By

tokenizing some and not others, whites were asking blacks, on good faith, to trust that

eventually there would be full equality. The problem, as King points out, is that at any

moment the token could be revoked. Further, King raises the question of how can there

be equality if one group determines who among the other group will rise? Thus, he

concludes that the real harm of tokenism was that it served to "obscure the persisting

reality of segregation and discrimination" (*Why We Can't Wait* 17).

King identifies five main areas in which tokenism was used to limit blacks'

progress. These areas consisted of: "schools, jobs, housing, voting rights and political

positions" (*Why We Can't Wait* 17). Ellison touches on two of these areas as seen when

Invisible Man receives a scholarship to attend one of the leading negro colleges and when

he is given a prominent role in the Brotherhood. In particular, whites would place token

blacks in positions on councils, committees, and commissions which oversaw these

issues. However, as King has already pointed out, many of these positions were

symbolic. Therefore, they had to play it safe or risk losing their position which would

ultimately set the progress of the race back. Further, while these positions were highly

honored, they were few and far between.

Whereas blacks were more willing at the beginning of the 20th century to entertain

the idea of tokenism as a starting place for equality, by the mid-century they exhibited

much less willingness. King notes that blacks no longer believed whites when they said

that tokenism was a beginning point on a longer trajectory of progress; rather, they fully

recognized that it was a dead end. This sentiment is what Ellison conveys when Invisible

Man dreams that inside the briefcase the men from his town give him is a plaque which

reads: "Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (*Invisible Man* 33). The symbolism within is

that the gold engraving is the scholarship which he has won to school. And the phrase

"Keep This Nigger Boy Running" speaks to the ultimate goal of his education. Invisible

Man has been given a scholarship which is a high honor in his community. His plan is to go to school and get his degree so that he can be a great educator and help uplift the race. But as the engraving makes clear, he has not been raised up so that he can help the race achieve equality. Rather, he has been raised up to keep running, never achieving the prize of racial equality. Therefore, unwilling to continue accepting that only "a selected few would become educated, honored, and integrated to represent and substitute the many," blacks began condemning tokenism as a policy, as well as those members of the race who willingly played the part of tokens.

Who Were the Tokens?

According to King, tokens were those members of the race who had been "educated, honored and integrated" (17). In other words, those who whites tokenized were often those who had assimilated to white middle-upper class culture. In his essay "Many Thousands Gone" (1955), James Baldwin alludes to this group as he discusses how they have replaced the Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom. He describes them as being, "amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed, who are never laughed at, who are never likely ever to set foot in a cotton or tobacco field or in any but the most modern of kitchens" (*Notes of a Native Son* 27). While class was an important factor, implicit within this description is the idea that these individuals were able to rise to the position they had achieved because they interacted with whites in a manner similar to Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima. Thus, how whites determined who exactly represented the future of the race often had just as

much to do with an individual's willingness to stay in their place as it did their scholastic

aptitude or leadership potential.

Again, Ellison illustrates this point when Invisible Man is invited to give his

speech to the leading white men of his town. Shortly after the Battle Royal, Invisible Man

delivers his recitation of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech. At one

point, he mistakenly says "social equality" to which the men become extremely alarmed.

When they ask him to clarify what he has said, he corrects himself and says "social

responsibility." This appeases the men and he is given his scholarship as he has

thoroughly proven himself to possess the qualities of a good token (*Invisible Man* 24-25).

The Token as "Uncle Tom"

As Ellison and Baldwin suggest, being a token was viewed by many black

Americans as akin to being an "Uncle Tom," as it was the token's job to acquiesce to the

will of whites. Although many mistakenly cite the heroic (yet problematic) character

Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the source of this

pejorative, journalist Brando Simeo Starkey clarifies that this term actually evolved from

the "theatrical performances based on Stowe's work—plays, minstrels, and movies—that

perverted the character" (*In Defense* 31). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first adapted into plays

c.1852, which made revisions to Stowe's character and original story. In particular they

depicted Uncle Tom as being content with his life of enslavement and omitted those

scenes from the novel which depicted the brutality of slavery. Instead of ending with

Tom being killed by Simon Legree, the theatrical version would end with Tom being

happily returned to his original owners. Starkey explains that these revisions served to

further the stereotype of the contented darky, while also hiding the horrors of slavery. He observes that these revisions "sullied blacks' opinions of Uncle Tom. Indeed, to make Uncle Tom a happy slave is to render him an enemy of blacks" (*In Defense* 31).

Uncle Tom's Cabin would continue to be adapted from plays into minstrel shows over the latter part of the 19th century. The association of Uncle Tom with minstrelsy, which blacks found offensive, would only lead black Americans to further resent the character of Uncle Tom. Even when James B. Lowe, a black male actor, was finally permitted to play the part of Uncle Tom in the 1927 film adaptation, he was still forced to assume the same stereotypical role.

Starkey concludes that because the public's exposure to the plays, minstrels and movies far outweighed their exposure to the novel, "these heinous reproductions controlled how blacks viewed Uncle Tom" (*In Defense* 35). Likewise, whites' reactions to the theatrical Uncle Tom would only exacerbate blacks' negative view of this character. Starkey notes that whites began appropriating the term "Uncle Tom" beginning in the late 19th century to "describe the helpful or non-threatening black man as distinguished from the black brute who terrorized whites" (35). With the term enjoying regular usage among whites the transformation of Uncle Tom from titular hero to epithet was now complete.

Invisible Man fears being labeled an "Uncle Tom," as it is a symbol of shame. He is also preoccupied with making his black community proud. Throughout the novel, the figure of the Uncle Tom looms over him, taking several forms, including Dr. Bledsoe, the President of his college; Mr. Brockway, the elderly anti-unionist who works in the basement at Liberty Paints; the coin bank at Mary's boarding house; and the Sambo doll

78

which Clifton is seen selling after he defects from the Brotherhood. Each time an "Uncle Tom" appears in the text, Invisible Man experiences some kind of conflict which forces him to interrogate his own relationship to whites. Although he tries to outrun this identity, it eventually catches up with him as he is called an "Uncle Tom" by Ras and his men (*Invisible Man* 369, 421).

Ras is the charismatic Garvey-esque leader of a burgeoning radical black nationalist movement based in Harlem. He and his men encourage the people to riot in order to overcome the color line. Because he is a racial separatist, Ras is adamantly opposed to the white-run Brotherhood. While he supports organizing a revolution, he believes that it should be exclusive to blacks. Citing historical precedent, Ras explains that he does not trust whites and believes that they are merely manipulating the black community in order to abandon it once they have achieved their own purposes. Prior to his appointment with the Harlem branch, Ras's men start instigating physical altercations with members of the Brotherhood, who they perceive as moving in on their territory (*Invisible Man* 283).

Invisible Man first encounters Ras when he arrives in Harlem: "And I saw the squat man shake his fist angrily over the uplifted faces, yelling something in a staccato West Indian accent, at which the crowd yelled threateningly. It was as though a riot would break out any minute, against whom I didn't know" (*Invisible Man* 159-60). The next time he encounters Ras, it is after he has joined the Brotherhood. While delivering a speech atop a ladder, Invisible Man observes Ras and a group of his men advancing. A group of men from the Brotherhood rush to head them off, but not before one of Ras's men manages to throw an unidentified object which hits Invisible Man in the head.

Finishing his speech, Invisible Man rushes to join the ensuing fight when he is sucker-punched in the stomach by one of Ras's men, who calls him an "Uncle Tom" (*Invisible Man* 369). At the same time Invisible Man is injured, Clifton manages to knock Ras down with a pipe, which sends Ras launching into a disquisition on why they should not be working with the Brotherhood. During his speech, Ras accuses Invisible Man of helping whites in exchange for money and white women, implying that he has been bought off. In this way Ras attempts to make Invisible Man aware of his own token status within the Brotherhood, an accusation which he firmly rejects. However, his status as a token (which is to say an "Uncle Tom") is also hinted at during two interactions he has with white members of the Brotherhood.

The first instance occurs when, while attending a dinner party with several white brothers, Invisible Man is asked to sing a Negro spiritual. He is watching a group of brothers singing work songs around a piano when one of them approaches and asks him to join in: "You're just who we need. We been looking for you," (311). This interaction hints at the way he is recruited by the Brotherhood because of his blackness. They plan to use his blackness in order to recruit and control the people of Harlem. Therefore, in the same ways Brother Jack seeks out Invisible Man to become the Harlem branch director so as to lend credibility to the organization, so too do the men at the party seek him out to lend an air of authenticity to their performance. Further, that this interaction is centered on spirituals and work songs speaks to the ways in which Invisible Man is expected to perform for them in his role as a token.

The second instance occurs when he receives an anonymous letter warning him "***Do not go too fast***" (*Invisible Man* 383; emphasis in original). The author goes on to

remind him: "You are from the South and you know that this is a ***white man's world***. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people" (*Invisible Man* 383; emphasis in original). The author is later revealed to be Brother Jack, the man responsible for recruiting Invisible Man. His letter comes after Invisible Man starts to become a prominent figure in Harlem. Lest Invisible Man forget who he is working for, Brother Jack reminds him to "not go too fast" or in other words, go slow. By go slow, Brother Jack means that Invisible Man should not conduct himself in a manner equal with whites nor should he work independently of them. By mentioning that it is a white man's world, Brother Jack is reminding Invisible Man that he lacks control. Further, that Brother Jack threatens Invisible Man that if he is not careful he could be removed from his position speaks to the ways in which the only reason he has the leadership position he does is because whites permit him. Thus, if he wants to keep his position so that he continues helping the race he must do as he is told without resistance.

Despite these interactions smacking of tokenism, Invisible Man persists in working for the Brotherhood. Not until he is informed that his people will be sacrificed does he become aware that he has been working as a token all along. Still he is not ready to admit that he has harmed the race through his participation. Only once he comprehends the Brotherhood's plans to sacrifice the people is he able to fully appreciate the ways in which he has harmed, and therefore betrayed, the race.

Tokenism as Racial Treason

Tokenism represents an act of racial treason in that it slows the progress of the race to end the color line. First, it serves to perpetuate the stereotype of the "Uncle Tom."

If those who are in positions of authority and affluence are expected to conduct themselves as "Uncle Toms" how can there ever be equality? Second, tokenism slows progress as tokens are less likely to fight for the race in radical ways due to their limited sense of power. Because they are appointed by whites, tokens can easily be replaced. Therefore they lack the ability to speak out without risking what limited power and influence they have among whites. In some cases they are even willing to allow harm come to the race in order to protect their position. This is more or less what Dr. Bledsoe admits when he tells Invisible Man: "But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (143). As Dr. Bledsoe makes clear, tokens slow things down partly because they do not want to risk losing the privileges which came with being a token. But also partly because they are content with being accepted by society even if no one else is. This is the sentiment behind James Baldwin's assertion that: "most of them care nothing about the race. They want only their proper place in the sun and the right to be left alone like any other citizen of the republic" (*Note of a Native Son* 27). Finally tokenism slows progress because it helps to alleviate the pressure on whites to increase diversity. By promoting only a few blacks whites are able to make it seem as if they were working towards progress. If blacks complained about discrimination, whites can always point at the few blacks in positions of power to support that progress was being made. However, at the time *Invisible Man* was published, this change was nominal as tokenism granted only a few limited freedom at best while the majority of blacks remained in oppression.

But there is a difference between slowly making progress and halting—or worse yet, sabotaging progress. It is clear that not all tokens are necessarily working against the

race. It is possible, then, for someone to be a token but also be committed to making progress on behalf of the race, albeit gradual. If this is the case, how are we supposed to view their actions? What concept can we apply to describe the relationship of tokens to the black communities which they represented?

The Token as Double Agent

We can conceptualize the relationship of the token to his or her community in terms of the figure of the double agent. As I have already mentioned, double agency refers to the act of pretending to be a spy for one country while secretly working for the enemy (Ben-Yehuda 72). In *Gender and Jim Crow* (1996), Glenda Gilmore uses the metaphor of the double agent to describe the difficult balance black educators such as Charlotte Hawkins Brown had to strike between their public and private allegiances. As Adam Fairclough explains, black educators were in a more difficult position than black ministers in that they had to rely on white school officials for support. Whereas ministers could look to their congregants as the source from which to raise the necessary funds for improvements to the church building, black principals and teachers could not necessarily do the same. Therefore, they came to rely heavily on white superintendents for monetary support, as well as political endorsement.

In exchange for this support, black educators were expected to play a number of roles (*Teaching Equality* 14-15). For example, Fairclough notes that "white superintendents kept black principals under careful scrutiny, and looked to them as a source of information about what was going on inside the black community" (*Teaching Equality* 15). As part of their role as informants, black educators were also expected to

serve as spokespersons for whites. Thus, the views which they expressed regarding race matters were said to appease whites and not necessarily reflective of their personal views. No doubt, this must have been alarming for members of the black community to which these teachers belonged. However, Fairclough reminds us that if black educators "appeared to appease whites and play the role of the 'Uncle Tom,' it was for the larger purpose of serving the black community" (*Teaching Equality* 16).

The Double Agency of Tokenism

As Fairclough's comments suggest, some tokens used the mask of the Uncle Tom in order to accomplish seemingly mundane goals and objectives which they believed would benefit the race in the grand scheme. One of the best examples of double agency was Booker T. Washington and his program of Industrial Education. In his Atlanta Compromise speech, Washington advocated for the doctrine of compromise, reassuring whites that blacks would not fight them on the color line if they were allowed to pursue industrial education and economic improvement. Washington called blacks to pursue industrial education over civil rights. Likewise, he urged whites to utilize the black labor force instead of foreigners. He suggested that this would cultivate a larger culture of racial amity and integration; however, he underscored that this did not mean social equality between the races.

Washington's public stance on education and racial equality would ultimately earn him widespread public support among whites. Washington then used this support to secure funds to support his Tuskegee Institute, as well as other black schools and educational programs in the South. For example, in the "Secret Life of Booker T.

Washington" historian and biographer Louis Harlan notes that steel industry titan Andrew Carnegie contributed large sums of money to support the Tuskegee Institute as well as several of Washington's black enterprises. Other large donors included John D. Rockefeller and Julius Rosenwald, both of whom, at Washington's request, gave substantial donations towards the development of the Tuskegee Institute and other black schools (394).

With the exception of the extreme case of whites who opposed any and all education for blacks, most whites found Washington's program non-threatening. For instance, Emma L. Thornborough cites an article in *Harper's Weekly* which applauded Washington and his program because it encouraged blacks to "leave politics alone, and to cultivate the virtues of industry and thrift" (170). As Washington rather convincingly and consistently spoke in favor of gradual progress, whites contented themselves with the idea that he knew his place and was content to keep it. While Washington's public persona depicted him as a man who had no interest in advocating for racial equality on behalf of the race, Harlan paints quite a different picture of Washington's private life.

Washington used the financial and political support his public persona garnered to work behind the scenes for racial progress, specifically with regard to disenfranchisement, jury exclusion, Jim Crow railroad car laws, and unfair criminal sentencing ("The Secret Life" 399-403). Harlan further notes that Washington played a major role in a number of high profile cases, offering financial support or enlisting the help of influential whites in order to test and push the boundaries of laws. In each instance, Washington was cautious to use discretion, often relying on messengers, spies, or collaborators to accomplish his goals. It was vitally important that there be no mention

of his involvement as this could affect his standing with white supporters, and thus threaten his access to resources. In this sense, Washington functioned as a literal double agent, as he secretly played the black masses against white philanthropists without the other's knowledge. As Gilmore, Fairclough, and others illustrate, black American history is full of examples of black educators who, like Washington, used their token status to strategically work towards overcoming the color line.

Booker T. Washington's Legacy of Double Agency

After Invisible Man is fired from his job at Liberty Paints, he finds himself as the token black spokesman of the Brotherhood. He is recruited and appointed to be the director of the party's Harlem branch (a position which involves educating the public), after several members observe him give a speech which temporarily controls a crowd of angry black citizens. While wandering through the city Invisible Man happens upon a crowd, watching bewilderedly as an older black couple along with all of their possessions are evicted from their apartment into the cold wintery street by three white marshals. Tensions quickly erupt when one of the marshals blocks the couple as they attempt to rush back into the building, causing the elderly woman to fall backwards into the crowd. Right when a confrontation seems certain (the marshal draws his gun on the crowd as it moves in to attack him and his associates), Invisible Man intervenes by telling them a riddle.

He encourages the crowd to follow the example of the "wise leader" from Alabama, "who when that fugitive escaped from the mob and ran to his school for protection, that wise man who was strong enough to do the legal thing, the law-abiding

thing, to turn him over to the forces of law and order" (*Invisible Man* 276). The wise leader which he refers to is Booker T. Washington, who was rumored to have refused a wounded black man at Tuskegee Institute as he sought refuge from a lynch mob in pursuit of him. In "Washington in Biographical Perspective" (1970), Harlan confirms that this event did occur, but that some major details were omitted.

The man whom Washington was rumored to have turned away was Thomas A. Harris, a local black lawyer. The incident first began when Harris, an attorney, decided to move back to Tuskegee to practice law. This offended the local whites, who were tolerant of "black farmers, teachers and businessmen but could not accept black lawyers or editors" ("Washington a Biographical Perspective" 1596). The final offense occurred when Harris violated social custom by hosting a white preacher in his home. The townsfolk took Harris's hosting the minister to mean that he was advocating for equality between the races.[20] A mob was formed and the minister was forced to leave. At the same time, a note was left for Harris warning him to leave town by a certain time. He was, however, not at home in time to receive it in time. When he finally returned home and read the note, the deadline had already passed. The mob tracked Harris to a neighbor's house where they attempted to apprehend him. He managed to narrowly escape but not before being shot in the leg. As he required medical attention for his wound, Harris was rushed to Booker T. Washington's home by Harris's son Wiley where, according to local reports, he was turned away.

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[20] It was taboo for whites to eat or drink with blacks as this implied that they were social equals (Ritterhouse 44).

The local white press praised Washington for "conduct[ing] himself and his

school in the most prudent manner" ("Washington a Biographical Perspective" 1596).

Whites had no reason to question whether Washington was truly capable of sending

Harris away, as he had thoroughly ingratiated himself to whites with his Atlanta

Compromise speech. During his speech he famously declared, "It is important and right

that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared

for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now

is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house"

(Washington 3). Whites and blacks took this to mean that he was advocating for

accommodationism in which blacks would submit to white rule for a period of time until

they had fully developed as a race. Thereafter, he become the token black leader for

whites, who would regularly consult with him on race matters.

Apparently, neither did blacks question the report as observed when one of the

speakers at a public forum hosted by the Bethel Literary and Historical Society cited the

article as proof that he was "hypocritical." Washington's personal friend Rev. Francis J.

Grimke happen to be in attendance. Concerned with what he had heard, Grimke (an

advocate for black rights) wrote Washington a letter inquiring if the rumors were true.

Washington confirmed that the reports were true, rationalizing: "I could not take the

wounded man into the school and endanger the lives of students entrusted by their parents

to my care to the fury of some drunken white men. Neither did I for the same reason feel

that it was the right thing to take him into my own home" ("Washington a Biographical

Perspective" 1597). However, he also included additional details which he had previously

withheld from the press: "I helped them to a place of safety and paid the money out of my

own pocket for the comfort and treatment of the man while he was sick" ("Washington a Biographical Perspective" 1597). Washington intentionally and strategically omitted this information during his initial interview so as to protect both his and the school's reputation.

While on the surface it seems as though Washington does the "law-abiding thing," upon closer examination we find that he breaks the social laws by providing transportation and aid to a fugitive. The Harris event is one example of how Washington used appearances to tactically deceive whites and help the other members of his race. In this way we can think of him in terms of Glenda Gilmore's metaphor of the "double agent." This is similar to the way Invisible Man's grandfather describes himself on his deathbed confession: "[O]ur life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country" (*Invisible Man* 16). What he means by this is, like Washington, he played the part of the token black in order to overcome, undermine, kill and destroy whites (*Invisible Man* 16). Having been present during his grandfather's confession and having attended one of the leading Negro college's in the south, Invisible Man is both informally and formally taught how to be a double agent for the race. Therefore, he draws on the example of Washington, arguably one of the most famous tokens and double agents in African American history, to try and inspire the people to do the same.

In particular, he wants the group to put the couple's possessions back in their apartment, allowing for them to obey the law by clearing the street of "junk." Unfortunately, as his audience consists of a culturally and ethnically diverse group of blacks, they do not necessarily share his education and so they do not immediately pick up on what he is implying in reference to the Harris incident. Instead of seeing

Washington as a double agent the people regard him as a "hankerchief-headed rat" which, of course, is not what he intended (*Invisible Man* 276).

After his first attempt at organizing the people fails, Invisible Man is forced to try a more direct approach. Recalling that the old woman initially wanted to go inside to pray, Invisible Man instructs the people: "Let's go in and pray. Let's have a big prayer meeting. But we' need some chairs to sit in...rest upon as we kneel" (*Invisible Man* 281). This time the people understand what he is asking them to do and begin hauling the couple's furniture back into the apartment building. That the people do not understand the significance of the reference to Washington's tokenism foreshadows how they will respond later on when he reveals his own status as a double agent.

Invisible Man as Double Agent

Gilmore's concept is particularly relevant to my discussion, as Invisible Man is mistaken for a double agent a couple of times in the text. He is first mistaken for a double agent by Dr. Bledsoe, who questions him as to why he took a white trustee of his college to see a sharecropper who has impregnated his daughter. When Invisible Man explains that it was at the request of Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe does not believe him. Dr. Bledsoe suspects that Invisible Man is not acting alone, and so he asks him "who really told you to take him out there?" (*Invisible Man* 139). It is as if he thinks Invisible Man is a spy working for some outside organization to bring the school down.

Next, Invisible Man is mistaken for a double agent by the union organizers, and then by Mr. Brockway at Liberty Paints. In this instance, Invisible Man stumbles upon a union meeting when he heads to the employee locker room to retrieve his lunch. The men

invite him in and inquire why he is late. When he explains that he did not know about the meeting they ask him who his supervisor is. He informs them that he reports to Mr. Brockway, a known anti-unionist. The men instantly become upset and try to throw him out of the meeting. The chairman attempts to caution them against prematurely accusing him of being a union breaker, to which they reply: "Who sent this fink into the meeting, brother chairman? Ask him that!" (*Invisible Man* 220).

Still, they suspect Invisible Man of being a spy and informant as he works for Mr. Brockway. When Invisible Man first arrives in the basement Mr. Brockway is immediately distrusting of him. That he gets delayed at the union meeting only serves to increase Mr. Brockway's suspicions. When he arrives back at the basement Mr. Brockway asks him where he has been. He is attempting to explain that he was attacked at a union meeting when Mr. Brockway launches into his own attack. However, unlike the union workers he does not ask any questions. After a brief skirmish, Invisible Man asks why Mr. Brockway attacked him. He explains that he thought that Invisible Man was a spy and informant sent there by the union to try and force him out.

In addition to these moments, there are also several scenes which allude to Invisible Man's identity as a double agent. There is the scene where he receives the briefcase from the leading white men of his town. The briefcase is an item commonly associated with espionage. There is the scene where Invisible Man is being experimented on by the physicians at Liberty Paints, which resembles an interrogation. There is the scene where he is recruited by Brother Jack, who speaks in a kind of cryptic code. Then there is the scene where he is given an envelope which contains his new identity within

the Brotherhood. Finally, and most importantly, there is the scene where he dons a hat and sunglasses so that he can evade Ras's men while walking through Harlem.

Dressed in his disguise, the narrator is repeatedly mistaken for a mysterious figure named Rinehart. First he is mistaken by Rinehart's girlfriend, and then by an array of different members from the community including hipsters, barflies, street-corner-men, a gambler, a prostitute, the police, and two elderly church-goers. Even two of the narrator's own acquaintances, Brother Maceo and Barrelhouse mistake him for Rinehart. The disguise ultimately leads the narrator down a path of discovery on which he learns about Rinehart's "multiple personalities." He discovers that Rinehart is a hustler, a numbers runner, a pimp, and a preacher all at the same time. Thus, as Robert Fleming, Rinehart emerges as the "ultimate trickster figure" ("Ellison's Black Archetypes" 431). Just as the trickster uses performance and language to mask his true identity, which is to say his thoughts and motives, so too does Rinehart use the glasses and hats to mask his multiple personalities. Invisible Man initially thinks of the glasses and hat as a disguise, but after his foray into the world of Rinehart he comes to view them as a "political instrument" (*Invisible Man* 499). Having become aware of Rinehart's multiple personalities, the narrator catches a vision of the endless possibilities which the mask of tokenism might hold for him.

Invisible Man subsequently decides to become a double agent after he discovers that the Brotherhood is plotting to "sacrifice" its members in Harlem in order to accomplish its larger plan. He had been warned by Ras, the black militant leader and his political rival, that the Brotherhood was using him to betray the race. As it turns out, he was correct. The Brotherhood had been actively mobilizing the people only to abandon

them with no clear directives. Although he is told the people are being sacrificed,

Invisible Man is not sure what this means. Faced with the decision of either leaving the

Brotherhood with what limited information he has or continuing to play the token so that

he can uncover exactly what they are up to, Invisible Man chooses the latter.

Harlem grows restless after the Brotherhood begins withdrawing its presence.

With no one to organize them, the people begin staging individual protests over the

shooting of an unarmed black man by the police: "Store windows were smashed and

several clashes erupted during the morning between bus drivers and their passengers...

The mirrored facade of one store on 125th Street was smashed...a group of adults looked

on, refusing to move at the policemen's command, and muttering about Clifton"

(*Invisible Man* 513). Meanwhile the Invisible Man begins feeding the Brotherhood false

information about what is going on in Harlem. He even provides them with a fake list of

new members to make it seem as though black people are still joining their roster. Just as

his grandfather predicted they would, Invisible Man's superiors at the Brotherhood

believe him because, after all, it is what they want to hear: "They were vindicated; the

program was correct, events were progressing in their predetermined direction, history

was on their side, and Harlem loved them" (*Invisible Man* 514). But in actuality Ras has

been gathering the people of Harlem in preparation for a riot.

Invisible Man's plans to gather more information are cut short when he gets a call

from someone at the Harlem branch office telling him that they are under attack. When

he arrives downtown, he discovers Ras has already mobilized the people and that they are

headed for a clash with the police. It is at this point that he realizes what the Brotherhood

meant by "sacrifice." Just as they used him to control the people, now the Brotherhood

was sacrificing the people by turning them over to Ras. He eventually tracks them down, but when he tries to warn the people Ras tells them to ignore him. He attempts to explain that he is no longer a token for the Brotherhood but it is too late. The people do not believe him. Further, Ras encourages the people to racially police him: "Hang him up to teach the black people a lesson, and there be no more traitors. No more Uncle Toms" (*Invisible Man* 557).

It is not surprising that Ras and the crowd are unwilling to believe Invisible Man. First, they are unaware that he has been working as a double agent for the community as he has been working secretly. Second, they are unable to distinguish his motives in telling them not to riot because he has been saying this all along on behalf of the Brotherhood. Now, when it counts the most, the people regard his warning as just another ploy by the Brotherhood to manipulate and control them. The people proceed with their riot as planned, and Invisible Man is forced to flee in an attempt to save his life.

The Limitations of Double Agency

The fact that, even with his spying and informing, Invisible Man is still unable to mitigate the harm he does by serving as a token of the Brotherhood speaks to the limitations of double agency as a strategy for overcoming the color line. The logic behind the use of double agency is that the potential gains one makes on behalf of the race will outweigh the harm which one causes in the process. This is the assumption Invisible Man makes when he first decides to become a double agent. He believes that by merely pretending to be a token he is not actually harming the race. In fact he goes through great measures to involve the people as little as possible so as to minimize the impact that the

Brotherhood's plan will have on them. Yet, when he is unable to convince the people not to follow Ras, he is faced with the prospect that he *has* harmed the race through his continued participation, even if it was done with the best of intentions.

Similarly, black educators, politicians and other leaders caused harm to their black communities even as they sought to uplift them by playing the part of the token. For instance, Washington's refusal to openly advocate for black political rights ultimately served to undermine the work and credibility of more radical leaders like Du Bois. Furthermore, Washington was known to have served as an informant for whites, using his network of spies and informers to expose individuals and activities which would have posed a threat to his larger plan. Still, Harlan points out that the positive effects of Washington's leadership are undeniable.

Through the art of white appeasement, Washington was able to develop his industrial education program with the blessing of whites. Through this program he was able to provide the some of the black masses with an education, albeit technical, which gave them the skills they needed to run their own farms and businesses, and possibly even become property owners someday. In addition to his Industrial education program he also managed to somewhat successfully to run a private campaign to secure black political rights. What is more, he got whites to pay for all of it.

Unfortunately, much of what Washington did for the race could not be appreciated while he was alive, as this would have jeopardized his reputation. Not until after he died did he allow a statement to be published which stated unequivocally his support for equal rights. Likewise, not until he died did leaders, including his rival Du Bois, acknowledge the positive impact of his leadership. As double agents have both a

positive and negative impact on the race it can be difficult to determine exactly where

their loyalties lie. Therefore, the question arises: How are we to assess their loyalty?

Fairclough explains that "in the world of spying, the acid test of loyalty is called

the 'profit-and-loss' account, a process in which the known good an agent has done is

weighed against the suspected harm he has done" (*Teaching Equality* 16). Fairclough

goes on to suggest that if we apply this principle to Booker T. Washington we discover

that much of the harm he was suspected to have done (the deterioration in the status of

black southerners) was outside of his control, and occurred "independently of anything he

said or did" (*Teaching Equality* 16). Robert J. Norrell echoes this sentiment when he

observes that "the local context in which Booker T. Washington worked always

circumscribed his options" ("Booker T. Washington" 99).

Tuskegee, and the South more broadly, was the scene of intense violence towards

blacks. The whites who would later help attain state support for the founding of

Tuskegee, were the same people responsible for discouraging and terrorizing black voters

and officeholders in earlier years. Washington understood all too well that in order for

Tuskegee to survive he would have to have "the support, or at least the toleration, of the

white community" ("Booker T. Washington" 99). Thus, Washington's public comments

on education were reflective of the context in which he happened to find himself, and not

one which he himself created.

While I do agree with Fairclough that Washington should not be held fully

responsible for the deterioration of the status of black southerners which the nation

witnessed at the turn of the century, I do think that Fairclough oversimplifies the extent of

Washington's role and thus his responsibility. Looking back, modern audiences are able

to recognize the larger context in which he was working was beyond his control. However, for blacks living through this experience, it was much harder to maintain this perspective. Further, despite Fairclough's suggestion that this was not the case, Washington's public actions and comments seemed to have a cause and effect relationship. Especially when we consider that he himself fed into the popular perception that he was the most influential black man in America. If Washington was willing to take credit for the success of the race, then how else were the people to understand his relationship to their oppression?

Even if we set aside the question of how much influence Washington really had over the status of blacks in America, there remains the issue of perspective, or lack thereof, which the community experienced. Because of the secrecy surrounding many of the radical acts which Washington performed on behalf of the race, the masses of black people remained in the dark as to what he was doing until after his death. This lack of perspective was exacerbated by the fact that Washington's inner circle was just as secretive. Much of what Fairclough and other scholars now point to as evidence of Washington's loyalty to the race would not have been widely accessible to most black Americans. Therefore, how could the community effectively evaluate his "profit-loss" account if they had no idea what he did? Further, when a community lacks knowledge of a potentially profitable act, this raises the question of whether or not the act is still profitable if the community does not recognize it. Thus, we can boil down the difficulty of determining loyalty to the issues of distance and value.

By distance, I am referring to the socio-economic and geographical gaps which emerge between the double agent and the black community as he assumes the role of the

token. Tokens were often personally compensated in addition to the resources they secured for their communities, in exchange for their participation as spies, informants, and spokespersons. Forms of compensation often included better salaries, access to education, appointments to special councils, committees and commissions, better housing and greater social contact with powerful whites. Aside from the matter of compensation, class differences also contributed to the gap between the masses and the token. Because being a token necessarily involved interacting with whites, tokens often assimilated the social and cultural norms of the white middle-upper class. Further, the fact they believed it was their responsibility to help the masses assimilate as they had did not help matters. This view only served to create mutual tension between the black middle-upper class and the black masses, thereby widening the already existent gap.

In addition to the money he received from Carnegie for the development of the Tuskegee Institute and other black schools, Washington also received $150,000 for his personal use. The generosity of white benefactors such as Carnegie enabled Washington to circumvent the restrictions of the color line. For instance, Harlan notes that he developed a reputation for renting summer homes near white tourist areas when in the North. When in one instance a white real estate agent refused to rent him a home, Washington purchased one instead ("The Secret Life" 394). Besides money, there were also other privileges which came with being the leading token of the race. In his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington details his travels abroad, during which he had the opportunity to socialize with some of the world's most powerful white figures, including Queen Elizabeth who hosted him and his wife for tea. While he

enjoyed similar freedoms domestically, the response of whites to his having accepted an

invitation to dine with President Roosevelt proved that he still had to keep a low profile.

These privileges did not just create a distance between the token and the

community socio-economically and geographically, but also experientially. Because of

these privileges tokens had a different experience of the color line. That tokens would

often advocate against racial equality while enjoying privileges which alleviated some of

the day-to-day pressures of living under the color line served to sever their trust with the

community. Ellison captures this sentiment when Mary Rambo says to Invisible Man:

"And I tell you something else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what

knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits. They finds a place

for theyselves and forgits the ones on the bottom. Oh, heap of them talks about doing

things, but they done really forgot" (*Invisible Man* 255). The natural consequence of this

severed trust is alienation. Washington exemplifies this better than any other double

agent. Washington had to carefully guard his true thoughts (and actions) with regard to

racial equality lest they be discovered and used to undermine his life's work. Thus, the

distance which necessarily comes with being a token makes it hard for the double agent

to maintain the type of contact and openness required for the community to view his

actions as being profitable—which is to say loyal.

We see the issue of distance play out first-hand when Invisible Man is unable to

convince the people that he is a double agent working on their behalf. Prior to joining the

Brotherhood, Invisible Man lives with the masses in Harlem. Initially, he lives with the

other tokens at the Men's House, but once they see that he had taken a job at Liberty

Paints he is no longer welcome. Left with nowhere to go, Invisible Man is forced to return to Mary Rambo's boarding house.

Mary's house is located near Lenox Avenue which is in the heart of Harlem. Mary has a reputation in the community for helping those who are struggling, particularly southern migrants, adjust to life in the city. Mary's boarding house is an allusion to the living conditions experienced by the majority of the black masses who migrated out of the South throughout the early to mid-20th century. Although those who migrated found that their situation somewhat improved, historian H. Viscount Nelson notes that blacks in the North were still affected by the color line. In *The Rise and Fall of Modern Black Leadership: Chronicle of a 20th Century Tragedy*, Nelson notes that most black Americans who emigrated came to reside in major northern cities. However, he explains "as the numbers of blacks moving into cities increased, housing became cramped, sanitary conditions worsened, and low-income migrants became objects of derision." Not only was housing scarce, but so too were employment opportunities (40). Likewise, Mary also functions as a symbol for the masses as she is herself a southern migrant, she struggles financially to support herself, and she exhibits many of the folk traditions which characterize the masses who migrated to northern cities in search of better opportunities. Thus, by living with and befriending Mary, Invisible Man is able to maintain a close socio-economic, geographical, and experiential connection with the masses.

However, once Invisible Man is given the position with the Brotherhood all of this changes. He is given a salary of sixty dollars a week, as well as a three-hundred dollar advance in order to pay off his debts with Mary and buy a new suit. He is also furnished with his own apartment in a Spanish-Irish neighborhood on the Upper-East

Side. Even the leadership position he is given by the Brotherhood eventually takes him out of Harlem. After he is accused by a suspicious brother of being an opportunist, Invisible Man is temporarily reassigned from the Harlem office to work on the Woman's Question, which leads him to interact with wealthy white women. Eventually, once he is permitted to return to Harlem, he discovers that his relationship to the people has changed. While walking through the streets he stumbles upon Ras and the people holding a rally over the shooting of Tod Clifton by a police officer. As Invisible Man attempts to pass unnoticed, Ras calls him out. He accuses Invisible Man of having collaborated with the Brotherhood to sell the people out. When Invisible Man attempts to defend himself, Ras states: "That mahn is a paid stooge of the white enslaver! Where has he been for the last few months when our black babies and women have been suffering" (*Invisible Man* 481). Ultimately it is the perceived distance between Invisible Man and the people which keeps them from believing him when he says that he is no longer affiliated with the Brotherhood.

Because the people are unable to perceive his loyalty, they do not value the information he gives them. The warning he delivers sounds suspiciously close to the message he had been pushing all along on behalf of the Brotherhood, therefore the people are unable to distinguish between actions prior to and after his becoming a double agent. Further, his warning only serves to underscore the gap which has widened between him and the people. What the people want is action, or protests more specifically, in response to the injustices they suffer. Action is what he temporarily provides when he organizes the funeral service for Tod Clifton.

When news of the murder reaches the other members of the Harlem branch of the Brotherhood, the liberal, quasi-socialist organization which Tod Clifton and Invisible Man both belong to, they immediately set out to seek justice for their fallen brother. They encourage the community to publicly denounce the police commissioner and protest the mayor through a letter-writing campaign. They also organize a community-wide funeral service to honor Clifton and express their dissatisfaction over the continued oppression of the race. As anticipated, the funeral draws the attention of the surrounding community and numbers swell into the thousands. The narrator is called upon to deliver the eulogy before the crowd, which stands waiting quietly in the hot sun.

He begins by instructing everyone to go home; however, when the people refuse to leave he continues talking, explaining to everyone that Tod Clifton was killed because he was black and dared to assert his manhood with a white cop. He further explains that when the cop shot Tod Clifton he was labeling him a "nigger," putting him back in his symbolic place. The injustice enacted upon black men like Tod Clifton by law enforcement was a manifestation of the broader racial discourse which systematically denied the humanity and devalued the lives of black people. Aware of the reality that all blacks are subject to injustice by cops who have the power, the will, and the "triggers" with which to kill them, he instructs everyone to "go home, keep cool" (*Invisible Man* 459). Unfortunately, nothing else comes of his efforts to bring about action for the community. Upon discovering what he has done, Brother Jack instructs Invisible Man to cease all activities related to the Tod Clifton shooting. Further, it is shortly after his confrontation with Brother Jack that he learns that the Harlem office is to be sacrificed, limiting what he can do and say even more.

Unable to inspire any direct action which would bring about justice for Tod Clifton and the other members of the community, Invisible Man resolves to work behind the scenes to try and prevent future harm from coming to the race. However, because being a double agent means continuing to play the part of a token, the race has no way of knowing that he is now working on their behalf, as his actions appear to be the same. For example, when news of the increased racial incidents reaches the Harlem office of the Brotherhood Invisible Man sends members out to "mingle with crowds and try to discourage any further violence," and publishes an open letter to the press "denouncing them for "distorting" and inflating minor incidents" (513-14). Coincidentally, it is the people's desire for action which the Brotherhood has been counting on and manipulating the entire time. By stalling the people and then abandoning them, the Brotherhood actually motivates the people to join forces with Ras. However, there is no way for Invisible Man to prove this and so he must accept responsibility for his role in the ruse.

In the end, Invisible Man discovers that he has actually become a race traitor. He was only playing the part initially; however, he realizes that the harm he creates by playing the part of a token—even if it was with the best of intentions—is real. Those intentions do not undo or prevent or outweigh the potential/real damage. Likewise, he realizes that the fundamental flaw in his plan is secrecy. To be an effective double agent you have to maintain secrecy, and therefore distance from the people. In the end, this distance works against him as it obfuscates his loyalty. Therefore when it comes time for him to reveal the true intentions of his plan, the people are not in a position to believe him. Further, as it difficult to perceive his loyalty, it makes it even more difficult for the people to calculate the "profit-loss" account of his actions.

He finds his subsequent experience of being racially policed traumatic, so much so that he goes into hiding for an extended period of time. It is traumatic not only because it involves acts of physical punishment, but also because it involves alienation. Thus, white people are not the only ones for whom he is invisible; black people also lack the ability to see him for the double agent he is. It is at the point that he finally starts to come to grips with this experience that his story begins and ends.

Ellison's depiction of Invisible Man's racial policing and subsequent traumatization seems to anticipate his own future status as a token black writer and the trauma he would experience from being racially policed by black college students, despite his viewing himself as a double agent. Rampersad points to the example of a confrontation which Ellison had with a young black militant while participating in a panel discussion at Grinnell College. He notes that after the talk, a young black militant cornered Ellison and began to debate with him about *Invisible Man*. "Suddenly the black-jacketed man turned on Ralph. 'You're an Uncle Tom, man' he shouted. 'You're a sell-out. You're a disgrace to your race'" (*Ralph Ellison* 440). Although in the moment Ellison was able to handle himself with dignity, Rampersad notes that after the student left Ellison apparently "lost control" (*Ralph Ellison* 440). "Putting his head on [a black student leader's] shoulder, he broke down in tears. 'I'm not a Tom. I'm not a Tom,' he sobbed" (*Ralph Ellison* 440). James Alan McPherson would describe a similar scene at Tougaloo University where he was met with similar resistance from students.

Following the success of Invisible Man, Ellison was regularly sought after to join some of the most elite—read white—boards, councils, and committees. In his profile of Ellison "Indivisible Man" (1969), James Alan McPherson lists some of these

memberships, which include The National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York's Century Club, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Citizens' Committee for Broadcasting ("Individble Man" 175). As Ellison was often the only black member of these organizations, he came to be viewed as a sellout by many black Americans, in particular black college students who had recently been galvanized by the rising Black Power movement of the 1960s. Specifically, they felt that the success of his book and presence on the councils were evidence of tokenism, as neither did anything to empower the black community.

To their credit, Morris Dickstein notes that Rampersad's biography of Ellison seems to confirm their impression that Ellison was a token. "In this milieu he was invariably the token black, doing little to bring along others of his race. He took no part in the civil rights movement, arguing that a writer's duty was to stay at his typewriter and perfect his craft" ("Ralph Ellison Visible"). However, McPherson presents a different view of Ellison as a "double agent," infiltrating these predominantly white spaces in order to exert some influence on behalf of the race much in the same way that Invisible Man attempts to infiltrate the Brotherhood. Responding to his critics' claims that he was a "token Negro," Ellison explains his motive for serving with these organizations: "All right, if you don't want me on, I'll resign. But you had better put a cardboard Negro in my place because when the decisions are made which will affect black people you had better make sure that those people who make the decisions remember that you exist and are forced to make sure that some of your interests are being met" (178). Despite the

tough exterior Ellison attempted to project in response to his being racially policed by members of the black community, he was much more susceptible to trauma than one might think, as the incident with the student at Grinnell College proves.

In the conclusion of the novel, we discover that Invisible Man has been toying with the idea of coming out of "hibernation," or isolation, as it were. However, exactly how and when he plans to accomplish this is unclear. In my next chapter I will continue exploring this notion of trauma and the ways in which it can be mentally damaging to the race traitor. The notion that treason can be a traumatic experience for those who are betrayed by a fellow member of their race is fairly obvious. Less obvious, however, is the notion that treason can be a traumatic experience for the traitor himself. Instead of focusing on the trauma black Americans experience when they are betrayed by one of their own, in his pulitzer prize winning play *No Place to Be Somebody* (1969), actor-turned-playwright Charles Gordone focuses on the way in which the black male race traitor is traumatized as a result of the punishment he receives at the hands of other black Americans.

CHAPTER 4

TRAUMA AND THE RACE TRAITOR:

CHARLES GORDONE'S *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY*

In 2004 Amiri Baraka sat down for an interview with Maurice A. Lee, who at that time was working on his book *Aesthetics of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka:The Rebel Poet*, which traces the influence of Marxist theory on Baraka's early work published between 1961 and 1969. When Lee asked Baraka to name some of the writers who influenced him, instead he redirected his response to call out black playwrights Robert O'Hara, George C. Wolfe, and Charles Gordone within whose work he observed "another politics" besides Black power. Although it had been over 30 years since the premier of Gordone's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *No Place to be Somebody* (1969), Baraka was still haunted by what he called the "anti-Black Power thing" in the final scene. Writing about this moment in his essay "The Descent of Charlie Fuller into Pulitzer Land" (1983), which he penned nearly two decades before his interview with Lee, Baraka explained: "When Gordone's main character shoots the black gangster figure (Black Power) and then gets into drag announcing he is ecstatic because black militancy has been killed forever, it makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck" ("The Descent" 52). The horror Baraka experienced was not unlike that of the mother from his short story "The Death of Horatio Alger," who "shudders" when she is forced to recognize her son's effeminacy as he lets another boy beat him up ("Tales" 68).

Baraka found the sight of the main character (Gabe) wearing a dress grotesque, as it was an example of the type of "death-producing images" which he railed against in his

op-ed for *Ebony* magazine entitled "Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life"
(1971). "The images--say any 'fag' or 'naked' play" wrote Baraka, "are distortions of
healthy humanity but perfect reflections of the sick species they portray." At the root of
Baraka's view that homosexuality is "sick" is the idea that it was unproductive. The
notion of productivity played a central role in the ways Baraka and other Black Arts
writers constructed their definition of black identity. He goes on to explain that while
reflections, Baraka felt the images were not only portraying the sickness but also
inducing it within those who viewed them. Much like the way a vector passes along
disease from one host organism to another, these images passed along the sickness of the
"dying animal called America" to unsuspecting black audiences. He argued that under the
guise of entertainment, the images were actually programming blacks and turning them
into "sick exhibits from the dying culture" (75). Just as sick if not more (to Baraka) were
black artists like Gordone who reproduced them for consumption by black audiences.
They were in some ways worse than blacks who exhibited the culture because they were
causing other black people to internalize images which confused them, and therefore,
"slow[ed] the total liberation from coming for yet a few more beats" (75). Thus, Gabe is
doubly-sick, in Baraka's estimation, as he is both the image and the artist responsible for
reproducing the image (he is supposed to be the fictional playwright of the play).

The notion that the black male race traitor figure was sick is a common theme in
Black Arts Theater, most notably Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life* (1967) and Ron
Milner's *The Monster* (1968). Within these plays the race traitor is depicted as
emasculated, effeminate, and castrated in the face of white acceptance. For example, the
black Dean from *The Monster* literally lacks testicles which his white wife keeps in her

purse and doles out to him as necessary. Along the same line, the race traitor is depicted as being obsessed and identified with white upper-middle class identity. In *Great Goodness of Life* the protagonist Court Royal constantly identifies himself in terms of the trappings of middle class success. "Please there's some mistake. Isn't there? I've done nothing wrong. I have a family. I work at the Post Office, I'm a Supervisor. I've worked for thirty-five years. I've done nothing wrong" (Baraka 72). Finally, the race traitor is depicted as being complicit in the effort by whites to suppress black people's resistance to their oppression. At the request of the Judge (a white man who we cannot see, but whose voice we can hear) and his team of Klu Klux Klansmen, Court Royal murders his son, a black revolutionary, in order to absolve himself of the guilt for having "harbored a wanted murderer." Similarly, the Dean works to undermine the efforts of the black students to organize and protest racial oppression on his college's campus. He even goes as far as to read from a book full of scripted speeches which are designed to quell the possibility of black student uprisings.

The ways in which the race traitor was depicted by Black Arts playwrights such as Baraka and Milner spoke directly to the politics of black identity of the 1960s and 70s. They presented the race traitor in such unfavorable terms in order to advance the notion that healthy black identity was powerful and productive. Although Baraka reads him as yet another sick race traitor, I believe Gabe suffers from a different sickness than that of Court Royal or the Dean. Specifically, I believe Gabe suffers from trauma as a result of having been racially policed by his community after he unintentionally commits racial treason. Whereas Court Royal and the Dean are quick to move on mentally and

emotionally after they are racially policed, as though it never happened, Gabe relives the incident in which he was policed through dramatic writing and theatrical performance.

On one level, *No Place* depicts the struggle of young black male playwright Gabe Gabriel to complete the play he is writing. Except for a brief moment in the opening scene, we never actually see him performing the physical act of writing, but he does frequently pause to address the audience in soliloquies which help us to chart his progress. In the first couple of soliloquies he speaks in prose form to the audience, specifically giving us information about himself and the play he is working on. However, as the play progresses his soliloquies become more poetic and bizarre. For example, at the top of Act 2, Gabe gets drunk and delivers his soliloquy in the form of a poem entitled "Whiter Than Snow." Likewise, at the top of Act 3, he recites the poem "They's Mo' to Bein' Black Than Meets the Eye," after which he invites the audience to dine on a meal consisting of a revolver and molotov cocktail. Lastly, there is the fourth act and final scene of the play in which he reemerges dressed in drag in a funerary ceremony in which he proclaims, paradoxically, that by dying the character Johnny is actually being born again.

On another level and at the same time, *No Place* employs the frame device to depict the play that Gabe is writing as he and several other characters act it out on stage, presumably as it is being written. The play he is writing revolves around the struggle of a black small time crook named Johnny to protect his piece of the action—a dive bar located in Greenwich Village, New York—from being shut down by notorious mobster Peter Zerroni. Johnny finds support in Gabe, a fair-skinned out-of-work black actor, who helps him outwit Zerroni's men when they come looking for a missing file which

contains incriminating information which could bring down their boss and a local politician. This support is short-lived, as Gabe wants to call the police after witnessing a shootout between Johnny and two mobsters. Johnny then tries to pressure Gabe by reminding him that he was the one who gave Johnny the file back, but Gabe stands his ground, explaining "That's where I got off! I ain't got no stomach for this personal war you got ag'inst the white man!" (100). Johnny then turns to intimidation. He forces a gun into Gabe's hand, dares him to shoot him, and then calls him a "lousy, yellow, screamin' faggot coward!" At this point, Gabe loses his temper and shoots Johnny to death.

The Inspiration behind *No Place to be Somebody*

No Place is loosely based on Gordone's experience working as a waiter at Johnny Romero's bar in the late 1950's. Romero's, which Jack Kerouac once described as "one of the best new bars in the Village," was known for its relaxed, friendly, and diverse atmosphere. During an interview for Ebony magazine (1970), Gordone shared that he took the job at Romero's after he was unable to find work as an actor. This was a major blow to Gordone's ego, as he had recently starred in an all-black production of *Of Mice and Men;* a performance which, by the way, earned him an Obie Award for best actor. Although it did not seem like it at the time, Gordone's working at Romero's would prove to be instrumental to his future success as a playwright. He would form a bond with his customers, people who he observed "had no place to be somebody." These customers would later serve as the inspiration for the characters in his play, including: Shanty Mulligan, a young irish man who abandons his wife and kids to try and become a jazz drummer; Dee Jackson, a young white prostitute and Johnny's dejected lover; Evie

Ames, Dee's friend and a fellow prostitute; Cora Beasely, a surrogate mother to Johnny and Shanty's lover; and Melvin Smeltz, an aspiring black dancer who struggles with his sexuality. He would also form a close relationship with the bar's owner Johnny Romero.

Johnny Romero's was the only black-owned bar in the West Village until one night Romero was mysteriously forced to close up the bar and move to Paris. In an interview with journalist Patricia Bosworth from the *New York Times* Gordone recalls of Johnny: "Johnny drew people to him, mainly women...He could provoke people into telling him things about themselves—private, terrible things. He just pulled their secrets out like thorns. He provoked. He taunted. He laughed. But he was a true friend because he listened" ("From Nowhere to 'No Place'" 2).

It would take Gordone seven years and multiple revisions before he would complete his play. Between 1961 and 1963, he began drafting sketches of scenes which he would later incorporate into the play. In her article "The Prize Winners" Phyl Garland notes that it was around 1964 that Gordone began to take the writing process more seriously (36). His process involved holding readings at friends' homes so that he could determine which parts to edit. His wife Jeanne Warner estimated that Gordone must have "finished the play five or six times" before he had a version that read all the way through the way he wanted it to. Feeling that his play was finally ready to bring to production, Gordone set about looking for financial backing.

The Critical Reception to *No Place to be Somebody*

On May 4, 1969, *No Place* premiered at the New York Other Stage. It was one of seven plays the Other Theater planned to workshop with funds from a Rockefeller

Foundation grant. However, Bosworth observed that the workshop showcase of *No Place* was so successful that Shakespeare Festival founder Joseph Papp, "decided to move it from [workshop] status to full fledged Equity production at the larger Public Theater" ("From Nowhere to 'No Place'" 2). The response by critics to Gordone's play was largely positive. Following the Other Stage premier, theater critic Clive Barnes in his review of the play, also for *The New York Times*, praised the "vigor of the writing and language" of the play which he described as "witty, salty, and convincing" ("Theater" 53). Similarly, in his review of the same production, Walter Kerr commended Gordone's ability to write verse, specifically the prologues with which he opens several of the acts. Commenting on the strength of Gordone's writing, Kerr playfully quips that "he has not only written act prologues that expand like arias but at least one passage of deliberate verse that begins at doggerel beat and then climbs beyond simple tempo to full orchestration (Listening to it is to have one's hope renewed that verse theater, clamoring and contemporary, may be possible after all)" ("Not Since Edward Albee…" 2). *Time Magazine* also took note of his dialogue, asserting: "Gordone has expertly oiled the sly and sassy tongues by which black puts down his fellow black, and the cast's phrasing of these expletives is impeccable" (109). And yet, while the general consensus of the play was that it was a success, it was not without its problems.

Nearly every theater critic who reviewed *No Place* found the structure of the play to be confusing. For instance, veteran theater and cinema critic for *the Washington Post* Richard L. Coe found Gordone's use of the "frame" device, a strategy of presenting the play within a play, only served to "confuse rather than clarify the strict chronology of the play" ("The Play" 2). Black Arts Movement founder Amiri Baraka was much harsher in

his criticism, arguing that the structure was so confusing that it was even barely recognizable as a play ("Afro-American Literature" 332). Therefore, to maintain the "strict chronology" when discussing or analyzing the play, many critics have simply merged the two plays into one. While I understand this temptation—I too found myself doing the same in earlier drafts of this chapter—this forces us to lose sight of the frame device which is critical to our understanding of how traumatic the experience of racial treason and policing are for Gabe. Therefore, to maintain the distinction between these plays I will use the phrase *exterior* play to refer to the external play and *interior* play to refer to the internal play or the play within the play.

The Dramatic Structure of *No Place to be Someboday*

Framing is the theatrical device whereby the playwright uses one play to contextualize another, in effect creating a play within a play. The play within a play is a common convention in theater and the most common form of *mise-en-abyme*. As Theater Studies scholar Patrice Pavis explains, *mise-en-abyme* refers to a work or "enclave" embedded within another work, "reproducing certain of its structural similarities or properties." The reproduction represents a kind of reflection or mirror image of the work in which it is embedded. He notes that the reproduction may be "presented in the form of an identical, reverse, multiple, or approximate image" (*The Dictionary of Theater* 215). In the case of the play within a play, it is the image of the outer performance which is being reproduced by the enclave, or interior performance.

It is likely that Gordone was inspired to use this device by French playwright Jean Genet's play *The Blacks: A Clown Show* (1958). As Caroline Sheaffer-Jones observes:

"[T]he play within a play is an integral part of Jean Genet's theatre. Characters step into the roles of others, or represent themselves, in front of an audience played by other characters" (47). *The Blacks* tells the story of a white Queen and her royal court who are murdered after they watch the reenactment of the ritual sacrifice of a white woman and the trial of her assailant by a troupe of black actors. What is more, this entire performance is enacted before a white audience which the Queen and her court mirror. Although they are understood to be white, the Queen and her court are actually played by black actors in white masks. Thus, Genet, like Gordone, uses the elements of the exterior play to call attention to itself as theatrical performance. In his stage notes Genet indicates that the costuming of the Queen and court members should call attention to the fact that they are actually black actors in whiteface. "The mask is worn in such a way that the audience sees a wide black band all around it, and even the actor's kinky hair" (Chaudhuri 367).

It was while starring in the original production of *The Blacks* that Gordone first began work on *No Place.* He would even go as far as to credit this experience with changing his vision for the possibilities of what theater could be for him and other black actors. Specifically, he credits Genet with teaching him about the power of self-definition. Recounting Genet's attitude while working on *The Blacks* Gordone states: "Living with Genet's words night after night got to me. His attitude—'If the world treats you like a piece of —, you have the right to decide what kind of piece of—you're gonna be!'—I understood that" ("From Nowhere to No Place" 2). As his comments illustrate, Genet also inspired Gordone by modeling what it looked like to reclaim the abject, the indigestible, the unproductive, and to transform them into a symbol of empowerment and liberation.

The difficulty viewers experience in trying to maintain the distinction between the two plays in *No Place* is due, in part, to the fact that Gabe is also a supporting character within the play he is writing. In order to distinguish between the two characters I will use "Gabe" to refer to the character Gabe of the interior play. Within the interior play he portrays "Gabe," an out-of-work actor who is working as a bartender at his friend Johnny's bar until he has his first big break. "Gabe" attributes the difficulty he has finding work to his being fair skinned. He believes his complexion keeps him from getting roles because, as he puts it: "he is too black for white roles and too white for black roles." In the same ways, the exterior Gabe struggles to complete his play while also battling feelings of placelessness. Through his monologues "Whiter Than Snow" and "They's Mo' to Bein' Black Than Meets the Eye!" exterior Gabe reveals how he is similarly caught between the black and white worlds. The former describes how he grew up in a white community which accepted him. However, when he graduates from high school and tries to exercise his white acceptance in the larger society, he is made to feel that he does not belong. He alludes to this feeling when he states: "In spite of what I learned in college, it did not give me that introduction to success, equality an' wealth, that to my parents were the most logical alternatives to Heaven" (*No Place to be Somebody* 405).

In the latter monologue, exterior Gabe parodies black arts writers with his satire of performative blackness, a dizzying list of behaviors which one is expected to perform in order to be black. Having been acculturated by a white community, exterior Gabe and his family grow up removed from black culture. Specifically, he does not share the same

commitment or reverence for black art as other black artists: "Because I call myself a black playwright, don't git the impression I'm hung up on crap like persecution an' hatred" (405). Like his interior counterpart, exterior Gabe is caught somewhere between the white world of the traditional career path and the black world of the Black Arts Theater, neither of which accepts him. Therefore, because Gabe's character's storyline within the interior play is so similar to that of his storyline in the exterior play, it is easy for audiences to conflate them.

Another contributing factor as to why viewers have had such difficulty keeping the plays distinct is that they are staged using the same set and props. Gordone's staging of both plays with the same set and props makes it appear as though they take place in the same location—Johnny's bar. In the opening scene, Gabe is seen sitting at a table near a jukebox where he delivers his first monologue as part of the exterior play. The lights dim as Gabe exits, and moments later come up on the character Shanty standing at the same jukebox. Other than the dimming the lights, there are no other physical markers to signal to the audience that we have moved from the interior setting of Johnny's bar to the exterior setting of Gabe's home, which is where we are told he has been holed up for months writing. Along these same lines, there are no clear time markers to signal the passage of time for viewers. For instance, the interior play moves at a rate of days, sometimes weeks between scenes. However, whole months pass between scenes in the exterior play. While hypothetically the audience could use the different rates of progress to keep the plays separate, the issue is that none of this is indicated clearly if at all apart from the stage directions.

Lastly, the thematic overlap between the two plays also contributes to why viewers have a difficult time keeping them distinct. Initially, the distinction between the subject matter of each play can be observed readily. At the beginning of the exterior play the theme of writing is clearly present. In Act 1, Scene 1 Gabe states that he is a writer and that he is currently working on a play about his life. He then explains that he used to believe the saying that "if you want to be a writer you gotta go out an' live" (394). However, he no longer believes this, implying that he tried this technique but it did not work. Instead, he proposes that he will make his play up as he goes along, while using actual events from his life. As we will later discover, he bases the interior play on his lived experience of growing up in an otherwise all white neighborhood, and the resulting trauma of being rejected by members of both the black and white communities.

We continue to observe the theme of writing in the second scene of the exterior play. In Act 1, Scene 2, Gabe focuses on the content of his writing and how being forced to sit alone with that content for extended periods of time leads him to want to commit acts of violence. He clarifies that although he is a black playwright, he is not like Black Arts writers. Further, although the content of the play focuses on the "treachery and harm" waiting for him, as a black man out in the world, he clarifies that it is not the same kind of violence that shows up in a play about "Negro self-pity" or "that ol' 'You owe me whitey party line'" (405).

However by the time we reach Act 2, Scene 1, the focus of the exterior play has shifted away from the process of writing to content similar to that featured in the interior play. For example, in the same scene Gabe discusses his childhood and how he was raised by his parents to be "clean and white" (415). His monologue parallels the previous

scene of the interior play in which Sweets Crane, Johnny's surrogate father, explains how he raised Johnny to have the Charlie Fever: "You got the Charlie fever, Johnny. Tha's what you got. I gave it to you. Took yo' chile's min' an' filled it with the Charlie Fever...Way we was raised, husslin' an' usin' yo' buisquit to pull quickies was the only way we could feel like we was men" (414).

Likewise, in Act 3, Scene 1 Gabe discusses the performativity of blackness and what it takes to be black. "They's mo to bein' black than meets Eye! Bein' black, is like the way ya walk an' talk!" (432). Again, the subject matter of outer Gabe's monologue parallels that of the previous scene of the interior play in which the nearly-white interior Gabe, in response to Johnny's suggestion that he is not black enough, asserts: "I mean black in here!...Don't make no difference what color I am. I'm still black" (427). This comment concerns the performativity of blackness much in the same way Gabe's monologue presents blackness as an identity which one comes to possess through performing certain social conventions. Similar to how an actor memorizes his lines and blocking, Gabe has internalized the social conventions of blackness which he then exhibits.

For example, he and Johnny play the dozens in Act 1, Scene 2, trading quips with one another. Not until Act 3, Scene 4 does Gabe return to discussing the theme of writing. However, it is still in relationship to the previous scene of the interior play in which his character "Gabe" kills Johnny.

The theme shifts even more so as Gordone critiques the black conventions which Gabe claims to have internalized. In the final scene of the exterior play, Gabe appears on stage to inform the audience that he has already started working on his next play in which

he will portray the part of the "The Black Woman in Mourning." Gabe is dressed in a black dress and veil, a clear nod to Johnny's murder and funeral which were staged in the final scene of the interior play. The interior play has now fully blurred into the exterior play. Further, that he says his next play will be about mourning, "the passing and ending of a people dying. Of a people dying into that new life" also creates a sense of thematic overlap, not only between the interior play and exterior play, but also extending into this new play which Gabe is preparing to start. Ultimately, his emphasis on the theme of death and rebirth impedes the viewer's ability to recognize the levels of distinction between the now three different plays.

Although Gordone's technical execution of the framing device is less polished than that of Genet's, the structural effect of it on *No Place* is no less impactful to our experience of the performance. In fact, it is crucial to our understanding of how we are expected to view, and as such interpret, the action of the interior play. We see this illustrated in the introduction to *No Place* when the narrator Gabe informs the audience that what we are about to watch is a work in progress: he will be writing the play in his head as he goes along (394-95). In effect, he has just informed us that what we are watching is the inner workings—the imagination, the thoughts, the emotions—of Gabe's mind come to life.

Gabe also informs us that the performance we are going to see is at once real and unreal. Although he appears on stage smoking a marijuana cigarette, Gabe cautions the audience against dismissing all that we see as fictional events: "[I] wanna warn you not to be thinkin' I'm tellin' you a bunch'a barefaced lies. An' no matter how far out I git, don't want you goin' out'a here with the idea what you see happenin' is all a figment of my

grassy imagination" (395). By situating the play he is writing within another play, Gabe

moves the audience further away from the action of the interior play, while

simultaneously moving them closer to the action of the outer play. Thus, the playwright

strengthens the audience's experience of the interior play as a fictionalized version of the

exterior play. It is important to acknowledge that the exterior play is also fiction.

However, it feels less like a fiction due to the fact that Gordone calls attention to the

artifice of the theater within this space. For instance, he has the character smoking

marijuana which was most likely not actual marijuana. Then there is the scene where

Gabe bites into the revolver and asks the audience to dine with him. It is a fiction but

Gabe intentionally breaks the fourth wall, bringing the audience into the illusion and

making it feel more real. Thus, he blurs the line between the artifice of the play and the

world in which it occurs.

     This distinction between fiction and real life, which Gordone wishes to maintain,

is why Gabe cautions the reader against assuming everything we see is part of the same

play. Because to do so would be to risk potentially misinterpreting, or worse missing

relevant information which would otherwise help us understand the meaning of

individual scenes within the interior play, as well as the entirety of *No Place* as a

performance. Rather, he wants us to view them as mirror images of one another. For

example, two scenes that are important to recognize as parts of the exterior play are the

soliloquies in Act 1, Scene 2, and Act 2, Scene 1 which are both delivered to the

audience. In the first example, Gabe explains that he feels so "vicious" when he is left

alone with his thoughts for too long that sometimes he thinks he wants to "go out an'

commit mass murder" (405). He is so vicious that he must sequester himself at home for fear of the "treachery an' harm" that will find him if he leaves the house (405).

This soliloquy is a continuation of the prologue in which he mentions that he has a problem with his temper. In Act 1, Scene 2 Gabe is sitting at a typewriter. He then removes the paper from the carriage, balls it up, and throws it at the audience. He immediately apologizes, explaining: "Excuse me. Forgot you were out there...Didn't mean to lose my temper. Something I've been working on all my life. Not losing my temper" (405). Does he lose his temper because he is displeased with the quality of his writing? Or, is it that he is displeased with the subject of his writing? As we will later see, it is the content of his writing which sets him off.

Conscious of the historical moment at which he is writing, Gabe recognizes that to call himself vicious and advertise that he wants to commit mass murder evokes the image of black nationalist artist Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and his notion of the Revolutionary Theater. "It must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating...The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths" (*Home* 236). Within the theater, the hate Baraka calls for takes the form of scenes depicting the violent murder of whites at the hands of black militant heroes. While Gabe does incorporate similar acts of violence into his play (Johnny Williams, a black small-time crook, shoots and kills two white mafiosi at the end of the play), it is important for him that the audience not get the impression that he shares this same hate for white people. He explains: "But don't misunderstand me. Because I call myself a black playwright, don't git the impression I'm

hung up on crap like persecution an' hatred. Cause I ain't! I'm gonna leave that violence jazz to them cats who are better at it than me" (*No Place to be Somebody* 405). Gabe wants us to know that the violence we see in his play is something altogether different from that which Baraka and others depict.

In the second example, Gabe recites his poem "Whiter than Snow," describing the time when he and his family moved from their black neighborhood to the all-white neighborhood across the tracks. At first his family encounters racism from his new neighbors, but eventually, they gain acceptance. At the same time, they also have to deal with bullying from the black children from their old neighborhood. After they move, he and his siblings begin playing with the white children and no longer play with the black children. The black children take this to mean that they are trying to be like their white neighbors and become "angry, jealous and mean!" (Gordone 416). Whenever they would see Gabe and his siblings alone, his former neighbors would racially police them by chasing them down and then kicking them, slapping them, spitting on their clothes, and calling them "dirty black names" (Gordone 416). Similarly, Gabe breaks solidarity and over-identifies with the white mobster Pete Zerroni when he refuses to help Johnny and tells him "I ain't got no stomach for this personal war you got ag'inst the white man" (Gordone 449). This leads Johnny to racially police him by calling him homophobic slurs similar to how the kids call him dirty-black names. Later on, when Gabe and his family try to move back into their old neighborhood, their former neighbors racially police them once again, only this time they go as far as to disown them. In both instances of racial policing, Gabes loses his temper which leads him to call them "niggers" in retaliation.

Gabe's use of this epithet represents an act of violence against his black neighbors. In *Byways*, noted American traveler Clifton Johnson observes that each instance where whites used the term "nigger" was "equivalent to a kick" (Ritterhouse 42). It does not matter that he is a black person using the term against other blacks. It still has the same impact as if a white person were using it.[21] His use of the word is still an act of violence, as he uses it with the intent of hurting the black children in the same ways whites would. This scene is helpful in that it establishes a pattern of behavior that will help us understand the final scene of the framed play. It reveals how Gabe's violence towards others is reactive and directly tied to his being racially policed. Gabe experiences racism from his neighbors but does not retaliate against them, other than by trying to earn their acceptance. It is only when his black neighbors racially police him that he loses his temper and reacts violently. Thus, the poem prepares us for the moment he is willing to kill Johnny for calling him names but is not willing to kill Zerroni or his men.

By repeating the event from his childhood in which he lost his temper through his confrontation with Johnny towards the end of the play, Gabe reveals how he wishes it never happened. At the same time, it reveals his fixation on this event. Therefore, that Gabe is unable to move past this event of racial treason and policing and finds himself reproducing it in his play all these years later is evidence that he is traumatized.

Depicting Trauma in *No Place to be Somebody*

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[21] Invisible Man expresses a similar sentiment in response to Dr. Bledsoe (a fellow black man) calling him nigger. "It was as though he'd struck me. I stared across the desk thinking, He called me that . . . 'Answer me, boy!' That, I thought, noticing the throbbing of a vein that rose between his eyes, thinking, He called me that" (*Invisible Man* 139).

In "Notes on Trauma and Community" sociologist Kai Erikson defines trauma as "an assault from outside that breaks into the space one occupies as a person and damages the interior." However, he goes on to explain that there are two major ways we can think of this term: as the traumatic experience (the assault) and as the traumatic condition (the damage) (Erikson 456). The traumatic experience can "result from a constellation of life's events as well as from a discrete event—from a prolonged exposure to danger as well as a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a period of attenuation and wearing away as well as a moment of shock" (Erikson 457). The traumatic condition refers to the "resulting state" of the trauma. Symptoms of trauma include: "periods of nervousness, restless activity—scanning the world for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages, reacting with a start to everyday sights and sounds—against a numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, a loss of various motor skills, and a general closing off of the spirit as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm" (457). However, of all of the symptoms of trauma, the most characteristic is that it "involves a continual reliving of the original experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances" (457-458). If we apply Erikson's definition to *No Place*, it becomes evident that Gabe has been traumatized. The moment he commits racial treason and is policed represents a traumatic experience: It can be characterized as violent, sudden, and something which changes Gabe's personality as it causes him to lose his temper.

Likewise, he exhibits several of the symptoms of a traumatic condition. He displays nervousness and restless activity as he admits that he fears that "all manner of

treachery an' harm" is waiting for him out in the world. He shows the potential for explosive rages when he talks about wanting to "go out an' commit mass murder." He also closes himself off as he isolates from the outside world for "days, weeks, or months as a time" to think and write (Gordone 405). However, of all the symptoms he exhibits the most significant as it pertains to this discussion is that he relives the original trauma experience in a couple different forms.

First, Gabe relives the original trauma experience in the form of hallucinations and flashbacks within the context of the exterior play. What then is the interior play but an extended hallucination which takes place in the mind of Gabe? While the interior play is based on events which happened in his life, this is not to say that it is the same as a memory. Rather, the frame play represents a kind of memory and fantasy combination—a daydream—in which he can reenact a version of events which actually took place. Likewise, the poem "Whiter than Snow" could be considered a kind of flashback. Gabe shares the memory of when he committed racial treason and was policed by his community in vivid detail. Not only does he detail the events surrounding the treason and policing, but also the specific ways in which he was policed.

Finally, Gabe relives the original trauma by "compulsively seeking out similar circumstances." Erikson equates this compulsory seeking to being possessed by the traumatic event itself. He explains: "[O]ur memory repeats to us what we haven't yet come to terms with, what still haunts us. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, occupies you, takes you over, [and] becomes a dominating feature of your interior

landscape." Thus, he concludes: "The traumatic experience possesses one, takes one over, and in the process threatens to drain one and leave one empty" (Erikson 458).

Possession is the perfect word to describe this experience as we see that Gabe is possessed by Johnny who represents the "ghost" of the children from the original traumatic experience. Johnny comes to take over the narrative as he completely dominates Gabe and the other characters of the play. Furthermore, Johnny's identity as a possessing spirit is underscored by the fact that he is "possessed" by a figure named Machine Dog, the leader of an imaginary black militant death cult whose members are required to sacrifice themselves for the race. At the opening of the scene, Machine Dog explains to Johnny that he has quit his job as a mechanic so that he can focus his efforts on fixing his black brothers. He reveals his plan for fixing the race as he has Johnny recite the following command:

> I have been chosen to be the nex' brother to live on in the hearts an' min's a' the enemy host...My duty will be to ha'nt they cripple an' sore min's. I will cling to the innermo's closets'a they brains an' agonize them; Maniacks though they is already! The mo' they try to cast me out, the mo' they torment will be! (Gordone 444).

From this command, it becomes clear that Machine Dog's plan is to have Johnny sacrifice himself in death and then possess those brothers who have betrayed the race. Take possession of another brother is what Machine Dog does at the end of the interior play when he appears to "Gabe," who previously could not see him, and calls "Gabe" a traitor. However, this is also what Johnny does to Gabe throughout the interior play as he repeatedly confronts Gabe over his choice not to get involved with Johnny's criminal activities. The more that Gabe resists, the more Johnny torments him by mocking him, until the end when he explodes in a lengthy tirade of homophobic slurs. Even Johnny's

use of homophobic slurs becomes a reflection of the original event. In the same ways the children play on Gabe's anxieties over his black identity, Johnny plays on Gabe's anxieties over heteromasculinity. Therefore, by having Johnny recite this command, Gabe makes us aware of the ways that his exterior character has been possessed by Johnny all along.

The interior play is a repetition of the original traumatic experience depicted in the exterior play. While it may not appear so at first, this becomes clear once we consider the ways in which several key aspects of the framed play parallel those of the poem "Whiter than Snow" which Gabe recites. For instance, Gabe deludes himself into thinking that he can make it in the theater as a black actor, in the same ways his family deludes themselves into thinking that they can gain the acceptance of their white neighbors. Despite having been rejected in the past, he remains hopeful that he will land a part in a play. His optimism pays off as he receives a callback for a second audition for the part of a guitar player in a play entitled "The Tooth of a Red Tiger." That the producers give Gabe the script implies that he has the part. As Melvin, an aspiring dancer and waiter at Johnny's bar, exclaims: "They gave you the script, didn't they?" (Gordone 423). Unfortunately, Gabe's excitement is short-lived as he discovers that the part is given to another black actor as he does not have what the producers are looking for (Gordone 427). Thus, Gabe is provisionally accepted for the part, just as his family was provisionally accepted by their white neighbors. More importantly, he deludes himself into thinking that nothing will happen to them if they tell the police the truth about the shootout. Johnny knows that telling the truth would only incriminate them for the theft of

the file and the murders of Zerroni's men. It would be the word of two black men against the word of a mobster with connections in the police department and courts system.

Also, Johnny polices Gabe by calling him a "lousy, yellow, screamin' faggot coward!" (450) in the same ways that the black children from his old neighborhood call him names, among other things. The final confrontation between the two friends starts after Gabe refuses to help Johnny lie to the police about the shootout so that he can continue to carry out his plan to blackmail Zerroni. Johnny tries to persuade Gabe to change his mind by reminding him that he is already an accomplice in that he helped Johnny hide a copy of a stolen file containing incriminating information on Zerroni and his associates, instead of handing it over to the police when they inquire about it. Thus, he is partially responsible for the shootout which occurs when Zerroni's men come back to the bar looking for the file. Gabe acknowledges his involvement but insists: "That's where I got off. I ain't got no stomach for this personal war you got ag'inst the white man" (449). When Gabe withdraws his support and refers to Johnny's plan as a "personal war" he distances himself from his friend. Likewise, when he expresses his desire to give back the file and tell the truth, Gabe is in effect choosing to help Zerroni instead of continuing to help Johnny. Therefore, Johnny experiences Gabe's refusal to continue helping him as racial treason in the same ways the children experience Gabe's inability to live or play with them any longer as an act of racial treason.

Lastly, Gabe loses his temper and assaults Johnny, in the same ways that he lost his temper and assaulted the children. The children police Gabe, humiliating him so that he might change his behavior. The children also do this with their own interests in mind, as they benefit by discouraging other members from the group from doing the same

thing, protecting group solidarity from future erosion. So, too, Gabe's return to the community would restore group solidarity. It would also benefit Gabe as it saves him from the disappointment of realizing his delusion. In the same ways, Johnny polices Gabe to provoke him. He humiliates Gabe in an attempt to get him to recognize the delusion he is living in and to turn from it before it is too late. However, instead of heeding the discipline of both the children and Johnny, Gabe loses his temper and lashes out in ways which forever haunt him.

The culmination of the interior play hinges on "Gabe's" masculine heterosexuality being called into question. Although the action of the interior play has been building up to this final confrontation between Johnny and Gabe over his racial identity, it still comes as a shock when it happens precisely because Johnny's question takes this particular form. If Johnny is concerned with Gabe's blackness, why then does he articulate his critique in terms of gender and sexual identity? Through the discourse of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka and other black arts practitioners redefined and repositioned black identity within the popular imagination of the dominant white culture by subverting and inverting the historical meanings of the racial signifiers "white" and "black." If in the past black was marked as inferior, feminine and other, within the context of the new aesthetic it now stood as a symbol of pride, strength, self-respect and, more importantly, power and productivity. Conversely, black arts leaders aligned whiteness with those terms—femininity and homosexuality—which stood in opposition to the vision of strong virile masculine heterosexuality they idealized. This is the discourse which exterior Gabe alludes to in Act 1, Scene 2 when he refers to that "violent jazz" and "You owe me whitey party line" (405). Thus, Johnny questioning "Gabe's"

gender and sexual identity is tantamount to his questioning "Gabe's" blackness as it is a direct reference to this larger discourse of blackness.

The moment Johnny polices Gabe's performance of his gender and sexual identities—which is to say his blackness—is significant as it represents the total dissolution of the barrier which separates the two worlds of the respective plays. We would expect that the death of Johnny would signal the end of the exterior Gabe's experience of reliving the childhood trauma, which the interior play represents. However, that the discourse on blackness of the exterior play has spread into the interior play suggests that Gabe's reliving of his trauma does not end with Johnny's murder. While we can read the final scene of the interior play to mean that Gabe, in completing the interior play, has finally cured himself of his trauma, I argue that it is evidence to the contrary. Instead of being set free, Gabe is propelled into an endless loop of performances, which ultimately comment on the extent to which he is traumatized by the event from his childhood.

(Re)Restaging Gabe's Original Trauma

When Gabe appears on stage in the final scene of Act 3, he dresses up as a woman in mourning with a shawl draped over his head. He knows that his appearance is shocking as he admits to doing this intentionally. He taunts the audience: "Like my costume? You like it? You don't like it! I know what I am by what I see in your faces" (450). He explains that his purpose in taking up this role is to "provoke" our attention. That he presumes the audience does not like his costume speaks to his anxieties about race and his self-perception. Just as the character "Gabe" from the interior play declares that he is

black enough although he lacks the requisite racial phenotype, so too does Gabe from the exterior play declare himself to be a black playwright although he lacks the requisite commitment to Black Arts politics. The emphasis Gabe places on his blackness speaks to his fear of being perceived as wanting to be like whites, the perception which leads to his being traumatized by the black children from his neighborhood in the first place. Unable to confront his feelings of fear and anxiety directly, Gabe externalizes them by dressing in drag and then projecting them onto his viewers' reactions to his appearance. In this way he exhibits a compulsion to seek out similar circumstances to those of his original trauma. Gabe anticipates that his drag performance will provoke the hostility of black viewers, both in the audience and on the street, similar to how he and his siblings provoked the hostility of the children from the black neighborhood; the difference between these scenarios being that, whereas, the latter was unintentional, the former is done with the anticipation that it will provoke viewers to police him.

As Gabe projects his internalized self-image onto viewers, he transforms them into a set of mirrors. However, because they are in fact people and not "metallic reflections" they can only hold his image for so long before they lose interest (450). Therefore in order to keep their attention he, "must change [his] part over and over again" (450). Keeping in mind that "The Black Woman in Mourning" is already a mirror image of his own anxieties, by treating the audience as a mirror Gabe creates the ultimate mise-en-abyme: an endless and circular projection of his negative self-image and the trauma it signifies. Thus, we can confidently surmise that he is still traumatized as he informs us that there is no end in sight as to the number of performances he plans to stage.

Indeed, he goes on to explain that what we are viewing is merely a rehearsal, that tomorrow is when the actual performance will begin. But unlike his former role as "Gabe" which involved murder, his new role involves rebirth. As part of his portrayal of the "Black Woman in Mourning" Gabe will weep, wail and mourn for "the passing and the ending of a people dying. Of a people dying into that new life" (Gordone 451). Just as Gabe's negative self-projection is reborn through his taking on a new role, so too is Johnny reborn as a member of the "people dying" who Gabe grieves (Gordone 451). And it is with this phrase that Gabe solidifies the connection between Johnny and the children for viewers.

Although Johnny is only one person, Gabe refers to him as a "people." This reference echoes the guilty verdict which Machine Dog delivers to Gabe in the previous scene. Machine Dog explains that by killing Johnny, Gabe, in effect, has also:

> ...kil't all them li'l innusunt cherbs'a ghetto! Them li'l rams who been hatin' 'thority eb'm from the cradle! All them holy de-lin-cunts who been the true creators'a unsolved thef's an' killin's! You has slenw an' slaughtered them young goateed billygoats who ben dedicated to that sanctified an' precious art'a lootin' the destruction'a private public property! You has hung an' lynched the black angels'a color who went by that high code'a rooftops an' been baptised in the stink of urine scented hallways! You has burnt an' melted down a million switchblade knives an' razors an' broke preshus bottles'a communion upon the empty white-paved streets'a the enemy host! An' lef' the brothers thirsty an' col' to bang the doors'a the guilty white samaritan! You has crushed the very life fum black an' profane souls! Hordes'a un-re-gen-rants! An' smashed the spirit an' holy ghost fum rollers an' dancers who founded they faith on black, human sufferin'! Burnt an' tortured souls who knew th'ough the power of love that they trials an' trib'lashuns could not be leg'slated away by no co't, no congruss, not eb'm God Hisse'f! You has scortched an' scalded them black Moheekans an' stuffed them in the very stoves they cooked on! Se la! An' ay-man! (450).

Similar to how Gabe uses the phrase "a people dying," Machine Dog uses phrases like "innusunt cherbs'a ghetto," "black angels'a color," and "black an' profane souls" here to refer to Johnny. Not only do these phrases evoke a similar sense of plurality but

also life after death. Further, by using adjectives like little, young, cherubs and angels to describe Johnny, Machine Dog infantilizes him as though he were a child. Likewise, the language which Machine Dog uses to describe Johnny and the environment he grew up in also closely parallels that which the exterior Gabe uses to describe the black children and the surroundings of his former neighborhood in the poem "Whiter than Snow." Like the children, Johnny grows up in a slum, or as Machine Dog puts it, "the ghetto." Johnny's ghetto is characterized by features similar to the hovels in which the children live, such as damaged property and overcrowding. It is also marked by the presence of "garbage and filth" which take the form of melted knives and razors, broken bottles, and urine scented hallways. Likewise, Johnny is also described as being dirty and black like the children. However, whereas the dirtiness of the children is a marker of poverty, in the case of Johnny it is also a marker of criminality, violence, immorality and ultimately death.

If Johnny—which is to say the children—is reborn, then what are we to make of the fact that Gabe appears to mourn his death? The fact that the children are dying into new life means that they will continue to haunt Gabe's mind. Therefore, when he mourns their collective passing it is less from a place remorse and more from a place of resentment. Further, that his trauma is wrapped up in the children's racial policing of him, it means that if they live on so too do his symptoms. Thus, we can read the end of the play as marking the beginning of a new iteration of the reenactment of his trauma.

Challenging Representations of the Race Traitor as "Monster"

That racial treason and policing could be traumatizing for Gabe suggests that the traitor feels something in response to the treason and policing. This depiction of the race

134

traitor as responsive stands in contrast with other theatrical representations of the traitor by Black playwrights from the period, most notably Amiri Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life* (1967) and Ron Milner's *The Monster* (1968). *Great Goodness of Life* depicts the trial of a middle-aged black man named Court Royal by an unidentified Judge who is only heard but never seen on stage. He is on trial for "shielding a wanted criminal. A murder" (62). Court initially protests to his characterization as a criminal, explaining that there must be a mistake as he has worked at the Post Office 35 years and is now a supervisor there. Later he explains that he has a home, a car, and a club (71). Moreover, he argues that it is impossible as he has not had the time to harbor a murderer as he has had the same daily routine for years: "I work for eight hours, then home, and television, dinner, then bowling (72). However, the Judge insists he is guilty and allows for him to call his lawyer, a John Breck. When attorney Breck appears on stage Court is horrified at the sight of him. The stage directions dictate:

> *A bald-headed smiling house slave in a wrinkled dirty tuxedo crawls across the stage; he has a wire attached to his back, leading offstage. A huge key in the side of his head. We hear the motors 'animating' his body groaning like tremendous weights. He grins, and slobbers, turning his head slowly from side to side. He grins. He makes little quivering sounds.* (64)

Assuming there must be a mistake, Court demands to know, "what kind of foolishness is this?" (64). When he asks to know the name of the creature in front of him, it simply responds, "Plead Guilty." It warns him that it is the only way for him to get off easy. His only other option is death. When he continues to demand to see his lawyer, Attorney Breck finally addresses him directly at which point it becomes clear Court does not recognize his friend. Attorney Breck insists: "I have always looked this way Mr. Royal. Always" (66).

Attorney Beck is not the only monster on stage. Court is depicted as being a grotesque monster who does whatever he has to protect himself and the social status he has acquired. The two men are then joined on stage by the voice of a young black man who berates Court for not having listened to his warnings in the past. The voice, questioning Court, demands to know:

> Now will you believe me, stupid fool? Will you believe what I tell you or your eyes? Even your eyes. You're here with me, with us, all of us, and you can't understand. Plead guilty you are guilty, stupid nigger. You'll die, they'll kill you, and you don't know why now will you believe me? Believe me, half-white coward. Will you believe reality? (66)

The voice of the Judge then demands that the young black man be beaten and silenced. As he is taken away he pronounces judgment on Court: "And you Court Royal you let them take me. You liar. You weakling. You woman in the face of degenerates. You let me be taken. How can you walk the earttttt…." (66). It is later revealed that the young black man is the murderer and ultimately turns out to be Court's son. Realizing his guilt by association Court confesses to the crime; however, the Judge gives him one last opportunity to be forgiven. He must complete a rite in which the murderer is killed. Court agrees and then shoots his son in the face, killing him. In this way, he commits racial treason against his son, and with him all of the other black male revolutionaries whom his son symbolizes. Having purchased his forgiveness and freedom with the life of his son, who is symbolic of the countless black men who have been sacrificed, he rejoices: "My soul is white as snow. White as snow. I'm free. I'm free. My life is a beautiful thing" (78). Interestingly, Gordone would also use this notion of assimilation and white acceptance being salvific when Gabe recites his soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 3 which opens with him singing a hymn:

> Whiter than snow, yes!
> Whiter than snow!
> Now, was me, and I shall be
> Whiter than snow! (415)

Without so much as a second thought, Court asks his wife where his bowling bag is so that he can go down to the alley and then exits the stage. Thus, he emerges as a monster in the sense that he can kill his son without hesitation. Furthermore, he shows no remorse but keeps living his life as if nothing has happened.

Similarly, Milner's *The Monster* depicts the racial policing of the black Dean of a college by a group of black students. It is revealed that, like Attorney Breck, the Dean is a kind of automaton who has been programmed by white people to diffuse black student protests on campus by pretending to be a revolutionary (he wears shades, a fake Afro and beard, a bulletproof vest around campus). One evening, while the Dean's wife, a white woman named Jane, is away, the students drug the Dean with a truth serum which allows them to control the Dean so that they can reprogram him. To access his "programming," the students must recite the key-words: "Prestige! Status! Security! White acceptance!" (Milner 96). As they do this, the Dean grows increasingly sexually excited until he begins to "whimper, moan and squirm like a woman at the crest of lovemaking" (Milner 96). The students are so repulsed by this display that they hide the Dean from the view of the audience. After the students fully "activate" him, they attempt to reprogram him by chanting the keywords once more except this time they insert the phrase 'Black man's' before each key-word, as in: "Black man's prestige! Black men's Status! Black men's security! Black men's acceptance." (Milner 102). The students send the Dean out to deliver a message, but he soon turns around and begins heading back to his home. It is clear to the students that his reprogramming has not worked. Disappointed, they resolve

that the only way to neutralize him is to kill him. So they stage a scene to make it look like he has hanged himself. The play ends with the students leaving the scene of the murder and discussing their plans to track down other monsters like the Dean.

Both of these representations conceptualized the race traitor as someone who was unaffected, unaware, and unchanged by his actions or the actions of the community to police him. That the experience of committing racial treason and being punished meant nothing to him was to suggest that the race traitor was in fact, to use Milner's phrase, a monster. The common perception was that traitors did not care about betraying the community nor about being policed. And even if they did respond to being policed, given the first opportunity they would, like the Dean, return to betraying the community because their love for whiteness was that much stronger than their love for their own race. This depiction of the race traitor was intentional on the part of Baraka and others. First, they intended that these representations would serve as a commentary on white society. As Larry Neal explains in his essay "And Shine Swam On" (1968): "The white world—the West—is seen now as a dying creature, totally bereft of spirituality. This being the case, the only hope is some kind of psychic withdrawal from its values and assumptions" (Neal 75). That both Court and the Dean are depicted as being soulless, conscious-less monsters speaks to the effect which integration has on the black man. It makes you "sick" in the sense that it makes you do things that are perverted, twisted, and shameful without recognition of the negative effect it has on you or the community. Second, it was intentional in that they were constructing a narrative of the traitor that ultimately served as a foil for their construction of the black militant figure. If the race traitor was sick, then the black militant figure was the epitome of healthy black identity.

Gordone engages with this notion of monstrosity as excess throughout the final scene of the exterior play. The image of the nearly-white masculine Gabe in a dress is—to use Gabe's word—provocative in a number of ways. First, in that it is shockingly ridiculous. Second, the image of Gabe in the dress and veil highlights his supposed physical oddity as it emphasizes the stark contrast between the whiteness of his fair complexion and the blackness of his clothes. Thus, he calls to mind the image of a "circus freak" on display before an audience. Third, that he is a man wearing a dress calls to mind the homophobic notions of sexual deviancy which were attached to cross dressing.

The defiant tone with which Gabe delivers his final monologue alerts us to the fact that his costume is intended to mock Johnny as opposed to mourn his passing. That this scene was intended to be satirical is confirmed by critic Walter Kerr who found the costume to be "false to the play's tone." Elaborating on this position, Kerr explains: "it is too thin and obvious in its humor for the weight and willingness of the text as a whole and should, I think, be dropped" (22). While I agree with Kerr that the scene does feel out of place within the larger performance, I disagree that it should be dropped altogether as I believe it is ultimately a critique of the hypermasculine-homophobic tendencies of Baraka and other Black Arts leaders.

Instead of reading it as a departure from the tone of the play, I suggest that this scene, in particular Gabe's costume, be read as a kind of willful, celebratory protest to the politics of black identity of the 1960s and 70s which mirrors the climactic moment in which Gabe kills Johnny. We can view Gabe's dress as a radical protest gesture in that it functions as a source of empowerment and celebration for him. The dress is the excessive version of the race traitor figure as imagined by Baraka. By this I mean that it is the

accumulation of all those figures--the sexual deviant and the racial deviant--black artists excluded from the black community. By putting these figures on at once, Gabe seems to be saying to the audience that he is acting it out this way because this is how Johnny, the children, and black artists like Baraka ultimately see him. Thus, if he seems monstrous to the audience it is from our perspective and not his own.

Further, the form of the play itself performatively reproduces the kind of excessive monstrosity the dress represents in three ways: First, the play is extremely lengthy. The original version of the play ran for nearly 4 hours, and the revised version, while having been cut substantially, still ran for nearly 3 hours. Second, many viewers believed it contained too much content for a single play. As critic Clayton Riley, (a Black Power activist and friend of Gordone's) observed, there were too many characters being introduced and developed. He argued that although they were interesting, several of the characters could have been saved for another play. Likewise, he felt that Gordone tried to do and say too much in his first play. Although Riley recognized the merits of Gordone's experience and talents, he felt that they should have been spread out over several projects. Third, and most importantly, the play incorporated an interracial cast. Black Arts plays did not feature interracial casts. When there were white characters depicted they were played by black actors, as seen with the Dean's wife from *The Monster*. However, Gordone broke with this tradition and wrote a play which called for an interracial cast. In this way the form of the play represents a collision of two worlds which never align comfortably, as seen most directly in the interior and exterior plays. However, more significantly and on another level, it represents the collision of the black and white communities which Gabe straddles. In the end we see how Gabe does not have a space to

140

be a writer, or as it were "somebody." Therefore, he willingly occupies the space of the monstrous, the traitor, in order to try and open up a space for himself.

No Place ultimately complicates the way we think about the race traitor by countering this notion that he is a monster. Opposed to the image of the traitor as an unfeeling automaton, dehumanized and made monstrous, Gabe is traumatized by racial policing. That said, he still emerges on stage as something monstrous in the end. Gabe is stuck in a repetitive cycle of reliving the trauma, an illness for which the play does not offer a cure. While he is willing to acknowledge what happened, Gabe is unwilling to accept full responsibility for his actions and the way it impacts the community. For, just as he insists that the kids were wrong that he was trying to be like his white neighbors, he insists that he did not mean to kill Johnny. Only when he takes full responsibility for his actions towards the community will he be able to move on with his life. In my next chapter, I will examine John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* as an example of what it looks like to demonstrate this kind of accountability, and the restorative impact it can have on the race traitor and his relationship with the community.

CHAPTER 5

(DE)COMPARTMENTALIZATION AND THE RACE TRAITOR:

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S *BROTHERS AND KEEPERS*

In his memoir *Brothers and Keepers,* which bears John Edgar Wideman's name alone but which he produces through conversations with his brother Robby, Wideman figuratively "pulls the mask off" of the American prison system and the Steel crisis of the 1980s to provide an intimate look at the impact which mandatory prison sentences and the recession of the steel industry have on his family and friends in Homewood--a predominantly black neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

While driving to visit Robby who is serving a life-sentence in prison for the accidental murder of a white man (a local fence named Nichola "Nickie" Morena), Wideman surveys the terrain of his hometown which bears the signs of an "atrocious crime":

> Someone had stripped Homewood bare, mounted it, and ridden it till it collapsed and lay dying, sprawled beneath the rider, who still spurred it and bounced up and down and screamed, Giddyup. I knew someone had done that to Homewood, to its people, to me. The evidence plain as day through the windshield of my car. (40).

The "rape" of Homewood, as Wideman puts it (40), was not an instantaneous one-time occurrence. Rather it was the accumulation of the multiple realities of racism, unemployment, depopulation, poverty, drugs, and street crime over time. Wideman had witnessed this process, but relieved himself of the responsibility of intervening—he had made it out of town on a basketball scholarship to an Ivy League college.

Despite the physical and emotional distance Wideman tried to put between himself and Homewood, he explains that he still "knew too much" (40). To survive while away at the University of Pennsylvania, Wideman learned to mask the fear, and more importantly the anger he felt over the constant reminders of the realities he witnessed during his visits home "each summer or for the Christmas holidays" (40), which he thought he had escaped but discovered were still operating on him as one of the few black students attending a predominantly white university. At the same time that he learned to mask his fear and anger, he also learned to mask the guilt he felt over having made the conscious decision to abandon his brother and his community—which is to say his decision to commit racial treason against the other members of his race.

In other words, the same survival mechanism of masking which was used by blacks against whites in order to protect themselves was now being used by the race traitor—in this case Wideman—against other blacks to save himself from being punished by other blacks instead of whites. Therefore, just as Wideman pulls the mask off of these larger social calamities, he also pulls the mask off of the performance of masking in African-American culture. However, instead of simply focusing on what the process looks like from the outside, Wideman goes a step further, offering to readers his best approximation of what it *feels* like from the inside for black men to mask themselves—an experience which he refers to as "compartmentalization."

According to Wideman, "compartmentalization" is a survival mechanism (he also refers to it as a strategy, a tactic, and a trick) where you divide yourself into two parts--an exterior and an interior--in order to deny "disruptive emotions" like anger, hurt, and fear (11). The exterior part is like a mask you wear, similar to the way an actor plays a role;

143

while the interior part is like a psychological "sanctuary," or an internal space, where your thoughts and feelings are housed (32). It is important to clarify that compartmentalization is not the same as masking, although they are closely related. Compartmentalization is the *internal* process which makes it possible for you to wear the mask without betraying your true thoughts and feelings, especially to those who would seek to humiliate you for their own entertainment. By holding back our true thoughts and feelings we deny our detractors the satisfaction of seeing us upset, or in the case of James Baldwin's rage which I will discuss in more detail, having an excuse with which to kill us. Thus, compartmentalization becomes a way to maintain a sense of dignity in an otherwise humiliating and dangerous situation.

Although in the short term compartmentalization proves to be a useful solution to his problems, as it allows Wideman to maintain the facade of coolness at school and loyalty at home by creating an invisible mental repository for vulnerable thoughts and feelings he does not want others to know about, in the end it functions more like a prison. He explains that the psychological cage which he built to keep others out became the same walls which prevent him from accessing his emotions. As he is no longer able to get in touch with them, Wideman's feelings begin to take on a life of their own, manifesting themselves in ways which begin to threaten his career, his marriage, and his sanity. In order to regain control of his life, he enlists the help of his brother with the longer process of learning how to decompartmentalize. By confessing but more importantly confiding to Robby the secret of his racial treason, Wideman is able to restore his connections with his lost emotions as well as the outside world. Through their correspondence and interviews, Wideman ultimately uncovers a healthy alternative to the classic method of

compartmentalization: instead of hiding one's emotions away within the self, he

encourages black men and women to hide them away within one another. It is through

this radical act of confiding in his brother, as well as re-assuming responsibility for his

brother and his brother's burdens, that Wideman begins to experience healing and

restoration from his past. The contribution Wideman is making is to show not only how

compartmentalization actually feels, but also how it is undone—how it can actually be

healed. And in so doing he provides us with a literary representation of what it looks like

for the race traitor to return home to his people. Before moving to a discussion of

Wideman's account, I offer the following literary and cultural history in order to help

provide a better understanding of his contribution to the theory and practice of

compartmentalization.

An Historical Account of Compartmentalization

Dating back to slavery, black Americans used compartmentalization to avoid

having to publicly display their true thoughts and feelings over their subordination to

whites. This is best illustrated in the oft quoted lyrics of the work song "Me and My

Captain"[22] from Lawrence Gellert's collection *Negro Songs of Protest*[23] (1936):

> Got one mind for white folks to see,
> 'Nother for what I know is me;
> He don't know, he don't know my mind
> When he see me laughing
> Laughing just to keep from crying (Dundes, 489)

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[22] Captain was a common term for master. We see an example of this in Frederick Douglass narrative when he states: "we seldom called him 'master;' we generally called him 'Captain Auld' (52).

[23] Recently, scholars have called into question the authenticity of the blues. However, it was commonly cited by numerous black scholars and historians and still serves as an excellent example of how the mind played an integral role in compartmentalization.

The laughter slaves wore in front of their masters, as well as other whites, was but one example of what literary historian Trudier Harris calls the ritualized performances of slavery.[24] In *Exorcising Blackness*, Harris identifies other examples, which included: "fooling ole master about the location of a recently cooked pig, or swearing that a plow really did break of its own accord" (3). To a large extent, these performances were motivated by the desire to keep from being punished. As the master's role was to "keep them subservient, to be ever watchful for potential rebellion from them, and to maintain his superiority under all circumstances," he was constantly testing his slaves "to gauge their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their existence (3-4). Harris notes that the average slave knew that if he revealed his true thoughts and feelings about his enslavement, "he might find himself with additional lashes or sold onto some plantation 'down river' which [would] be much harsher than his present condition" (4). Therefore, slaves compartmentalized their dissatisfaction for their own protection.

Although wearing the mask of laughter appeared on the surface to be an act of submission, for many it was actually a self-protective act of defiance. This is the premise of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask," in which he famously proclaimed:

> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask.

These performances were defiant not only insofar as they helped ensure the enslaved person's protection and survival, but also insofar as they enabled them to

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[24] In *On the Real*, Mel Watkins identifies several other examples of sabotage which blacks used to avoid working, including theft, arson and the destruction of crops. (51)

"salvage some dignity" (Harris 2). Although in many cases whites knew that slaves were lying during the various ritualized performances, there were many instances where they were genuinely deceived because enslaved blacks were just that good. In *On the Real Side* (1994), American critic and historian of African American comedy Mel Watkins cites the comments of two slaveholders who attested to the ability of their slaves to outsmart them:

> "So deceitful is the Negro," one explained, "that as far as my own experience extends I could never in a single instance decipher his character...We planters could never get at the truth." Another claimed: "He is never off guard. He is perfectly skilled at hiding his emotions...His master knows him not." (51)

The slaves' ability to outsmart their master and other whites who were testing them by "puttin' on" represented a significant victory in a world otherwise characterized by defeat. While it in no way made up for their enslavement, the fact that slaves could regularly beat whites at their own game—a fact which even slaveholders had to admit— was empowering, and therefore something to celebrate. This can be observed in the refrain in which the speaker states: "He don't know, he don't know my mind." The repetition of this line emphasizes the significance which the master's ignorance holds for the speaker. On the one hand we can read this emphasis as though the speaker is lamenting the fact that his true identity, along with his thoughts and emotions, is suppressed as he is forced to "laugh to keep from crying." On the other hand, however, we can also read it as though he is celebrating his acumen for subversion which surpasses that of his master, who buys into the performance. Thus, compartmentalizing allowed enslaved blacks, like the speaker, to still think thoughts and feel emotions which were prohibited, while, at the same time, avoiding detection and punishment, thereby outwitting their masters who were supposedly superior.

Black Americans continued to compartmentalize themselves after slavery and Reconstruction well into the 20th century. Similar to the way slaves were forced to socially dissemble their dissatisfaction over their enslavement, emancipated blacks and their offspring who lived in the south were expected to hide their dissatisfaction with their treatment as second-class citizens under the racial etiquette of Jim Crow rule. For example, according to the racial etiquette blacks were not permitted to eat or drink with whites. Sociologist Bertram W. Doyle in his study *The Etiquette of Race Relations* (1937)*,* discusses this rule in further detail, explaining:

> Negroes are not, and do not expect to be served in white-restaurants, hotels, or drug or department stores. Yet they frequently buy food from those places. In such instances they may stand--they do not expect to sit--at the rear of the counter...In most cases, however, they take their food outside before eating it, although they may occasionally eat in the kitchen. One Negro traveler, upon entering an eating place where his presence was frowned upon, hastened to remark that he wanted some sandwiches 'in a paper sack"...A Negro may not drink Coca-Cola at a soda fountain for white people, but he may present a tin bucket...He, of course, drinks his Coca-cola outside. (146-47)

Considering that blacks had to stand while waiting for their food (if they were even allowed to place an order at all) only to have to turn around and eat it from a paper sack or bucket, either in the kitchen or outdoors, it is understandable that many grew frustrated under these circumstances.

Famed author James Baldwin himself recounts in his collection of essays *Notes on a Native Son* (1955), a story of how he once grew so angry that he attacked a white waitress for refusing him service. He actually wanted to strangle her; however, when his ruse of trying to get her to come closer by pretending not to hear her fails, he settles for picking the nearest object ("an ordinary water mug half-full") and hurling it at her with all his strength (594). This, of course, was not the first time Baldwin had been refused

service (only moments before the attack he is denied service by a counterman at the "American Diner"). Likewise, this also was not the first time he had openly expressed his dissatisfaction. He notes "I was always being forced to leave, silently, or with mutual imprecations" (592). Although he was living in New Jersey, in the "North," it had apparently been overrun with white southerners who migrated there to work in the defense plants which had sprung up as part of the war effort during the Second World War.

Over the course of about a year, Baldwin had been refused service or run out of several different establishments by whites, and not just restaurants but also "bars, bowling alleys, diners and places to live" (592). As a result he developed what he describes as "some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels" (592). He goes on to explain that once you contract this disease, "one can never *really* be carefree again, for the fever, without an instant's warning, can recur at any moment" (592; emphasis added). His use of the word really speaks to the fact that the carefree attitude which blacks were often known to possess, was nothing more than a facade. Furthermore, he observes that this disease was more common than whites might have wanted to believe, explaining: "There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it" (592).

Baldwin's observation is useful in that it speaks to how most blacks were enraged by the racial etiquette but not all were willing to express it. Unlike Baldwin who had never really grown up under Jim Crow rule and was living in New Jersey only temporarily (it is not surprising, then, that the night of the attack also happened to be his

149

last night in town), southern blacks had a healthy fear of expressing their dissatisfaction.

This was because they knew all too well what the procedure was for dealing with "bad

niggers."[25] In *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.* (2011), American folklorist and human

rights activist Stetson Kennedy offers a brief summary of the procedure blacks could

expect whites to follow if they ever breached the racial etiquette:

> If you are a nonwhite and offend some white by a breach of etiquette, then the
> usual procedure is for the white to exact an apology, if that is not forthcoming, to
> launch a physical attack upon you. If he fails to derive satisfaction in this manner,
> or if you seek in any wise to retaliate or defend yourself, he will likely summon a
> white mob or officer of the law. The officer may join in the attack upon you,
> and/or arrest you on some charge as "disorderly conduct" or "assault and battery.
> (206)

Baldwin experiences this procedure first hand after he attacks the waitress. He

notes that once the mug shatters on the mirror behind the waitress, he instantly becomes

aware of all the other white people sitting in the restaurant staring at him. Afraid,

Baldwin tries to run for the door but before he can reach it, he is seized by a "round, pot

bellied man" who grabs him by the neck and begins beating him in the face (594).

Baldwin kicks the man which allows him to free himself so that he can escape just in

time to avoid the police, who quickly arrive on the scene. Luckily, his white friend is

there and misdirects them which gives Baldwin time to get away. Back at his room, he

finally has a chance to process the night's events, observing: "I saw nothing very clearly

but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other

people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart" (594).

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[25] Kennedy explains that a "Bad Nigger" is one who refuses to treat every white person as if he is superior.
However, Kehinde Andrews expands this definition to address the ways that the "Bad Nigger," "was
someone who was resisting, tough, and would take no nonsense from Whites or anyone else" (23).

Although Baldwin managed to narrowly escape with his freedom, as well as his life, many blacks were not so fortunate. For example, cultural historian Jacqueline Goldsby cites the example of black entrepreneurs Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart, who were lynched via a firing squad for taking up arms and enlisting the help of the black community to help them protect their store, the People's Grocery Company, from white vandals (*Spectacular Secret* 44). Likewise, Kennedy cites the example of Martin Flowers whose cousin "was jailed and sentenced to seven years for assault with intent to kill" for trying to protect him from an angry white mob (*Jim Crow* 217). And although black men made up a substantial portion of the 3,346 lynchings and countless unrecorded beatings of black people in the United States between 1882 and 1968, they were not the only ones who suffered the procedure for breaching racial etiquette.

Black women and children were also known to be jailed, assaulted and killed by individual whites or lynch mobs. For instance, historian Jennifer Ritterhouse points to the examples of Esther Fells who was beaten and sentenced to prison for standing up to her white neighbor Thomas Tucker after he complained about the noise from her home, as well as Miss Florence Hayes who was severely beaten to the point of losing consciousness by John Warren for her failure to sufficiently apologize to his wife after she bumped into her (*Growing up Jim Crow* 40, 45).

Probably one of the most famous examples of a black child being lynched is that of Emmett Till, the 14 year old boy from Chicago who was killed for supposedly whistling at a white woman. Still, journalist Stacey Patton, whose research focuses on the ways in which black children have historically been viewed and treated as adults by white

society, observes that Till was hardly the first and only black youth to be lynched. In her article "In America, Black Children Don't Get To Be Children" (2014), Patton observes that between 1880 and the early 1950s numerous black boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 19 years old met a similar fate to Till for offenses which included accusations of slapping white babies, fighting with their white playmates, or protecting black girls from sexual assault at the hands of white men.

For example, Kennedy points to the example of 15 year old Hubert Watt, who was beaten by a white shopkeeper for insisting that he had paid a bill (*Jim Crow* 217). What made black children especially susceptible to racial violence was that although they "looked like adults" to whites (a statement which was a veiled commentary on their supposed over-developed bodies), in actuality, they did not possess the same level of restraint or knowledge as to how to navigate the racial etiquette as an adult.

Because even the most knowledgeable and restrained black adults regularly found themselves in situations which tried their emotional endurance and tested their mental acumen when it came to upholding the racial etiquette, blacks had to develop a way to vent their frustrations without offending whites. One way blacks determined they could do this was by using the mask of laughter to help them indirectly express their dissatisfaction to whites. In most situations it was best to stay quiet and avoid getting into an argument with a white person. However, Kennedy observes that, if it was absolutely necessary for a black person to vocalize his or her dissatisfaction, the best technique by which to do so was to ask a "non-belligerent question" such as "Do you think that…" that was fair? (*Jim Crow* 217). Indirect questions were yet another part of the larger

performance of the mask blacks wore and sometimes still wear to give an impression of deference and good humor when talking to or generally interacting with whites.

Living according to the racial etiquette was not only frustrating but also humiliating, especially for black men. Kennedy points to the example of one black male southerner who was quoted as saying: "If I was a little better off I would get away from around here, and all of the white folks could kiss where the sun don't shine. This place is all right in a way, but a man has to be less than a man to get along most of the time" (*Jim Crow* 216). For black men, like the speaker, being able to mask their pain allowed them not only to salvage some of their dignity, but also to defy whites who wanted to break them down emotionally and psychologically. After all, the purpose of the racial etiquette was to instill in blacks a sense of inferiority through brute force. By wearing the mask of laughter, black men were able to hide their feelings of dehumanization and emasculation from white people, who would have simply construed these feelings as evidence that they had successfully broken the black mens' spirit. Thus, as the narrator of *Invisible Man* observes, by wearing the mask of laughter southern blacks were:

> [D]oing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired [blacks] to act just the opposite...and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted [blacks] to act as [they] did. (Ellison 17)

Laughter was not the only mask which blacks wore when compartmentalizing. Other masks included the widely popular cool mask, which emerged as part of the American jazz culture of the 1940s—for instance, in Baldwin's work and persona we see

the use of masking as a defensive strategy for hiding vulnerability and pain[26]—, as well as a general kind of stoicism which was seen with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. As blacks continued striving for social equality and civil rights throughout the 20th century, they cared less and less about hiding their dissatisfaction. In fact, beginning with the New Negro movement of the early 1900s, blacks became increasingly comfortable demanding their rights as citizens. However, they were still careful to do so with poise and dignity. Ultimately, the wearing of masks allowed for blacks to safeguard their vulnerable emotions while at the same time express their dissatisfaction with the color line. It was not until the Black Power movement of the 1960s would blacks not only express their demands but also their associated feelings of rage.

Wideman's Account of Compartmentalization

Like the black men before him, Wideman, a descendant of blacks who migrated from the south, learned to compartmentalize in order to survive. He observes that the process of learning to compartmentalize "…begins with black skin, with your acknowledgment of racial identity" (*Brothers and Keepers* 221). This is because being born black means that you are subject to racial prejudice, or bias against your character, under the color line. In his essay *The Color Line* (1881), abolitionist and national hero Frederick Douglass notes that this bias leads whites to make "unfavorable presumptions" about blacks such that, "…everything against the person with the hated color is promptly taken for granted; while everything in his favor is received with suspicion or doubt"

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[26] For a discussion of Baldwin's use of the cool pose mask in his writing see Jeffrey Brown's essay "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero." For a brief discussion and example of Baldwin's use of the cool pose mask in his persona see Herbert Lottman's interview "It's Hard to Be James Baldwin."

(569). To illustrate, Douglass points to how whites were quick to take for granted that blacks committed the crime when the identity of the criminal is unknown, but then turn around and doubt that blacks could be victims of murder by whites even when they are shot and killed while unarmed (569). Being confronted with racial prejudice, in turn, leads to an acknowledgment of racial identity on your part.

Next, Wideman observes that both a way of seeing and being seen develops from your awareness of racial identity. He explains that in order to survive and stay sane, you must activate your "seventh sense" which is the ability to "recognize the invisible barriers disciplining the space in which you may move" (221).[27] The barriers he is referring to are the biases whites have against blacks which get expressed and enforced in the form of racial slights. The way in which you recognize barriers is by "tak[ing] second readings, decod[ing] appearances, pick[ing] out the obstructions erected to keep you in your place" (221). Wideman continues by explaining that as you learn to look beyond the surface of things to recognize the barriers, you come to realize that the visible world has nothing to do with you and that it will never change (221). From this realization there develops a way of being seen which is characterized by skepticism, stoicism, and (for some) ironic detachment (221).[28] [29] [30]

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[27] Wideman's notion of the seventh sense is similar to Anderson Franklin's notion of the inner vigilance for racial slights, which he notes is considered a sixth sense among African Americans.

[28] It is helpful to think of this skepticism in terms of what pioneering black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs call black "cultural paranoia." To protect themselves, black men exhibit "a cultural paranoia in which every white man is a potential enemy unless proved otherwise and every social system is set against him unless he personally finds out differently" (149). As numerous scholars observe, an effect of this paranoia was that it made blacks hesitant to self-disclose their inner thoughts and feelings to whites.

[29] It is helpful to think of stoicism in terms of the notion of "emotional hardiness" as discussed by sport historian John Milton Hoberman in *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (2012). Hoberman defines emotional hardiness as the myth, or "idea that black Americans are psychologically stable and durable to a greater degree than whites" (125).

[30] And lastly it is helpful to think of ironic detachment in terms of the notion of the "cool attitude" as discussed by former underground newspaper columnists Dick Pountain and David Robins, which they identify in their study *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (2000). Pountain and Robins define cool as an

Brothers and Keepers is an innovative literary representation of compartmentalization in that Wideman hides his thoughts and emotions not just from white people but also from his own family. In the chapter entitled "Visits," he reveals to his younger brother Robby that while Wideman was attending UPenn during the late 1950s and early 1960s, he betrayed the race in order to fit in and "survive" in that collegiate environment. By survive, he means to be successful, to advance to something better or, in other words, to make it out of poverty. As he explains in his speech *Imagining (1986)*:

> I came from Pittsburgh; I came from a poor family, a black family, and I must have had a very strong sense of self, because I had been able to survive when lots of my friends had not been able to survive. Survive in that very curious sense of getting ahead. I graduated from high school and was prepared to go to a university. (20)

As critical biographer Keith E. Byerman confirms, Wideman did indeed "get ahead," as suggested by his various accomplishments in high school, which included being "a star basketball player, class president, and valedictorian of the senior class." (*The Life and Work* 5). Byerman goes on to point out that it was Wideman's success on the court, but more importantly his success in the classroom, which earned him a Benjamin Franklin Scholarship (in the amount of $2,250)[31] to attend and play basketball at UPenn (*The Life and Work* 5).

Although he might have been prepared to do well academically and athletically, Wideman was not prepared, for the cultural shock he experienced upon arriving at the

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"oppositional attitude" or personality type, "adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance to authority" (19). Elsewhere, they describe ironic detachment as being like a wall which allows for those who employ it to hide, and to distance themselves from authority rather than directly confronting it, which would result in punishment (23).

[31] Greenwald "John Wideman and the 1963 City Champions: Examining Academics, Athletics and Race at the University of Pennsylvania" (8).

university. He admits as much when he states: "But there I was, a young black man from Pittsburgh in a completely different environment...this university that seemed so foreign to me, which I was having a helluva time acclimating myself to!" (*Imagining* 20). Despite having lived in Shadyside, a majority white neighborhood, for a brief period, as well as having attended Peabody High, an integrated public high school, Wideman had no real intimate social contact with his white peers beyond his classes and sports activities. As one of his white classmates Betsy Ward recalls: "We sat next to each other in homeroom, and we talked a lot. But we never talked about what it meant to him to be a Negro...When class breaks came, he would seldom walk to the next class with the white students. Instead, he would go off to talk with the other Negroes in the corridor" (Shalit 3).

That Wideman would be distant with his white peers makes sense considering the racial climate under which he grew up. Summarizing the racial landscape of Pittsburgh during the mid-20th century, historian Alyssa Ribeiro explains that although black Pittsburghers had witnessed some civil rights gains during the late 1940s when they "peacefully desegregated downtown department stores and the Highland Park swimming pool," they continued to face "increasing residential segregation and blatant discrimination at local establishments," throughout the 1950s and 60s ("A Period of Turmoil" 148-149). Even as a child Wideman was aware that blacks were unwelcome in certain parts of town. For instance, he recalls from his days as a newspaper boy delivering in the affluent and very white Negley Hill area of Pittsburgh, that he felt like an intruder, whom, if discovered, would be punished ("Language of Home" 35). Further, it was in this context of a racially segregated Pittsburgh that he first learned to compartmentalize.

Internally Wideman might have been fearful, but on the surface he appeared cool. In order to mask the feelings of fear he felt over being black in a white neighborhood he would whistle out loud to himself or, at other times, sing doo-wop songs in his head. He explains that the songs he would sing were representative of the feelings he experienced, which lacked shape. Thus, the songs helped give his feelings a shape. Further, these songs and the feelings they symbolized served to protect Wideman from the hurt of segregation and discrimination, or so he hoped. The power of the songs to protect him lay in the fact that they represented an "alternate reality" which contradicted that of "a world which insistently denied [him]" (35). Therefore, like his blacks predecessors, Wideman kept the songs, which is to say his feelings, hidden from whites because he knew instinctively that: "If anybody ever heard the music in my head, I'd be in real trouble" (35).

Going off to university, where Wideman was 1 of only 10 black students out of the total 1,700 students in his entering class, raised similar feelings of fear for him. He catalogs these fears which included: "Fear of acknowledging in myself any traces of the poverty, ignorance, and danger I'd find surrounding me when I returned to Pittsburgh. Fear that I was contaminated and would carry the poison wherever I ran. Fear that the evil would be discovered in me and I'd be shunned like a leper" (*Brothers and Keepers* 27). However, instead of turning once again to the doo-wop songs from his youth for protection from the fears and pressures of his being an outsider, this time Wideman ran from the music of home and the people it represented. This might have been because one of his white male peers called the doo-wop he listened to "junk" and "R-and-B crap" (*Brother and Keepers* 29).

His family and neighbors back in Homewood were not the only ones he was running away from: Wideman was also running away from the other blacks on campus. Discussing the thought process behind his running, he states: "I'd see other black faces like me as a threat because I realized I was a special case, and I didn't know exactly how these other special cases related to my special case...Could they screw up in a way that could hurt me, or reflect on me?" (*The Art of Fiction* 143). For example, Wideman felt threatened by Bill Fontaine, the only black faculty member on campus. This worry that Bill and the other black students would somehow reflect negatively on him stemmed from internalized notions of racial inferiority. As Wideman explains in *Imagining*:

> I had been told enough times that black was inferior that I had lost my capacity to image what black could be. And so Bill Fontaine, although I knew I needed him was somebody I couldn't talk to, because I was afraid—I was afraid that what other people had told me about who I was, was in fact true; and if it were true about me, then it would be true about this man, this teacher. (21)

Although Wideman wanted to put as much distance between himself and the negative images of blackness which he carried around in his head, images which he recognized were "not of [his] making," he did not necessarily like or prefer the whiteness of the university either. He describes the environment of UPenn as being "so different" that it did not seem "quite real" when compared to the community, the people and values he grew up with. In fact, he disliked it so much that he tried to leave a couple of times during his freshman year (*The Art of Fiction* 142). However, as much as he may have wanted to leave, Wideman recognized that if he wanted to make something of himself and make it out of Homewood for good, he would have to learn how to survive in that environment. Therefore, to protect his special case and get ahead at UPenn, Wideman betrayed his family and community by emulating his white male peers.

This was not the first time Wideman was forced to betray the race in order to survive. Before he entered high school, his family moved to Shadyside, where they were one of only three or four black families at the time. This was a major feat for his father who worked blue collar jobs to support a family of seven. Despite the financial strain it placed on the family, his parents made the sacrifice so that he and his siblings could attend better schools ("The Language of Home" 35). It was at Liberty elementary school where Wideman, not wanting to be singled out, first learned to emulate his white male classmates. As he recalls: "I learned to laugh with the white guys when we hid in the stairwell outside Liberty School gym and passed around a 'nigarette.'I hated it when a buddy took a greedy, wet puff, 'nigger lipping' a butt before he passed it on to me" ("The Language of Home" 35).

His betrayal was not just in the fact that he stayed silent while his peers used these slurs, but more so in that he refused to identify himself with other blacks by actively using the slurs himself. He alludes to as much when he says, "I talked the talk and walked the walk of the rest of my companions" (35). To clarify, it was not that Wideman condoned their behavior. Rather, he saw speaking out as an impossibility as he had "neither the words nor the heart" (35). Thus, he had to compartmentalize his thoughts and feelings about his friends' use of racial slurs while in his presence.

Similar to when he was in elementary school, Wideman learned to emulate his white classmates at UPenn. For example, he remembers having to adjust his tie so that it would look more like those of his white peers. After one of them pointed out that Wideman's tie was tied wrong, he did a quick scan of the room and realized that the end of his tie was hanging below his belt, as was the style back in Homewood, whereas his

160

peers' ties were all tied so that the ends stopped above their belts. Other "adjustments" he

made were to his shoes, to the way he said his name, to the rhythm of his speech, and to

the way he walked (22).

Just as Wideman objected to his friends use of racial slurs, so too did he object to

the adjustments his peers at UPenn were asking him to make. He contends that while

many may think that it is "no big deal," being repeatedly told to make adjustments to

yourself is significant. This is because, as he illustrates, it can cause a growing sense of

conflict and resentment. This sense of resentment can be detected when he says:

> [Make adjustments] a thousand times a day, and you begin to ask questions, like:
> Why shouldn't I tie my tie the way I want to?...Is there something more involved
> here than just a dress code? What am I giving up? Why am I giving it up? And
> why are other people telling me these things? (*Imagining* 22)

Likewise, this sense of conflict can be detected when he describes the university

as a place where he encountered "people and situations which continually set me against

them and against myself" (*Brothers and Keepers* 32). Wideman clearly had his own

thoughts and feelings about the adjustments he was being asked to make; however, much

like when he was in elementary school he compartmentalized these too by internally

restraining himself and conforming to the culture of the university.

At the same time his having to make adjustments was bringing up feelings of

resentment and conflict for Wideman, it was also bringing up feelings of guilt. He felt

guilty because by making these adjustments in order to get ahead Wideman was running

away from his home, his community, his family and his racial identity. And by running

away Wideman was neglecting his responsibility to his family, community and race. The

consequences of his neglect are on full display when he returns to Homewood to pick up

his mom to drive her to visit his brother in prison. First, as his little brother has been

imprisoned. Second, as he is forced to confront how run down his former community has become in the time he has stayed away.

Further, he felt alienated from both the campus community at UPenn, as well as his family, friends and neighbors back in Homewood. He felt alienated because he could not truly identify with either community due to the "awkward mix of school and home [he]'d become" (*Brothers and Keepers* 27). Looking back, Wideman recognizes that what he needed was to confide in someone about the struggles he was facing at school, the pressure he felt to survive, and the guilt he was wrestling with over his betrayal ("Imagining" 20-21). However, because these feelings were tied to his betrayal, he could not risk exposing them without also exposing himself to be a traitor. Therefore, whenever he returned home he was forced to hide his betrayal from his family and community by adopting what Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson call the "cool pose." This was the same strategy he employed with his white peers at UPenn, albeit it looked very different.

In their study on the subject entitled *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992), Richards and Billson define it as "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." They go on to explain that "black males who cool pose are often chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation or audience" (4). For example, Wideman would shift his performance "by taking on the emotional or intellectual coloring of whatever circumstance [he] found

[him]self in" (33). Further, Majors and Billson identify two parts or "sides" to the cool pose: the non-expressive and the expressive sides.

The non-expressive side is characterized as a kind of "'restrained masculinity': emotionless, stoic, and unflinching" (4-5). This is the type of cool pose Wideman performs at UPenn. The expressive side is characterized as a kind of lifestyle. Aspects of this lifestyle include: staring, watching and gazing (73;74), standing (74), walking, strolling or "strutting" (73), dancing or "boogieing" (75), "low riding" or leaning while driving (82), handshaking and "giving and getting skin" (73), playing sports (76), sartorial and hirsutal dressing (73; 80), "rapping it down to a woman" (79), and playing the dozens also known as "momma talky," sounding, joning, woofing, sigging, signifying or ribbing (91; 96). This is the type of cool pose Wideman assumed at home as observed when he states: "I needed to prove that I hadn't lost my roots. Needed to boogie and drink wine and chase pussy, needed to prove I could still do it all. Fight, talk trash, hoop with the best playground players at Mellon Park. Claim the turf, wear it like a badge, yet keep my distance, be in the street but not of it" (*Brothers and Keepers* 27).

The reason Wideman needed to prove that he had not lost his roots and could still do it all was self-protection (33). Wideman needed to protect himself from the potential of being sent back to Homewood for openly expressing his feelings to whites. But even more than this, he needed to protect himself from the possibility of being made "a target" by his family and community along the same lines that basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr.) was.

Abdul-Jabbar, describing his experience growing up and attending Holy Providence School, an all-black school located outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,

163

states: "I became a target...I found myself being punished for everything I'd ever been taught was right...I spoke correctly and was called a punk. I had to learn a new language to be able to deal with the threats. I had good manners and was a good little boy and paid for it with my hide" (*Giant Steps* 16). This is the type of punishment Wideman seeks to avoid by compartmentalizing.

While much has been written about the tradition of compartmentalization within black America, little if any of this work focuses on what the process actually feels like first-hand. This is one area where Wideman's text proves to be especially useful. In no uncertain terms, he paints compartmentalization as an out-of-body experience in the sense that the part of him which contains the emotions and thoughts he is trying to compartmentalize stands *outside* watching him perform ("Art of Fiction" 142; *Brothers and Keepers* 33). In addition to revealing how the part of him where his emotions are deposited is located outside as opposed to inside, Wideman also shares how instead of feeling like order and control, compartmentalization feels like "chaos, a yawning emptiness at the center of my being" (*Brothers and Keepers* 33). Through his description of the watching part of himself as chaos, he intentionally invokes the image of the formless matter which pre-dates the creation of the world. This stands in stark contrast to the image of compartmentalization as a kind of inner sanctuary where he could hide and live his life free from the view of others which he initially had in mind:

> I had learned to construct a shell around myself. Be cool. Work on appearing dignified, confident. Fool people with appearances, surfaces, live my real life underground in a region where no one could touch me. The trouble with this survival mechanism was the time and energy expended on keeping up the shell. The brighter, harder, more convincing and impenetrable the shell became, the more I lost touch with the inner sanctuary where I was supposed to be hiding. It was no more accessible to me than it was to the people I intended to keep out. Inside was a breeding ground for rage, hate, dreams of violence...I thought I was

running but I was fashioning a cage. Working hand in hand with my enemies. (*Brothers and Keepers* 32)

He explains that the compartmentalization is chaotic because, in the process of trying to maintain the mask, he loses touch with the watching part where his emotions reside. The harder he tries to maintain the walls of this part the harder they become. However, the harder the walls become the more difficult it becomes to access his own emotions because the walls are just as effective at keeping him out as they are at keeping out others. And, it becomes more difficult to access his emotions the longer they go unchecked. Finally, the longer they go unchecked the more chaotic things become internally as there is nothing and no one to give them order (*Brothers and Keepers* 32).

Hence this is the problem with compartmentalization: that it is hard to maintain contact with the watching part as it comes to take on a life of its own apart from the individual who is compartmentalizing. Furthermore, Wideman notes that once the watching part comes to take on a life of its own it can resurface at any time, bringing with it the potential for treachery (34).

Brothers and Keepers as an Example of Decompartmentalization

Ultimately, Wideman asserts that the way to put an end to the chaos and regain control over one's life is to learn to decompartmentalize. Wideman's begins decompartmentalizing with a letter he writes to his brother nearly three months after first hearing the news that Robby had murdered someone and was wanted by the police.

Wideman's initial reaction is a mix of emotions, specifically anger and fear. Instead of sitting with these vulnerable feelings he immediately compartmentalizes—he builds an emotional and psychological barrier between himself and his feelings over his

brother's situation. However, while the whole point of Wideman's compartmentalizing is to avoid dealing with his feelings, he finds that they begin interrupting his daily life. As Wideman explains: "Sudden lashes of fear, rage, and remorse could spoil a class or party, cause me to retreat into silence, lose whole days to gloominess and distance" (5). But as much as Wideman wants to block his brother out, he also desires to visit with him. One day, while listening to the music from his youth, Wideman is flooded with emotions and memories he has not thought about in years. He is so overwhelmed that he begins writing a letter to Robby, who miraculously shows up a few days later.

Wideman clarifies that "really it was more of a conversation than a letter. I needed to talk to someone, and that Sunday Robby seemed that perfect someone" (5). The sense that the letter was more of a conversation can be seen in the language Wideman uses to describe its rhythm and pattern. In particular, he notes how: "The letter rambled on and on for pages. Like good talk, it digressed and recycled itself and switched moods precipitously. Inevitably, one subject was home and family. After all, I was speaking to my brother" (5). Within the "conversation" Wideman touches on everything from mundane topics like the weather to more meaningful topics like the "frightening circumstances surrounding the premature birth of Jamila," Wideman's newest daughter (5). Jamila's birth had been quite an ordeal for Wideman who experienced a mix of fear and shame; fear over having almost lost his wife and daughter due to complications with her birth, and shame over having a daughter in the preemie ward with the other "creatures from another planet, miniature junkies feeding in transparent kennels" (17). While Wideman does not disclose everything he feels surrounding Jamila, that he has someone

who can just listen to him share is a start towards helping him learn to decompartmentalize.

When Wideman gets to the topic of home the figurative distance between him and his brother seems to disappear. The distance between him and his forgotten memories of the past and the associated emotions start to fade as well. For instance, he recalls a rather funny memory in which he, Robby, and their other siblings watched their dad come running through the room "dropping a trail of farts, blip, blip, blip" (11). More than the sounds of his father's farts, Wideman recalls the laughter he and his siblings shared as they reenacted the scene over and again until their mother finally says: "that's enough now, that's enough yaouall" (12). Although it is only a letter, the conversation which he has with his brother is no less impactful than if Robby had actually been there with him in his office. Wideman's sense of the letter's power to connect is only strengthened by the fact that a mere two days later Robby arrives in town to visit him. In hindsight, he realizes that at the same time he was writing the letter to Robby, his brother was already headed to see him. The sudden appearance of his brother leads him to conclude that they were indeed communicating with one another that Sunday afternoon he sat down to write his brother: "Two men, hundreds of miles apart, communicating through some mysterious process neither understood but both employed...as efficiently, effectively as dolphins talking underwater with beeps and echoes of their sonar" (6).

As natural as it may have felt for Robby to show up as if by response to the letter, holding a conversation with him, in person, proved to be difficult for Wideman in a way he could not have anticipated. That interacting with Robby would be awkward on some level was not unexpected. After all, Wideman and Robby had not spoken to each other in

years. However, Wideman was not prepared for the "regret, an instant devastating sadness" he would feel upon connecting with his brother. When he picks up the phone to hear Robby on the other end of the line, he is surprised to be greeted as "Big Bruh" (9). He is caught off guard because Big Brother was not a nickname which Robby commonly used. Further, he is apprehensive about the title, as there is something about the way in which Robby says it that makes him uncomfortable. Sounding somewhere between forced and natural, the term Big Brother lacks the certain quality of "magic" Wideman needs to maintain the narrative which he had created of their relationship. And if there "was no special language [they] shared," nor "magic formula" which could make up for the years, silence and distance, then the letter did not really possess the power Wideman desperately wanted to believe that it did (9). Still, Wideman is grateful to his brother for pretending their relationship looks different than it really is, as: "…anything was better than dwelling on the sadness, the absence, better than allowing the distance between [them] to stretch further" (9-10). No to mention there was something irrefutably powerful about Wideman's drawing closer in physical proximity to his brother. For instance, he explains that knowing his brother is nearby caused "pieces of [his] life to rush at [him], as fleeting, as unpredictable as the clusters of clouds scudding across the darkening sky" (11). In the end Wideman meets Robby at a bowling alley in town and then brings him back to his house so that they can visit in person.

Despite his relief at seeing his brother alive and well, Wideman continues to maintain his emotional distance by compartmentalizing. For instance, whenever they find time to talk alone he still cannot bring himself to say the things he wants to say to Robby about Jamila's birth nor ask him the questions he wants to ask about the murder. But for

that brief moment in time before Robby showed up in person, Wideman has started to

decompartmentalize, helping him to regain some sense of connection with his feelings

and his brother. Only after his brother is caught, tried, convicted and sentenced to a life-

sentence in prison will Wideman begin making regular visits to see Robby in prison,

where he continues the process of learning to decompartmentalize.

True to form, Wideman later forgets many of the details surrounding the events of

their visit the night his brother showed up miraculously, as if summoned by his letter. He

would even try to write a fictional version of their visit in attempt to remember; however,

it does not work, as "the interplay between fiction and fact in the piece was too intense,

too impacted, finally too obscure to control" (18). Further, it does not work because he

knew that "…something of a different order remained to be extricated. The fiction writer

was also a man with a real brother behind real bars" (18). Haunted by his "inability to see

clearly, accurately, not only the last visit with [his] brother, but the whole long skein of

[their] lives together and apart," Wideman decides to write *Brothers and Keepers* (18).

Thus, by writing his memoir, Wideman is attempting to "break out, to knock down the

wall" of willed forgetfulness and alienation from self and others which

compartmentalization represents.

In the "Author's Note" to *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman explains that the

writing process he employed involved visiting Robby in prison and listening to him talk

about his life. During their visits he would take notes and then, "some time later, after

[he] had the opportunity to absorb [Robby's] words but while they were still fresh in [his]

mind, [Wideman] would reproduce on paper what [he'd] heard. Robby would read what

[Wideman had] written and respond either when [he] visited him next or by letter" (xix).

This approach to writing proves to be more difficult than Wideman thought it would be. He notes that he and Robby were both "rookies" when it came to "sharing [their] feelings with other family members," (79). They had been raised to value privacy, and so while you were part of the family you were also expected to keep your private world to yourself and not intrude on anyone else's.

Wideman initiates their visits by sending Robby some rough sketches of stories he had adapted from his original letter and his notes on their final visit before he was imprisoned. These stories were the second step in his learning to decompartmentalize. The draft of his stories were an important step, as they represented an:

> …[A]ttempt to reveal what [he] thought about certain matters crucial to [them] both. [Their] shared roots and destinies. [Wideman] wanted him to know what [he'd] ben thinking and how that thinking was drawing [him] closer to [Robby]. [He] was banging on the door of his privacy. [Wideman] believed [he'd] shed some of [his] own (80).

Although this did help in that it gave them something to talk about initially, they still had to work at learning to talk with each other, Wideman more so than Robby. During one of their visits Wideman notices himself compartmentalizing his guilt over having forgotten to bring Robby's son Omar to their visit. Wideman admits that he keeps forgetting his brother's requests because he keeps forgetting about his brother altogether as soon as he leaves the prison. Forgetfulness is a consequence of his compartmentalizing the emotions surrounding his brother and his imprisonment, which Wideman recognizes has the potential to continue to mar their already fragile relationship. Thus the only way for him to unlearn this behavior is to first learn how to confront his emotions and thoughts.

They persist through the challenges and eventually Wideman is able to get a first draft written using this method. However, it falls short of the initial vision of Brothers and Keepers, which was to have provided readers with a "whole, rounded portrait" of his brother by the end of the book (194). While Robby could not pinpoint the specific issue, he knew that something was missing from the first draft. Wideman agreed but was unsure of how to get to the draft he had in mind. It was not until he read the comments of an early reader that it clicked: he had not provided enough insight into Robby's "inner self." There were two issues holding Wideman back from fully grasping and therefore capturing his brother.

First, there was the matter of his fear. Wideman tried to force a narrative on to his brother instead of letting Robby tell his own story. He took this approach because he wanted to paint a picture of his brother as "a model human being with a cure for cancer at his fingertips if only the parole board would just give him a chance, turn him loose again on the streets of Homewood," (195). Wideman eventually had to come to terms with the fact that the core of his brother was still intact despite the growth he had made while in prison. As he explains it: "The character traits that landed Robby in prison are the same ones that have allowed him to survive with dignity, and pain and a sense of himself infinitely better than the soulless drone prison demands he become" (195). Thus Wideman had to learn to trust that Robby's best qualities—"his optimism, his intelligence, his capacity to love, his pride, his dream of making it big—would translate just as powerfully as his negative qualities—"dumb[ness], corrupt[ness], selfish[ness] and destructive[ness]" (195).

Second there was the matter of his inability to listen. Wideman notes that whenever Robby talked of Homewood during their visits he had a habit of getting lost in his own story, his own vision of Homewood. He describes this habit as being like "listening to [himself] listen to him" (77). At the beginning of their visit, Wideman would start out like "an obedient shadow" trailing over and through the contours of Robby's story. However, at some point some detail would send him spiraling into a story of his own, "a dark form still skulking behind [Robby] but no longer in tow" (77). It is important to note that what Wideman describes is a form of compartmentalization. The phrase "listening to myself listen to him" implies that there is a part of Wideman which is listening to Robby talk. Still, there is another part of Wideman which is listening to himself listen. This is the part that holds the thoughts, emotions and more importantly the *memories* which he compartmentalizes. Further, Wideman has come to benefit from compartmentalization as it has contributed to his success as fiction writer. However, Robby's life—Robby's story was not a fiction. Therefore, Wideman has to unlearn the habit of compartmentalizing for the sake of the book. After all, he observes, "that habit would destroy any chance of seeing my brother on his terms; and seeing him in his terms, learning his terms, seemed the whole point of learning his story," (77).

Once Wideman understands that it is his fear and inability to listen—which is to say his tendency to compartmentalize—impeding his ability to learn and therefore represent his brother's story fully, he has a clearer sense of what he needs to do to revise the book. He begins by asking Robby for more input which looks like "poems, anecdotes, meditations on his time behind bars," (195). He also begins listening more actively to his brother instead of trying to superimpose his own narrative onto Robby's life story. As a

172

result, a new book starts to take shape which looks much closer to that what he had originally envisioned. Not only does the book improve, but Wideman also personally benefits from this new direction as he "feel[s] released rather than constrained by the new pattern beginning to emerge" (199). Further, he finds that this new approach also allows him to get in closer touch with himself—his "listening, waiting self part of the story, listening, waiting for [him]" (199).

Out of this shift emerges a new method of writing: "Robby would tell stories. I'd listen, take notes, [and] reconstruct the episodes after I'd allowed them to sink in, then check my version with Rob to determine if it sounded right to him. Letters and talk about what I'd written until we were both satisfied" (199).

As they neared the end of the book, the practical matter of what would happen once the book was finished began to rear itself. Wideman had come to look forward to the time he was spending with his brother. In fact, his level of emotional investment in his brother has deepened to the point where he confides in Robby that he had an affair in his marriage. Robby in turn tells Wideman that he is in love with a woman on the outside that he knows he cannot actually be with. He knows that he should break it off but he is afraid to hurt her. Wideman could have simply told him to "tell the truth" because it is the "right thing to do." However, Wideman instead goes as far as to tell Robby that he is speaking from experience and then begins to share: "the chaos of [his] life, the troubles [he] must return to when [he] pass[es] out of the prison walls," (216).

This moment represents a major "breakthrough" for Wideman, to use his phrase (199). While in the past he may have felt like he should say something, or privately thought it to himself, here Wideman actually says what he is feeling and thinking to his

brother. More importantly, he is able to unload some of the burden he has been carrying around onto his brother, who responds in kind: "I needed to talk to somebody, man. Needed to hear somebody say the things I been saying to myself all along. I know you're right, Bruh. And I'm sorry you having trouble at home" (217). Thus, by reaching the conclusion of their work together, Wideman might be losing an intimate connection with his brother on which he had come to rely even as he completes his book.

Wideman fears the end of their work together because he does not trust that, without the demands of the book project, he will be able to return the same level of investment his brother has shown him. Would he continue listening as he had learned to over the course of their visits or would he return to compartmentalizing himself? Even with the internal changes he had made, the propensity for him to once again desert his brother, not to mention the self he had recently discovered, was always there. He cautions Robby: "But what I was, I still am. You have to know this. My motives remain suspect. A potential for treachery remains deep inside my core. I can blend in with my surroundings, become invisible. An opaque curtain slides down between me and others...Then as always I'm capable of profound irresponsibility" (34).

Ultimately, Wideman makes the decision to try and share his concerns with Robby despite the fact that many of his questions were "intimidating, too close to the bone to raise with [his] brother" (200). While this does not necessarily resonate with Robby, who has larger concerns related to life in prison and its effects on his mind, that Wideman is able to articulate them at all represents a type of growth. That Wideman has grown over the course of their visits can also be seen in that he grows comfortable with listening, even in the moments where it is silent. He admits that at first the silences made

him uncomfortable as he took them to be a reminder of the distance between them: "Were they a sign that we didn't have as much to say to one another as we'd thought?" (237).

However, Wideman learns to value these silent moments as they are not what they seem to be. Simply being present with another person through the passing of time is the ultimate act of decompartmentalization. He discovers that instead of creating space between him and Robby, the silence actually joins them. In the end, the silence comes to represent a "common ground, a shared realization that for the moment we've come as far as we can, said what we have to say and maybe...maybe there will be more, but there's nothing to say now...just wait now for what may...what must come next…" (237-38).

We can view Wideman's text as a cautionary tale for black men contemplating compartmentalization, but more importantly as a template for those who have already compartmentalized but wish to put an end to the watching part. First, he models what it looks like to face the truth of your emotions. Wideman does the difficult work of revisiting some of the most painful moments in his life and exploring them. Second, Wideman articulates the emotions and the situations surrounding them to another member of the race, in this case his brother Robby. In this way, Wideman offers an alternative form of compartmentalization. Instead of hiding those emotions away within the self, he suggests that black men and women can hide them away within one another. Thus, through the radical act of confiding in his brother, as well as by re-assuming responsibility for his brother and his brother's burdens, does Wideman begin to experience healing and restoration. While Wideman examines the notion of responsibility from the perspective that the race traitor should show some responsibility for what

happens in his community, in my final chapter I will shift focus to briefly consider how

the race traitor should also be responsible *to* the other members of his community.

In the end *Brothers and Keepers* serves as an example of how acts of betrayal can

be beneficial to those who are oppressed and victimized within the community. Through

taking responsibility and sharing his narrative of betrayal, Wideman is able to draw

attention to the larger issue of the color line, which is tied to the discrimination he

witnessed in Homewood and at UPenn, as well as to his brother's imprisonment.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION:

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE RACE TRAITOR IN

PAUL BEATTY'S *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

The 1990s was a period marked by a number "crises'" for the black community. There was the "crisis" of black males in which black men and boys were depicted by sociologists, politicians, and, most notably, the media as being prone to sexual promiscuity, alcoholism and drug addiction, violence, crime, imprisonment, or death by gun violence. Therefore, the notion that black males were "endangered" or "at risk" became a favorite subject of popular public discourse and debate. One readily calls to mind the "controversies" surrounding mainstream gangster rap music, depictions of black males in popular movies and television shows such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Jason's Lyric* (1994) and *Cops* (1989-present), as well as the public murders of rival artists Tu Pac Shakur and "Biggie Smalls" (Christopher Wallace).

Closely related to this "crisis" was that of "racial profiling." While this phrase explicitly referred to the use of hypervigilance and excessive force by police officers towards black and Latino citizens, it has also been used to loosely refer to police mendacity. The "crisis" of racial profiling would be thrust onto center stage after leaked home video footage surfaced of several police officers beating an unarmed, disoriented Rodney King during a traffic stop. Black Americans were all too familiar with the double standard of police racial bias. However, what made this incident particularly poignant was that it forced into plain view what white society had been trying to deny all along. In

light of the widespread public outrage in response to the footage, the Los Angeles County

District Attorney charged all four officers. Even in the face of video evidence, a jury

failed to convict the officers involved, sparking outrage in the black community which

swelled into the 1992 L.A. riots.

The Rodney King beating was followed a few years later by the high profile trial

of O.J. Simpson for the suspected murder of his wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her

friend Ron Goldman. Once again, the topic of police racial bias would gain national

attention when Johnny Cochran, Simpson's defense lawyer, invoked the legacy of police

mendacity within the Los Angeles police department, and the criminal justice system

more broadly. Cochran argued that the evidence which was being used to indict Simpson

had been planted. His key witness was Mark Fuhrman, the veteran detective responsible

for discovering a bloody glove at the crime scene. While under oath, Furhman admitted

to using racist language in the past but insisted that he had not done so for nearly a

decade. However, Cochran was able to produce recent recordings of Fuhrman conducting

interviews with witnesses in which he used racist language. By painting Fuhrman out to

be dishonest, not to mention racist, Cochran raised the possibility that Simpson had been

framed by the Los Angeles police department because he was black. This possibility was

further supported by the fact that when Assistant District Attorney Christopher Darden

asked Simpson to try on the bloody glove, he obliged. The nation watched as Simpson

struggled to put on the glove which clearly didn't fit. Hence Cochran's famous rejoinder:

"If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit."

There was also the "crisis" of crack cocaine (also known as the crack epidemic)

which was cast as a criminal justice issue as opposed to a public health crisis. Situating

the crack "crisis" within the larger discourse of the "War on Drugs," legislators, the courts, and police focused their attention on setting harsher sentencing guidelines as opposed to developing possible solutions for prevention and treatment. Because the distribution of crack was largely concentrated in poor urban neighborhoods where it was more affordable (as compared to conventional "pure" cocaine), black people were prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned at a disproportionate rate when compared with other users. Jumping on this disproportionality the mainstream media was able to cast the crack "crisis" as a black problem, giving rise to popular tropes like the "black male crack dealer," "the black female crack whore," and the "crack baby."

A major participant in this culture of "crisis" surrounding the black majority was the contemporary black public intellectual. Indeed, some of my earliest memories from childhood are of my family watching televised interviews and panel discussions on shows like Charlie Rose which featured prominent black scholars like Cornel West, bell hooks, and Michael Eric Dyson to offer their take on a range of topics related to black identity (such as race in America, the Simpson trial, and Hip Hop music). However, while I naively found their growing presence and visibility to be a promising sign of racial progress (as they were literally being invited to the table of the national public discussion), others saw their "trendiness" as troubling. A good example of this trope of the prominent black intellectual is Gunnar Kaufman, the narrator of Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, and the final race traitor of my literary archive.

Gunnar commits racial treason when he chooses to publicly desert black America in its ongoing campaign to win what he refers to as the "eternal war for civility"—the struggle of black Americans to end the color line and gain full recognition as citizens

(*The White Boy Shuffle* 1). Drawing on the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gunnar reveals how he believes the contemporary black leadership, in particular black public intellectuals, to be nothing more than an ineffective group of "talking-heads." As he is on his way to being one of these leaders, Gunnar publicly confesses his lack of commitment to the eternal war for civility during a live televised rally in support of black South Africans. However, because Gunnar holds himself responsible to the black community for his racial treason he ushers in a new type of black leader: One who engages his black audience in a discussion of critical group self-examination to the exclusion of whites. Further, by turning his back on his white audience and speaking exclusively to blacks, Gunnar helps to inspire a movement which serves to actualize the black nationalist vision of a unified black America nation state operating independently within North America.

Before I proceed with a more lengthy analysis of Beatty and Kaufman, however, I would like to lay the groundwork for that discussion with a close look at contemporary criticism published from within the black community during the same period as Beatty's novel, among who Adolph Reed Jr. is a particularly prescient observer of the black public intellectual.

The "Crisis" of the Black Public Intellectual

In "'What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?': The Current Crisis of the Black Public Intellectual," political economist and cultural critic Adolph Reed Jr. turns over the alleged culture of "crisis" to expose the "crisis" surrounding the emergence of a group of scholar-leaders calling themselves "black public intellectuals." Broadly defined, the term "black public intellectuals" refers to "black people who write social commentary and are

known to white elite institutions" (78). Reed notes that while they are descendants of the

black public intellectuals of the past such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington,

James Baldwin, and James Weldon Johnson, contemporary black public intellectuals are

different from their antecedents in what he finds to be some very disconcerting ways.

First, he observes that there is little to no controversy between them. For Reed,

the issue with this is that the "absence of controversy betrays a lack of critical content and

purpose" (82). The fact that they "gush" over one another's work speaks to the fact that

what passes for cultural critiques among them, "are only easy pronouncements against

racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-semitism or equally easy dissent from a lame

Afrocentricity that has no adherents among their audience anyway" (82). Thus he

concludes that the stance of the contemporary black public intellectual has been reduced

to mere posturing. But who are they posturing for and to what ends?

> The posture of black public intellectuals is a claim to speak from the edges of convention, to infuse mainstream discourse with a particular "counter hegemonic" perspective at least implicitly linked to one's connectedness to identifiably black sensibilities or interests. It is also therefore, again at least implicitly, a claim to immersion in a strategic conversation among black Americans about politics, culture and social affairs. The posture is flimflam that elides the dual audience problem. (82)

By the dual audience problem, Reed is referring to James Weldon Johnson's

pointed observation that black writers faced the burden of having to write for "more than

a double audience" made up of both black and white readers but also a "divided audience

made up of two elements with differing and often quite opposite and antagonistic points

of view" (81). Expanding on Johnson's discussion Reed theorizes the role of the black

public intellectual in terms of the disparate viewpoints of this dual audience.

On the one hand, black audiences expect a "careful, tough-minded examination of the multifarious dynamics shaping black life" (83). In other words, they want to see that the black public intellectual is "engaged in a discourse of group self-examination" (83). Therefore, in order to fulfill this obligation:

> [T]he black intellectual positions herself metaphorically at the boundary of the black experience and faces in, establishing enough distance to get a broad perspective but intent on contributing to conversation that presumes not only intricate knowledge but also an interpretive orientation filtered through shared, racially inflected assumptions that inform strategic thinking (83).

On the other hand, white audiences expect the black public intellectual to take up the familiar role of "explaining the mysteries of black America" (83). This expectation is best illustrated by the quote from which Reed takes the title of his essay. He cites an episode of the classic television show *Ramar of the Jungle* in which the two white adventurers summon their African bearer Willie to decode for them what the drumming they hear in the distance means.

Similar to how Willie is summoned, the black public intellectual is called upon to help white audiences make sense of black American culture. In order to fulfill this obligation, the black public intellectual must once again position himself at the boundary of the black experience; however, he must orient himself outward. As Reed astutely observes, the problem with an outward orientation is that "there isn't much attention to flux, differentiation, contingency, or even analysis of social process in our public intellectuals' account of black life; you don't see nuances with your back turned, and besides that sort of messy texture doesn't count for much because the white audience mainly just wants an executive summary anyways" (83). Thus, by honoring his obligation

to white audiences the black public intellectual fails to honor his obligations to black audiences.

As it is clearly impossible for the black public intellectual to simultaneously meet the obligations of both audiences, we are forced to contend with the question how is it possible that the black public intellectuals of today have been so successful? Reed suggests that instead of constructing a discursive space which privileges one of these audiences, the black public intellectual "either conflates the audiences into an unhelpful least common denominator or undertakes a misdirection in combining an insider's 'it's a black thang' posture with a superficial, other-directed analysis explaining or defending the negro" (83-84). This further explains why black public intellectuals have managed to avoid much internal controversy. It would be impossible for one of their cohort to call out the others as they are all playing the same strategy of splitting the difference.

Second, Reed observes that contemporary black public intellectuals broke with their antecedents in that they willingly, if not gladly, accepted the "Black Voice" designation (84). By "Black Voice" Reed is referring to the common presumption that "any black individual's participation in public life always strives to express the will of the racial collectivity" (81). The reason contemporary black public intellectuals were so willing to accept the "Black Voice" designation was that it lent them the necessary credibility they needed for whites to accept that their interpretations are "authentic." This is arguably Reed's most compelling argument for the interrogation and reevaluation of the black public intellectual by the black community. If the black public intellectual is able to rely solely on the "Black Voice" designation to establish credibility with white audiences, then this relieves them of the burdens of having to prove that they are

credentialed to speak for the race, and what is more, actually having to be affiliated with an actual, physical black community, organization or movement which can hold them accountable. With the black public intellectual claiming no particular black community, and no particular black community claiming the black public intellectual, it becomes clear that the basis of the "Black Voice" designation is his performance of certain cultural tropes of black identity, much to the delight of white audiences.

Again, the issue here for Reed is that this type of flimsy, performative posturing masks the disconnectedness, and thus the failure of contemporary black public intellectuals to engage black audiences. He finds evidence of the effects of this failure in at least the following fours ways: First, in that it "has baleful effects on the scholarly examination of black American life" (87). Specifically, by rejecting certain expectations for rigorous academic discourse (standards of evidence and argument), this allows for the "cultural politicians to make the story up as they go along" (87).

Second, in that it pushes an agenda of political conservatism by engaging in discourse which denigrates the black majority. Here, Reed points to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s admission to the white readership of Forbes magazine: "'yes, there's a culture of poverty,'calling up the image of 'a sixteen-year-old mother, a thirty-two-year-old grandmother and a forty-eight-year-old great-grandmother,' noting for good measure that 'It's also true that not everyone in any society wants to work... not all people are equally motivated'"(88).

Third, in that it suggests that "meaningful political engagement for black Americans is expressed not in relation to the institutions of public authority—the state— or the workplace—but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical

acts" (89). The danger in this is that it stunts real political analysis which could lead to the creation of radical politics of resistance by suggesting "all we have to do is change the way we define things" (89).

Last, and worst of all, "it presumes a condition of political demobilization" (89). After all, the notion that one must assume the role of the "Black Voice" suggests "a black population that is disenfranchised and incapable of articulating its own agendas as citizenry" (89). Thus, for all of these reasons Reed frames the growing class of black public intellectuals as an epidemic—or "crisis"—which if left unaddressed could have dire consequences for the black community.

Satirizing the Black Public Intellectual

Published the year following Reed's article, *The White Boy Shuffle* takes the black public intellectual to task in ways which echo "What Are the Drums Saying."

After Gunnar's book of poetry *Watermelanin* becomes a national bestseller, the white academy and mainstream media begin grooming him to become the next premier black public intellectual. To this end, Gunnar is instructed by his fictional publisher, Gatekeeper Press, to attend a rally protesting Boston University's decision to honor a sycophantic black South African diplomat. (Of course, they want him to comment on the political conflict in South Africa as it is an example of how blacks are in "crisis" all over the world). "I was to be the drawing card, the liberal, libertine, and literary nigger stamp of approval" (196). However, instead of focusing his critique on said diplomat as he is expected to, he turns it around to focus on the corruption among contemporary black leaders, including himself.

185

This shift in focus is inspired by the statue of Martin Luther King Jr. which he

notices the crowd has gathered around. An academic at heart, Gunnar "close reads" the

statue for the black members of the audience. "Notice them steel birds are migrating

south—that's BU's way of telling you they don't want you here...Who knows what it

says on the plaque at the base of the sculpture?" (199). As no one in the crowd responds,

he proceeds to relate the story of how one day he dropped his Taco Bell Burrito Supreme,

and when be bent down to wipe the mess off of his shoe he read the plaque. "'If a man

hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live. Martin Luther King, Jr.'"

(199-200). He resumes his speech, opening up the discussion to everyone in the crowd.

"How many of you motherfuckers are ready to die for black rule in South Africa—and I

mean black rule, not black superintendence" (199). He then points to Harriet Velakazi,

the fictional lieutenant of the African National Congress (ANC) and fellow speaker, as an

example of what true leadership looks like. "[S]he's willing to die for South Africa. She

don't give a fuck about King's sexist language, she ready to kill her daddy and if need be

her mama for South Africa" (200). Gunnar on the other hand is not so willing. "So I

asked myself, what am I willing to die for? The day when white people treat me with

respect and see my life equally valuable as theirs? No, I ain't willing to die for that,

because if they don't know that by now, then they ain't never going to know it. Matter of

fact I ain't ready to die for anything, so I guess I'm just not fit to live" (200). It is with

this admission that Gunnar reveals himself to be a traitor. By articulating his

unwillingness to die or even to continue fighting in the war for eternal civility, he is

essentially deserting the other members of the race and thereby breaking group solidarity.

Further, he observes that he is not the only one. It is at this point that Gunnar directs his critique towards black leaders, arguing:

> That is why today's black leadership isn't worth shit, these telegenic niggers not willing to die. Back in the old days, if someone spoke up against the white man, he or she was willing to die. Today's housebroken niggers travel the country talking themselves hoarse about barbarous white devils, knowing that those devils aren't going to send them back to hell. And if Uncle Sam even lights a fire under their asses, they backtrack in front of the media...What we need is some new leaders. Leaders who won't apostatize like cowards. Some niggers who are ready to die! (200).

There are several key observations Gunnar makes about contemporary black leaders. First, he observes that their activism is mostly discursive. The only "work" which black leaders do is "talk themselves hoarse," and this comes at little to no risk to themselves. Worse, the content of their talks poses little if any threat to whites, ultimately revealing itself to be powerless to effect change. And in the rare event that they actually do manage to threaten white people they are subject to manipulation by the state (Uncle Sam). Second, he observes that their work is not rooted in an actual, physical black community such as a neighborhood, organization or movement.

To return to the example of true leadership looks like, the lieutenant of the ANC, Harriet Velakazi, is rooted in a particular "black community"—the African National Congress—which is rooted in the broader black community of black South Africans. As her activism stands to benefit a specific community this makes it possible to measure the effectiveness of her actions based on material outcomes. Contrast this image with Gunnar's view of "today's black leadership," which he describes as "telegenic" and "travelling," implying that they are not rooted in any particular community, and things start to look grim. Further, because they are not tied to a particular community it makes it

difficult to hold contemporary black leaders accountable or to understand their effectiveness in any measureable way.

By applying King's quote to the contemporary black leadership, Gunnar reduces all efforts on the part of black leaders which fall shy of a willingness to die to an "empty" posture. Ever the satirist, Beatty imagines what it would look like if blacks were so committed to ending oppression that they literally started killing themselves. However, as the examples King and Harriet Velakazi illustrate, we can also interpret this willingness to die figuratively, viewing it as a metaphor for a willingness to sacrifice one's own personal safety for the community. This unwillingness to sacrifice on behalf of the group is what makes the activism of "today's black leadership" so hollow in Beatty's perspective.

While Gunnar never explicitly calls them out, that he is referring to "black public intellectuals" during his critique of contemporary black leaders can be seen when we consider an earlier scene in which he is being recruited by a black professor from Harvard University to attend the university as a student the upcoming fall semester. "[He] was a marginally known bespectacled public intellectual who had moved west to Los Angeles to set up a think tank of mulatto social scientists called High Yellow Fever" (157). During dinner, he in entertained by the "Harvard man's" performance of elitism[32]. First, he extends his pinkies throughout their meal. "Encased in gold rings, these majestic fingers never touched any part of the pu-pu platter, cooly avoided the stem of the wineglass, and punctuated his points on affirmative action with a bombastic vigor unseen

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[32] Based on Beatty's penchant for irreverence (there is no aspect of black culture he will not mock), the description of the recruiter as "high-yellow" and a "Harvard man" is most likely an allusion to Henry Louis Gates Jr.

since Frederick Douglass" (157). Second, he carries a pocket watch and uses the phrase "nightcap." Towards the end of dinner, the "public intellectual" takes out his watch and then invites Gunnar back to his home for a "nightcap." Both of these acts are intended to impress Gunnar so that he will want to come to Harvard. Consequently, they do manage to impress Gunnar but not so much as a matter of admiration as amusement. "I was mesmerized; this was the first nigger I'd ever seen who owned a pocket watch and the only one I've ever heard say 'nightcap'" (157).

His critique of the "public intellectual" only sharpens from here. Gunnar notes that the "ersatz egghead lived in Chevoit Heights"—the upper-middle class neighborhood which overlooks Gunnar's own impoverished community Hillside (157). That Gunnar describes him as an "ersatz egghead" implies that the quality of his scholarship is second rate, echoing Reeds sentiment that black public intellectuals have made their success off of publishing sub-standard work which passes for rigorous academic scholarship. This sentiment is further reflected in the title of the "Harvard Man's" recent book, "*Antebellum Cerebellums: A History of Negro Super-Genius*." Read satirically, this book title announces that the "public intellectual" is merely using word play in the Signifyin' tradition to mask the lack of depth of his work. Ultimately, the "public intellectual's" plan to entice Gunnar fails when he shows him his prized collection of Peggy Lee records. "After one listen to 'Surrey with the Fringe On Top' I'd pretty much decided I wasn't going to Harvard, but I didn't say anything because the French pastry was humming" (157).

As the "public intellectual" becomes more desperate to persuade Gunnar his tactics become more overt. First, he tries to appeal to Gunnar by explaining to him the

benefits of attending an Ivy League institution. "Look, Gunnar, I understand your

reticence, but you're being offered a rare opportunity to sit in the lap of academe and

suckle from the teat of wisdom" (158). The "public intellectual's" comments have as

much to do with how he sees his own relationship to "academe" as they do whatever

possible relationship Gunnar might have with it. Second, he shows off his wife, a white

woman, who is scantily clad in a "see-through chiffon gown" (158). The implication

being that if Gunnar attends Harvard he too will gain access to white women. Then, in an

attempt to "connect" with Gunnar, he reveals his own motives for recruiting him. "If I get

you to attend Harvard, I get seventy-five thousand dollars, exactly enough to buy a new

motorhome" (158). His old motorhome was destroyed by Gunnar and his friends

(although he does not know this) during the L.A. riots, following the Rodney King

verdict. Gunnar, feigning ignorance, asks the "public intellectual" to repeat himself when

he asserts that he knows the culprits were the "demonic rowdies" from Hillside. "Hell,

you mean?" The "public intellectual" missing the sarcasm in Gunnar's tone, clarifies that

he is talking about Hillside which he describes as "a Petri dish for criminal vermin"

(159). As if it were not already clear, the "public intellectual" reveals himself to not only

be removed from but at odds with the black community. Thus, the work that he and other

public intellectuals claim to do on behalf of the community is purely motivated by self-

interest.

Further, Beatty asserts in no uncertain terms that the black public intellectual's

relationship to the community is exploitative. Again, Gunnar mockingly asks if the whole

point of him going to Harvard is so that he can learn how to become "a gentrified robber

baron?" (159). Detecting Gunnar's sarcasm this time, the "public intellectual" attempts to

assuage what he detects as Gunnar's guilt over taking advantage of the black majority as represented by Hillside. "I got mine, you get yours. Those poor people are beyond help, you must know that. The only reason I and others of my illustrious ilk pretend to help those folks it to reinforce the difference between them and us...You know the phrase 'Each one, teach one?'...'Well my motto is 'Each one, leech one'" (159). Through Gunnar's interaction with the recruiter from Harvard, Beatty paints black public intellectuals as a group of con artists, who leech off of the black majority as opposed to contributing to it. Unable to withstand the conversation any longer, Gunnar uses a rock climbing lesson as an opportunity to exit.

As one last ploy to secure Gunnar's commitment to go to Harvard, the "public intellectual" offers to teach him how to rock climb so that when he is at Harvard they can go climbing together on the weekends. As his backyard is buttressed by the giant concrete retaining wall which separates Chevoit Heights from Hillside, the "public intellectual" rigs up a rock climbing billet with the intent that Gunnar go part way down the wall and then come back up.

Following the "public intellectual's" instructions Gunnar begins lowering himself. However, much to the surprise of the "public intellectual" he keeps lowering himself until he is ten feet or so above Hillside. When the "public intellectual" asks Gunnar where he is going, he coyly replies "Home" (160). Having been under the impression that Gunnar was from the "Valley," the "public intellectual" is shocked to discover that he has been from Hillside all along.

While somewhat overdrawn, Gunnar's description of his interaction with the "Harvard man" perfectly crystalizes the points from Reed's essay. He shows the black

public intellectual to be more concerned with posture than politics. He reveals how their

scholarship trades on tropes of blackness as a means to mask its lack of academic rigor.

He articulates what he assumes to be the motives of the black public intellectual, which

include fame, wealth, comfort, and most importantly distinction from the black majority.

And it is this *distinction*—or distance—which Beatty seems to find most problematic.

A "New" Kind of Black Public Intellectual

That Gunnar chooses to rappel himself back home to Hillside foreshadows the

moment he rejects the black public intellectual role as defined, only to return home where

he immerses himself in the community. At first, when he arrives Gunnar is unsure of

what to do. However, after reconnecting with his childhood friend Psycho Loco, he is

inspired to begin organizing open mic events called "MiseryFests" in the local park every

Friday night. During these weekly gatherings, everyone from the community would

gather together to participate. "The shows lasted all night, and the neighborhood players

read poetry, held car shows, sang, danced, ad-libbed harangues about everything from

why there are no Latino baseball umpires to the practicality of sustaining human life on

Mars. Sometimes troupes of children simply counted to a hundred for hours at a time"

(219). One particularly interesting segment of the MiseryFest was the hour known as

Community Stigmas. During this hour those members who belonged to one of the many

stigmatized groups would have a chance to "kvetch and defend their actions to the rest of

the neighborhood" (220).

As Gunnar notes that the "MiseryFests" sometimes consist of children counting

he makes ironic the very idea of the inward-facing, community-centering inclusive space

192

which he seems to create. In this way Gunnar, which is to say Beatty, reveals himself to be a post-soul satirist.[33] As used by Derek C. Maus, the term "post-soul satirists" refers to the group of black American artists from the early 1990s who subscribed to the "post-soul aesthetic" and used satire to critically examine black culture (*Post-Soul Satire* xii). The "post-soul aesthetic" (also referred to by some scholars as the "new black aesthetic") refers to the cultural aesthetic developed by the generation of young black artists who were "either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 611). However, this does not necessarily mean everything created by a black artist who is of this post-Civil Rights generation necessarily constitutes "post-soul" art. In order for something to qualify as "post-soul" Bertram Ashe submits that it needs to fall within his "triangular post-soul matrix" which consists of: "the 'cultural mulatto' archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and, lastly, the signal allusion-disruption gestures" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 613).

By the cultural mulatto archetype Ashe is referring to the idea that those of the "post-soul" generation possess a kind of mixed cultural identity which enables them to fluidly move between white and black spaces ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 613). Gunnar displays this kind of cultural fluidity because he was raised in the predominantly white suburb of Santa Monica, California before moving to the predominantly black and Latino neighborhood of Hillside. For instance, he notes that he was "the only cool black guy at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica's all-white multicultural school" (*The White Boy Shuffle* 28). While Ashe acknowledges that all Americans are

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[33]Bertram D. Ashe cites Beatty as being among the inaugural generation of post-soul artists ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 610).

"cultural mulattos" to an extent, what distinguishes the "post-soul" generation from everyone else is that "these artists—and their characters, their music, their filmic and painterly representations—are consciously crossing traditionally separated racial lines in US popular culture in a way that, although it did indeed exist, was either unlikely or unseemly in earlier black artistic eras" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 614).

By "the execution of an exploration of blackness" Ashe means that "post-soul" artists "trouble blackness" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 614). "[T]hey worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 614). Still, Ashe insists that this interrogation of blackness by "post-soul" artists "is done in service of black people," in particular the communities to which they belong. We see this "troubling of blackness" when Gunnar asks the black community to question its leaders and hold them to a higher standard of commitment. Ultimately, the way in which the "post-soul" artists "troubling of blackness" benefits their community is that it "argues that blackness is constantly in flux, and in that way…'responds' to the 1960's 'call' for a fixed, iron-clad black aesthetic" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 615).

Finally, by "signal allusion-disruption gestures" Ashe is referring to the tendency of "post-soul" artists to "allude to" and then "pry apart" movements which have defined blackness. For instance, Ashe notes that a regular target of "post-soul" artists is the Black Power movement. "Post soul" artists also "signify on" the Civil Rights movement and other periods of African American history. However, Ashe discourages us from seeing

these gestures as a sign of disrespect. In fact, Maus uses the oxymoronic phrase "subversively respectful" to describe the ways in which "post-soul" artists employ the allusion-disruption strategy. Ashe even cites Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* as a prime example. In particular, the moment where Gunnar relates the story of one of his ancestors, Swen Kaufman, who accidentally ran away into slavery. "Being persona non anglo-saxon, Swen was unable to fulfill his uppity dreams of becoming a serious dancer...So on a windy night he packed his ballet slippers and stowed away on a merchant ship bound for the Cotton Belt" (*The White Boy Shuffle* 12). Soon thereafter, Swen arrives at the Tannenberry plantation where he is arrested by the sound coming from the fields where "some slaves were turning up rows of Tobacco" (*The White Boy Shuffle* 13). As he listens to their work songs he is inspired to choreograph a "'groundbreaking' dance opera. A renegade piece that intertwined the stoic movement of forced labor with the casual assuredness of the aristocratic lyric" (*The White Boy Shuffle* 13). Ashe concludes that through this process of allusion-disruption artists like Beatty use "cultural mulatto" characters to "trouble blackness, to oppose reductive iterations of blackness in ways that mark the post-Civil Rights movement African American literary subgenre as compellingly different from those of earlier literary periods" ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 616).

The significance of "post-soul" artists being born after the Civil Rights movement is best summarized by the comments of Marc Anthony Neal, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*: "the generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the

movement's legacy from a state of subjectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing" (103). Clarifying Neal's point about the subjectivity of "post-soul" artists, Maus explains: "Neal's rejection of 'nostalgic allegiance' does not preclude the possibility of acknowledging the past and the sacrifices made on behalf of future generations by artistic and political forebears, it only suggests that any debt of gratitude owed to them neither includes uncritical acceptance nor precludes pointed satirical subversion" (*Post-Soual Satire* xv). We observe this kind of subversion first hand as Gunnar uses the statue of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of the key figures of the Civil Rights movement, to wipe the remnants of a spilled burrito supreme off of his sneakers.

As the example of Gunnar wiping his sneakers on the statue of Dr. King illustrates, satire plays a central role in the ways in which "post-soul" artists examine black culture. Maus observes that "post-soul" satire is "dual-vectored" in that it "transmits its ethical critique at two distinct frequencies" (xiii). The first frequency is aimed at "in-group" audiences and offers a "Horatian (i.e., relatively mild ridicule of vices and hypocrisy) satirical commentary on follies and self-destructive habits...within the African American community" (*Post-Soual Satire* xiii-xiv). The second frequency offers a "Juvenalian (i.e., scornful and morally indignant mockery) satire directed at political institutions, social practices, and cultural discourses that arise outside the community and constrain, denigrate, or otherwise harm it in some way" (*Post-Soual Satire* xiv). It is important to note that while the second frequency concerns white audiences it is not explicitly aimed at white audiences, meaning the "post-soul" artists can address white audiences without having to turn their attention away from black

audiences. As Gunnar, which is to say the post-soul artist, uses satire to level a critique at both white and black audiences, does not this solve the dual audience issue which the black public intellectual faces?

Because he belongs to this post-soul generation, Gunnar is able to "trouble blackness" in such a way that he opens up space for those who are at the margins of community to participate in the discourse. By allowing them to speak, Gunnar is able to create an inclusive space which does precisely what Reed called for. He is able to position himself on the metaphorical boundary of blackness and turn his attention towards the community to provide a broader perspective. As I argued in the Introduction, I believe that this metaphorical boundary is racial treason. Only by becoming a race traitor is Gunnar able to gain the perspective which allows for him to stop trying to negotiate the dual audience problem altogether and focus his attention on serving the community he left behind when he went off to college.

Soon the the MiseryFests grow to be major events which black people from all over Los Angeles begin to attend. Naturally, this draws the curiosity of white audiences who want to partake in the spectacle which these events have become. However, Gunnar is intentional about ensuring that this remain a private discursive space for blacks to gather, express, and debate among themselves. "Psycho Loco stationed armed guards at the gate to keep out the blue-eyed soulsters. Questioning anyone who looked to be of Caucasian descent, the sentries showed those of dubious ancestry a photograph of a radial-tire colored black man, the asked, 'What's darker than this man's face?' Anyone who didn't answer 'His butt' or 'His nipples' didn't get in" (221).

197

Surely this system of determining racial belonging is problematic to say the least. First, in that it relies on an outdated construction of race as phenotype to determine who gets to belong. Second, it employs a litmus test of cultural authenticity to determine who is black enough. In this way, Beatty is also satirizing the very process of racial-border-policing that is producing the very discursive community and black nationalist space which Hillside comes to represent.

In a seemingly counterproductive move, Gunnar sells access to the media networks. However, unlike black intellectuals who provide whites access to the conversation for their own benefit, Gunnar leverages the privacy of the community to everyone's benefit.

> We accepted the best offer and divided it up among all the households in Hillside, and the television station agreed to the following conditions.
>
> - Build the Reynier Park Amphitheater and pay for its maintenance.
> - Build huge video screens throughout.
> - Use only colored camerapersons and support staff.
> - All broadcasts must be live and unedited.
> - Stay the fuck out of the way. (221)

Although at first glance it seems as though Gunnar is compromising the privacy of the community in order to appeal to a white audience, this is not the case. Rather, he is merely requiring whites to pay for the privilege of listening to a private conversation of which they are expressly not the intended audience. Further, he uses this trade-off to build up his community.

He requires the media to pay for the building and maintenance of a physical space in which blacks can continue to engage in a discourse of group self-examination. As this is a bigger space, this means that even more members from the community and beyond (who can pass the authenticity test at the gate) are able to participate. Also that it is

televised means that black people in other communities can also participate. He ensures that it leads to the creation of jobs within the black community. He also ensures that the space in which the conversation is had remains exclusively black. While whites are permitted to observe from afar, whites are clear that they are not the intended audience. Along these same lines, by retaining full control of what gets aired ("All broadcasts must be live" and "Stay the fuck out of the way") Gunnar ensures that the black audiences remains the focus.

Gunnar then uses his newly gained platform to begin what he describes as an "insurrection." He stages the ultimate act of resistance by challenging white America to kill him and the other black people in Hillside by dropping an atomic bomb on them. He reveals that through "painstaking research" he discovered proof of a third atomic bomb, "Svelte Guy," which the U.S. government had planned to drop on Japan during World War II. As he and the other members of Hillside have decided that they are unwilling to die in order that whites fully acknowledge them as citizens, they are no longer fit to live as citizens. Therefore, Gunnar and the other residents of Hillside cease to participate in American society and take Hillside hostage.

In an attempt to call Gunnar's bluff, the U.S. government issues a warning to all residents of Hillside. "[R]ejoin the rest of America or celebrate Kwanzaa in hell" (224). However, the community does not back down. Beatty ends the novel with the image of an apocalyptic community of excessively self-defining, unfettered, and radically free black people who assume a posture of defiance towards the state. What makes this community so radical is that its people seek to obtain their freedom by inviting their own annihilation. They are not the first black community to pursue this strategy, rather they

fall in a long line of enslaved and free black people who have enacted a kind of suicide-as-rebellion. "The response was to paint white concentric circles on the roofs of the neighborhood, so that from the air Hillside looked like one big target, with La Cienega Motor Lodge and Laundromat as the fifty-point bull's-eye" (224). Further, with this image of the giant bullseye Beatty uses the allusion-disruption strategy to signify on the various moments in black American history in which police have bombed black communities including the bombings of Black Tulsa and the Philadelphia MOVE House.

The Race Traitor Comes Full Circle

As Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* illustrates, the race traitor continued to serve as a metaphor for the politics of black identity at the close of the 20th century. During the 1990s the black majority and black elites were engaged in a war to determine which class identity would come to signify the race. In the same way that the "public intellectual" calls the people of Hillside "criminal vermin," many black elites during the 1980s and 90s saw the black majority as being at fault for the continuation of black oppression.[34] Some were even willing to publicly express this opinion. Although some members were not willing to go this far, they did level critiques at the black community under the guise of intervention. In response, members of the black majority in the post-soul era came to question the authenticity of black elites whom they felt had abandoned them. It is somewhere in between these two opposing communities that Gunnar finds himself when he heads off to college.

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[34] For examples of this kind of class-based critique by members of the black elite please see Ellis Cose's *The Rage of a Privileged Class*.

Although Gunnar momentarily believes that he can speak to both audiences simultaneously, he ultimately realizes the farce which is black public intellectualism. By turning inwards to the community and engaging in critical self-examination, Gunnar is able to recognizes and acknowledge the limitations of his commitment to the race. In this way, Beatty crystalizes what is at the core of the discussion on racial treason: a lack of responsibility to the community. Gunnar's unwillingness to die for the race represents a failure to honor his responsibility *to* the black community at large, but more specifically the community of Hillside. As people look to him for answers on the plight of blacks—in other words, to interpret the collective voice of the black community—he is forced to ask himself the question: are you willing to die to uphold black identity? Is this a war even worth fighting for? In the end, Gunnar is ready to die not because he is committed to the cause but because he refuses to live in a system which expects him to continue fighting for his humanity although it will never grant or recognize it.

There are two resonant meanings of the word "die" which Beatty is playing with. First, there is the idea of the activist who dies in direct conflict with the forces of oppression in order to achieve a purpose. We see this exemplified in Dr. King, Harriet Velakazi, and the numerous men and women in *The White Boy Shuffle* who begin committing suicide as a display of their commitment to the campaign to win the war for civility. This is a sort of death by humiliation if you will. The second resonant meaning which Beatty seems to be getting at is the idea of the person who chooses annihilation over humiliation. This brings to mind the notion of death by cop. While suicide-as-rebellion may seem to lack a purpose that is in service of the people, it still makes a significant statement about the system itself. That someone would choose suicide as

opposed to some other form of resistance is the ultimate moral critique of the system that produces this as the only possible act of resistance.

Beatty complicates the discussion by having Gunnar open up this question to the larger black community. He asks the other black members in the crowd, are any of you willing to die for black identity? As a result he inspires a wave of suicide-protests by which black leaders begin sacrificing themselves on behalf of the race. What is more, he inspires those who recognize that they are also unwilling to die for the cause to join him in migrating to Hillside where they begin to build a black community which is engaged in a discourse of self-expression which evolves to one of self-examination and ultimately to one of self-determination. This discourse community is not limited to one particular recognizable trope or "type" of black American identity. No—as Gunnar says, "They're all here, the black American iconographic array" (2).[35]

By representing Hillside as a black Mecca to which blacks from all over the United States flock in search of freedom, Beatty dramatizes the need for this reorientation in perspective. Further, by positing suicide-as-rebellion as a viable form of resistance, Beatty forces us to reconsider the ethos of "ready to die" which was popularized by black urban male celebrities such as Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur.[36] Beatty invites us to

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[35] However, even as Beatty presents an image of a more inclusive discourse community he discourages us from taking him too seriously. Irony plays into his representation of an inclusive community in that he implies that every kind of recognizably black American "type" is there, rather than indicating the actual complexity and variability of real black people.

[36] For an in-depth discussion of the "ready to die" ethos embraced by some black men, see Aimé Ellis's *If We Must Die* in which she asserts: "[S]ome black men anticipate death with increasing impatience; some beckon it, shadowbox with it; some, like Wallace and Shakur before being gunned to death, willfully explore--even traverse in their music *and* lived experiences--death's ubiquitous domain" (5) She goes on to claim: "first,...the cultural imaginations of many contemporary black men have been profoundly shaped by a deathly history of racial terror and state violence; second...that it is, paradoxically, this same history of terror and violence that has supplied black male writers, musicians, and filmmakers with an unlikely horizon for imagining freedom is charted in relation to overcoming one's fear of death" (5).

think in a more nuanced way about why black men who embrace identities such the "ready to die" ethos—For instance, one calls to mind the image of black men toting guns, "sagging" their pants, flipping the bird, etc.—are so dangerous to both whites and blacks. Could it be that by adopting a stance which invites annihilation these men are in fact enacting a type of suicide-as-rebellion? To be clear, Beatty is not trying to reproduce a big-tent blackness which is centered on the urban black community. Rather he is critiquing the view of the black community which reproduces respectability politics, as this view is always ultimately directed towards the "other" and the white supremacist gaze. In the end, Beatty calls for blacks to develop their own expansive sense of black identity, free from the influences of the white audience, by turning inward to examine itself, beginning with those identities at the center and moving outward towards the margins.

But what does this look like practically on the eve of the 21st century, especially when we consider that the black community becomes increasingly stratified along class and political lines? Beatty does not engage with this question, instead opting to envision a world in which some blacks choose to take their lives as an expression of their activism, while others wait blissfully for their lives to be ended for them, a decision which, ironically, allows for them to simply live. What emerges is a black community that no longer needs to patrol its borders or keep certain people out. It's a black community that can hold and literally accept everyone who no longer wishes to play by the former rules. In this way, *The White Boy Shuffle* is the the fulfillment of the plea and prediction made by Berl Trout, the narrator of Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, who was in fact willing to die for both race and nation. "[H]elp my poor down-trodden people to secure

203

those rights for which they organized [resistance], which my betrayal has now destroyed.

I urge this because love of liberty is such an inventive genius, that if you destroy one

device it at once constructs another more powerful" (177).

So, we have looked at the following characters, who all wrestled with the specter

of being called a race traitor: Berl Trout; Invisible Man; Gabe Gabriel; John Edgar

Wideman; and Gunnar Kaufman. Each of these black male characters provide a critical

if not fresh perspective on the discourse of black identity. Berl's narrative brings into

focus the intersections between the anti-African emigration sentiment of 19th century

AME Zion church leaders and black identity. They believed that only by remaining in the

United States and standing their ground could black people demonstrate that they had

what it took to be citizens. Invisible Man calls attention to the legacy of double agency

black leaders such as Booker T. Washington (and, for that matter, Ralph Ellison) and the

subversiveness of tokenism. Gabe's (re)staging of his trauma reminds us of the

frightening reality that although it can be affirming, the discourse of black identity is also

fraught with psychological danger: guilt, anxiety, fear, shame, and alienation. John Edgar

Wideman uses the intimate bond he shares with his brother Robby to increase our

awareness of the personal and collective stakes surrounding the discourse of black

identity. And lastly, Gunnar pokes fun at the pernicious presence of white spectators in

the conversation and the negative impact which their influential presence can have on

black identity.

As I approach the conclusion of my project, I am left with the question of what

has my journey through these six chapters produced? I submit that with each

reproduction of this figure—that of the black male race traitor—by the black male

authors within this archive, we witness the evolution of a critique of the ways black people have engaged in group self-examination (i.e. the politics of black identity). Beginning with Berl Trout and ending with Gunnar Kaufman, we see a gradual shift in the focus of the race traitor figure's critique of the politics of black identity, a shift away from concern over how black identity was perceived by white audiences. Whereas Berl produces a critique of the way black people engaged in group self-examination which privileges the white gaze, Gunnar produces a critique which enables his black community to engage in a discourse of group self-examination free from white influence.

Further, by taking up the trope of the black male race traitor the authors in this archive invite us to consider how the discourse of black identity, while necessary, can be problematic. In particular, as my use of a male gendered metaphor for black identity implies, the discourse of black identity has privileged masculinity in ways which distort the view of black women's role in the formulation and policing of black identity. Therefore, at the same time that these texts depict the shifting politics of black identity, they also depict some of the ways black women have been mistreated as part of the larger conversation. Some black women have been blamed like Viola (*Imperium in Imperio*). Others have been discounted like Mary Rambo (*Invisible Man*). There are others who have been abused like Cora (*No Place to be Somebody*). And still there are others who have been marginalized like John Edgar Wideman's mom Freda (*Brothers and Keepers*). Beatty breaks with this pattern in that he positions a black woman, Harriet Valkazi, at the center of the conversation (he defines black solidarity in terms of Harriet's willingness to die).

Furthermore, Beatty, Wideman, Gordone, Ellison, and Griggs invite us to consider how the discourse of black identity, as it has been imagined in the past, is burdensome. In addition to coping with the burden of racism, black Americans have also had to put considerable energy into negotiating the possibility of being perceived as a race traitor by another member of the race. While the inclination of black Americans to construct black identity in ways which counter the negative representations put forth by whites is understandable, unfortunately it comes at the high cost of energy which could be put to better use on things which actually would benefit the community. Thus, the issue of trying to avoid being perceived as a race traitor is the often unrecognized but the hugely perilous counterpart to the overt issue of the struggle for equality in a racist society.

As long as the discourse of black identity continues to cater to white spectators, no matter how small the extent, then masculine identity will continue to be privileged in the conversation to the marginalization of feminine identity. And, as long as the discourse of black identity continues to privilege masculinity and marginalize femininity (among other perspectives), then the future possibilities for what definitions of black identity can be will continue to be circumscribed. However, by ignoring the white gaze and expanding the scope of the discourse to include the perspectives of identity groups within black America which have been traditionally excluded (e.g. black women and black queer people), black Americans can open the borders of black identity for exploration, moving the conversation into new uncharted territories.

EPILOGUE

The specter of the black male race traitor seems to seek out and haunt me no matter where I go. While attending the 103rd Academic Conference for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, I had the opportunity to debut an early version of my archive. The evening of my presentation, my archive was generally well received. However, the next day I found that it had started to gain some buzz due to the then recent Kanye West debacle at the White House. I had missed his "stunt" at the White House as I had been preparing most of the day before.[37] But apparently it was bad. As one of my colleagues put it: "He acted an entire fool. An entire *damn* fool." What I found fascinating was that my presentation had engendered an entire conversation about the nature of race traitors and where Kanye West might fit in the longer trajectory of my project. As my project stops in the 20th century I was able to, momentarily, put up mental blinders.

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[37] On October 11, 2019 President Trump hosted Kanye West in the Oval Office. During their televised visit, Kanye wore Trump's signature Make America Great Again (MAGA) bright red hat cocked to the side. Addressing why he chose to wear a hat which many have come to see as a symbol of racism, Kanye explained: "You know they try to scare me to not wear this hat, my own friends. But this hat, it gives me, it gives me power in a way...It was something about when I put this hat on, it made me feel like superman. You made a superman. That's my favorite superhero. And you made a superman cape for me." (Seifu). After praising Trump, Kanye would then offer an at times incoherent critique of black Americans. For instance he claimed: "I think with blacks and African Americans, we really get caught up in the idea of racism over the idea of industry. You see if people don't have land, they settle for brands. We want a Polo-sporting Obama again. We want a brand, because we haven't known how it feels to actually have our own land and have ownership of our own blocks" (Seifu). He also took the opportunity to address the use of fatal force by police officers on black Americans: "But we also as black people have to take a responsibility for what we're doing. We killed each other more than police officers. And that's not saying that a police officer is not an issue because they are in a place, a position of power. But sometimes they're in a place of law enforcement, they need to be law power" (Seifu). Needless to say Trump and Republicans in general were pleased with West's stunt. In fact, black conservative commentator and political activist Candace Owens would attempt to use West's appearance to make her case for what she called "blexit": the mass exodus of black people from the Democratic Party. Although West would later apologize, stating that his comments were taken out of context, the impact of his Oval Office visit had already begun to reverberate across the nation, sparking debate.

However, this past winter break I was forced to take off my mental blinders when news broke that on January 3, 2019 the cable network Lifetime would be airing a documentary series produced by Dream Hampton which would detail the allegations of several black women that R&B singer R. Kelly (Robert Kelley) had sexually, mentally and physically abused when they were underage, and would examine why, despite these allegations, R. Kelly had not been brought to justice. Rumors that R. Kelly had a preference for younger black girls have long been a topic of conversation (and derision) among black audiences. For instance, there was the urban legend that he had secretly married the singer Aaliyah when she was only fifteen.[38] Also there was the fact that Kelly had already stood trial and been acquitted of child pornography charges in 2008 when a video was released which allegedly showed him engaging in sex with a minor.[39]

As news of the series began circulating, black people on Twitter began engaging in a critical conversation as to why these incidents of abuse were allowed to go on for so long without any recourse despite numerous attempts on the part of the women featured in the documentary to share their stories. Many black women on Twitter began citing the predicament of these women as an example of "misogynoir." Coined by Moya Bailey, misogynoir refers to the particular type of misogyny black women experience in which

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[38] This rumor was recently confirmed by R. Kelly's current lawyer Steven Greenberg, who claimed that his client was unaware of Aaliyah's actual age at the time of their marriage. Apparently this was in response to a copy of their alleged marriage certificate being leaked online a few days prior. Greenberg's claim that his client was unaware that he was entering into a marriage with a minor was quickly challenged by TMZ when they released a video from 1994 (the year prior to Kelly's marriage to Aaliyah) in which he states: "Right now I'm producing a very talented lady -- a young lady. She's 14, Aaliyah. She's real street" ("Old R. Kelly Clip").

[39] This case, its subject matter, and the response of black American spectators was famously parodied by Dave Chappelle on his comedy program *Chappelle's Show* in the sketches "Piss on You" and "Celebrity Trial Jury Selection."

both race and gender are factors.[40] Many felt that Kelly had exploited black women and girls because they were a demographic which was largely ignored. Although none of the black female Twitter users to whom I am referring said it outright, the implication was that Kelly was a race traitor precisely because his exploitation of these women and girls was motivated by his embrace of an ethos which took advantage of their *blackness* as well as their sex. As a result, the black women on Twitter began calling on members of the black community, in particular black male artists, to stop protecting R. Kelly and demand that he be brought to justice. In other words, they were saying that anyone who hurts the most vulnerable members of the race—if we recall the sound bite featured in Beyonce's visual album *Lemonade* in which Malcolm X proclaims, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman"—is in fact hurting the race as a whole and is no longer entitled to its protection or financial support.

Further, those who had associated with (and thereby enabled) him were also being taken to task. Everyone from his management team to former artists with whom he had collaborated on projects were being called upon by the "digital" black community on Twitter to give an account for their actions. Some like Chance the Rapper attempted to engage in the conversation. Shortly before the final episode of the series aired, Chance the Rapper posted a video of himself being interviewed about his regret over having worked with R. Kelly, in which he states: "We're programmed to really be hypersensitive

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[40] For a more in-depth definition and discussion of the term "misogynoir," I highly recommend the blog post "Explanation of Misogynoir" by Trudy of the Gradient Lair.

to black male oppression...but black women are exponentially a higher oppressed and violated group of people just in comparison to the whole world. Maybe I didn't care because I didn't value the accusers' stories because they were black women" (Samuel). It was the tail end of this comment which many found so troubling. Although Chance the Rapper later claimed that his comments were being taken out of context, he did issue an apology shortly thereafter. "[T]he truth is any of us who ever ignored R. Kelly stories, or ever believed he was being setup/attacked by the system (as black men often are) were doing so at the detriment of black women and girls. I apologize to all survivors for working with him and taking this long to speak out" (Owbum). Other black male artists (e.g. Jay-z, Drake, P-Diddy, Timbaland) attempted to steer clear of the conversation, refusing to pick a side. They were subsequently called out by black Twitter users who felt that their silence was tantamount to complicity. This even led some black people to speculate that they were silent because they were guilty of similar behavior.[41]

While the general tone of the conversation was that Kelly should be brought to justice, there were those black people who began questioning the details of the accusations and speculating about the possible motives of these women for coming forward. Further, they began questioning the willingness of those demanding justice for Kelly's victims to be complicit in what they saw as a plot by white America to assassinate the character and legacy of yet another black male celebrity, while ultimately distracting black people from issues which really matter. As one black female Twitter user (Crystal Baker) put it: "Black people do you ever question America's motive. Ask

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[41] For a list of artists who were suspected of similar behavior please see Ibn Safir's article "Why You Can Expect Silence from These Legends When it Comes to R. Kelly's History of Abuse" at *The Grapevine*.

yourself what are they distracting us from with this @rkelly story? Because they sure

didn't do a Trump story, a Kavanah [sic] story, a white Hollywood story.... but they chose

another black man. Equity is a major problem for me" (Baker). Some such as Tariq

Nasheed were even more pointed in their attack: "I haven't seen one person on twitter

defend R Kelly's sexually deviant behavior. Not ONE. But have you noticed how this 30

year old R Kelly scandal is being used by certain people in the white media, and their

negro employees to defend WHITE rapists in the entertainment industry?" (Nasheed).[42]

      Again, we see the specter of the race traitor being raised here. The implication of

such remarks by black Twitter users like Baker and Nasheed was that Kelly's accusers

and their supporters were failing to put the race first and thus naively allowing

themselves to be used by white America.[43] The misogynoir which fueled such sentiments

was quickly called out. For instance, Baker's comments were met with the following

reply: "Equity? EQUITY? You really decided to die on the hill of "Black men should be

able to get away with pedophila and abuse like white men can!" Seriously?! My God.

What black man hurt you, that you have internalized his bullshit apologism?" (Jemisin).

Others like Mikki Kendall were less tactful in their responses. "I really want you to ask

me this face to face. Pull up. Seriously. Pull up" (Kendall). Thus what ensued was a back-

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[42] Nasheed in attempt to "shade" R. Kelly's accusers and their supporters, actually reveals his neglect for black girls and women. Why, if for the past thirty years the community has known that R. Kelly was guilty, has Kelly been allowed to continue preying on young black women? Why has it taken till now for something to be done? As in any family, any dysfunction is often covered up so that outsiders don't see it. But even if we try and approach Nasheed's argument for silence about Kelly's "sexually deviant behavior" as an attempt to protect the "family," it still does not add up. Fine, you do not want to air the dirty laundry of the race (in particular black men) in public. But doesn't that mean, then, that the community must be willing to bring its own members to justice? Nasheed seems to think that the issue stops with merely acknowledging what Kelly has done.
[43] It is interesting (and certainly tragic) that "putting the race first" is seldom articulated or understood in terms of addressing the ways in which black women have been oppressed by fellow members of the race.

and-forth chorus of accusations of racial treason by many of those participating in this conversation.[44]

There were two things I found interesting about the conversation surrounding the documentary *Surviving R. Kelly* and the allegations being brought against him. First, there was a noticeable difference in how each side made the case that the other was the real culprit of racial treason. It was quite sad to witness those who supported Kelly's accusers actually spell out—albeit in very eloquent, thoughtful, cogent and powerful ways—how the refusal to believe these women's stories represents a specific type of anti-Blackness which he and his supporters were playing into. This was not the case for Kelly's supporters, who merely had to allude to the idea that the allegations brought forth by these women somehow served white America, in particular white male celebrities who have been accused of sexual assault and predatory behavior. I found this difference saddening because it crystallized for me the major reason why I frame a narrative of black identity around a male gendered trope—the unfortunate persistence with which masculinity looms over the discussion on the construction of black identity.[45] At the core of this issue is the question: What kind of black community do we want to be? One which removes pedophiles and rapists, and the people who support them, from among us? One which believes black women and girls when no one else will? Constructing black identity

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[44] The frustration which black female Twitter users like Jeminsin and Kendall expressed, were shared by similar frustrations on the part of queer black people for what they see as a willingness of the black community to stand by a known pedophile (according to Nasheed) but not queer black people. For instance, in response to news that a black woman has posted bail for Kelly Adrian Xpression reflected: "If y'all went up for black LGBT like this, a lot of us wouldn't be dead/homeless. But protect the abusers like y'all always do, I guess!" (Xpression).

[45] As I have explained in the introduction, just as race has played an integral role in the construction of our national manhood (in that white Americans have constructed notions of citizenship in opposition to blackness), masculinity has played an integral role in the construction of black identity (in that black Americans have attempted to construct black identity in relation to the national manhood).

exclusively in terms of patriarchal masculinity, with an acute hyper-awareness of how black identity is being perceived by white America, is the ultimate act of privileging the white audience. And, as we see with this conversation, it often has the tendency to prevent the black community from engaging in critical in-group self-examination in ways which open up new possibilities for self-definition and healing.

The second reason I found this discussion interesting was that I witnessed real, tangible consequences for those who were choosing to stand by Kelly. In addition to the the article which *The Grapevine* published, these artists also faced calls by many black Twitter users to see them "canceled." By "canceled" they mean that the individual has been "unfollowed," blacklisted, prohibited, stigmatized. What is more, this is a social designation which has material consequences. Being unfollowed means fewer viewers, which can harm endorsements. Or worse, it means that black consumers, particularly black female consumers, will stop buying your music. In this way, Twitter solves the problem of the black leader who trades on his connection to black culture (without actually being tied to a community) by affording black Americans the ability to hold one another accountable, or at the very least the rich and famous blacks who are using their celebrity as a social platform from which to sell things to black folk (or other people) by trading on their associations with blackness. I say all this to say, I wonder if Twitter and similar spaces have come to represent a new formulation of the discursive territory which Beatty imagined. Similar to Hillside, "black Twitter" as it is affectionately known represents an extremely diverse discursive community which rallies to discuss current issues facing black Americans free from white interference. They may eavesdrop on the discussion. They might even be the subject of the discussion. But white people are not the

intended audience of the conversation. While this community has gained attention for its humorous-yet-critical engagement with popular culture, this is not to overshadow the important type of group self-examination work which it is doing.

Beatty's prophetic vision for the future of black America has come to fruition in part. The eve of the 21st century has come and gone, and black Americans still have yet to realize a literal territory in which to govern themselves. For now, it seems as though Twitter will have to do. But as exciting as this may be—that black Americans have seemingly carved out a space for themselves where they can be themselves—there are a number of concerns I have. First, what about those members of the black community who are not online? Does black Twitter automatically exclude certain people and therefore repeat the same issues as past formulations of the "black community"? Also, how are we to account for the fact that it is a platform which is owned and operated by a private corporation? While Twitter may be used as a space for black people to hold an intra-group conversation, this was not the purpose for which it was created. Further, that it is not a private space means that black people are subject to being trolled,[46] doxxed,[47] threatened, fired, and more for what they say as they are engaging in this public conversation. These are just some of the questions I have.[48] Who knows but this may lead

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[46] In "Searching for Safety Online," Susane Herring notes that "Trolling entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions" (372).

[47] As Brianna Wu explains, being doxxed refers to "having your personal details leaked online, an increasingly common technique used by trolls and hackers to silence people they don't agree with" ("Doxxed" 46).

[48] There is a large amount of work being done in the area of trying to conceptualize Black Twitter and to address some of the questions I have raised. Some interesting projects to consider are André Brock's "From The Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," Sarah Florini's "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin' Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'" Sanjay Sharma's "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," and Meredith Clark's "To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon 'Black Twitter.'"

to another project on the race traitor. Thus, just when I think I have escaped him, there

the race traitor appears yet again.

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