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EVERYDAY MEN, EXTRAORDINARY HUSTLES:
SOUTHERN BLACK MASCULINITY IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

By

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

EVERYDAY MEN, EXTRAORDINARY HUSTLES: SOUTHERN BLACK MASCULINITY IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

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This dissertation explores the complex lives of African American men in Memphis, Tennessee (1925 – 2006), whose vocations and acts of courage afford alternative perspectives on Black masculinity. Comparing the Jim Crow, post-apartheid, and “postracial” eras. The project documents institutional and socially-sanctioned racism over the course of a century in the U.S. south. Crafting an interdisciplinary methodology that encompasses archival investigations, critical race and gender theories, and analysis of visual culture, I conduct case studies of the heroism of dockhand Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968, and the depiction of twenty-first century urban life in *Hustle and Flow* to disrupt pernicious and pervasive stereotypes of Black men. I demonstrate how a culture of emasculation generated practices of subjugation and systemic oppression, which operated over time and through changing modes of employment and economic dispossession to produce Black men as racialized and gendered subjects. I also illuminate Black men’s creative resistance to these modes of subjugation, identifying diverse means devised by Black men who struggled against great odds to build lives of dignity and win public respect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DEDICATION

One thing they cannot prohibit – The strong men . . . coming on. The strong men gittin’ stronger. Strong men. . . Stronger. . . Sterling Brown, 1931¹

To Edward Miller Davis, My Father/ My Danish: If no one else ever acknowledges your presence and footprint in this earth I will. As a southern black man you were misunderstood and underestimated. I am the proof of your love, compassion and tenderness. You fed seven with an eighth grade education and single income. You taught me how to cook, play hopscotch, and say prayers at night and how to persist in the midst of obstacles. My inheritance is your manhood. I am your seed. I embrace the man and woman within me. I remember you. You were and you still are here, *Tu tamen et hic*.

To all the men with tears unshed, fears fed, left weak by a false fortitude, I see you, I know you. This is our Pandora’s Box we must open. Let the floodgates of love and vulnerable drown us in the regret that we made you less human, less than a man.

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¹ Originally published in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931)

Gone before us, our sister Melissa Darlene, the first educator I knew. Thanks for being a great big sister.

To those gone before me: Calvin, Nina Ida, Arnim, Dallas, your blood and wisdom runs through my veins. To Lucille and Umar, St. Mary's College of Maryland, and all of my SMCM family, you were the place and the people that first recognized my passion and purpose. My heart is filled with gratitude, and this work is for you.

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Chapter 1

Theorizing Black Masculinity in the New South

What do a dockhand in 1925, sanitation workers in 1968, and a 2006 film featuring an Oscar winning southern hip hop group have in common? Put somewhat differently: what do a black savior, a group of innovative laborers, and salacious redeemers have in common? The lived experiences and social realities that surrounded Tom Lee, Black Memphis sanitation workers, *Hustle and Flow* and Three 6 Mafia spanned disparate decades. Yet, each provided powerful insights into the politics of race, gender, respectability and worthiness that shaped and informed Black men in Memphis, Tennessee. Examining these lives is a means to gain a more nuanced understanding of the unconventional ways that black men have asserted themselves, disrupting stereotypical projections about race and manhood in the contentious and often complicated mid-southern United States.² Although their lives appear disconnected, their stories, social positions and vocations illuminate the forces that circumscribe and constitute black male subjectivity and self-determination.

At first glance, it might appear that Memphis, Tennessee has few racial, social or political continuities that span 1925, 1968 and 2006. Yet closer reflection makes it clear that each of these years (and the years in between) have been profoundly shaped by the history of slavery, an institution that created and solidified the racial caste system of the United States with continuing reverberations in the twenty-first century. Various

² I use the term *maleness* as an inclusive term connoting young black boys as well as men. I used *manhood* to refer exclusively to adult men, avoiding the conflation of young boys with men, a problematic and often disregarded difference.

labeled the eras of Jim Crow, post-apartheid, and “postracial,” all three of these historical moments have been marked by institutionalized and socially sanctioned racism, adorned with derogatory notions of blackness particularly in the US south. Although the manifestations of institutional racism have differed in these epochs, each building upon its predecessor and taking on new forms, pervasive inequality persists.

Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness* characterizes white supremacy as a “faith” held by white elites to maintain the social order of the south: “This deep faith in white supremacy not only justified an economic and political system in which plantation owners ruled through the brutality, torture and coercion of other human beings; it also endured like most articles of faith, long after the historical circumstances that gave rise to the religion passed away.”³ White supremacy created and sustained race-based servitude. As unwaged labor, enslaved blacks were so valuable to the agriculture industry they were insured like any other property. After the Civil War, when newly freed blacks demanded wages (although far less than white workers for far more grueling work), white supremacists found new ways to perpetuate servitude, using the law to criminalize “loitering” and “vagrancy” and sentencing African Americans convicted for those misdemeanor “crimes” to the convict leasing system. Given the speed with which white law enforcement generated new black convicts, employers leasing prison labor had no compunction about working the men to death—affording far less protection to exploited black workers than had been granted to prized slaves. Produced as inferior racialized and gendered subjects, black men in the

³Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010. pg.26.

south and across the US were subjected to a culture of emasculation, subjugation and systemic oppression—even as the specific forms of employment available changed.

Racist practices and economic exploitation connected the lives of Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers and Three 6 Mafia.

Institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow perpetuated race-based servitude and a racial caste system that persists in the post-apartheid and the “postracial”⁴ south. For southern whites, the emancipation of African Americans raised questions involving ownership, dominance, and personhood. It ruptured systems that maintained and oppressed blacks. The federal government’s mandate (i.e., Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments) fractured white dogmatisms rooted in the commodification of black bodies, which provided the bedrock of white supremacy. The shift from enslaved labor to waged labor and from property to personhood did not alter the concentration of black labor in the agricultural sector. Granting blacks the rights of citizens prompted a division of black labor based on gender. During slavery, except for pregnancy and wet nursing, men and women performed the same work within and without the plantation. Freedom provided choices, which were limited for African Americans and particularly limiting for black males. Recruited by white women, black women entered domestic work, while black men remained tethered to the land. Scholarship that explores southern history tends to focus on either race or gender, comparing black women and white women or black men with white men, generating oversimplified analyses of racist practices and customs that veil particular forms of oppression by whites that targeted black men.

⁴ I use quotes around the term “postracial” because I don’t believe it exists.

Elite southern whites sought to reduce expenditures on black waged labor, while producing the same crop yields. State laws served as conduits for the newest form of indentured servitude. “So-called Black Codes, passed as early as November 1865 in Mississippi required freed people to sign labor contracts that defined mobility as vagrancy.”⁵ Vagrancy violations particularly targeted black men as their labor required a level of transience. Black men walking the streets during the day could be charged with vagrancy and sentenced under the convict leasing system to months or years of hard labor on local plantations and farmland. The treatment of blacks in these labor camps worsened as insurance policies no longer paid for death or injury. Vagrancy laws and convict leasing replaced slavery with debt peonage.

The Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* announced the unconstitutionality of “separate but equal;” but Black communities continued to be plagued by limited cultural and social resources. By the late 1960’s African American voting rights solidified blacks’ abilities to influence local, state and national elections, but housing and jobs remained segregated in the south, confining blacks to sanitation, warehouse, domestic and agricultural work. Although large numbers of African American women remained in domestic work, some found an array of alternatives, but black male mobility and economic opportunities remained narrowly constrained. As urban decline plagued cities like Memphis, a new way of life emerged in the concrete landscape: hustling.

In response to insidious institutions of oppression, black men seized opportunities and secured a level of autonomy with few allies and little recourse. From slavery to

⁵ Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. , 2015. Print. Pg. 284.

freedom, black men hustled. As white fears of the physicality and unpredictability of black men limited labor opportunities, black men created their own economic, cultural and social capital. The act of hustling entailed innovation, vision and artistry to find value in the least valuable, to craft treasures out of trash. African Americans coined the term *hustler* to describe a male who lived on the edge and worked outside the formal economy. A hustler's skill set included acts of barter, exchanging little to no money for tangible, marketable goods that produced revenue or other commodities. The hustler's ability to persuade others to assist with or invest in their endeavors bore resemblance to entrepreneurs and venture capitalists. The vocation and performance of the black male hustler included charisma, persuasion, and high intensity. News accounts of Tom Lee as a "roustabout," who completed odd jobs, transported goods and people, and used the refuse of a sinking ship to save the lives of thirty-two white people, suggest that he was the embodiment of a hustler. The sanitation workers in 1968 who used a strike to mobilize a city and recruit one of the greatest civil rights leaders in history to aid their struggle relied on their ingenuity and powers of persuasion to bring their cause to a national public. Three 6 Mafia composed lyrics of "thuggish," brazen disenfranchisement to claim the national spotlight, producing "It's Hard out Here for a Pimp" for the 2005 film *Hustle and Flow*. Deploying the resources at hand to transcend the limitations imposed by systemic racism, these men hustled with potent effects. Challenging the derogatory connotations of the hustler, this dissertation explores the creativity and resistance of black men who struggled against great odds to build lives of dignity and win public respect.

To investigate the modes of oppression and forms of resistance of black men in Memphis is to engage in the academic enterprise of black masculinities studies, a field

underrepresented in the social sciences and humanities. Black feminist and womanist theories (e.g., hooks: Collins: Walker) paved the way to complicate and explore the liberation of all persons of African ancestry. Black men, however, have often hovered on the periphery of these discourses as their gender has positioned them as “privileged” subjects. This dissertation provides a different perspective on black manhood. Using theoretical frameworks similar to those developed by black feminists and womanists, I investigate black masculinity beyond the confines of problematic notions of “hypermasculinity” and “hypersexuality.” By focusing on black men’s labor, understandings of freedom, and complex gender identities, I illuminate black male subjectivity in relation to desires, vulnerabilities and self-love.

White hegemony in the academy has contributed to racialized constructions of emotion, which consign black men to the narrow range of rage and violence. Within this narrow frame, there is little room to define black manhood as inferior to white masculinity without primitivizing or feminizing it. To challenge this dehumanizing frame, I investigate qualities central to the Black masculine subject over three distinct time periods, constructing an epistemological framing of southern black manhood that unapologetically foregrounds self-understandings rather than cultural stereotypes.

Within the past decade, the US south and the city of Memphis have been on the intellectual radar. Focusing on the South, scholars have contested the “Lost Cause rhetoric,” a nineteenth-century movement to memorialize and vindicate the values of the Confederacy.⁶ Scholars have also provided powerful accounts of black agency during the

⁶ Karen Cox defines the Lost Cause in *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003. It is interesting to note that according to Cox, it was Southern elite women who spearheaded the Lost Cause rhetoric that erected monuments throughout the US, and educational materials including textbooks that to this day circulate in southern schools.

antebellum and post antebellum South as a means to disrupt the dehumanizing discourses that plague the studies of the south. The Jim Crow south, the civil rights movement and contemporary southern hip hop culture produced in Memphis a metropolis of worth surveying in spite of its history of being one of the central trafficked routes of enslaved Africans and the cotton industry for the entire world.⁷

In analyzing black masculinity, I pay particular attention to labor for two reasons. Although the legacy of slavery marked black bodies as valuable because of their unwaged labor, discounting humanity, various modes of masculinity are performed through the laboring body. A certain type of manliness is often manifested in relation to race, class and vocation. It is through what men do, the meaning of their acts, words and deeds that one can see the essence of their character, innovation and creativity. For black men, what they did for a living was often narrowly constrained by race, but how they felt about their work and the dignity they brought to their vocations provide important clues to their subjectivity.

Tom Lee, for example, was a black dockhand who entered the public imagination in Memphis, in the heart of the Jim Crow south, on May 8, 1925, when he rescued thirty-two white tourists on a sightseeing expedition on the M.E. Norman streamliner, when their boat capsized in the Mississippi River. His heroic action was memorialized with a monument in the heart of downtown Memphis, adjacent to that same river where he saved lives. The Mayor was so impressed by his heroism that he gave Lee a job as a sanitation worker and a title that few blacks in the south let alone the nation would ever

⁷ Sven Beckert lays out a fascinating genealogy of cotton and its connection to imperialism and the empire it created at the expense of many including the enslavement of African Americans in *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, 2014.

receive in the early 20th century, “A Very Worthy Negro.” If not for saving these white lives, there would be no story to tell and no designation of his human worth. A dockhand in Memphis was considered an unskilled laborer at best with little stable income or work as the south faced a transition from agriculture to industrialization. His act spoke volumes of his character, compassion and humanity yet little is known about the type of man Tom Lee was in his community as his self-worth was wrapped around the narrative of saving the lives of whites who probably would never have done the same for him or anyone that looked like him in 1925.

Forty years later, although segregation had been declared unconstitutional and Jim Crow laws and practices had been legally abolished, there had been little social or racial progress in Memphis, which like most of the south remained residentially and economically segregated. When two men died on their trash collection route in February 1968, 1,300 black men marched in the streets in a labor campaign demanding higher wages and safer working conditions. The position deemed a fitting reward for Tom Lee’s heroism was difficult, dangerous and sometimes deadly. Between 1925 and 1968, collecting garbage in the city had become a majority minority occupation, affording black men positions with low wages and long hours.⁸ That the sanitation workers were considered as disposable as the trash they collected was made clear when the death of two workers elicited no sympathy or even notice from the white residents of the city. This callous disregard motivated the Sanitation Workers to embellish their strike, demanding more than changes in wage and working conditions. Compelled by righteous

⁸ *The Atlantic* interviewed anthropologist, Robin Nagle about her ethnography on sanitation workers in New York City. Her book outlines the history of the department of Sanitation in NYC. For more information see, Robin Nagle, *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

indignation, the striking workers asserted their own humanity, carrying placards proclaiming, “I Am a Man.” They served notice to the white establishment that the institutions and social climate unleashed on African American men and the black community in Memphis would no longer be tolerated. Loose are the threads between Tom Lee and the Sanitation Workers, but both episodes illuminate the social trappings that ensnared black men as second class citizens in the south. Both episodes also demonstrate the heroism required to counter dehumanizing subjugation.

Thirty eight years later in 2006, some things have changed in Memphis. Artist David Alan Clark erected a bronze sculpture of Tom Lee dramatizing his black hand reaching out to save drowning whites from the turbulent waters of the Mississippi River.⁹ Willie Herenton an African American man now serves as Mayor of Memphis; and African American A.C. Wharton, serves as the mayor of its surrounding county--Shelby. Some blacks live in million dollar homes, and are visible contributors to the economic, social and political landscape. Yet undereducated African Americans worked low wage jobs persisted in conditions reminiscent of the social and cultural world of Jim Crow, condemned to substandard education, deficient social services, and second class citizenship. Yet from the midst of this dispossessed community in the heart of North Memphis, a new voice captured the spotlight. In contrast to the organized voices of the salvific black church, community organizers and citizens involved in social movement activism demanding social justice, this voice was different—a voice that spoke with syncopation, rhythm and grit, articulating the dilemmas of being poor and black in the

⁹ For more information see the image and summary

<http://catalogquicksearch.memphis.edu/iii/cpro/DigitalItemViewPage.external?lang=eng&sp=1000966&sp=T&sp=1&suite=def>

US. This is the voice of Jordan Houston, Cedric Coleman and Paul Beauregard, the southern hip hop group Three 6 Mafia, who won an Oscar for best original score, “It’s Hard out Here for a Pimp” in a major motion picture, “Hustle and Flow.” While the world watched three black men from Memphis receive an award for a song about Pimps and Whores, blacks and whites had an array of opinions whether this group was “worthy” of such a prestigious honor.

Blacks no longer live in the Jim Crow south or the racist, segregated south of the 1960s. They now live in an era proclaimed “postracial” by some, an era in which racial hierarchies are not as clear and distinct as they once were, and worthiness and value are not so systematically ascribed to a particular pedigree of people. Nonetheless, black men face many of the same challenges that Tom Lee faced living in a state-sanctioned apartheid, and the same challenges the sanitation workers faced living in a post-apartheid neocolonial municipality. As articulated in their music, the young men from North Memphis continue to face an ontological crisis in the twenty-first century: there is no space for them to exist as equals, no recognition of their full humanity. They can't just “be.”

Black male subjectivity is often analyzed in juxtaposition to white male subjectivity, a frame that fails to give epistemic privilege to their stories. As Dan A. Rodd and Theo Bond noted in their 1917 biography of Scott Bond, an innovator and entrepreneur from Arkansas: “In offering this biography to the public, it is our purpose to show some of the many disadvantages that must be overcome by the Negro in his way upward. We also want to impress the idea that the Negro will be measured by the white man's standard; that he must survive or perish when measured by that scale. The Negro

must ‘find a way or make one.’”¹⁰ This dissertation advances an account of black subjectivity through a black masculinist lens disinterested in what white men “do” or how white men “are.” Understanding black male worthiness no longer requires the validation or acceptance of others. Black manhood is beautiful, innovative, vulnerable, thoughtful and complex. That is what the dockhand, garbage men, and southern hip hop artist have in common.

Do Black Male Bodies Matter?

“The body is a more or less neutral surface or landscape on which a social symbolism is printed.” R.W. Connell Masculinities (2005)¹¹

“I tried to balance the sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis, and the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America’s body and white America’s soul.” James Weldon Johnson (1912)¹²

The neutrality of the human body would be an easier philosophical pill to swallow if not for the social realities that some bodies--in particular bodies of color--are marked as dispensable. For upon exiting the safety of their mother’s birth canal, some black males are plagued with infractions that are almost palpable. While their bodies are as Connell describes “more or less neutral” biologically, the social realities are quite physical. The fear of a life ending in extrajudicial execution as witnessed by James Weldon Johnson haunts black men in the United States. The juxtaposed passages from Connell and Johnson represent the differences between white male bodies and black male bodies in

¹⁰ Dan A. Rod and Theo Bond, *From Wealth to Slavery, the Life of Scott Bond: The Rewards of Honesty, Industry, Economy and Perseverance*. Pg. 15 The Journal Printing Company 1917 made available at the University of North Carolina online archives, “Documenting the American South.” <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/rudd/rudd.html>.

¹¹ Connell, Robert William, and Raewyn Connell. *Masculinities*. University of California Press, 2005. Pg. 46

¹² James Weldon Johnson wrote this testament during his visit to the south upon finding a charred black lynched body in 1921. This passage is found in, Carby, Hazel *Race Men*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

the US. White bodies signify a privileged and individualistic potentiality at birth; black bodies, a subjugated, racially-sanctioned violence in death. Hazel Carby in *Race Men* explores the black male aesthetic in modernist renderings and concludes that the very mention of the black male body evokes white angst and fear:

What must always be remembered, I would stress, is that alongside the white fascination with primitivism and the various cultural excavations to recover and claim an essence of masculinity, often believed to have been lost in the modern industrializing world, existed the imaginary fears and desires acted out in ritual fervor on the actual bodies of black men.¹³

Carby's esoteric explanation of the social and artistic expression of black maleness uncovers the fears and anxieties specifically regarding not just black men but also what their bodies represent, express and have the ability to produce. Juxtaposing Connell and Johnson's statements serves as an entry point to address the gendered social and institutional demarcation of white and black bodies in the United States and the historical and contemporary social implications for each racialized terrain. White male subjectivity tends to provide space for individualizing white male behaviors, habits and decisions with less apparent consequence to all white males. The United States was built upon the mantra of individual ruggedness, manifest destiny and self-determination but these qualities or traits were never attributed to African Americans. And when posited as possibilities for blacks, the lack of social or economic progress was often used as an argument to justify what was believed to be blacks possessing an inherent inferiority.

Social science provided accounts of black maleness and subjectivity that left little opportunity to see black men as individual, exclusive, and whole subjects. Black maleness often, typed signifying an expectation for all black males to act, behave or

¹³ Connell, Robert William, and Raewyn Connell. *Masculinities*. University of California Press, 2005. Pg. 46

assert their personhood singularly, even when attempting to claim positive attributes like black men are athletically inclined, inherently rhythmic or possess sexual proclivity. In James Weldon Johnson's account of a lynching, we see the impossibility of disconnecting himself from the charred remains of a black man, whose lynching symbolized that any black individual could be the victim of terror and murder. While he contends that the white man's soul is indescribably linked to the ways in which he treats his darker brother, white group mobism and terrorism implicated white men in this pathology of hate and brutality. The presence of a black male in the US conjures fear and white angst that produces a physiological response, manifested in crossing the street, heart palpitations, or stark fear. In sum, black lives do not matter as much as white lives. Moreover, the violence of white men against black men is committed with impunity. Black males who are the victims of this white violence, however, are constructed as criminals. Allegations of violence are attributed to them, although there is no evidence that black mobism or brutality against whites has ever been pervasive. This further supported the belief that black men lacked sympathy, compassion and peaceable resistance. This is a hypothesis debunked in this project.

Various schools of feminism analyze the politics of individuality, arriving at the conclusion that the "personal is political."¹⁴ While that may be true in theory and in social reality for some, personhood and individualism are privileged positions that not all bodies are able to achieve. For bodies of color, specifically black male bodies, collective social terrains are mapped by stereotypes and a history of subordination. Black men have been viewed as lacking compassion, vulnerability, intellectual or intuitive depth.

¹⁴ Ann Koedt and Shulamith Firestone, "Notes from the second year: Women's liberation" (1970).

In their introduction, Ronald Jackson II and Mark Hopson in *Masculinity in the Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood* capture this dilemma:

Another kind of pain emerges for Black males in the United States. That pain is steady and constant and seems to never fully subside. It is racial pain, complicated by the rules of being made. . . . When Black males experience racism, bigotry or even prejudice we are expected to ‘take it like a man.’¹⁵

Black manhood has been the depository for human pain and suffering that is underestimated and under explored. Their bodies, hearts and souls are programmed to internalize and never release or articulate the pain that ever haunts their being. They, like other men, are supposed to “take it.” It is culturally and intellectually acceptable to acknowledge the racialized pain black men experience but pain and inferiority attached to their maleness is often conflated by their gender privilege and the true meanings of intersectionality and standpoint theory are not taken into consideration. While all social identities are constructed, subaltern identities are manufactured by and in opposition to hegemonic narratives of white upper class maleness as strong, equipped, and capable to uphold and undergird these qualities. The act of making gender—of “man”ufacturing gender—is a hyper creative process by which white male elitism engenders positive and redeemable attributes leaving other men as the antithesis. Black men as racialized gender subjects are underexplored and often underestimated in African American and Gender Studies. The generic black manhood and the stereotyping of black maleness suffocates individual black agency and subjectivity which is the ultimate goal of a “man”ufactured blackness. How then do these bodies overcome the dilemma of representing the masses?

¹⁵ Jackson, Ronald L, and Mark C. Hopson. *Masculinity in the Black Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. Print. Pg. 2

And in what ways do scholars circumvent that cycle of misappropriating individual actions with cultural collective expressions? The lives of Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers and Three 6 Mafia follow a lineage of a constrained subjectivity that has been sorely underestimated. Their acts, thoughts and deeds subvert typical notions of black manliness. While their stories are individual and distinct, their social and political outcomes present possibilities of an alternative approach to exploring southern black masculinities.

The South and the Genesis of Black Masculinity

Social (individual and collective) identities are embedded in the customs, practices and beliefs of people and their locale. Ethnographic research and methods validate the need to recognize the relationship between locality and identity. Feminist scholarship and Critical Race theory expands the meaning of place to include understanding one's social, racial, or gender posture. The term "place" as noun and verb literally and figuratively takes on multiple meanings in this project. The U.S. south must be contextualized in order to understand the stories of Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers and Three 6 Mafia, specifically the Tri State Area known as Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas.¹⁶ Ignoring place and space is impossible when thinking about African American identity. Many of the cultural practices and mores of Blacks are rooted in the south as most black families and histories began in the southern portion of the US. Yet, defining space is complex when one attempts to narrow space as just a physical site. Space is the occupation of substance within the physical and the intellectual.

¹⁶ These states are relational as blacks migrated between them throughout the late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. For more information see Laurie Green's, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*.

Understanding the south as a geographic and cultural phenomena is critical to analyzing contested southern black masculinities.

Two critical texts in the twenty first century illuminated blackness in Memphis: *Battling the Plantation Mentality* by Laurie B. Green and *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* by Wanda Rushing. Their scholarship provided a framework that identified the histories, economies, politics and social practices that have influenced and shaped all three eras of this project. Laurie B. Green defined the plantation mentality as a term that “captures both the perpetuation and mutability of racial ideology and practices in American culture.”¹⁷ Green saw racism as fickle in the US and at times nonsensical, yet rooted in every composition of the nation’s “his” story: “Most obviously, those who talked about the plantation mentality referred to white racist attitudes that promoted white domination and black subservience, which they construed as reminiscent of slavery and sharecropping.”¹⁸ The absence of the plantation as place in 1925, 1968 and 2006 haunted and enforced a culture of black subjugation.

For historian Sheldon Van Aucken, “The South cannot be understood except through an understanding of the plantation system and its enduring strength as a cultural and economic concept.”¹⁹ This landscape survived as a symbol of power and status for elite whites, a desired attainment for poor whites and a location of pain and subjugation for blacks. A picture of a plantation without knowledge of its location conjured specific historic memories. A line of oak trees meant something to those who have seen and

¹⁷ Laurie Beth Green, “Battling the Plantation Mentality: Consciousness, Culture, and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Memphis, 1940-1968.” 1999, pg. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sheldon Van Aucken, “A Century of the Southern Plantation.” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 58.3 (1950): pg. 357.

heard where it leads.²⁰ It is one of the most notable and recognized images in the US.²¹ The landscape served as a signifier of a racialized and gendered topography. Even in its absence the plantation as a mental locale has the propensity to reify notions of white power, politics and the production of free or exploited labor hence the term often used in the south, the “plantation mentality.”²²

Whether blacks in Memphis possessed blue or white collar jobs, there existed a level of scrutiny of their spaces. The binary of blackness as “sharecropsque” and whiteness as proprietary continued to shape the labor force. The southern plantation typology consisted as a white psychosocial obsession (real and imagined) of manhood rooted in domination, racism and sexism. Southern black masculinities cultivated within these spaces as subjugated both in relation to race and to gender. *Memphis and the Paradox of Place* explored ways Memphis maintained an authenticated southern identity in the midst of a globalizing world in attempts to stay current and relevant during national transitions specifically industrialization. Maintaining Memphis’ southernness meant maintaining particular racial and gendered politics reminiscent of the plantation. Rushing described place as “not just a background for transformative local and global processes. Place also a site of imagination, constructed through symbolic work. Place exists in the mind as well as on the land.”²³ National conscience resided within southern history and critical when thinking about gender relationships. The byproducts of slavery fed a global

²⁰ Tree lines in the south were the aesthetic of a rich and regal plantation. The tree line lead to the main house's entrance.

²¹ Tara McPherson does a treatment of the ways in which the plantation symbolizes the south and its duplicitous meanings in US culture in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Duke University Press, 2001.

²² Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

²³ Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pg. 26.

enterprise yet no place on earth operated and subjugated enslaved humans the same. The obsession with eugenics in the US substantiated enslavement based on a racial caste system that permanently ranked blacks as inferior in every manner of society. Gender in the south post emancipation presented a different set of challenges and shifted not only labor but also racialized notions of personhood.

The southern plantation, as real, imagined, figurative or literal— was the social and economic barometer for the south. As an institution, it socialized and excluded blacks as free agents. This indoctrination continued to affect African Americans for generations. It enfolded, shaped and architected future generations of black men in ways that replicated the behavior, beliefs and systems born within this edifice. Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussana in *Black and White Masculinity in the American South: 1800- 2000* recognized the uniqueness of the south and its influences on identity formation:

From slavery, through to Reconstruction, segregation and into the present, these factors have had a major impact on the course of Southern politics, culture and identity, setting the region apart from the rest of the United States. Consequently gender ideals, such as notions of masculinity, have taken their own distinct form in the South, forged out of varied relationships over the years such as those between black and white, master and slave, and landowner and sharecropper.²⁴

For Lost Cause believers, individuals and groups that preserved the history of the Confederacy relied on monuments and plantations, a physical manifestations of their history. Southernness carried a multiplicities of meanings and values dependent upon its audience and its evaluator. Tourists and scholars viewed them as epic homes of a certain type of southern living and a universal capitulation of patriotism. As Jessica Adams

²⁴ Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussana, eds. *Black and White masculinity in the American south, 1800-2000*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. Pg.3.

illustrated in “Local Color: The Southern Plantation in Popular Culture,” “Plantation houses satisfy some desire for connection with history; as these sites contextualize the present within a history that is tangible, they convey a sense of collective identity, of a heritage that Americans share.”²⁵ Adams’ analysis exemplifies lapses in collective memory. Her work produces the plantation as the romantic landscape, a place of wealth and prosperity, audaciously suggesting that white owners’ experiences were shared within these properties of perversion and terror. Southern studies lack Black perspectives that contest such glamorous accounts. Otherwise, men like Lee, the sanitation workers and Three 6 Mafia remain enigmas and foreigners in their own habitats.

Although a place of pain and trauma for African Americans, the plantation reified black reproduction and preservation of a culture and its people. The shame and trauma was an indictment of white’s inhumanity and greed. The more one investigates the survival and fortitude of blacks at these sites of terror, the more it becomes clear that the enslaved population that had been intentionally and systematically dissembled, nonetheless found the strength to appropriate what Audre Lorde called “the master’s tools” to sculpt their own personhood and self-worth. The south stacked the odds against those of African descent—circumscribing the possibilities for a life of contentment, love, and fulfillment for themselves and their successors.

To disconnect southern black maleness from its site of inception in the US would be an intellectual infraction. Africans in the Americas have already been literally and figuratively displaced in history. Offering no original land to claim as a site of genesis

²⁵Jessica Adams, "Local Color: The Southern Plantation in Popular Culture." *Cultural Critique*.42: pg. 164.

would once again leave blacks natively homeless. Whether owned or not, citizenship of the south belongs to blacks just as much as it belongs to whites. Black history is grounded in the south and in this project the south will remain paramount. The desire for scholarship that attempts to transcend the south as a physical space occupied by others beyond titles of slave or enslaved, free or indentured could be assumed a projection of white intellectual angst and avoidance of crimes committed against humanity. When southern scholarship attempts to avoid this location as a physical landscape worth exploring, it conveniently ensures that there is no crime scene, no violated bodies, and no white transgression. For the sake of this project, rooting and grounding U.S. southernness as an analytical site must transcend attention to southernness beyond the US border. The south is a place where these subjects lived; it is the place where their manhood and personhood was actualized.

Scholarship that identifies the south as a monolithic locale of racism is also problematic. The construction of a stark opposition of disenfranchised blacks and privileged whites oversimplifies race relations in the south. The southern landscape is the origin of a specific type of white supremacy that is compatible with a multitude of forms of whiteness and blackness. Scholarship that attempts to place whiteness and blackness as stable binaries is flawed. Antebellum, Reconstruction and Jim Crow are distinct eras that challenge any attempt to frame a binary that postures an invariant scripting of black and white bodies. The social realities pitted free blacks against enslaved blacks, elite white women and white planters. Plantation owners lived at the pinnacle of privilege, but there were multiple dimensions of existence for those who sought to reach the same status of freedom and subjectivity as the plantation owner. Binaries do not work in the south. The

use of this binary is fragranced with white essentialism. The diversity of demographics in the south creates multi-levels and multi-tiers, breadth and depth of the people who live in this region. Legal and social segregation confounds that binary even when thinking of a North distinct and separate from the South. Spreading southern ideologies or attempting to locate southernness in other spaces essentializes and conflates southernness as “USness” which has just as many problems in theory and in practice.

Finally, while scholars’ debate whether or not to abandon demarcating the physical south from other parts of the United States, the lives of people of color and women and the uniqueness of this region is still underexplored. Nationalizing and globalizing southernness without a full understanding of all of its inhabitants continues to essentialize whiteness as the only prevailing national identity. Scholars and theoreticians in their respective fields of study must recognize that there are other voices that define southern manhood and womanhood as some scholars (inside and outside of the discipline) work diligently to offer an array of perspectives.²⁶ This work of interrogating the southern landscape as a site of a specific racialized discourse has just begun.

²⁶ Scholars who provided accounts of other voices of the south included, John Howard, *Men Like that: A Southern Queer History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; and Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to be and to do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Black “Man”ufactured Identities

“I have been in the world, but not of it. I have seen the human drama from a veiled corner, where all the outer tragedy and comedy have reproduced themselves in microcosm within.”²⁷

William Edward Burghardt DuBois prophetically used the veil as a trope of racial subjectivity, personhood, subjectivity and citizen status—a symbol of the relational disconnect blacks experienced from the rest of the colonized world. In most renditions of the veil, scholars invoke a DuBoisian duality, where racial identity is embattled and collides with the other parts of the self and which has often in literature appeared as a point of contestation and isolation. This dissertation will attempt to find solace in this veiled isolation, turning to it as a method to buffer social praxes that attempt to negate blackness, specifically black manhood, in order to create a proactive process to locate an epistemic and agentic articulation of self. After all, if blacks are figuratively negated, one’s view may appear skewed; but if the focus is inward, those who attempt to see the true essence of blackness encounter an obstruction, particularly if they are outsiders.

While DuBois’ articulation of dual consciousness has been ascribed to the African American community as a whole, his texts’ use of personal pronouns are worth noting. Gendering the work of DuBois and exploring his concept of the veil can be useful to describe the innermost workings of black manhood as desire, vulnerability, and compassion are at the forefront of his work. After all, DuBois was a black man. His elite

²⁷ DuBois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover, 1994; 1903. Print. Dover Thrift Editions. Pg. 46.

status and educational pedigree did not shield him from white hegemony. Perhaps, DuBois' over indulgence in perfecting the language of self and personhood was itself an overcompensation, a coping mechanism to manage the pain of the warring he describes within himself and other black men alike. He was not devoid of the trappings of being a black man in the US. As his history makes clear, he spent the end of his days abroad in isolation because of his intellectual and theoretical views on racism in the US.

Ralph Ellison's, infamous Battle Royale scene taken from his novel *Invisible Man* provides a template to explore the complexities of manhood and the assertion of black personhood. Ellison's account is similar to the posture adopted by the Sanitation Workers in 1968 in protesting not only for fair wages or personhood, but demanding recognition specifically of their manhood as the nation watched them battle the political engine of Memphis. Under the command of Mayor Henry Loeb, all communications between the protestors and the city were to be recorded and published for the public. The ritual of public humiliation as a form of emasculating black men was not a new concept. The ritual of publicly literally or figuratively lynching blacks was used to serve notice of the pervasiveness and permanence of white supremacy as a southern practice. This attempt to "emasculate" the men only made them stronger. It is through the use of Ellison's craft, embedded within the narrative of the strike, that one can view the Sanitation Workers as innovators and "man"ufacturers of their own destiny.

James Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," serves to contextualize Three 6 Mafia's Oscar winning song, "Hustle and Flow" as not just a work of misogyny but also a redemptive piece of art that speaks to the pain, vulnerability and predicaments of being young and black in the poorest sections of the US south. Winning the award

was not just an exercise of vanity or the recapitulation of the proverbial white endorsements of the most egregious and countercultural functionalities of blackness in the US. When viewing it from a different purview, it was a moment when another veil of black male subjectivity was revealed and the pain and suffering of black men at the cost of black women and the family can be analyzed with less judgment and more compassion and context. Seeing the plight of the black men in the urban south and the ways in which they navigate their space without the care and weight of respectability politics is redemptive to black manhood and in some ways liberating. The profane, forbidden and censored hypermasculinity is unleashed and available and open for all to see and in this sense it contests the notions of worthiness and respectability.

Black male subjectivity involved thoughts, ideas, desires and place. It is no coincidence that men such as DuBois, Ellison and Baldwin confront the south with a most fervent psycho-social, intellectual and personal epiphany of raced-gendered subjectivity. While the south has been relegated to a location of pain and embarrassment in the national narrative, it provides a clandestine and esoteric revelation of black manhood that is worth excavating. Slavery attempted to dehumanize black men, alienating them from their families and communities. Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers and Three 6 Mafia are examples of intricate ways that black men continue to struggle against dehumanization and reclaim the qualities they perceive as constitutive of manhood. The works of DuBois, Ellison and Baldwin provide a methodological framework to deconstruct the significance of these individuals and incidents.

It would be impossible to discuss the inner workings of black men and not include William Edward Burghardt DuBois. His aristocratic approach complicated blackness by

exploring the soul of African Americans. The reading of DuBois as intellectual but also as a black man in the US provides a methodological approach to understanding a different type of black manhood that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century in the midst of the images, stereotypes and scientific racist propositions about blackness. William Edward Burghardt DuBois was man first. His experiences as a young boy and a young man in the south were all influenced by the racial veil he describes in his 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Being black and male creates an impossibility of separation from one's gender and race. It is in the south that DuBois discovers what he calls a veil that divides blacks from whites literally through segregation and figuratively as possessing human attributes that frame and shape black subjectivity. It was in the heart of the south that DuBois recollects his life, his social standing and his dilemma of not only being black but also of being a man.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.²⁸

DuBois captures the soul of black men who are open and susceptible to pain, disappointment and sufferings that are often unscripted in their personhood. His writings and work were a collection of thoughts and ideas about policy mechanisms to address racism in the US.²⁹ His work has been adopted by scholars such as Baldwin, Fanon and

²⁸ DuBois, William, Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover, 1994. Pg. 2.

²⁹ Stephanie Shaw provides an in depth analysis of the relationship between DuBois work and the creation of academic disciplines, public policy and the conversation with his philosophical contemporaries in, *W.E.B. Du Bois And The Souls Of Black Folk*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

others to propose the clairvoyance of black subjectivity and in gendering their works, black male subjectivity. As Dubois explores his personhood particularly in the south, he is constantly confronted with his manhood serving as the antithesis of power and relevance.

In his collection of essays, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, DuBois depicted the negotiation of blackness and masculinities within the confines of white patriarchy. The autobiographical creative prose presented a different expression of black manhood. DuBois' subjectivity and his writing proved invaluable to analyzing the artistic production of black men. His vulnerabilities and uncertainties connected with the same type of articulation expressed by the subjects explored in this project. Where most scholars explored his intellectual accounts to construct blackness, this project is informed by DuBois, the black man in the US, subject to Jim Crow laws, racism and at times isolation. His response to these dilemmas are inconsistent with the narratives of black force and coercion as a means of liberation. In the Credo to *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, DuBois elects peace over violence, vulnerability over aloofness and sympathy over apathy.

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color, thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.³⁰

The lesson that is paramount in understanding DuBois as subject and object is that his money, influence and pedigree could not vaccinate him from the “dis”ease of white supremacy. Similar to James Weldon Johnson’s epiphany of subjectivity, DuBois has a

³⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920, pg. 1.

clarity that his destiny is tied to other African Americans. In his Introduction to *Darkwater*, Manning Marable writes that DuBois envisions “the African American as the permanent outsider in U.S. democracy, an oppressed member of the household perhaps, but never a member of the national family.”³¹ His approach to a subjectivity without deficit is what is most appealing to this project.

Fanon’s Ontology of Black Male Consciousness

DuBois’ sociological and ethnographic scholarship provides a lens to view the realities of racism and gender oppression of black men. Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* explores the psychosocial dynamics of Blacks in the West Indies and their relationship with the white male hegemonic structures and institutions in which they participate. Like DuBois (and influenced by his work), Fanon reaches the conclusion that there is a duality in black subjectivity that is linked to a moment of recognition of “otherness.” Fanon’s determination to disconnect black subjectivity from the white gaze is particularly important for this project. Fanon shifts the frame from a focus on whiteness to an examination of the humanity of black masculinity and the steps black men must take to reclaim that humanity. For Fanon, “What matters is not to know the world but to change it.”³²

Blackness in the world created by European colonialism is, according to Fanon, a form of abjection, “the black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extracted.”³³ For Fanon, to extract black men from dehumanization by the colonizer is to end the practice

³¹ Ibid. pg. v.

³² Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. , 1967, pg. 17.

³³ Ibid. pg. 10.

of colonization. Black men can reassert their humanity only through struggle against colonial oppression. Fanon makes clear that “male privilege” does not exist independent of race. The many privileges that white men have accorded to themselves through law, economics, politics, and war do not apply to the abject black whose subhuman status is fixed by the white colonizer’s gaze. Fanon’s analysis of blackness is thoroughly gendered. Unlike DuBois, he tends to situate the black woman only in relation to the white man. Although this degree of sexism is problematic, the exclusive focus on black masculinity has played a critical role in subsequent theorizations of black manhood.

In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, Darieck Scott uses the work of Fanon as a tool to address the liberation of African Americans as sexual beings. In his introduction, Scott compares Fanon’s conception of abjection to a “flinch” that occurs when one is recognized as black, something of an autonomic response to dehumanization, which affects the potential for liberation.

In this context, the abject describes a kind of lowering historical cloud, a judgement animating arguments and rhetoric in both currents in which the histories of peoples in the African diaspora- having been conquered, enslaved and then, post Emancipation, being dominated by colonial powers or by homegrown white supremacists- is a history of humiliating defeat, a useless history which must be in some way overturned or overcome. To this way of seeing, the past is an obstacle to imaging and building an empowered political position capable of effective liberation politics.³⁴

Within this frame, white supremacy and white hegemonic structures of power influence and shape racialized gender at a subliminal level. It foreground black maleness as an “in spite of” instead of “if not for” these social obstacles. For Fanon, the

³⁴ Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: New York University Press, 2010, pg. 4.

comprehension of maleness and racial subjectivity are similar to the Freudian reactionary process of seeing oneself through a gaze that constitutes one's separation from another. For Fanon, it is the white gaze that prompts the unveiling of blackness as difference. The formation of a racialized and gendered identity that distinguishes black men from white men prompts the unconscious yet all-encompassing marking of otherness embedded within the black identity. While DuBois and Fanon link black masculinity to a sense of isolation, DuBois finds hope where Fanon finds no solace. If the black man for Fanon is to ever morph into a fullness of self, there must be revolution and resistance to what he finds looking back at him in the mirror.

Fanon explains this phenomenon through his use of the term collective catharsis. In *Black Skin: White Masks*, Fanon argues that "In every society, in every collectivity exists- must exist- channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released."³⁵ Fanon's use of the term aggression is often attached to the ways in which men do gender. The master slave narrative is present for Fanon, as a Black man must work out his masculinity through understanding the necessity to repress his dehumanized state. Only then can he be free in thoughts and actions, transcending colonial discourses and white presence.

Fanon's ontology of blackness provides the language to comprehend a form of justice that arises from within the psyche, whereas DuBois seeks justice from without. According to Fanon, when the black man reasserts his humanity, he is no longer dependent on what others believe about the essence of his identity. Like the colonized

³⁵Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967, pg. 145.

who were the focus of Fanon's concern, black men in the United States have been dehumanized and disrespected. Many African American men have suggested that the only way to fortify their own sense of worth is from within. They echo Fanon's thoughts about the epistemological affirmation of self: "Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower."³⁶

They Said It, I Believe It: Oral Histories as a Methodological Tool

The theorization of black masculinity by thinkers as diverse as DuBois, Fanon, and Baldwin provides analytical tools that are helpful to the study of African American men's lives. But this theoretical framework must be supplemented by the voices of an array of black individuals who struggled daily with racism and asserted their humanity in diverse ways. African American men have been pathologized into categories so conflated with negative and derogatory stereotypes that it is imperative to turn to their own voices to counter these distortions. For this reason, my dissertation research relies upon oral histories to understand black manhood in the south, particularly the stories and lives of Tom Lee, the Sanitation Workers and Three 6 Mafia.

The use of oral histories and firsthand accounts has been contentious among historians, who note that memories are fallible and unreliable and cannot be trusted to accurately capture the past. Women's Studies and other social science disciplines, however, find them valuable in providing key lessons about underrepresented groups on

³⁶ Ibid. pg. 103.

their own terms. Much of this nation's history has been determined by elite white men, both those whose papers populate the archives and those who have written histories based on those papers. What these white men say is deemed more valuable than the experience of excluded others. Christopher Columbus discovering the Americas or “the happy slave” depicted in white oral histories and art that have been disproved and dispelled as false over and over again. Yet, Columbus Day is still a federal holiday and Texas textbooks in various public school systems refer to enslaved Africans as “immigrants,” as if blacks freely and willingly arrived in the Americas. When blacks are given the opportunity to provide their own perspective of an important part of history, they have been quickly disregarded as a compromised subject. Rather than listening to their stories, Blacks are treated as “artefacts supplying proof of the complex social situations people faced during the 1930s, when egalitarianism and diversity were the prevailing social values.”³⁷

I turn to oral histories in my dissertation research not to establish “the facts,” but to gain an understanding of how black men saw themselves and made sense of the choices available to them. By studying to their own words, it is possible to gain glimpses of the values that guided their decisions and the goals that shaped their strivings. The Federal Writer’s Project (FPA) offers such rich and detailed primary sources that members of the history profession have come to reconsider the advantages and disadvantages of oral histories.

³⁷ Lynda Hill’s, “Ex- Slave Narratives: The WPA Federal Writer’s Project Reappraised”. *Oral History*. Vol. 26.No. 1, spring 1988. Pg. 64.

But for historians, one of these projects [oral histories] actually resulted in a paradigm shift in the scholarly discourse. The WPA workers' interviews with ex-slaves made it possible to rewrite part of the history of the antebellum South from the perspective of the slave.”³⁸

The lives of people living under extraordinary circumstances is the foundation for women's and gender studies. Interpreting the lives and the meanings of politics, agency and subjectivity for individuals and communities that have been rendered invisible poses methodological challenges. But finding creative ways to meet these challenges is critical to a deeper analysis of the lives of black men from the south. My research investigates the odds that black men in the south have had to overcome to remain a “racial social species” in the spite of attempts of institutional annihilation. Not only does this project intend to provide an epistemic stage for black men in the south but also provide a script to deconstruct the dogmatism of maleness in the US and provide deeper more authentic ways to see and hear what black men have to say and how they express their subjectivity.

I turn to the oral histories of the FPA for insights into the experiences of Black masculinity in the United States. The voices of former slaves provide an alternate discourse of black subjectivity that spans enslavement, Reconstruction, and the Nadir in the post-Reconstruction south. Across all these eras, black men's lives have mattered to black men, if to no one else.

One interview that sheds particular light on the experience of freedom is that of Gip Minton, who recalls his younger years when he worked on a farm owned by whites who raised him. He never knew his parents. His mother died when he was young and his father fought and died in the Civil War. He was unsure of his status as a free man or

³⁸ Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression.” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2003, pp. 623–624.

enslaved but for him there was little difference between the two: “I come out here (Memphis) after the war. I reckon I was freed, but I was raised by white folks and I stayed right on wid em. Dat freedom ain’t never bother me .³⁹ For Minton, freedom was not a legal position of citizenship. It was a mindset. African American men have had to learn to find and seek freedom and self-determination in the midst of war, enslavement and sometimes in the solace of white landowners. “Dat freedom” Minton references, is a real yet mythical freedom that is lofty and unattainable. For Minton, freedom was a possession that could be given or taken away. Never fully relying on this semantic of liberation, black men like Minton often made the decision to physically, mentally and emotionally move, whether “dat freedom” existed or not. Freedom for some blacks was subjective and, depending on their position in society, irrelevant. For some during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, the ability to navigate the precarious southern terrains depended on mental fortitude.

Freedom as something endowed by the government post slavery was a concept that Minton never saw as necessary in order to assert his own level of liberation. “Dat freedom” when subsumed in Minton’s account of his life was benevolent, fraudulent, and irrelevant. “Dat freedom” was a conjured imaginary offered by whites as a symbol of reckoning to a group of people they stole, owned and attempted to dehumanize in every meaning of the word. “Dat freedom,” whites could choose to make available or withhold. Blacks chose to pay “Dat freedom” what African ancestors would say, “No nevamind.”

³⁹ *AJ Mitchell Interview. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5. Interviewer, Mrs. Bernice Bowden.*

Minton's entire life, he recalls, was with white people who owned and took care of him even after the Civil War. "My master and mistress names was Master Alfred Winton. They call me Gip for him. They raised me, n I come on here wide m. I don't know nothin about that freedom."⁴⁰ The reiteration in his oral history about "Dat freedom" could be interpretation as an intentional overemphasis of its importance or lack thereof in Minton's shaping of self. He ends the narrative discussing having voted, never owning anything but a horse. But in his mind, he was an independent man. "I has been allus self sportin'. Didn't pend on no livin' soul but myself." While some scholars pontificate on liberation theology and use marginalized groups as a litmus or barometer to understand liberty, Minton and men like him move forward with their lives navigating the spaces they are given. This posture disrupts the position of the passive black awaiting deliverance but instead offers a view of the active black man noting his objective and without permission gaining it.

And my father, he, in the olden days, before he owned his own land, he would sharecrop or rent. And he would pay standard rent, you know, so much per year for that land. So I never have had the experience as some of the others, you know, white was over them to tell them what to do. The only person I had to look to was my daddy, my mother and father⁴¹

In the 20th century, all African American men were not born into slavery. Leroy Boyd was born in 1925 to a father who owned land as had his grandfather according to his oral history. Yet, Boyd is a descendant of a slavery economy and the vocation and life of his parents were an example of this precarious institution. But they managed to

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Oral Interview with Leroy Boyd ID:btvct04040, interviewed by Paul Ortiz, Memphis (Tenn.), June 22, 1995, Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries

sharecrop or rent land placing them in a pseudo proprietary position that is sometimes overlooked in exploring this period. Boyd's account of his life had little discussion about white men. And when he mentions his relationship with whites it was during his childhood when his peers were teased because they had to walk so far to school. They white boys called them names, and Boyd called them names back. Unafraid of their color or the power it yielded. This story illustrates the ways black manhood was shaped and influenced without the presence of whiteness. Whatever mores or customs were a byproduct of Boyd's father's life, they were not apparent to Boyd as a young man or as an older man accounting his childhood. This type of exploration should be taken into consideration when understanding black male subjectivity in the south.

White supremacy does not operate solely in relation to cause and effect, but also by action and consequence.⁴² To study black masculinity in terms of self-assertion, determination and agency,⁴³ I focus on black maleness⁴⁴ in relation to action that is not merely a response to white supremacy. In contrast to racist depictions of black male hypersexuality, I bracket questions of sexuality or sexual identity throughout this work in an effort to produce a black manhood paradigm defined between the ears instead of between the legs. Sexuality and sexual identity is one aspect of human experience, but women's studies has demonstrated the importance of exploring women's lives beyond their sexuality. This dissertation attempts to offer the same conceptual space and freedom to the study of black men.

⁴² For more information see Messner, Michael. *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements*. Altamira Press, 1997.

⁴³ Laurie B. Green defines agency as an internal and external ability to resist in *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*.

⁴⁴ The use of the term maleness instead of manliness or manhood denotes the intentionality of gender at any age therefore it is important to not equate manhood with all things male as young boys and adolescents experience different ways in asserting their agency and subjectivity. While not explored fully in this project, it is recognized.

In contrast to whites in the south, blacks could not be as concerned about knowing “who” they were genealogically because they were often separated from their families. A good deal of scholarship trades on the assumption that black children, especially young black males, were fatherless. Historians often paint the picture of an ex-slave as a down-trodden black man with little self-guidance or ability to self-actualize. Giving too much credence to the statistical information about the dislocation of families, some black men have spread propaganda about young boys with no male modeling. Yet sustainability was a character trait for black men in the south. Self-determination and dignity were not new phenomena post slavery. Some black men were shaped and influenced by their fathers. James Morgan of Little Rock, Arkansas recall his father’s creativity and perseverance in gaining his freedom, thriving and creating his own physical space for himself and his family:

My father told me that his old master told him he was free. He stayed with his master till he retired and sold the place. He worked on shared with him. His old master sold the place and went to Monticello and died. He stayed with him about fifteen or sixteen years after he was freed, stayed on that place till the Government donated him one hundred sixty acres and charged him only a dollar and sixty cents for it. He built a house on it and cleared it up. That’s what my daddy did. Some folks don’t believe me when I tell ‘em.⁴⁵

Disbelief concerning black men as property owners is still haunts southern scholarship. While works on women’s innovations have increased, an analysis of black male innovation lags behind. The WPA oral histories are a testament to black men’s agency and resistance to oppression. For Morgan, the land and the ability to till the land gave them hope and a sense of liberation in spite of their status as enslaved or free. Their end product was a byproduct of their own innovation. Whether the land was owned,

⁴⁵ James Morgan Interview. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Tennessee Narratives, Volume 15. Interviewer, Unknown

leased or borrowed, what they manufactured translated into a production of self. His father provided a model of human capital successfully deployed to generate property meant to be preserved. In due season, Morgan's father owned the land he tilled. Because of his persistence and his capacity to see beyond the binary of bound or free, he died owning a piece of the land which he sowed.

A.J Mitchell, a garbage hauler from Arkansas, recalls his father's experiences during slavery in the south. Mitchell's father embodied his freedom regardless of consequence: "My father said he was freeborn and I've seen stripes on his back look like the veins on the back of my hand where they whipped him tryin' to make him disown his freedom." Slavery was such a cruel institution that attempted to dehumanize and undermine the human spirit and determination for black's manumission. Mitchell's father was a man born free yet slaveholders and whites were determined, as Mitchell puts it, to beat his father into a posture of submission. Yet, his spirit and determination looms throughout this narrative and Mitchell's successes after slavery are a testament to what black men experienced and overcame during one of this nation's most cruel and darkest moments.

Andy Odell from Spring Hill, Tennessee recalls his coming of age as not a number but an intuitive moment in his life. "I wuz bawn ob Spring Hill, Tennessee. I don't know in w'at y'ar but I wuz a ful' grown man w'en I waz free."⁴⁶ During his interview at 96 years old, Odell described life after liberation: "Since freedom I hab plower, hoed, cut wood, en wuk'd in the quarries pecking race. I hab voted almost eve'y

⁴⁶ Andy Odell Interview. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Tennessee Narratives, Volume 15. Interviewer, Unknown

election since freedom 'til dese last few years. I uster think 'omen (women) shouldn't vote, but I guess hit ez alr'te."

There is no evidence in this account that Odell was uninterested in exercising his right to vote or work for what he possessed. While his memory is most likely compromised because of his age, his understanding of who he is and his accomplishments are clear. Not only did he work but he also exercised his constitutional rights. Men of the south were change agents. Not all ran for office or served the community selflessly. Some just took advantage of the opportunities available, which is as just as valuable a story.

This exploration into vulnerability and agency of black men does not negate the fact that black men possessed some male privileges. They too circulated the jargon of male superiority. Odell recalls his relationship with his mother and her role as a field hand like his father. They were standing side by side working, and yet he did not think that women should vote. Yet he exercised his right to vote for years after liberation. His alignment with patriarchal beliefs and practices as an enslaved person contributed to the disenfranchisement of black women. It is not until he is older and takes stock of his life that he realizes that it is "alright" for women to vote.

Male privilege is a social reality for black men but it is not a simple ascertaining of a male power base. Black race and low income have been markers of racial subordination, which have rendered many powerless. The gender oppression that women of color feel from men of color stems from men's own inability to obtain the power which they believe their male status affords them.⁴⁷ The anxieties about the inferiority of

⁴⁷ Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* written in 1970 illustrates the way black emasculation has the propensity to destroy families and black women. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, 1980 also serves as an example. The novel is set in the south and depicts the lives of black men and women and the causes and effects of black male cruelty as a result of the insubordination of black men to white

women or their misogynistic appropriation of women may be a symptom of their own emasculation by the racial oppression they face. It is not an operation of power but a projection of their own victimhood. This observation is not to excuse what transpires but to contextualize and nuance the way power and privilege operate among subaltern men.

Black manhood is not monolithic. Yet, the stereotypes of black men often relegate black men to a position of weakness, incapable of a thoughtful long-term analysis of the state of the black community. Several of the men who provided WPA interviews defy such stereotypes. Indeed some declare that they were satisfied with their conditions and the way they were treated. Rejecting any notion of victimhood, they construct themselves as men who understood the world and the racial hierarchies that structured it. Some of the interviewees manifest distrust and disappointment in other black men, particularly those of a younger generation. For many of the older black men, young black men were not taking advantage of their freedom or were attempting to place themselves on equal footing with whites. AJ Mitchell from Pine Bluff, Arkansas believed that a black man's status should be beneath that of white men; "Dis young peeples 'cordin' ter de Bible ez on de broad road ter ruin. Dey think dey ez as good as de white poople but dey ez classed as niggahs in mah eye." Another interviewee stated that he felt a decline in black respectability due to the guises of the young. "The young people is goin' too fast. The people is growin' weaker and wiser. You take my folks- goin' to

supremacist systems. That is why redemption is a theme in both of these texts. While fictitious works, history serves as an accurate backdrop for the conditions of blacks in the US and for Walker the US south.

school but not don' anything. I don't think there's much good. I was brought up with what they called fireside teachin.'" ⁴⁸

Towards a Black Masculinist Discourse

In his ethnography of masculinity in Mexico, Matthew Gutmann defines masculinity as "Anything that men think and do" (year? 386). Although Gutmann's definition is impressively broad, it does not draw attention to the social restrictions and expectations that circumscribe what it means to be a man in the United States. Gender roles and gender performance are delimited by public expectations and social norms, as well as local, state, and national laws that curb social identities most notably on the basis of race and class. Those who defy traditionally prescribed notions of masculinity may not be legible to those around them. Vulnerability and sensitivity are not easily ascribed to men, particularly to black men. But scholars must reframe and broaden conceptions of masculinity to advance an account that is sophisticated and nuanced and captures the full expanse of black men's *thinking and action*.

Black masculinist theory provides a lens to examine black men in the US on their own terms and through their own experiences from an anti- deficit locus.⁴⁹ Black Masculinist theory attempts to differentiate "black masculinity" as the communal performative interpretation of black manhood from "black masculinity" as an individual expression not always contingent on cultural and social apparatuses by which black maleness is often framed and constructed. Whites specifically white men have had the privilege of their manhood being separate from their personhood, which individualizes

⁴⁸ AJ Mitchell Interview. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Tennessee Narratives, Volume 15. Interviewer, Unknown

⁴⁹ Shaun Harper, "An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM". *New Directions for Institutional Research*. Winter 2010, Vol. 2010 Issue 148, p63-74. 12p. 5

their experiences and absolves them from being the example of “all white men.” Black masculinist theory and discourse attempt to do the same for black men.

Black masculinist theory contests the monolithic narrative of black men and frames individual and collective experiences as incidents and moments that offer insight into understanding how gender and race are culturally mediated and situated.⁵⁰ Black male thought, experiences and their stories centralizes Black Masculinist Thought which marginalized and positions whiteness along the margins. Research projects that analyze black manhood often rests within intellectual crossfires between black and white feminists’ critiques of black male subjugation of and misogyny towards women. The very presence of black males’ bodies in proximity to white bodies (intellectually or literally) scripts them as culprits and criminals capable of rape and the embodiment of criminality. Discourse and social assumptions about black men particularly when juxtaposing southern black manhood to white manhood appears as a projection of anxieties that stem from a fear that a self-actualized black man in the south (or anywhere else in the US) threatens the balance of a stolen and self-entitled sense of power. More apparent is the historical fear in the south by white elite men that poor whites will see themselves as similar to black men, disenfranchised and also an outsider to the acquisition white privilege and power.⁵¹

This new approach to constructing black maleness broadens the possibilities of viewing black men as tender, conscious, and forward thinking unsettling the political and

⁵⁰ Donna Haraway posits knowledge is situational and culturally mediated in, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. Cornell University Press, 1988.

⁵¹ There are moments in history when working black men and white men attempted to protest together over exploited wage labor and discrimination which prompted the permitting of poor white men and planters into a metaphoric or social positioning equating and articulating their whiteness as superior to blacks.

philosophical jargon constructed by white racist and well intentioned neo- liberal discourse. Additionally, the continual positioning of black men as anti- feminine and anti- white erases their humanity and soul as they are rarely seen as fluid in their identity, victims, subalterns or true postcolonial subjects. It is in spaces of vulnerability that one can locate black men's ingenuity and innovation literally and figuratively. Black masculinist discourse provides that space for dialogue.

Traditional black manhood scholarship is fixated on the narrative of black men as hyper-masculine, violent, and well endowed, a myth passed down by an array of whites in the region included but not limited to slaveholders, planters, and poor whites. The south as Dixie, is a feminized territory needing protection and the maintenance of a racialized purity which makes white women susceptible and potential sexual victims to licentious black men. The need to perpetuate this stereotype must be disrupted within the very spaces in which it was erected. Because traditional southern scholarship has wantonly depicted black men in this negative light, new scholarship about the south must correct and reform those notions by developing a powerful counter narrative.

Black maleness has been rooted in the binary of liberation and bondage with semblances of bondage albeit physically, mentally, emotionally or socially situated in their everyday lives. While notions of desire and freedom have often been relegated to white bodies⁵² and black women⁵³, little research shapes or frames black manhood as a psycho- social manifestation as DuBois eloquently interjects where the soul and the

⁵² Teresa De Lauretis , *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction.* , 1987, and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

⁵³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990, and bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center.* Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984.

social collide.⁵⁴ By investigating the lives of men who changed their own lives and the lives of others on a local level, I will show how black men asserted their manhood not in spite of but because of their own drive to excel and achieve for themselves and their families.

Contemporary Readings of Race and Gender

Contemporary black feminist scholarship, black masculinity studies and critical race theory are key to interpreting and deconstructing the attempts by postracial scholars to bury racism as a prevailing threat to social justice in the US while it is yet still alive. Kimberle Crenshaw confronted the defects of single-axis accounts of subordination by challenging scholars to consider the mutual constitution of race and gender in black women's account of violence. For Crenshaw, "Feminists efforts to politicize the experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains."⁵⁵ The same intersectional analysis is critical when considering the conflation of black maleness and race. While black feminist and womanist scholarship has blazed the trail in the specificities of intersectionality and standpoint theories, its focus is more on providing room to address black women's particular dilemmas with race and gender. These perspectives have provided a context for analyzing black males as a privileged gender. As racialized and gendered subjects, however, black men are also violated in gender-specific ways--often associated with expectations of violence.

Combining an intersectional analysis with key insights drawn from the scholarship of

⁵⁴ William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, A.C. McClug and Company, 1903. I use the original publication date as a symbol of DuBois' contribution to early US sociological, race theory and philosophy.

⁵⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color ". *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6. . pg. 1242. Jul., 1991

Fanon and DuBois, I develop a framework to rewrite black maleness attuned to sensitivities, emotion, vulnerabilities, self-love and a sense of discovery that has often been missing in scholarship on black male subjectivity.

African American scholarship that focuses purely on the African American experience void of white intellectual validation is critical to this project. Memphis native, sociologist and cultural archivist Zandria Robinson explored southern blackness in *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-soul South*. She analyzed blackness not only as part of the region's identity, but as paramount, providing the lens to explore black art and the articulation of distinct and separate notions of worthiness. She interviews state workers in Memphis and gains insight into the everyday negotiations of race and class in the mid-south. For Robinson, "Nowhere are the debates over place the place of the South in black identity are more prevalent than in hip hop culture."⁵⁶ Robinson traces the everyday as an epistemological staging of the black experiences as rich, authentic and illuminating whereas early intellectual scholars and canons have often demarcated these practices, customs and culture of southern black life as "common":

Public discomfort with images and representations seen as detrimental to the race is rooted firmly in class- based respectability politics that date back to the late nineteenth century. Respectability politics were undergirded by the notion that if black people only demonstrated their morality, thrift and humanity to whites, than whites would not only stop their campaign of violence against but would also recognize their shared humanity and eventually accept them as equals.⁵⁷

Her play on words and worthiness provide a refreshing insight into the coalescing of class and culture. For Robinson white permissibility in making room for a display of

⁵⁶ Zandria F. Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*. , 2014, pg. 162.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 160.

an authentic black cultural moment or another way to put it, “being unconsciously and “uncensoredly” black” even among one’s members is not necessary. In interviewing respondents and their relationship to nuanced forms of white racism in the south, she finds that blacks in the south must live their lives reflective of their own values and the affirmation of white acceptance is not realistic nor necessary: “Not stud’n’ ‘em White folks”, at the very least, means supplanting emotional reactions to everyday racialized injustice, whether a slight in service during a restaurant visit or a blatant discriminatory employment outcome, with indifference.”⁵⁸ Robinson’s affinity for Memphis, her regional standpoint, epistemic and ontological and personal investment with this subject matter provides the intellectual and practical segue of negotiating black spaces of resistance scripting and “unscripting” of whites with the same level of intentional invisibility and irrelevance that has often been manufactured in white cultural studies. While it is true that two wrongs do not justify nor rectify a dilemma, it provided an image that can catapult white erasure as an intellectual possibility if the disrespect and persistence of othering continues in the social sciences and humanities. Using contemporary scholars specifically in grounding the 2006 moment in hip hop history provides a foundation to connect and streamline black forms of resistance with academic credentialing.

Organization of Chapters

The next three chapters analyze white media accounts of Tom Lee’s heroism, the Sanitation Workers strike and the success of Three 6 Mafia’s music in *Hustle and Flow* to illuminate textual and visual tropes that continue to denigrate black men. Reading

⁵⁸ Ibid. pg. 92.

against the grain, I contrast limitations of the politics of respectability as an analytical frame with self-representations of black men that capture the dignity and worthiness of Tom Lee (chapter 2), the Memphis Sanitation Workers (chapter 3) and the music of Three 6 Mafia that gained national recognition in conjunction with the film, *Hustle and Flow* (chapter 4). The final chapter weaves together themes developed in the previous chapters in an attempt to offer a nuanced approach of southern black male subjectivity. Supplementing existing scholarship on the south, this chapter provides an intersectional analysis of region, race and gender in order to develop a vernacular account of black masculinity.

Chapter 2

The Useful Negro: Re-Constructing an Obstructed Version of Black Masculinity—

Tom Lee, 1925- 1954

“God ruled as always and in his perfect wisdom and arranged that the material promises of the twentieth century should be effected through one’s race, nation, and section.”⁵⁹

Perhaps it was modesty or the unspoken cultural expectations for Negroes to serve and protect whites in the south that caused black dockhand Tom Lee to continue his day as if nothing relevant or life changing happened on May 8, 1925. He was commissioned by his employer, C. Hunter to take a company official down to Helena, Arkansas in a small motor boat, the Zev. Lee passed a steamboat, the M.E. Norman, about fifteen miles south of Memphis on his way back from dropping off his transport.⁶⁰ According to Lee, when he glanced back at the steam liner, it appeared distressed, leaning to one side. It was his second glance at the ship that prompted him to turn around and offer assistance. The Mid-South’s American Society for Civil Engineers was hosting a conference in Memphis, and participants on board were spending their day sightseeing the Bluff City. According to Lee, the boat was sinking. Immediately the roustabout began to use Zev and debris from the Norman to retrieve passengers and sailed them ashore. In all, Lee saved an estimated thirty lives.⁶¹

After Lee did as much as he could, he left the scene and continued with his day. Not until Lee’s conversation with white “friends” (as history reports), did Lee disclose

⁵⁹ William D. Miller, *Memphis: During the Progressive Era 1900- 1917*. The Memphis State University Press. Memphis, 1957, pg. 4

⁶⁰ Incident account recorded in the *Commercial Appeal*. 9. May. 1925, pp. 1 and 3.

⁶¹ The actual number of passengers is unclear as various papers, *New York Times*, *Memphis Scimitar*, and the *Commercial Appeal* that reported on May 9, 1925 reported different numbers.

what happened earlier that day and caught an inkling of the impact of his actions.⁶² After consulting with his “peers,”⁶³ Lee decided to contact the Mayor’s office and was immediately invited to City Hall to “provide his side of the story.” Impressed with Lee’s heroism, Mayor Rowlett Paine recognized Lee as a local hero and contacted the White House recommending to President Calvin Coolidge that Lee receive a medal of honor. Many local and some national media outlets spotlighted the story. The thirty-nine year-old dockhand from Hopefield, Arkansas became an overnight celebrity.

From the *New York Times* to the *Baltimore Afro American Newspaper*, white and black media outlets were fixated with this “Negro, black and kinky haired.”⁶⁴ Newspapers recounted the story of the lives he saved and the disposition with which Lee performed the feat of salvation. After several days of covering the story, the focus shifted from Lee to the details about the wreckage, the lives lost, and investigated responsible parties for the loss of more than twenty lives that day. Although Lee was no longer the center of the coverage, citizens of Memphis and across the country continued to reach out to Lee and offered him tokens of their appreciation. Despite the racial climate in the Jim-Crow south, whites set aside their racist beliefs, acknowledged their debt to Lee and began to make financial provisions for Lee and his family. Knowing the seasonal nature of dock work, Mayor Paine offered Lee a “prestigious job” in the department of Public Works as a garbageman making twenty cents an hour, entitled to a

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Emphasis my own. No information is available about the white “friends” Lee consulted.

⁶⁴ Unknown, “Saving 30 Lives Doesn’t Excite: Tom Lee, Negro Hero of Norman Tragedy Off Coahoma,” *The News Scimitar*, May 2, 1925, pg. 1.

city pension upon retirement. This opportunity provided Lee with a level of economic stability. He no longer had to canvass the land or sea for gainful employment.

At a meeting with a reporter from a local newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*, Lee was asked what he most wanted and his response was, “I guess I needs a home wuss’n than anything else.”⁶⁵ Lee was granted his wish and with the collection of four thousand dollars, from private donors, the newspaper and the Memphis Corps of Engineers, he purchased a home (also furnished by his benefactors) in Memphis at 923 Mansfield Street in October, 1925.⁶⁶ The Memphis Corps of Engineers continued to give him money for several Christmases to show their appreciation of his heroic work. At the age of 62, Lee retired from the Memphis Department of Public Works, making seventy dollars a month. In 1950, Lee was diagnosed with cancer and died in his home on April 1, 1952.

A former Mayor Edward Hull Crump (E.H. Crump or Crump), a stark segregationist and anti-unionist, organized a campaign to have a monument erected in Lee’s honor. “In 1954, Astor Park, between the Mississippi River and Riverside Drive, near the Monroe Avenue landing, was renamed Tom Lee Park, and an obelisk monument that tells his story was erected there.”⁶⁷ Tom Lee’s life—from the moment he entered the Mississippi River on May 8, 1925 until his death at the age of 64 changed. Yet, despite all the financial support, recognition, and accolades for his deed, Lee died a black man in the Jim Crow south. He was not exempt from forced segregation, or the need to navigate prevailing political and cultural practices that precluded blacks from full participation in Memphis life. The state of Tennessee’s Jim Crow laws were on record as early as the mid

⁶⁵ The Memphis and Shelby County Room collection on Tom Lee holds this article but there is no date or name of paper provided. The title of the article reads, “Ball Started Rolling to Buy Tom Lee a Home.”

⁶⁶ <http://tomleeamemphishero.webs.com/history.htm>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

1800's, which mandated segregation in education, streetcars and trains, and banned miscegenation.⁶⁸ It was not until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that the south was forced to consider the unconstitutionality of "separate but equal." Lee's daily negotiations of space, time and politics relegated him to an underclass, underserved, under-supported and overworked daily existence. The recognition of his heroism made whites feel more positively toward this one particular black man, but Lee's heroism did not generate any changes in policies, economic gains, or more social interaction between members of the white and black communities, in spite of his benevolence.

In addition, the mention of Lee's race in press accounts insinuated white astonishment at this black man's compassion. The incident did not inspire any investigations of or commentaries on the quality of life for blacks in the south. The specificity of Lee as a symbol of heroism added nothing to what whites in the south (or across the nation) believed about blacks or offered any reprieve from the dire plight of the majority of blacks. Any strides made during this period were related to civil rights mobilization and had no direct correlation to this particular moment of valor.

The Tom Lee monument was erected in Memphis in 1954. Under the obelisk in Lee's honor, the following words were inscribed in bold print, "Tom Lee Memorial: A Very Worthy Negro." Within the white imaginary, Lee's heroic action was the exception to a type of masculinity, blackness, and class behavior. By all accounts, he was not the rule. In this chapter, I examine the life of Tom Lee to gain insights into both black masculinity and white distortions of that masculinity before the Civil Rights era.

⁶⁸ Tennessee Laws. <http://www.blackpast.org/primary/jim-crow-laws-tennessee-1866-1955>. Tennessee Jim Crow laws can also be found in the National Civil Rights Museum exhibit, "The Rise of Jim Crow."

Scholarship on black male history in the US south offered similar narratives about public figures, leadership, political engagement or economic challenges. Although scholarship on black women in the twentieth century addressed individual agency, labor, and political engagement, there was little information on “everyday” black men with extraordinary spirits, who—despite racial and gendered attacks on their personhood— maintained integrity, compassion and munificence for others.

Segregation as a structure and institution appeared to operate within the binary of black and white, barrenness and abundance, insider and outsider; yet that was a simplistic view of the south. In examining the relationships among black and white individuals and communities, class and gender complicates the Jim Crow narrative. When one thinks of the Mississippi River images of Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer, and the song “Old Man River,” belted by Paul Robeson during his performance in “Showboat,” one would not immediately imagine black men working in warehouses or sailing ships along the Mississippi River. Memphis was anything but a typical southern city: its location and industries made it far less picturesque. Yet the very complexity of Memphis as an industrial center and transportation hub were central to understanding how a working-class black man in the mid-south could earn the respect of an entire city, gain recognition in the *New York Times*, receive an invitation to the White House, and a posthumous endowment of, “A Very Worthy Negro.”

Africana and Gender Studies provided an intellectual space to examine notions of black manhood, contesting the stereotype of black men as sexual predators, unintelligent and unskilled brutes, offering a different rendering of southern black men as compassionate and rooted in the humanity of a self-effacing hero and a civil servant. Tom

Lee's actions serve as a conduit to explore a specific southern black masculine iconography manufactured by the media (black and white), as well as white political leaders and businessmen. Staged in the local media, specifically, Tom Lee offered a trope for a type of black masculinity that differed from the construction of black men as non-agentic, backward thinking, and void of positive human qualities such as compassion, empathy, salvation and redemption--traits which have historically been assigned to white men and white women, and recently inserted in women of color narratives.⁶⁹ Yet discourses about Lee's heroism also reveal a great deal about the complex ways that white elites used black men to shore up the white power structure. I will suggest that Lee's manhood was celebrated by white Memphis conglomerates as a means to display urban progressivism and to differentiate their own gendered identity and class distinctions from their contemporaries in other southern cities.

This chapter repositions Lee from the category, "exceptional Negro" and situates him among other men in his community as the rule and not the exception. I deconstruct the propaganda of white paternalism, casting it as a backdrop instead of the central theme of Lee's moment in the media. I use various public discourses about Lee to "re-member" Lee as agentic, a person with his own agenda for social and economic gain, while also explicating his "utility" for various white politicians in Memphis. In my re-reading of the case, Lee is transformed from a happenstance participant in a cataclysmic event to a

⁶⁹ For more information see, Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 93, no. 3, 2003, pp. 657–686. For Hoelscher, whiteness created and contrasted customs, practices and images of whiteness that countered the negative and stereotypical images of African Americans in an attempt to create a false white superiority.

salvific black man, a compassionate personification of integrity.⁷⁰ Lee's actions call into question the value ledger whites use to isolate incidents of black heroism by declaring them to be exceptional behavior, which marks one as "a very worthy negro."⁷¹ Lee's self-understanding existed before *The Scimitar* or the *Commercial Appeal* began their press coverage and before Mayor Paine or E.H. Crump ever mentioned his name. To explore Lee as a member of the black Memphis community, I first must examine the complexity of Memphis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Memphis and the "Progressive" Politics of Race

Prior to the 20th century, blacks in the mid-south took advantage of the Reconstruction period and voted, purchased property and created communities. This was halted by the rise of Jim Crow. In "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," Steven Hoelscher examines everyday practices that altered racial and gender performances in the south:

More than just a reaction to a turbulent world where Civil War defeat destabilized categories of power and authority, white cultural memory there became an active ingredient in defining life in the New South. The culture of segregation that mobilized such memories, and the forgetting that inevitably accompanied them, relied on performance, ritualized choreographies of race and place, and gender and class, in which participants knew their roles and acted them out for each other and visitors.⁷²

Memphis' geographic location made the city a thoroughfare since slavery for the transport products, goods and services. Black bodies as commodities were just as important to building the new and improved Memphis as it was in prewar years. With the

⁷⁰ By salvific I am alluding to Ernest Gibson's definition of salvific manhood as the state of male existence predicated on wholeness, intimacy and oneness with self and others. For more see his manuscript entitled, *Salvific Manhood: James Baldwin's Novelization of Male Intimacy*.

⁷¹ The inscription on the obelisk honoring Tom Lee.

⁷² Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93.3 (2003): 657–686.

rise of industrialism, the rest of the Tri-State area suffered after Reconstruction.

Agriculture was still a prevalent market, but it did not yield the same amount of revenue as in ages past. Memphis was determined to reinvent itself after the Yellow Fever epidemic in 1878- 1879, turning to manufacturing and transportation and becoming one of the largest manufacturing districts in the south. Manufacturing warehouses were erected and the cotton industry boomed as the Mississippi River served as the conduit to carry this lucrative crop to the rest of the country and in some instances the world.⁷³

Memphis became a migration site because there was a plethora of low skilled low wage jobs that required little training but heavy work. With a population depleted by the yellow fever epidemic, those who survived welcomed the mass migration of poor whites and blacks from across the region after the Civil War, whose desperate straits left them no choice but to accept the abysmal wages offered.⁷⁴

The dawning of the twentieth century provided white elites an opportunity to rebrand and market the south as a place that had moved from the darker ages of violence and oppression towards blacks, while preserving the white supremacist narrative that established their dominion over this particular region of the United States. The opening quotation in this chapter captures the persistence of a specific “Lost Rhetoric” ideology that marked a divinely ordained racial order in which white civil war veterans were heroes, white women were the quintessential symbol of femininity, and blacks were supplements to a story defined by white racist ideologies. African Americans were

⁷³ See Sven Beckart’s, *Empire of Cotton*. Knopf Books, 2014.

⁷⁴ See Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

props, inserted when necessary into southern history for aesthetic, political or socio-economic gain.

White business elites and political leaders in Memphis took opportunities to promote their urban progressive⁷⁵ agenda each time the rest of the south or the nation was willing to listen. Reinventing Memphis was not only an exercise in introducing the south to a different model of southern living. It also served to introduce a new type of white man--one who was more paternalistic, benevolent and advanced in understanding the benefits of viewing blacks as consumers and subordinate partners in economic development. This separate elite of White Memphians generated a more nuanced and contemporary “southern man.” White men had to shift their engagement with blackness which in turn shifted their own subjectivity. This was the agenda of new southern white elitism. White elites buffered themselves from working poor whites and blacks by handpicking a selection of black leaders who were delegated certain responsibilities in the black community and on city commissions. Whites were aware that cooperation among black and white leaders was critical to the implementation of a new system of governance. Historians documented that Memphis gave its black citizens some level agency, tempered by handpicked black men and women whose role was to control the black working class within the city. This cooptation of black leaders generated an aura of progress without mass participation in the political process.

⁷⁵ Urban Progressivism is a term used in David Miller’s *Memphis: During the Progressive Era 1910- 1917* to define the ways in which white Memphis businessmen and government officials with the aid of selected black leaders would address the booming of manufacturing warehouses and other large businesses ushered Memphis into an era where race would play secondary to the goal of economic prosperity by allowing whites and blacks to work together.

Memphis became “the second largest urban center in the southeast.”⁷⁶ But it was not the only site in the country that welcomed blacks for low-waged employment. At the same time, Atlanta, New Orleans and Chicago were also hotbeds for newly free blacks in search of opportunity. This urged white elites to begin considering ways to keep black labor in the market without compromising the racial hierarchy. In the *Commercial Appeal* on March 26, 1919, a local businessman, J.T. Morgan was quoted saying that “the business men of Memphis should help make Memphis the best town in this country for our negro population, and make it so much better for them to live in that they will not want to migrate to better places.”⁷⁷ Morgan’s use of the possessive symbolized the parent-child relationship whites had with blacks. Although blacks were free to move and relocate, city leaders, like parents, sought ways to persuade them to remain in the city. Although the careful selection of black leaders for roles in the city was a symbolic gesture in many ways, it was substantial enough for blacks to call Memphis “home.”

Demographics also contributed to the “progressive” approach to race relations in Memphis. By the end of the Civil War, Memphis had become a largely African American city.⁷⁸ With newly established rights, and some economic and political options, blacks were a population that could not be ignored. The white elite began to convene to discuss an infrastructure that could support the ideologies of separateness while simultaneously making Memphis livable for its black working class population. Since Reconstruction, black communities in the city embraced an array of different political and racial

⁷⁶ Blaine A. Brownell, “The Commercial-civic Elite and City Planning in Atlanta, Memphis, and New Orleans in the 1920s,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41.3 (1975): 339–368.

⁷⁷ David Tucker, “Black Pride and Negro Business in the 1920’s: George Washington Lee of Memphis,” *The Business History Review*, Vol. 43, No. 4. Winter, 1969, pp. 435-451.

⁷⁸ Wanda Rushing attributes the large influx of blacks due to the end of the Civil War and the exodus of elite whites during the city’s Yellow Fever epidemic. See *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization and the American South*, pg. 14.

ideologies. Finding the right compliant blacks to adhere to their agenda of “separate and sub equal” would not be an easy task: “At least three African-American communities existed in Memphis between 1890 and 1920. Each represented the activities and ideologies of a particular African-American group. First, there were those who composed the talented tenth.”⁷⁹ Some among this group of elite blacks under the leadership of educator Julia Hooks assumed the responsibility of representing the masses of Memphians as the city reconstructed itself.

Although most leaders of the Memphis elite were white, they sought to convene an ecumenical racial group of individuals to begin the restructuring of the city through the creation of the Memphis City Planning Commission. One of the main goals of this commission was to construct the residential and business districts. While black neighborhoods had always been a part of the city’s landscape, blacks were given areas of the city that were less desirable:

Spatial stability in the South also meant racial segregation. Like most American cities southern urban areas reflected informal patterns of spatial separation along racial lines. Randolph observed that most black neighborhoods in Memphis were found in the lower ground bordering on the drainage courses. The rule is that the colored population is found exclusively in the cheaper, less desirable sections of the city. Thus, we have a sort of natural zoning of the races. However, these informal boundaries had a tendency to float with the tides of urban growth and change.⁸⁰

Selected blacks were often hired as surrogates to market goods and services within their communities. This was profitable for those black men and women with talent and drive. It also offered a different socio-economic frame for a kind of “useful Negro,” capitalizing on a respectable cohort of black manhood, who were championed by white southern

⁷⁹ Kenneth Goings and Gerald L. Smith, “Duty of the Hour: African American Communities in Memphis, Tennessee 1862- 1923, *Historical Quarterly*, Vol 55, No. 2. Summer 1996, pp. 130-143.

⁸⁰ Brownell A. Blaine, “The Commercial-Civic Elite and City Planning in Atlanta, Memphis, and New Orleans in the 1920s, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Aug., 1975), pp. 339-368.

leaders to afford blacks some sense of change, while preserving black subservience to whites in every way. Men like Tom Lee existed in Memphis and across the south, but their usefulness lay in their only labor. Because he was not of a certain pedigree, he was invisible to the social engineers as they pursued their “tokenist” agenda. He remained a part of the invisible black populous without whose physical labor, elite whites could not restructure or renovate the city.

Within the historical context of Memphis during the early twentieth century, black men had to navigate a class-structured racial terrain and project a self-imposed mode of emphasized or understated masculinity depending on their individual circumstances. Tom Lee was not an enigma or an atypical man of his time. He, like other black men, was daily trusted and relied upon to practice a solid code of ethics and produce high-quality goods and services while earning low to minimal wages. Few documents provide insight into Tom Lee, the man. Municipal records were sparse, and it was not the practice of the time to keep detailed records of one’s life. Most people just lived life. Further, little information is provided in archives about Tom Lee because his significance to whites in Memphis did not rest in his humanity but in his utility. But it is Lee’s usage by whites that reveal important keys to understanding his acts, character and basic values.

E.H. Crump and the New Racial Order in Memphis

Edward Hull Crump appears on the political stage in Memphis during this renaissance, indeed his business savvy and political leadership played key roles in the city’s resurgence. His interest in black leadership had a distinct preference for black men. To sell Memphis as a progressive city, Crump and other white leaders’ first solidified economic, political and social structures that complemented their crusade. Crump’s

racial politics and practices set the parameters that Tom Lee had to navigate over the course of his life. Crump's leadership helped define "progressive" white uses of blackness to serve the interests of the white community. Crump's thirty year tenure as a key leader in Memphis shifted the paradigm of a particular white masculinity rooted in consumerism, economic convenience, and the participation of all citizens—white and black in the political process. This staging of progressive white masculinity blurred moral and ethical issues regarding race. By no stretch of the imagination did Crump believe that blacks were equal to whites. His policies and practices constructed layered racial castes. Yet, when given the opportunity, particularly during his years in political office, he included blacks as a part of his constituency either through black surrogacy or direct contact. Crump was a sound businessman and understood that moving Memphis into a different category of southern white respectability required coopting black labor, voting support, and consumerism to frame a new southern urban capitalism.

Crump was recognized for running the most efficient "political machine" in the history of Memphis, and it was Crump, who at the end of Lee's life recognized him as a "worthy negro."⁸¹ From 1910 until his death in 1957, Crump ensured that he would leave a legacy that distinguished him from other white politicians by gaining the respect of many black leaders. Crump crafted Memphis politics, practices and customs that created the macroclimate of race in Memphis, which positions the figure of Tom Lee and other black men like Lee as archetypes of a black masculinity constructed through white paternalism.

⁸¹ For more information of the political power and influence of Crump see, Miller's *Memphis: During the Progressive Era*, Wayne Dowdy's *Mayor Crump Don't like It: the Machine Politics in Memphis*. University of Mississippi Press, 2006.

Crump's campaign and political platform were successful because he was less interested in alienating blacks from the social fabric of the city and more interested in using them and poor whites to secure some of the lowest wages in the south in order to attract northern businesses. This new system provided "a means of fostering its Calvinistic ideals of bourgeois respectability."⁸² As the professional class gained momentum from industrialization, Crump sought to distinguish a particular type of white masculinity that was attached to old south dictates from a more advanced white masculinity that believed in divinely dividing and conquering, acquiring power and obedience from the masses, black and white alike. Crump played a key role in changing the city's charter, which created a series of commissions, siloes in city government that made political elections less central, and placed more emphasis on "relationship building." Thus securing his position as leader and voice of all the people of Memphis:

It was his ability-- even genius-- that was responsible for much that was to be accomplished for Memphis in realizing some of the objectives of the progressive movement. It came about, however, by a tortuous route with the aid of some political chicanery that was hardly progressive. The commission plan, accounted one of the most important municipal reforms of the progressive movement, was intended to imitate in efficiency the methods of the modern corporation.⁸³

By allowing various interests within the city government to create their own level of autonomy within these commissions, powerful individuals has disproportionate influence upon decision making, granting certain rights and "privileges" to whomever they deemed worthy. By including selected black leaders on the commissions, the system gave the appearance that blacks held power and were able to make change within their communities. For example, the *Commercial* wrote an article on blacks in Memphis

⁸² Miller pg. 148

⁸³ Miller pg. 149.

desiring, not demanding space for a park: “The decent Negroes of Memphis want a park. By a common consent they have withdrawn from the public parks now used by the white people. . . We believe it would be a good thing for Memphis and a good think for the Negroes.”⁸⁴

The use of the term “decent” implied a certain respectability politics that deemed the demands of some blacks in Memphis legitimate and valuable to the progressive agenda. That separate parks for blacks and normalized white-only “public parks” provides an example of the ways in which progressivism was rooted in white supremacy and not in racial inclusivity.

Crump spearheaded the campaign to build a park for blacks in Memphis. Crump and his commission went so far as to locate fifty acres of land on a street called Macon Road. When white elite businessman and Park Commission member heard of the possible creation of this park on Macon, he rushed back from his trip on a yacht, to encourage Crump against the plans, noting that he “was ready at any time to appear before the board of city commissioners in opposition to the plan.”⁸⁵ In a letter to another business leader, Mr. W. H. Allen, Crump further indicates his ambivalence about building a park, noting that white’s angst regarding location would be taken into consideration: “I desire to say that I am in favor of a Negro park if a suitable location can be had. Otherwise, I am opposed to it and you can be assured that the Commissioners of the city will give the Negro park question every consideration before it is finally acted.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Unknown. *Commercial Appeal*. 20. April 1910.

⁸⁵ Miller pg. 85

⁸⁶ E.H. Crump Collection. Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center. Series I. “Mayoral Correspondences 1910- 1916. Box 1. Folder- A- City Business 1911.

Crump flip-flopped his entire career when it came to endorsing black progress and services in the city. Although some black leaders supported Crump and the changes he made in Memphis, it was clear that few could trust that what he did was for the betterment of the black community. It was clear that his investments in blacks' gaining any level of racial equity was first gauged by its utility to the interests of whites.

The kind of respectability politics that Crump prescribed used blacks; but at times the relationship had some level of reciprocity. Black leaders were aware that the "utility" of the black community rested on political capital. Famous musician William Christopher Handy (W.C. Handy) was used by the Crump campaign team to perform on Beale Street during election season. As Handy recollects, "In Memphis as in Clarksdale it was known to politicians that the best notes made the most votes, and there came a time when we were called upon to do our bit for the good of the government."⁸⁷ Handy was clear that his relationship with Crump was mutually beneficial, even as it advanced Crump's political career. Handy had no delusions about Crump's racial politics as his song entitled "E.H. Crump Blues" demonstrates

Mr. Crump won't allow no easy riders here,
Mr. Crump won't allow no easy riders here
I don't care what Mr. Crump don't allow.
I'm gonna barrelhouse anyhow.
Mr. Crump can go and catch hisself some air.⁸⁸

Like many other blacks, Handy was not fooled by Crump's posture; he saw through a political agenda that claimed it would provide equity for blacks, understanding that inclusion was not the same thing as equity. Handy's song highlights that Crump's

⁸⁷ Johnson, Mark. A. "The Best Notes Made the Most Votes: W.C. Handy, E.H. Crump, and the Black Music as Politics". *Southern Culture*. Vol. 20. No. 2. Summer 2014

⁸⁸ "The Political Machine of Mr. Crump of Memphis, Tennessee. <http://www.applet-magic.com/crump.htm>

support for a neighborhood park for blacks depended upon the condition that blacks would not be allowed to ride the trains through the neighboring white community. Crump's conceptualization of the "usefulness" of blacks for his various economic and political scheme separated him from stark racists and moderate segregationists, but it did not make him an egalitarian.

This was but one example of the racial dynamics of Crump's machine operations in Memphis. Other examples abound. In 1906, Crump fought to increase a poll tax on saloons because some whites complained about drinking in neighborhood saloons frequented by blacks. Yet other whites rejected the idea, arguing that white saloons were being punished for poor black behavior. In 1908, Crump led a community of white and black elites to create a Playground Association, but in 1909 he created a "Reformatory" to house young delinquents (mostly blacks) because the white administrators of the Young Men's Christian Association complained about "negro dives" that led youth into temptation.

An Italian by the name of V. Guintini opened a "soft drink" stand. It is evident that this is really a negro dive. . . There are over 200 young men rooming in the Y.M.C.A. Building. Our membership includes over 1,400 young men and also nearly 500 boys under the age of 17. These men are constantly coming and going to and from the association and it is the very sincere and earnest wish of the Association that the atmosphere about the building and at least in its immediate neighborhood be kept as free from temptation and contamination as possible. We know that you are in sympathy with this purpose and with the work that our organization is trying to do, and feel sure that you will help us in making the surrounding here wholesome and clean.⁸⁹

Crump talked out of both sides of his mouth, offering an olive branch of racial uplift to blacks while quelling the murmurings of racist whites who sought to rid "public"

⁸⁹ E.H. Crump Collection. R.L Alexander. Letter from the Young Men's Christian Association. September 24, 1910.

spaces of negro presence. Because of this balancing act, Crump remained a steadfast leader for over three decades. Toward the end of his life, as he was beginning to fall into public and political obscurity, Crump seized upon Tom Lee's heroism as mechanism to regain the lime-light. The Crump machine mobilized to commemorate Lee's selfless action, while also shoring up Crump's legacy as a man who recognized great acts of kindness and decency among his fellow brethren, black and white.

Emerging politician, Rowlett Paine, became a thorn in Crump's side by refusing Crump's mentorship and ousting him from office with the help of Robert Church, a black leader who endorsed Paine in mayoral election of 1923. During his tenure as Mayor, Paine honored Lee, while simultaneously remaining deferential to Judge Clifford Davis, the only judge in Shelby County to have won an election under a Ku Klux Klan ticket.⁹⁰ Crump blasted Paine for his support of the Klan and fought all the way to Tennessee's capitol in Nashville to denounce the Klan as deviants who endangered white progress and had no place in Memphis. Crump's anti-Klan activism was a means to preserve his ties with a large following of black voters. Thus, he insisted that all who have the right to vote should vote, and that Klan intimidation threatened the progress of white-black "integration," which he had fought so hard to build.

In 1925, when Lee was declared a hero by Mayor Rowlett Paine, Crump was still a force in the city. But there are no records indicating that Crump offered any note of gratitude to Lee. In 1924, Crump announced that he would not seek a re-election as Trustee but would move onto a national platform, campaigning for the Democratic Party: "Travelling to New York, Crump supported Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law for the

⁹⁰ Paine did not endorse Davis but did not do anything to keep him from winning the judgeship in Memphis.

Democratic Party's presidential nomination.”⁹¹ Having focused his outreach to the black community on the “talented tenth,” blacks of Lee's class and racial caste remained below Crump's threshold of visibility. As a politician, Crump insured that men like Lee could vote, purchase what they wanted, have a place to sit in a segregated park, and attain gainful employment, but Crump was not interested in their condition or the quality of their lives during this era. Having exhausted his power in Memphis and moved on to a different agenda, Crump had little concern with Tom Lee in the 1920s. But his silence towards Lee was but for a season. There was a use for a man like Lee as Crump contemplated his legacy, and so near the end of his life, Crump launched an effort to erect a monument in honor of the hero posthumously, devoting considerable efforts to fundraising to erect a statue in honor of Tom Lee.

The Other Lee: George W. Lee and the Politics of Respectability

During the era of Crump's greatest power, there was another Lee who embodied the traits that Crump found most useful in black masculinity. This Lee had the tenacity and drive to create a space and platform to display a type of black manhood atypical of the manhood whites expected of black men. He was forthright, extremely ambitious and vocal about racial politics. This Lee would prove to be a force in Memphis, required no monument to mark his contribution in history.

George W. Lee, an Army veteran of World War I, moved to Memphis in search of opportunity. His attraction to the Bluff City was its rapidly growing markets and the belief that Memphis had potential to lead the south as a symbol of racial peaceful

⁹¹ Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis*. University of Mississippi Press, 2006, pg. 42.

coexistence.⁹² Possessing a strong sense of self-worth and a desire for self-actualization, George Lee sought a climate in which he could excel. George Lee was not an assimilationist. His notions of peaceful coexistence privileged black independence and economic self-determination. George Lee published commentaries and spoke out against blacks' acquiescence to the status quo, which subordinated blacks, offering them only economic and political crumbs that fell from the white table. To build strong black communities, Lee advocated economic nationalism.

George Lee's first job in Memphis was selling "nickel and dime"⁹³ insurance policies to African Americans. Within a few weeks, he was promoted from salesman to manager. That was only the beginning of his impact. By 1920, he was promoted to Vice President of the company and was well on his way to making a fortune, but he did not do it alone. He gave other black men the opportunity to sell policies, making Mississippi Insurance an employment mecca for black men. He offered a new ideology of spreading the wealth among black Negro businessmen, setting ablaze their desire for self-determination within the black communities. He was a capitalist who understood the power elite that whites and selective blacks had over the city. His studied northern publications such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's *The Crisis* and the Harlem Renaissance-inspired work, *The Messenger*, founded by A. Phillip Randolph,⁹⁴ which provided him with a language to address inequalities without antagonizing whites.

⁹² Gloria Brown Melton, *Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee, 1920- 1955: A Historical Study*, Washington State University, 1982.

⁹³ Because of racism in the south, George Lee was able to utilize his blackness to sell what the article called, "nickel and dime" life insurance policies. For more information see, Tucker, David M. "Black Ride and Negro Business in the 1920's: George Washington Lee of Memphis." *The Business History Review*. vol. 43, no. 4, 1969, pg. 439.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

An example of George Lee's political savvy can be found in his 1966 interview with Dr. Aaron Boom. Lee discusses the "Industrial Welfare Committee," which was designed to address issues that plagued black communities. Yet, Lee recognized that it was designed to keep civility at all cost between and among the races, while feeding the Jim Crow machine. Thus, Lee suggested that this façade of concern should be replaced by the Interracial League:

It is the aim of the Interracial League to establish helpful contacts between those elements of the two races who think that racial community and cooperation are helpful to the community in many ways, and, who feel that contact and cooperation may be established without doing any violence to customs and traditions.⁹⁵

Lee offered a powerful critique of an organization created by white leaders that appeared to resolve black discontent, but functioned merely as a front that perpetuated inequality. Lee pointed out the inauthenticity of white "interest" in black communities, debunking an image for which Memphis had become famous in the south and across the nation. Lee found a way to circumvent the red tape that stifled black economic growth by helping blacks in their own communities. Unfortunately for blacks, however, the Interracial Committee was not taken seriously. With a staff consisting of two African Americans, it lacked the resources to move beyond a mirage of racial progress.

George Lee's respectability politics was staged from a self-written script. He was not consumed with pleasing white audiences regarding his craft, intellect and foresight. Lee focused instead on the black community, creating opportunities to shape their own meanings and expectations around self-respect and self-worth. Highly respected in both

⁹⁵ Ibid. Quotation is drawn from an interview with George Lee conducted by Dr. Aaron Boom in 1966 in the University of Memphis Oral History Project archives, pg. 34.

black and white communities, Lee had no desire to propagate white narratives of black inferiority. Nonetheless, white elites found his doctrine of black self-sufficiency useful: blacks who created their own wealth placed fewer demands on whites. Moreover, Lee endorsed a paradigm of racial separatism, albeit one in which being separate did not equate to being unequal. Black self-determination did not threaten the white establishment because it seemed to preserve a separate racial order. George Lee serves as a reminder that even structures built on racial binaries have gray areas of exceptionalism. And although it could not provide full equality to African Americans in Memphis, George Lee's life and legacy gave blacks a social economic and political outlet to empower themselves and seek to control their own destinies. George Lee embodied a manhood rooted in innovation, integrity and self-determination--qualities and commitments that Lee possessed prior to working at Mississippi Life and independent of any recognition by whites. George Lee's success helps illuminate the paradoxes and complexity of the times in which Tom Lee lived. Despite all of the strides that black men were making and their growing visibility in the cultural fabric of the city, whites still questioned the value of black males, their dispensability and their utility.

Men like George Lee were upwardly mobile and consultants in the new structure of Memphis. He was remembered for his role in catapulting the city into a unique position distinct from other urban southern municipalities of the era. As an entrepreneur he made fishermen instead of providing handouts to his compadres. While he helped to improve the lives of those with whom he came in contact, he dwelled within a black city within the city and a black reality within a larger reality. African American men and women daily built and sustained this Memphis but were unrecognized for their

contributions and rarely benefited from the city's advancement. They were invisible. Although Memphis considered itself to have arrived at an evolution of racial separation that was civil and more advanced than its contemporaries, black lives still did not matter. For members of a certain lower economic bracket to ascend to visibility, an extraordinary occurrence would have to unfold for them to achieve a level of visibility. Tom Lee embodied a sense of manhood and sense that seemed illegible to the average white. And within a day of his service, the white media attempted to interpret his act as something worthy of the attention of the city. In this very exceptionalism, whites missed Lee's humanity and the humanity of black citizens of Memphis.

Memphis was a city of contradictions. Attempting to sanctify itself from the rest of the south as different, it held tightly to racial rituals laced in violence and dehumanization. By the turn of the twentieth century, mob violence against communities and groups of blacks in Memphis was for the most part no longer common practice, but lynching was still permissible. Black leader's proximity to and endorsement by white leaders designated a few as "acceptable Negroes," who were exempted from accusations of infractions that were susceptible to lynching and public torture. Men like Tom Lee, however, were targets of local sanctioned violence. Ell Persons, a black woodchopper was burned alive in May 1917, accused of killing and raping Antoinette Rappel, a sixteen year old white girl. The same press that lauded Lee a hero printed Person's address, thus, making him a target of a lynch mob.⁹⁶ Six months prior to the lynching, Black Memphians celebrated the largest black voter turnout to date. Black voting was

⁹⁶ Unknown, "Mob captures slayer of the Rappel girl: Ell Persons to be lynched near scene of murder; May resort to burning." *Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 1917, pp. 1 and 2.

becoming common place in the Bluff city unlike other places in the south, and yet, black bodies were publicly hanged and charred with pictures and memorabilia circulated by whites to celebrate these ritualistic acts of crime that further validated and solidified the racial hierarchy in the south. The same space that produced leaders like Robert Church and Tom Lee still honored ritual killings of blacks based on hearsay without a trial, much less a jury of his peers. Despite the cruel hand blacks were dealt, Tom Lee's life demonstrates how the "everyday" working class black man negotiated this perilous racial terrain with human dignity, compassion and salvation.

The "Nigger Bleeds Red": Birth of a Nation, Zombies and the Re-Placing of Black Humanity through Tom Lee

"Tom Lee, 40- year old, Negro, black and kinky haired became a hero. . ." ⁹⁷

The images of Tom Lee and his characterization in the white press resurrected an old southern notion of black men of the plantation era who were far removed from the aristocratic blacks recruited to public service by white elites in Memphis. The May 9, 1925 *Memphis Scimitar* headline read, "Saving 30 Lives Doesn't Excite Tom Lee, Negro Hero of Norman Tragedy off Coahoma." The verbal reference to lack of excitement underscores visual representations of black men of the southern past, who are depicted with a vacant stare, suggesting an empty, dismal, hollow existence. This picture was usually juxtaposed to imagery of black men in the glorious south who were most happy when serving their masters. Framing such extremities, these images convey powerful lessons about the utility of servitude, suggesting that blacks get little out of life if not

⁹⁷ Unknown. *News Scimitar*, May 9, 1925, pg. 1. Afternoon Edition. Copies of the *News Scimitar* are available at the Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, Tennessee.

serving whites. In the white imagination, free blacks—especially black men—were zombie like, manifesting no emotions, feelings or desires. From caricatures to movies to editorial cartoons, there was a presentation of black masculinity that insinuated that black men were a subspecies. This propaganda fueled the fancy of whites (and the internalization of these images by blacks) that black men lacked a soul, the internal mechanism that informs value systems, standards, and character.



Figure 1. Tom Lee ⁹⁸

How could a Negro, a body that was often not afforded a gender or pronoun when addressed, find excitement in saving the lives of thirty people? The *Scimitar* reporter's fixation with Lee signified the ways black males were perceived and scripted as zombie-like ritualistic creatures. This headline, published less than twenty four hours after Lee's demonstration of humanity, was quickly disregarded. Lee's instant decision to risk his

⁹⁸ Memphis Magazine, <http://memphismagazine.com/features/tom-lee-a-heros-tale/>

own safety to save the lives of others was quickly refigured as nothing more than well-oiled machine fulfilling its duty to preserve white life even at the cost of his own (Lee did not know how to swim). The writer shows no impulse to provide Lee with human qualities that would prompt him to act from compassion to aid those in peril. For in the white southern imagination, Lee was not capable of helping because of his inner workings as a man with a conscience, soul and virtues. His actions could be explained only as an instinctual primitive reaction to save white folk.

A zombie is a creature in science fiction and fantasy prose that is often used to destroy lives, complete a task or serve at the pleasure of its master who brought it out of its dead zone. Originally, zombies were mythic figures in Afro-Caribbean history who represented the atrocities and cruelties that the Haitians endured under slavery. In “The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies,” Mike Mariani of *The Atlantic* provides a genealogy of zombies from their African roots to its US reincarnation. Mariani notes that “the zombie is such a potent symbol.”⁹⁹ At one level, current zombie fetishism signifies the U.S. appropriation of African spirituality and religion devoid of any respect for its purpose and sanctity to African history and culture. Some whites in the south became obsessed with an African presence embodied in the black slaves, captured, transported, sold and at times mutilated by their owners. Some were haunted by the violence perpetrated on black bodies for no other reason than capital gain. This was and still is literally and figuratively the ultimate blood stain on white US and southern history. If whites see blacks as less than human or a part of different lineage, however, they could

⁹⁹ Mike Mariani, “The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombie,” *The Atlantic*. October 28, 2015.

justify the inhumane capture and brutality they unleashed. The zombie motif along with other Africanisms carried this narrative well into the twentieth century:

The monster once represented the real-life horrors of dehumanization; now it's used as a way to fantasize about human beings whose every decision is *ex alter*. The original emerged in a context where humans were denied control of their own bodies and sought death as an escape. And now in pop culture, the zombie has come to serve as the primary symbol of escapism itself-- where the fictional enslavement of some provides a perverse kind of freedom from everyone else.¹⁰⁰

Zombies require magic or a crafting that will transform them from dead to undead. Undead, is not synonymous with being alive. There was never a plan or agenda post antebellum that southern whites took seriously to integrate blacks into society. That was the crux of the dilemma that plagued leaders and intellectuals, black and white from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. From Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln to W.E.B. DuBois, there have been several reiterations of this interrogative with the same bewilderment, what does one do with the Negro? Similarly, in the case of Tom Lee, allegations that he had little or no emotion after saving the lives of thirty people align him with the indecipherability that whites attribute to blacks.

In the absence of any interest to discern what inspires black men to act, white Memphians took recourse to their racial superiority and a putative black imperative to serve whites. Indeed, *Scimitar* suggests that Lee needed white validation even to understand the magnitude of his action. He could understand his role in rescuing survivors from the sinking Norman only after speaking to his white "friends," who articulated a sense of heroism. Only after he provided an account of the tragedy to whites, did Lee decide to go public, informing the highest public official in the city, Mayor

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Rowlett Paine, of his action: “After his white friends told him he was the hero of the disaster, Tom thought he ought to call on Mayor Paine and explain his part in saving lives.”¹⁰¹

The tone of the article and the language depicting an unaffected black male and his flatlined disposition were typical racist descriptors of black manhood. Whites had been accustomed to seeing blacks as void of emotion and substance. D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film, “Birth of a Nation,”¹⁰² warned against whites giving too much credit to blacks, much less positioning them as examples of good citizenship and humanity. Print, motion pictures and other artistic mediums circulated widely among whites of all classes, constructing images of black men that warranted fear and angst in the context of any manifestation of black power and pride. In “The Good Lynching and ‘The Birth of a Nation’: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow,” Michele Wallace summarizes the potency of Griffith’s work in solidifying white southerners’ fears that blacks would become unrecognizable creatures once freedom and economic gain were secured:

The Birth of a Nation has stood not only as a dominant fictional account of Reconstruction but as an apologia for the nearly one hundred year-reign of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist politics that followed in the South and effectively dominated social policies in the West and North.¹⁰³

Even as it depicted Lee as a hero, the first paragraph of the *Scimitar* story colors Lee, using the terms dark and Negro within the same sentence. Colorism was a major factor in the selection of black leaders and elites in Memphis. Blacks of a lighter

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² D.W. Griffith. “Birth of a Nation” Clip of Video: Youtube.com. *Humor in History*. June 6, 2011.

¹⁰³ M. Wallace, “The Good Lynching and The Birth of a Nation: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43 no. 1, 2003, pg. 103.

complexion had more opportunities to obtain wealth than darker blacks¹⁰⁴ and were often seen as more respectable. Marking Lee as Negro and dark provided an image that would fuel and sensationalize the story. Black men of a darker hue were often perceived as brutes, uncooperative and difficult to control. Southern whites during the early part of the twentieth century saw lighter complexioned blacks as palatable—the tolerable portion of the afflicted separate community. When convenient, light-skinned blacks were accorded human attributes on the assumption that their lighter complexion signified proximity to whiteness. Although the sexual intermixing of blacks and whites was strictly prohibited by law, white racism insinuated that any product of miscegenation would inherit superior qualities from a white ancestor. Within this racist frame, mixed-race offspring would be more evolved and more capable of assimilation than darker blacks. Memphis leaders Robert Church and George W. Lee were both fairer-skinned, a particular black pedigree that permitted them to mediate between white and black relations. Yet in celebrating the heroism of a “dark Negro,” white Memphis also proclaimed its own progressive nature. Providing Lee’s hue offered a message that even darker blacks in Memphis were more evolved than in other parts of the south; their behavior was partially tempered by the changing face of Memphis, as well as the traditional discourse surrounding black obedience and loyalty.

The reference to Lee as a Negro hero and not just a hero creates a racialized subcategory of male performance and duty: “He saved more than thirty lives and today

¹⁰⁴ For more information see, Howard Bodenhorn, and Christopher S. Ruebeck, “Colourism and African—American Wealth: Evidence from the Nineteenth-century South,” *Journal of Population Economics* 20.3 (2007): 599–620. Howard and Ruebeck state that “The analysis reveals a distinct racial hierarchy. Black wealth was only 20% of white wealth, but mulattoes held nearly 50% of whites’ wealth.”

went about his usual haunts in Memphis, without claiming any honor for his work.”¹⁰⁵

The writer disregarded Lee’s purpose for sailing the Mississippi and the responsibility, temperament and maturity that comes with being entrusted by whites to not only use their resources but take care of them. The reference to Lee’s “haunts” implies that Lee lacked an itinerary; he was not on the river for any designated purpose; his encounter with the Norman was happenstance. Yet within the white imaginary, “haunts” also conjure the possibility that Lee’s day was consumed with diabolical exploits and evil doings. The figure of the lazy shiftless Negro of the south often promoted the message that black men had no goals or business to attend, and that emancipation left black men idle similar to children without school or homework. This characterization discredits Lee’s skill and craft as a sailor and his talents in navigating a ship in rough waters while simultaneously saving the lives of the shipwrecked. The implication for Lee’s motives for travelling the river undergirds whites’ belief in the black man as nomadic. After emancipation, blacks often relocated to find employment, shelter, and resources for themselves and their families.¹⁰⁶ But this was not the case of Lee and the writer was privy to his position and residence. By combining Lee’s flat affect, intimations of itinerancy and instability and descriptions of his darkness, the *Scimitar* re-inscribed white racist tropes that position Lee as less than human, zombie-like; while simultaneously hinting that white influence (“friends”) has the capacity to transform Lee into a resemblance of humanity.

The following day, the same newspaper catalogued Lee’s daily routine in “Tom Is Going to Pray.” Addressing Lee by his first name carries multiple racial and gendered

¹⁰⁵ *News Scimitar*, May 9, 1925, pg. 1

¹⁰⁶ Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

meanings. First, it signals to the reader that Lee holds lower socio-economic and racial status. Moreover, it robs Tom Lee of his status as an adult worthy of respect. Blacks were often referred to by first name even by whites younger in age. This racial practice mimics naming practices between adults and children, relegating the black man to the perennial underdevelopment of a “boy.” Members of high socio-economic standing would likely be addressed in public by surname, regardless of race. Lacking the protections afforded by elite class, Tom Lee, one of the working poor, was relegated to the level of respect afforded to children. Yet the refusal to provide the surname is also compatible with a more complex interpretation, linking Lee to the realm of a zombie or creature from a different heritage. Surnames display one’s history, heritage and background. Omitting Lee’s surname obliterates his heritage, allowing the elite white audience to render Lee an untraceable lineage, an outsider heritage unworthy of adulthood or citizenship.

With his choice of terms, the reporter shrouded the Negro hero with the markers of black genericity. His cultural and social practices were characterized as ritualistic, predictable and programmed. In Lee’s own words, “Sunday mornin’ and evenin’, I always prays Sundays for the forgiveness of my sins foh do past week.”¹⁰⁷ Attending church in the south was like breathing air or drinking water. It was something that everyone did as established cultural practice. Placing Lee within a routine of habitual southern practices was a way to reintroduce him to the public as a regular, law-abiding Negro, moving through life as the rest. Black men who habitually attended church were considered less threatening by whites than those who were less refined and found their

¹⁰⁷ Unknown, “Tom is Going to Pray: Mayor’s “Fusses” Negro Hero of Tragedy,” May, 10, 1925. *The News Scimitar*. Pp. 1 and 3.

spirituality in the streets. The Protestant church in the south was a tool used by whites during slavery to indoctrinate blacks into a culture of submission. The use of stories from the Holy Bible about the natural relation between “master” and “servant” gave blacks a rationale for their lower social standing and a promise that their obedience would be rewarded if not in this life, perhaps the next life. Demonstrating the role of religion in Lee’s life, the media reminded whites that this heroic act did not make Lee haughty or alter the way in which he saw himself as a ‘typical’ Negro.

Upon further interrogation, the second *Scimitar* article reveals multiple stereotypes that white Memphians held about blacks. “Tom is only a black kinky haired negro, but he proved that he has red blood in his veins by saving more than 30 people who were struggling in the Mississippi river against great odds.” Using the diminutive, “only a black kinky haired Negro,” positions Lee within the subhuman category of blackness in the south. Yet referring to the “red blood in his veins,” invokes the whole racial apparatus of blood quantum, used in the United States to strip African Americans and Native Americans of citizenship rights. The masses of blacks in the south who were deemed nameless, faceless and socially invisible to whites possessed a quantum of “black” blood, which whites insisted constituted proof of racial inferiority. Within this white racist and racializing frame, even an article meant to compliment an heroic deed replicates tropes of white supremacy. Neither isolated incidents nor consistent evidence of black subjectivity and personhood could eradicate white convictions concerning their racial preeminence. There was nothing a black man could do in the south to prove himself equal or worthy of respect from whites.

The May 9 edition of the *Scimitar* provided a direct quote from Lee explaining his motivation: “I guess I didn’t do any more than any “nigger” would have done if in my place.”¹⁰⁸ The *New York Times* paraphrased Lee’s direct quote the same day without the epithet. What value was added in the use or omission of the word, “nigger”? Conceptually, the moniker reifies the racialized subjugation of blacks since the early eighteenth century. There is no surprise that a white southerner would jump at the opportunity to endorse a black man’s self-proclaiming his own racial and gendered inadequacies. For whites it fed into the narrative of black manhood as unworthy of honor although his heroism is the antithesis of his self-label. The *New York Times* would gain no value in using such a word considering the antiracist factions that existed in the northeast not to mention its readership spanned the world.

Furthermore, the article effaced Lee’s racial and gendered identity by including a caption, “Old River Negro.” At a moment when lynching fixated the south and the nation on black male physiology, this article barely mentions Tom Lee’s male gender, much less his status as a grown man. Although the description of Lee diminishes his humanity and elides his gender identity, the article is riddled with allusions to blackness. From hair to skin color to the addition of “nigger,” Lee’s racial identity is at the forefront. The article’s double entendre, describing Lee as “negro” and “dark” conjured an image of a particular type of blackness that is suspect, inferior to lighter blacks and linked to a particular class status grounded in complexion, occupation, and income. But inclusion of the reference to “nigger,” adds an additional unsavory dimension to the news report. The Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University offers a genealogy of the word.

¹⁰⁸ *Memphis Scimitar*, May 9, 1925, Pg. 1.

It is usually directed against blacks who supposedly have certain negative characteristics. The Coon caricature, for example, portrays black men as lazy, ignorant and obsessively self-indulgent; these are also traits historically represented by the word nigger. The Brute caricature depicts black men as angry, physically strong, animalistic, and prone to wanton violence.¹⁰⁹

In the context of an article about Lee's heroism, this term seems a misnomer. His actions showed none of the characteristics attached to this term. There is no evidence that Lee thought less of himself or possessed a poor self-image. Yet Lee might well have known the range of meanings this word could evoke. Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois and other intellectual leaders argued that nature of blackness was intimately tied to the pathology of whiteness.¹¹⁰ The knowledge of a black self was inseparable from knowledge of the racist system that constrained black subjectivity. Indeed, knowing white racism could arm blacks with precautionary measures that could spare them from additional emotional, mental and physical harm.

By identifying himself as a nigger, Lee situated his subjectivity as a member of the black community that whites so often disregarded. By asserting that he was no different from any other black man, Lee signaled that he was uninterested in accepting white exceptionalism and the politics of black tokenism. It also encouraged whites to view blacks as lifesavers literally and figuratively. While white elites found Lee useful to shore up their paternalist and benevolent image, Lee used the newspaper to reinterpret blackness, demonstrating a double consciousness, which required that he placate white patriarchal misconceptions concerning white supremacy, at the same time that he noted that whites needed blacks to rescue them from disaster. Reading against the grain, one

¹⁰⁹ "Nigger and Caricature," Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University. <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature/>.

¹¹⁰ "The Veil and Double Consciousness," American Studies at the University of Virginia. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug03/souls/defpg.html>.

might also suggest that by inserting this colloquialism, Lee unmasked white moral pretensions, alluding to their long history of terror, torture and death of those they deemed ‘niggers.’ The same sentence used to disembody Lee and disengage him as subject, Lee used to call into question the humanity of those who dared ask him his reasons for saving the lives of others.

In conclusion, I would suggest that this article is duplicitous in meaning. At one level, Lee’s language resonates with the vestiges of slavery and internalized racism, which placed Lee in a position of having no choice but to save the lives of whites for fear of repercussions. The proximity of Lee to the site of the disaster would have made inaction culpable. He would almost certainly have been marked as guilty of allowing whites to die, and subject to punishment by lynching or burning at the stake. His racial and gender identity were highlighted to provide a scripting of his actions as an improbable expectation from black men, particularly ones who consider themselves niggers. Within this frame, Lee was constructed as an object to admire but only with a temporally-ingratiated eye as his action to save lives was not because he was human but because they were white.

At a second level unbeknownst to the reporter and editors of the newspaper, Lee scripted the inhumanity of whites who puzzled over a black man who saved 30 lives. They believed that blacks were incapable of compassion, salvation and care. But for Lee perchance, there was nothing to be excited about. The ontological framework of blackness is grounded in preservation, cooperation and compassion, respect for life and redemption. African history and culture supports the notion of call and response, action and reaction. Black culture requires a response for everything that happens whether

coincidentally or divinely destined. As a member of a community that had been obliterated to a state of unrecognition, African Americans clung to qualities of humanity that whites take for granted. Being in a position to choose is a privilege of power that Lee optimized. The shortsightedness by the author and southern whites ensnared them in a state of angst and paranoia, comparing their own behavior toward Africans in the Americas since the seventeenth century with the heroic acts performed by Lee. African and African American culture rooted in Protestant faith in the south practiced the moral precepts of redemption and salvation with an eternal hope in the human subject becoming a better version of itself. This moral code dates back to Africa. Perhaps Lee's efforts were an attempt to give whites the chance to join an evolved type of humanity where inclusion and gratitude welcomed one into kinship instead of the white Eurocentric habitual response to historical, social and cultural adversity, destruction or othering.

While Lee was humble and did not want celebrity for his act, he was a member of a capitalist society that understood that no good deed goes without reward. As a sailor, Lee recognized the benefits of taking paths with the least resistance. In non-nautical terms, Lee was like any other individual in a society where value and worth can at times be quantified. Unwaged labor by blacks in the south had been outlawed by the Civil War Amendments. And as the proverbial adage attests, nothing in this world is free. Less conservative and racist newspapers didn't require the same grunt work for Lee to prove himself worthy and a respondent to the crisis of humans in distress. Therefore Lee could reposition himself as a venture capitalist, marketing his skill and savvy for the acquisition of a commodity improbable or difficult to acquire for a man of his socio-economic status. Memphis whites', particularly more progressive whites, understood the value of

exploiting moments where recognition would shed a more favorable light on the ways in which the south viewed and treated blacks. The *Commercial Appeal* was a more progressive newspaper and provided a different way of seeing Lee as not only a black man but a citizen of Memphis deserving of appreciation. The paper not only headlined Lee but also invited him to their headquarters. He knew he had a short timeframe in which to obtain something more beneficial than fame or fortune. More importantly, Lee did not cast his net of hope to those who were disinterested in reciprocity or offering him some semblance of gratitude for the sacrifice he made on May 8. He was intentional in dropping his wish list to the *Appeal* cognizant they would lend their ear and their publication to rally around his cause.

Tom did not request a visit to see the Governor of Tennessee or the President of the United States. He did not ask for a nominal reward for there could be no cause that could equate to his sacrifice and the number of lives he saved. He was not flashy and his comrades attested to his sincerity and integrity so he did not need spirits, clothing or items that depreciated in value. Lee worked hard day in and out. His faithfulness to his job is what positioned him to save the passengers on the Norman. But like many black men in the south, the ability to possess land or property was stripped from many of them after Reconstruction. The 40 acres and a Mule was a myth and no one was offering something of that value without it being attached to something just as valuable. Tom Lee wanted a home. He made that clear in his meeting with the *Appeal*. The May 10 *Scimitar* added to his sentiments, “Tom lives on North Second Street. He is a renter. ‘I ain’t never had enough to buy myself a home.’ The editor along with several local organizations ran a campaign in the daily publication admonishing the community to

invest in Lee's dream. Within several months, the paper secured enough money with the help of the Memphis Engineers Club to purchase Lee a home.

While Lee visited the White House, the *Scimitar* reported his itinerary including all those with whom he would visit and the things he would do while visiting the nation's capital. The May 29th article, "Shower Honors on Tom Lee: Apex is Reached When President Voices Praise for His Bravery," notes that Lee's interactions with the elite in Washington DC were vastly different from his daily lived experience. "A few weeks ago, Lee was a humble resident of Memphis, unsung and practically unknown."¹¹¹ The article continues to give the play by play of Lee at the White House ending his trip at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier where he laid a wreath in honor of the soldier's valor. But it wasn't long before his welcome even in the city of white dignitaries shifted--as the remaining time Lee spent in DC included visiting Howard University, a black church and socializing with black elites. One could only imagine Lee's new world order. Being in Washington DC, which is nothing close to his beginnings in a small town of Arkansas could have provided him with a different lens to explore his personhood. His conversations with blacks from a different political and racial castes may have substantiated his own identity as a member of a race that was politically engaged, well connected and astute to the politics of not only the District of Columbia but the entire nation.

In the May 30th edition, an article entitled, "Tom Lee Tired, Happy: Norman Hero Curtails Visit for Home, Sweet Home" the reporter relays to the readers that Lee has had

¹¹¹ "Shower Honors on Tom Lee: Apex is Reached When President Voices Praise for His Bravery," *Press Scimitar*, May 10, 1925.

enough of the big city and the limelight for, “there is no place like home . . . Such being the case. Tom Thursday night decided to curtail his visit to Washington and to leave on the first train bound Memphisward.”¹¹² This tone of a tired overwhelmed Negro way out of his league being in the big city continues as a subtitle declares, “He is Unchanged.” A man of few words and an account from an outsider looking in the author’s imposition of Lee’s disposition again relayed the message that in spite of his opportunities to visit with a living President, communing with blacks from one of the oldest and reputable historical black universities in the world, that he remains the same Negro as before this journey. Even outside Memphis, the southern gaze insists that Tom Lee’s subjectivity, personhood and inspirations are immovable, unable to progress, evolve. But in all of the author’s arrogance, he gives readers a clue that Lee has indeed changed:

Tom was particularly interested in the Potomac River and considerable time was spent around the Speedway, where Tom looked over the boats, big and little, with much satisfaction. While he admitted some of the boats were larger than any he had seen before, he stoutly maintained that Potomac, the Washington channel and the Anacostia River combined where they join at the point of the Speedway, were as nothing compared to the Mississippi.¹¹³

In his outline of the remainder of Lee’s trip, the author provides the reader with something that stems from the man himself. And for those that have a chance to explore his life, one message was clear, Tom Lee was a changed man or possibly the man he always knew himself. Tom Lee didn’t morph into or evolve into a man, he already was a man black and proud. His observation about the comparative size of the Potomac and the Mississippi was not related to what someone told him or something he read it in a book, but reflected his lived relation to the water and his experience of the vast beauty and

¹¹² “Tom Lee Tired, Happy Hero Curtails Visit for Home, Sweet Home.” *Press Scimitar*. 30. May, 1925. Print

¹¹³ Ibid.

depth of the Mississippi. The size of the boats in DC did not intimidate him, the President of the United States did not dissuade him that he was better off living above the Mason Dixon line, he wanted to leave early because he could leave early. He wanted to go home not because it was sweet like the cliché' of southern romantic notions of the south where a Lost Rhetoric prevails of a region that didn't lose a war but gained racial independence from the rest of the world. Lee loved home because a wife and family that loved him. This is the home he knew and occupied his entire life. The author mentions in the closing of that he lugged a big box of candy on the train for his wife. She was the sweetness of the south. Not the landscape, the politics, the racial or gendered status that for but a moment catapulted him into a national spotlight. Not the reward or marks of distinctions but the people who knew him intimately were what Tom Lee valued most.

Tom Lee may have been out of the public's eye after his visit to the White House, but news outlets would periodically update their readers about Lee's life. For some parts of the country particularly Baltimore, the *Afro American* newspaper followed Lee's life and used his experiences to provide a critique of race relations in the south. In the May 23, 1925 edition, a reporter commented on Lee's heroism and the irony of treating Lee as an exception, disregarding the other "Tom Lees" of the south:

Mayor Paine of Memphis is to be revered for recognizing Tom Lee's heroism, which should incidentally give the conscience of the Democratic party of the Southland some perturbation when it is realized that Tom Lee's blood kinsmen are voteless. Tom Lee should be given access to the ballot and the thousands of worthy Negro citizens of the Southland, from whom certain of the U.S. Constitution amendments have been withheld by the parts of Tillman and Vardaman should be given the full right of suffrage.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Columbia Press Bureau, *Afro American*, May 23, 1925, pg. 3.

The Baltimore *Afro American Newspaper* wrote a brief article updating Lee's Christmas six years later. For the holidays, Lee was invited by the Engineers Club to attend their Christmas party with his wife and was given a cash donation.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, the updates were more about what was *done* for Lee rather than Lee's mental, emotional or nostalgic outlook about the incident. The benevolence towards Lee continued until his dying day. Even as Lee struggled with cancer, the Memphis Engineers Club raised money to pay Lee's surgery¹¹⁶ but it did not aid in removing the cancer. April 1, 1952 Lee died of cancer and two days later, E.H. Crump determined to honor Lee's legacy by spearheading a fundraiser to have a monument erected in his honor. Lee's fame continued, but at what price and under what terms? Will Lee forever be remembered as a hero or a symbol of white paternalism and racist ideologies of black exceptionalism? The monument was erected two years later with the inscription, "A Very Worthy Negro." Lee's place in Memphis history rested within the narrative that the salvation of whites gave him a special seat "near" the master's table. But even after his physical departure from earth, his legacy inscribed the indispensability of his deed to Memphis history. Crump may have erected a statue to cement own legacy, but Lee's successors white and black had last say on the interpretation of what Lee would signify as a black man in the south.

¹¹⁵ Unknown, *Afro American*, January 3, 1931, pg. 7.

¹¹⁶ Documented on the website tomleeamemphishero.webs.com

A Placeholder: The Stagnation of White Masculinity and the Evolution of Black Masculinity?

“This is to advise that we have received contributions totaling \$5,480. 54 as of this date for the Tom Lee Memorial Fund. We may receive a few more straggling contributors, but I think this is about all we will receive” ¹¹⁷

Two days after the death of Lee, Crump surfaced in a newspaper article reminiscing about his knowledge of Lee and his works: “I saw Tom at intervals-- always admired him-- unassuming and very polite.” ¹¹⁸ Crump had no intimate knowledge of Lee. Like others whites who spoke to him in polite surface conversations, Lee appeared to be a Negro whose actions and disposition matched a particular narrative dating back as far as slavery of a black man who offered no disruption in the order of race relations in the south. He served and lived to help whites. In the same article he continued his eulogy for Lee: “I suggested naming the pool at Ayers and Lane for him.” ¹¹⁹ Crump’s days were numbered and his legacy was tainted when he was ousted from office. For years he inserted himself in politics and other city affairs, but there was a hint of Crump in his earlier years as a man driven with purpose. He needed to do something with his later life to consolidate his legacy. Tom Lees’ deeds seemed a benign mechanism to preserve his own community standing.

Crump informed the reporter of the land he had acquired near the place of the Norman tragedy. He also mentioned recommending that a black housing be named in honor of William Foote, another respectable Negro. Crump had known Foote as a young man, who became a mail carrier and then a lawyer; “always a good boy and a good man.”

¹¹⁷ Letter to E.H. Crump from City Engineer dates May 13, 1952. Memphis City and Shelby County Collection

¹¹⁸ Article in the Memphis and Shelby County from the E.H. Crump Collection’s folder on Tom Lee and the Monument. No name of the paper or author only a date in pencil, April 3, 1952.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Crump's colloquial use of the term 'boy' could be a reference to the time when he had known Foote as a youth; yet it also echoes whites' cavalier paternalism toward blacks. This comparison of Tom Lee to another notable black Memphian illuminates Crump's fixation with a particular type of black man. Crump had a stake in the creation of the Department of Public Works in Memphis, but never recognized Lee as a retired Sanitation Worker. Yet he now worked overtime to erect a statue in Lee's honor. Six days later, Crump announced his interest to create a memorial in honor of Lee in the *Commercial Appeal*: "Mayor Watkins Overton, Chairman E.W. Hale, Will Fowler, Jim Wood, Hugo Dixon and I will get up money to erect an appropriate monument for Tom Lee--friendly salute to a very worthy citizen."¹²⁰ It is clear that Crump has a fixation on creating and erecting memorials honoring black men. Crump's determination to create a public history of black men is similar to white southern women's creation of the "Lost Cause" rhetoric as a means to propagate their own legacies. Crump's investment in marking spaces throughout the city to acknowledge black men as key figures of history enabled Crump to catalogue his own white masculinity. Manufacturing images of men like Foote and Lee throughout Memphis signals Crump's desire to rescript and rebrand his own power paradigm and influence. Crump's suggestion that he "knew" Lee, was dispelled by the lack of creativity and imagery produced by Lee's obelisk. The wording on the edifice was superficial and lacked the recognition of the man and focused more on the act. The adjectives were derivative and could have been inspired by the newspaper clippings and other materials that circulated. Crump proved stuck in the manufacturing of his own racial and gendered identity. The moment had passed and there was nothing

¹²⁰ Unknown, "Crump Launches Fund to Honor Tom Lee," *Commercial Appeal*, July 9, 1925.

that suggested progress, evolution or a change of perspective in the older Crump's understanding of black men.

In the *Press Scimitar* on July 9, 1954 Crump heralded Lee's contribution to the city: "Watkins Overton, Will Fowler and I helped raise money. But there were a lot of us who took part. It's a nice monument, one which I hope will be a credit to Memphis as the man it honors was."¹²¹ Even after Lee's death, his value as a human was still connected to his act of saving the lives of white folk thirty years prior. The north side of the monument holds an inscription written by "Grateful People" served as a testament to what Lee represented and less about the man:

*Tom Lee Memorial
A Very Worthy Negro
Tom Lee with his boat 'Zev' saved thirty-two lives when the steamer U.S. Norman
sank about twenty miles below Memphis May 8, 1925. But he has a finer
monument that this- an invisible one, a monument of kindness, generosity,
courage and bigness of heart. His good deeds were scattered everywhere, that
day and into eternity. This monument erected by the grateful people of
Memphis.¹²²*

¹²¹ Unknown, *Press Scimitar*, July 9, 1952, pg. 30.

¹²² John Wilford, "Grateful City Pays Tribute to Tom Lee for His Bravery," *Commercial Appeal*, July 9, 1954 pg. 1.



Figure. 2. Tom Lee Obelisk ¹²³

There is always a danger in overcomplicating an historic moment by reading too much into the racial and gendered politics by using a contemporary lens. It is important that scholarship must take into consideration the culture of a particular moment in history. In the south, blacks were oppressed and treated like second class citizens. That was fact. Memphis, with its interesting love, hate and hate relationship with its black citizens was no exception to the racial climate that surrounded it and was embedded in its institutional practices and customs. The white men, social engineers and leaders who attempted to fix Lee as a particular black subjugated object fell short. Their desired agenda to manufacture a black masculinity of their own creation only provided clues for current scholarship to seek an alternative prospective. Progress means moving forward. Yet the past must be reckoned with, particularly when dealing with a history that caused

¹²³ Tom Lee Memphis Hero Website. <http://tomleeamemphishero.webs.com/history.htm>.

intense pain, displacement, emasculation, painting black men as soulless subjects.

Recent critical race scholarship has unearthed deeper meanings of the experiences of the millions who were trafficked, enslaved, and used to build the U.S. economy, as well as their successors. By analyzing discourses about Tom Lee, I have attempted to resurrect his voice and the voices of men like Lee, giving full fervor to their intentions, human dignity and qualities that make them more man and more human than those who tarnished their reputations. Lee and his family got the last word. In 2006, a newly erected monument made of bronze depicts Lee as salvific, compassionate and bold. Sculpted by a white artist from Wyoming, Lee is re-envisioned as the hero required to save more than thirty lives. His story was constructed with a more thoughtful glance of his actions and his humanity:

2006 brought another monument to the riverfront, a bronze sculpture of Lee and the Zev, poised to pull a drowning man from the river. These monuments, however, pale in comparison to the memory of the man himself. In a world driven by self-preservation, Lee's utterly noble act—risking his own life for the lives of people who, under different circumstances, might not have even shaken his hand—proves that sometimes legends are not the product of bravado and fanfare, but are born quietly, unassumingly, in a single moment of selfless bravery. Such is the case with Memphis's Tom Lee, the hero of the *M.E. Norman*.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Sarah Glaser, "Tom Lee: Hero of the M.E. Norman," Porter Briggs, The Voices of the South. <http://porterbriggs.com/tom-lee/>.



Figure 3. The new Tom Lee sculpture in 2006 ¹²⁵

¹²⁵ "Tom Lee Memphis Art Project," Memphis Art Project. <http://www.memphisart.org/tag/tom-lee/>

Chapter 3

The Missed Subject: Black Masculinity in the 1968

Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike

In order to limit the movement of black men into social positions of importance, influence, and power, black male agency needed to be defined as threatening. This turn established in the white cultural 'mind' a worldview that saw black men as either docile, childlike, and suited to serving whites or as brutes harboring a ready anger that threatened at any minute to erupt as violence against whites.¹²⁶

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words



Figure 1. Memphis, Mayor Henry Loeb shaking hands during the Sanitation Workers strike's negotiations.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Susan Booker Morris, "Targeting Black Masculinity: An Analysis of the (mis)Representation of Black Men in the History of Early American Popular Culture," *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. 28.2 (2011): 78-87.

¹²⁷ The photo is available in "Media Cache". <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/b7/67/f9/b767f9868b437d9ecc5dbb7a1ef3c78a.jpg>.

Southern white men's preemptive actions can be read as indicators of latent fears reflecting their perception of the threat of black violence. Mayor Henry Loeb's decision to keep a shotgun under his desk during negotiations with sanitation strikers and union representatives (Figure 1) signaled to the public that black men were dangerous.¹²⁸ In what sense were underpaid, "invisible" workers who traversed the city daily to preserve the cleanliness of white neighborhoods "dangerous"? Why would the mayor feel it necessary to display a shot gun under his desk while meeting with these men?¹²⁹ US history documents centuries of state-sanctioned white violence against African Americans, yet, there is no evidence of premeditated violence against whites—either individually or collectively at any time during the twentieth century. Historians have investigated moments of resistance and rebellion during antebellum and Reconstruction eras, but scholars of the contemporary rights movement have found no occurrences of violence by blacks against whites. White violence against blacks has included rape, cross burnings, lynching, fire bombings of occupied homes and churches, the obliteration of black communities, and the destruction of black-owned land and businesses.¹³⁰ With the history of violence squarely on the side of white perpetrators, why was the mayor of Memphis, the highest local official of the Bluff City, keeping a rifle under his desk while

¹²⁸ <http://blackhistorymonth2014.com/1761/sanitation-workers-strike-memphis-1968/>.

¹²⁹ The website, "Memphis City Beautiful" traces the beautification project as far back as E.H. Crump: "Through the efforts of City Beautiful, Memphis gained the title of cleanest city in Tennessee in 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945 and 1946. Memphis also received the Ernest T. Trigg "Nation's Cleanest City" award in 1948, 1949, 1950 and 1951". <http://memphiscitybeautiful.org/about-us/history>.

¹³⁰ Wood, Amy L. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Print.

meeting with labor leaders, sanitation workers and allies in front of an extensive press corps?

This odd yet predictable behavior was inextricably tied to enduring racist perceptions that the most docile, “infantile” southern black male possessed an unpredictability that could erupt in violence at any time.¹³¹ From Emmett Till in Moody, Mississippi to Jimmie Lee Jackson in Selma, Alabama, a black male’s physical proximity was deemed so threatening that it legitimated preemptive white violence, including torture and death. Black males were recurrent victims of white aggression and terror campaigns. Thus Loeb’s shotgun must be situated in relation to the extralegal ways that whites expressed their dominance through vigilante justice. This picture captures the persistent threat of white violence in nonviolent situations when African Americans seek to assert their right to equal treatment. Loeb’s gun signified impending danger if the strike persisted and authorized whites to guard themselves against the “threat” of black men. As such, the photo freezes a particular stereotype of black masculinity that fueled white readiness to enact a battle in a continuing “race war.” The mayor’s preparedness provides important insights about institutional racism even as it encapsulates misperceptions of southern black maleness.

White Southern “decorum” in Memphis manifested a chivalrous public face that belied a history of savagery. A rational and genial Mayor Loeb shakes hands with black strikers, a gesture that symbolizes politeness and fair play during negotiations. He intends the people of Memphis—black and white—to perceive his actions as sincere concern, telling the press and the striking workers that their “jobs are of the utmost importance to

¹³¹ Crimes in the south and these transgressions happened to adult men and young boys.

you and your family and I am sincerely interested in your welfare.”¹³² But this pretense is unmasked by the gun beneath his desk. The presence of the firearm signified the long legacy of white supremacy, and dispute resolution mechanisms that black men faced if they refused to comply with white demands. Despite the air of civility and respectability cultivated by southern white elites, particularly in places like Memphis that considered itself a progressive urban municipality, the plantation mentality of domination persisted.

Such menacing images circulated for decades without question or interrogation. Yet observed from the standpoint of critical race feminism, they reveal the threatening situations black men faced by the constant threat of white terror. The photo also demonstrates the necessity for black men to preserve the appearance of a calm temperament and a mild disposition when confronting potential terror. The white press captured this image but made no mention of the rifle under the desk. Scholars have referenced this photo without considering the power dynamics encoded in the presence of the shot gun. The historical record of the strike, then, presents the concerns of whites, while saying little about the lives of black men who remained pillars of strength within their community, manifesting self-assurance despite their heightened vulnerability in such a volatile context. But there is another story to be told about the black sanitation workers in 1968, a story of men who accepted help, leaned on women and children for provision, solidarity, and emotional fortitude—who found their agency through the recognition of their vulnerability. This chapter explores that other story.

From the perspective of white supremacists, protest, resistance and rebellion were the ultimate form of “disobedience,” enacted by unruly children who needed direction,

¹³² Henry Loeb, *Press Scimitar*, February 2, 1968. n.p.

supervision and control. Assigning black men to the status of children was a racial and gendered form of oppression typical of cities such as Memphis that prized their reputation for peaceful race relations, marred by few incidents of racial violence and unrest.¹³³ Loeb insisted on transparency during his administration, mandating that all hearings and meetings be photographed, recorded and disseminated to the public. Although this mandate suggested democratic accountability, the presence of a shotgun at a negotiation session carries quite different messages as well, asserting white elites' commitment to preserve a racial hierarchy, by force if necessary. Whites may no longer have gathered in public places to witness murder and mutilation of blacks as in earlier periods of southern history, but that does not mean they abandoned white supremacy. Their respectability masked other measures of black suppression. Loeb attempted to introduce the new Memphis to a national audience, using television to record new modes of ritualistic violence.

Scholarship on the sanitation strike hints at white resistance but lacks any sustained analysis of the racialized gendering that black sanitation workers confronted during the strike. This chapter examines the new racist politics and innovations in black male protest in response to these methods of social discipline and punishment. By analyzing racial discourses circulating in the “new” Memphis, public records, and photography, I trace competing accounts of black masculinity, contrasting white news media's attempts to present black men as lazy, ungrateful, and unworthy of a decent wage and standard of living with the depiction of black masculinity captured by civil rights

¹³³ Although Memphis positions itself as nonviolent and more civilized of the handling of blacks, Ida B. Wells and other journalist and activists trace the violence and murder of black men in Memphis. For more information see, Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War*, 2013, and Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors*, Gale, 2006. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.

photojournalist, Earnest C. Withers. A close observer of the strike and a civil rights activist invested in the success of the strike, Withers documented dimensions of black men's struggle that remained invisible in the white press.

Shifting Racial and Gendered Politics in Memphis from Tom Lee to 1968

Tom Lee, whether intentionally or unintentionally, asserted his personhood without much ruckus and without unsettling southern racist beliefs or structures. He was not a civil rights leader and made no mention of the social inequalities African Americans faced in the South. He did not offer to share his reward with other blacks who lacked economic resources. There were no records of Lee speaking at local schools or churches to encourage youth to heroism or leadership. He lived his life, saved others in the process, and died. The counter-narrative provided in Chapter two, however, supports an alternative reading of Lee, as a black man who subtly protested racist messages about black manhood. His heroic rescue of white people crossed the color line so strictly drawn during the Jim Crow in the south.

From the 1920's to the early 1950's, the federal government did little to protect black citizens' rights or to uphold constitutional guarantees routinely violated by local and state governments as well as white citizens. But technology brought a new dawn to the south. Jim Crow was no longer performed on a small stage before an audience that condoned and supported of these practices. The south—and Memphis in particular—attempted to present itself as an example of progress, but its notion of evolution in race relations was relative. In part to insulate itself against Soviet claims about racial inequality in the United States, the federal government no longer turned a blind eye against racial injustices perpetrated by southern states. With the advent of television,

technologies of communication and information were more effective and immediate. As the US castigated other nations for human right violations, it also had to contend with human rights violations within its own borders. Under new federal scrutiny, southern whites decelerated their reign of terror, although they still treated blacks as second-class citizens. As the south became the barometer of the nation's racial climate and moral compass, liberal rhetoric confronted the southern way of life, their politics and their most inner circles. Persisting Jim Crow practices drew negative attention to the south and to the nation more generally, challenging its definition of democracy. Memphis, like the nation as a whole, sought to protect its reputation.

Tom Lee's appointment as the first black sanitation worker in the city of Memphis seemed a progressive move at the time. A decade later, it was more apparent that it relegated black men to low-waged, "unskilled" employment. Although the city disregarded the importance of sanitation for the well-being of all citizens, black sanitation workers used this vital labor as the ground for a campaign for recognition and rights, under the rubric, "I am A Man." Central to the civil rights movement's mobilizations for dignity, respect, political empowerment, and full citizenship, the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968 deployed the slogan to demand equal wages and economic justice. During the strike, working class people stole the spotlight from black and white elites as they pursued their quest for higher wages, better working conditions and a renegotiation of perceptions of black manhood. When black garbage-men went on strike, Memphis trash drew attention to white supremacist, sending a distasteful stench across borders well beyond the region. The smell of hate and disenfranchisement sparked black

men to move and resist. Wreaking inequalities created a possibility for action to heighten black freedom.

Contextualization of the strike is important to the exploration of Memphis politics during the desegregation period. Lee's death in 1952 occurred just as the Jim Crow era was ending in the south, even as whites were determined to maintain the racial hierarchies that had existed for centuries. Demagogues like E.H. Crump, who preached philosophies of resistant reciprocity and segregation were becoming passé. For thirty years, Crump had promoted the "progressiveness" of the city, emphasizing that Memphis was clean, well-ordered, and had lower crime rates than other southern cities. Moreover, Memphis markets were booming, yet the "plantation mentality" persisted:

Memphis had sold its soul to Crump and lost its freedom, the critics declared. The average citizen could understand nothing of this charge, but a few, aware that the highest and purest form of freedom involved faculties of the mind, and spirit, depressingly sensed that there was something hostile in Memphis to this aspiration. But the wall of hostility in Memphis that prevented some intellectuals from finding a comfortable place in society was not Crump's creation. It was still the persistence of an anti-intellectual agrarian and religious traditionalism.¹³⁴

Memphis' progressive texture was smooth but sticky. Blacks and whites were satisfied with the economic and political viability of the city, but claims about equal protection of the law coexisted with implicit messages about the inferiority of blacks within the city's racial strata, messages that were fueling battles for black civil rights across the nation. Crump is typically characterized as the boss of a political machine. His business savvy gave him carte blanche to influence decisions economic and political. But Crump shared the creed of most white southern leaders, who ascribed inferiority to

¹³⁴ William Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis*, Louisiana University Press, 1964.

blacks, and enacted policies that created layers of inequality, entrenching employment disparities that gravely limited access to wealth for southern blacks. Crump's version of "racial cooperation" consistently advantaged whites, shoring up a thoroughly racialized urban economy.

In 1954, the same year that Crump died, the U.S. Supreme Court demanded an end to state-sponsored segregation. African American plaintiffs in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Kansas had sued departments of education in their municipalities for the right to fair and equal education, culminating in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. To end state-sanctioned apartheid in the south, the Court issued a unanimous ruling, demonstrating its seriousness about ending practices and customs that had reduced many blacks to living just a step above debt peonage and convict leasing since the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896. J. Harvie Wilkerson III has noted the significance of the unanimous decision.¹³⁵ "To speak with one voice was to speak with force and finality; to speak otherwise was but to lend comfort to an enemy already in prey."¹³⁶ Despite the force of the mandate, some southern states appealed to state sovereignty and resisted compliance. Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia claimed that the court decision violated state constitutions and continued practicing racial apartheid.¹³⁷ Although these states dared explicit opposition, they were not the only states that circumvented the Supreme Court decision and retrofitted their politics to maintain white dominance.

¹³⁵ Harvie J. Wilkerson III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration: 1954- 1978*. Oxford University Press, 1979, pg. 78.

¹³⁶ Kira Duke in her Master's thesis on the desegregation of Memphis City Schools lays out an extensive argument regarding the pace and temperament of the city under this new decision. See "To Disturb the People as Little as Possible: The Desegregation of Memphis City Schools," MS Thesis, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. May 2005.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

The initial Brown decision offered no deadlines or instructions about how to begin the desegregation process. Nor did the federal government make any immediate effort to redress racial injustice enacted by state governments. No enforcement plans or executive orders immediately followed. Despite the powerful language in the decision, the federal government continued to defer to states, governed by white elites, to determine when and where integration occurred. Nearly eight months later, the *Brown II* decision reiterated that separate schools could not be equal and urged desegregation with “all deliberate speed.”¹³⁸ In practice, states were entrusted to develop desegregation plans suitable for their political, social and cultural milieus. The lack of direction and leadership by the federal government mired blacks in continuing injustices, as they were promised social change that was continually deferred.

The white press mirrored the racial climate during this transition, which feigned compliance while resisting change. In Memphis, the *Commercial Appeal* told its readers that “The main thing is for the American people to face this squarely as an accomplished fact, and work out our destiny for the general good and the greater glory of our nation.”¹³⁹ White residents in Memphis remained composed and passively aggressive, a social and political tactic often used to keep blacks captive to Jim “Crowesque” observances without violence and discourteousness. But the author of the *Appeal* spoke to a deeper pathology inculcated in whites since the abolition of slavery. The mien of level-headedness and southern composure overlay hostility, which could erupt in violence if African Americans showed any sign of “uppityness.” Whites waited for blacks to question white power or

¹³⁸ *Brown v. Board* (1955) supplements the 1954, decision giving states the opportunity to end segregation as each state sees fit.

¹³⁹ “A Decision Expected,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 18, 1954, pg. 6.

assert liberties historically relegated to whites. Blacks in Memphis were socialized to understand this threat of latent violence and were careful and to avoid behavior that might result in lynching and massacres as had happened in the past. Blacks in the Bluff City also witnessed the violence in neighboring cities like Little Rock, Arkansas that erupted when black children attempted to integrate schools (see Fig. 2). Southern whites established terms for peaceful coexistence contingent upon blacks remaining in their place.



Figure 2. White students taunting the, “The Little Rock Nine” African American youth integrating Central High School 1957.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ <https://insidenianda.wordpress.com/tag/little-rock-arkansas/>.

Kimberly S. Johnson's, *Reforming Jim Crow: Politics and State in the Age before Brown* describes democratization in the south in the context of explicit and implicit white resistance. The white press legitimated appeals to states' rights as the condition for union with the rest of the country, thereby endorsing modes of politics and governance tied to white supremacy.

These studies and activities strengthened the South's intellectual and administrative integration into the nation by re-legitimizing government in the South and introducing to a new generation of southerners the notion that a government by and for the people was not antithetical to notions of efficiency and effectiveness.¹⁴¹

The old dish of the "Lost Cause" was re-mixed and served on a new platter attractive and palatable for young whites (elite and poor) to devour. The ingredients were revised to satisfy the appetite of a new generation, but remained consistent in providing the appropriate batch of nutrients to fuel white supremacy. Appeals to states' rights indoctrinated a new generation of southern practitioner, committed to uphold racial caste and invoke secession discourse when confronted with unwarranted federal intervention.

The May 18, 1954 *Commercial Appeal* posted an editorial cartoon entitled, "Relax! He'll Drink When He's Ready" (see Fig. 3). A white man wearing a black robe, embroidered with the label "Supreme Court," holds a horse by its mane while pushing it under a trough. The horse has a sign around its neck that reads, "Non-segregation." The imagery in the cartoon fed a white southern frenzy that their lives were on the verge of federal occupation. Echoing messages that circulated from the end of the Civil War throughout Reconstruction, the cartoon characterized equal access to education as a

¹⁴¹ Johnson, Kimberley. *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown*. Oxford University Press, 2010, Print. Pg. 89

national imposition inimical to the will of the south. Non-segregation is different from desegregation. Non-segregation refers to the elimination state-mandated segregation. The end of *de jure* segregation suggests that southern states were in full cooperation with the Court's ruling even though their action produced neither desegregation nor integration. Preposterous as it may sound, the play on wording proved successful in maintaining racial peace in Memphis. White Memphians could maintain their lifestyle of non-segregation, considering themselves compliant with the federal government. They just needed their own time-frame to sort out the semantics of fair and equal education. The editorial asked citizens of Memphis for time and patience as the city refashioned policies that offered a façade of compliance while doing little alter white power and privilege.



Figure 3. *Relax! He'll Drink When He's Ready*¹⁴²

¹⁴² 1954. Photograph. Shelby County Public Library. Memphis, Tennessee. *Commercial Appeal Archives*.

Many southerners considered education the most dangerous and inopportune institution in which to begin integration. The classroom is a social space in which particular constructions of history, political ideology, racial and gendered roles and expectations are taught and consolidated. White supremacy had long been the hidden curriculum of segregated schools, perpetuating the systems of domination and oppression. How could the south reproduce erroneous claims about white superiority and black inferiority in integrated classrooms, where black children could outperform whites?

Schools were also dangerous because social change could readily be enacted there. Pupils were imagined to be fragile but moldable subjects, capable of quick adjustments and open to new paradigms regarding relationships and interactions amongst diverse groups. If white power were to be preserved, young white boys and girls must be socialized to maintain racial hierarchies not disrupt them. Thus, many whites dreaded integration, fearing that integrating schools could cause a shift in power within one to two generations. They feared that the sanctity of white privilege would not survive. As a social transformation strategy, successful integration of the schools threatened white supremacy systemically.

To counter this threat, white propagandists reverted to tropes deployed to separate blacks and whites for centuries. Collaboration of white and black adults was portrayed as possible if and only if blacks remained in their “place.” Proper decorum and etiquette in “mixed company,” whether in the workforce or other social arenas, required balancing

domestic and public codes of engagement.¹⁴³ Miscegenation statutes had been used for centuries to prohibit the amalgamation of races. These laws permitted proximity without intimacy. Penalties for violating miscegenation laws were harsh, ensuring that children produced from these relationships were property and enslaved.¹⁴⁴ In the aftermath of the Civil War, anti-miscegenation statutes proliferated, fostering understandings that inter-racial relationships were illegal and socially acceptable. Citizens who violated these laws were considered callous, disloyal to their race, and mentally unstable. They were ostracized, and often disowned with potent consequences in relation to inheritance, posterity and the dispossession of people of color. Opponents of integration suggested that children who attended integrated schools could become victims of proximity. Classrooms were places of exploration, openness, and emotional alchemy. If uncontrolled, integrated schooling could produce a generation desensitized to racial purity, a generation that might literally and figuratively breed a new racial paradigm that disavowed sacred principles cherished in the south.

To escalate their rhetoric about the dangers of school integration, some whites resurrected the myth of the hypersexual black male who posed a dire threat to elite white womanhood. This trope fueled white men's desire to "protect" white womanhood and the south at all costs. The idea of black men corrupting, contaminating and deflowering the southern belle had long prompted violence against black male bodies. White supremacist groups circulated fears that black men would sleep with white men's daughters if schools

¹⁴³ A colloquial southern term, meaning the presence of different races, gender or classes occupying the same space at the same time. In southern etiquette, when this occurred, one would be conscious not to act in ways that could destabilize the barometers of social acceptability.

¹⁴⁴ Joan Dayan in, "Codes of Laws and Bodies of Color" lays out the extensive political and economic spread of miscegeny as a method to maintain racial purity throughout the US and the Caribbean. *New Literary History*. Vol 26. No. 2. Spring 1995, pp. 283-308.

integrated. Within the “Bible Belt,” southern whites argued that subordination of blacks was divinely ordained. Miscegenation was not only a betrayal to racial allegiance, but also a betrayal of divine order. Figure 4 captures multiple dimensions of these racist ideologies, depicting a white woman’s virtue in jeopardy from a black beast. This photo was used by the White Citizens’ Council to fuel the fear that blacks were interested in integration only in order to rape white women. The caption in the picture claims to cite the words of Walter White, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The cartoon suggested that black children occupying the same school space as white children would be a step not only toward racial impurity but toward bestiality.



Figure 4. *Conquer and Breed*¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ *Commercial Appeal*, 1954. Photograph, *Commercial Appeal Archives*, Shelby County Public Library. Memphis, Tennessee. For an interesting take on the use of satire in public images, linking editorial cartoons to “memes” in the twenty first century, see <https://meetmythamerica.wordpress.com/page/3/>.

Blacks viewed access to education as an equalizer; but whites viewed blacks' quest for education as an abomination. Education had been outlawed, punishable by death during slavery because whites understood knowledge and literacy as cultural capital that could offer a path to emancipation, thereby threatening the permanent subjugation of blacks. Despite the creation of Freedman Schools after slavery was outlawed, segregated schooling had ensured that most Blacks remained undereducated, consigned to classrooms with deplorable resources.

To exercise their constitutional right to equal education, parents of thirteen African American students enrolled their children in first grade at a white school in Memphis on October 3, 1961. Bruce Elementary became the first Memphis city public school to open its doors to black students. There was some resistance but nothing as egregious as occurred at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.¹⁴⁶ These black members of Memphis' middle class helped consolidate an image of Memphis as a tolerant city. The parents of the black first-graders who entered Bruce Elementary were members of a black elite, recognized as worthy to lead the black masses to progress. They embodied the temperament and disposition of progressive politics, but white recognition of their elite status was tied to class distinctions. The children known as the "Memphis Thirteen" encountered few challenges at Bruce Elementary.¹⁴⁷ But the tiny number of black students attending white schools neutralized the threat of any radical socio-economic change for the city. Back respectability politics among the elite

¹⁴⁶ The Little Rock Nine integrated Central High School on September 25, 1957 with the accompaniment of the 101st Airborne Division. For more information a website has been dedicated to their story and a foundation was created, <http://www.littlerock9.com/history.html>

¹⁴⁷ They were called the Memphis Thirteen as the number of black students duly recorded by the city as the number of pupils who integrated the school.

prevailed; Memphis maintained its racial equilibrium as the majority of black children remained in black majority schools. While the rest of the south fought and shed blood over school integration, black Memphians protested with a passivity that kept their garb, hats, handkerchiefs and makeup in place. But this mode of affluent respectability politics would last less than a decade.

The black working poor grew tired of seeing change that benefitted only those at the top of the social hierarchy. They grew disinterested in past relationships and bargaining chips. They witnessed social changes in other cities grow out of grassroots organizing and black Memphians began to question the value of norms of respectability and civility that left them dispossessed politically and economically. The “integration” of Bruce Elementary appeared as the last straw for social change efforts that benefitted far too few.

For the next seven years Memphis began economic gentrification with profound social and political effects. Elite whites did not overtly articulate opposition to integration; they created economic barriers instead. They created private primary and secondary schools. Blacks were not explicitly denied admission to the schools; but most could not afford to send their children to these expensive schools. Thus private and parochial schools became the new Jim Crow institutions in Memphis and throughout the south. White flight depleted the resources available for public schools as whites fled urban neighborhoods and disinvested in public services in the city center. As public schools lost critical funding, many neighborhoods suffered “blight” as black unemployment and underemployment persisted. Memphis remained separate and

unequal. Blacks received few public services, had little access to community resources, and were paid the lowest wages in the city.

The Department of Public Works, where Tom Lee had been given an appointment, became a stigmatized site, employing the least educated and the least skilled. With the influx of blacks, sanitation work became marked as “black work.” Whites who had held these positions were promoted to drivers, unionized positions that afforded better pay and benefits. This was not a new tactic in southern racial and class politics.¹⁴⁸ Blacks were strongly discouraged from union participation—modes of discouragement included coercion. Whites were able to join unions and have their dues deducted from their paychecks. In the rare instances when black men were allowed union membership, they were required to pay dues in cash in advance; payroll deduction was denied them. Few were able to circumvent this process. Black wages and working conditions remained in the hands of white leaders who detested white outsiders’ intervention with labor disputes.

But working class black Memphians recognized that outside assistance could be the key to progress. Surrounding counties and other cities had organized sit-ins, integrated higher education and demanded voting rights and full citizenship. Television and newspapers brought images of these struggles to Memphis, where some brave African Americans replicated nonviolent resistance.¹⁴⁹ Tom Lee’s successors turned to outside help to advance their struggle for social justice. When the Congress of Industrial

¹⁴⁸ Memphis and the south have histories of demoting certain positions and assigning them to blacks while promoting white laborers to maintain their sense of superiority. For more information read, Michael Honey’s *The Road to Jericho: The Memphis Sanitation Worker’s Strike, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Last Campaign*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ There are a plethora of resources on the history of Memphis protests. For a brief overview of the Tennessee timeline on social justice see, The Jackson Times, “Timeline of civil rights in Tennessee.” http://orig.jacksonsun.com/civilrights/sec2_tn_timeline.shtml

Organizations appeared in Memphis in 1968 on behalf of black workers seeking wage and union representation, their methods were labeled “nigger unionism” by the white press.¹⁵⁰ Black sanitation workers were not the first to fight against wage injustice but they were formidable opponents, possessing the strength and community support to resist racist rhetoric. Informed by civil rights activism, black workers demanded recognition of their humanity and their rights. And in their corner were community men and women ready to assist the battle against white tyranny and “rationed benevolence.” The battle for black manhood in Memphis was racialized and gendered. When black men refused to collect trash, the value of their “invisible” labor quickly became apparent to all.

The 1968 Sanitation Workers Strike and the Politics of Representation

Black sanitation workers in Memphis differed from earlier generations in certain key respects. By 1968, black men were not as transient as men of Lee’s generation had been. Opportunities for stable employment enabled them to build their lives in their communities. More owned homes, attended churches and were entrenched in community politics—both local and citywide. Their children were able to attend school. And the physical violence that had haunted black communities was far less frequent. Most importantly, resistance no longer resulted in lynching. Although acts of terror were still practiced, they were no longer commonplace and no longer celebrated by the local press. Desegregation efforts following the Supreme Court decision placed a new spotlight on the south. Recurrent black protests prepared activists for future acts of resistance. The very effort by whites to appear respectable and civil in their interactions with blacks limited the repertoire of acceptable actions in managing race relations. Black men took

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. pg. 13.

advantage of civil rights language, law, and activism to stake their claims for equal citizenship.

In 1968 Henry Loeb was in his second term as Mayor of Memphis. He was a self-professed white segregationist, who denounced integration as a form of “anarchy.” During his first campaign for office in 1959, he told the *Press Scimitar*: “I am a segregationist . . . I don't think any good would come to the city if a negro were elected to the City Commission.”¹⁵¹ Although non-combative in demeanor, Loeb was unyielding in his segregationist philosophies. He believed groups such as the KKK were beneath his social and political standing, but he shared their principles, arguing only against their methods. In his 1967 campaign, he grew even more antagonistic to civil rights and promised that he would make no concessions to black workers if he were elected. City ordinances prohibited strikes by municipal workers and Loeb promised to uphold those laws.

Labor unions exist to improve wages and working conditions for their members, using collective bargaining to counter the power of owners and managers. Union membership afforded workers greater job security as well as financial assistance in the case of strikes. Many southern states were notoriously anti-union, but in Memphis white workers, including employees in the Sanitation Department, were allowed to join unions. In 1968, thirty of 1300 black sanitation workers had managed to join AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, setting money aside to pay their dues in cash. Yet black union members did not receive either the same wages or

¹⁵¹ Whitney Strub, “Black and White and Banned All Over: Race, Censorship and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Spring, 2007), pp. 685-715. The original text can be found in the *Memphis Press Scimitar*, July 8, 1959.

benefits as white workers. Indeed, wages for full-time employment were so low that black sanitation workers were eligible for public assistance.¹⁵² On rainy days, they were expected to report to work but were denied pay if the city deemed the conditions too bad to collect trash. White co-workers were paid even when the city suspended trash collection due to inclement weather. Separate and unequal was still the practice in Memphis.

February 1, 1968 was a typical day at the job for Sanitation Workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker. It was raining but not hard enough to delay collection or deny the men work, but the rains became torrential before their shift ended. In route to the dump, three men squeezed into the cab of the truck and Cole and Walker, the employees with the least seniority rode in the truck's grimy barrel. As Cole and Walker stood inside the cylinder designed to smash refuse mechanically, an electrical wire shorted and the compressor began to run. The button to stop the machine was on the outside of the truck, far from their reach. Before they could escape, the steel packer used to mangle the city's garbage pulled Cole and Walker inside. Within seconds they were "chewed up like refuse in the back of a garbage compactor."¹⁵³ They were not the first to die in this gruesome fashion. In 1964, two black men were killed the same way. Sanitation workers had been beseeching the city to purchase new equipment for at least a decade, noting that the old trucks were faulty and dangerous. The city had refused to buy new equipment. Claiming that Cole and Walker were hourly-wage workers rather than full-time employees, the city denied their families worker compensation, pension, and insurance benefits. Instead the

¹⁵² See Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 101.

city offered the widows of Cole and Echol one month's salary, a sum too low to cover funeral expenses. Their bodies lay in caskets at a local funeral home until the families could secure the sum to bury them. Blacks who came to the financial rescue of these widows were of the working class poor and already financially strapped, but they shared what they had to assist families in dire need. This incident incited righteous indignation among the sanitation workers and eleven days later they walked off their jobs, striking for safer working conditions, better wages, and union recognition.

Mayor Loeb was already on record that he would not tolerate an illegal strike by municipal workers. He had a reputation for refusing to compromise with those who opposed him.¹⁵⁴ At his own request, all meetings, public confrontations and public hearings concerning the strike were recorded. Loeb anticipated that he would demonstrate his toughness to the white Memphis audience, but he had not anticipated a national audience forged by civil rights activism since 1954. He encountered workers, who were resolute, who were not alone and who were no longer invisible.

The press was the new "noose" for white supremacists. In keeping with long-established traditions, the media served as the voice of the white population, which claimed the universal stance of "citizens." In "The Newspaper and Public Opinion," George Lundberg describes the way the US press levies power and influence: "They [the newspapers] create great men out of next to nothing and destroy the reputation of men truly fit for leadership. They decide questions of war and peace. They carry elections. They overawe and coerce politicians, rulers, and courts. When they are virtually

¹⁵⁴ For example, A.W. Willis, an African American attorney ran against Loeb for the mayoral seat and was defeated. The city recognized Willis as a leader among blacks and offered him a seat in the city council, Loeb vetoed the recommendation.

unanimous, nothing can withstand them.”¹⁵⁵ The press played a critical role in the civil rights movement, but it was no longer unanimous. Some news outlets propagated the message of white supremacy; others documented and advocated for the black freedom struggle. When the newspapers and media did not cover events, the potency of protest often went unnoticed.¹⁵⁶ The Memphis newspapers understood the power conveyed by images. By 1968, the population of Memphis were predominantly working class and underserved whites and blacks. Pictures sent messages without relying on literacy for comprehension. Caricatures of black men and women were circulated to consolidate white racism, conveying derogatory messages about the black individuals, organizations, and the black community. Echoing scientific racism, newspapers portrayed blacks as deviant and inferior.

The white press allowed Loeb to speak for himself, providing a megaphone for the mayor’s views. They also published citizens’ opinions both for and against the strike. The mayor was consistently portrayed as representing civility and the public good, while blacks were cast as unreasonable and selfish. An article in the March 23rd *Appeal* exemplifies these sentiments. By this point in the standoff, mediators, attorneys and other third-party entities had volunteered to assist in negotiations to end the strike, but the mayor refused. The article quoted from two distinct populations who supported and opposed the mayor’s stance against the strike: “The first group, of about 50 was headed by Mrs. Claude Pugh of 5405 Mesquite. Members strongly supported the mayor’s strike

¹⁵⁵ George A. Lundberg, “The Newspaper and Public Opinion,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Jun., 1926), pp. 709-715.

¹⁵⁶ There is an array of information on the role of the media and the civil rights movement. For an in-depth review, see, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2006; or Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Both texts offer insight to the ways in which media coverage influenced what was considered the successes and failures of the civil rights movement.

stand and presented him with a letter in which they commended ‘his gentlemanly behavior, his fairness and honesty to all concerned and his humanitarian concern for the workers themselves (by furnishing food stamp money).’¹⁵⁷ Pugh’s comment about Loeb’s demeanor articulated white women’s support for a leader purportedly representing the best interests of the city. Her portrayal of Loeb’s “humanitarian efforts” suggested that the mayor had real compassion towards the black workers, despite their disobedience. Yet, the mention of social services also emasculated the striking men, positioning them as recipients of food stamps and welfare, resources typically available only to women and children. Loeb’s offer of subsistence to strikers was a means to subjugate black manhood, casting them as dependents, who could not support their families or broader communities.¹⁵⁸ Yet this effort to feminize black men failed to recognize that gender roles in the black community did not mirror white bourgeois norms. Slavery had precluded that possibility. White notions of emasculation equated the feminine and domesticity. Yet neither black men nor black women had enjoyed the gendered division of labor constructed by white elites in the nineteenth century. Whites may have tried to humiliate black men by suggesting they were in need of handouts, but after centuries of depredation, the black community did not read social assistance as an insult.

Some white reporters tried to manifest concern with black pain and suffering by seeking experience with sanitation work. As the city tried to recruit scab labor to break the strike, *Appeal* reporter Thomas Fox, for example, depicted his three-hour stint as a

¹⁵⁷ Joseph Sweat, “Two Issues Keep Union, City Apart,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 13, 1968.

¹⁵⁸ This statement is not meant to demean recipients of public assistance, but to show how white leaders degraded black men by trying to undermine their role as family providers .

sanitation worker. He recounted the application process at City Hall, noting that he had observed a conversation between a city worker and “a tall Negro man dressed in a suit and a top coat.”¹⁵⁹ The well-dressed man was urged to consider taking a job as a garbage collector, but he declined the offer. Fox described the well-dressed black man as a butcher, implying that a job as garbage collector would be a step up in the social hierarchy. Fox also chronicled the intensity of labor required by the job: “Even in yesterday’s cool temperatures, sweat stood out on the forehead of the men as they wrestled with the heavy barrels.”¹⁶⁰ The picture shows Fox dumping trash into a truck, neatly dressed, and meticulously clean, demonstrating that a white professional worker was able to handle the demands of the work without the exertions of his coworkers.



Figure 5. *Commercial Appeal* contributor, Thomas Fox collecting trash.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Fox, “Work is No Barrel of Fun for Reporter- Garbageman,” *Commercial Appeal*, February, 18, 1968. Pg. 18.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Fox's piece concluded by insinuating that garbage collectors have a relatively easy life, receiving wages for far more hours than they worked: "Even though we worked only three hours, Mr. Stiles said we went on the payroll at 10 a.m. and would be paid until 5 p.m. As I watched the trucks disgorge their foul loads at the dump, I decided it was time to end my career as a Garbageman."¹⁶² Fox's article captures the inability of whites to comprehend the strikers' predicament. Relying on his racial privilege and sense of innate superiority, he grasped neither the physical arduousness of the labor nor the psychological toll of working in a job in which black workers were treated differently from their white counterparts. His "decision" to end his "career" as a sanitation workers made it clear that as a white professional, he had a range of choices that were not available to black workers in Memphis. By claiming to place himself in the sanitation workers' shoes, Fox generated propaganda that impugned the legitimacy of the workers' claims, while reinforcing white notions of superiority.

The white press also invoked an insider-outsider dichotomy to condemn sanitation workers for bringing persons outside of the city (and region for that matter) into local affairs. From the administrations of Crump to Loeb, outsiders' involvement in city business was welcomed only if outsiders brought additional wealth and resources to the city. In taking up the cause of striking workers, AFSCME Director P.J. Ciampa was making neither of those contributions and was decidedly unwelcome. Forced to contend with such unwanted outsiders, particularly from the north, Memphis elites manifested apprehension, offense and detestation.

¹⁶² Ibid.

An article in the February 14 *Appeal* quoted directly from Loeb and Ciampa during strike negotiations. The banter between the two white men demonstrates how quickly the issues of concern to black strikers could be displaced by references to north-south antagonisms.

Mr. Loeb: this new administration is not going to be pushed around right off the bat in office. If it does it's in for a mighty tough four years. P.J. Ciampa, field staff director of State, County, and Municipal Employees (to Mr. Loeb): Put your halo in your hip pocket and let's get realistic. Mr. Loeb (when asked if the city had a grievance procedure): I have an open door policy. Anybody with a problem can come see me. Mr. Ciampa: It's a hell of a way to run a ship. Mr. Loeb: I don't care what (New York Mayor John) Lindsay did, I don't care what (New York Gov. Nelson) Rockefeller did. You're talking to a country boy. This is not New York, this is Memphis. I live here and my kids live here and I am not going to play around with the health of this city.¹⁶³

By positioning himself as a “country boy,” born and bred in the region, Loeb claimed the status of a consummate insider and the heritage of white paternalism. Just as white slave owners in the antebellum period claimed to know what was in the best interest of enslaved African-Americans, Loeb implied that he alone knew what was best for blacks and whites in Memphis. He wanted no interference from meddling northerners. And he wanted no union interference with the city's cheapest source of labor. The ability of local black men to solicit assistance from other white men implicitly challenged white southern men's control over black bodies. Side-stepping issues of black men's rights to fair wages and human recognition, Loeb and Ciampa jockeyed for the role of white savior, confident that the future of black workers lay in their hands.

Manifestations of white paternalism also surfaced in the February 19 article, “Union to Seek Delays on Debt—Rally is Held.” The article was accompanied by an

¹⁶³ Unknown, “Stiff Bargaining Lips Flips Quips,” *Commercial Appeal*, February, 14, 1968.

image of an emptied trash can with a handmade sign reading, “Ciampa Go Home.”

Ciampa was encouraging local business owners to grant striking workers a “a moratorium on debt collections until the strike was over.”¹⁶⁴ White city leaders recoiled at the audacity of an outsider to attempt to organize temporary debt relief—a move that could lengthen the strike. But not all whites supported the city. An ecumenical collective of white clergy supported the workers. The article reported that the ministers were encouraging the strikers to hold out for justice: “Last night a crowd estimated at 2,000, which included striking sanitation workers, their families and sympathizers, hear[d] ministers and labor leaders say the garbage strike couldn’t last forever but that the strikers could hold out longer then the city of Memphis.”¹⁶⁵ Although the text indicated that some whites in Memphis supported the workers, the photograph conveyed a different message (see Figure 6). The empty trash can suggested that the city had everything under control. The demand that Ciampa go home suggests universal anti-strike sentiment, masking white support for the strikers. The insinuation of collected trash made clear the indispensability of black strikers.

¹⁶⁴ Unknown, “Union Seek Delays on Debt- Rally is Held,” *Commercial Appeal*, February, 18, 1968.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.



Figure 6. Photograph from *Commercial Appeal*, “Ciampa Go Home”¹⁶⁶

Editorial cartoons communicated powerful messages. As Pam Hackbert-Dean noted in “Comic Relief: The Processing, Preservation, and Cataloging of Editorial Cartoons,” cartoons can be particularly valuable in documenting accredited public sentiments. “Cartoonists’ drawings address wide-ranging social and political issues, capturing in snapshot form important moments in history.” The cartoon that appeared in the February 23 *Appeal* aligned the newspaper with Mayor Loeb’s perception of the threat the strike posed. “Beyond the Bounds of Tolerance” depicts social and economic apocalypse if city officials are unable to keep black sanitation workers in their place (see Fig. 7). Representing a black man as an ape-like creature, a member of a subhuman

¹⁶⁶ Unknown, “Union to Seek Delay on Debt- Rally Held,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 19, 1968. Photograph by Tom Bussler.

species, the cartoon suggests that the “City Hall Sit-In” quite literally stinks, imperiling the city with noxious fumes incompatible with civilized existence.

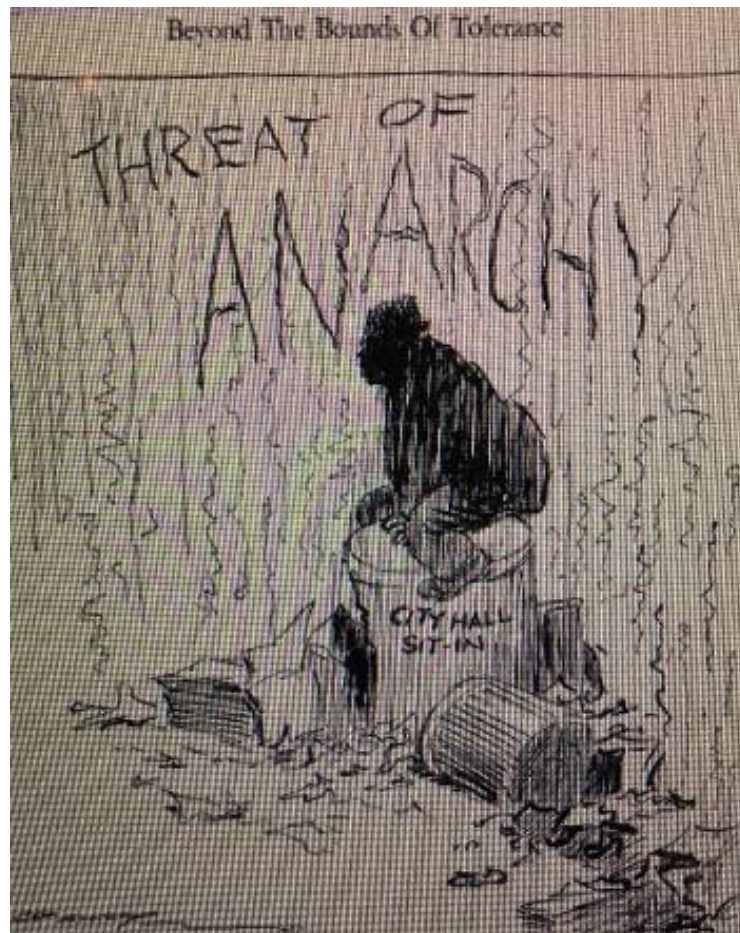


Figure 7. *Commercial Appeal* editorial cartoon depicting man amidst trash. ¹⁶⁷

Echoing Mayor Loeb’s campaign rhetoric, the strike depicted a form of anarchy that subverted the established social and political order.

In “A Space Apart: Animation and the Spatial Politics of Conversion,” Nicolas Sammond identified conventional racial narratives embedded in early twentieth century short films and cartoons:

¹⁶⁷ Unknown, “Beyond the Bounds of Tolerance,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 23, 1968.

Still, it's important to note the ways in which this onstage/onscreen racial imaginary refracted the lived racial geography of segregation: even staged representations of blackness (with or without blackface) conventionally located black bodies in the imagined landscapes of Africa, the plantation, or the uptown jungle/underworld of the ghetto.¹⁶⁸

The *Appeal's* editorial cartoon animalized black men and resurrected tropes popular in the nineteenth century, which insisted that black men were incapable of self-control and self-governance. The audaciousness of the animalization provided a glimpse of an unfiltered southern white imaginary. In addition, the suggestion that uncollected trash only negatively affected white neighborhoods signifies the belief that blacks feel at home in squalor, as evidenced by the man sitting playfully on a trash can. Although dressed in a suit and wearing a hat, the caricatured creature is portrayed as comfortable in the midst of garbage and toxins. Challenging the notion that the strikers are men of dignity, the cartoon unmaskes black respectability as performative only, insisting that black men are untamed and undomesticated animals masquerading as human. A clean Memphis is envisioned as essential to white expectations of a livable city and contrasted with a city full of garbage—the natural habitat of blacks.

This blatantly racist cartoon sent markedly different messages to whites and to blacks. “Threat of Anarchy” warned whites of the dire threat to a democratic society, should whites cease to keep blacks in “their place.” Patriotic whites were expected to denounce the strike for the sake of democracy. Yet such systemic repudiation of blacks’ humanity made clear that whites would never allow even the most disenfranchised blacks to have an opportunity for a decent standard of living. Second-class citizenship was the lot that even the most tolerant white southerner would accord to African Americans. By

¹⁶⁸ Nicholas Sammond, “A Space Apart: Animation and the Spatial Politics of Conversion,” *Film History* 23.4 (2009): 276.

reducing blacks to the subhuman, the cartoon visualized the assumption that whites must control all aspects of black existence because they assume blacks are incapable of controlling themselves. Absent white control, blacks exist in the white imaginary as dangers, threats, menaces to public order and democratic rule.

An Alternative View: Ernest Withers and the Embodiment of Southern Black Masculinity

The strike began eleven days after the deaths of Cole and Walker. In the interim, there was no evidence of black violence or disarray in the city. As the strike progressed, African American men, women and children marched peacefully in the streets. On February 19, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, local black leaders, and concerned citizens held a vigil outside City Hall.¹⁶⁹ Despite the peaceful manifestation of dissent, the white press routinely primed the white population to perceive danger, whether danger to public health, civic order, or Memphis' racial "balance." Fortunately, the white press was not the only medium documenting the lives of the sanitation workers and the operation of the strike. White media published white conversations about black men—as if black men were mute and incapable of speaking on their own behalf. When seeking perspectives on the strike, the white press never approached striking workers, requesting their assessments of the issues. The black press played a vital role in providing alternative perspectives, sharing insights about the views of African American readers and strike sympathizers. Another narrative and resource emerged. Ernest C. Withers, a civil rights photojournalist, used his camera to capture

¹⁶⁹ For more information of the Sanitation Workers timeline see, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) <http://www.afscme.org/union/history/mlk/1968-afscme-memphis-sanitation-workers-strike-chronology>.

important moments in southern history, often publishing images with little or no written interpretation (see Fig. 8).

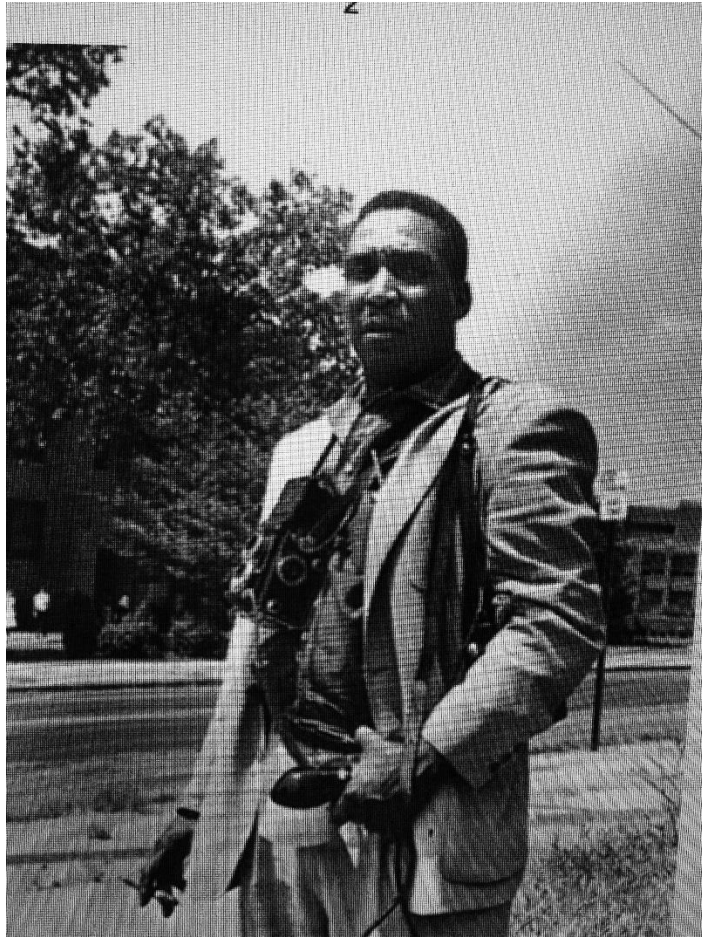


Figure 8. Ernest Withers, civil rights photographer during his coverage of the Little Rock Nine.¹⁷⁰

Born August 7, 1922, Withers was one of six children of Arthur and Pearl Withers. His mother died when he was six years old and he had a contentious relationship with his

¹⁷⁰ Ernest Withers Collection. Ernest Withers Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee.

father. Legend has it that his first relationship without contention was with a camera.¹⁷¹ During a high school assembly, Withers snatched a camera from his sister's boyfriend and took a picture of heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis' wife, Marva Louis.¹⁷² As a young man, Withers enrolled in the Army. During World War II, he trained and worked as a military photographer.¹⁷³ Returning to Memphis after the war, he opened a studio with his brother in South Memphis.¹⁷⁴ Withers became one of the first African American police officers in Memphis in 1955.

In following his ambition to become a photographer, Withers both embodied and documented alternative modes of southern black masculinity. As stereotypes circulated during the 1950's of the brute, lazy, and inconsequential southern nomadic black male, Withers found his vocation in expressing a markedly different account of black men. His photographic repertoire covered moments in black history and culture in the turbulent decades of the civil rights struggle, when he and his subjects faced the brutal violence of white racism. Through his work, Withers provided a nuanced articulation of black subjectivity in the south. His photography presented an unconventional account of black life in the south that contested derogatory stereotypes of black southern manhood. Withers captured smiles, tears, glances, reflective moments, introspection, exposure, love and other characteristics of black males rarely illuminated in public discourse. He saw what others did not see, drawing on his own double consciousness to illuminate gendered

¹⁷¹ Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2002.

¹⁷² Anette John Hall, "A lensman's legacy: Wielding a camera in the Jim Crow South, Ernest C. Withers didn't just document history- he helped make it," March, 9, 2003. www.philly.com.

¹⁷³ Ernest Withers Collection, http://www.stonebridgemastring.com/withers/?page_id=670.

¹⁷⁴ Quarterback: A Look at Dr. Ernest C. Withers. Withers Collection Museum and Gallery. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dngAozDbgDg>.

oppression and racial domination. Withers' gave visual form to the "souls of black folk."¹⁷⁵ He traversed the nation and the south to memorialize the struggles of blacks for social justice. Drawing upon his own subjectivity, he cultivated a visual vernacular that manifested whenever he aimed his camera and recorded an image.

Withers' powerful images provide a crucial alternative the visual narratives that populated the white press. In contrast to the *Commercial Appeal's* "Ciampa Go Home" image, which depicted striking workers as dispensable, Withers offered a different interpretation of the workers' indispensability, by foregrounding uncollected trash in Memphis in the midst of the strike (see Fig. 9). Persons in the background indicate that this picture was not taken in an all-black community, every part of Memphis was affected by the strike. The figure most prominent in the shot is a black man wearing a sign supporting the strike, whose intense gaze is fixed in Withers' direction. His eyes suggest recognition not only of the camera but of the person behind it. He moves toward the camera with steadfast purpose, as others move past or away as if Withers were invisible. For most of the people on the street, Withers and the young man seem to be of no account. But the young man and Withers connect, manifesting a form of black recognition that is not hostile, hypermasculine or aggressive, but rather personal, intimate or indeed, familial. Withers had a capacity to capture dimensions of black male subjectivity that eluded white photographers. The connection shared between Withers and the central subject in this image exemplifies how Withers' embodiment and subjectivity affected the camera's eye. As both a black man and an observer of black

¹⁷⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903.

men, Withers occupied the space both knower and known. His images possess unparalleled authority.



Figure 9. Black Protester during the Sanitation Strike, 1968 ¹⁷⁶

Wither's Gender-Inclusive Politics

Civil rights historians often cover the Memphis strike as if it only involved men, erasing the roles played by many women and children, who were central to the strike's success.¹⁷⁷ Women were of critical importance to mobilizations designed to transform

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷For historians such as John Hope Franklin and Juan Williams, women's roles were often restricted to traditional gender expectations.

racial politics in the South, yet they are typically treated as auxiliaries, who were purely supplemental to male initiatives. During the sanitation strike, black men welcomed any and all assistance offered by women and youth. Women coordinated, fundraised, marched and protested in solidarity with black men. Yet, historians and archivists often feature images of women and children in churches and homes—spaces deemed appropriate to traditional gender roles.

Withers deviated significantly from such gendered racial scripts. His photographs of the strike depicted gender-inclusive and multigenerational praxis. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer visited Memphis in 1968 in support of the workers (see Fig. 10).¹⁷⁸ Known for the tenacity of her leadership in mobilizing voters in support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, and leading a credentials challenge to the white racist Democratic Party delegates at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer was an eminent civil rights leader. Her appearance in Memphis in support of the strike would have meant a great deal to the strikers and their supporters, yet but her visit has been elided in comprehensive works on the strike.¹⁷⁹ Earnest Withers, however, made sure to enter Hamer's presence in the historical record (see figure 10).¹⁸⁰ As figure 10 demonstrates, Withers captured the civil rights activist as an orator, who not only appeared on stage, but owned the stage.

¹⁷⁸ Ronald W. Bailey and Michele Furst, Eds., *Let Us March On! Selected Civil Rights Photographs of Ernest C. Withers 1955- 1968*. Northeastern University, Massachusetts College of Arts. Boston. 1992, pg. 70.

¹⁷⁹ Michael Honey was a leading historian who wrote several books about the Memphis strike. Hamer was not mentioned.

¹⁸⁰ Ernest C. Withers, *Let Us March On! : Selected Civil Rights Photographs of Ernest C. Withers 1955-1968*. Boston, Mass: Massachusetts College of Art, 1992.



Figure. 10. Mississippi civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer speaking to sanitation workers in Memphis 1968.¹⁸¹

Wither's gender-inclusive photography recognized the importance of celebrating eminent civil rights activists whose commitments included economic rights and poverty alleviation. He left a permanent record of leaders who had the courage to cast their lot with struggling strikers and lend their voices to the cause of workers' rights.¹⁸²

Hamer was not the sole woman to appear in Withers' photos of the strike. His collection is rich in pictures of women, performing diverse roles during the strike.

Margaret Walker's Foreword in *Let Us March On: Selected Civil Rights Photographs of*

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Working on the scholarship team for the National Civil Rights Museum, historians from all regions of the country shaped the interpretation of the exhibits using intentional methods to connect the stories of leaders who surfaced in multiple locations; but none mentioned Fannie Lou Hamer visiting Memphis during the 1968 strike. The Shelby County Library holds the largest archive of printed newspapers and materials on the strike in the city and there was no record of Hamer's presence. The only place a picture of Hamer's involvement with the strike is found is in a Withers' book.

Ernest C. Withers's 1955- 1968 notes Withers' inclusive gender politics of representation: "Successful social movements are based on the masses of people. I am also very pleased to see the many photographs of Black women who were key and too often unheralded participants in the Civil Rights Movement."¹⁸³ Withers' intentional recognition of black women provided them a space in this history as leaders, strategists, collaborators, and supporters.

Photography as visual art requires the same level of intentionality and craft as painting. Both do far more than record an image, they construct a way of seeing. Withers sought to make visible the many women who were not known outside their communities, but who devoted untold hours to ensuring the strike's success. In figure 11, for example, three women take center stage as protesters. Leading the marchers, one woman carries a sign, "Dignity and Decency for our Sanitation Workers." Fighting the dehumanizing racialization in the images in the white press, Withers shows what is at stake in the strike while also demonstrating women as significant agents of solidarity and social justice activists. The woman's courageous participation dispels sexist notions that the Memphis protests were male-dominated and male-centered. Although the sanitation workers were all men, black women were invested in the strike and in safety and decent treatment of the workers. Withers' images tell a different story about black women civil rights activists. They are not the emasculating matriarchs of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's imaginings; nor are they the faithful kitchen workers of mainstream historical accounts.

¹⁸³ Ibid., pg. 3.

Withers provides a way of seeing black women as co-owners and co-conspirators in a movement to tear down white supremacy in the south.



Figure 11. Black Women Protesters on behalf of the sanitation workers.¹⁸⁴

Lens-crafter: Fraternal Bonds through Withers' Gendered Optic

Wither's intimate familiarity with southern racism shaped his aesthetics. He was not only a recorder of images, but also a historian of southern culture who sought to preserve black history. His sensitivity to the plight of black men in the racist south gave his photographs a depth and perspicacity missing from other depictions of black sanitation workers and supporters of the strike. As a black man living in the south, he was keenly attuned to racial codes and to subtle strategies of resistance. In figure 12, for

¹⁸⁴ Ernest Withers Collection. Memphis, Tennessee.

example, Withers depicted an effort by a black male picketer to subvert an ignoble trope of southern white racism. One means devised by white supremacists to deny black men recognition as humans worthy of equal respect and equal rights was to call black men “boy.” The colloquial “boy” relegated adult black men to the status of children, subjecting them to the whims of white men. The protestor in Figure 12 carries a sign that had been crafted by a white strike opponent, commanding the striking workers to “Sign Contract: Boy!!!”¹⁸⁵ Rather than obeying this command, the Black protestor reworked the message to assert his own authority as a man, entitled to give orders to the mayor. Rather than performing deference to the white racist order, the protestor instructed the mayor to negotiate and sign a fair contract, by reversing the referent of “boy.” “This means you, Henry Loeb.” Black men raised in the south knew that when they were interpellated as “boy” by whites, defiance could carry violent repercussions.

¹⁸⁵ Withers Collection, Withers Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee.



Figure 12. Black male protestor with placard.¹⁸⁶

Nonetheless, the protestor chose to powerfully assert his manhood. Dressed in business attire, the protestor walks with dignity, demonstrating through his demeanor that there was nothing uncivilized, infantile, gauche, or unrefined about black men. Indeed, by daring to address Mayor Loeb as “boy,” he made it clear that he was not afraid of southern white terrorism and that he would not be bullied by white racists.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

Withers' photo draws attention to both the message and the messenger. The simplicity of verbiage, showing the ease with which whites manifest disrespect for black men, made it clear to a national public that little had changed in the post-Jim Crow south. Yet the equanimity manifested by the protestor, who dared to subvert white power, sent a potent message to the striking workers, their families, and allies that *black men had changed*. They would no longer tolerate infantilization, disrespect, and denial of their rights.

Withers' photos provided an alternative perspective of southern black masculinity. As a black man, his entrance and acceptance into certain spaces provided an intimacy unavailable to whites and those outside the region. The publication of his work availed an alternative reading of black male subjectivity and made visible the ways in which black men in the South were dependent upon multi-gendered and multi-generational resources. His work disrupted the perpetuated images of black men as rugged, disconnected from their community, without the need of assistance, apathetic or uncompassionate and self-serving. In other civil rights protest, children were deployed to avoid adults from being arrested or losing their jobs such as Birmingham.¹⁸⁷ Withers captured young black male investments in the strike was a reflection contested the belief that black men were invisible and unavailable figures in the lives of black children specifically black male youth. (See Fig. 13).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Project C for Confrontation is a film depicting the story of the Birmingham civil rights movement, which mobilized to integrate the downtown district of the city. Children were intentionally used in the protests. Over 5,000 students walked out of their classrooms across the city and shut down the city for five days.

¹⁸⁸ Ernest Withers Gallery, Withers Collection. Memphis, Tennessee.



Figure 13. Young boy asleep after protest. ¹⁸⁹

The archived description provided by the Withers' Collection stated the male youth was napping after a day of protest. There was no historic records, propaganda or correspondences that suggested strikers campaigned for youth participation. Moreover, the young male's commitment to justice created a different narrative of what black men meant to their communities. In the midst of debris and trash the boy is sleeping next to a sign with a single word, justice. The overarching commentary about this picture was the interconnectedness to the fate of the workers and their successors. There was an emotional and intimate accessibility to the workers that prompted collective compassion,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

support and collaboration. In the midst of the chaotic backdrop, the young man's slumber appeared peaceful and uninterrupted. A reward for a day of activism on behalf of men he admired and entrusted his future.



Figure 14. Sanitation Workers and National Guard.¹⁹⁰

Although Withers' credited many women and children that participated and assisted in the strike, black men provided an autoethnographic account of a moment in history when his vocation and his actual investment in the outcome of a particular civil rights struggle collided. As a native Memphian, Withers' legacy resided within the life and the memory of the workers. (See Fig. 14).¹⁹¹ From the very young to the seasoned, their stories were prophetic testimonies of a chapter within his personal history. Withers' was an unnamed in the Memphis Sanitation Workers strike of 1968. His personal and professional legacy embedded within each image of the black men he seized throughout

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

the strike. The fraternal bonds of love, friendship, vulnerability, and compassion were embedded within magnetized gazes directed not only towards the camera but also towards Withers. The only consistent politics he displayed and articulated through his work was the politics of worthiness, manhood, and self-respect. If one ever desired to search within the essence and motivations of the strike of 1968, it only required a collection of Ernest Withers' work, an inverted retrospect of the black man behind and in the black men in front of each picture.

Chapter 4

“It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp”:

New Spaces of Redemption Created by Southern Black Men

“Cuz here is where it all started. Heavy percussion. Repetitive hook. Sexually suggestive lyrics. It’s all blues. Back Door Man to Back that Ass Up. It’s all about pain, and pussy.”¹⁹²

“You know it’s hard out here for a pimp.”¹⁹³

Hustle and Flow, the 2005 film created and directed by white, California native Craig Brewer, takes place in North Memphis, Tennessee, an impoverished black neighborhood on the outskirts of Memphis proper. Winner of the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Original Song, “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” the film achieved commercial success.¹⁹⁴ Brewer described *Hustle and Flow* as his attempt to make a “classic American film.” Yet his decision to place African Americans at the heart of an American story of self-making deviates significantly from Hollywood norms and his depiction of black masculinity has been the subject of controversy within the black community.

Many educated African Americans have been critical of representations of blacks in popular culture, which notoriously replicates derogatory stereotypes of black criminals, drug addicts and dealers, pimps, and thugs, images readily available in *Hustle and Flow*. As Wendi Thomas, for example, wrote about the Academy Award ceremony in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*: “While many Memphians were probably jumping up and

¹⁹² *Hustle and Flow*. By Craig Brewer. Dir. Craig Brewer. Perf. Terrence Howard and Taraji P. Henson. Independent, 2005. Film. Pg. 55.

¹⁹³ First line of lyrics to the song, “It’s Hard out Here for a Pimp,” by Three 6 Mafia. *Hustle and Flow*.

¹⁹⁴ The song was written and performed by Paul Duane Beaugard (DJ Paul), Jordan Houston (Juicy J) and Darnell Carlton (Crunchy Black), known as Three 6 Mafia, who are North Memphis natives.

down on their sofas while Three 6 Mafia flashed metallic grills and demonstrated their inability to speak proper English in their acceptance ramble, I was mortified.”¹⁹⁵ Blacks’ demand that Hollywood “clean up” the messages, images, and representations of African Americans in film informs the rejection of *Hustle and Flow* by those who advocate black pride and a specific black aesthetic.¹⁹⁶

But there is much more to be said about the construction of black masculinity in this widely-viewed production. In this chapter, I analyze *Hustle and Flow* as a complicated, cinematic, masterpiece about love, legacies, redemption, and the preservation of southern black male artistic innovation. Graphically depicting a complex mix of black violence, prostitution and hip hop, this film captures multiple modes of southern black male subjectivity in the characters DJay, Key and Black Skinny. The film illuminates a social context markedly different from the Memphis inhabited by Tom Lee and the Sanitation Workers, but one which presents continual challenges for black men in their quests for self-actualization. It examines music as a mechanism of redemption even as it probes the commodification and recuperation of southern black masculinities in “post the civil rights era.” The same year that the bronze sculpture of Tom Lee was unveiled in downtown Memphis, Hollywood and hip hop offered another image of black masculinity. From Tom Lee as a savior of vulnerable whites to hip hop as a means of redemption for vulnerable black men, these stories offer markedly different accounts of

¹⁹⁵ Wendi C. Thomas, “Oscar win cast bad light on city,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 10, 2006. Friday Edition. Pg. C8.

¹⁹⁶ “Black Aesthetic” was conceptualized by Larry Neal in “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 12.4 (1968): 29-39.

southern black masculinities as white supremacy gives way to sustained white privilege in a nation that proclaims itself a land of equal opportunity.¹⁹⁷

Same Script, Different Day: Black Marginalization in U.S. Films

African Americans have long contended that American cinema supports and validates the oppression of an entire population of people. From Hollywood's treatment of slavery to the depiction of family dynamics, representations of blacks in film and television—whether created by African Americans or by whites—is remarkably narrow.

Hollywood, like the country it mirrors, is a place of contradictions, especially when race is involved. For every film that has bravely confronted uncomfortable social truths, there are dozens that shrink from telling us what we might not want to hear. And this timidity has meant that stereotypes of black servility have been supplanted, over the years, by stereotypes of black villainy and black nobility.¹⁹⁸

It has been economically advantageous for Hollywood to portray certain problematics in black culture, only occasionally allowing alternative images to surface. African American directors have not wanted to violate codes of ethnic and racial privacy by advancing depictions that illuminate the challenges blacks face within white-dominant society. White directors who produce gritty images of the unspoken realities of institutional racism can do serious harm to their careers. What cinema failed to depict has been tackled in prose, poetry and plays by Black writers for centuries. Toni Morrison in 1970 published *The Bluest Eye*, which depicted rape and molestation. *The Color Purple* in 1982 addressed human trafficking and Jim Crow life in rural Georgia. Male characters in these works were complex, haunted and deeply invested in finding their humanity in the

¹⁹⁷ As a disclaimer, this chapter seeks to analyze messy and complicated notions of black male identity. It does not intend to justify, endorse, or disregard problematic relationships between black men and southern women.

¹⁹⁸ A.O. Scott, "FILM: Oscars' Step Toward Redemption," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/31/movies/film-oscar-s-step-toward-redemption.html>.

midst of their own demons and their sometimes demonic treatment of the women and children in their lives. Some scholars, journalists and civil rights leaders were flabbergasted by these works and, in some instances, called for protest.¹⁹⁹ Black authors were not allowed to “dimensionalize” black life, if it did not yield “positive results.”

Following the civil rights struggle in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, urbanization and inner city blight landscaped urban terrains throughout the country. Authors and creative minds addressed the repercussions of enslavement and other forms of oppression in the US by relocating black narratives from the plantation to the concrete jungle.²⁰⁰ This shifting landscape was designed to display the disenfranchisement of blacks beyond the south. A new genre of movies entered during this era. Since the early 1980’s, the production of “black gangsta” and “Blaxploitation” films have proliferated derogatory images of disenfranchised black men and women.

Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice President Al Gore, spearheaded media regulations regarding the exposure of young children to racy content in the media: “More than anything else, I want this book to be a call for American parents. I want to offer them the very real hope that we can reassert some control over the cultural environment in which our children are raised.”²⁰¹ Targeting diverse genres of music and media for social control, Tipper Gore imagined a monolithic [white] “home,” in which neither race nor class affected the experiences or possibilities of children. She posited a particular

¹⁹⁹ The Los Angeles Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for a boycott of the movie, *The Color Purple* in 1986, but then the NAACP was outraged that it was snubbed for an Oscar. For more information on the fiasco, United Press International. “Color Purple was Shut Out: Blacks outraged over Oscars,” *The Bulletin*, March 26, 1986. Google News. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1243&dat=19860326&id=bZNTAAAAIAJ&sjid=GocDAAAAIAJ&pg=3451,3116654&hl=en>.

²⁰⁰ Colloquialism for urban areas.

²⁰¹ Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in X-Rated Society*, Abingdon Press, 1987.

“cultural environment” devoid of violence, gang culture, misogyny, and economic barrenness as the universal American experience, which made some genres of music and film more of a target than others. *New Jack City*, set in New York, *Boyz from Da Hood*, set in California, were precisely the kind of films that Gore wanted removed from “our children’s” cultural environment.

As Hollywood and black filmmakers obsessed with black east and west coast culture, the urban south was unexplored territory. Few paid attention to the changing landscape of the south. Pimp, drug, and disenfranchisement movies became the norm in representations of black life in the US, but their presence in the urban south went unnoticed until *Hustle and Flow* brought them to center stage.

Hip Hop music had been around for nearly three decades before the release of *Hustle and Flow*, yet never received the recognition or the credit it deserved as a poetic art form set to music. The griots and archivists of the history of blacks in the United States were monetarily compensated but were exploited and utilized as the antithesis of respectable decorum. Black scholars and activists often saw hip hop as part of the problem that plagued African American communities. Those that analyzed the work and grounded it in critical race theory or gender studies, nuanced the expressive art form but rarely receive the type of public recognition to counter the negative narratives circulated in spaces outside the academy. Governments and social institutions at the national, state and local level did little to improve conditions that served as muses to black hip hop artists. Less money went into inner city and poor rural education. Social services in these areas were inaccessible. For some, the way out was to expose their everyday lived experiences to the world in the most visceral and gritty way. Hip hop captures both the

ugliness of urban blight and the beauty and innovativeness of black men as they confront the existential crises posed by “being” and “becoming” racially-entrapped gendered subjects. Gangsta, hip hop and urban culture replaced “mammies” with “ride or die” women, “sambos” with broke pimps, and “overseers” with middle and upper class blacks who judged and condemned those who were less fortunate but whose labor fed the Memphis economy. Negro spirituals were replaced with gangsta rap, which provides encoded messaging about the impending danger of the accumulation of wealth to “the soul of black folk.”

The omission of the urban south was glaring from the pop culture depiction of black life. Memphis, like other metropolises changed and while the world focused on New York and other cities outside of the south, Memphis created its own subculture, a city within a city. *Hustle and Flow* was the first acclaimed full-feature film that took place in the “dirty” south. *Jason’s Lyric* was created and produced in 1999, but was seen by few outside the black community. *Hustle and Flow* transcended the black audience and introduced the US to southern urban culture. The film depicts tensions of internalized racism, invisible white supremacy, male dominance and southern plantation ideologies. It also provides insights about black men and women, who are dreamers, innovators, and entrepreneurs—albeit dispossessed due to economic, racial and gender marginalization.

In the following analysis, I explore the pains and pressures of becoming and being black men, which at times exacerbate relationships between young and old, and between those with resources and those without. The film shows how the development of personhood includes salving and mending relationships. It also enables a discussion of the black vernacular, in which not all bitches are women, not all ho’s are ho’s, and more

importantly, not all pimps are pimps in the same stereotypical way. The film contextualizes prostitution and demonstrates that there are many kinds of black men who are not conscious actors in the misuse and abuse of black women. In the case of DJay, the film's protagonist, pimping involves the use of black women (and one particular white woman) as an economic strategy in a world devoid of alternatives, yet pimping is also enmeshed in one black man's search for safety, love, and a sense of belonging. I will argue that the film facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of the economic constraints that circumscribe urban black life in the south, illuminating the difference between the protagonist's definitive sense of self and his clear recognition of the improbability of self-actualization because his means and methods are limited by the social, political, racial, gendered and ideological constraints imposed because of his "demographic personhood."

"He's not white. He's light skinned": Brokering Whiteness in Urban Film Culture

White privilege allows whites to dream, hope and desire in a way not available to marginalized subjects. Works created by whites in Hollywood are not tainted by the legacy of disenfranchisement, racialized and gendered self-doubt, or the fear of failure based on one's demographics. Craig Brewer possessed the cultural capital necessary to create what he called "a classic American story." According to Brewer, "the common ingredient in American cinema is a wildly outlandish dream that you truly believe in."²⁰² Persons of color in a racist society are not afforded the luxury to dream, desire and hope on the same terms as whites. Social constraints and the psychological warfare

²⁰² "Meet the Artist: Interview with Craig Brewer," Sundance Film Festival, February 6, 2009. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mngQ4TrBM5g>.

experienced by those who are conscious of their subordinate status can prohibit certain cultural interventions. White privilege provided Brewer resources as a white man that encouraged his confidence that he could create a film about black life in the urban south. Brewer was convinced that he could articulate a type of complex black manhood because his white privilege afforded him an epistemic stance believed to be “universal.”²⁰³ John Singleton, who financed the film, was renowned for his films from *Boyz in Da Hood* to *Poetic Justice*, and for his cinematic artistry that captured a form of black *Bildungsroman*.²⁰⁴

Although Brewer created a film that placed race at the heart of the narrative, *Hustle and Flow* did not receive critical acclaim as a “race” film. By contrast, Lions Gate released a film in 2004 that depicted racial tensions in Los Angeles, California and was marketed as “a race movie.” *Crash*, created by Paul Haggis, examined the intersection of individuals’ lives in a way that was designed to spark conversations around race and issues of inequality. By presenting intertwined lives of individuals in everyday encounters, Haggis sought to address stereotypes, racist perceptions and beliefs that fuel, guide and alter lives. Although *Crash* received critical acclaim, the film problematically suggests that racism affects the privileged in the same way it impacts the marginalized. Perhaps due to this leveling effect, *Crash* served as a conversational vehicle for race among whites. It did not offer any nuanced ideas or perspectives to those who experience the multiplicities of intersecting oppressions first hand. Ironically, there is a plethora of scholarly works on the Haggis film, but none on *Hustle and Flow*. Secondary and post-

²⁰³ Fanon has argued that universality is an epistemic stance that white racism denies to racialized subjects. See *Black Skin, White Masks*.

²⁰⁴ German term to describe self-development, moral maturation, and “coming of age.”

secondary schools use *Crash* as a resource to discuss race relations in the US. A simple web search produced pages and pages of lesson plans, and curricula to encourage use of *Crash* as a teaching tool. Yet, *Hustle and Flow* offers far more opportunities to examine race relationships in nuanced ways. For this reason, it is particularly important to investigate how white filmmakers such as Brewer are constructing black characters, as well as intra-racial and interracial relations. Brewer has normalized the roles accorded to blacks in *Hustle and Flow* by labeling the film a classic American story. The convolution of race has literal and figurative implications in the exploration of Brewer's work. Where Haggis attempted to broker his white privilege to address injustice, he circulated a distorted white view of race that appeals exclusively to whites. Brewer on the other hand, complicates understandings of race and universality by the sparse appearance of white characters, the particular roles assigned to whites, and the relationship of whites to the black lead character.

The opening dialogue in *Hustle and Flow* between DJay and Nola symbolize the racial and gendered purgatory both characters face living in a city where they are literally and figuratively invisible. Brewer's description of Nola is as vague as her lines: "NOLA opts to wear long blond mini-braids like most of the black topless dancers at the local clubs. She is, to the best of her recollection, 20 years old."²⁰⁵ Her assimilation into black culture is indicated by her lack of racial power—she is a tool that serves DJay. White women living among blacks in inner cities are not a new phenomenon. After slavery, widowed or single white women were left to fend for themselves. If they had no property

²⁰⁵ Craig Brewer, *Hustle and Flow: An Original Screenplay*. Original White Shooting Script. June 24, 2004. Dailyscript.com, pg. 1.

or money, they were often relocated by southern municipalities to poorer areas, often African American communities. Curiosity and sexual attraction between black men and white women prompted sexual activity, which generated multiracial children, further rooting white women in these communities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s in Memphis, most whites who lived in the city were affluent, transplants, or folks who inherited property from their families. None of these resided in North Memphis. Any white living in that part of the city was an outcast with nowhere else to go. White privilege in the south requires a certain level of affluence. Lower class background, lack of pedigree or other social factors can exempt some whites from exercising white privilege to their advantage. Blacks who interacted with local whites, fully cognizant of their pariah status, may yet have been interested in those white individual's usefulness as brokers to resources and status or as bridges to circles otherwise inaccessible. Where privileged whites entered predominantly black communities with an arrogant expectation that they would be well-received, white pariahs like Nola had no comparable expectation.



Figure 1. Nola fighting the heat working the streets. Character played by Taryn Manning²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*; Image from "Google Images"

https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1920&bih=974&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=Hustle+and+Flow+NOLA&og=Hustle+and+Flow+NOLA&gs_l=img.3..0j0i30k1j0i24k1.714008.721466.0.721963.40.17.13.10.15.0.343.1274.16j3-1.17.0....0...1c.1.64.img..0.39.1278...0i10k1j0i8i30k1.vDx3egXlyhY#imgsrc=oH_U0JkOTIagJM%3A

Nola, then, is an interesting vehicle for the white supremacy that implicitly dominates the narrative of *Hustle and Flow*. DJay and the African American characters who populate North Memphis—particularly women in the sex industry and men in the music industry—represent the vast majority of inhabitants, but they are also the byproducts of a white-dominant social, economic, and political system that denies them any meaningful opportunities to escape poverty. Within this complex racial landscape, Brewer plays with race and with whiteness, probing the potential for shifts, mutations and pseudo-subordination. Nola, the first white character introduced presents a stereotypical yet nuanced dynamic between black men and white women, one which historically confronted black men with death and destruction. Yet in *Hustle and Flow*, it was the opposite. Nola serves as DJay’s meal ticket. Her ability to sell her body on the street made her not only economically useful but the source of his prosperity.

North Memphis was not always the “hood” filled with trash, empty homes and broken promises for youth. Like most black neighborhoods at the turn of the 20th century, African Americans kept North Memphis clean, valued their property and had a sense of community. With the increase of crack cocaine and easy access to drugs at a time when there was little access to education and employment, the communities declined. Residents grew older and unable to keep up the neighborhoods. The young generation saw no value in efforts to preserve a pretense of respectability as they pursued materials birthed from drug dealers’ culture. DJay is the embodiment of the southern

black male in crisis, a transitional figure who cannot benefit from his labor power because there are no blue collar jobs available in the south. He must find other means to assert his manhood and moor his sense of self to a different way of making a living.

In constructing DJay as a black man pimping both white and black women, Brewer borrows from hip hop mythology that creatively appropriates the legacy of Emmett Till. Although it was never proven that Till whistled at a white woman, the mythology of his bravery and determination to assert his manhood in the presence of a white woman, inspired the term “swagger.” In “The Revenge of Emmett Till: The Impudent Aesthetics and the Swagger Narrative of Hip Hop Culture,” James Braxton Peterson draws upon this tragic history of interracial relations to explain the physical deportment of young black men, who turn to hip hop to acquire power and articulate their masculinity.

Swagger is technically defined as ‘1) to walk with a bold, arrogant stride [or] 2) to boast or brag loudly—in a swaggering walk or manner.’ Within hip-hop speech communities, swagger basically maintains the general sense of its standard definition. However, the ‘walk’ or ‘walking’ has been transformed into the total projection of one’s public persona. Thus, swagger is a comprehensive, boastful, stylistically arrogant, and somewhat effortless presentation of self in the public sphere.²⁰⁷

DJay swaggers and he pimps. He speaks the vernacular of hip hop. Indeed, he turns to the creation of hip hop lyrics as his medium of self-creation.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. pg. 618. It should be mentioned that Peterson provided additional commentary to elaborate on his definition of swagger in the footnote section of the article page 29: The term’s meaning may be even more nuanced than I have time to elucidate here, since it is so closely tied to the ability of the subject to verbally articulate the attributes of one’s *swag/swagger*—in rhymed verse. Thus the “walk” and the “talk” referenced in the standard definitions of the term are integrated in the meaning of the vernacular version of the term.



Figure 2. DJay persuading Nola to connect with a John.²⁰⁸

“Man I Ain’t Tryin’ to Call No Ho No Bitch”: Hip Hop Vernacular beyond Gender Binaries

See. . . man ain’t like a dog. And when I say “man,” I’m talking about man as in mankind, not man as in men. Because men, well, we a lot like a dog. You know, we like to piss on things. Sniff a bitch when we can. Even get a little pink hard- on the way they do. We territorial as shit, you know, we gonna protect our own. But man, he know about death. Got him a sense of history. Got religion. And one day God gonna come calling, so you know, they going through life carefree. I mean, we man. I mean, you a woman and all, but we man. So with this said, you tell me what it is you wanna do with your life.²⁰⁹

As envisioned by *Hustle and Flow* writer and director Craig Brewer, DJay is not just another black drug-dealing pimp spending his time pontificating on frivolous urban folly. DJay represents the existential potential of interracial and intra-racial relationships, if and when humankind eradicates traditional gender expectations. He concludes that only a society that refuses imposed gender roles and traditional gendered divisions of

²⁰⁸ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*. Image from, Google Images”

https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1920&bih=974&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=DJay+Hustle+and+Flow&og=DJay+Hustle+and+Flow&gs_l=img.3..0.3469.9388.0.9654.30.11.6.13.17.0.124.746.10j1.11.0....0...1c.1.64.img..0.24.503...0i24k1.OH8PMZGHNjI#imgsrc=cxDYUeq92fyZAM%3A

²⁰⁹Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*.

labor can sustain enterprises that ensure prosperity and yield capital gains. Moreover, DJay sees work that leaves a lasting footprint as the means to achieve immortality. These ideas surface in a dialogue between a thirty-something black man in Memphis, whose vocation is pimping, and a late-twenty-something destitute white prostitute Nola, who he admonishes to continue hooking. A descendant of enslaved Africans, DJay understands that a gendered approach to cooperative economics and the utilization of human capital can transcend gender roles and expectations. His ecumenical racial politics and understanding of the value of the commodification of white female sex, however, derives from something deeper. DJay represents a new southern hustler. He evokes methods, means and precepts similar to those of his ancestors, who navigated racist, sexist and elitist Memphis. In so doing, he explores the depth and breadth of gendered and racial relationships and the instability of power dynamics.

Brewer's dialogue, full of hopefulness, romance, and humanity's quest for meaning and purpose displays some of the most intimate, raw, and vulnerable articulations of southern black masculinity. Yet rigid gender stereotypes and heteronormative presumptions have caused many to misinterpret this depiction of black male sensitivity and vulnerability, and to perceive DJay as a demagogue, a narcissist and a misogynist. Within the film, the stark manmade urban backdrop wracked by summer heat provides an alternative southern black aesthetic, highlighting the everydayness of DJay's life in north Memphis. The bleak urban setting is the antithesis of the "natural," yet it is the context in which the dispossessed must construct an urban personhood, which is often misconstrued as self-serving and synthetic.

The lead is pariah-like, a marginal who adheres to an anti-intellectual black aesthetic. His verbiage is syncopated with vernacular idioms, typically interpreted as unevolved and static. For scholars who search for a deeper understanding of black masculinity, films like *Hustle and Flow* are muted, mutilated, inaccessible and considered background noise in need of justification to white audiences. Alternately, they may be seen as sympathetic pontifications to the black community, as art forms that are not sanctioned and endorsed by Africana Studies or other disciplines within the academy. Yet these misguided interpretations underestimate the challenges that these everyday experiences pose for black men like DJay in Memphis, who are seeking a viable mode of existence. Reading the film against the grain, it is possible to see DJay as a character who appears to possess little depth, but actually has gained vast wisdom, knowledge and understanding of desire, self, and what it truly means to hustle.

The overlooked masterpiece is an example of the systematic erasure of black male vulnerability, depth and the intellectual acuteness of self. Tom Lee was deemed “worthy” because of his heroism, and the sanitation workers played a key role in the civil rights movement and the politics of race and labor. *Hustle and Flow* explores the overlooked and underwhelming efforts of young black youth in the south to craft viable modes of black maleness. DJay signifies a “Dream Deferred,” an *Invisible Man*, and the *Souls of Black Folk*. Set in the south, in the heart of a new Memphis where the factories that replaced plantations are closed and dilapidated sidewalks are an iteration of oak alleys and archways of the plantation aesthetic, *Hustle and Flow* grasps that unemployment, underemployment, under-resourced schools and drugs are the new chains. Yet, the movie and its protagonist reveal a different kind of beauty in America.

Critical race and gender scholarship has provided a plethora of theoretical models and analytical tools with which to examine the language and the lives of those who reside along the margins. What scholarship does not provide is the freedom from pain for those whose personhood is investigated. Liberation theory within the academy often leaves black southern urban lives untouched or worse as when leading scholars indict hip hop culture and popular forms of black masculine performativity. There is some legitimacy in connecting the lyrics and performance of hip hop culture to misogyny and derogatory images that demean women. Yet to see hip hop only in those terms is to miss the class dynamics that undergird this art form and to fail to comprehend the ambiguities and nuances of hip hop and rap vernaculars. As in any complex linguistic system, there are often huge slippages between what one says and what one means. Black vernacular is one of the most complicated vernaculars in the US English language. Each word can have multiple meanings depending upon the audience, the speaker's intention and the objects targeted. No word makes this complexity more evident the term, "nigger." This racist epithet spews the heat and fire of hatred when articulated by a white supremacist, but it may convey love, familiarity, and a sense of belonging when used as a colloquialism by low-income African Americans. To reject all uses of the term as racist discourse is to close off possibilities for understanding certain dimensions of life among black urban youth.

Similar complexity characterizes signifiers of gender, and gender relations in the black community. DJay's discussion with Key about the content of his lyrics illuminates this complexity. Key, born and raised in the church represents a bridge between "the streets" and a distinctive form of black respectability. Living in the suburbs with his wife

and family, Key has a passport between two worlds. Through his work as the musical director for a black church, he has chosen a life in the streets among African American folk, but not life on the streets. Church in the black community often serves as the broker between those who live beyond the law and those who adhere to a particular respectability politics. During the conversation, Key suggests to DJay that his original selection for the “hook” in “*Beat that bitch*” is not acceptable for the radio, or for mainstream audiences.²¹⁰ In discussing the potential hook, a diatribe erupts that is the quintessential black vernacular, moving well beyond conventional usage and standard gendered references.

KEY: It’s just that we want radio play right? And man you got a song called, “Beat that Bitch”? They might hear that and think that’s degrading.

SHELDON: Yeah, but that’s only if you calling a woman a bitch. This sounds like a tearing up the club song.

D.JAY: Man I ain’t tryin’ to call no ho no bitch

SHELDON: Yeah, I know besides most of the bitches I know are men.



Figure 3. Former high school classmate and producer Key played by Anthony Anderson.²¹¹

²¹⁰ The Urban Dictionary online defines hook as the “catchy part of a song that draws in the listener, not necessarily the chorus.” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hook&defid=125521>

²¹¹ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*. Image from Google Images <https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1920&bih=974&tbn=isch&sa=1&q=Key+Hustle+and+Flow&oq=Key+Hustle+and+Flo>

The choices individuals must choose from are only as good as their options. The same goes for a community. African Americans in North Memphis and other under-resourced communities create hybridity's of survival. Many people in cities across the country never leave their neighborhoods. While one could argue that images and representations through social media, television or other visual medium are visible it does not necessarily translate into accessibility. Three men from three distinct backgrounds create a conversation around naming, value and public legibility.

DJay, the character with the least exposure to information outside the parameters of his reality offers a syntactical distinction between terms that have historically been considered derogatory, demeaning and degrading towards women. Interrupting Sheldon, he makes his meaning clear, saying, "I ain't tryin to call no ho no bitch." To grasp his full meaning, it is important to recognize that one who is a "ho" has a direct connection to DJay's vocation as a pimp. For DJay, the term "ho" refers to what one does, a form of labor that carries no stigma in his world. As a pimp, DJay's relations with his "hos" are complex, these women work under his supervision, guidance, affection, and at times, love. Calling a woman attached to him a "bitch" then, would insult his manhood. Within DJay's world, a hoe is what one does and not the essence of the individual. "Bitch" in the context of this conversation connotes one without morals, scruples, or integrity. Sheldon further complicates the meaning of "bitch" by rejecting its gendered connotation: many of the "bitches" he meets are men.

Those ignorant of the black urban vernacular easily miss the intricate gender-defying designations of hip hop culture. Little space has been devoted to teasing apart the entanglements of language, gender appropriation and the adaptation of words in hip hop. Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto in “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze,” for example, construct an argument that attempts to offer a deeper insight into lyrics, racial and gender ideologies within the genre of music and visual representations of gender in videos:

Music videos and rap lyrics increasingly draw on well-established themes in pornography. The “pornification” (Paul, 2005) of rap music also involved increased representation of women as porn stars, strippers, prostitutes, and other types of sex workers. Beyond representations of “types” of women, the pornification of rap also involves the routinization of a “pornographic gender relation.” We describe pornographic gender relations as those that portray interactions between women and men in particular and limited ways.²¹²

In their essay, Hunter and Soto identify several tenets of mainstream pornography: woman are depicted as sex workers, women’s voices are used to sell certain sexual images and gender ideologies, and black women are portrayed as unendingly loyal to black men who exploit them.²¹³ Their research focuses on hip-hop’s lyrical content and meaning. Yet, the article does not address the “limitations” or “tensions” between gender relations, roles or performance in the lyrics, the videos and on the street. Hunter and Soto provide an analysis of race but offer no genealogy of racially, gendered terminologies. They seem oblivious to the urban derivatives of bitch and ho and the multiple meanings of these terms in hip hop.

²¹² Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto. “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze,” *Race, Gender & Class*. Vol. 16 No. 1-2. 2009, pp. 170-191.

²¹³ Ibid. pg. 170.

In a 2011 article, Margaret Hunter identifies strip clubs as a location of the pornographic gaze: “Rappers from all regions of the U.S. have created hits about strip club culture, but Southern rappers have become best known for raps about strippers, strip clubs, and prostitutes, earning them the now popular designation, the ‘Dirty South’.”²¹⁴ The fascination with sex work culture has largely focused on the role of women, overshadowing the role men play in the industry. Little is said about why men join the industry or the way the industry subjugates and stifles their personhood. In the web series, “P.O.P. (Power of Pussy), Simone stripped at Magic City, a famous club in Atlanta. In her interview, she separated being a stripper from her personhood: “I’m a Tom Boy. And to this day, I think I know how to perform I guess? But I don’t know how to seduce. You get what I’m saying?”²¹⁵ Simone calibrates her personhood and value independently from what she does for a living. Black feminist discourse on black women’s sex work similarly disconnects the profession from any claims about individual value. Yet, scholars seldom offer black men the same latitude in their analyses of the sex industry. *Hustle and Flow* provides an opportunity for a comparably sophisticated account agency and subjectivity for black men involved in sex work. DJay’s lifestyle directly opposes romanticized notions of wealth and luxury, as does the lyrics and videos of many southern hip-hop artists. He invests in sex work as a means to an end, but he does not see this work as eradicating his humanity or personhood:

People like you and me, we always guessin’. Always wantin’ to know “what if”, naw what I mean? So when you say to me, hey I don’t think we should be doin’ this. I gotta say, uh-huh. I don’t think we should be doin’ this neither.

²¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 171.

²¹⁵ ChristmasinJuly 1982. Productions. P.O.P. (Power of Pussy) Web Series: Part One. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdauyFhjz0&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DpdauyFhjz0&has_verified=1

But we ain't gonna get a move on in this world layin' in the sun, lickin' our ass all day.²¹⁶

The accumulation of money for southern black men did not convert or translate into a better life or a different racial or gendered status. Music as an art form provided a mechanism for material gain but the music industry continued to operate within a racist and gender oppressed paradigm. DJay's nemesis and model for success Skinny is described as, "Big time now . . . but he is still Memphis, you know."²¹⁷ Like DJay, his desire for more did not translate into an ontological shift from the core of his personhood. Vocations like pimp, sex worker, or drug dealer, much like the institution of slavery require African Americans to insulate their sense of personhood, agency, influence and humanity from institutions designed to undermine and deny black humanity. Oppressive social, economic, and political systems that pervade black urban enclaves betray blacks as they attempt to capture the "American Dream."

Language is a medium in hip-hop culture with a propensity to keep peace or evoke violence. "Dirty South" as a terminology, locale, and cultural phenomenon is no exception. It describes the aesthetic of the region but also the politics and the people. Dirty south represents a culture within a culture, a city within a city. For example, Madison Avenue in Midtown Memphis Tennessee would not encapsulate dirty south, but less than a mile away, Vance or Jackson do. The complexity of black southern culture and heritage are reflected in every aspect of hip hop. Trap music, birthed in the dirty south, a deviation of southern hip-hop described as southern black drug culture, signifies dirty south. The urban metropole, hot vast and wide full of fields once occupied by

²¹⁶ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, pg. 1.

²¹⁷ Ibid., pg. 6.

enslaved Africans is a part of Dirty South discourse. Within this landscape and aesthetic frame, southern black women's bodies serve as the embodiment the dirty south.

While black men used black women to sell music and a particular lifestyle, they recognized a sanctity of the black feminine physique invisible in hip-hop gender discourse. Black women in the south serve as the counter culture to white aesthetics. Their body shape and color are the antithesis of white women whose images occupied spaces of normalcy. Buttocks, breast and lip injections monopolize the medical beauty industry. It is not accidental that the rise in medical enhancements occurred at the same time southern strip club culture gained prominence. There is no doubt that black gender relations are constrained, and at times, drastic and polarizing, but their depiction in the film, *Hustle and Flow* captures certain dynamics of urban subaltern cultures in the south.

Blacks in the US south have literally and figuratively been given the refuse of southern white culture and transformed it into some of the richest music, art and culture in this nation. One might draw an analogy between DJay's relationships with his prostitutes and US marriage contracts. According to the laws in many U.S. states, men are expected to provide shelter, support, and stability for their wives in return for sex on demand. Although DJay is not married to his hos, aspects of his relationship with Shug and Nola are similar of the institution of marriage, there is a peculiar sense of ownership there. DJay's analysis of gender relations is articulated in the lyrics of his songs. *Whoop That Trick* becomes the hook of a song whose lyrics are a battle cry, admonishing any individual or collective against daring to cross his path with an intent to harm or disrespect him. For DJay, as for many African American men in the south, their word and their respect are the most intangible possessions. The song evolves into a clarion call

that is not about women or men but about any social, political or cultural phenomenon that attempts to repossess anything owned by the protagonist.

“I think I may be getting’ one of them mid- life crisis”: Mortality, Vulnerability and Southern Black Manhood

Brewer’s attribution of stereotypical character traits to black men in *Hustle and Flow* are problematic, yet they also offer glimmers of truths about black manhood, revealing vulnerabilities that haunt their paths as they seek to cultivate their personhood. The narrative of the “deadbeat” or missing father from the lives of young black man was an unoriginal approach to introducing DJay, but the juxtaposition of other black men provides enriching constructions of black manhood that off-set this theme. Brewer constructs supporting characters who have similar backgrounds, yet come from an array of familial experiences. Deadbeat dad discourses suggest that a father’s absence condemns children to a life of struggle, but they say little about what causes a father’s absence. Many black men do not choose to be unavailable to their families. For many, employment opportunities necessitate transience. Far more scholarly attention must be directed to the effects of absent fathers on young black boys, and the cultivation of racial and gendered subjectivities, and subsequent home life and family formations. Two men in the film, Key and DJay, encounter experiences that determine the future direction for their lives, directions that resonate the challenges that black men in the heart of Memphis experience. The film captures a particular stage in the growth and development at which racism and gendered oppression have profound effects on the possibility of reaching full adulthood.

Key, played by Anthony Anderson, represents a middle-aged black man who was raised in the city, but who has attained a suburban lifestyle and middle-class status unusual for black youth raised in the same neighborhood as DJay. Key is described in Brewer's script as "a simple looking, chubby black male in his mid-thirties. He is wearing glasses and a blue button-down shirt with ran dockers."²¹⁸ His physical appearance conforms to the stereotypical notion that black men who were not athletic must cultivate other skill sets, especially if they are musically or academically inclined. Key's real name in the movie is Clyde, but his nickname reflects his ability to produce and orchestrate music for his church choir, which is located in his old neighborhood. Geography in the south presents an array of dilemmas for blacks who attain a certain social economic rise in status.

Although de jure segregation ended in the mid 1950's, de facto segregation continues to circumvent African American mobility. Blacks who live outside the city acquire spaces that remain segregated:

By 1990, more than a quarter of all African Americans resided outside the central city, a growth rate in excess of 500 percent in just fourteen years. The move from city to suburb may well represent upward mobility for blacks, particularly for those moving out of desperate conditions in the inner city, but the suburbs to which most blacks are moving are the older suburbs adjacent to the central city, older suburbs experiencing the same kind of white flight and physical deterioration as did the central cities themselves following the Second World War.²¹⁹

African Americans from urban centers who relocate in suburbs often maintain close connections to their inner city origins literally and figuratively. Increasing capital does

²¹⁸ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, pg. 22.

²¹⁹ John V. Moeser and Christopher Silve, "Race, Social Stratification, and Politics: The Case of Atlanta, Memphis and Richmond," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 102.4 (1994): pg. 519.

not always translate into a disconnection from one's roots. Middle-class African Americans are constantly reminded of their subjugated position in the south. Living in the suburbs does not create an alternate racial universe for blacks. The realities of their racial subordination follows blacks who watch whites flee one suburb to create another all-white new one. Brewer uses Key as a transitional and mobile figure who symbolizes semi-nomadic black space, reflecting the reality that blacks never truly own or possess a space to call their own. Moreover, when blacks occupy a space, its value falls, economically and symbolically, reflecting African Americans' inescapable second class citizenship.

Upper middle-class black professionals, like their white counterparts, are drawn to the new upscale subdivisions of the outer suburbs, but blacks living in the outer suburbs do not represent the vast majority of black suburbanites. Given also the tendency for suburban blacks to live in racially defined enclaves, black suburbanization has not led to the dismantling of the "two societies" described by the Kerner report. In fact, black suburbanization in all three southern cities has simply constituted a geographic expansion of the separate city.²²⁰

Blacks return to their neighborhoods for multiple purposes. It helps them to keep rooted in a particular value system, even as it reminds them of the progress they made individually. Simultaneously, every return makes visible the struggles and setbacks blacks still face as a collective. In returning to the old neighborhood, upwardly mobile blacks reconnect with those whom they have "left behind." For many blacks, the effort to transcend their past is haunted, both by the challenges of erasing the traces of a "lower class" upbringing and by the pain of leaving loved-ones behind. Key's experiences and life choices enabled him to attain a middle-class lifestyle, but it was important for him to

²²⁰ Ibid., pg. 520.

renegotiate his relationship with the city, and his relationship with his own past. African American respectability politics dictated the sanctity of his roots, symbolized by the church, which still called him back home.

Key's first encounter with DJay occurred at a grocery store on Vance Avenue in North Memphis. His presence at the store revealed to the audience his familiarity with the community. Although aesthetically and verbally Key did not sound like a "local resident" or share the same vernacular as DJay, his knowledge of the store indicated that he was not an "uppity negro" who had lost his way, but one who once navigated north Memphis. Brewer foreshadows the significance of Key to DJay's future: his nickname Key not only represents his musical abilities but also signifies his ability to unlock and unfold DJay's potential. Rugged individualism plays a central role in hegemonic masculinity, adopted by many men of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Yet the myth of the rugged individual masks the fact that persons of color cannot build, create or occupy positions of stature or wealth without the assistance of others. Key serves as the conduit to DJay's professional, personal and psychological maturity. The beauty of Key's relationship with DJay, and type the type of masculinity he portrays disrupts notions of maleness as inherently competitive and self-serving. Key agrees to serve as DJay's bridge, opening doors to unlock his potential and desires.

In "Where Are the White Girls? Choice, Individualism and Meritocracy: Let's Play the Blame Game," Bettina L. Love locates spaces in contemporary hip hop culture where individualism is used to promote white supremacy's belief in black inferiority and to justify tokenism, insisting that only a few black hip hop artists can rise to celebrity.

Choice, individualism, and meritocracy are all major components of America's lexicon because they are fundamental to the neo-conservative "bootstraps model" of achievement, which was established by the dominant hegemonic groups in order to control the marginalized masses. The bootstraps model is grounded in the belief that marginalized groups are willing to accept the norms and values of the dominant culture and press on to succeed despite systematic oppression. As a result, low-quality education, dilapidated communities, poor health care, and violence become normalized as "general circumstances" that marginalized groups must endure and overcome. In the eyes of the neo-conservative framework, these "common circumstances" are a result of poor choices made by persons in a marginalized group such as African Americans.²²¹

The history of racism and the gendered oppression of black males, however, dictates that uplift or movement from one space to another (in all facets of black life) requires a social response of a collective collaboration. In contrast to the individualist model, racial uplift suggests coordination of goals, shared resources, capital, and skills in ways that link the well-being of each to the advancement of all. In the film, Key represented the potentiality of racial uplift, amalgamating hope and opportunity to assist those most marginalized.

Movies, literature and other artistic forms of storytelling often require a nemesis who appears as a savior. Skinny Black, played by Atlanta native and Hip Hop artist Ludacris, serves that purpose in *Hustle and Flow*. He epitomizes a distorted and misplaced hegemonic masculinity. Similar to Key and DJay, Skinny Black lived among north Memphians and shared their stomping grounds. His arrival and his aesthetic, "bottle-rimmed sunglasses, camouflage designer threads, and a mouth full of platinum" separate him from those with whom he long ago shared spirits and debauchery.²²² Skinny Black signifies the terrifying consequences of conflating black male success with white

²²¹ Bettina L. Love, "Chapter Five: Where Are the White Girls?" *Counterpoints* 399 (2012): pg. 68. Love heavily relied upon the work of Omi and Winant, *Racial conditions: Politics, theory, comparisons*, University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

²²² Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, pg. 91.

patriarchal masculinity, generating a consumerist version of southern urban black manhood that bastardizes black male creativity and authenticity.

In “Pearly Whites: Minstrelsy’s Connection to Contemporary Rap Music,” sociologist Kareem Muhammad connects the minstrel shows of the early twentieth century to the marketing and commercialization of black manhood in particular black hip hop artists:

Perhaps the most important implication taken from Little Brother's work is that minstrelsy of hip-hop is not an arbitrary process, but is something done to maintain white supremacy by America's corporate media elite. Additionally, in using minstrelsy as the frame of reference, it positions this process as a historical continuum to how blacks have been portrayed in other moments of American history.²²³

Skinny Black’s flamboyant dress, language, platinum grills and distaste for his roots differentiate him from the homegrown, rooted and prolific artistry he once possessed before selling out. He has accepted his position as commodified token, reiterating a history of black performers as a hyperbolic blackness that haunts the mainstream media’s white imagination and defines southern black hip hop culture. His set of groupies signify blacks’ acquiescence to this role as long as there is some economic or social benefit. According to Muhammad’s analysis, the onus of selling out in the contemporary era differs from decisions to perform in minstrel shows which were often the only choice available to black men at the time.

²²³ Kareem R. Muhammad, “Pearly Whites: Minstrelsy’s Connection to Contemporary Rap Music,” *Race, Gender & Class* 19.1/2 (2012): pg. 306.



Figure 4. Skinny played by hip hop artist Ludacris ²²⁴

Skinny also represents an existential crossroad that black men experience as racialized subjects when they decide to invest in capitalist patriarchy at the expense of their own creativity, moral compass and racial loyalties. Brewer's timing of *Skinny Black*'s arrival is ingenious, providing a recipe for disaster when DJay's desperation meets a Trojan horse. DJay needs inspiration and a black man from his "hood" provides a natural stimulus. But DJay was not allowed to showcase his talents at the behest of *Skinny* or Arnell the owner of the club. He was invited to meet *Skinny* as the "weed man," the local provider of cannabis because he had a reputation for a finer quality brand than the typical Memphis supply. DJay had two options, acquiesce to the likes of *Skinny Black*, a misogynistic egocentric, watered-down leftover of southern hip hop artistry or

²²⁴ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*. Image from Google Images

https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&tbn=isch&sa=1&q=skinny+black+hustle+and+flow&og=Skinny++hustle+and+flow&gs_l=img.1.0.0i7i30k1l2.117052.118528.0.122025.7.7.0.0.0.83.453.7.7.0....0...1c.1.64.img..0.7.453...0i7i5i30k1j0i8i7i30k1.A5q8vgL_suA#imgrc=Q2WVDU2436JFcM%3A

resist the temptation, which would not resolve his current situation or enable him to fully develop his artistry.

Men experiencing a mid-life crisis is a common theme in movies. *American Beauty*, for example, centered on the lead's mid-life identity crisis. Often, the crisis involves sexual, emotional or physical decline. DJay, as a sexual being, is unexplored in the film. His health is not in question except for his mental health. One song in *Hustle and Flow*, prepared as DJay's biopic describes his mid-life crisis. "Look this is my life, and it's a battle within/ I gotta survive, even if I'm sinning to win/ And if I show no remorse I reap the devil's reward/ He said he'd give me riches but I'm lookin for more."²²⁵

At this point in the film, DJay has experienced a religious epiphany regarding his destiny but his everyday life reflects little change. The crisis he faces is existential and signifies the struggles and challenges black men experience as they attempt to articulate their manhood in a society that emasculates them and stifles their opportunities. DJay's dual consciousness of the choices between good and evil denote the options black men face during this era.

Contrary to Brewer's depiction, of DJay as wayward and without parental or adult guidance through the lyrics DJay revealed a relationship with his father. In his lyrics he described not only the character of his father but the political climate that produced him: "When I was young, witnessed my dad standing for right/ Black pride in him even though he passing for white/ Took years from my life, now I'm missing the man/ Moms on some other shit and now I'm missing the plan."²²⁶ Written by Memphis rapper Al Kapone, the

²²⁵ "It Ain't Over," lyrics from *Hustle and Flow*. Genius.com: <http://genius.com/Djay-hustle-and-flow-it-aint-over-lyrics>

²²⁶ Ibid.

song reflects the shared experiences of black men—real or imagined—in the south, illuminating the racial and gendered topography descended from Black protest rhetoric. DJay’s father was a product of what some scholars called the “Emmett Till” generation.²²⁷ The Emmett Till generation was defined as the group of southern youth who grew up, mirroring the potential life that Till would have attained had he not been killed in Mississippi 1955. These young men and women were marked by this tragedy and their lives reflected the social change they deemed necessary to eliminate the violence and inequalities within the south. DJay’s manhood and the manhood of many southern black urban youths were rooted in the life and demise of Till.

The Emmett Till narrative echoes within hip-hop culture. Much of the scholarship on hip-hop culture has worked to distinguish it from the civil rights generation and in some ways, to partition the hip-hop generation from the civil rights era, as if the actual fact of speaking (or writing) the generational schism will somehow reify it when in fact its resolution, or more important, its deconstruction, is critically useful and instructive.²²⁸

DJay’s relationship to the protest generation stems from viewing his father as a hero, leader of civil rights activism, and sophisticated working class southern black man. DJay’s recollection of his family life also challenges the myth that it is always the father who is the absent parent. DJay identifies his mother was the unavailable parental figure. DJay’s lineage provides the audience with an alternative perception of southern black manhood and the role of parenting, stability and inheritance of personhood within the black community.

²²⁷ For more information, see Heather Andrea Williams, *History of Education Quarterly* 48.2 (2008): 319-20.

²²⁸ James Braxton Peterson, "The Revenge of Emmett Till: Impudent Aesthetics and the Swagger Narratives of Hip-Hop Culture," *African American Review* 45.4 (2012): pg. 617.

The untimely death of this father haunted DJay and served as a reminder of his mortality and the need to mark his stead in the world. In a dialogue with Shug, he verbalizes his angst and looks to her for refuge, reassurance and compassion.

(DJay sighs and closes his eyes. Suddenly a wave of fear and paranoia hits. Something or someone just charged him. He scrambles to his feet, looking around the room. What was that?)

DJAY: Shug. We got history. You know, you been trickin' for me goin' on a few now. So... there's that. Me not pimpin' you 'cause of, you know. . .

(referring to her stomach) It kind'a . . . puts us in a different place.

SHUG: You wantin' me to leave?

DJAY: Naw. That ain't. . . Naw I think I may be getting one of them mid-life crisis. You know my Daddy's heart gave out when I's just twelve years old.

He was a young man. I mean. . .

I mean he's my age. That's been fuckin' with my heard. Like this is it for me.

It's fuckin with my Mode on the track, can't concentrate, can't smoke weed without feelin' like I'm getting' a heart attack and... and I don't know what I'm supposed to do.²²⁹

His reference to their shared history suggests that Shug is the perfect sounding board for his crisis. Black men living in conditions of urban blight often live brief lives. His father's consciousness of racism, and the struggles he faced to make ends meet as the primary provider working for the school company fixing buses increased his level of stress. Although DJay's vocation differs significantly from his father's, his constant awareness of his father's early death affects his ability to dream and believe there was more to his life than pimpin' women and living second to second. Shug stands in for the absent mother in his life. Her pregnancy, and her role as the primary caregiver for Lexus' son, proves her motherly wisdom, love and compassion. When DJay is with Shug he is able to abandon his manly swagger and lay bare his vulnerabilities. In the context of popular culture, black men rarely express their inner fears and self-doubt. This scene

²²⁹ Ibid., pg. 26.

attests to the emotional complexities experienced by southern black men, while also drawing attention to the lack of outlets black men possess when they need to confess in a location of trust. DJay's mid-life crisis is just as complex as the lead in *American Beauty*. Yet, the rarity of this depiction of a black man experiencing mid-life crisis attests to the fact that American popular culture is largely disinterested in the psychosocial development of black men particularly within the urban south.

Another manifestation of DJay's mid-life crisis was the loss of his swagger, which is exemplified in his relationship with Lexus. He responds intensely and violently when Lexus (played by Paula Jai Parker) suggests that his only usefulness to her is as driver. She calls him a "bitch," which both emasculates DJay and reminds him that he has played the power game too long. His exercise of power no longer yields the same results as in the past.

LEXUS: You ain't gonna never be more than what you is, D. A fuckin' chauffeur. Yeah, that right. Come to think of it, I wanna go make some money, I wanna go shake some ass, go suck some dick. . . (snapping her fingers) D. Jay go get the car, boy. I'm ready to make me some money. Go on, now. Run along bitch.²³⁰

DJay's responds by throwing Lexus and her infant son out of the house, yet he is aware that his power over women is declining. In the past, his swagger was tied to the pimp culture and the direct influence he had over the women he pimped. Lexus' antagonism leaves him no choice but to throw her out. This scene could be interpreted as cruel, but DJay construes it as self-preservation. Her lack of respect indicates that his kingdom is crumbling, but her eviction warns Shug and Nola of their subordinate status and their fate if they question his power in the household or his station as a black man.

²³⁰ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, pg. 60.

Dynamics Within and Beyond Gender: Betrayal or Survival

In the world of *Hustle and Flow*, white Nola is often mute or low voiced and, when in the presence of black women, silent or silenced. When DJay, Nola, and Lexus travel together to the suburbs, they are out of their racial, class and gendered comfort zones. Visiting Key at his home, DJay meets with Key, leaving the women entertained by Key's wife, Yvette (played by Elise Neal), a native of Memphis. Their small talk quickly brings the dynamics of class privilege and racial position to the fore. Lexus, who is portrayed throughout the film as quick tempered and void of compassion, admonishes Nola to be silent, insinuating that Yvette's casual conversation is mere good manners, not real interest in a white prostitute.

NOLA: Hey I really like your hair. It's got some chocolate like colors in it.

YEVETTE: Oh thank you. I have this great guy that does it over in Germantown. The uh coloring.

NOLA: I try and do my hair every couple of months. It keeps the tricks guessing. You know?

YEVETTE: I'm sorry. What?

NOLA: Well my hair has to be redone a lot. Cause these aren't my real braids. These just extensions.

LEXUS: Nola would you just shut the fuck up please? What makes you think this lady care about your kitchen ass hairdo?

YEVETTE: I think you know what, it's nice. It's ok . . .

LEXUS: Lady you don't have to be nice to her just cause she sittin' on your couch. If you think her hair look like a wet dust mop go on and tell her so. I do.

NOLA: Damn Lex

YEVETTE: Well I didn't, I don't

NOLA: Lex why you gotta be so ugly?

LEXUS Your ugly ass a swamp duck ho

NOLA: Everybody else say my hair look sexy

LEXUS: And then they nut (legs opened wide so Yvette can see her underwear)



Figure 5. Nola and Lexus, DJay's employees (played by Paula Jai Parker)



Figure 6. Yvette, Key's wife (played by Memphian and actress Elise Neal)

Lexus refuses to grant Nola any white privilege or to recognize that Nola's racial ambiguity might be attractive to black men. Instead, Lexus asserts a pecking order among the women in DJay's life, insisting that Lexus is more valuable than Nola because she supplements her earnings from prostitution with a steady income as an exotic dancer.

The brutality of Lexus's attack on Nola is linked to their presence in Key's home in the suburbs of Shelby County, Tennessee. Middle-class African Americans feel a sense of economic and social "arrival" when they move to the suburbs. Yevette's status as a married woman and a home-owner remind Lexus of how very far she is from any such arrival. Lexus' name marks her as a luxury model, signifying a desire for an upwardly mobile lifestyle. Those unspoken desires increase her disdain for Nola, who Lexus perceives as a white woman too lazy to use her white privilege to leverage more power. Yevette is a painful reminder of Lexus' own shortcomings and disappointments with her life. Sitting across from Yevette, Lexus cannot overlook that they are worlds apart or that her dreams are never likely to be fulfilled.

Yevette's pleasant disposition toward Nola captures a dimension of black respectability. Yevette recognizes that Nola could be characterized as "poor white trash." Nonetheless, as a guest in her home, Nola deserved respect or at least cordiality. Insulted that Yevette seems to find more conversational value with Nola than with her, Lexus responds with jealousy and lashes out to make Yevette uncomfortably aware that her guests are sex workers. Within the order established by white supremacy, Nola has more value than Lexus, a value that Lexus cannot ignore despite her contempt for Nola. Verbal assaults are the only means Lexus has to demonstrate her power. By opening her legs in the midst of her conversation, Lexus draws attention to sexuality, suggesting a commonality between the multitude of tricks Lexus turns to secure revenue and the means Yevette has to secure her monogamous marriage. Although their class status is markedly different, their mode of interacting with men is the same. Nola's presence in this black middle-class home is used by Brewer to display tensions between black

women, particularly related to white culture's celebration of white women as the quintessential "Woman." Nola, however, is a shell of whiteness. She possesses no home, no name, and no lineage from which to draw her racially-designated privileges. Her amnesia toward her white heritage is useful to DJay and those who use her. Within the world of *Hustle and Flow*, Nola is just as subjugated as any of the black characters.

Brewer's politics surrounding white femininity appears unsympathetic to sexist praxis. Nola is the most used of all characters as she is not a love interest for DJay, does not have children like Lexus and is not pregnant like Shug. She does not make him the most money, yet her "concubinage" is not strictly business. Walking the streets of the south with a white woman behind or next to him increases DJay's cultural capital. While other pimps have black women working for them, he possesses a socially-prized possession: a white woman and her sexuality: "I got a snow bunny and a black girl too. You pay the right price and they'll both do you."²³¹ Brewer's commodification of the white vagina breaks away from white patriarchy's exceptional fixation on white female purity. Not all white women were held to the same standards. Racially orphaned females could find foster care with black men. They had a little more value but their dispensability was tied to their continuing utility. Beyond her ability to increase DJay's social capital and the revenue she generated on the street, Nola also served as an intellectual and creative outlet for DJay. Many of his defining moments occur in the presence of Nola. Although historically, African Americans in film and television often have served as a subconscious moral barometer for whites, in *Hustle and Flow* Nola is the "white Mammy" figure for DJay.

²³¹ Lyrics from "It's Hard out here for a Pimp," *Hustle and Flow* soundtrack.

Peculiar Brotherhood: Raced-Gendered Relations between DJay and Nola

Nola's relationship with Shug and Lexus manifests the ambiguities and tensions among black and white women mediated by race and power. DJay and Nola's relationship, however, represents a peculiar brotherhood. As a white woman, Nola's race privilege is thwarted by her gender and class. DJay's gender privilege affords him certain perks but his race often trumps his ability to access the privileges associated with the male gender. DJay is acutely aware of the constraints that deny him access to particular locations of power, so he turns to Nola, a white female player, to gain that access. Yet his reliance on Nola for this access creates a certain equality between them, which is manifested in DJay's "masculinization" of Nola. As the opening dialog demonstrated, DJay acknowledges Nola as "mankind," placing her on the same level of playing field as him. In his quest for fame, he eradicates her gender.

One of the most powerful scenes in the film occurs in the church. After meeting Key, DJay asks Key what he does and Key obliges him with a demonstration. As the minister of music for his church, Key produces the songs for singers. In this scene, a soloist and a small host of background singers rehearse "I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name."²³² Surrounded by beautiful stained glass window and sitting in the front row as the only audience for this rehearsal, DJay experiences a moment of spiritual transcendence. Negro spirituals carry double meanings that were known to blacks during the antebellum period. DJay is in need of transformation—physically, emotionally and spiritually. His symbolic agreement to a name change shifts his vocation from pimp to

²³² This song is not listed on the soundtrack but it is an old Negro spiritual. I found a rendition by Nina Simone on YouTube where the words included. "Jesus told me I would go hungry if he changed my name." Nina Simone, "If He Changed My Name," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dDFcSOztp0>.

artist, and transforms his work from hustling to writing lyrics. This shift requires all parties surrounding him to converge and change their identities as well. Nola, the outsider with no family and no name is present in the church at this significant moment. Her presence at this moment of spiritual transformation elevates her personhood, making her whiteness and femaleness secondary to her humanity. Her proximity to DJay provide her the opportunity for a self-created nomenclature. Nola's presence in this scene signifies her importance to the various shifts and changes occurring in DJay's life. Her ability to sense and understand these changes cements her indispensability.



Figure 7. Nola and DJay listening to Key direct his choir²³³

“Shit, baby, you’re my operation. You what they call my primary investor. Making all this shit happen one trick at a time.”²³⁴

²³³ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, Image from, Google Images.

²³⁴ Brewer, *Hustle and Flow*, pg. 47.

Interpreting this quote simply in terms of a pimp speaking to his “hoe” misconceives and underestimates their relationship. DJay originally found Nola running her own prostitution ring at a truck stop. He was impressed with her independence and savvy, operating without security or any protection from men.

Think about how I found you at the truck stop. You the smallest lot lizard I ever seen, trickin’ them truckers. You had balls man big gorilla balls.²³⁵ I got love for you, Nola. Not like a man loves a woman. But like a brother. Like you my own blood.²³⁶

The relationship between Nola and DJay complicates the narrative of the sexually-charged love or lust between white women and black men often equated with southern plantation dynamics. Within the traditional plantation narrative, the dalliance between the white owner and the enslaved black woman left the plantation owner’s wife lonely and the black enslaved man either without a love interest or forced to watch another man rape his woman. *Hustle and Flow* moves well beyond the dynamics portrayed in slave narratives, suggesting that within the contemporary world of the urban south a black man has the upper hand in a relationship with a white woman. There is no threat of violence in his use of Nola and no repercussion for his sexual exploitation of a white woman. Of course, Nola is depicted as “white trash.” Her utility to white men is sexual at best. Nonetheless, in the world they inhabit, Nola is a vessel and a unique gem, who possesses the ability to navigate male-dominant spaces inaccessible to black women.

²³⁵ Ibid. There is a discrepancy between the script and this line. This line is found in the movie but not the available script. It could be speculated this was an improvisation by Howard (played by DJay) or an addition by the production team.

²³⁶ Ibid., pg. 47.

In Closing

Craig Brewer's film illuminates the power of racial brokering and its difference from racial allyship. The term "ally" in social justice activism indicates a role for whites to do social equality work alongside blacks and other underrepresented populations. In most cases, however, the historically disadvantaged lead social justice activism, educating allies and creating agendas for social change. However well-intentioned, whites will never know or fully understand their power or the full costs borne by disenfranchised others. The term ally is laced with expectations of reciprocity, when in fact social justice work is one-sided. The goal is to level privilege and equalize resources. There is no evidence that Brewer created *Hustle and Flow* to address inequality, promote social justice, or equalize blacks in Hollywood. Yet, as a white male in the US with particular privilege and opportunities, Brewer was able to create a classic American film that accurately portrays the dilemmas that dispossessed black men face in pursuit of their dreams.

Crash was designed as a cinematic work that sought to address racism in the US. The problem with the film was that racial discourse was tainted by the belief of a white man that intersections of identity existed on the same plain and that the impact of racism on whites and others had similar consequences. Therein lies the problem with allies. In their attempts to converse with marginalized others about power and privilege, they often fail to acknowledge their own positionality. Brewer did not appear in his interview to be interested in presenting a race story. Yet, his film is full of examples of power and privilege, the confluence of whiteness and the ways in which blacks even in the worst environments are agentic and conscious of their personhood.

Brewer's use of the white characters provides another example of racial brokering. Sheldon, a musician at Key's church, is a part of the white working-class community in Memphis. Unlike many southern cities, workplaces in Memphis have been consistently interracial even during World Wars I and II, when there were concerns about black men and white women working together. Sheldon's nickname, "light skinned," indicates blacks' willingness to forgive his whiteness and his relation to the systemic oppression that plagued southern history. Sheldon deviates from the norm for white males because he is willing to work collaboratively with— and not managerially for— Key and DJay. Brewer depicts a class politics that suggests that all who hold less cultural and economic capital are essentially "othered" by rich white elites. Those presumed to be white trash are a treasure for blacks who can help build and promote DJay's music endeavors.

This does not excuse Brewer's stereotypical use of whites as saviors. One could read Nola as a savior figure, who has the potential to create a nuanced and rich racial conciliation. Although Brewer has not been vocal about his racial politics in creating the film, it is important to consider both the possibilities and limitations of casting DJay's tale as a "classic American movie." Brewer's ability to set the terms of debate, normalizing black urban life as altogether "American" depends on his white privilege. Yet he used this white privilege to produce a film that focuses on black characters who pursue big dreams against incredible odds. His examination of and conclusions about Memphis are spot on. He captures the city's passion for music, the connection blacks maintain to their roots, and the bartering system deployed in low-income communities, an African legacy used when money is not available.

Brewer is able to use his privilege creatively to make an important contribution to social justice work. Rather than being stifled by white guilt, he has created a film that complicates race and gender in productive ways. Indeed, although freighted with white privilege, his insights are far more powerful than those who regurgitate the language of social justice activists, demanding that everyone leave their privilege at the door.

Brewer's attempt at making a great American film about black urban life could be read as post-racial, if one is skeptical or it could be read as a white man attempting to provide a story about African American manhood without the ceilings and social constraints of race and gender. Quite apart from his intention, Brewer created a powerful depiction of black men in Memphis who struggle against enormous odds to cultivate their talents and achieve recognition.



Figure 8. Craig Brewer, Director and Creator, *Hustle and Flow*²³⁷

²³⁷ IMBD website. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0108132/>.

Chapter 5

Re/Visioning Southern Black Masculinity

Tom Lee, Sanitation Workers in 1968, and 21st century hip hop artists share certain commonalities structured by the persistence of white supremacy in Memphis over the past century. Although the nature of white power has changed over the decades as the city transformed from a white-dominant enclave run by the machine politics of E.H. “Boss” Crump to a Black-majority, African Americans remain second-class citizens. Across the three distinct eras of southern politics and culture examined in this dissertation, white power has operated to obstruct black progress in the Bluff City. The Jim Crow era of *de jure* segregation gave way after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the black freedom struggles in the second half of the 20th century, yet African Americans remained economically disadvantaged. In the 21st century, claims about a “postracial” era have done little to mitigate systemic dispossession among the majority of Black citizens. White economic power has proven to be every bit as potent as a white political power in disempowering Black citizens. In these changing circumstances, African American men have navigated racial barriers, drawing upon a sense of community and collaboration to cultivate ways of thinking and living that sustained their dignity and self-respect. This dissertation has examined varying modes of southern black manhood seldom explored in the scholarly literature. Rather than focusing on “the talented tenth,” I have investigated the lives and livelihoods of men who were not interested in making history as much as forging a sustainable place for themselves and their families. Their visibility tended to be noted by those they loved and those who supported their efforts, not by a wider public.

Tom Lee had no intention of saving 32 lives in 1925. He was going through life, earning a living as a boat handler. He did not know how to swim, but he knew how to show compassion for those whose lives were in danger, and he knew how to use his skills to save many from drowning. The Sanitation Workers sought safe working conditions, a living wage, and public recognition of the value of their lives and labor. Ernest Withers captured their struggle in powerful photographs that documented African Americans' everyday lives. He did not march or fight with signs or petitions. His empowering instrument was a lens that illuminated the dignity of southern Black manhood on film, providing a glimpse of understudied lives. Three 6 Mafia, musicians, coming of age in one of the worst neighborhoods in Memphis, were not chasing an Oscar. Their dream was to make music that people could hear and enjoy; yet their songs, circulated nationally through the film, *Hustle and Flow*, also enabled many to empathize with the struggles of young Black men in the "dark ghetto," while also offering hope to those plagued by similar living conditions.²³⁸ Their lives provided a starting point for the examination of southern black manhood, which disrupts distorted narratives concerning Black masculinity. Black men in Memphis worked to achieve self-realization despite de facto segregation, discrimination, constraining economic circumstances. This investigation offered a new approach to black masculinities studies, a nuanced account of southern culture and history and the ways it shaped and informed black men's self-understanding and the scope of possibility afforded in the world around them. The dissertation offers insights into dynamics of salvation, innovation, and redemption--dynamics that

²³⁸ I borrow the phrase, "the dark ghetto" from Shatema Threadcraft, "Intimate Justice, Political Obligation, and the Dark Ghetto," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39(3): 735-760.

characterize black manhood and challenge short-sighted views that slight to Black men's humanity.

Mainstream scholarship and popular culture caricature African American masculinity, imputing a "lowest common denominator" that dehumanizes these gendered and racialized subjects. Constructing Black manhood within a deficiency framework, scholars and pundits blame the oppressed for structural conditions altogether beyond their control and suggest that oppression precludes individual triumph over horrific conditions of existence. Stock narratives of violent and depraved Black men actively suppress awareness of the abundance of talents and abilities they possess. By removing men from their local contexts and conceiving them as subhuman, these noxious representations not only construct Black masculinity as a "problem," but contribute to abusive social policies and police practices that can culminate in death. This dissertation demonstrates the appalling inaccuracy of these popular misconceptions and offers detailed alternative accounts of multiple generations of Black men.

Expanding the Interdisciplinary Framework for Scholarship on Black Masculinities

To advance a sophisticated analysis of Black masculinities, I have drawn from multiple academic disciplines. One discipline alone could not address the complexity of the subject. Using historical analysis, I have turned to the archives to trace Tom Lee's heroism; the sanitation workers protested in 1968, and *Three 6 Mafia's* Oscar win. I have drawn upon urban studies and sociology to examine local customs and practices in Memphis that illuminate the changing shape of white domination and its pernicious effects on black citizens. Political science and economics offer insights into dimensions of disenfranchisement, disempowerment, and marginalization that structure the obstacles

that Black men confront in their daily lives in Memphis. Media studies provided a particularly helpful approach to cataloging who, what, when, where, why and how race relations functioned in Memphis over the past century. In addition to these established disciplines, my work is grounded in interdisciplinary Africana and Gender Studies, relying upon the rich resources of interdisciplinary work to probe the complexity of Black masculinities.

Combining insights from Africana and Gender Studies has enabled me to overcome lapses in each framework and to begin to rectify the lack of qualitative research on southern black manhood. Africana Studies has explored messages and meanings within diasporic and continental communities, challenging white supremacy and colonialism. Gender Studies has challenged androcentrism and heterosexism that distorts gender representations and categories. Both approaches are needed to theorize black masculinities. Africana Studies has tended to fixate on the binary of privilege and disenfranchisement, while Gender Studies has overestimated the male privilege in ways that distort Black men's experiences. Moreover, Gender Studies has failed to recognize and disengage from norms of whiteness and the tendency to equate gender with women. As a consequence, neither Africana Studies nor Gender Studies alone are adequate to investigate the beliefs, values, motivations, and behavior of Black men who must struggle with manifold forms of oppression in their everyday lives. In this dissertation, I have developed a "black masculinist methodological lens" to probe epistemological presuppositions about the nature of power and their intimate relationship to white privilege to situate power about a social reality dominated by elite white males, which play critical roles in creating and maintaining inequalities and injustice. Black

masculinist theory, however, also recognizes another dimension of power tied to the agency, which enables Black men to build their lives within a discourse of hope. The ideal of hope, a misconstrued altruistic impossibility for racialized bodies denied privilege, was a conduit for the cultivation of personhood. Hope enables Black men to act upon their talents and seize opportunities to create change. Hope enables the marginalized to look beyond current social circumstances and envisions a different future. Hope possessed by Black men can alter the conditions of their existence, actualize their abilities, and act to liberate themselves from systemic domination.

Southern black masculinities when studied by scholars seldom moved beyond individual or cultural deficit analysis.²³⁹ Deficiency language made impossible discourse inclusive of everyday lived experiences as examples of personhood and character traits often overlooked when addressing manhood. From scientific racism to the Moynihan Report, black manhood has been categorized as pathological, suggesting that black maleness is akin to an illness. Although many scholarly contributions no longer relied on eugenic and scientific racist discourse, the residuals of this history marked black manhood within popular culture.²⁴⁰

This dissertation offered a systemic critique of these pernicious academic and popular misconceptions about black manhood. While it is plausible to juxtapose whiteness as an obstacle to marginalized groups, I refused to reduce agency to merely the contestation of oppression. It's my belief those socialized in dire circumstances still

²³⁹ Shaun Harper, "An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM," *New Directions for Institutional Research*, Winter 2010, Issue 148, pp. 63-74.

²⁴⁰ W.E.B. DuBois debated Lothrop Stoddard, his contemporary and fellow alumni of Harvard. For more information see, Carol M. Taylor, "W.E.B. DuBois's Challenge to Scientific Racism," *Journal of Black Studies* 11.4 (1981): 449-60.

possessed life changing tools at their disposal. Audre Lorde and many other scholars and activists have suggested that the “master’s tools” can never dismantle the master’s house, intimating that altogether different tools are required to dismantle systems of power and oppression. Where those tools are derived? What becomes of the “master’s house” and what is the fate of the master when these new tools are invented and deployed? Whether taken figuratively or literally, Lorde’s prescription places social change beyond the sphere of existing society, which affords few options to those who rely on and live within the realities of oppressive social systems and forms of government. My research on three generations of black men in Memphis suggests that privilege, power, and influence are relative, gaining their meaning and potential within specific situations. The same beliefs and cognitive capacities that contribute to oppression can be deployed to create spaces of liberation. Marginalized populations can deploy relative privilege and influence to contest and destabilize the “normal” operations of racial power. Both Africana and Gender Studies would benefit from the recognition that tainted tools, which afford “privileges” to some can nonetheless provide important means to empower marginalized populations. Rather than denying the possibility of incremental change, it is imperative that interdisciplinary scholars study the tools used the disenfranchised to remedy their situations. Toward this end, it is necessary to transgress the borders of Africana Studies and Gender Studies to develop a vocabulary and a methodology that advances research by those who commit to doing the work.

Male Interiority versus Male Exteriority

Many foundational studies of masculinity characterized identity development among boys as autonomy, competence, mastery, supremacy, and competitiveness.²⁴¹ When scholars advanced universal claims about male strivings or male privilege, they masked the fact that racialized male subjects experienced gender differently from elite white males. Beyond traits attributed to all boys in their quest for manhood, black manhood has been characterized far too frequently regarding hypersexuality, which reduces black masculinity to appendages and imputed appetites. Black masculinity routinely demonized and oversexualized. Numerous studies of African American men focus on sports, sexuality, competition, the workplace, or education, offering frameworks that characterize what black men “do,” but omit any discussion of what black men think or feel. In general, studies of African American men lack an in-depth analysis of the interiority—the inner workings of black masculinities.

Feminist scholars have painstakingly created theoretical approaches that refuse to conflate women with an embodiment and which explore agency within and beyond traditional spaces that have confined and enabled women. They have probed the mechanisms that marginalize women, restricting affluent white women to the private sphere, while rendering the arduous labor of enslaved and working class women invisible. They have probed gender symbolism that associates “nature” and “emotion” with femininity and “reason” and “science” with Euro-American masculinity.

²⁴¹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Scholarship that complicates these binaries has explored women's subjectivity but devoted little attention to the emotions and inner life of men.

Sociologists Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell and John Lee have called attention to danger in certain approaches to feminist scholarship that replicate a male/female binary that conflates masculinity with domination and femininity with subordination.

A powerful current in feminism, focusing on sexual exploitation and violence, sees masculinity as more or less unrelieved villainy and all men as agents of the patriarchy in more or less the same degree. Accepting such a view leads to a highly schematic view of gender relations, and leads men in particular into a paralyzing politics of guilt. This has gripped the "left wing" of men's sexual politics since the mid-1970s.²⁴²

Although their analysis is simplistic, failing to engage more complex feminist accounts, certain tenets of their argument illuminate a clear limitation of a good deal of feminist scholarship. As Black feminist theorists have noted, hegemonic feminist research has privileged white, Western women, omitting the lives and experiences of women and men of color, who comprise the vast majority of the human population. In devoting my research to the study of Black men in Memphis, and developing a Black masculinist lens, I have sought to overcome this limitation of mainstream feminist scholarship, creating analytical tools to disentangle webs of domination in ways that enhance understandings of Black working class and poor men.

Within the newspaper accounts of his heroism, Tom Lee appeared as a man of few words. Lee rarely smiled for the cameras, and when asked about his decision to save the lives of whites along the Mississippi River during one of the most racially charged moments in history, his response directly correlated to his moral compass of "doing unto

²⁴² Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell Bob, and Lee John, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 14.5 (1985): 551-604.

others.” When the *Commercial Appeal* interviewed Lee after the incident, all he wanted was a place to “call home.” He was always photographed with his hat in hand, a sign of respect and respectability. There was no suggestion that any of his words, deeds, and beliefs reflected his integrity, compassion and an outlook that prized humanity as worth saving. Further, there was no indication in these white news reports that Lee was a “free” agent, acting on his volition to save the lives of 32 whites. While I postulated several possible motivations for Lee’s heroics, including the fear that of leaving the scene if witnesses identified him, white newspapers were content to define Lee by his acts and his presentation of self.

His compassion, not his gender prompted Lee’s salvific act. Stereotypical constructions of masculinity and race might construe the act as a means to leverage favor or gratitude from powerful whites. Lee saved them because his moral compass dictated that that is what one human being does for another. To grasp that motivation, one would have to look past Lee’s phenotype and biological sex and look deeper into his relations with his family and his community.

Decentering Whiteness: The Unmarked Norm

When Tom Lee referred to himself as a “nigger,” the poisonous associations of the term with white supremacy was mitigated by Black vernacular English. Like Lee, the majority of working class African Americans in the early 20th century did not have the time or the luxury to deconstruct white preoccupation with Black inferiority. Double consciousness marked their self-knowledge analyzed by W.E.B DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folks*, which both recognized and created critical distance from whiteness as the unmarked norm. Lee’s account provides a lesson concerning self-valuation that can

serve as a template for divestment from presumptions about whiteness as the appropriate frame for scholarly discourses. Critical race and gender theorists must move away from centering whiteness as the unquestioned framework of analysis. Southern white culture operated under that guise. As Tara McPherson noted, this limited frame fails to account for the experiences of those ensnared by the institutions of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, second-class citizenship, and dispossession in the “postracial” United States.²⁴³ An inclusive southern history must be expanded to address the lives, livelihoods, and cultures of African Americans. Scholars must learn to re-center arguments around the value systems, beliefs, and customs of diverse racial, ethnic, class, and gendered segments of the community. This dissertation is one step in that direction.

Locating Beauty within the Ugly

(Shug enters holding a box)

SHUG: I’m sorry y’all. Didn’t mean to disturb yo recording

(She removes a green lava lamp. Everyone looks at it with confusion and curiosity as she sets it up on the table.)

SHUG: They had this interview with Skinny Black on TV. Look like he got one of these in the studio he use. So I thought I’d go down to the Mall and get you one.

(She turns it on. Green colors ooze in a hypnotic motion. The men are captivated. Shug smiles at her contribution and leaves.

Silence

D.JAY: Now that’s bottom bitch right there

KEY: Good Woman. Good woman.

SHELDON: Wow! It’s like she was a little angel, just flew in and flew out.

Contemporary popular culture leaves little space for men to express love. The vast preponderance of male images express rage, sexual domination, and violence; even depictions of fear, doubt, regret and remorse are scarce. Treatments of hip hop are

²⁴³ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

paradigmatic in this respect. Analysts emphasize misogyny and “Gangsta” culture in hip hop, ignoring black male vulnerabilities, the quest for recognition, and acceptance of love. The failure to perceive hip hop as a site of intimacy and vulnerability exacerbated by southern respectability politics, which reduced black men’s humanity to sexuality, or conflation of habitation as indicative of their moral values. Relying on surface meanings to interpret the gender problematics of the word, “bitch,” is easy. Discovering far more complex dynamics including love, recognition, and respect is far more difficult without adequate knowledge of black urban vernaculars. My analysis of Three 6 Mafia lyrics replaces the racial, gendered and class paradigm that pigeonholes black men as receptacles of rage and misogyny with an understanding of black men as emotional, sensitive and complicated beings who use the tools available to produce their versions of respectability and civility. Decentering Whiteness and drawing upon Black vernacular discourses can illuminate problematic dynamics in many popular terms. Consider, for example, the term, “lady,” which has been racialized and sanitized through a white, aristocratic lens that masks white women’s status as property and third class citizens, even as it excludes black women from the term’s domain of reference.²⁴⁴ From the perspective of a Black masculinist lens, “Lady” reflects a racialized-gendered southern narrative just as prohibitive and troubling as “bitch.” In the absence of more systematic critique, “Lady” has persisted as the aspiration of most women in the south—despite its racial, political and social limitations.

²⁴⁴ When white men granted freedom to African Americans but restricted the vote to black men, they made women third class citizens in regards to the exercise of constitutional rights.

In the dialog quoted above, DJay, Key, and Sheldon recognized Shug's respect and admiration for DJay, symbolized in her gesture of support. In the 1990's, lava lamps were outdated artifacts often found in low-end retail stores. Within a white-centered frame, they symbolize tastelessness. The lamp held a very different meaning in the context of this scene, as the comments of DJay, Key, and Sheldon attested. In referring to Shug as a "bottom bitch," DJay recognized the sacrifices that Shug was making through this gift. In the context of their shared love and intimacy, he could appreciate the cost and the significance of her generous gesture. In this scene, which follows a heated argument about Key's wife, Shug stood as the epitome of a woman who loves and supports the man in her life, and shares his dreams of fame. Interpreting the scene with a white-centered politics of respectability, it's ugly and insulting. By contrast, when interpreted with a full understanding of the intentions and idioms of hip hop, attuned to vulnerability and the expression of love and appreciation, DJay characterizes Shug as a "bottom bitch" as a term of endearment, which captures the tenderness, compassion, and desire he feels toward this woman, who has the power to anticipate his needs, and intervene constructively to enable the men to suspend their heated argument and resume their music making with new inspiration.

Scholars must find a way to meet subjects where they are and perceive the beauty that lies within. Southern urban life is a brutal landscape of poverty, exploitation, and violence; yet it is also a space of hope, creativity, ingenuity, and love. The positive dimensions of life within the ghetto lie below the threshold of visibility set by elitist notions of beauty and respectability.

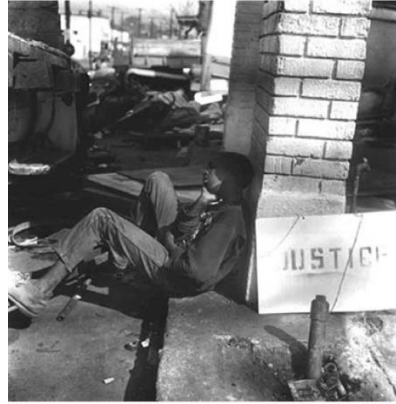


Figure. 1. Young boy asleep after the protest. 1968.²⁴⁵

Ernest Withers captured more than one million images in his lifetime. Many depicted the black freedom struggle in the US, documenting the individuals—famous and unknown—who committed their lives to social change. The photograph above provides one example of Withers’ unparalleled ability to capture beauty wherever it resides. The slumbering young man in the image is surrounded not just by trash, but by the hope that he would see justice for African Americans in his lifetime. His physical location amidst the trash does not provide any information about his background, intellectual goals, or current economic circumstance. It reveals only exhaustion after a hard day of labor and activism, as this young man rests at a site profoundly affected by the Sanitation Workers Strike. Where some see trash, others see a resting place. The ability to capture beauty within the most horrific circumstances is essential for those who wish to illuminate the agentic spirit of marginalized research subjects. My dissertation illuminates some of the beauty created by Black men in Memphis under conditions of radical inequality.

²⁴⁵ Photograph. Ernest Withers Collection. Memphis, Tennessee.

Final Words

For sociologists, blackness is overwhelmingly urban and poor, a position that for many years obscured rural black folks and the black middle class. When blackness was not urban, it was rural and small-town, obscuring the existence of blacks in Southern cities. Further, Southern Studies fixes blacks as historical and historicized political actors, and is, therefore, unable to see contemporary black life and changes in black modernity in the post-Civil Rights era.²⁴⁶

In this quote, Zandria Robinson articulates the limitations of contemporary sociological scholarship on Black poverty. My dissertation seeks to expand the breadth and depth of southern black masculinity studies and advance a more comprehensive account of southern blackness. Slavery left an imprint on the African American community, which many have suggested is impossible to transcend. When scholars fail to broaden their interpretation of Black life in the southern United States, they analyze African American existences within far too narrow a frame. By adopting methods drawn from multiple academic disciplines, my research illuminates a new approach to the study of southern Black men, which is attuned to historical change in the city of Memphis, but also documents patterns of entrenched racial inequality. Using diverse primary sources, supplemented by music and film, I have analyzed aspects of black southern masculinity that have eluded previous scholarship.

Black men's sociability, capacity to hustle, desire, dream and creatively coexist in southern cities evaded popular culture and academic research. Tom Lee opened the door for black men in Memphis to work as sanitation workers. Within a generation, a position deemed a worthy reward for a hero who saved the lives of 32 whites was devalued as a

²⁴⁶ Zandria Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Regional Distinction in the Post-Soul South*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Northwestern University. 2010.

job for unskilled Blacks, an occupation devoid of decency and honor. The delegation of sanitation work to blacks placed it on the bottom of priorities for the city to upgrade technology or improve working conditions. This racist indifference to the working conditions of African American men culminated in the tragic deaths of two black men in 1968. Although African American men faced onerous and underpaid work in Memphis in the mid-20th century, they had jobs. Over the past fifty years, the living conditions of the southern urban poor have further deteriorated. Dr. King's assassination on the balcony of room 306 at the Lorraine Motel stunted the growth of Memphis politically, socially and economically. As successors of these conditions, Three 6 Mafia inherited crumbs of hope from their ancestors, whose forced labor, free labor, and disrespected labor have produced the wealth of a nation whose appetite for riches and power seems insatiable. The sacrifices of many generations of Black Memphians has produced a cohort distrustful of the promise of equality, which seems altogether reasonable in the context of their living conditions in North Memphis, which is poverty-ridden and plagued by a persistent absence of employment. Convinced "that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned,"²⁴⁷ Black youth have pursued their dreams within realities of power and influence that differ markedly from the conventions of middle-class respectability.

My dissertation explores the lives of Black men beyond the frame of southern whiteness studies, asking different questions to construct different narratives of Black masculinity. Why do black men in the south hustle? They hustle because there are few

²⁴⁷ This quotation revisits the language of Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," a speech delivered on August 28 1963 at the nation's capital. For a detailed assessment of all the broken promises, see Philip Kennicott, "Revisiting King's metaphor about a nation's debt," *Washington Post*, August 21, 2011. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/revisiting-kings-metaphor-about-a-nations-debt/2011/07/26/gIQArsHBaj_story.html.

options for descendants of enslaved Africans in the South, a region that consistently views them as objects rather than subjects, servants rather than free, self-determining citizens. They hustled because they love their families, their communities and themselves. In my discussions with Tom Lee, the striking sanitation workers in 1968, and Three 6 Mafia, I have excavated the virtues of the subaltern, which are sorely missing from mainstream scholarship and popular culture.

To locate virtues and dispositions of southern black men, I have turned to familiar episodes in Memphis history, advancing critiques of dominant narratives, and offering a revised account grounded in my Black masculinist perspective. My goal is not to homogenize African-American men in the South, but to trace the emotional fortitude and ingenuity of diverse characters. Like the vast and complex images that Ernest Withers captured by carrying seven cameras to all his field sites, I have sought to document multiple dimensions of the lives and livelihoods of black men, knowing that I cannot even begin to exhaust the possibilities. Gathering data from three different historical periods, I have found inner beauty in black maleness by tracing a common thread from the days of Jim Crow to the twenty-first century. Black men have been and continue to be visible to one another and their communities, even when ignored by mainstream scholarship. Black men have made the best of the circumstances handed to them by white structures of oppression, exclusion, and inhumanity. Black men have loved and cared for those around them and served their community and its members. And Black men have dreamed and hoped for more than what they have inherited and sought to achieve more for their beneficiaries. Across multiple generations, Black men have

pursued salvation, innovation, and redemption as southern black masculinity has moved from heroism and collective action to swagger, Memphis style.

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