

**He Thinks He's Down: White Appropriations of Black Masculinities
in the Civil Rights Era, 1945-1979**

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Abstract

“He Thinks He’s Down” examines the ways in which a significant and influential collection of white artists and activists in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, seeking an alternative to hegemonic white middle-class masculinity, appropriated imaginary black masculinities into their lives and work. The dissertation demonstrates that during the civil rights era images of black men circulated widely in U.S. popular culture, in part because of the acceleration of the black freedom struggle. Media depictions of black men engaging in struggles for civil rights, integration, self-determination, and the end of white supremacy highlighted their rebelliousness, strength, freedom, and power. In this same moment, many white middle-class men felt anxious, disempowered, insecure, and disillusioned with norms of middle-class manhood, especially in the context of a growing white-collar economy, the nuclear arms race, suburbanization, and political corruption. These emotions were expressed in various popular culture forums, including literature, political movements, magazines and films.

“He Thinks He’s Down” argues that one strategy adopted by white artists and activists to reinvigorate white middle-class masculinity was the appropriation of imaginary characteristics of black masculinity circulating in media, including rebelliousness, strength, freedom, and power. The four case studies examined here—Beat writers, Students for a Democratic Society activists, *Playboy* fashion editors, and Blaxploitation film directors—show that the artistic and political appropriations over the course of the period changed as the images of black men in the media varied, but that they nevertheless had similar consequences. Though

often celebrating the strength of black masculinity, they ultimately reduced black manhood to a series of consumable images, perpetuated many racist stereotypes, silenced the role of black women and black femininities, and reinforced the structurally-based privileges that were denied to black men to either accept or reject hegemonic masculinity.

**This dissertation is dedicated to the people who continue to struggle to make
the dream of a just world a reality.
“No Freedom Until We’re Equal.”**

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the McMaster University Libraries, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the University of Rochester Libraries, and the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project made my research process a pleasant and exciting journey. Those who are trying to cut funding to archives need only spend one long afternoon with an archivist who is helping to decipher the notes that Jack Kerouac wrote on napkins to realize that these cuts are foolish and short sighted.

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Introduction: Can He Be Down?

When champion American swimmer Ryan Lochte was photographed with one of his gold medals during the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, he smiled to show off his custom-made red, white, and blue grill. The grill, a metallic mouthpiece long associated with African American rappers, sparked a conversation among cultural commentators that focused less on whether the fashion accessory is aesthetically pleasing in general and more on whether it was appropriate for a young white swimmer to sport the mouthpiece. In Eric Wilson's *New York Times* article, for instance, fashion designer Robert Tateossian bemoaned Lochte's grill because it was "so nonharmonious with his image and with the sport that he represents." Tateossian believed that the grill had no place around the pool because "swimming is such an elegant sport"; it's "all about softness."¹ Implicit in Tateossian's statement is a judgment about those who are associated with the grill in the mainstream U.S. imagination: African American men. If swimming precludes grills because it is elegant and soft, then those who usually wear the mouthpiece are inelegant and hard. Tateossian seemed to object to the meaning of Lochte's appropriation of this symbol in a sport dominated by white men and women.

The media attention that Lochte's grill garnered was partially a result of the swimmer's claim that he had been asked by U.S. Olympic officials not to wear it on

¹ Eric Wilson, "That Flashing Smile," *NYT*, August 1, 2012. For other commentary on Ryan Lochte's grill, see Nicole Auerbach and Kevin Johnson, "Ryan Lochte's Post Race Grill Shines with Stars and Stripes," *USA Today*, July 29, 2012; Jennifer LaRue Huget, "What's on Ryan Lochte's Teeth?" *Washington Post*, July 30, 2012; Cavan Sieczkowski, "Ryan Lochte Grill: London Olympics Swimmer Shows Off Red, White, and Blue Teeth," *Huffington Post*, July 30, 2012.

the podium, but it was also, as Wilson argues, a result of media curiosity about Lochte's motivations for appropriating "a style that became fashionable among rappers" and media debates about "whether he could pull it off." According to Wilson's article, Lochte wore the grill to "show off his personality," a vague comment on its ability to set the swimmer apart from others in his sport.² But Lochte's decision to wear a mouthpiece that was associated in the popular cultural imagination with the rebellious, hypermasculine, and hard black men of late twentieth and early twenty-first century rap signaled a variety of possible messages to viewers. Perhaps Lochte used the grill to set himself apart from the very white world of swimming. Perhaps he wanted it to represent his distinction from teammate Michael Phelps; Lochte may have wanted to be the "bad" man to Phelps's All-American athlete. Or perhaps he just believed, as so many white Americans do, that black masculinity represented a cooler version of manhood than white middle-class masculinity ever could. Regardless of his specific motivations, Lochte appropriated a symbol of black male culture in order to define his public image.

The example of Lochte's grill is just one among many recent instances in which young white men have appropriated cultural symbols of black masculinity. Young white men who wear clothing associated with black urban youth to ensure their coolness, use rap to denote their struggles, and speak with Hip Hop jargon to highlight their street sensibilities are so common in today's culture that there are slang terms such as "wigger" to describe them. While "wiggers" do not always openly acknowledge the black culture from which these pieces of clothing, music,

² Wilson, "That Flashing Smile."

and language are taken, observers recognize them as signifiers of black masculinity, as was the case with Lochte's grill.³

Many people believe that this phenomenon is a relatively recent one, but it is not new, despite the emergence of new terms to describe white men who appropriate signifiers of black masculinity. Since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, various white men have been engaging in what is sometimes referred to as "racial tourism" or racial "slumming." In the early twentieth century, white men journeyed to New York City's black neighborhoods in large numbers to listen to black musicians, attend the literary parties of black artists, and watch black performers in live shows. As they did so, some adopted language and style that was associated with black culture in this period. For instance, the language associated with jazz peppered the slang of the urban white middle and upper classes and the clothing associated with the same movement adorned the white men and women who populated New York City neighborhoods beyond Harlem. This was a relatively small and regional phenomenon, however, and it did not extend far beyond those who lived and played in New York City and other major urban centers. Nor did it maintain its central place in urban popular culture much beyond the Great Depression.⁴

³ For a historical exploration of the term "wigger," see David Roediger, "Guineas, Wiggers, and the Drama of Racialized Culture," *American Literary History* 7, no. 4 (1995): 659-660.

⁴ For explorations of race relations during the Harlem Renaissance, see Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday, 1996); Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Carla Kaplan, *Miss Anne in Harlem: the White Women of the Black Renaissance* (New

Although less often studied by historians, white men's appropriation of black masculine signifiers accelerated dramatically after World War Two. One of the important contexts for this was what various scholars have described as the crisis of white masculinity, which was fueled by various economic, political, social, and cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century. The shift to a white-collar consumer economy and the rise of the corporate "organization man" after World War Two led many men to re-imagine a U.S. manhood that had for so long been defined by physical strength and physical labor. This was exacerbated by the reality that thousands of men were returning from the warfront with physical and mental injuries that made a masculinity defined by physical strength and ability much more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, the political instability of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race created anxiety and fear among U.S. men, which also threatened their sense of manhood. The black freedom movement and the growing presence of powerful and talented black men in popular culture, such as boxer Jack Johnson and Olympian Jesse Owens, also challenged the supremacy of white men. Labor unrest, changing gender roles, and a push to marry young and move to the suburbs compounded these economic and political realities. As will be outlined in the following chapters, white men responded to these perceived threats to white middle-class masculinity in many forms of popular culture in the post-World War Two period.⁵

York: Harper, 2013); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

⁵ For studies of masculinity in the post-World War Two period, see Gamal Abdel-Shahid, *Who da' Man?: Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005); Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America:*

Historically, middle-class white men had often defined their masculinity in relation to a variety of class-, ethnicity-, and race-based masculinities, including those of Indigenous, black, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and working-class Americans, as well as various U.S. femininities. This continued in the post-World War Two period, as the perceived crisis of middle-class white manhood perpetuated desires among some white men to incorporate attributes associated with these groups into their own performances of masculinity.

In large parts of the country, and especially in big urban centers, African Americans were often the most visible minority group in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, making black masculinities especially important to middle-class white men's performances of gender. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Great Migration and as the black freedom struggle intensified in this period, middle-class white men's media exposure to images of empowered black men increased, especially as television became ubiquitous. Black men were often well-positioned to attract the U.S. popular imagination. First, the African American civil rights movement greatly influenced political, social, and cultural life in this period. Black men fighting for their rights, whether through liberal civil rights organizations, Black Power movements, or less formally-organized words and actions, became iconic symbols of

Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Kyle A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1983); James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Teresa Rundstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

liberty, freedom, and democracy in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Before this period, black men commonly evoked images of enslavement, criminality, degradation, or weakness in the white popular imagination, and they were often used in mainstream white culture as foils for ideal and idealized manhood. As the civil rights and Black Power movements gained momentum, however, the black man came to symbolize a powerful and liberating rejection of U.S. failures and limitations. Within some sectors of white society, black masculinities increasingly came to be seen as appealing to white men who were seeking to redefine their manhood.

Second, literature, film, and music in this period, helped by the proliferation of popular culture technologies, presented images of black men that appealed to white middle-class men who felt stifled by post-World War Two U.S. society. Images of black masculinity as more “natural and authentic,” of black men who were presumably liberated from capitalist and familial responsibility, and of black manhood as rebellious and urban in a time that seemed to demand conformity and suburban living were common in the popular culture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These images often did not represent the reality of black life in the United States in this period, which was as complicated and varied as the lives of white Americans, but they still permeated the popular imagination and offered white middle-class men powerful alternative versions of manhood.

Finally, challenges to anti-black racism in this period made it easier for middle-class white men to see black men as deserving of respect, admiration, and emulation. The strength of the black freedom struggle in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s undermined U.S. stereotypes of African American men as bumbling,

feminized fools or rabid, terrifying rapists, allowing many white men to reimagine the value of blackness. Moreover, the civil rights and Black Power movements made it more possible, albeit not certain, for some white men to celebrate certain black masculinities without fear of ridicule or rejection from their white peers.

This dissertation examines negotiations of white manhood and masculinity in the civil rights era through the lens of appropriation. It seeks to understand how and why some white artists and activists, feeling alienated from the ideals of middle-class white manhood, were attracted to black masculinities. To explore appropriation as a site for negotiating white masculinity, I rely on four case studies chosen for their consequential relationships to popular culture. These case studies by no means represent an exhaustive study of appropriation and masculinities in this period, but they are representative of a larger phenomenon in a period normally understood as polarized by racial segregation and strife. The reality was much more nuanced and included countless episodes of interracial dialogue, exchange, and appropriation.

From 1945 to 1980, a significant number of middle-class white men who felt alienated and marginalized in U.S. society sought out and appropriated, either consciously or unconsciously, African American cultures in order to benefit from what they believed were powerful black masculinities. These white men, many of whom felt that they stood outside of hegemonic white American masculinities because of their religion, ethnicity, age, generation, politics, or sexuality, found alternatives to middle-class expectations on the fringes of masculinity, a space partially occupied by black culture. In so doing, these men did not destroy

hegemonic white masculinities or relinquish the privileges associated with them. This dissertation demonstrates, in fact, that marginalized white men who appropriated symbols of black masculinities into their work and lives, even when they believed themselves to be challenging racism and other forms of injustice and oppression, reinforced the power of white manhood.

The white men who adopted what they perceived to be black masculinities often did so without questioning the racist foundations on which these perceptions were based. Assumptions about black male sexual prowess, evolutionary primitivism, biological simplicity, and honorable suffering were linked to a long history of racist justifications for the enslavement and disenfranchisement of black men and women. In appropriating black masculinities, often without careful self-reflection, these white artists and activists frequently perpetuated the very pernicious and tenacious stereotypes that black men and women who were engaged in the black freedom struggle were trying to destroy. Even when white men were aware of and critical of racist stereotypes, they did not generally appreciate that their invocation of stereotypes might contribute to their reproduction.

Furthermore, in focusing on the power that black men gained from their alienation and their fight for freedom, the white men who adopted black masculine signifiers rarely considered black women, the specific ways in which they were exploited, or their key role in the black freedom struggle. These white men tended to erase and eliminate black women from the narrative of black culture and black life, thereby contributing to the longstanding problem, inside and outside of the

African American community, of privileging black male voices over black female ones.

Finally, the white men who appropriated black masculinity did not generally consider the complicated dynamics involved in the act of appropriation when it involves groups with disparate access to power. White artists and activists used black masculinities to deliberately relinquish their birthright, which included access to the privileges inherent in white manhood. They often focused on the ways in which social and political disenfranchisement made black men more manly, ignoring the harsher realities of this isolation. Even when they acknowledged these harsh realities, as was the case for activists who were deeply engaged in anti-racist politics, they never really considered their structurally-based ability, which was denied to black men, to either accept or reject hegemonic masculinity. White men's power to either accept or relinquish the demands of their racialized gender was key to their privilege. They could live on the margins if they so chose, but they could reclaim their white manhood whenever they wanted, as many did in this period. This demonstrates their ultimate ignorance about the ways in which appropriation served to perpetuate the hegemonic structures of white privilege that these marginalized white men claimed to abhor and that African Americans were struggling to dismantle.

While developing these arguments, this dissertation makes important interventions in four areas of scholarship: the history of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; the study of masculinity; theories of appropriation; and popular culture studies. In all four of these areas, the dissertation contributes to a greater

understanding of the intimate links between race and gender and the ways in which these links have been expressed in the U.S. popular imagination.

First, this dissertation builds on and contributes to the work of scholars who have explored the United States in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Historians of these post-World War Two decades have emphasized the ways in which social movement struggles shaped politics, society, and culture in this era. The most influential movement in this era was the black freedom struggle. Scholars such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Peniel Joseph, Charles Payne, Timothy Tyson, and Victoria Wolcott have traced the complicated history of the black freedom struggle, which included both the civil rights and Black Power movements.⁶ Hall and Joseph in particular have undermined any notion of a distinct split between civil rights politics—normally understood as the movement to guarantee the legal, political, and social rights of African Americans—and Black Power politics—a complicated combination of black nationalism, other forms of black radicalism, and various movements that promoted self-determination for people of African descent. They have instead emphasized the ways in which both political ideologies existed throughout this period, sometimes

⁶ See Peniel Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Victoria Wolcott, *Race Riots and Roller Coasters: the Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

even in the same individuals and organizations. Hall thus refers to the black freedom struggle as “the long civil rights movement.”⁷

This dissertation accepts the “long civil rights” periodization, but extends the scholarship by focusing on developments outside of formal politics and political protest. The various cases investigated here, arranged in chronological order, show that the black freedom movement strongly influenced mainstream popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. As historians such as Ruth Feldstein, Grace Elizabeth Hale, and William Van Deburg have demonstrated, white writers, activists, editors, and filmmakers in this period were attracted to civil rights and Black Power organizing, which they associated with liberation, fraternity, and empowerment, and they incorporated ideas about black freedom into their work.⁸ My study of the influence of the black freedom movement on popular culture in this era challenges the notion of a clear split between civil rights and Black Power politics. These political orientations had much in common, had influence throughout the period, and had many of the same spokespeople in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and it is therefore unsurprising that both shaped post-World War Two popular culture.

⁷ The term “Black Power” has been a difficult one for historians to define. Joseph states, in fact, that Black Power “would become as hard to define as it would remain controversial” from the 1960s onwards. See Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt 2006), 147.

⁸ For histories of the relationship between culture and black freedom movements in the post-World War Two period, see Ruth Feldstein, *How it Feels to be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); William Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African-American Culture Heroes in their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: the Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The dissertation also makes gender more central to the narrative of popular culture in the civil rights era. Black popular culture provided a space for black men and women to define themselves in the face of racial exclusion. It also created opportunities for white men to redefine themselves in order to reject the imperatives of white middle-class masculinity without abdicating any real privilege. In addition to contributing to new ways of thinking about the history of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, this dissertation builds on and contributes to scholarship on the history of gender. Feminist and queer scholarship has interrogated gender and sex as important historical categories. They have brought attention to the ways in which gender changes and varies, the ways in which power and gender are linked in various historical contexts, and the ways in which the practice of history itself is gendered. Furthermore, in questioning the power of heteronormativity, the links between genders and sexualities in historical spaces and times, the relationship between power and sexuality, and the nature of sexual desires, acts, identities, and communities, these histories have injected a necessary consideration of sex, sexuality, and sexualized bodies into investigations of gender. In other words, these studies have contributed to an understanding of gender as contested, performed, historically contingent, and linked to sex and sexuality. They have also reinforced an understanding of the ways in which men can be masculine or feminine, as can women, and that gendered identities can never be assumed.⁹

⁹ For examples, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "What Has Happened Here? The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 295-312; Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*

Over time, there has developed a much stronger sense that gender is relational and that it is important to study men, manhood, and masculinity as gendered, rather than continue to leave them unmarked. The study of masculinities has used the foundations laid by feminist and queer historiographies, as well as the significant work of R.W. Connell, to explore the dynamics of manhood in U.S. history. In her 1995 sociological study *Masculinities*, Connell argues for a deeper understanding of the differences between “hegemonic masculinity” and “subordinate” masculinities and the ways in which negotiations of manhood are influenced by relationships to power. According to Connell, “hegemonic masculinity” is the “currently accepted strategy” for maintaining patriarchy, or “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” She stresses that it requires a “correspondence between cultural ideal” and “institutional power” and that it is a “historically mobile relation.” Subordinate masculinities are masculinities that take the oppressed position in the “gender hierarchy among men.” They are directly related to hegemonic masculinities in that men who perform subordinate masculinities are “expelled” from acceptable social norms.¹⁰ The case studies in this dissertation confirm that hegemonic masculinity in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was directly related to normative cultural performances of manhood and power.

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 179-191; Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1980); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995); Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities: Second Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77-78.

They also demonstrate that masculinity cannot be separated from other categories of power and oppression, such as race, and that hegemonic masculinity changed in reaction to various political, social, economic, and cultural realities, as well as to challenges from subordinated men and women.

In fact, Barbara Ehrenreich anticipated Connell's theories of masculinity in her influential 1985 study *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. Ehrenreich's book explores the ways in which the culture of this era revealed growing anxiety among white middle-class men about the requirements of suburban, monogamous, and corporate manhood. Ehrenreich's study created the groundwork for later masculinity studies scholarship, including the work of Ava Baron, Gail Bederman, Michael Kimmel, John Tosh, Anthony Rotundo, and Kevin Murphy, which insisted on the contested nature of U.S. manhood.¹¹

Studies of historical masculinities have made several important contributions that inform this dissertation. First, this work emphasizes that masculinity and manhood change over time; they are not biological, innate, or essential. Second, this work argues that masculinities are never monolithic in a

¹¹ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. See Ava Baron, "Acquiring Manly Competence: The Demise of Apprenticeship and the Remasculinization of Printer's Work" in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, Mark C. Carne and Clyde Griffen, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 153-163; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kevin P. Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic, 1993); John Tosh, "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity?" *History Workshop Journal* 38, no. 1 (1994): 179-202.

particular historical context; there are dominant and subordinate masculinities and these are often related to class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, (dis)ability, etc. For instance, many scholars of masculinity have investigated the ways in which access to whiteness was a necessary precondition for achieving ideal manhood. But subordinate cultures had their own senses of what constituted ideal manhood and masculinity and these often were quite different from the middle-class white ideal. For example, physical strength, the ability to work with your hands, and violence, while of minimal importance in performances of 19th century upper middle class masculinities, were necessary to perform working-class manhood in the same period.

My dissertation expands our understanding of the changing and contested nature of masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by looking specifically at the importance and significance of white appropriations of black masculinities in this era. In recent scholarship, especially among post-colonial scholars such as Ann McClintock, the power of hegemonic gender structures to consume aspects of subordinate gender structures for their own gain has been explored.¹² The case studies investigated here, however, further complicate any easy division between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities by showing that those who embody traits of hegemonic masculinity in some ways often embody subordinate masculinities in others. Furthermore, many men who have had access to hegemonic masculinity have chosen to reject it in favor of subordinate masculinities, and yet they have still been able to maintain their access to power and privilege. Finally, those who are

¹² See Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

subordinate are often more powerful in the popular imagination than their access to political and social power would suggest. Black men in the Black Power movement, for instance, were imagined as so powerful that they posed a real threat to U.S. structures of power. All of these complicated realities, which are explored in the case studies of this dissertation, demonstrate the deeply tangled nature of masculinity in the history of the United States and force us to reconsider our theoretical categories. This dissertation thus expands the existing scholarship on gender in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by demonstrating that negotiations of manhood could involve more than simple acceptance or rejection of the norm, especially when white men attempted to construct and reconstruct their masculinities. At times, these men incorporated complicated ideas about black masculinity into their gendered identities, a dynamic that was directly related to the importance of the black freedom struggle in the popular imagination in this era.

The case studies included in this dissertation also contribute to the historiography of racialized gender. Historical scholarship has combined the intellectual legacies of “whiteness studies” with explorations of gender to consider the ways in which race and gender broadly, and whiteness and masculinity specifically, intersect. Studies by Gail Bederman, John Kasson, and David Roediger have investigated the ways in which various types of U.S. men have worked to negotiate their whiteness in attempts to gain access to the rights and privileges of hegemonic masculinities.¹³ This scholarship has emphasized that in times of

¹³ See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: the White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New

perceived crises, due to war, economic downturns, or civil unrest, white men exhibited intensified anxieties about their social positions. This was especially the case for those who lived on the margins of power, such as working class white men. In order to combat these feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, many white men emphasized their place in the racial hierarchy, as well as their manhood. Scholars who have worked on these topics have demonstrated that whiteness and masculinity influenced one another in multiple ways.

Within this historiography, many scholars have emphasized that white manhood was often defined relationally. Ideal white men were understood to be inherently different from marginalized men, such as black men, Indigenous men, male immigrants, gay men, and others, who were often imagined as unmanly or hyper-masculine. This was particularly true of black men, who due to their enslavement had a special position in the racial and gender hierarchy of the United States. If white manhood was at the top of the U.S. social hierarchy, then black manhood was at the bottom. Those who existed somewhere in the middle often worked to be considered white because they feared being relegated to the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Roediger demonstrates this in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, which explores the ways in which white working class men, afraid of being perceived as equal to black slaves, acted in various ways to be understood as “white.” Foundational to many of these studies of the relationship between white and black masculinities is the work of scholars who have investigated the ways in which manhood has been negotiated by African

York: Hill and Wang, 2001); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

American men; this includes work by Christopher Booker, Steve Estes, Herman Graham III, Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, Andrew Leiter, Marlon Ross, Penny von Eschen, and Maurice O. Wallace, as well as the work of scholars who have explored the role of sex and sexuality in white and black historical negotiations of U.S. manhood, such as Heike Bauer and Matt Cook, George Chauncey, and Angus McLaren.¹⁴

This dissertation demonstrates that when white men felt threatened, they did not necessarily emphasize their distance from nonwhite masculinities. Nor did men whose status as white was contested, such as Jews and European immigrants, always work to “whiten” themselves in order to find power and stability, as the Irish immigrants in Roediger’s study of the antebellum United States did when working to distance themselves from African American slaves. The case studies presented

¹⁴ See Christopher B. Booker, *I Will Wear No Chain!: A Social History of African American Males* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic, 1994); Steve Estes, *I am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Men’s History of Masculinity, Vol. 1: “Manhood Rights”: The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750-1870* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Herman Graham III, *The Brothers’ Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Andrew Leiter, *In the Shadow of the Black Beast: African American Masculinity in the Harlem and Southern Renaissances* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); HB and MC, eds., *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Postwar Years* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Marlon Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

here show that many white men who lived on the margins of power because of their age, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation appropriated marginalized black masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Alienated by hegemonic middle-class white ideals of masculine restraint, corporate work, and suburban domesticity, these men came to see black masculinities as appealing, attractive, authentic, free, liberated, natural, powerful, sexual, and strong. Some of these white men came to believe that by associating with black men, by adopting what they believed to be black men's styles and sensibilities, and by acting and speaking like the black men they imaginatively constructed in their minds, they could solve the crisis of white masculinity that threatened to emasculate them. The fact that in this period black men were commonly associated with struggles for equality, freedom, and justice only increased the perception among many whites that black men were on the cutting edge of masculine power. For these and other reasons, some white middle-class artists and activists incorporated what they believed to be black masculine qualities into their lives and work.

In studying these incorporations, this dissertation makes important interventions in theories of appropriation, a subject that has long been considered by cultural studies scholars. Most of these scholars understand appropriation to mean the act of borrowing or taking something from a culture that is not one's own and incorporating it into one's life or work. They most often explore the tendency of mainstream groups to adopt the culture of marginalized peoples. In the case of the United States, at least, they tend to focus on white people's appropriation of various marginalized cultures. Scholars debate, however, the origins of these adoptions and

the wider consequences of appropriation. Stanley Crouch, for instance, in his book *The Artificial White Man: Essays on Authenticity*, differentiates between artists who engage in “empty-headed appropriation,” which leads to racist and exploitative portrayals of the Other, and those who feel “inspired” by “influences from outside of one's class and ethnic conventions,” which can lead to interesting art.¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson, however, argued that all appropriation between groups with different social statuses perpetuate essentialist and hierarchical understandings of difference.¹⁶ While scholars agree that white Americans are attracted to marginalized cultures, then, the reasons for and the consequences of appropriation remain contested and complicated.¹⁷

Many scholars have specifically studied the history of white appropriations of black cultures in the United States. Historians such as Ann Douglas, Benjamin Filene, and Grace Elizabeth Hale have considered specific moments in which white

¹⁵ Stanley Crouch, *The Artificial White Man: Essays on Authenticity* (New York: Basic, 2004), 6.

¹⁶ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁷ For studies of appropriation, see Crouch, *The Artificial White Man*; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000); Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Susan Gubar, *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Crossover Dreams: The Exceptional “White” in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*; Ian MacKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1994); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Americans have appropriated cultures associated with black Americans.¹⁸ This work often utilizes concepts of primitivism in order to understand why in moments of economic, social, or political crisis white Americans have turned to black American culture. Some of this scholarship, including Douglas's foundational study of the 1920s, emphasizes fears of emasculation to explain why white Americans have adopted black American culture.

These scholars have offered various explanations for why this adoption has occurred. Some scholars, such as Robert Dawidoff and Kevin Phinney, have defined this type of appropriation as a form of cultural theft, concentrating on the profit motive of white producers to capitalize on popular black culture. These studies have most often explored music. Other studies have defined appropriation as a version of slumming, focusing on elite white Americans who travelled to lower class neighborhoods, often populated by racialized groups, and enjoyed the "exotic" culture of the Other. Frequently taking the Harlem Renaissance or the Hip Hop era as their historical subjects, scholars who investigate appropriation as racial tourism, such as Ann Douglas and David Levering Lewis, point to the ways in which elite Americans weaved the culture of the Other into their highbrow entertainments in order to create a distinctly American modernity. Finally, some scholars, such as Thomas Frank, understand appropriation as an avenue for white Americans to

¹⁸ See Robert Dawidoff, "The Kind of Person You Have to Sound Like to Sing 'Alexander's Ragtime Band,'" in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 293-309; Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*; Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*; Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*; Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*; Kevin Phinney, *Souled American: How Black Music Transformed White Culture* (New York: Billboard, 2005).

establish and maintain their cultural caché, which helps distinguish them from mainstream whiteness.

This dissertation contributes to scholarly understandings of relationship between white and black culture, as well as the larger historiography of appropriation in the United States. First, historians have emphasized the ways in which white Americans have used negative portrayals of black masculinity in the service of white supremacy, such as depicting African American men as sexually threatening in order to justify segregation. My dissertation, however, points to some white men's admiration of black masculinities, even in a time of heightened racial tensions, and their subsequent appropriation of imaginary black manhood as a way to find empowerment. Furthermore, the dissertation demonstrates that this type of admiration, paradoxically often worked in the service of white supremacy.

Second, this dissertation fills important gaps in the historiography of white men's appropriation of black cultures. Against the scholarship that has emphasized economic or cultural caché motives for these appropriations, my dissertation highlights personal motivations related to racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities and the ways in which these influenced some white artists and activists decision to appropriate imaginary black masculinities. Additionally, alongside the scholarship that has focused on the Harlem Renaissance and the Hip Hop era as key moments in white men's appropriation of black cultures, this dissertation uncovers the ways in which these appropriations operated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, drawing attention to the importance of appropriation as a tool for racialized gender performances throughout the twentieth century.

This dissertation's examination of appropriation in the civil rights period also contributes to our understanding of popular culture. Popular culture is sometimes understood as the culture consumed primarily by non-elite groups. Traditionally this included literature, theater, film, music, and fashion. Many scholars have expanded this conception of popular culture to include language, ideas, and attitudes. Beginning in the late 1980s with scholars such as Jackson Lears, Lawrence Levine, Janice Radway, and Andrew Ross, studies of U.S. popular culture have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which popular culture can serve as a site for the expression of political concerns and social values for all Americans.¹⁹

In early studies, scholars often understood popular culture as a site of cultural hegemony, a medium used to reproduce and disseminate political, economic, social, and cultural ideals for the masses. The foundations of this understanding of popular culture were laid by theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their important treatise published in 1944, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Adorno and Horkheimer argued that popular culture industry produced standardized, shallow entertainment that was meant to pacify the masses and distract them from the problems in society.²⁰

¹⁹ See T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

²⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Jon Cumming, trans. (London: Verso, 1986).

More recently, however, scholars have emphasized the ways in which popular culture can be a site of conflict and contestation, a space for producers and consumers to exercise agency and resistance. Robin D.G. Kelley, for example, argues that popular culture has been an important site for resistance in black working-class communities, especially since African Americans have often been denied access to official political power. In this context, Kelley explains, popular culture was one of the only public spaces for African Americans to exercise their agency.²¹ The role of popular culture continues to be debated but most current scholarship accepts that popular culture has allowed for some resistance by U.S. marginalized groups, even if it was also used to reinforce hegemonic ideals.

This dissertation also demonstrates that the role of popular culture in negotiating power cannot be neatly divided into the ways in which those who have social, political, and economic power use it and the ways in which it is used by those who are marginalized from these sites of power. The case studies show that popular culture has been used by white men who existed on the peripheries of these sites of power to mimic the racialized gender performances of those who were marginalized. Furthermore, they did this not to reinforce hegemony, but to resist it. This demonstrates that popular culture has been a site where the lines between powerful and marginalized peoples have been blurred.

Some scholars have also dissected the specific nature of subsections of U.S. popular culture: the popular culture of African Americans, Indigenous peoples, Asian Americans, the working class, gay men and women, and Latinos. Many of

²¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

these studies emphasize the ways in which marginalized groups have used popular culture to negotiate meanings of race, class, and ethnicity in the United States. Some scholars have also emphasized the role that popular culture can play in constructions of gender and sexuality. Finally, many scholars have investigated the business of popular culture, focusing on industry structures and capitalist incentives. Many of these studies take as their premise the notion that popular culture is an important site for all Americans to negotiate personal, group, and national identities.²²

My dissertation seeks to expand the definition of popular culture to encompass the role of political activism and ideology, an inclusion that is key to an understanding of popular culture after World War Two. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, social movements steeped in the politics of civil rights, poverty, and antiwar activism took over the popular imagination. These movements and their styles of activism generated music, fashion, theater, film, and literature that were initially countercultural but eventually permeated the mainstream. This means that even those not involved in the movements were influenced by their ideas and styles. Three of the popular culture genres examined in the dissertation—literature, fashion, and film—demonstrate the important role that the black freedom movement had in shaping the ways in which the male artists envisioned genders and sexualities in the popular culture that they produced. The second case study, focused on student movements in the first half of the 1960s, shows that political

²² For examples, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, Kelley, *Race Rebels*, Roediger *The Wages of Whiteness*, Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*.

activism influenced style, clothing, and language, among other things, all of which became part of the larger U.S. popular culture in this period.

By exploring intricate relationships between racialized gender, cultural appropriation, and popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, then, this dissertation contributes to multiple fields of scholarship. It expands existing theories and histories in order to complicate understandings of the role of popular culture and cultural appropriation in negotiations of white masculinities in the civil rights era. In so doing, it explores the meaningful and complicated experiences of those who lived through an era influenced by the reimagining of various racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities.

In order to explore this complicated terrain, the dissertation is divided into four chapters, each exploring a different genre of popular culture: literature, activism, fashion, and film. These genres represent a small portion of what I believe was the much larger phenomenon of white men's appropriation of imagined black masculinities. A study of music, sport, comedy, theatre, and television could also demonstrate the existence and the character of this kind of appropriation. The case studies used in this dissertation were chosen because the artists or activists studied were leaders of influential cultural movements and produced work and ideas that were consumed by large numbers of Americans. In addition, gender and race were important themes in the work they produced and the case studies allow me to focus on the appropriation of racialized masculinities. This is not meant to imply that only men engaged in debates about, or appropriated, masculinity. In fact, the histories of these movements explicitly show that women played a significant role in these

debates and appropriations and at critical moments in this dissertation I consider the voices and viewpoints of women.

This study does not mean to argue that racial realities in the United States in this period can be divided into a simple binary of white and black. Instead, the case studies here consider the ways in which white manhood has been defined historically against Indigenous, working class, Jewish, Irish, and Mexican masculinities, as well as against various femininities. Many marginalized groups continued to play a large role in how U.S. white men understood their masculinity. But because of the growing significance of the black freedom struggle and black popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as well as the personal histories of the artists and activists studied here, they were especially invested in the appropriation of imagined black masculinities.

Nor does this study intend to reinforce the essentialism, racism, and sexism perpetuated by the ways in which the white artists and activists imagined black masculinities. Much of what these white men believed they were appropriating from black culture was, in fact, a product of their imaginations. It was not necessarily part of black men's cultural realities. I use the concept of appropriation, then, not as way to understand what black men were doing, thinking, consuming, or performing in this era, but to understand the ways in which these specific white male artists and activists imagined black men and what purpose these imaginings served.

The dissertation begins in the 1945 and concludes in 1980. Many of the artists and activists produced popular culture beyond the period in which they are investigated in this dissertation, but their relationship to black masculinity was

heightened at this time due to various factors, including their age and generation, the mid-century crisis of white masculinity, and the social movements of the period. The case studies are arranged in chronological order, beginning with the literature of the late 1940s and the 1950s and ending with the film of the 1970s, in order to consider the continuities and changes in white appropriations of black masculinities in this period. By crossing the historiographical divide between scholarship on the 1950s and early 1960s and scholarship on the late 1960s and early 1970s, the case studies also allow me to highlight the connections between these two periods, which helps to undermine the notion of a dramatic split.

Chapter 1 explores the literature of Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac from 1945 to 1965 in the context of the growing civil rights movement and black literary portrayals of masculinity. Mailer, who was Jewish American, and Kerouac, who was Franco American, had complicated relationships to white masculinity and significant encounters with black masculinities. A close examination of their early work illuminates the ways in which their gendered and racialized feelings of anxiety about a changing U.S. society permeated their literary depictions of white men. For both writers, the decision to alleviate these concerns by having white male characters admire and adopt imagined black male characteristics culminated in their iconic works, "The White Negro" and *On the Road*, but then continued to influence their later works. It also perpetuated racist stereotypes about black primitivism and, therefore, worked in the service of white supremacy.

Chapter 2 analyzes the deployments of black masculinities by white men in Students for a Democratic Society. Social movement historians and biographers

have exhaustively explored SDS's close ideological relationship with the black-led Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. But an analysis of this relationship through a gendered lens reveals the deliberate performance of black masculinities on the part of white middle-class male youth who were attempting to disengage themselves from the legacy of the capitalist, militarist, and racist masculinities of their fathers. Even though their intentions were anti-racist, however, their appropriations of black masculinities simplified black men's sociohistorical realities and reinforced white privilege.

Chapter 3 considers the role of *Playboy* magazine and its publisher Hugh Hefner, often celebrated for his racial politics and denigrated for his gender politics, in the popularization of a Black Power fashion aesthetic in the 1970s. An analysis of fashion in *Playboy*, one of the most important features in the magazine, demonstrates that the magazine promoted black masculine fashion on white male models in order to solidify the supposedly antiestablishment masculinity of the readers. In so doing, he trivialized the struggles of African American men engaged in the fight for black self-determination.

The black urban hustler is also the focus of the final chapter. Blaxploitation, a black action film genre, became wildly popular among African Americans audiences in the first half of the 1970s. Starting out as an independent film movement, Blaxploitation films surpassed expectations for the intended black urban audience. But the genre was also very popular among white audiences and eventually drew the attention of Hollywood. White Hollywood filmmakers appropriated Blaxploitation films into their lexicon and in many ways honored the black

masculinity so central to these films and the Black Power movements. They also, however, reconfigured the masculinities to fit their own agendas and, consequently, stifled an important expression of resistance to white hegemony.

Two of the case studies focus on the role of liberal civil rights in defining masculinity in this period. The other two focus on the role of Black Power ideologies in defining manhood. While not meaning to over-emphasize a split between these two ideologies (in fact, white-directed Blaxploitation films demonstrates that Black Power and civil rights orientations coexisted in the filmic imagination), it is important to recognize that their relative influence shifted with popular perceptions throughout the three and half decades explored in this dissertation. Two of the case studies also focus on popular culture that had an explicit profit motive. The fashion and film movements studied here were overt in their pursuit of a mainstream market to make money for various popular culture industry giants. The literary movements were partially related to the book market, but the two examples explored here were never explicitly used for financial gain or market domination. And the political activism explored in the second chapter explicitly rejected profit-making and elements of the U.S. capitalist system. These differences are important to the dissertation in that they emphasize the complicated reasons for white appropriations, the ways in which these reasons changed, and the diverse arenas in which white men appropriated black masculinities.

Each case study in this dissertation follows a parallel structure that addresses the reasons for and outcomes of white appropriation of black masculinities. First, each chapter dips back into the historical relationship between

white American and black American cultural productions within the genre, specifically as they relate to gender, demonstrating the existing relationship on which later appropriations were built, as well as the distinct nature of the appropriation in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Second, each chapter investigates the black American popular culture that was available to the white artists and activists in the chosen period and the ways in which this popular culture explored the link between gender and race. Third, each case study explores the personal history of the white artists or activists in order to highlight their previous engagements with black masculinities. Fourth, each case study shows that the white artists or activists felt marginalized from ideal U.S. manhood, contemplated their alienation in their cultural work, and then appropriated what they understood to be constructions of black masculinity in an attempt to adopt alternative ways of being a man. Finally, each chapter contemplates the specific reasons that each white artist or activist turned to black manhood as an escape from ideal masculinity and the consequences of this decision, ultimately offering critical perspectives on white men's appropriation of black masculinities.

By focusing on white masculinity, there is a danger that these case studies perpetuate the privileging of white men in U.S. history and reduce African American men to tropes and stereotypes. The dissertation attempts to avoid these difficulties in several ways. In outlining the black contribution to U.S. popular culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, it continues the project of showing how black masculinities were as complicated and nuanced as white masculinities were. While I focus on white male appropriations of black masculinities, I do so in ways that

intend to promote a greater understanding of the images and realities of black masculine identities in the civil rights era and the ways in which these images and realities changed over the period. The dissertation also highlights the ways in which white masculinity and black masculinity are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, in focusing on the role that race plays in negotiations of gender, and specifically the ways in which “white” and “black” are arbitrary categories that have been contested, negotiated, and appropriated, this dissertation contributes to the longstanding project of undermining the power of race as a tool to disenfranchise the many while privileging the few. All four of the case studies investigated here prove that race is not necessarily a singular experience; it changes with history, society, and perspective. Masculinity is also a varied experience, often contested, and rarely assumed. By paying attention to the ways in which race and gender intersect and change in various periods of U.S. history, as well as the ways in which they are strategically deployed in popular culture, this dissertation undermines any single definition of “white masculinity,” as well as “black masculinity,” and helps to clear a space for the further unraveling of the arbitrary power discrepancy between the two.

As part of this project, this dissertation demonstrates that white American male artists and activists, feeling alienated from hegemonic masculinities in the civil rights era, turned to popular ideas about black masculinity and considers the reasons for and effects of this appropriation. Ultimately, in appropriating images of black masculinity, the white artists and activists failed to recognize their own privilege or acknowledge the ways in which their art and activism perpetuated the

privileging of masculinity at the expense of black and white women. Sometimes, despite their best efforts, they did little to empower real black men, which trivialized the very black freedom struggle that they admired. In fact, in seeking respite in the shadows of the margins, these white men ultimately stood in the way of those trying to come out of the darkness.

Chapter 1:
“Try to Keep the Rebel Artist in You Alive”: Literary Constructions and Appropriations of Black Masculinity by Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac, 1945-1965²³

In 1959, U.S. novelist Norman Mailer proclaimed that “Hip” was “wild, romantic, instinct, Negro, spontaneous, perverse, midnight, sex, the body, rebel, the child, barbarians.” In contrast, “Square” was “practical, classical, logical, white, orderly, pious, noon, religion, the mind.”²⁴ Amidst all of the explosive adjectives describing Hip and the very different ones describing Square, Mailer used two of the most polarizing in 1950s America: “Negro” and “white.” In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Mailer was not the only white author to make these types of racialized associations and endow blackness with these sorts of affective qualities. Beat writer Jack Kerouac made similar claims when he lamented in his 1951 semi-autobiographical novel *On the Road* that “at lilac evening I walk with every muscle aching” in the “Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy.”²⁵

Why would white men in the 1950s, an era of segregation and poverty for the majority of African Americans, idealize blackness, and what did they understand blackness to signify? A close examination of the work of Mailer and Kerouac reveals that they, like many white men in this period, romanticized African American masculinities because they believed that black men were less constrained by

²³ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself: An Autobiographical Narrative, Perhaps the Most Unusual Ever Written, Which is Startling in the Candor of Its Confession* (New York: Berkley, 1959), 251.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 389.

²⁵ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking, 1951), 148-149.

hegemonic gender roles. For a variety of reasons, Mailer and Kerouac felt alienated from the white, middle-class, normative masculinities that were associated with post-World War Two prosperity. Hegemonic norms of masculinity demanded that middle-class white men work in the growing white collar job sector, marry in the first half of their twenties become responsible husbands and fathers, and live in suburban houses filled with the latest consumer products. As the more physically demanding manliness rooted in the blue collar industries of the 1920s and 1930s and the military mobilizations of the 1940s declined, middle-class men were expected to engage in masculine extra-curricular activities such as sports, fraternities, and home repair.

Instead of identifying with these norms, however, Mailer and Kerouac appropriated African American masculinities in their literary reconstructions of U.S. manhood. For both of these men, African American men offered promising possibilities for reconstructing American manhood. In their attempts to find empowerment in African American masculinities, however, Mailer and Kerouac invoked and propagated a series of racial stereotypes. While they may have thought that they were expressing respect and admiration for African American men, their work functioned primarily in the interests of white manhood. Moreover, neither author ever acknowledged the ways in which their appropriation of black masculinities was only possible because of their white privilege.

This chapter examines the writings of Mailer and Kerouac from 1945 to 1965, focusing on the ways in which their male characters (black and white) embodied imagined blackness. I have chosen these authors for several reasons.

First, Mailer and Kerouac were exceptionally popular writers and influential leaders of literary movements in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁶ Second, gender, masculinity, race, and whiteness are important themes in their works. Many of Mailer's and Kerouac's narratives explore the ways in which white U.S. men struggle to construct their identities in relation to shifting post-World War Two conceptions of gender and sexuality.²⁷ Third, Mailer's and Kerouac's books examine the relationship between gender roles and race relations in 1950s and 1960s America. While several literary critics have explored their representations of African American men, this has rarely been linked to Mailer's and Kerouac's complicated relationship to whiteness and the ways in which their white characters embody blackness.²⁸ Mailer was Jewish and

²⁶ On Kerouac's life, see Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove, 1983); Ann Charters, *Beats & Company: A Portrait of a Literary Generation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986); Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Charters, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956* (New York: Viking, 1995); Charters, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1957-1969* (New York: Viking, 1999). On Mailer's life, see; Mary V. Dearborn, *Mailer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); Barry Leeds, *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer* (Bainbridge Island, WA: Pleasure Boat, 2002); J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (New York: Washington Square, 1985).

²⁷ On Kerouac and gender and sexuality, see Jack Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education, 1935-1946* (London: Paladin, 1990); Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). On Mailer and gender and sexuality, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 180-183; Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*; D. Taylor, "Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 70-101.

²⁸ On Kerouac and race, see Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*; Jon Panish, "Kerouac's The Subterraneans: A Study of 'Romantic Primitivism,'" *MELUS* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 107-123; Douglas Malcolm " 'Jazz America': Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 85-110. On Mailer and race, see John R. Cooley, *Savages and Naturals: Black Portraits by White Writers in Modern American Literature* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982).

Kerouac was Franco American, and their relationship to dominant white masculinity was unstable and contested, which reminds us that hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily singular and cohesive. For a study of white appropriations of black masculinities in the post-World War Two era, the works of Mailer and Kerouac offer much to consider.

While Kerouac and Mailer had long careers, this chapter focuses on the early years of their influence, roughly from 1945, when they began publishing, to 1965, when their lives, works, careers, and politics changed significantly.²⁹ By examining Mailer's and Kerouac's representations of black masculinities, the intent is not to decide whether Mailer's and Kerouac's characters were authentic. Instead, the goal is to show that Mailer's and Kerouac's portrayals of powerful black masculinities paradoxically reproduced white privilege.

Literary Constructions of Black Masculinities Before World War Two

Mailer and Kerouac were influenced by a long literary tradition of racialized masculinities in U.S. culture. In fact, novelist Toni Morrison contends that the presence of people of color in America is what gives U.S. literature its distinctive style. She states, "The very manner by which U.S. literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population." Morrison also argues that white literary uses of the "American Africanist presence" reveal the fears, anxieties, and desires of white rather than black Americans: "It provides a way

²⁹ In the second half of the 1960s, Mailer's interest in formal politics deepened and the majority of his writings, until the 1980s, were non-fiction essays that focused on the Vietnam War and other political subjects. From 1965 until his death in 1969, Kerouac wrote mostly poetry, his alcoholism deepened, and his personal life deteriorated with his mother's stroke and the death of his friend Neal Cassady.

of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom.”³⁰ For instance, Morrison notes the many ways that U.S. authors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Edgar Allen Poe and Mark Twain, used black male characters as foils for what they imagined as the unique freedoms available in the United States. Putting “savage” slaves in the narrative, she contends, only made the white characters seem more free and more civilized.³¹

Other scholars have pointed out different ways in which black characters were inserted in nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. literature as foils for whiteness. Paul Gilmore, for instance, argues that Nathaniel Hawthorne used racialized men as a symbol of something more natural and primitive than American white men, whom Hawthorne believed were becoming feminized by overcivilization.³² Historians and literary critics have also mined Harriet Beecher Stowe’s iconic work, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), for the various ways in which she constructed black masculinity, some of which have become archetypes, including “Uncle Tom,” the wise and dutiful slave.³³

Historians and other scholars have also explored other appropriations of black masculinity in popular culture, including minstrelsy. Minstrelsy, live performance shows that included comedy sketches, variety acts, dancing, and music, much of which was performed by white actors in blackface, had a deep impact on

³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992), 5, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38-57.

³² Paul Gilmore, *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 2.

³³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1878).

white and black communities in the United States, as well as U.S. culture broadly. Scholars have noted the complicated motivations for and effects of performing in blackface, ranging from admiration and celebration to mockery and satire.³⁴

The writers of the “Lost Generation” who rose to prominence after World War One also employed racialized bodies to address their changing world, and in so doing they revived common stereotypes of black masculinity. For instance, literary historians have noted how Ernest Hemingway used racialized bodies to discuss the insecurities of his world. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the main character, a white man, returns from World War One impotent and stripped of his sense of manhood. He is juxtaposed with the Spanish bullfighter Pedro Romero, whose darker body is strong, virile, and fearless. Several decades later, Mailer and Kerouac followed in the tradition of Hemingway and other white writers who used racialized masculinities to explore the problems and possibilities of white manhood.³⁵

Both of these writers also produced their work in the aftermath of an influential generation of African American writers. Many of the writers in the Harlem Renaissance movement, including Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, invoked stereotypes of black masculinity, but challenged and

³⁴ For histories of blackface minstrelsy, see Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Susan Gubar, *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Yuval Taylor, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop* (New York: Norton, 2012).

³⁵ Betsy L. Nies, *Eugenic Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of the 1920s* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

complicated them. Historians have noted, for instance, that Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston used black folk traditions that highlighted the southern black farmer as the hero of morality tales. In Toomer's and Hurston's novels, the southern black farmer was often constructed with many of the attributes of the Uncle Tom caricature: wise, noble, and dignified in the face of oppression and poverty. As literary critic Nathan Grant points out, however, when African Americans began to tell their own stories in popularly published works, the constructions of blackness became more complex than they had been in the works of the Lost Generation. The heroes of Toomer's and Hurston's novels, according to Grant, were not simply reproductions of the Uncle Tom slave. Instead the farmer-as-hero was flawed in his humanity, facing fear, anger, indecision, and ineffectuality in the face of his oppression.³⁶

Scholars have noted that African American novel in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s offered new sites for constructions of black masculinity. These offered figurations of black masculinities that reproduced some of the old stereotypes of black manhood. As with the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, however, many African American writers in this period, including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, invoked but also challenged the stereotypes, offering more nuanced images of the black man in America. For instance, in Wright's *Native Son* (1940),

³⁶ For studies of race in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, see Nathan Grant, *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Sharon Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2002); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Patrick Mullen, *The Man Who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

Bigger Thomas embodies many of the characteristics of the feral black man: anger, violence, and uncontained sexuality. The internal dialogue of the character reveals, however, that he is not driven by simplistic animal emotions. He is instead conflicted and demeaned in the face of U.S. racism. Baldwin, a contemporary of Mailer's and Kerouac's, further complicated black masculinity in his large body of work, including novels, short stories, plays, and essays. Baldwin set out to portray the African American male neither as villain nor victim, seeing both as detrimental to the African American community. As he explained in 1985:

I refuse to speak from the point of view of the victim. The victim can have no point of view for precisely so long as he thinks of himself as a victim. The testimony of the victim as victim corroborates, simply, the reality of the chains that bind him-confirms and, as it were, consoles the jailer.³⁷

Baldwin recognized a relationship between race, masculinity, and sexuality, and this recognition was reflected in his popular works. Baldwin's African American male characters suggested the complexities of black America; they were in different literary moments rural or urban, middle-class or working-class, young or old, gay or straight, aggressive or passive, defeated or hopeful, and religious or secular. Baldwin did not construct these attributes as mutually exclusive, but instead presented African American men who had all of these possibilities within them while they sought love and dignity in a racist America.

As Mailer's and Kerouac's careers began, they were deeply influenced by many nineteenth and twentieth century literary representations of black masculinities, including those authored by white and black writers. In his personal notebooks, for instance, Mailer wrote about the impact that Hemingway had on his

³⁷ James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Buccaneer, 1998), 78.

thinking and writing, as well as the influence of his contemporary, James Baldwin.³⁸

The changing social, cultural, and political circumstances of post-World War Two America, however, especially as these changes related to masculinities, soon provoked new literary relationships between white and black masculinities.

Mailer's and Kerouac's Pre-World War Two Encounters with Black Masculinities

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Mailer and Kerouac wrote several novels that invoked, explored, and used black masculinities. In the decades preceding the beginning of their careers as published novelists, both writers confronted diverse racialized, gendered, and sexualized constructions of manhood that shaped their understanding of black and white masculinities.

Mailer was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1923 but spent the majority of his childhood in Brooklyn, New York. His middle-class family lived in Crown Heights, a mostly Jewish neighborhood that was situated next to Bedford-Stuyvesant, which was becoming a predominantly African American neighborhood. In his childhood, his father was an accountant and his mother ran a cleaning and nursing company and the family had a black maid who kept house for them.³⁹ After World War Two, Bedford-Stuyvesant became a popular destination for African American men and women migrating from the South, which did not sit well with many white inhabitants of Brooklyn. For Mailer, this likely meant that many of the black men and boys who he encountered as a child were from the rural South. In fact,

³⁸ See Norman Mailer Collection. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

³⁹ Manso, *Mailer*, 16-18.

in 1930, 42% of black Brooklynites were born in the South Atlantic states.⁴⁰ This may have formed and strengthened his perception that black men were the products of a rural past.

While Brooklyn's social and cultural geographies were mostly segregated by race, Mailer's status as a Jewish Brooklynite complicated his relationships with African American men. Notwithstanding the many differences in the history and the status of Jewish and African Americans in U.S. society, many Jewish New Yorkers had affinities with African Americans since they, too, were migrants or the children of migrants, came from rural backgrounds, and were viewed by white Christians as antimodern. One part of the discrimination that Jews faced, in fact, was the myth that they were more primitive and less civilized than white Americans. This may help explain why many Jewish Brooklynites saw the African American struggle as linked to their own struggles. On Passover, Jews celebrated their liberation from slavery in Egypt; many Jews thought they had a special appreciation for the struggle to end African American slavery in the New World. In the early twentieth century, Jews, too, were discriminated against in the United States and were viewed as backward migrants who were unworthy of full citizenship. They also faced many of the same stereotypes that existed about black men. Jewish men were commonly seen as effeminate, but at the same time they were often viewed as violent, hypermasculinized, and hypersexualized, which in some respects paralleled

⁴⁰ Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 122-123.

stereotypes of black men as childlike fools, feral predators, and noble slaves.⁴¹ Many Jewish leaders in Brooklyn during Mailer's childhood were overt in their support for and admiration of the African American community.⁴² Furthermore, once the Harlem Renaissance took hold of the cultural life of New York City in the 1920s, many Jewish intellectuals praised and celebrated African American culture.⁴³ In fact, many Brooklynites in general admired African American culture. According to a study undertaken in the 1940s:

The Americans of Brooklyn...are seeing the Negro people for what they are—a many-sided, many-talented people who will have a vastly greater part in the unfolding drama of Brooklyn's democratic life than they have yet had an opportunity to play.⁴⁴

How true this was of the majority of Jewish Brooklynites is impossible to know, but Mailer likely was influenced by Jewish cultural perceptions of African Americans in New York.

Mailer may also have been exposed to a cultural movement termed "Muscular Judaism," which celebrated strong Jewish masculinities and sculpted Jewish male bodies as an antidote to the feminization of Jewish men. This movement rejected stereotypes of Jewish men as weak, bookish, and domesticated and instead emphasized physical strength, athletic accomplishment, and sexual power.⁴⁵ If

⁴¹ Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Inter-marriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁴² Adina Black, "Blacks, Jews, and the Struggle to Integrate Brooklyn's Junior High School 258: A Cold War Story," in *Jews of Brooklyn*, eds. Ilana Abramovitch and Sean Galvin (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 250-263.

⁴³ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Holt, 2000), 26.

⁴⁴ Ralph Foster Weld, *Brooklyn is America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 173.

⁴⁵ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 183.

exposed to this movement, Mailer would have been primed to admire the stereotypes of hypermasculinized and hypersexualized black men. In general, Mailer's status as a Jewish American man living inside and outside the mainstream of U.S. masculinity may have established a foundation for affinity, kinship, competition, and conflict with African American men.

In his late teens and early twenties, Mailer attended Harvard University and soon thereafter he fought in the Pacific in World War Two. As with Brooklyn in this period, Harvard had *de facto* segregation policies. African American men had attended Harvard since after the Civil War, but they did so only in very small numbers and nothing was done to recruit them. As of the 1930s, there was only one black faculty member and most classrooms and fraternities at Harvard were effectively segregated. But Mailer's identity as a Jewish American man at Harvard may have increased his kinship with African American men. The admission of Jewish American men was restricted at Harvard, and it was not until World War Two that Harvard administrators stopped talking about the "problem" of having too many Jews.⁴⁶

After Harvard, Mailer served in the U.S. Army in the Pacific. With the exception of the Coast Guard, all training camps and units in the U.S. military during World War Two were racially segregated. African American men lived and worked in close proximity to white men in the service, however, and cross-racial

⁴⁶ Morton and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50-60. Harvard at this time had only male students.

relationships emerged in the context of combat.⁴⁷ U.S. military segregation confirmed for various white ethnic groups, including Jews such as Mailer, that the most fundamental division among men was race and that they were part of the white majority, even if their religion and ethnicity set them apart. It also reinforced for Mailer and men like him the sense that whites were superior, as blacks were restricted from various military spaces, units, and, up until the Battle of the Bulge, combat positions. Mailer may have resisted some of these lessons, as did many white men during the war, but his ideas about racialized masculinity undoubtedly were affected by his wartime experiences.

Mailer thus came of age in a racially segregated world that influenced his encounters with and access to African Americans. But African Americans lived, studied, and fought in close proximity to him and this must have informed his ideas about race and gender. He would have seen many African Americans who were rural in origin, but had taken on urban identities. He also came of age when many whites continued to celebrate the accomplishments of African Americans in the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, his identity as a Jewish American likely elicited feelings of affinity and competition with African Americans, who also stood on the margins of mainstream America's ideas about race and gender.

Kerouac's early identities and experiences, like Mailer's, put him on the margins of hegemonic white constructions of race and gender. Born in 1922, Kerouac grew up in a French-Canadian working-class community in Lowell, Massachusetts, although his father was a French-Canadian middle-class printer. In

⁴⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, *Hidden Heroism: Black Soldiers in America's Wars* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), 131, 149.

the 1880s, when French-Canadians first came to Lowell, they were segregated and faced discrimination. By the era of Kerouac's childhood, however, French-Canadians made up a large portion of the residents of Lowell. Around World War One, 41% of the residents of Lowell were foreign born and 25% of the total population identified as French-Canadian. There was no longer any forced segregation for French-Canadians and they enjoyed many of the same privileges as white, non-French speaking Americans, but Kerouac's mother, who spoke little English and was able to thrive in her French-Canadian community, ultimately lived a segregated life due to language barriers.⁴⁸ Kerouac himself learned English, but also spoke "joual," a French-Canadian dialect, and at school he said the Oath of Allegiance to the Sacred Heart Flag of Quebec, in which he promised to always be loyal to "la race canadienne-française."⁴⁹

Kerouac's sense of being an outsider in mainstream white culture came through in many of his journals and letters. In a 1950 journal entry, Kerouac wrote that he had gone through "the same feelings any Jew, Greek, Negro, or Italian feels in America," as he "cleverly" hid his ethnic identity "even from myself."⁵⁰ He often felt self-conscious about his French-Canadian identity, especially once he was travelling outside of his hometown. In a 1950 letter to his friend Yvonne La Maître, he stated: "All my knowledge rests in my 'French Canadianess' and nowhere else." He worried

⁴⁸ Joyce Johnson, *The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 2012), 32.

⁴⁹ Translated: the French-Canadian race. Gerard J. Brault, *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), 47-50, 93-96.

⁵⁰ Jack Kerouac "Journal Entry: May 19, 1950," in *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Viking, 2004), 258-259.

that this would prevent him from fitting in.⁵¹ Finally, like many men who see themselves as outsiders, Kerouac worried about leaving his ethnic identity behind. In the same journal entry, Kerouac wrote that he had dreamed of a visit from his deceased older brother Gerard: “He hinted I should go to Lowell, or Canada, or France, and become a Frenchmen again and write in French and shut up.” He indicated that he did not see Gerard in his living image, but as himself, “returning after all the years” since he “was a child trying to become ‘un Anglais’ in Lowell for shame of being a Canuck.”⁵² While French-Canadians in Lowell may not have been racialized in the same way that other groups were in this period, Kerouac identified as an ethnic outsider.

In his childhood, Kerouac would have had some exposure to African Americans, as during World War One, African Americans migrated from the South to Lowell due to the same labor shortage that drew African Americans to Mailer’s Brooklyn.⁵³ As was the case with Mailer, this likely meant that Kerouac was exposed to southern and rural African Americans, which may have solidified a specific image of blackness in his mind.

In the late 1930s, Kerouac moved to New York City in order to attend Columbia University. Like Harvard, Columbia in this period did not have an official policy regarding African Americans, but the number of black students was small.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Charters, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 229.

⁵² Translated: An Englishman. Kerouac, “Journal Entry: May 19, 1950,” in *Windblown World*.

⁵³ Yukari Takai, *Gendered Passages: French-Canadian Migration to Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 44.

⁵⁴ Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 388.

In moving to New York, however, Kerouac would have been exposed to more African Americans on a daily basis than he may have seen in his lifetime. In *The Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education, 1935-1936*, his overtly autobiographical novel, Kerouac describes travelling to Harlem on a regular basis to listen to jazz and “to watch spareribs turning in the spareribs shack window, or watch Negroes talk on corners; to me they were exotic people I’d never known before.”⁵⁵ He juxtaposes this affinity for African Americans and their culture with a description of his fictionalized parents visiting New York City and the aversion he and they felt to what they perceived to be the black urban lifestyle: “It wasn’t so much that my mother or father or myself minded Negroes, God bless ern, but broken glass and crap on the floor, broken windows, bottles, ruined plaster, the works.”⁵⁶ According to this perception, urban African Americans lived amidst chaos and filth with a seemingly careless disregard for their homes. There was great food and great music, then, but also urban decay and a lack of the respectable middle-class values that Kerouac’s parents embraced. After dropping out of Columbia, Kerouac served briefly in the Navy during World War Two, perhaps confirming and perhaps challenging his sense of fundamental differences between white and African American masculinities and the primacy of race in shaping masculine identities.

Most white Americans in this period would have encountered black masculinities through popular culture, but Mailer and Kerouac also did so in their everyday lives. These encounters helped establish the foundation of their literary

⁵⁵ Jack Kerouac, *The Vanity of Duluoz*, 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

explorations of black masculinities, which celebrated the marginalization, primitivism, and power of African American manhood.

The Boy from Brooklyn and Weak White Men

Before engaging with black masculinities directly in his literary works, Mailer explored the failings of manhood. In Mailer's earliest narratives, his white male characters were plagued by insecurity and doubt, which provides a helpful context for interpreting his construction of African American men and black masculinities in his later works, including his controversial 1957 essay "The White Negro."

Mailer's earliest works explored the anxieties and troubles of white men within the context of World War Two, even before he experienced the war himself. For example, in "A Calculus at Heaven," written in his senior year at university (1942), Mailer's white male characters are wracked by sexual uncertainty. Facing off against a group of Japanese soldiers, the captain of a U.S. platoon recalls his life back in the United States. He reveals that people no longer thought him interesting or lovable, so he tried to rectify this by having aggressive sex with his wife as often as possible. When this failed to address his feelings of inadequacy, he joined the army to find meaning in his life by facing death. Ultimately, the main character dies in combat, unable to conform to the model of heroic manhood, which seems to confirm his general inadequacy.⁵⁷

Mailer's first complete novel, written about his time in the Pacific, also explores the insecurities and failures of white men, especially in relation to their sexualities. *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) recounts the story of the U.S. invasion of

⁵⁷ Mailer, "A Calculus at Heaven," in *Advertisements for Myself*, 25-65.

an island in the Pacific during World War Two and the narrative reveals the inadequacies, fears, anxieties and anger of men as they try to come to terms with their mortality and their feelings of irrelevancy. When describing General Cummings, the commander of the forces, Hearn, his subordinate, says, "The self-pity in his voice had been disgustingly apparent." A soldier on patrol realizes that he was scared for the first time in his life and this made him feel irrepressible rage. Perhaps the strongest and most experienced of the soldiers, Red, reveals that he realized "with surprise and shock" that "man was really a very fragile thing."⁵⁸ These sentiments suggest the impact of the war on masculinities, as do large parts of the narrative. Throughout the novel, the impact of violence, cruelty, separation, estrangement, and uncertainty on men's sense of their manhood is explored at length.

A closer look at the first-person narrative revelations of some of the men locates their malaise beyond their war experiences. For instance, the general states that "the natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety" and a soldier reveals that he felt inexplicable rage and irrelevancy long before he entered the war.⁵⁹ Many of the characters indicate, in fact, that they had always felt phony and that they do not have any real friends or accomplishments; they also indicate that the war took them away from the malaise of U.S. life in the 1930s and 1940s.

Mailer's characters in *The Naked and the Dead* express this malaise sexually. The young soldier Stanley is sure that his wife is cheating on him at home, not just

⁵⁸ Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1948), 78, 155, 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 164, 237.

because of the war, but because he does not perform adequately during sex, is “indifferent to love-making,” and is “weak and terrified.” He contemplates how his feelings of anxiety are partly a result of “facing death for the first time,” but also that they “swelled out of everything he had been thinking about before the skirmish had begun.”⁶⁰ Hearn, while thinking about how he has spent most of his life feeling like a phony, relates this to a friend’s comment that the problem with Americans is that they “don’t know how to screw.”⁶¹ Mirroring colonial literature, Mailer describes the island that they are trying to conquer in sexually suggestive language. He writes that it is a “sensual isle” at which the “men stared and stared” because it was “a vision of all beauty for which they had ever yearned, all the ecstasy that they had ever sought.” He also described the soldiers’ reaction to it: “It dissolved the long dreary passage of the mute months in the jungle, without hope, without pride. If they had been alone they may have stretched out their arms to it.”⁶² The sexualized island seems to hold out hope for the white male soldiers to shed themselves of some of their feelings of shame and inadequacy, even though it is also the site of conflict and death, as the soldiers have to forcibly take it from the enemy.⁶³

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶³ Sigmund Freud argued that sex and aggression were both expressions of the Id, the part of the psychic apparatus that is driven by instincts. Freud also argued that both sex and aggression were natural parts of the masculine maturation process. Interestingly, Freud also argued that “savages” (usually people of color in his studies) were less able to control their sexual and violent instincts, a belief that was also at the core of many racist stereotypes about African Americans. For an overview of his theories on sex, aggression, race, and gender, see Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1930). For an historical exploration of the influence of Freud in this era, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts*

As the narrative reaches its climax, the connection between many of the characters' feelings of inadequacy and anxiety and their failure to live up to masculine ideals is deepened. While the platoon that is sent out to kill any remaining Japanese soldiers makes its way to the peak of the mountain, the soldiers get sick and injured; many of them die. They fail to demonstrate heroism or strength, both of which were essential to ideals of white manhood. In fact, their commanding officer, Croft, screams "you bunch of women!" at the men when many refuse to keep going, verbally feminizing them.⁶⁴ As Ridges, a member of the platoon, tries to keep climbing, he begins to weep, a distinct sign of femininity and weakness: "He wept out of bitterness and longing and despair; he wept from exhaustion and failure and the shattering naked conviction that nothing mattered."⁶⁵ That the white male soldiers fail to conquer the island, which Mailer had previously feminized, is telling. Their inability to conquer and possess the feminized object of their affection and fear signifies and symbolizes their failed masculine heterosexuality.

Mailer's next published novel again positioned white men as weak. *Barbary Shore* (1951), which Mailer described as having "the doubtful distinction of receiving possibly the worst reviews of any serious novel in recent years," highlighted the vulnerability of his white male characters.⁶⁶ Mailer described *Barbary Shore* as centering around the character of Lovett, who needed "to stand on

of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment (New York: Anchor, 1984).

⁶⁴ Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 606.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 682.

⁶⁶ Mailer to Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, December 29, 1952. Norman Mailer Collection. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

his own two feet.”⁶⁷ It is the story of a rooming house in Brooklyn filled with a cast of secretive characters. Lovett, the central protagonist, cannot remember his previous life, but believes he fought in World War Two. He comes to the rooming house in order to write a great novel and meets several characters: McLeod, who loves to talk politics; Hollingsworth, a disturbing executive; Guinevere, the landlady; and Lannie, a psychologically disturbed young woman who works for Hollingsworth. No one in the house is who they appear to be, however, and as the story unfolds we discover that Hollingsworth is a government agent who has been sent to retrieve a mysterious item that McLeod, a communist, is said to have in his possession.

Barbary Shore alludes to many of the problems facing white American men in the 1950s. As a story about a member of the Communist Party USA who is investigated and destroyed by the U.S. government, it examines Cold War surveillance and intolerance and the ways in which this relates to American masculinities. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, white middle-class masculinity in this period was undergoing changes brought on by the growth of white-collar jobs, the return of World War Two veterans with physical and emotional disabilities, and the uncertainties of a nuclear age. In other ways, however, white middle-class masculinity remained much as it was before World War Two and it continued to be marked by heteronormative masculinity, which Mailer linked to aggression and conformity. *Barbary Shore* explores all of these continuities and changes in relation to its white male characters.

⁶⁷ Mailer Notes on *Barbary Shore*, 1949, Norman Mailer Collection.

Throughout the brief and tangled narrative, Mailer's weak and uncertain white male characters are sexually repressed or inexperienced, as are his characters in *The Naked and the Dead*. For instance, Lovett spends the better part of the novel desiring the landlady Guinevere, but never acts on this desire. While in her apartment, he admires "her plump hand" as it "darted into the space between her breasts" and he found it "difficult not to stare."⁶⁸ Staring, however, is all Lovett ever does with Guinevere. All of his sexual advances, once he gets up the courage to approach her, are thwarted.

In this novel, however, there are early signs of Mailer's celebration of black masculinity, which he later expanded on in his essay "The White Negro." For example, in having an important white male character speak in a jazz vernacular and visit Harlem, Mailer implicitly linked white masculine empowerment to African American culture. At the beginning of the novel, before his true identity is revealed, Hollingsworth is described as having a "colorless voice," but as he becomes more and more powerful, his language begins to reflect the jazz vernacular.⁶⁹ For example, he begins referring to all of the other male characters as "man" and the female characters as "sister." He also expresses interest in racialized space when he tells Lovett that he has a strong desire to see the "evil quarters" of Harlem, which he has heard is "quite something." While these are brief moments in the text, they are linked to moments when Hollingsworth is especially masculine, such as when he is convincing a female stranger in a bar to have sex with him and when he subdues McLeod physically. In these moments, Hollingsworth's empowered masculinity

⁶⁸ Mailer, *Barbary Shore* (New York: Signet, 1951), 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

stands in contrast to the white masculinities of McLeod and Lovett. These passages suggest that Mailer was making a transition from pointing out the failings of white manhood to proposing possible avenues for renewed empowerment.

Part of Mailer's use of the jazz vernacular in *Barbary Shore* could be explained by his deepening relationship with "hipsterism" in this period. The "Hipsters," as they came to be known, were a group of predominantly white men who first appeared in the 1950s, were associated with the resurgence of jazz, and fostered a new cultural ideal. Associated with Greenwich Village, they seemed to be the inheritors of bohemian traditions. Their credo was that if death was imminent and mainstream society had nothing important to offer, why play by the rules? They created their own cultural movement and proclaimed that "HIP has rewired the nervous system to accommodate the overload of ecstasy and to coast through the cut-out of exhaustion, registering upon the dial only the immobile needle of hang-loose ironic cool."⁷⁰ Their cultural movement, however, was deeply rooted in white men's engagement with black culture in New York City. They were particularly enamored with jazz and jazz culture, much as the white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance had been. Mailer's immersion in this culture no doubt encouraged him to use the jazz vernacular in his works.

Mailer's earliest works did not engage extensively or explicitly with black culture. Instead, his short stories, *The Naked and the Dead*, and *Barbary Shore* explored the failings of hegemonic white manhood. The narratives highlighted the ways in which white men in the 1940s and 1950s failed to exemplify ideal

⁷⁰ Roy Carr, Brian Case and Fred Dellar, *The Hip: Hipsters, Jazz and the Beat Generation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 11.

masculinity, which required physical bravery, heterosexual skill, and embodied strength. His growing experiences with the racial tourism that was popular with Hipsters in this period may have helped him develop a sense that the solution to the problem of white men's fears and anxieties was to appropriate key aspects of black manhood.

The Park of Inequity

In Mailer's third novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), he took another step toward the appropriation of black masculinities that would culminate in "The White Negro." Just as in *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*, the narrative first presents a white middle-class man in crisis due to the effects of World War Two. It also introduces the idea that the U.S. government and its treatment of non-conformists are threatening white middle-class men.⁷¹ The main character, Sergius, comes to the resort town of Desert D'Or after fighting as a pilot in Japan. He reveals that ever since he bombed an orphanage, he has been figuratively and literally impotent. And even though he used to be a boxer, the epitome of masculinity in sport, he "had no punch."⁷² He eventually befriends Charles Eitel, a famed Hollywood director, who is being investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (Eitel is in the process of deciding whether to submit to the committee and name supposed communists in Hollywood). Sergius's impotence, a definitive failure of masculinity, is temporarily alleviated in his relationship with an actress, Lulu, but ultimately she uses, rejects, and replaces him. This sequence of events presents Sergius as unable

⁷¹ The title, *The Deer Park*, is a reference to the fabled retreat of French King Louis XV, where he apparently kept women for his sexual pleasure.

⁷² Mailer, *The Deer Park* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1955), 7.

to sustain some of the most vital characteristics of white masculinity: sexual performance and patriarchal control.

In the middle portions of the narrative, when Sergius is engaged in a sexual relationship with Lulu, he at times uses the language Hipsters associated with black masculinity and Mailer subtly engaged with in *Barbary Shore*. During foreplay, he asserts to Lulu that he wants to “cut the knot, baby.”⁷³ Significantly, this is also the scene in which Sergius can reach orgasm for the first time. After Lulu uses and dumps him and he is stripped of his sexual power, however, Sergius stops speaking in this way. He is also unable to protect his friend Eitel from the government and when F.B.I. agents question Sergius, they feminize him by implying that he is a homosexual, thereby humiliating and disempowering him.

Eitel also follows a character arc that takes him from empowerment to failure, albeit for slightly different reasons. Eitel begins as a rich, independent, heterosexually virile man. In these moments, he embodies some of the traits of black masculinity highlighted by the Hipsters, especially in his use of the jazz vernacular. Eitel, who is being asked to give the names of suspected communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee, is eventually completely emasculated by the experience. He loses his girlfriend, job, and money, along with his jazz vernacular. In this case, his failure seems to stem from his half-hearted rebellion. He sympathizes with communists, a definite form of political rebellion, but still attempts to maintain a foothold in ideals of monogamy and domesticity. His position halfway between the

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 83.

binaries of acceptable manhood and political rebellion ultimately destroys his masculinity.

Marion Faye, Eitel's former stepson, is the only main character who is truly powerful in *The Deer Park*. And Marion distinctly rejects white middle-class expectations of masculinity and instead embraces the lifestyle and language that Mailer had begun to associate with black masculinity. Marion is a pimp who lives by his own moral code. He is not completely devoid of the individualistic capitalist impulse celebrated in hegemonic masculinity because he is enterprising and financially successful, but he embraces the life of the hard-working pimp that Mailer later described in "The White Negro." He does not maintain a heterosexual and monogamous relationship; he does not attempt to find a "civilized" job; and he uses the jazz vernacular. Marion calls everyone "man" and "chick"; he tells people to "knock off"; and he "digs" his life because "so many chicks think I'm the jack."⁷⁴ Marion is contrasted with Sergius and Eitel because he rejects the dominant codes of white masculinity. He is also contrasted with them because he seems to embrace black masculinity, albeit from the privileged position of whiteness. In that embrace, he becomes physically powerful, sexually assertive, and culturally rebellious, just like the black men Mailer would go on to describe in "The White Negro."

The White Negro Comes to Town

Originally published in *Dissent* magazine in 1957, "The White Negro" appeared during a tumultuous period in U.S. race relations. By 1957, several key events in the struggle for black liberation were publicly affecting the relationship

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20, 40, 131, 134, 286.

between African Americans and white Americans. First, the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education* ordered that all schools in the United States be desegregated with “deliberate speed,” potentially bringing young black and white students into closer proximity. Second, the murder of the young African American boy Emmett Till in 1955 and the subsequent acquittal of his murderers gave new vigor to organized fights for African American civil rights. Third, the boycott of the public buses in Montgomery, Alabama (1955-1956) presented a direct challenge to the segregation of public transportation and popularly demonstrated the collective will of African American civil rights organizations. These three very public events, along with many other acts of civil disobedience and public protest, were familiar to most Americans in this period due to extensive media coverage. On the one hand, these events and the media coverage of them made tragic heroes of the black men and women who were fighting for black liberation. In this context, many African American men appeared heroic, defiant, and strong, key characteristics of hegemonic manhood. On the other hand, these events scared many white Americans, who felt threatened by an empowered black community in the United States. Both of these characterizations could have appealed to Mailer, who longed for the strong male hero who would challenge the tired and ineffective white power structure. In this context, “The White Negro” discussed the failures of white men in the 1950s, the power of black masculinities, and the promise of the Hipsters, the name often used to describe people (most often imagined as masculine) who engaged with the jazz subculture in this period and

rejected many of the norms of white, middle-class conformity. Hipsters, according to Mailer, benefited from using black masculinities to solve the problems of white men.

The essay began by presenting white men as shattered by the experiences of World War Two, which echoed the narrative themes of *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer described the war as “a mirror to the human condition” that “blinded anyone who looked into it.” He claimed that the realities of war—destruction, murder, chaos—made death seem senseless to all those who experienced it, which in turn made life seem senseless as well. He argued that “we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years.” One thing that Mailer was certain of was that the trauma of combat, which induced feelings of anxiety, cowardice, and fear in the soldiers and sailors who fought in the war, challenged their ability to fulfill masculine ideals that were rooted in bravery, independence, and strength. With the “stench of fear” coming out of “every pore of American life,” white men were suffering from “a collective failure of the nerve.” If white men could not be brave, daring, and self-assured, they did not fit the standards of hegemonic masculinity in this period. This failure, according to Mailer, was exacerbated by fears of atomic annihilation, cultural conformity, and totalitarian governance. “It is no wonder,” Mailer asserted, “that these have been the years of conformity and depression.” The only real answer for white men was to reject existing cultural ideals. “If our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l’univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled,” then “the

only life-giving answer” is to “accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self.”⁷⁵

Second, Mailer celebrated black masculinities and the alternative manhood they offered. Throughout his explanation of why white men were so unhappy, for instance, Mailer argued that African American men were happy because they had been denied access to the very things that stifled white men: “home,” “job,” and “family.” The African American man, according to Mailer, could not let himself be weak and cowardly or be cowed by the “cameos of security” because he lived a life of “ever-threatening danger.” The African American man’s exile from mainstream society kept him vital, brave, and exciting, all of which were necessary for successful manhood. Mailer described African American men as a “new breed of adventurers” whose culture was like an “orgasm,” the epitome of pleasure. He defined African American men by their ability to live “in the enormous present” for their “Saturday night kicks,” and for the “more obligatory pleasures of the body,” rather than the imperatives of “the mind.”⁷⁶

Mailer summed up the admirable characteristics of the African American man with the descriptor “psychotic,” commonly defined as not in touch with reality. Mailer believed in the suitability of this term for describing the black masculine experience because, “hated from outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or

⁷⁵ Mailer, “The White Negro, 311-313.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

morbid or self-destructive or corrupt.” Facing the reality of “the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimping, drug addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break, what-have-you,” African American men “discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom, an ethical differentiation between the good and the bad in every human activity from the go-getter pimp (as opposed to the lazy one) to the relatively dependable pusher or prostitute.”⁷⁷

Finally, "The White Negro" argued that, in contrast to other white men, the white Hipster found happiness by rejecting hegemonic white masculinity and modeling themselves on African American men. The white Hipster “drifted out at night looking for action” armed with “a black man’s code.” Using this code, the white Hipster could succeed in the search for the “good orgasm,” the language here further linking liberation, already associate with black masculinity in Mailer’s formulation, to sex.⁷⁸

Mailer’s essay placed the Hipster in African American space. Hipster masculinity required urbanity, a clear rejection of white suburban manhood, and a continuous cultural exchange with African Americans in that space. Mailer argued that in New York, New Orleans, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and particularly in Greenwich Village, "the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face to face with the Negro." In this context, the Hipster became a “fact of American life.” Mailer described the Hipster in black city spaces as the “frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life,” conjuring images of the cowboy, an ideal white man, on the edge of civilization. He also said that the Hipster had “the sophistication

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 312, 315

of the wise primitive in a giant jungle.”⁷⁹ In constructing the Hipster in this way and placing him in this space, “The White Negro” racialized the male Hipster experience.

Mailer characterized Hipsters as imbued with the spirit of the “black man’s code”; Hipsters had “absorbed” the “synapses of the Negro.” The Hipster was rebellious and hedonistic, which removed him from the confines of civilized manhood. He was also a “philosophical psychopath.” Mailer’s use of the term “psychopath” to describe Hipsters who lived like black men, put his belief that African Americans were not of the material world and therefore did not have to adhere to the demands of U.S. consumer capitalism into stark relief. This term also further linked Mailer’s imaginary black masculinity to sexuality, as in the Freudian formulation popular at this time one of the main characteristics of psychopathy was an uncontrollable libido, or sexual drive, which was dominated by the Id. Mailer argued that the psychopath, like a child lived an “infantile fantasy” and gave “expression to the buried infant in himself,” while wishing to “satisfy his immediate wishes and desires.” This was admirable, in Mailer’s estimation, because of its “divorce of man from his values, the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society.” Behaving in this way also helped the Hipster bury the “weaker more feminine part” of his “nature.” Mailer even spiritualized the experience of total hedonism, arguing that it would help the Hipster find “God.” Not the God of churches, but “the unachievable whisper of mystery within the sex, the paradise of limitless energy and perception just beyond the next wave of the next orgasm.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 315, 316, 325, 327.

The characterization of the Hipster as “infantile,” led by the need to gratify his “desires” and divorced from “his values,” mirrors the way that Mailer described the “Negro” earlier in the essay. Mailer characterized the Negro as “following the need of his body,” “living in the enormous present,” and subverting morality by celebrating “the pimp.” By first defining the character of the Negro and then describing the character of the Hipster in the same terms, Mailer offered definitive support to his claim that the Hipster was a white Negro. He strongly encouraged the reader to value the Hipsters’ appropriation of blackness because “the middle-class values” to which white men had been subscribing were the “pre-requisite to sublimation,” but the Negro “possesses a potential superiority” in his ability to “hold the tail of the expanding reality of truth.” This made him the hero of the necessary revolution in values.⁸¹

Finally, the Hipster had a specific discourse to help him navigate through his urban life, which came directly from an urban Negro dialect. Mailer stated that when the white urban-dweller joined with the Negro, “the child” of this union “was the language” of Hipsters, which was “a communication of art.” The black dialect brought the Hipster into a hedonistic world by telling the white listener, “I feel this, and now you do too.” The Hipster needed this language because, “like children, hipsters are fighting for the sweet, and their language is a set of subtle indications of their success or failure in the competition for pleasure.” The power of his language resided in its relationship to African Americans and, therefore, its ability to truly express the human condition. It was a language that was best “equipped to describe”

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

both the “elation and exhaustion” of life’s experiences. It included words such as “man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square,” all of which, Mailer believed, denoted movement, the antithesis to the static and boring life of white masculine conformity. Mailer wrote that the Hipster adopted this language from African American men, who in “the cunning of their language, the abstract ambiguous alternatives in which from the danger of their oppression they learned to speak,” found a “profound sensitivity,” best embodied in “the Negro jazzman who was the cultural mentor of a people.”⁸²

Mailer closed his essay by celebrating the “desegregation of the schools in the South,” a direct reference to *Brown v. the Board of Education*. He recognized that this had given fuel to rabid fears of miscegenation, but he candidly stated that he saw miscegenation as part of the “absolute human right of the Negro to mate with the white.” While this was a direct comment about fears of sexual relations between African Americans and white Americans, it also spoke to his overall point that the contact between, and blending of, blackness and whiteness promised by desegregation was a good and necessary challenge to a flawed white power structure. He contended that “the Twentieth Century is a vastly exciting century for its tendency is to reduce all of life to its ultimate alternatives.” He believed that there were two possible paths for U.S. men at this key juncture: they could fight on the side of hegemonic whiteness in the “last war of them all between the blacks and the whites” or they could choose to appropriate blackness once they realized that “the meaning of life has so unexpectedly come from a virtually illiterate people.” The

⁸² *Ibid.*, 322, 323

latter would lead “our rebellion” while the former would remain in “monotony” and “bleakness.”⁸³

Commentators had complex reactions to “The White Negro,” with some condemning it for its reduction of African American men to caricatures and its simplification of the complex realities of poverty and oppression. Others praised it for bringing attention to the value of blackness and the African American experience and for honestly exposing the conflict between white power structures and black men. In one example of the latter response, Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver praised “The White Negro” for pointing out the sexual power of African American masculinity and its revolutionary potential. In his 1968 book *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver described “The White Negro” as “prophetic and penetrating in its understanding of the psychology involved in the accelerating confrontation of black and white in America.”⁸⁴

Black author James Baldwin, who had also spent time with Mailer, however, had a more ambivalent reaction to “The White Negro” and Mailer himself. His reaction supports the argument that Mailer imagined black masculinity in order to deal with his own struggles. In his essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” first published in *Esquire* in 1961, Baldwin argued that Mailer had “a real vision of ourselves as we are” and that “young people” whose “instincts are quite sound” respected Mailer. Baldwin, however, called Mailer out for using imaginary black men in order to work out his “relationship to his own life.” Baldwin made clear that he was offended by Mailer’s use of “the Depression language of deprived Negroes”

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 329-331.

⁸⁴ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 97.

and “the sorely menaced sexuality of Negroes,” which Baldwin believed Mailer praised in order to mollify “the white man’s own sexual panic” and to justify a “grim system of delusions.”⁸⁵ Baldwin, then, recognized in Mailer’s work an attempt to use blackness as a way to work through his feelings about his own status as a white man in the United States at mid-century. And Baldwin, however much he admired Mailer as a writer, felt little sympathy for the problems of white people in this era. In the essay he wrote: “I am afraid that for a very long time the troubles of white people failed to impress me as being real trouble.” He continued that white people complaining about their anxieties and troubles reminded him “of children crying because the breast has been taken away.”⁸⁶

Baldwin also questioned Mailer’s knowledge of the reality of black life and black masculinity in the United States, arguing: “I think that I know something about the American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way that I have been.” He also reminded Mailer that he “could have pulled rank on him” because he “was black and knew more about the periphery he [Mailer] so helplessly maligns in *The White Negro* than he could ever hope to know.”⁸⁷

Published at a moment of the intensification of black liberation struggles and public resistance to white supremacy, both of which Eldridge Cleaver and James Baldwin became deeply involved in, “The White Negro” was, regardless of whether one supported or opposed its vision of blackness, definitely of its time. In it, Mailer

⁸⁵ James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell, 1961): 171-190, 174-175, 181, 188-190.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

denigrated white masculinity, celebrated a particular brand of black masculinity, and recommended that white men appropriate blackness in order to lead a rebellion in U.S. values. Mailer soon used these characterizations of white and black manhood in his novels to re-present his understanding of white American masculinities.

A Political Turn

“The White Negro” drew much attention in the years after it was published and Mailer’s role as a prominent leader in the Hipster movement intensified. He also became involved in politics, including the growing civil rights movement. In the early 1960s, the movement accelerated with lunch counter sit-ins, voter registration campaigns, vocal student movements, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. In the media, African American men were even more visible, powerfully and positively resisting U.S. power structures and threatening for the same reason. In Mailer's new novels, these dueling perceptions of African American men and masculinity were both present. His first novel published in the 1960s was also influenced by the feminist movement, which was beginning to permeate mainstream consciousness and increasing a sense of threat to white patriarchal hegemonic structures.

At the heart of Mailer’s 1964 novel *An American Dream* is a white male character who is threatened by dominating women and powerful African American men, but who also is invigorated when he appropriates the power of black masculinity. This novel addressed the struggles of white, middle-class masculinity somewhat differently than the novels that Mailer had written in the 1950s. *An American Dream* focuses on a World War Two veteran, Stephen Rojak, who is

scarred by his wartime experiences. It also features an emasculating wife and an African American antagonist, which reflected and promoted white male anxieties about the growing African American civil rights movement. The rage that Stephen feels over his emasculation at the hands of his estranged wife, his decision to murder her, his replacement at work by an African American man, his fall from public grace, and his relationship with several women are all explored. The narrative emphasizes many of the same themes from Mailer's earlier works: white, middle-class men's anxieties about a changing political and social landscape; their fears of inadequacy and effeminization; and the relationship between sex, violence, and masculine control. In this case, however, the white protagonists' appropriation of imagined black masculinities is even more prevalent.

As with the other central protagonists in Mailer's novels, Stephen's memories of combat are described in sexual terms. While fighting with his wife, who is characterized as a drunken harpie, Stephen remembers killing a young German soldier who had "a healthy overspoiled young beauty of a face" and was a "possessor of that overcurved mouth which only great fat sweet young faggots can have when their rectum is turned and entertained from adolescence on." In this passage, the character uses gendered and sexual metaphors to emasculate, and thereby degrade, his opponents. He also uses gendered and sexualized language when recalling that when he pulled the trigger on his gun, it was as if he "were squeezing the softest breast of the softest pigeon which ever flew." The war did not make Stephen feel manly and empowered, however, but instead left him feeling as if his "personality was built upon a void." After the war, settling down in middle-class matrimony with

a woman who he felt robbed him of his manhood only exacerbated these feelings. She emasculates his wartime experiences, for example, when she accuses him of “whimpering and whimpering” and “going pop pop pop with your little gun.”⁸⁸

At the beginning of the novel, Stephen considers taking his own life, which he comes to view as the ultimate act of cowardice, but instead he begins to rediscover his masculinity in the intensely violent acts of strangling his wife and throwing her body out the window to create the illusion of suicide. His masculinization is then linked to his heterosexuality when immediately following the murder he goes downstairs and has sex with the German maid. This scene links sex and violence to Stephen’s reclaiming of power after he has spent years of being emasculated by his wife, which reveals the deep current of misogyny that runs through this novel. The women in this novel, as in *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, are sexual props who serve mostly to reinvigorate the failing manhood of the male protagonists. In *An American Dream* they are also more explicitly used as props for venting masculine violence.

In Stephen’s journey to find a powerful manhood, several of the empowered characters that he confronts appropriate the language Mailer associated with black manhood in “The White Negro.” For instance, when Stephen’s boss fires him from his job on a television show, Stephen’s half-hearted pleas (an indication of his emasculation) are met with his boss asking him about the “chick scene,” telling him not to worry “baby,” and inquiring, “Don’t you dig these things?”⁸⁹ The producer’s cool talk in a moment when he exhibits the power to fire his employees is

⁸⁸ Mailer, *An American Dream* (New York: Henry Holt, 1964), 4, 5, 23.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

contrasted with Stephen's feminized pleas for his job. Stephen's replacement at the studio then turns out to be an African American man; Stephen's white masculine weakness will literally be replaced by black masculine strength. This engages with white men's anxieties about black men taking their jobs as African Americans pushed for integration and the end of racist hiring practices.

Stephen is not always weak, however. When he evades the police and finds another woman to sexually penetrate, his masculinity is reaffirmed. In these moments, sex is linked to psychopathic rage. After spending a morning having sex with an African American nightclub singer, Cherry, Stephen confronts and beats up her ex-boyfriend Shago, who happens to be the African American man who will soon take his job. In this case, his sexual prowess is highlighted by his disproportionate rage.⁹⁰ Recall that Mailer proposed that black manhood was more powerful than white manhood because of its primitive disregard for rationality, rules, and etiquette. He also linked this to African American men's sexual exploits. In this scene, Stephen quickly moves from sex to violence and is able to overcome the black man, taking on his characteristics in the process. Furthermore, Stephen has figuratively crossed over into the primitive and has found power in the experience, which is heightened because he has reversed the specter of black-on-white violence. Interestingly, he is in Harlem in this scene, putting him in the urban space that Mailer imagined as the heart of darkness.

Shago is one of the few primary African American characters in Mailer's early works of literature, perhaps because, as literary scholar John Cooley argues, "Mailer

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

has always been more interested in an intellectual conception of black life than in blacks themselves.”⁹¹ The description of Shago’s attire immediately brings to mind the men the Hipsters are trying to emulate. He is “wearing a small black felt hat with a narrow brim,” “short boots of some new and extraordinary cut (red-wine suede with buttons of mother-of-pearl),” and a “red velvet waistcoat to match.” He also has an “umbrella, taut as a sword in its case,” which he holds “at an angle to his body,” invoking “some perfect recollection of a lord of Harlem standing at his street corner.”⁹²

At the beginning of the confrontation, Mailer characterizes Shago as hip, primitive, and powerful. The scene begins with Shago using words such as “sugar,” “baby,” “honey,” and “cool” and he cries “shee-it” as he comes storming into the apartment. Mailer’s characterization of Shago’s speech and voice evoke animalism and primitivism: “There were snakes in his tropical garden, and a wild pig was off in the wilderness with a rip in its flank from the teeth of a puma, he gave you a world of odd wild cries, and imprisoned it to something complex in his style.”

Furthermore, “he had a beat which went right through your ear into your body.”⁹³

Mailer then uses the phallic umbrella to signify the shift in power between the two men. At first Shago dominates the scene, but once Stephen has gained control and pushed Shago down a flight of stairs, he takes his umbrella from him. He now possesses the phallic symbol of African American masculinity.

⁹¹ Cooley, *Savages and Naturals*, 160.

⁹² Mailer, *An American Dream*, 183.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

The continued presence of the umbrella serves as a symbol of Stephen's empowerment at the book's conclusion. He carries this umbrella with him to meet with his ex-father-in-law, a notorious mobster who wants answers about the death of his daughter. While he talks to Mr. Kelly, "the umbrella lay like a sleeping snake" across his legs and when Mr. Kelly tries to take it away from him, he feels that "it seemed desperately unfair in a way" that Stephen "could not name."⁹⁴ Finally, when Mr. Kelly tries to push Stephen off his balcony, which echoes what Stephen did to the body of Mr. Kelly's daughter, he fends him off with the umbrella. In taking the umbrella from a black man and using it to assert his power over a white patriarch, Stephen has appropriated a symbol of the most historically threatening construction of black masculinity, the penis. He is no longer scared and trapped in a domestic hell. At the end of the novel, he flees the city, never to be punished for his deeds.

Even the title of the novel seems to invoke the fantasies of "The White Negro." A play on "The American Dream," the system of values that requires hard work, aggressive individualism, and capitalist success, *An American Dream* depicts an alternate reality where white men can reject their middle-class jobs, domestic lives, pursuit of financial success, and political positions by going to Harlem, having sex with African American women, obtaining the black phallus, and fleeing all responsibilities.

Disrupting the Fantasy

Mailer's formulation of black masculinity and his notion that white men could appropriate black masculinity in order to reject the hegemonic masculinity

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240, 256.

that was stifling them were deeply problematic. One reason for this is that Mailer's works insisted on seeing black marginalization as empowering, instead of acknowledging the ways in which marginalization reflected and perpetuated racism, poverty, and disenfranchisement. Mailer's works also masculinized the African American experience, even though African American women were equally, if not more, marginalized in U.S. society in the 1950s and 1960s. The books further marginalized African American and white American women by reducing them to sexual props and objects on which to unleash violence. Rarely in these novels, if ever, did Mailer give women a voice beyond these roles. His writings also ignored the complex social and cultural realities of African American men, reducing them to jazz, urbanity, pleasure, and nightlife and ignoring central features of black life, such as religion, work, and family.

The gift of black masculinity, in Mailer's view was that it helped to free white men from the chains of hegemonic masculinity, not that it could offer African Americans freedom. This is in direct conflict with the black civil rights movement, which was calling for the political and social empowerment of African Americans. In the 1950s and 1960s, African American leaders were forcing a public discussion of the political and social oppression of African Americans, a fact that Mailer knew. For these real African Americans, as opposed to Mailer's literary ones, the answers to racial oppression did not lie in disengaging from the U.S. system, but instead in revolutionizing it. Unfortunately, Mailer's construction and appropriation of black masculinities reduced them to commodities to be consumed, leaving them devoid of any potential for empowerment.

Even though Mailer's vision of black masculinity was celebratory, reversing the white tendency to disparage, fear, and pathologize black manhood in the 1950s and 1960s, it still sowed the seeds of white supremacist thinking and promoted the fears associated with racial integration and black empowerment. Furthermore, it was based on racist visions of black manhood, which Mailer adopted without questioning and applied to Hipsters. For instance, Mailer described black masculinity as "primitive," but the Hipster as a "wise primitive" living in a "jungle." This construction built on longstanding racist discourse that linked African Americans to jungles. In order to save the Hipsters from the jungle-based taint of their association with African Americans, he elevated them to "wise" primitives. This is reinforced by an anecdote that Mailer explored in "The White Negro" in which an African American man talks to a white woman at a party. The woman is making a sophisticated argument, which the African American man can see through, not because he is wise, but because he is tapped into her emotionally. As Mailer explained, "Being unable to read or write, he could hardly be interested in ideas nearly as much as in lifemanship, and so, he eschewed any attempt to obey the precision or lack of precision in the girl's language and instead sensed her character (and the values of her social type) by swinging with the nuances of her voice."⁹⁵ While the Hipster is a wise primitive in an urban jungle, the illiterate African American man can "sense" and "swing."

He also did this in his explanation of the Hipster's psychosis. While he described the Negro as primal in his "psychosis," the Hipster was a "philosophical

⁹⁵ Mailer, "The White Negro," 324.

psychopath.” He had “converted his unconscious experience into much conscious knowledge” and “shifted the focus of his desire from immediate gratification toward that wider passion for future power which is the mark of civilized man.” Again, Mailer elevated the Hipster above the Negro, even while arguing that the Hipster’s power was derived from his appropriation of blackness.

The metaphor of a wedding, used by Mailer to describe the desired relationship between white Hipsters and black masculinity, also maintained and promoted white supremacy. As Mailer stated, white men and black men should come together, especially in urban centers, and “in this wedding of the white and the black” it was the latter who should bring “the cultural dowry.”⁹⁶ The imagery of the cultural dowry is important because it puts the African American in the subservient position. The one who brings the dowry to the relationship is the weaker in the partnership. This would seem to contradict Mailer’s belief that the black masculine was the more powerful of the two, but it reflects a deeper, more fundamental, and unshaken belief that even though black masculinity was empowering, white men were still the patriarchs in the interracial exchange.

Furthermore, Mailer’s appropriation of African American literary masculinities represented a continuation of white privilege, even as Mailer sought to deconstruct ideal white manhood. Mailer never contemplated the power he exerted when treating black masculinity as a commodity. By calling Hipsters “White Negroes,” Mailer constructed them as the same as African American men, just with a simple racial difference. But there was nothing simple about this difference in 1950s

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

and 1960s America. Hipsters were “wise primitives” who had consciously decided to engage in African American culture in order to escape what they perceived to be the trappings of white, middle-class masculinity. African Americans, according to Mailer, were victims of their circumstance, forced into abandoning their quest for white American morality. White American men, then, had power in their ability to choose to either reject or accept U.S. standards of male morality, while African American men did not. In failing to see the privilege inherent in white American men’s ability to choose and in failing to allow for any power for African American men, except as foils, Mailer perpetuated white privilege. By calling the Hipster a “White Negro,” Mailer also simplified racial realities in 1950s America, which was a reflection of the privilege of his whiteness.

Mailer’s appropriation of black masculinity in *An American Dream* continued to simplify the realities of racial oppression, ultimately positioned white men as more civilized, and reinforced the privilege of white men to ultimately direct their own fate, especially given that Stephen is never punished for the two murders and one assault he commits. It was also an early example of the backlash against civil rights and the empowerment of black men. While in “The White Negro,” Mailer urged the white “humanist radical” to support the liberation of black men as a route to positive change in U.S. masculinity, in *An American Dream* he constructed a narrative that spoke directly to the fear that if African American men became too powerful, they would ultimately make white American men obsolete. This is most obvious in Shago replacing Stephen on the television show. In order to counter Shago’s power, Stephen has sex with an African American woman and appropriates

Shago's black masculinity. In this way, the novel presented appropriation as a path to the re-empowerment of white masculinity, not a true celebration of an empowered black masculinity. In so doing, *An American Dream* undermined Mailer's insistence in "The White Negro" that he yearned for the "rise of the Negro" and the "rebellion" that would "replace the time of conformity."⁹⁷

A Primitive Utopia

In his first complete novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), Kerouac expressed his longing for a simpler and more primitive past when white masculinity was empowered. He presented this primitive past as a rural utopia and depicted the failures of white manhood in a contemporary urban wasteland. Much like Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Town and the City* addressed white American men's emasculation in the 1940s and 1950s, while not yet explicitly incorporating black masculinities into the text.

The Town and the City tells the story of the Martin family, a large, well-established family in Galloway, Massachusetts, and their journey from country to city. Loosely based on Kerouac's childhood, Galloway represents the male characters' past, where an ideal white masculinity was rooted in nature. In his 1946 journal notes about the novel, for instance, Kerouac described the patriarch of the Martin family as "a tall whitehaired man" who embodied "old time American 'manliness' in the frontier and culture sense, politically America First, emotionally + morally 19th century."⁹⁸ When he lives in Galloway, Mr. Martin is the epitome of

⁹⁷ Mailer, "The White Negro," 324.

⁹⁸ Kerouac 1946 Journals: Incl. notes for *The Town and the City*, Subseries 3: Journals, Box 53, folder 7, February 25, 1946-May 2, 1946 Jack Kerouac Collection,

white masculinity: he is rugged, on the boundaries of civilization, financially successful, and patriarchal. While his male children still live in Galloway, they fit a youthful ideal of white masculinity. Peter (the character modeled on Kerouac) is described as “wild in his heart” because he is in touch with the “invisible brooding landscape” in which he lives.⁹⁹ This invokes a pastoral manhood common to white masculinities in 19th century U.S. novels and especially in frontier literature. The characterization of the oldest brother Joe as a horseman further strengthens the imagery of frontier masculinity.

As the young white male characters are confronted with the realities of the present, such as the encroachment of industrialization, capitalism, and militarism, they begin to feel insecure and unsure, much as Mailer’s characters in *The Naked and the Dead* were. Joe is described as knowing that “there was something else he wanted,” that “he did not know what it was,” and that “he would never get it.” Joe exclaims to a friend, “Dammit.... I wish I could have lived in those days when you rode on horseback and all you had ahead of you was this big unexplored space,” an era “when men were men.” Joe’s yearning for an ideal manhood rooted in a fading U.S. past reinforces the novel’s theme of a crisis in white masculinity. Eventually the Martin men (and women) leave “the old house..., the plot of ground, the place of earth,” the only place they have ever known, because of economic hardship, war, or

Berg Collection of English and American Literature: New York Public Library, New York City.

⁹⁹ Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), 1, 11.

lack of opportunity. Being forced out of their home is described as “a real and unnameable tragedy.”¹⁰⁰

In the city, Kerouac’s male characters are surrounded by modernity, which is linked to the destruction of their manliness. His 1946 journal explains that Peter succumbs to “the abyss of modern decadence” and finds that only “the mocking self” is left for a man who “strays from his kind.”¹⁰¹ In the realities of the city, the Martin men are destroyed. Joe returns from war “scarred and darkened and embittered,” Mr. Martin dies without his fortune and Peter becomes associated with effeminate urban decadence.¹⁰²

In the *Town and the City*, Kerouac juxtaposes a rural past where white manhood was powerful with an urban present, where white men are physically, mentally, and emotionally compromised. As with Mailer, Kerouac roots some of the destruction in World War Two, but he also more explicitly points to industrialization and urbanization as phenomena destroying white manhood. As was the case with Mailer, Kerouac first wrote about the crisis of white masculinity; only later would he use black masculinities to address this crisis.

Beating it Back

In the period immediately following the publication of *The Town and the City*, Kerouac wrote several books, including his canonical *On the Road* (1957), and he became the unofficial leader of the Beats, a cultural movement that critiqued

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 56, 201.

¹⁰¹ Kerouac 1946 Journals: Incl. ‘After a hike at Sundown, Series 3: Journals, Box 53, folder 8, May 6, 1946, Jack Kerouac Collection *Berg Collection of English and American Literature: New York Public Library*, New York City [hereafter cited as 1946 Journals].

¹⁰² Kerouac, *The Town and the City*, 373, 386.

conformity in many of its guises, but especially in the demands of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁰³ Kerouac and the Beats believed that the answer to the emasculation inherent in post-World War Two U.S. society lay in a rejection of wage labor, domesticity, and Christianity; they recommended unemployment, travel, drugs, alcohol, jazz, and Buddhism as alternatives.¹⁰⁴

Around the period when he began to publish his books, Kerouac began to make a connection between a reinvigorated U.S. masculinity and blackness. In a journal entry marked March 11, 1946, he wrote: "West-Europeans, beneath your sterile gloominess beats the jubilant jazz of the young Negro. Turn to his ecstasy or die!"¹⁰⁵ Many of his contemporaries noted and criticized Kerouac's and the other Beats' emphasis on African Americans and black culture. In 1961, for example, sociologist David Matza explained that Beat "Bohemianism" romanticized the "lower-class Negro," who had been "granted" the "dubious honor" of being the "folk hero" for the Beats' unique brand of populism, which was characterized by "primitivism."¹⁰⁶

During the time Kerouac published the bulk of his books, African Americans were also publicly engaged in the struggle for civil rights. This provided Kerouac with images of powerful, defiant, heroic, and dangerous black masculinities. And from the early 1950s until his death in 1969 Kerouac's work included an

¹⁰³ It is difficult to map the chronology of Kerouac's writings, since he claimed to have written most of his books in bits and pieces over the course of only a few years, despite their publication dates.

¹⁰⁴ Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*, 240.

¹⁰⁵ Kerouac 1946 Journals.

¹⁰⁶ David Matza, "Subterranean Traditions of Youth," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 338 (Nov. 1961), 112.

appropriation of black masculinity as an antidote for the failures of ideal white manhood. In relinquishing contemporary U.S. expectations of middle-class white men in the 1950s and 1960s, Kerouac, like Mailer, appropriated the masculinities of marginalized African American men as he imagined them.

The Road to Empowerment

With Mailer it is important to distinguish between the author and his work, but this becomes more difficult to do in the case of Kerouac, since his works, especially those that were part of *The Duluoz Legend*, are all semi-autobiographical. From 1946 until his death in 1969, Kerouac wrote a set of novels directly based on his experiences, friends, desires, and fantasies. Many names were changed for legal reasons, but these books brought readers into the psyche of Jack Kerouac, where he attempted to challenge the boundaries of acceptable masculinity for white men.

In 1950, Kerouac began writing what became his canonical work, *On the Road*. It was a description of several trips around the United States that he took with William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and many others. These journeys began with his desire to find happiness in travel and distinct landscapes. He wrote to Cassady in 1948 that he wanted to “live a good life in the canyon countries, lots of forage, trees high sharp mountain air.”¹⁰⁷ When trying to sell the book to a publisher in 1950, Kerouac wrote that “on the surface” *On the Road* is “a story of many restless travellings at the same time an imaginative survey of a new U.S. generation known as the ‘Hip’ (The Knowing), with emphasis on their problems

¹⁰⁷ Kerouac, “Letter to Neal Cassady Friday May 7 [1948] [Ozone Park],” in *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, 149.

in mid-century 50s.”¹⁰⁸ The parallels with Mailer’s “The White Negro” are evident in this description of *On the Road*. The novel, like Mailer’s essay, described the ways in which a group of white men, faced with the futility and absurdity of mainstream, middle-class life, chose to reject these standards of morality. And as was the case with “The White Negro,” the characters in *On the Road* drew inspiration from what they perceived to be the visceral reality of African American men.

On the Road first sets up a context in which the male characters, especially Sal (Kerouac) and Dean (Cassady), feel disengaged from mainstream U.S. life. Sal constructs America as a place where men are only doing what is expected of them, not what will make them happy. “This is the story of America,” he says, where “everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do.”¹⁰⁹ Sal explains that when he first met Dean, he “had just gotten over a serious illness” that “had something to do” with his “feeling that everything was dead.” Sal doubts his previous ideas about family life, monogamy, and happiness. At one point, Sal even wonders “what God had wrought when He made life so sad.”¹¹⁰

Sal’s doubts about his middle-class, collegiate ambitions are positioned in relation to the life and lifestyle of Dean. He yearns for Dean’s working-class existence, which he sees as part of a simpler past. In “his dirty workclothes,” which “clung to him so gracefully,” and “in his excited way of speaking,” Sal “heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of

¹⁰⁸ Kerouac, “Letter to Mr. Morley July 27, 1959,” in *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, 226.

¹⁰⁹ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 57.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5, 48.

afternoon where boys played guitars while their oldest brothers worked in the mills." He also sees Dean as a counterpoint to his collegiate friends, because Dean's "intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness." Ultimately, for Sal, Dean is "like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation."¹¹¹

Throughout the narrative, Kerouac celebrated black masculinity for its divergence from hegemonic masculinity. First, Kerouac described "madness" as a positive rejection of middle-class masculinity, much as Mailer did in "The White Negro," and characterized African American men as closer to this state than white men were. When discussing the madness of Old Bull Lee, for instance, Sal says that Lee's psychoanalyst had "found that Old Bull had seven separate personalities, each growing worse and worse on the way down." The least mad personality was that of "an English lord." The most mad was "the idiot." The one in the middle was "an old Negro who stood in line." Of the two racialized personalities, the African American one was closer to madness. And Dean, the most admired character in the novel, is racialized as black when he is depicted as "mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn."¹¹²

Second, Kerouac described the African American characters that appear in *On the Road* as dignified in their suffering and oppression. When Sal first stays with his friend Remi (a white man), for instance, he describes the joy of Remi's African

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10, 46.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 120, 10-11.

American neighbor, even though the man has a very hard life. Sal explains that “next door to Remi lived a Negro called Mr. Snow whose laugh, I swear on the Bible, was positively and finally the one greatest laugh in all this world.” Sal encourages Remi, who is having many problems of his own, to emulate this dignity and joy, even in the midst of suffering. Sal contends that even “though Remi was having worklife problems and a bad lovelife with a sharp-tongued woman, he at least had learned to laugh almost better than anyone in the world.”¹¹³

Sal also wants to emulate this dignified suffering when he takes a job picking cotton. He recounts this story:

There was an old Negro couple in the field with us. They picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in antebellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, and their bags increased. My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting, I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life’s work.¹¹⁴

Dean is clear about his desire to embody the wretched soul of the African American man. For instance, as Sal and Dean are watching a black man in the South riding in a mule drawn wagon, Dean encourages Sal to “consider his soul,” because “there’s thoughts in that mind” that Dean would “give anything to know.” He envies him even though the African American man is destitute, or as Dean describes him, “poor-ass.” He is not troubled like Dean and Sal. His mind is instead filled with thoughts of “this year’s turnip greens and ham,” an offensive simplification.¹¹⁵ The African American

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

man is constructed as a person whose simplicity allows him freedom from the burdens of the white man's intellect, even in the face of suffering.

Sal echoes this sentiment while he is watching a group of African Americans attending a sporting event. He says that "there was excitement and the air was filled with the vibration of really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and 'white sorrows' and all that." This makes Sal wish that he "could exchange words with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" instead of being burdened and sad.¹¹⁶ The audacity of the belief that impoverished African Americans in the 1950s were not burdened by disappointment was largely sustained by the notion that the oppression of African Americans paradoxically brought great joy to their lives, a belief that had also been used to justify the enslavement and exploitation of African Americans.

Third, Dean and the other male characters in the novel are enamored with African American jazz culture and the masculinity they believe it promoted. When Sal first gets to Chicago, for example, he takes a walk "into the jungles" to listen to African American musicians, because bop was filled with the "sounds of the night" that represented all that he desired for his existence.¹¹⁷ Throughout the rest of the novel, in cities such as Fresno, San Francisco, Detroit, and New York, Sal and his friends spend the majority of their time listening to jazz and worshiping African American musicians. In San Francisco, for example, Sal and Dean go to a nightclub to listen to Sam Gaillard play. He is "a tall, thin Negro with big sad eyes," who Dean listens to while "clasping his hands in prayer." Dean had a dream of asking Sam to be

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

part of their Beat group. In the dream, “Dean approached him, he approached his God; he thought Slim as a God; he shuffled and bowed in front of him and asked him to join us.”¹¹⁸ Dean literally worshipped this African American man and all that Dean believed he represented: freedom, joy, and a life without constraints.

Throughout the narrative, Sal and Dean appropriate the language they associate with black jazzmen. Sal says that he “dug Chicago,” which is his way of expressing how much he liked it. He tells a friend that “everything would jump” to emphasize that everything would be okay in the future. And when Sal describes a music show that he and Dean see in a club, his description is peppered with words common to the jazz vernacular. He writes that “the behatted tenorman was blowing at the peak of a wonderfully satisfactory free idea.” As the musician “blasted along to the rolling crash of butt-scarred drums hammered by a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn’t give a damn about anything but punishing his busted drums,” he “looked at the street outside with his lips curled in scorn, Billie Holiday’s hip sneer.”¹¹⁹ This characterization uses the jazz vernacular to invoke common stereotypes of black masculinity: violent; merciless; and cruel.

While Sal veers back and forth between a white, middle-class vernacular and the jazz vernacular depending on his circumstances, Dean has completely abandoned white, middle-class respectability. He has fallen fully into madness, speaks entirely in the jazz vernacular, and is, therefore, ecstatically happy. Dean, for example, describes Sal as “you fine gone daddy you,” always “digs” women who

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 162-164.

interest him, describes situations that are fun as “kicks,” and calls on musicians “to blow man, blow.”¹²⁰

In the end, Dean sees himself as standing outside of white, middle-class norms of masculinity, while Sal is still somewhat enamored with them (he wants to get married and have a family, for instance). Dean’s jobs, marriages, relationships with women, relationships with his children, and relationship with his father all fail—a narrative that parallels the mainstream belief in black men’s inability to sustain the responsibilities of manhood. He tells Sal: “*You’ve* seen me try and break my ass to make it and *you* know that it doesn’t matter.” Instead, Dean believes wholeheartedly that it is better to “slow it up,” “walk and dig,” and emulate “old-fashioned spade kicks,” because “what other kicks are there?” The reference to “spade,” slang for an African American man, leaves no doubts about the importance of appropriated black masculinity for Dean’s happiness.¹²¹ In one of the most famous passages from the novel, Sal makes clear that he feels the same way: “At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.” He concludes that he was “so drearily” a “white man disillusioned,” because all of his life he had been burdened by his “white ambitions”: financial success; materialistic gain; and a wife a children.¹²²

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38, 96, 97, 114, 132, 136, 162.

¹²¹ “Spade” is a shortening of the original saying “black as the ace of spades,” used to describe African Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 148-149.

On the Road presents Kerouac's vision of the relationship between African American masculinity and happiness. He begins his story by explaining the failures of white masculinity. He proceeds to construct African American masculinity as desirable. Then he demonstrates the ways in which it can be emulated by white men, never considering the problematic nature of these characterizations and appropriations.

Visions of the Past

The works that followed *On the Road* continued to position black masculinities as powerful and suggested that white men were happiest when they rejected hegemonic masculinity in favor of the authentic lifestyle of the jazzman, becoming similar to Mailer's "White Negro." In *The Duluoz Legend* novels of the 1950s, however, Kerouac continued to associate black masculinities with happiness in an almost uniform way, which is particularly noteworthy given the major changes in public perceptions of African American men in this period. While Mailer's writings evolved and engaged with the defiant, heroic, and threatening black masculinities that were portrayed in media reports about the civil rights movement, Kerouac's writings always insisted on a mostly apolitical, non-threatening black masculinity rooted in either an imagined primitive African past or the jazz culture of the 1940s and 1950s.

The Dharma Bums (1958), for instance, is the story of a group of young male characters, stand-ins for Kerouac and his friends, who spend their lives partying, listening to jazz, and living in semi-poverty, all the while following pseudo-Buddhist philosophies. These young men, who reject the "two cars, garage, lawn," and "nice

home,” since a man who lived this way “really wasn’t free,” consistently use jazz phrases, such as “square,” “ain’t being a happy little sage no mo’,” and I’m “the happiest cat in the world.”¹²³ The happiness of these white male characters depends not only on rejecting the trappings of hegemonic masculinity, but also on adopting the language of black masculinity as Kerouac imagined it.

The next novel in the series, *Visions of Cody* (1960), which was based on taped recordings of Kerouac and his friends, is an excellent example of the three parts of Kerouac’s understanding of manhood. First, Kerouac’s characters in the novel bemoan the necessities of ideal masculinity. Cody Pomeray (Cassady) and Jack (Kerouac) discuss at length the unhappiness brought on by their attempts to find permanent employment, get married, have children, and live in the suburbs. Second, Jack describes African American men and black masculinities as manlier than hegemonic masculinities and as rooted in an essential past. He describes the “American Negro” as “primarily meek Myshkin-like saintliness mixed with the primitive anger in their blood” and he describes an African American male friend as having “nothing feminine about him at all and especially nothing Uncle Tom Negro.” Jack describes jazz as having a bass that is a “big African world beat that comes from sitting before fires in the crickety night with nothing to do but beat out the time by the great wall of vines,” thereby associating it with an African past unburdened by the demands of civilization, and he proclaims that you can “find a justification for

¹²³ Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1958), 329, 81, 170, 68.

yourself in the past only,” reminding the reader that the past is more vital than the present.¹²⁴

Finally, the white male characters in *Visions of Cody* embody jazz masculinity when they express their joy and freedom. For instance, Cody and Jack spend hours speaking in a stream of consciousness, a deliberately free style of exposition, about their love of jazz and the joy it brings them.

Jack: But you dig this?...Boy that’s really something...You don’t want to dig it now, do you?

Cody: Do whatever you say...Get high, get h-i-g-h

Jack: *Man*, he used to blow like that *all* of the time...

Cody: No, that’s the guy who blows so sweet I told you

Cody: Alright I’m sorry I cut you. Jack, I’m sorry I cut you man, sorry, man, to cut you, you dig me.¹²⁵

Or when Jack and Cody go to a jazz club in an African American neighborhood, Cody says that “it’s the big moment of rapport all around that’s making him rock; that’s jazz; dig him, dig her, dig this place, dig these cats, this is all that’s left, where else can you go Jack?”¹²⁶ Concluding with “where else can you go Jack?” signals Cody’s belief that the only space for true happiness is the one populated by African American jazzmen, whom the Beats revere for their primitive masculinity.

As he continued to write installments of *The Duluoz Legend*, Kerouac’s convictions about the dire position of U.S. white men who were trapped in the models of manhood remained consistent. In 1961, he proclaimed in his notebook that “the necktie is nothing but a medieval holdover of the noose-Every fine citizen in the world is now wearing a noose around his neck, put there by society

¹²⁴ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: Penguin, 1960), 19, 95, 352, 373.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 131, 142, 168.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

[underline his]."¹²⁷ In *Big Sur* (1962), a novel about Kerouac's road trips in California in the 1950s, his protagonist voices the same unease:

Sleek long stationwagon after wagon comes sleering by smoothly, all colors of the rainbow. The husband is in the driver's seat with a long ridiculous vacationist hat with a long baseball visor making him look witless and idiot- Beside him sits wifey, the boss of America, wearing dark Glasses and sneering, even if he wanted to pick me up or anybody she wouldn't let him.¹²⁸

The ridiculousness of the state of the American man is heightened by his emasculation at the hands of a domineering American woman.

He also continued to position African American men as powerful due to their relationship to a primitive past and to represent white men who appropriated the jazz manhood as powerful. His black characters were consistently associated with an imagined Africa—an uncivilized, dark, and wild space—frozen in Kerouac's fantasies about the past, or as non-threatening entertainers, and his white male protagonists were consistently dropping into the spaces populated by the primitive black man whenever they needed to escape from their dreary middle-class existences.

The consistency with which these three elements appeared in all of the novels Kerouac published in this period is attributable to the fact that, according to his own account, he intended them to be one long exposition on his feelings about life in the 1950s and 1960s. In his foreword to *Visions of Cody*, in fact, he stated that all of the books he wrote after *The Town and the City* were "just chapters in the whole work," which he called "*The Duluoz Legend*." Together they form "one

¹²⁷ Kerouac "A 1961" Notebooks, Subseries 2.6: Notebooks Box 42, folder 1, 1961, Jack Kerouac Collection.

¹²⁸ Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Penguin, 1962), 44.

enormous” story “seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me), otherwise known as Jack Duluoz, the world of raging action and folly and also gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye.”¹²⁹ The novels that comprised *The Duluoz Legend*, then, give readers access to Kerouac’s views, including his perception of the relationships between black and white masculinities.

Kerouac’s View

Like Mailer, Kerouac saw hegemonic middle-class masculinity as hopelessly flawed, revered black masculinities for their presumed power, and called on white men to appropriate black masculinities as a path to happiness. Not surprisingly, Kerouac’s literary works were similar to Mailer’s in the ways they understood and used black manhood.

First, Kerouac’s insistence that African Americans should be admired for their “dignified” acceptance of their suffering displayed a shocking ignorance or willful avoidance of both the indignities of racism and white supremacy and the ways in which African Americans fought against the powers that sought to keep them subservient. Like Mailer, Kerouac romanticized suffering and victimhood, ignoring the political, social, and economic consequences of the U.S. racial system, especially when he described them as the “happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” in *On the Road*. Nowhere in Kerouac’s novels is black masculinity empowered by a struggle for political and social enfranchisement. In fact, nowhere in Kerouac’s novels are there African American characters who even discuss a desire to be politically and socially enfranchised. This makes black masculinity convenient

¹²⁹ Kerouac, “Foreword,” *Visions of Cody*.

for white Beats who were looking for a way to remove themselves from traditional locations of power in America, while at the same time leaving no room for the political empowerment of black men.

Second, Kerouac's reverence of black men, like Mailer's, perpetuated ignorance about the role of black women in African American communities, as well as the realities of black women in a society that privileged whiteness and manhood. Kerouac's only reference to black womanhood appeared in his 1958 novella *The Subterraneans*, which was a fictionalized account of his brief affair with an African American woman; it did little to acknowledge the distinct ways in which black women navigated racism and sexism.¹³⁰ Furthermore, as was the case with Mailer's novels, the women who appeared in his novels were rarely fleshed out characters with agency; they were most often objects of affection, sexual props, or nags and killjoys to be avoided at all costs. While Kerouac's characters did speak at length about their love for women, these women were seldom allowed to speak for themselves.

Third, like Mailer, Kerouac continued to privilege white masculinities, even while he celebrated the superiority of blackness. In *On the Road*, for instance, the protagonist Sal, who continues to maintain a foothold in hegemonic manhood in his desire to form monogamous relationships and find gainful employment, is ultimately the hero of the novel. Sal finds happiness and companionship. Dean, the man who completely rejects dominant ideals and becomes deeply imbedded in jazz

¹³⁰ For a critical reading of *The Subterraneans*, see Panish, "Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*."

culture, ends up mad and is last left standing on a street corner, having been abandoned by Sal and his other friends.

Furthermore, Kerouac used words and phrases that helped to maintain white supremacy, such as describing the jazzman in *Visions of Cody* as having a “primitive anger” in his blood, as well as a talent for “beat” that was derived from sitting around in Africa with nothing to do but “beat out the time by the great wall of vines.” The connections that Kerouac drew between his black characters and a dark, primitive Africa perpetuated the juxtaposition of a civilized whiteness and an uncivilized blackness, lazily free from the burdens of acceptable manhood.

Finally, Kerouac failed to see the privilege in whiteness. Again, this is perfectly embodied by Sal, who is able to move in and out of the world of black masculinities easily and without any real repercussions. When he wants to engage with jazz culture, he does so, but when he is tired of the poverty and alienation this can bring, he quickly returns to his aunt’s middle-class home. The power of white men to engage in racial tourism is demonstrated again and again in *The Duluoz Legend* novels, as the white male characters decide to leave their middle-class lives, including the economic security and political power inherent in that lifestyle, to live a more “authentic” life, which is only possible because of the privileges afforded white men in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. While the characters in Kerouac’s books often critique middle-class life, they do not critique the inherent privilege in whiteness. In fact, Kerouac writes about blackness and black life without ever really considering what it meant to be a black man in this era.

What seems to differentiate Kerouac's appropriation of black masculinities from Mailer's is its ahistorical insistence on an African American archetype rooted in the past. Mailer's writings engaged with the growing civil rights movements and the models of black manhood they offered. Kerouac's writings fixated on the jazz masculinity so popular in mainstream media in the 1940s and 1950s, at the expense of some of the other realities of the black liberation movement.

These seemingly distinct choices, however, are rooted in the same general unease about the power of real black men, as opposed to the fictional ones Mailer and Kerouac created. By constructing black masculinity as existing in a primitive past, Kerouac was able to circumvent the realities of present day African American men and women. While African Americans may have a historical presence in the United States, which Kerouac imbued with all kinds of magical properties, they are not constructed as active and relevant in the present-day United States. When they did exist in Kerouac's present-day narratives, they were entertainers, not political actors. This allowed Kerouac to avoid the presence of radical, rebellious, and assertive black masculinities, which were threatening white supremacy and that stood in stark contrast to Kerouac's vision of African Americans who accepted their inferiority with dignity and even joy. A focus on the primitive past allowed Kerouac to keep black masculinity at a safe distance, while still being able to use it to empower his own masculinity in the present

Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac were racialized white men who felt disengaged from hegemonic masculinity in the 1950s and 1960s. Mailer's identification as a Jew and Kerouac's Franco-American immigrant mentality

encouraged their interest in alternative manhoods. Both men became enamored with imaginary black masculinities, partly because of their personal histories and partly because of the influences of a long tradition of literary representations of black manhood. Mailer and Kerouac sought empowerment in these imaginings of what it was like to be an African American man in the 1950s and 1960s. They expressed these sentiments most glaringly in their most provocative and popular works in the period, but the sentiments worked their way through the majority of their works in this era. Mailer and Kerouac used constructions of black masculinity in pursuit of their own liberation and pleasure and even if it was their intention to celebrate black men, they kept black masculinities in the two-dimensional primitive mold that had so long been the framework for blackness in U.S. literature. The undeniable problem was that the cultural dowry that the African American was forced to bring to the black-white relationship in Mailer's and Kerouac's fantasies perpetuated the white, patriarchal relationship that kept African American masculinity as a consumable, pleasurable commodity and white American masculinity as the seat of power.

Chapter 2:
“And They Are Outraged”: Black and White Student Organizing, 1960-1965

*“Black and white,
the young rebels are free people, free in a way that Americans
have never been before in the history of their country.
And they are outraged.” – Eldridge Cleaver¹³¹*

*“The fundamental concern for SDS is how minority problems relate to the general
problem of building a democratic society.”¹³² – Students for a Democratic Society*

In 1962, at the annual convention of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the organization approved the Port Huron Statement, which became the manifesto of the national student group. Describing itself as “an effort in understanding and changing the conditions of humanity in the late twentieth century,” the manifesto identified the African American struggle for civil rights as a critical impetus for SDS’s plans to change the world. In its creation story, SDS asserted that “the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism.” According to the manifesto, students “might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems,” but “these were too immediate and crushing in their impact” to escape.¹³³

Several of the founding members of SDS were attracted to the student arm of the African American civil rights movement, which was embodied in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In particular, several of the male founders were drawn to what they perceived to be the models of masculinity

¹³¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 83-84.

¹³² “Northern Civil Rights Proposal,” *Students for a Democratic Society Papers, 1959-1970* (Hanover: Dartmouth Libraries Microfilm), microfilm, reel 1.

¹³³ “Port Huron Statement,” *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo Teodori (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 163-165.

offered by SNCC men. But as former SDS member Todd Gitlin, who later became a prominent sociologist, asked in his 1987 study of the 1960s, why were middle-class northern white students in SDS “looking in such strange places for heroes” and what did SDS men believe that SNCC organizers could teach them about young and active masculinity?¹³⁴

Founded while the Hipsters and the Beats were invigorating parts of the U.S. counterculture, SDS shared several ideological tenets with the cultural movements. Like the Hipsters and the Beats, many members of SDS were dissatisfied with the culture of capitalist, corporate conformity that middle-class respectability demanded of white men. Many of these members were also weary of the traditional icons of manhood, such as the soldier, the white-collar worker, and the suburban father. They also looked to subordinated masculinities for alternative ways of performing their gender and were intrigued by the models offered by the black freedom movement. Unlike the Hipsters and the Beats, however, many SDS members, who were primarily and white college students, did not want to disengage from mainstream U.S. society and culture; instead, they wanted to revolutionize it.

This chapter explores SDS men's engagement with the models of masculinity that they witnessed in SNCC from roughly 1960, when SDS and SNCC were formed, to 1965, when SNCC and SDS changed dramatically. SNCC began in 1960 as a forum for discussion and information about student protests in the South. Within a short period of time, SNCC became a more formal and action-oriented organization. SDS's origins also can be traced to 1960, when the Student League for Industrial

¹³⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 2.

Democracy (SLID) was revived by the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), which was a socialist (but anticommunist) labor organization. Wanting to distance themselves from traditional labor organizing and transcend the politics of anticommunism, SLID leaders from the University of Michigan changed the group's name to Students for a Democratic Society.

From the beginning, there was an important relationship between SDS and SNCC. One of the original SDS organizers, Tom Hayden, recalls in his 1988 memoir that “the student civil rights movement took the moral leadership, showing how values could be translated into direct action.”¹³⁵ More specifically, historians and activists have explored the multiple reasons that SNCC inspired the members of SDS. First, SDS members were greatly influenced by the movement’s campaigns against racism, inequality, and injustice. Second, they were inspired by SNCC specifically because it was made up of young men and women who saw themselves as active agents of change. Third, SDS activists were greatly interested in SNCC's new approaches to political organizing, which relied on direct action, participatory democracy, and community empowerment.

In her 2005 book *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement*, Judith Lowder Newton highlights some of the ways in which SDS men’s interest in SNCC related to their dissatisfaction with white culture and their attraction to black masculinity. She argues that “as participants in the civil rights movement,” white men followed “the lead of politicized black men and women,” adopted “their self-sacrificing politics,” and supported “their implied critique of

¹³⁵ Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), 31.

national manhood and individualistic, self-making values.”¹³⁶ In her brief analysis, Newton does not emphasize the specific relationship between SDS men and SNCC men or the ways in which SDS men gendered their perceptions of SNCC activism, but her references to the competitive, corporate, and individualistic nature of white manhood in this period and her discussion of SDS men’s admiration for SNCC make it clear that she is primarily talking about white men’s impressions of the alternative masculinities of SNCC’s black men.

Notwithstanding Newton's abbreviated discussion, historians and activists have rarely analyzed the ways in which SDS men found constructions of masculinity in SNCC that helped them combat the feelings of helplessness and ineffectuality that they believed permeated white, middle-class youth. More specifically, several SDS men, especially two of the founding members, Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin, were inspired by SNCC men’s subversions of gender norms in the first half of the 1960s. While mainstream white culture emphasized masculine values of individual achievement, personal independence, and self-interested ambition, SNCC men seemed to privilege community service, social engagement, collective empowerment, and attachments beyond the familial home. While mainstream culture valued white men’s capacity for violence when deemed necessary and viewed black men as either cowardly or incapable of civilized restraint. SDS men saw SNCC men, especially in their nonviolent civil disobedience campaigns and rhetorical styles, as embodying desirable alternative masculinities that depended on extraordinary strength, self-discipline, and self-control.

¹³⁶ Judith Lowder Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 107.

In witnessing and encountering these subversions, several influential SDS men found opportunities to resist many of the gender norms of the early 1960s and to idealize those found among SNCC men. They believed that SNCC men were leading the way to a revolution in young masculinities, just as they were leading the way in the black freedom struggle. In a variety of ways, they tried to emulate these subversions. If white masculine ideals had failed them, they could use black reconstructions of masculinity to escape middle-class expectations, just as African American men were using them to escape the bondage of white supremacy.

Despite the fact that they saw themselves as committed to challenging American racism and that they believed themselves to be challenging dominant models of masculinity, SDS men's appropriation of the black masculinities that they associated with SNCC was deeply problematic. As was the case with Mailer and Kerouac, they often reduced the complex and varied realities of black men's lives to consumable and simplified identities. They did not always recognize the multifaceted dimensions of black men's racial and gender identities or appreciate the complicated sociocultural history of black political masculinities. Also, in vocalizing their admiration primarily for the black men in SNCC and prizing the masculine embodiment of the radical organization, some of the young men in SDS ignored the roles of women, both black and white, in SNCC and SDS. Furthermore, for a variety of complicated reasons, including a shift in tactics after 1965, many of the young men in SDS did not work to dismantle the privileges of white manhood, even though their efforts in the antiracist struggle were genuine. This illustrates the politics of privilege that so often is found in acts of cultural appropriation.

SDS and SNCC, and the relationship between them, are valuable for studying white appropriations of black masculinities in the sphere of political activism for several reasons. Historians and activists have noted that both were important organizations in the 1960s and both played leading roles in civil rights, antiwar, anti-poverty, and student activism.¹³⁷ Furthermore, participants and observers have noted that the membership of the two organizations was similar in almost every

¹³⁷ For general histories of SDS, see David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Hayden, *Reunion*; James Miller, *“Democracy is in the Streets”: from Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); *Rebels with a Cause: Voices of Students for a Democratic Society*, DVD, directed by Helen Garvey, Shire Films, 2000. For general histories of SNCC, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: the Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Turé)*, with Michael Thelwell (New York: Scribner, 2003); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Cynthia Fleming Griggs, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Faith S. Hulseart, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2006); Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Belinda Robnett, “Women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee: Ideology, Organizational Structure, and Leadership,” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds. (New York: Garland, 1999).

way but racial make-up and region of origin.¹³⁸ While there were white members of SNCC and a few non-white members of SDS, SNCC was primarily seen as a black organization in the popular imagination, just as the popular media imagined SDS as white.¹³⁹ Finally, activists and scholars have argued that both SDS and SNCC featured interesting and complicated gender dynamics. Both had members who deliberately challenged what they saw as the failures of older masculine traditions and both succeeded in distancing themselves from previous generations and their organizing traditions. At the same time, both reproduced patriarchal, sexist, and traditional gender norms. The men in both tended to reinforce and reproduce gender and sexual hierarchies, though there were important differences between SDS and SNCC. While SDS had several key women in the leadership, they never became vocal spokespeople. In contrast, four of the most prominent spokespeople for SNCC, however, were women (two white, two black).¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Many of the original members of SNCC were young black men and women who came from working-class or poor families. Some were entering the middle class by way of a university education. This was also true of some of the young white men and women who joined SDS, although many also grew up in middle-class homes. For an analysis of the early membership of SNCC, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* and Howard Zinn, *The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon, 1965). For explorations of the early membership of SDS, see Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Hayden, *Reunion*; Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*.

¹³⁹ While not overtly discussed in the sources studied here, the lack of non-white members in SDS was most likely a result of the demographics of recruitment areas. SDS did most of its recruitment on northeastern college campuses, largely white institutions in this period. See Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell*.

¹⁴⁰ Ann Braden, Casey Hayden, Diane Nash, and Ella Baker. Gender dynamics in both SNCC and SDS have been documented and critiqued by activists and historians. At a 1964 SNCC meeting, women in the organization presented a paper that critiqued sexism and misogyny in the organization. A similar paper was presented in 1965 at an SDS convention. Male members of the organizations generally met these papers with indifference or hostility. For studies of women in SNCC and SDS, see Francis Beal, "Interview by Loretta Ross, Transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005,"

This chapter explores the reasons that SDS men admired SNCC's black masculinities, the ways in which they emulated these masculinities, and the problematic aspects of their cultural appropriation of black masculinities. First, the chapter offers a brief historical overview that demonstrates the importance of gender in U.S. political organizing, highlights instances when interracial organizations used racialized masculinities as part of their strategies for empowerment, and introduces influential models of black masculinities that were popularized in black movements in the first half of the twentieth century. Second, the chapter explores the founding of SNCC and SDS, paying close attention to the roles of race and gender in these histories. Third, the chapter examines the ways in which SDS men, especially Hayden and Gitlin, celebrated and emulated the black

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project (Northampton, Mass: Sophia Smith Collection); Rhoda Lois Blumberg, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15, nos. 2-3 (1990); Evans, *Personal Politics*; Tanisha C. Ford, "SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress," *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 3 (August 2013); Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1984); Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo," *Students for a Democratic Archives and Resources*, sds.org; Hogan, *Many Minds*; Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*; Robnett, "Women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee"; Doug McAdam, "Gender as a Mediator of the Activist Experience: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 5 (March 1992): 1211-1240; J. Todd Moya, *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement," Anonymous (November 1964), *The Civil Rights History Project*, Library of Congress Digital Collections, loc.gov/folklike/civilrights/survey; Sue Thrasher, "Circle of Trust," in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine Women White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Dennis J. Urban Jr., "The Women of SNCC: Struggle, Sexism, and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness," *International Social Science Review*, 77, nos. 3-4 (2002): 185-190.

masculinities that they encountered in their interactions with SNCC. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that while these emulations and appropriations reflected an anti-racist impulse among SDS men, they were problematic because, like the writings of Mailer and Kerouac, they simplified the black male experience, silenced women's voices, underestimated the power of white privilege, and exercised that privilege when it was needed.

Racialized Masculinities in U.S. Political Organizing

Historians have documented the long history of white political activists who were inspired by black men, worked with black men, and engaged with the politics of black masculinity. For example, they have highlighted the many white men and black men who worked together in the 19th century to end slavery and lynching by disrupting popular white understandings of manhood.¹⁴¹ These activists denied the

¹⁴¹ For analyses of gender in U.S. organizing traditions, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2000); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: Norton, 1999); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Nancy Maclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: the Making of the Second Ku-Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Simon Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out That We Are Really Men': Violence, Non-Violence, and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era," *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (November 2007): 543-564. For explorations of interracial alliances in political movements, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Robin G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Paul Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A*

hegemonic formulation of black masculinity as oversexed and feral and instead presented it as respectable and restrained in the face of great humiliation. They also denied the hegemonic formulation of white masculinity as civilized by shaming white men for the barbaric crimes of slavery and lynching.¹⁴²

Historians have also documented the many forms that black political manhood took in the twentieth century. These include W.E.B. Du Bois's New Negro; Booker T. Washington's self-reliant man; Marcus Garvey's black nationalist; A. Philip Randolph's and Paul Robeson's organized worker; Robert F. Williams's and Malcolm X's black militant; and Martin Luther King's moral crusader. None of these models fully represented entire movements, organizations, ideologies, or even the leaders who came to be associated with them, but they were powerful constructions of black masculinity that had a deep impact on the U.S. imagination.¹⁴³

New History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2006); Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 2007.

¹⁴² See Gail Bederman's investigation of anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells in *Manliness and Civilization* and Lori Ginzberg's exploration of abolitionists in *Women in Antebellum Reform*.

¹⁴³ For explorations of black masculinities in twentieth century African American political movements, see Christopher Booker, *'I Will Wear No Chain': A Social History of African American Males* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000); Melinda Chateaufort, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000); Paul Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (New York: Wiley, 2007); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Were Really Men."

SNCC was influenced by many elements of these models, but did not adopt any of them in their entirety, partly because most of the models came from hierarchical organizations run by an older generation of men and partly because they were sometimes disappointed with the actions and arguments of these men. For instance, in his memoir SNCC leader James Forman notes that the young men and women who formed SNCC were unhappy with the patriotism and anticommunism of the NAACP leadership, as well as the leadership's authoritarian control of its membership.¹⁴⁴ SNCC ultimately borrowed from the models of masculinity that were available to them from the history of African American organizing traditions, but developed new variations in the context of the politics, society, and culture of the 1960s.

Students Organize

SNCC was established in 1960, shortly after a large number of young men and women, most of whom were African American, participated in sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, first in Greensboro, North Carolina, and later throughout the South. During the first wave of sit-ins, Ella Baker, who was the interim executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), gathered many student activists at a conference at Shaw University and encouraged them to lead their own movement and not let themselves be co-opted by older organizations such as the

¹⁴⁴ James Forman, *The Making of a Black Revolutionary* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 220-221.

SCLC, which was led by King.¹⁴⁵ SNCC was established in the immediate aftermath of this conference.

In October 1960, SNCC held a meeting at which the membership outlined the purpose, tactics, and structure of the organization. At this stage there were many white members and leaders of SNCC, including Carl and Ann Braden, but the organization was racialized as black in the public imagination, partially because media images of actions focused primarily on black participants and partially because the antiracist campaigns, while applicable to all Americans, took as their main focus the fight for the civil rights of African Americans. SNCC agreed to promote nonviolent direct action and decided that SNCC would provide a forum for discussion and information, not to initiate or lead actions.¹⁴⁶ Within a year, however, SNCC initiated and led several actions, in which both black and white activists participated, including perhaps its most famous, the Mississippi voter registration drive that began in 1961. Many members of SNCC wished to continue direct action protests, including sit-ins and Freedom Rides, which were integrated bus trips designed to protest segregated bus stations and highway stops, but ultimately SNCC made voter registration its main priority. According to participant and historian Clayborne Carson, by 1961-1962 SNCC had “sustained local community projects

¹⁴⁵ At this time many established civil rights organizations, including the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP, were interested in absorbing the African American student movement. Baker worked hard to stop this from happening because of her commitment to grassroots organizing, student-centered politics, and gender equality, which did not exist in the male-led NAACP, CORE, and SCLC.

¹⁴⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 27-29.

around voting,” as well as a central administrative structure to run the organization.¹⁴⁷

In 1964, SNCC launched what became known as Mississippi Freedom Summer, calling on student volunteers, both black and non-black, to register voters in Mississippi. This action dramatically increased the number of participants, including young white men and women, in the organization. It also increased the media exposure of SNCC actions. The white backlash that ensued helped put SNCC in the national spotlight and brought many new people to the organization, including some of the founding members of SDS. SNCC’s core beliefs throughout this early period were that only mass action could end racial inequality and the power to act would come from the ability of young people to create a space for all black people to claim their freedom.¹⁴⁸ By the mid 1960s, however, many members of SNCC were also interested in formal politics, which led to SNCC’s participation in the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, a political party that attempted to displace the state’s official Democratic Party. According to Carson, by this period SNCC was also attracting members who had been “radicalized” before joining the organization and who were interested in action beyond rights-based work.¹⁴⁹ While always committed to the power of young people to affect change, SNCC evolved as

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Carson, *In Struggle*, 27, 62-70; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 123-127. SNCC also created Freedom Schools, which were designed to teach locals how to educate and empower themselves, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which hoped to seat delegates at the 1964 National Democratic Party Convention.

¹⁴⁹ Caron, *In Struggle*, 71; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 321.

an organization throughout the first half of the 1960s and then changed even more dramatically in the second half of the decade.

Students for a Democratic Society also believed in the power of young people to affect political, social, and cultural change. After some of the early leaders in SLID decided to rename the organization Students for a Democratic Society in 1960, they set out to alleviate their feelings of alienation and disempowerment by engaging more actively with civil rights politics. According to Gitlin's recollections in 1987, the founders of SDS "felt cramped by the normal middle-class pursuits of career, family, and success, and they brandished their alienation as a badge."¹⁵⁰ Before the formation of SDS, Gitlin argues, there was little in the way of organized ideas about alienation in political circles. There were cultural models, including those associated with Mailer's Hipsters, Kerouac's Beats, and bohemians and juvenile delinquents, all of which helped middle-class white youth express their dissatisfaction, but SDS would be one of the first organizations in this period to offer a politically-structured vehicle for expressing that dissatisfaction.¹⁵¹

After several informal meetings and protest actions on the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor campus in 1960, SDS began to focus on civil rights. After SNCC's actions gained national attention in 1960, SDS dispatched several members to the South as field officers in 1961. In 1962, the small membership of SDS began planning meetings with SNCC, which gave SDS ideas for a formal direction, and a manifesto was adopted at the conference near Port Huron, Michigan.¹⁵² SDS soon

¹⁵⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 27.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32, 57.

¹⁵² Hayden, *Reunion*, 84.

grew from a small organization of 600 members in 1963 to 4300 by 1965 and 100,000 by 1968.¹⁵³

SDS had a political vision that deliberately distanced itself from the Old Left and the Cold War frameworks that viewed the world primarily through the prism of communism versus anticommunism. According to Gitlin, SDS leader Tom Hayden argued that while the Old Left was hierarchical and ideological, SDS focused on “highly moral” issues and had an anarchic protest style of the “non-ideological sort.” While SLID had focused on organizing workers, SDS focused on organizing young people on college campuses. While SLID had been concerned with bureaucratic channels of power, SDS was concerned with the power of local communities and individual people. SDS would be the “New Left.”¹⁵⁴

The early members of SDS identified “participatory democracy” as the core commitment of the organization; this meant emphasizing the need for all members to have equal say in decision-making, the creation of opportunities for increased community involvement in local governance, and the rejection of hierarchical and representational politics. In an interview in the 1970s, however, former SDS member Dick Flacks explained that participatory democracy was more of a vision of social change than an organizational and strategic framework.

Participatory democracy did not mean abandoning organizational structures of the usual sort, like elected officers and parliamentary procedure. We were thinking of participatory democracy at that time as a concept of social change, not as a set of principles for guiding the internal organizational life of SDS.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*, 21; Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, 138.

¹⁵⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 32, 57.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*,” 143.

In practice, this meant that SDS did not completely reject hierarchical power structures, even while committing itself to a bottom-up vision of political organizing. This had important consequences for gender relations within SDS.

While SDS committed itself to many causes, including campaigns against poverty, war, and militarism, in its early years the group focused on racial oppression in the Deep South. Other movements, ideologies, and strategies influenced SDS, but the civil rights movement, and especially its emphasis on using nonviolent resistance and community engagement to challenge racial oppression, most directly inspired it. SNCC, with its young membership, its belief in participatory democracy, and its efforts to build a "beloved community," had the deepest impact on SDS. In a letter to SDS leader Paul Potter in 1964, an SDSer identified as "Rothstein" wrote that SDS could trace its "spiritual and political ancestry" to the day that the sit-ins began in Greensboro.¹⁵⁶ In his 1988 memoir *Reunion*, Hayden recalls his feelings upon first encountering SNCC in person. While attending a National Student Association conference in 1960, he heard 25 students from SNCC speak:

They lived on a fuller level of feeling than any people I'd ever seen, partly because they were making modern history in a very personal way, and partly because by risking death they came to know the value of living each moment to the fullest. Looking back, this was a key turning point, the moment my political identity began to take shape.¹⁵⁷

Hayden remembers that he was "struck by how challenging and revolutionary they were in contrast to those of the white northern students searching for meaning

¹⁵⁶ Rothstein, "Letter to Paul Potter (October 19, 1964)," *Students for a Democratic Society Papers* (Hamilton: McMaster University Libraries), microfilm, reel 12.

¹⁵⁷ Hayden, *Reunion*, 39-40.

through abstract ideas alone.” For Hayden, the students of SNCC inspired the students of SDS to make the transition from intellectual work to political work.¹⁵⁸

Many young SDSers adopted SNCC as their role model and they did so for several important reasons. From the standpoint of SDS, SNCC was leading the revolution against racial oppression, adapting a preexisting organizing tradition to new realities, breaking up traditional locations of power, organizing at the grassroots level, and empowering youth. In their estimations, SNCC workers emerged from difficult and oppressive conditions not to seek personal power, but to work for the empowerment of the oppressed in their communities, making them worthy of awe. For many in SDS, SNCC workers were moral, powerful, intelligent, and attractive young people and ideal heroes for the 1960s student movement.

The Founding Fathers

Many young SDS men saw in SNCC’s actions and words a way to refuse the masculinity of their fathers, which emphasized individual achievement and disciplined violence, and become part of the “Band of Brothers” that encouraged men, white and black, to be fraternal and peaceful. These SDSers believed that SNCC masculinities would ultimately empower them.

SDS’s dissatisfaction with the mainstream political and social climate in the United States, the gendered nature of this dissatisfaction, and the masculinized possibilities that SNCC offered for empowerment were all clear in the original philosophies of the organization, which were laid out in the Port Huron Statement.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55, 75, 91.

The statement contained eight parts. The first seven outlined the primary problems that young Americans faced in the early 1960s: white, middle-class alienation; racism; political corruption; capitalism; militarism and nuclear war; colonialism; anticommunism; and poverty. The final section proposed solutions, such as eliminating structural racism, achieving disarmament, promoting educational reform, abolishing the two-party system, and nationalizing resources.

The concerns that the statement outlined paralleled many of Mailer's and Kerouac's concerns in that they identified apathy and alienation as the primary barriers to happiness in this period and attributed those barriers to militarism, consumerism, and capitalism. The statement argued that when the United States continued to engage in military actions around the world even after World War Two, primarily because of the Cold War, "not only did tarnish appear" on the "image of American virtue" and "not only did disillusion occur" when "the hypocrisy of American ideals" became apparent, but students also began to sense that what many believed was "the American Golden Age" was actually "the decline" of an era of possibility and peace. The statement also argued that as new economic and technological developments created "new forms of social organization," there was more and more "meaningless work" and an increase in "idleness instead of creative leisure." These factors were making U.S. democracy "apathetic and manipulated when it should be dynamic and participative."¹⁵⁹

In criticizing U.S. militarism and colonialism, SDS was attacking quintessentially masculine forms of violence and aggression. When SDS condemned

¹⁵⁹ Students for a Democratic Society, "The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society" (1962), het-net.org, accessed on July 18, 2012.

the meaningless character of middle-class jobs in the statement, it was addressing workplaces that were dominated by men. And when SDS critiqued party politics and electoral politics, such as the current U.S. systems apathy towards its voters and the lack of distinction between parties, it was objecting to historically masculine domains. In fact, sociologist Michael Kimmel describes the statement as “an anxious plea for a new definition of manhood.” He sees the Port Huron Statement as part of a larger popular culture conversation, which included sociological studies, philosophical tracts, and the entertainment industry, about masculinity in work and politics in the 1960s. He relates this most closely to the anti-war work of SDS, however, and does not elaborate on the influence of the civil rights movement in expressing and alleviating anxieties about masculinity.¹⁶⁰

The masculine orientation of the Port Huron Statement was arguably most evident in a section that presented existing social arrangements as particularly damning for young, white, middle-class men. The joyless and disengaged young person was described as living according to a prescribed and “systematic” schedule that consisted of a youthful stage marked by “two nights a week for beer” and “a girl or two,” which was followed by “early marriage” and a life focused on “the quality of shirt collars,” “making solid contacts” and entering the “rat-race.” This was the alienated life of middle-class corporate men. There was no comparable discussion of the life limitations of middle-class women.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Michael, Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 267.

¹⁶¹ SDS, “The Port Huron Statement.”

Significantly, Hayden's original draft of the Port Huron Statement, which was revised by the membership at the 1962 meeting, included other explicitly masculinized language. He wrote in one passage, for example, that Cold War militarism continued to prevail because this was a time "when many of us were becoming anxious about our manliness," and "Congress required a social test of it by establishing University Military Training, the first peacetime conscription." Hayden believed that the government was using the military "as a solution to the economic problems unsolved before the post-war Boom, most notably the problem of the seventeen million jobless."¹⁶² In this formulation, the government was attempting to address the problem of unemployment by promoting militarism, which also was tied to masculinity. Hayden found this solution wanting, however, and worried about addressing manhood in these ways. The reference to anxieties about "manliness" was removed for reasons that are not clear, but the original language provides further evidence to support the claim that SDS men indicted society in highly gendered terms.

To address these gendered problems, the statement looked to student activism within the civil rights movement. Two years after SNCC was founded, SDS argued that the "permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation" witnessed in the antiracist struggle in the South "compelled most of us from silence to activism." The Port Huron Statement emphasized that the most difficult things to accept in U.S. society were the "disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America," most importantly "the declaration 'all men are created equal,'" which "rang hollow before

¹⁶² Hayden, "Port Huron Statement Draft," (1962), het-net.org, accessed on July 18, 2012.

the facts of Negro life in the South and the big cities of the North.” SDS positioned the students who were leading the fight for civil rights in the early 1960s as the revolutionaries who would liberate other Americans from their apathy. Just as “rockets” were “emancipating man from terrestrial limitations,” the students of the civil rights movement, many housed in “Mississippi jails,” were working for the “emancipation of man on earth.”¹⁶³

SDS described the possibilities presented by student activists in the civil rights movement in gendered terms. Young civil rights activists were inspiring not only because they challenged “injustice” but also because their organizing demonstrated that “there can be a passage out of apathy.” SDS urged its members to follow the examples provided by students in the civil rights movement, who were showing that “human relationships should involve fraternity and honesty” and that “human brotherhood must be willed.” SDS further argued that “as a condition of future survival and as the most appropriate form of social relations,” the “personal links between man and man” needed to be strengthened so that young people could “go beyond the partial and fragmentary bonds” of middle-class life. While the references here to fraternity, brotherhood, and man reflected the common practice of using masculine language for men and women in this era, they also reflected the distinctly gendered concerns of SDS’s young men. The U.S. political economy, which was based on militarism and corporatism, produced alienated masculinities. SNCC,

¹⁶³ SDS, “The Port Huron Statement.”

in contrast, spoke openly about the deep brotherhood that could come from rejecting social norms of masculinity.¹⁶⁴

The declaration of SDS's intent to emulate the student civil rights movement in order to alleviate the apathy of middle-class life was also gendered. The statement announced that having been called to action by the fight against racial injustice, the students of SDS would “seek to be public, responsible, and influential,” to be “both passionate and reflective,” and to not “emasculate our principles.” This passage implied that SDS's principles were masculine and that emulating SNCC would help SDS retain its masculine principles.¹⁶⁵

The statement, then, while laying the groundwork for SDS's vision and action, presented problems and solutions in highly gendered terms. Militarism, capitalism, and corporatism plagued everyone, but were understood in the early 1960s as particularly problematic for men and their masculinities. The absence of any comparable references to women's problems and solutions makes it even more clear that the authors of the Port Huron Statement believed that young black masculinities might help young white men address their gendered anxieties and generational problems. Given this understanding of the problem, the statement offered the black student-led civil rights movement as the most important model for masculine happiness and manly empowerment.

Reorganizing Masculinity

Throughout the early period of SNCC, the members of the organization subverted many ideals of hegemonic masculinity and many stereotypes about black

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

masculinity that were prevalent in the early 1960s. The young men in SNCC publicly challenged white mainstream culture's emphasis on masculine individual achievement, personal independence, self-interested ambition, and disciplined violence, as well as its portrayal of black masculinity as weak, dependent, and feral.

In the 1950s and early 1960s hegemonic ideals of masculinity seemingly promoted the individualistic, yet responsible, white male and denigrated dependency. White mainstream culture valued self-directed, ambitious, and competitive men, traits that were said to be desirable for survival in the capitalist economy. Men who were too attached to or dependent on their parents, wives, or friends were seen as feminine. According to historian David Serlin, for instance, popular culture following World War Two often positioned the man who depended on, or worse was controlled by, his wife or mother as being an insidious problem. He points out that films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *Psycho* (1960), for example, all featured men who were undone by domineering mothers, wives, and daughters.¹⁶⁶ White middle-class men should be husbands, but not be controlled by their wives, be fathers, but remain providers and protectors, not loving nurturers. White mainstream society did not believe that African American men could be successfully self-reliant and independent. In many contexts, black men were depicted as dependent—on white employers, patrons, and politicians; on the state; and on black women. In many other contexts, black men

¹⁶⁶ See David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 20). For other analyses of white masculinities in this period, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1983); Kimmel, *Manhood in America*; Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

were regarded as a collective threat. Groups of African American men—sometimes depicted as mobs or gangs—were to be feared, not admired.¹⁶⁷

In the 1950s and early 1960s, hegemonic masculinity also demanded that middle-class white men be aggressive, but restrained, disciplined, and controlled. Men were expected to curb their naturally violent tendencies and conform to the social and cultural needs of the capitalist economy, which required the appearance of rationality, restraint, and civility, especially in white-collar work. This message, however, was ambiguous. At the same time that society demanded restraint, social scientists and psychologists still promoted a certain level of physical aggression as good for the maturing of men. U.S. popular culture also celebrated military violence and athletic aggression. Kimmel argues, for instance, that in this period sociologists and psychologists worried that U.S. men were becoming over-intellectual “sissies” because of the ascendance of corporate, white-collar capitalism and the decline of jobs requiring physical strength and exertion. These experts, according to Kimmel, encouraged middle-class men to play football, join fraternities, and allow themselves to enjoy alcohol and heterosexuality. Middle-class men were expected,

¹⁶⁷ For an overview of hegemonic stereotypes of black masculinities in this period, see Booker, *I Will Wear No Chain!*; Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Men's History of Masculinity, Vol. 1: "Manhood Rights": The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750-1870* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*; Aime J. Ellis, *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011); Estes, *I am a Man!*; Herman Graham III, *The Brothers Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Kimmel, *Manhood in America*; Maclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*; McAlister, *Epic Encounters*; Rotundo, *American Manhood*; Serlin, *Replaceable You*; Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial, 1979).

however, to make these activities extracurricular, not the center of their lives, and to exercise restraint.¹⁶⁸

In the same period, social commentaries and popular culture often depicted African American men as unable to restrain their natural tendencies for violence and sex. As scholar bell hooks contends, in the 1960s “black masculinity, as fantasized in the racist white imagination” was represented as free from the constraints of civilized manhood. Black men were imagined as wild, sexual, and violent.¹⁶⁹ While this led many white Americans to believe that black men were not in danger of becoming “sissies,” it also meant that black men could be viewed as dangerous and out of control. Likened to wild animals by southern segregationists, for example, black men were pathologized, vilified, and tortured because of assumptions about their violent behavior, most abhorrently in the practice of lynching, which was justified by many white southerners as a practice that was necessary to prevent and punish black male sexual violence.¹⁷⁰

For many observers, SNCC men represented a reevaluation of the priorities of hegemonic masculinity and a challenge to white expectations about black masculinities. SNCC seemed to venerate supportive bonds among its male members and communal bonds between organizers and communities. Mutual interdependence seemed to be the goal and strategy. Needing and relying on each other was what gave SNCC men strength and the fraternal man was an important

¹⁶⁸ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 153-168.

¹⁶⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 95-96.

¹⁷⁰ See Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

model for masculinity in the organization. Many SNCC members admired the lack of self-interest and ego among the leadership. Historian Clayborne Carson, who participated in SNCC, notes that he revered SNCC organizer Bob Moses's "selfless commitment." He also argues that the egalitarian bonds between members differentiated SNCC from the NAACP or SCLC.¹⁷¹ In 1964, official movement documentarian Howard Zinn observed that "in the deep and complex relationships among people in SNCC, we have perhaps the blurred vision of what awaits the nation and the world." Zinn claimed that SNCC was "recapturing from some time and place long forgotten an emotional approach to life, aiming, beyond politics and economics, simply to remove the barriers that prevent human beings from making contact with one another."¹⁷²

The bonding experience in SNCC was masculinized in various political slogans and campaign platforms and in the consciousness of many members. Former SNCC leader James Forman recalled in his 1972 memoir that the success of early SNCC organizing was directly linked to the fact that SNCC was an organization of friends, not just colleagues. In his recollection, however, he specifically invoked a popular SNCC slogan that described the organization as "a band of brothers, a circle of trust."¹⁷³ Forman's use of this slogan highlights the important role of masculine imagery in SNCC. It did not state that SNCC was a group of friends or siblings, but depicted SNCC as a "band of brothers." It was a fraternity, not a family.

¹⁷¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 4.

¹⁷² Zinn, *The New Abolitionists*, 237.

¹⁷³ Forman, *The Making of a Black Revolutionary*, 418.

The masculinization of SNCC's goals is evident in other movement slogans and statements as well. In a 1960 statement to the Platform Committee of the National Democratic Party Convention, SNCC declared:

The threads of freedom form the basic pattern in man's struggle to know himself and to live in the assurance that other men will recognize this self. The ache of every man to touch his potential is the throb that beats out the truth of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. America was founded because men were seeking room to become. We again are seeking that room.¹⁷⁴

When arguing that the "ache of every man" is to declare his freedom and that America was founded because "men were seeking room to become," the struggle for civil rights was masculinized. This is the case not only because of the use of the gender-specific term "men," but also because the vision of freedom that was offered here, the war for independence from Great Britain and the independence that was associated with western expansion, were historically masculine visions of freedom in that it was a fight to allow upper class white men in the colonies to control their political fates. This is also evident in the 1966 voter registration campaign slogan, which was "One Man/One Vote."¹⁷⁵ These slogans masculinized the radical experience, even though there were many important and valued female leaders in the organization. SNCC's masculinization of the radical experience did not mean that women could not participate and were not valued and included, but masculine traits were most often prized.

¹⁷⁴ "Statement Submitted by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to the Platform Committee of the National Democratic Convention, July 7, 1960, Los Angeles, California," *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers* (University of Rochester Libraries), series I, II, V, microfilm, reel 3.

¹⁷⁵ "One Man/One Vote Poster," *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, series I, II, V, microfilm, reel 3.

Many members of SDS admired and adopted SNCC's model of fraternal manhood in order to avoid what they believed were the failures of hegemonic masculinity. In their personal writings, SDS men decried the ways in which U.S. society corrupted masculinity and the ways in which traditional patriarchal bonds had failed them. For instance, an anecdote that Miller recounts in his book about an early SDS meeting also effectively demonstrates the sense among early male SDSers that they wanted to distance themselves from traditional paternal bonds, as well as their white privilege. At an SDS conference, Robb Burlage put out a pot to collect money for the organization. He then encouraged young members to "Come up! Come up and confess. Put some money in the pot and be saved." As young activists approached the pot, they confessed their middle-class sins, declaring for example that "my father owned a newspaper" and "my father works for the government." These confessions helped young members distance themselves from patriarchal authorities.¹⁷⁶

SDS men did not have to turn to SNCC as a way to distance themselves from traditional paternal bonds. But through the mass media and through personal experiences, SDS saw a group of men and women who were their age, fighting against traditional powers, and creating bonds of brotherhood. SDS men repeatedly referenced fraternalism as the counterweight to capitalist dehumanization and patriarchal failures. For example, in his personal recollection of this period, Gitlin likens "the surrogate family" that SDS founded to the "Band of Brothers" created in SNCC, invoking the phrase that was associated with the fraternal model of

¹⁷⁶ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 178.

organizing in this period.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, in a letter to SNCC leader John Lewis in 1964, SDS National Secretary Clark Kissinger argued that SDS should operate as a “fraternal organization” because the membership was growing at such a rapid rate that new SDSers might feel alienated if older activists dominated the organization. He warned that a lack of fraternity would disrupt SDS’s key goal, which was to “give the people voice.” He signed the letter “fraternally” to reinforce his brotherhood with Lewis.¹⁷⁸ In a letter to a prospective female member, South-Southwest SDS Correspondent Judy Pardun described SDS relations as “fraternal” as well.¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, Pardun used quotation marks around the word, which either intentionally or inadvertently pointed to the irony of an important female figure in the movement recruiting another woman by depicting SDS as a fraternity.

SDS members also appropriated SNCC’s model of fraternity into their descriptions of close bonds between men in SDS. Gitlin, for example, has written about how SDS men often spoke about their love for each other. He claims that many SDS men, when addressing one another, “spoke without embarrassment” in a “language of love.” After acknowledging that this could have been shameful for young men in the early 1960s, presumably because dominant masculine norms did not permit the open expression of love between men, he attributed the lack of shame that SDS men felt in acting this way to the example set by SNCC leader James Forman’s “band of brothers standing in a circle of love.” Years later Gitlin observed

¹⁷⁷ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 106.

¹⁷⁸ Clark Kissinger, “Letter to John Lewis (November 9, 1964),” *Students for a Democratic Society Papers* (McMaster), microfilm, reel 9.

¹⁷⁹ Judy Pardun, “Letter to Diane Pinkley (August 3, 1965),” *Students for a Democratic Society Papers* (Dartmouth), microfilm, reel 5.

that the "sexual exclusivity" of this way of thinking was "not yet apparent" in the 1960s, but in the 1980s he recognized that this understanding of social relations in SDS and SNCC problematically excluded women.¹⁸⁰

Just as SNCC men subverted the masculine ideal of independence and the characterization of black men as dependent, they subverted the masculine ideal of disciplined violence and the racist characterization of African American men as feral. SNCC men valued non-violence in their activism and shamed their oppressors for their use of violence against weak and vulnerable people who were attempting to exercise their civil rights. This reversed popular links between hyper-masculinity and black masculinity by portraying southern white racist men as violent and thus failing to appropriately control their masculinity. SNCC men were asked to put their bodies on the line, but to not use violence themselves, and the black men in SNCC were praised by many activists and observers for their intellect and rhetoric rather than their physical prowess.¹⁸¹

While this model echoed the model associated with the Highlander School, Martin Luther King, and earlier, Mahatma Gandhi, some young members of SNCC expressed a desire to distance themselves from their elders. For instance, former SNCC chairman James Forman recalled in 1972 that SNCC could not identify with "the super-Toms" in organizations perceived to be part of the Old Guard (including the NAACP and SCLC). These older African American leaders were "the brothers"

¹⁸⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 106, 107.

¹⁸¹ For examples, see Carson, *In Struggle*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Hayden, *Reunion*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; Miller, *'Democracy is in the Streets'*; Zinn, *The New Abolitionists*.

who SNCC members “would have liked to call brother, but could not.”¹⁸² Many SNCC members understood that their tactics were partially inspired by earlier movements, but they set out to make them in their own image. One reason is that King's nonviolent campaigns commonly relied on female activists and activists who were either younger or older than the college-age men in SNCC, who faced distinct challenges in the context of white stereotypes about young black men. SNCC's tactics and the images of young black men that they produced posed a direct threat to mainstream beliefs about young black manhood in important and innovative ways.

While SNCC actions were not covered by the mainstream media with the same consistency as King's actions, both observers of and participants in SNCC recognized the potential power of images that depicted SNCC members responding nonviolently to physical attacks by Southern racists and noted that most of those participating in SNCC's most public acts of non-violent resistance were men. During a 1964 SNCC executive meeting, for instance, Frank Smith summed up the SNCC strategy by stating, “We are fighting the structure of Mississippi with only our bodies and souls.”¹⁸³ These characterizations of non-violent protest did not necessarily apply only to men in the movement, but they invoked bodily sacrifice, human bravery, and protective instincts, all of which were considered masculine traits. Sociologist Doug McAdam's 1992 study of SNCC participants notes that almost all of those doing voter registration during SNCC's Freedom Summer were men (91%). Women, in contrast, made up more than half of those working in the

¹⁸² Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 361.

¹⁸³ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Meeting Minutes, Wednesday June 10, 1964,” *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, series I, II, V, microfilm, reel 3.

Freedom Schools (57%).¹⁸⁴ What this meant was that those who were most often confronted by white violence in public spaces, where the mainstream media was most present, were men. This strengthened the image of SNCC's masculine bravery, discipline, and self-restraint.

When images of nonviolence circulated in mass media and popular culture, many Americans may have been startled to see black men refusing to respond to violence with violence, as it contradicted some of the expectations of masculine behavior. In fact, historian Simon Wendt argues that the feeling that nonviolence was contrary to hegemonic ideals of manhood kept many men away from this type of political activism. In his estimation, African American men were more apt to want to join black militias, such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice, because this allowed them to protect their women and children in more traditionally masculine ways.¹⁸⁵ Wendt's analysis, while not referring directly to SNCC men, suggests some of the ways that images of SNCC men's non-violent ethos challenged mainstream understanding of manhood in the early 1960s.

At the same time that SNCC's commitment to nonviolence challenged some hegemonic masculine ideals, it also tapped into hegemonic ideals of masculine chivalry. Many black men in the organization tried to protect SNCC women, while taking on the most dangerous roles for themselves. Movement participant and historian Sara Evans recalls that male leaders imbued dangerous work with "an air of macho derring-do" and that "in many ways women were 'protected' from dangers

¹⁸⁴ Doug McAdam, "Gender as a Mediator," 1227.

¹⁸⁵ Wendt, "They Finally Found Out That We Really Are Men," 543, 548.

men faced.” All of this, in Evans’s estimation, had “echoes of chivalry.”¹⁸⁶ One powerful example of this can be seen in SNCC marches and protests where men were encouraged to position themselves so that they, rather than SNCC women, were more likely to experience white violence.

Scholars have also noted that the gendered nature of SNCC’s non-violent tactics created a hierarchical power structure in the organization, even while activists consciously tried to avoid it. As SNCC men publicly took on the most dangerous roles in the organization, often making them the subject of public curiosity and adulation, they also became SNCC’s primary public spokesmen. Historian Wesley Hogan concludes, for instance, that “since black men took the greatest risks, they held the preponderance of power in the organization.”¹⁸⁷

The principles of restrained manhood, which in many ways created similar imagery to that of Mailer’s and Kerouac’s representations of black men suffering in dignity, were carried into the ways that SNCC leaders, mostly men, ran meetings and spoke publicly. A 1965 *Newsday* profile of SNCC leader John Lewis, for example, highlighted his unique leadership qualities and the ways in which SNCC members embraced these qualities. In the profile, journalist Thomas A. Johnson described Lewis as “the youngest, smallest, least known and poorest paid of the national civil rights leaders,” but noted that his lack of celebrity and pomp worked in his favor. A CORE veteran was quoted as saying: “He’s normally very quiet, he never shouts and he doesn’t have to—he has an inner strength that everyone notices after a while.” According to a former NAACP worker, while Lewis did not have the “moving

¹⁸⁶ Evans, *Personal Politics*, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Hogan, *Many Minds One Heart*, 77.

language of King,” no one doubted that he was “genuine” and many therefore chose to follow him.¹⁸⁸ Lewis’s quiet but convincing rhetorical style was common among the SNCC leadership and contradicted many early 1960s ideals of male leadership steeped in bombastic, forceful expression. The powerful black male orator was definitely not new in the black organizing traditions of the 1960s; it was deeply rooted in diasporic oral and Christian religious traditions. SNCC men, however, subverted the model of the fiery black orator, famously embodied in Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. This subversion also rejected the white, middle-class masculinity that asked men to be individualistic leaders. The rhetorical style popular in SNCC asked men to subordinate their own egos in order to empower others. SNCC offered a counterhegemonic model of masculinity in its promotion and celebration of the power of SNCC men to facilitate debate, friendship, and empowerment.

At the same time that the model of restrained manhood challenged popular stereotypes of African American masculinity, it also ran the risk of reinforcing the romantic image of black men who could suffer with calm dignity, or even joy, as opposed to rage and vengeance, bringing to mind the cotton pickers in *On the Road* or the hedonistic jazzmen in “The White Negro.” While it did counter the stereotype of the feral black man, therefore, it also invoked a stereotype that could be just as harmful to real black men and women. If African Americans could suffer with dignity, did their oppression really hurt them? Or was their oppression part of their natural condition?

¹⁸⁸ “Profile: John Lewis in *Newsday*, March 9, 1965,” *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, series I, III, V, microfilm, reel 4.

Regardless of these risks, SDS men admired the ways in which SNCC's style of non-violent protest could subvert and potentially replace traditional forms of masculinity, which celebrated strength, aggression, and the use of physical violence to defend oneself. In this context, SNCC offered something extraordinary: African American men, long portrayed as violent and aggressive, not only were refusing to use violence offensively, but also were refusing to use it defensively, even in the face of brutal white racist violence. This inspired the white men of SDS, leading them to participate in non-violent civil rights activism in the South and recreate that activism in the North. As they did so, they used black masculinity to reconstruct white manhood.

The memoirs, writings, and personal communications of many SDS men demonstrated their admiration for the non-violent masculinities of SNCC. Many members who witnessed SNCC's non-violent actions commented on the bravery of the men, neglecting the role of women in the process. For instance, Gitlin's memoir of the 1960s clearly demonstrates how much he admired the men in SNCC and in particular their commitment to nonviolence. He recalls that while watching early SNCC actions, he felt that the men were "unimaginably brave" and that they lived "as if you could actually take life in your hands and live it deliberately, as if it were an artwork." He calls this "expressive politics," which was the willingness to put your body on the line "not only to win demands, but to *feel good*."¹⁸⁹ This again recalls the idea that black men could feel good through suffering. And the statement emphasizes the emotive quality of SNCC men's political actions, as opposed to the

¹⁸⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 106, 134.

intellectual qualities, a theme that recurs throughout many of the SDS men's commentaries.

It also suggests Gitlin's sense that putting one's body on the line could be a model for personal reinvention. "SNCC moved us," recalls Gitlin; SNCC activists "seized our imaginations" and "from 1960 on, SDS felt wired to these staggeringly brave, overalled, work-shirted college students." Gitlin continues, "SNCC had suffered, SNCC was *there*, bodies on the line, moral authority incarnate." This echoes the romanticism that ran through Kerouac's and Mailer's writings: black men derived moral authority by way of their suffering.¹⁹⁰ Significantly, in describing the "staggeringly brave" SNCC workers in these clothes, Gitlin depicts them as masculine. After all, it was SNCC men, not women, who wore overalls and work-shirts as signs of solidarity with those they were trying to recruit. Even though women also put their bodies on the line and were an important part of SNCC, Gitlin describes being wired to masculine images of the organization.

Gitlin's recollection of SNCC leader John Lewis also demonstrates his deep admiration for the heroic chivalry in non-violent actions. For example, in his recounting of Lewis's speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, Gitlin emphasizes that Lewis called out the federal government for not protecting non-violent protestors generally, but most egregiously for not protecting Slater King's pregnant wife when the police attacked her. Gitlin then goes on to emphasize Lewis's and other field secretaries' attempts to protect the vulnerable members of society, unlike the federal government's proposed civil rights bill, which

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103-106, 128, 133-134.

did nothing to protect “young children and old women from police brutality.”¹⁹¹

While this was not the focus of Lewis’s speech that day, it is the only part that Gitlin chose to recount in his memoir. It demonstrates the ways in which he saw and continued to see Lewis’s role in SNCC. Unlike the federal government, which represented an old form of patriarchal power, Lewis and the SNCC field secretaries (most of whom were men) were protecting the vulnerable from violence, a distinctly masculinized role.

Hayden has also signaled his admiration for SNCC’s model of the self-sacrificing non-violent man. In his memoir, Hayden recalls his initial feelings when he came into contact with SNCC protestors. After indicating that “they lived on a fuller level of feeling,” again emphasizing emotion over intellect, Hayden wondered, “How are seemingly ordinary people capable of extraordinary feats? Perhaps like soldiers who know their cause is worth dying for, they were simply and bravely carrying out their acknowledged duty.” This statement did not acknowledge the long history of suffering and sacrifice in the African American community, perhaps because that suffering and sacrifice was rarely public and politicized as it was in SNCC. The soldier analogy distinctly masculinized the bravery of SNCC workers, in part by associating non-violent activists with soldiers. Furthermore, in his memories of SNCC, Hayden most often describes the men as brave, daring, and fearless in their ability to withstand violence. He admires the female leaders in the movement, referring to them as dignified and dedicated, but his awe was mostly reserved for the male leaders. For example, he describes Charles McDew as having an “ear-to-ear

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

grin, white teeth on black face,” and an “absolutely arrogant fearlessness” that “drove the segregationists crazy.”¹⁹² In McDew, Hayden found a model for his own activism.

Hayden links his experiences with non-violent civil rights activism to his masculine maturation, as well as the masculine maturation of those he was liberating. He argues that non-violent protest was “a necessary moral act and a rite of passage,” and he paraphrases a quotation from his idol, C. Wright Mills, when he recalls his non-violent protest work with the Newark Economic Research Action Project, a program designed to educate and empower the urban poor in the North. Mills wrote that in revolutions the organizers are “men” at the “expense” of those they are organizing. Hayden invokes this passage to signal that the non-violent work in Newark offered him “possibilities for asserting a systematically denied manhood,” which reinforces the idea that this political activism is a male project.¹⁹³

SDS members appropriated a gendered model of non-violent action into their work in the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP). In a 1964 report to SDS on the Cleveland ERAP, Sharon Jeffrey asked: “Aren’t radicals martyrs? Don’t you give up everything and nail yourself to the cross?” This metaphor invokes Christian iconography, which embodies sacrifice as male.¹⁹⁴ To emulate this sacrifice, ERAP workers moved into the impoverished neighborhoods that they were trying to empower and reform. Like the SNCC workers who moved into the small towns of

¹⁹² Hayden, *Reunion*, 39-40, 54, 62.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 60, 165. The Mills quotation about revolutionaries, as cited by Hayden, is: “We find our humanity on this side of death and despair; he finds it beyond torture and death. We have sown the wind; he is the whirlwind...[sic] We were men at his expense, he makes himself man at ours: a different man, of higher quality.”

¹⁹⁴ Sharon Jeffrey, cited in Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*,” 199.

Mississippi, ERAP workers felt that real change could only happen when they put their bodies, not just their souls, on the line.

In fact, Hayden describes the work that he and others did with ERAP as a bodily sacrifice, which set these activists apart from other activists trying to save the poor. In his memoir he states his conviction that, while he attempted to organize the poor around issues such as welfare, rent, neighborhood maintenance, and police persecution, he “affected most of the people” he was trying to reach with his “willingness to sacrifice.” He believes that this “separated us from any other would-be organizers, missionaries, or social workers these poor had ever seen.”¹⁹⁵ This language again invokes the martyr from Christian iconography, embodied as male, who puts himself in harm's way for a higher cause. This masculinization of the ERAP work continues in Hayden's recollections when he describes what happened when he and other community members stood their ground against government authorities in Newark in 1965. He recalls that this was a moment when “everyone began to feel we were flexing a set of muscles the community had not felt before.”¹⁹⁶ Linking non-violent protest to the use of muscular strength against your antagonists masculinizes the action.

SDS also admired the SNCC oratorical style, which provoked change through rhetoric and which SDS members attributed almost entirely to the men in the movement. SDS members viewed SNCC men as intellectuals, which defied stereotypes of black masculinity as rooted in the body instead of in the mind. An SDS member told Miller, for example, that at a 1965 ERAP meeting, the SNCC members

¹⁹⁵ Hayden, *Reunion*, 130.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

who spoke impressed them “with the image of an organizer who never organized, who by his simple presence was the mystical medium for the spontaneous expression of ‘the people.’”¹⁹⁷ While King or Malcolm X seemed to be larger than life figures who filled the room with their presence, the SNCC male organizer was a quiet and modest figure. His speech was understood as the “spontaneous expression” of the people. It was also understood as “mystical,” which characterized the SNCC male organizer’s oratorical style as part of a magical, natural, or faithful tradition, as opposed to an intellectual or rational one.

SDS men reserved their greatest admiration for Bob Moses. In his 1961 report to Al Haber, Hayden described the abilities of Moses: he “is an able, competent, radical, and a very contemplative individual, as good as they come.” Interestingly, Hayden praised Moses’s organizational skills by racializing him. He said that Moses had a “terrifying organizational sense” and that his strength came from the truth that he is “a Harlem guy, nothing else.” This description of Moses emphasized that part of what Hayden admired in Moses was that he was from Harlem, a mostly non-white, non-middle-class neighborhood. For Hayden, Moses’s skill was enhanced by his separation from the white, middle-class world.¹⁹⁸

Gitlin’s recollections of Moses also demonstrate a deep admiration for him and his organizing style. In Miller’s history, Gitlin describes Moses as “the quintessence of SNCC and its foremost saint.” Importantly, Gitlin presents Moses as “something of an older brother to a movement suspicious of fathers.” Moses

¹⁹⁷ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 213.

¹⁹⁸ Hayden, “To: Haber, From: Hayden, Observations from Jackson, Mississippi (1961),” *Students for a Democratic Society Papers* (McMaster), microfilm, reel 9.

presented a model of masculinity for male SDSers who sought new masculine heroes. His oral style was often what most impressed these early members. Gitlin describes this in great detail:

His voice was mild, even-toned. He spoke slowly, plainly, pausing frequently to gather his thoughts, or to think things through one more time, giving the impression that every occasion was unique and required something unique of him. He lacked high-flown rhetoric, or adornment, or what is conventionally called charisma-but charisma is the property of a specific culture, and what passes for charisma in one setting goes overly poorly in a culture that honors something different.¹⁹⁹

SDS believed that “political style is central to political substance,” according to Gitlin’s memoir, and Moses provided a model for the kind of style the New Left was craving. Gitlin argues that “the early New Left distrusted flourishes” and “it wanted elemental talk, not grand rhetoric.” Moses embodied this in the way he used his voice and his body. Gitlin recalls that “to teach his unimportance” Moses would “crouch in the corner or speak from the back of the room, hoping to hear the popular voice reveal itself.” Most importantly, “he seemed humble, ordinary,” and “accessible.” In Gitlin’s estimation, “in voice and gesture, Moses did more than anyone else to create the premium movement style.” Gitlin summarizes this style as “diffidence over bravado,” a “quiet assertion rather than driving crescendos,” and “plain, halting speech rather than rolling phrases.” He remembers that Moses “liked to make his points with his hand, starting with palm downturned, then opening his hand outward toward his audience, as if delivering the point for inspection, nothing up his sleeve.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 148.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 135, 148-149.

Moses, in Gitlin's observations, was the ultimate male role model for the SDS men who were "suspicious of fathers" and the models of masculinity they offered. Moses was black, peaceful, thoughtful, and openly loving and was not afforded many of the privileges that came along with white, middle-class manhood. All of this praise was reserved almost entirely for Forman, Lewis, McDew, and Moses in the early years and for Stokely Carmichael in the later years. This effectively silenced the role of the female SNCC organizers and those leaders and organizers who did not fit this particular model of black leadership, as well as the rank and file membership.

Several male SDSers attempted to emulate Moses. Paul Booth later told Miller that the way that SDS men speechified was "imitation SNCC." He recalled that "it was such a thrill to have Bob Moses or Stokely Carmichael address a national meeting." Booth admitted that he himself "was infatuated with their personal style" and added, "While they talked, they would gesture and wave their finger around in a circle. It must have been funny to go to an SDS meeting and to see all these fingers moving around whenever anybody got up to talk."²⁰¹

Many male leaders in SDS adopted this style. According to Sale, for instance, ERAP organizers believed that the way to lead "was not with top-down liberal paternalism but bottom-up identification and the sort of self-effacing, nonideological, with-the-people, leaderless, and non-manipulative organizations." Sale argues that this came directly from SNCC, which replaced paternalistic organizing with a non-hierarchical style that was embodied by Moses and other

²⁰¹ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 225.

SNCC men. As he states, “the SNCC mystique was powerful” and the “patterns of speech, the gestures, the argot” of SNCC came “to be adopted.”²⁰²

Despite efforts to create a bottom-up style of organization, there were singular leaders in SDS, most of who were white men, and they did at times make the big public speeches that they originally rejected, especially in the mid-1960s. Most notably, Paul Potter, the leader of SDS in 1965, made a speech at the March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam in April of that year with thousands of people in attendance. This was a turning point in the organization for several reasons, one of which is that it marked SDS’s move from small meetings and face-to-face actions to large-scale speeches and protests. Not all of SDS followed this route (ERAP, for instance, continued small, localized work), but a large part of SDS and the public face of SDS moved to this model as the organization became more influential on a national scale. It also marked the period in which SDS became more focused on efforts to end the war in Vietnam and participated in fewer formal actions with SNCC.

Potter gave the speech in almost the same spot where King had delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963, but Potter’s speech invoked the SNCC style, which differed dramatically from that of King. The features of Moses’s oratory that Gitlin outlines—“diffidence over bravado, quiet assertion rather than driving crescendos” and “plain, halting speech rather than rolling phrases” are clear in recordings of Potter’s speech.

²⁰² Sale, *SDS*, 99.

Potter's speech had no trace of bravado because it invited the members of the audience to consider their own feelings about the war in Vietnam. It was filled with dozens of facts and statistics, seemingly in an effort to convince the audience of the plausibility of his argument to end the war in Vietnam. The speech focused not on emotional pleas, but factual points for debate and consideration. The audience was invited to think about the facts. This was indicated by his habit of concluding factual sections with questions for the audience, such as "what can we do?," "what questions can we ask?," and "what strategies should we use?" The "we" in these questions was central to SNCC's and SDS's rhetorical style. Potter referred to himself as a member of the movement repeatedly, highlighting equality with, instead of leadership of, the people in the audience. King's speech was individualized; it was about *his* dream, while Potter's speech used collective language. He also presented solutions and explanations as questions, not as statements. He was not telling the members of the audience what to do. Instead he was proposing possible solutions.²⁰³

The speech was also free of soaring oratory and was instead delivered in quiet tones. While Gitlin later described the speech as "soaring" and "electrifying," it had almost no rhetorical flourishes.²⁰⁴ The speech was delivered in an even-tone, with no rises and falls in volume. It had very little drama and did not even conclude with a dramatic escalation in power and tone. King's style was that of a preacher delivering a sermon. The rises and falls in volume and power cued emotions.

²⁰³ Paul Potter, "March on Washington Speech," *Students for a Democratic Society Collection*, Wisconsin Historical Society (April 17, 1965), Track 3.

²⁰⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 184.

Potter's speech was delivered quietly, though passionately. Even though he was in front of a huge audience, he sounded like the men, such as Moses, who gave speeches at small SNCC meetings ²⁰⁵

Potter's speech exemplified the rhetorical style that he and other members of SDS associated with Moses and Lewis, as well as the influence of white intellectuals popular in the movement, such as Mills. This style— a subtle, quiet, self-effacing, and intelligent invocation of community—stood in stark contrast to mainstream U.S. perceptions of the capabilities of black men (who were assumed to be feral, loud, and ignorant), the established tradition in the black community of male preaching (which was gaining in mainstream recognition due to public leaders such as King), and white, middle-class masculinity's focus on individualistic, bombastic, and powerful leadership styles.

Many young men in SDS, then, admired and appropriated the models of manhood they observed among SNCC men. The SDSers believed that these models of manhood were empowering in a time when, as noted in the Port Huron Statement, white middle-class masculinity was ineffectual and unsatisfying. Appropriating the fraternal and non-violent models popularized by SNCC deepened the alliance between the two organizations in the anti-racist struggle, while also gendering the activist experience.

Equal Allies

SDS men's appropriation of SNCC's counterhegemonic ways of being a man had ambiguous results. On the one hand, this appropriation had positive outcomes.

²⁰⁵ For a sample of recordings of early SDS meetings, see The Wisconsin Historical Society holdings.

In their admiration of nonviolent black masculinities, these SDS men rejected certain stereotypes of black masculinity that had long been present in the U.S. imagination. They celebrated and spoke openly about the ways in which black men were peaceful, communal, intelligent, and loving. In this estimation, black men had much to teach individualistic, cold, and violent mainstream white men. SDS men also appeared to use these models of black masculinity to commit their lives to social justice, equal rights, and community empowerment, not necessarily for profit or personal aggrandisement, as was so often the case in other forms of appropriation.

On the other hand, SDS men's appropriation of the black models of manhood in SNCC had several problematic outcomes. First, these appropriations silenced and marginalized the roles of black women in the movement. In focusing on the male leadership of SNCC and in prizing masculinity, members of SDS diminished the many contributions that African American women made as leaders and activists. These SDS men acknowledged the presence of a female leadership in SNCC, especially Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, but they did not speak of adopting their styles in the ways that they spoke about male leaders, such as Bob Moses and Stokely Carmichael. For instance, in Gitlin's book *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987) he speaks at length about the influence of SNCC men such as Bob Moses and Stokely Carmichael on his thinking, but Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hammer appear mostly in footnotes. The same is true of Hayden's memoir *Reunion* (1988). Furthermore, these SDS men did not speak as candidly about the ways in which SNCC was offered spaces and possibilities for the empowerment of African American women. Nor did they see what African American women could offer them

in terms of rethinking their masculinity. Ella Baker was a strong mother figure who, according to historian Barbara Ransby, helped SNCC men embrace a new kind of masculinity. Ransby quotes Charles McDew as saying in 1960 that it was Baker's example of how to be a radical activist and still be loving that led him to "embrace his comrades" and tell "them that he loved them in a way he could not have conceived of doing before he entered the movement."²⁰⁶ But Baker's role in reimagining masculinity is largely absent in the SDS recollections studied here, as it is in many SNCC recollections. Furthermore, the descriptions of Baker and other female leaders do not acknowledge the role of female masculinity in these movements. Female members of SNCC often performed historically and culturally masculine tasks in their revolutionary work, demonstrating physical prowess and endurance. The lack of reference to the ways in which women in SNCC also embodied counterhegemonic masculine traits indicates that some SDS members assumed that only men could embody masculinity, a simplified and sexist understanding of the varied ways in which gender operated in the early 1960s. Reserving the majority of their praise for the SNCC men they deemed manly, these members of SDS ignored the complicated reality of gender roles in the black freedom struggle.

SDS men's veneration of SNCC men also ignored the important criticisms coming from black and white women within the civil rights movement who wanted to draw attention to the problematic nature of gender relations within SNCC. For instance, at a SNCC meeting in November 1964, a paper entitled "Student

²⁰⁶ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 256, 258, 295-296.

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement,” was presented anonymously to those in attendance. The paper argued that often women in SNCC were relegated to typing and office maintenance positions, were rarely allowed to take up leadership positions, and were often asked to defer to SNCC on major decision-making issues. The paper compared the ways in which SNCC men failed to acknowledge patriarchy and paternalism to the ways in which white Americans failed to acknowledge racism.²⁰⁷

Portraying SNCC men as heroes left little room for any acknowledgement of black women’s critical voices. It also added to the mystique of black men, which contributed to problematic sexual relationships in the movement, a subject that remains obscure and complicated in the historiography and memories of SNCC and SDS activists. According to some accounts, with no portrait of a hero to rest on, black women were often relegated to the sidelines, often only acknowledged as the sexual partners of white and black men.

SDS men’s appropriation of black masculinities also had implications for white women in the civil rights movement. In focusing so much attention on their real and imagined homosocial relationships with black men, they avoided dealing with the issues that were beginning to come to the fore about heterosocial relationships between white men and white women in SDS. There was growing

²⁰⁷ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Position Paper: Women in the Movement (1964),” *The Sixties Project* (University of Virginia), http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Sixties.html, accessed on July 3, 2012. SNCC men’s response to this paper, specifically Stokely Carmichael’s infamous comment that “The position of women in SNCC is prone,” is documented and debated in Holseart, Noonan, Richardson, Garman Robinson, Smith Young, and Zellner eds *Hands on the Freedom Plow* and Robnett, “Women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.”

criticism in the mid-1960s from within SDS by a group of white women identifying with feminism who argued that the male leaders in SDS had not done enough work to dismantle hegemonic masculinities. Female SDS members brought attention to the sexism within the movement, the machismo that flourished among male leaders, and the refusal of many male members to do the necessary work to confront patriarchy. SDS members Casey Hayden and Mary King, for instance, presented a paper entitled “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo” at a 1965 SDS meeting. Much like the SNCC paper addressing gender inequality in the movement, Hayden and King’s paper likened the treatment of women in the movement to the treatment of African Americans in U.S. society, listing the many instances in which SDS women were treated differently than SDS men.²⁰⁸ The Port Huron Statement alluded to the problems with hegemonic masculinity, but many men in SDS were not committed to ending male dominance. They were, in fact, committed to finding new ways of empowering themselves. This did not necessarily preclude confronting patriarchy, but ultimately the focus on a reinvigorated masculinity came at the expense of empowering women and of recognizing the ways in which they were oppressed by the U.S. social system.

Also, any reduction of complicated men, identities, and histories to a set of limited models of masculinity negated the multiple realities of black life in the United States in this period. The black men in SNCC and the tactics that they decided to use were part of a longer African American organizing tradition and were linked to a set of circumstances specific to their own lives. These were not simply models

²⁰⁸ Casey Hayden and Mary King, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo (1965),” <http://www.sds-1960s.org/index.htm>, accessed on July 3, 2012.

of masculinity, but real men and women. The male SDSers certainly recognized this on some level, but their romanticization and fascination with the black masculinities they saw in SNCC reduced SNCC members to consumable products that could be appropriated by those who did not share their experiences.

The romanticization of SNCC masculinities also set up impossibly high standards for the real men in SNCC, which meant when they faltered, as all people inevitably do, this could lead to disappointment or disillusionment. At the very least, it meant that when the SNCC membership changed in the mid-1960s and younger, urban men, steeped in the ideologies of Black Power, joined, many members of SDS experienced disillusionment or disappointment with the new tactics promoted in SNCC. As Gitlin later recalled, “when SNCC proclaimed Black Power in 1966, though the white Left took their side, it was difficult to stay enthusiastic.”²⁰⁹ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many members of SDS gravitated away from civil rights organizing specifically and turned their attention to the antiwar movement. The antiwar movement definitely shared much in common with the black freedom movement, but it also allowed the SDS leadership to distance themselves from SNCC.

Finally, SDS men’s appropriation of black manhoods ultimately served to privilege white, male, middle-class opportunities, even while promoting justice for black men. These SDS men were committed to racial justice, but it was their dissatisfaction with white male role models and white masculinity that ultimately led them to appropriate SNCC manhoods. This meant that they could use these models without having to reject their own privilege. They could protest in southern

²⁰⁹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 184.

states, live in inner city neighborhoods, and register voters, but they could also do so without ever really giving up their power. This should not downplay the reality that white activists fought real battles in the South, many were ostracized, threatened, and injured, and some died fighting against racism and segregation.

White privilege, however, meant that it was possible to appropriate marginalized masculinities without ultimately abandoning all access to financial, social, and cultural opportunity. Marginality, in this case, was a lifestyle, not a life. The urge for change may have come from a genuine belief among young white organizers in a better future, as well as a genuine bond with young African American men, but it had some of the same ambiguous results as the literature of Mailer and Kerouac, neither of which dismantled hegemonic masculinity. In fact, the kinds of manhood that many SDS men adopted were not even necessarily revolutionary. Fraternity may have disrupted the individualism expected of white middle-class men, but it did not completely negate gender constructions in this period. It did not celebrate same-sex sexual love, acknowledge the power of femininity, or recognize the potential masculinity of women. Furthermore, non-violence disrupted popular understandings of the ways in which a man should respond to aggression and the stereotype of hyper-violent black men, but it may have also rendered black men non-threatening, which younger members of SNCC, including Stokely Carmichael, later critiqued.

“By that time I thought I was black.”²¹⁰

After 1965, SNCC changed in many ways. By 1966, many of the new members of SNCC were young urban African Americans who brought with them a different racial sensibility, the influence of increased militancy, and a focus on Black Power in the civil rights movements. The 1966 election of Stokely Carmichael as head of SNCC marked a move to a new leadership, the use of powerful and aggressive styles, and a re-evaluation of non-violent protest. With these changes, SNCC offered new models of manhood.²¹¹

SDS changed in many of the same ways, so it perhaps is not surprising that they continued to express admiration for the men of SNCC. While severing some of their official ties with SNCC, primarily because of the expulsion of whites from SNCC in 1966, SDS men continued to express their respect for SNCC manhood and portray black men as models for empowerment. In a 1974 interview with *Playboy* magazine, for example, Hayden described his admiration for those in the Black Power movement and defended their call for self-determination and self-protection given the reality of racism in the United States.²¹² In his recollections, Gitlin argues that while many white people in the New Left found it difficult to personally identify with SNCC after the emergence of Black Power, the “prowess” and the “martyrdom” of the Black Power activism made it “compelling” to white students.²¹³ The prowess and martyrdom of black men in the Black Power movement, both of which were

²¹⁰ Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: A Memoir* (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 218

²¹¹ For an exploration of these changes, see Forman, *The Making of a Black Revolutionary*.

²¹² Leroy F. Aarons and Ron Ridenour, “Playboy Interview: Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden,” Douglas Bauer ed., *Playboy* (April 1974): 67-90, 180-184.

²¹³ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 350.

understood as distinctly masculine, inspired white male activists, demonstrating the continued influence that young black activists had on white organizers.

The SDS men's appropriation of SNCC models of manhood has many similarities to the ways in which Mailer and Kerouac appropriated black masculinities in their novels. Like Mailer and Kerouac, many of the young white university men in SDS felt let down and cheated by the failed models of masculinity that had been offered by their fathers. They therefore turned to the black men in SNCC, who they believed had found better ways of being men due to their forced exile from the racial, class, and gender privileges granted to middle-class white men. Like Mailer and Kerouac, the young white male SDSers celebrated and admired what they believed to be black male qualities, even though mainstream media often belittled or reviled black manhood.

SDS men's appropriations of black masculine styles of radicalism, however, differed from Mailer's and Kerouac's appropriations for two important reasons. First, many of the young men cited here were engaged in the antiracist struggle on a daily basis. They worked and fought alongside the black men they admired and created intense bonds with many of those men, many of whom also admired and trusted their white colleagues. These were deeply mutual relationships in many ways. While Mailer and Kerouac certainly knew and celebrated some black men, especially the stars of the 1950s jazz world, they did not overtly engage in the politics of or necessarily see themselves as allies in the antiracist struggle. In fact, Mailer's and Kerouac's motivations were rooted in a distinct desire to not be engaged in a political revolution, at least in the period in which they wrote the

works studied here. What they valued most in the black jazzmen they claimed to admire was their removal from the political world, which in Mailer's and Kerouac's estimation made these men more free.

The young men in SDS, in contrast, were motivated to adopt black masculine radical styles specifically because they were distinctly political. SDS men constructed themselves as youth who had been cheated by their biological and ideological fathers and turned to other youth to become radical and politicized adults. They therefore admired the growing political power of youthful black masculinities. Mailer and Kerouac admired the black man's ability to reject normative masculinities and retreat into what the writers perceived was a better, simpler, more hedonistic world. Many male SDSers admired SNCC men's ability to engage with, fight against, and hopefully conquer U.S. hegemonic power.

The different motives and results in part reflect the rapid growth of the black freedom struggle and the media coverage of the black men and women fighting the revolution. They may also relate to age and generational distinctions. Recall that many of the young men who were involved in SDS had not fought in World War Two, while Mailer and Kerouac had, which may have reduced their taste for conflict. In addition, Mailer and Kerouac worked on their own, which distinguished them from the men in SDS. Simple differences in personal politics, motives, and desires all influenced the artists' and activists' choices as well. This chapter demonstrates, therefore, that the dynamics of cultural appropriation occurred beyond the parameters of artistic and literary movements. Political movements, especially in this period when art, politics, and culture became so entwined in the mainstream

consciousness, were also important sites of appropriation between white and black men.

What these artists and activists had in common, however, was that they looked to empower themselves by appropriating imaginary black masculinities and in so doing reinforced the privilege of whiteness and the erasure of women from positions of cultural and political power. As historian Grace Elizabeth Hale points out, “African Americans could not be resources in some white people’s quest for transcendence and yet be equal allies in a collective fight for political transformation.”²¹⁴

SNCC’s influence on SDS lasted well beyond 1965 and still looms large in the memories of activists from both organizations. SNCC’s “beloved community” included SDS members, which perhaps sets these young white men apart from our traditional understanding of those who appropriate. Nonetheless, many young SDSers appropriated the masculinities that they thought were admirable among many black men in SNCC and this was inevitably complicated by their own class, race, and gender privilege.

²¹⁴ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235.

Chapter 3: Hef's Harlem Hip: The Soul Aesthetic in Playboy Magazine, 1964-1979

At the same time that SDS and SNCC were changing their organizational styles, as well as their political priorities, hegemonic masculinity and challenges to it were evolving. New ideals of middle-class, white manhood arose partially as a result of the escalation of the Vietnam War, the rise of women's liberation and gay movements, the growth of the counterculture, and the expansion of Black Power. For instance, by the second half of the 1960s, according to culture theorists Kate Milestone and Anneke Meyer, white-middle class men were expected to put more care into their appearance and participate more actively in the fashion economy as part of the reimagining of gender boundaries propelled by the feminist and gay movements.²¹⁵ Unlike the period in which SDS and SNCC were formed white middle-class men were encouraged to put more care into their hair, clothing, and personal style. They were also permitted to express their individual personalities through expressive clothing.

In the second half of the 1960s, U.S. men's fashion shifted from the tailored suits and muted colors of the "organization man" to peasant shirts, wide lapels, bright colors, and bell bottoms, which among other things reflected the rise of various political, social, and cultural movements. As cultural critic Tom Wolfe stated in 1979, "Fashion is a code, a symbolic vocabulary that offers a subrational but instant and very brilliant illumination of individuals and even entire periods,

²¹⁵ For a detailed exploration of the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and the fashion industry from 1965 to 1975, see Kate Milestone and Anneke Meyer, *Gender and Popular Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2012).

especially periods of great turmoil.”²¹⁶ In many contexts, for example, the long hair, blue jeans, and casual shirts worn by young white middle-class men reflected and announced the anti-materialism of the hippie movement, the liberationism of the counterculture, and the democratic class politics of student activism. One of the most popular U.S. styles from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, British Mod, which was linked to the British Invasion in popular music, was associated with a youthful subculture known for its hedonistic pursuit of pleasure.²¹⁷

In the same cultural moment, the soul aesthetic promoted by the Black Arts Movement, which was linked to Black Power politics, declared that “Black is Beautiful” with styles drawn from an imagined African past and the underclass hustler of the inner cities. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was the artistic branch of Black Power, an eclectic political movement focused on self-determination for peoples of African descent. BAM consisted of a group of black artists dedicated to establishing black-owned art industries, expressing black culture, and engaging in community activism.²¹⁸ One of the fashion aesthetics BAM celebrated as part of an “authentic” black culture was what I refer to as the soul aesthetic, which consisted of bright colored clothing, tapered fur coats, wide-brimmed hats, platform shoes, bell-bottomed pants, and “natural” hairstyles, such as the Afro.

²¹⁶ Tom Wolfe, cited in Francesca Stanfill, “Decoding the Style of the 1970s,” *NYT*, December 30, 1979, SM6-SM7.

²¹⁷ Daniel Delis Hill, *American Menswear: From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 245-246.

²¹⁸ For a detailed exploration of the Black Arts Movement, see William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Beginning primarily in 1970, *Playboy* magazine pictured white men wearing clothing associated with the soul aesthetic in its fashion spreads. In fact, a close examination of the masculine styles pictured in *Playboy* magazine reveals the striking similarities between Black Arts fashion and the middle-class white fashion promoted by *Playboy* in this period. On the one hand, many of the fashion styles that appeared in *Playboy* in this era derived from the larger history of men's fashion. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s these representations often referenced Black Arts fashion specifically. While *Playboy's* references to the soul aesthetic were partly the result of racial integration and interracial exchange, *Playboy* did not continue to market the soul aesthetic to the same extent after 1975, even though it was still popular among African Americans, which raises questions about the distinct character of developments in the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Moreover, racial desegregation cannot explain why the fashions of primarily urban African Americans, a group that did not have access to substantial political and social power and was not the focus of public attention when racial integration was more popular, ended up in a magazine marketed primarily to white men envisioned in a high status lifestyle. What explains *Playboy's* appropriation of particular black masculine styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

One possibility is that *Playboy* was capitalizing on subcultures, which, as business historian Thomas Frank argues, was the modus operandi of many marketers and designers in this era. Frank demonstrates that advertisers in the 1960s and 1970s used rebellion from mainstream culture to make consumer

products seem hip and current.²¹⁹ But this does not help us understand why *Playboy* favored specific subcultures and not others. *Playboy* could have easily promoted popular fashions that reflected the growth of self-indulgent and politically apathetic cultural tendencies that were captured by the notion of the “Me Generation.”²²⁰ For example, the disco fashions favored by John Travolta’s character in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) emphasized glitter and vanity as markers of social deviance. *Playboy*, however, did not embrace disco fashion, despite its value for attracting a youthful consumer market, with the same enthusiasm as it did the soul aesthetic. What was the particular appeal of the black soul aesthetic for the white male readers of *Playboy* in this era?

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, fashion in *Playboy* was part of larger conversations about the role of white men in U.S. society. The student movements explored in the previous chapter changed the ways that young white middle-class men understood their position in the Cold War, corporate capitalism, and the racial order. Many white middle-class men in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, were as disillusioned with and alienated by the masculinities promoted in the student movements as the students had been with militarized and corporatized masculinities. Many believed that the student movements had failed or that student

²¹⁹ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²²⁰ The “Me Generation” is sometimes used to describe a later segment of the Baby Boomers (born in the late 1950s and 1960s) who came of age in the 1970s and were adults in the 1980s. They were so named to reflect the perception that they were motivated by self-interest and self-indulgent consumption. This was often contrasted with the earlier Baby Boomers, who engaged in political activism in the 1960s. See Steven M. Gillon, *Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever, and How it Changed America* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

politics and styles were not appropriate for their post-student lives. Others did not want to give up the many privileges that came with middle-class life. Feeling alienated by middle-class, suburban, and corporate conformity, but also feeling ambivalent about the student movement, many white men in the late 1960s and early 1970s were seeking alternatives.

Among those who were looking for new cultural possibilities was the influential editor of *Playboy*, Hugh Hefner, who promoted an urban bachelor lifestyle and rejected the politics of alienation. He was searching for a manhood that embraced capitalist expressions of empowered, urban, and cool culture. He found this in soul, a cultural movement that was powerful in urban black communities and celebrated the hipness of outsiders. An exploration of fashion editorials and commercial advertisements in *Playboy*, a magazine geared to white middle-class men in this period, highlights the marketing of soul fashion to these men in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Playboy's decision to sell the soul aesthetic was very much influenced by the ethos of the magazine. *Playboy*, like Kerouac, Mailer, and many SDS men, promoted rebellion among white men. And as was the case with various earlier rebellions of white men, *Playboy* relied on racialized representations of masculinities. In order to allow its readers to reject the trappings of the suburban, corporate, and white middle-class family man, if even if just in their imaginations, *Playboy* adopted and adapted the style of the imaginary hero of urban sexuality and cultural resistance: the African American soul man. In marginalizing the African American man, U.S. society had encouraged him to create and develop unique forms of masculinity and

use this to find a distinct place in the post-World War II capitalist economy. For the editors of *Playboy*, the African American man's distance from hegemonic white masculinity was his greatest advantage; for these men, this distance ultimately empowered the rebellious black urban man's masculinity and saved him from the stifling effects of white middle-class life. The soul aesthetic, which was popularly associated with the urban black man, gave the editors access to this privilege.

Playboy's appropriation of the soul aesthetic was based on a perception that black urban masculinities could give white men imaginary access to the rebellious and daring lifestyle they fantasized about, but it was also deeply problematic. In imagining black men's oppression and resistance as cool and rebellious, *Playboy* avoided extensive and serious discussion of the ways in which U.S. society's systematic racism disempowered African Americans. Moreover, in appropriating the soul aesthetic for the magazine's fashion spreads, the editors of the magazine removed the soul aesthetic from its political moorings, capitalized on the ethos of Black Power, and trivialized the struggles of black men and black communities. In the end, *Playboy* used Black Power fashion, which was part of a movement to celebrate black culture and drive black self-determination, to empower white men. In so doing, *Playboy* reinforced the power of the white consumer at the expense of black men. At the same time, *Playboy's* focus on black men's fashion did nothing to empower black women and simplified the complicated character of gender relations in radical black politics in this period. The magazine's overall objectification and silencing of women more generally, as well as its derogatory stance on feminism and the empowerment of women, exacerbated this.

In order to explore the relationship between *Playboy* and the soul aesthetic, this chapter first provides a broad overview of the relationship between masculinity and fashion, which shows why an analysis of clothing and its uses is important for understanding how and why masculinity is imagined. It also demonstrates the ways in which explicitly commercial projects, propelled by the growing marketing industry, challenged gender rules while focusing on profit and branding. Unlike SDS and SNCC, organizations that were not driven by profit, and Mailer and Kerouac who wrote for primarily artistic reasons, the advertising and fashion spreads studied in this chapter were designed to market consumer products.

Second, the chapter explores the soul aesthetic and illustrates the key motivations behind the creation of a distinctly black and political mode of fashion in the 1960s and 1970s. Third, the chapter analyzes fashion editorials and advertisements in *Playboy* in the 1960s and 1970s and demonstrates the influence of the soul aesthetic on *Playboy's* fashion lexicon.²²¹ Finally, the chapter explores the reasons for and meanings of *Playboy's* appropriation of the soul aesthetic.

Playboy is a revealing source for examining the influence of the soul aesthetic on white fashion for several reasons.²²² *Playboy* was marketed primarily to a male

²²¹ While *Playboy* did not design the advertisements that appeared in the magazine, Hefner and his staff chose the advertisements and were selective because of the large number of vendors who wished to purchase advertising. In 1956, the editorial board of *Playboy* publicly stated: "We could fill our pages with advertising if we were willing to take everything submitted." See Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 129.

²²² For analyses of *Playboy* magazine, see Becky Conekin, "Fashioning the Playboy: Messages of Style and Masculinity in the Pages of Playboy Magazine, 1953-1963," *Fashion Theory* 4, no. 4 (November 2000): 447-467; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1983); Elizabeth Fratterigo, "The Answer to Suburbia: *Playboy's* Urban Lifestyle,"

and white audience and therefore was a distinctly white and masculine space in the larger print economy of the United States in this period. Moreover, the magazine self-consciously promoted discussions of middle-class manhood, inviting readers to read and respond to content that addressed the relationships, lives, and lifestyles of white men in the post-World War Two era. As one of the most popular and influential men's magazines of this period—according to *Playboy* historian Steven Watts, the magazine had five million subscribers in the late 1960s and seven million by the early 1970s—*Playboy* presented itself as a cultural trendsetter in masculine fashion. Its many fashion features emphasized clothing as a vital component of U.S. male identity and recommended the proper attire for embracing a single, heterosexual, and urban manhood.²²³ While not commonly thought of as a fashion magazine, *Playboy* consistently highlighted the importance of fashion and made clothing central in every issue.

Playboy is also a valuable source for this project because it promoted itself as a space for debate on racial issues in the 1950s and 1960s, but did so mostly in support of the liberal politics of integration and the cultural aesthetics of jazz. In this period, multiple articles published in the magazine celebrated liberal African American politics. *Playboy* also famously fought a battle against segregation in its southern clubs. The magazine also had a regular jazz all-star column, which

Journal of Urban History 34, no. 5 (2008): 747-774; Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist, and Rebel*, DVD, directed by Brigitte Berman (Canada: Metaphor Films, 2009); Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*; Carrie Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies: the Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Steven Watts, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2008).

²²³ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 2.

celebrated African American artists. *Playboy's* founder, Hugh Hefner, regarded himself as a supporter of civil rights and publicly spoke out against racism, which will be discussed in detail below.

In contrast, *Playboy* rarely discussed and almost never promoted Black Power politics, which is often understood as the revolutionary politics of the African American underclass. This complicates the possibility that the appearance of the soul aesthetic in *Playboy* was another sign of *Playboy's* support for African American racial politics, as does the continued presence of racist depictions of African American men and the trivializations of their politics, such as those in the cartoons reproduced below. In other words, *Playboy* distinguished between the kinds of black political empowerment that it supported (civil rights integrationism) and the kinds of black politics that it did not (Black Power radicalism). This makes it particularly interesting that the magazine promoted masculine fashions that were commonly associated with Black Power politics.

The magazine's adoption of Black Power fashion in its editorials and advertisements, despite the fact that *Playboy* was marketed mostly to white, middle-class men, is directly related to the ethos of the magazine, which sought to construct a rebellious masculinity that challenged the suburban and conformist masculinities that were popular in the U.S. imaginary. By the early 1970s, the popular image of African American men had shifted away from the non-violent protestors of the 1950s and 1960s and toward urban Black Power revolutionaries. Paradoxically, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Playboy* supported the politics of civil rights integrationism and the styles of Black Power radicalism. Ultimately, this chapter

argues that in promoting the soul aesthetic, *Playboy* appropriated the style, but not the substance, of Black Power masculinities in its efforts to empower white men. In so doing, *Playboy* ignored the complicated truths about racism that members of the Black Power movement were trying to highlight and undermined the efforts of black radicals to expose the privileges of whiteness and end the oppression of African Americans.

Fashion and Masculinity

Historians and sociologists of gender have examined the important role that fashion plays in the social construction and cultural performance of masculinity.²²⁴ They have demonstrated that the fashions prescribed to Western men have varied across time and culture and have informed and been informed by gender ideals. Other factors, such as the emergence of new materials, the rise of new technologies, and the experiences of colonialism and imperialism, also have played roles in the history of fashion.²²⁵

In doing this work, scholars have noted the important distinctions between fashion and clothing. Clothing choices depend on several utilitarian variables, including materials, need, and situation. Fashion, in contrast, depends less on the

²²⁴ On masculinity and fashion, see Susan Fillin-Yeh, ed., *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Hill, *American Menswear*; Richard Martin, *Jocks and Nerds: Men's Style in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); Colin McDowell, *The Man of Fashion: Peacock Males and Perfect Gentlemen* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997); Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009); Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*; Storey, *History of Men's Fashion: What the Well-Dressed Man is Wearing* (Barnsley, U.K.: Remember When, 2008); John Sims, *Icons and Men's Style* (London: Laurence King, 2011).

²²⁵ Tim Edwards, *Fashion in Focus: Concepts, Practices, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

everyday needs and choices and more on prescriptive values and prescribed lifestyles. Throughout the twentieth century, men's fashion offered a model of ideal masculinity and therefore changed with U.S. social values and culture. Fashionable clothing was marketed only to those whose lifestyle necessitated it and those who could afford it, although those outside of this market could still have been aware and influenced by fashion. Over the course of the twentieth century, the fashion-conscious public expanded from a relatively small elite to a broader cross-section of the U.S. population. Throughout the century, however, fashion styles and trends helped shape an image of manhood for all who aspired to achieve the ideal.

At the turn of the twentieth century, men's fashion was suited primarily to the lifestyles of the upper class. Fashion editorials typically promoted "evening wear," which consisted mostly of tuxedos, "day wear," which consisted mostly of conservative suits, and "country wear," which included clothing suitable for hunting for sport. In each of these styles, the fashion dictated little variety in color (mostly browns, blacks, and whites), natural fibers, conservative hats, square-shaped cuts, and no jewelry other than watches and cufflinks, which had to be made in precious metals or stones, but not be gaudy.²²⁶

Beginning in the 1920s, men's fashion incorporated styles that were intended for life in the modern city. Partially inspired by the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, and the Harlem Renaissance, city culture became trendier and men's fashion increasingly emphasized clothing appropriate for going out dancing,

²²⁶ McDowell, *The Man of Fashion*, 82.

attending theatres, and eating in public restaurants.²²⁷ As middle-class manhood, to a certain degree, replaced upper-class manhood as the ideal, men's fashion that was suitable for working life and leisurely pursuits became more important. Leisure styles allowed for more variation in color, incorporated new synthetic materials, and were cut to allow for the freedom of movement necessary for activities such as dancing. Business attire, however, maintained many of the elements of the earlier male fashion, with muted colors, conservative hats, and limited jewelry as the norm.

The Great Depression and World War Two contributed to a return to a masculinity that was more serious, focused, and austere; men's fashion reflected this change well into the 1950s. According to fashion scholar Daniel Delis Hill, for instance, the corporate suit, a staple of men's fashion at mid-century, was a "shapeless, tubular sack with natural shoulders, narrow lapels, and the straight-hanging lines of fifty years earlier." Even in leisurewear, Hill points out, men's fashion was mostly colorless, boxy, and unadorned.²²⁸

One important change noted by scholars, however, is that in the 1950s men's leisure fashion increasingly looked to the working-class for inspiration, starting with the attraction to clothing associated with the working-class cowboy.²²⁹ The admiration of working-class masculine fashion continued with the mass popularity of blue jeans and leather motorcycle jackets, which were made famous by film stars James Dean and Marlon Brando.²³⁰ While this points to a shift to working-class

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

²²⁸ Hill, *American Menswear*, 216.

²²⁹ McDowell, *The Man of Fashion*, 106.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

styles of masculinity, the cowboy and the blue-collar worker were still typically imagined as white.

Scholars have also emphasized the importance and inspiration of social movements for men's fashion in the 1950s and the 1960s. Student, antiwar, countercultural, feminist, and gay movements all had major impacts on men's fashion.²³¹ Outside of the United States, for example, the Peacock Revolution, often associated with working-class British youth, promoted a heterosexual masculinity that was strengthened by attention to fashion. Overall, historical studies have confirmed scholars' insistence on the important relationship between fashion and gender, as well as the impact of intersectional identities based on factors such as class and age on this relationship.

Black Fashion and White America Before 1965

Historians have demonstrated that African American style has been both similar to and different from white American style. It has depended on various social, cultural, political, and economic factors, such as access to materials, legal codes, social geographies, work cultures, and wider fashion trends. In various contexts, white supremacists have used clothing to oppress African Americans; during the era of slavery, for instance, many white slaveowners forbade black men to adorn themselves in any clothing associated with free white men. African Americans, however, used fashion, clothing, and style for resistance purposes; for example when black slaves wore clothing associated with their homelands in order

²³¹ Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*, 101, 91.

to resist assimilation.²³² They also used fashion to strengthen community bonds, highlight their dignity, promote their respectability, and resist their dehumanization. In a racially oppressive America, black fashion helped construct black identities and was used to resist white supremacy even after emancipation.

During the Harlem Renaissance, many white Americans started openly admiring the styles associated with African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance emphasized the beauty and value of African American culture and actively sought to engage white Americans in this celebration. For example, several black stars of the Harlem Renaissance became mainstream fashion icons. According to historians Carole Marks and Diane Edkins, African American performer Josephine Baker “became the rage on two continents” and Louis Armstrong, who was a successful jazz musician, adopted a style of tie that became so popular that it was commonly referred to as the “Louis Armstrong Knot.”²³³ According to fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson, many white men were drawn to black men’s Harlem Renaissance fashion in this period because they believed it expressed an urban and modern rejection of

²³² For an exploration of African American fashion, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Helen Bradley Foster, *'New Raiments of Self': African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (New York: Berg, 1997); Lillian O. Holloman, Barbara Starke, and Barbara Nordquist, eds., *African American Dress and Adornment: A Cultural Perspective* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1990); Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: the Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Shaun White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²³³ Carole Marks and Diana Edkins, *The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Crown, 1999), 30-32, 74, 117.

Victorian repression. It was associated with the joyous rebellion of black culture more generally, which included jazz and the Blues.²³⁴

In other contexts, white Americans violently resisted African American fashions. For instance, the zoot suit (a wide shouldered, tight-waisted, and tight at the ankles suit), which was worn by many African American and Mexican American male youth in the 1940s, celebrated instead of denigrated non-white masculinities and questioned the racial and gender status quo, which was particularly defiant during wartime. This challenge to the racial status quo hit its boiling point in June 1943 when U.S. soldiers on leave in Los Angeles attacked Mexican American youth in zoot suits, offering violent resistance to fashion that was considered overtly threatening to white supremacy.²³⁵

In the 1940s and 1950s, popular black men's fashion continued to resist the white supremacist insistence that black men were feral and low class. In this period, however, African American men participated in larger middle-class trends instead of rejecting them, including the business suit, tailored clothing, and muted colors, signaling their desire to be included in larger U.S. society. Importantly, the early civil rights movement frequently presented African American men in respectable middle-class suits and in so doing attempted to remind white Americans that black men deserved to be treated with the same respect accorded to white middle-class men.

²³⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985), 56.

²³⁵ Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*, 4, 5, 80, 157-177. For a cultural history of the zoot suit, also see Peiss, *Zoot Suit*.

The dialectic between celebration of and resistance to African American fashion was repeated throughout the twentieth century. African Americans continued to use fashion to resist the devaluation and denigration of blackness in U.S. society. White Americans continued to have an ambiguous relationship with black men's fashion, at times feeling threatened by the politics of resistance expressed in the style of African Americans and at other times seeking it out because of the perceived freedom and vitality that black men's fashion expressed.

Black Soul Aesthetic Fashion in the 1960s and 1970s

In the 1960s and 1970s, black men's fashion continued to be used as a tool of resistance and often became even more overtly political. There are several iconic images of African American men's style in the 1960s and 1970s and each of these can be associated with a specific African American political movement. There is the image of African American men in the middle-class, conservative, executive suits that were popular in the 1950s. This was most prominent in the U.S. popular imagination through media representations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. They often wore the three-piece suits with boxy lines in muted colors, with ties to match, associated with middle-class corporatism. They also frequently wore fedora hats, popular among U.S. men. While they supported different organizations, strategies, and visions, both men represented political movements that were constructed around respectability, discipline, and faith, and they therefore dressed similarly as an expression of these politics. As important symbols in mainstream U.S. consciousness, King's and Malcolm X's style came to be associated with these tenets.

Black Power organizations also provide an iconic image of black men's fashion. Its members used imagined imagery and styles associated with the African continent to emphasize an African diasporic consciousness, as well as solidarity with 1960s and 1970s global anticolonial movements. One of the most popular images of this movement is a photograph of Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. In it, Newton sits in a wicker chair; he is holding a spear, dressed in a leather jacket and beret, and surrounded by tropical plants, shields, and a zebra skin rug. The combination of his military-style clothing and the plants and wicker chair evoked the popular image of an anti-colonial African leader. The Panthers used this photograph on flyers during their "Free Huey" campaign, which meant that the image was widely circulated.²³⁶

By the 1970s, popular attention often focused on Black Power organizations, including Black Nationalist movements, which increased mainstream access to their fashion choices. This meant that in the popular imagination, African American men's fashion became less about respectability and discipline and more about pride, defiance, and power, even if the concept of a decisive and linear shift from civil rights to black nationalism is erroneous. These styles also became more associated with a younger generation of activists and artists.²³⁷

²³⁶ Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2006), 219.

²³⁷ While there was a shift in the popularity of certain approaches to African American liberation and equality in this period, the shift should not be overstated. Black Power ideologies existed alongside liberal ideologies throughout the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. And the fashion of these movements did not always reinforce or denounce liberalism or Black Power. For instance, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam men wore suits, but for different reasons than Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC.

Black Power fashion was part of a larger “soul” movement, which was intended to be distinctly different from white popular culture. In 1968, African American sociologist Adrian Dove described “soul” as an “indigenous” but “separate” cultural movement.²³⁸ Cultural historian William Van Deburg describes soul as “the essence of separate black culture.” Soul was the secular and cultural expression of the black experience in the United States in cultural form, Van Deburg explains. He argues that “if there was beauty and emotion in blackness, soul made it so,” as it was the “primal spiritual energy and passionate joy available only to members of the exclusive racial confraternity.”²³⁹

Soul fashion, which combined the aesthetic of the urban hustler with styles from an imagined African past, was one of the most important parts of the new soul aesthetic that was favored by many African American men in this period. It had distinct style elements that distinguished it from mainstream fashion. First, the soul aesthetic favored bright colors ranging from fiery reds and fluorescent oranges to eggplant purples. Van Deburg argues that these colors were in the soul aesthetic palette as an homage to both “an African past” and the “sartorial standards of inner city hustlers.”²⁴⁰ According to Van Deburg, the clothing materials that were associated with the soul aesthetic also honored an African past, referenced the street hustler, and flattered the perceived African American physique.²⁴¹ Many materials used in soul fashion, such as polyester, were common in the 1960s and were partly used because of technological innovations in the garment industry, but

²³⁸ Adrian Dove, “Soul Story,” *NYT*, December 8, 1968, 359.

²³⁹ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 195.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

combining this with the soul aesthetic color palette made even traditional materials feel new. Furthermore, the clothing was cut tight and had tapered pants and short suit jackets that were cinched at the waist with wide lapels. Van Deburg argues that this cut was deliberately chosen to emphasize the stereotypes about the black male physique: “thick” thighs, “large” bottom, “heavy” chest etc. One clothing company, New Breed Ltd., explicitly stated this when explaining that its suits were designed to fit the African American man, who is “customarily heavier of chest, thinner of waist,” and has a “slightly protruding backside.” Furthermore, the New Breed Ltd. suit had pants that were tight, with a higher waistline and gentle tapering to accent the “capital assets of the black male,” perhaps referring to stereotypes about black men’s large legs, buttocks, and genitalia. Finally, wide brimmed hats, gold jewelry, furs, and canes were all hallmarks of the soul aesthetic, inspired mostly by the urban hustler.²⁴² Together, these elements made up the core of the soul aesthetic look.

In the early 1970s, the soul aesthetic became a seal of authenticity for many black men. For instance, an image from the cover of the October 1970 issue of *Ebony* magazine, which presented itself as a magazine for middle-class African Americans, proclaimed the new, urban hustler style to be “The Liberated Look,” implying that men who bought and wore these clothes had been liberated from racial oppression, or at the very least the oppression of the traditional styles of clothing created for and by white men. The male model smiled, looked directly at the camera, and appeared confident and joyful. His body was adorned with key elements associated with the soul aesthetic: a wide-brimmed hat, a tapered calf-length coat, and shiny

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 197-198.

shoes. An equally joyful African American woman, whose look of adoration seemed to confirm the heterosexual and masculine desirability of the male model, accompanied him.²⁴³

The soul aesthetic appeared in black magazines for both working and middle-class adult men, on the album covers of African American singers, and on the actors in Blaxploitation films. In all of these forums, the African American men adorned in soul fashion were often presented as liberated, empowered, proud, urban, and heterosexual men who were rebelling against traditional mainstream values. As African American artist Barbara Ann Teer pointed out in 1968, Black Power style stood “alone in comparison to other cultures” and was “uniquely, beautifully and personally ours.” She believed that “no one” could “emulate it.”²⁴⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, the soul aesthetic was distinct from mainstream middle-aged men’s fashion, offering an alternative to an idealized white middle-class masculinity.

Playboy Magazine, Masculinity, and Race

From its inception, *Playboy* intended to revolutionize the publishing world and present an alternative to the idealized white-middle class masculinity. Hugh Hefner launched the magazine in 1953 with an announcement that his goal was to fill “a publishing need only slightly less important than the one just taken care of by

²⁴³ *Ebony*, October 1970, cover image. *Ebony* magazine’s intended audience was mostly restricted to mainstream middle-class African Americans, or at least those aspiring to join the middle class, and it was widely criticized by those in the Black Arts movement who felt that it promoted the “whitening” of African American culture by selling products such as hair straightener and skin whitening cream. See Johnson and Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics*. The fact that *Ebony* promoted and celebrated the soul aesthetic suggests the ways in which the look had become mainstream and the extent of its reach.

²⁴⁴ Barbara Ann Teer, quoted in Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 192.

the Kinsey Report.”²⁴⁵ The comparison to Kinsey’s report on American sexual behavior signaled that *Playboy* would also be a space for discussion about sexuality. *Playboy* combined this sexualized space with a consumption-oriented space; male readers would be able to escape the stifling confines of middle-class respectability through sex and consumption. *Playboy* was part of the post-World War Two U.S. male rebellion and its approach to this rebellion, as Barbara Ehrenreich explains, was to challenge respectable roles for U.S. men (husband, worker, homeowner) within the bounds of heterosexuality, marriage, and parenthood. *Playboy* attempted to alleviate concerns about the unmanly nature of sexualized consumption by portraying the happy U.S. man as hypersexualized and therefore hypermasculine.²⁴⁶

Playboy magazine was part of a larger market in men’s lifestyle magazines, an industry that became lucrative after the success of *Esquire*, which was founded in 1932. Magazines directed at middle-class, middle-aged male consumers who had the time and money to purchase luxury cars, made-to-wear clothing, and sound and visual technologies were partially financed by selling marketing space to advertisers.²⁴⁷ *Playboy*, therefore, relied heavily on convincing companies to market their goods in the pages of the magazine, which gave Hefner and the other editors of the magazine an incentive to promote an image of a *Playboy* man who not only loved women, but loved the clothing and accessories necessary to attract women. As *Playboy* historian Elizabeth Fraterrigo recounts, readers of the magazine believed

²⁴⁵ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 1, 21.

²⁴⁶ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 50.

²⁴⁷ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 46-61.

that “the good life” included not just “the boy” and “the girl,” but also “the pad, with fancy lighting and sports car.”²⁴⁸

While one man did not produce *Playboy*, the integral role of Hefner in the history of the magazine is undeniable. Hefner was born in Chicago in 1926 and spent his childhood on the West Side near the Austin district, where he enjoyed the new urban leisure culture, which included movies, amusement parks, and dance halls.²⁴⁹ Austin, on the western end of Chicago, was developed in the years following the Civil War as a commuter suburb for upper middle-class men who worked in the Loop, Chicago’s downtown core. By the 1920s it was a distinctly urban neighborhood, populated almost entirely by white middle-class families. The area did not have significant numbers of African Americans until the 1980s.²⁵⁰

Hefner did not come of age living among African American families, but his city was quickly becoming home to large African American communities. From World War One to World War Two tens of thousands of African Americans moved to Chicago to escape oppression and destitution in the South. The majority moved to the South Side, but African Americans and African American culture also permeated the downtown areas that were frequented by Hefner in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the jazz venues he loved. While Hefner did not live among African

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁴⁹ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 19, 20.

²⁵⁰ Judith A. Martin, “Austin,” in *Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs*, ed. Ann Durkin Keating (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 99-100.

Americans in Chicago, he encountered African Americans in jazz spaces as urban, hip, and modern.²⁵¹

In March 1944, Hef, as he became popularly known, moved to the University of Wisconsin to attend basic training as a cadet for the Army Specialized Training Reserve program. As noted in the cases of Kerouac and Mailer, the U.S. military was racially segregated in this period, so Hef would not have trained or served with African Americans. According to his own recollections, however, he did confront issues of race in this period. According to Watts, Hef believed that he first confronted racism and anti-Semitism while serving in the army.²⁵² He claimed that he had gotten into several arguments with other cadets over their intolerance, particularly their intolerance for African American culture. By this time Hef was deeply engaged with jazz and defended it against other cadets' claims that it was "nigger music." In 1944, he wrote to his parents, "You meet all kinds of prejudices and hatreds and it makes me glad and proud to know I have no such hatreds."²⁵³ Whether or not this was true, Hef's claim suggests that his commitment to racial liberalism was strong by the 1940s.

After leaving the army and moving to the South Side in 1952, Hef demonstrated his affection and admiration for African American culture with his

²⁵¹ Henry Binford, "Multicentered Chicago," in *Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs*, 49 and Dominic Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 228, 284.

²⁵² This claim is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Hefner grew up in Chicago, a city plagued by racial tensions that sometimes reached violent proportions. He may not have been aware of this, though, and the fact that he remembers his time in the military as a turning point in his racial consciousness is important in that it suggests that he was racially liberal by the time he began publishing *Playboy*.

²⁵³ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 37.

continued infatuation with the jazz world. In this period Hef was not a lone white man in a crowd of African Americans appreciating jazz. By the 1950s, according to several scholars, jazz had been “whitened” after decades in which white production companies modified earlier styles of jazz to make it attractive to white audiences.²⁵⁴

Hef started his magazine in 1953, at first calling it *Stag* but quickly renaming it due to concerns about copyright infringement. He marketed the magazine as a celebration of the swinging life of the single American man. As was the case with Hef’s personal life, his magazine had a particular relationship with heterosexual masculinity, but also with African Americans and blackness. Watts claims that Hef and *Playboy* magazine “helped fan the flames of the civil rights movement.”²⁵⁵

Whether or not this claim is overstated, the magazine published numerous articles that were sympathetic to civil rights for African Americans. Hef told his biographer that he decided to aid in the fight for African American civil rights because he wanted to pay “attention to major social issues that were keeping a good number of people from enjoying the life we were espousing in the rest of the magazine.”²⁵⁶ So Hef encouraged his editors to find African American women to pose for the magazine and he published several articles that explored and celebrated the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.²⁵⁷ He also had a running feature on jazz

²⁵⁴ For more on this phenomenon, see Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997).

²⁵⁵ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 3-4.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁵⁷ *Playboy* occasionally featured black models in its fashion spreads in its first decade. On black models in this period, see Barbara Summers, *Skin Deep: Inside the World of Black Fashion Models* (New York: Amistad, 1998), 33-50. The magazine had a few black centerfolds, the first of whom appeared in 1965, but there was an

that lauded African American singers and musicians and his television shows in the 1950s and 1960s (including *Playboy's Penthouse* and *Playboy After Dark*) featured black and white guests. He supported non-discriminatory hiring practices; he received the "Brotherhood" award from the Chicago Urban League after mounting concerts to raise money for the organization; and perhaps most famously, he fought public battles over desegregating *Playboy* clubs in the South, which were privately owned franchises sold by *Playboy*.²⁵⁸ In 1961 when an editor from *The Chicago Defender* was barred entrance to the club in New Orleans, Hef wrote him a letter, later printed in the newspaper, that stated, "We believe in the acceptance of all persons in all aspects of life on the basis of individual merit, and without regard to race." Hef insisted that *Playboy* supported not only economic but social integration as well. "We believe in being colorblind straight down the line!" the letter stated. Hef's letter also assured readers that *Playboy* is "actively involved in the fight to see the end of racial inequities in our time." The magazine could not, however, ultimately force its franchisees to end racial inequality due to the franchise arrangements in its standard contracts.²⁵⁹

While Hef and *Playboy* promoted the liberal politics of racial integration, they were not as sympathetic to the politics of Black Power. In fact, as his references to individual merit and colorblind politics suggest, Hef's politics generally seemed openly liberal, but rarely radical. He believed in equal opportunity hiring, integrated spaces, and interracial sexuality. But there is less evidence that he expressed

average of four years between appearances from 1965 to 1980. See Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*.

²⁵⁸ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 194-195.

²⁵⁹ "Playboy Vows to End Club Bias," *The Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1961, 2.

support for the liberation of people of color as defined by Black Power organizations, which is not surprising given that he was a successful white businessman. There were few *Playboy* articles that openly supported Black Power leaders or promoted Black Power ideals. Along similar lines, one could argue whether or not Hef supported liberal feminist ideals—for instance, he supported abortion rights, but he also objectified women’s bodies and printed sexist cartoons— he was definitely at odds with radical feminists and radical feminism, just as he was at odds with black power politics. Hef and *Playboy* were often more liberal than radical by the standards of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Playboy also had a particular relationship to urban spaces in the 1960s and 1970s. This is important for understanding the relationship between *Playboy* and the soul aesthetic, as the soul aesthetic was inspired and perpetuated by the urban African American experience. *Playboy* promoted an urban lifestyle as a masculine counterpart to the supposedly effeminate suburbs. Most of the articles and images of the magazine, for example, were centered on apartment living and nightclub hopping. Readers of the magazine, who were mostly suburban, were offered the city as a fantasyland of freedom and liberation from the confines of suburbia. The *Playboy* lifestyle contained many elements familiar to the readership, such as large televisions and stereos, cars, and furniture, allowing the suburban male reader to feel comfortable in the fantasy space.²⁶⁰ In this way, the urban world of the perpetual bachelor remained different but not incomprehensible to the suburban husband who was the magazine’s target consumer.

²⁶⁰ Fraterrigo, “The Answer to Suburbia,” 757-759.

***Playboy* Fashion in the 1950s and 1960s**

For a variety of cultural and economic reasons, fashion played an important role in the aesthetic of *Playboy*. To spearhead its important monthly fashion editorials, Hef hired Jack Kessie as its fashion editor. Kessie had the taste that Hef wanted to promote in his magazine. The magazine promoted polished fashion for all aspects of men's lives, not just in the office, which was important for moving manhood out of the corporate world. *Playboy* men were highlighted outside of their work environments, enjoying the fruits of their labor. Fashion pieces for entertaining at home, attending cultural events, enjoying expensive cars, and seducing women were key staples. In the beginning, Kessie wrote articles that spoke to the practical fashion needs of *Playboy's* readers. By the late 1950s, however, he created a more aspirational aesthetic in his fashion editorials. At this time, *Playboy* hired Robert L. Green as a fashion director. He worked alongside Kessie and under their guidance the magazine advised men not on how to dress within their lifestyle, but how to dress to better their lifestyle.²⁶¹

Playboy was, in many ways, on the cutting edge of men's fashion in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In promoting fashion consciousness as a sign of vigorous heterosexuality, the magazine helped to masculinize the fashion sphere. This was partially accomplished by putting fashionable men alongside beautiful women and including situational imagery that reinforced the sense of masculine power. For instance, a fashion conscious playboy would be advertised wearing a cutting-edge suit while attending a football game or fraternity party. In the 1950s and 1960s,

²⁶¹ Conekin, "Fashioning the Playboy, 15-17.

Kessie and Green promoted an executive look. In this period, *Playboy* most often depicted younger men who favored a conservative style that reflected current style trends and the readership of the magazine. A market research company in 1955 found that the majority of *Playboy's* readers were between the ages of 20 and 34, had attended or were attending college, and were either business professionals or students studying business.²⁶² Fashion expectations for this readership dictated tailored suits, plaid shorts, and polo shirts. Kessie pushed the Ivy League look that suited a college-age middle-class reader. In the October 1955 issue, for example, he stated: "Few will argue against the fact that it is to the Ivy Leaguers that we owe the current national acceptance of the trim, tapered look in men's clothing."²⁶³ One Brooks Brothers advertisement proclaimed, "Burn my zoot suit, mother. Conservative eastern dress is a must this season."²⁶⁴ The imperative to wear conservative eastern dress put the fashion promoted in *Playboy* in a specific class construct of masculinity, while the reference to burning the zoot suit indicated a turn away from black and Latino aesthetics, seeming to racialize *Playboy* fashion as white.

From its inception, *Playboy* emphasized fashion as part of accomplishing a sophisticated urban heterosexuality. The editors of the magazine worked hard to promote an aspirational fashion aesthetic that helped white middle-class men fantasize about a liberated lifestyle while they fantasized about the partially nude women depicted in the magazine. It was important for the fashion editors to find

²⁶² Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 77.

²⁶³ *Playboy*, October, 1965.

²⁶⁴ Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*, 79.

fashions that were in line with the general ethos of the magazine, which focused on rebellion from middle-class and suburban masculinities.

In the 1960s, despite advocating for the rejection of mainstream manhood in the majority of the magazine, *Playboy's* fashion spreads and advertisements followed and promoted standard male clothing trends. Formal and business attire in *Playboy* consisted mostly of conformist suits. For instance, in the October 1965 issue an advertisement for the Cricketeer Hopsacking Shaped Sportcoat showed a white man wearing a tailored three-piece suit while on a date with a pretty young white woman. The caption described the suit as “something that’s relaxed enough for the concert and dress-up enough to see you through a supper date.” The suit fit all of the standards of masculine dress in this period: it was brown, the jacket had broad shoulders and a long hem, the trousers were straight-legged and hung loosely, and it was paired with a white dress shirt and a black tie. The male model also had a short, manicured haircut.²⁶⁵ In the 1950s and early 1960s anything too colorful was seen as effeminate, broad shoulders denoted the wide stature of desirable masculinity, and the long hem made the man’s body appear boxy, which fit the standard of masculinity as hard-edged and rigid.²⁶⁶ The text of the advertisement reinforced the sophistication and maturity of the male subject: “Miles is playing a gig. How are you going to dress...like you’re going to a rock and roll show?” In the mid-1960s, as youth were revolutionizing culture and politics, this *Playboy* advertisement insisted on the desirability of sophisticated traditional manhood, which is interesting for a magazine that resisted tradition in so many other ways. Also interesting is the fact

²⁶⁵ *Playboy*, October 1965, 45.

²⁶⁶ Hill, *American Menswear*, 216.

that the man, dressed in the traditional suit of the middle-class executive, was attending a Miles Davis jazz concert. By the 1950s and 1960s, however, jazz was no longer necessarily considered an exclusively black art form due to decades of appropriation by white middle-class male producers and audiences. In this period jazz was not at odds with middle-class respectability. The white man in this advertisement was not out of place situationally or sartorially. He represented a standard of traditional, conformist, and mature U.S. masculinity in the 1950s and 1960s.

One area in which mainstream male fashion allowed for colorful experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s was accessories. Ties, jewelry, and handkerchiefs gave small allowances for the need to stand out and *Playboy* embraced this fashion. For instance, in the February 1964 fashion editorial “The Hippest of Squares,” the text announced that “strictly for the unimaginative is the trimly folded white handkerchief that formerly graced every gentleman’s jacket.” Instead, “today’s pocket square is a cascade of color keyed to contrast or complement its surroundings.” The image displayed a series of colorful handkerchiefs—deep purple with green stripes, white with red polka dots, bright red with gold patterning, and blue with large white polka dots—while the remainder of the text explained the “*Playboy* fold,” a new way of folding one’s handkerchief in order to be hip: “pinch an unfolded pocket square soundly in the center, letting the points fall where they may.” While the handkerchief colors and the new fold allowed for self-expression, this was limited by the message that one’s handkerchief should be “accenting its setting but not shouting it down.” In this

period, U.S. men were allowed to express some individuality and freedom in their fashion choices, but these expressions were expected to be careful and controlled.²⁶⁷

Casual wear in *Playboy* in this period also reflected traditional trends in U.S. men's fashion. Hill describes U.S. men's casual fashion in the 1950s, known as the "Ivy League Look," as mostly "sport shirts in small, traditional plaids, stripes, and the occasional tiny print in a basic button front, button down collar variety."²⁶⁸ The Ivy League Look was apparent throughout the fashion editorials of *Playboy* in the 1960s. For instance, in this April 1966 Spring/Summer fashion forecast, the two male models aligned with the Ivy League ideal. On the left is a man in brown, straight-legged slacks paired with a forest green pullover and a cream turtleneck, all neutrals. The outfit is completed with wingtip formal shoes. Even more typical of the Ivy League Look, the male model on the right is in plaid shorts and a polo shirt. Complementing the clothing are deck shoes and a formal belt. The overall aesthetic of the fashion editorial was accomplished with beautiful young women gazing at both men, which highlighted the sexual appeal of this style. The male clothing in this fashion editorial affirmed the masculine heterosexuality of the *Playboy* man and confirmed that women would hang off the arms of the men who wore the clothing.²⁶⁹

Even celebrities, often spokespeople for trendiness, wore traditional conformist fashions in 1960s *Playboy* articles. An October 1965 article featured Kirk Douglas and Sean Connery in popular contemporary casual wear. Douglas wore

²⁶⁷ *Playboy*, February 1964, 124-125.

²⁶⁸ Hill, *American Menswear*, 225.

²⁶⁹ *Playboy*, April 1966, 92.

straight-legged beige trousers with a light brown boxy jacket and a pink dress shirt. Connery sported black straight-legged trousers paired with a white dress shirt and a dark blue button-down cardigan. He also wore a pageboy cap. While Douglas's pink shirt added a splash of color, it was the pastel pink common in the Ivy League look. There was nothing bold about the color. In these clothes, both actors were pictured leaning on cars, confirming their performance of ideal masculinity in the 1960s. Male readers would also, no doubt, have associated these actors with their ultra-masculine movie hero personas, which reinforced the link between conformist fashions and heroic manhood.²⁷⁰

In the first half of the 1960s, *Playboy* encouraged its male readers to see fashion choices as part of performing the liberated masculinity idealized within the magazine. While doing so, however, the magazine promoted the conformist clothing popular among middle-class white men in this period, seemingly negating or limiting its rebellious message. The *Playboy* man was expected to reject the mainstream ideals of monogamy, suburbia, and parenthood, but he was not expected to reject the mainstream ideals of men's fashion. Significantly, the popular icons of rebellion in the United States to which *Playboy* looked for inspiration in this period were primarily white men, or at least men dressed in the styles associated with white middle-class masculine standards.

Playboy Fashion in the 1970s

By 1970 there was a perceptible shift in men's fashion in the United States and Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the Peacock Revolution rejected the

²⁷⁰ *Playboy*, October 1965, 122.

conformity of color and shape that had marked the Executive and Ivy League styles. Brightly colored shirts and pants, synthetic fabrics, long hair, and hatless heads became the fashion as the decade turned. Hill argues that this was partially a result of the importation of the British Mod style into the United States, but also because as social movements questioned some elements of traditional masculinity, men no longer had to fear being deemed effeminate if they didn't dress for the office in muted colors and tailored slacks.²⁷¹

Within the United States, the Black Power movement was one of the social movements questioning the supremacy of white masculinities with its emphasis on the power and beauty of blackness. And in popular culture, Black Power politics was associated with the soul aesthetic. In this period, African American men appeared in various mainstream media, such as film and music, adorned in clothing that defied the rules of conformist fashion, creating a new popular icon of rebellion in the urban hustler. By the early 1970s, the soul aesthetic and the urban hustler provided new inspirations for *Playboy* fashion, influencing the colors, materials, designs, and accessories worn by men in the magazine.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the bright colors, furs and leathers, tapered cuts, and large and bold accessories that were associated with the soul aesthetic appeared in the fashions of *Playboy*. For instance, in a 1971 fashion editorial featuring luggage, "Travelling Light," *Playboy* featured white men in suits that were different in cut and color from the suits of the 1960s. The spread depicted four suits: one white, one powder blue, one bright pink, and one bright orange. Each of these

²⁷¹ Hill, *American Menswear*, 245-246.

colors would have been considered effeminate in the early 1960s and therefore rarely appeared in the suits advertised in *Playboy*. Even the background color (bright orange) served to distinguish this editorial from those of the 1960s, which tended to feature men at sunny summerhouses and smoky jazz clubs. The cuts of the suits were also different from the cuts of the suits in 1960s *Playboys*. Tapered at the waist, belted, form-fitted, and accessorized with wide, patterned ties, these suits veered dramatically from the conformist boxy suit in the Cricketeer ad. These outfits did not resemble the skin-tight pants and blousy shirts of the British Mod look, but instead, along with the wide brimmed hat and platform shoes worn by one man in the spread, brought to mind the colorful tapered suits of the urban hustler. In fact, the text in the editorial informed the reader that the featured luggage was perfect for the “winter-weary urbanite.” The reference to urbanity imagined these white men in the same space as the black men of the soul aesthetic.²⁷²

The 1977 editorial for the “Fall Look” demonstrated the importance of new materials and accessories in *Playboy* fashions, as the white men in the spread were wearing fur. For instance, the white man on the first page of the editorial wore a fur-lined coat slung over his shoulders as he glared to a point outside of the image. The way that he was standing was also important for the look. Strong but at ease, he exuded cool. Evident in this look is Hill’s observation about the opening up of acceptable styles for masculinity, since fur coats were previously the reserve of women. Men’s fur coats were integral to the soul aesthetic. Fur coats and hats appeared on soul celebrities and the urban gliteratti throughout the 1970s, while

²⁷² *Playboy*, February 1971, 132-133.

they rarely appeared in mainstream popular fashion for men. *Playboy's* fashion, as with many elements of the magazine, redefined acceptable masculinity in its promotion of the fur coat. The cane in the white man's hand further emphasized the relationship between this image and images of soul men who were often pictured with canes. In fact, a 1974 issue of *Ebony* depicts a man in the same style of coat and hat, holding a cane at his side and glaring at a point out of view. This highlights the parallels between the male fashion that was being sold to the primarily white, middle-class readers of *Playboy* and the primarily black audience of *Ebony* in this period.²⁷³

Fashion pieces related to the soul aesthetic also appeared in an intriguing editorial from July 1975. In it, several men were dressed in suits cut in the urban style, with cinched waists, wide ties, and tight-fitting pants and in the colorful palette allowed in men's soul fashion, but they were placed in a forest, an atypical space for an urban hustler. According to the text, the forest was where the "mating game" happened. In order to attract the female animal in the wild, the white man sported elements inspired by an urban black aesthetic while continuing to keep his cool demeanor. The text stated: "She's having a tropical heat wave, but he couldn't care less dressed in a polyester/cotton brushed poplin gabardine three-piece suit."²⁷⁴ The forest was a strange space for urban fashion. On one level, this signaled that white men clothed in soul fashion were out of place. These soul-inspired suits, however, fit ideologically with the forest theme in important ways. The streets of urban centers, at least to those who did not inhabit them literally, were figuratively

²⁷³ *Playboy*, October 1977, 149 and *Ebony*, November 1974, 55.

²⁷⁴ *Playboy*, July 1975, 186-189.

seen as “wild” and “primal” and therefore the forest as a setting for the soul aesthetic was not so unusual.

Jewelry in general and large gold pieces in particular were also important to the soul aesthetic movement. In the *Playboy* of the 1950s and 1960s, jewelry almost never appeared in fashion spreads, especially not anything that could be mistaken for a wedding ring. In the July 1972 issue, however, an editorial written by Green entitled “So It’s a Bracelet. What’s it to Ya?” featured actors James Caan and Burt Reynolds, both noted for their vigorous heterosexuality, wearing various pieces of gold jewelry, including large necklaces, bracelets, and belts. Noting James Caan’s tough guy role in *The Godfather* (in which Caan was “knocking them dead”), the text assured readers that wearing jewelry was masculine. Green warned that “if you think all that glitters belongs only on girls, tell it to these guys.” Interestingly, the text situated the historical importance of jewelry to masculinity within a racialized paradigm. It noted the importance of gold jewelry to “Egyptians kings and Indian rajas,” as well as the Sumerians, who “gilded themselves in precious metals for their magical power,” and the Persians, who “donned diadems as symbols of wealth and power.”²⁷⁵

African American men also appeared in *Playboy* wearing soul-inflected jewelry, mostly in sex scene stills from Blaxploitation films. In this period *Playboy* included a monthly feature of filmic sex scene stills, most of which were European but some of which were produced in the United States. In several of the stills from Blaxploitation films, black men wore the same types of gold medallions and chains

²⁷⁵ *Playboy*, July 1972, 106.

that were featured in the Caan and Reynolds editorial described above, creating a sartorial link between the urban black hustler protagonists of Blaxploitation and the aspirational look that *Playboy* was promoting for its white middle-class readers.

Occasionally *Playboy* also referenced black soul men specifically by including them in its fashion advertisements and editorials. In these moments, it was clear that the editors of the magazine associated black men and black male fashion with a cool rebelliousness. The Campus Expressions advertisement that appeared in the April 1971 issue of *Playboy*, for example, showed a black man wearing a colorful one-piece suit, wide lapelled shirt, and wide brimmed hat, all of which situated him within the fashion lexicon of the black hustler. The text provided hints about the reasons for putting these kinds of advertisements in *Playboy*. The clothing was described as “an imaginative bag of right-on things to wrap around a body. Colorful. Rebellious. Daring.” All of these traits were desirable for the modern-day Playboy.²⁷⁶

At other times, *Playboy* curiously featured black men distinctly not in the fashion of the soul aesthetic, while in the same spreads white men were featured in soul aesthetic fashions. In a “Back to Campus” editorial from the September 1971 issue, the clothing worn by the male models was a long way from the plaid shorts and polo shirts promoted for collegiate life in the 1960s. A white man in the first image wore a coat in the style of the urban hustler: fur-lined leather, tapered at the waist, vented in the back. He also had large curly hair, a style that evoked the Afros that were popular in the Black Power movement. One of the other white models in the background wore a similar coat, but in fur. Interestingly a black woman was

²⁷⁶ *Playboy*, April 1971, 77.

wrapped adoringly around his body. Wearing the clothing coded as black, the white man had also appropriated the black woman's sexual gaze, which further authenticated his heterosexual appeal and, perhaps, his presence in a black world. This imagery is particularly loaded given the history of white men using black women's bodies to exercise their power throughout U.S. history, but the suggestion in this advertisement is that the white man is performing blackness.

A few pages into the same editorial, a black male model appeared, which was very rare for *Playboy*, and he was *not* wearing clothing inspired by the soul aesthetic. In a U.S. flag themed cowboy shirt complete with long tassels, the black man was depicted as an all-American patriot rather than an urban hustler, which is particularly striking given debates over the nature of U.S. patriotism due to the war in Vietnam. Removing the African American model from the urban aesthetic, highlighting his patriotism, and placing him in masculine clothing that was associated with frontier heroism may have made him less threatening. Pairing the cowboy imagery with the American flag, the African American model sartorially supported the United States. White men could sell clothing associated with the soul aesthetic because they were not necessarily making a political statement. A black man wearing the same clothing would have been associated with a critique of the United States, which could make white middle-class readers uncomfortable.²⁷⁷

All of these features of men's fashion in *Playboy* in the 1970s—colorful palettes; tapered, tight-waisted, form-fitting suits; fur; leather; wide-brimmed hats; canes; gold jewelry; and platform shoes—were significantly different from the

²⁷⁷ *Playboy*, September 1970, 167.

traditional suits and conformist Ivy League polo shirts and plaid shorts that the editors had featured in the magazine in the 1960s. And all of these features were staples of the soul aesthetic fashions that were popular among black men in the same period. *Playboy* used fashion to promote an overall image of an alternative masculinity that embraced urbanity, promiscuity, and bachelorhood. This change announced that *Playboy* had adopted a new model for manhood by the 1970s, which seemed to be influenced by the now infamous black urban hustler.

Consuming the Rebel

Taken on their own, the fashion elements that were popular in *Playboy* in the early 1970s were not unique to the soul aesthetic. Colorful clothing, platform shoes, and gold jewelry were featured in many styles in the 1970s, especially as disco became more popular. Even before this period, movie stars including James Dean and Marlon Brando wore leather jackets. Taken together, however, these individual elements made up a specific look that was most closely associated with black men in urban communities, not with *Playboy's* predominantly white middle-class suburban readership.

Playboy's adoption of the soul aesthetic can be interpreted in a number of ways. One possibility is that *Playboy* saw this as a way to court African American readers without alienating white ones, but *Playboy* never acknowledged the role of the soul aesthetic in its fashion choices and soul fashion was associated with the urban “underclass,” not the black middle class. Another possible explanation for the appearance of the soul aesthetic in *Playboy* is that the magazine was trying to increase its appeal to youth and it saw the soul aesthetic as a way of doing so. But

Black Power and the soul aesthetic were not exclusively associated with youth and the images of white men in soul fashion were not distinctly youth-oriented. It also seems unlikely that *Playboy* was using these representations to signal its political radicalism. As noted above, the magazine's politics was liberal rather than radical and it regularly expressed opposition to and ambivalence about radical politics.

A more plausible and compelling interpretation is that *Playboy's* embrace of the soul aesthetic in the early 1970s was a direct result of the ethos of the magazine and its associated perceptions of the type of black masculinity that was signified by the urban hustler, whose popularity and exposure was increasing due to several cultural movements, including Blaxploitation. As discussed in previous chapters, there were multiple models of black masculinity in the U.S. imagination. One model was the bold, urban, and sexual black man. The Black Power movement drew popular attention to the plights and powers of the urban black man. More than the liberal civil rights movement, which was popularly associated with southern towns, the Black Power movement was commonly associated with inner-city African Americans. The soul aesthetic, which was the preferred style of the Black Power movement, constructed an urban black man who was secure in his masculinity, sexuality, and prowess, proud of his heritage, clever in his actions, and rebellious against authority; he was able to achieve all of this despite the constraints and expectations of a repressive America.

The appeal of this construction to *Playboy* is clear, as the magazine promoted virile and adventurous sexuality to its readers. *Playboy* did not simply promote a rampant sexuality, however, but situated it alongside an urban sensitivity, a fashion

conscious style, and a suave sophistication, all of which could be fueled by consumption. Representing white men as feral would have been problematic from the standpoint of the kind of masculinity that *Playboy* wanted to promote. In contrast, appropriating Black Power styles and the soul aesthetic in particular allowed *Playboy* to masculinize and sexualize white men without making them seem dangerous and violent. The presence of these black male styles alongside the pornographic images of white women increased the illicit nature of the sex in the magazine without explicitly crossing a line into interracial sex and desire.

Several articles and features in the magazine demonstrated that *Playboy* imagined the 1970s black urban hustler as admirable and powerful. In a 1973 cartoon, for instance, an African American man fashioned in the soul aesthetic is ascending a staircase under the heading “Winners,” while a white man, dressed in a 1950s conformist suit, descends the stairs under the heading “Losers.”²⁷⁸ While the article that accompanied this image referenced winners and losers in gambling specifically, the message is meaningfully racialized. The rebellious African American man was succeeding, while the conformist white man was failing. Furthermore, in the 1970s, *Playboy’s* regular “Jazz Hall of Fame” feature switched from highlighting mainstream black jazz artists to celebrating soul music, which was explicitly associated with urban masculinities and the culture of Black Power. In promoting these artists as the best that U.S. music had to offer, the editors were also celebrating a specific kind of black masculinity.

²⁷⁸ *Playboy*, June 1973, 118-119.

Playboy had also shifted from promoting a rebellious white manhood that still conformed to many of the conventions of male fashion to promoting a rebellious white manhood that rejected conformist fashion in favor of the clothing of the empowered black rebel. This new black masculinity, which was a variation of older constructions, was ideal for *Playboy*. The *Playboy* man was urban, rebellious, sophisticated, secure in his masculinity, and confident in his sexuality. In order to accomplish all of this, *Playboy* had to look outside mainstream manhoods. A viable alternative was the black urban underclass man: the superfly.²⁷⁹ The hippies and the beatniks were inappropriate because they had abdicated from the capitalist system and were not considered “manly,” and the politically engaged student movement was unfitting because it questioned the capitalist system. While the Black Power movement as a whole critiqued elements of the capitalist system and some organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, wanted to dismantle it, large portions of the movement did not want to destroy the system so much as find a space for black empowerment. *Playboy* wanted to harness the power of consumerism, promoted the ideal that what you wore and the ways in which you expressed yourself were integral to the construction of your masculinity, and constructed a racialized, heterosexual and urban masculinity that was rooted in rebellion and non-conformity. While used in different ways, Black Power masculinities and *Playboy* masculinities in the 1970s had much in common.

²⁷⁹ “Superfly” was a term used in the 1970s to describe an urban black man who was the height of cool, rebelliousness, and fashionability. The term was popularized partially by the successful Blaxploitation film, *Super Fly* (1972), which is discussed in the next chapter.

Playboy's decision to appropriate the soul aesthetic in its fashion, but not to explicitly celebrate it, is significant. The cultural reach of *Playboy* meant that an open celebration of the aesthetics of Black Power could have been a moment of genuine dialogue and reconciliation between mainstream and black masculinities. As noted in the survey of the historical relationship between African American and white American fashion, there have been moments when the culture of African Americans was celebrated, such as during the Harlem Renaissance. This celebration was complicated because it continued to be predicated on racial stereotypes and white expectations of black culture, but it was a public celebration nonetheless. In the 1970s, Black Power was being reviled amongst the mainstream public, especially in the white media. *Playboy* had a chance to counter this popular narrative by, at the very least, celebrating the male fashions associated with the cultural movements for black self-determination. *Playboy* could have identified these styles as positive, powerful, and worth emulating. This may seem unlikely, but *Playboy* had already acknowledged the important musical contributions of African Americans. *Playboy* did not simply appropriate African American music and then ignore the black contribution to U.S. popular music; it celebrated the role of African American musicians and singers. *Playboy* also celebrated African American contributions to liberal civil rights in articles, on its television show, and in Hefner's philanthropy. It is not impossible to imagine, therefore, that *Playboy* could have used an attraction to the masculinities presented by the Black Power movement to publicly praise elements of the movement. An endorsement from *Playboy* could have been an

important step in reconciling the Black Power movement, especially its representations of men, with the wider U.S. culture.

What made this kind of reconciliation via *Playboy* unlikely, though, was that *Playboy* never acknowledged the political relationship between the soul aesthetic and Black Power. The soul aesthetic was an important part of a wider struggle for African American liberation. It was not simply about being cool—although it could be used that way—nor was it simply about hustling—although it could be used that way as well. Part of the intent of the soul aesthetic was to celebrate the beauty and power in being black. This was especially important given the long and deep history of white denigration of blackness often used to support the racist structures that denied African Americans access to power. Aware of this, members of the Black Power movement sought to create a fashion that could alter the course of race relations in the United States. It could also, not insignificantly, demonstrate the importance of purchasing power for African American liberation. Soul fashion was a cornerstone of the promotion of black business ownership and black consumption. But *Playboy's* appropriation of the style of Black Power without its substance presented the clothing as apolitical adornment. *Playboy* used black fashion but left blacks and their concerns behind.

Playboy's use of the soul aesthetic in men's fashions without any discussion of the politics that inspired it also denied the importance of radical African American men as political actors in this period. *Playboy* admired black men for what they could offer to the cultural world, but not for what men in the Black Power movement could offer to overt discussions of power and democracy. Many men in

the Black Power movement were committed to ending colonialism, racism, poverty, and violence. None of this was acknowledged in *Playboy's* appropriation of the soul aesthetic. Popular culture is an important space for public debate about identity and group politics, but in U.S. history it has often been the only space in which African Americans were allowed to exercise real power. The fight for civil rights and the end of white supremacy was meant to free African Americans from these limitations. *Playboy's* use of the soul aesthetic did little to help in this fight.

The focus on black masculinity and black men in *Playboy* also silenced the role of African American women in the Black Power movement, as well as the complicated gender dynamics in the black community at this time. They bestowed liberatory power on the black hustler and ignored the political and cultural work of the black women engaged in the fight for empowerment. As with SDS, the editors of *Playboy* privileged the black masculine identity. Black women contributed to the Black Power and Black Arts movements, including the design of the soul aesthetic.

Playboy was a masculine space and the sexual objectification of women's bodies was key to the creation of this space. The women in the magazine, whether it was the women featured in the centerfolds, pornographic film stills, or fashion spreads, were props in the creation of an idealized image of U.S. middle-class manhood. The women's partially or fully nude bodies were objects of sexual desire under the scrutiny of the (assumed) male gaze, just as the images of clothing, cars, apartments, and electronic equipment were designed to elicit an aspirational longing. This made any overt discussion of femininity and women, white or black, complicated, but the editors rarely even included black women as objects of desire

alongside the white female models and centerfolds, ignoring the “Black is Beautiful” campaign that sought to celebrate black women’s bodies. Most of the black bodies that existed in *Playboy’s* fantasy worlds were imagined as masculine.

A study of the fashion in *Playboy*, a significant part of the larger magazine, ultimately demonstrates how it completely removed the soul aesthetic from its political moorings. It took something meant explicitly to celebrate African American sensibilities and used it to enhance the lives of white middle-class Americans. In appropriating a cultural expression of black nationalism, without any acknowledgement of this expression, *Playboy* trivialized the struggle of African Americans. It made the important politics of blackness into a fashion fad. It also highlighted the ongoing power of white privilege. Like the Beats, the Hipsters, and SDS, *Playboy* was able to dip into black culture, which offered varied examples of marginalized masculinities in different historical moments, take what it needed to thrive, and step back into its world of affluence and power. *Playboy’s* decision to appropriate the black hustler specifically was a matter of both need and availability. The editors wanted a model of rebellious masculinity that fit with their mandate. With the media coverage of Black Power, the popularity of soul, and the production of Blaxploitation films, the black hustler was present in the U.S. imagination, as the civil rights activists had been in the 1960s and the jazzmen had been in the 1950s. In adopting this popular model, *Playboy* did not break down any barriers; it merely visited the other side in its hedonistic quest. In this way, as in many others, *Playboy* was an extraordinarily relevant exemplification of white middle-class heteronormative masculinities.

The Movement Away from the Movement

As the soul aesthetic declined in popular exposure in the mid-1970s, the attraction to soul-inspired fashion did not last in *Playboy*. The reasons for the diminished popularity of the soul aesthetic in the wider U.S. popular consciousness are many and varied, but not pertinent here.²⁸⁰ Importantly, as the hero of the soul aesthetic, the black urban man, receded in the popular consciousness of white America, its appeal as an icon in *Playboy* ended. The shift away from the soul aesthetic is evident in the fashions in *Playboy* in the late 1970s. For instance, in the April 1978 “Treads and Threads” editorial that paired men’s fashion with motorcycles, there was almost nothing left of the soul aesthetic in the clothing. Long coats tapered at the waist and lined with fur were replaced by shiny and short motorbike coats, the men were hatless, and the pants of choice were tapered jeans.²⁸¹ With a move away from the style of the soul aesthetic, *Playboy* settled back into the fashion lexicon more often associated with white middle-class America. The ethos of the magazine did not change. *Playboy* was still selling a rebellious urban bachelorhood decorated by a consumerist lifestyle. The black urban man of the popular U.S. imagination, however, no longer offered an appropriate example of this lifestyle. The politics of liberation and celebration made popular by African American political movements, such as the Black Arts and the Black Fashion

²⁸⁰ See Van De Burg, *New Day in Babylon*. This decline was partially related to the decline of Blaxploitation films, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁸¹ Hill notes that hats diminished in popularity in general in the 1970s. However, as noted, hats were present in the style of the soul aesthetic. See Hill, *American Menswear*.

movements, did not disappear from the reality of black America, merely from the imagination of *Playboy* magazine.

Like the SDS students studied in the previous chapter, Hugh Hefner, oftentimes using *Playboy* magazine as a vehicle, also spoke out for African American civil rights. His focus was on liberal civil rights rather than radical black power. Hef argued for racial desegregation and the color-blindness of capitalism, but he rarely argued in favor of radical black freedom movements. He did, however, include imaginary constructions of the clothing associated with these radical freedom movements, as well as the Blaxploitation films explored in the next chapter, in the magazine's fashion spreads. Wanting to remove his brand of masculinity from the hegemonic expectations of white manhood—including monogamy, suburban living, and fatherhood—Hef promoted the aesthetics of Black Power. The culture of Black Power often framed black masculinity as rebellious, urban, and hypersexual, all elements that Hef wanted to include in his ideology of reconstructed manhood. And the cultural elements of the Black Power movement did not necessarily demand opposition to consumerism, which was central to *Playboy's* ethos. Hef consumed specific elements of black masculinity in order to empower the white, middle-class, male consumer who was the core of his target audience. This ultimately worked in the service of the white privilege that the Black Power movement was trying to end.

Chapter 4: The New Badass: Blaxploitation Films in White America, 1971-1979

In the early 1970s, a group of African American directors created a new genre of film that celebrated the soul aesthetic and urban spaces and featured mostly black actors in action adventure narratives set in inner-city neighborhoods. Critics named the new genre “Blaxploitation,” a play on the notion of “exploitation” films, which were low budget productions with lurid subject matter. Immediately popular among African Americans living in urban centers, Blaxploitation films also proved to be popular with white audiences and filmmakers, the latter of whom soon began to produce their own Blaxploitation movies. Like the soul aesthetic, Blaxploitation was inspired by the Black Power movement generally and the Black Arts movement specifically. It not only provided an artistic avenue for black filmmakers, technicians, and actors, but also encouraged black audiences to be proud of their culture.²⁸² Understood in this context, the appeal of Blaxploitation films for whites is intriguing.

A close examination of the relationship between white Americans and Blaxploitation shows that the appeal to white filmmakers and audiences was in large measure due to the cultural caché and marketability of the genre, both of which were linked to the black masculinities featured in the films. Much like the fashion of the soul aesthetic, Blaxploitation films offered white Americans access to the perceived benefits of black urban masculinities while never having to challenge their privileged existences. By creating a filmic world that made the inner-city lives of African American men appear cool, hip, and liberated, Blaxploitation provided

²⁸² For an overview of Blaxploitation, see Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

white audiences with voyeuristic opportunities to fantasize about living as rebels in urban ghettos.

Within this fantasy, however, there was limited room for the Black Power politics that confronted conservative and liberal racial politics in this period, despite the fact that elements of Black Power had originally fueled the Blaxploitation genre. A careful comparison of gendered representations in black-directed Blaxploitation films and their counterparts in white-directed Blaxploitation films reveals that a significant set of white artists, while fascinated by the masculinities in early Blaxploitation, removed some of the more radical elements in the characterizations of black urban men and reconstructed them within a liberal civil rights paradigm. In repositioning these black masculinities, white filmmakers generally empowered white middle-class values at the expense of radical black masculinities.

In order to explore the relationship between Blaxploitation and white America, this chapter does four things. First, it provides a broad historical review of Hollywood film representations of white and African American masculinities. This establishes some of the primary ways in which Hollywood depicted racialized masculinities in the period before Blaxploitation and the ways in which these depictions began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, as did idealized white manhood.

By this period, idealized white manhood embraced fashion, design, and consumption as acceptable features of masculinity. While white middle-class men were still expected to form heterosexual bonds, head a household, and raise a family, they were also expected to fantasize about a life of leisure, sex, and single life, as evidenced by the popularity of *Playboy*. Furthermore, by the early 1970s, the

unpopularity of U.S. military engagement in Vietnam and political corruption scandals (including the Watergate scandal from 1972 to 1974) led to an ideological rejection of authority figures. The U.S. military's failure to end the Vietnam War also led to a fear of the feminization of U.S. men, making popular culture featuring violent and sexual rebels quite popular in the period.²⁸³

Second, the chapter examines the historical emergence of Blaxploitation films and their representations of masculinities. Shaped by Black Power narratives, intended for African American urban audiences, motivated by African American criticisms of the movie industry, and centered (at least in its early incarnations) on figurations of masculinity, Blaxploitation was representative of a wide variety of black political discourses about gender in this period.²⁸⁴ Its appeal to white America, then, serves as an interesting example of the relationship between African American cultural politics and white responses to those politics.

The early Blaxploitation films that are analyzed in this section—*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Shaft's Big Score!* (1972), and *Super Fly* (1972)—were examples of a specific version of Blaxploitation and were promoted as such by their creators.²⁸⁵ These early Blaxploitation films offer the best

²⁸³ For an analysis of the relationship between U.S. manhood and popular culture from 1970 to 1975, see Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006); Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

²⁸⁴ See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Stephane Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Massood, *Black City Cinema*.

²⁸⁵ *Shaft*, directed by Gordon Parks (New York: Shaft Productions, 1971); *Shaft's Big Score!*, directed by Gordon Parks (New York: Shaft Productions, 1971); *Super Fly*,

sources for understanding the original politics and intentions of the genre. The four films analyzed here featured male protagonists in urban settings, were directed by African Americans, and were among the most commercially successful of all of the Blaxploitation films. The popularity of these films put them in a unique position to have an impact on mainstream culture and filmmaking in the United States in the 1970s and thus they are key for understanding Blaxploitation's role in U.S. popular culture in this period.

Third, the chapter demonstrates that white Americans participated in the Blaxploitation phenomenon, both as viewers and as critics of the most popular films. An analysis of mainstream responses and critiques provides strong evidence of the ways in which white audiences rejected, reconstructed, and revised the masculinities in Blaxploitation. And finally, the chapter reviews representations of manhood in several white-directed Blaxploitation films. This reveals that these white directors deconstructed Black Power masculinities and re-presented them within liberal integrationist paradigms. The films in this section, *Slaughter* (1972) and *Slaughter's Big Rip Off* (1973), *Hit Man* (1972), *Black Caesar* (1973), and *Detroit 9000* (1973), are comparable to the Blaxploitation films analyzed in the earlier part of the chapter.²⁸⁶ All of these films featured black male protagonists, urban settings,

directed by Gordon Parks Jr. (New York: Sig Shore Productions, 1972); *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, directed by Melvin Van Peebles (Los Angeles: Yeah, 1971). There are other films, for example *The Mack* (1973), that are sometimes considered Blaxploitation works, but the producers resisted that label at the time of the making and release of the films. See Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

²⁸⁶ *Black Caesar*, directed by Larry Cohen (Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1973); *Detroit 9000*, directed by Arthur Marks, (Los Angeles: Miramax,

and black-centered narratives; all were relatively successful; and all were produced and released in the early 1970s. Later, in the second half of the 1970s, the Blaxploitation genre became less profitable, partially because of the realities of the film market and partially because of a shift in the Black Power politics that influenced its creation.²⁸⁷

An analysis of the original Blaxploitation films, the reaction of white audiences, and the reconfiguration of Blaxploitation by white directors makes it clear that when white filmmakers appropriated Blaxploitation, they did not depoliticize the genre, as *Playboy* had done with fashion in this same period. Instead, while capitalizing on the popularity of Blaxploitation amongst white audiences, they changed Blaxploitation from an expression of the radical black politics of the Black Power movement to a cipher for liberal integrationism, which was much less threatening to white middle-class audiences.

Unlike in the earlier case studies in this project, the prime motivation for the appropriation in this case was to capitalize on an existing white market for a specific part of black culture; Blaxploitation, while originally marketed to black audiences was ultimately quite popular among white audiences. But the possible reasons for Blaxploitation's popularity and the consequences of the appropriation were similar to the reasons and consequences offered for the literature, politics, and fashion studied in the previous chapters. The black male protagonists in Blaxploitation may

1973); *Hit Man*, directed by George Armitage (Los Angeles: Penelope Productions, 1972); *Slaughter*, directed by Jack Starrett (Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1972); *Slaughter's Big Rip Off*, directed by Gordon Douglas (Los Angeles: American International Pictures, 1973).

²⁸⁷ See Edward Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: the African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

have appealed to white audiences due to their individual rebelliousness, physical prowess, sexual vitality, and fashion sense, all of which addressed white middle-class men's fears about the alienation and feminization of U.S. culture, as well as the rejection of authority caused by political corruption at all levels of government. This glorification and commodification of urban black masculinity, however, disregarded complicated social circumstances. It also perpetuated the hypermasculinization of Black Power culture.

The decision by the white filmmakers studied here to alter the politics of the black-directed Blaxploitation films had several consequences. It eliminated an important space for celebrating Black Power politics and culture, which the mainstream news media had tended to distort up to this point. Blaxploitation could have provided a space, one steeped in imagination and fantasy, to confront mainstream Americans with the ongoing reality of white supremacy. Instead, the white-directed Blaxploitation films turned the black male hustler into an apolitical fashion icon or an argument for liberal integrationist politics, which not only demeaned Black Power, but also used one of its most powerful cultural figures to undermine some of its agendas.

Masculinity and Film in Post-World War Two America

Film scholars have noted that many Hollywood films reinforced mainstream masculinities in the post-World War Two period. Genres ranging from war action and cowboy adventure to heterosexual romance and suburban family drama included films that aligned with the masculine ideal. Film historian Stella Bruzzi, for instance, notes that *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) presents the heroic lawyer and

compassionate father as the ideal man at a time when white middle-class men were being encouraged to be white-collar workers, heads of households, and engaged fathers. Film studies scholar Megan E. Abbott points out that other films, such as the iconic *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and various film noir works, also show the perils of non-conformity by highlighting the dangers of urban life and the appeal of suburban lifestyles.²⁸⁸

In the 1950s, however, various Hollywood film genres joined the Hipsters, Beats, SDS, and *Playboy* in depicting suburban and familial masculinity as alienating and emasculating. This was especially true of the popular films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which critiques emasculated fathers, *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which portrays suburban life as pathological, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), which presents masculine conformity as pathetic. These films encouraged and provoked debate about masculinity by showing white middle-class suburban life as leading to the emasculation and destruction of strong men. The non-conformists in many of these films die, however, which complicated the politics of rebellion and warned audiences about the consequences of liberating oneself from normative gender constructions.

²⁸⁸ Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2005). For other explorations of representations of masculinity in post-World War Two American films, see Melvin Donalson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006); Frank Krutnik, "Something More than Night," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (New York: Routledge, 1997); George S. Larke-Walsh, *Screening the Mafia: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Mobsters* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006); Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, eds., *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); Will Straw, "Urban Confidential: The Lurid City of the 1950s," in *The Cinematic City*.

Changing racial politics in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s had an impact on representations of black masculinities in Hollywood. Before the 1940s, Hollywood films tended to present African American masculinity in ways that perpetuated the same one-dimensional stereotypes that appeared in literature: according to film historian Donald Bogle, they included the Tom (the loyal slaves in *Gone with the Wind* in 1939), the Coon (the laughable Steppin' Fetchit), and the Buck (the feral Gus in *Birth of a Nation* in 1915). During times of racial conflict, the Buck was predominant; in the 1920s and 1930s the general levity of films made the Coon popular; and in the late 1930s, economic insecurity made the loyal and steadfast Tom popular.²⁸⁹ According to Bogle, however, in the 1940s and 1950s, some film depictions of African American men became somewhat more sympathetic due in part to a desire in Hollywood to celebrate the contributions of African Americans to

²⁸⁹ These terms for stereotypical constructions of black masculinity in Hollywood film are taken from Bogle's foundational study of African Americans in film, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. The marginalization of African Americans in the film industry contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes. While there were a few African American actors, there were almost none on the technical side of filmmaking. Some African Americans, mostly men, found success in writing film scores, especially during the Jazz Age, and a few African American actors were able to move into screenwriting, directing, and producing. But generally racism in Hollywood and the exclusion of African Americans from craft unions kept African Americans out of many positions in the industry. For histories of African Americans in the U.S. film industry, see Jesse Algernon Rhines, *Black Film White Money* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Donalson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film*; W.R. Grant, *Post-Soul Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints 1970-2005* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Massood, *Black City Cinema*; George Nelson, *Blackface: Reflections on African Americans and the Movies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Vincent F. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000); Sieving, *Soul Searching*.

the war effort, because the NAACP supported black filmmakers, and because the civil rights movement was gaining in influence.²⁹⁰

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement had an even larger impact on Hollywood filmmaking. In 1963, the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP held a press conference demanding the end of racist hiring policies in Hollywood industries and racist portrayals of African Americans in Hollywood filmmaking. The NAACP's efforts were supported by Attorney General Robert Kennedy's public acknowledgement that racism in Hollywood played an important role in maintaining white supremacy in the United States.²⁹¹ There was also a small increase in the number of Hollywood films that addressed the African American civil rights movement and depicted black masculinity as respectable, intelligent, and refined; examples include Sidney Poitier's films *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). The Poitier oeuvre consisted mostly of Hollywood filmic representations of African American men situated squarely within a liberal civil rights paradigm. The films featured a black male protagonist performing respectable middle-class masculinity (hard working, monogamous, and driven); a white power structure portrayed as outdated and unjust; and liberal white men and women assisting the black male protagonist in his pursuit of racial justice. And Poitier himself was held

²⁹⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 101, 118, 137.

²⁹¹ Many prominent actors in Hollywood, including Paul Newman and Marlon Brando, supported the NAACP's critique, but many of the "non-talent" workers in the industry fought to keep their unions segregated. Partially because of this, the increase in employment of African Americans in Hollywood industries in this period was marginal. See Sieving, *Soul Searching*.

up as an example of respectable black masculinity, at times making it difficult to separate the man from his characters.²⁹²

Some scholars have argued that when Hollywood attempted to produce films outside the liberal civil rights paradigm of black masculinity they failed to garner support among major studios. Film historian Christopher Sieving argues, for instance, that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (never produced) and *Uptight* (1969)—both scripts that featured black revolutionaries—faced strong resistance from movie studios. Furthermore when films were made that repositioned popular narratives of black masculinity, like Gordon Parks's *The Learning Tree* (1969), they did not reach large audiences.²⁹³

Hollywood filmmaking perpetuated stereotypes about black and white men, then, but also offered a platform for critical debates and discussions about masculinities. This was especially true in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, when changing political and social systems influenced the industry, the art being produced, and the expectations of the audiences. The alternative masculinities, such as the radicalized urban men in *Uptight* or the oppositional sharecroppers in *The*

²⁹² Black audiences did not always feel satisfied with the black masculinity embodied in Poitier, or as the media dubbed him, “the ebony saint.” In 1969 Larry Neal of the *New York Times*, in an article entitled “Beware of the Tar Baby,” argued that African Americans in film were “locked into such a prison of distorted symbols and images that the very attempt to extricate ourselves only leads to more confusion.” In a 1967 article entitled “Why Does White American Love Sidney Poitier So?” Neal’s *New York Times* colleague Clifford Mason argued that Poitier “has been a showcase nigger” and he has been “helping the white man solve the white man’s problems.” Because of this, “Poitier will forever be condemned on the screen to reassuring white people of their innocence and superiority, good nigger that he is.”

²⁹³ Sieving argues that there were several reasons that Hollywood studios were wary of addressing or unwilling to address African American experiences, including financial insecurity and the lack of black filmmakers and technicians in Hollywood. Sieving, *Soul-Searching*, 47-77.

Learning Tree, never took over Hollywood representations of white and black men, but they provided a space for new negotiations of gender and race.

The Birth of Blaxploitation

The reasons for the rise of Blaxploitation films, produced mostly between 1970 and 1974, were due to several phenomena in the 1950s and 1960s, both inside and outside of Hollywood. As mentioned in previous chapters, in the 1950s and 1960s, black masculinity within the black freedom movement was often constructed within the paradigm of liberal, middle-class respectability; it presented ideals of nonviolent resistance, Christian faith, and self-sacrifice. In the mid-1960s, however, there was a popularly perceptible shift in the freedom struggle and this changed the way that black masculinity was constructed in the popular imagination. The Black Power movement steeped black masculinity in racial pride, Pan-Africanism, urban sophistication, cultural nationalism, and empowered sexuality. The differences between the civil rights and Black Power movements and their constructions of black masculinity should not be overstated; the movements were not monoliths and their ideas about masculinity were diverse and complicated.²⁹⁴ In general, however, there was a noticeable change in how black men presented themselves in the black freedom struggle and the ways in which the wider white U.S. public perceived men within these movements. As mentioned in the last chapter, for instance, black men in the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense adopted some of the iconography of

²⁹⁴ The Black Power movement encompassed the Black Arts movement, black socialists, worker's rights advocates, community organizers, feminists, civil rights workers, and many others. Prominent participants included Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Elaine Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, James Foreman, Audre Lorde, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Nina Simone, Michelle Wallace, and Alice Walker, among others.

anticolonial liberation armies. The mainstream media used this iconography to portray BPP men as threatening and violent and insisted on contrasting this with older civil rights leaders, such as the deceased Martin Luther King Jr., who the media represented as more peaceful and less threatening.²⁹⁵

Historians such as Ed Guerrero note that at the same time as the Black Power movement was changing popular conceptions of black masculinities in the freedom movement, the film industry was changing under the burden of financial difficulties. With the rising popularity of television, the failure of several huge Hollywood blockbusters, the 1948 Paramount Consent Decrees, which broke up vertical integration in the film industry, and the retirement of an older generation of filmmakers, major studios were suffering severe monetary losses by the late 1960s.²⁹⁶ Desperate to get back into the black, the major Hollywood studios devised new strategies for making money, some of which involved targeting audiences near preexisting urban theatres, which by the 1970s consisted mostly of a declining white working-class population and a large black working-class population. These theaters, while no longer owned by the studios, had low exhibition costs and a captive audience in black Americans who were eager for more films about African Americans. The studios, therefore, produced low budget films that appealed to urban black audiences, exhibited them in cheap urban movie theaters, and hoped to

²⁹⁵ Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2006).

²⁹⁶ In 1948 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the structure of the Hollywood studio system violated antitrust law. Before 1948, studios owned every level in the production and distribution of films (including the star contracts, films processing labs, movie theaters etc.). The U.S.S.C. decision ended this “vertical integration,” forcing the studios to sell pieces of their companies. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 82.

increase their profit margins.²⁹⁷ This plan had the added benefit of addressing the growing pressure on studios to include more African Americans in the film industry.²⁹⁸ In this context, major studios began producing Blaxploitation films in the 1970s.²⁹⁹

According to film historian W.R. Grant, by 1970 black audiences wanted film heroes who were “able to touch on the new national mood of Black militancy and cultural nationalism.”³⁰⁰ In an effort to cultivate this type of cultural politics, Blaxploitation writers and directors created black male characters who represented the politics and styles of the Black Power movement. The relationship between Blaxploitation and Black Power was complicated. The majority of the films often resisted the formal politics and strategies of specific organizations. For instance, in *Shaft*, the main character exposes the corruption of Lumumba, the Black Nationalist organization arming itself for the anticolonial movement. And in *Super Fly*, the protagonist questions the power of local black political organizations to help urban African Americans resist white supremacy. He indicates that life as a criminal does more to undermine racist U.S. power structures than political organizing ever could.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹⁸ By October 1969, when the U.S. Justice Department threatened to sue six film studios for racial discrimination in employment practices, Hollywood was coming under repeated attack for its racist hiring practices and racist depictions of African Americans. Creating a new kind of film that appealed to urban African American audiences would not only turn a profit for the studios, but also alleviate some of the tensions between them and minority rights groups. See Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

²⁹⁹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 69. For histories of Blaxploitation, see Dunn, “*Baad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*; Grant *Post-Soul Black Cinema*; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Mikel J. Koven, *Blaxploitation Films* (Harpenden, England: Kamera, 2010); Massood, *Black City Cinema*; Sieving, *Soul Searching*; Kevern Verney, *African Americans and US Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³⁰⁰ Grant, *Post-Soul Cinema*, 35.

However, the films aligned with the political sensibilities of Black Power and they embraced several key components of Black Power manhood, as well as the Black Power aesthetic. The male characters in the films have a sense of racial pride, a connection to a disenfranchised community, an urban sensibility, a belief in cultural nationalism, and a virile sexuality.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song was the first film labeled as Blaxploitation and its director, Melvin Van Peebles, is widely considered the architect of the new black film aesthetic. According to film historian Jesse Rhines, Van Peebles financed *Sweetback* himself, choosing to reject a film contract offered by Columbia Pictures because he wanted to have full control of his film. This is important to note, since according to Rhines, only one-fifth of all Blaxploitation films were financed by African Americans, making *Sweetback* a rare exception in an industry where even "black art forms" were often produced with white money. Released in April 1971, *Sweetback* was wildly popular with urban black audiences, ultimately grossing ten million dollars in its first run.³⁰¹ It was also popular among black revolutionaries. In fact, Huey P. Newton wrote an article in the Black Panther Party newspaper entitled "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*." Newton praised *Sweetback* as the "first black revolutionary film" and argued that it reflected the values of the Black Power movement directly. He stated, "Bobby [Seale] and I started the Black Panther Party" in order "to build the Black community" and "*Sweetback* helps to put forth the ideas of what we must do to

³⁰¹ Rhines, *Black Film/White Money*, 43-46.

build that community.”³⁰² Other African American commentators, however, critiqued Blaxploitation and the ways in which it was linked to the Black Power movement. Michelle Wallace, for instance, stated in a 2004 collection of essays that *Sweetback* was “fantastically misogynistic” because “practices of resistance” within the Black Power movement were “always deeply compromised by their willingness to make major concessions to other hegemonic conventions.”³⁰³

Sweetback tells the story of a young urban black man who at the beginning of the film is working in a brothel. While he is with two white police officers, Sweetback witnesses them beating Mu-Mu, a young black member of a radical political organization. Enraged, Sweetback assaults the police officers and then spends the rest of the film fleeing to the U.S./Mexican border. The film is organized as a series of encounters in which Sweetback challenges various white and black men who try to help or hurt him and a series of sexual escapades in which Sweetback pursues pleasures with white and black women, demonstrating his sexual appetite for and sexual appeal to both races.

³⁰² Huey P. Newton, “He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song,” *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, June 19, 1971. In contrast, many white and black critics attacked the genre. Some white film critics saw it as a direct threat to white people. *New York Post* critic Archer Winsten argued that “whites would have to be masochistic to accept the unrelenting portrait of their fellows.” Critiques also came from within the black community. Lerone Bennet of *Ebony* magazine explicitly stated: “It is necessary to say that nobody ever fucked his way to freedom. And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to screw their way across the Red Sea. Fucking will not set you free. If fucking freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago.” For a selection of critiques, see Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

³⁰³ Michelle Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 227.

After the financial success of *Sweetback*, major motion picture studios tested the new genre with *Shaft* (1971), which was directed by African American filmmaker Gordon Parks. *Shaft* was originally written for a white cast but was changed to satisfy a black market. Produced and distributed by primarily white Hollywood insiders and crewed by mostly white technicians, *Shaft* was still considered a “black film” by critics because its director and most of its cast were African American and its narrative focused on the urban black community.³⁰⁴ Moreover, the studio and producers were direct about wanting to market to a black audience and this guided many of their decisions, including the subject matter and director. For instance, the decision to hire Parks, a high profile African American photographer and director, was not simply designed to rectify racist hiring practices in Hollywood. If that had been the only intent, the studios should have also hired an African American crew, as Van Peebles did. The decision to hire Parks reflected a belief that an African American director brought a black vision and black authenticity to the project.³⁰⁵ The director, widely considered the primary auteur and visionary of filmmaking, created the point of view for the film.

Shaft is the story of John Shaft, a super-suave, well-dressed, jive talking private detective hired to find the kidnapped daughter of a local gangster, who has been taken by a gang of black nationalists demanding a ransom. Shaft, originally reluctant to help a local gangster, pursues the kidnappers using intimidation and violence. At the same time, white police detectives are harassing Shaft for information, while he refuses to cooperate. Ultimately, Shaft uses a member of the

³⁰⁴ Rhines, *Black Film/White Money*, 41-46.

³⁰⁵ Sieving, 128.

Black Nationalist gang as an informer and is able to liberate the gangster's daughter Marcie. Throughout the film, Shaft's sex life functions in similar ways to Sweetback's. It engages with stereotypes about the sexual appetite of black men and it redefines black male bodies as objects of affection and desire.

Shaft appealed to black and white audiences alike. In fact, the movie was so popular that when a 1971 showing of *Shaft* was sold out at a movie theater in Brooklyn, a small riot had to be broken up by the police. The 1200 seats that were available for the showing were not enough to satisfy the appetite for the movie.³⁰⁶ The popularity of the film and its crossover appeal prompted the quick production of a sequel and was most likely a result of the film's light touch, cool characters, snappy dialogue, and fast-paced action sequences, as well as its driving soundtrack, in an era of dark and depressing antihero movies.

In 1973, Parks released a sequel to *Shaft* entitled *Shaft's Big Score*. The film was not nearly as critically popular as *Shaft*, but it was released more widely and it was ultimately more financially successful.³⁰⁷ The sequel finds Shaft investigating the assassination of a white gangster. The investigation takes him through a series of encounters with the Italian Mafia, Bumpy (the black gangster from the first film), and various black and white women with whom he has sex. In the end, he uncovers corruption and collusion within and between white and black gangsters. The sequel was popular enough with audiences for the studio to release a third installment in the Shaft series entitled *Shaft in Africa* (1973), although Parks did not direct it.

³⁰⁶ "Unruly Movie Crowd Injures Two Policemen," *NYT*, October 25, 1971.

³⁰⁷ *Variety*, February 7, 1973, 9.

On the heels of the success of the first *Shaft* came *Super Fly* (1972), directed by Parks's son, Gordon Parks Jr. Unlike his father's films, *Super Fly* was written and financed by African Americans, including two New York City dentists and Parks Sr. A friend of Parks Jr., black writer Philip Fenty, wrote the script for *Super Fly*. In a 2004 interview, Fenty said that he wanted to write the script because in the 1960s and 1970s, Harlem was "an exciting place to be," making it and its residents an intriguing subject for a film. He spent time with street hustlers and black residents in order to understand how "Broadway had totally given over to street people." White producer Sig Shore, who had had success in bringing European films to the U.S. market, helped Parks Jr. release the film. *Super Fly* was not controlled by a major studio in its production, although it was eventually distributed by Warner Brothers.³⁰⁸

Unlike John Shaft, the protagonist in *Super Fly*, Priest, works against the law as a cocaine dealer and is planning a large final heist in an effort to leave the business. The mob he works for, however, is not willing to let Priest go and threatens to kill him. Throughout the film, Priest follows a similar sexual pattern as Sweetback and Shaft. In the end, he is able to outsmart and outgun the mob.

Many Blaxploitation films followed *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, *Shaft's Big Score* and *Super Fly*. There were also several popular variations of the traditional Blaxploitation films featuring African American female protagonists directed mostly by white directors, such as Jack Hill and Jack Starrett. Most of the films that came after the four noted here were seen as blatant attempts to cash in on the

³⁰⁸ Philip Fenty and Sig Shore, "Special Features: One Last Deal," *Super Fly*, DVD, directed by Gordon Parks Jr. (1972; Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 2004).

phenomenon and none was quite as successful. Significantly, African Americans did not direct most of the later Blaxploitation films, including the five studied here.

Black Masculinity in Early Black-Directed Blaxploitation

The four early Blaxploitation films, while different in important respects, adhered to several structural imperatives: they all featured a powerful and proud black male protagonist who had little interest in working with or integrating into white society; they all took place primarily in urban black working-class neighborhoods; they all engaged with the soul aesthetic's fashion and music; and they all had protagonists who engaged in multiple sexual encounters with white and black women. These structural choices were linked to specific visions of black masculinity that were associated with the culture of Black Power.

First, the early black-directed Blaxploitation films presented proud and unapologetic African American men who resisted white supremacy and integration in ways that echoed the politics of black radical movements in this era. For instance, *Sweetback* opens with two quotations that place the narrative of the main character within a black power framework. While *Sweetback* is running on screen, presumably from the police, with sirens blaring in the background, the first quotation states: "Sire these lines are not homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality." The second states: "This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man." The first quotation reminds the viewer that the film is meant to depict the real brutality of being a black man in the United States, as well as implying a male audience given the use of the term "sire." The second uses language—brothers and sisters for black

people and "the Man" as an embodiment of white power—that was popular in Black Power movements. In addition, the film presents Sweetback's life as evidence of an oppressive white state that wants to control the physical and sexual power of black men. Sweetback, for example, is punished for turning on the white supremacist police officers who want to use him as a patsy. His flight from the officers and his decision to live on the run demonstrate his unwillingness to work with white society.

John Shaft is also portrayed as proud, aggressive, and non-compliant. When Shaft is first approached by the white detectives who want his help in Harlem, for instance, he mocks the white lieutenant's lack of understanding of black culture, saying that it's because "us black folks speak mushmouth, detective." Furthermore, he refuses to say why two black gangsters are looking for him and plays on the racist expectations of the detectives. He says that the two gangsters are "soul brothers" who want Shaft "to teach them the secret handshake," blatantly mocking the white police officers' racism. He leaves the scene with a final act of defiance. The detective asks, "Where the hell you goin' Shaft?" and Shaft famously replies, "I'm goin' to get laid. Where you goin?," after which he laughs and strides away. In a sense, Shaft was suggesting that white men might want to follow the lead of black men if they wanted to embody masculinity and pursue pleasure.

Shaft not only defies white supremacy and resists working with white authorities, but also honors and identifies primarily with his race, another important component of Black Power. Shaft becomes enraged when he is accused by another African American man of being "a Tom," a white lackey, to which he shouts, "Don't Tom me!" His loyalty to his race is also made clear when he refuses to be a

spy for the police. The detective tells him that he is not asking Shaft to “sell out” and implores him to lay off “all this black shit.” Shaft replies coolly that all of the gifts in the world will not make him “sing for the cops.” Shaft is keenly aware of his racial and class affiliations, as he says that all of the power bestowed on him by the Man will not change the fact that he “was born black” and he was “born poor.”

Priest, the protagonist in *Super Fly*, is also defiant and proud. He rejects the insults he receives for being “white looking” and instead emphasizes his racial oppression, linking him to the black freedom struggle. Referring to drug dealing, he states that he is a winner in “the only” game that “the Man left us to play.” He also rebuffs the white police officers who try to enlist his help. According to filmmaker Warrington Hudlin, this particular scene was important to black audience members. He recalls in a 2004 interview that when he saw *Super Fly* for the first time in St. Louis, Missouri, in its opening year, the whole black audience got to its feet and applauded at the conclusion of the scene. He saw this moment as a “catharsis” for an oppressed people. Cultural critic Todd Boyd argues, “At the end Ron O’Neal [Priest] basically tells the white man to kiss his ass and walks off and jumps in his tricked out hog. That’s John Wayne riding off in the sunset for black people.”³⁰⁹

The second way in which the early Blaxploitation films linked the masculinity of their characters to Black Power was by making an urban setting integral to the films’ aesthetic and narrative construction of black manhood. The directors of the early Blaxploitation films accomplished this in several ways. To begin with, the films situated the black male protagonists in real city streets. The directors avoided sets,

³⁰⁹ Todd Boyd and Warrington Hudlin, “Special Features: One Last Deal.”

instead choosing to film on the streets of New York and Los Angeles. The directors also accomplished this with driving sequences, during which the protagonist operates a car while the camera shows what the character is seeing. In *Sweetback*, for instance, the audience is introduced to the reality of Los Angeles nightlife through a car camera technique. The camera is placed on the car looking outward so that the audience sees the city through the eyes of the male protagonist. In *Super Fly*, Priest drives down the streets of Harlem at night while the theme song “Pusherman” is playing. The camera shows the mundane activities of Harlem life: people on sidewalks, fire trucks driving by, the lights of entertainment marquees, and storefront signs. Finally, the directors situate the black men in urban settings by using hand-held cameras, positioned right in front of the protagonist, as he walks down the street. Parks Jr. does this several times with Priest. This immediacy reminds the viewer that the actor really inhabited the city space.

Third, these films celebrated a black masculinity steeped in the fashion, language, and music of the soul aesthetic. The first camera shot of *Sweetback*, for instance, presents him in a wide-brimmed hat, flared jacket with wide lapels, velvet vest, and skintight velvet bellbottoms, and the camera slowly pans over Sweetback’s body. In *Shaft*, the title character is distinguished from all of the other men in the opening sequence by his clothing. While the other men walking down the street during the opening credits are wearing black coats, business executive fedoras in muted colors, and neckties, Shaft stands out in a long, brown, leather jacket, a skintight beige turtleneck, and tight brown bell-bottomed pants. He also stands out among his fellow law enforcement associates, who wear mostly ruffled,

unfashionable suits, and the gangsters in the film, including the African American ones, who wear pinstripe suits, heavy gold jewelry, and wingtip shoes.

In *Super Fly*, Priest is the model of the soul aesthetic with his long flared coats, wide-brimmed hats, gold jewelry, and lowered El Dorado with shiny silver rims. Sheila Frazier, who played the role of Priest's girlfriend, Georgia, said in a 2004 interview that "it was fly to have the maxi coats and the big lapels and the flare." The cast of *Super Fly* reflected the real style of many urban African Americans, because lacking a costume budget, one of the black producers on the film, Nate Adams, merely dressed the actors in clothing belonging to the cast and crew. This fashion, Adams said, was meant to invoke the "attitude that people felt when they were wearing it."³¹⁰

Furthermore, the dialogue in the films was peppered with jargon that was popular in urban African American neighborhoods and used in the soul aesthetic in the 1970s. Sweetback rarely speaks in the film, keeping him aloof, but many of the other black men in the film use the jargon that was popular in black urban neighborhoods. When Sweetback appears at his home, his boss says: "Hey baby. Hey Sweetback baby. You cool. Don't worry about it baby. Can you dig it?" One of the first lines that Shaft utters includes the slang "Harlem cats" to refer to two black men from Harlem. When Shaft is angry at Bumpy's subterfuge, he proclaims, "Don't jive me man." And in *Shaft's Big Score*, Shaft tells the police captain to "rap on" when he wants him to keep talking.

³¹⁰ Nate Adams, Ron Finley, and Sheila Frazier, "Special Features: One Last Deal."

Finally, the soundtracks of these films were heavily based in funk and soul music, both of which were associated with Black Power. For instance, Stax Records artist Isaac Hayes composed the music for *Shaft* and the main theme song, for which Hayes eventually won an Academy Award, uses the wah-wah effect that was common in funk music in this period, along with percussions and synthesized keyboards.³¹¹ Hayes's songs, including "Theme from Shaft" and "Soulsville," help to situate the male protagonist in an urban black world. For instance, in the parts of "Soulsville" heard in the film, Hayes sings about hard times in Harlem, where rent is high and resources are scarce.³¹²

Curtis Mayfield was recruited to compose the soundtrack for *Super Fly*, which also used funk sounds and lyrics to put the protagonist in an urban black world.³¹³ The main song, "Pusherman," plays while Priest is driving his El Dorado and then continues as he enters a nightclub. Like Hayes's with his *Shaft* recordings, Mayfield composed the soundtrack in the funk genre, using high-hats and bases to fill out the sounds. He also used bongo drums. The lyrics of the song that are heard in the film explain what kind of man Priest is:

I'm your mamma; I'm your daddy
I'm that nigga in the alley
I'm your doctor when in need, want some coke, have some weed
You know me; I'm your friend
You main boy, thick and thin.
Ain't I clean? Bad machine
Super cool, super mean

³¹¹ The wah-wah effect, named for the sound that it produces, is when a musical note is drawn out and the treble is altered as if the note is going in and out of tune.

³¹² Isaac Hayes, "Shaft," Vinyl. Stax, 1971.

³¹³ According to the producers, Mayfield wrote, recorded, and performed the soundtrack for essentially no fee because he could relate to the script. Fenty, "Special Features: One Last Deal."

Feelin' good, for the man
Superfly here I stand
Secret stash, heavy bread
Baddest bitches in the bed.
I'm your pusherman, I'm your pusherman, I'm your pusherman.

Like Shaft, however, Priest is victimized by the realities of Harlem life.

Solid life of crime
A man of odd circumstance
A victim of ghetto demands
Feed me money for style
And I'll let you trip for a while
Insecure from the past
How long can a good thing last?³¹⁴

The soundtracks in *Shaft* and *Super Fly* play an important role in constructing the masculinity of the main male protagonists. The soundtrack is not simply background noise; it is, as film and sound scholars would say, diegetic, meaning that it is embedded in and integral to the narrative. The songs situate the male characters in an urban black world. As Hudlin states, the soundtrack is always “giving you clues” about the characters and narratives.³¹⁵

Finally, in all of these films the protagonists' masculinity is partially defined by their strong sexual appetite for and sexual appeal to white and black women. This is significant in at least two ways. By celebrating instead of reviling the black hero's pursuit of white and black women, the audience is cued to admire and covet black men's sexuality, which was historically feared by white people in the United States. And by framing the black hero's body as sexually appealing, the audience is

³¹⁴ Curtis Mayfield, “Pusherman,” Charley Records, 1972.

³¹⁵ Hudlin, “Special Features: One Last Deal.”

set up to desire the black man in a way that was previously limited in public spaces.³¹⁶

Shaft, for instance, is presented as desirous and desirable throughout the movie, even when it does not advance the plot. In fact, the first scene of sexual intercourse in *Shaft* is jarring. Moving away from the narrative arc of Shaft's investigation of the missing girl, the audience suddenly sees Shaft sitting naked on a couch. A female character, who has not been and is never introduced into the story in any meaningful way, enters the room and shortly thereafter she and Shaft have sex. During the scene, the camera roams over Shaft's naked body while the soundtrack registers the woman's moans. As Shaft is the protagonist, the audience members are encouraged to either identify with his sexual urges and abilities or to view Shaft as an object of sexual desire.³¹⁷ The audience is also meant to believe that Shaft is desirable to women. There is no doubt about his success as a lover when later in the film a white woman tells him that he is "really great in the sack" even if he is not a nice person.³¹⁸ He is indeed a "sex machine," as the opening song describes:

³¹⁶ Scott Poulson-Bryant, *Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

³¹⁷ For a detailed description of the gaze, gender, and sexuality in film, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

³¹⁸ The role of women in these early Blaxploitation films is complicated. On the one hand, the beauty and desirability of black women is celebrated. On the other hand, there is sexual violence towards black women. Furthermore, the male protagonists tend to have relationships with black women who are very light-skinned. This was partially a result of the success of light-skinned African American actresses relative to dark-skinned African American actresses in this period. But it also fed in to a longer history of associating light skin with feminine beauty. Many black women and men were critiquing these associations in this period, especially in Black Power

Who's the black private dick
That's a sex machine to all the chicks?
SHAFT!
Ya damn right!³¹⁹

Even the promotional poster for the film emphasized Shaft's sexuality by strategically placing his gun in a way that positions it as a phallic symbol exploding with power.



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Priest is also desirable to white and black women. The first time that the viewer sees Priest, he is lying naked in bed with a white woman. As he's leaving, she implores him to stay, saying that she needs to have sex with him. He merely snorts derisively in response. At the end of the scene she commands him: "You be back soon."

Priest seems to have the same hold on his black girlfriend, Georgia. In a scene in the middle of the film, Georgia and Priest are laying naked in a bubble bath

circles, but these early Blaxploitation films did not overtly join in this critique. See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*; Dunn, *"Baad Bitches" and Sassy Supermamas*; Grant *Post-Soul Black Cinema*; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Massood, *Black City Cinema*; Sieving, *Soul Searching*.

³¹⁹ Isaac Hayes, "Shaft," Stax, 1971.

³²⁰ "Shaft," (1971), imdb.com, accessed on April 5, 2014.

together. Georgia becomes incensed with Priest's lack of intimate connection and states firmly, "fuck you," as she goes to exit the bathtub. Priest grabs her wrist, however, and defuses her anger by kissing her neck and caressing her body. His sexual power over her is evident. She repeatedly moans "oh Priest" as the camera pans over their bodies. In this moment, the lyrics of the soundtrack state: "I want you so bad I can't stay mad at you. What thing, you really swing, and I feel so good it's true." The majority of the camera work shows Priest's hands manipulating and groping Georgia's body, implying her passivity and his power.

The promotional poster for *Super Fly* also emphasized his sexual appeal to women. It included a widened image of his El Dorado, a long, gold, powerful phallic symbol, with his girlfriend lovingly draped over its hood. In case the imagery remained ambiguous for some audience members, the tagline reinforced Priest's sexual power: "Never a dude like this one! He's got a plan to stick it to the man." Priest, therefore, has sexual power over women and he has a plan to dominate men as well, should he need to.



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Sweetback's entire development into manhood is defined by his desires and his desirability. In a central scene in the film, the pre-pubescent Sweetback, who is

³²¹ "Super Fly," (1972), imdb.com, accessed on April 5, 2014.

working in a brothel, is enticed into entering one of the prostitutes' rooms and then is either raped or willingly participates in sexual intercourse with the much older prostitute. It is apparent from the cues that director Melvyn Van Peebles gives to the viewer that the event is meant to be significant in the growth of the character. During the scene, the camera pans lovingly over his young body, using the gaze to invoke desire in the viewer. Then, immediately after the encounter, the camera cuts to an image of Sweetback's adult body. This event is the bridge between the character as a young boy and the character as an adult. In fact, he was given his adult name, "Sweetback," in this moment. After the sexual encounter, the women name him "Sweet Sweetback" because of his sexual prowess and large penis.

The protagonists of the early successful Blaxploitation films, then, were constructed as proud, urban, sexual, and sexually desirable black men who resisted white supremacy, as well as integration into white society. The films celebrated these traits, which were popular in Black Power movements. The imagined violence and rage of black men and the criminal underworld was no longer scary; it was exciting, empowering, and justified. The sexuality of black men was no longer threatening to women, white women especially; it was admirable and desirable. Or, perhaps, it retained some of its danger, which made the Blaxploitation man more appealing as a rebel icon. Either way, unlike the films of the 1960s, such as the Poitier films, that integrated black men into a mainstream vision of manhood in an effort to make the case for liberal integration more widely, Blaxploitation films unapologetically distinguished the urban black man from mainstream white America. The films also made the urban black man accessible and consumable.

Blaxploitation and Mainstream America

The directors of Blaxploitation seemed to anticipate that white and black audiences might respond to the films differently. When asked to describe his film, for instance, Van Peebles stated:

It tells you about Black life like it is—not like the man wants to hear it is. It's also the first revolutionary Black movie. It shows *a nigger* that busts a white man's head *and gets away with it!* Now bourgeoisie [sic] critics may not like that, but Black folks do. They scream and cry and laugh and yell at the brother on screen. For the Black man Sweetback is a new kind of hero. For the white man my picture is a new kind of foreign film.³²²

Van Peebles's acknowledgement that black and white audience members might respond differently to the film implied that he knew that his audience would not be racially homogenous. In describing *Sweetback* as a foreign film for white audiences, however, he also implied that black America was culturally distant from white America and that white audiences would approach *Sweetback* like intellectual urban sophisticates who enjoyed sampling foreign films in order to experience a world far from their own, invoking a parallel to the racial tourists who went "slumming" during the Harlem Renaissance.

Evidence suggests that white audiences contributed significantly to the financial success of Blaxploitation films. One way to begin to understand the demographics of a film's audience is to determine in which neighborhoods the film was screened and note the racial makeup of those neighborhoods during the period of the screening. In the United States, space and residence were racialized, meaning that the racial makeup of a neighborhood determined not only who was likely to live

³²² Grant, *Post-Soul Cinema*, 38.

there, but also who was likely to work and play there as well. The results of this analysis suggest that the viewership of Blaxploitation films included significant numbers of white Americans.

For instance, in New York City, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Shaft's Big Score* played in a variety of neighborhoods, including predominantly black, mixed, and predominantly white neighborhoods. In its opening weeks in the spring of 1971, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played in Harlem and Washington Heights, both of which were non-white neighborhoods.³²³ But it also played in Greenwich Village, which was predominantly white, featured strong left-wing political sensibilities, and had sizable populations of Jews and white gay men. And it played in Times Square, which was primarily a commercial neighborhood, but also had the largest and most important concentration of movie theaters in New York City. The fact that *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played there meant that distributors felt that there was a large mainstream audience for it.³²⁴ *Shaft*, *Shaft's Big Score*, and *Super Fly* played in Harlem and Washington Heights, both of which had large African American populations, but also in the Village and the Upper East Side.³²⁵ The latter is especially noteworthy since in the 1970s the Upper East Side was only really affordable for upper-middle class households, most of

³²³ *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* played at the Broadway Cinerama Theaters at Broadway and 47th Street (Time Square), the Loew's Theaters at 125th Street (Harlem), the Art theater in Greenwich Village, the RKO Coliseum at 181st Street and Broadway, the RKO at 23rd Street, the RKO at 42nd Street (Times Square), and the RKO at Roosevelt and 145th Street (Washington Heights) *Variety*, April 1971.

³²⁴ Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City: Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 556, 557, 573, 574, 839, 860, 861, 1380.

³²⁵ *Variety*, June 21, 1972, 13 and *Variety*, February 7, 1973, 18.

which were white.³²⁶ To be screened in that neighborhood signaled that the producers and distributors expected a sizable white market for these films.

Blaxploitation also played to white markets in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Movie listings in *The Chicago Sun Times* indicate that both *Sweetback* and *Shaft* played in the downtown neighborhood known as the Loop, which was an important commercial district for white Chicagoans (*Sweetback* played at the Marks and Rosenfield Oriental, near the intersection of Randolph and State Street, while *Shaft* played at the Roosevelt, near the intersection of State and NE Washington Street).³²⁷ In Detroit, Blaxploitation films played at the Grand Circus and the Mercury, both of which were downtown theaters that catered to white and black working-class residents.³²⁸ Warner Brothers played a first screening of *Super Fly* in Westwood, California, for an almost entirely white audience.³²⁹

The decision to screen Blaxploitation films in racially mixed and predominantly white neighborhoods would seem to indicate that the film studios believed that Blaxploitation had the potential to appeal to many Americans, although they were originally intended primarily for a black market. Producers may have been surprised by the popularity of Blaxploitation films in white markets, but

³²⁶ *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 839, 1218, 1352, 1353.

³²⁷ *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 1, 1971, 22. Until the 1950s, the Loop was the “second neighborhood” for many residents of Chicago because of its network of shopping and working areas. This began to change after 1950 because of suburbanization and the creation of an upscale shopping neighborhood on the northern end of Michigan Avenue. After the 1950s, the Loop remained a commercial area, but more so for urban residents and shoppers working with smaller budgets. See Gerald A. Danzer, “Loop,” in *Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs: A Historical Guide*, Ann Durkin Keating ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³²⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 187, 188, 202.

³²⁹ Adams, “Special Features: One Last Deal.”

given that success in the mainstream market would be much more lucrative, they were probably also eager to find ways to ensure that Blaxploitation could appeal to white audiences.

It is difficult to ascertain the multiple ways in which audiences—black and non-black—responded to Blaxploitation. The lack of audience marketing and audience response surveys makes this difficult to research. But published film reviews suggest that white people enjoyed the heroic, adventurous, rebellious, and sexualized masculinities in Blaxploitation, perceiving them as cool and hip. Film reviews also suggest, however, that white audiences responded more negatively to some of the racially divisive, anti-integration, or anti-white politics of Blaxploitation.³³⁰

Many film reviews described Blaxploitation's main protagonists as fun and cool action-adventure heroes. For instance, a 1971 *New York Times* review of *Shaft* proclaimed that it was a “good Saturday night movie” without “great pretensions” and described its protagonist as a “flamboyant” and “tough-talking” detective who “moves through Whitey’s world with perfect ease and aplomb,” but “never loses his independence.” The reviewer admires Shaft’s ability to face danger, never feeling “threatened, only amused.” In fact, Shaft is so cool that he negates “awe and reverence of physical might.”³³¹

³³⁰ Some of the reviews of Blaxploitation in black publications were critical of the race politics of the films, but often for different reasons. Some reviewers, including Lerone Bennet writing for *Ebony*, resented the implication that drug dealing and sex were meaningful ways to find freedom in white supremacist America. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 90.

³³¹ “‘Shaft’ –At Last a Good Saturday Night Movie,” *NYT*, July 11, 1971.

Another *New York Times* review of *Shaft* admired the streetwise hip protagonist of the film, whose swagger was directly related to his status as an urban African American. Recalling Mailer's "The White Negro," which emphasized the ways in which living down and out empowered black men, the reviewer describes Shaft as "both underdog and overlord" who has the "freedom of the city" no longer "granted to anyone named Marlowe or Harper," both fictional white detectives. According to the reviewer, Shaft was the height of cool with "the pad, the girls," the "fancy leather clothes, the ability to put down absolutely everybody and be paid back in admiration, the instinct for danger," and "the physical prowess."³³²

Time magazine's review of *Shaft* also found the film entertaining and the protagonist appealing. The reviewer pointed out that "despite a few too many racial jokes, *Shaft* is a fast moving pleasure." The reviewer described the film as a "window-rattling thriller about a black private investigator" and its protagonist as a cool detective who "says 'Right on' a lot and runs around in an endless variety of leather costumes making things hot for the bad guys."³³³ There is no indication that the reviewer considered the ways in which this language or costuming related to urban black politics. Interestingly, *The New Yorker* said that what made *Shaft* fun and cool entertainment was that the movie shoves "the race thing under the carpet" and portrays "the Mafia" as the antagonist because "the Mafia is a smaller ticket-buying ground to lose than the whole white population."³³⁴ Even the negative reviews of *Shaft* appreciated its value as hip and mindless entertainment. The

³³² "Screen: Soul Gumshoe," *NYT*, July 3, 1971.

³³³ "Summer Coolers," *Time*, July 26, 1971.

³³⁴ "The Current Cinema: Tell Me When I Can Look," *The New Yorker*, August 7, 1971.

Newsweek reviewer compared it to the popular action-adventure television show *Mission Impossible*, saying that the story is “sort of technological drama in which you watch people assembling their escape or penetration apparatus.”³³⁵

Reviews of *Super Fly* similarly emphasized its cool cache. The 1972 *New York Times* review of *Super Fly*, for instance, attributed its success as a fun film to the ways in which the protagonist lives a cool, urban, fantastical life. The reviewer stated that it was “almost exclusively an action movie,” with a lead character who embodies “a lifetime of fantasies with his mammoth car, his apartment downtown” and “his rich and elegant women.”³³⁶

While mainstream reviewers, then, apparently found reason to appreciate and admire many elements of the black masculinities portrayed in these films, they resisted and rejected some of the messages that aligned with Black Power racial politics. The *Time* magazine reviewer, for instance, characterized *Super Fly* as racist and bemoaned its portrayal of “all white men as drooling, craven criminals.”³³⁷ The *Newsweek* review of *Shaft* described the protagonist as “a black private eye who goes around shafting everybody, a kind of fantasy idol paying it back for the Negro who feels he’s been shafted for centuries.” According to the reviewer, *Shaft* was not a realistic portrayal of a black man, but a satire of black empowerment politics. The reviewer even characterized *Shaft* as a “black Archie Bunker.” The parallel with Archie Bunker, a satirical character from *All in the Family* who was meant to ridicule

³³⁵ “Black Eye,” *Newsweek*, July 19, 1971.

³³⁶ Roger Greenspun, “The Screen: *Super Fly*,” *NYT*, August 5, 1972.

³³⁷ “Racial Slur,” *Time*, September 11, 1972.

closed-minded bigots, presented Shaft as a similar satirical character, meant to ridicule and critique Black Power cultures, not celebrate them.³³⁸

Some reviewers also did not like the racially divisive politics of the film, even if they were not specifically anti-white. For instance, a *New York Times* film critic emphasized that “it may be personally ego-gratifying for blacks to see ‘one of their own’ stick it to The Man,” but “what these films have failed to do is go beyond their limited medium of expression and provide something new, something more imaginative than enticement based purely on black vs. white society.” The reviewer continued by noting that Blaxploitation depicted “a view of a confrontation-type society in which one race is bad and the other good.”³³⁹

Other reviewers believed that Blaxploitation was a cheap exploitation of the black market, which as mentioned, in some ways it was. In *The Hollywood Reporter*, a reviewer argued that *Shaft* will surely do very well” with “black audiences, both in its first runs and in later multiple release,” despite the fact that it “is not a good movie,” because it is “aimed at black audiences unused to seeing their urban experience portrayed on the screen.”³⁴⁰ The *Variety* review of *Shaft* emphasized that it was only Charles Cioffi, the white actor who played Shaft’s boss, who upgraded “the plot from strictly racial polemic.” This would not be a problem, though, for “those who dig the opening footage.”³⁴¹ The reviewer’s reference to those “who dig” the opening footage appropriated the language of urban black communities and

³³⁸ “Black Eye.”

³³⁹ “Black Movies,” *NYT*, September 12, 1972.

³⁴⁰ “‘Shaft’ Looks Very Good: Special, General Audiences,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 10, 1971.

³⁴¹ “Shaft,” *Variety*, July 16, 1972.

implied that a black audience could appreciate *Shaft*, while a non-black audience might not. These reviews accused early Blaxploitation films of racial pandering.

Some reviewers responded to Blaxploitation films differently, but these were the exceptions and their work was typically published in white-oriented publications that were aimed at audiences with distinct social, cultural, and political perspectives. For instance, the review of *Shaft* in *The Village Voice*, a New York City paper known for its liberal politics and its coverage of avant-garde and independent art, acknowledged that *Shaft* had a mindless entertainment quality, but noted its importance to the black experience. Reviewer N. Owaino bemoaned Roundtree's performance in *Shaft* as "James Bond" in "blackface." He argued that "when Roundtree shows his muscles for the 50th time, and bares his gun for the 20th time, he is a little less than a man, strutting his physical stuff." Owaino continued by noting, however, that although "the story is in the bang-bang genre of American 'B' films," its black director brought something to filmmaking that a white director never could. In the film, "footage on Harlem is not taken from an old pile of 1969 clips, re-edited—the kind of impression you get when you see Harlem done by a white film-maker." Instead, "Gordon Parks gives us Harlem 1971." Owaino pointed out that Parks pictured "Harlem tenements like they are (not deserted, with wistful flute music background, as a rat jumps over a pile of rubble); but with black folks, lots and lots of black folks," which Parks delivered "in split-second, yet lasting, impressionistic vignettes of black folk living, breathing, and trying to survive."³⁴²

³⁴² "Film: Nothing Less Than a Man," *The Village Voice*, July 8, 1971.

Film Quarterly, one of the most prestigious academic film studies journals, took notice of the Blaxploitation trend in 1975 with an article titled “Black Dreams: The Fantasy and Ritual of Black Films.” In this essay, Brandon Wander implied that “black films” were part of a racialized urban culture, stating that “the ritual of black films begins in a downtown theater, a soiled, aging movie warehouse built for a different class and a different race.”³⁴³ Wander also called on critics to take these films seriously as important U.S. cultural products.

Most black and white critics spend their time attacking shortcomings of black cinema, and not paying enough attention to what’s going on beneath the diamond-gloss surface. Since *Shaft* (1971), critics have devoted their energy to fashioning barbs about machodom, reverse racism, intellectual malnutrition, and violence-as-art masquerading-all of which are true to a certain degree. But simplistic answers explaining these films’ popularity are insufficient.

He continued by noting that “Black films, despite their shoddiness, are creating a black mythology” and “each film is a ritual, a morality play, recognized and appreciated by its audience.” Wander ultimately argued for the incredible potential of black films to have a serious impact on the way we tell our stories. He contended that besides the impact of “language, dress, and music,” these films “can reflect upon non-European interpersonal relationships and non-European economic relationships.”³⁴⁴

Wander’s article did not necessarily applaud all elements of black film generally or of Blaxploitation specifically. But it recognized the important impact that Blaxploitation did and could have on U.S. culture more widely and did so not by

³⁴³ Brandon Wander, “Black Dreams: The Fantasy and Ritual of Black Films,” *Film Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 2.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 11.

insisting that its universal appeal would bridge racial gaps, but by claiming instead that the power of Blaxploitation was in its contribution to black culture. The power of Blaxploitation, according to Wander, was that it provided a space for African Americans to celebrate their unique culture and tell their own stories. At the very least, Wander's analysis of Blaxploitation allowed for a nuanced appreciation of its potential, as well as a recognition that it was rooted in the politics of black empowerment.

White Americans did participate, then, in the Blaxploitation phenomenon as audience members and as critics. They contributed to its financial success, possibly demonstrating to Hollywood studios that there was a potential for growth in the Blaxploitation market. Mainstream critics appreciated the entertainment value of Blaxploitation and they often admired the hip male protagonist for his cool clothes, as in the case of *Playboy*, and his language and demeanor. They did not, however, always welcome the elements of the films that aligned with the racial politics of Black Power.

Blaxploitation and White Directors

The decision by major studios to make more Blaxploitation films and to have white directors helm the projects beginning in 1972 marked a turning point in the genre. First, it signaled that the studios were now less concerned about optics and the need to hire more African Americans. But it also meant that the studios were no longer concerned about having an African American artistic voice at the center of these films. The primary auteur, from the perspectives of the studios, did not have to be African American in order to address the African American experience. Outside of

Hollywood, some independent filmmakers were asking complex questions about the relationship between a director's racial identity and the subject matter of a film.

White director Jules Dassin, when he accepted the request to helm *Uptight* (1969), a film about urban black politics, freely admitted that "I don't know how capable I am, or indeed any white man is of understanding the black man or putting himself in the black's position." He conceded that he was "on the outside looking in—as are so many other whites."³⁴⁵ If the white studios that hired white directors for Blaxploitation projects shared these concerns, they didn't let these concerns override their preference for white directors.

The white-directed Blaxploitation films studied here had many of the same features as the earliest Blaxploitation films. They, too, featured individualistic and proud African American men, played out in urban settings, used the soul aesthetic, and emphasized the protagonists' hypermasculine sexualities. They maintained the core elements of the male Blaxploitation protagonist that seemed appealing to mainstream reviewers: he remained soulful, cool, defiant, and urban. The white-directed Blaxploitation films studied here, however, altered the protagonist's anti-integration and anti-white stances, as well as some of the class politics in the films, and in so doing made him more palatable to a mainstream white audience that might have felt uncomfortable with the politics of Black Power.

For instance, *Hit Man* (1972), directed by George Armitage, is the story of Tyrone, a former street hustler who has returned to Los Angeles to attend his brother's funeral. As he investigates his brother's death, Tyrone finds himself mixed

³⁴⁵ Quoted in Sieving, *Soul Searching*, 128.

up in an illegal drug and pornography ring. Eventually he discovers that his brother had antagonized local Italian gangsters because they had featured his daughter, who was under the influence of drugs, in a pornographic film. In many ways, the narrative is serious and topical, but it plays out in a series of sex and action sequences that place it squarely in the Blaxploitation genre.³⁴⁶

In *Hit Man*, Tyrone is characterized as a man who has regained his pride. When he had worked for the gangsters, he had been subservient. His old boss, Mr. Zito, says that Tyrone “never used to give no one trouble.” Now, however, Tyrone refuses to play the “Uncle Tom” for the gangsters. He insults the gangsters and calls their young black protégés “house niggers.” Tyrone is “proud and erect,” as one female character describes him.

Tyrone is also positioned as urban, using similar aesthetic techniques as those in the black-directed Blaxploitation films. After he leaves the Los Angeles airport, a car camera shows the streets, the sunburned grass, the wide sidewalks, the hustler street life, and the car culture of Los Angeles from the point of view of the protagonist. His ability to move smoothly through this landscape speaks to his belonging on the streets of Los Angeles, even though he has spent time away. Just to make it clear to the audience, Tyrone tells a man at an illegal dogfight that he “is back on the streets.”

Tyrone’s street authenticity is confirmed by his soul aesthetic clothing, the same style that appeared in the pages of *Playboy*, the language he uses, and the

³⁴⁶ This film also introduced Pam Grier to the Blaxploitation genre. She would later be featured in some of the most popular female-driven Blaxploitation films. See Dunn, “*Baad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*.

music that plays during his exploits. In every sequence Tyrone is wearing a new hustler outfit. The opening sequence features Tyrone strutting through the Los Angeles airport in a unicolored suit, flashy gold jewelry, and a large, feathered, fedora. He is wearing tinted sunglasses, which he wears for most of the film. He also appears throughout the film in an all-black outfit with tight bell-bottomed pants, a skin-tight shirt opened wide at the neck, a black fedora, and a pink and red suit and hat of the same style. When Tyrone meets his brother's girlfriend, he calls her a "two for a nickel, jive time, freak time whore" and he warns her to not "shine on" him, meaning that she should tell him the truth. When he is giving burial instructions for his brother, he says that he wants a cremation because his family does not "dig being put in the ground." He also refers to the work that most African Americans are allotted in U.S. society as "hustlin' or hookin.'" All of these scenes are set to the funk music popular in the soul aesthetic.

Finally, Tyrone is sexual and desirable, according to the female characters in the film and the intended audience perspective. The female motel owner calls him "Big Daddy" and says that she knew his name would be Big Daddy because she checked him out. She also tells him that he is just like she likes her men, "proud and erect." Tyrone's body, like the bodies of many of the early black-directed Blaxploitation protagonists, is also fetishized by the camera in several long and exploitative heterosexual scenes that seem to be extraneous to the main narrative of the film.

In fact, the promotional poster for the film emphasizes the importance of Tyrone's sexuality.



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The elongated shotgun, positioned between his leg as an overt phallic symbol, and the tagline “He aims to please” emphasize the important relationship between the black man’s power (his guns) and his sexuality.

Slaughter (1972) and *Slaughter’s Big Rip Off* (1973), directed by Jack Starrett and Gordon Douglas also rely on many of the same conventions of masculinity that were used in the black-directed Blaxploitation films. Featuring football star Jim Brown in the lead role, *Slaughter* opens with the murder of Slaughter’s father. He eventually discovers that his father was involved with organized crime and he goes to Mexico, under the supposed supervision of a police investigative team, to avenge his father. While he is in Mexico he falls in love with the crime boss’ white girlfriend and tries to take her away. This film also stays in the exploitation genre by being mostly a series of graphic sex and violence sequences. The sequel, *Slaughter’s Big Rip Off* (1973), is much the same, only in this narrative Slaughter is hoping to destroy the first film’s crime family, whose members are seeking revenge for Slaughter’s earlier actions.

In both films, Slaughter is a proud black man. In one of the first scenes in the film, a white detective wants him to sign a full confession about his involvement in

³⁴⁷ “Hit Man” (1972), imdb.com, accessed on April 5, 2014.

his father's crimes. The detective asks: "Who do you think you are boy?" and "Who do you think you are nigger?" Slaughter does not accept the infantilizing term "boy" or the racist term "nigger" and instead becomes enraged. He responds by grabbing the detective by the throat and telling him that he can "jam" the confession "straight up your ass." Slaughter even has the nerve to claim the head gangster's white girlfriend for himself. He tells her: "I'm gonna set you free baby. Slaughter, the baddest cat who ever walked the earth." To have an African American man defiantly take a white woman from a white man represented a powerful rejection of dominant sexual codes in U.S. society in this period. In addition, an African American man freeing a white woman from bondage is a powerful reversal of the stereotype of white liberators and black slaves.

Slaughter also embodies the street hustler style that was part of the soul aesthetic. Similar to the fashions that appeared in *Playboy* in this era, he sports an Afro and wears unicolored suits with wide lapels and bell-bottomed pants. He also at times wears dashiki-style tops, which were part of the Africanist trend in Black Power culture in the 1970s. Slaughter also uses urban jargon throughout the narrative. He responds to most questions he is asked with "right on baby" and "stay cool baby." He accuses another character of being a liar by saying that they have "been givin' off all kinds of jive information." Furthermore, he refers to himself as "the baddest cat who ever walked the earth" and in both films asks for confirmation by saying "can you dig it?"

Finally, in both films, Slaughter is represented as sexually powerful and desirable. When he is having sex with the Mafia boss' white girlfriend for the first

time, the camera lovingly pans over his body, moving with her hands so that the gaze of the viewer follows her desires and the pleasures of touching his skin. While the Mafia boss threatens to “cut that nigger’s balls off” when he hears of his girlfriend’s betrayal, which invokes powerful images of lynchings, the threats are useless. Slaughter defeats the Mafia boss, the girlfriend flees with Slaughter, and she proclaims her love for him.

Detroit 9000 (1973), directed by Arthur Marks, and *Black Caesar* (1973), directed by Larry Cohen, are slightly more serious than *Hit Man* and the *Slaughter* series are, but still have many of the same features. *Detroit 9000* is the story of two police detectives, one white and one black, who are working together to find out who robbed a political convention in Detroit. The story has the detectives unearthing political corruption, organized crime, and international crime rings. Eventually, the white detective, Dan, is killed and the black detective, Jesse, is left to wonder whether Dan was working with the criminals, as seems to have been implied in the way he died. Dan and Jesse are grudging partners for most of the film, representing tense racial relations in this period in Detroit.

The black male protagonist in *Detroit 9000*, Jesse, is similar to the other Blaxploitation protagonists. He is a proud black man and resents the older generation of black men who he believes are too subservient. When an old African American hotel owner speaks to Dan in deferential tones, Jesse tells the old man, “I’ve got news for you, Lincoln freed the slaves” and then Jesse complains to Dan that the old man is the “ultimate product of your jive-ass honky establishment.” The old man, Jesse believes, is a “house nigger.” Jesse positions himself in opposition to

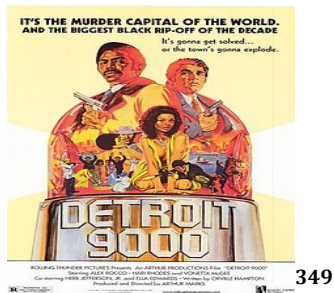
the old man's subservience; he is powerful and proud, despite years of living in a racist U.S. society.

He is also distinctly urban and soulful, coming from the streets of Detroit, although the director here does not use the common camera techniques to specifically situate the protagonist in the urban setting. Instead the audience is introduced to the setting through an omniscient eye as the camera flashes by the lighted signs, storefronts, broken down cars, and homeless people of Detroit. Jesse is not nearly as grounded in the urban aesthetic as Shaft, Priest, or Tyrone are. He is, however, similarly grounded in the soul aesthetic. In contrast to Dan's wrinkled grey suits, Jesse wears fur-lined coats, pink dress shirts, and bell-bottomed pants, and he has a well-groomed Afro. Unlike Dan's distinctly non-urban dialect, Jesse refers to white men as "honkies" and accuses liars of "jive talking."

Jesse's sexuality and desirability are contrasted to Dan's lack of both. Jesse's girlfriend adores his sexuality. She lovingly says that "anyone who has any doubts about black being beautiful" needs only to look at Jesse, as she caresses him with her hands and gazes at his body. Jesse describes his sexual life in powerful terms. He says that his girlfriend is a "sex maniac." Dan, in contrast, is in a sexless marriage and his wife is in an institution. She also emasculates him by nagging and chastising his choices. The contrast between black sexuality and white sexuality here is telling. That a white director chose to frame the black man as sexually powerful and the white man as sexually emasculated recalls the way that Mailer wrote about Sergius, the white character in *The Deer Park* who "had no punch" when he returned from

war.³⁴⁸ Dan's sexless marriage, like Sergius's impotence, allows the auteurs to represent the disempowerment of white middle-class masculinity.

The promotional poster seems to reinforce the sexual contrast between Jesse and Dan. Jesse stands taller and wider than Dan in the image and is featured above sexualized images of black women, including that of his girlfriend. The smaller Dan stands behind Jesse and above an image of the boat chase featured in the film. The positioning of the characters draws a link for the viewer between the black protagonist, larger and more looming than the white protagonist, and sexualized bodies.



Finally, *Black Caesar* uses many of the same filmic and narrative structures. It is the story of Tommy, an African American hustler, who is trying to make his way to the top of the Harlem crime scene. Abused and framed by a white police officer at a young age, Tommy is released from juvenile detention ready to remove the Mafia as the seat of crime power in Harlem. He does eventually make it to the top of the Harlem crime world, earning the love and admiration of many in his community, but along the way he alienates his mother, father, girlfriend, and best friend. Eventually he is attacked by the white police officer who framed him as a child because Tommy

³⁴⁸ Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1955), 7.

³⁴⁹ "Detroit 9000" (1973), imdb.com, accessed on April 5, 2014.

threatens to expose him. Tommy retaliates, killing the police officer, and then succumbs to his injuries.

In *Black Caesar*, Tommy is also powerful and proud, despite the actions of a racist white detective. In the conclusion of the film, Tommy beats the white detective, McKinney, to death, in retaliation for the pain and suffering the detective caused Tommy when he was young, as well as the pain and suffering he has caused the African American community in Harlem in general. This beating is interesting, however, in that Tommy uses a shoeshine kit, a symbol of African American men's service to white men. In fact, at the beginning of the film when Tommy was a young boy and McKinney first abused him, he worked as a shoeshine. He gains power over the detective, therefore, using his masculine strength, and ultimately reverses the roles that a racist United States would assign him. Tommy even blackens McKinney's face with the shoe polish and tells him, "McKinney, I want to hear you sing." He orders him to "sing one of the good ole massa tunes" because he wants "to hear" him "sing boy!" By blackening McKinney's face, calling him boy, and forcing him to sing slave songs, Tommy demonstrates that he is now the powerful one in the relationship between the two and that McKinney is now the subservient slave. This aligns the characterization of Tommy with one type of Black Power understanding of pride, masculinity, and power.

Furthermore, Tommy is framed aesthetically and narratively as urban. *Black Caesar* opens with a wide shot of Harlem and no musical soundtrack. Instead the soundtrack is of diegetic sounds: sirens, car horns, street traffic, and people talking. This puts the viewer in the reality of Harlem street life. We are then visually

introduced to Tommy as a young man working as a shoeshine. He is part of the economy and life of Harlem. After he participates in the shooting of a white man, he begins to run away. At this point the music starts and the camera jumps between wide shots and extreme close-ups of Tommy. The wide shots show Tommy as part of the scenery of Harlem (including run-down buildings and littered alleyways). The extreme close-ups have the audience literally running with Tommy, bringing everyone into the reality of Harlem crime life. The soundtrack is James Brown singing "Down and Out in New York City." The audience hears the lyrics: "I was born in New York City, saved by the night on a Monday" and "When a cold wind comes in New, New York City, and the street's no place to be but there you are, so you try hard or die hard." These lyrical cues inform the audience that Tommy is part of the New York City landscape and his experiences as a young man in Harlem are shaped by the realities of the city. When the audience sees Tommy for the first time as an adult, he is strutting down the streets of Harlem, music playing, in the fashion of a street hustler. The camera is at a close-up angle to remind the audience that Tommy, even though he has been gone from Harlem during his time in a juvenile center, is a participant in and product of Harlem urban life.

The whole soul and funk soundtrack, mostly written and recorded by James Brown, helps to cue the audience to Tommy's growth as a man in Harlem. When he is a child, "Down and Out in New York City" puts Tommy in an urban setting of deprivation and hardship. "The Boss," which plays as the audience sees Tommy as an adult, reveals who he is now:

Look at me you know what you see
You see a bad mutha

Look at me you know what you see
You see a bad mutha
Paid the cost to be the boss
Paid the cost to be the boss
Look at me you know what you see
You see a bad mutha
Told you so! Told you so!
Havin' fun, got money to boot³⁵⁰

These are the lyrics playing when Tommy's gang overtakes the Italian Mafia. The lyrics, like in the early black-directed Blaxploitation films, are not incidental. They are deliberately placed in order to frame the masculinity and character of the black male protagonists. The same is true of the soul aesthetic clothing Tommy wears, the urban jargon he uses, and the multiple sex scenes that portray him as a powerful and desirable sex symbol.

While *Slaughter*, *Slaughter's Big Rip Off*, *Hit Man*, *Detroit 9000*, and *Black Caesar* had many of the same constructions of black masculinity that were popular in the Black Power movement and that were on display in the early black-directed Blaxploitation films, the white-directed films also placed the male protagonists within a liberal civil rights framework. The white-directed films focused on African American men who embraced racial integration, openly promoted liberal politics, and were punished if they strayed beyond ideals of middle-class respectability.

To begin with, black men in the white-directed Blaxploitation films were empowered by non-sexual interracial relationships, like the one between Jesse and Dan in *Detroit 9000*. Jesse is not taken very seriously within his police department because he is an African American. His sergeant often belittles and emasculates him. He is assigned to work on a case with Dan because Dan is a seasoned professional.

³⁵⁰ James Brown, "The Boss," Universal Records, 1973.

As Dan's partner, Jesse finally gains acclaim from his superiors. He is represented at the end of the film as the powerful and clever hero who found success in his job (all necessary pre-requisites for normative masculinity) with the help of his white partner. In the end, Jesse is somewhat ambivalent about Dan's morality, but he knows that the case would not have been solved if it had not been for their partnership and he begrudgingly accepts the value in a black man and a white man working together to end crime in Detroit. This same buddy formula would become even more popular in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁵¹

Sexualized interracial relationships were also depicted as empowering for black men in these white-directed Blaxploitation films. In *Slaughter*, for instance, Slaughter's masculine power is directly related to his sexual relationship with Ann, the white girlfriend of Mafia boss Dominic. The film begins with Slaughter wanting to avenge his father, who was killed by this Mafia boss. Dominic also, however, takes Ann captive, knowing that she has had sex with Slaughter. Dominic demands that she have sex with him again and show him what she learned from Slaughter in bed. He then beats her for "wanting that nigger." It is at this point in the film, only after his white lover has been taken captive, that Slaughter decides to attack Dominic's lair to attempt a rescue. Avenging his father is seemingly incidental to this larger act of love and desire. Dominic tries to reduce Slaughter to a buck, thereby representing the racists who denied the humanity of black men and were deeply threatened by interracial relationships. It is not Slaughter's arrogance, cool pose, or urban swag

³⁵¹ For examples of "buddy films" from the 1980s and 1990s, see the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987-1998), the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984-1994), *48 Hours* (1982), and *Ghost* (1990).

that irks Dominic, but his attempt to integrate into the white world by “possessing” a white woman. Slaughter and Ann are genuinely in love, with Slaughter professing to love and protect her always, and they are positioned as the heroes in a story of loving integration. Dominic comes off as an unreasonable, racist, and villainous buffoon. In this respect, this action-adventure revenge story quickly becomes a tale with elements that are similar to the 1960s Hollywood films about interracial love, such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. In the end, Slaughter kills Dominic and his crew and is able to protect and love Ann. His masculine strength and his use of calculated violence allow him to be the hero of interracial love.

Their love is an interesting twist on the role of white women in black-directed Blaxploitation. In those films, white women were sexual objects, not companions. The black male protagonists sometimes had sex with white women in the black-directed films, but their roles in the narratives were usually to be used for quick sexual release, such as the white woman who Shaft meets in a bar, or to lead the protagonists astray, such as Priest's white mistress, who is a cocaine addict and refuses to help him leave the business. The white mistress is contrasted starkly with Priest's black girlfriend, who believes that he is capable of succeeding beyond the crime world. In the earlier black-directed films, black women could empower black men, while interracial sex did not offer love or liberation in the way that it does in *Slaughter*. And at the very least, the black men in the earlier films had sex with white women as carelessly and frequently as they did with many of the black women, demonstrating their ability to attract and possess whomever they chose.

A white woman as object, not subject of the black man's love or part of a fairytale of interracial love was a common trope among Black Power writers in this period. For instance, in *Soul on Ice* (1968), Black Panther Party member Eldridge Cleaver famously argued that black men should fully possess white women sexually, even against their will, in order to demonstrate to white men that black men are entitled to all women.³⁵² This was framed as a powerful rejection of the violent efforts of white supremacists to keep black men away from white women. While all who supported Black Power did not adopt this position whole-heartedly, it was discussed within the movement.³⁵³ In *Slaughter*, however, the director drew the white woman as a romantic love interest, as well as the object of sexual desire.

These white-directed Blaxploitation films also differed from their black-directed predecessors by representing black men who worked toward ending racial inequality as a positive force. The early black-directed films drew attention to racist white structures of power, such as the police force in *Shaft* or the drug lords in *Super Fly*. They did not, however, indicate at any point that liberal civil rights policy could alter these structures. They didn't even really go beyond making vague references to "The Man" who attempts to dominate the "black man." The white-directed films, however, emphasized the ways in which middle-class liberal desires can right racial wrongs and put white and black Americans on an equal playing field. For instance, in *Hit Man* Tyrone makes an impassioned speech about racial inequality before he kills one of the men responsible for his brother's death. He says that it is not fair that

³⁵² Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

³⁵³ See also Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965).

girls such as the man's daughter, who is rich and white, can "do anything they want to do," but black girls end up "dead or hustlin' or hookin'." He does not celebrate the street lifestyle from which his brother and niece come. Both end up dead because of their participation in the hustle, which if taken too far is not in fact cool. The clothes, the music, and the neighborhoods are represented as important parts of black culture, but the main message of the film is that the goal is to get young black people out of that world. Tyrone insists, "That shit has got to stop." Only then can young white girls and young black girls have equal opportunity.

This is similar to a conversation that Dan has about the evils of racism in U.S. society in *Detroit 9000*. His white wife, who suffers from an unnamed psychotic disorder, is virulently racist. She does not like her hospital because she does not want to be touched by the black orderlies. Her disorder can be seen as a symbol of the pathology of U.S. racism, which in this instance is feminized. Mental psychosis as feminine is a common trope, but in this case it also implies that those who are not willing to accept the new racial order are feminine. Dan, in contrast, is framed as the kind of white man who wants to move forward in race relations and is unsure of his role in making that happen. After Dan and Jesse are forced to work together as partners, they have several conversations about race in America. When Jesse refers to the old man as Dan's "house nigger," Dan replies: "Don't look at me. I didn't do it." Jesse gives voice to black men in the 1970s who were frustrated with the status of race relations in the United States and Dan speaks for white men in the 1970s who were frustrated about being blamed for poor race relations in America. They represent good men who were unsure about how to navigate territory so

historically and socially loaded. The fact that Jesse does not respond to Dan's insistence that he is not to blame for U.S. racism with anger or even a rebuttal allows the audience to sympathize with Dan. Furthermore, Jesse and Dan then resort to humor, which alleviates any discomfort the audience might feel about their own prejudices and roles in integration.

Jesse: Damn I'm stiff everywhere except where I want to be.

Dan: I always thought you spades were perpetual humping machines.

Jesse: Is that why white chicks been chasing us all these years?

For these two cops to work together, they need to admit that racism exists, they need to be reasonable men (as opposed to the mentally ill wife), and they need to be honest about their prejudices. Given that the two cops are ultimately effective partners for a while (before Dan is murdered), these moments can serve as lessons to audiences on a non-threatening, effective conversation about race in America. In contrast, in the early black-directed Blaxploitation films, no productive conversation between white and black is represented as possible. The black male protagonists accuse the white men of trying to keep them down, refuse to discuss it with them, and then walk away.

The white-directed Blaxploitation films also promoted a liberal ideal of masculinity by downplaying the importance of racial solidarity for black masculinity. While the early black-directed Blaxploitation films celebrated racial solidarity, even if they stopped short of supporting Black Power political movements, the white-directed Blaxploitation films showed Black Power political ideologies as weak and corrupt. In *Detroit 9000*, for instance, the African American congressman who is

running for governor and whose political rally is robbed at the opening of the film uses race for his cause. At the fundraiser, he implores his fellow black Detroit citizens to demonstrate racial solidarity and give an African American man more power. He implies that racial solidarity should also mean political solidarity. As the narrative develops, however, it is revealed to the audience that this politician is corrupt. In this case, racial solidarity is merely a cover for individual greed. He uses his community's sense of racial solidarity to solicit their money and use it for his own purposes. Jesse, however, can see through all of the lies of racial solidarity. He shouts to another black man, "When are you going to realize that not all black people are your brothers?" This of course is doubly powerful given that it is coming from the same character who is working successfully with a white partner. The heroes of the film opt for integration; the failed and corrupt antagonists relied too heavily on the supposed power of racial solidarity.

Finally, the white-directed Blaxploitation films often punished the black male protagonist for not conforming to middle-class norms, which was not the case in the black-directed films. In *Hit Man*, Tyrone decides to leave the street hustling life and move outside of the crime world of Los Angeles. His brother decides to stay in that world and his niece was enlisted to serve the criminals. Tellingly, Tyrone's brother and niece are murdered and Tyrone survives. He not only survives, but also punishes those still involved in the crime world. This is also true of *Slaughter*, whose father is murdered because of his involvement in the crime scene, which Slaughter rejects and heroically overcomes.

Punishment for straying outside middle-class norms is most obvious in the killing of black male protagonists who are involved in dealing drugs. Tommy, in *Black Caesar*, is the best example of this. Over the course of the movie, Tommy goes from being a low-level criminal to being the head of a multi-city drug operation. His financial success allows him to help his mother quit her job as a maid and enables him to move into an upscale apartment, purchase expensive cars, homes, and fashion, and become the most powerful man in his urban neighborhood. It also helps him to push the Italian Mafia out of Harlem. This is very similar to Priest in *Super Fly*. The main difference is that Priest evades capture and death, while Tommy is killed by a police officer who is trying to hide his own corruption. Even though the audience sympathizes with Tommy and is set up to dislike the brutally racist cop, Tommy still has to pay for working outside middle-class standards of morality. Where *Super Fly* complicates the role of the drug dealer in urban black neighborhoods by constructing Priest's masculinity as empowered and empowering, *Black Caesar* leaves little room for debate on the fate of black men who become drug dealers. Along similar lines, in *Slaughter*, the main character's father, who is involved with drug dealing, is killed. Slaughter then spends two feature-length films destroying the immoral drug cartels. In *Hit Man*, Tyrone is able to survive his former job working for a drug dealer only because he leaves the business. The message of the film is that he made the right decision to abandon his criminal ways and fight the drug dealers.

These white-directed Blaxploitation films, then, repeated many of the features of black-directed Blaxploitation films that were popular with mainstream

critics and audiences. They focused on the cool, proud, urban, and soulful caché of the typical black Blaxploitation man. At the same time, they revised the elements of the black-directed films that were problematic for mainstream white critics and audiences: the rejection of racial integration and liberal middle-class morality. Once mainstream Hollywood producers picked up the Blaxploitation genre to expand it beyond its niche market and abandoned the concept of an “authentic” black art form, they kept Blaxploitation cool, but not they changed its politics. These films were hip, but not divisive. As noted in the *Playboy* chapter, the soul aesthetic was popular among white audiences, but Black Power politics were not nearly as popular.

Keeping Hollywood Safe

Blaxploitation began in 1971 as an opportunity for movie producers to make cheap films that could use a primarily black crew and cast, alleviating some of the pressures that studios were under from the NAACP to integrate their movie sets. In addition, the films could appeal to an otherwise untapped black urban market. The fact that black-directed Blaxploitation films also had successful runs in white markets may have been an unforeseen benefit. While white audiences were engaging with Blaxploitation, mainstream critics were publishing reviews about its strengths and weaknesses. Most of the mainstream press studied here celebrated Blaxploitation’s cultural caché because of its hip, urban style. They applauded it as action-adventures, featuring individualistic, cool, well-dressed, streetwise, soul men. In other words, the critics celebrated the most basic elements of Black Power styles and culture in the films. Mainstream critics were much less enthusiastic about overt expressions of the politics of Black Power politics. Sure enough, when Hollywood

started producing Blaxploitation films, using mostly white directors, the protagonists no longer resisted integration and they embraced key liberal middle-class values.

The fact that Blaxploitation, a genre never really intended to be popular in mainstream markets, found success with white audiences is significant. So are the changes that Hollywood studios made to the films once they appropriated them. The wide reach of many of these Hollywood studios could have meant that some of the important features of Black Power politics, which were represented more favorably in the early Blaxploitation films, would have a chance to permeate further into mainstream culture. At the very least this could have forced mainstream audiences to confront some of these politics, regardless of how uncomfortable this might have been. The early black-directed Blaxploitation films were problematic, especially in their simplification of the many complicated components of Black Power politics, but they were a valuable expression of some of the ongoing critiques of white supremacy and the politics of racial reconciliation. Blaxploitation films could have been an opportunity for white Americans to engage with Black Power masculinities, which often felt threatening to white Americans, in a fun, yet honest, way. As with the soul aesthetic in fashion, the black masculinities in early black-directed Blaxploitation films were not always about being cool, although that was definitely an important part of it; they were also a celebration of the masculinities that arose from the specific experiences of class, gender, and racial oppression that were unique to U.S. cities, which were often ignored in liberal integrationist politics.

Hollywood white-directed Blaxploitation muted a major filmic platform for debating and celebrating urban black masculinities.

It was also problematic to stop hiring African American directors to helm these films. African American directors were a rarity before this moment, but with Blaxploitation had found an important and somewhat lucrative niche. When Hollywood studios hired white men instead, black men lost that narrow space to produce their art. They never really regained it until the Black Film Renaissance in the early 1990s (the era of Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the Hughes Brothers) and that moment, too, proved to be fleeting.³⁵⁴ As with *Playboy's* profiting off the soul aesthetic, Hollywood used Blaxploitation to tap into a cultural attraction to masculine rebels and increase its profits.

Furthermore, the privileging of middle-class liberalism in films featuring black men perpetuated the popular narrative of the black freedom struggle in Hollywood and beyond, which celebrated civil rights integrationism and Black Power style but vilified the politics of Black Power politics. The decision to alter Blaxploitation ultimately meant that the urban Black Power voice was silenced in a major part of mainstream popular culture and the liberal integrationist voice continued to dominate the narrative of the black freedom struggle. This framework for understanding the black male experience in films had long and wide reaching effects. Film scholars have noted that most of the films in the 1980s that featured African Americans were buddy films (like *Detroit 9000*) or told the story of African

³⁵⁴ Films in the Black Film Renaissance included Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), and The Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993).

American men fighting for integration into the wider U.S. system.³⁵⁵ Studios eventually abandoned the Blaxploitation genre in favor of the renewal of the blockbuster format, but the liberal integrationist framework that took over the genre continued to be used.³⁵⁶ Perhaps if Hollywood had produced and promoted films that celebrated Black Power masculinities, they would have continued to be viable. At the very least, if Hollywood had continued to make these movies, mainstream audiences could have continued to be exposed to alternative ways of understanding black masculinities. It may also have helped ease the general vilification of Black Power that took deep root in the mid-1970s and lives on in the popular memory of the era. And it would have been deeply important for black audiences.

The decision in the Hollywood white-directed Blaxploitation films to emphasize the value of interracial sexual relationships also was unfortunate. Sexual relationships between black men and white women had a tangled history, as has been discussed at length in previous chapters. The white-directed Blaxploitation films simplified these conversations to the point of trivializing the historical consequences of black men coveting or having sex with white women. In using interracial love as a vehicle for a celebration of the gains of liberal integration or simply as an example of love overcoming the odds, the later white-directed Blaxploitation films missed an opportunity to discuss this tangled history, its

³⁵⁵ See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

³⁵⁶ Changing economic circumstances, the ability to build suburban multiplexes, and the success of several blockbuster movies aimed at “broad” (read white) audiences partially removed studio incentive to make Blaxploitation films. See Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*.

contemporary implications, and the many ways in which interracial sex was understood by white and black Americans.³⁵⁷

The white-directed Blaxploitation films also continued to depict black women as sexual objects, obstacles, or servants for black men. This reduced the role of women in Black Power culture and politics in ways that were increasingly exasperating for black women. Like Mailer, Kerouac, SDS and *Playboy*, Blaxploitation, both black and white directed, silenced the role of black women in politics and punished them for attempting to find a space in the complicated urban world of the 1970s. There were many Blaxploitation films not discussed here that had black female protagonists; these at least tried to complicate the role of black women in 1970s black urban politics. Unfortunately, however, these films never found the market or acclaim of the movies that featured black men, partially because they were made at the tail end of the popularity of the genre generally.³⁵⁸ The hero of the urban landscape was definitely and defiantly masculine.

While early Blaxploitation films had many problematic ways of depicting manhood, often making black masculinity seem monolithic, at least they offered an alternative vision of being a man in the United States. It is not often that marginalized masculinities are celebrated in popular culture. When they are, the results are rarely appealing to both mainstream and marginalized audiences. Unlike

³⁵⁷ See Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

³⁵⁸ See Dunn, "*Baad Bitches*" and *Sassy Supermamas*. Examples of female-centered Blaxploitation films include *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Coffy* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974).

the literature of the Beats and the Hipsters or the fashion in *Playboy*, white-directed Blaxploitation films were never severed from their relationship to African American culture. By the mid-1970s, Black Power was very familiar to the U.S. mainstream and white audiences were interested in Blaxploitation. In this way, the appropriation of Blaxploitation by Hollywood is similar to the appropriation of SNCC masculinities by SDS in that it celebrated elements of the black freedom struggle, especially the men who were part of the movement. This meant that black men could be heroes, albeit flawed ones. Hollywood, however, eventually abandoned the racially divisive politics of Black Power. Meanwhile, Hollywood maintained its romance with the black street hustler. This was most likely because the Hollywood money-making machine could not sit comfortably with critical accusations about white supremacy and the failures of racial integration. The goal of Hollywood is to bring as many people into movie theatres as possible.

Representations of liberal integrationism, which were not nearly as threatening as they had been in the years in which Mailer, Kerouac, and SDS were working, could sit well with white audiences across the country. Black Power Blaxploitation had fewer chances of being celebrated outside of urban centers and black communities.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Hollywood and Blaxploitation never had a truly mutual relationship. Blaxploitation was originally built on the premise that hegemonic masculinity was flawed, corrupt, and in many ways, pathological, as was the early work of Mailer and Kerouac, parts of SDS activism, and *Playboy* mythology. And like the imaginings of Mailer, Kerouac, SDS, and *Playboy*, white-directed Blaxploitation films often began with an image of black manhood steeped

in popular culture representations often removed from realities of what it meant to be a black man in America. The white directors studied here re-presented a palpable rebel who questioned hegemonic masculinity in order to serve their own financial and creative agendas, not necessarily those of the black men they were pretending to represent.

Conclusion: When Can He Be Down?

In January 2014, the white rapper Macklemore accepted the Grammy for Best Rap Album, a category historically dominated by black artists, quickly prompting a response from music critics and industry “gatekeepers,” the industry insiders who take it upon themselves to determine who is and who is not an authentic artist.³⁵⁹ While many commentators focused on Macklemore’s decision to make public a text message apology he sent to Kendrick Lamar, a black rapper whom Macklemore had beat in the category, the white performer’s Grammy win also sparked a wider debate about the white appropriation of black culture. In his evaluation of the win, *New York Times* music critic John Caramanica summed up his thoughts on the history of the white appropriation of black art: “In a nutshell, this is the entire cycle of racial borrowing in an environment of white privilege: black art, white appropriation, white guilt, repeat until there’s nothing left to appropriate.” He went on to both critique Macklemore’s “transparent ploy for absolution” and praise Macklemore’s willingness to discuss his “position of privilege and the role that it had in catapulting him to fame.”³⁶⁰

Interestingly, while cultural critics like Caramanica were quick to consider the racial dynamics involved in Macklemore’s role in the rap world and the history

³⁵⁹ For analyses of Macklemore’s Grammy win, see John Caramanica, “Finding a Place in the Hip-Hop Ecosystem,” *NYT*, January 27, 2014; Marc Hogan, “Macklemore Admits He ‘Robbed’ Kendrick Lamar of a Grammy Win,” *Spin*, January 27, 2014; Gerrick D. Kennedy, “Drake Calls Macklemore’s Apology to Kendrick Lamar ‘Wack,’” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2014; John Kennedy, “13 Thoughts on Macklemore Winning Over Kendrick Lamar at the Grammy Awards,” *Vibe*, January 28, 2014; Jason Newman, “Kendrick Lamar Praises Apologetic Grammy Text,” *Rolling Stone*, February 28, 2014.

³⁶⁰ Caramanica, “Finding a Place in the Hip-Hop Ecosystem.”

of the white appropriation of black music more generally, there was little discussion of other significant dynamics at play. Macklemore is not simply a white rapper; he is a white, straight-identified man from middle-class suburban origins who gained mainstream recognition partially because of his very public critique of rap's performance of masculinity, which in some of his music he portrays as materialistic, misogynistic, and homophobic. Traditionally, rap masculinity has been rooted in the experiences of black men living in urban poverty, about which Macklemore admits he has very little personal experience. Some artists and industry insiders, including Kendrick Lamar, have taken offense to a middle-class white outsider critiquing the way black men perform their masculinity in rap. In March 2014, Lamar was quoted as saying that Macklemore's admonishment of Hip-Hop masculinity is "the equivalent of someone walking into a stranger's home and trying to redecorate the living room."³⁶¹ Other insiders and artists have taken Macklemore to task for not acknowledging the ways in which black rap artists, including female and queer artists, have critiqued its misogyny and homophobia. They accuse him of setting himself up as the "Great White Savior," coming to rescue black men from their pathologies.³⁶²

Critics' evaluation of Macklemore's place in rap culture, as well as his place in a longer history of white appropriations of black culture, reveals some of the

³⁶¹ Leon Neyfakh, "Hip-Hop's Alpha Conservative," *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2014.

³⁶² For example, see Hel Gebreamlak, "Race + Hip-Hop + LGBT Equality: On Macklemore's Straight White Privilege," *Racialicious*, racialicious.com (March 6, 2013), accessed on June 12, 2014.

complexities of racial appropriation and the role of gender in this process.³⁶³ Male and female rappers have historically tended to perform a very specific version of racialized masculinity in order to be deemed “authentic” artists. When Macklemore sought a place for himself in the rap world, therefore, he had to consider the ways in which a white man could or could not adopt the dominant rap version of black masculinity and what that performance would mean for his own identity as a middle-class white man. His decision to critique traditional performances of rap masculinity was perhaps an acknowledgement on his part that, as a middle-class white man, he could not convincingly adopt that particular version of black manhood. Or maybe, as his critics contend, he does see himself in a better position to critique black rap masculinity because he is an outsider. It may be easier for him to a judge rather than try to be an ally in a community suspicious of outsiders. Or perhaps his decision to critique rap masculinity while also speaking at length about his white privilege was a way for Macklemore to consider the social performances that white and black men in the United States have been forced to adopt. His attention to his privilege also operated as a kind of pre-emptive apology to the black men from whom he has adopted rap, an acknowledgement that he is engaging in an appropriation of not just an art form, but a performance of black masculinity about which many African Americans are very protective.

Public conversations about cultural appropriation seem to happen often when art forces us to consider the ways in which appropriation can be used as a means to reshape, reconsider, or refine various identities, and not just racial ones.

³⁶³ The Best Rap Album category at the Grammy’s in 2014 included no women, as is typical in mainstream rap music award competitions.

This reminds us that appropriation is never a simple act, especially between groups with disparate access to power and privilege, and that it can reveal as much about the performative complexities of gender, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and age in the U.S. popular imagination as it does about race.

“He Thinks He’s Down,” in its exploration of white artists and activists in the civil rights era who struggled with ideal white manhood, imagined black masculinities as powerful, free, sexual, urban, and cool, and then adopted their imaginings in their work and lives, explores the ways in which appropriation was used in that period to navigate the complexities of racialized gender. The four case studies investigated here expose the ways in which popular culture served as a site to imagine and debate multiple white masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the common elements in these imaginings, and the ways in which the imaginings differed. The case studies also reveal the deep and consequential links between ideal white manhood and marginalized black manhood.

Throughout the era, the demands of an idealized white masculinity changed as the United States turned to a consumer-based economy, redefined public and private life, and engaged in several wars. Furthermore, idealized white masculinity changed in response to various social movements that challenged traditional gender, race, age, ethnicity, and sexual roles in U.S. society. While several marginalized groups were engaged in these social movements, the black freedom struggle often dominated media and public discourse, which altered the popular perception of black men in particular. In many ways black men came to represent aspirations for freedom, democracy, and strength that for so long had defined U.S. national identity.

The case studies demonstrate the ways in which the instability of both white and black masculinities in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s created a space for white artists and activists who felt marginalized from ideal white manhood because of their ethnicity, age, sexuality, and other factors to critique its tenets and reshape their own performances of masculinity by appropriating imaginary black manhoods. The artists and activists studied here had a variety of motivations for wanting to abandon hegemonic masculinity and therefore it is not surprising that the ways in which they appropriated black masculinities, and the meanings they attached to it, varied as well. Moreover, as the demands of hegemonic masculinity and the popular perception of what it meant to be a black man shifted, the possibilities for deploying black masculinities, for profit, for politics, or for personal reasons, transformed as well.

Notwithstanding their differences, what the case studies have in common is that they show that white men who felt marginalized were driven to appropriate black masculinities because of a belief in the ability of those masculinities to free them from the dominant expectations of white manhood. These white men believed that the black man's isolation from privilege made him more free, more powerful, and more masculine than his oppressors.

The case studies are also linked by the consequences of the white artists' and activists' appropriation of imaginary black masculinities. In using black manhood to reinvigorate their own masculinity, the white artists and activists investigated here often perpetuated stereotypes about African Americans that had long been used in the service of white supremacy. They reduced black men to a series of consumable

images and reproduced them in popular culture and political activism, drawing attention away from the complexities of life for black men in the United States. Furthermore, their focus on the liberatory powers of black masculinities frequently ignored the oppression of black women, silenced the black women who worked in the black freedom struggle, perpetuated the sexual objectification of women's bodies, assumed the superiority of masculinity over femininity, and misunderstood the ways in which performances of masculinity and femininity informed one another. Finally, in seeking to abandon many of the expectations of white manhood, the artists and activists confirmed their white privilege. They could decide to adopt black masculinities at their convenience and were not necessarily isolated from real power because of that decision. Black men were not afforded this privilege in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

In exploring these connections, "He Thinks He's Down" has reconsidered several important social and cultural theories. Scholars have argued that masculinity is performative and unstable. They have also demonstrated the ways in which various groups of marginalized men have negotiated masculinity and the equally performative and unstable categories of race in order to gain access to whiteness and the power that comes along with it. This dissertation, however, highlights the ways in which artists and activists wishing to critique hegemonic manhood, not gain access to it, have negotiated masculinity. Men like Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Tom Hayden, Todd Gitlin, Paul Potter, Hugh Hefner, George Armitage, Jack Starrett, Gordon Douglas, and Larry Cohen negotiated racialized masculinities in order to find power in marginality. They used black masculinities to do this

because they believed that African American manhood was powerful enough to withstand their political and social banishment. Ultimately, though, their appropriations worked in the service of white privilege, not marginalized manhood.

Second, this dissertation extends the conversation about appropriation beyond the frameworks of economic exploitation and racial bigotry. Studies of minstrelsy and Rock & Roll have confirmed the ways in which appropriation serves to financially and politically benefit white individuals and corporations, as well as serve as an outlet for white denigrations of black life. Scholars have also demonstrated the ways in which appropriation of black culture, especially during the Harlem Renaissance, helped white Americans move into a uniquely U.S. modernity. Appropriations of black masculinities by marginalized white men in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s reveals the ways in which adopting racialized manhood allowed men who felt isolated from white middle-class ideals of masculinity to adopt traits perceived as ideal for living outside hegemonic frameworks. This kind of appropriation was still exploitative, but had different motivations, and this study has revealed new ways of thinking about the ways in which race, gender, age, sexuality, and class were negotiated in these types of contexts.

Finally, this dissertation extends the project of historians who are arguing for the probative value of popular culture studies. Popular culture, as many historians have pointed out, can be very political. But “He Thinks He’s Down” also demonstrates the ways in which politics can be understood as popular culture. Most poignantly in the case of SDS, political movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, especially the black freedom movement, permeated the U.S. zeitgeist. This was

partially a result of the growth of the power and influence of the popular culture industry in this period, but it was also a result of the black freedom movement's power to create opportunities for popular reconsiderations of U.S. values, norms, and performances, all at the heart of popular culture.

Each chapter presented here serves as a case study of the relationship between marginalized white men and African American men in popular culture. They are not identical; nor are they fully unique. Each demonstrates a small part of a larger phenomenon during the civil rights era. Together, these case studies demonstrate, quite poignantly, the ways in which appropriation was an insufficient tool in the pursuit of radical manhood in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The white artists and activists examined here were seeking a masculinity that felt more authentic to them than ideal white, middle-class masculinity in this period. But appropriation is often about consuming an image and then reproducing it, until, as Caramanica points out in his critique of Macklemore, the cultural performances on which it was supposed to be based are watered down to the point of non-existence. In the civil rights era, Mailer, Kerouac and the white men in SDS tried to feel more authentically masculine by consuming what was really a representation of black masculinities. Hefner and several white Blaxploitation directors represented an imaginary black masculinity in the pursuit of profit. Ultimately, all of these artists and activists used a version of racialized masculinity that was a copy of an image. And as cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard points out, the copies of an image, or the

“simulacra” as he terms them, have great power as symbols of our social identities, but depict things that have no basis in reality.³⁶⁴

Beyond the Era

By the late 1970s, hegemonic masculinity demanded of white men many of the same things that it had in the previous twenty-five years: virility, individuality, strength, and capitalist prowess. It also, however, incorporated some of the counterhegemonic masculinities that were popular in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s by emphasizing “men’s liberation” and promoting narcissistic pleasures. According to scholar Michael Kimmel, for instance, in an effort to reject feminism, hegemonic masculinity in this era allowed middle-class white men to be primitive, fraternal, fashionable, and urban, all traits previously understood as a revision of ideal manhood.³⁶⁵ Kimmel emphasizes that by combining elements of 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s counterhegemonic masculinities with some of the elements of idealized manhood from the same period, hegemonic masculinity survived many of the attacks from various political and social movements. These traits, understood by the artists and activists studied here to be associated with black masculinities, were absorbed into the ideals of white middle-class masculinity.

This absorption was apparent in popular culture in the late 1970s. Popular movies emphasized liberated, strong, experimental, and violent manhood in a series of action films; Rock & Roll music celebrated virility and non-monogamous heterosexuality; fashion and grooming magazines for men were prolific; and

³⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

³⁶⁵ Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 174.

popular literature, including the novels of Philip Roth and Norman Mailer, emphasized the value of an unsophisticated manhood that was commonly associated with racialized groups, such as Jewish Americans. This did not mean that all popular culture promoted the new hegemonic masculinity— *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) challenged binary understandings of gender and sexuality and Christopher Lasch famously critiqued mainstream manhood in his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979)—but the influence of this reconstructed version of hegemonic masculinity was powerful in the late 1970s. It would only grow in the 1980s.

Historians have tended to emphasize a popular rejection in the late 1970s and 1980s of the masculinities that were associated with Black Power. They argue that black men were either ignored or reviled in the popular culture of these decades, partially as a reaction to the politics of black liberation and the threat that it posed to hegemonic masculinity. This, they contend, was most obvious by the 1980s, when young African American men took on mythical status as predators and the greatest threat to U.S. society.³⁶⁶

Popular culture in the 1980s usually presented black masculinity as assimilated into ideals of middle-class white manhood or completely removed from

³⁶⁶ For examples, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

any acceptable norms of masculinity. For instance, by the 1980s, black masculinities, while often ignored, mostly appeared in popular culture in the non-threatening form of integrated middle-class friends and partners, such as in the “buddy films” of the 1980s like the *Lethal Weapon* series. Gone were the heroic rebels of bohemian culture or the politicized young men of SNCC.³⁶⁷ When a black male rebel did appear in popular culture, he was demonized as a gangster, a thug, a welfare dependent, an absentee father, or a drug addict. These images were not very appealing to white men wishing to rebel against hegemonic masculinity. This would change with the advent of Hip-Hop culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which many scholars have looked at as a site of white appropriations of black masculinities and as another example of the ways in which black manhood is altered to serve white purposes.³⁶⁸

Even if mainstream culture in the late 1970s and the 1980s seemed to see black masculinities as having nothing positive to offer, however, marginalized white men continued to engage with black manhood and other racialized masculinities. For instance, disco and dance culture, with their roots in urban clubs catering to black communities and featuring the art of black DJs, were adopted by gay men and eventually became core features of urban gay life. The fashions and music of disco and dance culture were part of a direct challenge to hegemonic masculinity by

³⁶⁷ See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*.

³⁶⁸ For examples, see E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggas, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2005); Kevin Phinney, *Souled American: How Black Music Transformed White Culture* (New York: Billboard, 2005); Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

marginalized men in their emphasis on gendered and racialized traits that were commonly associated with femininities.³⁶⁹

Marginalized white men's appropriation of black masculinities in the late 1970s and early 1980s differed in many ways from those investigated in this dissertation, but they did continue, despite not always being recognized by academic scholars or cultural critics. As hegemonic masculinity, marginalized masculinities, popular images of black manhood, and popular culture changed, the appropriations necessarily changed with them. As evidenced here, appropriation is directly influenced by its historical context. Furthermore, focusing on binaries such as racial strife versus racial reconciliation or inside groups versus outside groups can lead scholars and critics to miss the subtle ways in which appropriation continued to serve as a site for negotiations of racialized gender throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

Can He Be Down?

When appropriation is understood in these ways, there is a lot more work for scholars to do to unravel the often subtle but meaningful relationships between race, gender, appropriation, and popular culture. Explorations of historical appropriations between various racialized groups in the United States are key to undermining the persistent misconception that U.S. race relations were always dictated by a white-black binary. Deeper investigations of the ways in which

³⁶⁹ For explorations of the role of disco in this era, see Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the Backlash Against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 276-306; Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: the Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005).

appropriation has served as a site for negotiations of identities that inform gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, religion, and age are necessary to complicate the ways in which gender operated in various historical contexts. Finally, an analysis of the ways in which appropriations of popular culture have allowed men and women to explore femininities would greatly enrich scholarly theories on the subject. It strikes me that cultural and scholarly conversations about appropriation seem to have surfaced most often when white *men* have adopted black masculinities. “He Thinks He’s Down” is no exception. Making space for explorations of women’s roles in popular culture, cultural appropriation, and racialized gender relations in U.S. history is imperative for enriching the field.

In focusing primarily on white men, however, I hope I have undermined the social power of whiteness and masculinity, not privileged them. Bringing attention to the ways in which Americans consider, negotiate, and perform white masculinities helps to highlight the fact that they are as arbitrary and ephemeral as the categories of race and gender that they are often used to oppress and marginalize. If they are as arbitrary and ephemeral as “woman,” “black,” “Latino,” “Jewish,” “immigrant,” “Muslim,” etc., then there is no reason why “white” and “masculine” should have more real or imagined power. And if they did lose their illogical power, perhaps we could imagine a way in which appropriation could be understood as sharing instead of taking.

But if the two streams of popular culture investigated in this dissertation, black and white—sometimes parallel, sometimes blending, sometimes diverging dramatically—are never equal in power and size, can there ever be a cultural

relationship between the two that is not exploitative? Can we imagine a way that the larger stream does not always overpower the smaller? The most convincing answer is no. Or at least not in the world in which they historically and presently exist. Many scholars point out that there is no real way to separate white American and African American culture because they have been entwined for too long. This may be true, but it does not mean that the two have equal power in U.S. society. Until white male privilege is acknowledged and addressed, appropriation may always be a problematic interracial relationship.

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