

# Violence and Masculinity in American Fiction, 1950-1975

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VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY IN AMERICAN FICTION, 1950-1975

by

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ABSTRACT  
VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY IN AMERICAN FICTION, 1950-1975

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This dissertation explores the intersections of violence, masculinity, and racial and ethnic tension in America as it is depicted in fiction published by Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, and Philip Roth between 1950 and 1975. Through close literary analysis coupled with a study of race and gender in 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture, I examine the manner in which gendered existential dilemmas are portrayed in this fiction as arising from a number of external factors, including racism, ethnic stereotyping, and the triumph of white heteronormativity as a model of masculinity. In doing so, I offer a reconsideration of existential questions about gender as they apply to the African-American and Jewish-American protagonists in these texts who, experiencing a period of transition amidst cultural and political upheaval, become particularly representative figures for the study of masculinity in crisis during these decades. While Eric Sundquist and Emily Miller Budick have laid the groundwork for putting black and Jewish authors in dialogue, and while some critical studies of these authors have addressed their respective representations of race and gender, none have placed these texts side by side to explore their instructive similarities, particularly with regard to the role violence plays in each author's representation of masculinity. My own research highlights how violence in these texts is problematically asserted as an inherent part of a man's existential freedom. I further advance the critical conversation surrounding constructions of racialized masculinity in post-WWII American literature by taking a philosophical and historicist approach, drawing from the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in order to discern the status of violence in the modern existentialist reckoning of identity, particularly as a key to understanding the many conflicting shapes of American masculinity. Specifically, I argue that the authors under investigation often figure violence as a central aspect of their respective constructions of masculinity, but that this use of violence harbors a problematic paradox, as its deployment in the name of liberation often reifies many of the cultural myths and power structures that they, or the protagonists who speak on their behalf, seek to overturn.

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## **INTRODUCTION: The Intersection of Violence, Gender, and Existential Theory**

This dissertation explores the intersections of violence, masculinity, and racial and ethnic tension in America as it is depicted in fiction published by Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, and Philip Roth between the 1950s and the 1970s. The time period within which these works were published, marked as it was by the cultural and political turbulence of the Civil Rights movement, second-wave Feminism, and later, the increasing Zionist sentiment in the wake of the Six-Day War, elicited passionate and often revolutionary voices and texts regarding race, ethnicity, and gender. For example, the publication of works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* paved the way for more conversation about female social roles and, implicitly, male social roles at this time. Similar conversations were sparked by feminist writings by women of color such as Angela Davis, and by the controversial masculinist ethic espoused by the Black Power movement, modeled by such figures as Eldridge Cleaver. As Michael Kimmel has noted, in the wake of these new dialogues in 1960s America, "the 'masculine mystique'—that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero—was finally exposed as a fraud" (173). Thus, the era marks an especially important moment for a study of the reconstruction of masculine identity within specific marginalized racial and ethnic groups in America.

With this in mind, I offer a reconsideration of existential questions about gender as they apply to the African-American and Jewish-American protagonists in these texts who, experiencing a period of transition amidst cultural and political upheaval, become particularly representative figures for the study of masculinity in crisis during these decades.<sup>1</sup> While Eric

Sundquist and Emily Miller Budick have laid the groundwork for putting black and Jewish authors in dialogue, and while some critical studies of these authors have addressed their respective representations of race and gender, none have placed these texts side by side to explore their instructive similarities, particularly with regard to the role violence plays in each author's representation of masculinity. I seek to fill this gap in scholarship by highlighting how violence is problematically asserted in this literature as an inherent part of a man's existential freedom. Specifically, I argue here that the authors under investigation often figure violence as a central aspect of their respective constructions of masculinity, but that this use of violence harbors a problematic paradox, as its deployment in the name of liberation often reifies many of the cultural myths and power structures that these authors, or the protagonists who speak on their behalf, seek to overturn.

My work situates itself within the critical conversation concerning constructions of racialized masculinity in post-WWII American literature.<sup>2</sup> I advance this scholarly work by taking a philosophical and historicist approach, drawing from the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in order to discern the status of violence in the modern existentialist reckoning of identity, particularly as a key to understanding the many conflicting shapes of American masculinity. Through close literary analysis coupled with a study of race and gender in 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture, I examine the manner in which gendered existential dilemmas are portrayed in fiction as arising from a number of external factors, including racism, ethnic stereotyping, and the triumph of white heteronormativity as a model of masculinity. In the texts I investigate, protagonists who fail to conform to this normative "ideal" are often marked as unmasculine and, as a result, feel as though they must constantly struggle to prove their manhood and regain the sense of power that is tied up in that gendered capital. In sum, these men often

seek to exercise an existential freedom they believe to be their right, as they work to establish a definitive sense of masculine power in the face of a limiting and often oppressive standard; however, I contend that their actions often suggest that they have also internalized patriarchal masculine roles that prompt them to reassert a violent performance of manhood. This in turn undermines their attempts to liberate themselves from the masculine model that oppresses them and simultaneously reinforces gendered oppressions against women and other marginalized men.

The basis of my understanding of masculinity in this project is founded on the idea that it is an existential construct—that, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre (whose existential philosophy informs much of my own discussion of existential constructs of masculinity), a man “is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (22). Further, my study works from the idea that gender is fluid, and that over time masculinity has been formed and reformed in light of social and political changes. Often, it is employed as a mechanism for social organization, with myths and archetypes of masculinity being used to categorize individuals according to various stereotypes within a hierarchical system whereby a certain “ideal” masculinity is presented as the apex of power. Simone de Beauvoir, noting this trend in her discussion of existentialism and gendered identity, speaks of masculinity as a construct that historically has been dedicated to keeping woman in an inferior social position. In light of these trends, this project views gender as a carefully formulated (and sometimes imposed) existential construct that is intricately wound up with notions of freedom, in that it can both empower certain individuals and inhibit the power and freedom of others.

In fact, my study is based on my belief that Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, despite its primary focus on the construction of femininity, can be particularly useful in helping to articulate the ways in which masculinity is constructed. Though Beauvoir focuses primarily on the



situation of women, the comparisons she draws between gender and oppression allow for an extension of her theory to a study of the existential plight of certain “marked” masculinities as well. In the texts I investigate here, men who fail to conform to the normative ideal—what R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt would identify as a cultural-historical “hegemonic masculinity”—by nature of race, ethnicity, or sexual preference, are often perceived to be “lacking” in masculinity and, internalizing a sense of emasculation, feel as though they must constantly struggle to prove their masculinity and the sense of self worth that is tied up in that gendered capital. These men (like the women Beauvoir discusses) are often deprived of the power and sovereignty that is granted to other men who possess this capital, and are thus fashioned into a foil for the white heteronormative masculine image that is set up within the text as the “ideal.” This ideal has relied for years on what George Mosse calls the “existence of a negative stereotype of men who not only failed to measure up to the ideal but who in body and soul were its foil, projecting the exact opposite of true masculinity” (6). Within this system, in order for a white heterosexual male to embody this “true” masculinity, he must subordinate men of other races and sexual orientations. Moreover, as Robyn Wiegman has noted, the trend of mapping gender onto the body has resulted in masculinities becoming so tied up in racial and ethnic stereotypes as to make the concept of masculinity itself a “disembodied” idea” that “translates the logic of epidermal inferiority to interior, invisible differences” (47). That is, certain myths surrounding masculinity become intricately connected to race and ethnicity, so as to render certain masculinities “lesser” than others. In the texts I investigate here, this consequence is compounded by the fact that the men who find themselves emasculated and subordinated by these factors also feel compelled to either imitate the actions of their oppressors

or completely reject the racial histories that have contributed to their imposed and internalized sense of inferiority.

This tendency often translates into acts of interpersonal violence and aggression. In this project, I both explore what it means that the existential refashioning of masculinity in the face of this crisis seems not only to exhibit but also to require this violence, and also highlight the various consequences of this trend. In each chapter, I examine the manner in which each of these protagonists faces an existential crisis of masculine identity marked by competing social and personal definitions of manhood, with the aim of not only demonstrating that violence plays an integral role in these masculine formation—most often, by serving as a means by which the protagonists attempt to reconcile contradictory definitions of manhood—but also of locating the source of that violence’s inefficacy. It is my belief that by making violence a central instrument of their masculine formation, the fictional protagonists actually serve to mire themselves more deeply within the racial and gendered conflicts that trigger their masculine anxiety. In other words, though the protagonists perceive violence as a way to step outside of an oppressive cultural framework, this very perception of violence also underscores the inherent complications that lie within this figuration of gendered identity, as it threatens instead to reify oppressive myths surrounding race, ethnicity and gender rather than eradicate them.

Some of the criticism that I offer in this vein is in line with what I perceive to be the authors’ own criticism of the representations of violence; for instance, I would argue that Roth builds into his texts a critique of the violence in *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *My Life as Man*, as does Baldwin in texts such as *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*. However, in some cases the critique of violence is solely my own intervention: in my view, for example, Wright fails to interrogate misogynistic violence in *The Outsider* the same way that he questions homicidal

violence among men as a tool for liberation, a disparity also apparent in Mailer's work. It is my hope that an investigation of violence in these texts will illuminate the ways in which we might employ theories of violence and existentialism as a way to read gender, specifically as a way to understand the shape of an American masculinity that attempts to incorporate conflicting attitudes towards race, ethnicity, and nationality.

### ***An Existential Theory of Gender Construction***

While all of these narratives are linked through their representations of masculine construction as a particularly violent process, they are also connected by similar representation of masculine formation as following an existential path toward "transcendence." Because each of the texts references themes of immanence, transcendence, alterity, and individualism, and in fact figures these to be inherently part of each protagonist's gendered project, I would suggest that the best framework through which to conduct an analysis of these particular texts is the existential theory of gender put forth by Beauvoir (and, by nature of association and influence, the existential model offered by Sartre), whose language is helpful in unearthing, articulating, and analyzing many of the latent and overt existential themes in this range of texts. Moreover, Beauvoir's text also provides us with the tools to identify precisely where and how each narrative invokes her call for gendered liberation, and, on the other hand, the ways in which the male protagonists in these texts still espouse the very oppressive tendencies and beliefs about gendered hierarchy that she criticizes.

In *The Second Sex*, published first in France in 1949 and later translated into English for U.S. publication in 1953, Beauvoir sets forth her argument that "the drama of woman lies in the conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential" (liv).

That is, the primary focus of Beauvoir's project is to draw attention to the ways in which women are denied the possibility of existential transcendence, by the very fact that they are defined as a lack; in other words, the category of "woman" is understood by the nature of its being "not man." The "feminine" is marked by and associated with the body, which contributes to what Beauvoir calls the "immanent" situation of woman, or the condition of being rendered stagnant, passive, and prevented from achieving an equal place with white men in society.

While Beauvoir focuses primarily on the plight of woman in the twentieth century, she makes direct connections between the culturally and historically embedded subordination of women and that of blacks and Jews to support her arguments.<sup>3</sup> She notes there are "deep similarities" between these marginalized groups, as all "are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to keep them in their place—that is, the place chosen for them" (xxix). For example, in her description of the white male perception of self as a "master race" in relation to woman, she also draws comparisons between the white male perceptions of blacks and Jews:

In the same way the whites of Louisiana and Georgia are delighted with the little pilferings and fibs of the blacks: they feel reassured of the superiority conferred by their skin color; and if one of these Negroes persists in being honest, he will be maltreated the more for it. And similarly in the concentration camps the abasement of men was systematically carried out: the Master Race found in this abjection proof that it was indeed of superhuman essence. (221)<sup>4</sup>

In these racial and ethnic communities, Beauvoir exposes shared experiences of oppression, pointing to the ways in which the problem of belonging to one of these marginalized groups is a socially constructed one, fashioned by those who feel threatened by external differences. The

black and Jewish protagonists in the texts at hand face a similar struggle, maintaining the conviction that they are “essential” while aware that they are perceived externally as “inessential.” As a result, they bear a similar desire to move, as she says, “toward liberation.”

In drawing on the similarities Beauvoir herself observes, I do not mean to elide the differences amongst racial, ethnic and gendered communities, nor is my incorporation of Beauvoir’s theory meant to imply that the experiences of each of these groups is the same or that these authors speak for all blacks or all Jews in America.<sup>5</sup> As Beauvoir herself states in the introduction to her text, “To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today—this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality” (xxxvii).<sup>6</sup> I would suggest, however, that Beauvoir’s acknowledgement of similar oppression *across* this racial, ethnic, and gendered diversity makes her text useful to an investigation of gender beyond feminist inquiries alone. In this case specifically, it renders her study of gender relations particularly fruitful in exploring the way that Wright, Mailer, Baldwin, Bellow and Roth use fiction in order to fashion masculinities in the face of racialized social conflict. By employing Beauvoir’s study as a methodological analogue for my own, I seek to show that her discussion of alterity and essentialism provides a context for discussing each author’s fictionalized philosophy of masculinity, even for the ways that they move beyond her text to imagine a type of creative violence that might theoretically allow their protagonists to move toward liberation and transcendence.

For example, the main dilemma of femininity as framed by Beauvoir is defined by existentialist notions of transcendence versus immanence, a dichotomy which is also implied by—and at times even directly articulated within—the texts at hand, particularly in terms of the

antagonism each man faces between the man he has been in the past and the man he want to be—or believes he is expected to be. As Beauvoir writes, “The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation” (430). The men in these texts struggle with this tension between immanence and transcendence as they work to overcome the conditions that have led to their oppressed conditions in the world (their immanence) by emphasizing their freedom to choose and create themselves, thus suggesting the possibility of transcending their current conditions. This potential transcendence is often imagined in these texts more specifically as the potential for a gendered liberation that is as integral to the individual gendered projects of these male protagonists as it is to Beauvoir’s discussion for women. As Beauvoir also posits, the path to freedom is attained by continually working toward transcendence, “through a continual reaching out toward other liberties” for it is through this that man “creates values” (xxxiv-v; 64). The men in these texts also reach out for these liberties, by which they might create a new set of values that extend beyond their various experiences of emasculation and intertwining racial, ethnic, sexual, or gendered oppressions.

Additionally, a sense of otherness contributes significantly to the feelings of gendered inferiority experienced by these male protagonists, just as it factors into Beauvoir’s discussion of femininity. In the existential theorizing of Sartre and Beauvoir, the Other becomes “a necessity” to man; as Beauvoir repeats throughout her study, man “attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself” (139) and “seeks through the world to find himself in some shape, other than himself, which he makes his own” (57).<sup>7</sup> However, while both acknowledge this “being-for-others” as essential to one’s identity and existential freedom,

they also note that this sense of otherness also has detrimental effects on one's sense of individual power. As Beauvoir notes, "man incarnates the Other, as [woman] does for the man; but this *Other* seems to her to be on the plane of the essential, and with reference to him she sees herself as the inessential" (329). Though this comment is couched within Beauvoir's larger discussion of the designation of women to specific, inferior domestic spaces, the universal terms she employs here point to the way her existential theory of gender is applicable to gendered struggles experienced by marginalized men, as well—particularly with regard to the inferiority complex that arises from this sense of otherness (which, as I argue in throughout this project, often inspires acts of aggression). That is, the alterity that is constructed by another's gaze can and has been manipulated to fashion an idea of superior and inferior genders, as well as a notion of an "ideal" (white hetero) masculinity.

Thus, masculinity—like the femininity Beauvoir discusses—can be viewed as a construct defined by a particular cultural system whereby only certain forms become associated with power. Specifically, the white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-class male becomes synonymous with a culturally and politically powerful masculinity, while other races and ethnic groups are confined to stereotypes that relegate them to "lesser" forms of manhood. My study embarks from the assumption that society creates notions and stereotypes of "Jewishness" and "blackness" which then inform the way that masculinity within these groups is often perceived and by turn represented within the narratives at hand. That is, this "ideal" informs the inferiority complexes and oppressions of those men who, like women, "share in that mysterious and threatened reality" of a preformed gendered identity defined by others (xix). Though they exist in a fictional space, the male characters in these texts live under conditions where, as blacks and Jews in 1950s and 60s America, they find themselves defined by white heteropatriarchal American values, which

place them—like the women Beauvoir discusses—in a subordinate cultural position. For the most part (though not always) they remain separate from the marked and repressed feminine realm, but neither are they part of a hegemonic masculine universe. Much of the main characters' anxiety of masculinity arises from widespread perceptions of race or ethnicity that make them out to be “lesser” men: they are not only denied the power conferred on a masculine identity that is associated solely with whiteness, but in light of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and occasionally their sexual preferences, are also often viewed to be biologically inferior, and at times feminized.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, each protagonist is represented as combatting this image by asserting his masculinity, often via aggression, as a rebellious response to the various expectations regarding his gendered identity. In this way, my discussion of masculinity also coincides with Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative. (Butler herself, in fact, relies partially on Beauvoir's work for her own theorizing). Under Butler's rubric, masculinity “is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body stylization of the body” (xv).<sup>9</sup> To emphasize the idea of masculinity as a stylized performance is not to dismiss it as “fake” or inauthentic, nor is it to detract from its importance to a man's identity. In fact, it is my belief that quite the contrary is true—that a performance of masculinity actually lies at the center of a man's notion of his own identity. For the protagonists in each of these narratives, the ability to freely construct and perform a masculine identity also speaks to the individual impulse to express to others his existential freedom.<sup>10</sup> To fashion a masculine identity that works against or extends beyond the values that are opposed from without, these men consistently reach toward a future that even they cannot always fully articulate or clearly imagine. Yet their individual attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs to which we as readers are privy suggest



that they, like Beauvoir, firmly believe that “there is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence” (xxxv).<sup>11</sup>

In sum, the existential problem I investigate with regards to masculine constructions in these texts arises when each character’s freedom to perform gender is prevented by certain institutional oppressions or perceived threats, from racial and ethnic stereotyping to the presence of both feminine and masculine “others” who complicate and confuse each male character’s sense of his own masculine self. While the men in the fiction I analyze here seek to exercise the existential freedom they believe to be their right, their actions often suggest that they have internalized the aforementioned masculine roles and have embraced what Kaja Silverman would call a “dominant fiction” in culture (16). Often, these men seek to conform to a certain idealized masculine “role,” which contributes significantly to the failure of their individual projects.<sup>12</sup> They use an existential rationale to assert a masculinist ethic—often by way of violence—that undermines any attempt to liberate themselves from the masculine model that oppresses them, and simultaneously reinforces other gendered oppressions. Their actions are aimed to prevent or combat this sense of emasculation or failure, though by crafting masculine identity in response to the way they are stereotyped, these men often simply reenact another stereotype—that of the aggressive, patriarchal, oppressive male—that serves to reproduce the normative model that they have worked against.<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Role of Violence in Existential Gendered Crises***

Violence is one of the most central—and most problematic—of devices used throughout these narratives to assert various masculinities, and is often represented (at least initially) as a constructive exercise in each protagonist’s gendered existential project. The regenerative powers

mapped onto this violence by the protagonists themselves makes this element of gender construction both intriguing and controversial, as in many cases the acts of violence are initially intended not to destroy but to rebuild each man's sense of his masculinity, repairing what is imagined in the text as a fragmented identity. In Wright's *The Outsider*, for example, Cross Damon faces the opportunity to recreate himself as a new man, but finds himself compelled to commit four murders to maintain his newfound freedom. In Mailer's *An American Dream*, Stephen Rojack contemplates suicide in the face of his own existential crisis, until he is overwhelmed with the sense "rebirth" he experiences after killing his ex-wife. In Baldwin's *Another Country*, Rufus Scott asserts his own dominant masculinity through misogynistic abuse, and the repercussions of his later violent suicide affects the lives of all of the text's remaining characters. In Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man*, both Moses Herzog and Peter Tarnopol, respectively, fantasize about murdering their wives in order to regain control of the sense of manhood they feel has been compromised. These are only brief examples of the many instances in which these protagonists, faced with a faltering sense of their own masculinity, seek out violence as their primary recourse and temporary catharsis, imagining it to be a symbol of masculine power and freedom, and of their rejection of accepted or "normative" social performances of manhood.

The goal of each of these protagonists is to set himself up as an existential "sovereign subject," though as it is represented in many of these narratives, this project necessarily involves destroying the "other" that prevents each man from doing so (Beauvoir 140).<sup>14</sup> In short, what these men seek is liberation, and thus the violence to which they resort is imbued with a redemptive quality that becomes tied up in their masculine performances. Acknowledging this association between masculinity and violence, Beauvoir herself notes the following:

Many kinds of masculine behavior spring from a root of possible violence...for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty. Against any insult, any attempt to reduce him to the status of object, the male has recourse to his fists, to exposure of himself to blows: he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity. Violence is the authentic proof of one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself up in an abstract subjectivity; anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. (331)

This statement, I would argue, is key to understanding the way the protagonists themselves perceive violence as integral to their existential constructions of masculinity. Violence becomes an expression not only of physical strength, but also of existential freedom and independence.<sup>15</sup> My aim here is to examine in more detail the manifestations and consequences of this violence to which Beauvoir alludes while also using her own work as a model for this investigation, for it is my belief that the momentum for the violence wielded by these male protagonists is actually derived from a sense of lack and inferiority that, in its existential terms, is quite similar to that experienced by the women Beauvoir discusses.

In each of the works under investigation, violence ultimately serves as means by which men attempt to formulate what they consider to be an "ideal" masculine identity, though the shape of this violence and the version of an "ideal" vary from text to text. As I discuss below, for instance, violence manifests itself as everything from interpersonal physical aggression against other men to various forms of misogyny. While I will acknowledge these differences across the range of narratives, my discussion of violence in each chapter will regularly address

the following: (1) each protagonist's perception of violence, (2) the manner in which this violence is deployed, (3) the degree to which the author embeds a criticism of this violent masculine ethic within the narrative itself, and (4) the consequences of this violence that have gone unobserved or undertreated in each text. To aid my discussion of this last and perhaps most important point, I draw from the meditations on violence by Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, both of whom acknowledge violence as an embedded—and sometimes seemingly necessary—tool for social advancement, while also pointing to the instances in which this violence becomes corrupted and counter-productive.

In most cases, each protagonist's perception of violence is imbued with an understanding of a potential liberation based in existentialist ideology. For example, the language these men use to justify their actions often echoes that of Frantz Fanon (particularly that espoused in *The Wretched of the Earth*) and Sartre, in his preface to the same work. While Fanon and Sartre aim their discussion of violence in that particular text toward a theory of collective postcolonial liberation, they also justify a liberatory individual violence. Fanon, for example, argues that “at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force” that can rid men of an “inferiority complex” and a “passive and despairing attitude,” and that it “hoists people up to the level of the leader” (51).<sup>16</sup> Sartre echoes this sentiment, even more explicitly articulating the purpose of violence as a tool for individual liberation in the face of some larger oppression. As he states in his preface to Fanon's work, “irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man re-creating himself” (lv). Sartre views violence as a reparative force that “can heal the wounds it has inflicted,” and believes that it is, in fact, the only way to “efface the marks of violence” that perpetuate to social injustice (lxii). This, I would argue, is the way violence is also perceived by fictional characters like Cross Damon and

Stephen Rojack, each of whom interprets his identity—and the masculinity that makes up a central and significant part of this identity—to be stunted by a larger oppression, be it racism and Communism (as in Cross’s case) or the economic injustice and political totalitarianism of society (as in Rojack’s case). These characters use violence to combat a perceived threat of another violence wielded against their masculinities, to “efface the marks of violence” which undermine their individual autonomy and power.

These external threats of violence as perceived by the protagonists are manifested in several ways, most often as institutional forces such as racism and anti-Semitism that have been built into social practices—what James R. Giles describes as ideological and institutional oppressions upon which “structured oppression is always dependent” (6). In theory, these institutional violences that threaten the individual are also akin to what Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* calls “symbolic violence” or “gentle violence.” This kind of violence, in Bourdieu’s view, is enacted constantly in society and has come to be an accepted form of masculine domination that privileges a patriarchal structure. These structures of domination are “the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction, to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions—families, the church, the educational system, the state—contribute” (Bourdieu 34).<sup>17</sup> These violences, argues Bourdieu, are also particularly dangerous because they are often asserted “invisibly and insidiously through an insensible familiarization with a structured physical world” (38). Despite the fact that the protagonists themselves feel threatened by the institutional arm of this symbolic violence, it is precisely this kind of violence that many of them will come to reenact as they attempt to extract themselves from the violences enacted upon them by other men who represent a hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity.

This tendency is largely demonstrated by their response to a second threat to their masculinity—that of women. In this case the “violence” these men feel to be enacted against themselves is also largely theoretical, though it involves a dismantling of masculine privilege and power. From Cross Damon’s sense that the women in his life are conspiring against his freedom, to Fish Tucker’s understanding that his masculinity is held in check by the forbidden allure of white women, to Stephen Rojack, Peter Tarnopol, and Moses Herzog’s senses emasculation at the hands of their wives, every single male character in these texts faces at least one moment (though often many more) during which he views a female “other” as an obstacle to the freedom and power that he believes should be his masculine privilege, and is inspired to deploy misogynistic violence—physical, verbal, or psychological—in the name of masculine liberation.

The kinds of violence deployed by the men themselves differ across the texts in question, taking the form of homicide, physical aggression, misogyny, and suicide.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, violence in these texts might also be described in the idiom of the Oedipal complex, as the threat of violence that emanates from patriarchal institutions and the actual violence deployed by marginalized individuals in each novel are reminiscent of Freud’s discussion of Oedipal cycles of repression and domination, as well as Herbert Marcuse’s subsequent analysis and expansion of Freud’s theories in *Eros and Civilization* (1955).<sup>19</sup> Some texts, in fact, like Wright’s *The Long Dream* and Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, explicitly invoke Oedipal themes in their representations of masculine strife. In those texts, men like Fish Tucker and Alex Portnoy often take on the role of the son who seeks to overthrow the authority of a patriarchal society, but in doing so violently, only begin a new cycle of oppression. This cyclical form of violence suggests an overlapping of violences conducted by the oppressor and the oppressed—a factor that contributes significantly to my own critique of the violences in these texts. The men in the

texts—marginalized, feminized, and criminalized by nature of their races and ethnicities—come to use symbolic violence, misogynistic violence, and physical aggression practiced or endorsed by the very institutions that seek to diminish their senses of masculinity.

As mentioned above, each author also offers a different level of criticism with regard to the reproduction of these cycles of violence and issues of gender hierarchy that accompany them. Some of the consequences of violence that I locate in these texts are in line with what I perceive to be the authors' own criticism of the representations of violence; that is, the repercussions of violence are deliberately planted by the authors to undermine the authority of their aggressive protagonists. For example, I would argue that Roth builds into his texts some criticism of the misogynistic violence deployed by characters like Alex Portnoy and Peter Tarnopol, as does Baldwin in texts such as *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* (with regard to both homophobia and misogyny). With the exception of Mailer, none of these authors appears to hold up their protagonists' violent actions as a model for masculinity, and I would argue that even Mailer recognizes some of the caveats embedded within his endorsement of violence; like Arendt, he acknowledges the difference between liberatory and oppressive violence, and makes great efforts to distinguish between the two.

Still, in certain cases the consequences and implications of the violences in a number of these texts are not adequately addressed, and in these cases the criticisms and analyses of violence as a successful tool for liberation are solely my own intervention. In my view, for instance, Wright fails to interrogate misogynistic violence in *The Outsider* in the same way he questions the homicidal violence among men. In *An American Dream*, Mailer questions but also triumphs the violence deployed by Stephen Rojack. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow uses Artur Sammler to reproach large-scale and revolutionary violence, but does not offer the same level of

criticism with regard to his protagonist's own misogynistic and racist ideologies. By interrogating this violence more closely, I do not aim to condemn these authors or their works as racist or misogynistic, as has sometimes been done in the past.<sup>20</sup> Rather, I want re-examine and recuperate works that have been derided or dismissed because of their controversial representations of violence and masculinity, to more fully attempt to understand what, precisely, has led to this controversy, why many of these texts have accrued such a negative reputation, and how this violence might actually serve a more instructive function with regard to each text's gender politics.

To do so, I draw on the theories and critiques of violence put forth by Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. While Beauvoir's existential exploration of gender provides the language and method by which to discuss each protagonist's gendered project, the work of Benjamin and Arendt help to articulate why it is that violence often proves unsuccessful as a tool for individual power and liberation. While Arendt is the true contemporary of the authors here (the bulk of her publishing career existing from the 1950s through the 1970s), Benjamin, as her friend and mentor, had a significant influence on her work. It should be noted that, with some exceptions, Benjamin and Arendt often discuss violence largely as it is manifested in the political sphere, placing their respective critiques of such in the context of the law. The violence in the fictional text at hand is, by contrast, highly individualistic—as is Sartre and Beauvoir's existentialist theorizing which, while it takes into account the social context of the time, applies largely to the condition of the individual man. Though this difference might seem to suggest a barrier in the theoretical application of Benjamin and Arendt to the texts under investigation, I would suggest that the variances between Arendt and Beauvoir actually *enrich* our understanding of the intersections between violence, existentialism, and gender. In her study of violence and politics



in the work of Arendt and Beauvoir, for instance, Margaret Ogrondick gestures toward the usefulness of placing these theories side by side. While she notes that the two philosophers' respective treatments of violence "diverge in the more collectively oriented framework of Arendt's republicanism and the more individualistic rubric of Beauvoir's existentialist politics," she also notes that Arendt's analysis "does not provide an answer to the individual's moral question of what s/he should specifically do in terms of participation or resistance to violence," a space which Beauvoir's work, in its focus on an individual ethic, might fill (2; 6). To this point I would also add that Beauvoir herself notes that "the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens," thus inviting a direct connection between her study of the individual and the interest of the larger political sphere. (xxxiv). With this in mind, I adopt Benjamin and Arendt's broader criticisms of violence to interrogate the existential justifications for individual violence in the texts under investigation.

In "A Critique of Violence," Benjamin articulates what he perceives to be a problematic nature of the relationship between violence and law, particularly when violence is used in an attempt to move outside of law. As he writes,

All violence, seen as a means, is either law-establishing or law-upholding. If it claims neither label, it forgoes, of its own accord, all validity. The consequence, however, is that any kind of violence, seen as a means, participates even in the most favorable case in the problematic nature of law generally. (Benjamin 13)

This critique of the role of violence in law becomes integral to an understanding of why violence proves to be ineffectual for the protagonists in the literature at hand. In choosing to establish their own individual "law" by which to live, these protagonists contribute to a cycle of perpetual violence, which "continues until either new violences or those previously suppressed triumphed

over those that have underpinned the law hitherto, thus establishing a new law destined to decline in its turn” (Benjamin 27).<sup>21</sup> What the black and Jewish men in each of these texts seek is a masculine identity founded on notions of freedom and equality, ideals that a corrupt system of law has parceled out to only select communities in America. While these men use violence with the idea that it can, as Sartre suggests, “heal the wounds it has inflicted” (lxii), they also confront the fact that “from the standpoint of violence, which is the only thing that can guarantee law, there is no equality but at best equally great violences” (Benjamin 23). In other words, their understanding is that they must fight violence with violence to assert their autonomy and achieve a sense of equal worth as men.

Arendt draws from Benjamin for the foundational points of her analysis in *On Violence*, but her theory is applied more directly to the time period in question. Arendt too observes that any use of violence will have repercussions beyond its function as a means to an end, and she engages with the theories of violence posed by both Sartre and Fanon, as well as with the 1969 *Report on Violence in America*. She concedes that the *Report*’s conclusion that “force and violence are likely to be successful techniques of social control and persuasion when they have wide popular support” is an “obvious truth” and also observes that many revolutionary groups (like Sartre and Fanon’s Algerian peasants, whom she cites as an example) have discovered the efficacy of violence to their respective causes (Arendt 19). However, Arendt also critiques Sartre’s representation of violence as a redemptive or curative force, arguing that this idea of violence is a myth “on par with Fanon’s worst rhetorical excesses” and is actually more akin to a primitive revenge tactic (20). In response to Sartre and Fanon’s glorification of violence as a tool for liberation, Arendt questions the way in which violence is used to justify progress. The argument she cites for this justification often includes the logic that “since the motion of this

progress is supposed to come about through the clashes of antagonistic forces, it is possible to interpret every ‘regress’ as a necessary but temporary setback” (26). The problem with this view is that violence then becomes synonymous with power, and Arendt herself wants to separate these two terms, and to question the way that the former has become a metonym for the latter, and the latter a justification for the former.<sup>22</sup> Echoing Benjamin, she argues that “violence can always destroy power” but “what never can grow out of it is power” (53).<sup>23</sup>

A critical point of Arendt’s critique, which I adopt and apply to the texts at hand, is her analysis of *individual* deployments of violence, as a means of establishing individual power. Arendt acknowledges that in some social contexts, violence is the only way to “set the scales of justice right again,” but she also supposes that once one person attempts to rationalize this violence and find in it some sort of “method for living and acting,” it becomes “irrational” (66). Moreover, while Arendt notes that individual violence can sometimes serve to bring certain “grievances” to public attention, she argues that it cannot in itself create the kind of power that is desired by its users—something she emphasizes repeatedly throughout her text.<sup>24</sup> As she explains,

This violent reaction against hypocrisy, however justifiable in its own terms, loses its *raison d’être* when it tries to develop a strategy of its own with specific goals; it becomes ‘irrational’ the moment it is ‘rationalized.’ (66)

In light of this theorization of rational and irrational violence, the questions raised by these texts might be framed as follows: what happens when a man rationalizes violence in an attempt to craft a masculine identity? What are the consequences of the now irrational violence, and how does the protagonist’s personal strategy with “specific goals” ultimately work against him?

Because the consequences articulated by Arendt are enacted in various ways in the texts I investigate here, I contend that the actions of the protagonists undermine any notion of an inherently liberatory violence, as these violences often simply mimic those practiced by the institution that stands in the way of each man's freedom. As a result, the individual violent acts of the oppressed actually nurture the institutional violence of the oppressor and mistakenly affirm this violence as a viable tool for establishing power. For instance, the characters' physical aggressions and homicides solidify a hierarchical separation between men and women and take on qualities of what Bourdieu describes as "masculine domination," thus ultimately recycling the oppressive ideologies enforced by social institutions. These cycles of domination and repression often invite an Oedipal reference, as the oppressed group has only briefly, to use Marcuse's language, "broken the chain of domination then the new freedom is again suppressed—this time by their own authority and action" (67). In this way, cycles of specifically gendered violence become embedded in a cultural framework: violence is used to oppress certain masculinities, then used by the oppressed in an attempt to free themselves from this oppression, of which an inevitable consequence is the continued oppression or victimization of others—particularly women, but also other groups of men. The fictional spaces I examine here provide examples of particular iterations of these cycles.

In sum, I argue that these theories of violence help us to see is that what these literary figures seek through their use of violence is a masculinity defined by *power*, but what they actually fashion is only a masculine identity defined by *violence*. Each protagonist applies an existential theory of violence to his own situation that echoes that of Sartre and Fanon—a theory that violence can be used as a tool to freely construct one's gendered identity with the aim of transcending a stagnant or oppressive situation. However, while these men see this violence as a

tool for establishing freedom from the violence of oppression, they themselves actually participate in the repetition of oppressions against others. While these consequences are acknowledged and criticized within the texts to varying degrees, in nearly all cases the protagonists' deployments of violence epitomize Arendt's argument that violence "pays indiscriminately," that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probably change is a more violent world" (80).

### ***Structure of the Dissertation***

The chapters that follow are arranged in a roughly chronological order, beginning with an investigation of Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), and concluding with an analysis of Roth's *My Life as a Man* (1974). Chapter One examines the intersection of violence, existential gendered identity construction, and race in Wright's *The Outsider* and in his later novel *The Long Dream* (1958). In my analysis of both works, I observe the variant ways in which protagonists Cross Damon and Fish Tucker use violence as a tool to forward their existential journeys toward transcendence (projects that I demonstrate can be largely understood through the language of both Beauvoir and Sartre). As each man locates his loss of power in the political and cultural systems imposed on him by outside forces, he resorts to violence to eradicate this oppression and recreate himself as a new man. I aim to demonstrate that each man's flawed interpretation of violence, however, undermines his project, and prompts us to question what, if anything, this violence has succeeded in changing.

Chapter Two explores Norman Mailer's controversial essay "The White Negro" (1957) and his subsequent novel *An American Dream* (1965). "The White Negro," employing what has been viewed as an extended racial stereotype, works from the premise that black masculinity embodies the capacity for violent action that works outside of the law, and thus offers an escape

from the oppressive totalitarian systems criticized by Mailer. While the essay is flawed, it represents one of Mailer's most ambitious experiments, as he attempts to put forth a philosophy that would liberate men from what he views as a "cancerous" society. The essay, however, in justifying itself by the ends it supposes, not only exemplifies many of the inherent problems with violence articulated by Benjamin and Arendt, but also provides the foundation for what will become a central problematic theme in *An American Dream*, a novel in which protagonist Stephen Rojack also uses violence as a way to resolve his existential dilemma. While Mailer interrogates and criticizes Rojack's interpersonal violence to a degree, he just as often triumphs this violence as a viable way to assert masculine power and autonomy.

In Chapter Three, my examination of Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) highlights several similarities and parallels to Mailer's novel. While many have noted the divergent styles and political leanings of these two authors, episodes in both *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) demonstrate that both authors grapple with many of the same ambiguities and conflicts regarding the role of violence, race, and ethnicity in the construction of masculinity as represented in their fiction. As men of words, however, Bellow's protagonists do not resort to the same kinds of physical violence as either Wright's or Mailer's characters, and they more explicitly refuse to embrace violence in their own lives as an attribute of masculinity and individual power. Still, throughout each narrative however, particular *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, each protagonist's articulation of his masculine identity threatens to enact racist and misogynistic violences through language.

In Chapter Four, I examine the ways in which homosexuality factors into and complicates the construction of racialized masculinities in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962). I maintain the each man in these texts sets forth on an existential

journey to transcend a situation in which he finds himself socially emasculated by his same-sex desire, an emasculation that in some cases is compounded by his sense of racial inferiority as well. In a recurring trend, these men often resort to physical or psychological violence as they attempt to reconstruct a sense of masculine power and value and assert their masculine identities. While violence is embedded in each narrative's representation of masculine construction, Baldwin's treatment of this violence differs from that of the other authors in question, in that he does not ultimately represent violence as liberatory or euphoric; rather, it becomes a last grasp at an elusive and unattainable masculine "ideal."

Finally, Chapter Five examines Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967) and *My Life as a Man* (1975), novels that closely examine the masculine constructions of two of Roth's most infamous and humorously self-deprecating protagonists. Here I continue an analysis of the ways in which violence is used in an attempt to resolve existential dilemmas and contradictions arising from racial and ethnic stereotypes surrounding masculine identities, particularly those dilemmas faced by the assimilated generation of Jewish Americans in the 60s and 70s. For Roth's protagonists, violence not only measures but also undoes their manhood, a paradox underscored by the fact that each man's intention—to fashion for himself a sense of power not bound by moral codes and social conventions—fails to yield the desired consequences. In making this argument, I also aim to demonstrate that despite the fact that over twenty years have elapsed between the publication of Wright's *The Outsider* and Roth's *My Life as a Man*, Roth shows his protagonists to grapple with many of the same gendered anxieties that pervaded Wright's earlier works.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Existentialism Violence and Racialized Manhood: The Shape of Masculinity in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and *The Long Dream***

When we are first introduced to Cross Damon, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *The Outsider*, his life is already unraveling. Cross's marriage has disintegrated, he is massively in debt, and his girlfriend Dot, whom he has just discovered to be much younger than she led him to believe, is pregnant and threatening to accuse him of rape, should he fail to support her. Cross's wife Gladys will not speak to him, nor will she allow him to see his children, and Cross's mother does not hesitate to frequently offer her own disapproving opinion of his fraught relationships with both Dot and Gladys. While the reader is made aware that many of these dilemmas are of Cross's own making, in Cross's mind his unhappiness is largely the fault of these women who, he believes, have conspired to trap him in a life he has no desire to live, with the result that he is left feeling helpless and emasculated. Wright's fashioning of this embattled relationship between Cross and the novel's female characters has the effect of immediately setting up Cross's masculine strife as one of the novel's central problems, effectively placing this anxiety of masculinity at the center of what will be revealed as his existential dilemma. That is, Cross's plight is framed as a reaction to the feminine obstacles that he perceives to be standing in the way of his individual freedom and as a result. Thus, the very notions of freedom and identity become tied up in Cross's fashioning of masculinity, and his pursuit of liberation in a variety of situations is filtered through his desire to escape the emasculating forces in his life.

In Wright's 1958 novel, *The Long Dream*, Rex "Fishbelly" Tucker faces a similar dilemma to that of Cross, as he strives to fashion an identity in the face of competing perceptions about race, but also against a threat of a female "other." Like Cross, Fishbelly struggles to gain



control over his existence within a culture that threatens to categorize and manipulate his gendered identity through a series of oppressive expectations and racial stereotypes. As in *The Outsider*, this project is also set up in the immediate context of Fish's fear of the feminine, particularly the white female figure who stimulates his masculine desire while also representing a racially divided society's proscription of this desire. His life, as a result of this dilemma, becomes a series of contradictions, embodied in his father's comment that "when you have to do wrong to live, wrong is right" (273). This struggle exists, on a large scale, as a fight against a number of racial and institutional oppressions, but Fish himself sees it largely as a fight for his masculinity.

Because the project in each of these novels is defined by the male protagonist's desire to transcend a condition that is derivative of an oppressive social system, and in light of the fact that project is often articulated as a struggle to maintain an idealized notion of gendered privilege and strength, the existential framework provided by Simone de Beauvoir's study of gender in *The Second Sex* (and the existential writings of Sartre on which much of her own work is predicated) provides a useful language with which to discuss these texts. More specifically, this language can help us better understand the nature of each protagonist's personal strife, as well as the impetus for the violence that pervades each narrative, by nature of the fact that both Wright and Beauvoir focus on the existential and gendered dilemmas that arise from the condition of being "marked." More specifically, the primary focus of Beauvoir's project is to draw attention to the ways in which women are denied the possibility of existential transcendence, by the very fact that they are defined as a lack; in other words, the category of "woman" is understood by the nature of its being "not man." The definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" attached to these categories are, as Beauvoir points out, largely determined by the physical differences between men and women

that perpetuate a binary understanding of gender in society. In this binary distinction, “feminine” is marked by and associated with the body, which contributes to what Beauvoir calls the “immanent” situation of woman, or the condition of being rendered stagnant, passive, and closed off from society. What Beauvoir seeks to do is prove that gender is a constructed term—that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”—and that this becoming is shaped by the patriarchal culture in which woman has herself been created and, marked as feminine by her body and not by her mind, is thus unable to achieve the transcendence allowed to man.

While Beauvoir focuses primarily on the situation of women, the comparisons she draws between gender and racial oppressions allows for an extension of her theory to a study of the existential plight of black masculinity as well. Beauvoir’s existentialist discussion of gender in *The Second Sex* becomes particularly apt in a discussion of Wright’s work when one considers the mutually influential friendship between the two authors, which in Wright’s case likely helped to provide him with the vocabulary (most evident in *The Outsider*) that he uses to articulate his existential conception of black masculinity.<sup>25</sup> For instance, both Cross Damon and Fish Tucker experience a similar phenomenon to that discussed by Beauvoir in terms of woman, as they too are shaped by a white patriarchal culture that also oppresses them, leaving them feeling as they though they are denied possibilities of transcendence because of their condition in the world. Furthermore, while both protagonists are reluctant to admit it, Wright’s textual cues point to the fact that this immanence is largely located in their racialized bodies, which effectively leaves their identities “marked” as unmasculine. The threat to the male body imposed by women and other men (specifically, white men) seems to be the locus for their masculine anxiety, which prevents them from being fully free and equal in society and from developing the masculine identities they envision as representative of this freedom and autonomy. Like Beauvoir, Wright

also builds into his text the possibility of emancipation from this gendered oppression, as his protagonists hope to transcend the body that proves itself to be a constant obstacle.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, to deploy Beauvoir's work in this fashion is not suggest that the masculine strife present in Wright's texts is the same as the anxiety of femininity that Beauvoir explores in *The Second Sex*. For instance, Wright's examination of racialized masculinity through the characters of Cross Damon and Fish Tucker is unique to his own study, its depth and specificity going beyond the basic parallels Beauvoir offers. Furthermore, at times Wright's text enacts the very problem that Beauvoir herself seeks to remedy, as his representation of masculine identity reaffirms some of the misogynistic tendencies she observes in culture. However, what I do suggest here is that the *method* of Beauvoir's study of gendered existentialism serves in many ways as a model for Wright, and for my own study of Wright's work, as he seeks to define masculinity against and outside the social structures that he deems oppressive. The social oppressions and limitations conferred on Wright's protagonists as a result of race in particular does not necessarily preclude the application of Beauvoir's theory of gender in a reading of these texts, but rather adds a new dimension to her ideas, as Wright expands on the connection between race and gender that Beauvoir only treats briefly. For both Beauvoir and for Wright, gender becomes a representative marker of existential identity in crisis, as each seeks to formulate a new definition of femininity and masculinity, respectively, that will allow for a transcendence of immanent gendered identities society has constructed. In the case of Cross Damon and Fishbelly Tucker, this liberated gendered identity is a masculinity unthreatened by women and by white patriarchal systems of authority, and one no longer compromised by race.

These goals, however, are problematized by the fact that Wright depicts Cross and Fishbelly as seeking this transcendence and liberation through violent action. They embrace

violence as a vehicle for moving outside of oppressive family structures and social systems, employing it as a means to save themselves from these external influences (each largely influenced by racism) that create such threats to their senses of masculinity. However, this use of violence actually serves to undermine their attempts to declare themselves autonomous men, rendering them unable to achieve the masculine identity they have idealized.<sup>27</sup> In an expression of the Freudian Oedipal complex, each protagonist's efforts to regain a sense of masculinity, which he feels has been threatened by both female Others and patriarchal male rivals, build to episodes of violence that represent pivotal moments in each text and represent a struggle against an institutional oppression. In *The Outsider*, for instance, Cross Damon's interpretation of violence as a way to cleanse himself of the oppressions of his old life further entrenches him within the system of institutional racist and political oppressions that he seeks to escape, as his actions temporarily place him in the role of the violent and oppressive authority figure.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, his violence further entrenches him within the oppressive cultural and racial stereotype that black men are inherently violent, an assumption that actually further emasculates him by dehumanizing him in the eyes of others.<sup>29</sup> For Fish, the embrace of violence threatens to trap him within the corrupt system of law and racial oppression that defines life in his Southern town, and he discovers that his only recourse for escaping this violent life is to escape America altogether.

Thus, the episodes of violence in the text—from Cross's homicide and violence against women in *The Outsider* to the strange scene of Fish's evisceration of an animal and his ongoing obsession with the very real threat of lynching violence—actually serve to further mire both Cross and Fishbelly within the social systems in which they feel confined. Because violence clearly proves to be a failed tool for liberation and masculine autonomy, both texts invite an

application of the theory Hannah Arendt lays out in her essay *On Violence*. In moves that echo the Walter Benjamin's critique of violence (and, thus, anticipate Arendt), Wright explores the consequences of formulating an identity that aims to be what Benjamin might term "law-establishing" rather than "law-upholding," and which relies on violence as its primary method (13). Benjamin and Arendt's critiques of violence, however, can also help us understand why each protagonist is unable to fully fashion the ideal gendered identity he desires. Specifically, they provide the language for discussing the way that Wright makes violence fail for Cross and Fish: despite each man's beliefs that he is using violence to create his own law, he is actually only modeling the behavior of those figures of white patriarchal society from whom he seeks to escape.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, in this chapter, I seek to explore not only the ways in which violence becomes an integral factor in each text's imagined existential formations of masculinity, but also what it means that this violence actually works to further situate both of Wright's protagonists within a system of gendered and racial oppression. By using violence as a tool for liberation (in Cross's case) and as a way to perceive the world (in Fish's case), each man actually falters in his quest to achieve this ideal masculine identity. In sum, I argue that both of these texts, in their exploration of the contradicting demands of American identity formation, point to the ways in which violence serves two seemingly irreconcilable functions in these formations of masculinity: on the one hand, violence is perceived by each of the protagonists as a marker of masculine power, yet on the other hand, it works to further emasculate them, embodying Arendt's comment that "to substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power" (53).

## I.

*The Outsider* has often been read in the context of Wright's disillusionment with Communism in the years following the publication of *Native Son*. Maryemma Graham, for instance, argues that the novel must be read against a background "shaped by Cold War politics and Wright's own personal experiences in organized political movements" (xxii), and Darwin Turner interprets it as Wright's effort to redefine the existentialist ideas he had begun to explore in *Native Son*, which he could more clearly articulate after his move to Paris and his break with Communism (164). However, I would suggest that Wright is not only expounding on his evolving political allegiances, but is also asking us to view all of these political organizations as agents of institutional violence themselves. By pitting his main protagonist against the forces of Fascism and Communism, Wright works to represent these political categories as ideological violences that must be met with a theoretically liberating existential violence.

This, however, is not the only way Wright deploys violence in the novel. For instance, violence is first presented as a means for Cross to escape what he perceives to be the oppressive hopelessness of his life, at which point it manifests as physical aggression toward his wife Gladys and the murder of his friend Joe. Here, violence represents Cross's attempts to maintain a kind of masculine privilege that will permit him to live a life free of any female "threat." Later, violence becomes his way of enforcing a type of personal justice against those whom he believes to be largely responsible for the oppressive totalitarianism in the world, and again is manifested in multiple homicides. In these cases, Cross deploys individual violence as a means for fighting institutional violences that seek to control others. Perceiving violence as a remedy for oppression, Cross uses it in an attempt to erase the figures who threaten his aim of entirely reconstructing how he views himself—and how he is viewed—as a man.

Of course, as I describe in more detail below, many of the situations in which Cross deploys this violence appear to arise from pure chance—that is, the universe seems to act upon him, rather than he upon it, and thus his reactions might be read as purely reactionary, unplotted defense mechanisms. However, I would hesitate to attribute Wright’s representation of Cross’s actions solely to “gut reactions” or survival mechanisms, as throughout the novel Wright makes it clear that Cross’s choices drive the trajectory of his life. Cross’s use of violence in response to a series of events has serious intentions behind it, and his violent acts are most often carried out for a specific purpose that transcends the immediate circumstances in which he finds himself; that is, he uses violence to enact a wider rebellion against an ideological oppression or the threat of emasculation. Though at times Wright does not imbue Cross with the ability to articulate these larger purposes, Wright’s own textual cues point us to the ways in which we might read violence as indicative of the masculine anxiety and existential crisis that plagues Cross throughout the narrative.

In the beginning of *The Outsider*, the existential nature of Cross’s plight is gradually introduced by way of his awareness of his condition of the world, as one who experiences what Sartre would call “anguish,” or the condition of being conscious of one’s own existential freedom (Sartre 29). Cross realizes, for example, that “he was alone and that his problem was one of the relationship of himself to himself,” and that he is responsible for his own actions (10).<sup>31</sup> In his study of *The Outsider*, Mark Christian Thompson has argued that it is American culture itself that pushes Wright to adopt existentialism as a way to incorporate race into the identity of his protagonists. As Thompson notes, the “antagonistic American racial scene is the basis for Wright’s black existentialism” since “fear and dread, emotions Wright takes as the precondition for an existentialist understanding of being-in-(and for) the world, already denote

the essential determinations of blackness in America” (151-52). Working from Thomson’s argument, I would further suggest that much of Cross’s project is dedicated to working against these “essential determinations of blackness,” as the factor of race adds an exigency to Cross’s existential crisis of masculinity—something that Beauvoir herself at least partially recognized in *The Second Sex*. For example, she compares the white male’s perception of himself as a figure of the “master race” in relation to woman to the white male perceptions of African Americans, noting that these white men “feel reassured of the superiority conferred by their skin color” (Beauvoir 221). Wright works against this stigmatization of the black man, however, by investing Cross with an existential individualism beyond that which Beauvoir likely had in mind. Cross constructs his identity as a self-proclaimed “little god” through a series of brutal murders in an attempt to transcend a society that constructs him as inessential, thus manifesting Wright’s more explicit suggestion that the oppressive and emasculating effects brought on by race require extreme acts of individual violence that Beauvoir herself never addressed.

Though race plays directly into Cross’s existential journey—even forming the center of his crisis of identity—that dilemma is filtered through a simultaneous struggle with masculinity that is introduced more explicitly at the start of the narrative. In fact, in an early scene, it is his fear of emasculation that leads him to contemplate the existential dilemma of suicide. Feeling trapped within his current situation by his girlfriend, his wife, and his mother, and sensing that he has lost control of his life, he is overcome with a self-professed “self-loathing;” he considers suicide, but his inability to go through with it (which he views to be yet another failure) only leaves him further “wilted” and “choked with self-hate” (16). After a particularly frustrating argument with Dot in which she threatens to kill herself when he refuses to visit, Cross vows “he’d not crawl like a coward through stupid days: to act quickly was the simplest way of



jumping through a jungle of problems that plagued him from within and without” (16). Cross firmly believes that if he simply takes action, he can be in control of his own fate; however, this leads to a misguided (if half-hearted) attempt at suicide. Immediately we are shown that for Cross, even violence against the self serves as a marker of able manhood, and stands in contrast to the impotence and “shame” he feels when he cannot take his own life—“he could not even do *that*,” he chides himself (62).<sup>32</sup> Cross’s dire reflections on his hypothetical death further exemplify this early association between manhood and the ability to endure violence: “If he was ever so unlucky as to be sprawled from nervous collapse upon some frozen sidewalk or upon the floor of the Post Office,” he thinks, “it would be manfully better to let others see a bloody hole gaping in his temple than to present to the eyes of strangers a mass of black flesh stricken by stupor” (17).

This early embrace of violence is underscored by the bizarre strategies Cross employs to extract himself from his marriage to Gladys, and is thus directly connected to his understanding of gender as power. In other words, it is here that Wright first frames violence as a means of liberation from a specifically gendered oppression, as Cross deploys physical and psychological violence against Gladys to reclaim his own autonomy. Feeling that within his marriage he has “lost control of his life,” and realizing that Gladys will never leave him unless he resorts to drastic measures, Cross crafts a sadistic plan to convince her that his instability is a threat to both her and their children (71). On two separate occasions, Cross arrives home from a night of work at the post office, nonchalantly approaches Gladys, hits her, leaves, and returns again later with presumably no recollection of the beating. The second instance terrifies Gladys enough to induce her to leave with the children, thus rendering Cross’s plan disturbingly successful and marking his first deployment of violence as a tool for his existential reinvention.

In her study of existentialism in Wright's work, which intersects nicely with my own, Sarah Relyea calls this episode an act of "demonic masculinity" in which Cross "asserts a masculine and master consciousness against a feminine, familiar, and racial one, as he seeks to escape an identity defined epidermally and communally by blackness, for one founded on self-invention and desire" (71). Cross's use of violence here serves, then, as a retaliation to perceived threats (from his wife and the racial divisions that keep him, like *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas, in a lower socioeconomic class), and as means to overcome the obstacles that prevent him from "self-invention and desire." Yet this does not entirely separate him from responsibility to Gladys, for in the aftermath of their separation, she attempts to assert even more control over him, particularly by way of his finances. She makes him sign over their house and car to her, and negotiates the terms of a loan for which he will be responsible, and which he must pay to her. In the face of all of this, he admits that he feels "properly trapped," "depressed," "ashamed," and clearly demoralized and emasculated by Gladys's behavior—one of the first instances in which his violence already proves largely ineffectual (88-89).

It is only when Cross is mistaken for dead after a gruesome subway accident in Chicago that he is suddenly faced with the opportunity to recreate himself as a new man. In an attempt to escape a train car after the crash, Cross leaves his overcoat—with all of his identifying papers—behind him, thus leading the media to determine he is among the dead. This error provides Cross with the opportunity to leave behind all of those factors—namely, Dot, Gladys, and his mother—that have thus far threatened his sense of masculine autonomy and privilege. The language of his existential reflections at this moment bears the markers of a man intent on maintaining complete control of his own life; he believes, for example, that from this point, "he would do with himself what he would; what he liked" and that while "others took their lives for granted; he, he would

have to mold his with a conscious aim” (111). All of this is proclaimed in the name of his desire for freedom from all rules, laws, and social restrictions, for as he also notes: “That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom” (111).

This notion of an ideal freedom is also intricately tied to Cross’s understanding of manhood, and provides him with the terms to define his own gendered project. This chance to reinvent himself requires him “to map out his life entirely upon his new assumptions” about who he is (114). “The question summed itself up,” he thinks: “What’s a man? He had unknowingly set himself a project of not less magnitude than contained in that awful question” (115). At the center of Cross’s journey, then, is the mission to rediscover who he is as “a man” now that he no longer faces the feminine and socioeconomic threats to his sense of masculine dominance that defined his “old” life. This freedom to recreate himself is something he admittedly fears—a key characteristic of the existential anguish felt in the face of freedom—but something that he also sees as an exhilarating possibility. This chance constitutes for him a sense of rebirth, and as he considers the possibilities of his new life, “a keen sensation of vitality invaded every cell of his body” and he feels “as though he was living out a daring dream” (106). This adrenaline-fused sense of being more alive than he has ever been seems to signal for Cross an endless array of possibilities for his future. One of these possibilities is that he can now live to discover who he is as a man without the responsibility to women, to family, and to his financial conditions that he felt to be a burden. This notion of a “perfect freedom,” also tied in with his ideal masculine identity, is in part what informs his forthcoming acts of violence—yet it is also that personal idealism and blindness to consequence that will prove this violence to be largely ineffectual.

## II.

One of the most integral pieces in the existential construction of Cross's masculine identity is the way this idea of a "perfect freedom" manifests itself within his perceptions of racial identity. This becomes evident in his conversations with Ely Houston, the hunchbacked district attorney with whom Cross establishes a strange connection, a bond that Houston attributes to his own "insight into the problems of other excluded people," which he claims to have gained from harboring his disability (163).<sup>33</sup> During one of these conversations, Houston vaguely alludes to the notion of "double vision" explicated by W.E.B. Du Bois, which Cross, having already worked through "the many veils of illusion" around him, has already begun to articulate. Yet Wright also invests Houston with a separate prediction about the consciousness of blacks in America, one that more directly references an existential condition. As Houston says: "They are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time. They will become psychological men, like the Jews... They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centers of *knowing*, so to speak" (164). Here Houston directly references the condition of self-knowledge or self-awareness, another fundamental tenet of existentialism put forth by both Sartre and Beauvoir, while he also emphasizes the racial and existential plight of both blacks and Jews (underscoring the connections I myself draw throughout this project). Cross initially agrees with Houston and does not appear to be pandering to his ideas here, displaying genuine concern over racial problems in America. His apparent attention to the incorporation of race into American identity is also supported by the events of his early relationship with Gladys, to whom he is initially drawn partially because of her own concern with race. As Wright notes, Cross "hungered for [Gladys] as an image of woman as body of woman, but also as a woman of his

own color who was longing to conquer the shame imposed upon her by her native land because of her social and racial origin” (66).<sup>34</sup>

Yet Damon is quick to deny any identification with social activism or movements for racial equality; in fact, while he recognizes the racial problems in America, he is reluctant to acknowledge that these have any bearing on his “former” identity as Cross Damon or his new identity under the name of Lionel Lane. When he reflects on the series of events that have led to his current situation, he is adamant that his racial consciousness has simply not been a significant factor. Of his actions and their relations to the “racial struggle,” he says:

His consciousness of the color of his skin had played no role in it. Militating against racial consciousness in him were the general circumstances of his upbringing which had somewhat shielded him from the more barbaric forms of white racism; also the insistent claims of his own inner life had made him too concerned with himself to cast his lot wholeheartedly with Negroes in terms of racial struggle. Practically he was with them, but emotionally he was not with them...his decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself. (195)

On one hand, such apathy regarding racial struggle does not come as a surprise in light of Cross’s previous assertions that he is an outsider even in his own community. Yet while this conscious indifference (at least so far as he would have us believe) fits with what we already know of Cross’s character, Cross’s arguments that race is simply not part of his life, that he is just “any man,” point to the ways that he finds himself unable to come to terms with himself as an “other,” both in terms of race and gender. I would suggest that this attitude towards race exemplifies one of the impulses that prevent him from successfully reformulating his masculine identity under an existential framework—and may, in fact, point to one of the problems with

Wright's criticisms of Cross's existentialism. While Wright emphasizes the universality of the existential impulse for freedom—and the Nietzschean “will to power” as a goal of masculinity writ large as opposed to black masculinity specifically—by repeatedly setting Cross up to fail in this quest, he is also pointing to the dangers of completely ignoring the limitations imposed by race. By refusing to address race, Cross represents a failure to integrate the past into his future project—a key aspect of the move toward transcendence.<sup>35</sup>

To better understand the faults in Cross's existential project in this particular situation, it might be helpful to turn to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, where he addresses the complicated role of race in the existential project of transcendence (89). Sartre believes that part of the human project of transcendence—in which “human reality is its own surpassing toward what it lacks”—involves the “for-itself” (a condition of self-awareness) transcending the factual situation of being-for-others (89). In this case, “being-for-others” refers to the necessity of understanding oneself through the eyes of others in order to truly comprehend one's situation in the world. In Sartre's estimation, one cannot escape the condition of being-for-others and the acknowledgement of the body “as the necessary condition of the existence of a world and as the contingent realization of this condition” (328).<sup>36</sup> As Sartre further explains, “each for-itself, in fact, is a for-itself only by choosing itself beyond nationality and race... He arises in a world which is given to him as *already looked-at*” (520). It is this condition that Cross fails to fully acknowledge as he embarks on his new life, and which will in part lead to his use of homicidal violence as a way to simply *erase* those who would fashion him into a racial body.

Beauvoir echoes Sartre's comments in her application of existentialism to gender theory, and helps us to see the way in which Cross's struggle with race is connected to his struggle with gender. Beauvoir adopts the existentialist tenet that man constructs himself as a being-for-

others, yet she acknowledges the difficulty of accepting oneself as conditioned by perceptions of others, particularly when this seems to undermine independence. As she writes,

It is a strange experience for an individual who feels himself to be an autonomous and transcendent subject, an absolute, to discover inferiority in himself as a fixed and preordained essence: it is a strange experience for whoever regards himself as the One to be reveled to himself as otherness, alterity...The situation is not unique. The American Negroes know it, being partially integrated in a civilization that nevertheless regards them as constituting an inferior class. (313)

Though Beauvoir then applies this discussion of alterity to the situation of women—particularly, young girls who discover themselves to be designated to a specific, inferior space early in their childhood—the comparison to a marginalized group of people that also includes men is helpful in understanding the way her existential theory of gender is particularly applicable to Wright’s work. Specifically, it is this inferiority complex arising from otherness that Cross refuses to acknowledge, rejecting racialized oppression in an effort to reject this inferiority complex and prove or validate his masculinity.

It is the recognition of this otherness, too, that Sartre fashions into a condition of existential transcendence—the surpassing of one’s immanent self. Any contingencies or conditions of our being in the world—from disability to marginalized races—Sartre calls “necessary obstacles” for being that must be “surpassed” toward a future project (328). Yet because he bears this aversion to otherness, Cross underestimates the magnitude of race as a kind of “necessary obstacle” that must be acknowledged and surpassed. That is, Cross attempts to *escape* his circumstances rather *surpass* them—the former indicating an evasion of his condition in the world, or his being-for-others. Cross, rather than making race an obstacle, tries to remove

it from his project altogether in the name of liberation, yet as he will discover, to attempt to “escape” this condition by evading circumstances and eradicating threats through violence will not, in fact, result in his freedom.

Stephen Michael Best speaks to this issue of escapism in *The Outsider*, arguing that “the ideological uses of ‘flight’” in the novel are not meant as “a sign of escape, but as a trope of *suspension* between poles of black and white, public and private, real and imaginary, past and present experience” (112). While I believe the use of flight *is*, for Cross, primarily a sign of escape (indeed, that is one of the central problems with Cross’s quest for freedom), Best’s discussion of polarities is nevertheless particularly apt here since Cross’s suspension between these poles constitutes a large part of his existential dilemma. That is, Cross is trapped between a past that “had come to him without his asking and almost without his knowing,” and his present situation, in which he suddenly faces the opportunity to leave the past behind (110). “What was his past if he wanted to become another person?” Cross asks himself, answering his own question by reaching the conclusion that his past is, in fact, “nothing” and thus “would have to be a deliberately constructed thing” (110). Here, Cross’s reflections reference Sartre’s own existential theorizing in *Being and Nothingness*, wherein nothingness is a foundation for being; according to Sartre, “what being will be must of necessity arise on the basis of what it is not” (5). Yet here we can also begin to see where Wright might be criticizing the ineffectuality of this existentialism, for Cross begins to conflate *nothingness*, which precedes his being, with his *past*, which only precedes his current situation. Under an existential framework, Cross may have created himself from nothing, but his own individual history is *not* nothing; in fact, for both Sartre and Beauvoir, the success of a person’s future project is contingent on his or her ability to weave together the past, present, and the possibility of the future.<sup>37</sup>



This evasion of both his history and the facticity of his being-for-others, particularly his refusal to acknowledge the role race plays in the way he is viewed, becomes more evident (and more problematic) as the narrative progresses, and Cross reluctantly falls in with a group of Communist organizers in Harlem. Even when he agrees to help Gilbert Blount, one of the leaders of this particular Communist chapter, bring Blount's racist landlord to justice, Cross continues to insist that "there was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, *any* man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it," even asserting that "he possessed no notion of personal or social wrongs having been done to him," rationalizing that "if any such wrongs had existed, he felt fully capable of righting them by his own lonely strength and effort" (109; 254). His protests, of course, illuminate a positively charged desire for an egalitarian existence, in which race is not an oppressive force or destructive myth. Yet by insisting that no wrongs have been done to him, he is clearly ignoring the racial divisions that have shaped his masculinity from the outside.

Also embedded within these protests is a fear of the challenge he undertakes—the complete abandonment of his former self—as well as a distinct fear of forced obedience to a totalitarian or oppressive structure. Cross rejects any institution or individual that forces him to see himself as "othered," as this suggests a perception of self that is out of his control. Sartre stresses the fact that the structure of being-for-others is one of danger, as it makes one an "instrument" of others' possibilities (267).<sup>38</sup> This is precisely what Cross rejects in the functioning of racism, Communism, Fascism, and religion, and his attitude toward these institutional and organized oppressions is exemplified by his repeated efforts to set himself against the character of Bob Hunter, an African American Communist party member who befriends Cross. While Cross likes Hunter to an extent, he also views him as weak—a man who

“had run from one master [Communism] to another: his race” (259). Similarly, when Eva Blount, Gil’s wife, calls Cross “another victim,” he is quick to note that he is a “willing victim” (285). In identifying himself as a “willing” victim of the Communist agenda, Cross invokes a kind of martyrdom here in order to emphasize that victimization is not something that is acted upon him, but rather something that he chooses. By drawing this distinction and implying that he has *chosen* this victimization, Cross reestablishes for himself some sense of agency that might otherwise be lost in the connotations of the term.

Likewise, he makes clear his views on the oppressive (and, in his mind, victimizing) tendencies of cultural and political myth-making in one of his discussions with Blimin—another member of the Communist Party who, in the name of recruitment, is interrogating Cross about his political beliefs. During this conversation, Cross claims that “the degree and quality of man’s fears can be gauged by the scope and density of his myths, that is, by the ingenious manner in which he disguised the world about him,” and he emphasizes the idea that man lives “in the world of myths” (479-480).<sup>39</sup> What Cross references here is man’s tendency to live in bad faith; ironically, however, as he works to throw off these myths through a repeated refusal to both acknowledge his past and view race as an influential condition on the construction of his masculine identity, Cross in effect creates his own myth, thus perpetuating a cycle of bad faith himself.<sup>40</sup> As Sartre notes, “the first act of bad faith is to flee what it can not flee, to flee what it is” (70), and in doing so, Cross he becomes something akin to what Kingsley Widener has called both “the hero and the victim of existential lucidity” (177). In other words, his gendered project is in many ways directly in line with that outlined by both Sartre and Beauvoir, in that he persistently makes use of his power of choice to overcome the obstacles to his transcendence;

however, even as he is aware of these strategies, he is also a figure of that bad faith himself by his attempts to flee parts of himself.

In sum, Cross's existential dilemma is tied up in both racial and gendered struggles, as he seeks to establish himself as a model of masculine autonomy, set apart from the emasculating feminine forces in his home life and the cultural racial struggle around him. His actions to this point have exhibited many of the key tenets of existentialism as posited by Sartre and Beauvoir: his attempt to liberate himself from the past resembles Sartre's discussion of transcendence, and his efforts to do that by way of fashioning a liberated masculine identity call to mind Beauvoir's discussion of woman's need for liberation from gendered oppression. However, his actions in this regard also often resemble acts of bad faith, rendering him unable to truly free himself or transcend his condition.

### III.

In Cross's mind, the deliberate rejection and reconstruction of his past also seems to require several brutal acts of violence. While in the earlier episodes with Gladys Cross had perpetrated violence against his wife in order to fend off threats to his own masculine domination and autonomy, in the period of time following the train accident his acts of violence take the form of homicide. For Cross, this violence is meant to be liberatory and regenerative, carried out as a reaction to the threats of being "discovered" and returned to his past life of emasculation and poverty, and also as a reaction to the threats of institutional violence that he perceives as arising from Communist politics and the ideology of the Cold War.

The first episode of violence—in this case occurring as homicide—arises soon after Cross's "funeral," before he has taken his new identity as Lionel Lane. Having stopped over at a

motel (which also seems to be operating as a brothel) to plan his next move, Cross unexpectedly meets his old friend Joe, an encounter that suddenly threatens to undo all of Cross's plans for a new life—for by his mere presence, Joe is “tearing down his dream, smashing all he had so laboriously built up” (135). Acting immediately and impulsively, Cross knocks Joe unconscious and throws him out of the window, “all in one swift, merciless movement” (136). While this act in itself is somewhat shocking, what proves to be most interesting here is Cross's reflection in the aftermath. While he admits that “he had done a horrible thing” and “he hardly recognized what he had done as he recalled it to his mind,” he also admits that “he had done that to save himself,” thus presenting the act as necessary to the construction of his new self (139).

In addition to that redemptive rationalization, Cross also believes that this murder exemplifies the ways in which he has begun to fashion himself into a creator and purveyor of his own system of law. “The outside world had fallen away from him now,” he thinks, “and he was alone at the center of the world of the laws of his own feelings” (148). He is caught in a kind of trance or “hypnotic sway” during which his reflective language implies a new sense of control and sustenance augmented by his own murderous act (150). Here his thoughts invoke a Nietzschean ideal, the idea “that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension” (Nietzsche 340, s. 636). In other words, Cross feels he *must* commit this murder in order to survive and to exercise his will over anyone who would stand in his way. Though Joe is just an innocent bystander in Cross's journey, he represents the life that Cross has left—a life which threatened to undermine his individual power and thus, by association, his masculine power. At the same time, Cross immediately realizes the illusion of this power: that by killing Joe, he has only reinforced a sense of self-entrapment. “He was free from everything but himself,” he realizes—at the mercy

of his own fear, and imprisoned by the anxiety surrounding the violent construction of his selfhood (147).

Despite this conscious recognition, however, Cross does not renounce violence as a primary tool in the crafting his new life—in fact, this violent streak only increases in intensity. By continually imbuing Cross with an attraction to violence and a regret in its aftermath, Wright is able to demonstrate both the appeal and the limitations of violence in a number of circumstances—against ideology, against the past, against the problem of race. With each murder, Cross’s motivations and rationales change, gradually revealing the ways in which he comes to deploy this violence as an attempt to reconcile his competing impulses of fear and desire as they relate to the problematic intersections between racial identity, masculinity, individual power, and his own existential notions of freedom. For example, Cross’s second and third murders—of Gilbert Blount and Herndon, Blount’s Fascist landlord—are carried out for much more specific ideological purposes than his murder of Joe, which was in many ways a knee-jerk reaction to his fear of being discovered and sent back to the confines of his former life. Yet here too, as in his murder of Joe, Cross uses violence as a tool for liberation but immediately faces a similar sense that he has only become further entrenched in the problems he is trying to escape—once again “free from everything but himself.”

Cross’s involvement with Blount and Herndon arises almost immediately upon his arrival in Harlem, where he intends to start his new life. After being introduced to the agents of a local Communist sector by Bob Hunter, whom he met on the train from Chicago to New York, Cross agrees to move in with Blount and his wife, Eva, to help them make a statement against the racist segregation deployed by their landlord. His move into the building incites an argument between Blount and Herndon, which then escalates into a physical fight in which Cross involves himself.

Like the appearance of Joe, this situation too seems to arise from circumstances beyond Cross's control, but his reaction to it involves a particular and conscious choice. Instead of jumping in to help Blount, Cross suddenly faces a moment of clarity, as "a fullness of knowledge declared itself within [him] and he knew what he wanted to do" (302). And what he suddenly wants to do is to kill both Blount and Herndon, which he does by bludgeoning both men to death with a table leg. Though he claims to be "acting before he knew it," this "fullness of knowledge" points to an awareness of his actions and their motivations. He kills Herndon first, and then immediately turns to Gil, and carries out the second murder with a determined clarity:

The imperious feeling that had impelled him to action was not fulfilled. His eyes were unblinkingly on Gil's face. Yes, this other insect had to be crushed, blotted out of existence...The universe seemed to be rushing at him with all the concreteness of its totality. He was anchored once again in life, in the flow of things; the world glowed with an interest so sharp that it made his body ache...He knew exactly what he had done; he had done it deliberately, even though he had not planned it. He had not been blank of mind when he had done it, and he was resolved that he would never claim any such thing. (303-304)

As with the murder of Joe, this act inspires within him a sense of vitality—he feels "the flow of things" in an almost physiological sense—and with these murders he also finds a sense of purpose, beyond self-preservation, feeling "no regret" for his actions (308). The notion that he is "impelled" to kill these men suggests again that it is a necessary act, on which his own sense of masculine agency and power rests.

These murders, more plotted than his murder of Joe, are carried out not only to save himself from discovery, but to forward his own political and social agenda—in other words, as a

response to the threat of institutional violence modeled by Communism and Fascism. In Cross's mind, both Gil and Herndon act as "little gods" who assume control by manipulating and systematizing the feelings of others, bending the structure of those feelings to their political will. This submission of one's agency to the power of another is something from which Cross has been running since the opening of the narrative, and the use of violence as a means to maintain his own individual power, which has succeeded in the past with Gladys and with Joe, again seems to be the only way for him to assert his freedom.

Cross's motivations become even clearer in a later conversation he has with Ely Houston, the Harlem district attorney he also met on the train from Chicago. Houston, unaware of the true nature of Cross's involvement in the double murder of Blount and Herndon, is unsatisfied with the police's conclusion that the two men killed each other. Instead, he poses the possibility of a "third man," who is neither Communist nor Fascist, but who lives by a similarly absolutist anti-ideology "that no ideas are necessary to justify his acts" (376). Cross's contribution to this conversation serves as a self-assessment, a fact that is clear to the reader if not to Houston, and serves as an attempt to further justify his violent behavior. To Houston's suggestion, for example, Cross adds that this third man is also one "for whom all ethical laws are suspended" since "a man of lawless impulses living amidst a society which seeks to restrain instincts for the common good must be a kind of subjective prison" (378). Though laws are put in place for the supposed "common good," Cross believes the law's ultimate goal is "to *inhibit* in the consciousness of man, certain kinds of consciousnesses which the law had to *evoke* clearly and sharply in man's consciousness" (Wright's italics, 411). In other words, Cross realizes that the law itself "makes the criminal consciousness of man" and has thus has fashioned him into a criminal (412).<sup>41</sup> Thus lawlessness (specifically, violence outside of the law) serves as a

liberating and redemptive force: pitted against the oppressiveness of society, its justification is predicated on the idea that the law perpetuates these oppressive systems. When the law seems impenetrable, Cross's remedy is to use violence to create his own system, viewing this as not only necessary but even his "right." He asks himself: "Had not Houston admitted that maybe some men had the right to become lawgivers? Was there not, maybe, in Houston's heart the capacity to *respect* some forms of forceful crime? Had not men respected the crimes of Napoleon, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler...?" (411). This, however, comes dangerously close to acting out Arendt's warning that "any violent reaction against hypocrisy, however justifiable in its own terms, loses its *raison d'être* when it tries to develop a strategy of its own with specific goals" (66).

Yet even as he seeks to justify violence as a tool for liberation, Cross recognizes the hypocrisy inherent in his actions. Reflecting on his murder of Herndon and Blount, for example, he speaks to the strategy and its faults:

He too had acted like a little god. He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them....He had assumed the role of policeman, judge, supreme court, and executioner, --all in one swift and terrible moment... He had become what he had tried to destroy, had taken on the guise of the monster he had slain. (308-309).

For Cross, violence becomes (to use Arendt's language) a "flagrant manifestation of power and an "instrument of rule," as he demonstrates the conflation of violence and power that Arendt criticizes (36). In other words, violence becomes a tool for exerting the very force over others that Cross despises, and he realizes here that he has taken on the very qualities of



the individuals he despised—and killed precisely because they deployed those forceful qualities.

However, yet again, his awareness of these faults does not prevent him from continuing to see violence as his only recourse to freedom, as Wright plots one final murder scene to explore the appeal and failure of violence. Cross's last murder—this time of Jack Hilton, another Communist leader—arises in many ways from his previous murders, as he kills Hilton in part to cover his tracks. Yet this murder involves more conscious planning than that of Joe, Herndon, or Gil, providing Cross more time to think through his actions and motivations. Interestingly, before he commits the murder, Cross already understands that his act may have the opposite effect of that which he intends; that is, he knows that “to kill Hilton...was a way of lending multiplicity to Hilton's acts, of making them right somehow” and that “to kill him was a way, really, of exonerating him, of justifying him” (388). Again, as after the double murder of Blount and Herndon, Wright invests Cross with the recognition that a consequence of this violence is that he himself is mimicking the forceful oppression employed by the Communists. Yet he also believes that using this violence is the most immediate way to combat the oppressiveness he sees around him. In this way, one might read a bit of the tragic hero in Cross as he simultaneously accepts responsibility for his actions, which are reliant on his own flawed interpretations of freedom and violence, while he also predicts his own demise.<sup>42</sup>

Still, Cross takes excessive measures to carry out this murder: lying in wait for Hilton in his hotel room until his return in order to force him to the ground, smother him with a pillow, and shoot him in the temple--though not before Hilton has offered some surprisingly insightful commentary regarding Cross's actions.<sup>43</sup> Hilton condescendingly refers to Cross

as “boy,” accusing him of “looking for paradise on earth” and embracing “idealistic rot” (400). When Cross replies by insisting that he is not idealistic, he is also insisting that he is not a boy—that he is mature and masculine enough to see, as Hilton does, that life is “bare, naked, unjustifiable...the end and reason are for us to say, to project” (402). The ideals that Hilton himself is espousing here are also profoundly existentialist ones, and Cross’s reluctance to listen demonstrates the limits of existentialism in his quest, for they do not allow Cross to satisfy his “need for a stabilization of his surroundings” and its tenets have also, it would seem, contributed to Hilton’s own justification of his use of manipulation and oppression (196). Thus, though Hilton’s words affect him, Cross continues to carry out a murder that reveals itself to be based in the very ideology he rejects; in other words, he “exonerates” Hilton by adopting the same fascistic rejection of another’s beliefs and ideologies as justification for his actions. When he does kill Hilton, he says that “mainly it had been to rid himself of that sense of outrage that Hilton’s attitude had evoked in him, Hilton’s assumption that he could have made a slave of him” (409). Yet by reacting violently to the oppression and condescension embodied by Hilton—obstacles that deny him existential autonomy—Cross himself makes his autonomy reliant on oppressive force.

#### IV.

Thus far, we have seen Cross attempt to transcend the self he perceives to be victimized by the feminine “other,” by the past that holds him back socially and economically (embodied in the figure of Joe), and by the white Communist and Fascist leaders who make it their goal to coerce him into adhering to their philosophies. The problem in Cross’s existential search for autonomy and liberation from these threats to his manhood and identity is that he fights them off

with a violence that only perpetuates the patriarchal power structures that he seeks to escape.

What becomes evident at this point is that Cross is, in many ways, an embodiment of the black man that critics like Hazel Carby and bell hooks criticize, as his own actions actually undermine his freedom because they are modeled after the racial and institutional forces that oppressed him in the first place.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Cross has further mired himself within the institutional violences against which he has rebelled, which contribute to his frustration and sense of entrapment in an economically and socially inferior status, and which in turn he sees as contributing the fraught home life that left him feeling emasculated.

The ways in which violence actually interrupts Cross's construction of a liberated masculine identity also reveals itself within his confessions to Eva Blount. Amidst Cross's several murders, he and Eva have become involved in a romantic entanglement, with the result that Eva becomes the only person toward whom Cross displays any convincing feeling of affection. For this reason, perhaps, he is compelled to confess his crimes to her, yet his act of confession only reveals a duplicity that has not only confounded Eva, but also betrayed her trust—essentially victimizing her in an evocation of the kind of “symbolic violence” Pierre Bourdieu references in *Masculine Domination*. This “gentle” violence, as Bourdieu also refers to it, does not necessarily need to be defined by physical aggression, but can be a misogyny or condescension that is enacted “invisibly and insidiously” within gender relations (38). This is in part what Cross practices with Eva, as he exerts a psychological control over her through his dishonesty about his past and then, when he confesses his crimes, by placing on her the responsibility of keeping his secret.

Furthermore, in his attempt to explain the murders he has committed, Cross also confesses to using the victimizing tendencies he loathed in men like Gil. Telling Eva that when he confronted Gil and Herndon, he felt compelled to kill in order to live, he says,

When I stood in that room I saw more senselessness and foolishness right before my eyes and I felt a way to stop it! I hated what I saw! And I hated myself because all my life I was unable to do anything about it...I wanted to live so badly; I wanted a good life so terribly much that what I saw made me mad, mad, *mad*...And I killed them. (533)

Ideologically, this “senselessness and foolishness” represents for Cross oppression on a large scale: the men whom he despised enough to kill are those who had presented obstacles to individual existential awareness, and who also reminded Cross of his own specific inability to surpass these obstacles. When Eva retorts, “But I thought you were against brutality—I thought you were going to tell me what Gil had done to you—I thought you hated suffering”—Cross replies that he does hate suffering, “That’s why I did it! I couldn’t stand the thought of it, the sight of it...”<sup>45</sup> Thus, admitting to a paradox of sorts, Cross claims to have used violence in an attempt to eradicate it; however, in doing so, he only perpetuates the cycle of violence and traps himself within it. The despair over this discovery, and the forced responsibility of remaining silent, prompts Eva to commit suicide, which because of her relative innocence seems to be the most gratuitous of all the violences present in the text. Though Cross is less physically responsible for this death, the psychological violence he wielded over Eva was a direct catalyst for her death, a result of his desire to refashion himself an autonomous identity of masculine privilege.

Darwin Turner has argued that in *The Outsider*, “Wright suggested that the sensitive, questioning individual, the existentialist, will be destroyed by the organized institutions which fear him because they do not understand him and fear his questions because they cannot answer them” (171). On one hand, this would seem to be the case, for on his way out of a final meeting with Ely Houston who has finally uncovered the truth about Cross’s true identity, Cross is shot—presumably by a member of the Communist party. Yet in the end even Cross realizes that it is not only the institutions that destroy him, but also the means by which *he* attempts to destroy *them*. After he is shot, for instance, he admits, “he had been living by a law and that law had turned on him” (583). He recognizes that just as he had adopted his own code of law to justify his use of violence against others, those others had used the same code to kill him. To employ Arendt’s language once again, the trouble with this violence is that while it “pays” for injustice, it “pays indiscriminately,” and “the danger of violence...will always be that the means overwhelm the end” (80).

Thus, Wright’s ending demonstrates that Cross’s free choices have left him entirely alone with “no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas” which is, in fact, what he wanted, at least in theory; however, the construction of himself as such has defined his life as violent and exclusionary (504). He rejects the myths that govern appropriate behavior in society and, as Kingsley Widener aptly observes, “With the old myths gone, he discovers that revenge *is* permitted—violation, crime, hatred, killing—but results in ultimate revenge against the self” (173). In this case, Cross is a victim of his own violent actions, as he adopts the fascistic tendencies of patriarchal power and masculine domination that are held by his enemies, the perpetrators of this institutional violence. Cross’s “liberation” entails adopting the oppressive posture of masculine privilege against

both Gladys and Eva, in some ways imitating that of Herndon and Blount, preventing him from truly transcending the oppressive system under which he lives. Cross sets out with the goal of enacting liberatory violence like that articulated by Fanon and Sartre, but ends up perpetrating isolated acts of misogynistic and hate-driven violences that become his only means of escape.

The contradiction between Cross's liberatory goals and the actual outcome is compounded by the fact that he himself (as exhibited by his very name) is a veritable embodiment of contradiction: Cross accepts his race, but refuses to acknowledge it in the construction of his masculinity; he hates the violence he sees surrounding him, yet he deploys it toward his own ends; he flees from the world and yet embraces it; he chases lawlessness and desires stability. While Cross believes freedom from these contradictions might be achieved through individual acts of violence against institutions and social expectations, in the end this violent structure leads to a more alienating than liberating end. His actions demonstrate what Arendt critiques about the relationship between revolutionary violence and individual power: that "the loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power...and that violence itself results in impotence" for "violence may destroy power, but it is incapable of creating it" (54; 56). Cross might prove his ability to destroy the power of individual men, but is left in the wake of his own destruction, having created no new real power for himself.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of Cross's death at the end of the novel, one cannot help but ask: if violence proves to be ineffectual, even as Cross views it as the means for his redemption, what then are we left to interpret as a more meaningful or successful tool for reinvention? While Wright does not provide any easy answers to this question, his text does

help us understand *why* certain deployments of violence are not only inadequate but actually damaging. Throughout the novel Cross has, at some point or another, adopted a variety of violences within a broad scope: homicide, wife-beating, symbolic violence, and revolutionary violence. This revolutionary form (in the vein of Fanon's violence of liberation) is what he truly seeks to deploy, but this is undermined by the fact that other violences come to define his life. Arendt notes in her acknowledgement of revolutionary violence that at times violence is in fact the only way to "set the scales of justice right again;" however, she also notes that "it becomes 'irrational' the moment it is 'rationalized,'" and it is within the language of this critique that we might identify Cross's error, for his repeated attempts to rationalize his behavior—and the increasing frequency of his individual use of violence—prove to be his undoing (66).

The playing out of events in the narrative also exemplify with a surprising degree of accuracy Arendt's remarks that "single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully" (51), and that while "the extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All" (42). Cross himself realizes as much after he is shot; his last words include the assertion that "'Alone a man is nothing' ...Starting from scratch every time...is no good" (585). This realization points to the fact that Wright himself, despite his minimal treatment of Cross's misogyny, is aware of Cross's faults with regard to the deployment of existential violence in the text and, I would suggest, sets out to critique this. In this way, my own investigation is in line with those critics such as Jeffrey Atteberry who read *The Outsider* as a critique not only of Communism, but of existentialism as well. As Atteberry writes, "Wright's use of existentialism may strike some as 'ill-digested' precisely because he refuses to incorporate this discourse in its entirety

since, in Wright's estimation, it ultimately fails to carry out its critique in a fashion that is sufficiently radical" (883). I agree with Atteberry that Wright intentionally sets up Cross's existential acts to fail—indeed, the failure of Cross's existentialist ideology is at the heart of my reading of the novel—yet I believe it is also important to note that in some cases, Wright does not sufficiently interrogate the role of this violence in perpetuating masculine privilege. Cross's faculties of self-criticism provide Wright with a voice to critique existential violence, and to demonstrate that Cross's actions are by no means meant as a model of a black masculinity successfully liberated from a deeply embedded social oppression and domination. Still, certain scenarios—Cross's behavior with Gladys, for instance—go largely uncriticized in the novel, suggesting that even Wright perpetrates notions of a black patriarchal masculinity that seeks to subordinate black—and white—women.

One of Cross's early reflective considerations of freedom offers some food for thought in terms of the ways in which Wright himself continues to struggle with and explore these themes of violence in his later works. Following his murder of Joe, Cross acknowledges that he had "reckoned that his getting rid of the claims of others would have automatically opened up to him what he wanted, but it had merely launched him to live in the empty possibility of action whose spell... had bound him more securely in foolish drifting that he had experienced in all the past" (196). This notion of being caught in a "possibility of action," a decidedly existential theme that might be compared to immanence, lends to Cross's journey an unfinished quality, and suggests that Wright too might be grappling with how to envision and articulate the problems that arise from using violence to attain liberty, particularly the contradiction that arises when one espouses ideals of existential freedoms while simultaneously silencing others. Perhaps because of these remaining problems, and the



fact that Cross's long journey has not provided a model of what a truly liberated black masculinity might look like, Wright continued to fashion protagonists who grapple with the intersections among oppression, existential freedom, violence, and masculine posturing—albeit in very different ways.

## V.

In *The Long Dream*, published five years after *The Outsider*, Wright crafts a protagonist whose life in the South appears to differ greatly from that of Cross, but whose masculine identity is similarly centered around experiences with violence. The plot of *The Long Dream* centers on the intersection of race, sexuality and violence in the South in the late 1950s, exploring the ways in which these overlapping themes inform the developing masculinity of the novel's main protagonist, Rex "Fishbelly" Tucker. Fish's narrative is set against the backdrop of an American South slow to adopt the changes introduced by the onset of the Civil Rights movement. Though the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling set the stage for nationwide desegregation, it by no means signaled the end of extreme racial tension and episodes of violence in the southern states, as evidenced by events such as the August 1955 murder of Emmet Till. Moreover, as Riche Richardson has argued in her study of black masculinity in the South, southern black men have often been placed at the bottom of the "hierarchical discourse on black masculinity" (21), and were at this time in particular viewed as "inferior and undesirable models of black masculinity within such racial hierarchies based on geography" (2). Due to this setting, violence manifests itself quite differently in *The Long Dream* than it had in *The Outsider*, often functioning on a more external level—as something Fish constantly observes as part of his daily life, but only infrequently enacts himself. Nevertheless, the experience of this violence also plays an integral

role in the shaping of Fish's masculine identity, an identity that is informed by his complex interpretations of lawlessness, which are grounded in his existential struggle for individual liberation and wrapped up in his conflicting ideas about race and history. It is this constant awareness and fear of the possibility of racial violence—particularly lynching and castration—that negatively affects Fish's sense of his masculine identity.

In its stylistic and thematic differences from *The Outsider*, the novel provides new insight into the function and role of violence in Wright's own constructions of masculinity, tracing Fish's more direct experience of extreme racism in the Jim Crow south and exploring more deeply the way in which Fish's struggle with race and gender is intricately intertwined with white prohibitions against black male sexuality. In many ways, actually, Fish's plight more closely resembles that of *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas in that he lacks the level of awareness held by Cross. In this way, Wright has chosen to pen a novel in which he takes away some of that freedom of choice and intellectual privilege he had bestowed on Cross, while maintaining similar existential themes of liberation and masculine agency. As a result, Fish lies somewhere between the characters of Bigger and Cross, lacking that awareness but also pursuing more actively a course of existential freedom that is opposed to institutional violences forced upon him by society.

Though the context and setting of this novel diverge from that of *The Outsider*, Fish Tucker also faces institutional oppressions that threaten his sense of autonomy and masculinity. Like Cross, Fish is at odds with his lived history, but his struggle is a more explicit response to racism and racial divisions than Cross's, as he works to construct his masculine identity in the face of a whiteness that he perceives as both alluring and repulsive. Because of this, Fish appears more confined by his environment in this novel than Cross does in *The Outsider*, though Wright

also places Fish in a situation in which escape seems directly tied to freedom. And like Cross, Fish too fashions an understanding of freedom, autonomy, and power specifically through his gendered identity, acutely aware of the ways in which a specific performance of masculinity will gain him a limited entry into society. Ultimately, however, it is the confining falsity of this performance that he seeks to escape. In a more subtle manifestation of the existential themes Wright first examined in *The Outsider*, Wright constructs a character who seeks transcendence and existential freedom: he represents Fish as wanting to surpass the part of himself that would adopt different guises of black masculinity that are “acceptable” to both white society and black society.

Fish’s primary aim in the narrative is to move outside of the oppressions and race laws that are reinforced by everyone from his family to the local police force, all of whom seem to control his gendered identity as a way of controlling his level of freedom. Fish’s struggle with identity is set up through notions of sexuality and gender in several ways, often within a Freudian framework. Initially, for example, Wright makes the Oedipal complex a central focus of the novel, particularly in his elucidation of Fish’s childhood preoccupation with his mother’s sexuality and his later struggles to take over his father’s role in the business.<sup>46</sup> Yet this Oedipal anxiety also plays out in the racism Fish experiences, as his constant fear of castration and the attempts by a patriarchal white society to repress his natural sexual desires repeatedly emasculate him. This, along with Fish’s witnessing of Chris’ lynched body, presents anxiety over the masculine body as a central focus of the novel, and of Fish’s existential struggle. This entrapment causes Fish to view the “Black Belt” in which he was raised as “a kind of purgatory, a pit of shame in which he had been unjustifiably consigned,” and the question that plagues him

throughout the narrative is how he might one day “climb out of that purgatory, escape that pit” (164).

Fish dreams of being able to use violence as an escape mechanism, but even in his imagination he envisions this tactic turning on him, as he is violently attacked and emasculated in his dreams. For instance, at the narrative’s opening, we see Fish as a child who, born into this violent society, seems to inherently or instinctually understand the world through violence before he is even consciously aware of the reality of social conditions surrounding him. For example, as a small child Fish eagerly awaits his father’s return from a fishing trip and, never having seen a fish before, imagines this unknown entity within a violent framework (Wright’s way of foreshadowing the way Fish will envision the forbidden mysteries of whiteness, particularly white femininity, later in the novel). After watching his mother gut and cook the fish, he falls asleep, dreaming “that he saw a huge, angry fish waddling toward him with a gaping mouth” and thinking that “he’d crack it over the head with a stick and make all the blood come out” (10). Though Fish is only four years old and cannot interpret this dream himself, Wright’s detailed narration of this nightmare clarifies that in this moment, Fish imagines himself being drawn to and killing that which he does not understand.

At the same time, these childhood dreams also anticipate the ways in which this reliance on violence as a kind of coping mechanism will only perpetuate the cycle of violence that keeps him mired in his place of racial oppression: his dream, for example, becomes a nightmare, as the fish he imagines to have killed suddenly throws a ball at his mouth, which gets wedged between his teeth:

*he could not take it out and could not swallow it and he knew that the fish had done to him what his pap did to fishes catching him on a hook and the fish was coming at him*

*with gleaming read eyes and he tried to scream but could not and he could see the fish's mouth opening to swallow him...(10)*

This vision of entrapment will be repeated throughout Fish's adolescence and early adulthood, both in his dreams and his daily life, as this imagined violence is always punished in his dreams by an even more violent force. This move, I would argue, is Wright's way of suggesting (as he did with Cross) that to deploy violence as a black man is to feed into the inherent stereotype of the violent black rapist—the very thing Fish wants to overcome.

In a Freudian reading of the novel, Michelle Yukins deems this scene to be representative of Fish's "developing consciousness of the power of the phallus and the potential violence of sexual associations" (753).<sup>47</sup> I would agree with this assessment in the sense that I believe these dreams prefigure Fish's growing awareness of the violence that defines his life, foreshadowing the very real threat of castration and death that might arise from breaking the racial laws set by white society—especially those that forbid any sexual encounters between black men and white women. This awareness will become particularly acute when he later imagines Chris Sims, who will be lynched for his sexual relationship with a white woman, to be the dying fish.

Fish's tendency toward violence also develops through a number of sexualized encounters and experiences in the narrative, thus more firmly associating violence with his masculine anxiety. For example, as a young boy, Fish finds a condom on the ground and, not recognizing what it is, ties it to a stick and shows it to his friends. Chris Sims, the older and thus much revered peripheral member of their crowd, laughs at this naiveté, which leaves Fish "full of fuming anger," though he admits that "he did not know against whom" (31). Another episode, driven by a similar pairing of violence and sexuality, finds Fish bullying Aggie Smith, a boy his age who has been named a "fruit" and a "queer" by his peers, and whose possible homosexuality

introduces Fish to another unknown—and unaccepted—sexual territory. When Aggie asks to join the boys’ baseball game, he is refused and subsequently taunted. Encouraged by his friends, Fish then “kicked, slapped, and punched Aggie, who walked groggily, turning, stumbling toward a field, not protesting the raining blows,” after which he and his friends merely “paused and silently watched the retreating Aggie, staring at his sunlit, blood-drenched shirt gleaming amidst the sea of green corn” (39). Much of this violence is motivated by the boys’ fear of what they do not understand—not an unfamiliar theme, as it reflects a somewhat stereotypical urge to lash out at the strange, unfamiliar, frightening or embarrassing. What is particularly interesting, however, is the way that Wright invests Fish with an almost subliminal understanding that his own violence is enacted against something other, and more abstract, than the immediate threat with which he is faced. In other words, though this violence against Aggie and his rage at his own sexual naïveté seems initially to be largely unprovoked by any direct antagonism towards himself, it becomes increasingly obvious to both Fish and to the reader that these violent impulses are largely informed by the racial divisions and tensions in his community, which are themselves manifested in the sexual prohibitions against black men.

The difficulties surrounding such sexualized racial identity become increasingly prominent as Fish becomes more aware of “whiteness” as something distinctly strange from his own experience. Initially, though Fish finds whiteness unfamiliar and views the white population as “other,” he remains a relative idealist about his place in society, largely because the white population barely registers within his perspective during his early life. His first direct encounter with whites occurs on a trip to town, when he is summoned by a group of white men engaged in a dice game who want to use him for “luck.” As they play, Fish fixates on “their dead-white *whiteness*,” noting that “they seemed like huge, mechanical dolls whose behavior he

could not possibly predict” (14). While Fish is admittedly terrified of the men, his view of whiteness as mechanically inhuman prevents his fear from as yet translating into the sense of inferiority that will later plague him, as will his maturing awareness of the existing racial divide in the South.

The dissolution of Fish’s adolescent assurance of his own selfhood and relative ignorance of the sexual anxieties that face a black man in the 1950s American South begins to play out in an argument he has with his friends concerning whether or not they can even be considered “American” because they are black. While Fish’s friend Sam adamantly insists that because of their race they are considered less than American, Fish (much like Cross) ardently refuses to believe his skin color interferes with his understanding of his nationality. Here again, Wright fashions characters who view—or want to view—their struggles as universal, to eliminate the limitations of the skin color that they have no power to change. Yet Wright also acknowledges the difficulty in achieving this universality, here through the counter-argument offered by Sam, who argues that their race will always affect the way they are viewed in America, and will always precede their national identity. As he says, “Them Irish and them English is white folks. Fish is a African who’s been taken out of Africa. Fish ain’t no American” (34). Sam’s argument may be cribbed from the Pan-African centered conversations he has overheard between his parents, but his words nevertheless hold enough weight to unsettle Fish. When Fish—and all of his friends—vehemently protest, insisting that they are Americans because they live in America, Sam yells back, “Aw, naw, you ain’t!...You niggers ain’t *nowhere*....You can’t live like no American, ‘cause you ain’t no American. And you ain’t no African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just *nothing*! (35). In this way, as Fish and his friends identify as a “lack” of identity, they represent the very issue taken up by Beauvoir, as well as the existential problem of

nothingness articulated by Sartre. For Sartre, nothingness is a foundation of being; as he notes, “the permanent possibility of non-being, outside us and within, conditions our questions about being” and that “what being will be must of necessity arise on the basis of what it is not” (5). To be black in America is, within this existential framework that Wright also adopts, to be nothing—at least as Sam perceives it. As Sartre also notes, freedom is achievable only when this nothingness is surpassed toward a future project. Fish, not yet ready to acknowledge the socially and racially imposed inferiority that will prove to be central in his existential struggle, is thus unable to surpass this imposed sense of “nothingness.” He pleads with Sam to “stop talking race,” and when Sam refuses, declaring that “there ain’t nothing else to talk about,” the two boys are at each other’s throats.<sup>48</sup> While the boys resolve their frustration through this brief tussle and promptly “forget” about the argument, Sam’s words resonate throughout the remainder of the narrative, speaking directly to Fish’s struggle with his own masculinity as a perceived “lack” with relation to the white masculine norm.

Fish’s denial here in the face of Sam’s astute observations about the seemingly contradictory nature of being a black American man calls to mind Cross Damon’s refusal to incorporate race into his American identity—an attempt to leave the past behind in order to existentially transcend it. Yet unlike Cross, Fish will eventually incorporate his growing consciousness of race and racism into his perceptions of masculinity. In a way, he will carry with him throughout his early adulthood Sam’s comment that “when you know you a nigger, then you ain’t no nigger no more. You start being a *man*!” (32). What Sam unwittingly refers to here is a kind of existential awareness that might allow Fish to understand and therefore transcend the conditions (namely, racial oppressions) that hinder his freedom. Ironically, however, the ensuing moments of revelation when Fish recognizes race and starts “being a man”



are also the moments when he begins to question this very manhood, since his awareness of racial oppression coincides with his awareness of a racist white society's attempts to emasculate him. Thus his awareness of his racial positioning seems to exist in an inverse relationship to his confidence about his masculinity—he does not feel he is a “man” when he reflects on the fact that he is a “nigger.”

The ways in which racial stereotyping and oppression conflict with Fish's ability to craft a sense of masculine power and autonomy is particularly visible during a trip Fish takes to the farm fair with his friends one afternoon. There, he encounters a sideshow in which patrons can pay fifty cents to, as the banner proclaims, “Hit the Nigger Head.” After watching a white man enthusiastically participate in the sordid game, Fish decides to volunteer, his decision arising from a struggle with the contradicting impulses to embrace or reject his racial identity. In other words, in this instance, Fish is torn between loyalty to and shame about his own race. Observing the game at the fair, he reflects:

[He] felt he had either to turn away from the black face, or, like the white men, throw something at it. That obscene black face was his own face and, to quell the war in his heart, he had either to reject it in hate or accept it in love. It was easier to hate that degraded black face than to love it. (47)

Ultimately, Fish decides to try to hit the black face in front of him, exemplifying a shame that overwhelms him. This excerpt, I would argue, also demonstrates Fish's struggle to understand his being in relation to what Sartre would term his being-for-others. That is, he identifies with the racialized figure in front of him, but at the same time recognizes that this face is “othered” and outcast by white society, a condition that he then internalizes: seeing himself in this black face, Fish faces himself here as the “inessential,” both in terms of race and masculinity. To be

inessential, as Beauvoir describes it in *The Second Sex*, is to be stagnant and hemmed in by the definitions others have imposed; for example, Beauvoir notes that to be considered woman by society, every female “must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (xix), and because man as Other “seems to her to be on the plane of the essential...with reference to him she sees herself as the inessential” (329). Fish too, experiences a similar dilemma, in that to be a man in society, he must share in the “reality” of a masculinity that is defined and disciplined by the actions of white men, in the hopes that he might be able to reach that plane of the “essential.” However, this task is constantly interrupted by the racially inflected violence Fish sees around him, especially by the lynching of Chris Sims.

## VI.

While violence undergirds Fish’s sense of identity even from childhood, his earliest, most direct, and most unsettling encounter with racial violence occurs during and after the grotesque murder of Chris Sims. This episode not only illuminates the stark realities of life for a black man living in the South at this time, but also provides some explanation for the reasons why Fish’s existential struggle for freedom is inhibited by a sense of castration anxiety. After Chris Sims is found with a white woman, he is lynched and castrated and Fish, at his father’s funeral parlor when the body is brought in, is witness to Chris’s mutilated body: an image that will haunt him throughout the narrative in its representation of the danger, proscription, and shame placed upon any interracial sexual encounters or relationships. Here, Chris’s castrated body exemplifies the black male’s restricted access to masculinity as it is defined by white society, as the physical marker of his manhood is violently removed as punishment for freely pursuing his own desires. Invoking Freud’s discussion of the Oedipal complex and the castration anxiety that results from

being held under a patriarchal authority, Wright sets up this lynching episode as representative of the threats that prevent black men like Fish from attaining physical and psychological manhood, effectively keeping them children in the eyes of white society.<sup>49</sup> Thus the freedom that Fish seeks as he struggles to fashion his budding masculine identity is denied him by the significance of Chris's violated body, which by its very existence seems to prohibit him from acting on the natural sexual desire he would feel as a man. Here we can see the ways in which the existential and gendered theory that pervades Wright's text converges upon the historical reality that he also explores. In exploring the impact of lynching on Fish's sense of masculinity, Wright is also examining the fraught nature of Southern black manhood in particular, which was degraded and terrorized by the threat of white supremacist violence like lynching, even into the second half of the twentieth century. The murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, for example, is one of the most notorious examples of the way that lynching was used to literally and figuratively emasculate black men, perpetuating racist ideology through the disciplining of the black male body. It acted as a literal prohibition of black manhood, emasculating even the men who were not the physical victims of the crime, denying them the ability to move beyond their current situation and surpass their racial limitations, and to declare themselves as men.

Jeffrey Geiger's study of masculinity in *The Long Dream* makes several points that I believe illuminate the masculine anxiety I also see to be a central to this text. Drawing from a Freudian framework, Geiger argues that "Wright perceived deeper links between the development of African-American masculine identity and the actual and psychic castration prominent in cases of lynching: a spectacle of white hysterical violence that targets not only black social autonomy but also the visible signifiers of masculine identity" (197-198). Such an event exemplifies Geiger's larger point that even as masculinity develops here, it is

“systematically unmade in terms of a positive racial or sexual identity, for it is formed within an arena of white power which circumscribes entrance into the social world by persistently threatening the black male subject with total erasure and indeterminacy” (205). In other words, in terms of the existential framework that I believe to be useful in an explanation of Fish’s dilemma, his masculine identity is defined as a lack of manhood or, form of “inessential.” As a result, Fish is repeatedly threatened with emasculation by the restrictions on that manhood by/within the larger white community, leaving him with an increasing sense of victimization at the hand of a social structure over which he has little control.

Yet the “unmaking” of black masculinity that Geiger believes to be triggered by Chris’s lynching is not a conclusive phenomenon, but instead a catalyst for a continual *remaking* or reconstruction of the self. As Fish witnesses the destruction of Chris’s masculinity here at the hands of a white mob, the connection between whiteness, violence, and sexuality is cemented in his mind, a connection that will inform each act he takes in the future in an attempt to move outside of this system and regain a sense of his masculine self. One of the most unsettling aspects of Fish’s growing awareness of his condition lies within his observation of his parents’ reactions to the lynching violence of the south. His father, for instance, automatically assumes that “Chris *had* to die” as a result of his relationship with the white woman, an assumption that Fish reacts to with disgust (69). This repulsion is augmented by the way his parents tremble in the face of racial violence. Though he himself is afraid of what Chris’s body represents, the fact that his parents too are reduced to the same levels of anxiety unsettles him. “Were these scared and trembling people his parents?” he asks, finding himself “more afraid of them than he was of the white people” as “suddenly he saw his parents as he felt the white people saw them and he felt toward them some of the contempt that white people felt for them” (63). This particular

scene acts as a type of synecdoche for Fish's larger struggle; in other words, this brief moment in which he is able to step outside of this racial conditioning and see his family in this way exemplifies just a small piece of his larger goal, to construct a masculine identity that departs from his father's example and allows him to rebel against the black masculinity that has been defined and controlled by the white-dominated environment around him.

From this point on, however, Fish seems unable to extract sexuality from images of violence, as he internalizes the message that his masculinity will be threatened should he act on any of his own male desires. The direct intersection between violence and a repressed black masculine sexuality, for example, plays out in Fish's dreams following the lynching episode. In one of these nightmares, Fish imagines a connection between a train and a fish belly: two figures which he has, since childhood, associated with sex. He begins to associate these sexual figures with the murder of Chris, dreaming of a train that collides with a fish belly, upon which the belly bursts and *"he saw the naked bloody body of Chris with blood running to all sides of the room round his feet at his ankles at his knees rising higher higher he had to tiptoe to keep blood from reaching his mouth and it was too late it was engulfing his head and when he opened his mouth to scream he was drowning in blood..."* (82). Here the horror arises not only from the reenactment of Chris's death, but from the far-reaching implications of this violence, for it is not only Chris's masculine body that is affected by this brutality, but Fish's as well; the violent environment in which he lives threatens to drown him.

Though Fish has no recollection of these nightmares, Wright's narrative proves that they are everywhere enacted for him by a racist society that triggers the associative connections he makes in these dreams between race, sexuality, and violence. When looking at pictures of naked white women that Zeke smuggles into school, for instance, "another vision replaced the photos

and he saw the naked, bloody, dead body of Chris prone upon the table under the yellow, glaring electric bulb...He was looking at the naked white world that had killed Chris, and the world that had killed Chris could also kill him” (92). Speaking to this connection between racial and sexual discourse in *The Long Dream*, Yoshinobu Hakutani argues that “the prerequisite to [Fish’s] manhood constitutes his freedom of a sexual relationship with the white woman” and that “this white-imposed taboo emerges as the central problem in his life” (268). Fish’s own reflections seem to verify this observation, for as he notes: “As long as he could remember he had mulled over the balefully seductive mystery of white women, whose reality threatened his life, declared him less than a man” and “placed the white female beyond the pitch of reality” (363). In the continued nod toward Freud’s discussion of the way repressed sexual desire keeps one a child, Fish is prevented from achieving a masculine maturity because, as a black man, he does not have the freedom to act on his natural sexual desires.

The fear of being castrated and lynched for his desires reaches a peak when Fish is arrested for trespassing on a white man’s property and he remembers that he has a picture of a white woman folded up in his pocket. His fear of being found with this is so acute that he eats the photograph on the way to jail. The police, the unaware of this photograph, exacerbate Fish’s anxiety by threatening him with castration after bringing him into the station; interestingly, Fish’s ability to “survive” this experience prompts the police chief to wryly ask, “They made a man out of you today, didn’t they boy?” (121). Though Fish is supposedly a “man” now that his eyes have been opened to oppression and corruption, thus doing away with the last vestiges of idealism he held as a child, he also intuitively feels that this has occurred because the police “had not so much selected him as he had presented himself as a victim” (122). In other words, he recognizes that his so-called manhood is founded on oppression: he has been “made a man” by

being beaten down by white law enforcement, thus reinforcing the idea that black masculinity is defined in part by victimization and submission to discipline. From here on, Fish truly begins to realize the state of what Sartre would call his “being-for-others,” and the difficulty he will face in surpassing this obstacle to his freedom.

## VII.

Fish’s arrest marks a pivotal moment in his construction of masculinity, in that from that point on, he begins to embrace the kinds of violences he sees performed around him in an attempt to work around the white system of law, much like his father has done; in fact, after being released from jail, he realizes that “he could not imagine any way of meeting [white racist society] other than violence” (127). And here lies one of the fundamental differences between Cross and Fish: while Cross employs violence to escape the totalitarian forces of oppression he sees as standing in the way of a liberated masculine identity, Fish at first uses violence in a conscious attempt to work within the system of those very forces. This becomes particularly evident when Fish comes across an injured dog lying in the road and, seeing that the dog is near death, he decides to kill it to put it out of its misery; however, after doing so, he carries out a strange process of disemboweling the dog as a kind of ceremonial “embalming.” As he does this, he consciously links the death of the dog with the lynching of Chris; the dog laying before him calls to his mind Chris’s body on the undertaker’s table, an association that prompts him to believe that in killing this dog and ceremoniously removing its entrails, he is “kneeling before the fact and reality of death, trying to come to terms with them, seeking for a way to accept them” (135). He is, in other words, attempting to accept the danger that is inherent in simply existing as a black man in a racist southern society.

Speaking of this scene, Kenneth Kinnamon notes in his preface to *The Long Dream* that violence has always been Wright's "stock in trade," but he also wonders "how this ritual aids Fishbelly's maturation and whether the violence here is not gratuitous" (xiii). While this scene is certainly disturbing, not only because of its gruesomeness but because of Fish's relative calm during the process, I would argue that the moment itself is not gratuitous. Rather, it provides Fish with an important moment of clarity with regard to what he understands to be necessary to the construction of his masculine identity. After his ritualistic embalming, for instance, Fish reflects: "When the whites came at him now, he would know what death was...he could live somewhat at peace now with himself; the world of white faces no longer had the power to surprise him" (135). In other words, by forcing himself to face this death and embalm the body of the dog, he adopts a kind of stoicism in the face of violence, something that is, in his mind, required of his manhood. Fish, like Cross, attempts to create order out of disorder by deploying violence as a way to control what is occurring around him, but he does so to "live somewhat at peace" with that threat of racial violence.

Fish's sense that he must necessarily numb himself to the violence around him is further cemented when, immediately after this ceremony, he comes upon a white man trapped in his car who explains that he had swerved and crashed in order to avoid hitting the very dog Fish has just killed. Fish initially attempts to seek help, but the first car he flags down for help happens to be a police car, and he instead retreats in fear, leaving the injured man behind. Interestingly, while he is overcome with terror in the face of the law, he feels almost nothing in the face of this dying man, as he sees only "a melting image of white man dying beneath a wrecked car" but decides "it was neither compelling or important" (138). This exemplifies not only the process of his gradual acceptance of violence, but also his acceptance of the possibility of violent death as



embedded in his life's racial conflict. His sense that the image of the white man is "melting" and soon to disappear from his conscious memory altogether (echoing the way in which his dreams vanish upon waking), signals a shift in Fish's reaction in the face of both death and a threatening white figure. His fear of lynching and castration, so acute in the past, seems tempered in this moment. Whereas in the past he might have feared what would happen if he did *not* help the trapped man, and whereas his fears might have haunted his dreams, now the man seems "neither compelling or important."

After this coming to terms with the situation in which he is trapped, Fish seems determined to adopt a performance of manhood that is condoned by the men in both the black and white community, as a way of self preservation. One of the first ways he does so is by sleeping with a black prostitute, an act meant to solidify his particularly masculine authority to others in the black community. In this way, his actions (like Cross's) embrace a variation of Bourdieu's symbolic violence, as he accepts the objectification of black women as a way to verify his own manhood—and this too goes largely unquestioned by Wright in the text. Fish's perspective of black women is, in large part, informed by his fear and desire of white women, for he not only views black women as an entirely separate (and more accessible) form of the feminine, but also one which will allow him to redeem the masculinity that white society disallows. His fascination with white femininity, by contrast, both invigorates and weakens his sense of masculinity as he feels sexually attracted to white femininity and also belittled by the fact that he is supposedly unworthy of that which he desires—he is meant to be "merely a face, a voice, a sexless animal" in the presence of white women; to assert any masculine power is to risk his life (363).

Thus, he searches for any opportunity he can to regain a sense of his masculine virility, for, as Michelle Yukins notes, the sexual identity that is so directly tied to his masculinity “is racially determined in such a way that each sexual gesture simultaneously signifies an act of masculine resistance and a moment of emasculated exposure” (774). Unlike his view of the white woman as an entity who “threatened as much as it beckoned,” Fish sees black women as a “gift” to which he is entitled, a view that is condoned by other men around him (158). In this way, Fish adopts his father Tyree’s objectification of black women as beings who exist to bolster his sense of masculine authority and sexuality; in fact, Tyree himself takes Fish to the local brothel as a type of initiation into manhood. Later, Fish drops out of school to work for his father, then decides to “keep” one of the prostitutes, essentially paying for her life away from the brothel so that she can belong to him; in essence, she becomes a figure onto which he can impose his masculine power, demonstrating both his wealth and virility.

Yet despite this adherence to one of Tyree’s examples of manhood, and his impatient desire to leave school and become a businessman like his father, Fish often expresses his determination to become a man very much *unlike* his own father. When he observes the way his father behaves in front of whites, he becomes increasingly ashamed, observing that Tyree is “shamelessly crawling before white people and would keep on crawling as long as it paid off” (140). While he watches Tyree “act” in front of the white police chief, he sees in his father’s behavioral changes “a bitter pride, but also a black defeat,” an astutely observant pun which leads him to articulate his own conflicted emotions toward his racial and masculine identity. In an angry reaction to a historical precedent of racial behavior enacted by his father, Fish says:

He knew intuitively that his father, hating the demands of the white folks, had made a bargain with himself to supply the blood that he felt that the white folks wanted in order

to buy a little security for himself, but, since his security could be had only by making victims of black men, he hated the black men too. All of which meant that he was consumed by self-hatred. (71)

This reflection exemplifies Fish's increasing struggle to reconcile blackness with manhood. On one hand, Fish clearly finds participation in the white system of law to be somewhat reasonable, and he is witness to the power Tyree holds within the black community as a result of his corrupt dealings with the police. On the other hand, this participation also shapes black men into lesser citizens, undeserving of equality and lacking the freedom to act on their own desires, thus making the black masculinity performed by men like Tyree into an emasculating performance instead. Fish refuses to choose between the options of "crying and grinning," and thus realizes that "he could not be a man before the white folks and he could not be a man before his father," as the freedom he desires is accommodated by neither "side's" definition of black masculinity (146).

Tyree himself articulates this dilemma, remarking that "a black man's a dream, son, a dream that can't come true" (79). Yet while Tyree himself believes that the way he lives his life—the acceptance of and participation in the status quo—is what makes him as much of a man as he can be, this ideology does not match Fish's own aims to move outside of the oppressive social structure in which he finds himself. In fact, Fish sees Tyree's participation in laws that perpetuate his own subordination to white men to be emasculating instead. As Fish notes, "Tyree not only violated the law, but violated the law with the law's *permission*"—a trick that baffles Fish, yet also points to the way Tyree does not truly fight the system or transcend the "hopelessness" that Fish dreads.<sup>50</sup> Thus, until Tyree's death, Fish sees his father as emasculated and weak—leading him to disavow Tyree's patriarchal and paternal influence over him

altogether. In the aftermath of Chris Sims' lynching, for instance, Fish reflects that as he "discovered how brutal the white world could be, he had also discovered that he had no father," and:

it made him weep ...for his father's fear and weakness, for the trembling he hid behind false laughter, for the self-abrogation of his manhood. He knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration; Tyree was already castrated (144).

Within the Oedipal idiom in which Wright has situated Fish and his family, Tyree's symbolic castration has paved the way for Fish to take over as the masculine head of the business and the family, though Fish realizes he does not want to follow directly in his father's footsteps. Significantly, it is not until Tyree is violently murdered at the hands of white law enforcement enmeshed in corruption that Fish can find any admirable manhood in Tyree, admitting to his father's girlfriend Gloria that Tyree "went like a man," not because he fought back, but because he died violently; in Fish's eyes, Tyree's violent end, as a contrast to his otherwise submissive life, serves as a type of re-establishment of his manhood. (311).

After Tyree's murder, Fish is jolted out of his complacency; he no longer seeks to work within the white law that oppresses him or survive by submission like Tyree, but actively rebels against this corrupt system. His goal is to bring to light the corruption of Officer Cantley, a member of the police who accepted bribes from Tyree, by handing over a series of cancelled checks that would prove his guilt. These checks are intercepted by one of Cantley's cohorts, however, and Fish himself is severely and disturbingly punished for his act of rebellion in a climactic scene that displays the unequal distribution of legal justice, and the role of white law in perpetually inhibiting a black man's sexuality and masculinity. Fish awakens from sleep one

night to find a young white woman at his door who claims to have been sent to him by Maude Williams, the owner of the local brothel. However, Fish immediately (and correctly) suspects a trap, soon realizing that the girl “had been ‘planted’ on him” in order to frame him for false rape charges (348). This demonstrates that Fish, as a black man, is not only denied the protection of the law, but also that he is perceived to be inherently criminal and violent by nature of his black masculinity—white society is quick to accept the fact that Fish, simply because of his race, is entirely capable of committing the act of which he has been falsely accused.

All of his fears that have been building since the lynching of Chris Sims, then, seem to him confirmed, as he is sure that an angry white mob will undoubtedly lynch him in the face of this accusation; the full impact of his condition as inferior in the eyes of white culture seem fully realized. Though he is not lynched, he is jailed for a year—an act of injustice that he rightly blames on the institutional forces of racism that have put him there, as well as the complicity of his own ancestors in that system, who have continued to pander to the expectations of white patriarchy. “My papa, my papa’s papa, and my papa’s papa’s papa, look what you done to me!” he seethes—his acknowledgement here exhibiting a departure from Cross Damon’s refusal to acknowledge the way his past has conditioned his present (346). Fish feels that because of his racial history, “there was some quality of character that the conditions under which he lived had failed to give him” and “there was no clearly defined, redeeming future toward which he could now look with longing. He had only the flat and pallid present” (356). In other words, he feels that his goal—to freely construct his masculinity that does not exist under the thumb of white racist institutions—is hampered by decades of work by white society to make “masculinity” itself a purely white privilege.<sup>51</sup>

At this point, Wright suddenly seems to be at a loss for what to do with his protagonist. This grim conclusion on Fish's part and the seeming triumph of racism leaves Fish little room to remake his masculine identity in the Southern community of his upbringing. And so, Wright affords Fish Tucker the opportunity that he did not ultimately allow Cross Damon—the ability to successfully escape his past life. After serving time for his false rape charge, Fish concludes that while he has been attempting to create for himself an identity as a free American man, America has only provided him with a “nightmare” and the promise of more violence; for these reasons, he decides to quietly leave for France after his release from jail. Upon boarding the plane, Fish finally experiences a slow release from his sense of conflict, both internal and external. Already he envisions a life in which race is no longer the hindrance it was, but instead sees

the bud of a new possible life that was pressing ardently but timidly against the shell of the old to shatter it and be free... it was a free gesture of faith welling up out of a yearning to be at last somewhere at home...He was now voluntarily longing to pledge allegiance to a world whose brutal might could never compel him to love it with threats of death. (383)

Yet while Fish himself is hopeful, the message this act sends—that the only way to craft a liberated masculine identity as a black man is to leave America altogether—is a rather hopeless one. By leaving America, Fish might escape the oppression and violence he has faced since childhood, but in doing so, he does not solve his conflict, but merely abandons it. While on the surface, the ending to Fish's narrative seems more optimistic in tone than that of Cross in *The Outsider*, the fact remains that here, too, existential freedom and possibilities for personal transcendence remain, for him, unavailable under the American institution of racist oppression.

In *The Outsider*, Wright claims that “the world of most men is given to them by their culture, and, in choosing to make his own world, Cross had chosen to do that which was more daringly dangerous than he had thought” (196). Both Cross and Fishbelly face the danger of working to liberate themselves from their perceived threats, and both employ violence as either a form of momentum, a coping mechanism, or a lens with which to understand the world around them. However, neither is able to reshape his own American masculine identity with violence as its main impulse. For both protagonists, to be a man means to somehow step outside of society and its systemized racial and sexual oppression, though the experiences of violence that inform these attempts only work to further confuse or threaten their masculine projects. While neither novel offers a tidy solution (to do so would be to misrepresent the cultural struggle at the time), both provide the reader with a better understanding of the limitations of constructing masculinity within an existential framework in which race is a central factor—limitations that become particularly evident when so-called liberatory violence becomes the primary mechanism for doing so. As Kingsley Widener notes, “Existential awareness, we are reminded by Wright, provides an extreme exploration into truth but no mythos to live by...To attempt to be outside reveals black truths about those inside but is no sufficient escape from them” (180). Thus, in another sense, these novels reveal to us the difference between escape and liberation, a subtle but significant distinction that will be explored into the 1960s by Norman Mailer in his controversial work *An American Dream*.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Violent Liberation and Racialized Masculinities: Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" and *An American Dream***

"Being a man is the continuing battle of one's life, and one loses a bit of manhood with every stale compromise to the authority of any power which one does not believe." —Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*<sup>62</sup>

In *Advertisements for Myself*, his 1959 collection of excerpts and commentary, Norman Mailer pauses to meditate on Ernest Hemingway's influence on his own work. While he admits to a deep-seated admiration for his literary predecessor and acknowledges that Hemingway "did a lot of things which very few of us could do," Mailer also believes that the author "pretended to be ignorant of the notion that it is not enough to feel like a man, one must try to think like a man as well" (20). While it is tempting to take issue with this assessment of Hemingway, the statement's significance to a study of Mailer's work lies not necessarily in its accuracy but in its purpose, for in expressing this concern, Mailer implies that he, by contrast, will *not* neglect this point. And Mailer does, in fact, spend much of his literary career exploring what it means to "think like a man," his assertions on this point often dividing his critics and readers. While the controversy and criticism surrounding Mailer's gender politics is sometimes understandable, Mailer's body of work, particularly the fiction and nonfiction published in the 1950s and 1960s, nevertheless offers significant insight into prevalent issues of gendered identity and conflict in American culture at the time. That is, Mailer's representation of masculinity is controversial in that its reliance on various modes of violence—from interpersonal to misogynistic to political—threatens to reify many of the oppressive social structures that Mailer and his protagonists find so restrictive. Yet what is often overlooked in Mailer's work is the ambiguity and complexity surrounding this intersection of violence and gender. In this chapter, I aim to illuminate the ways



that Mailer's representations of masculinity paradoxically reinforce the oppressions he seeks to overturn through his protagonists' rebellions, as well as the moments when Mailer himself interrogates these violences and their roles in shaping gender identity.

Mailer's meditations on masculinity revolve around an existential anxiety in the midst of what he continually refers to as a cancerous or decaying society. His existential theory draws on the tenets of French existentialism, his early work suggesting that the major similarities between his definition of existentialism and that of Beauvoir and Sartre lie within two particular tenets: his view of individual liberation as a step towards transcendence, and the importance of the role of an Other in that project.<sup>53</sup> As I have noted in preceding chapters, Beauvoir frames the main dilemma of femininity within existentialist notions of transcendence versus immanence: the plight of woman has historically been based in immanence, with woman perceived as the inessential and defined by the masculine characteristics that she lacks.<sup>54</sup> Beauvoir's work is designed in part to make a case for the existential freedom of woman, and as she explains, the path to this freedom is attained by continually working toward transcendence, "through a continual reaching out toward other liberties" to create a new system of values (64). Additionally, part of coming to terms with one's existential situation, according to both Beauvoir and Sartre, involves understanding one's self in relation to an Other; Beauvoir writes, for example, that man "attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself" (147).<sup>55</sup> Although in Beauvoir's discussion of women this Other is often defined as man, she also uses the concept of otherness to draw comparative connections to blacks and Jews, thus highlighting the similarities and intersections between gendered and racial oppression in America that Mailer will take up in his own work.

These existential themes are central to “The White Negro” (1957) and *An American Dream* (1965), two works that I believe demonstrate most explicitly the connections between existentialism, violence, and masculinity that pervade Mailer’s oeuvre. In these pieces, Mailer fashions protagonists who articulate a sense of entrapment within a stagnant situation often described as one of decay, which Mailer depicts as arising from an increasingly totalitarian society that enforces conformity—a scenario that parallels the existential concept of immanence discussed by Beauvoir and Sartre. The protagonists’ repeated references to an escape from this conformity also invokes Sartre and Beauvoir’s explications of transcendence, as both the hypothetical “sexual outlaw” of Mailer’s creative nonfiction essay “The White Negro” and the morally ambiguous Stephen Rojack of *An American Dream* work to fashion a masculine identity that defies the conformity that might threaten their masculine potency. Thus, in these texts, I would suggest that Mailer, though often maligned as a reactionary, anti-feminist writer, adopts a project similar to that of Beauvoir in his examination of masculinity as an existential journey from immanence to transcendence. In Mailer’s language, man’s immanence is associated with totalitarian cultural oppression, and the direction of man’s ultimate quest is toward a transcendent liberty that allows one to move outside of this oppressive culture and define oneself as an “outlaw.”

Furthermore, much of Mailer’s conception of existential masculinity in “The White Negro” and *An American Dream* is based on a masculine protagonist’s anxiety over being defined by what he lacks, a theme augmented by Mailer’s fixation on an “other” as an integral factor in the construction of a liberated masculine identity. Echoing Beauvoir’s comparisons between blacks, Jews, and women in America, Mailer’s constructions of both the “white negro” persona and the character of Stephen Rojack are founded on a simultaneous tension and

identification with a racial or female other. That is, each protagonist sees some of himself in these others, yet also fears that this other will somehow threaten his own masculine power or authority. Thus, the masculine identity of each character comes to rely on either an approximation of the other's identity or a complete eradication of the other's threat.

In some ways, however, Mailer's existentialism is as interesting for its differences to Beauvoir and Sartre as it is for its similarities. For example, his own conception of existentialism is grounded more in mysticism and instinct than in the explicit principles of either Sartre or Beauvoir. "To be an existentialist," Mailer writes in "The White Negro," "one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one's desires, one's rages, one's anguish" (341). Additionally, Mailer's existentialism is much more concerned with a Manichean vision of the world; that is, Mailer reads existentialism as a battle not simply between immanence and transcendence, but between good and evil. He believes that to be a "real" existentialist, one must "be religious" and have a sense of purpose that is grounded in an awareness of heaven and hell (a "meaningful but mysterious end"), a point that (as he himself admits) runs contrary to Sartre's own atheistic existentialism.<sup>56</sup> In sum, Mailer draws on many fundamentals of existential theory put forth by some of the principle existential theorists, but also makes clear that these theories diverge from his own understanding of existentialism. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, for example, Mailer states his suspicion that Sartre and Heidegger "are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world" for "the new continent which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered" (CC 252). For Mailer, these "psychic maps" include a more embattled vision of existential philosophy that includes references to God and the devil, as well an investment in the possibility of magic and mysticism.

Despite Mailer's esoteric interpretation of the philosophy of existentialism, the similarities between his own existential premises and those of the French existentialists from whose work he borrows become apparent in his discussion of existential violence. These parallels are particularly evident when one compares Mailer's ideology to that of Sartre, as both perceive interpersonal and political violence to be imbued with positively charged revolutionary and liberatory qualities. In his famous preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, for instance, Sartre argues that "at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force" that has the potential to raise people up from oppression and subordination (Fanon 51). In Sartre's estimation, then, violence contains within it a redeeming power.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Mailer views individual violence as a tool that can liberate men from the totalitarian oppression that threatens them, and that can thus serve as a means to recuperate their compromised masculine identities. In a 1964 interview with W.J. Weatherby for *Twentieth Century*, for instance, Mailer argues that individual violence is an essential response to a possible "extinction of possibilities" presented to us by our environment (28). He further argues that those who lack an understanding of existential experience do not understand the complexities of violence, but for those who do harbor this understanding, violence can offer not only liberation, but revelation. "When violence is larger than one's ability to dominate," he notes, "it is existential and one is living in an instantaneous world of revelations" (*PP* 30). Thus, Mailer presents a vision of a specifically existential violence that has the potential to govern the way one lives and understands the world. Moreover, for Mailer violence not only offers the possibility of cleansing or healing, but also serves as a badge of honor or courage—a longstanding foundational point of his own definition of masculinity.<sup>58</sup>

This assessment of interpersonal violence as ideologically liberating is not without its problems, as I will discuss below; still, it is important to note the instances in works like *An American Dream* where Mailer himself can be seen to struggle with the violent masculine ethic he has created. My own critical intervention on this point comes by way of Benjamin and Arendt's respective critiques of violence as a potential mechanism for aggressively enforcing authority and law, which I believe help to illuminate the complexity and ambivalence within Mailer's idea that existential violence is a necessary marker of American masculinity.<sup>59</sup> On one hand, for example, Mailer and Arendt would likely agree that while at times violence is a necessary tool for justice, certain violences are more often employed as "successful techniques of social control" than social justice, and that in the political sphere, violence often becomes "nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (Arendt 19; 35).<sup>60</sup> That is, Mailer clearly believes in the power of violence, yet like Arendt and Benjamin, he also sees the damage that might be wielded by violence as power, especially as used by governments as a mechanism of totalitarian control. Indeed, though his violent masculinist ethic is controversial and problematic, this kind of critique—and the related ambivalences surrounding the relationship between violence and gender—often go unrecognized in Mailer's fiction, and should be recognized as part of Mailer's own dedication to the dialectical nature of these issues.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, at times Mailer's criticisms cannot erase the fact that he has created protagonists whose actions reify racist and misogynistic ideology. While Mailer does not endorse violence unquestioningly, he does embrace certain kinds of violence as the only way out of the totalitarian society he sees around him. In doing so, he threatens to perpetuate what Arendt refers to as the "instinct of domination" inevitably tied up in violence, re-enacting through his literature new cycles of oppression (36).<sup>62</sup> In other words, Mailer constantly resists (in his

essays and fiction) what Arendt later emphasizes: that violence, when viewed as not merely a means to a just end but as a way of life, results in “impotence” (Arendt 54).<sup>63</sup> Mailer often takes the opposite position, defining violence as an inherent part of masculine identity is a vehicle for transcendence, not immanence or, for that matter, impotence; violence becomes not merely an instrument or individual but also, philosophically, a way of life. The violent episodes in Mailer’s fiction demonstrate that while he attempts to construct an alternative manhood outside of the oppressive society he perceives, he largely continues to participate in the violence of that very society by essentially reenacting on an individual level the violence he condemns on the large scale. As Benjamin has argued,

All violence, seen as a means, is either law-establishing or law-upholding. If it claims neither label, it forgoes, of its own accord, all validity. The consequence, however, is that any kind of violence, seen as a means, participates even in the most favorable case in the problematic nature of law generally. (13)

This problem also applies to Mailer’s tendency to reinstate the kinds of oppression (particularly, against women and black men) that he would theoretically like to eradicate through violent rebellion.

Thus, the violence of his protagonists often participates in the establishment of new “laws” or systems of oppression. Thus, the problem with Mailer’s goal of fashioning a masculine ethic defined by characteristics of an existential outlaw is that while the initial intention of his protagonists might be liberatory and equalizing, and while Mailer explores the consequences of violence perhaps more than he is given credit for, the violent means by which they achieve this serves instead to reestablish oppressive racial and gendered stereotypes, in effect re-submerging the “submerged classes” and individuals that Mailer seeks to liberate (*PP* 345). Moreover, by

way of his protagonists, Mailer emphasizes the need for a consistently violent performance of masculinity, one that asserts itself via violence against these oppressed others. Despite the existential tenets he borrows from Sartre and Beauvoir, Mailer often seems to uphold some of the assumptions about gender that Beauvoir herself tries to undo, as the language of liberation that he invokes ultimately liberates *only* his protagonists. Nevertheless, Mailer does not assert this stance unquestioningly. In light of the embedded criticisms I have also mentioned above, I would argue that Mailer himself questions violence in his own work, particularly in *An American Dream*, exploring the nuances and consequences of this violence nearly as often as he extols it as an essential aspect of masculinity.

# I.

“In America few people will trust you unless you are irreverent; there was a message returned to us by our frontier that the outlaw is worth more than the sheriff.”

--Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (1964)

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that “it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but that which kills” (68). In theorizing here about why social superiority is granted to man over woman, Beauvoir taps into a point that Mailer will fashion into a central tenet of his philosophy of masculinity: the importance of risk-taking and violence in the construction of a powerful, independent identity.<sup>64</sup> Mailer addresses the necessity of risk and an embrace of violence in a number of his novels, interviews, and essays; however, his thoughts on this subject are most extensively laid out in his 1957 essay “The White Negro,” the foundation for much of his later work on this topic. In fact, Philip Buftithis has argued that “each

of Mailer's subsequent protagonists in his novels is emotionally (though not factually) autobiographical and modeled on the hipster delineated in this essay" (59). In "The White Negro," Mailer outlines the "bleak" American social scene against which he is writing, and pits the image of the "Hip" persona in America against that of the "Square."<sup>65</sup> As he had explained earlier in a 1955 column for *The Village Voice*, the "hipster" is the American existentialist who lives in "the undercurrents and underworlds of American life" amongst "the defeated, the isolated, the violent, the tortured, and the warped," and who rejects the totalitarian conformity of American society (*Advertisements* 314). As he then clarifies two years later in "The White Negro," this advocate of the "Hip" philosophy must also decide to "encourage the psychopath" in himself and "explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness" (339).<sup>66</sup>

The idea of the "psychopathic" hipster is, for Mailer, also founded on the idea that violence is a necessary tool for liberation from a conformist society. To encourage the psychopath is to embrace that violence as an inherent part of one's freedom. As Mailer writes,

Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth. (355)

Through this depiction of the hipster, Mailer references the desire for liberty that is expressed by Beauvoir, as well as the possibility of violence as a cleansing force as also posited by Sartre; at this point and under these circumstances—in which civilization is built on "cultureless and alienated bottom of exploitable human material," Mailer finds in violence creative potential and



generative properties. Violence, in fact, is not only presented as essential to liberation from conformity, but in a nod to Girard's theory of sacrifice, also appears to be a way to eradicate or at least diminish violence.<sup>67</sup> As Mailer writes, "the psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love, his being is frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice" (347). In addition to being a means to a more positive end, violence is represented by Mailer as a cathartic outlet here as well.

Furthermore, this violence is decidedly "masculine" in Mailer's view, as is the figure of the hipster itself. That is, existential freedom via the psychopathy of the Hip is an integral part of Mailer's philosophy of masculinity at this time, and relatedly it seems to be inclusive of men only—Mailer himself calls his work a "masculine argument," one that should be differentiated from that of the "mystic," which even Beauvoir notes is often associated with the feminine. In fact, to "goof," as he says, or lose control is to "reveal the buried weaker more feminine part of your nature" (351). As Mailer falls back on this simplified dichotomy of gender (which Beauvoir herself exposes), we can observe a seed of the problems that will arise from the built-in exclusivity of a philosophy that initially intends to ground itself in a theory of liberation, as Mailer's liberatory aims are refined to one gender.

Another central focus of "The White Negro"—and the central focus of the essay's controversy, for the most part—lies in Mailer's racialization of the hipster, which also contributes to the hypermasculinity of the "white negro" persona and later makes its way into Mailer's philosophy of masculinity in *An American Dream*. In his vision of the liberated individual, Mailer imagines a hypothetical man of the future who would appropriate the position of the marginalized American black man. This element of Mailer's theory is founded on his

belief that the black man exists in a type of liminal space in America, as “he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries” (340). Because Mailer sees the black man in America through the lens of the stereotype perpetuated at the time—a hyper-sexualized, violent, criminalized figure—he views this figure to be an ideal representative of the sexual and moral outlaw he envisions, a man “forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or morbid or self-destructive or corrupt” (348). According to Mailer, this hyper-sexualized hipster is searching for an “apocalyptic orgasm” which will free him from social constriction and allow him to be the signifier of a new era in which rebellion will replace the conformity that Mailer sees as more destructive even than violence. Thus, for the black man (and the white man who, in Mailer’s theory, would model himself after the mythicized qualities of this black man on the margins), sex becomes the force behind one’s individual power. For Mailer, then, an identity that embraces the kind of regenerative violence he envisions is also one that embraces rather than suppresses sexuality.<sup>68</sup>

The reliance on individual acts of violence to formulate a masculine identity that is liberated from an oppressive society becomes immediately and perhaps obviously problematic. Though Mailer would later address the consequences of interpersonal violence more fully, his comments at this period of his career are much more extreme, so much so as to seem almost sensationalist.<sup>69</sup> In his earlier *Village Voice* essay, for example, Mailer asserts that “to a Square, a rapist is a rapist...But a hipster knows that the act of rape is a part of life too, and that even in the most brutal and unforgivable rape, there is artistry or the lack of it...and so no two rapists nor no two rapes are ever the same” (314). This suggestion that there are acceptable or “artistic” kinds of rape threatens to do irreparable damage to Mailer’s theory by way of its moral

relativism and apparent embrace of sexual violence. Indeed, the Hip “morality,” which Mailer defines as “to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible sounds suspiciously like amorality (354).<sup>70</sup> Further, the assertion that rape “is a part of life” points to an inherent problem with Mailer’s theory of violence that is later articulated by Hannah Arendt. In Arendt’s view, when one tries to find in violence a “method for living and acting,” it becomes “irrational,” yet for Mailer, the idea that violence not only *is* a method for living, but that it actually *must* be so is a foundational tenet of his notion of liberated masculine identity (Arendt 66). Its irrationality, however, arises from the fact that Mailer equates an act that victimizes another with an act of growth and liberation, as he attempts to make violence an inherent part of freedom. While Mailer’s hipster might achieve a sense of freedom and catharsis from this act, it nevertheless comes at the expense of another whose freedom is suspended as a result.

Yet one need not only look ahead to Arendt to question Mailer’s philosophy of masculinity here. In its winter 1958 issue, *Dissent* published a dialogue entitled “Reflections on Hipsterism,” which served largely as a response to Mailer’s essay (which had been published by the magazine the previous year). In this response, French novelist Jean Malaquais (one of Mailer’s mentors) argues that the hipsters so lauded by Mailer are not exceptional revolutionaries; rather, their final act is to contribute to the kind of conformity they originally intended to overthrow. “The remarkable thing about hipsters of all kinds and variety,” he states, “is that, except for a case or two in a generation, as a body they are sooner or later swallowed up by the most conforming routine ever. Hip is but another name for lumpen, and lumpen make excellent conformists and the best of potential hangmen for ‘order’s’ sake” (*Advertisements* 360). While Malaquais’s comments here pertain to the hipster figure, I believe that they are particularly indicative of the problem with Mailer’s advocacy of violence as well, particularly

as Malaquais's remarks echo Benjamin's criticisms of violence as a contributor to the cyclical process of law-making, where violence "continues until either new violences or those previously suppressed triumphed over those that have underpinned the law hitherto, thus establishing a new law destined to decline in its turn" (27). In other words, the behavior of the hipster that Mailer believes stands for disorder threatens to contribute to the authoritative order he desires to undo, as his advocacy of individual violence actually feeds a social cycle already in place.

Mailer's racialization of the hipster also creates a set of problems that anticipate similar issues in *An American Dream*. The most obvious of these is that by imagining an ideal masculine figure who lives by what he calls a "black man's code," Mailer risks upholding racist stereotypes of the heightened sexuality and criminality often attributed to blackness. In his own contribution to the *Dissent* forum, Ned Polsky argues that the humanity of the American black man is not fully acknowledged in Mailer's theory; rather, this figure is seen only as "the bringer of a highly specified and restricted 'cultural dowry'" through which Mailer fashions an "inverted form" of racial oppression (369). James Baldwin also responded to this problem in his 1961 *Esquire* article, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy." There, Baldwin acknowledges that, as a black man, oppression has shaped his worldview—and that perhaps, as Mailer puts it, that he "knows more about the ugliness and danger of life than the white" (*Advertisements* 356). "It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol," Baldwin admits, "which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. The relationship, therefore, of a black boy to a white boy is a very complex thing" (Baldwin 270). It is this complexity that Baldwin feels Mailer does not quite do justice, "for exactly because he knew better... Norman felt compelled to carry their *mystique* further...and since this *mystique* depended on a total rejection of life, and insisted on the

fulfillment of an infantile dream of love, the *mystique* could only be extended into violence” (277). In other words, Baldwin accuses Mailer of perpetuating the myths that govern social assumptions about black masculinity, thus creating the “mystique” around the figure of the black man that further contributes to his otherness.<sup>71</sup> In this way, Mailer perpetuates the kind of oppressive othering that Beauvoir criticizes; he becomes the Other who “limits and denies” as he mythicizes the black man into a category outside of rational, normative behavior and in doing so, removes some of his agency (Beauvoir 147).<sup>72</sup>

Yet at the same time, I believe it is important to remember here these are the very kinds of assumptions and stereotypes that Mailer himself was initially trying to eradicate via his essay. As he stated forthrightly in one of his *Village Voice* columns in 1956, “My passion... is to destroy stereotypes, categories, and labels” (*Advertisements* 310). Moreover, as he explained in *Dissent* in 1958, the “real desire” of the masculine figure he introduces in “The White Negro” is to “make a better world, one in which individual violence would “still spare us the collective violence of rational totalitarian liquidations” and “open the possibility of working with that human creativity which is violence’s opposite” (363). The final vision Mailer holds, then, is in fact one of “love” and “justice,” in which all men are freed from their respective oppressions by the violence of the individual which serves as a preventative measure. Thus, the figure of the “white negro” hipster, modeled on Mailer’s misguided perceptions of blackness, is meant to represent the man of the future: Mailer foresees not only the ability for the black man to “win his equality” but also envisions that “he will possess a potential superiority” that will change the face of psychology, politics, and culture at large. The problem is, however, the underlying contradiction in Mailer’s hypothesis that “a time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion will then be likely to replace the time of conformity” (356). This celebration of

violence and its rationale—that violence can eventually create “violence’s opposite”—brings with it all of the aforementioned problems that make its justification so difficult. It is only later, in *An American Dream*, that Mailer truly begins to interrogate these difficulties as he experiments with the ideology of violence in a fictional setting.

This problematic interpretation of violence as a marker of both masculine power and individual freedom remains central to much of Mailer’s writing during the 1960s, and during that time Mailer continued to revise and reshape his evolving views on the role of this phenomenon. For example, in an “Impolite Interview” with Mailer for *The Realist* in 1962, Paul Krassner notes that in *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer’s first novel, there exists “a theme about the futility of violence on a grand scale,” while in “The White Negro,” there is instead “almost a justification of violence, at least on a personal level.” When asked to account for this inconsistency, Mailer replies:

The ideas I had about violence changed 180 degrees over those years. Beneath the ideology in *The Naked and the Dead* was an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people. Ideologically, intellectually, I did disapprove of violence, though I didn’t at the time of “The White Negro.” But what I still disapprove of is *inhuman* violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract. I disapprove of bombing a city. I disapprove of the kind of man who will derive aesthetic satisfaction from the fact that an Ethiopian village looks like a red rose at the moment the bombs are exploding. (PP 136)

In other words, while Mailer admits that his views on violence have changed, he also notes that even in his earlier novel, there existed a latent admiration for violence. That is, the most significant difference between his views of individual violence in *The Naked and the Dead* and

“The White Negro” seems to be that in the latter essay, his admiration is no longer a secret. Still, what his above remarks also suggest is that *individual* violence has almost always been a characteristic that he has admired and even advocated, believing that it allows one to move outside of the totalitarian structure of society. In terms of the masculine crisis felt by characters like Rojack in *An American Dream*, Mailer also reveals an admiration for individual violence by fashioning it as a badge of masculine honor or courage, and in some cases, a source of creative energy.<sup>73</sup>

Equally important to consider is Mailer’s distinction here between a human and inhuman violence, or between large-scale violence that is either purely “aesthetic” (as in, a mere show of authority or mass power) and an individual violence that is necessary or justified by its revolutionary, liberatory, and creative potential. These differentiations are integral to an understanding of the deployment of violence in *An American Dream*, a novel that certainly still exhibits the “obsession with violence” Mailer himself mentions, as in that novel Mailer traces the development of his protagonist’s masculinity through a series of violent episodes, often condoning and justifying individual violence while rejecting a larger “abstract” violence of society. Stephen Rojack of *An American Dream* exhibits many of the same controversial attributes of the existential “hipster” hero Mailer fashions in “The White Negro,” rendering this novel similarly problematic in its evocation of a masculinist ethic that, in theory, runs counter to the type of freedom characteristic of the “better world” Mailer originally envisions. Yet because Mailer shows much of Rojack’s project of violence to be a failure, he leaves the reader with a series of contradictions that raise important questions about the consequences of an individual violence that manifests as both liberating and oppressive.

## II.

*An American Dream*, Mailer's self-proclaimed "modern myth," demonstrates perhaps most explicitly the connections between his oft-misunderstood philosophies of violence and masculinity, and thus serves as an ideal place in which to locate a discussion of these themes ("Mailer on *AAD*" 102).<sup>74</sup> The nuanced distinction between destructive and creative violence comprise a central theme of the novel, and despite Mailer's own assertion that "sentence for sentence *An American Dream* is one of the better written books in the language," upon its publication many readers and critics found it difficult to come to grips with the unsettling events of the novel that surround this theme—not to mention its morally ambiguous anti-hero ("Norman Mailer" 5). As a result, many have overlooked the novel's complexities, instead offering a denunciation of its violence.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, in recent years, surprisingly few scholars have embarked upon an in-depth critical study of the violence that pervades the novel and aside from a few notable exceptions, most contemporary studies have tended toward a reiteration of some of the early reductive criticisms of the novel's violence as either wholly misogynistic, unpunished within the narrative, or unquestioned by Mailer himself.<sup>76</sup> While it is important to question the nature of violence in *An American Dream*, I believe it is also important to consider this violence as a literary device that facilitates Mailer's promulgation of existentialist thought and his implicit analysis of social oppression and gendered relationships. That is, while I would argue that the representation of violence in the novel can be problematic in that it often reasserts the very oppressions Mailer seeks to overturn, this consequence does not translate to an indiscriminate glorification of a violent masculine ethic or a triumph of what Algis Valiunas has called "the psychic benefits of wife killing." More importantly, the repercussions of violence are not lost on



Mailer himself, as is evident in the acknowledged consequences of associating violence with a liberated masculinity, which are embedded in the narrative itself.

*An American Dream* traces the personal journey of Stephen Rojack—war hero, established professor of existential philosophy, commercially successful author, and well-known television personality—as he finds himself, as he says, at “the end of a very long street,” having decided that he is “finally a failure” (8). When we are first introduced to Rojack, he is at a friend’s party, drunk, standing on the edge of a high-rise balcony, contemplating suicide and talking to the moon, which he believes is ordering him to jump to his death. At this moment, he looks inside himself to find only “rotting nerve” (a reference to Mailer’s fixation on the sickness of modern society, which he deems “cancer gulch”), and this is in a sense his tipping point; Rojack admits that “this is the moment when it all began,” a statement which rings true for the structure of the novel as well, for it is following his conversation with the moon that the events of his life begin to spiral out of control.

As the narrative unfolds, Rojack embarks on an alcohol-soaked, sleepless, violent, and sex-filled bender, with some of his behavior calling to mind that triumphed by Mailer in “The White Negro.” Though Nigel Leigh has argued that “Rojack is not heroic in the style of the white negro” but is “merely an uprooted, deracinated and alienated self,” I would argue that Rojack does, in fact, seem at the very least dedicated to chasing the identity of the hipster Mailer imagines in his earlier essay (89). Like that figure, Rojack acts on a desire for total freedom from the “decaying” society he envisions around him, and with each social taboo he breaks, he feels himself more detached from the world he sees as oppressive to his individual freedom and the development of his masculine identity. The latent tensions present in the structure of “The White Negro” also manifest themselves in *An American Dream*, as the progression of the novel

makes clear that Rojack's actions are also *reactionary*; that is, the events of the novel demonstrate that Rojack feels his masculinity to be undermined by gendered and racial Others, thus imbuing his violent assertions of physical power with a defensive impetus. His headlong rush into an exhilarating life on the margins is inspired not only by a desire for freedom, but a desire to reclaim the kind of masculine power he feels to be lacking in the face of these threats.

Stephen Rojack's existential crisis is almost immediately introduced within a framework of violence—first amidst Rojack's self-comparison to JFK, who is represented in the text as the embodiment of the quintessential American hero.<sup>77</sup> Rojack notes that while both he and Kennedy faced violence and death during the war, Kennedy was able to remain a functioning member of society, while he himself became “lost in a private kaleidoscope of death” and obsessed with the image of the last German soldier he shot (7). At the onset of the narrative, then, Rojack has already confessed to a psychological preoccupation with death and violence, and has separated himself from men like Kennedy by nature of the fact that, in his mind at least, violence and death have become more entrenched in his psyche, and serve as the primary way he understands himself and the world around him. Thus, Rojack feels he is balanced on the edge of two lives: in one, he himself remains the upstanding citizen who operates by society's standards, and in the other, he exists as a man whose obsessions with death offer him greater insight into the “cancer” of society, and who is bent on escaping the decay of social conformity.

Rojack's desire to cast off the restraints he sees as evidence of this social decline almost immediately take the form of one of society's greatest crimes, as he murders his wife within the first thirty pages of the novel. Yet in this brief time, it also becomes evident that tied up in this murder are Rojack's conflicting perceptions of what it means to be a man. In fact, he seems able

to discuss manhood *only* through the language of violence. For example, prior to the murder, he reflects:

Murder, after all, has exhilaration within it...there is something manly about containing your rage, it is so difficult, it is like carrying a two-hundred-pound safe up a cast iron hill. The exhilaration comes I suppose from possessing such strength.

Besides, murder offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unsexual (8).

Thus, to be “manly” *inside* society, according to Rojack, is to repress one’s instincts toward violence; to be manly *outside* of society is to embrace these instincts. In either case, violence becomes the figure around which masculinity is fashioned, but it is the latter that Rojack wants to embody: a masculine identity founded on relief as opposed to restraint. Further, in being “never unsexual,” murder is also associated with a virility and sexual freedom that is often denied by a repressive or “cancerous” society. By making these associations, Rojack depicts violence as a catalyst for greater freedom, and in turn foreshadows his own attempts to liberate himself from society’s constricting definitions of manhood. Of course, the fact that his actions leave a trail of destruction in his wake forces one to question whether or not Rojack’s mission is truly in the interest of healing the “cancer” of society, as would be suggested by his adherence to tenets of Mailer’s theory of Hip, or whether his purpose is entirely self-interested—questions that Mailer acknowledges and takes up sporadically throughout the novel. Yet while it is important to note the consequences of Rojack’s masculinist philosophy, the process of doing so will also help us to consider the way a study of this violence can be instructive, in that it highlights Mailer’s own struggle to articulate an existential philosophy that would both embrace violence and acknowledge the victims of that violence.

At the center of Rojack's existential crisis, and his ensuing reliance on violence as a tool for liberation, is his relationship with his wife Deborah, the woman who has helped him fashion his current life and who represents one of the many external threats to his manhood. Though Rojack looks back on the early years of their marriage with nostalgia, remembering Deborah's love for him as something that imbues him with "vitality," he also fears this power she wields over him; when they separate, for example, Rojack admits, "all of my substance fell out of me" (18). As a reaction to this, and in a move indicative of his attitude toward women throughout the novel, Rojack attributes Deborah's potency (and his sense of anxiety in the face of this) to some feminine mysticism that would supposedly afford her the ability to "lay a curse" on him should she choose to do so (22). Her power, then, is reduced to one of the stereotypes Beauvoir criticizes in the *Second Sex*, that "woman is related to *nature*, she incarnates it...she can hold the keys to *poetry*; she can be *mediatrix* between this world and beyond" (Beauvoir 262). By being cast in this role, Beauvoir notes, woman "is doomed to *immanence*" (262). In relegating Deborah to this category, Rojack threatens to hold over women the kind of oppression he actually seeks to remedy.

Yet Rojack's depiction of Deborah seems to serve two purposes here. On the one hand, it is an attempt to prematurely excuse his own behavior toward her, with his depiction of her as a "Great Bitch" who "delivers extermination to any bucko brave enough to take carnal knowledge of her" serving as an insistence that he is somehow justified in defending himself against her cruelties (9). On the other hand, this depiction of Deborah also serves to bring to light the fact that Rojack's own sense of compromised masculinity and his use of violence is not entirely a result of his fear of women (though that does come into play), but also a result of his reliance on the hierarchical and limiting class structures of society that seem to dictate the status of his

manhood. That is, his sense of inferiority in the face of his wife is augmented by his awareness that his success has largely been a result of her social connections; often, Rojack senses that Deborah herself is his greatest “achievement.” “She had been my entry into the big league,” he explains. “I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut” (17). His love for her, then, is based on her ability to build him up, to support him, and to feed his ego by introducing him into the upper echelons of society—and it is society that is meant to be feels to be his true enemy. In other words, Mailer’s aim here is not to fashion a masculine hero whose primary aim is to exert control over Deborah—or over women in general—but one whose aim is to free himself from the socially imposed obligation to abide by any socially imposed hierarchy at all.

This goal is limited by the fact that Rojack’s desire for social liberation and existential freedom is often framed in terms of a purely masculine crisis in the novel, with the result that the freedom of others is rendered invisible. As Rojack begins to come to terms with the nature of his relationship with Deborah, his awareness directly impacts his sense of masculinity, particularly when he acknowledges that the wealth he has achieved with Deborah’s aid has not increased his sense of power but has instead “become the manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of my force” (18). This connection between Rojack’s self-doubt and the state of his masculinity calls to mind some of Beauvoir’s central points that further invite an application of her existential theory of gender. “My personality was built upon a void,” he says (7), invoking the language of absence Beauvoir uses to characterize the situation of the woman who is identified by what she is not, who is merely “the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself” (Beauvoir 196). Likewise, Rojack appears able to see himself only

through Deborah, and in his realization of such fears being trapped in what Beauvoir would herself call an immanent situation, relegated to a certain social role that Rojack believes to have been fashioned for him by a gendered other.

Unlike Beauvoir, however, Rojack's solution to the problem he perceives is to destroy what makes him feel this lack, and he thus fashions Deborah into a threat and a rival for power, rather than a partner. Again, Rojack articulates this newly realized tension in their relationship through the language of violence, and in doing so attempts to reclaim violence as a marker of masculinity. Living with Deborah, for example, Rojack admits he was "murderous" (9), but also acknowledges that Deborah herself "was not incapable of murdering" him herself (25). In reaction to this threat, Rojack murders Deborah within the first thirty pages of the novel. Though Rojack and Deborah have been separated for some time, Rojack, still in a drunken haze, calls Deborah following his episode on the balcony, and she invites him over. Though their initial contact is civil, they begin to engage in an increasingly tense banter, the atmosphere developing into what Rojack describes as "that heavy air one breathes in the hours before a hurricane" (25). Deborah informs Rojack matter-of-factly that she wants a divorce, and that she no longer loves him, but it is when she begins to reference the many lovers she has had during their separation that Rojack finally resorts to physical violence, slapping her across the face. Deborah immediately fights back, and Rojack's physical impulses consume him; he is aware in the moment that his body is working faster than his brain, and ultimately, in little more than a page, he has strangled and killed her.

While such violence would seem to be purely misogynistic, its complexities play out in the specific details of the murder. Initially, the brief description of Rojack's murder of Deborah is saturated with details that highlight Mailer's belief in the liberating and cathartic power of

violence. The fact that this comes not only at the expense of Deborah's freedom but her life, of course, makes this justification of violence in the name of freedom difficult to digest: in stark, visceral and grotesque detail and in crisp, straightforward prose, Mailer recounts the way Rojack "struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat" (30). These disturbingly dispassionate details are juxtaposed with Rojack's own reflection on his actions as he carries them out, as his insights are presented in terms of a "crossing over" that invokes a metaphor of transcendence and suggests an emergence into a new and better existence. For example, in the midst of the murder itself, time appears to slow down as Rojack reflects on the details and sensations elicited by what is occurring:

I released the pressure on her throat, and the door I had been opening began to close. But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk, and I thrust against the door once more and hardly felt her hand leave my shoulder...I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well...I was floating (31).

Here Rojack's reaction seems counterintuitive: while we might expect strangulation to invoke images of closure in death, it is only when he releases the pressure on Deborah's throat that the metaphorical "door" begins to close. For this reason, Rojack is driven to continue by the promise of some beauty—images of "jeweled cities" and a "tropical dusk"—that exist beyond this door and seem to represent recompense for his actions upon their completion. This vision of a remunerative paradise is supplemented by Rojack's sense that all of his hatred and illness depart upon his passage through the door—in fact, the language suggests that Rojack is describing his

*own* death experience, rather than that of Deborah. Rojack's metaphorical death is followed closely by his metaphorical rebirth, for after he commits the murder, he feels that he sees the world with new eyes. Every detail is fascinating, clear, and fresh, almost euphoric, even down to the most ordinary routine of washing his hands and dressing himself, reflecting on the specific details of the process as though he is performing it for the first time.

On the one hand, this description is powerfully disconcerting, since Rojack appears to resume his daily routine without difficulty; everything he does is presented as mundane in the face of what seems a so decidedly abnormal act. The exhaustive description that works to create a vision of the simplest objects—a bar of soap, a necktie—also works to re-humanize Rojack, as the familiarity of his actions invites identification, and his first person account is told in a tone of almost innocent obliviousness. By subverting the horrific detail and foregrounding the strange and unpredictable sensations experienced by his protagonist, Mailer attempts to subvert the corrupt nature of murder, representing it instead as an escape from social corruption. In this way, he fashions Rojack into a character reminiscent of the “the white negro” who, as Mailer indicates in that earlier essay, has “faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth” (355). Whereas before the murder, Rojack claims he had “lost his sense of being alive” (14), in the aftermath, he says, “my hair was alive and my eyes had the blue of a mirror held between the ocean and the sky. I was feeling good, as if my life had just begun” (38-39).<sup>78</sup>

Thus the aftermath of the murder, despite its focus on creativity and transcendence, is as disconcerting as the murder itself, since Rojack appears to resume his routine without difficulty or guilt; everything he does is presented as mundane in the face of what seems a so decidedly abnormal and horrifying an act. Yet this, I would argue, is precisely the effect that Mailer wants



to create. In other words, Mailer does not diminish the horrifying nature of murder itself or hold it up to be universally glorified; instead, he uses the unsettling juxtaposition between the details of Deborah's murder and Rojack's spiritual rebirth to demonstrate that violence cannot be wholly triumphant. Rather, it is part of Rojack's ongoing battle between good and evil, and between destruction and creation. Mailer may create a protagonist who believes that murder is necessary—even creative—but it does not follow that he imagines violence to be without consequences or that *An American Dream* is “an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after” as Kate Millett has argued (15).

This becomes particularly evident during Rojack's encounter with Deborah's live-in housekeeper Ruta. The scenes between Rojack and Ruta highlight a number of important points that speak to the nature of Rojack's murder of Deborah, and also foreshadow certain consequences. Firstly, his encounter with Ruta demonstrates that his sense of rebirth and renewal is not permanent, and that the murder has not truly solved anything. In the aftermath of the satisfaction and “honorable fatigue” he feels following this act of violence, Rojack continues to chase that catharsis and joy he felt so briefly. Sensing that “something fierce for pleasure was loose,” he walks in on Deborah's housekeeper Ruta while she is masturbating, and invites himself to join her (41). What ensues is a bizarre interlude during which Rojack, in the midst of sex with Ruta, fixates on the act as representative of the good/evil binary he envisions in the world; that is, he believes sex to be an act of creation or, when reproduction is not the goal (as in the case of sodomy, which he also practices with Ruta), it becomes an act of evil. One is “a raid on the devil,” the other a “trip back to the Lord,” a Manichean representation of sex that typifies Mailer's lifelong view of existentialism as a battle between good and evil—an ideology which pervades both *An American Dream* and “The White Negro (45). Of course, these terms are

relative here: Mailer's good is likely another man's evil. Yet while such personal ideals are controversial, they do point to the fact that Rojack is not meant to be an amoral character; rather, as an extension of Mailer's own philosophy, he believes that any act with creative potential—from sex to violence—can be interpreted as “good.” Thus, the scene with Ruta also demonstrates that Mailer's intention is to depict Rojack in an ongoing battle between good and evil, and between destruction and creation, in which he is constantly vacillating between the two forces and experimenting with actions that may tip the scales in one direction or another.

Moreover, while Rojack is not brought to justice under the law, his actions do not go unquestioned or uncriticized within the construct of the narrative. After the murder, for example, Rojack has not achieved the freedom he seeks—either from Deborah or his attachments to society—a fact revealed in another disturbing moment in the aftermath of the murder. When Rojack finally returns to Deborah's body to consider his plan of action, he finds himself overcome with rage again, fighting “an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again, kill her good this time, kill her right” (50). This violent desire is also accompanied by a strange cannibalistic fantasy in which he and Ruta place Deborah's body in the bathtub and “sup on [her] flesh,” for in this way he feels he might be able to “digest [his] wife's curse before it could form” (50). Thus, despite his initial euphoria, even in her death Deborah exerts an influence over Rojack, diminishing his power and instilling fear within him, as if to prove his impulse toward masculine dominance is destined to be unsuccessful. Tied to gendered stereotypes instilled in him by society, Rojack maintains his belief in a mystical power that Deborah might be able to wield over him from the grave and is therefore not, in fact, entirely free from his gendered anxiety. As Nigel Leigh notes, while Rojack's murder of Deborah is “a hysterical attempt by the self to get free of the miasma

of social existence,” its results are in fact “far from liberating” as Rojack “in isolation is terrifyingly free, unhinged” (91). Specifically, as Rojack begins to envision the potential consequences of his actions, he realizes that his violent method of freeing himself of his wife may actually be his undoing.

Still, perhaps illuminating his own ambivalence about violence, Mailer continues to show his protagonist Rojack embracing violence even as he recognizes its consequences. In an effort to avoid these consequences, however, he decides to throw Deborah’s body from the bedroom window and blame her death on suicide. Further, in yet another controversial move, after disposing of Deborah’s body, Rojack returns to Ruta to inform her of Deborah’s “suicide,” and they immediately engage in sexual intercourse again, though this time, Rojack imagines that he is firing “one hot fierce streak of fierce bright murder” into Ruta as the final act of his purgative violence (56). And, in doing so, he also believes that he has impregnated Ruta, thus essentially capping off his series of violent acts with one act of creation. This chain of events strongly invokes Mailer’s theory of “Hip” morality and his petition to “encourage the psychopath” in the self, as he envisions destruction as feeding a creative act; specifically, it is reminiscent of his claim that “the psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love” (347). In addition to justifying violence with a final act of supposed creativity, Rojack and, in large part, Mailer, also justify these acts by insisting they will ultimately end in “violence’s opposite” (363). In other words, by traversing the boundaries of morality and blurring the distinctions between life and death, and good and evil, Rojack believes (like the “white negro”) that he will prevent himself from being “frozen with implacable self-hatred.”

Rojack's decision to throw Deborah's body from the window and deem it suicide also advances his journey. It not only marks Rojack's decision to evade the law and define freedom on his own terms, but it allows him to meet Cherry Melanie, who will figure significantly in the ongoing construction of his masculine identity and his struggle to come to terms with the murder he has committed. After encountering Cherry on the street amidst the traffic halted around Deborah's body, Rojack finds himself immediately attracted to her and, after being questioned and released by the police, he visits her at the nightclub where she sings. This episode at the club demonstrates clearly that though he desires her, he has not completely emptied himself of hatred, nor has he resolved his apprehension over his masculine identity. With Cherry, as with Deborah, Rojack reveals a gendered anxiety that arises from the perceived threat of feminine power. Later, for instance, Cherry admits to a violent dimension of character that accentuates this threat, confessing that: "There *was* a crazy killer right inside" (173, emphasis Mailer's). Rojack, however, seems unsurprised by this revelation, perhaps because he himself has already confessed that he "had come to the conclusion a long time ago that all women were killers" (82). More to the point, before Cherry even acknowledges the "killer" inside her, Rojack is already on the defensive, prematurely reacting to an imagined threat of feminine violence or evil mysticism. As he watches her sing in the club, he surmises in a drunken haze that "women must murder us unless we possess them altogether," and admits to having a "fear" of Cherry that can only be resolved by visions of possessing her:

I shot one needle of an arrow into the center of Cherry's womb, I felt it go in. I felt some damage lodge itself there. She almost lost her song. One note broke, the tempo shuddered, and she went on, turned to look at me then, a sickness came off her,

something broken and dead from the liver, stale, used-up, it drifted in a pestilence of mood toward my table, sickened me as it settled in. (100)

Initially, this imagined violence seems to embody Rojack's patriarchal aim to establish control over Cherry and assert himself as the more powerful being, able to inflict "damage" over the source of her biologically creative power.

Yet this moment is more complex than that, for while Rojack inflicts violence upon her, he then takes it into himself and assumes responsibility for it. Soon after this illusory act of violence, for example, he pictures himself "draining poison from the wound I had inflicted in Cherry's belly," after which he himself is sick, as though from purging the violence in both of them (101). These contradictory impulses to both harm Cherry and save her reflect Rojack's similarly conflicted desire to love her even as he feels threatened by her. "Let me love that girl, and become a father, and try to be a good man, and do some decent work" Rojack prays at one point (162). And though she cannot offer the justification for violence that he seeks, and though his prayers here are never quite answered, Cherry will ultimately offer Rojack the chance, at least in his own mind, for redemption. That he will squander this chance through another act of violence only further demonstrates Mailer's possible reservations about Rojack's aggressive assertion of power.

Unsurprisingly, many critics view all of these aforementioned episodes—with Deborah, with Ruta, and with Cherry—as evidence that both Mailer and his work are highly misogynistic. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), for example, Kate Millett takes Mailer to task on this point, arguing that he marginalizes women through his fiction by inflicting most of his violence upon his female characters and by portraying "hostile society as a female intent on destroying courage, honesty and adventure" (329). Eight years later, Judith Fetterley echoes Millett's suggestion that

Mailer's depiction of women represents the author's own fear of female sexuality, arguing that the women *An American Dream* not only "clearly and consistently elicit Rojack's sense of himself as marginal, threatened, and given over to death" but also symbolize the "evil" institutions that Rojack must ultimately resist (137). This gendered battle, according to Fetterly, ultimately leads to Rojack's (and, in her view, Mailer's) unnatural hatred of women.<sup>79</sup> And perhaps no one gets in Norman Mailer's way more often than Norman Mailer, who has himself often provided the additional material necessary for critics to extend these criticisms to his own character, as they do here.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, I believe it is important to locate the source of these attitudes toward women in his fiction, rather than dismiss the fiction or author out of hand. By unpacking Mailer's depictions in this way, we can better understand the image of an ideal masculinity he offers here, and can also better articulate where and why that image is flawed. One of my aims in illuminating the contradictions and nuances of violence has been to demonstrate that Mailer's ultimate goal is not to preserve or maintain a masculine dominance, but to advocate for individual freedom from social restriction. That this goal assumes a masculinist ethic at the expense of others is one of the consequences of the novel's depiction of individual violence. In the second half of the novel Mailer will more closely examine the responsibility his protagonist bears for the harm done to others, specifically addressing the consequences of violence as it pertains to issues of race and gender.

### III.

The feminine other and high society are not the only forces with which Rojack grapples in *An American Dream* as he attempts to build up his own sense of masculinity; race and ethnicity also become integral factors in this construction. While Wright's explorations of

racialized masculinity clearly and directly invoke Beauvoir's own connections between race and gender (as in her own analogies between the situation of woman and that of African Americans), Mailer's work is a bit more elusive in this regard.<sup>81</sup> That is, race certainly plays a factor in his crisis and construction of masculinity, yet Rojack's reflections on his own ethnic and racial background are more infrequent and submerged than we might find in Wright's work. Overall, Rojack seems fairly ambivalent about his background; he identifies himself as "half Jew," for example, and when Deborah asks him to identify his other "half," he replies that he is "Protestant. Nothing really" (33). However, his awareness of Deborah's opinion of this background also contributes to his sense of emasculation at her hands. Deborah, Rojack informs us, detests both Jewish Protestants and Gentile Jews—those who, in her perception, "know nothing about grace" and seem to her ambivalent about their faith (34). Deborah, then, makes Rojack out to be a lesser man because of the ambiguity of his ethnic and religious background. He is aware that in her eyes, he is not whole: unable (and, perhaps, unwilling) to fully claim any part of his background as an identifying characteristic, he does not identify as a Jew, yet his references to his Jewishness, and the ways in which this background nevertheless implicitly renders him an "other" in Deborah's eyes, separates him somewhat from her mainstream white society as well.

The anxiety over his own racial identity is only augmented by the introduction of Shago Martin, a well-known jazz artist and Cherry's ex-boyfriend, whose blackness is represented as indicative of a threatening, hyper-sexualized masculinity. Shago immediately poses a threat to Rojack not only because he is competition for Cherry, but because he represents the powerful and sexually potent male Other that calls into question Rojack's own sense of what it means to be a masculine force. Though Rojack's confrontation with his Shago is brief, this episode is key to the development of his own personal philosophy of masculinity, as Rojack finds in Shago both

a mirror and an antagonist in the ongoing construction of masculine selfhood. In other words, Shago both revises and reaffirms Rojack's perceptions of blackness. On the one hand, he prompts Rojack to briefly reconsider his own mythologizing of race and gender by inviting a mutual identification. On the other hand, Mailer's depiction of Shago also reiterates the stereotypes laid out in "The White Negro," which Rojack will maintain as a model for his own masculinity, and in doing so seems to reject Baldwin's critical response to that earlier essay—as well as Beauvoir's criticisms of representations of otherness—as Mailer continually fashions Shago into what Beauvoir might deem a kind of mystical "archetype" (Beauvoir 1v) whose "mystique" is, as Baldwin warned, eventually "extended into violence" (Baldwin 277).<sup>82</sup>

This tension between the two men becomes particularly palpable when Cherry matter-of-factly describes Shago to Rojack as "a stud" (125). When she conveys the ease with which Shago was able to seduce her, Rojack feels the violence of his own jealousy: "The word went in like a blow to the soft part of my belly. There was something final in the verdict as if there were a sexual round robin where the big people played. All the big Negroes and the big Whites" (125). Rojack's most distinct anxiety is established in relation to Shago's sexuality, particularly in his role as Cherry's ex-lover, yet this tension is founded on a racial fault line, as he sees the game of "sexual round robin" in which they are engaged as arising from qualities of racialized masculinities. As a result of this tension, Rojack says he feels a "mean edge" building up inside him, as the forces that contribute to his masculine anxiety converge. He even imagines at this moment that he "could see Deborah's face staring in the morgue, one green eye," but then notes that rather than fearing the face in this vision, he feels instead as though he "owned the hatred in her eye" (125). In this way, he seems to be drawing power from his murder of Deborah, as though by murdering her, he appropriated her force and consumed her hatred. In this, a variation



of what bell hooks might deem “eating of the other,” Rojack temporarily takes on the strength of one who had previously threatened his power in order to overthrow a second threat to his masculinity (hooks 21). While such a scene demonstrates Rojack’s tendency to assert his masculinity at the expense of others, this assertion of gendered identity is complicated by Mailer’s implicit invocation of his own earlier ideas about liberatory violence in “The White Negro” as well as by a climactic scene in which Rojack begins to sense the personal consequences of his aggression.

For instance, though he views Shago as a threat, Rojack also displays a simultaneous desire to approximate the characteristics Shago embodies, qualities reminiscent of those Mailer valorizes in “The White Negro.” In fact, Laura Adams has argued that Shago is the figure mythologized in that earlier essay, a logical assumption, as the description of both Shago’s music and appearance largely mimics that of the “hipster” in that earlier essay (Adams 89). Rojack, for example, remembers that Deborah had once called Shago “the most attractive man in America,” and his own admitted dislike of Shago is that “his talent was too extreme” (180). As he explains, Shago “had a beat which went right through your ear into your body, it was cruel, it was perfect” (182), an assessment that echoes Mailer’s discussion of jazz in his hipster ideology and its similar ability to infiltrate the body through its “knifelike entrance into culture, its subtle but so penetrating influence” (*Advertisements* 340). Moreover, Shago’s music sounds like a “clash of hysterias” (183), much as the Hip philosophy articulated by Mailer in “The White Negro” was meant to usher in an age of “new hysteria” (356). This, for Rojack, is yet another significant point that feeds his admiration, as Shago thus seems to have broken through the social conformity he finds suffocating and to introduce something entirely new, strange, and unsettling. In valorizing Shago’s marginalization this way, however, Mailer ignores Baldwin’s warnings

with regard to his depiction of otherness, and instead continues to perpetuate the othering “mystique” of blackness.

Shago’s speech patterns also introduce an inversion of the stereotypes that his persona has thus far perpetuated. For example, Shago’s first words to Rojack are: “Listen Sambo... You look like a coonass blackass nigger jackaboo to me cause you been put-putting with blondie here, my wife, you see, dig?” (185). Despite the fact that Shago employs the kind of vocabulary Mailer attributes to the figure depicted in “The White Negro,” by calling Rojack “Sambo,” Shago inverts the racial stereotypes that would normally be associated with each man. That is, by naming Rojack as “other” through this language, he fashions himself the dominant, civilized male. Mailer’s depiction of Shago, then, attempts to eradicate the social hierarchies founded on race, as his allusion to the figure outlined in “The White Negro” suggests that it is Shago who might be considered the “man of the future.”

At the same time, Mailer also shows Rojack beginning to question the myth of black masculinity that Shago seems to embody. Rojack remembers, for example, that he when he had seen Shago’s face before on his record covers and on film, he had decided it was “a handsome face, thin and arrogant” but also, clearly, “a mask” (180). His sense that Shago dons a performative guise for the public demonstrates his awareness that there might be a disconnect between the appearance Shago puts forth—the confident, sexual, fast-talking bastion of black masculinity—and the identity behind the mask, one that, in fact, will prove to be much more vulnerable than our initial introduction to Shago might suggest. This also opens up the possibility for Rojack to identify with Shago: as he senses Shago’s human vulnerability, Rojack begins to search for commonality between the two men. Two years earlier in *The Presidential*

*Papers*, Mailer had interpreted the social context for these competing senses of fear and desire Rojack feels in the face of Shago. As he wrote then:

Minority groups are the artistic nerves of a republic, and like any phenomenon which has to do with art, they are profoundly divided. They are both themselves and the mirror of their culture as it reacts upon them. They are themselves and the negative truth of themselves...For decades the Jews have been militant for their rights, since the Second War the Negroes have emerged as an embattled and disciplined minority. It is thus characteristic of both races that they have a more intense awareness of their own value and their own lack of value than the awareness of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant for himself. (*PP* 187)

In Mailer's view, then, blacks and Jews see themselves mirrored in one another, if only as a result of their similarly negative relationship to a predominantly white culture. Because each sees in the other "their own value and their own lack of value," however, each is also threatened by the other's potential. Perhaps because of this latent threat, the common ground that Rojack begins to locate with Shago ultimately only reinforces his emphasis on violence as a sign of masculine power. So, for instance, Rojack senses a connection between himself and Shago, yet his feeling of "curious happiness" about this identification arises from "the knowledge Shago was capable of murder" (183). Thus, while a shared capacity to commit murder draws the two men together, it also increases the tension between them.

This rivalry and its racial undertones are further illuminated by each man's desire for Cherry. Sensing the connection between Cherry and Rojack, for example, Shago finds in Rojack a threat to his own masculine power, inspiring an evident fear in Shago that Rojack observes and compares to "a big fish just speared" (191). Shago almost directly admits, in fact, that his own

masculinity has been compromised, even as he threatens Cherry if she does not leave Rojack. “Listen, baby, you don’t leave me,” he says to her. “I’ll cut your heart...I’m a captive of white shit now” (191). Yet Cherry immediately rejects Shago’s suggestions that his violence is reactionary, arising from the fact that he is at the mercy of a white woman and that he is, in fact, “a white man now,” as he insists. “You black-ass ego...you’re not white, you’re just losing your black,” she says (191). This banter, though initiated by Shago in a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek tone, once again serves to simultaneously reinforce and revise social stereotypes of black masculinity. By attributing Shago’s apparent weakness to a diminishing “blackness,” Cherry aggrandizes both blackness and violence as indicative of masculine power. For Laura Adams, one of the first scholars to conduct an in-depth analysis of the novel, Cherry accuses Shago of “losing his black and becoming evil” and performing “a Poe-like inversion where black equals good and white evil” (89). Here Mailer seems to be revising stereotypes of black masculinity and upholding them at the same time, working against some of the stereotypes of racialized morality and social positioning based on race that are embedded within American society, while also managing to reaffirm the notion that there are some supposedly inherent qualities of blackness.

This complex glorification of what Mailer (and Rojack) perceive as the inherently powerful characteristics of blackness is further manifested in the physical fight that ensues between the two men. This fight demonstrates the narrative’s triumph of violence as a mechanism for individual power, as well as the persistent “othering” of Shago through what is depicted as his mystical violence. While this episode demonstrates a shared masculine anxiety grounded in the reciprocity of fear and desire, it also serves as a means for Rojack to appropriate those qualities he feels he lacks by overcoming Shago with physical force. Interestingly, it is

their shared vulnerability (as perceived by Rojack) that provides Mailer's protagonist with the courage and strength he needs to defeat Shago. Throwing Shago to the ground, Rojack declares,

I got whiff of his odor which had something of defeat in it, and a smell full of nearness as if we'd been in bed for an hour—well, it was too close... Some hard-lodged boulder of fear I had always felt with Negroes was in the bumping, elbow-busting and crash of sound as he went barreling down, my terror going with him. (193)

This language, bearing simultaneous references to sexual intimacy and physical violence, goes to the heart of Rojack's perception of Shago as a mirrored other whose sexual potency he desires but feels he must destroy. And indeed, before Rojack throws Shago down the stairs in the finale of the fight, he notes that "violence seemed to shake himself free from [Shago] every time I smashed him back to the floor and shake itself into me" (193). Again, as with his murder of Deborah and his metaphorical wounding of Cherry, Rojack imagines that he can take another's violent power into himself through his own act of violence. In this way, he works to assume some of the mystique he associates with Shago's blackness, which would in turn allow him to formulate an identity similar to that outlined in "The White Negro." By rejecting sympathy in favor of violently seeking to acquire characteristics he associates with Shago's "blackness," Rojack essentially reenacts racial oppression in the divide between black and Jewish—and black and white—masculinities.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, however, Rojack's confrontation with Shago does briefly alter his perceptions of violence as a mechanism for performing a model of hyper-masculinity, as in its aftermath he begins to question whether or not he has truly won the fight. Barry Leeds has argued that "the strength derived from Shago (as he represents the best virtues and strengths of his people) is necessary to Rojack for victory" (148). While I would agree that Rojack perceives the violence

as necessary here and that he believes in the transference of power, the “victory” obtained here is questionable. Certainly, this confrontation is symbolic of Rojack’s desire to replace Shago by appropriating his violent, masculinist qualities, and physically, Rojack does win the fight. However, after he sees Shago leave Cherry’s apartment, Rojack is suddenly overwhelmed with dread, and just as after the murder of Deborah, his euphoria is only temporary. “It had all gone wrong again,” he says. “If I could have taken some of it back, I would have returned to that moment when I began to beat Shago to the floor and he dared me to let him go” (195). In retrospect, he senses that his actions have done irreparable damage to his relationship with Cherry, that because of this fight, “some flaw would continue to rot at the center” of their bond (199). In other words, Mailer allows his protagonist to glimpse the negative consequences his violence may yield for himself and for Cherry.

Rojack’s sense of a shared propensity for violence in others becomes a common denominator in all of his relationships, as he locates this trait first in Deborah, then in Cherry, and finally in Shago. In each of these relationships, the potential violence of the gendered or racial “other” draws Rojack in and also threatens him; as a result, he feels compelled to overcome these various racial and gendered others in order to appropriate the power he sees as arising from their respective abilities to deploy violence. While Rojack’s acts of violence are reactionary, generated by the fear that he had “lost [his] sense of being alive,” he is consistently driven to threaten the lives of others to regain a sense of self. Thus, though Rojack may not be aware of it, his assertions of masculinity have become predicated on the oppression of others, dependent on his ability to demonstrate his superior physical prowess and strength. And because he finds himself repeatedly chasing this power and the temporary euphoria of liberation from his

previously suffocating life, he risks being left not with power, but with a cycle of violence he seems doomed to repeat.

#### IV.

This embedded ambivalence about the intersections among violence, masculine identity, and liberation is also present in Rojack's meeting with Barney Oswald Kelly, Deborah's father, which also represents a climactic moment in Rojack's existential quest. Kelly invites Rojack to Waldorf Towers to discuss Deborah's death and Rojack, interpreting this meeting as the culmination of a series of tests of his masculine strength and courage, decides upon his arrival to walk around the parapet of Kelly's apartment twice, essentially mimicking the scene from the previous day when he had balanced drunkenly from the balcony at the party. The existential nature of his task here is made transparent as the circumstances of Rojack's trip around the parapet of Kelly's apartment strongly invoke Sartre's discussion of existential anguish—an anguish that has plagued Rojack throughout the novel. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes:

It is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom... Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over. A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation. (29).

Likewise, as Rojack balances on the parapet, he is presented with the options he faced at the hour during which we were first introduced to him: he has the freedom to throw himself over, but also to complete the journey around the parapet he has set for himself. On the one hand, Rojack sees his own death as heroic, envisioning his action as somehow indicative of not only his freedom of

choice but also his devotion to Cherry. ““If you loved Cherry, you would jump,”” he thinks to himself, which he deems “ an abbreviation for the longer thought that there was a child in her, and death, *my* death, my violent death, would give some better heart to that embryo just created, that indeed I might even be created again, free of my past” (224). Here Rojack envisions death as his ultimate transcendence, as suicide becomes his effort to achieve that liberation from his unhappy life and the cancerous society around him. Moreover, here Mailer once again relies on violence as a creative power, as in Rojack’s imagination, a violent death will improve the life of his hypothetical child.

Yet Kelly stops him from jumping to his freedom (or rather, in Sartre’s language, jumping in the face of his freedom), persuading Rojack to join him for a drink instead. What ensues is a strange confessional on Kelly’s part, during which he divulges that his relationship with Deborah was for a brief time incestuous. This, coupled with Rojack’s knowledge that Kelly had also been involved with Cherry, so disturbs him that he admits that he “slipped off the lip of sanity” and prepares to fight (253). In this moment, he feels that this is what he *has* to do, for Kelly merely presents another figure who is both threatening and attractive, made up of “stopped-up violence” and “a fired heat of lust” that, assumedly, he might be able to assume should he defeat Kelly (254). Yet Rojack balks at his own potential use of violence here, briefly considering instead a kind of liberation that would leave violence behind:

I wanted to escape from the intelligence which let me know of murders in one direction and conceive of visits to Cherry from the other, I wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the Devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again, nailed tight to details, promiscuous, reasonable. (255)



These desires to free himself from the forces that have thus far threatened his sense of power inspire him to test himself instead of fighting Kelly, and so he attempts to make his way around the walls of the parapet once more, believing that in doing so he will be released from the guilt of murdering Deborah free to start a new life with Cherry. This is the third time Rojack will have attempted this feat in the novel, yet this moment is marked by his belief that if he should successfully complete a trip around the walls of the tower, he will be released from the guilt of murdering Deborah and injuring Shago, and will thus be free embark on new life with Cherry.

Yet Rojack cannot be absolved from this guilt: in a tragic twist, he returns to Harlem after circling the parapet to discover that Cherry is dying, fatally beaten by members of Shago's gang—a conclusion that punctuates Mailer's contradictory attitudes toward the violence that has pervaded the novel.<sup>84</sup> In one sense, this violent act against Cherry seems strangely positive, as Cherry's death does serve to release Rojack from his last attachment to society. He retreats to the desert and strikes out on his own, ultimately living the life of the outsider he desired, considering himself part of the "new breed" of man being fashioned in the West (269). In this way, Mailer upholds the concept of violence as a successful tool for liberation and masculine power by allowing Rojack the escape he desires, and his conclusion seems determined to justify Rojack's actions by inviting us to accept violence as an inherent characteristic of individual life and as an embedded characteristic of modern culture. This is largely supported by the scene that concludes the final chapter of the novel, the goal of which appears to be to confirm Rojack's own acts of violence as only part and parcel of a larger structure of violence and chaos, which guides the lives of every character in the novel and renders Cherry's death inevitable. Here, Detective Roberts, a supporting character in the novel who had questioned Rojack about Deborah's "suicide" (and who was certain of his guilt) invites Rojack out for a drink, whereupon Roberts

spontaneously confesses to beating his own wife, divulges that Cherry had done some work for the police, threatens Rojack, and then begins to cry, after which Rojack remarks, “The Irish are the only men who know how to cry for the dirty polluted blood of the world” (264). It would seem that Mailer’s goal here is to emphasize this “dirty polluted blood of the world” as something that has corrupted even the men who, like Roberts, appear at first to be innocent. Life, this conclusion implies, is defined by chaos, and what connects everyone’s chaotic lives is violence. In this way, the ending confirms Rojack’s own beliefs about the corruption and decay of society, and allows Mailer to uphold the concept of a liberating, masculinist violence by allowing Rojack to escape from any legal repercussions.

Yet on the other hand, Mailer seems equally determined to demonstrate that Rojack’s quest is unsuccessful, largely by emphasizing that his murder of Deborah has set in motion a chain of events that have led directly to Cherry’s own death, thus ruining his chance at redemptive love. Of course, the fact that Rojack survives while Deborah and Cherry must die seems cruelly unjust—but that is precisely Mailer’s point. Though Rojack can escape to the desert and face no legal penalty for his violence, to a certain degree Mailer himself recognizes that the justice in—and justification for—his violence must be called into question. As Mailer stated in an interview with Richard Wollheim in the *New Statesman* in 1961: “Violence must be violence for which full responsibility is accepted, and that’s rare today. Today we have the violence of the man who won’t look his victim in the face” (66). By taking Cherry from Rojack as a consequence of a long chain of events in which Rojack’s actions have often been the catalysts, Mailer forces Rojack to look his victim in the face, and denies his protagonist the complete freedom from guilt and the reward of Cherry’s love.

Nevertheless, as in *The Outsider*, we are left asking what it means that, according to Mailer, the only way out of the “alienated bottom” of society seems to be through “psychopathic”—and often violent—behavior. Barry Leeds has rightly pointed out that for Rojack and for Mailer, violence is often represented as “the achievement of personal freedom and integrity” and “a possible hope of salvation as a reward for courage” (*Structured Vision* 173). Yet the challenge for Mailer seems to be to prevent the violence of his protagonists, which he views as necessary to this freedom, from becoming purely destructive. Because this salvation is couched in terms of his own gendered identity, and because this identity is framed against a number of potentially threatening external forces—women, hyper-masculine figures like Shago and Kelly, the oppressions of a totalitarian society—Rojack often ends up fashioning this identity at the expense of those he perceives as his rivals. Thus, despite the fact that Mailer’s work exhibits strong similarities to Beauvoir’s investigation of existential gender construction, Rojack and his theoretical predecessor in “The White Negro” often end up reaffirming precisely what Beauvoir desires to change, as liberation itself remains a masculine quality. That is, the problem attached to his project is that the result of his protagonists’ attempts to reclaim power by violence is that in many cases, both femininity and “blackness” have been re-marginalized again along the way, and masculinity itself remains defined within a framework of violence from which it cannot escape. In this way, Mailer’s work here realizes Hannah Arendt’s observation in *On Violence*, that “the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world” (80).

This is made all the more complicated by the fact that it is the oppressive totalitarian violence of this world that Mailer is writing against. As a response to the various threats to freedom he perceived, Mailer sought to find a way to live outside of the confines of society and

to fashion not only new type of masculine selfhood, but also a new social structure for which there was no previous model. He was not always successful, as evidenced by the various ways in which the novel seems to uphold gendered and racial hierarchies as often as it questions them. While this tends to make his work controversial, it is only in studying the various manifestations of violence, as I have done here, that we can come to understand how and where Mailer is attempting to reckon with racial and gender stereotypes that interfere with individual freedom. His alternating veneration and criticisms of violence in *An American Dream* highlight the way he struggled to acknowledge the repercussions of violence within his fiction while also incorporating violence into his model for a liberated man of the future. By engaging with the various manifestation of violence in his work, we can better observe the extent to which Mailer himself recognized some of its consequences as well, even as he maintains a faith in an individual liberatory violence as a force that will eventually lead to “violence’s opposite.”

### CHAPTER 3

#### **From Herzog to Sammler: Saul Bellow's Meditations on Masculinity, Modernity, and Violence**

At first glance, Saul Bellow's fiction stands in sharp contrast to that of Norman Mailer. Bellow's work, for example, comprises more conservative views—politically and socially—than that of Mailer and, as I will discuss in this chapter, Bellow exhibits a more reluctant and more deeply critical attitude towards individual violence than Mailer as well. Recognizing such differences, Daniel Fuchs has called Mailer “Bellow's cultural anti-self” (23) and Michael Macilwee has argued that “the very perversity of the experiences of Mailer's protagonists seems the exact opposite of that Bellovian sense of moral sensibility” (7). While their works do diverge on several counts, they also demonstrate some key similarities in terms of their representations of masculinity. Specifically, both authors use their fiction to explore similar themes of compromised masculinity, each imagining protagonists who are “marked” as different or other, and who subsequently attempt to construct a masculine identity in the face of their own conflicted perceptions of race, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, Bellow, like both Mailer and Wright, also represents violence as playing a central role in this masculinist construction, fashioning it as a potential but ultimately unsuccessful mode of individual liberation for his protagonists.

Bellow's critical meditations on violence and masculinity, and the role of these intersecting themes within modern existentialist formations of identity, lie at the center of both his 1964 novel *Herzog* and his 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. In each of these texts, Bellow introduces fictional protagonists whose precarious masculine identities are marked by otherness (largely as a result of their Jewish identities but also because of their own perceived physical

inadequacies) and who articulate their sense masculine selfhood by identifying what they are *not* as opposed to what they are. As each man seeks to find his place in the world in the face of this sometimes emasculating and often power-reducing otherness, he vacillates between a desire to employ individual acts of violence as an indicator of individual power and, on the other hand, to reject this interpersonal violence as a sign of modern society's decline. I argue here that these conflicted attitudes towards violence are, in fact, the source of much of each protagonist's gendered strife, and that ultimately both Herzog and Sammler (despite being very different characters in many respects) reach the same conclusion, finally refusing to embrace violence in their own lives as an attribute of masculinity and individual power—though not before extensive and occasionally agonizing contemplation. In other words, violence temporarily acts as a central aspect of each man's sense of masculine identity, as each feels drawn to violence as a legitimate way to define his masculinity. Bellow, however, manipulates the construct in such a way that each man's *deliberation* about violence—rather than his actual deployment as a mechanism of liberation—allows it to function as an integral part of his respective gendered formation.

The difference in the way violence is perceived and represented by the characters in Bellow's fiction is, in many ways, a result of the texts' representations of existentialism. On one hand, both Herzog and Sammler desire a kind of liberation from the conflicts and confines of their present lives, a desire that imbues their narratives with an existential undercurrent much like I have observed in the fiction of Wright and Mailer.<sup>86</sup> For example, Herzog and Sammler each seek to transcend their present selves, a basic existential goal that the language of existentialism itself can help to illuminate and explain. For example, Bellow has his protagonists in these narratives act out the tension between immanence and transcendence that Beauvoir and Sartre describe as a fundamental condition of an existential life. Moreover, the existential

language of otherness becomes central to understanding each man's plight as well, as both contemplate their masculine identities at a moment when their previous notions of selfhood and autonomy seem to be threatened from the outside. That is, each protagonist's awareness of his otherness triggers a need to rearticulate his own gendered identity, and in this way each man (to use Beauvoir's language) "attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself" (139).<sup>87</sup>

Beauvoir's existential theory of gender becomes a particular useful framework for considering the journey of Bellow's protagonists since each man's perception of otherness and sense of being marked as "other," like the women Beauvoir discusses, is often directly connected to an anxiety focused on the male body. Herzog, for instance, tends to articulate his gendered anxiety by alluding to the way this masculinity is defined by his physical self. Often, this works to suggest that his gender is mapped onto his body in a way that threatens to emasculate him by setting physical and sexual standards of manhood that Herzog repeatedly feels unable to meet. Likewise, Sammler also feels his masculinity to be "marked" as lesser or undesirable, as he compares himself to a younger generation of both gendered and racial "others" whose presence forces him to question the way he is perceived as a man, and thereby articulate what he believes a modern masculine identity should entail. Still, rather than fashioning protagonists who constantly and aggressively chase a particular masculine "ideal," Bellow has each of his characters question the various models of masculine behavior with which they are presented as they compare these identities to their own. Amidst this examination of their gendered selves in relation to these others, both Herzog and Sammler's constant *deliberations* about masculinity and violence—as opposed to violent performances of masculinity, for instance—come to define their existential projects of selfhood.

In other words, while characters like Cross Damon and Stephen Rojack envision and subsequently practice a kind of existential violence to counteract these threats, Herzog and Sammler (like Bellow himself) are more skeptical of a liberatory existentialist doctrine that requires such violence.<sup>88</sup> Though Bellow's protagonists both seek what can be defined as existential freedom through self-invention or reinvention, they are also interested in preserving certain traditions as opposed to escaping or destroying them; in this way they maintain, as Daniel Fuchs has put it, a "politics of civility" (23). While Mailer and Wright's protagonists look to the future, seeking a new identity that would eliminate or render insignificant their own cultural histories, Bellow's protagonists often look back in their quests to articulate a concept of the masculine selfhood; they immerse themselves in history and memory, nostalgic for an older, humanistic ideal of the self that does not entail violence.

Furthermore, when experimenting with or seeking to articulate liberatory ideals, Bellow's protagonists prove for the most part to be men of words rather than men of action. Mark Cohen has noted, for example, "In *Herzog*, talk itself is a subject" (4), and as Thomas Rhea has also argued, "Artur Sammler infrequently takes action; however, what he lacks in physical activity he more than compensates for in his verbal and reflective involvement with those around him" (57). Thus, each protagonist engages in a profoundly existential quest to integrate the past with the present in order to put into words what they view to be a truly powerful masculinity.<sup>89</sup> Still, Bellow proves that these words themselves can evoke their own kind of violence. That is, the violence deployed in Bellow's fiction does take on misogynistic and racist qualities, though it does so as a linguistic and metaphorical entity rather than as homicide or physical aggression.

In sum, violence for both of Bellow's protagonist's remains largely an idea that they rarely act upon. They contemplate it and they observe it, but they do not deploy it, though this



does not mean it does not become a central aspect of their understanding of masculine identity—nor does it mean that violence is not problematic in these texts. In fact, the language each man uses to contemplate his place in the world and assert his own autonomy often serves to reiterate gendered and racial hierarchies in much the same way Mailer's work threatens to do.<sup>90</sup> After all, both Herzog and Sammler recognize to an extent what Beauvoir herself observes: that “for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty” and that violence is an expression of subjectivity; it is “the authentic proof of one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will” (Beauvoir 331). The difference here is that each man comes to more firmly reject violence, and in the end, Bellow ensures that his protagonists recognize Arendt's thesis that violence as a way of living is “irrational,” even as a tool for liberation from a threatening force.<sup>91</sup> As Ada Aharoni has noted, Bellow's protagonists “are malleable seekers with a specific goal—to find personal ethics that can allow them to live and act in a responsible way” (36). To advance this idea, I would also argue that this system of personal ethics allows them to see that violence can establish neither individual power, nor a particularly *masculine* individual power.<sup>92</sup>

## I.

When we are introduced to Moses Herzog, he is in the midst of what could be stereotypically defined as a “mid-life crisis.” As Herzog reflects on his life thus far, he feels “he had mismanaged everything—everything” and that “his life was, as the phrase goes, ruined” (10). To develop his protagonist's sense of failure, Bellow describes Herzog's crisis by frequently employing language that suggests frailty and victimization: Herzog is the “*suffering joker*” (19) and (in a more underhanded reference to his weakness) “a solid figure of a man, if pale and

suffering, lying on the sofa” (17). Herzog himself admits to a desire to maintain the reliance on others that is invited by this condition of frailty, confessing that: “he had been hoping for some definite sickness which would send him to a hospital after a while” after which “he would not have to look after himself” (21). In light of this initial depiction, we might at first agree with Norman Mailer’s assessment of Herzog, published in *Cannibals and Christians* soon after *Herzog*’s release. There, Mailer writes,

So the hero of moral earnestness, the hero Herzog and the hero Levin in Malamud’s *A New Life*, are men who represent the contrary—passive, timid, other-directed, pathetic, up to the nostrils in anguish: the world is stronger than they are; suicide calls...Not one of the critics who adored the book would ever have permitted Herzog to remain an hour in his house. (CC 142)

And certainly, this passivity and surrender does sometimes appear as part of Herzog’s character, and could even be used to describe his masculine identity more specifically. Herzog himself, for instance, wonders at times “whether he didn’t belong to a class of people secretly convinced they had an arrangement with fate; in return for docility or ingenuous good will they were to be shielded from the worst brutalities of life,” and he describes his “meekness” by noting that this perceived arrangement with fate made him “feminine” and “childlike” (191). He seems, then, alternately accepting and ashamed of the kind of timidity and anguish Mailer describes, his masculine identity both defined and yet destabilized by this ambivalence.

Yet on the other hand, Herzog himself lists aspects of his personality that might actually be used to describe many of Mailer’s own protagonists. When reflecting on his character, Herzog names it “narcissistic” first and foremost, a term which might certainly characterize a man like Rojack (10). Concerned with the “invasion of the private sphere (including the sexual) by

techniques of exploitation and domination,” Herzog also displays a disdain for cultural totalitarianism akin to Mailer’s, one that also similarly serves as a catalyst for his many musings on the importance of crafting and maintaining individualism (202). Most importantly, Herzog too feels bound by society’s normalization of a particular kind of manhood, to the extent that he is revealed to have internalized certain notions of what a “masculine” life should entail. “He could be a patriarch, as every Herzog was meant to be,” he thinks to himself, but laments:

The family man, father, transmitter of life, intermediary between past and future, instrument of mysterious creation, was out of fashion. Fathers obsolete? Only to masculine women—wretched, pitiful bluestockings. (249).

Despite his earlier insistence on his own passivity and frailty (typically associated with stereotypes of femininity) Herzog here betrays a desire to appropriate a socially lauded masculinity whereby patriarchal ideals are reinforced at the expense of women. In doing so, he reiterates oppositional gender stereotypes that deem any woman who would question these roles as overly masculine and therefore “wretched.”

This seemingly contradictory idea of masculinity makes it difficult to discern what Herzog (or Bellow) truly believes about manhood. What is evident, however, is that Herzog is unsatisfied with the man he is and with the cultural definition of the man he is supposed to be; thus, in part, his project involves crafting for himself a new and more satisfactory definition of manhood. Summing up the crisis that the novel envelops, Herzog acknowledges,

He let the entire world press upon him. For instance? Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. (247)

Herzog wants to understand and articulate not an ideology of masculine individualism, but his own individual masculinity that can also exist as part and parcel of the larger culture. That is, he values independence and individuality, but also recognizes the importance of brotherhood and community, and so must strive to understand how he can maintain his sense of self while also participating in a culture that in many ways endorses conformity.<sup>93</sup> He employs a language that alludes to existential themes of transcendence as he reflects on his need to work against the grain of such a society: “My behavior implies that there is a barrier against which I have been pressing from the first, pressing all my life, with the conviction that it is necessary to press, and that something must come of it. Perhaps that I can eventually pass through” (283). What Herzog expects to find when he passes through this invisible barrier is not stated directly, but in light of his musings on his masculine identity and his role as an individual “in a century” and “in transition,” I would argue that part of what he hopes to achieve is a greater understanding of his particularly gendered role in society, and an ability to declare himself an individual man amidst other individual men—to achieve autonomy without having to become a cultural outlaw.

This project also invokes an existential focus on the role of the “other.” In Herzog’s case, this role is almost always assumed by a woman who forces him to reexamine his masculine identity, his place amongst other men, and ultimately, what he wants from life. In attempting to see himself as others see him, he comes to realize that otherness is something he must continually seek to transcend if he is to return to this notion of a self. As Bellow writes, “Herzog momentarily joined the objective world in looking down on himself. He too could smile at Herzog and despise him. But there still remained the fact. *I am Herzog. I have to be that man. There is no one else to do it*” (86). Here, Herzog’s comments also illuminate the way he uniquely combines existentialist aims with more traditionally humanistic ones, a Janus-faced project that

simultaneously assumes that the self must be constructed by the individual who looks to the future *and* that there is some inherent idea of a self to which that individual can return.<sup>94</sup>

That Herzog's dilemma stems largely from anxieties about gender is supported by the fact that much of his internal crisis throughout the book revolves around his fraught relationship with his wife Madeleine. Madeleine is a powerful personality, tending to overwhelm those in her company—something that Herzog admires, but which also adds to his own faltering sense of self. In a description similar to Rojack's assessment that his wife Deborah "occupied my center," Herzog says, "Everyone close to Madeleine, everyone drawn into the drama of her life became exceptional, deeply gifted, brilliant" and admits that "it had happened also to him" (38). The negative consequences of this relationship frame Herzog's plight as a specifically gendered struggle, in which Madeleine is painted as the villain. As with Rojack's account of Deborah (and, as I will explain in Chapter 5, Philip Roth's account of Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*), it is important to note that the reader has only Herzog's account of his wife on which to rely; she has no interior life of her own, and therefore, her villainy in Herzog's eyes is largely subjective. However, proving whether or not Madeleine is the villain is somewhat beside the point here; rather, it is more significant to observe the way she is represented through Herzog's perspective, in order to uncover what that might tell us about his own anxiety.

For example, the language Herzog uses to describe Madeleine is often reductive, as her coldness and infidelity are attributed to her femininity. He puzzles over her changing expressions and personalities, interpreting biologically feminine characteristics as the source of her evil. As he remarks at one point, for instance: "How lovely she could be!...Very different from the terrifying menstrual ice of her rages, the look of the murderess" (63). Herzog also perceives Madeleine as trespassing on his intellectual and vocational territory, thus seeing her as not only

diminishing his pride but appropriating his livelihood as well. “I understood that Madeleine’s ambition was to take my place in the learned world. To overcome me,” he explains. “She was reaching her final elevation, as queen of the intellectuals, the castiron bluestocking. And your friend Herzog writhing under this sharp elegant heel” (98). This image paints Herzog as the victim of Maureen’s ambition. Her actions disprove for Herzog the old-fashioned notion that such intellectual pursuits are a man’s territory, thus forcing him to reluctantly recalibrate his own ideas of masculine and feminine roles in society. Moreover, by elevating herself professionally and intellectually above Herzog, at least as he perceives it, Maureen upends the domestic gender hierarchy that has also traditionally aided definitions of manhood. Herzog, who has perhaps unwittingly internalized these gender roles, is left now without the traditional means to assert his masculine identity.

In other ways, Herzog’s anger towards Maureen is more warranted, his feelings of emasculation more easily explained. After he discovers that Madeleine has been having an affair with his good friend Valentine Gersbach, “foolish, feeling, suffering Herzog” becomes the cuckolded victim of Madeleine’s treachery (76). Compounding the masculine anxiety that Madeleine’s infidelity inspires within Herzog is Gersbach’s personality and appearance. “Dealing with Valentine was like dealing with a king,” Herzog insists. “He had a thick grip. He might have held a scepter...His face was all heaviness, sexual meat...His chin was thick, and like a stone ax, a brutal weapon” (79; 314). Gersbach not only exemplifies the physical characteristics of an idealized masculinity, but is also described by Herzog as being an “emotional king,” suggesting that he maintains a sensitivity and empathy even as his masculine appearance invokes images of a “brutal weapon.” Thus, Gersbach seems to embody

characteristics typically associated with both the masculine and the feminine; he has reconciled the multiple facets of his identity to craft one imposing, desirable model of manhood.

Herzog, comparing himself to Gersbach, finds himself falling short, and as a result, his confidence in his own masculine performance—particularly his sexual performance—is shaken. As he explains, “His sexual powers had been damaged by Madeleine. And without the ability to attract women, how was he to recover? It was in this respect that he felt most like a convalescent” (12). Here the potential recovery of his manhood is shown to rely on the way women perceive him, as Herzog obtains a sense of his own masculine potency by gauging the way it is viewed by a female “other.” This imbues women with a certain degree of power, in that they are represented as having the ability to restore Herzog’s masculine confidence; however, this very masculinity that they might build up is one that Herzog also believes to be superior to femininity. In other words, by relying on women to recuperate his sense of his manhood that has been so compromised by Madeleine’s behavior, Herzog reinforces gendered hierarchies and divisions that would bestow upon him a renewed sense of power, sexual potency, and superiority by revitalizing his perceived right to patriarchal authority.

It is not only with Madeleine that Herzog exhibits such views of gender. On numerous occasions, Herzog sets himself apart from women in an attempt to define his masculinity, upholding the very kind of oppositional definition of gender that Beauvoir herself seeks to undo in her own treatise on gendered liberation. Observing a woman across the train car, for example, Herzog takes note of what he believes to be her “bitch eyes,” which “expressed a sort of female arrogance which had an immediate sexual power over him” (47). At another point, he claims, “hugging and heartbreak is for women” while “the occupation of a man is in duty, in use, in civility, in politics” (119). Moreover, in one of his many letters, Herzog writes: “*Will never*

*understand what women want. What do they want? They eat green salad and drink human blood”*

(56). Herzog’s language here fashions woman as a foreign, frightening, and unknowable being.

In what appears to be an attempt to defer his own increasing sense of inferiority and confusion, he defines his masculinity by marking femininity as strange, and therefore participates in a social gender construction that positions the male as the unmarked and gendered “standard.”

These assessments of the nature of femininity might seem to indicate that Herzog is simply misogynistic, his “politics of civility” geared towards upholding the status quo. Yet it is important to note Bellow’s own subtly humorous treatment of some of Herzog’s views, revealed in what Natalie Wu has previously identified through an analysis of Bellow’s “authorial discourse.” As Wu writes, Bellow “inserted authorial discourse to display the author’s sneering position toward the ideology of the hero,” showing himself to be “rather amused about the hero’s nonsensical sufferings in private life and public affairs as well as his self-invested big project for mankind” (135-136). Such humorous undertones, exemplified by Bellow’s wry judgments of Herzog’s behavior, temper the seriousness with which we might be expected to take Herzog’s commentary, and suggest that Bellow himself is holding his protagonist up for a certain degree of ridicule.<sup>95</sup> The subtlety of this humor makes it difficult to detect (even Irving Howe once complained that: “One becomes somewhat irked at being unable, a times, to grasp which of the letters are serious, that is, Bellow’s opinions, and which are not, that is, Herzog’s conniptions”) but the mocking commentary is nevertheless present during some of Herzog’s most self-absorbed moments (Howe 32). As Bellow himself said in 1966, Herzog’s melodramatic seriousness is frequently meant to be a subject of irony and humor, and the novel itself “points to the comic impossibility of arriving at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands” (72). By holding up his protagonist as an object of humor in this way, Bellow also calls into question



many of Herzog's reflections, including those pertaining to gender. His criticisms are not overt, but they are at the very least suggested by his authorial tone.

Additionally, in much the same way that Alexander Portnoy will do in Roth's 1967 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, Herzog appears to be experimenting with this particular brand of masculine posturing. For Herzog loves women—in fact, aside from his dealings with Madeleine, the narrative is in many ways a love song to the many women in Herzog's life. His real confusion and anxiety arises from who he is expected to be for and amongst these women. When he thinks of marrying his mistress Ramona as a way to end his troubles, he immediately reprimands himself for being a coward; for succumbing to that idea of who he is *supposed* to be—conforming to the social rule that one must find a wife and settle down and blend into the scenery, when he really wants to “return to his own self” and feels that marriage would get in the way (86). Yet in an attempt to discover what women—and what society—asks of him as a man, Herzog ends up approximating a masculine performance that actually oppresses the women he so admires. As evidenced by the above examples, his own language reiterates the same kind of divisive and essentialist stereotypes that have long perpetuated essentialist gender divisions in society and marked women as strange, unknowable, and monstrous.

Herzog's views of how violence should factor into this masculine self are plagued by a similar ambivalence; that is, in an attitude similar to the one he harbors toward women, Herzog expresses both admiration and fear of violence. On one hand, Herzog is often dismayed at the individual acts of violence that seem to increasingly pervade society. This is nowhere more evident than the afternoon when Herzog, waiting to speak to his lawyer, witnesses the court proceedings surrounding the violent murder of a child. The details surrounding the murder leave Herzog horrified at the state of the world: agonizing over its injustice, “he was wrung, and wrung

again, and wrung again, again” (294). In his reaction to the court proceedings, Herzog sets himself apart from the kind of person who would commit any act of violence. For instance, like Roth’s Portnoy, Herzog pronounces that violence is for the “goy,” and thus decidedly removed from his actions and identity as a Jew. Furthermore, when he contemplates what he could have done to Madeleine and Gersbach when he discovered they were having an affair, he remembers that his father had a gun in his desk, and notes that had he actually any proclivity towards violence, he could have simply retrieved it and killed them both. As he writes to Madeleine’s aunt Zelda, with whom he has struck up a friendship:

*You thought I might kill Mady and Valentine. But when I found out, why didn't I go to the pawnshop and buy a gun? Simpler yet, my father left a revolver in his desk. It's still there. But I'm no criminal, don't have it in me; frightful to myself, instead. (55)*

By insisting that he doesn’t have the capacity to kill Madeline and Gersbach, Herzog divorces himself from individual violence and excoriates a society that turns a blind eye to violent crime. Instead, Herzog yearns for an imagined past when people harbored more respect for life and moral character. “Are all the traditions used up, the beliefs done for?” he asks. “Has the filthy moment come when moral conscience dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses in cowardice, decadence, blood?” (96). Here Herzog reveals his belief in an ordered civilization, one in which courage is defined by restraint and “decency” rather than “decadence,” brotherhood rather than blood. In setting himself apart from what he sees as a declining contemporary society, Herzog also experiences himself as “othered” from other men, his own goals and behaviors representative of another time.

Yet as noted above, part of the humor in the novel, which Bellow himself acknowledges via his humorous attitude toward his protagonist, arises from Herzog’s tendency to over-think

and over-analyze, his indecisiveness leading him to second guess his own assertions. Thus, despite his laments and criticisms, Herzog finds himself considering violence as a way to reestablish a sense of masculine selfhood that he feels has been taken from him by Madeleine. Shortly after suggesting that violence is a “goyish” rather than a Jewish trait, for instance, Herzog claims that in fact the Jewish ancestors who shunned violence were “gone, vanished, archaic men” (350). Thus, perhaps in an attempt to diminish his sense of being an outsider, and as an experiment in aligning himself with a new generation of men that embraces violence, Herzog himself weighs the possibility of violence as a possible mechanism for his release and liberation from Madeleine and from the pain of his disintegrating marriage. In some ways, his consideration of violence here resembles that of Stephen Rojack and anticipates Roth’s Peter Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*, both of whom justify violence by declaring it a necessary response (or at times, a preemptive strike) in the face of a potentially violent female other. That is, Herzog toys with the possibility of using violence against Madeleine and Gersbach largely because he sees her to be more capable of violence than himself. For example, he remembers the scene of his wife’s request for a divorce as follows:

In this confrontation in the untidy parlor, two kinds of egotism were present...hers in triumph (she had prepared a great moment, she was about to do what she longed most to do, strike a blow) and his egotism was in abeyance, all converted into passivity (16).

This scene, coupled with the aforementioned image of Herzog writhing under Madeleine’s heel, depicts their relationship in such a way that he sees himself not only as an emotional victim but also a potentially physical victim of her latent violence, which is simmering at the surface during her “great moment” of triumph. It is only when, as Herzog says, she had “beaten him so badly”

that her pride can be “fully satisfied” (17). Such language demonstrates that Herzog’s entire understanding of his relationship with Madeleine is now couched in violence, both physical and psychological; as Madeleine’s threat of violence works to emasculate him, his perception of an autonomous and powerful masculine identity is consequently reliant on his ability to use violence as well.

Thus, Herzog envisions himself fighting violence with violence, in this case his violent impulse arising largely in response to a perceived threat of feminine power, as he often wishes he had handled things with Madeleine more aggressively and violently. For instance, he broods over hypothetical scenarios in which he might have proven his strength and power over her:

Herzog...pictured what might have happened if instead of listening so intensely and thoughtfully he had hit Madeleine in the face. What if he had knocked her down, clutched her hair, dragged her screaming and fighting around the room, flogged her until her buttocks bled. What if he had! He should have torn her clothes, ripped off her necklace, brought his fists down on her head (10).

And though he eventually recoils from his own fantasy here, Herzog admits that “he was afraid he was really given in secret to this sort of brutality” (10) and later insists that he “did not flinch from these criminal fantasies” (155). In effect, his fantasy temporarily renders this brutality the ideal in his mind. In wishing that he could have deployed actual violence, Herzog reveals his desire to participate in a culture where aggression and masculinity go hand in hand. Moreover, this is a masculinity that is clearly defined in opposition to the feminine: only when he anticipates Madeleine’s violent streak does he acknowledge his own, perhaps in an extension of his observation that everyone around Madeleine, including himself, seems to adopt the qualities

she herself exudes. As he senses Madeleine's capability and desire to "strike a blow," he convinces himself that he too was "capable of killing her."

As if in an attempt to allow Herzog the opportunity to gain advantage over Madeleine through violent language, Bellow intensifies his protagonist's fantasies and visions, showing him to temporarily—and casually—embrace violence. Herzog declares, for instance, that: "while filled with horrible rage, he was able also to shave and dress, to be the citizen on the town for an evening of pleasure, groomed, scented, and his face sweetened for kisses" (155). As Herzog also admits openly to his lawyer Simkin, "There are times when I know I could look at Madeleine's corpse without pity" (214). Encouraged by Simkin's observation that Gersbach and Madeleine are the ones who, at least metaphorically, struck the first blow ("they tried to murder *you*," Simkin says), Herzog joins in this justification of violence as a retaliation against an emasculating problem and reasserts his belief that he is not only capable of but comfortable with the idea of murder. "I've tested it in my mind with a gun, a knife, and felt no horror, no guilt," he claims (214). Such assessments of his own latent violence will prove to be transitory, but for a brief time, Herzog believes himself to be the kind of man that Mailer fashions Rojack to be—capable of murdering someone and then simply going about his daily routine as though nothing had happened. He believes that this is the kind of masculine power, strength, and stoicism that he *should* be performing, and could enact if only he could commit the crime he imagines.

Though these fantasies are never enacted, Herzog's brief affair with the possibility of violence escalates before it falls apart. His appropriation of a violent ethic peaks when he travels to Chicago with the intent to kill Madeleine and Valentine, feeling completely vindicated in his intentions. "It's not everyone who gets the opportunity to kill with a clear conscience," he thinks, and insists that Madeleine and Valentine "had opened the way to justifiable murder. They

deserved to die. He had a right to kill them” (311). Exhibiting the language of exhilaration and release used by Mailer to describe murder in *An American Dream*, Bellow writes that Herzog “felt in his arms and in his fingers, and to the core of his heart, the sweet exertion of strangling—horrible and sweet, an orgiastic rapture of inflicting death” (312). He yearns to kill in the hopes of somehow healing himself and eradicating what has left him feeling humiliated and emasculated.

Yet Herzog’s complex views and overall ambivalence about violence are once again expressed via his musings on his personal and cultural history, through which he reveals a deeply felt aversion to several kinds of violence. Before embarking on his short-lived and ultimately defunct quest to murder Madeleine with his father’s gun (a weapon he knows his father had also never been able to shoot), Herzog attempts to derive some meaning from the violence of his historical past in an attempt to understand his attraction to violence in the present. In one of his many letters, for example, Herzog identifies himself as a survivor, and suggests that his recognition of the history that gives rise to this identification gives him a unique insight not only into modern society but also into violence specifically:

*To realize that you are a survivor is a shock. At the realization of such election, you feel like bursting into tears. As the dead go their way, you want to call to them, but they depart in a black cloud of faces, souls. They flow out in smoke from the extermination chimneys, and leave you in the clear light of historical success—the technical success of the West. Then you know with a crash of the blood that mankind is making it—making it in glory though deafened by the explosions of blood. Unified by the horrible wars, instructed in our brutal stupidity by revolutions.” (96)*

Embedded in this poetic reflection is a deeply critical view of more than one kind of violence—the violence of the Holocaust as well as the violence of war, even a war that finally ends the Nazi regime and leads to “historical success.” Here Herzog suggests that historical and technological advancement seem possible only through “explosions of blood,” and that humanity is only willing to come together in war and revolution. Herzog himself laments the losses of war and condemns its “brutal stupidity,” calling into question the Western success that seems to have emanated from both the individual and large-scale violence of the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of this reflection, the question remains: why in the wake of revelations like this does Herzog still contemplate violently murdering his wife and her lover? In part, it may be because this very history he contemplates also calls to mind the victimization of the Jewish people—indeed, any innocent people affected by the “crash of blood” that defines the modern age. This in turn prompts his refusal to be seen as the victim in his relationship with Madeleine (“I hate the victim bit,” he says at one point), a label that emasculates him and divests him of power and control (82).

Yet I would also argue that the above reflection on the Holocaust, war, and the cost of Western success also eventually serves to nudge Herzog out of his ambivalence, as it reminds him of his own dedication to an optimistic society based in a much more peaceful notion of brotherhood. After traveling to Madeleine’s home with violent intentions, Herzog sees Gersbach engage in a tender moment with his daughter, and immediately feels foolish for having even considered murder; “his intended violence turned into *theater*, into something ludicrous” (316). Though Herzog does not go through with his plan, his near-violent episode does elicit the recuperative qualities for which he was searching. He feels a sudden clarity akin to that which Rojack feels after killing Deborah, yet unlike Rojack, his clarity comes from *not* having

committed the crime. At the end of the day, he avoids sleep, afraid that “he might not be able to recover his state of simple, free, intense realization” (324). In contrast to his comment that humans seem to have been “unified” by violence, it is only when he *rejects* violence as a mechanism for the assertion of his masculine power that Herzog experiences a unification of his own fragmented self—a self that, in the end, is no longer refracted across various letters and disappointments. Ultimately, Herzog believes that from the consequences of revolutionary, wartime, and mass scale violence, humankind may have “learned something,” and likewise as he himself experiments with the possibility of interpersonal violence that he ultimately rejects, Herzog does learn a bit more about the kind of man he wants to be, deciding more definitively that this identity should be marked by nonviolence (96).

Herzog’s aim thus far has been to reconcile his belief in the construction of an individual self with his simultaneous belief in brotherhood. He wants to be what Jonathan Wilson has previously called a “self-creating figure,” working to maintain his individuality while also being a man “in a city” and “in mass” (Wilson 127). In the end, Herzog ultimately decides that “brotherhood is what makes a man human,” and that for him, this brotherhood does not entail violence against other men (333). His tone becomes more hopeful, and his criticism of the encroachments of an intrusive society is tempered by his belief that humanity is still by nature *good*. In Herzog’s opinion, human life is more complex than that presented by the existential theorists; rejecting what he believes to be their too heavy emphasis on nihilism and dread, Herzog chooses to invest confidence in others. In 1966 interview with Gordon Lloyd Harper for *Commentary*, Bellow himself shares a similar sentiment. As he says, “I seem to have asked in my books: How can one resist the controls of this vast society *without* turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion? I have asked, Are there other, more good-natured



forms of resistance and free choice?” (76). Bellow invests Herzog with the ability to discover that in fact there are these forms of resistance and choice, and Herzog chooses to define himself not through violence or vengeance nor through victimization, but by seeking the kind of companionship that he has triumphed under the banner of brotherhood for the majority of the novel. That this “brotherhood” is enacted through his final investment in a relationship with Ramona is even more significant, as it suggests, albeit subtly, that he and Ramona can live together as equals. This positive relationship and companionship between the sexes, however, is not replicated in Bellow’s later novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. There, Artur Sammler, a protagonist much older and more conservative than Herzog, also struggles to define himself against femininity, as well as against a racial other, and his narrative ends with a conclusion far less optimistic than that of Herzog.

## II.

Artur Sammler’s struggle to define and articulate his masculine identity presents a unique departure from most of the other protagonists I address in this project: as an older man in his seventies, he does not embark on the same kind of adventures of self discovery as do many of the younger male protagonists I discuss. Yet the similarities that do exist between *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and these other narratives, specifically in terms of the protagonists’ masculine anxieties, make this novel an interesting complement to the other works in this project, and an especially interesting addition to the study of masculinity in Bellow’s work. Like Herzog, Sammler too is searching for a way to articulate the many facets of his identity and his place as a man in modern society, and his reflections on masculinity are often encompassed by attempts to understand the nature of humanity. That is, he works to make sense of his environment by reflecting on his own

position in the world, which he often does through an examination of his gendered self. Moreover, like Herzog, Sammler favors contemplation over action; for instance, one thing he admires about H.G. Wells, whose biography he has been writing for years, is that Wells “did not demand the sacrifice of civilization...He did not feel disgraced by words” (194). Sammler’s goal is, in many ways, to emulate this model, and define himself through language—this is how (to draw from Sartre’s definition of existential identity formation) he “makes of himself” what he will be (22). For despite the subordination of action, a fundamental tenet of existentialism, Sammler’s journey still invokes existential categories in its focus on individualism, its recognition of an “other as a key factor in understanding the self,” and its emphasis on personal liberation—all of which, as I describe in more detail below, becomes particularly evident during scenes when themes of masculine identity also come to the fore.

As part of this existential project, Sammler too reckons with violence as he formulates his own views of gender, criticizing it even more sharply than Herzog does, but also recognizing its centrality, appeal, and occasional necessity in modern culture. He himself recalls the liberating sensation he achieved by using violence to reclaim a sense of autonomy after escaping from a concentration camp in Poland during the war, but juxtaposes this liberatory violence with the distorted individual violence that he feels has become the norm in America. As Sammler’s musings on violence are often connected to his reflections on gender, his masculine strife becomes intertwined with his own conflicted attitudes toward various modes of aggression. With this in mind, I argue here that Sammler’s own competing attitudes toward violence and aggression serve as primary obstacles in his existential struggle to define himself and locate his value as an aging man in modern society. Further, Sammler’s conflicted quest to understand and explain himself allows Bellow to criticize the centrality of violence in contemporary

constructions of masculinity in America. This embedded critique, however, does not encompass all of the problematic ways masculinity is defined in the narrative, as Sammler often defines masculine identity by negatively marking both femininity and blackness, thus reasserting an oppressive gendered and racial hierarchy that Bellow himself neglects to fully address.

The existential nature of Sammler's quest is introduced most clearly through his perception of himself as "other." Sammler views himself as a social outcast—an outsider in America as a result of his Jewish heritage, his history as a Holocaust survivor, his status as a Polish immigrant, and his age. As Bellow writes, Sammler "had had as much trouble in life as he wanted. A good deal of this, waiting for assimilation, would never be accommodated" (9).<sup>96</sup> While acknowledging that the prevailing maxims of his contemporary society are to "accept and grant that happiness is to do what most other people do" and not to "contradict your time," Sammler constantly resists the conformity he sees around him, believing that "the place of honor was outside" this society (69). Sammler thus situates himself as an outsider by insisting upon his own unique sense of "honor," an assumption that allows him to elevate himself above other men. As he reflects, "From a sense of deference, from age, from good manners, he sometimes affirmed himself to be *out* of it, *hors d'usage*, not a man of the times" (125). Yet this is not necessarily something he is willing to change; he expresses exasperation at his predicament, but rather than feeling ready to adopt the morals and behaviors of those around him, his criticisms suggest that he would rather the rest of the world live up to the code of honor he himself would proscribe. While in many ways this code is very different from Rojack's in *An American Dream*, the overall impetus is the same: to resist social conformity, to stand behind an individualized sense of honor, and to fashion a self that is based on those codes of honor.

Before embarking on a discussion and analysis of Sammler's more specific views on gender, it is important to parse out his unique ideas with regard to honor that he uses to judge other men against himself, since these ideas directly inform his notions about existential freedom and violence. While critical of conformity, and of anything that might compromise individual liberty, Sammler articulates a largely different view than that of Stephen Rojack or Cross Damon in terms of what society should look like. His model society is one of order rather than chaos, and it is often nostalgic in its criticism of the current generation (thus emphasizing his place as a man "hors d'usage"). This becomes particularly evident during Sammler's lecture at Columbia, where a student insults and humiliates Sammler for being out of touch. "Why do you listen to this effete old shit?" the student cries to the auditorium. "What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead" (42). This episode (drawn from Bellow's own experience while delivering a lecture at San Francisco State in 1968) only solidifies Sammler's sense of being a man out of use. He admits to feeling "severed" from society, "not so much by age as by preoccupations too different and remote" and of another time (43).

Adding to his sense of otherness is the fact that Sammler, though a proponent of liberty, also questions liberal intellectualism's attack on civilization "in the name of perfect instantaneous freedom" (34). In this way, his view of existential freedom is much more tempered than that of the other protagonists discussed thus far; though he values individuality and the opportunity to create oneself anew (he himself did this in many ways upon immigrating to America), Sammler believes more strongly that there should be limits to this freedom in order to preserve order and decency, criticizing the newly embraced "libidinous privileges" throughout society, "the right to uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions" (33). He recognizes that he is not one of the "anarchistic sons" of the century, a title

that Mailer might readily bestow on Rojack (219). Furthermore, even more desperately than Herzog, Sammler wants to preserve aspects of civilization that characters like Cross Damon or Stephen Rojack seek to destroy. As Sammler himself argues, “it is the strength to do one’s duty daily and promptly that makes saints and heroes” (87) and “a human being, valuing himself for the right reasons, has and restores order, authority” (45). Thus much of Sammler’s project—to articulate his goals, his identity, his place in society, and his role as a man—is informed by these more conservative notions of honor and order. Speaking to the plight arising from these alternate views and sense of otherness, Stephanie Halldorson has argued that while “Sammler’s initial heroic narrative of intellectual self-reliance has become distorted, it is not his place to bemoan but to re-create” (22). In his reflections on his own masculine identity, which is framed within the context of his concurrent reflections on gender, race, and age, Sammler seeks to re-create through language a self that is based in this order and honor, not only for himself but for society as well.

Sammler’s struggle to “re-create” is often informed by his views on violence. These views, as previously mentioned, are marked by conflict and complexity. Sammler expresses criticisms of violence, but does so for only particular kinds of violence; in fact, certain violences are not only attractive to Sammler, but often go unrecognized by him as modes of violence at all. For instance, Sammler recognizes violence during wartime to be horrifying on a large scale but has experienced it as personally liberating on an individual level. At the same time, he condemns interpersonal violence and aggression in the novel’s present day. Adding to this complexity is the fact that Sammler himself often asserts a verbal, misogynistic violence in his ongoing reflections on gender and race. As he voices these alternate views throughout the novel,

Sammler's ongoing reflections on what it means to be a man in society become defined by contradiction.

Sammler's complex relationship with violence, and the reasons for his embrace of certain violences as liberatory, dates back to his experience as a victim of Nazi brutality during World War II—an experience that contributes to his current existential struggle to understand not only himself but the absurdity of human life in general. Imprisoned in a Nazi death camp during the war, Sammler was shot along with a number of other Jewish prisoners. Though he watched his wife die and was nearly buried alive himself, Sammler miraculously survived and escaped. While hiding in a Polish forest, he encountered a German soldier who he immediately ambushed and killed. In retrospect, Sammler admits that:

To kill the man he ambushed in the snow had given him pleasure. Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy. You would call it a dark action? On the contrary, it was also a bright one. It was mainly bright. When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life... His heart felt lined with brilliant, rapturous satin. To kill the man and to kill him without pity, for he was dispensed from pity... When he shot again, it was less to make sure of the man than to try again for that bliss... Then he himself knew how it felt to take a life. Found it could be an ecstasy. (129-130)

This reflection suggests the kind of catharsis that stems from a deployment of violence, one similar to that experienced by Rojack in *An American Dream*. Though the soldier surrendered and begged for his life, Sammler recalls feeling no remorse; to him, killing the German soldier seems not only justified, but also affords him the chance to reclaim some of the autonomy, dignity, vitality, and humanity that he had lost in the concentration camp. Interestingly, it is here,

in the description of his embrace of violence, that Sammler expresses more self-assurance and confidence than at any other point in the novel—his strongest sense of himself tied to a single, life-affirming act of aggression.

In her discussion of war motif in Bellow and Mailer, Susan Glickman locates some key differences between Sammler and Rojack that speak to this particular episode. Glickman argues that both Bellow and Mailer use war as a “metaphor for the existential condition of man,” but claims that Sammler’s wartime experience “was the complete inversion of Rojack’s and reveals the other side of war” for “what is grand and visionary for Rojack is reduced to something mean and nasty by Mr. Sammler” (573). This particular contrast, however, does not seem entirely accurate, for in terms of their memories of *wartime* violence specifically, it is actually Sammler who views killing the German soldier as cathartic and “visionary,” while Rojack describes no such catharsis when recollecting the moment he killed an enemy soldier (this is saved for the aftermath of his murder of Deborah).<sup>97</sup> Moreover, while Sammler views certain aspects of modern society—and certainly of the war itself—as “mean and nasty,” his murder of the soldier is not among them; in fact, this is represented as a single moment of relief and clarity in the entirety of his wartime experience. Like Mailer, however, Bellow does not allow the clarity Sammler achieves from individual violence to preclude his criticisms of other violences.<sup>98</sup> For instance, Sammler’s tragic experience in the face of Nazi brutality makes him despise large-scale violence, even as he recognizes the cathartic and liberatory power violence might hold for the individual. He also calls the Germans just one example of the modern machine culture: “the aesthetic machine, the philosophic machine, the mythomaniac machine, the culture machine,” which contributes to a society that “demands mediocrity, not greatness” and certainly calls to mind Mailer’s study of a cancerous totalitarianism in the twentieth century (21).

Along with his criticisms, Sammler does acknowledge the historical power of violence—particularly the individual acts of violence that confer power specifically on men by suggesting courage and strength—though he remains puzzled and not entirely accepting of this idea. On one hand, he acknowledges that for centuries, observing that “killing was an ancient privilege,” and that even today contemporary society maintains aspects of this notion in its assumption that violence can bestow power and privilege. As he explains:

For the middle part of society there was envy and worship of this power to kill. How they loved the man strong enough to take blood guilt on himself. For them an elite must prove itself in this ability to murder. For such people a saint must be understood as one who was equal in spirit to the fiery twisting of crime in the inmost fibers of his heart...And now the idea that one could recover, or establish, one's identity by killing, becoming equal thus to any, equal to the greatest. A man among men knows how to murder. (133)

Sammler recognizes that society views a “man among men” as one who can wield violence effectively, and he recognizes that the accepted Western ideal of masculinity values carnage and measures strength by the ability to murder. Moreover, he notes, murder is an upper class privilege—in the middle and lower classes, what Sammler labels “blood crimes” mean very little unless they harbor the potential to alter one's place in society, as in a revolution (133). In the present, Sammler thinks, the “children of bourgeois civilization” are drawn to violence in their capacity as “revolutionists, as supermen, as saints, Knights of Faith” and that “even the best teased and tested themselves with thoughts of knife or gun” (61).

On the other hand, Sammler's tone as he summarizes this state of affairs is one of concern; indeed, as Bellow writes, it seems that “only Mr. Sammler was worried” about this



headlong rush into revolutionary violence as an assertion of strength and prowess (60). He “knew things about murder” that, Bellow suggests, those around him do not. By positioning his protagonist this way, Bellow implies that Sammler’s more reflective and hesitant views toward violent masculine posturing are the wiser ones.

Still, Sammler’s masculine identity remains riven by conflicting beliefs and a variety of anxieties: he feels himself to be an outsider because of his age, finding himself living in an era of sexual liberation whereby his own views of decency, order, and honor are rendered out of date. He also sees around him a glorification of violence that accompanies a new era in which freedom is sought at any cost, and observes that despite the changing times, violence still remains a marker of a particularly masculine strength and power. Thus, to fully reject an aggressive or violent assertion of individuality, as Sammler largely does, would also seem to be a surrender of power and autonomy in the modern age. Sammler seems to realize this and therefore his criticisms of revolutionary violence are accompanied by his own deployment of a more subtle but still problematic individual aggression, manifested in his belittlement of women and minorities.

As Sammler struggles with his own sympathy toward and criticism violence and aggression, his focus remains on the role of men in society—and his role as an aging, foreign, socially conservative man in particular. As a result, women often get left out of Sammler’s deliberations, and when they *are* considered, Sammler often reasserts gendered oppressions and divisions through misogynistic language that arises from his own notions about propriety and gender roles. For example, the depictions of women throughout the narrative, as seen through Sammler’s eyes, are rarely favorable. In contrast to Herzog, who waxes poetic about his various lovers’ loveable idiosyncrasies, women in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* are always talking incessantly,

acting inappropriately, and presenting a general nuisance. Sammler is often befuddled by the women in his life, from his nieces Margotte and Angela to his daughter Shula who, he says condescendingly, “like all the ladies perhaps, was needy” (35). As he also says of women more generally:

It was elementary among the tasks and problems of civilization...that some parts of nature demanded more control than others. Females were naturally more prone to grossness, had more smells, needed more washing, clipping, binding, pruning, grooming, perfuming, and training. (37)

Sammler reveals his discomfort with the unfamiliarity of the female body by declaring that its “grossness” and wildness needs more control than that of men. This uneasiness is further emphasized when Sammler accidentally walks in on his daughter taking a bath, and is haunted by the image of her naked body not so much out of embarrassment as out of revulsion.

Furthermore, Sammler frequently expresses dismay over what he believes to be his niece’s too-revealing attire and overly promiscuous lifestyle. Angela is “sensual womanhood without remission;” she makes no moves to hide her sexuality, and Sammler finds this unsettling and inappropriate (31). Angela’s appearance and behavior seem to him representative of the chaos arising from the sexual revolution of the age, whereby a loss of “femininity” and “self-esteem” has resulted from the feminist movement (31; 37). In depicting women this way, Sammler betrays his longing for a past time when gender could be easily categorized. In an attempt to reestablish for himself the order that these gender divisions previously provided for him, which would then allow him to fashion a more stabilized and concrete definition of masculinity, Sammler repeatedly distances himself from anything feminine, fashioning the female as irrational, grotesque, and beyond understanding.<sup>99</sup>

In this way, the violence that Sammler enacts through his relationships with women is performed through misogynistic language; it is violent in its insistent assertion of feminine strangeness and inferiority, which continues to reinforce oppositional definitions of gender that firmly place women in the category of unknown and undesirable largely because of their physicality. It is this tendency to diminish women by marking their physical and biological differences from men that Beauvoir criticizes in *The Second Sex*, and which she makes the foundation of her focus on the existential plight of women. “The body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world,” she admits. “But that body is not enough to define her as woman” (38). Yet this is the very thing Bellow depicts Sammler doing as he defines—and defines himself against—women: he fixates on their physical qualities as a means of judging their character and behavior.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, for this reason several critics have labeled Bellow’s work misogynistic.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, many critics have also used evidence from Bellow’s personal life to argue that Bellow himself is speaking through Sammler, articulating his own conservative views about the sexual revolution and Feminist movements of the 60s.<sup>101</sup> In response to this, Gloria Cronin reminds us, it is important not to conflate Bellow and Sammler too closely, particularly in terms of potentially misogynistic viewpoints. As she writes, “To see Bellow and Mr. Sammler simply as entirely unselfconscious ‘Western Civ’ male misogynists is to miss the whole issue of deconstructive self-irony which comes from that very real working space existing between Bellow and those fictional characters” (99). I agree that it is dangerous and often erroneous to conflate an author with his protagonist, yet I find it more difficult to locate the self-irony that Cronin observes here. While I see such irony manifested clearly in Roth, who undermines his protagonists’ misogyny with humor, Bellow does not apply the same sardonic,

mocking tone to subtly criticize the actions of his protagonist. I do agree, however, with Cronin's final conclusion that Sammler finds in himself a lack of "the 'feminine' ability to feel empathy for and connect with others" (108) and "the final outcome of Sammler's misogyny is his desire for total immunity from women" (117)—a concise statement of Sammler's flawed assumptions about gendered emotions and his ultimate fear of women.

In addition to defining himself against femininity, Sammler also defines himself against blackness—another broadly generalized category that for Sammler represents the "libidinous" nature assumed by a society bent on liberation. On one level, Sammler's encounter with the black pickpocket serves a narrative function quite similar to that of the encounter between Rojack and Shago in *An American Dream*, providing an alternate model of masculinity that Sammler finds both attractive and unsettling. The black "other" as Bellow represents him offers a mirror to Sammler, reflecting his own vulnerability, yet at the same time, he is similarly objectified as a catalyst that affirms Sammler's belief in racialized stereotypes, particularly with regard to the role of violence in the construction of black masculinity.

The allure of the black pickpocket is clear during Sammler's first encounter with him on the city bus. He is introduced as "a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat, dressed with extraordinary elegance" whose eyes were "perfect circles of gentian violent banded with lovely gold" (8-9). This outward appearance is strongly reminiscent of Shago, who is dressed in pink silk shirt, red velvet waistcoat: a "perfect recollection of a lord of Harlem standing at his street corner" (Mailer 183). Sammler also reiterates some similar stereotypes, associating blackness with an animalistic or primal nature by noting that: "this African prince or great black beast was seeking whom he might devour between Columbus Circle and Verdi Square" (17). Though Sammler insists that "he didn't hive a damn for the glamour, the style, the art of criminals" and

that “he didn’t have much use for the romance of the outlaw,” he also “had to admit that once he had seen the pickpocket at work he wanted very much to see the thing again” and that “illicitly—that is, against his own stable principles—he craved a repetition” (14). While he initially claims that he cannot place the origins or reasoning for this desire, he recognizes upon further reflection that it is in fact the sense of the exotic and illicit evoked by the pickpocket that inspires this fascination. Reflecting on the event, Sammler thinks that:

...horror, crime, murder, did vivify all the phenomena, the most ordinary details of experience. In evil as in art there was illumination...And while Sammler, getting off the bus, intended to phone the police, he nevertheless received from the crime the benefit of an enlarged vision. The air was brighter...The world, Riverside Drive, was wickedly lighted up. (14-15)

As in *Herzog*, Bellow depicts illumination and exhilaration arising from an episode that contains the possibility of violence. The “enlarged vision” Sammler experiences from observing the pickpocket arises from its unfamiliarity, as he gets a glimpse into a life—and a performance of masculinity—much different from his own.

Moreover, in the same way he is fascinated and repulsed by femininity, he also expresses fear of and disdain for what he believes the pickpocket represents. As Ethan Goffman has remarked, for Sammler, blackness “conveys the threat of violence...destabilizing the neat categories which order the world” and that because of hyper-sexuality often mapped onto the black male body, the “disruption of categories” represented by the sexual liberation of the Sixties is also linked in Sammler’s mind to blackness (711). In this way, Sammler’s attitude towards black men is similar to the one he expresses towards women, in that blackness (and all the sexual and violent characteristics Sammler associates with that blackness) also suggests chaos and

disorder. Stephanie Halldorson similarly argues that Sammler's fascination with black men *and* white women lies in "the fact that they have chosen to embody only the dark side of the human, believing it to be a primal cure or power" (88). And indeed, after discovering that his daughter Shula has stolen a valuable manuscript to give to him, Sammler compares her to the pickpocket and all the social chaos he represents.

In a racist reflection that associates amorphous qualities of "blackness" with primitive nature and hypersexuality that are depicted as infecting the nation, Sammler thinks:

From the black side, strong currents were sweeping over everyone....Millions of civilized people wanted oceanic, boundless, primitive, beckfree nobility, experienced a strange release of galloping impulses, and acquired the peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone. (149)

Here Shula's behavior is not only represented as inappropriate because she has committed a crime, but because she has approximated behavior that Sammler deems to be both masculine and black. In this way, Sammler's definitions of gender not only remain divided, perpetuating a dangerous binary, they become racialized and racist—sexual freedom is "sexual niggerhood" and the "black side" is defined by primal and violent action. Sammler's language throughout serves to indicate his discomfort with the current generation's definition of freedom, which includes a sexual, gendered, and racial liberation that Sammler conflates under one banner of chaotic and primitive behavior and that he views as regression rather than progression. While I would not go so far as to say that Sammler's viewpoint is Bellow's, here too there remains little evidence here that Bellow criticizes his protagonist in the same way he does so in *Herzog*, by humorously mocking that earlier protagonist's own statements and positions. Like Sammler himself,

Bellow's authorial voice only recognizes Sammler's views only as out of date—not as restrictive or oppressive.

The “disruption of categories” Sammler attributes to certain racialized and gendered identities is manifested again during his second encounter with the pickpocket, a confrontation grounded more firmly in an act of sexual violence, and one that more directly speaks to the masculinities with which Sammler engages throughout the novel. This episode provokes in Sammler a more visceral reaction to the sexuality of the pickpocket that emphasizes his fascination with the man's physical, masculine presence. When the pickpocket observes Sammler watching him, he follows Sammler off the bus, traps him, and exposes himself to Sammler, who “was required to gaze at this organ” under an unuttered but strongly felt threat of violence. Yet as Bellow writes, for Sammler “no compulsion would have been necessary. He would in any case have looked” (49). Sammler, of course, feels compelled to look under the threat of violence, but also as a result of his clear fascination with the physically intimidating model of masculinity before him, a model which seems to Sammler to represent a masculine power and authority well beyond his own. After this encounter, Sammler recalls Schopenhauer's observation that “the organs of sex are the seat of the Will.” And as Sammler notes, “The thief in the lobby agreed. He took out the instrument of the Will. He drew aside not the veil of Maya itself but one of its forehangings and showed Sammler his metaphysical warrant” (191). The sexual capital of the black man is the foundation for a particular model of masculinity that is out of reach for Sammler, and represents an individual power Sammler desires yet also condemns as part of what is wrong with contemporary society.

While this scene invokes stereotypes of black masculinity, and suggests that Sammler adheres to the myths surrounding the racialized masculinity of black men versus white men, it

also provokes in Sammler a study of his own masculinity as well as that of the men around him. For example, after his second encounter with the pickpocket, Sammler makes what he calls an “unavoidable” comparison between the criminal and Wharton Horricker, Angela’s boyfriend, also a physically imposing and impressively dressed figure. As he says, “This cult of masculine elegance must be thought about. Something important, still nebulous, about Solomon in all his glory versus the lilies of the field” (66). In making this reference, Sammler alludes to the New Testament passage in which Jesus criticizes material wealth.<sup>102</sup> In light of Sammler’s other criticisms of contemporary society, we might take this reference for his own criticism as well. However, the “nebulosity” surrounding this reflection suggests that Sammler also realizes that cult of masculine elegance still wields power, and is therefore magnetic even for him. That is, as with his comment that “a man among men knows how to murder,” Sammler’s comments on the outward appearance and performance of a particular kind of imposing masculine “elegance” indicates his acknowledgement that this performance represents a contemporary ideal of manhood. Sammler’s detachment from this figure allows him to criticize this brand of masculine posturing, yet his distance from it also emphasizes once again his feelings of being an outsider in his own masculinity. His reference to a “cult” of masculine elegance suggests that he feels himself to be on the perimeter of a group of men who have bonded together over a shared performance of manhood, to which Sammler is not privy.

The final encounter between Sammler and the black pickpocket—what might be considered the novel’s climactic moment—upends Sammler’s notions of blackness in certain ways. Here, as Joshua Charlson states, “the precariousness of the black man’s power is revealed,” which threatens to undermine all of Sammler’s previous notions about what a commanding, seemingly unshakeable model of masculinity would look like (535). The power of a dominant



masculinity here is not metaphorically passed on to Sammler as it was passed to Rojack through the transference of Shago's umbrella, as it is not Sammler himself who usurps the power of the pickpocket; however, Sammler does witness a similar weakening of the myth of violent masculinity he himself has mapped onto blackness.

On his way to visit Elya Gruner, his nephew and financial provider, Sammler comes across his acquaintance, Feffer, who has, like Sammler, been "seen seeing" the pickpocket. Caught taking a photograph of the pickpocket, Feffer is now fighting with (and losing to) the pickpocket, refusing to turn over the camera with the incriminating film. Once again, Sammler is overcome with fascination at the appearance of the pickpocket. He observes:

...the Negro's strength—his crouching, squeezing, intense animal pressing-power, the terrific swelling of the neck and the tightness of the buttocks as he rose on his toes.

In straining alligator shoes! In fawn-colored trousers! With a belt that matched his necktie—a crimson belt! How consciousness was lashed by such a fact! (263).

Here again is a reference to "the cult of masculine elegance," which Sammler finds alluring and strangely powerful—and in fact the pickpocket has mesmerized an entire audience, who stand frozen in front of the spectacle. While the silent crowd looks on, Sammler begs anyone to help break up the fight, but he soon realizes that people who might be willing to lend a hand "did not exist" and that "no one would do anything" (262). This lack of the very brotherhood that Herzog had also called for makes Sammler feel more alone and outcast than ever; he admits to feeling "extremely foreign—voice, accent, syntax, manner, face, mind, everything foreign" (262). In large part, this foreignness arises from his sense that everyone watching the fight is participating in and condoning the violence of the pickpocket, for unlike Sammler, who is old, frail, and cries

out for help in a foreign accent, the pickpocket cuts an imposing figure, one that asserts masculine strength and power that no one is willing to contest.

Witnessing the crowd's participation in this violent performance, Sammler is suddenly shaken out of his own ambivalence, rejecting his own fascination and expressing horror at the fight instead. He asks his son-in-law Eisen, also a witness to the fight, to step in and end the altercation; however, rather than breaking up the fight, Eisen accelerates it, savagely beating the pickpocket with nothing less than a bag of ancient Dead Sea Medallions he had been carrying. Sammler is disgusted at Eisen's violence but Eisen, on the other hand, is "amused at Sammler's ludicrous inconsistency" with regard to aggression, and says: "You can't hit a man like that just once. When you hit him you must really hit him. Otherwise he'll kill you. You know. We both fought in the war" (266). Eisen, in this reference to the war and to Sammler's own act of wartime violence, taps into their shared history to suggest that they—particularly as Jewish men—must fight back or be victimized, in this way condoning the formulation of a violent or militant identity through his act of violence. Considering the time period in which Bellow was writing this novel, Eisen's militancy might also be said to represent a newly publicized kind of Jewish identity fostered in the wake of the Six Day War, during which the Israeli soldier was glorified and romanticized.<sup>103</sup> Yet what Bellow also wants to convey is that Eisen's is a warped militancy: he is not out for justice, but for blood. His violence is for violence's sake—to prove his own strength—not to end a war, achieve peace, or establish brotherhood. And it is this distorted violence that Sammler, now horrified, rejects. Sammler is "sick with rage at Eisen" (268) and his witnessing of the violence Eisen inflicts upon the pickpocket is "the worst thing yet" (265).

Reflecting upon the violence of this encounter, Sammler comes to see himself in the vulnerability of the black pickpocket, in what Ethan Goffman has called a “moment of identification between Jew and black” that serves as the culmination of a “counternarrative of terror inflicted upon marginalized peoples” (706).<sup>104</sup> As Sammler watches Eisen beat the pickpocket, he is troubled not only by the brutality he witnesses, but by the overturning of his preconceived notions of what he views to be a pinnacle of masculinity. Sammler still believes that “the black man was a megalomaniac” and “probably a mad spirit” but now he also sympathizes with him, thinking: “How much he would have done to prevent such atrocious blows!” (268). This sympathy prompts a refiguration of his own sense of masculinity, one that works *against* that violent and aggressive image to which he had initially been reluctantly attracted.

Bellow actually introduces the connection between Sammler and the pickpocket before Eisen begins his brutal attack, drawing comparison’s to each man’s life on the periphery and the physical powerlessness with which they are both left. Sammler’s, of course, is a different kind of weakness:

He was old. He lacked physical force....Sammler was powerless. To be powerless was death...This was not himself. It was someone—and this struck him—poor in spirit. Someone between the human and not-human states, between content and emptiness, between full and void, meaning and not-meaning, between this world and no world. (264)

Sammler’s sense of his own powerlessness and weakness is mirrored by the weakness of the pickpocket, who during the confrontation with Eisen is rendered vulnerable and therefore more human. The strength, the glamour, and the violence that Sammler had used to characterize the

pickpocket's masculinity are not necessarily made undesirable, yet the myths of black masculine identity—the unwavering sexuality and strength—are weakened in the face of the pickpocket's inability to physically defend himself. Sammler, in his horror at the complete lack of empathy around him, can for a moment identify with the pickpocket who, up to this point, he had only feared.

Yet while Sammler is stricken at the final climactic moments by the breakdown of a myth of masculinity that he himself had participated in creating, he is not entirely able to break out of the conservative and oppositional definitions of gender he has carried with him for most of the narrative. Though he claims that he no longer feels “any prejudice about perversion, about sexual matters,” his behavior towards his niece Angela in the final pages of the novel belie this assertion (270). As he waits in the hospital with Angela to see Elya, who is quite literally on his death bed, Sammler still reiterates his disdain for his niece's behavior, criticizing her attire and warning her not to hurt and shame her father in his last hours with what he perceives to be an inappropriate display. “Oh yes, I know I may be out of order, with bad puritanical attitudes from the sick past which have damaged civilization so much,” Sammler says, though as evidenced by his mocking, mimicking tone as he describes the way he is seen by others, he clearly has no intention of reform (274). Sammler's investment in his idealized code of behavior, particularly with regard to gendered behavior, remains constant and largely unquestioned until the end of the novel.

Though Angela is hurt and humiliated by his criticisms of her at the hospital, Sammler attributes her anger to her dissatisfaction with the men in her life. Looking back on the narrative, however, it becomes evident that Sammler himself is equally unsatisfied with all of the models of masculinity that have been presented to him. All of the men Sammler knows are rendered unappealing in some way—Eisen, the pickpocket, Feffer, his nephew Wallace—even Elya, who

is revealed to have performed some under-the-table abortions for the Mafia. Significantly, Sammler's ultimate dissatisfaction is articulated through his disdain for lawlessness and violence: he recognizes vulnerability in the pickpocket only after the man has been violently attacked; he confirms the ridiculousness of Wallace's behavior when Wallace, repeatedly reckless with his life, crashes a plane; he is embarrassed at Feffer's inability to back away from a fight; he is horrified at Eisen's violence against the pickpocket; he is unsettled by the discovery of Elya's participation in mafia abortion, which he also believes to be a kind of violence.

Ultimately, then, Sammler rejects violence as a mechanism for asserting masculinity, but this does not leave him with an alternative masculine ideal, or even a sense of his own masculine power. He is left instead with the sense of chaos, disorder, fury that has plagued him throughout the novel, but the ending of the novel suggests that he is coming to terms with this chaos. After witnessing the fight between Feffer and the pickpocket, and immediately afterward being confronted with Angela's "superfemininity," Sammler claims that his vision of the world was one of "heightened clarity," and is "wickedly illuminated" in the same way it was after he had watched the pickpocket on the bus (271). In the wake of Elya's death, Sammler realizes that what he wants is to simply make it through all of the "clowning" and uncertainty of life as Elya had done (286). In other words, while Bellow has set out here to work through some of the mysteries of existence, the only truth that he allows Sammler to uncover is that "the sun may shine, and be a blessing, but sometimes shows the fury of the world" (271).

## CHAPTER 4

### Desire, Violence, and Masculine Anxiety in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* & *Another Country*

In his 1985 essay “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” James Baldwin says of American masculinity: “There are few things under heaven more difficult to understand or, when I was younger, to forgive” (821). The anxiety and resentment towards ambiguous and conflicted definitions of masculinity that Baldwin makes reference to here also comprise a central theme in his fictional works, particularly those published in the 1950s and 60s. The subject of masculinity in crisis is expressed most overtly in two of his most controversial texts: *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962).<sup>105</sup> Both narratives recount the struggles of male protagonists who work to establish a sense of specifically masculine power in the face of a culture that seems to deny them the privilege to do so, by nature of the fact that they do not fit the definition of what Michael Kimmel has called the “complete” American male who is “straight, white, middle class, native-born” (4). The frustration expressed by Baldwin’s characters over an inability to meet the requirements of a “complete” American masculinity is not, at least on the surface, entirely unique; as I have already demonstrated, Wright, Mailer and Bellow fashion characters who also grapple with the prohibitions and restrictions they feel prevent them from achieving this ideal. However, one of the unique aspects of Baldwin’s work is that his male protagonists are “othered,” marginalized, and emasculated as a result of not only their race but also of their sexual preferences, as both novels focus on the impact of same sex desire and interracial romance on individual and cultural perceptions of masculinity and, in *Another Country* especially and *Giovanni's Room* more subtly, the implications for *black* masculinity in particular.

Central to this discussion is my belief that the dilemma of being “othered” as it is represented in these texts highlights the ways in which the gendered struggle of these protagonists is an existential one.<sup>106</sup> Under Sartre’s existential rubric, the other is necessary in order for a person to “realize fully all the structures of [his or her] being” (222). It is the gaze of the other, however, that also prompts a man to view himself as an object, and it is the freedom of the other that “confers limits” on his own freedom (526).<sup>107</sup> In response to this very judgment passed on them by an Other, the men in both *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country* sense that, in the eyes of others, they lack value—a value that I would suggest is particularly gendered. As black men (or, as in the case of Giovanni, men ambiguously racialized as non-white), these characters already experience an existential and gendered crisis similar to that articulated by Beauvoir—a similarity that, as I have previously noted, Beauvoir points out herself. Like the women around whom Beauvoir centers her study, these marginalized men suffer oppression at the hands of a white “master class” whose goal is to relegate them to “the place chosen for them” (xxix); however, unlike these women, their masculinity is questioned as a consequence of their race.<sup>108</sup> Further adding to the masculine strife that contributes to this existential crisis are the same-sex desires expressed by Baldwin’s protagonists, which serve to feminize them in the eyes of society and preclude them from the realm of manhood defined by a heteronormative culture. That is, in addition to their struggle to reconcile cultural notions of blackness with masculinity, their sexuality also results in their being “marked” by society as feminine, instilling within them a sense of the “lack” that Beauvoir locates as a defining insecurity of women.

This idea of an existential struggle unique to American identity formation is alluded to by Baldwin himself in an essay entitled “Princes and Powers,” published in *Nobody Knows My Name*, in which Baldwin recounts the proceedings at The Conference of Negro-African Writers

and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956. In this essay, Baldwin admits his realization that what distinguished the black population in America from that of Africa was that blacks in America “had been born in a society, which...in a sense which has nothing to do with justice or injustice, was free. It was a society, in short, in which nothing was fixed and we had therefore been born to a greater number of possibilities, wretched as these possibilities seemed at the instant of our birth” (147). This reflection on existential possibility and anguish, written almost simultaneously with the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, points to Baldwin's preoccupation with a distinctly existential crisis of African-Americans at the time, particularly that of African-American *men*. Though Baldwin has been accused of both betraying his own race and of ignoring race altogether (an accusation that I will further describe and refute in my discussion of *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* below), his treatment of the existential struggle in the face of a “greater number of possibilities” in America is, in fact, focused acutely on the connection between race and masculinity, particularly the way that race impedes one's sense of masculine power.

With this in mind, I would argue that we might conceive of each protagonist's project in these works as maintaining a goal of transcendence that, to use Sartre's language, involves a being's “own surpassing toward what it lacks” (89). In both of the novels in question, each man's masculine identity is contingent on his body, yet it is the body that also seems to hinder this masculine construction. In other words, by interpreting his own non-normative desires as emasculating, each of the male protagonists effectively maps a “lack” onto his own body. This connection between the internalization of racial and sexual inferiority can be illuminated by Sartre's discussion of the limits of the body to one's freedom, in which he notes that “race, class, nationality, physiology—all as indicated or revealed by the attitudes of Others—is reliant on the body as the necessary condition of the existence of a world and as the contingent realization of



this condition” (338). I would suggest that the protagonists’ existential goal, then, is to transcend the situation in which they find themselves oppressed and emasculated by the various marks of their bodies, to reconstruct that sense of gendered value for themselves, and to access that freedom that will allow them to define themselves as men *and* homosexuals *and* black.

I would also suggest that this existential journey is complicated by the role of violence in each novel, and that violence as a trope in both of these works provides key insights into Baldwin’s own critiques of masculine posturing. Throughout the course of this existential journey, David and Giovanni of *Giovanni’s Room* and Rufus and Vivaldo of *Another Country* come upon seemingly insurmountable obstacles to which they respond with acts of violence, from suicide to murder to misogyny—violences that are directly tied to this masculine strife, and are enacted largely as a result of feelings of emasculation. However, I argue that in contrast to a work such as *An American Dream*, the liberatory nature of this violence in Baldwin’s work is more explicitly called into question within these texts. In fact, at this point in time, Baldwin had already been criticizing the connection between masculinity and violence for years. In “Preservation of Innocence” (1949), for example, Baldwin states the following:

In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at man’s estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected, whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust. (23)

Baldwin applies this same criticism towards a violent masculine ethic in his fiction, creating protagonists who view violence as necessary and liberating; however, even as they deploy violence as a mechanism for escaping the confines of their situations, Baldwin fashions them in

such a way that it is evident to readers—and eventually, to the protagonists themselves—that this violence will not free them from their individual oppressions. Moreover, these protagonists lack the sense of euphoria or rebirth in the aftermath of violence, as experienced by protagonists like Cross Damon, Stephen Rojack, or (as I will highlight in Chapter 5) Roth’s Peter Tarnopol.

In these ways, Baldwin’s views align with Arendt’s position that violence as a “method for living and acting” is “irrational,” as he fashions protagonists who also anticipate her warning that while “violence appears where power is in jeopardy...left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (56). In sum, violence here is also a tool these men use to cope with feelings of emasculation; it is a reaction to their gendered struggles, caused (to draw once again from Arendt’s language, which itself invokes existentialist tenets of anguish and immanence) by “severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world” (83). It is not, however, used as a way to justify individual progress or liberation, but as a last resort, indicative of a despair and realization of the inability to construct a masculine identity that can be somehow legitimated by society.

## I.

*“At bottom, what I learned was that the male desire for a male roams everywhere, avid, desperate, unimaginably lonely, culminating often in drugs, piety, madness or death.”*

—James Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood.”

Conflicting notions of masculinity, race, homosexual desire, and violence intersect in *Giovanni’s Room*, a narrative that recounts the brief and tenuous but intense relationship between David, an American tourist in France, and Giovanni, a bartender he meets while there. The physical and romantic nature of the relationship is only somewhat out of the ordinary for both men: David confesses that he has slept with a man before, and Giovanni, though he was previously married, expresses a comfortable openness to relationships with both men and women.

However, the difficulties of this relationship, particularly the fact that David is engaged to be married and is also intensely reluctant to relinquish the social privilege his heterosexuality affords him, ultimately renders the affair disastrous. As a white, middle-class, American male, David has the tools to conform to that “complete” picture of American masculinity described by Kimmel, but his sexual desires place him more firmly on the margins of this ideal of manhood. His ultimate rejection of this nonconformist desire in favor of a more socially acceptable lifestyle, coupled with what seems to be a paradoxical blend of self-loathing and narcissism, leads not only to the unraveling of his own life, but also to Giovanni’s death. By structuring the narrative in this way, punctuating the novel with a supreme act of violence, Baldwin is able to criticize both the heteronormative masculinist ethic that prevents David from embracing his sexual identity, the violence David and Giovanni use in response to their inability to be accepted as men outside of this ideal, and the violence propagated by a society that is also unwilling to incorporate homosexual desire into its definitions of “acceptable” gendered behavior.

Furthermore, I would also suggest that Baldwin’s novel, perhaps unwittingly, offers a more subtle critique of the absence of race in contemporary discussions of homosexuality, a criticism that Baldwin will expand further in *Another Country*. While some critics have argued that *Giovanni’s Room* is a “raceless” novel due to the fact that its main characters are white, I would argue that in fact race is central to the novel, and that the very *absence* of a black protagonist in this early work—and specifically, the absence of a black gay protagonist—serves as a commentary on the way in which homosexuality and blackness were often seen to be incompatible.<sup>109</sup> While I agree with the assessments posed by some critics that Baldwin is critiquing white hegemony here, I also believe that the absence of the black homosexual man in *Giovanni’s Room* points more to the fact that black masculinity itself is stereotypically marked as

heterosexual by both white and black culture.<sup>110</sup> In order to explore the existential struggle a man might face when realizing his same-sex desire, Baldwin eliminated race as a complicating factor. In fact, when asked by *The Paris Review* in 1984 to comment on his decision to leave black characters out of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin replied:

I certainly could not possibly have—not at that point in my life—handled the other great weight, the “Negro problem.” The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it. I might do it differently today, but then, to have a black presence in the book at that moment, and in Paris, would have been quite beyond my powers.

In light of this, I suggest that Baldwin's goals in making David and Giovanni his main protagonists are twofold: on the one hand, he criticizes the tendency to de-masculinize both blackness and homosexuality in the interest of preserving a white heteronormative masculine “ideal,” while also demonstrating via silence the tendency to deny the existence of a black homosexual masculinity.<sup>111</sup>

Early on, David's desire is pitted against his fear of failing at a type of manhood that is everywhere preached as the only option. David's father, who says that all he wants is for David to “grow up to be a man,” has long encouraged this masculine ideal (231). As he clarifies more specifically: “When I say a man... I don't mean a Sunday school teacher,” inferring that the passive and peaceful qualities associated with the stereotypically feminine position of a Sunday school teacher are not the characteristics of manhood he desires for his son (231). David's father subscribes to the notion that a man should live a life of action, should work in a more masculine job (whatever that may be), and that he should marry and raise a family, thus reinforcing a

divided, binary system of gendered identity and setting up a foil for Baldwin's critique of that system.

David embodies the consequences of this imposed ideal of manhood, experiencing a sense of shame whenever his desires contradict the image of the triumphed heterosexual masculinity. When he describes his first sexual encounter with a man, for example, he remembers:

My own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But above all, I was suddenly afraid... That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. (225-226)

As a result of this fear of being feminized by his alternative sexual desires ("I was ashamed," he states matter-of-factly), David seeks escape (227). Later in life, David expresses an awareness of how this flight was a manifestation of his self-deception regarding his sexual identity and desire, and in admitting as much he highlights the self-deluding nature of the masculinity he had been performing until he met Giovanni.

This former masculinity was based in virtues of willpower and restraint, which translate later to David's realization that he has ultimately been denying another, perhaps more honest, masculine self.<sup>112</sup> As he realizes,

People who believe they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all...but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey's bed, came to. I had decided to

allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well—by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion. (235-236)

What David is describing here is, essentially, bad faith. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that a man who behaves in bad faith hides the truth from himself. It is “an escape” that is “not restricted to denying the qualities which I possess, to not seeing the being which I am. It attempts also to constitute myself as being what I am not” (65; 67). David’s own masculinity is created, then, in a state of perpetual escape from himself; he chooses to fashion himself into a man that he is not. While this exemplifies an exercise in existential choice, David’s self-deception will prevent him from achieving true self-knowledge or transcendence of his situation.

Moreover, the difficulty David faces in achieving the masculine role that has been socially assigned to him points to the impossibility of this imposed ideal. And here especially, Baldwin’s relative silence on the issue of race points to the fact that if David, as a white, American born, middle-class man cannot achieve this, then the possibilities for meeting this false “ideal” would be twice as impossible for the American black man. In sum, by fashioning the character of David as a white man, Baldwin can exemplify the struggle to incorporate same-sex desire into a universal idea of masculinity, while also demonstrating that this “universal” itself is marked as white.

Much of David’s masculine anxiety is centered on his struggle with this aforementioned masculine ideal, the strictures of which he attempts to escape (both figuratively and literally) by traveling to Paris.<sup>113</sup> However, his time in France only serves to further augment this anxiety. It is in Paris that he meets Hella, to whom he proposes marriage—though in retrospect, he admits that she was simply someone with whom it “would be fun to have fun with” and confesses that

he is not sure that she “ever really meant more than that to me” (222). In a comment that both exhibits the tenuousness of his relationship with Hella and foreshadows its demise, David remarks that his time with her in Paris was “being acted out under a foreign sky, with no-one to watch, no penalties attached—it was this last fact which was our undoing, for nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom” (222). Here David makes a clear reference to his plight as an existential problem: it is his freedom in Paris to pursue his own desires, and the anguish he faces at his choices, that is their (and his) “undoing.” When Hella retreats to Spain to consider David’s proposal, leaving him alone and nearly broke in Paris, he contacts Jacques, an old acquaintance, who takes him to the bar where David first meets Giovanni. When Jacques suggests that David ask Giovanni to join them for a drink, David initially refuses, fearing that he will give off the impression that he harbors a desire for the bartender. After all, David has not come to Paris to find a place where his same-sex desires might be accepted, but rather to run from them. Jacques scoffs at David’s reaction, replying: “I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that...*immaculate* manhood which is your pride and joy” (244). Jacques’s emphasis on the adjective indicates his disdain of the heterosexual masculine posturing that David attempts to maintain, despite his evident attraction to Giovanni, and his remark demonstrates not only David’s own obvious insecurity and conflicted sense of self, but also the fact that his notion of an “immaculate” manhood is in fact a false one.

Still, David believes he can adhere to this masculine ideal by the power of choice. David’s trust in his existential freedom to choose—specifically, to choose to be a man who is accepted by society, and thus imbued with the power such a society bestows on heteronormative masculinity—is highlighted during his first conversation with Giovanni. During this exchange, Giovanni criticizes the American mentality, which he believes assumes too much control (“as

though with enough time and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place”)—when in actuality, as Giovanni puts it, “the big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn’t care” (247-248). David, championing the power of existential freedom, argues that all people—not only Americans—have the power to control their lives. “Time’s not water and we’re not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat,” he replies. Giovanni, finding David’s response humorously naive, replies, “To choose!...Ah, you really are an American. *J’adore votre enthousiasme*” (248). This conversation points to two problems with David’s assessment of existential freedom. Giovanni, as a dark-skinned, lower class Italian, who as a result of his connection to the homosexual bar owner Guillaume is identified with a gay community, does not have the same luxuries as David when it comes to choosing his lot in life. Additionally, his amusement points to the limitations of choice in general for, as David will discover, one cannot necessarily “choose” the object of one’s desires—though one can choose to ignore these desires and live in a state of self-deception and bad faith.

Though David does eventually give in to his feelings for Giovanni, their relationship is troubled by shame and fear that feed his masculine anxiety. Jacques observes this the very start of David and Giovanni’s flirtation: “You have the feeling it may not be safe,” he says to David. “You are afraid it may change you” (266). And indeed, David’s fear that his sense of a masculine self will be permanently altered—or lost—by succumbing to his feelings for another man is the perpetual cloud that hovers over their relationship. He worries that his desire for Giovanni has awakened a “beast” inside of him which, when Giovanni is gone, will lead David to follow “all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, and into what dark places?” (288). More specifically, David fears becoming a man like Jacques or Guillaume, relegated to what Baldwin depicts as a subculture surrounded by shame and secrecy—a life of “dark avenues”



and “dark places.” Moreover, for David, raised as he has been in a home and a country that privileges white heteronormativity and refuses to recognize same-sex desire as a viable characteristic of manhood, a romance with Giovanni can be considered a crime. In fact, as David explains, the two men would be considered at the very least an aberration in France as well, believed to harbor what the French would call “*les gouts particuliers*”—men who, while not considered criminals in France, “are nevertheless regarded with extreme disapprobation by the bulk of the populace” (343). Therefore, he foresees himself not only as lacking in a certain prescribed manhood, but rendered criminal by this lack as well.

While Baldwin’s presentation of David’s strife invites sympathy, embedded in this characterization is also a critique of David’s simmering rage over his own condition, and his own internalized homophobia that he projects towards others—both forms of latent violence that have arisen from his immersion in white heteronormative ideals of masculinity. For example, the prejudices that David has internalized with regard to his homosexuality, and which prevent him from transcending his self-deception and incorporating his desires into a new definition of masculinity, are evident in his own behavior toward other gay men in the French Quarter. Even as David begins his relationship with Giovanni, he exhibits what might today be called an “effemephobia” by way of his intolerance of the “fairies” in the Quarter, who announce their homosexuality with flamboyant dress and behavior. David finds these men, as he finds the effeminate bar owner Guillaume, disgusting: he compares “*les folles*” to a number of baser animals, claiming that “they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard” (241). In a particularly disturbing analogy, David notes:

I confess that this other grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomach's. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings. (241)

David not only emasculates homosexuality here, but also dehumanizes it. In describing this manifestation of homosexual identity as a bizarre and grotesque phenomenon that is somehow removed from the human experience, David all but proves his inability to envision a way in which same sex desire can be figured as a characteristic of masculinity.

This inability to reconcile his manhood with his same-sex desire leads to a persistent self-loathing, and highlights the ways in which David's actions contradict his previously expressed belief in the power of existential choice as a mechanism for ignoring these desires. As Jacques reminds him, however, David can also exercise his freedom to choose *not* to see his relationship with Giovanni the way he perceives *les folles*. "If you think of [those times with Giovanni] as dirty, then they *will* be dirty," Jacques reminds him. "They will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe" (267). Yet David cannot let go of his shame, and cannot resolve to leave behind the restrictive definition of manhood that would have him marry Hella and return to America to raise a family like any "normal" man would do. In other words, he cannot transcend himself as he is seen through the eyes of others—under Sartre's framework, he only exists for himself "as a body known by the Other," unable to surpass this body toward a future situation, thus ensuring that his masculinity remains perpetually in a state of crisis, his freedom limited, and his true sexual desires unrealized (Sartre 351).<sup>114</sup>

The literal space of Giovanni's room, which is frequently compared to a kind of prison, symbolizes this sense of entrapment. The cramped room has only two small windows, "against which the courtyard malevolently pressed, encroaching day by day, as if it had confused itself with a jungle" (289). The more time David and Giovanni spend in this room, the more isolated and closed off they feel from the outside world, and the less it seems they will ever be able to enter that world *as men* while they are still together. In light of this, David perceives his task to be "to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life" (291). David recognizes that he must acknowledge their situation, give himself wholeheartedly to his desire and his love for Giovanni if he is truly going to give them both "a better life." However, once again, a fear the social rejection that he will face in walking away from an image of manhood under which he has been raised prompts David to walk away from the desire that might, in fact, truly define the self that he searches for in his existential quest.

While the novel is narrated from David's point of view, often rendering Giovanni simply an object of his desire and cause of his strife, Giovanni is in fact a pivotal character, and integral to Baldwin's criticisms of modern masculinity. Giovanni's masculine crisis also arises from his feeling of being trapped by his body, prohibited by his physical desires from achieving a socially acceptable version of manhood. Though Giovanni initially seems more able to reconcile his desires with his masculinity, it becomes evident that he too feels confined by his body, and the regulations posed upon it from the outside. "Me, I want to escape," he says to David early on. "*Je veux m'évader*—this dirty world, this dirty body. I never wish to make love again with anything more than the body" (238). Giovanni, in his desire to escape being defined by the body, exhibits a central existential dilemma; however, by seeking to escape or deny his physicality—rather than surpass or transcend it—he risks living the life of bad faith that David also lives.<sup>115</sup>

His desire to reject his sexual identity altogether, to deny his body by escaping it rather than recognizing it as an existential “obstacle” on his path to transcendence, contributes in part to his eventual depression and demise.

Yet before his death, Giovanni serves another important function in the novel, acting as the catalyst for the destabilization of David’s gendered identity and a voice for Baldwin’s own critique of rigid gender norms. Once, for example, Giovanni tells David he has found in him “a lover who is neither man nor woman, nothing that I can know or touch” (334). This notion of an identity that transcends the limiting gender binary is, I would argue, one of Baldwin’s key hopes.<sup>116</sup> Baldwin here seems to anticipate such gender theorists as Ann Fausto-Sterling and Judith Butler, both of whom discuss the problems and limitations inherent within a fixed two-gender system, in which heterosexuality is made to be the norm and the whole person is often subsumed within one’s gendered identity.<sup>117</sup> Thus, what Giovanni proposes in many ways anticipates the alternate possibilities these theorists suggest, whereby gender is no longer divided into restrictive categories; however, David is not ready to relinquish his own traditional ideas of masculinity. In fact, misinterpreting Giovanni’s meaning, he is convinced that Giovanni’s way of redefining his (David’s) manhood is evidence of a desire that he to take on a stereotypically feminine role. “You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money,” David says to Giovanni, “and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*” (337). The prospect prompts David to turn away from Giovanni in fear of feminization and dependence, of being trapped in a feminized domesticity within the confines of his lover’s room.

It is at this point, when David truly begins to break away from Giovanni and when his

fear of the feminizing mark of homosexuality reaches its peak, that the threat that has lain over their relationship erupts into physical violence, as well as what Mae Henderson has called an “emotional violence” that is marked by David’s psychological and emotional manipulation of others (315). Occurring as a series of episodes gradually escalating in seriousness, the earliest manifestations of this violence lie within David’s misogynistic use of women to regain a sense of normative masculinity. David feels that his “real” manhood has merely escaped from him temporarily, that he has wandered out onto the margins but can find his way back in again if he only works hard enough. As he says:

I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted the same bed at night and the same arms and I wanted to rise in the morning, knowing where I was...I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again. (305)

David wants to return to the “safety” of a socially accepted manhood defined by heterosexuality, where he can exercise his masculine dominance by gaining possession of a woman and family. Thus, to make his manhood “real” again, David convinces himself to sleep with Sue, an American acquaintance residing in Paris. He finds the one-night affair to be horrible, however, not only because he has now been unfaithful to both Hella and Giovanni, but because he realizes that he is acting against his own desires, and is mistreating Sue (and Hella, and Giovanni) in the process. He confesses to the realization that he “was doing something awful to [Sue] and it became a matter of my honor not to let this fact become too obvious” (302). For to him, the woman he sleeps with is irrelevant: sex with Sue, and later with Hella, is in many ways a preventative, protective gesture for David, the woman being merely the object upon which he

attempts to transplant his desire for Giovanni. Even he admits that he simply “wanted to find a girl, any girl at all” (297). (In this way, David himself embodies Giovanni’s previous observation of his behavior: “You do, sometimes, remind me of the kind of man who is tempted to put himself in prison in order to avoid being hit by a car” [316]). Rather than experience the force of his feelings for Giovanni, which may come with some serious consequences, David chooses instead to imprison himself in a life that is more expected of him as a “safer” option.

David’s fear of (and, it is revealed, his disrespect for) women like Hella and Sue stems largely from his belief that he *should* or *must* be with these women even though his desires exist elsewhere. This fear also has its roots in his childhood—namely, in the figure of his aunt Ellen, who comes to live with David and his father upon the death of his mother. Ellen is a formidable figure, who assumes a traditionally “masculine” role by ruling over the household, while also exhibiting a femininity that David finds somewhat terrifying. He remembers watching his aunt Ellen at a dinner party, “dressed, as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood...the cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and that voice going on and on like a razor blade on glass” (229). Ellen’s alien femininity is represented as embodying a threat of latent violence; she is depicted as a quintessential stereotype of the feminine other, emasculating both David and his father, and instilling in David a fear of the feminine that he carries through to his adulthood.

David continues to position his masculine identity against what he perceives as a threatening female other in his relationship with Hella. Her body, for example, inspires a distinct anxiety within him, as he envisions it as not only harboring the potential to emasculate him, but to kill him. He confesses:

I was fantastically intimidated by her breasts, and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive...I think that I have never been more frightened in my life. When my fingers began, involuntarily, to loose their hold on Hella, I realized that I was dangling from a high place and that I had been clinging to her for my very life. With each moment, as my fingers slipped, I felt the roaring air beneath me and felt everything in me bitterly contracting, crawling upward against that long fall. (350-351)

By implying that Hella is swallowing him whole, and that her female body is threatening his very vitality, he effectively equates his sexual relationship with her to a complete and emasculating loss of self. He realizes that he had been “clinging” to Hella as a way of preserving the idea of manhood that he had been raised to believe was the only available definition. In reacting to the possibility of letting go of that relationship, formed as it was in a condition of bad faith, David is essentially demonstrating an existential anguish in the face of a newly realized freedom.<sup>118</sup> If he leaves Hella and acknowledges the reasons why he does so, his sense of identity—so reliant on what it means in society to be a man—will itself be called into question.

As part of a recurring trend I have observed throughout this project, it is Hella who is able to articulate the ways in which a person’s identity is so intricately wrapped up in what it means to be a man or a woman; here, the female voice acts as a voice of reason.<sup>119</sup> At first, Hella points directly to David’s particular fears of being at her mercy. “Men may be at the mercy of women—I think men like that idea, it strokes the misogynist in them,” Hella says. “But if a particular *man* is ever at the mercy of a particular *woman*—why, he’s somehow stopped being a man” (323). Hella realizes here that David can band together with many men who commiserate over their submission to their wives, and in doing so still be considered a man. Alone, however, being at her mercy means being emasculated and feminized—and this is precisely what David

also fears in his relationship with Giovanni. Later, Hella's somewhat reluctant pleas to David to let her "be a woman" by marrying her and desiring her point to her awareness (and Baldwin's awareness) of the limitations conferred on women as well by society's expectations of femininity. When she decides to accept David's marriage proposal, she says it is because in doing so, she can "have a wonderful time complaining about being a woman. But I won't be terrified that I'm *not one*" (324). David, faced with the weight of compromising both his own and Hella's gendered identities, decides to go through with the marriage; just as it will allow Hella to confirm herself as woman, it will allow him to "be a man" in the eyes of society.

The underlying sense of defeat that punctuates this conversation conveys Baldwin's own sharp criticism of the oppressive nature of these gendered "rules" in society, which clearly inhibit the sexual liberation of the individual, and David's subsequent actions only serve to augment this criticism. In response to his fears and anxieties, David attempts to extract himself from his relationship with Giovanni, and as a result the threat of violence within their relationship escalates. In the midst of an argument—over David's plans to ultimately return to the United States with Hella—David and Giovanni look at one another across what Baldwin terms "a narrow space that was full of danger" in which desire and violence seem to become two choices pitted against each other, so closely related that one misstep could turn one into the other. As David notes at that moment, for example: "I was vividly aware that [Giovanni] held a brick in his hand, I held a brick in mine. It really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to him, we would use these bricks to beat each other to death" (317). At this moment, David chooses desire over violence, yet he also reflects that they "were merely enduring and committing the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder" (317). David's allusion to a "perpetual murder" seems a likely reference to the damage they are doing to their own relationship: by allowing this violent



tension to exist, they allow the space between them to gradually isolate them from one another. Neither David nor Giovanni will fully accept their feelings, nor do they fully reject them, and David seems aware in this instant that this will only delay the pain that will inevitably ensue.

Baldwin demonstrates in these two protagonists the increasing isolation that he also discusses in 1954's "The Male Prison," an essay that anticipates the struggle he fashions in this moment for David and Giovanni, and helps to explain the role violence plays in the existential crisis each man faces. As Baldwin writes in his earlier essay, "When men can no longer love women they also cease to love or respect or trust each other, which makes their isolation complete. Nothing is more dangerous than this isolation, for men will commit any crimes whatever rather than endure it" (235). Underlying this phenomenon in *Giovanni's Room*, however, may also be the "longer and lesser and more perpetual" murder of David's own stable sense of masculinity—at these moments he moves further and further away from the familiar and the safe, deconstructing his own notions of what manhood entails. Ultimately, however, the "murder" does become actual rather than metaphorical, taking the form of Giovanni's execution. Though David may not be directly responsible for this murder, his narcissism, homophobia, rejection of desire, and his inability to reconcile his masculinity with his homosexuality help set in motion the series of events that lead to Giovanni's violent demise.

Interestingly, though David's masculinity has seemed most compromised throughout the novel, if only because his is the perspective from which we receive the narrative, it is Giovanni who ultimately deploys the most extreme act of *physical* violence in reaction to his situation. Distraught over the deterioration of his relationship with David, and left with no means to support himself, Giovanni returns to Guillaume's bar to beg for help. However, faced with the reality that he will have to satisfy Guillaume's sexual desires in order to keep his job, Giovanni,

in a fit of passionate and despairing rage, strangles Guillaume with a scarf. Though he escapes temporarily, he is caught and sentenced to death for his crime. As Baldwin emphasizes in his description of the manhunt for Giovanni, the latter's reputation as a gay man on the fringes of French society is viewed by the authorities as only further evidence of his guilt.

After Giovanni's execution, David is burdened not only with own guilt but with the knowledge that his temporary escape to Paris has accomplished nothing—particularly in terms of his attempts to establish for himself a more “complete “manhood. In retrospect, he thinks, “if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home” (236). Distraught over his role in the events leading to Giovanni's death, David only maintains his relationship with Hella for a short time thereafter. After catching David with another man, which forces him to fully reveal the true nature of his desire, Hella dissolves their engagement and returns to America. Rather than feeling liberated by the revelation of this part of his identity, however, David remains conflicted. He continues to consider his very gendered identity a crime, believing that he has somehow wrongfully compromised his masculinity. At the same time, he feels that to rely instead on the normative definitions of masculinity that are expected of him would now also be wrong. Left alone in the apartment in Paris he and Hella had rented, he sees himself as existing in a perpetual state of criminality that not even his whiteness can remedy. “I feel that I want to be forgiven,” he says. “But I do not know how to state my crime. *My crime, in some odd way, is in being a man*” (278, italics mine). In other words, it has become a crime to perform his manhood via a heterosexual relationship with Hella *and* a homosexual relationship with Giovanni. He must either betray himself, or betray the masculinity that he, as a white American male, is expected to maintain.

In the end, David is left suspended in the kind of existential gendered crisis that Beauvoir articulates, his body marked as unmasculine by nature of his actions and desires. He experiences a kind of psychic castration as he attempts to come to terms with the desire that marks him as an outsider and threatens his sense of manhood. Examining his body in the mirror, David employs the language of liberation to express the kind of masculine identity he longs to construct:

I long to crack the mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh. (359)

That is, what traps David and what can set him free is his body. By embracing his desires, he will face inevitable hurdles in his existential quest to construct himself as a man in society, thus making his body, always threatened by a kind of psychological castration, a seeming limit to his freedom. At the same time, his very freedom itself is contingent on his continuing to construct this masculine identity *despite* these social obstacles; his existential task involves recognizing the way he is perceived by others (a fundamental tenant of both Beauvoir and Sartre's existentialism) while still exercising his right to embrace a sexual identity other than the one that is socially prescribed for him.

Thus, one might say that as a result of his deployment of emotional and physical violence, as well as his internalization of heteronormative standards, David has failed in his existential quest to articulate and perform a masculinity that is acceptable to either society or to himself, although Baldwin has succeeded in criticizing that heteronormative structure through the very tragedy of David and Giovanni's relationship. Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson argue that David's existential quest fails because from the very beginning, "the novel suggests that this

quest is futile in the first place,” since “the Paris of existentialism, of Camus and Sartre, in which the individual takes responsibility for constructing the rules of his own life, ironically defeats Baldwin’s purpose, precisely because of its emphasis on the individual, its alienation from politics and collective action” (254). While I find merit in this analysis, I believe that Baldwin’s critique here is not directed toward the limitations of existentialist theory (though he did, as previously mentioned, express skepticism with regard to Richard Wright’s reliance on this philosophy in his own life and work) but rather the limitations to existential *freedom*. What he is criticizing here are the social categories that limit a man’s freedom to construct his own image of manhood; David might be seen to “fail” not because he is alienated from politics and collective action, but because of the contemporary sexual politics that mark homosexuality as an emasculating crime.<sup>120</sup> The alienating nature of these social politics—and their power to cause violence—is something Baldwin will take up several years later in *Another Country*.

## II.

The connection between violence, desire, and masculinity is more overtly linked to issues of race in America in Baldwin’s 1962 novel, *Another Country*. *Giovanni’s Room*, in addressing homosexuality through white protagonists and rendering blackness as an absence, engaged with the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality by commenting on the ways in which homosexuality was excluded from the image of black masculinity. However, *Another Country* engages not only with the role of homosexual and heterosexual desire on the protagonists’ senses of their masculine selves, but also more explicitly with the role that race plays in these constructions of masculinity. Baldwin’s later novel examines the intertwining lives of a group of friends living in New York City—black and white, men and women, gay, bisexual, and

straight—as they attempt to come to grips with the suicide of their mutual friend, Rufus Scott, whose short and tragic life makes up the novel’s first chapter. In the aftermath of his death, each one of these characters embarks on a journey to uncover what role they played in Rufus’s tragedy, while they simultaneously seek to avoid Rufus’s fate, working to come to terms with the ways that race and sexual preference factor into their own personal constructions of gender.<sup>121</sup>

By examining the effects of a white masculine “ideal,” as well as the effects of a heterosexual masculine model as they converge on the identity of both white and black American men, Baldwin is able to better address the complexity of masculinity and criticize the social categorization and racialization of manhood. In doing so, he is also able to examine the effects of interracial romances on masculinity as a whole. Moreover, Baldwin not only explores his black protagonists’ inability to meet the hegemonic standards of white masculinity, but their failure to meet the stereotype of a black masculinity that would allow them to be accepted as men within the black community. In fact, Black Nationalists, who saw black masculinity as inherently heterosexual, accused Baldwin of misrepresenting his race and gender by featuring a black homosexual man as one of his pivotal characters in *Another Country*.<sup>122</sup> In *Soul on Ice* (1968), Eldridge Cleaver argues that Baldwin’s work exhibits “the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time” (98-99). And, as Stefanie Dunning has noted in her study of Cleaver’s response, “black nationalism’s worst-case scenario is that of extinction, and so like Eurocentric nationalist discourse, black nationalism mobilizes around the question of reproduction and the threat of extinction (or death)” (97). Thus, the homosexuality triumphed by Baldwin in *Another Country* would, in Cleaver’s mind, ignore this responsibility to reproduce and thus augment fears of

extinction; hence Cleaver's accusations that Baldwin has a "death wish" for his race (Cleaver 103). In sum, Baldwin has, in Cleaver's view, betrayed his race by questioning the notion of a fixed, racialized masculinity. However, outside of Cleaver's limited view, it is this very questioning that demonstrates Baldwin's *compassion* for his race, as his aim in this novel is to embrace the natural variances in sexual preference that arise within black men as well as white.<sup>123</sup>

Moreover, Baldwin does justice to the difficulty of embracing these variant desires, and like *Giovanni's Room*, the language of *Another Country* also presents the masculine crises of its main protagonists, Rufus Scott and Vivaldo Moore, as existential ones; each man engages in a struggle to incorporate the view of the Other in the construction of a gendered self, and seeks to transcend the limiting binary definitions of gender and sexuality that define his current identity. Here too Baldwin fashions characters who find their bodies racially or sexually marked in such a way as to call into question their gendered identities, at least insofar as those identities are perceived by society. In this way, the nature of the protagonists' dilemmas again parallel the kind of existential struggle discussed by Beauvoir: while Beauvoir's is a study of white women, and Baldwin's novel interrogates concepts of whiteness that Beauvoir does not, both question the patriarchal definitions of masculinity that would render homosexual men and black men "lesser" in the eyes of a society that deems white heterosexuality the epitome not only of masculinity but of gendered power.

Additionally, in *Another Country* Baldwin interrogates violence in order to criticize the role of institutionalized racism and homophobia in perpetuating stereotypes of masculinity. As Keith Mitchell has noted, the novel examines "unwanted attention, surveillance, and in Foucauldian terms, institutionalized attempts to 'discipline' the black male body through

intimidation and violence” (26).<sup>124</sup> By focusing on a number of protagonists who do not fit the model of white heteronormative masculinity held up as the ideal by society, Baldwin is able to examine the ways these masculine bodies are policed by a racist and homophobic culture, while also exploring the ways that these men respond to the impositions and limitations placed on their existential freedom.<sup>125</sup> Acts of violence—misogyny, suicide, physical brutality—act as a primary trope through which we can clearly read this interrogation, as the male characters’ violent responses in the novel allow Baldwin to critique an individual use of violence, as well as the institutionally imposed violences of racism and homophobia. For example, Rufus and Vivaldo each perform variations of misogynistic violence as a means to establish for themselves a sense of their own masculine power, which they perceive to be lacking as a result of their race and sexual desires. Both are shown to fail in this endeavor, however, as Rufus’s inability to reconcile competing definitions of manhood leads to his suicide, and Vivaldo is left in a sort of “limbo,” unable to extract himself from a relationship founded on guilt and race-based resentment.

The brief glimpse offered into Rufus’s life emphasizes almost immediately that his existential crisis is rooted in his conflicted masculine identity, which he attempts to reconcile through violence. This is particularly evident in the development of his relationship with Leona, a white woman from the South with whom he begins a tumultuous relationship. It is clear early on that this relationship, at least from Rufus’s viewpoint, is based in a simmering rage towards white racism, which translates to a resentment of Leona’s whiteness. As Rufus becomes more lost, his anger and resentment increase, leading him to seek revenge against the racist white population by abusing Leona’s white body.<sup>126</sup> Rufus cannot often identify or articulate the motivation behind this abuse, often acting without thinking:

Many times...he had, suddenly, without knowing that he was going to, thrown the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, pinned her against a table or a wall; she beat at him, weakly, moaning, unutterably abject; he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most. It was not love he felt during these acts of love: drained and shaking, utterly unsatisfied, he fled from the raped white woman into the bars. In these bars no one applauded his triumph or condemned his guilt. (412)

Rufus here exemplifies the plight of the black man who has internalized a racist stereotype of blackness, and who simultaneously embodies and fights against this stereotype. His reference to Leona as the “raped white woman” indicates his recognition that their interracial relationship erroneously but inevitably and preemptively marks him as a violent aggressor to Leona’s innocent victim. His rage in the face of this awareness leads to his violence against her; in effect, he traps himself within a vicious cycle of violence, employing it because he resents the fact that he is expected to do so.

Baldwin even imbues Rufus with a vague knowledge of this kind of self-entrapment, as Rufus reflects that when he moves from violence toward Leona to violence against white men in bars, “the air through which he rushed was his prison and he could not even summon the breath to call for help” (412). He hates himself for hurting Leona, but he hates Leona for being white, and so in an attempt to displace this rage, he begins to pick fights with white men. (“You got to fight with the landlord because the landlord’s *white*!” he cries. “You got to fight with the elevator boy because the motherfucker’s *white*” [425]). While his desire to humiliate her has the ring of misogyny, I would argue that his violence arises more strongly from his frustration with and internalization of the racial profiling that would associate his desire with rape and reinforce a



stereotype of a primitive black masculinity. In a fine assessment of Rufus's violence, Susan Feldman has argued that in *Another Country*, Baldwin demonstrates that Rufus's deployment of misogynistic violence stems from "his own anxiety over his social disempowerment and the threat this disempowerment presents to his masculine identity," and therefore he "uses sex as a weapon to avenge racism and to reaffirm his masculinity, ultimately delivering himself more fully into the power of the forces that sought to control him" (93).<sup>127</sup> Here Feldman draws a connection between racism and sexism that I too make in this project, though I do so via the use of Beauvoir's existential theory of gender, and Feldman does not address existentialism explicitly. This connection, however, demonstrates precisely where I think such a philosophy can be particularly helpful in elucidating *why* violence becomes so central to masculine construction, and also why it fails. By seeking to transcend the limitations of his body as it is viewed by others, Rufus's journey becomes one of liberation, yet precisely *because* his masculine identity up to this point has been so largely fashioned by the gaze of white hegemonic society, Rufus only has the behavior of his oppressors as a model for what it means to be truly free. Thus, by adopting this behavior, Rufus ends up reaffirming the cycles of oppression he has sought to escape.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, his actions have consequences for both his own life and Leona's: his physical abuse of Leona drives her to a mental institution, after which Rufus turns away from his family and friends, still consumed by rage but also by guilt over what he has done. With no job and no money, Rufus is then forced to live on the streets, where he prostitutes himself to other men for food and money, seeing his body even more as his own enemy.

Rufus's behavior in *Another Country* might also be better understood by some of Baldwin's later comments on what he saw as a schizophrenia that was particular to black Americans. In "A Talk to Teachers," published in 1963, Baldwin speaks to this phenomenon,

arguing that blacks in America are taught that they are part of the nation yet also that they are “nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured” (326).<sup>129</sup> As a result, they are overwhelmed with a self-hatred and a desire to attain the freedom and power conferred upon whiteness. Rufus’ sense of masculinity might then be tied up in this idea of a schizophrenic identity: a desire to be what he is not, coupled with his rage against a society that would construct that desire.<sup>130</sup> In “The Harlem Ghetto,” (published in *Notes of a Native Son*), Baldwin addresses this as well, arguing that “Negroes live violent lives, unavoidably...in every act of violence, particularly violence against white men, Negroes feel a certain thrill of identification, a wish to have done it themselves, a feeling that old scores are being settled at last” (47). Thus, Rufus reacts with physical aggression against those whose faces represent to him this internal schizophrenic conflict that prevents him from establishing not only an equal sense of masculine power, but also a sense of basic human equality with others. His sense of inferiority erupts in violence for which liberation and the “settling of scores” is the ultimate rationale.<sup>131</sup>

In addition to his violent reaction to a desire for Leona, Rufus maintains relationships with two white men—Vivaldo and Eric—that further complicate his views toward race, as his love for these men becomes combined with his resentment toward whiteness, while also adding the element of same-sex desire to his already in-crisis masculinity. Rufus and Vivaldo’s relationship involves performances in which both men display a sort of masculine posturing founded in virility and sexual prowess, but is also marked by a distinct sexual tension and desire—a tension that is also informed by Rufus’s own resentment toward Vivaldo’s whiteness. Baldwin illuminates the source and manifestation of this tension through the perspective of Vivaldo, who reflects:

Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white.

Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black. They had balled chicks together, once or twice the same chick—why? And what had it done to them? And then they never saw the girl again. And they never really talked about it.

(485)

This reflection merges the two men's shared expression of manhood through conquest and physicality ("they had balled chicks together") with the deep-rooted racial tension that feeds the violence of their masculine relationship as it threatens to emasculate one or the other. Rufus calls Vivaldo his "best friend" even as he feels himself "nearly strangling with the desire to hurt him" (409). Further, throughout the novel Vivaldo is haunted by his memories of Rufus, which are marked by this violent sexual tension. He remembers playfully arguing with Rufus—"I bet mine's bigger than yours is"—but also remembers "occasional nightmares in which this same vanished buddy pursued him through impenetrable forests, came at him with a knife on the edge of precipices, threatened to hurl him down steep stairs to the sea. In each of the nightmares he wanted revenge" (485). Stefanie Dunning calls these exchanges a "battle of patriarchies," noting: "It is their loyalty to a fantasy of masculinity that bars the free flow of desire between them. Implicit in these questions of sex and masculinity is the idea of submission...In other words, who will have the power, who will be *the man* is the question standing between them" (107). In a situation nearly identical to that of David and Giovanni, the questions of manhood and power that Dunning articulates here are, I would suggest, the driving force behind the latent violence that defines Rufus's relationship with Vivaldo.

The two men also engage in a more overt discussion of masculinity, as Rufus articulates his gendered anxiety prior to his violent death. They discuss their fear of feminine power, which

arises from a distrust of a feminine “other” but also from a wariness of social definitions of masculinity as purely heteronormative; in this way both men share a masculine anxiety similar to that exhibited by David in *Giovanni’s Room*. For example, Rufus asks Vivaldo, “Did you ever have the feeling...that a woman was eating you up? I mean—no matter what she was like or what else she was doing—that that’s what she was *really* doing?”—to which Vivaldo answers unhesitatingly in the affirmative (410). Here, as both men face the threat of social emasculation in light of their homosexual desire, they grapple with an overwhelming fear both being feminized and being forced to submit to the feminine body, to the point where their articulation of this struggle—as exemplified in the above conversation—carries the weight of misogynistic language. Additionally, in a continuing discussion of the way their freedom hinges on their a gendered notion of liberation, Rufus’s last conversation with Vivaldo speaks to his struggle to “be a man” in a culture where masculinity is defined on someone else’s terms. After Vivaldo confronts Rufus about beating Leona, getting in bar fights, and selling himself on the street, Rufus says, “I guess you think...that it’s time I started trying to be a new man” (409). The anger and sarcasm with which he utters these words indicates his belief that this is not a possibility—already close to his suicide, Rufus has given up on the possibility of becoming a “new man” who can transcend his current situation and establish for himself the freedom to desire whomever he wants while still maintaining his sense of masculine identity.

Rufus’s relationship with Eric is similarly fraught with a tension that revolves around his sense of masculinity, and further demonstrates his inability to reconcile his own same-sex desire with social or cultural ideas of what black masculinity should be. Though he claims that he loved Eric, and Eric reciprocated that love, he also admits that “he had despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as

nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity” (406). Rufus equates homosexuality with femininity to relegate it to a place beneath him, as he adopts the heteronormative position that relegates anything considered unmasculine (such as homosexuality) to socially and individually inferior status. Baldwin’s move here anticipates the anxieties that Eldridge Cleaver expressed in *Soul on Ice*, anxieties that caused Cleaver to harshly criticize Baldwin’s work and deem Rufus Scott “a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man’s pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual fuck him in his ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman...the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man” (107). Cleaver’s comments are directed at what he believes to be Rufus’s weaknesses, a betrayal to his race. Yet Baldwin is aware of this kind of criticism even before Cleaver articulates it: in fact, it is Rufus’s own internalization of such an accusation that ultimately causes him to verbally abuse Eric, physically abuse Leona, and eventually commit suicide. That is, Baldwin constructs Rufus himself to be internally conflicted and ultimately violent in order to critique the limiting definition of black masculinity triumphed by Cleaver.

This internal conflict is also represented by the comparisons he draws between Leona and Eric, which arise from a frustration over the desires that contradict the triumph of a distinctly heterosexual black masculinity. His insecurity leads him to refer to Eric as a “deformity,” and while he admits that Leona was less of an aberration in terms of what his relationship with her said about his sexual identity, he also notes that the tabooed nature of their relationship caused him to wield “against her the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest” (406). His desire for Leona as a white woman is, as previously mentioned, coupled with his own resentment towards white racism and towards the definition of black masculinity that would render any

interracial romance a betrayal to the black community. His relationship with Eric presents similar anxieties, as this too denies him entry into a black masculine community, as well as the socially acceptable community of masculinity more generally.

Rufus, at an impasse of this gendered crisis, commits an act that demonstrates a complete surrender, a rejection of his existential imperative to continue to live.<sup>132</sup> He can only picture an increasingly violent world, full of hate and intolerance: on the subway on the night of his suicide, he imagines a train barreling down the tracks, unable to stop, “and the people screaming at windows and doors and turning on each other with all the accumulated fury of their blasphemed lives, everything gone out of them but murder, breaking limb from limb and splashing in blood” (441). Moreover, his surrender is marked by the tragedy of his racial positioning: before he jumps off of the George Washington Bridge, he reflects that “he was black and the water was black” (443). Baldwin’s heavy-handed reference to race here holds multiple but related meanings: as he sees himself in the water, Rufus also sees his future as “black” in the sense of hopelessness, rendering his suicide (at least in his own mind) to be inevitable. Simultaneously, he sees his future to be “black” in the racialized sense; that is, he envisions a perpetual marking and qualification of his identity as a result of his race, forever preventing him from achieving the masculine power he desires.

Many critics perceive Rufus’s suicide as Baldwin’s commentary on the grim prospects of the American black man.<sup>133</sup> I would agree with this to the extent that I believe Rufus’s final inability to incorporate his desires into an acceptable definition of masculine identity serves as Baldwin’s critique of racialized masculinities. Yet his suicide is also a result of his inability to face the socially favored heteronormative definitions of masculinity, and serves not only as Baldwin’s commentary on the perpetuation of racial divisions, but the restriction of sexual

identity as well. I further believe that Rufus's suicide is also Baldwin's way of criticizing Rufus's violence, which quite literally destroys him, and in many ways threatens to destroy all of the novel's characters—including but not limited to Leona, who bears the brunt of Rufus's physical rage. That is, the threat of racial, misogynistic, and homophobic violence that hangs over the novel acts as a constant menace, its destructive possibilities embodied in the figure of Rufus, who is unable to escape the prison of rage and violence in which he finds himself. Rufus's suicide is evidence that violence for Baldwin is no existential tool for liberation; in fact, Baldwin's text might be seen as an argument with Mailer's—in an existential search for a masculine self, Baldwin seems to say, violence is decidedly *not* the answer. Rufus's violence destroys power in some instances—that of Leona, for example, who is rendered completely powerless by Rufus's treatment of her—but it also destroys his own power as well, a consequence that it is reflective of Arendt's own remarks that “violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience” but “what never can grow out of it is power” itself (53).

It is this message that informs the events of the remainder of the novel, which explores the lives of Vivaldo, Ida, and Eric, as well as—though more peripherally—Cass and Richard Silenski. After Rufus's death, it is Vivaldo who connects all of these characters, serving as the common denominator in their intersecting relationships. Vivaldo's manhood is also informed by the disparity between a socially endorsed masculine ideal and a racialized reality, and his position in the novel, like David's in *Giovanni's Room*, is largely defined through his various modes of escape. Though he is a white male and therefore born into a certain form of social privilege, Vivaldo feels disconnected from that part of society, perhaps because of its restraints. He admits that he “felt more alive in Harlem” where “he had moved in a blaze of rage and self-

congratulation and sexual excitement,” and believes that by moving there he “was snatching manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire” (484). With this insight, Baldwin reveals that Vivaldo’s idea of freedom, specifically the idea of transcendence over mediocrity, is intricately connected to his sense of masculinity: he defines liberation itself as the freedom to test his manhood. This gendered notion of freedom and courage, however, also foreshadows the limited perspective Vivaldo will later portray with regard to racial and gendered divisions.

The concept and implications of flight, and this intermittent sense of exclusion, is central to Vivaldo’s own existential dilemma, for throughout the novel he is perpetually working to escape those oppressions that Rufus himself could not handle as well as those stereotypes that would limit his masculine identity to one particular category. He escapes to Harlem to simultaneously escape a conservative white community of privilege—though by way of the reactions Vivaldo receives in Harlem and the juxtaposition of his whiteness with Rufus’s blackness, Baldwin demonstrates that his struggle to do so is not on the same plane as that of Rufus.<sup>134</sup> In Harlem, for example, Vivaldo recognizes that he does not truly belong, for people “saw something in him which they could not accept, which made them uneasy” (419) and “watched him with a hint of amused and not entirely unkind contempt” for “they knew that he was driven, in flight” (484). This sense of otherness stems from an awareness of his whiteness, an awareness that is dramatically increased by his romance with Rufus’s sister Ida: a romance born out of love but also out of a latent guilt over Rufus’s fate, and one that often seems, to him, to restrict his masculinity by reminding him of the whiteness that defines and, in an interesting twist, excludes him. In the company of the musicians in Ida’s band, for example, Vivaldo often feels “he had *no* function, they did: they pulled rank on him, they closed ranks against him”



(652) and he connects the hatred toward his body that this inspires with Ida's hatred of his whiteness:

If he despised his flesh, then he must despise hers—and *did* he despise his flesh? And if she despised her flesh, then she must despise his. Who can blame her, he thought wearily, if she does?...Who can blame *me*? They were always threatening to cut the damn thing off, and what were all those fucking confessions about? (642).

In reaction to the feelings of emasculation that Ida's bitterness exacerbates, Vivaldo adopts a performance of masculine posturing that perpetuates the white male dominance he has sought to escape. He claims that Ida's body "belonged" to him (525), and simultaneously blames Ida for his sense of disempowerment, feeling that she "was attempting to stand between himself and his fulfillment," thus perpetuating the gender binary that would place men above women on a gendered hierarchy, and conferring the blame for his sense of emasculation on Ida's failure to recognize this social division between man and woman (653).

Manhood as a position of power both within society and within his relationship with Ida becomes one of Vivaldo's central preoccupations; when Ida asks him in the midst of an argument whether he's sure he is a man, he replies, "I've got to be sure" (736). To "be sure" and to regain his confidence, *as a man* particularly, Vivaldo increasingly resorts to age-old gender stereotypes to assert his elevated position: "Men have to think about so many things," he says to Cass. "Women only have to think about men" (613). Though Vivaldo does have a brief affair with Eric—an encounter that would, in the eyes of society, seem to further compromise his manhood—he also reflects afterward that he is "condemned to women" (711) despite the fact that "most women inspired great contempt in him" (481). His belief that he must ultimately maintain a relationship with a woman, regardless of where his desires may truly lie, leads him to

express a general resentment toward women, while upholding truisms such as the one expressed to Cass.

While I believe this depiction of Vivaldo serves as Baldwin's comment on the absurdity of racial and gendered privilege, to view Vivaldo's misogyny as the author's critique in this way becomes particularly difficult when one recalls that Baldwin himself has been accused of upholding masculinist ideologies; indeed, later in life, he embraced the black nationalist ideology that relegated women to the sidelines.<sup>135</sup> However, in this particular novel, Baldwin is clearly more critical of masculine privilege and gender imbalance, a fact that is often demonstrated by his representation of Cass. Cass's role in the narrative seems puzzling on the surface: though she interacts with many of the novel's protagonists as a friend, confidant, and sometimes lover, her actions and storyline seem at first to be tangential. Yet through her conversations with the various men in the novel, it becomes evident that she—like so many women that have appeared across the novels addressed in this project—is meant to be a voice of reason. This fact in and of itself highlights the ways Baldwin wants to undo traditional notions of gendered identity, as he imbues Cass with a voice that articulates an awareness of the way gender imbalance is perpetuated. For instance, as Cass says to her husband Richard at one point in the novel: "What men have 'dreamed up' is all there is, the world they've dreamed up *is* the world" to which he replies, "What a funny girl you are...you've got a bad case of penis envy" (461).<sup>136</sup> Baldwin's set-up here clearly casts Richard as the hapless husband who lacks a true understanding of his wife's plight and flippantly disregards her very real insight, while Baldwin's own views are ventriloquized through Cass.

Still, Baldwin does not ignore the difficulty of escaping a historical precedent that has prompted Vivaldo to internalize the gendered and racial stereotypes he asserts amidst his fear of

emasculation. In fact, the fraught nature of Vivaldo's attempts to extract himself from a history of white masculine privilege and idealized heteronormativity is manifested in the constant threat of violence embedded within his life. In a move similar to that of *Giovanni's Room*, for example, Baldwin fashions Vivaldo's desire and violence to be paradoxically intertwined and oppositional—an overlap that suggests that Vivaldo's homoerotic desire not only invites the threat of interpersonal violence from others, but also that it does a metaphorical violence to the false American ideal of manhood which would reject such desire. For example, Vivaldo has a dream in which he sees Rufus' "distorted and vindictive face," and knows that "his death was what Rufus most desired" (708). He begs Rufus not to kill him, and then "to his delight and confusion, Rufus lay down beside him and opened his arms" (708). His nightmares here exemplify the ways in which what he loves is colored by what he fears: he loves Rufus, but to love him is to risk emasculation and experience homophobic violence or social rejection. Baldwin allows Rufus to speak beyond the grave in this scene, placing him into Vivaldo's unconscious in order to demonstrate that for Rufus, too, love embodied within homosexual and interracial relationships is tied up with violence and rage. Again, violence proves to be the obstacle, not the liberating agent, to a free embrace of one's desires.<sup>137</sup>

At first Eric seems to be the only character in the narrative to have come to terms with maintaining a sexual identity that exists outside of the American masculine ideal. Eric remembers his first sexual encounter with a man and thinks, "that day was the beginning of his life as a man"—a far cry from the fears of David in *Giovanni's Room* that homosexuality would be the *end* of his life as a man (549). Moreover, as Vivaldo observes of Eric on screen: "In precisely the way that great music depends, ultimately, on great silence, this masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something that was not masculine. But it was not feminine,

either, and something in Vivaldo resisted the word *androgynous*” (661). Vivaldo’s resistance of the identifying term “androgynous” suggests that what Eric exudes is not an absence or blurring of gender, but by something that is still definable as masculinity—though this masculine identity, untroubled as it appears to be by its inclusion of what might be otherwise defined as “feminine” stands apart from Vivaldo’s own. Further, Eric also appears to be the character whose manhood is least defined by violence. He notices that the other gay men in New York City seem “to be at home with, accustomed to, brutality and indifference, and to be terrified of human affection,” and he is puzzled by this trend, feeling himself to exist apart from this acclimation to a violent life (196).

In light of these details, many have argued that Baldwin holds Eric up as an “ideal” masculine figure here, and that it is Eric’s love that cures the other characters, that he is the only one that truly loved Rufus, and that he is the only man secure in his own definition of masculinity.<sup>138</sup> However, Baldwin makes sure to reveal in Eric an insecurity and internalization of the supposed criminality of homosexual desire; when Eric recalls his first sexual encounter with a man, he not only remembers it as the beginning of his manhood, but also as transgressive and criminal, as “in the same way that he knew everything he had ever wanted or done was wrong, he knew that this was wrong” (548). Moreover, despite his brief romance with Rufus, Eric does not resolve—or truly interrogate—the issue of race as it factors into masculine identity. His anxiety over bringing his relationship with Yves to the United States, however, does further exemplify the very “Americanness” of the conflicts of masculinity that surround the characters in the novel—while Eric and Yves can live in relative comfort in France, for example, Eric knows that in America, they themselves may have to become “at home with, accustomed to, brutality and indifference” in order to maintain their “alternative” masculine lifestyles.

In the end, then, no male protagonist is able to fully transcend his situation, as each remains aware and at the mercy of the way he is perceived by others, this gaze a perpetual source of potential emasculation. Baldwin depicts men such as Rufus, Vivaldo, and Richard as maintaining the status quo as a result of this fear, their masculinity exacted through misogyny, rage, and homophobia. By interrogating the nature of these violences, as I have done here, I believe we can better understand Baldwin's key criticisms about the circular nature of oppression and masculine privilege. That is, violence is the access point for Baldwin's critique; it is not simply a product or end point of emasculation but also the starting point for a new cycle of domination that will be perpetuated, should gendered and racial binaries remain in place. Moreover, by reading the gendered crises—and the enacted violences—of these protagonists as manifestations of an existential philosophy, it becomes evident that both the source and the problematic consequences of the male characters' actions lies within the hope for liberation from fear, from immanence, from racial and sexual profiling, and from the responsibilities attendant on what is revealed to be an unrealistic ideal of manhood.

## CHAPTER 5

### **“A grueling and gratifying ethical life”: Manhood, Morality, and Violence in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* & *My Life as a Man***

“Doctor, I can’t stand any more being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole!*” (37). So cries Alex Portnoy to Dr. Spielvogel in Philip Roth’s 1969 novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Five years later, in *My Life as a Man*, Peter Tarnopol offers a similar lament, asking himself, “How do I ever get to be what is described in literature as *a man?*” (299). While the myths, conventions, and ideals that have historically defined American manhood plague many of Roth’s protagonists, Portnoy and Tarnopol, via their personal confessions, are among the most self-reflexive on this point. Each imagines a certain deficiency in his performance of the duties of manhood, leaving him with the sense that he is persistently unable to embody, as Portnoy puts it, the “respectable conventions” of manhood (124). In response to this internalization of a deficient manhood, one that largely arises from ethnic stereotypes surrounding Jewish masculinity, both Portnoy and Tarnopol turn to violence in an attempt to establish a sense of masculine power and recognition. With this in mind, my aim in this chapter is to examine the ways in which existential constructs of masculinity in both *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *My Life as a Man* turn on the intersection of violence and morality, to study the way these constructs are informed and undermined by competing cultural and national identities, and to explore why it is that Roth fashions protagonists who adopt violent strategies, only to repeatedly show them to fail.

One of the reasons that violence in both of these novels proves to be so fascinatingly complex is that Portnoy and Tarnopol each display a distinct ambivalence about this violence, particularly as it relates to gender—a phenomenon that Warren Rosenberg has explained in

*Legacy of Rage*.<sup>139</sup> For example, Portnoy and Tarnopol repeatedly assure us that violence exists in a realm decidedly outside of the definitions of manhood to which they have been exposed in their Jewish families. Yet that, in these cases, is also its very appeal for them: violence seems at first to allow each man to temporarily step outside of the restrictive laws of morality in which he feels himself confined and which have also resulted in seemingly ineradicable and pervasive feelings of guilt. Violence, then, becomes a temporary break from this oppressive sense of what kind of men they “should” be. It becomes an experimental display of the masculine performance that both men have previously criticized in their Gentile neighbors, but which they simultaneously envy for the power it suggests. Herein, I argue, lies the fallacious reasoning that informs the failure of violence as a tool for reinvention: what both Portnoy and Tarnopol represent is the tendency to define masculinity as synonymous with power, reducing their masculinity to an assertion of authority that can be represented physically.<sup>140</sup> As a climactic (or rather, as it will turn out to be, a somewhat anti-climactic) device, this violence seems to be the mechanism which not only measures but also undoes their manhood, a paradox augmented by the fact that each man’s intention—to fashion for himself a sense of power not bound by moral codes and social conventions—fails to yield the desired consequences.

The attempts by Roth’s protagonists to formulate a working definition of masculinity parallel, perhaps unwittingly, Simone de Beauvoir’s attempt in *The Second Sex* to define femininity—not only because the perceived absence of a “whole” masculinity in Roth’s work echoes the concept of inessentiality described by Beauvoir in her discussion of gender, but also because the protagonists’ plights embody Beauvoir’s connection between gender construction and a theory of transcendence. In *The Second Sex*, for example, Beauvoir argues that the dilemma of woman lies in the fact that she regards herself as essential within a culture that

regards her as inessential. That is, woman herself might regard her femininity as a positive characteristic, defined by what she is and what she creates herself to be, but externally she is viewed in the negative; that is, she is “not man,” or rather, lacking masculinity. As Beauvoir herself points out, a similar dilemma is shared by blacks and Jews who, while in the process of “being emancipated today from a like paternalism,” are still perceived from the outside as inessential and as lesser members of society by a “former master class [who] wishes to keep them in their place—that is, the place chosen for them” (xxix). Thus, both Jews and women face a threat to their own sense of selfhood from a hegemonic white society that, as Beauvoir notes, feels itself to be imbued with “superhuman essence” (221). I would suggest that the resemblances Beauvoir locates between the plight of women and that of Jews—these shared experiences of oppression and similar burdens of cultural history—point to the ways in which Beauvoir’s text in many ways cues Roth’s own exploration of gender construction.<sup>141</sup> In other words, what Beauvoir explores with regard to the status of women might be seen as an analogue for Roth’s depiction of the emasculated American male Jew. Thus, her work allows us to read the plight of Roth’s protagonists as existential dilemmas, and likewise allows us to understand that each of these men, like the woman she discusses, “is not a complete reality, but rather a becoming” (34).

By emphasizing these similarities, I do not mean to suggest that the dilemmas of Roth’s protagonists mirror those of the women Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex*. That is to say, while cultural oppression similarly problematizes their constructions of gender, both Portnoy and Tarnopol, as American Jewish men, necessarily experience a different sense of “otherness” than white women. Still, that these protagonists are also marked by a “lack,” their gendered identities negatively marked by the racialization of their Jewish identities, demonstrates how Roth’s texts



invite a consideration of Beauvoir's existential theory. This racialization has been chronicled by such critics as Sander Gilman, Daniel Boyarin, Paul Breines, and Warren Rosenberg, each of whom explore sociological and race-based constructions of the Jewish body (and in particular the Jewish male body) which have reinforced stereotypes of a feminized, criminal, and morally and physically weak Jewish identity. As Neil Davison has also argued in his more recent work on Jewishness and masculinity, perceptions of what he calls a "malignantly feminine" Jewish masculinity were reasserted throughout the nineteenth century by such renowned Jewish scholars and philosophers as Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger, and Theodor Herzl, whose internalization of the concept of the "feminized Jew" led them to call for a "remasculinization" of Jewishness (26). Modern Jewish men, then, were often presented with competing definitions of masculinity: one offered by their Jewish families, informed by what Warren Rosenberg has argued to be a revival of *Yiddishkeit* (a Jewish code of conduct founded on responsibility and nonviolent resistance, often embodied in the figure of the *mensch*, or the "good Jewish man") and another, more aggressive and violent performance of manhood operative and idealized within the larger constructs of American society (Rosenberg 153).<sup>142</sup> With this in mind, it becomes more apparent how Beauvoir's existential theory of gender, which highlights the individual and social implications of privileging masculinity, also helps to illuminate the ways in which existential constructions of Jewish-American identity, as represented here in fiction, is fraught by the condition of being similarly "marked" as unmasculine and therefore defined as inessential.

Specifically, Portnoy and Tarnopol often find themselves torn between two conflicting desires: on the one hand, a desire to reject society's projection of these differences and define themselves against other non-Jewish men, and on the other, a desire to throw off what they view as the restrictive definitions of manhood projected by their Jewish culture, history, and family.

In her study of gender in Roth's fiction, Debra Shostak speaks to this dilemma within American culture at large:

While the myth of masculinity in the United States has been founded upon competition and achievement in the fields of both sexual prowess and economic gain... the Jewish man operates under conflicting expectations forged in the European Diaspora. Broadly, these expectations take shape in two related ways. In ethical terms, the Jewish man must choose *how* to behave as a Jew; in ontological terms, he must understand *who* a Jew is in relation to non-Jews. ("Roth and Gender" 113)<sup>143</sup>

In the face of this conflict between their American identities and their Jewish identities, both men attempt to find some way to hybridize the two, seeking to fashion individual masculine identities that amalgamate their past upbringing with their present desires and so ultimately transcend both definitions of manhood. I would argue that it is through these imagined experiences that Roth is able to investigate the ways in which the Jewish American man might attempt to decipher and transcend the conflicting models of manhood presented to him, or, in the existentialist language of Beauvoir, to "seek through the world to find himself in some shape, other than himself, which he makes his own" (57). By imbuing his protagonists with a desire to move beyond the limiting models of gender presented to them, Roth also invokes an existentialist theory of transcendence, a concept that Beauvoir recognizes as the primary goal of existence, and which she defines in part as the expansion of one's purpose into an "indefinitely open future" (xxxv).<sup>144</sup> For example, Portnoy and Tarnopol, as part of their respective existential projects, articulate a desire to move beyond the burdens of their cultural history and the socially constructed "lack" that defines their identities, with the aim of crafting new masculine identities that transcend the conventions and rules of their respective cultures.

As I discuss below, however, the protagonists' repeated inability to define manhood on their own terms also seems to represent, even in their minds, a manifestation of the "degradation of existence" that Beauvoir names as a result of one's inability transcend immanence or stagnation. Despite their attempts to achieve an existential transcendence that is filtered through their gendered identity, neither Portnoy nor Tarnopol successfully meet the goals of the project they set for themselves. In fact, each man's respective attempts to formulate an individual and concrete sense of masculinity appear, ironically, to have much the opposite effect. Roth, interpreting his own infamous fictional alter ego, said as much in a 1969 interview for the *New York Times Review of Books* on *Portnoy's Complaint*. "Portnoy's pains," Roth surmised retrospectively, "arise out of his refusal to be bound any longer by taboos which, rightly or wrongly, *he* experiences as diminishing and unmanning. The joke on Portnoy is that for him breaking the taboo turns out to be as unmanning in the end as honoring it. Some joke" (*RMAO* 19). This bleak "joke," I would suggest, also later plagues Peter Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*. Adding to the all-consuming frustration and anxiety that consumes both Portnoy and Tarnopol is each man's acute awareness of the extent to which he is unmanned by both the repression he locates in Jewish definitions of manhood, as well as his attempts to escape those definitions.

What is perhaps most interesting about this dilemma in both texts is the fact that this ironically emasculating process of attempting to construct a masculinity is interspersed with episodes of violence whose basic function—and basic flaw—is strikingly similar to that present in Wright, Mailer, Bellow, and Baldwin. That is to say, even though I have argued in previous chapters for the distinctive contexts and socio-political situations informing the representations of violence by Roth's predecessors, violence is deployed by Roth with much the same existentialist rationale as a tool for reinvention, and carries with it many of the self-same faults.

In fact, I would argue that Roth himself prompts us to question its efficacy, for his wry satirization of his own characters allows the reader to see flaws in this process that both Portnoy and Tarnopol cannot, thus pointing to a critique of violence embedded in the texts themselves. That is, I would argue that Roth, like Baldwin and Bellow to an extent, overcomes more of his own ambivalence toward violence than either Mailer or Wright, rejecting Mailer's endorsement of liberating violence in favor of representing it in an almost farcical nature.<sup>145</sup> In doing so, he is able to acknowledge the impetus and attraction for this violence via the struggles of Portnoy and Tarnopol, but maintain a criticism of his own protagonists' violent masculine posturing.

While violence as a figure of masculine anxiety does not necessarily mean the same thing for Roth as it does for an author like Mailer (who is more apt to enthusiastically embrace violence than to ironically critique it), the nature of violence in Roth's texts can still be better understood by consulting the respective critiques by Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. For instance, Benjamin argues that violent assertions of power tend to demonstrate a cyclical function; when one attempts to gain power or establish a new law through violence, what is created is a system that not only condones violence but also relies on it as a "law-establishing agency" (22). Or, to draw from Arendt's similar theoretical discussion many years later (which, as outlined in the introduction, is strongly influenced by Benjamin's work), violence used by an individual can never *create* power; rather, it is only a destructive force. These critiques of violence prove particularly applicable in terms of Roth's protagonists, for when violence is used as a means in these texts, what is achieved is not (to use Benjamin's language) "an end that is free of violence and independent of it," but rather one that "is necessarily and intimately bound up with violence," and one that conflates notions of power with violent aggression (22).

Viewing violence as an extreme remedial measure for their escalating inner conflicts of masculinity, both Portnoy and Tarnopol attempt to violently throw off the various structures of masculinity and ethnicity that have prevented them from becoming the “ideal” men they set out to be—structures which they often describe in terms of their relationships with women and white Gentile society, but which also include their own moral systems and beliefs. Witness, for example, Portnoy’s elation while visiting a Turkish bath: “There are no women here. No women—and no *goyim*. Can it be? There is nothing to worry about!”(48). However, as a means to this end, violence does not prove to be empowering or particularly effective; in actuality, it only appears to solidify each man’s own personal guilt and confusion. Both of Roth’s protagonists must, in the aftermath of their attempts to use violence as an instrument, face the realizations that it does not create the power they seek.

# I.

*Portnoy’s Complaint*, whose 1969 publication was greeted with much controversy, details the confessions of Alexander Portnoy to his analyst Dr. Spielvogel.<sup>146</sup> To Spielvogel, Portnoy describes in detail the anxiety over his masculinity that arises from his various neuroses. Portnoy is particularly fixated on his sexuality, and expounds on his frequent masturbation as an adolescent and his later sexual exploits as an adult, alternately expressing embarrassment, consternation, pride, and guilt throughout these explications. Suffocated by the rules of Jewish tradition, Portnoy feels he is “marked like a road map from head to toe with [his] repressions” and attributes much of his current anxiety over his masculine identity to his Jewish culture and, particularly, his parents, who he deems “the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time” (124; 36). Portnoy’s relationship with his parents points to perhaps the most pressing personal dilemma causing his masculine anxiety, and also highlights the Oedipal dimension from

which Portnoy's defense of masculinity arises; in fact, Portnoy himself often uses the language of Freud to attempt to psychoanalyze himself and explain the impact of these repressions on his own masculine crisis. This tendency, and the fact that the entire novel is set up as one long therapy session reflects America's preoccupation with Freudian psychoanalysis at the time. In his assessment of Freudian psychoanalysis in the 1960s, for example, Eli Zaretsky notes that it was "as much a church as a profession" (97) and in his 1969 review of *Portnoy*, Alfred Kazin remarked that Alex Portnoy is only "the latest and most vivid example of the tendency among American Jews to reduce their experience to psychology" (3). Roth himself, an analysand for many years, admitted in 1974 that "the psychoanalytic monologue—a narrative technique whose rhetorical possibilities I'd been availing myself of for years, only not on paper—was to furnish the means by which I thought I might convincingly draw together the fantastic element of the *The Jewboy* and the realistic documentation of...*The Nice Jewish Boy*" (RMAO 41).

It is this widespread faith in psychoanalysis as a cure-all that Roth both explains and sends up in *Portnoy*, and which factors heavily into Portnoy's own humorous explication of his own masculine anxiety.<sup>147</sup> In a kind of ironic twist that has come to be known as characteristic Roth, however, Portnoy's Oedipal dilemma does not reflect a traditional Oedipal complex. That is, in Freud's explication of the Oedipus complex, the subject is male and the primary fear is of the father as rival: this inspires the castration anxiety between father and son, and the obsession with the mother arises from this competition. However, much of the comedy of *Portnoy* lies in Roth's parodic inversion of the Oedipal dilemma and its implications for Alex Portnoy himself, for in applying the Oedipal complex to the Jewish family figured in the novel, Roth fashions the mother as the father figure in the Oedipal paradigm, and Portnoy's father as an emasculated figure, thus setting the stage for the anxiety over emasculation that plagues Portnoy himself

throughout the text.<sup>148</sup> By reversing these roles, Roth works in the vein of many feminist readings of Freud, which criticize Freud's tendency to define woman only as lack.<sup>149</sup> These readings of Freud point to its male-centric dimension, and I would argue that Roth in turn questions that male-centric dimension by making it a figure of strife for Portnoy. By playing with the Oedipal complex in this way and introducing a mother figure that is also, paradoxically, a symbolic father figure, Roth sets the stage for the many contradictions plaguing Portnoy throughout the novel, as Portnoy's conflicting attitudes toward violence, American identity, Jewish culture, and Gentile society will all factor simultaneously into this gendered dilemma.

Portnoy's general anxiety and frustration arises most frequently from a general sense of being overwhelmed by a variety of rules—taboos, moral codes, and conventions—which dictate his actions and appear to manipulate his conscience. The existential nature of his dilemma allows him to recognize that, as Beauvoir states, it is “as a body subject to taboos and laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment”—but this in itself is part of the problem, for Alex feels physically smothered by these taboos (36). “Look,” Alex Portnoy says to Dr. Spievogel early on in his “complaint.” “Am I exaggerating to think it's practically miraculous that I'm ambulatory?” (34). Portnoy is, of course, exaggerating here, but he does so in the midst of a genuinely frustrated lament over what he believes to be a childhood suppressed by a series of unending and often indecipherable laws and warnings:

The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-it's and be-carefuls! You musn't do this, you can't do that—hold it! Don't! you're breaking an important law!...I couldn't even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offense to God Almighty. (34)<sup>150</sup>

It is this guilt in the face of breaking these laws that specifically beleaguers Portnoy, and his frustration over this prompts him at first to reject the heritage that he views as so oppressive to the masculine identity he wants to fashion in the present. He is, as Roth himself has noted, torn between competing impulses toward being the “nice Jewish boy” and the “Jewboy.” Or, as Alan Cooper has observed in *Philip Roth and the Jews*, Portnoy manifests Roth’s own desire “to explore what it is like to want to be bad—that is, acquisitive and carnal—when one is essentially good—that is, restrained by moral upbringing and cultural values” (47). In other words, Portnoy knows that he does not want to submit himself to what he calls his “ridiculous past,” which includes not only his identity as the obedient (and emasculated) “nice Jewish boy” but also his sense of the legacy of tragedy and victimization bequeathed by his Jewish history.

While Portnoy wants to fashion a masculine identity that allows him to be master of his own desires, however, he also acknowledges that he cannot completely erase this Jewish history from his present self. An early example of this conflict arises when Portnoy recalls his sister’s attempts to explain the inescapability of history in the construction of their contemporary Jewish life—and in the construction of his own gendered identity. Hannah insists that Portnoy is more tied to Jewish culture and history than he is willing to admit, and presses him to consider where he would be had he been born in Europe as opposed to America. Portnoy immediately points to what he sees as illogical in this argument, crying, “*I suppose the Nazis are an excuse for everything that happens in this house!*” “Oh, I don’t know,” replies Hannah after this outburst, “maybe, maybe they are,” and she begins to cry, which produces in Portnoy more guilt and regret. “How monstrous I feel,” he says, “for she sheds her tears for six million, or so I think, while I shed mine only for myself. Or so I think” (77-78). The “or so I think” that qualifies the distinction here exemplifies the fact that his sister might not, in fact, only cry for six million, and



that Portnoy himself cries not “only” for himself. Rather, the emergent uncertainty Portnoy expresses here speaks to the possibility that both he and his sister cry for six million as much as they do for themselves--that self and history become inextricable. In this moment, then, he begins to realize that he is thus tied to and constructed by that history he has inherited. That is, Portnoy’s moment of clarity here demonstrates his awareness that in order to define himself on his own terms, he must strike a balance between these competing impulses and conflicting markers of identity. This lends to his journey an existential horizon similar to that articulated by Beauvoir: in order to “expand toward the future” he must “integrate the past” (Beauvoir 430).

This exchange with Hannah, however, is a retrospective reflection on Portnoy’s part and stands out as one of his more insightful self-analyses. More often, his struggles to integrate past with present are far more problematic, and are wrapped up in the conflicted sense of the masculinity he feels he should embody. In these cases, Portnoy seeks first to throw off this history and claim for himself a semblance of control, acts which are often delineated by his obsession with defying the seemingly pre-ordained rules of his existence that he believes to be dictated by his Jewish culture and religion. Though he is often assured that these rules are representative of something bigger and more important than himself, he finds these promises unconvincing. “I am a nothing where religion is concerned,” he cries, “and I will not pretend to be anything that I am not! (72). What he is *not*, at least so far as he insists, is suffering, melancholic, devout, or victimized, nor does he want to be lumped together with a “people,” to whom, in a characteristic outburst, Portnoy directs these objections:

...instead of wailing for he-who has turned his back on the sage of *his people*, weep for your own pathetic selves, why don’t you, sucking and sucking on that sour grape of a religion! Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the

suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick our suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen to also be a human being! (76)

His aim is to cast off this “saga” of suffering, which he believes stands in the way of not merely his masculine identity but also his very humanity.

Yet while Portnoy (desiring distance from the guilt-inflected manhood imposed by his family) rejects a masculine identity defined by his Jewish heritage, he also feels apart from the larger white “*goyische*” society to which he turns for an alternative. He claims to resent the self-righteous superiority he associates with Jews, but also remarks that “when it comes to tawdriness and cheapness, to beliefs that would shame even a gorilla, you simply cannot top the *goyim*” (168). Moreover, it is largely through his interactions with “the *goyim*” that Portnoy truly begins to recognize the way he is defined by others as a kind of “inessential” being, defined socially and individually by what he is not. “These people are the *Americans*, Doctor,” he says to Spielvogel. “Don’t tell me we’re Americans just like they are. No, no, these blond-haired Christians are the legitimate residents and owners of this place, and they can pump any song they want into the streets and no one is going to stop them either” (145-146).<sup>151</sup> He experiments with adopting his family’s own approach to this otherness—that “the *goyim* pretended to be something special, while *we* were actually *their* moral superiors”—but finds this to be unsatisfactory and just as limiting as rejecting his Jewish heritage for his family’s “narrow-mindedness” and “self-righteousness” (56). Ultimately, exasperated by the simplistic and, as he deems it, “barbaric” definition of the Jews as “good” and the *goyim* as “bad,” Portnoy strives for an understanding beyond this binary (75).

His rebellion against this “barbaric” behavior begins with small but exhilarating acts during his childhood that, in his mind, seem to destabilize the religious laws under which he has

lived his entire life. He contemplates, for example, the time when he embraced the “suicidal Dionysian side” of his nature and indulged in a lobster dinner (79). Looking back, the adult Portnoy views these as a doorway into his more serious engagement with the taboo, explaining that “the lesson may have been learned that to break the law, all you have to do is—just go ahead and break it!” (79). This lawlessness he justifies as something that is part of the natural maturation from boy to man; that to be rebellious, defiant, and even illicit is even what *makes* a man. “Where appetite is concerned, a man in his thirties is responsible to no one but himself!” he insists. “That’s what’s so nice about growing up! You want to take? You take! Debauch a little bit, for Christ’s sake!” (199).

Yet while Portnoy wants to “debauch” as a way to break away from both his oppressive adherence to rules and his feeling that he is somehow a “lesser” man in society, his internalized notions of morality prevent him from doing so—and he is only too aware of his own inhibitions. As Roth himself notes, “In Portnoy the disapproving moralist who says ‘I am horrified!’ will not disappear when the libidinous slob shows up screaming ‘I want!’” (*RMAO* 243). Thus, we are presented with Portnoy’s frustrated question, repeated in variations throughout his entire complaint: “Why must the least deviation from respectable conventions cause me such inner hell? When I *hate* those fucking conventions! When I know *better* than the taboos!” (124). When this question is left unanswered and his problem unresolved, he attempts to justify his adherence to conventions by situating his own internalized moral awareness against that of a larger society who, he feels, falls short of his own moral codes. “The things that other men do—and get away with!” he cries in disbelief (273). This exclamation gets to the heart of Portnoy’s anxiety over being identified as an “other” who lacks entry into white society and, as a result, is

somehow barred from the actions that would seem acceptable—even encouraged—were he a white Gentile male.

Portnoy is so disbelieving of the apparent double standard because, as he continually reminds us, he is the Assistant Commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity, a self-described “most moral man in all of New York, all pure motives and humane and compassionate ideals,” whose work should place him an ethical bar above the rest (174). After being approached by an old acquaintance who appears unaware of Portnoy’s benevolence, he cries in only partially mocking astonishment: “Doesn’t he know that what I do for a living is I’m *good*?” (174).<sup>152</sup> This preoccupation with his own morality is significant here not only because it allows Portnoy to temporarily justify his inability, as he sees it, to adopt the conventions of manhood established by a white Gentile society, but also because his confused and conflicted notions of morality have been tied up in his own imagined ideal of “Americanness” since childhood. As an adolescent, for example, Portnoy authored a play entitled *Let Freedom Ring!*—which he admits as an adult to be a transparent morality play—whose two main characters were named Prejudice and Tolerance. Yet though he recognizes the play for what it is, after writing it he clearly remembers feeling “reborn,” “free,” and “clean-feeling,” terms and sensations he associates with a particularly American identity (170). His association of American identity with virtue and moral fortitude is one that will, in his adulthood, be largely corrupted, as represented by his reflections on white Gentile masculinity. Yet this memory provides a glimpse into the highly idealized manhood Portnoy might have envisioned in his youth—one that he is constantly and futilely trying to chase as an adult. In other words, while Portnoy views white Gentile masculinity as lacking in virtue and morality, he also recognizes

that these men are defined as quintessentially American, thus adding further conflict to his own definition of American masculinity.

This contradictory perspective on masculine morality is particularly evident during Portnoy's visit to his college girlfriend Kay Campbell's home over Thanksgiving, where he dons a stance of moral superiority to cope with his feelings of being an outsider, and seems to both condemn and condone violence as a marker of American masculinity. Here, Portnoy goes on the offensive: unprovoked, he nevertheless envisions Kay's family assaulting him with anti-Semitic remarks, and his defiance in the face of this imagined scenario takes on the form of a wish for violence, which he threatens against any member of the family who might utter a racist remark. He immediately retracts this threat, however, disassociating it from his Jewish identity and connecting it to the intrinsic character of the Gentile man. "Let *them* be violent, that's *their* way," he says (224). Portnoy relies instead on his ability to "shame and humiliate" his potentially racist hosts through the power of his language. His repeated insistence that he doesn't need to use violence like *they* do, however, suggests that he might, in fact, feel a certain pressure to do so in order to "fit in"—that perhaps it is something he *should* be doing to reach that level of ideal masculinity that he envisions, and that the performance of this identity might require some kind of assimilative sacrifice. "After all," he insists, "to be bad...that is the real struggle: to be bad—and enjoy it! That is what makes men of boys" (124). To "be bad," for Portnoy, means transgressing Jewish cultural restrictions and embracing Jewish cultural taboos—among which violence is counted—and it is the Gentile man who is the embodiment of this transgressive hypermasculine identity.

Portnoy's desire to "be bad and enjoy it," his assumption that this is somehow indicative of a transition from boy to man, and his perception of the *goyim* as representative of an ideal

masculinity have foundations in some of his own early childhood experiences, particularly those in which Portnoy sees his father emasculated and perceives this as a result of some essentially Jewish behavior. For example, when imagining that his mother finds out that his father is having an affair, he says: “Tell her, tell her: ‘That’s right, Sophie, I slipped it to the *shikse*, and what you think and don’t think on the subject doesn’t mean shit to me. Because the way it works, in case you ain’t heard, is that I am the man around here, *and I call the shots!*’ And slug her if you have to! Deck her, Jake! Surely that’s what a *goy* would do, would he not?” (88). Violent assertions of masculine domination become, then, Portnoy’s imagined vehicle for access into white society; they become a way to escape the weak, victimized persona exemplified, so he decides, by his Jewish father and which he also associates with Jewish masculine identity. “How could he oppress?” he asks of his father. “He *was* the oppressed. How could he wield power?—he *was* the powerless” (40). This assessment inspires in Portnoy not simply pity or disgust, but rage; it fuels his own desire to perpetrate the aggression and violence he believes to be essential to a modern manhood that his father, in his oppressed and powerless position, lacks. “What terrified me most about my father was not the violence I expected him momentarily to unleash upon me,” he admits, “but the violence I wished every night at the dinner table to commit upon his ignorant, barbaric carcass” (41). Again, Portnoy uses the idea of barbarity to define his father (and by implication, his Jewish family in general), indicating a belief that some alternative masculinity might somehow prove to be more “civilized”—a strange association, since that alternative itself, characterized as it is by violence and aggressions, is also defined simultaneously by Portnoy as barbaric.

In these contradictions we can begin to understand the problems inherent within Portnoy’s adoption of violence as a marker of his own masculine identity, for even Portnoy does

not quite know what he believes about violence. Furthermore it becomes evident that within this perception of his father's masculinity lies the crux of the unique Oedipal dilemma that so heavily influences his gendered anxiety. Portnoy himself is aware of the reversal in traditional gender roles in his household: while his father is passive in his marital relationship—stressed and repressed to the point of physical constipation—Sophie Portnoy is outspoken, commanding, and aggressive: in a heavy-handed reference to the emasculating implications of this aggressive mother figure, Roth fashions one of Portnoy's clearest childhood memories to be of his mother threatening him with a kitchen knife as a result of his disobedience. Portnoy, then, wants to avoid becoming a man like his father, but neither can he use the alternative figure in this inverted Oedipal paradigm--his mother--as a model for masculinity. In fact, as Sarah Blacher Cohen has previously observed, the latter alternative is likely a primary impetus for Portnoy's frequent and controversial sexual escapades, for the idea of identifying himself with his "omnipotent mother" inspires within him childhood fears that he might actually turn into a girl (212). Additionally, as others have observed, this inability to identify with either mother or father, leaves Portnoy trapped in a pseudo-adolescent stage.<sup>153</sup> These conflicts leave Portnoy trapped in a stagnant situation that, as I describe below, he attempts to resolve through violence.

## II.

While Roth inverts the Oedipal paradigm to give traditional patriarchal power over to the mother, Portnoy's other encounters with women introduce new problematic intersections between violence and gendered identities.<sup>154</sup> Portnoy's existential situation is still defined by what he lacks: while he may have avoided a life like his father's, he has also not "earned" or "achieved" the masculinity offered by white Gentile society as an alternative. Thus, as his small rebellions as a child have seemingly proved ineffectual, Portnoy as an adult turns to Gentile

women as a way into the society that might grant him this hypermasculine identity. Yet when romantic involvement with these women also proves ineffective, Portnoy turns to violence as a way to “conquer” these women and emulate what he sees to be a more dominant form of masculinity. For Portnoy, violent behavior toward women is indicative of a more “mainstream” masculine ethic, one which he supposes to be less haunted by tragic history and, consequently, responsibility to that history. In effect, Portnoy imitates the violence of patriarchal western society. Though he claims that his goal in “conquering” Gentile women is in fact to “conquer America,” it soon becomes clear that he also seeks out these women as a reaction against his personal experience of oppression and, perhaps, his cultural and ancestral history of victimization—his worry over being victimized by a woman serving as a kind of metonymy for his worry over inheriting a sense of victimization via his Jewish past (235).

Portnoy’s attempts to throw off the oppressed and victimized masculinity that seems to define his Jewish father, and to overcome the taboos that prove so restrictive to the free creation of his masculine identity, however, have led more than one critic to identify much of Roth’s novel as misogynistic.<sup>155</sup> Yet this label tends to oversimplify Roth’s work which, because of its deployment of irony and Roth’s satirical perspective towards Portnoy, complicates and questions the misogyny Portnoy enacts. Admittedly, this tone, as Debra Shostak has observed, can make Roth’s work “appear as much a prescient critique of misogynist attitudes as a purveyor of them;” however, it is my sense that Roth leans much more heavily on the critique (112). Dean Franco, also reluctant to charge Roth with misogyny, offers some insight that I believe helps to explain some of Portnoy’s actions and highlights where we might find this critique of misogyny. In his study of Roth, Franco compares *Portnoy’s Complaint* to Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, an association which would seem at first unlikely to dispel accusations of misogyny (in fact, it



might seem to do the opposite). However, Franco's comparison highlights moments in Roth's text that invite such labels, in an attempt to first explain *why* these interpretations might arise, and to then reconsider them. As he says,

Roth's novel is comedic, but it relies structurally on the same symbolic economy of race and sexuality as does Cleaver's justification for his crime. Like Cleaver, Portnoy longs for white women and becomes aware of his own racial distinctness through contiguity. Also as with Cleaver, Portnoy's desire is masochistic, bringing him moral "pain." And finally, again like Cleaver, Portnoy turns that masochism outward, deflecting it or displacing it onto the women he ravishes. (99)

The significance of Franco's reading lies in its suggestion that Portnoy's relationships with women are directly tied to his own understanding of his racial or ethnic identity as it stands in contrast with white society, particularly with the white women he pursues.<sup>156</sup> These relationships, however, rather than making Portnoy feel closer to this white masculine ideal, actually make him feel further away from it—as evidenced, for instance, by the aforementioned Thanksgiving visit with Kay Campbell and her family.

Interestingly, Portnoy's treatment of these women is also tied up with the fact that his existential situation is actually strikingly similar to that faced by women themselves, at least so far as Beauvoir presents the comparison between women, blacks, and Jews in *The Second Sex*. That is, his is also struggle to face the existential realization that he, who thought himself to be essential, finds himself named inessential by others, and therefore much of his dilemma involves resisting identification with an oppressed class of people. His attempts in the face of this situation to reclaim that individual power he feels to be lacking, then, are manifested in a failed performance of an aggressive masculine ethic.

Still, I would emphasize that while a deflected masochism in the face of heightened racial awareness might help to *explain* Portnoy's violence, ultimately in Roth's mind, it does not excuse his behavior. While the impetus for Portnoy's action as described above does not render his actions free of misogynistic qualities, I argue that Roth embeds in his satirical and exaggerated portrait of Portnoy's trials—and failures—a criticism of Portnoy's use of violence against women. This situation is largely embodied within Portnoy's dysfunctional relationship with Mary Jane Reed (who he nicknames "The Monkey"), which he chronicles in some detail in his confession. He frequently claims to harbor little respect for her, calling her "coarse, tormented, self-loathing, bewildered, lost, identityless," essentially imposing his own securities onto the woman who, it will be revealed, ultimately contributes to his internalized emasculation (214). Portnoy is drawn to Mary Jane's straightforward sexuality, which is why he claims to stay with her despite his apparent lack of respect for what he sees as her subpar intelligence and crassness, which he often conveys through an attitude of condescension—at times veering into the spiteful.

At the same time, however, he is quick to observe that in spite of this behavior on his part, she is not his "victim." It is difficult to see the situation otherwise, particularly when Portnoy assures us that he wants to be bad—and to enjoy it!—and when he prefaces his assertion that the Monkey is not his victim with a description of her as "a pathetic screwy hillbilly cunt" (135). Even more puzzling is the contradiction between Portnoy's connections between manhood and violence and the nature of his protestations about her victimhood. For example, his emphasis on the word "*my*" (she "is hardly what could be called *my* victim") suggests that it is *he* who might be considered *her* victim in their relationship—at the very least, that is his implication. As he explains to Spielvogel, "The last words I hear have to do with the fact that it was only out of love

for me (“*Love!*” she screams) that she allowed herself to do the degrading things I forced quote unquote upon her. Which is not the case, Doctor! Not the case at all!” (107). In fact, at the heart of this specific complaint is Portnoy’s fear of being trapped in a relationship that oppresses him with even more guilt, for as he believes, the Monkey’s accusations are merely “an attempt on this sly bitch’s part to break me on the rack of guilt—and thus get herself a husband” (107). Here, Portnoy rejects the masculine role of husband that would most likely be encouraged by the definition of manhood endorsed by his Jewish-American family and closely associated with the Jewish *mensch*; in doing so, Portnoy again attempts to deny that responsibility, obligation, or stability should be dimensions of his manhood and accuses the Monkey of therefore impinging on his manhood by forcing him into this role. Thus, he claims innocence through victimization here, remaining with the Monkey largely out of that “guilty deference” he recognizes in himself and his own father, yet he simultaneously believes that in order to assert a more powerful, dominant masculinity, he must somehow cast off any semblance of this persona (88). Roth’s humorous portrait of Portnoy here, and what Posnock calls Roth’s “aesthetic distance” allows us to see these behavioral contradictions as undermining Portnoy’s narrative authority; his frantic attempts to convince Spielvogel that *he* is the victim in fact draw attention to his attempts to blame (and victimize) the Monkey, rather than accept responsibility for his own actions (Posnock 17).<sup>157</sup>

This conflict then, stands in for Portnoy’s other conflicted attempts to integrate the divergent aspects of masculinity into one ideal, his relationship with the Monkey exemplifying his impulses to both reject and claim victimhood as a marker of his masculine identity. In this, Portnoy also recognizes that while he wants to declare superiority over the Monkey—both in terms of morals and intelligence—the uncertainty that arises from his many incongruent

impulses toward masculine identity prevents him from fully laying claim to this. Though he recognizes that any man in his “right mind” would remove himself from such a dysfunctional relationship, he also acknowledges, “My right mind is just another name for my fears! *My right mind is simply that inheritance of terror that I bring with me out of my ridiculous past...* In the street, who had been trembling, me or the girl? Me! Who had the boldness, the daring, the guts, me or the girl? The girl!” (160-161). Portnoy recognizes this inheritance of his “ridiculous past” scornfully, as though to mock it, and with the goal perhaps of blaming his current identity crisis on this history that inspires such contradiction, fear, and passivity within him. It is this “right mind” that he seeks to suppress, for it demonstrates his attachment to moral responsibility, which he perceives as a barrier to that masculine identity which would liberate him from his guilt. Arising from this is Portnoy’s sense that his fears and his history hold him back and prevent him from fashioning the individual masculine identity he desires. This dilemma invokes the existential plight outlined by Beauvoir, for what Portnoy fears in this anxiety over victimization and powerlessness parallels what Beauvoir defines as the immanence that contributes to the state of being rendered inessential; that is, Portnoy fears a static, confining life defined by passivity in the face of his cultural past, which he feels would relegate him to some “lesser” manhood.

All of this is compounded by his trip to Israel, where Portnoy further encounters his own inability to escape the pre-established conventions dictated not only by his Jewish-American family and by non-Jewish American society at large, but also by the views of the Jewish people newly ensconced in their homeland. His trip initially inspires in him a longing for the youthful and unadulterated admiration he felt for the Jewish men in his family. “I love those men!” he cries. “I want to grow up to *be* one of those men!” (245). Here, amidst this fit of nostalgia (and in a move that anticipates Nathan Zuckerman’s vision of marrying Anne Frank in Roth’s 1979

novel *The Ghost Writer*), Portnoy asks Naomi—an Israeli woman whom he has just met—to marry him, in the what seems to be an attempt to embrace his heritage and prove his Jewish identity to himself and to his family. Yet Naomi sees right through Portnoy’s impulse, disdainfully (and violently) refusing him, her assertion of authority tapping into Portnoy’s unstable sense of his own masculinity. She maps onto his character all of those weaknesses that he himself wants most to avoid:

By dawn I had been made to understand that I was the epitome of what was most shameful in ‘the culture of the Diaspora.’ Those centuries and centuries of homelessness had produced just such disagreeable men as myself...It was Diaspora Jews just like myself who had gone by the millions to the gas chambers without ever raising a hand against their persecutors, who did not know enough to defend their lives with their blood.

(265)

And here, perceiving himself to be rejected as an undesirable other from all sides, Portnoy finally makes an attempt to embrace that violence he feels will allow him to exercise the power that he feels to be so lacking: he attacks Naomi, tackling her from behind and violently throwing her to the floor. He fantasizes in his moment of violence of not only raping her, but of passing along a venereal disease which will taint her future Jewish offspring and “spread forth from her unto all those brave and virtuous Jewish boys and girls” (266). He takes pleasure not only in his temporary ability to physically overwhelm Naomi, but in his brief fantasy that he will somehow be able to pollute the holiness of the religion and culture that has seemed to betray, confuse, and “other” him as have the women and the *goyim* in his life. “O you virtuous Jewess, the tables are turned, *tsatskeleh!*” he cries. “*You* on the defensive now...Make ready, Naomi, I am about to poison your organs of production! I am about to change the future of the race!” (268). His

attack on Naomi, in his mind, enacts a symbolic violence against the pure Jewish bloodstream from which he feels excluded (in yet another ironic twist) by being *too* American. As Portnoy explains later, forcing Naomi beneath him in this act of sexual violence while “tasting there the grit of...all that holy soil” is meant to impress upon her his “lesson,” the nature of which is not entirely clear, but seems to mean a lesson in his masculine authority; that is to say, he wants to demonstrate to Naomi—and implicitly, to the world at large—that he can effectively overcome centuries of socially embedded stereotypes of Jewish passivity and nonviolence by choosing to exercise his physical will against one woman (267).

“But of course I couldn’t,” Portnoy immediately admits (268). Even he acknowledges the absurdity of his brief foray into aggression and violence, recognizing that his force here, which seems not only surprising but almost farcical in light of what we know of Portnoy’s character, will be short-lived, perhaps even a solitary digression from the usual. This, again, is not meant to excuse Portnoy’s violence, for the fact remains that in his fear of being victimized by the violence of the goyim, Portnoy has exacted himself through violence, with women as substituted objects onto which he projects his rage. While this act in itself can be justifiably construed as misogynistic, what I have sought to argue is that embedded in the text is a criticism of that misogynistic violence.<sup>158</sup> In other words, though Portnoy excuses himself, he is not excused by Roth in the way that Stephen Rojack, for example, appears to be excused by Mailer in *An American Dream*; unlike Mailer, Roth does not hold Portnoy up as a model. In fact, this moment of aggression seems to have changed nothing, and only magnified his guilt. Moreover, in representing the failure of violence in this way, Roth has illustrated a certain failure of masculinity on two counts: the first being Portnoy’s failure to accept responsibility for his own actions, particularly his treatment of “the Monkey,” and the second being the failure to commit

sexual violence against women. Both of these represent two alternate versions of masculinity with which Portnoy struggles—the dutiful and nonviolent mensch versus the physically aggressive manhood typically seen to be a Gentile characteristic. His failure to meet the demands of both of these masculine stereotypes demonstrates to Portnoy a “weakness” surrounding his own masculinity—though a weakness that Roth calls into question by making Portnoy the butt of the jokes, rather than an affirmation of misogyny.

In any case, Portnoy certainly does not reach any therapeutic resolution in the end—a point exemplified by Spielvogel’s “punch line:” “Perhaps vee may now to begin, yes?” (274). After all, the whole novel in its send-up of the confessional is, essentially, about a necessity to speak, and the ways in which speaking is a continuous, even cyclical process. However, Portnoy *has* begun, through speaking, to uncover both the limits of violence and the nature of the contradictions within his own masculine identity. What Roth has given us is a glimpse into a life of contradictions that that inform this cycle, and the reasons *why* violence enacted against tradition, against women, and against an “other” cannot work to foster any sort of revolutionary change in masculine identity—at least, not one in which the past can be completely and violently eradicated from the ongoing construction of a gendered identity. As Daniel Kartiganer argues in his analysis of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, metamorphosis is at the center of nearly all of Roth’s fiction, but “the strangeness of the transformation lies not only in its improbability or the grotesqueness of the new self, but in the survival of the old as a grudging yet tenacious partner... The transformations... are always incomplete—dramas of changing rather than change” (82). This unfinished business—the evidence that Portnoy’s own sense of his manhood is still, after all of this, as “incomplete” in his eyes as ever—carries over into Roth’s later work, specifically 1974’s *My Life as a Man*, in which Peter Tarnopol faces a strikingly similar dilemma, with an outcome

that suggests Roth is still grappling—and asking readers to grapple—with the slippery definitions of manhood and American identity. In this later work, Roth again fashions a protagonist who assigns violence and transgression to an idealized masculine myth, and as a result, his task of “achieving” this masculine identity will again be set up to fail. What I aim to prove, however, is that in this narrative construction, Roth provides us with the clues necessary to uncover through his protagonist’s failures some of the key contradictions and fallacies present within these perceptions of what it means to be a man, particularly the notion that one is able to “reach” a masculine identity—as though it were the endpoint on a journey.

### III.

“What is it with you Jewish writers?” Morris Tarnopol asks his brother Peter in *My Life as a Man*. “Madeleine Herzog, Deborah Rojack, the cutie-pie castrator in *After the Fall*...And now, for the further delights of the rabbis and the reading public, Lydia Zuckerman, that Gentile tomato” (118). Morris is referring here to Peter Tarnopol’s recent short stories, “Courting Disaster” and “Salad Days,” in which Tarnopol provides a “post-cataclysmic fictional meditation” on the “true” story of his disastrous marriage, where the “fictional” Lydia Zuckerman stands in for the “real” Maureen Tarnopol. This engagement with the blurred lines between reality and fiction—exemplified in Morris’s allusion to Bellow and Mailer, as well as in Tarnopol’s own story within a story—pervades the tale of Tarnopol’s struggle to, as Roth puts it, “achieve a description” (*RMAO* 97). Tarnopol himself alludes to what he hopes to achieve in this description, declaring simply, “I wanted to be humanish: manly, a man,” thus tying his very humanity to his masculinity (173).

This belief in the powers of description—the ability to make himself a man through language—is part of what makes Tarnopol’s existential and gendered struggle ultimately



problematic. As Margaret Smith has argued, Tarnopol turns to the reading and writing of fiction in the hopes that his imaginative process will grant him more individual agency; she claims that “if determinism is a doctrine based on the claim that the construction of self... is a construct influenced by human actions and determined by other causes external to the will, Roth may be suggesting that the act of imagination is a different process that takes place outside of the determining properties of that will” (79). While this nod to Roth’s existential theme of individual will coincides with my own reading, what I argue here is that language and description cannot help Tarnopol “achieve” the kind of manhood he seeks, particularly when the description relies on the use of violence. Like Portnoy, Tarnopol’s experience of Jewish culture—also grounded firmly in a moral framework that he finds oppressive—complicates his understanding of manhood, as he finds himself dissatisfied with both the expectations dictated by his heritage and those seemingly required of him by white Gentile “American” society. He deploys violence in the face of these competing impulses toward different definitions of manhood, but this backfires, leaving him feeling emasculated and unable to transform himself into the man he feels he should be.

Much of *My Life as a Man* is devoted to Peter Tarnopol’s narrative of his tumultuous relationship with his wife Maureen—a relationship that constantly feeds Tarnopol’s masculine anxiety. Maureen, by Tarnopol’s account, is volatile and manipulative: in one of her most appalling moves, she tricks him into marriage through a convoluted plot in which she pays a woman for a urine sample to prove to Tarnopol that she is pregnant. This fraught relationship with Maureen forms the center of, and often acts as the catalyst for, Tarnopol’s newly realized aspiration to be “humanish” and “manly,” for it is his choice to stay with Maureen even in the face of her instability and dishonesty that seems, paradoxically, to both affirm and compromise

his masculinity. For Tarnopol, it is restraint and reliability that are the scions of “manliness;” thus, his decision to stay with Maureen rather than rid himself of her becomes for him, in a twisted and masochistic way, proof of his manhood, just as it simultaneously emasculates him.<sup>159</sup> His efforts to construct a masculine identity that would somehow remove him from this paradoxical quagmire escalate toward violent confrontations which, in Tarnopol’s mind, serve a reactionary function as a defense mechanism against Maureen’s own violent instigations.

I would argue that within this very perception of violence, however, also lies the clues to its ineffectiveness. For Tarnopol, as for Portnoy, violent action and acts of forced aggression represent an exhilarating lawlessness that allows access to a world outside his own strict moral code, and a temporary way out of his self-victimizing tendencies. Ultimately, however, these attempts at violence point to a fundamental problem with the way Tarnopol approaches his own existential and gendered project: he, like Portnoy, perceives aggressive force as a marker of masculine identity that will allow him entry to white society and the freedom to construct an identity defined not by what it lacks but rather by what it contains. In her study of Roth, Shostak observes that in many representations of American selfhood, “the more neutral idea of an *act*...becomes for a man conflated with an *act of force*” (*Philip Roth* 26). This observation might certainly be applied to Tarnopol, as he attaches physical aggression to his idea of manhood and of autonomy. Yet by perceiving force as an identifier of masculinity, Tarnopol only reinforces the limiting myth of white Gentile masculinity that he finds so oppressive. That is, rather than transcending the binary he fashions between passive Jewish masculinity and a more desirable Gentile masculinity, Tarnopol chooses to fashion the latter as an end-goal, thus reinforcing both the binary itself and the notion, to use Beauvoir’s language, of the “superhuman essence” of white masculinity (221).

While it gradually becomes evident throughout the novel that Tarnopol's insecurities over his masculinity stem from sources other than his marriage to Maureen, she most often serves as the trigger that brings these to the surface—at least so far as we know, since all we know of Maureen is what Tarnopol himself recounts. In his recollection, she exploits his insecurities, placing her own tenuous well-being in the hands of his faltering sense of masculine selfhood by informing him, for example, that “she might very well have to be institutionalized one day” if he were “to continue to refuse to ‘be a man’” (268). It is as a result of her ability to psychologically emasculate him that Tarnopol further projects onto Maureen many of his own self-doubts; for instance, in one of his imagined scenarios, he envisions her calling him a fraud and a liar in front of his students and imagines that in response to whatever he said to his class she would cry, ‘Lies! Filthy, self-serving lies!’” (104). This is only one occasion in which the extent of Tarnopol's overwhelming and emasculating fear becomes evident, though even he cannot pinpoint at first what, exactly, he fears. He is afraid of being found guilty of something, *anything*, but harbors a particular anxiety over the possibility of discovering that he is, in fact, what Maureen accuses him of being. His fear of being found to be less of an upstanding, moral, intelligent man than he presents himself to be is so acute in fact, that it inspires his sister Joan to ask him if there is “no bottom” to his “guilty conscience,” and prompts his submissive lover Susan McCall Smith to finally assert herself, as she insists to Tarnopol that “the only one who thinks you're guilty of *anything* is *you*” (114; 318).

While the Tarnopol of “My True Story” is unable to articulate the foundations of his emasculating fears, Roth provides insight into this dilemma in the two short stories that introduce the character of Nathan Zuckerman and serve as the opening of *My Life as a Man*. Though Tarnopol insists that these stories are fictional, telling his sister Joan that she shouldn't read too

much of herself into the character of Zuckerman's sister in "Courting Disaster" and "Salad Days," the semi-autobiographical nature of these stories and Tarnopol's clear use of them for cathartic purposes, cannot help but lead us to read Zuckerman as Tarnopol. In fact, Tarnopol himself admits that "Courting Disaster," while a work of fiction, is still a "meditation on nothing more than my marriage" (113). These stories, then, work to punctuate and enhance the themes addressed in "My True Story"—one of these being his fear of remaining trapped in a Jewish stereotype as an inessential "other" separated from the rest of society in which the ideal picture of American masculinity appears to Tarnopol to be embodied by the white Gentile male. As these particular stories exemplify the internalized competition between his seemingly disparate American and Jewish identities, they also demonstrate the way that this conflict fuels Zuckerman/Tarnopol's anxiety and uncertain masculine identity.

In "Useful Fictions," for example, Nathan Zuckerman is dismayed that his brother Sherman has forfeited an exciting life in New York with June Christie—an attractive blonde singer who "opened up a fantasy or two" in his younger brother's imagination—in favor of a marriage to "some skinny Jewish girl from Bala Cynwyd who talked in baby talk and worked as a dental technician somewhere" (11). Sherman's new wife, the very image of the nondescript ("some" girl who worked "somewhere") seems to eradicate all the possibilities open to Sherman in the city. Zuckerman's father believes that Sherman "saw the light" in his decision to marry a nice Jewish girl and move back home to the family, but Zuckerman feels otherwise. It was, after all, "pictures in the Bass catalogue of the apple-cheeked boys in white bucks crossing the sunlit New England quadrangle in the company of the apple-cheeked girls in white bucks" that drew Zuckerman to Bass College, where he is one of only three Jewish students. Though that minority status makes him something of a campus celebrity, he is reluctant to claim tokenism as the

avenue to individuality. He joins and promptly quits a Jewish fraternity, for example, leading his father to question his devotion to anything. “Tell me Nathan,” he says. “How do you quit something you don’t even belong to yet? How can you be so goddam superior to something when you don’t even know what it’s like to *belong* to the thing yet? Is this what I’ve got for a son all of a sudden—a *quitter*?” (13). Whether or not Nathan is a “quitter,” he does not want to “belong” solely to his Jewish culture. Rather, he wants to be part of that group of “apple-cheeked boys” from the Bass catalogue. In short, he desires, in Beauvoir’s terms, “to possess is that which he *is not*, he seeks union with what appears to be *Other* than himself,” which in this case translates to a more self-assured sense of his masculinity and his American identity (Beauvoir 74).

However, despite the way he represents this world that exists beyond the confines of his Jewish upbringing—or, perhaps, *because* of this perception—he also recognizes his place outside of it. So, like Portnoy, Zuckerman tries on the moral superiority modeled by his parents to cope with his sense of being perceived as less of a man, and uses his perceptions of violence to set himself apart from this Gentile other. He refers, for example, to an inherent “Gentile barbarity” that he finds within his wife Lydia Ketterer’s ex-husband, a kind of behavior he claims to have “rejected as irrelevant to the kind of life that I intended to lead” (92). As he further explains of this “barbarity:”

Exciting and gripping as they were to a helpless child—hair-raising tales of ‘their’ alcoholism, ‘their’ violence,’ ‘their’ imperishable hatred of us, stories of criminal oppressors and innocent victims that could not but hold a powerful negative attraction for any Jewish child, and particularly to one whose very body was that of the underdog...I reacted against these tales with all the intensity my mission required. (93)

The collective persona of white Gentile society takes on the character of fantasy here, the “hair-raising” tales of “their” violence turned into thrilling bedtime stories of some other unattainable but strangely attractive world. Thus, even though he claims to work against this attraction as part of his “mission,” calling Ketterer “the embodiment of shagitz thuggery” and Ketterer’s daughter Monica the model of “shiksa wiliness,” and further justifying his marriage to Lydia by asserting that she “*detested this inheritance*” of violent “thuggery” herself, there is tied up in this rejection a distinct magnetism and awe (94).<sup>160</sup> This contradiction, exemplified through Zuckerman’s relationship with the Ketterer family, particularly with Lydia (who bears striking similarities to Maureen), ultimately renders Zuckerman unable to detach himself from the situation in which he is mired, and prompts him to confess his belief that, as he says, “I squandered my manhood” (95).

These contradictions might, at least in part, be informed by Roth’s own assessment of the Jewish American dilemma at the time. In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth articulates the developing predicament faced by Jews in America, something which he had begun to investigate implicitly in *Portnoy* and which he examines more closely in *My Life as a Man*. By 1975, Roth says:

The cry ‘Watch out for the goyim!’ at times seems more the expression of an unconscious wish than of a warning: Oh that they were out there, so that we could be together in here! A rumor of persecution, a taste of exile, might even bring with it that old world of feelings and habits—something to replace the new world of social accessibility and moral indifference...*Jews are people who are not what anti-Semites say they are.*

That was once a statement out of which a man might begin to construct an identity for himself; now it does not work so well, for it is difficult to act counter to the ways people expect you to act when fewer and fewer people define you by such expectations. The

success of the struggle against the defamation of Jewish character in this country has itself made more pressing the need for a Jewish self-consciousness that is relevant to this time and place. (*RMAO* 165)

This assessment of the situation of Jews in America echoes Sartre's discussion in 1948's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in which Sartre argues that it is the anti-Semite, as opposed to any historical fact or experience, who creates the "idea" of the Jew. Sartre posits that if Jews have a "common bond," it is a result of this construction as "they have in common the situation of a Jew; that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews" (*Anti-Semite and Jew* 67).<sup>161</sup> Roth affirms this assessment, but his comments here are intended to draw attention to the shift in attitudes toward the "idea" of the Jew. That is, Roth's remarks point to the ways that the increasing assimilation of Jews in America in the late 60s and early 70s further complicated their sense of cultural identity as Jewish-Americans, as the successful assimilation Roth mentions seems to simultaneously diminish and increase the immediacy and necessity of banding together as a marginalized group. Thus, Roth's interpretation of manhood as presented in his fiction must be seen as connected to the changing roles and perceptions of what it meant to be Jewish in America. Yet as we saw in *Portoy's Complaint* and as we see again in *My Life as a Man*, Roth does not embrace either the increased assimilation or the previous sense of community fashioned by marginalization; rather, his protagonists seek a source of identity located outside of this binary.

Such newfound freedom to construct one's identity as altogether "American" may provide Tarnopol with more control over the shape of the man he wants to be, but it also translates into an increased sense of responsibility to his heritage and culture which, as the repeated references in his own writings (such as the Zuckerman story above) make clear, informs

his struggle to “achieve a description” of manhood throughout the novel. For example, before he recounts one of his final violent confrontations with Maureen, Tarnopol returns to a poignant memory particularly related to his Jewish heritage. He recollects a time in his childhood when he accidentally returned to his old house, from which he and his family had recently moved, to find his family gone. Before realizing his mistake, he momentarily feared that his mother had been taken away by the Nazis, and immediately began to weep. He recounts this tale to Spielvogel, who serves here again as a vehicle for the protagonist’s confession. However, as a caricature of the psychoanalyst’s fondness for interpretive displacements, Spielvogel completely misconstrues the meaning of this memory, deeming it an example of “guilt over the aggressive fantasies directed toward the mother.”<sup>162</sup> Tarnopol, however, believes that he cries not out of guilt but out of relief, not only that his mother is alive but that he lives in America rather than in “ravaged, ancestral, Jew-hating Europe” (245). This memory fosters a moment of realization for Tarnopol—that by the fortune of where and when he was born, he has been spared the atrocities of the Holocaust, and he realizes that he might use this realization to be grateful for the history and culture preserved within his own family. Yet similar to Portnoy’s struggle with a sense of responsibility to the “six million” whom Hannah mourns, Tarnopol’s sense of responsibility to his heritage, while by no means a negative character trait in itself, does complicate his situation when he attempts to weave its importance into his modern interpretations of American manhood.

These complications are further manifested in Tarnopol’s perception of violence, which exhibit contradictions symbolic of his larger masculine identity crisis. Zuckerman’s admission of a squandered manhood closes the “Useful Fictions” section of *My Life as a Man*, which then transitions into “My True Story,” in which Tarnopol allegedly presents the readers with the “facts” of his own life. Almost immediately, he acknowledges the fact that he is “unable to



separate himself” from his marriage to Maureen, a site of humiliation which is often the focus of his own self-derogating sense of humor, and which he readily attributes to his own aversion to violence (101). In fact, at several moments he fixates not only on his skepticism toward violence, but on what he sees to be an *inability* to practice violence in any form.<sup>163</sup> Once, for example, when halfheartedly contemplating suicide in the New York City subway, Tarnopol says: “I scanned the tracks, to be certain that I had in fact succeeded in stifling this wholly original urge for Peter Tarnopol to be transformed into a mangled corpse; amazed, terrified, I had also, as they say, to laugh: ‘Commit suicide? Are you kidding? You can’t even walk out the door’” (102).<sup>164</sup> Manhood, it is implied here, is in part defined by the courage and ability to inflict violence, even on the self, and again, Tarnopol feels he falls short.

In much the same way, he defines his early relationship with Maureen as constituted largely by his *threats* of violence, which both he and his brother perceive to be a masculine weakness on his part, as they once again exemplify a failure to follow through on some ideal of forceful masculinity. For example, when Maureen shows up at his classroom one day and an argument ensues, Tarnopol cries, “Go Maureen, or I’ll throw you down those fucking stairs! Go, *before I murder you!*” (103). On another occasion, when she comes at him with her purse, he screams, “CLIP ME WITH THAT MAUREEN AND I’LL KILL YOU!” (184). In both cases, he does not touch her, and even Morris recognizes in his brother this tendency to balk in the face of violent confrontation. When Tarnopol assures Morris that he had reached a point at which he “was going to kill” Maureen, for instance—“with an ax! With my bare hands!”—Morris skeptically replies: “You? *You* were?...Oh, I’ll bet. Oh, you poor, pussywhipped bastard, I’ll just bet you would have” (126). Morris’s taunting of his brother’s inability to follow through on his threats reaffirms the notion that a man who was *not* “a poor pussywhipped bastard” would,

indeed have followed through on his words. Thus, Morris himself perpetuates the masculine myth that confines his brother, as does Tarnopol in his lament that his “inability” to enact physical aggression proves to be some failing on his part. Yet despite Morris’s mockery and disbelief, Tarnopol’s abusive speech is in itself a form of violence; however, it is not the type of violent force he believes will show his masculine superiority or strength—perhaps because Maureen can meet him equally threat for threat and often, as in her insistence that Tarnopol refuses to “be a man,” she herself is the verbal aggressor. Thus, in Tarnopol’s mind, without the ability to perform a physically aggressive violence—to which he will eventually resort—Tarnopol feels unable to achieve a traditionally masculine dominance over his wife.

Additionally, while Tarnopol acknowledges his aversion to violence on the very heels of his fictionalized alter ego’s distinction between a Gentile tendency to embrace violence and a Jewish aversion to violence in “Courting Disaster,” he also, in a contradiction reminiscent of Portnoy’s confusion, seems reluctant to attribute this very attitude toward violence to any aspect of his ethnicity or heritage. In “Salad Days,” for example, he has Zuckerman project a non-violent disposition that seems to arise not only from his “physical timidity,” but from a Jewish upbringing that emphasized violence as beneath him (20). However, during his brief stint in the military when he is bedridden with migraines, Zuckerman also admits that he is disappointed at the thought that his debilitating headaches, which only began once he entered the army and began carrying a weapon, might somehow be associated with this “traditional Jewish abhorrence of violence;” this explanation seems to him “too conventional and simplistic, too ‘easy’” (55). Thus, though the intricately interwoven relationship between masculinity and violence in *My Life as a Man* is complicated and at times contradictory, it is evident that neither Tarnopol nor Zuckerman (nor Roth) wants it to be linked to any inherent—or inherited—part of his being, for

the possibility that this might be a particularly Jewish inclination toward non-violence would suggest that he is at the mercy of something over which he has little control—an obstacle to his existential freedom.

Tarnopol does not leave these conflicts in his fiction, however, but also expounds on these troubles during his “true story,” where he continues to explain his existential struggle to transcend the either/or binary of Jewish and Gentile identities that complicates his American identity. A case similar to Zuckerman’s, for example, arises when Tarnopol’s sister Joan sends along reviews of “Salad Days” and “Courting Disaster” from Lane Coutell, a twenty-four year old editor of *Bridges* magazine who, as Joan says, would supposedly “give anything” to publish Tarnopol’s work. In his notes on the stories, Lane comments that Tarnopol “is to be congratulated heartily for triumphing (at least here) for all that repressive piety and fashionable Jewish angst” that he found in Tarnopol’s previous acclaimed novel *A Jewish Father*, though he also notes that “the character of Zuckerman embodies and represents that misguided and morbid ‘moral’ imagination” that drove that earlier work (117). The significance of this critique lies in the tone in which it is presented—it tends toward the presumptuous and appears to oversimplify Zuckerman’s dilemma, boiling it down to some essence of “Jewishness” when, it becomes clear, there is far more at stake than such an assessment would suggest. Tarnopol offers no commentary in the face of this review, other than to compare it to his brother’s similarly “trenchant comments”—thus indicating that a “triumph” over a “fashionable Jewish angst,” as Lane puts it, is not quite what he wants to convey. Instead, like Portnoy, he wants to move beyond the divisiveness indicated by such a distinction, with the aim of hybridizing the seemingly variant aspects of his American and Jewish identity to craft a masculine ethic that will imbue him with physical power but allow him to retain his moral center.

The ethical impulses arising from the side of Tarnopol that is, as Roth would say, “the nice Jewish boy” complicates this mission, however, and confounds his notions that there might be any such thing as an ideal masculinity. Tarnopol’s sense of manhood, as he reminds us, is directly connected to his notion of moral fortitude and responsibility, which he uses to compare himself to other men in much the same way that Portnoy uses his occupation as “the most moral man in all of New York” to justify his own behavior. This tendency to fixate on his moral superiority also manifests itself in his relationships with women. In his imaginary letter to Karen Oakes, for example (a student with whom he conducted an affair as his marriage to Maureen was crumbling), Tarnopol admits, “I am sensitive to nothing in all the world as I am to my moral reputation” (229). He views his relationships with women as a kind of “test” of this virtue, insisting that his behavior is actually emblematic of his morality. “It isn’t that women mean too little to me—what’s caused the trouble is that they mean so much,” he says. “The testing ground not for potency, but *virtue!*” (243).

As he is also ready to admit, however, his obsession with his moral reputation proves repeatedly to be his undoing. When he decides to ask Maureen to marry him, for instance, it seems nothing less than an act of masochism. In an attempt to explain how he imagines this decision would actually strengthen his own sense of masculinity and morality, he refers back to his work in *A Jewish Father*, in which he had carefully chosen a quote from Thomas Mann as an epigraph, reading: “All actuality is deadly earnest, and it is morality itself that, one with life, forbids us to be true to the guileless unrealism of our youth.” Reflecting back on this, he observes the effect that literature has had on this sense of morality: in a sense, it has shaped it into a nearly impossible ideal and imbued within him a “lofty moral attitude” the likes of which can be found in works by Dostoyevsky and Henry James. “Probably had I not been so grandiose

about my honor, my integrity, and my manly duty, about ‘morality itself,’ I would never have been so susceptible to a literary education and its attendant pleasures to begin with,” he says (193).

This unattainable pillar of moral fortitude translates into a similarly unattainable ideal of moral masculinity—unattainable because it would mean that both staying with Maureen and leaving her are each the solution to his masculine crisis. He dreams of leaving Maureen to reclaim some semblance of his former life as a man, if such a thing existed, but also says that he did not leave her because “that isn’t what a man like myself did” (197). This definition of what it means to be a man, however, ultimately works to further emasculate Tarnopol, which even he himself acknowledges. “I made the grotesque mistake of *elevating* her to the status of a human being toward whom I had a *moral responsibility*,” he admits. “Had I actually been able to treat her as some goddam ‘object,’ or simply to see her for what she was, I would never have done my manly duty and married her!” (234). In other words, he believes that if he had been able to be less upstanding and ultimately more misogynistic, his life would be better. In the end, then, he concludes that doing what “he thought to be ‘manly’ and ‘upright’ and ‘principled’ was actually “cowardly and submissive” (256). Thus, though he previously associated manhood with a moral foundation, here the equation of morality and manliness is complicated by the fact that Tarnopol’s moral act, as he perceives it, works to emasculate him instead, and the more violent options appears to him as the more lucrative option.

Interestingly, though, following this admission of the faultiness of his perceptions of moral masculinity, Tarnopol begins to create associations with victimization to justify his situation. This adds another conflict to Tarnopol’s work towards a description, for while claiming to be Maureen’s victim might allow him to claim a certain degree of innocence, it also

forces him to present himself as powerless. In a move reminiscent of Portnoy's accusative assessment of *The Monkey*, Tarnopol protests to Spielvogel that Maureen is not the victim, but rather, *he* is. "Did it ever occur to you, Doctor, in the course of your ruminations, that maybe *I* was the one who was made into a sexual object?" he asks (243). When Spielvogel points out that Tarnopol is not an innocent victim here—that he was, in fact, unfaithful to Maureen—Tarnopol again draws from his personal sense of morality to justify his behavior in comparison with other men. In a tone strongly reminiscent of Portnoy's disbelief at "the things other men do—and get away with!" Tarnopol assures us that while "another man would have beaten her head in," he himself is "a literary person," and therefore his infidelity—with Karen Oakes and with a prostitute in Italy, was actually "the civilized thing" (254). His interpretation of morality becomes so confused at this point that he tries to insist to Spielvogel that his infidelity actually represent his manly restraint—that his affairs "constituted the only praiseworthy, the only manly, the only *moral*..."—but even he cannot complete this protest (256). From what we know of Tarnopol's life, and from what we know of Maureen, perhaps we *might* see his restraint of violence as a positive characteristic, but in this moment Roth even has Tarnopol realize that it is pointless to try to justify his behavior. While it might allow him to hold fast to the moral reputation that means so much to him, it does not render him any more equipped to either leave Maureen or fashion himself into that masculine literary hero he envisions. In this way, Roth can also indicate that neither infidelity, misogyny, violence, nor hyper-moral posturing can be held up as models of masculinity.

This dilemma is further elucidated in "Useful Fictions," where a similar inversion puts Zuckerman at odds with his own aversion towards victimization. Here again we find the suggestion that violence might be a way into manhood, but this time it is again the act of

*suffering* violence and emerging from it relatively unscathed which would symbolize masculine power, for it displays not only strength but moral triumph. In his account of his marriage to Lydia Ketterer, Zuckerman makes clear that the violence holds a certain magnetism for him; he is drawn to Lydia's violent past, noting that he is not only in awe of the "incest, the violent marriage, then what she called her 'flirtation' with madness" but with her casual acceptance of this which, he says, exemplifies a kind of "moral triumph" (41; 46). Zuckerman also goes so far as to admit to feeling morally superior after having survived a headache, echoing Tarnopol's own tendency to find some larger literary significance in his pain:

I would almost believe that whatever had laid that dose of suffering upon me had been driven from my body for good, that the powerful enemy...who had unleashed upon me all his violence, who had dragged me to the very end of my endurance, had been proved unable in the end to do me in. The worse the headache the more certain I was when it was over that I had defeated the affliction once and for all. *And was a better man for it.*

(60)

Zuckerman's idea that suffering will somehow make him a "better man" exemplifies the inversion mentioned above—for here he does not associate manhood with force but with endurance; he does not inflict violence or pain, but suffers through it, and at this moment, this fortitude contributes to his masculine maturity. This glorification of suffering and victimization harkens back to Roth's own comment in *Reading Myself and Others* that it was these very qualities that had, historically, bound Jews in America together as one people. Yet we have also seen that Zuckerman is afraid of becoming too enmeshed in this definition and, we might infer, that Tarnopol is likewise afraid of allowing this to dominate his description.

## IV.

These endless oppositions and confusions, which Tarnopol attempts to work through in his “true” story as well as in his fiction, eventually cycle back to his violent episode with Maureen, where all of his insecurities and competing desires come to the fore, and where his attempts to don a masculinity defined by power lead to his reducing Maureen to an object of violence. This episode, albeit brief, acts as a heightened symbol of all of his frustrations and anxieties over a conflicted masculine identity. After Maureen coerces him into returning alone with her to his apartment under false pretenses of compromise, with the intentions only of again assuring him that she will not give him a divorce, Tarnopol finally follows through on his threats of violence. This passage is worth quoting in full for its explication of both the event itself, as well as Tarnopol’s controversial reaction, which clearly demonstrates the influence of Mailer’s construction of masculinity, in which fantasies of violence against women serve as a vehicle for men’s self-realization. So, in a reflection strongly reminiscent of something we might hear from Rojack in *An American Dream*, Tarnopol says:

Her blood was smeared everywhere: over her face, my hands, the rush matting, all over the front of her suit, down her silk blouse, on her bare throat...The real thing—and it was marvelous. I was loving it. I, of course, had no intention of killing her right then and there...I was not even really in a rage any longer. Just enjoying myself thoroughly. All that gave me pause—oddly—was that I was ruining the suit in which she’d looked so attractive. (280)

Tarnopol goes as far as to admit he experiences a “euphoria” here. He remains removed from the brutality, and in becoming so is finally (though temporarily) able to detach himself from the morality and fear of punishment that burdens him. As he says: “I still couldn’t grow



appropriately serious about the grave legal consequences of my brutality, or remorseful, quite yet, about having done so coldheartedly what, as a little Jewish boy, I had been taught to despise” (287; 289).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tarnopol’s actions and reactions here have led many critics to argue that he is by no mean the innocent he pretends to be; Mark Shechner, for example, has suggested that while “guilt, submission, intimidation, and sudden moral collapse had all played their part in leading Tarnopol to the altar...one suspects that such marriages tend to befall a special class of man: those who bear a grudge against women” (54). Shechner also suggests that Tarnopol believes (though would not admit) that he finds in Maureen “the right type of woman, one for whom...misogyny could seem a just and reasonable hatred” (54). In other words, while Tarnopol claims that it was his sense of moral duty and responsibility to marry Maureen, his treatment of her is far from moral or upstanding; instead, his behavior towards her demonstrates a “grudge” that borders on the misogynistic.

Even so, as readers, it is tempting to take Tarnopol’s side here, particularly in light of the fact that we have only his (albeit somewhat unreliable) perspective from which to view the series of events. However, I argue that while Tarnopol might see his misogyny as justifiable or “reasonable” in his case, this justification should not go uncriticized, for it is nevertheless a form of “victim-blaming” on Tarnopol’s part and demonstrates his refusal to take responsibility for his actions. Moreover, I would also argue that to merely label Tarnopol (or Roth) as “misogynist” is reductive, and somewhat beside the point, and more importantly, that Tarnopol’s belief in his ability to violently “free” himself from his moral and ethical burden should not be mistaken for a justification for his violence on Roth’s part, as it might be for Mailer. I do not read in the text itself any suggestion that violence is, in fact, the way into the kind of masculine identity that

Tarnopol thinks he wants to embody, nor is it held up as something Roth believes all men should employ; in fact, through his depiction of Tarnopol's failures, Roth instead is able to critique his protagonist's misogyny, violence, and irresponsibility.

For example, it is significant that Tarnopol's realization that this aggression, of which he has never been capable but which he has always associated to some extent with some type of essential masculinity, is instead, when finally performed, emasculating. At first, his attack on Maureen only exacerbates the passive aggressiveness she uses to prove that she is the victim, and deepens his confusion over the nature of his position as the aggressor or the victim in their relationship. As he says, "That I came to be bound to Maureen by *my* helplessness does not mean that either of us ever really stopped envisioning *her* as the helpless victim...so strong was the myth of male inviolability, of male dominance and potency, not only in Maureen's mind but in mine" (172). This language, however, in its emphasis on the reality of his own helplessness as opposed to the myth of his aggression, demonstrates that Tarnopol continues to resist seeing Maureen as the victim of what he has done, and that he refuses to take responsibility for his actions—thus failing (as Portnoy did) to meet either of the competing definitions of manhood (nonviolently responsible or violently authoritative) with which he struggles. When he does finally reflect on his own use of violence, he merely expresses his belief that, as a result of his Jewish upbringing, he is still incapable of fully embracing violence as a symbol of masculinity. "I had been raised to be fearful and contemptuous of violence as a means of settling disputes or venting anger," he says. "My idea of manliness had little to do with dishing out physical punishment or being able to absorb it...To find Maureen's blood on my hand was in fact *unmanning*, as disgraceful as her teeth marks on my wrist" (183). His initial euphoria arises from his short-lived lawlessness, the brief escape from the weight of accepting restraint and

responsibility as the pillars of manhood; in beating Maureen he experiments with the “exiting and gripping” violence that he describes as so attractive to Nathan Zuckerman. However, this sensory experience not only fades, but actually serves to work against his project, consequently upending nearly all aspects of the masculinist ideology that he has idealized—a result which points to Roth’s own embedded criticisms of his misogynistic behavior.

To invoke Benjamin and Arendt’s respective critiques of violence, Tarnopol (like Portnoy) is left not with any masculine power, but rather only with his violence, as well as the guilt and fear that arise soon after. Thus, Tarnopol’s attitude toward violence—and, by implication, his attitude toward masculinity—is at an impasse. He wants to be able to use force, but he wants to be excused from it. He wants to embody an aggressive masculinity defined by the ability to embrace violence and represented by white Gentile society, but he wants to retain that element of Jewish masculinity that makes him the “good boy.” He wants to be both victimizer and victim. The incompatibility of these desires leave him mired in a type of suspended adolescence similar to that of Portnoy; as Ross Posnock observes, Tarnopol “comes to realize that his operative assumption—that manhood is a discretely demarcated realm, a point of arrival, is in itself problematic” for maturity “is also artifice—to be a man is to imitate being a man” (87).

In retrospect, Tarnopol can put his relationship with Maureen in perspective; that is, he is able to step outside of his personal crisis to observe those larger and more violent social crises surrounding him in a “chaotic America” that make his personal problems seem “inconsequential.” For example, he recalls that “in the spring of 1963, for instance...police dogs were turned loose on demonstrators in Birmingham; and just about the time I began to imagine myself plunging a Hoffritz hunting knife into Maureen’s evil heart, Medgar Evers was shot to death in Mississippi”

(268-269). Though some might understandably read this commentary as Roth's way of indicating that a violent culture might have inspired Tarnopol's idealization of a violent masculinity, this is complicated by the novel's own skepticism of blaming social movements or events for either Zuckerman or Tarnopol's problems. In "Courting Disaster," for example, Zuckerman notes of his own story that

...it would seem to me that from the perspective of this decade particularly, there is much that could be ridiculed having to do with the worship of ordeal and forbearance and the suppression of the sexual man. It would not require too much ingenuity on my part to convert the protagonist here into an insufferable prig to be laughed at, a character out of a farce. Or if not the protagonist, then the narrator. (81)

Yet Zuckerman is quick to note that this line of reasoning is just a sweeping generalization meant to explain his emasculation in an oversimplified manner. "The country may have changed," he insists, "I have not" (86). In other words, what Zuckerman seems to say here is that while the social milieu may act as a trigger for many of his anxieties (for example, the increasing assimilation of the Jewish people that complicates their "Jewish self-consciousness," as Roth puts it) these social upheavals cannot solely explain or excuse, as I have shown in terms of Roth's commentary on misogyny, the individual behavior arising from these and any number of other anxieties.

There exists a similarly hesitant acknowledgment of social structures in Tarnopol's engagement with the contemporary status of women in American society. Tarnopol himself does acknowledge—albeit briefly—that this additional gender struggle may play a factor in his relationship with Maureen, particularly in terms of his fixation on morality and victimization. He writes:

For those young men who reached their maturity in the fifties...there was considerable moral prestige in taking a wife, and hardly because a wife was going to be one's maidservant or 'sexual object'...in that the great world was so obviously a man's, it was only within marriage that an ordinary woman could hope to find equality and dignity. Indeed, we were led to believe by the defenders of womankind of our era that we were exploiting and degrading women we didn't marry, rather than the ones we did...It was up to us then to give them the value and the purpose that society at large withheld—by marrying them. (169).

He refers to “the fact of female dependence, defenselessness, and vulnerability” to justify what he (and American society) view as his obligation or duty to his wife—for as he is “led to believe,” it is only through him that she might achieve anything (170). However, the sarcasm underlying his commentary here belies the nature of his own beliefs, and while he attributes some of his situation to a “more extensive social malaise” of which Maureen was one of “the more virulent strains of a virus to which only a few women among us are immune,” he is reluctant, again, to relinquish responsibility or control to this larger social structure (171-172). In Tarnopol's mind, these trends are misleading and an acceptance of them is confining, in essence rendering him a victim of a larger social structure without the “consent” he does temporarily give to his victimization at the hands of Maureen. This very contradiction—along with Roth's detailed explication of the social scene surrounding Tarnopol's actions—suggest that here too he is not in full agreement with his protagonists. While society cannot receive the blame for everything Tarnopol has done or has experienced, neither can it be completely ignored. Tellingly, in his attempts to escape both the social structures that mire him in his destructive relationships as well

as the moral codes that further keep him there, Tarnopol only ends up further stalled in his situation.

In his study of *My Life as a Man*, Patrick O'Donnell provides some useful language for making sense of this conflict. O'Donnell argues that the layered narratives within the novel are meant to convey the notion that constructions of “‘self’ and ‘manhood’ are represented as a series of rough drafts or false starts” and that these “drafts” are never completed. In other words, the stylistic construction of this novel is meant to reflect the construction of gender as an always unfinished and “indecipherable” entity that is constantly being altered by one’s environment, and that because of this, Peter Tarnopol is “more a process than a character” (157). Thus, following from this, it becomes evident that despite Tarnopol’s persistent attempts to locate masculinity outside of his internal contradictions, the masculine identity for which Tarnopol seeks is itself located *within* this struggle—a realization prompting Tarnopol to ask in reluctant disbelief: “Could it be?—is this boy’s life a man’s life after all? Is this *it*?” (299).

Tarnopol’s plight boils down to an inability to reconcile a crystallized ideal with a muddier reality; in other words, he is unable to strike a compromise between several competing impulses: his sense of responsibility to his Jewish past and his humility in the face of tragedy, his desire to be able to call himself American, his awe of violence, and his dedication to moral fortitude. The challenge for Tarnopol is to somehow find a way to incorporate the definition of that man he views himself to be into the man he wants to become in the future, with all of the attendant definitions of American and Jewish “manhood” that he brings with him out of his past, and which seem to accompany these overlapping projects. His violence reveals itself as an attempt to finally break with his former system of values, but he cannot part with these moralities entirely, and thus his extreme measures only seem to reify his masculine “crisis” and exacerbate

his confusion and guilt. Yet while these problems and contradictions might be the only aspect of his masculine project that Tarnopol is finally able to “realize with the right words,” the importance here lies in his ability to do even this. He is after all able to recognize, via Roth’s characteristic humor and sarcasm, that he is a man of contradictory impulses that arise from both external (cultural) and internal (moral) conflicts, that these conflicts cannot be reconciled deployment of violence or the acceptance of aggression, and this multifaceted and contradictory identity may, in fact, be the more accurate definition of “Americanness.”

In his discussion of masculinity and morality in Roth’s later novel *Sabbath’s Theater*, David Brauner has written that the character of Sabbath, when he is “tolerated, pitied, forgiven,” feels “humiliated, emasculated,” but when he responds to kindness with “insult heaped on injury, [he is] then able to reclaim [his] dignity and manhood” (140). Both Portnoy and Tarnopol also seem to possess this assumption about American masculinity, and they too anticipate that a new sense of masculine power might arise from heaping insult on injury. Both, however, begin to reclaim masculinity not amidst but only in the aftermath of such violence. Of course, this points to key differences in the natures of Portnoy, Tarnopol, and Sabbath, but the assumptions of masculine power behind these behaviors remains constant. Despite their perceptions that aggression and violence and the breaking of taboos is a way to break out of their current emasculated state and into a more idealized masculine persona, it is only after they realize fully that violence *cannot* work that they are able to truly begin to craft these masculinities.

Neither *Portnoy’s Complaint* nor *My Life as a Man* can be said to boast anything like a satisfactory “conclusion.” As Mark Shechner so aptly states: “I’m certain that Roth would be no more at ease being mistaken for a moral agent than he ever was when mistaken, as he has sometimes been, for an immoral one, and while his books are brimful of ethical considerations—

he is, after all, a Jewish writer—there is seldom a place where one can firmly place a finger on a moral issue and say for certain: ‘Here is where Roth comes down’ (4). Thus, at the end of each novel we realize that Portnoy and Tarnopol have only just—but finally—begun to come to terms with their own masculine personas, and with what Portnoy calls a “grueling and gratifying ethical life.” Yet perhaps what might make this life so “gratifying” is the moment when, all options exhausted (including violence, the greatest taboo) both Portnoy and Tarnopol recognize that these grueling and gratifying dichotomies and contradictions are, in fact, what makes a man.



## NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> Some additional events defining this period, for instance, include the aftermath of the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, the rapid assimilation of Jews in America following WWII, and the shift in perception of American Jews in response to increasing public conversation over the Holocaust in the 1960s and 70s. Additionally, this era saw the onset of an organized Civil Rights movement (spurred on by *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954), the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the establishment of the SNCC and the rise of Black Power.

<sup>2</sup> As I explain further throughout this introduction and in each chapter, my work is indebted to the cultural and sociological studies of masculinity conducted by Michael Kimmel, Gail Bederman, George Mosse, Hamilton Carroll, R.W. Connell, and Victor Seidler, as well as to the particular studies of African-American and Jewish American masculinities conducted by bell hooks, Robyn Wiegman, Warren Rosenberg, and Harry Brod, among others. Each of these scholars has uniquely investigated the shifting roles, definitions, representations, and expectations of various masculinities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>3</sup> Many years later in an interview with Michael Fabre, she remarked on the logic behind these connections, asserting that she found in the plight of blacks and Jews a similar difficulty in self-expression and communication, arising from a history of social oppression. She also notes that when she visited America, “The first thing a woman had said to me was: ‘Above all, do not speak of the Negro problem; you are new in America, you are a French woman, you cannot understand.’ And of course, I hastened to do the reverse” (qtd. in Fabre, *World* 253). A moment of her misunderstanding of race relations at the time, however, does reveal itself in a somewhat misguided analysis in *The Second Sex*, in which she claims that “the savagely racist American men of the South have always been permitted by the mores to sleep with black women, before the Civil War as today, and they make use of this right with lordly arrogance; but a white woman who had commerce with a black in slavery days would have been put to death, and today she would probably be lynched” (394). In fact, Beauvoir underestimates the disparate inequalities of black men and black women; it is far more likely that the black man would have been lynched.

<sup>4</sup> As she further notes, to emphasize the comparison between these minority groups and the struggle of women: “Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as ‘anti-semitism is not a Jewish problem: it is our problem’; so the woman problem has always been a man’s problem” (128).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Sundquist’s comments in *Strangers in the Land* are helpful here. Sundquist clarifies that his book’s “principal terms of analysis—*blacks* and *Jews*—are far from univocal in meaning, and each, on any number of occasions in what follows, might be put in quotation marks to indicate that it is not a person, a people, or their fundamental identity that is described but rather what a representative person or group says or believes, or what is perceived by others to be the case” (8-9). As Sundquist also observes, “Jews could not be ‘melted’ into quite the same American shape as other European ethnics, but the rapidity of their acculturation stood in stark contrast to that of blacks, who had long made essential contributions to American economic, cultural and religious life while continuing to face discrimination at every turn” (3). Nevertheless, the social and political shifts at the time offered individuals within these particular communities the occasion to similarly reevaluate their places in American culture.

<sup>6</sup> She also points out that women are not a minority like Blacks or Jews, that the bond that unites woman to man is unlike any other bond between oppressed/ oppressor, and that as opposed to blacks or Jews, women are “offered inducements to complicity” in their own oppression (298).

<sup>7</sup> Earlier, Sartre also clearly articulated otherness as a condition of existential transcendence—the surpassing of one’s immanent self. Any contingencies or conditions of our being in the world that render us “other”—from disability to marginalized races—Sartre calls “necessary obstacles” for being that must be “surpassed” toward a future project (328). Beauvoir, influenced by Sartre’s explication of this fundamental aspect of existentialism, locates the impetus for her own project in “the need to define what these ‘others’ were in relation to white men, then

to study the historical situations which made such alterity possible in the first place and what circumstances made it legitimate" (xii).

<sup>8</sup> For example, black masculinity in the first half of the century was largely still associated with a "primitive" masculinity. Gail Bederman argues that this stereotype relied on a widespread belief that "white men were able to achieve perfect manliness because they had inherited that capacity from their racial forbears" while black men "might struggle as hard as they could to be truly manly, without success" because "they were primitives who could never achieve true civilized manliness because their racial ancestors had never evolved that capacity" (29). Homosexual men were feminized or marked as aberrations from the norm by a range of prominent voices, from Sigmund Freud to Eldridge Cleaver. Jewish men, too, were feminized or rendered inferior by culturally embedded anti-Semitism.

<sup>9</sup> The notion that the concept of masculinity is not only centrally located within the body but also relies on a certain physical performance is also shared by George Mosse, who discusses the importance of physical appearance and strength in upholding the normative ideal of masculinity in *The Image of Man*.

<sup>10</sup> As Sartre theorizes in *Being and Nothingness*, one cannot escape the condition of being-for-others and the acknowledgement of the body "as the necessary condition of the existence of a world and as the contingent realization of this condition" (328). As he further explains, "each for-itself, in fact, is a for-itself only by choosing itself beyond nationality and race... He arises in a world which is given to him as *already looked-at*" (520).

<sup>11</sup> Sartre locates a similar importance in these "future projects" in *Being and Nothingness*. There, he argues, the focus of his existential goal is "to project myself toward the Future in order to merge there with that which I lack" (127) and also emphasizes that "the Future is the ideal point where the sudden infinite compression of facticity (Past), of the For-itself (Present), and of its possible (a particular Future) will at last cause the Self to arise as the existence in-itself of the For-itself" (128).

<sup>12</sup> As Carrigan, Connell, and Lee explain in their discussion of modern masculinity, the idea of a masculine role suggests an accepted standard or norm to be applied to all men, a standard which is not truly reflective of the varied and diverse nature of masculinity and actually "prevents personal growth" (78). Though these roles organize society according to masculinity and femininity, they point out that "most men's lives reveal some departure from what the 'male sex role' is supposed to prescribe" and thus the framework often sees variations from the presumed norms of male behavior in terms of 'deviance,' as a 'failure' in socialization" (77).

<sup>13</sup> The actions of these protagonists seem to embody the observations of bell hooks, Hazel Carby, and Harry Brod, all of whom criticize the tendency of black and Jewish men, respectively, to imitate a masculine model to which they were previously subordinated. Both hooks and Brod see this as a trend that manifests itself most overtly in literature. For instance, hooks criticizes well known "racial uplift" writings for participating in this problem, noting that their authors "were most often likely to accept the norms of masculinity set by white culture" (90). Hazel Carby has also written extensively on this problem within the African American community, noting that "while contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society" (6). Similarly, Brod argues that "to create a heroic Jewish male image one must abandon the Jewish component and rely on the dominant culture's version of the heroic male" (283).

<sup>14</sup> "As Beauvoir notes, "The subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the other" (xxiii).

<sup>15</sup> This theory of violence as a tool for self-transcendence is embedded in American mythos—in his seminal work *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin traces this narrative of violence all the way back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> Violence is presented here as a way out of oppression, as a means of destroying an old power to replace it with a new power. Of course, to discuss Fanon's definition of violence in terms of constructions of black and Jewish masculinities in America is to take it out of its immediate context, for as Homi Bhabha notes in his discussion of *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Fanon forged his thinking on violence and counterviolence in these conditions of dire extremity, when everyday interactions were turned into exigent events of life and death" (xxxiv). Nevertheless, Fanon's exploration of the way the violence is employed as a "cleansing force" that has the potential to eradicate a sense of inferiority is quite applicable here, as the literature in question (much of it contemporary with Fanon's works as well) also explores the plight of men who feel powerless in the face of cultural and existential strife, and who see violence as a way to craft a ideal of masculine power that will "cleanse" or "heal" them.

<sup>17</sup> In "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," Carrigan, Connell, and Lee similarly argue that violence is "a constitutive practice that helps to make all kinds of masculinity," and that "much of this violence comes from the state, so the historical construction of masculinity and femininity is also struggle for the control and direction of state power" (89).

<sup>18</sup> All of these forms are encompassed by what Michael Kaufman deems the "triad" of male violence: violence against women, against other men, and against the self (1).

<sup>19</sup> As Freud posits first in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and later in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, history and society provide ongoing examples of the son's continual attempt to overthrow the father. While the son's success may temporarily free him from patriarchal oppression, this oppression will then be reinstated by his own authority. This in turn makes way for what Marcuse calls "the mental preconditions for the *continued functioning* of domination" (60) in which the father is continually "resurrected" in laws and restrictions of culture (91). While Freud's discussion implies that civilization as we know it is founded on this domination and repression, Marcuse reopens Freud's investigation of the connection between civilization and repression and suggests that there is a possibility for a liberated, non-repressive culture that will not simply destroy itself when it opens itself up to organization by the pleasure principle rather than reality principle.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Millett and Judith Fetterly have published some of the most famous criticisms of Mailer on this point, both accusing him of upholding misogynistic gender divisions in his fiction. As late as 2007, however, Joan Smith all but dismissed Mailer and his body of work as homophobic and misogynistic. Bellow has similarly been accused of misogyny and racism, particularly following the publication of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and Marya Mannes, Vivan Gornick, and Linda Grant are among those who perceive both Roth and his fiction as "women-hating." In her 1982 essay "Papa Dick and Sister Women," Sherley Anne Williams accuses Wright of denigrating black women in particular. I strongly believe in the importance of feminist approach to these works and argue throughout this project that in some cases, the *protagonists* can be said to embody misogynistic behavior. However, several of the harshest criticisms of these authors confuse the authors with their protagonists, resulting in the labeling of the authors themselves as misogynist, homophobic, or racist—an unfortunate error that I believe continues to cause many readers to mistakenly dismiss their works outright as lacking in value.

<sup>21</sup> This, according to Benjamin, is not a situation specific to those who want to rebel against the law, but is also relevant to those who want to uphold the law—and who choose to do so through violent means. As he notes, "The function of violence in establishing law is in a sense twofold: while this operation seeks to achieve *what* is established as law as its end, using violence as its means, in the moment of establishing what it is aiming at as law it does not repudiate violence but only now, strictly speaking, turns it (directly, this time) into a law-establishing agency" (22). In Benjamin's view, this is why violence is so embedded in the workings of society, for in the end both those who make and break the law do so via violence, to an end "that is necessarily an intimately bound up with violence, calling it power" (22).

<sup>22</sup> As Arendt observes, "Power, strength, force, authority, violence—these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function" (43). Yet power and violence should be distinguished from one another, for "*power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence so long

as the group keeps together (43). Thus, she notes, “The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All” (42).

<sup>23</sup> She goes on to note, “Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; to speak of nonviolent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it” (56).

<sup>24</sup> For example, she posits that “to substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power” (53). She reasserts soon after that “violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (56) and she hesitates to provide any justification of violent action on an individual level, observing that “single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully” (51).

## CHAPTER 1

<sup>25</sup> Michel Fabre has argued that Wright’s existential “bible” was Heidegger’s *Existence and Being*, not Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, the latter being a strong influence on Beauvoir’s existential theory (“Richard Wright” 1978, p. 48). He also points out Wright did not read *The Second Sex* until 1953; however, I would point out that the friendship between Wright and Beauvoir began long before Wright published *The Outsider*, and it is nearly impossible to ignore the influence of Sartre and Beauvoir’s existential language on Wright’s work. Likewise, much of Beauvoir’s comparisons between blacks and women in *The Second Sex* might well have been derived from the close relationship she developed with Wright following his expatriation to France—in an interview with Michel Fabre, Beauvoir admitted that the two “were especially close from 1947-1955” and that she had “read all his works in English” (*The World* 254-255). In fact, Beauvoir even concludes *The Second Sex* with a reference to Wright’s semi-autobiographical novel *Black Boy*. Thus Wright’s reflections on the racial conflicts in America certainly influenced the way the Beauvoir considered and analyzed gender conflicts in her text, and vice versa. My understanding of this mutual influence coincides with George Cotkin’s observation that French existentialism offered Wright “a language of engagement, a philosophical groundwork to confront the vicissitudes of the human condition without forfeiting the specifics of the African-American milieu that served as the foundation for [his] writing,” allowing him to “confront the essential question of art, the ‘meaning of life,’ the crushing reality of death, and the need to channel the ‘cold rage’ that defined the existence of the artist and of the African-American experience” (183).

<sup>26</sup> This too is a fundamental tenet of existentialism: as Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, the body is “the necessary condition of the existence of a world and “the contingent realization of this condition” (326), and the body is “perpetually surpassed” as the individual makes choices in the world (338).

<sup>27</sup> This is not Wright’s first expression of ambivalence toward the role of violence in constructions of masculinity. One of Wright’s first short stories, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” (penned in the 1930s, though not published in its final version until 1960’s *Eight Men*), follows a young black man living in the South as he attempts to define his manhood by owning and shooting a gun. Here too, Wright demonstrates—albeit briefly—the dangerous and potentially emasculating consequences of deploying violence as way to prove one’s manhood.

<sup>28</sup> In this way, Cross’s attitude anticipates Frantz Fanon’s interpretation of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Justifying an existential and liberatory violence in that text, Fanon argues that “at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force” that can rid men of an “inferiority complex and a “passive and despairing attitude” (51). In a similar vein, Cross also sees this violence as a way to replace an old institutional power with a new power—his own (51).

<sup>29</sup> This racial stereotype, as represented by Wright, is a kind of conglomerate of what Riche Richardson has called “the rebel slave,” “the bad nigger,” and “the black rapist,” racial stereotypes based in assumptions about the violent character of the black man (33-34).

<sup>30</sup> Hazel Carby has also written extensively on this problem within the African American community in *Race Men*, noting that “while contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social

formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society” (6).

<sup>31</sup> This in itself signals the primary difference between Cross Damon and *Native Son*’s Bigger Thomas. Though Cross is similar to Bigger in that finds himself at odds with his own lived history, as the life he wants is not matched by the life he has lived and has been expected to live as a black man, Cross is able to articulate this conflict and recognizes that he has the ability to change it. While the earlier novel traces Bigger Thomas’ journey from subconscious action to conscious realization, Cross Damon—as an educated, philosophical, and intellectual character—is aware from the start not only of his status as an outsider or “other” but of the implications of that otherness, for he has “thought [his] way through the many veils of illusion” that structure racial hierarchy (35). Cross can see himself more clearly as he is seen in the eyes of others, and thus the novel is not a journey *into* political or racial consciousness but rather Cross’s attempted journey to define himself outside of those politics altogether. Therefore, Damon’s already present consciousness of his plight allows for a more immediate and extensive exploration of its existential repercussions.

<sup>32</sup> This attitude also reflect the existential anguish addressed by Sartre in *Nausea* and by Camus in *The Stranger*, works in which both authors create protagonists who contemplate the meaningless and hopelessness of the universe, to which suicide might seem to be the answer. Through the character of Roquentin in *Nausea*, however, Sartre makes it clear that part of the existential project involves facing this option of suicide and choosing to reject it. Indeed, in his analysis of *The Stranger*, Sartre also argues that the man who faces and understands the meaninglessness of the universe “will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him” (“An Explication” 6).

<sup>33</sup> The character of Ely Houston seems to be a clear allusion to Porfiry Petrovich, the investigator in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, which is often read as a proto-existentialist book. For an analysis of the connections between *The Outsider* and Dostoevsky’s novel, see Michael Lynch’s “Haunted by Innocence: The Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright’s ‘Other Novel.’”

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, perhaps as a nod to his indebtedness to Beauvoir, Wright places Cross’s quest in the context of a broader gendered struggle here. When observing Gladys’s color consciousness, Damon observes that “it was the helplessness of dependence that made her fret so. Men made themselves and women were made only through men” (66). Here Cross demonstrates his acknowledgment of masculine privilege—as well as his acceptance of these terms.

<sup>35</sup> Confirming his intention to universalize Cross Damon’s plight, Wright noted upon the publication of *The Outsider*: “Upon my race in the United States I have conferred the dubious honor of making my protagonist a Negro. But, frankly, my hero, Cross Damon, could have been of any race.” (As reported in *JET Magazine*, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1953, p.43)

<sup>36</sup> As Sartre explains, “My birth as it conditions the way in which objects are revealed to me...my race as it is indicated by the Other’s attitude with regard to me (these attitudes are revealed as scornful or admiring, as trusting or distrusting); my class as it is disclosed by the revelation of the social community to which I belong inasmuch as the places which I frequent refer to it; my nationality; my physiological structure as instruments imply it by the very way in which they are revealed as resistant or docile and by their very coefficient of adversity; my character; my past, as everything which I have experienced is indicated as my point of view to the world by the world itself” (328).

<sup>37</sup> Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, for instance, that “the Future is the ideal point where the sudden infinite compression of facticity (Past), of the For-itself (Present), and of its possible (a particular Future) will at last cause the Self to arise as the existence in-itself of the For-itself” (128). Similarly, Beauvoir writes, “The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation” (430).

<sup>38</sup> As Sartre explains, “To remain at home because it is raining and to remain at home because one has been forbidden to go out are by no means the same thing... It is not mere caprice which causes us often to do very naturally and without annoyance what would irritate us if another commanded it. This is because the order and the prohibition cause us to experience the Other’s freedom across our own slavery” (271).

<sup>39</sup> This also echoes an earlier conversation with Ely Houston, in which Cross asks, “If you’ve a notion of what a man’s heart is, wouldn’t you say that maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man’s frantic and frightened attempt to hide himself from himself? That there is a part of man that man wants to reject? That man wants to keep from knowing what he is? That he wants to protect himself from seeing that he is something awful?” (171).

<sup>40</sup> Sartre defines bad faith as a “determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself... Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth” (49). He goes on to note, “Bad faith is not restricted to denying the qualities which I possess, to not seeing the being which I am. It attempts also to constitute myself as being what I am not. It apprehends me positively as courageous when I am not so... Thus in order for bad faith to be possible, sincerity itself must be in bad faith” (67). In this way, while Cross might be sincere in his assertions that race does not factor into the construction of his masculinity, that does not remove him from the attitude of bad faith.

<sup>41</sup> This is also taken up by Benjamin, who theorizes that laws create the subjects they will dominate as well as the criminals they will punish; that is, the law seeks to “monopolize violence” to protect itself, sanctioning certain violences so that it can control them: an argument that also anticipates Foucault’s discussion of delinquency in *Discipline and Punish* (Benjamin 6).

<sup>42</sup> According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall.” The tragic hero is further defined as one who bears responsibility for his actions (as Cross’s existential life would have him do), but not his tragic flaw. Cross’s downfall, like other traditional tragic heroes, also imparts a greater self-awareness, and the readers themselves (like other characters in a tragedy) gain the benefit of increased meaning from his death.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, despite Cross’s (and Wright’s) criticisms of Communism, Hilton is one of only two characters who seems able to grasp Cross’s inner contradictions. The other, of course, is Houston, who Cross observes “had the kind of consciousness that could grasp the mercurial emotions of men whom society had never tamed or disciplined, men whose will had never been broken, men who were wild but sensitive, savage but civilized, intellectual but somehow intrinsically poetic in their inmost hearts” (342).

<sup>44</sup> These men, writes hooks in *Reconstructing Black Masculinity*, are “most worried about castration and emasculation and “have most completely absorbed white supremacist patriarchal definitions of masculinity” (93). The kind of literature in which they appear—written by both white and black authors—always presents black men as “failures,” and doesn’t “interrogate the conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity or question the extent to which black men have internalized this norm” (89). Fanon, too, references the trap in which the black man finds himself in *Black Skin, White Masks*, observing that “from time to time he fights for liberty and justice, but it’s always for a white liberty and a white justice, in other words, for values secreted by his masters” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 195).

<sup>45</sup> Eva is the first in a line of several women in the texts I examine in this project who serve as a voice of clarity for the protagonist, with an uncanny ability to articulate the nature of the man’s flaw.

<sup>46</sup> This Oedipal idiom, for instance, arises when Fish connects the smell of a fish brought home by his father to the smell of his mother’s body, and he finds this association inexplicably disturbing. His solution to the discomfort

arising from an awareness of his mother's sexuality is to respond with violence, as he urges his mother to kill the fish and eradicate the smell.

<sup>47</sup> This corresponds to the "phallic phase" of early childhood Oedipal complex, during which the male genitals take on what Freud refers to as a "leading role" in the development of sexuality, while the female genital "has remained undiscovered" ("Dissolution" 662). In other words, the power of the phallus is represented in its visibility and dominance with relation to the "lack" in the female. Such a psychoanalytical reading, invited by the text itself although distinct from my own methodology, also invokes the concept of "lack" as explicated by Lacan, particularly in terms of symbolic castration.

<sup>48</sup> This plea to stop "talking race" is repeated throughout the novel not only by Fish, but later by Gladys and many of Fish's friends. Before he is arrested for trespassing on white property, Fishbelly consistently protests "race talk" and insists naively that "white folks...ain't done nothing to us" (105). Though the immediate reasons for this rejection of race differ from Cross's reasons, by nature of the differences in the environment and personality of each man, the consequences of this rejection are quite similar, as the eradication of this naïve view will also increase Fish's understanding of himself and others within a framework of violence.

<sup>49</sup> Robyn Wiegman, for example, has argued that "In the lynch scenario, the stereotypical fascination and abhorrence for blackness is literalized as a competition for masculinity and seminal power" and "in severing the black male's penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine...thereby reclaiming through the perversity of dismemberment the black male's (masculine) potentiality for citizenship" (83). This act serves to further "mark" the black body as "an extreme corporeality that defined his distance from the privileged ranks of citizenship" (94). Likewise, Riche Richardson has noted that in the U.S. South, where the majority of lynchings occurred, these acts of racist violence "functioned as the most legible cultural practice through which black bodies were disciplined, contained, and subordinated within the white-supremacist ideology dominant in the South" (58).

<sup>50</sup> This control over certain "permitted" illegalities also calls to mind Benjamin's discussion of the ways in which law sanctions violent or criminalized behavior as a means to "safeguard itself," ensuring that the power rests with the law itself and not with the transgressive individual (6).

<sup>51</sup> This idea of masculinity as a racial privilege achievable only by white men dates back to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, as Gail Bederman has observed, white men adopted the stance that masculinity was an inherited trait, passed down specifically through the white race. They believed they "were able to achieve perfect manliness because they had inherited that capacity from their racial forbears, while black men, by contrast, could never achieve this masculinity because they were seen as "primitives" whose "racial ancestors had never evolved that capacity" (29).

## CHAPTER 2

<sup>52</sup> From "Advertisement for 'The Homosexual Villain'" in *Advertisements for Myself*, 222.

<sup>53</sup> While Mailer did not hesitate to call himself an existential author, and repeatedly referred to a wide range of existential themes in his own work, Mary Dearborn points out in her biography of Mailer that his knowledge of existential philosophy came mostly from reading William Barrett's *What Is Existentialism?* However, Mailer was certainly aware of the philosophies of Sartre and de Beauvoir from the company he kept as a member of the *Partisan Review* circle, and by 1966 when he was interviewed for *The Paris Review*'s "Art of Fiction" series, he admitted to having studied more of both Sartre and Heidegger.

<sup>54</sup> See the introduction to this dissertation for a longer explanation of these details.

<sup>55</sup> As Sartre also explains several years earlier in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), this awareness of the other is a difficult and humiliating obstacle in one's journey toward transcendence. As he writes: "The occasion which

arouses hate is simply an act by the Other which puts me in the state of being subject to his freedom. This act is in itself humiliating; it is humiliating as the concrete revelation of my instrumental objectness in the face of the Other's freedom. This revelation is immediately obscured, is buried in the past and becomes opaque. But it leaves me the feeling that there is 'something' to be destroyed if I am to free myself" (411).

<sup>56</sup> In *The Presidential Papers* (1964), Mailer writes: "If God is not all powerful but existential, discovering the possibilities and limitations of his creative powers in the form of the history which is made by His creatures, then one must postulate an existential equal to God, an antagonist, the Devil, a principle of Evil whose signature was the concentration camps, whose joy is to waste substance, whose intent is to prevent God's conception of being from reaching its mysterious goal" (193). By contrast, in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), Sartre writes: "Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence—a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or as Heidegger puts it, the human reality" (22).

<sup>57</sup> As Homi Bhaba puts it in his own preface to Fanon's work, for Sartre, violence "draws the fiery, first breath of human freedom" (xxxix). This assessment seems particularly apt when considered in light of Sartre's earlier arguments in *Being and Nothingness*. There, he writes: "If negation comes into the world through human reality, the latter must be a being who can realize a nihilating rupture with the world and with himself; and we established that the permanent possibility of this rupture is the same as freedom" (Sartre 439).

<sup>58</sup> As early as age 20, Mailer was already commenting on the necessity of violence to the construction of manhood. In "A Calculus to Heaven," a story he wrote as a senior at Harvard which was republished in *Advertisements for Myself*, one of Mailer's military heroes muses: "It might be necessary for him to die to find that dignity. Certainly, he thought, life and death and violent action were fundamentals, and he would find no lie there" (51). Laura Adams, who conducted one of the earliest studies of existentialism in Mailer's work, has argued that Mailer's particularly "American" existential argument is founded on the necessity of courage in the face of society's "destructive forces" and that it assumes that "if one is victorious he extracts from his defeated opponent some of his force, which is then used to sustain and nurture his own life" (5). It is this assumption that, according to Adams, gives rise to incidents of existential violence in Mailer's work.

<sup>59</sup> In particular, I refer to Benjamin's comments that a cycle of violence "continues until either new violences or those previously suppressed triumphed over those that have underpinned the law hitherto, thus establishing a new law destined to decline in its turn" and that "from the standpoint of violence, which is the only thing that can guarantee law, there is no equality but at best equally great violences" (23). Likewise, Arendt notes that violence wielded by lawmakers or authoritative bodies "can always destroy power" since "out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience," yet "what never can grow out of it is power" (53).

<sup>60</sup> In her analysis of political and revolutionary violence, Arendt also admits that "under certain circumstances violence—acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences—is the only way to set the scales of justice right again" (64).

<sup>61</sup> Two recent exceptions to this include Joseph Wenke's *Mailer's America* and Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage*. Rosenberg discusses Mailer's ambivalence about violence within a broader discussion of Jewish identity in Mailer's work, and Wenke provides an insightful analysis of violence in a number of Mailer's works, discussing violence as an "aesthetic problem" that exists within the dramatic situations presented in the texts themselves.

<sup>62</sup> In certain ways, this cycle of domination is reminiscent of Freud's discussion of Oedipal cycles of repression and domination, as well as Herbert Marcuse's subsequent analysis and expansion of Freud's theories in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). As Freud posits first in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and later in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in society the son will continually attempt to overthrow the father, and while his success will temporarily free him from patriarchal oppression, this oppression will then be reinstated by his own authority. This in turn makes way for what Marcuse calls "the mental preconditions for the *continued functioning* of domination"



(60) in which the father is continually “resurrected” in laws and restrictions of culture (91). What I argue here is that Mailer fashions characters who essentially take on the role of the son who seeks to overthrow the authority of a patriarchal society, but in doing so violently, only begins a new cycle of oppression.

<sup>63</sup> As previously discussed, for instance, Arendt suggests that violence cannot promote revolution or progress on its own; rather, she argues that violence can only “serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention” (79), reminding us that because violence is merely an instrument, it must be justified by its ends—“and what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything” (51).

<sup>64</sup> In *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer indicated his belief that courage and risk form the foundation of an existential masculine leadership, and that this “manly” existential leader would “create a new reality which would displace the old psychological reality” (26). He urges America to encourage “complexities” in their leaders, for it is only by doing so that the country will find the courageous and masculine leader they purportedly need. As he writes, to create complexities “is a manly activity. It offers more hope for saving the world than a gaggle of pacifists and vegetarians. The ‘Ban the bomb’ program is not manly. It is militant but it is not manly.” (128). This idea of complexity and risk-taking, as well as the necessity of replacing an old and decaying “psychological reality” with one that welcomes the possibility of violence, will form the basis for Stephen Rojack’s perceptions of desirable masculinity in *An American Dream*.

<sup>65</sup> In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Mailer expresses his belief that his engagement with “the mysteries of murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm, and Time” give him “a fair chance to become the first philosopher of Hip” (107).

<sup>66</sup> The psychopath, according to Mailer, is the “embodiment of the extreme contradictions of the society which formed his character” (347). Here Mailer appears to be searching for a way to reconcile the contradictions he himself has set up in his essay; that is, he seeks to fashion a figure who might successfully balance the best aspects of life within and outside of society. As Mailer notes: “when one lives in a civilized world, and still can enjoy none of the cultural nectar of such a world because the paradoxes on which civilization is built demand that there remain a cultureless and alienated bottom of exploitable human material, then the logic of becoming a sexual outlaw... is that one has at least a running competitive chance to be physically healthy so long as one stays alive” (348). In this way, the hipster and sexual outlaw is embracing his inner psychopath to save his own life.

<sup>67</sup> As Girard argues in *Violence and the Sacred*, the sacrifice of a surrogate victim is a means “to keep violence outside the community” (98). As he goes on to explain, “A trace of real violence persists in the rite, and there is no doubt that the rite succeeds at least partially because of its grim associations, its lingering fascination; but its essential orientation is peaceful. Even the most violent rites are specifically designed to abolish violence. To see these rites as expressions of man’s pathological morbidity is to miss the point” (108).

<sup>68</sup> Ideologically, this theory of the “psychopathic hipster” also signals Mailer’s indebtedness to Marcuse’s argument *Eros and Civilization*. There, Marcuse questions Freud’s argument that the sacrifice of libido is necessary for civilization and culture to exist, instead arguing that a liberated, non-repressive culture will not simply destroy itself should it allow itself to be organized and governed by the pleasure principle. In fact, Marcuse argues that this “gradual decontrolling of the instinctual development” is actually necessary if, as he says, “civilization is meant to progress to a higher stage of freedom” (134). Thus we can see the similarities between this and Mailer’s theory of Hip, with its anti-hero who embraces libidinal impulses and desires previously seen as forbidden or uncivilized. Mailer further expounds upon this in *The Presidential Papers*, where he notes: “I think that *any* submerged class is going to be more accustomed to sexuality than a leisure class” because the upper classes “exchange sex for power...whereas the submerged classes have to take their desires for power and plow them back into sex” (146).

<sup>69</sup> In *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*, he explains to J. Michael Lennon: “I work on the notion that there’s godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, ‘Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself.’ Because very often what comes out is so bad

that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully... To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so.” (67-68).

<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, both Wright and Mailer rely on the metaphor of jazz to express this creative amorality of their masculine philosophy. In *The Outsider*, Cross Damon reflects that “blue-jazz was the scornful gesture of men turned ecstatic in their state of rejection; it was the musical language of the satisfiedly amoral, the boastings of the contentedly lawless, the recreations of the innocently criminal” (180). In Mailer’s vision of the Hip existential hero, he also notes that “jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm... and so it spoke across a nation, it had the communication of art even where it was watered, perverted, corrupted, and almost killed” (341).

<sup>71</sup> As George Cotkin later notes along these same lines, Mailer “appropriated the image of the Negro as sexual libertine not to deny him his humanity but to celebrate the possibility of existential freedom” but that “in doing so, he froze identity for the African American, an act of bad faith akin to that of the racist’s search for a fixed identity, for the object of his scorn” (195).

<sup>72</sup> Beauvoir observes a similar phenomenon in the literary depiction of women, criticizing the ways in which the definition of women as such mystical or unknowable entities further marginalizes them and suggests some “eternal feminine” quality that might be used to define all women (xxxvii).

<sup>73</sup> The creative potential of violence was something Mailer believed in for most of his life. “If you cut all the violence out of society,” Mailer told Lawrence Grobel in 2001, “you also cut out all the creativity” (439).

<sup>74</sup> Throughout the course of this chapter, I will be referring to the 1965 publication of *An American Dream* in its novel form, as opposed to the serialized version published in *Esquire*.

<sup>75</sup> In her 1965 review entitled “A Nightmare by Norman Mailer,” for example, Elizabeth Hardwick deems the novel a “literary disaster,” calling it “morally foolish and intellectually empty” (145) and Stanley Edgar Hyman provided a similarly scathing review of the novel upon its publication. Donald L. Kaufmann concluded that “Mailer’s theory of authentic violence finds no way for American morality to come to terms with a ‘new nervous system’ of a murderer” (96) and even Philip Bufithis, who ranked *An American Dream* among the finest American novels, argued that “does not hold up well on the ethical level” (74).

<sup>76</sup> Daniel Fuchs has recently argued that in *An American Dream*, “we have murder without consequences, crime without punishment,” a statement reminiscent of Millett’s accusation that Mailer allows his protagonist to get away with murder (309). Warren Rosenberg argues that “Mailer’s version of the [American] dream is an essentially conservative one, based on outmoded and destructive definitions of masculinity,” a reading with which I agree to an extent, but which I also believe threatens to become too reductive as a final assessment. A notable exception to these criticisms has been Linda Patterson Miller’s recent article on the novel, in which she argues that Mailer’s purpose was “not to destroy women but to liberate them from within and to restore harmony for both men and women” (301).

<sup>77</sup> Mailer discusses JFK’s potential for existential heroism throughout *The Presidential Papers* as well. In “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” originally published in *Esquire* in November 1960 and later added to this collection, Mailer examines the Kennedy campaign and offers his views on what he calls Kennedy’s “potentiality” to be the kind of hero “whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries which could reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation” (42). This calls to mind Mailer’s additional comments (noted above) on the necessity of encouraging “complexities” in one’s leader; at the same time, his reference to a strong leader’s ability to “reach into the circuits of the underground” seems intended to imbue the ideal president with characteristics of the hipster figure discussed in “The White Negro.”

<sup>78</sup> Rojack also compares his feelings after the murder to those of the satisfaction after a sexual act. “I was weary with a most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new” he explains, noting that “it seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please” (32). This, too, calls to mind Mailer’s theory of the white negro hipster who goes in search of that “apocalyptic orgasm” that, for him, is the ultimate definition of transcendence over the stagnancy of a conformist lifestyle.

<sup>79</sup> Similar responses to Mailer’s work continued until—and even after—his death: an article by Joan Smith printed in *The Guardian* in 2007 concludes that “Mailer hated authority, homosexuality, women and almost certainly himself, producing fiction and essays that would be comically bad if they did not display addictions to violence and abusive sex.”

<sup>80</sup> In his interview with Paul Kassner for *The Realist*, for instance, Mailer uses language that keeps women firmly in their “place,” arguing that “the fact of the matter is that the prime responsibility of woman probably is to be on earth long enough to find the best mate possible for herself, and conceive children who will improve the species” (*PP* 130).

<sup>81</sup> Beauvoir compares men’s assumed superiority over women to a white sense of superiority over blacks, comparing the attitude of men toward women to the way “the whites of Louisiana and Georgia are delighted with the little pilferings and fibs of the blacks: they feel reassured of the superiority conferred by their skin color” (221).

<sup>82</sup> In many ways, Rojack’s perception of Shago is a manifestation of Emily Miller Budick’s remark that in the mid-century relationship between blacks and Jews, each group becomes for the other “a vehicle by which to think through their own ethnic identities,” and that many black and Jewish authors use texts to “construct their separate, ethnic identities, textually, *in relation to each other*” (1). Budick examines the way this mutual construction of ethnic identity can be both productive and detrimental to the construction of an ethnic identity, as it harbors the potential to both prevent the “sedimentation of culture into a hegemonic totality” and also to perpetuate stereotypes and hostilities (4). “Specifically,” she notes, “it may produce the repetition within each individual ethnic construction of those elements of the other’s ethnic position (and of American culture generally) that each group, in insisting on its ethnic position, would most like to disown or displace” (4).

<sup>83</sup> This blurring of the distinction between white and Jewish masculinity largely arises from Rojack’s relative silence about his own Jewish identity. In fact, Andrea Levine has taken up this silence as one of the novel’s main problems, arguing that “Mailer’s effort to appropriate a powerful phallic ‘blackness’ for the white hipster functions in part to mask the presence of another racial body: the Jewish victim of the Nazi Holocaust” (60). She argues that in general his “loud silences about Nazi Germany... speak to anxieties about the vulnerable Jewish body” (65) and “it is only by insistently mastering, denigrating, and finally erasing the feminine, that Mailer is able to silence all traces of the Jew” (75). While I find Levine’s argument compelling, I would hesitate to argue that Mailer’s “silencing... of the Jew” is as deliberate as she suggests. While the issue of history is present in the text, it is not, I would argue, so central a theme as we might find in works by Roth or even, for that matter, in Wright.

<sup>84</sup> Critics have responded variously to this somewhat perplexing conclusion. According to Stanley Gutman, it prevents the reader from ever fully determining “whether Rojack has, through magic, cut through rational conventions to a hidden significance, or whether he has entrenched himself more firmly in the illusory world of the psychotic” and Robert Merrill calls this “a fatal, if not entrenching, ambiguity” (75). By contrast, Barry Leeds sees the ending to the novel as ultimately optimistic. In *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*, Leeds argues that Mailer’s final position in *An American Dream* is “one of very carefully qualified hope” that has developed throughout the novel via Rojack’s “pilgrimage” towards the American myth of freedom (4). Ultimately, Leeds argues that Rojack successfully carries out this myth, “setting himself outside of society, wandering free, facing danger with wily resourcefulness” (174).

### CHAPTER 3

<sup>85</sup> As Gloria Cronin has previously noted, “The psycho-cultural crises of masculine identity in our age have been one of [Bellow’s] prevailing preoccupations... His male protagonists...all enable Bellow to explore masculine coding across class, ethnic, national, and historical lines” (99).” My aim here is to more specifically investigate this broad assessment by examining *how* Bellow’s protagonists allow him to do this.

<sup>86</sup> Ada Aharoni and Gloria Cronin have also both acknowledged the existential nature of these struggles. Aharoni argues that Bellow fashions an “introspective mode” in his fiction that “helps his protagonists emerge from their existential crisis and reach a new equilibrium from which they can eventually find a responsible place and become actively involved again” (“Engagement” 35). Elsewhere, she also argues that the Bellow hero’s generic qualities—his reflective nature and analytical turn of mind—are qualities shared by the existentialist hero as he appears in Sartre’s *Nausea* and Camus’ *The Stranger* (“Bellow” 42), and that Bellow seems more concerned with critiquing nihilism than existentialism as a whole. Cronin has also argued that Bellow’s protagonists buy into the myth of the possibility of a “transcendent self” (98).

<sup>87</sup> As mentioned in earlier chapters, Beauvoir’s comments here are likely influenced by Sartre, who also observed that “By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other... Thus shame is shame of oneself before the Other; these two structures are inseparable. But at the same time I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being. The For-itself refers to the For-others” (222).

<sup>88</sup> In “A World Too Much With Us” (1975), Bellow criticizes Sartre’s embrace of violence, claiming Sartre’s theories did not have a grasp of reality. “It is not inconceivable that a man might find freedom and identity by killing is oppressor,” Bellow writes. “But as a Chicagoan, I am rather skeptical about this. Murderers are not improved by murdering. Unchecked, they murder more and become more brutish... It may do more for manhood to feed one’s hungry children than to make corpses (5).

<sup>89</sup> Speaking to such actions, Beauvoir writes, “The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation” (430).

<sup>90</sup> M.A. Klug has rightly observed that while each of Bellow’s protagonists seeks out “what he instinctively knows is a decent life,” each man is simultaneously “betrayed by the demands of his own ego, which insists upon absolute freedom, absolute power, absolute understanding” (183).

<sup>91</sup> Bellow’s alignment with this particular view of violence espoused by Arendt is especially interesting, since in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Bellow uses Sammler to take Arendt to task for her argument about the “banality of violence,” which she put forth in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. “The idea of making the century’s great crime look dull is not banal,” Sammler says. “Politically, psychologically, the German’s had an idea of genius... This woman professor’s enemy is modern civilization itself. She is only using the Germans to attack the twentieth century—to denounce it in terms invented by Germans” (20-21). For an more extensive discussion of intersections and diversions between Bellow and Arendt, with a particular focus on *Sammler*, see Alan Marshall’s “Without Explaining: Saul Bellow, Hannah Arendt, and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*.”

<sup>92</sup> As I will describe further in the next chapter, this conclusion places Bellow closer to Baldwin on the spectrum of embedded critiques of violence in these texts, and further from Wright and Mailer, whose characters only gradually and partially recognize the ways in which violence cannot be fully rationalized or justified as a means for individual liberation.

<sup>93</sup> As Daniel Walden has previously noted, this is part of the inherent paradox in each of Bellow’s protagonists, most of whom “advocate an integration and fusion of the opposite laws of individualism and community and society. Living with self-indulgence *and* a form of collectivism, they want to pursue personal desires, freedom and selfhood, and yet maintain the sense of, and the actuality of, the unity and community of humankind” (67).

<sup>94</sup> As Ellen Pifer has pointed out, Bellow believes in what he calls a “primordial person” that “precedes culture and history” (113). This runs counter to Sartre’s argument that we come from Nothing; however, as Pifer also notes—and I would agree—this does not mean that Bellow does not find in modern man an existential crisis, though (like Mailer) this crisis is centered around questions of the soul. For further discussion of the ways Bellow also critiques the anti-humanist and nihilistic aspect of existentialism, see Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision*.

<sup>95</sup> Some of these instances, to which Wu has also pointed, include for instance Bellow’s commentary on Herzog’s need for “justice”: “People by the billions and for ages sweated, gypped, enslaved, suffocated, bled to death, buried with no more justice than cattle. But Moses E. Herzog, at the top of his lungs, bellowing with pain and anger, has to have justice” (Bellow 270). Others include the image of Herzog “tragically sipping milk” (134) and the narrator’s comment that Herzog’s attitudes demonstrate a “ridiculous intensity” (160).

<sup>96</sup> Later, Sammler also expresses the belief that “he himself, a Jew, no matter how Britannicized or Americanized, was also an Asian. The last time he was in Israel, and that was very recent, he had wondered how European, after all, Jews were. The crisis he witnessed there had brought out a certain deeper Orientalism” (120). In identifying himself as further disconnected from Western culture, Sammler reveals the extent to which he views himself as outsider in America.

<sup>97</sup> I do, however, agree with Glickman’s distinction between Mailer’s “insistence that in order to combat the Devil, man must not only acknowledge but exploit and *express* the evil in himself” and Bellow’s insistence that “humanity must learn somehow to *overcome* that evil without acting it out” (581). This difference is manifested in each novel’s variant treatment of individual violence.

<sup>98</sup> In a 1962 interview, for instance, Mailer admits to a fascination with and sometimes even approval or encouragement of individual, interpersonal violence, but argues that he disapproves of “*inhuman* violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract” (PP 136). While Sammler (and Bellow) would be unlikely to adopt all of Mailer’s views on violence, in times of extreme duress like war—in this particular instance, their views seem to align.

<sup>99</sup> Joseph F. McCadden has also noted of Bellow’s work that women in general “symbolize the irrationality of the contemporary world” (7). As he further argues, “The Bellow hero is irresistibly attracted to women who promise relief from his own isolation but at the same time threaten to involve him in a relationship that will lead to the loss of his freedom” (McCadden 9). In this way, McCadden speaks indirectly to the existential themes I draw on here, as women are represented as obstacles to the hero’s quest for freedom as he perceives it.

<sup>100</sup> For example, Vivian Gornick published an article in *Harper’s*, later included in her collection *The Men in My Life*, in which she writes: “Thirty years after the Depression—in the aftermath of the Second World War, and under the shadow of nuclear threat, gray-flannel anxiety, imminent cultural breakout—it is women who are the arch evil in the life of the Jewish-American protagonist. It is *they* who poison the spring of life at which our talented, high-minded narrator would otherwise be drinking happily; they who determine that he will stagger and drop in his prime, these agents of mortal threat, incomprehensible punishment, deliberate degradation.” As James Atlas points out in his biography of Bellow, accusations such as these often seem justifiable, for there is in fact “a sameness to the wives and girlfriends who populate his books, harassing his women-baffled heroes” (337).

<sup>101</sup> Richard Poirier argues that both *Herzog* and *Sammler* are “efforts to test out, to substantiate, to vitalize, and ultimately to propagate a kind of cultural conservatism which he shares with the two aggrieved heroes of these novels, and to imagine that they are victims of the cultural debasements, as Bellow sees it, of the sixties” (81). James Atlas also believes that: “Bellow was never one to let experience marinate; his work tended to reflect his circumstances at the moment of composition. . . . None was as explicit a response to its own historical moment as *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, begun in the late sixties—in Alfred Kazin’s words, ‘so openly Bellow’s mind now’” (386). Kazin also called Sammler a vehicle for Bellow’s “punitive moral outrage” (3).

<sup>102</sup> The King James version includes the following quote: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28-29).

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, the June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1967 *Life* magazine cover featuring an Israel soldier (Major General Yossi Ben Hanan) with an AK-47 rifle, a fighter in what the magazine calls “the astounding war.” Sammler also recognizes a certain appeal in Eisen, who is confident, handsome, and charismatic; however, Eisen’s aggression is shown early on to be far more controversial in its misogyny, as he beats Shula throughout their brief marriage.

<sup>104</sup> Carol Smith also reads Sammler’s encounters with the black pickpocket in light of the historical black and Jewish dialogue, though she sees it as evidence of Jewish assimilationist ideals subsuming the alterity of Blackness.

## CHAPTER 4

<sup>105</sup> According to W.J. Weatherby’s biography of the author, Baldwin was actually advised by his publishers at Knopf to burn the manuscript of *Giovanni’s Room* due to its controversial representation of homosexuality. As Douglas Field points out, homosexuality was particularly feared in the early 1950s as a sign of weakness or emotional instability that would make the nation unfit to face the Communist threat. (As a black homosexual man, Baldwin himself was under FBI surveillance during much of the Cold War). *Another Country* was also released to some controversy, for its depiction of interracial relationships as well as its positive treatment of homosexuality.

<sup>106</sup> Admittedly, Baldwin expressed some skepticism towards existential philosophy as a literary device; in his famous essay “Alas, Poor Richard,” Baldwin confesses that he distrusted Wright’s relationship with the French existentialists, for “it seemed to me that there was very little they could give him which he could use” (249). However, Baldwin belies his own skepticism in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” a response to Norman Mailer’s work that he published almost simultaneously with “Alas, Poor Richard.” There, Baldwin writes:

“To become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along. This had to be done in the not-at-all-metaphorical teeth of the world’s determination to destroy you. The world had prepared no place for you, and if the world had its way, no place would ever exist. Now, this is true for everyone, but, in the case of the Negro, this truth is absolutely naked: if he deludes himself about it, he will die. This is not the way this truth presents itself to white men, who believe the world is theirs and who, albeit unconsciously, expect the world to help them in the achievement of their identity” (279).

Here Baldwin articulates a variety of existential themes, including the necessity of constructing oneself in the face of anguish, particularly the anguish of recognizing oneself as “othered.” In this way, Baldwin also points to existential self-fashioning as a key point of strife for the American black man, who must overcome a number of unique obstacles to achieve transcendence.

<sup>107</sup> As Sartre further notes: “To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals—in particular, of value judgments... Thus being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as ‘slaves’ in so far as we appear to the Other... I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being” (Sartre 267).

<sup>108</sup> The association between masculinity and whiteness has a long history within American cultural studies—and in American culture. As Gail Bederman has demonstrated in her sociological study of masculinity in America, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, civilization has “constructed manliness as simultaneously cultural and racial” so that “white men were able to achieve perfect manliness because they had inherited that capacity from their racial forbears. Black men, in contrast, might struggle as hard as they could to be truly manly, without success. They were primitives who could never achieve true civilized manliness because their racial ancestors had never evolved that capacity” (29). Robyn Wiegman also describes how black men were simultaneously and paradoxically ungended and feminized by scientific and physiological “evidence” (such as that put forth by Carl Vogt in 1864’s

*Lectures on Man, His Place in Creation, and in the History of the Earth*) of their supposed racial and masculine inferiority.

<sup>109</sup> For instance, Robert A. Bone was one of the first critics to excoriate this “raceless” aspect of *Giovanni’s Room* in *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), arguing that African American literature should reflect the experiences of African American characters; otherwise, he argues, it betrays itself as inauthentic or assimilative, a kind of “literary passing” (248).

<sup>110</sup> Aliyyah Abur-Rahman argues that in *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin makes his main protagonist white in order to critique whiteness itself, noting that he makes it his task to “uncover the ways that whiteness itself depends on heterosexuality to perpetuate its own myth of normalcy and its status as the universal standard” (482), and that as a result David’s homosexual desires “undermine his claims to heteronormativity, to masculinity, and to whiteness, as David’s descent into intra-gender sexuality is simultaneously a descent into racial blackness” (480). However, heterosexuality also served as a defining marker of the “standard” of black masculinity as well. For an examination of the invisibility and denial of the black gay man as, in part, a result of the masculinist rhetoric of the NOI and the Black Panthers see Kobena Mercer’s *Welcome to the Jungle*.

<sup>111</sup> Here my analysis coincides with Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson’s assertion that “*Giovanni’s Room* invokes the expatriate experiences of a white man to make the case for the homosexual as hero, a possibility foreclosed by the construction of black American masculinity” (Shin 249), as well as with Marlon Ross’s argument that “Baldwin’s contribution to African American culture lies in his ability to imbalance the cultural conception of normalcy and in his linking of normalcy to racist ideology” (44).

<sup>112</sup> As Anthony Rotundo explains in *American Manhood*, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an increasing emphasis on restraint as a quality of manhood. At this time, to fail to develop a moral, courageous, successful, competitive self was to be insultingly associated with either a woman or a boy, neither of which was perceived as able to control passion or practice self-restraint. Gail Bederman in *Manliness and Civilization* also notes that beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, white society encouraged male children to embrace a “savage boyhood” so they could tap into and later restrain their natural “primitive” impulses—which black men, for example, were perceived as unable to control (119).

<sup>113</sup> Baldwin himself moved to Paris to escape racial oppression and homophobia, to escape the poverty and crime in New York (“I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed,” he says in an interview with *The Paris Review*) and to attempt to be seen as a writer as opposed to an African American writer, which he later writes about in *The Price of the Ticket*. Still, he also emphasized that Paris was by no means an ideal setting. In *Notes of a Native Son*, for instance, Baldwin notes that in moving to Paris he had hoped to find a place where he could avoid “the laughter of those who consider themselves to be a t a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real” but realized that in Paris ‘it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and can never be stilled’ (116). And later, in his *Paris Review* interview, he admits, “I’m not sure I’ve escaped anything.”

<sup>114</sup> As Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, “In so far as the body is the contingent and indifferent matter of all our psychic events, the body determines a *psychic space*” that must be “perpetually surpassed” (337-338).

<sup>115</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr alludes briefly to the existential nature of Giovanni’s gendered dilemma, arguing that “the central tragedy of the novel is the fact that Giovanni is never able to achieve his one true dream, the transcendence of the ideology of the corporeal” (Reid-Pharr 388).

<sup>116</sup> In a psychoanalytical reading of the novel, Yasmin Degout has similarly argued that Baldwin is concerned that David “grows out of the simplistic binary oppositions sustained by the ‘paralytically infantile’ American ideal of masculinity” (150). I would extend this idea further, as I believe Baldwin aims in this early text to encourage the

unraveling of *all* rigid categories of gendered and sexual identity, as will be evidenced by Hella's lamentations about a similarly restricted feminine identity.

<sup>117</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that society imbues the body with meaning as a regulatory practice, in order to perpetuate a hierarchy of sexuality and gender; as she says, "under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality" (xii). Similarly, Fausto-Sterling argues that this binary system helps "the normal take precedence over the natural" (8).

<sup>118</sup> "It is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom" Sartre writes. "A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation" (29).

<sup>119</sup> In a direct contradiction to the stereotypical equation of masculinity with reason, Eva in *The Outsider*, Cherry in *An American Dream*, Naomi in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Susan McCall-Smith in *My Life as a Man* all function as voices of insight into the masculine crises of each of these novels' male protagonists, offering a reasonable perspective in the face of the protagonist's often irrational behavior.

<sup>120</sup> Here my views align with Douglas Field's argument that "As a novel that remains on the peripheries of the African-American canon, *Giovanni's Room* is a sharp reminder of the ways in which Baldwin resisted dominant Cold War categories of black and white, gay and straight" (Field 101).

<sup>121</sup> Despite Rufus's relatively brief appearance in the novel, critics generally agree that he serves as the narrative's central character. (See, for example, Amy Reddinger's "Just Enough for the City"). However, Kevin Ohi argues that "by placing Rufus at the center of the text, as the Real or the crypt that structures and ruptures the text, Baldwin ... frustrates a liberatory reading of self-knowledge achieved in a transparency of unveiling." Ohi goes on to suggest that "this opacity of reading points to the implicitly masculinist ideology underlying the celebration of identificatory unveilings—whether in terms of 'race' or sexuality" (280). Indeed, the novel is structured around conflicts of masculinity, whereby an acknowledgment of feminine struggles is relegated to the background: though Ida and Cass are central characters, their role as women (and Ida's role as a black woman in particular) is addressed briefly but not interrogated. However, I would emphasize what Ohi only implies in his reading: that Baldwin himself does not, at least at this point in his career, triumph this masculinist ideology; rather his *deliberate* frustration of "a liberatory reading of self-knowledge" is at the heart of his critique of racism, homophobia, and masculinist posturing.

<sup>122</sup> In *Are We Not Men?* Philip Brian Harper notes that In the Black Arts movement, homosexuality signaled a "failed manhood" (50) and that the Black Arts rhetoric, "whose ostensible objective is to promote racial solidarity, actually engenders a *division* among blacks that is paradoxically necessary to the nationalist project—a division that, furthermore, is predicated on a profoundly masculinist ethic" (53). In fact, as Harper argues, African-American identity as a whole is often coded as masculine. The hyper-(hetero)sexuality of the black man that Harper also observes has long been a site of contention, triumphed by Eldridge Cleaver and Norman Mailer, and criticized by bell hooks in *Reconstructing Black Masculinity* and Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>123</sup> Terry Rowdon has more recently put forth what is, in my mind, a somewhat controversial argument with regard to race in *Another Country*, suggesting that it is in this novel, "with its general exclusion of black men and its racial scapegoating of the only one that it allows, that we are given the most explicit evidence of how ambivalent was Baldwin's relationship not only to the sexuality of the black man, but to the simple fact of the existence of black men in society" (42). Rowdon goes on to argue that the character of Rufus Scott "does not represent black men," and that "the best he can do is to represent or theatrically enact the kind of black male that Baldwin needs to serve his ideological purposes" (44). I think, however, that these representational problems are deliberate on Baldwin's part: Rufus's inability to identify with, speak for, or embody one particular culture allows Baldwin to point to the limitations of those identity politics.

<sup>124</sup> In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the connection between an emerging discourse of sexuality and power, examining the ways in which people sought to understand and regulate sexuality through language. It was



essentially, a “policing of sex” (25) that “put sexuality under “constant surveillance” and made marriage “the most intense focus of restraints” (37); those who deviated from these restraints were condemned as sinners or perverse individuals, encouraged to come forth and confess their crimes. Foucault also points to the way that the identity of the “subject” has been grounded firmly in these sexual discourses, that “causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex” (70). This is precisely the difficulty Baldwin engages with here, as he attempts to extract the identity of the subject from the oppressive power of these discourses.

<sup>125</sup> Though I have argued that Baldwin’s texts demonstrate many dissimilarities with Norman Mailer’s work, on this topic they are connected by a similar investigation and skepticism of what Marcuse would call the “surplus repression” of society, that “gradual decontrolling of the instinctual development” (134) that makes up “the restrictions necessitated by social domination” (35) whereby individuals are required to “renounce the freedom of the libidinal subject-object which the human organism primarily is and desires” (46).

<sup>126</sup> Much of Rufus’s life has been characterized by racial violence: memories of his early life, triggered by his first encounter with Leona, are punctuated by his memory of the racial tension at an army boot camp, where he recalls “the shoe of a white officer against his mouth” and his face “full of clay and tears and blood” (375).

<sup>127</sup> Anticipating my argument that characters like Vivaldo and Rufus both reaffirm masculine privilege, Susan Feldman argues that in *Another Country*, “the fear of emasculation can lead to both violent sexism and racism” (93) and that internalized homophobia, the source of emasculation for both Rufus and Vivaldo, “functions largely to maintain rigid gender roles and patriarchal power, since homophobia can maintain its force over the male psyche so long as men recognize and accept the existing inequality between the sexes” (97). I would add here that by representing homophobia this way, Baldwin paves the way for a critique of what I read as a particularly *existential* interpretation of both violence and masculinity, whereby transcendence becomes the goal and the justification for aggression.

<sup>128</sup> Both bell hooks and Hazel Carby have observed this trend within the African American community. Carby, for example, notes that “while contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society” (6).

<sup>129</sup> Originally delivered on October 16, 1963 as “*The Negro Child – His Self-Image*”; later published as “*A Talk to Teachers*” in *The Saturday Review* (December 21, 1963) and reprinted in *The Price of the Ticket*.

<sup>130</sup> Terry Rowdon calls this “a case of internalized racism of almost Frankensteinian proportions” (42).

<sup>131</sup> Robert Staples argues that because black men have internalized a sense of inferiority imposed on them by white men since times of slavery, they adopt the same dominant and oppressive tendencies of the hegemonic masculinity as a response. This is also addressed by bell hooks, who argues that “most black men remain in a state of denial, refusing to acknowledge the pain in their lives that is caused by sexist thinking and patriarchal, phallogocentric violence that is not only expressed by male domination over women but also by internecine conflict among black men” (102). Similarly, Maureen D. Thum has astutely pointed out that “while it is true that Rufus is surely a victim, and that his rage is understandable, it is just as true that Rufus has now assumed the very role which he had so detested in the white racists he had encountered...He mistreats those who are vulnerable and are victims, in many ways, like himself” (Thum 217).

<sup>132</sup> As I previously noted in my chapter on Wright, Sartre notes that an existential journey often entails the facing and rejection of suicide. In his analysis of Camus’s *The Stranger*, Sartre argues that the man who accepts the meaninglessness of the universe “will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him” (“An Explication” 6).

<sup>133</sup> Susan Feldman suggests that “Rufus’s absence is used to signify this failure to provide a place for the black male in the United States” (91). Similarly, Amy Ongiri has argued that Rufus “exists only as an absence which marks a negative possibility” for black masculinity (Ongiri 290), and Stefanie Dunning posits that Rufus’ death suggests that there is no black utopia, no place where he can escape the iniquities of racism. Keith Mitchell argues “that Rufus even attempts to transgress and subvert psycho-social boundaries marks him for annihilation” as “rather than risk death at the hands of whites, he commits suicide” (30; 32). Keith Clark has argued that Rufus’s brief appearance in the novel exemplifies that “Baldwin’s primary concern was not so much with how white society deformed and destroyed black men but how these men participated in their own demise” (32).

<sup>134</sup> Interestingly, Baldwin articulates some of his most salient points about policing of the black masculine body veresus relative freedom of the white body through Cass Silenski. As Cass reflects, she herself, as a white woman, had always viewed the police as simply “part of the landscape, present for the purpose of upholding law and order; and if a policeman—for she had never thought of them as being very bright—seemed to forget his place, it was easy enough to make him remember it.” Yet as she comes to realize, this was “easy enough if one’s own place was more secure than his, and if one represented, or could bring to bear, a power greater than his own. For all policemen were bright enough to know who they were working for, and they were not working, anywhere in the world, for the powerless” (625). This perspective highlights the disparate understandings of violence and the law experienced as a result of race and sexual identity, represented by the intertwined but simultaneously disconnected relationships between the characters in *Another Country*.

<sup>135</sup> In *Our Living Manhood*, Rolland Murray outlines Baldwin’s complicated relationship with Black Power and masculinist ideology, arguing that “Baldwin was not entirely consistent in making challenges to ideologies that presumed that men could claim certain rights, privileges, and authority because of the bodies they inhabited. Even as Baldwin raised critical questions about the NOI’s patriarchal politics, certain strains of his social philosophy conflated the quest for lack freedom with the fashioning of black masculinity” (15). As Murray also notes, Baldwin formed an alliance with the Black Power movement later in life, and “masculinity became a key term through which he negotiated and maintained this alliance” (29). Murray says this alliance was so “transformative” that “it eventually compelled a revision of his long-standing critique of patriarchal social logics...As he became the elder statesman to younger activists, he also became more susceptible to the patriarchy he had so often decried” (32;35).

<sup>136</sup> In fact, it is Cass who also offers the existential insight that “growing just means learning more and more about anguish” (729).

<sup>137</sup> Cora Kaplan also argues that *Another Country* “explicitly challenges the spectacle of degradation as a radical, transgressive erotic and the notion that women or men invite or enjoy violence, framing the brutality Rufus displays toward his southern white girlfriend Leona as sexist and abusive, a bleakly tragic failure both of heterosexual love and interracial alliance” (32).

<sup>138</sup> Robert A. Bone argues that “Eric is the first of Rufus’ friends to face his demons and achieve a sense of self,” after which he “emancipates the rest” (45) and Michael Lynch calls Eric the novel’s “existential hero” for “his courageousness in understanding that, ...he has to ‘create his standards and make up his definitions’ as he goes along (16). Terry Rowdon also argues that “*Another Country*’s utopianized image of homosexuality as represented by the sexually messianic figure of Eric” (44).

## CHAPTER 5

<sup>139</sup> Here Rosenberg argues that the modern notion of Jewish identity is largely defined by a simultaneous repression of and obsession with violence. In Rosenberg’s view, this ambivalence stems largely from historically conflicted messages about violence and Jewishness: while often repudiated as unbefitting of the responsible Jewish *mensch*, violence has actually been a central part of Jewish history and culture for centuries, dating all the way back to the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>140</sup> This response is likely a reference to the Zionist rhetoric of Jewish “remasculinization” that placed a strong emphasis on the “muscle Jew.” As Rosenberg has also previously pointed out (and as Roth’s characterizations of both Portnoy and Tarnopol exemplify) Roth himself displayed an ambivalence about this rhetoric, alternately seeming to reject it and support it. For example, in his 1961 essay “Some New Jewish Stereotypes,” Roth argues that by portraying the Jewish man as a “warrior” and “battle-scarred belligerent” in his widely popular novel *Exodus*, Leon Uris is generating stereotype about Jews that allows people to dispose of their guilt and shame over the victimization of the Jews in the Holocaust (*RMAO* 137). However, in his 1963 essay, “Writing About Jews,” Roth criticizes a rabbi (who had himself criticized Roth’s work) who chose to “remain a victim in a country where he does not have to live like on if he chooses,” and who demonstrated the “pathetic” tendency to invoke the “six million” to justify his “timidity” (*RMAO* 165). He also takes Bellow, Malamud, and even Mailer to task for suggesting that it is “inconceivable” that a Jewish literary hero could be violent or transgressive. Roth would later engage further with Zionist rhetoric in both *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), continuing to investigate its inherent complexities and limitations.

<sup>141</sup> For example, as noted in my introduction, Beauvoir draws comparisons among the white male perceptions of women, blacks, and Jews as she describes the white male perception of itself as a “master race:”

In the same way the whites of Louisiana and Georgia are delighted with the little pilferings and fibs of the blacks: they feel reassured of the superiority conferred by their skin color; and if one of these Negroes persists in being honest, he will be maltreated the more for it. And similarly in the concentration camps the abasement of men was systematically carried out: the Master Race found in this abjection proof that it was indeed of superhuman essence. (221)

<sup>142</sup> In *Unheroic Conduct*, Boyarin—who embraces the association of Jewishness with nonviolence—locates a certain hostility in this division. He defines *goyem naches*, or “the games goyim play” as “violent physical activity, such as hunting, dueling or wars—all of which Jews traditionally despised, for which they in turn were despised” (42).

<sup>143</sup> Debra Shostak develops this idea more fully in her earlier work, *Philip Roth: Counterlives, Countertexts* (2004), in which she argues that in Roth’s works, “the self becomes visible to itself through the dialogic process, which filters the perspective of the other through the self at the same time that it emphasizes the oppositional nature of I/Other dialogue” (12). In “Roth and Ethnic Identity,” Timothy Parrish takes a similar approach to the construction of identity in Roth’s fiction, noting that Roth “would not find self-invention interesting if it were not done in the context of other selves” for the author looks to examine how one’s identity impinges on those of others and does so within a context of pluralistic, or multicultural, American identity making” (130).

<sup>144</sup> In Beauvoir’s theory of transcendence, we can hear the echoes of Sartre’s own theory of existential freedom put forth earlier in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre argues, for example, that to act is to freely exert one’s will as “a projection of the for-itself toward what is not” (436) and that man understands who he is “from the standpoint of the future” as he continually aims for transcendence toward that which he lacks (469). It is this language that Beauvoir modifies to include the situation of women and their existential projects toward an “indefinitely open future” in *The Second Sex*.

<sup>145</sup> Though Rosenberg has argued that Roth aligns himself more closely with Mailer than with either Bellow or Bernard Malamud, in “Imagining Jews” Roth suggests that he wants to separate himself from the implication made by all of these authors: that violence could not be identified with a Jewish hero. Roth argues, for example, “that an identifiably Jewish hero could perpetrate such spectacular transgressions with so much gusto and so little self-doubt or ethical disorientation turns out to be as inconceivable to Norman Mailer as it is to Bernard Malamud” (233).

<sup>146</sup> See Alan Cooper’s *Philip Roth and the Jews* (1996) for an excellent assessment of the response to Roth’s novel. Here Cooper summarizes in detail the various responses from the Jewish community, particularly the sharp criticisms from rabbis and Jewish literary critics alike that Roth in this novel showed himself to be a self-hating Jew and that *Portnoy’s Complaint* contained anti-Semitic material. One of the most well-known of these criticisms is Irving Howe’s “Philip Roth Reconsidered,” published in *Commentary* in 1972: here Howe notes that while he does

not believe *Portnoy's Complaint* is an ant-Semitic book, it was also undeserving of the “solemn ecstasies” it had ignited in the culture (239).

<sup>147</sup> David Brauner has previously pointed to Roth's divided opinion of psychoanalysis as it manifests itself in *Portnoy's Complaint*, arguing that Alex's own self-analysis both reaffirms and satirizes the Freudian psychoanalytical model. As Brauner argues, the novel “exhibits an unresolved tension between two impulses—to treat psychoanalysis comically, and to treat comedy psychoanalytically” (“Masturbation and Its Discontents” 48).

<sup>148</sup> By inverting the Oedipal paradigm in this way, Roth, like Mailer, appears to be using Marcuse's *Eros in Civilization* as a type of analogue for his own interpretation and critique of Freud. By replacing the primal father with the mother figure, Roth himself also investigates this relationship between Oedipal domination, libidinal repression, and cultural domination, pointing to the absurdity of this cyclical repression in culture that has helped to create Portnoy's dilemma.

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, Elaine Showalter's 1981 essay, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” in which she summarizes the ways in which psychoanalytic criticism perpetuates the definition of the feminine as a “lack” and continually associates the development of femininity with a castration complex or fixation on the “absent phallus” (194). Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which the author's investigate a history of male-centered literary criticism, offers another example of this criticism

<sup>150</sup> In her essay, “Rebellion Against Jewishness,” Helge Normann Nilsen offers a critique of Portnoy's struggle against his cultural heritage, but also makes note of the sincerity of this rebelliousness, arguing that “Alex is endowed with a set of attitudes that defines him as Jewish though he is wholly sincere in his rejection of the ancestral heritage” (69).

<sup>151</sup> Estelle Gershgoren Novak has argued that Roth's Jewish protagonists exist in a fixed state of “spiritual homelessness” which contributes to a sense of estrangement from American culture that only increases with heightened attempts to assimilate. In her reading of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Novak anticipates my own argument in claiming that Portnoy blames his Jewish past for his present discomfort (physical and spiritual), and that it is this struggle to create a balanced identity that includes both an American and Jewish self that defines and frames his neuroses. As she writes: “The ability to adjust and be normal means for Roth to deny the self that is other” (53). The problem I explore here, however, is that Portnoy is unable to deny any of his conflicting “selves.”

<sup>152</sup> Portnoy's liberal work on behalf of poor—particularly poor blacks—as the representation of his “good” self also points to that moment in cultural history during which blacks and Jews in America engaged in both a tensely competitive and mutually supportive relationship. As Eric Sundquist has noted, blacks were often referred to as “America's Jews,” which he argues “made Jews sympathetic to their predicament if for no other reason than that it reminded them of the European pogroms they had escaped—and might face once again in the United States if not for the scapegoat provided by the African American” (3). In reaching out to a section of the American population that shares a history of oppression, Portnoy feels he is doing his moral duty as a Jew.

<sup>153</sup> In his 1969 review of the novel, Bruno Bettelheim takes on the role of Dr. Spielvogel and (perhaps missing some of Roth's own satiric criticisms of Portnoy), mockingly analyzes Portnoy's neuroses, focusing on his selfishness and narcissism. As R. Clifton Spargo has noted, Bettelheim's essay points to Portnoy's suspended adolescence under the hold of this matriarchal Oedipal figure and Portnoy remains, Spargo notes, “as part of his self-defined pathology, forever a guilty Jewish boy” (269). This issue of perpetual boyhood is also taken up by Ross Posnock in *Roth's Rude Truth*; however, Posnock sees what he calls Portnoy's “mature immaturity” as a more positively charged and even necessary stage. As Posnock states, “Freedom from being the good boy, freedom to discover and sublimate in art the anarchic and unsocialized parts of the self—all this requires an undoing of ‘maturity’” (37).

<sup>154</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Roth's distortion of the Oedipal complex is not without its problems. As Martha A. Ravits explains in her analysis of representations of the Jewish mother in popular culture, many Jewish

women were “outraged” at the depiction of Sophie Portnoy. They believed that this exaggerated negative characterization did not accurately represent the hard work and sacrifices of their own Jewish mothers that were more reflective of reality. As Ravits also notes, “rehabilitating the image of the Jewish mother proved to be a thankless task, in part because the stereotype dovetailed so effectively with the archetypes of the dangerous female, usurper of patriarchal power” (166).

<sup>155</sup> Marya Mannes (who called Portnoy “the most disagreeable bastard who ever lived”) was among those who charged Roth with misogyny around the time of the novel’s publication, but such readings of Roth have continued to the present. In 2008 submission to *Harper’s Magazine*, Vivian Gornick argues that *Portnoy’s Complaint* directly connects “women-hating” to the Jewish American experience of marginalization. “If in Bellow misogyny was like seeping bile,” she says, “in Roth it was lava pouring forth from a volcano.” Gornick goes on to make the not uncommon but somewhat erroneous interpretive decision to read Roth’s work as wholly autobiographical, arguing that in all of Roth’s publications following *Portnoy*, “the women are monstrous because for Philip Roth women are monstrous.” In her 2001 review of *The Dying Animal* (a novel that inspired a new wave of many of these accusations of misogyny), Linda Grant also claims that while Roth “can be the most humane, empathetic and compassionate of observers” across his body of work “there is in him a dark distaste for women, a repugnance that can only be described by the word misogyny.”

<sup>156</sup> As Shostak has similarly noted, “The *shiksa* reminds the Jew of his exclusion from the rewards of the masculine myth, challenging him to erase the opposition of Jew and goy in sexual congress and to reverse the implied hierarchy in that opposition by penetrating gentile America” (“Roth and Gender” 117). It is this perception of “the *shiksa*” that then “dictates Portnoy’s unmitigated objectification of the women who fill the role for him, as is evident in his belittling nicknames for them: the Monkey, the Pumpkin, the Pilgrim” (117).

<sup>157</sup> My argument here is aligned with Ross Posnock’s previous treatment of the misogynistic undertones in Roth’s fiction. Posnock acknowledges the charges of misogyny in Roth’s work, and concedes that the kind of immaturity Portnoy exhibits seems to be “solely a male privilege” (16); however, he also argues that Roth’s “aesthetic detachment” frees the author himself from charges of misogyny. Furthermore, he notes that as a narrative tool, this distance allows Roth to create a character who exhibits misogynistic tendencies, but not necessarily hold that character up as a model for masculinity. As Posnock notes, “Aesthetic distance becomes the condition whereby literature can traffic in the unbalanced, that realm where the uncensored, the anxious, and the exaggerated come to imaginative life” (18).

<sup>158</sup> Shostak offers a useful way to consider this. She first acknowledges that “even if one more generously interprets that in most case Roth is exposing rather than merely reproducing the way these female characters are objectified by males from whose point of view they appear in the narratives, his fiction may still be construed as representing a myth of phallic masculinity.” Yet she also argues that it is important to recognize phallic masculinity as a myth, one that Roth uncovers over the course of his career, as he struggles to understand and “become reconciled to” the burden of this myth of masculine selfhood, of which sexual desire is often at the root (*Philip Roth* 22).

<sup>159</sup> This is quite similar to the idea of “restraint” Mailer puts forth in *An American Dream*, where Rojack admits that “there is something manly about containing your rage” (8)—a connection that is not entirely surprising, for as David Gilmore has proven in his anthropological study *Manhood in the Making*, the belief in self-sacrifice as a defining characteristic of manhood is widespread and deeply embedded in culture

<sup>160</sup> This admiration of a “Gentile” violence is also prevalent in several of Bellow’s works; in *Humboldt’s Gift*, for example, Charlie Citrine, despite his protestations, allows himself to be taken in by Cantabile’s “thuggery,” frequently expressing his admiration for the “ingenuity” (97) of Cantabile’s manipulative behavior and insisting that there is a “natural connection” between them (87).

<sup>161</sup> By thus exploring the situation of the Jew, Sartre also articulates the very contradiction Roth explores in these novels. Sartre writes: “The anti-Semitism and the masochism of the inauthentic Jew represent in a sense the two extremes of his possible behavior: in anti-Semitism he denies his race in order to be more than a pure individual, a

man without blemish in the midst of other men; in masochism, he repudiates his liberty as a man in order to escape the sin of being a Jew and in order to seek the repose and passivity of a thing” (109).

<sup>162</sup> In “Revisiting Roth’s Psychoanalysts,” Jeffrey Berman observes that Roth’s portrayal of psychoanalysis grows more “hostile” over the years, and that Roth’s representation of the relationship between Tarnopol and Spielvogel in *My Life as a Man* is drawn directly from his own experiences in analysis (which Berman discusses more fully in his 1985 book, *The Talking Cure*). As Berman further notes, “No one can say whether psychoanalysis failed Roth or whether he failed psychoanalysis. What we can say is that he never sees psychoanalysis as an intersubjective, collaborative process in which both analyst and analysand seek to arrive at a mutually agreed truth...His later fictional characters visit doctors who seem to have missed all the important innovations in psychoanalytic theory and practice in the last forty years, including relational approaches and self psychology. His psychoanalysts seem frozen in time, imprisoned by a rigid Freudian ideology that most analysts have long ago abandoned or sharply revised” (106).

<sup>163</sup> In *Patrimony* (1996), Roth alludes to this inability to enact violence that even in his own life has been associated with the Jewish community. As he writes there, “We’re the sons appalled by violence, with no capacity for inflicting physical pain, useless at beating and clubbing, unfit to pulverize even the most deserving enemy...When we lay waste, when we efface, it isn’t with raging fists or ruthless schemes or insane sprawling violence but with out words, our brains, with mentality” (159).

<sup>164</sup> This scene is nearly identical to the episode in Wright’s *The Outsider*, discussed in Chapter 1, in which Cross Damon also berates himself for not having the masculine courage necessary to take his own life.

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