

B. . ' A B :
C (B) *
A

Guy Mark Foster

B. di C ege, SA

While transgender has served as a kind of umbrella term in recent years for cross-identifying subjects, I think the inclusivity of its appeal has made it quite unclear as to what the term might mean and for whom. . . . [W]e have hardly begun to recognize the forms of embodiment that fill out the category of transgenderism, and before we dismiss it as faddish [as some have done], we should know what kind of work it does, whom it describes, and whom it validates. Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds.

—J. Jack Halberstam (49)

White man, hear me! A man is a man, a woman is a woman, a child is a child. To deny these facts is to open the doors on a chaos deeper and deadlier, and, within the space of a man's lifetime, more timeless, more eternal, than the medieval vision of Hell.

—James Baldwin (726)

A year before the Supreme Court's historic

tools, Wright's narrative acquires a new relevance in an era marked by the proliferating deaths of cis, trans*, and non-binary black people at the hands of law enforcement officials (often black and brown men) and white vigilantes.² Some have called this an epidemic of fatal anti-transgender violence in the United States.

people can l-look at you and s-see that you're a man." However, Carl has anticipated his wife's principal objection and has a ready answer for her:

Ha, ha. No, Lucy. I just looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I've got on a dress and I look just like a million black women cooks. Who looks that close at us colored

women are nonwomen-nonmen. This conclusion is based on our premiss of whites—white men and white women—being both human, being both Presence, and our premiss of blacks, both black men and women, being situated in the condition of the ‘hole,’ being both Absence” (*B* 4, 124). For Gordon, the existential condition of being considered a “hole,” or an absence of human presence, aligns with feminine lack in a Lacanian sense. What this means is that black men, regardless of the genitalia they were born with, are positioned closer in an anti-black world to individuals assigned “female” at birth—both blacks and whites—than to white individuals who were assigned “male” at birth. In terms of sexuality, this model might translate into something like the following: “[A] black man in the presence of whiteness stands as a hole to be filled; he stands to the white man in a homoerotic situation and to the white woman in a heterosexual erotic situation with a homoerotic twist; she becomes the white/male that fills his blackness/femininity” (127).

This is hardly a new insight about anti-black societies. Its absurd parameters were first sketched out well over a century ago by W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously noted that juxtaposing black and white bodies in the same spatiotemporal landscape makes possible extraordinary effects out of ordinary situations. In such settings, a single black man and a single white man standing side by side, but separated by an abstract—although no less real—“color line,” may end up producing a skewed scenario in which the two will experience asymmetrical outcomes in life due to contrasting skin color. In this context, the white body indexes humanity, whereas the black body indexes something quite different. In Fanon’s inimitable words, for whites, “The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. . . . The Negro is taken as a terrifying penis” (177). Reduced to the genital, or to the biological, as Fanon characterizes it, the black person, whether man or woman, is not fundamentally human in the way that whites are fundamentally human, or perceived to be; the black person is a threat to white sovereignty and therefore must be contained, if not destroyed—hence, the significance of my second epigraph. For James Baldwin, black men, black women, and black children are tragically absented from the normative, human categories of “man,” “woman,” and “child.” After all, these categories have already been colonized by *hi*_̇*e* men, *hi*_̇*e* women, and *hi*_̇*e* children.⁸

Wright’s singular brilliance was to transfer such an insight to the segregated terrain of a pre-civil rights era North American city and to update it by fleshing out the absurdist gender and sexual dimensions submerged therein. These more complex narrative dimensions become obscured, I argue, when Du Bois’s signature concept, the color line, is restricted to its more literal meaning. However, for Gordon, “The [Du Boisian] color line is also a metaphor that exceeds its own concrete formulation. It is the race line, as well as the gender line, the class line, the sexual orientation line, the religious line—in short, the line between ‘normal’ and

‘abnormal’ identities” (*Ejje ci* 63). By staging a black-white encounter in which the story’s central black male figure cross-dresses (not principally to garner self-recognition from others as a woman but rather to claim recognition as a cis-gender man in our society’s normative terms—that is, as his family’s breadwinner and provider), Wright allows his protagonist, by the end of the narrative, to recover a modicum of gender and (hetero)sexual integrity. However, as I further suggest, the author manages in addition to critique and invert the normative hierarchy of human value that had been affixed so firmly to so-called black and white bodies for generations.

Indeed, as the story unfolds, it is revealed that Anne and Dave Fairchild hardly

Blackness to the bodies of people culturally designated as black only serves to naturalize race as a property intrinsic to some raced groups while conveniently being sidestepped by others. Such practices must assiduously be problematized to disrupt the pernicious assigning of “human” and “nonhuman” categories of being to those groups who, on the one hand, might be advantaged by those operations and those who, on the other, might be most disadvantaged by them—in this case, whites and blacks, respectively (333).

C : *- B

Some critics have suggested that Wright’s preferred literary strategy for restoring black male gender and sexual integrity was to highlight the way this figure’s banishment from these norms results in his no longer being properly a man.⁹ For Marlon Ross, “Man of All Work”

literalizes the connection between black male emasculation and race rape. . . . Wright is here embodying the idea that black urban men are emasculated partly because they are disallowed from taking the traditional husbandly role of family provider, while black women are seen to usurp that role due to their access to more reliable forms of domestic labor in the cities. (“Race” 323–24)

While there is much validity to Ross’s claim, I approach the narrative through a different lens. In exploiting gender as a fungible property, something that is interchangeable rather than stable and fixed, I argue that Wright’s text is able to manipulate the raw materiality of the fictional body to produce a dizzying narrative, one that both encompasses normative understandings of race, gender, and sexuality in terms of their ontic registers and simultaneously flips those understandings on their heads. As I suggest above, the author’s creative choices make possible an unhinging of Blackness and whiteness from black and white

American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn the female is within itself. . . . It is the heritage of the *her* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood." Notably, for Spillers, this black woman who lies within the black male is hardly understood as something to suppress or refuse, but rather as a "*r e e i* potential[ity]" (278). Bey provocatively suggests that "there is something decidedly non-normative, something even transgender, about Spillers's black heritage advancing the "power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (281). What Bey is referenc-

A Biography of E. C. Reed, M.D. (1912), Snorton leans into Spillers's pronouncement that it is "the heritage of the *her* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood" (278), to say "yes" to her who lies within him, to critique Fanon's gendered complaint in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that "the black is not a man" (8). Snorton discovers that, in these works, the black mother chiefly functions as a figure of abjection in the absence of black fathers, which in turn leaves these male protagonists without proper role models for establishing and sustaining a normative masculine identification. However, for Snorton, because of the careful policing of black women's reproduction during this period, their bodies played a vital role, for whites, in the maintenance of the color line and thus the production of "raced" identities. Hence, "the project of defining black manhood within a modernist idiom would necessitate an encounter with the figure of the black maternal as a character and as the ground of nonbeing that engenders black manhood" (108). In other words, there could be no escape from this figure; she could only be embraced.

It is Snorton's close readings of these unconventionally trans* figures in literary narratives that are most useful for my purposes here. In such narratives, Snorton seeks to "explai[n] how the condensation of transness into the category transgender is a racial narrative, [and] how blackness finds articulation within transness" (8). To make this "articulation" visible, Snorton holds no particular fidelity to contemporary understandings of trans*-ness nor to Blackness, especially those that require bodily ontology to be a privileged sight of interpretation. This allows him to read trans*-ness and Blackness semiotically—as phenomena that are produced on rather than in the body, often by external forces. The Du Boisian concept of double consciousness, for example, becomes a way for Snorton to read trans*-ness onto Blackness by locating a similar "double-ness"

B B B ?

male figures, whatever these characters' actual sexual orientation, reflect their authors' larger concerns about the deteriorating health of the black community, specifically the health of its black men. Set on a college campus in the mid-1960s, "The Alternative" centers on a group of young black male students who spy on a fellow black classmate having sex with an older man who is visiting their dormitory. Staring at the deviant lovers through a keyhole, the students heckle and use homophobic taunts against the two men, one of whom is described as stereotypically effeminate, only for the group to find themselves, in Ruff's words, "aroused by what they are watching, [so that the young men] turn against one another, their masculinity suddenly at issue" (Introduction xxi). In his 1977 analysis of "The Alternative," John Wakefield suggests that homosexuality is not the central focus of Baraka's story; rather, homosexuality—as abstraction and less so as an identity—is primarily the symbolic vehicle through which the author examines how, in his view, class and racial concerns intersect with gender expectations and norms to debilitate black masculinity. For instance, when the young black men witness their classmate, Bobby Hutchens, with a male paramour, the scenario is meant to communicate the "realization that the black middle-class students see their own weakness and crime in this [same-sex sex] act." As Wakefield puts it, "Bobby Hutchens serves merely as the scapegoat of their private fears at being emasculated by their entry into the black middle-class world" (199).

The homosexual as scapegoat has a long history, not only within American literature more broadly but also in black American literature more specifically.¹³ For writers such as Baraka, this figure marks the boundary line separating black marginality, and hence criminality and inferiority, from "white decadence" more broadly. Considered to be neither normatively black nor normatively white, the black "faggot" therefore serves as the "ideal policing vehicl[e] for constructing black male warrior identity" (Ross, "Race" 294). Rendered ineffectual by his proximity to homosexuality in this expanded sense, this figure embodies what a strong—that is, heterosexual—black man ought to be. For Baraka, the black college student of this era found himself straddling competing ideological traditions: "Education meant for the intelligent black the opportunity of joining the growing ranks of the black middle-class[;] it also represented, in Baraka's view, a temporary alienation from traditional black values" (Wakefield 188). Symbolically speaking, much like the homosexual (whether literal or metaphorical), such men teetered dangerously close to the edge of crisis and chaos. Their "crime" results from their naïve immersion in white cultural norms that are inhospitable to African Americans. As university students, these men reflected a growing concern, among many black nationalists such as Baraka himself, that

palpable anxiety as a result of his infatuation with white European high art and literature—an anxiety which can be glimpsed in this character's tendency to quote ostentatiously from the works of seventeenth-century English white male poets such as Richard Lovelace and Robert Herrick.

between blackness and queerness” that he observes in some African American-authored fictions (Scott 16).

As I have already noted, anti-black racism yielded a crisis in the ability of cis-gender black men and women to embody normative gender and sexual roles. Moreover, such a crisis was endemic to Blackness across gender and sexual categories—that is, it hardly mattered if one self-identified as heterosexual, homosexual, or transgender to suffer this crisis. Before he had encountered Baraka’s story, Ruff believed his selection process to be a sound one. As he explains it:

Early on I didn’t intend to use this story. My agenda was set: I planned to historicize
cn hen
hened218.56(n)10.9it

African Americans have of sharing a collective fate in an anti-black world, and the priority Ruff himself seems to attach to Blackness over gayness, there is little mystery as to which approach represents the most attractive option to him.¹⁶ This preference is somewhat telegraphed by Ruff's insinuation of a greater prestige

a sexual deviant, at least to whites, even to white lesbians, gay men, and transgender men and women. Armed with this rationale, Ruff has an epiphany, writing: "Including [these authors] meant that literature, not the sexual orientation of its writers, had to define this collection, with bisexuality and homosexuality as literary themes my guiding principle" (Introduction xxiii).

If Ruff organizes his anthology with an emphasis on a collection of written works that share common themes, rather than on (sexual) identity per se,

Although African American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolized a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heteronormativity. The racialized eroticization of black heterosexuals and homosexuals outside the rationalized (i.e., heteronormative) household, *b i c*, aligned black straight and gay persons. (87; emphasis added)

For better or worse, then, black straight persons always already presumably have

4. For more on black celebrity personalities and anti-gay bias, see Elwood Watson.
5. Ralph Ellison notes that whites' "i e r e ξ" are "those eyes with which they [whites] look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). These first set of "eyes" function as a metaphor for the way some whites internalize assumptions about black people based on stereotypes and then project those assumptions onto actual black men and women they meet or with whom they interact.
6. In her memoir *M b d, Be, .L e, Se, d, Life . i, h Cr ss d, e, s, er* (2003), Helen Boyd writes that "Children and teenaged girls are especially good at clocking cross-dressers. Kids are still learning about gender and haven't learned yet that it's impolite to point and ask questions" (201).
7. This essay's use of trans* inclusive language is indebted to several sources, including Dean Spade's essay "About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts" (2011). Here, Spade notes that otherwise smart and well-informed allies at times traffic in language that is not only sexist and transphobic but also tends to rely on problematic notions of biological determinism. For Spade, any terminology that references physiological or morphological features as a guarantor of some essential knowledge about someone's body "reproduce[s] the oppressive logic that our bodies have some purported biological gendered truth in them, separate from our social gender role. Our bodies have varying parts, but it is socialization that assigns our body parts gendered meaning." For more on trans* inclusive language and the surrounding debates, see Ray Briggs and B. R. George.
8. This insight is derived from Richard Dyer: "White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability, and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled), is to be white" (26–27).
9. For more critiques on Wright and gender, see Paul Gilroy and Trudier Harris.
10. According to Lewis Gordon, this is a world that "phenomenological sociologists refer to as an *idp* type. An ideal type is a subjunctive reality. It is a world with a strict logic and strict rationality. It is a world that is governed by a specific ontology where the human being collapses under the weight of existence" ("Race" 129).
11. There is some speculation about whether Amiri Baraka was actually heterosexual. Several writers detail the close relationship Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) had in the late 1950s and 60s with the openly gay Beat poet Frank O'Hara (see Brad Gooch, Andrew Epstein, and Joe LeSueur). Ron Simmons views the semi-autobiographical novel *The S, e f D, e, s, e* (1965) as a thinly veiled account of Baraka's own early homosexual past, which the author later

disavowed. While other scholars acknowledge the possibility of Baraka's past same-sex desire, they prefer to view his depictions of homosexuality as largely symbolic (see Marlon B. Ross ["Camping"] and Darieck Scott). José Esteban Mu~

18. For Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, "trans-identities are either collapsed into gay identities (gender and sexuality become one) or trans-identities are detached from gay identities (gay is subordinated to sexuality). In neither instance, it could be argued, are trans-identities granted visibility or voice on their own terms" (86–87). On this problem in queer theory, see Jay Prosser.

C

- "accident, ." *Journal of American Studies*, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/1051?rskey=Nv5VdC&result=1#eid.
- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. *Agony: The Story of a Black Man's Journey to the End of the World*. Duke UP, 2012.
- Baldwin, James. "'Go the Way Your Blood Beats': An Interview with James Baldwin." *The New Yorker*, 12 Oct. 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/16/baldwin, Melville House, 2014, pp. 57–74.
- . "The White Man's Guilt." *Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, The Library of America, 1998, pp. 722–27.
- Baraka, Amiri. "American Sexual Reference: Black Male." *Black Literature and Criticism*, William Morrow and Co., 1966, pp. 216–33.
- Bey, Marquis. "The Trans*-ness of Blackness, The Blackness of Trans*-ness." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 275–95.
- Bloodsworth-Lugo, Mary K. *Trans: A Journey of Self-Discovery*. State U of New York P, 2007.
- Boyd, Helen. *Mother's Milk: A Journey of Self-Discovery*. Seal P, 2003.
- Brandt, Eric, editor. *Black Literature and Criticism*, G. S., 1966, pp. 216–33.
- Briggs, Ray, and B. R. George. "Words for Everybody." *Aeon*, 6 Mar. 2019, www.aeon.co/essays/why-trans-inclusive-language-is-no-threat-to-cis-women.
- Dawson, Michael. *Behemoth: The History of the Americas from the First Peoples to the Rise of a New Superpower*. Princeton UP, 2004.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Penguin, 1989.
- Dvorak, Petula. "The Murder of Black Transgender Women is Becoming a Crisis." *The Washington Post*, 17 June 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-murder-of-black-transgender-women-is-becoming-a-crisis/2019/06/17/28f8dba6-912b-11e9-b570-6416efdc0803_story.html.
- Dyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *Priest*, edited by Michael Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, Westview P, 2003, pp. 21–32.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. Vintage, 1995.
- Epstein, Andrew. *Beats: A Journey of Self-Discovery*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Translated by C. L. Markmann, Grove P, 1967.

Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in British Trade: A Query for Critique*.

- Prosser, Jay. *Sec ɔ S i s The B ɔ N r r i e f Tr s s e i j*. Columbia UP, 1998.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert F. *B c G M E s s s*. New York UP, 2001.
- Ross, Marlon. B. "Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective." *G , L e b i , B i e , Tr s s g e d e r . L i e r , r e d , C , r e*, special issue of *C*, vol. 23, no. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 290–312. *JST R*, www.jstor.org/stable/3299563.
- . "Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest." *M s c i i j S d j e d , F e i i j , The r . Ne D i r e c i s s*, edited by Judith. K. Gardiner, Columbia UP, 2001, pp. 305–43.
- Rowley, Hazel. *Rich r d , r i g h t . The Life d , T i e s*. Henry Holt, 2001.
- Ruff, Shawn Stewart, editor. *G h e r B d , B e A A h g f L e b i d , G F i c i b A f r i c - A e r i c r i e r*. Henry Holt and Company, 1996.
- . Introduction. Ruff, *G h e r B d , B e s*, pp. xxi–xxix.
- Scott, Darieck. *E r g , A j e c i B c e s , P e r , d , S e i j i , h e A f r i c A e r i c L i e r r g i i*. New York UP, 2010.
- Simmons, Ron. "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals." *B r h e r , B r h e r . Ne r i i g b . B c G M e*, edited by Essex Hemphill, Alyson Publications, 1991, pp. 211–28.
- Smith, Barbara. "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism." 1978. *A f r i c A e r i c L i e r r The r . A R e d e r*, edited by Winston Napier, New York UP, 2000, pp. 132–46.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *B c B , h S i d e . A R c i i j , r f Tr s d e i j*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Spade, Dean. "About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts." 3 Feb. 2011, www.dean-spade.net/2011/02/03/about-purportedly-gendered-body-parts/.
- Spillers, H. J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." 1987. *A f r i c A e r i c L i e r r The r . A R e d e r*, edited by Winston Napier, New York UP, 2000, pp. 257–79.
- Terry, Jennifer. *A e r i c b , e s i S c i e c e , M e d j i e , d , s e i j i M d e r S c i e*. U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Tompkins, Avery. "Asterisk: Keywords." *Tr s s g e d e r S , d j e Q r , e r*, vol. 1, nos. 1–2, 2014, pp. 26–27.
- Wakefield, John. "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): The Alternative." *The B c A e r i c Sh r , S , r i , h e O , h C e , r A C e c i f E s s s*, edited by Peter Bruck, John Benjamin Publishing Co., 1977, pp. 187–204.
- Walker, Margaret. *Rich r d , r i g h t , D e i c G e i s , A P r , r i j , f , h e M , C r i c i L i j r*. Amistad, 1993.
- Warren, Calvin. "Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology." *Tr s s g e d e r S , d j e Q r , e r*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 266–74.
- Watson, Elwood. "Black America, Sexuality, and the Politics of Homophobia." *M e d j*, 17 Dec. 2018, medium.com/@elwoodwatson890/black-america-sexuality-and-the-politics-of-homophobia-590d7492218b.

Weheliye, Alexander. "After Man." *The Electronic Literature Review*. *The Electronic Literature Review*, special issue of *The Electronic Literature Review*, vol. 20, nos. 1–2, Spring-Summer 2008, pp. 321–36. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajm057>.

Wright, Richard. "Man of All Work." Ruff, George and Beckett, pp. 278–315.