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Alien Love: Passing, Race, and the Ethics of the Neighbor in Postwar African American Novels, 1945-1956

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

In English

By

Hannah Wonkyung Nahm

2021

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2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Alien Love: Passing, Race, and the Ethics of the Neighbor

in Postwar African American Novels, 1945-1956

by

Hannah Wonkyung Nahm

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor King-Kok Cheung, Co-Chair

Professor Richard Yarborough, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines Black-authored novels featuring White (or White-passing) protagonists in the post-World War II decade (1945-1956). Published during the fraught postwar political climate of agitation for integration and the continual systematic racism, many novels by Black authors addressed the urgent topic of interracial relationality, probing the tabooed question of whether Black and White can abide in love and kinship. One of the prominent—and controversial—literary strategies sundry Black novelists used in this decade was casting seemingly raceless or ambiguously-raced characters. Collectively, these novels generated a mixture of critical approval and dismissal in their time and up until recently, marginalized from the African American literary tradition. Even more critically overlooked than the ostensibly raceless project was the strategic mobilization of the trope of passing by some midcentury Black

writers to imagine the racial divide and possible reconciliation.

This dissertation intersects passing with postwar Black fiction that features either racially-anomalous or biracial central characters. Examining three novels from this historical period as my case studies, I argue that one of the ways in which Black writers of this decade have imagined the possibility of interracial love—with all its political pitfalls and ethical imperatives —is through the trope of passing. Through the paradoxical leitmotif of passing with its ontological defiance, fugitive liminality, and its distinctly African American historical association, Willard Savoy, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin invoke the Judeo-Christian ethics of the neighbor—loving one's neighbor as oneself—to envision love across different borders and to underscore the need for *intersectional* accountability, breaking down the binary divisions associated with race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as between the oppressor and the oppressed. They imagine passing as a vexed yet productive site or passage way toward neighbor-love. The primary methodological thread that interweaves my chapters is the use of intertextual lens: By reading the novel under study against works by the same author or by other African American writers, I spotlight the shared commitment of the authors studied to the ethics of neighbor-love as well as their deep engagement with the African American literary tradition.

The dissertation of Hannah Wonkyung Nahm is approved.

Fred D'Aguiar
Kenneth Reinhard
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University of California, Los Angeles

2021

For King-Kok Cheung and Angela Deaver Campbell,

two strong women and mothers

who embody the essence of Neighbor-Love

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I would also like to thank those teachers and mentors who have supported and inspired me in my graduate career. In the UCLA Department of English, I am indebted to Jenny Sharpe, the Vice-Chair of Graduate Studies, for her advice, wisdom, and compassion. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Caroline Streeter and Michael Colacurcio who encouraged and sustained my passion for American literature and whose mentorship and care I relied on during the various milestones of graduate studies. For their tireless support and nonjudgmental kindness, I must

thank Michael Lambert, our Graduate Adviser, and Jeannette Gilkison, our forever Departmental mother. I am also grateful to Chris Mott who has been my role model for excellence in teaching. In the UCLA Department of Political Science, the late James Tong deserves my heartfelt thanks for his kind spirit and intellectual brilliance. Beyond UCLA, I want to offer my deepest thanks to Eric Sundquist (Johns Hopkins) and Erica Edwards (UC Riverside) for their generosity and guidance during my earlier years as a doctoral student.

During my graduate years, I have been blessed with countless friends and colleagues whose good cheer, moral support, and words of compassion have made my life sane. To name all of them here would create perchance a list as long as the dissertation itself. Lest my memory falters and I am remiss in acknowledging all the names of these beautiful souls, I want to thank them collectively in this imperfect way instead. That said, I must acknowledge one person in particular: Angela Deaver Campbell, my supervisor and mentor at the UCLA Scholarship Resource Center. Over the years, Angela has nourished me, body, soul, and mind. Without her profound empathy, sage advice, and lively anecdotes, this dissertation would not have been written. This is why I have dedicated this dissertation to Angela alongside King-Kok. They are my role models, my surrogate mothers, and they have empowered me to love myself so that I have the wherewithal to love my neighbors. They have championed those of us who are moms in graduate school. They have taught me that I matter and that, roughly quoting King-Kok here, even if I do not do anything more in life; even if I did not pursue such a thing as a dissertation, I am already a "success" because I'm a "heroic mom."

Finally, I want to thank my family for their patience and love during this journey. I am grateful that the universe has brought us together. I am thankful to my parents, siblings, and my boys, Casper, Hero, and Jordan. I am blessed to have my soulmate, Jason Owen.

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INTRODUCTION

Alien Passers, Racialized Neighbors, and Postwar Black Novels

In the original 1956 version of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, sentient vegetations from outer space infiltrate the fictional town of Santa Mira, California, claiming the lives of all but one of the townspeople. But what the people face is not death but something more sinister: It's nothing less than complete bio-colonization where aliens take over the bodies of the human hosts, leaving no trace of difference on the outside but a world of difference within. Annihilated are complex human emotions such as "desire, ambition, faith" and most devastatingly, "love."[1] While *Invasion* represents but one of the dozens of "ufology" films to emerge in the post-World War II years,[2] it stands out from its alien-genre cohorts in the striking absence of blood and gore and loud explosions. In their place, we have a tale—and terror—of passing: Extraterrestrial impostors pass as humans, and as there are no physical demarcations of their alien ontology, they are bound to take over the world.

Many have come to view the film as reflecting the general paranoia of McCarthy-era America, but the theme of alien passing in *Invasion* may have a racial subtext, especially vis-à-vis the legacy of African American racial passing.[3] The U.S. wartime agenda bolstered the cultural mood that passing was no longer relevant in the period of growing economic prosperity

[1] *Invasion of Body Snatchers,* directed by Don Siegel (United States: Walter Wanger Productions, 1956).

[2] See "UFO and Aliens in Film," *History.com,* updated 15 Dec. 2018; 9 April 2010. www.history.com/topics/paranormal/ufos-and-alien-invasions-in-film.

[3] See Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000). Though of a different cinematic genre, this ufology film emerged in the wake of the late-1940s "message movies" in which Hollywood filmmakers began "to conceive of racial passing as an appropriate narrative device for the representation of 'minority' experience to 'mainstream' audiences." It denoted a shift in Hollywood's view of itself as purveyor of"'mere' entertainment" to promoting "cinema as a powerful shaper of national identity" and "public discourse about race" (Wald 88-9).

and racial parity, a view shared by the newfangled Black popular magazines such as *Ebony, Negro Digest,* and *Jet* (Wald, *Crossing the Line* 118-20). Yet what this film reveals about passing at midcentury is that belying the cultural dictum of racial passing as passé, it was very much current. It reveals White America's persistent preoccupation with and anxiety about passing—and, perhaps more ominously for some, the paradoxical potential of passing as an ethical mechanism.[4] As the psycho-analytical theorist Slavoj Žižek notes, this film reveals the unconscious operative of "everyday racism," where even as the West tries to "accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail which bothers us," something as pedestrian as the way "they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us."[5] Yet passing, as captured in this film, is a complex affair, discouraging a hasty conclusion that the passing aliens represent Blacks or other marginalized groups. In their monomaniacal mission to eradicate nuanced differences and flatten humanity into monstrous sameness, the alien passers bear the mark of the dominant racist order. Furthermore, near the end of the film when the last two humans of the town—two lovers—attempt to pass as aliens so as to keep their humanity and love alive, we see an uneasy tripartite alliance of passing, love, and redemption. It is a moment that punctuates the ethical

[4] In recent years, writing conventions have shifted to capitalizing racial Blackness. While there are ongoing debates as to whether racial Whiteness should also be capitalized, for the purpose of stylistic consistency and in recognition of both Black and White being historically constructed racial terms, I will capitalize both Black and White throughout this dissertation. My decision to capitalize White is also to stay vigilant about the ways in which we "implicitly affirm" Whiteness "as the standard and norm" when we capitalize all other racial or ethnic groups but let White slip into invisibility by denoting it with a lower case. See Kristen Mack and John Palfrey, "Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity." *MacArther Foundation*, 26 August 2020, https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity. For a helpful overview of the current debates on the case of capitalizing racial Blackness and Whiteness, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black," *The Atlantic,* 18 June 2020, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.

[5] Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007; Great Britain: Granta Publications, 2006), 67.

imperative of using the optics of deception and subterfuge to defend one's basic humanity and love—the key element that gives human connection meaning.

In 1947, the same year she published her second and ostensibly nonracial novel *Country Place*, Ann Petry wrote "The Necessary Knocking on the Door," a short story that meditates on the ethics of Judeo-Christian neighbor-love and the meaning of good Samaritanism (and its perversion) in the context of Black-White race relations.[6] Set in a weeklong Christian conference in a northern city, it narrates the tale of Alice Knight, a Black attendee who, blinded by the religious occasion, sits next to a White woman at lunch, not realizing that this Mrs. Gib Taylor is a devout racist from Mississippi. Mrs. Taylor then loudly hurls a racial expletive at Alice, rendering her feeling like an "animal, an outcast, an obscene crawling thing" (248). In her alienation and abjection, Alice begins to "hate" not just the speaker of the racial slur but all Whites categorically (247). That night Alice hears intermittent moaning from next door that seems to bespeak of someone in mortal pain. Going out into the hallway to check, she learns that the neighbor in apparent distress is the White racist from the luncheon, and she freezes, unable to perform the "necessary knocking on the door." After a long night of troubled sleep, Alice learns of Mrs. Taylor's death, and the story ends with the hotel custodian quoting the doctor, "[I]f anybody'd known about her havin' a heart attack they coulda saved her" (251).

With its emphasis on the preventability of Gib Taylor's death, the ending homes in on Alice's ethical responsibility to her neighbor in distress despite the latter's racism. Yet the story is sensitive about mutual accountability and holds the White woman equally responsible. The irony of Gib Taylor's failure to carry out neighbor-love, the centerpiece of Judeo-Christian

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[6] "The Necessary Knocking on the Door" was first published in *The Magazine of the Year 1947* (August 1947): 39-44. My subsequent reference to this story will be from her short story compilation *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2008).

doctrine, is that, to borrow a short story title by Flannery O'Connor, the life she saved could have been her own. I mention the exigencies of the Judeo-Christian ethics of neighbor-love in Petry's short fiction and have begun this introduction with the reading of alien passing in a popular postwar film so as to underscore the centrality of passing and the ethics of the neighbor in my study of African American literature at mid-century. The respective publication and production dates of "Necessary Knocking" and *Invasion*—1947 and 1956—also offer a frame to my loosely ten-year chronological focus. Given the simultaneous penning of Petry's "The Necessary Knocking" and *Country Place*, how does the former complicate the seemingly nonracial landscape of the novel? How might the story's insistence on the ethics of neighbor-love against the backdrop of the cultural ambivalence toward passing, guide us to read other midcentury novels by Black authors?

This dissertation examines Black-authored novels featuring White (or White-passing) protagonists in the post-World War II decade (1945-1956), an understudied period eclipsed by the Chicago-school naturalism of the 1930s—which remained influential through the 1940s—and the ensuing Black Arts movement of the 1960s. Published during the fraught postwar political climate of agitation for integration and the continual systematic racism, many novels by Black authors addressed the urgent topic of interracial relationality. Not stopping at whether Blacks and Whites can peacefully coexist or sufficiently tolerate each other, these works probed the tabooed question of whether the two historically embittered groups can abide in love and kinship.

At times explicitly—as in William Demby's 1950 novel *Beetlecreek* or Ann Petry's 1953 *The Narrows* which explore the themes of interracial friendship and love, respectively—but more often implicitly, a remarkable cadre of postwar Black writers contributed to the imaginings

of the Black-White relations in the contradictory face of the nation's professed democratic ideals and its racist *de jure* and *de facto* practices. One of the prominent—and controversial—literary strategies sundry Black writers used in this decade was casting seemingly raceless or ambiguously-raced central characters. Indeed, this decade witnessed a remarkable proliferation of what critics have variously termed "raceless," "anomalous," "white-life" or otherwise racially-indeterminate novels, a literary phenomenon that generated a mixture of critical approval and dismissal in their time and up until recently, relegated to the fringes of the African American literary tradition.[7] Even more critically overlooked than the ostensibly raceless project was the trope of passing some Black writers of this period strategically mobilized to imagine the racial divide and possible reconciliation. Perhaps the most famous of the passing novels of this decade is James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and even as the novel has garnered profuse critical attention, it has seldom been read alongside other contemporaneous passing narratives. As is the case for Baldwin's work where the White-presenting protagonist also performs sexual passing, passing novels and what Gene Andrew Jarrett calls "racially anomalous literature" are not mutually exclusive and call for an intersectional study that can shed a new light on both.

This dissertation puts passing narratives into dialogue with midcentury Black fiction that

[7] This genre of African American texts has collectively eluded the conventional parameters of the modernist Black novel that has inscribed politics and thematics of race—whether racial uplift, suffering, or protest—as the only suitable and authentic subject matter for the Black writer. See Gene Andrew Jarrett *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Such narrative transgressions are not novel in the annals of African American literary history per se, as we can point to various historical junctures where writers ranging from Paul Laurence Dunbar, George S. Schuyler, to Toni Morrison and others have defied the Black code of authenticity, with the first of these novels dating back to as early as 1890 with Amelia E. Johnson's novel *Clarence and Corrinne: or, God's Way*. See Robert Fikes Jr.,"The Persistent Allure of Universality: African American Authors of White Life Novels, 1845-1945" in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* (21.4, 1997): 225-231. Yet what *is* remarkable, are the sheer density and concentration of these novels in the 40s and 50s. To exemplify, according to one critic's calculation, over a third of "the thirty-three Negro novels written between 1945 and 1952 have been predominantly or exclusively white cast of characters" (Bone 169). For the discussion of Dunbar, Schuyler, Morrison (and the historical romance writer Frank Yerby) and their defiance of the literary norm of Black authenticity or "racial realism," see Gene Andrew Jarrett, ibid.

features either racially-ambiguous or biracial central characters. Examining three novels from this historical period as my case studies, I argue that one of the ways in which postwar Black writers have imagined the possibility of interracial love—with all its political pitfalls and ethical imperatives—is through the trope of passing. Through the paradoxical leitmotif of passing with its ontological defiance, fugitive liminality, and its distinctly African American historical association, Willard Savoy, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin invoke the Judeo-Christian ethics of the neighbor—loving one's neighbor as oneself—to envision love across borders and to underscore the need for *intersectional* accountability, breaking down the binary divisions associated with race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as between the oppressor and the oppressed. These writers intimate passing as a way to discover the ethics of neighbor-love, that is, passing (both racially and more generally) as a kind of pathway into the role of the other that instantiates what is alien both in the self and Other, thereby encouraging intergroup empathy. While my methodology is eclectic and strategic rather than directed by any singular school of thought, an intertextual thread interweaves my chapters. By reading the novel under study against works by the same author or by other Black writers, I spotlight the shared commitment of Savoy, Hurston, and Baldwin to the ethics of neighbor-love as well as their deep engagement with the African American literary tradition.

This dissertation highlights postwar Black writers' unique contribution to the recalibration, complication, and expansion of the theme of passing in the African American literary tradition. Throughout African American literary history, Black writers' use of the trope of passing was never monolithic. Pre-Harlem Renaissance writers, for instance, imbued passing with significations and implications distinct from their New Negro counterparts.[8] As Fabi, Wald,

[8] M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 4-6.

Ginsberg, Sollors and others have noted, passing has multiple valences, meanings and nuances; it is both deeply conservative and profoundly radical in its implications across various nodes of identity, including race, sex, gender, and class. As Wald articulates, even as "the enterprise of passing" can be "contradictory, self-defeating, or otherwise impracticable," passing has been cautiously efficacious "as an 'actual' mode of political or ideological critique" (8). Grounded as it is in African American Black-to-White trajectory, passing carries negative association of race betrayal, cynical opportunism, death (the tragic mulatto/a convention), escapism/exile (flight to Europe), or loss (of self and community belonging).[9] At the same time, passing can also encapsulate social satire, mockery of White supremacy ("fooling our white folks," as Langston Hughes has famously spoken), deconstruction of racial binary and other essentialized identity categories, and the radical and empowering reclamation or remaking of the self.[10] Broadly defined, passing is "the crossing of any line that divides social groups" and can include "an experience of living as a spy" with a sense of "double consciousness of his subterfuge," or a trickster figure who plays a "'capital joke' on society" (Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both* 247, 253). The implication of this broader definition of passing is that passing embodies subversive propensities—something like iconoclastic trespassing—one that can infiltrate,

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[9] For pre-Harlem Renaissance writers' complication of racial passing, see Fabi, *Passing*; for the gendered dimensions of racial passing, see Wald, ibid; for passing and loss, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard UP, 2014).

[10]Hughes qtd in Wald (*Crossing the Line* 8). for the intersectional reading of passing (race, sex, gender, class, nationality), see Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996); for a cultural-studies reading on passing as self-empowerment and self-making, see Brooke Koreger, *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003). For a reading on a racially deconstructive and strategically intermittent uses of passing, see Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing," *Diacritics,* 24.2/3, Critical Crossings (Summer-Autumn, 1994), 43-57. For a thematic reading of passing in American literature, see Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial* Literature (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 246-284. For a reading on the twenty-first century application of passing as a rhetorical trope, see Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*.

disrupt, or upend the status quo.

The Haunting of Passing: The Relevance of Passing during the Postwar Era

While some critics demarcate the mid-1800s to 1930s as the pertinent timeframe for the study of passing in American culture and literature, passing has a long history predating 1850 and continuing long after the WWII years.[11] Beginning with the earliest chapters of the nation's past, passing took firm root: Runaway slaves disguised themselves as White, Native American, "various tradespeople, upper-class, and even assorted [European] nationalities," revealing in their wake the various implications of passing: survival, freedom, self-dignity, and the instability of racial categories (Cutter 52-4). From its nascence, African American literary tradition too, was imbricated in passing of sundry all-but-White characters as the various editions of the earliest-known African American novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel,* illustrate.[12]

Passing has continued to haunt the collective American psyche throughout the postwar years; yet to date, no sustained literary study has focused exclusively on the motif of passing and the midcentury Black novels.[13] We can trace the critical dearth to various factors. First, throughout various junctures of the African American literary canon formation, its influential critics and Deans—to borrow Jarrett's metaphor—have harbored suspicion and bias against novels centered on all-but-White characters, especially the "mulatta figures" and the feminine— thus negative—association of passing; they were equally averse to promoting

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[11] Martha J. Cutter, "Why Passing is (Still) Not Passe After More Than 250 Years: Sources from the Past and Present," *Neo-Passing: Performing Identity After Jim* Crow. Ed. Mollie Godfrey and Vershawn Ashanti Young (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 50-1. For scholars who bracket the relevance of racial passing between 1850s to 1930s, see Cutter n63-4.

[12] For in-depth analysis of Brown's various novel editions of *Clotel,* see Fabi, *Passing,* 7-48.

[13] While Wald, Watkins, Smith and others have studied passing and midcentury films and popular Black presses or individual novels from this period, no literary study to date has exclusively read passing and postwar Black literature.

passing's negative connotations of myopic opportunism and race betrayal and the worrisome perpetuation of the tragic mulatto/a stereotype largely disseminated by White authors (Fabi, *Passing* 2-3 106-7). Consequentially, by the second-half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the next, the dominant association of passing was with "dying or with racial betrayal and racial forgery"; narratives that do not fall in line with these conventional expectations often fell out of radar, regardless of the author's race.[14]

Secondly, the critical gap has to do with political censorship and the postwar mood of cultural optimism. Black popular periodicals such as *Ebony* and *Jet* triumphantly pronounced passing as passé, even as these magazines treated their readers regularly to titillating confessionals on passing (Wald 118-9). These magazines participated in the general sense of postwar optimism of economic prosperity and promises of racial equity; they were driven by commercial self-interest to groom their Black readers to be middle-class consumers (128-30). In reassuring their mainstream sponsors of the health of the burgeoning Black middle class, the Black popular publications fell in line with *"the Cold War Consensus*," a "political and cultural settlement" that disseminated the notion that the only way they and other historically marginalized "could gain recognition for their contribution to the war effort was by limiting their demands for such recognition."[15] The popular Black magazines reassured Cold War ideologues that Blacks were good citizens and would not threaten the body politic by engaging in the un-American act of passing or trespassing—that is to say, encroaching upon the ontological real estate of Whiteness. For their "submission" to this anti-Popular-Front liberal compromise,

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[14] An example of such forgotten novels is J.T. Trowbridge's *Neighbor Jackwood,* white-authored Narrative on racial passing. See Cutter, "Why Passing," 55.

[15]Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993), 2; original emphasis.

Blacks and other subjugated groups "were allowed to participate more fully in the postwar culture of consumption" (Corber, *National Security* 2). In fact, Cold War America was mired in heightened paranoia about passing—communists passing as ordinary citizens, homosexuals passing as straight—together, these passers posed a national-security threat (8-9). In this paranoid atmosphere of the "infiltrated" body politic (3), Blacks passing as White—or Jews passing as Christians—would have likewise offset the national-security alarm.

The postwar decade seems particularly ripe for sustained critical reading in light of its ambivalent political and cultural disavowal of passing. As incipient Black periodicals' keen interest in what Wald has termed "'postpassing' narratives"[16] ironically reveals, this decade had no shortage of interest in and witnessing of the phenomenon of passing. In pairing articles of postpassing confessionals with photo collages of racially-inscrutable faces and provocatively daring the reader to guess their racial identity (Black or White), not only did these magazines satisfy the readers' ongoing hunger for passing narratives, but they subversively deconstructed the racial binary that they purportedly supported, revealing that the dominant ideology of national wellbeing and racial stability was never one of passive complicity but fraught with ongoing frictions and contradictions (Wald 127).[17]

Black popular publications and their readers were hardly alone in their repulsion-attraction to the theme of passing. White America too, promised lucrative reward for postpassing narratives. Consider, for instance, Hollywood's remarkable investment in producing multiple passing films in this decade: *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), *Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries*

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[16]The "post" here signifying that racial passing is obsolete due to the growing opportunities for upward mobility and "social wellbeing" Blacks supposedly enjoyed (Wald 119).

[17]Corber also concludes that the postwar-liberal ideology of national unity and stability was never one of passive indoctrination but a continuously contested and contradicted enterprise (*National Security* 17).

(1949), *Show Boat* (1951), and later, the remaking of the 1930s film *Imitation of Life* (1959).[18] Similar to Black popular magazines of the period, these mainstream cinematic narratives of passing promoted "liberal parables about the ability of African Americans to establish themselves as justly 'deserving' citizens within—and therefore despite the construct of "'race'" (Wald 84).[19] Even as these films vilify "racial discrimination and exclusion" that compel racial passing, they simultaneously upheld the Black-White structural divide by implying that "the real heroes of the films are sympathetic whites and an American class structure that promises racially defined subjects the means of establishing themselves as successful citizens despite" and *because* "of their 'difference' from the white majority" (85).

The midcentury Black writers such as Savoy, Hurston, and Baldwin would have been attuned to the remarkable cultural phenomenon of passing that went beyond a story one read about or watched on the big screen. For some Blacks who were able to satisfy the Caucasian phenotypical prerequisites and for Jews, Italians, Irish and other groups of European descent, passing was a personal if not a demographic reality. For Blacks, two major factors—the Great Migration (the mass exodus of Blacks from the rural South to the industrial North) in the earlier part of the century and the Second World War—provided wholesale opportunities for passing.[20] Among Blacks who passed included untold number of Black GIs who, after serving as White to eschew racism in the military, were loathed to return to civilian life as "second-class"

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[18]Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible,* 1, n161.

[19] The protagonists of *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries*, for example, were given "bourgeois agency and (gendered)) respectability, retaining many of the social and material 'wages' associated with 'white' identity even though they ultimately renounce crossing the line as a means of social and economic mobility" (Wald 84).

[20]Brent Staples, "Back When Skin Color Was Destiny—Unless You Passed for White." Editorial. *The New York Times* 7 Sept. 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/opinion/editorial-observer-back-when-skin-color-was-destiny-unless-you-passed-for-white.html.

Americans. While the nature of passing frustrates exact figures, according to one demographic tabulation, over "150,000 Black people sailed permanently into whiteness during the 1940's [sic] alone" (Staples).[21] This phenomenon would not have eluded the keen observation of Savoy, Hurston, and Baldwin.

This decade also experienced a remarkable flux in the making of Whiteness. Formerly non-White ethnic/cultural groups, including Jews, Italians, Irish and Catholics, "passed" into official Whiteness, a phenomenal enactment of the instability of Whiteness that would not have been lost to the astute eyes of Black American writers. It was an instantiation that explains the explosion of Black-authored novels that explore Whiteness in this period. In its recognition that "racial hatred" thwarted the war effort, the Roosevelt Administration "often decried discrimination in the broadest terms, condemning racism against African Americans as well as against those of various immigrant backgrounds. In practice, however, by offering a much greater degree of incorporation to Jews and other European groups than to black," it reinforced the system of racial binary.[22] Various government organizations including the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) and the military did away with the previous practice of "narrower racial designations" and broadly recorded Jews and others of motley European extraction simply as "white." While Jews, Italians, Irish and others were integrated into the military, "blacks and Asians were segregated into their own units" (Goldstein 192). All the while, the one-drop rule of the Jim Crowe-era played Blacks against other ethnic

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[21]One such famous African American who passed into permanent Whiteness after his WWII military service was the long-time editor of *The New York Times*, Anatole Broyard, whom Henry Louis Gates, Jr. surmises to be the real-life inspiration for Philip Roth's character Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000). For further details about Broyard's passing and the Coleman Silk connection, see Brent Staples; see also Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), 180-214.

[22] Eric L. Goldstein *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 192.

minorities, rendering Blacks hyper-visible and underscoring the former's unassimilable alterity while saddling African Americans to "disproportionately bear the burden of racial representation" (Wald 14). In short, Black writers of this decade would have had much food for thought in regards not only to the fluidity of race in general and Whiteness in particular but to the potential retooling of passing as a subversive literary and political strategy.

The critical shortage of studies on passing in postwar African American literature is all the more regrettable because key Black writers of the WWII-era did not subscribe to a static convention of passing but reshaped it for their unique purpose and in the socio-political times they occupied. As we will see, growing numbers of critics acknowledge that predating the formal emergence of Whiteness studies, midcentury Black anomalous fiction has theorized Whiteness as a dominant yet unstable signifier.[23] Likewise, postwar narratives on passing have anticipated what some contemporary scholars have called "neo-passing"—a term that denotes a broadening of the scope of passing from the typical Black-to-White trajectory to the intersectionality of passing identities (gender, sex, class, race, ethnicity, etc.).[24] I posit that neo-passing is not a post-segregation emergence but one that some Black writers of the postwar decade have already imagined in their nuanced and creative uses of passing.

Strangers Yet Kin: Blacks, Jews, and the Judeo-Christian Ethics of the Neighbor

While other previously non-White European groups such as Italians and Irish entered into the fold of Whiteness during the 1940s, it was the passing of the Jews into state-sanctioned

[23] As Veronica T. Watson posits, this is not unique to this decade but has a long history in the African American critical tradition. See Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013), 4-6.

[24] See Mollie Godfrey and Vershawn Ashanti Young, eds., *Neo-Passing: Performing Identity After Jim Crow* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Ilinois Press, 2018).

Whiteness that especially laid bare the artificiality of the system of racial dichotomy and its contingent claim of White superiority. Midcentury Black America and its writers, most notably Baldwin and Hurston, did not miss the irony of how Jews could go from being like Blacks to being like White and how the racial gulf separating the two was literally skin deep. They were able to observe how the American racial imaginary is deeply vulnerable to the conceit of passing, paradoxically sanctioning passing even as it feared its exposé of the myth of racial essentialism. In the liminal figure of the Jew, Baldwin and Hurston saw the ethical potentials of passing.

Transformed from being White in the nineteenth century to the racially-inscrutable Other in the twentieth-century progressive era, then back to being White again in the WWII era, the racially unstable figure of the Jew chronically threatened the existential fabric of the American Black-White racial duality and the claims of the "power of whiteness" (Goldstein 40-1). One of the ways that White America tried to tame the Jewish-identity threat "was to liken Jews" at opportune historical moments to Blacks "regardless of the social and historical differences that made comparison difficult" with the "underlying message" of their "unassimilability in American society" (42).

However, the "inclusive nationalism of the Roosevelt Administration, the integration of Jews into the U.S. military, and the spread of new theories about the difference between 'race' and 'ethnicity' all paved the way for Jews to gain acceptance as American whites during the war years" (193). Consequently, while "*Jew*" in general "stopped being the description of a racial category" and now became an "*ethnic*" one, "blacks remain *racial*," largely based on skin complexion.[25] Even as White America thus entered into an uneasy truce with their Jewish

[25]Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 14; italics in original.

compatriots with the concession of Whiteness so as to stabilize the racial system, the passing of the Jews in the midcentury exposed racial categories as unstable historical constructs. As Karen Brodkin opines, the shifting racial identifications of Jews in the U.S. (occupying the place of White at times and "off-white" at others) have provided the contemporary Jews "a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: of an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness vis-à-vis blackness."[26]

If Brodkin's notion of the Jewish "double vision" resembles the Du Boisian concept of African American double consciousness,[27] this Jew-Black affinity was palpable as well for many midcentury Black writers, including Baldwin and Hurston. I sense that they registered the "off-whiteness" and "racial middleness" of Jewish Americans as an identity grounded in the ethics of passing. As it is precariously positioned in relation to two warring identities, Black and White, the Jewish identity is one of ethical intersectionality and relationality. That is to say, as long as there are Jews—straddling the middle with the threat of passing—Whiteness cannot hide behind the façade of universality, and Black and White universes cannot maintain their claims to mutual exclusivity. In Baldwin's words, "The Jew, in America, is a white man. He has to be, since I am a black man."[28] Even as the former has to pass for White to survive "the fate" of anti-Semitism that "drove him to America"; even as the Jew is forced to do White America's "dirty work" (e.g., collecting rent from Black tenants for the invisible White landlord), Baldwin understands that the

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[26] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers UP, 1998), 1-2.

[27]W. E .B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*: A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999). For further reading on the origin and definition of Dubois' concept of the double consciousness, see Dickson D. Bruce Jr., "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," Ibid: 236-244.

[28] James Baldwin, "Open Letter to the Born Again," *Balwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 786.

liminal positionality of Jewishness can serve to wrest Whiteness out from its privileged hiding and lay bare the violence of its claims to universal power. Jews "were never really white for me," Baldwin writes, whereas "[t]he cops were white. The city was white. The threat was white, and God was white….I knew a murderer when I saw one, and the people who were trying to kill me were not Jews" ("Open Letter" 786-7). The metaphorical murderers, of course, are those who harbor the violence of White supremacy, and the figure of the Jew brings the murderer out into the open by serving as referential contrast and debunking the myth of essential Whiteness.

Like Baldwin, Hurston also recognized the ethical potential of the passing Jew. Her "abiding passion" from at least the mid-1940s to her death in 1960 was the study of Jewish history and its people.[29] Her last unpublished work was a revisionist biography of the Biblical Herod the Great, who, as Hurston interprets, was not a Jew by birth but by conversion; yet he emerges as one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people to whose ethico-religious philosophy Christianity is indebted.[30] She had already harnessed the ethical potential of the passing Jew and incorporated it into the prescient tale of Black cultural nationalism in her 1939 historical novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, where she defies the Biblical orthodoxy of the Jewishness of Moses and retells his tale as one of passing: Hurston's Moses is a biological Egyptian who "crosses over" or passes into Jewishness ("He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian") and becomes the foundational leader of Jewish nationhood, which Hurston's novel conflates with Black nationhood and the children of Israel with Black Americans.[31]

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[29]Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: The Biography of Spirit* (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 136.

[30]Hurston's singular conviction was that the Christian world stood to be corrected regarding this Jewish leader's paradoxical contribution to the emergence of the very Christian doctrine they used to disavow him; the Christian world could gain to learn from the complexity of the Jewish history, its people, and its contribution to Christianity (Plant, Ibid 143-9). See also Michael Lackey, "Zora Neale Hurston's *Herod The Great:* A Study of the Theological Origins of Modernist Anti-Semitism," *Callaloo*, 34.1 (Winter 2011): 100-120. As Michael Lackey expounds, Hurston's explication of Herod's affinity with Jesus and Jesus's indebtedness to the Jewish religious philosophy of the Essenes is a departure from the conventions of modern Christianity that argues that "Christ

As illustrated by Hurston's Moses, for Blacks, the figure of the Jew was much more than a fellow sojourner with parallel historical persecution but an ethico-theological and cultural kin. At times pigeonholed together or pitted against each other by forces of historical circumstances which caused them to view one another with "intermixture of empathy, anxiety, and hostility," Black and Jewish Americans shared a unique bond as their respective historical travails and tribulations made the Exodus-Levitical figure of the stranger in a strange land especially poignant and resonant with their collective psyche (Sundquist *Strangers in the Land* 2-4). Historically, African American culture has defined its communal selfhood founded on the Judeo-Christian theological model of Exodus—that emphasized Blacks' alien status in an oppressive Land (Sundquist 3, 5-6, 95-6).

For the African American writers of this study, the Exodus-Levitical figure of the stranger was closely linked with the accompanying Judaic Biblical precept to love the stranger/neighbor as oneself. As a preacher's daughter, Hurston grew up devouring the stories stories of the Bible—her favorite being Leviticus—and during her graduate years at Barnard, she studied major world religion where she reread the "Bible and biblical history," this time, as a

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emerged *sui generis* and therefore, His being marks a decisive rupture with all previous cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions"; however for Hurston, the exact opposite was the case: A "New concept of God and His relationship to man which had been working like a yeast in Palestine for 300 years [was] emerging, formulated at last as what is now known as Christianity. It was a movement totally within the Jewish people NOT A SUDDEN AND MIRACULOUS HAPPENING AS IS TOLD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" (Hurston qtd. in Lackey 105). Hurston understood that the *sui- generis* notion of Christ thus evacuated him from his Jewish roots and was used by Hitler and other anti-Semites in the twentieth-century to perpetuate "racist-based politics" (105).

[31]Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 103. Hurston's Israelites talk Black idiom and face the same social plagues that Black Americans confront, including intra-communal power struggle and intra-racial colorism. No less than Moses's sister Miriam refuses to accept Moses's wife Zipporah due to her dark complexion (296-8). Sounding very much like the color-
accept Moses's wife Zipporah due to her dark complexion (296-8). Sounding very much like the color-struck Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes,* Miriam insists that regardless of Zipporaph's birth and upbringing in Midian, she is a "BLACK" "Ethiopian" who cannot be respected: "Look how dark her skin is. We don't want people like that among us mixing up our blood and all. That woman has got to go" (296, 297).

mature and critical adult (Plant, *Biography of Spirit* 136).[32] For Baldwin too, the ethics of the neighbor—to love the stranger/ neighbor as oneself—was a key factor in his departure from the Black ministry of his youth (he could not abide by the Black church's withholding of neighbor-love to Whites) and becoming a writer whose creative Jeremiad was, in a sense, to preach the gospel of neighbor-love to the estranged brethren, Black and White.[33] As for Savoy, his commitment to the Biblical maxim of neighbor-love manifests itself in his recurrent invocation of the need for "simple human kindness."[34] As I explicate in Chapter 1 on *Alien Land*, it turns out that etymologically, the simplicity of this act is in its irreducible singularity, and kindness denotes human-relatedness (or kin-ness) or proximity (or neighborliness). Hence the concept of kindness embodies both something akin to the self and the neighbor, and this human kindness is not one of empty, universal platitude but one of radical, irreducible singularity.

A close examination of the Exodus-Levitical injunction of neighbor-love reveals three interrelated elements: one, its radical scope that crosses the boundaries of identity politics; two, the element of passing inherent in its language; and three, the driving force behind this love as being empathy. The key Biblical verses from Exodus and Leviticus read,

> Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing Ye were strangers in the land if Egypt.
>
> ……………………………………………………………………………….
>
> Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but

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[32] See also Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 595.

[33] See Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time, Baldwin: Collected* Essays: 291-347. Here, he exhorts his reader (via the rhetorical nephew James) to the "terrible" yet incontrovertible imperative to love the White racists as one's "brothers—your lost, younger brothers" (293, 294).

[34] Willard Savoy, *Alien Land* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company. Inc., 1949), 28-9; see also 258 and the Dedication page of the novel.

thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. I am the Lord.
…………………………………………………………………………………

But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt[…]. (KJV, Exod. 23.9, Lev.19.18, Lev.19.34).[35]

The two quoted verses from Leviticus read in tandem clarify that the "neighbour" and "stranger" are not mutually exclusive but interchangeable to the extent that they are to be loved as oneself. Hence this commandment to love is not exclusively for "the children of thy people," say, Black or White any other categories of one's belonging, but directed toward a wide range of identity borders.[36] In his exegesis of the original Hebrew scripture, Kenneth Reinhard shows how grammatically, "the particle *kimokha*, 'as yourself' implies "a certain incommensurability that marks the limit of any act of comparison" ("Ethics"). Remarkably then, the very language of the precept of neighbor-love invites the figure of passing; for to love the stranger/neighbor *as* oneself implies two discrete identities that cannot be conflated or collapsed as one in totality. Significantly, Lev.19:18 and 19:34 are the only two places in the Bible where we find this logic

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[35] My choice of quoting from the King James Version (KJV) here is that it is the likely version that Hurston would have had access to as a child in her parents' home as well as the most plausible version that she would have read as an adult. For the monumental impact of the KJV in the American cultural and political fabric, see Brian C. Wilson, "KJV in the USA: The Impact of the King James Bible in the United States," (2011). *Comparative Religion Publications.* Paper 2, http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion_pubs/2. While there were other versions of the Bible available for Hurston's access such as the American Standard Version (1901) and the Revised Standard Version (1945), these generally were not nearly as well received or impactful in the United States as the KJV (Wilson 17). While the nineteenth century was the height of the popularity and influence of the KJV, it continued to have social and political sway over the populace in the twentieth-century America. Significantly, it is the rhetoric and language of the KJV that inspired political speeches for social change, from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr. (Ibid.12).

[36] The dominant rabbinic reading of Lev. 19:18, interprets the "neighbor" (*re'a*) as exclusive to a fellow Jew. It is only in the twentieth-century that we get a broader definition of its constitution. See Kenneth Reinhard, "The Ethics of the Neighbor: Universalism, Particularism, Exceptionalism," *The Journal of the Society for Textual Reasoning* (4.1 November 2005). jtr.shanti.virginia.edu/volume-4-number-1/. Also see Ernst Simon, "The Neighbor (*Re'a*) Whom We Shall Love," *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1975): 29-56.

of one-to-one exchange ("Love *X* as yourself"), underscoring the vital connection between the stranger/neighbor and the self (Reinhard, "Ethics"). As Reinhard further explicates, the syntactical and contextual mirroring of *re'a* (neighbor) and *ger* (stranger) "alters the meaning of each term," revealing the bond between stranger/neighbor and the self as one not based on individual merits, shared values, common features or practices but one stemming from the inextricable "principle of solidarity in self-difference":

> [B]oth the self and the neighbor are "strange," internally alienated from the larger group…..[T]he neighbor emerges from this resonance a singular figure, an excluded element, the aggregation of which can never equal a totality. To be a neighbor in this sense is not only to be a minority or subaltern in relation to a surrounding hegemonic majority, but to become a "neighbor to oneself": alienated within exile, divided from the possibility of self-sameness, configured not only as different but, in the vertiginous space of proximity, as self-different. ("Ethics")

In this way, the very language of the Biblical injunction implies that self-love and neighbor-love are interchangeable—not in totality but in irreducible proximity (for *X as Y* does not mean *X equals* Y.) Self- and neighbor-love singularly *pass* into one another highlighting their mutual strangeness, with the remarkable implication that self-love is a necessary condition for neighbor-love, and vice versa. The inversion of this logic accentuates the ethical exigency of neighbor-love: If one does not love the stranger/neighbor, one does not love one's own alien/self. Baldwin recognized this necessary passing of the self and stranger/neighbor when he insists that Blacks and Whites "deeply need each other" (*Fire* 342) and why he implores his rhetorical nephew to "accept [Whites] with love" even as the task seems impossible or even unreasonable: "But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers" (294)—younger, because Whites do not yet

have the ethical maturity to realize the neighbor/alien that resides in the self makes loving the neighbor a self-directed and self-preserving love as much as it is other-directed and altruistic.

Many contemporary versions of the Bible translate KJV's rendition of "the heart" (Exod. 23.9) as "feelings" of the stranger, thus clarifying that neighbor-love is based on empathy.[37] Departing from its lexical precursor "sympathy" of the previous centuries which came to be synonymous, especially by the nineteenth century, with pity and the condescending "feeling-for" the Other, the term "empathy" appeared on the theoretical scholarly scene in 1909 and came into common usage after World World II.[38] Empathy is an elusive term that has generated a wide array of interpretations and have been taken up by multiple fields of disciplines, including moral philosophy, psychoanalysis, and more recently, by cognitive psychology and neuroscience.[39] Stripped down to its prime denominator, empathy studies scholars generally define empathy as a "cognitive and affective structure of feeling," a kind of "fellow feeling" that encapsulates "feeling with" (as opposed to the "feeling for," as in the case of sympathy) and "thinking with."[40] The significance of empathy as a building block of neighbor-love is that this "feeling-with" makes the seemingly impossible task of this Biblical injunction possible. As

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[37] E.g., New American Standard Bible: "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt. Cf., New International Version: "…you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners."

[38] Meghan Marie Hammond, *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* (United States: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1, 5-8.

[39] With the discovery of the mirror neurons in the early 1980s, empathy studies practitioners now understand that the function of empathy is hard-wired into our brain synapses and we can point to the region of our brain that houses empathy. For further reading on the interdisciplinary approaches to empathy (combining cognitive science and humanities), see Frederick Luis Aldama, ed. *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[40]Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Introduction, *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, eds. Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 1-2.

empathy study scholars have argued, we can empathize with one another on a wide scale, both intragroup as well as intergroup; with people who are lovable as well as unlovable; and we can empathize with people from real life as well as characters from fiction.[41] The verses of Exod. 23.9 and Lev.19.34 implore for empathy by invoking the memory of the Israelites' former alienation in Egypt. Patrick Colm Hogan would call this an instance of "situational empathy"—the shift from ego-driven to "nonego-focused" perspective and feeling—that can be activated by autobiographical triggers, experiential analogies or "structure of memories."[42] The significance of situational empathy is that it is generative of the ethics of care and love that rises above ethics of identity (empathy exclusively based on group belonging). The two ethics—one based on the "fear and pride" of in-group "protection" and the other based on universal care and "compassion"—"are sharply opposed," and the clashing of the two creates a palpable cognitive trauma (Hogan 137, 139). It is perhaps this trauma resulting from warring ethical models that makes neighbor-love so "hard to live with" and so "merciless," as Baldwin puts it ("Open Letter" 785); but as we will see, what makes this commandment compelling nonetheless is that it speaks to us at the psycho-ethical level of our unconscious.

In defining empathy as the "experience of foreign consciousness" that paradoxically serves to "give me myself to myself," Edith Stein, a contemporary of Freud and one of the pioneering philosophers of early-twentieth-century theorization of empathy, intimates the

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[41]For the study of inter-/intra-group dynamics of empathy, Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003); for the case study on empathizing with unlovable/unloving subjects, see Rebecca N. Mitchell, "Empathy and the Unlikeable Character: On Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*," *Rethinking Empathy*: 121-133. See also Eric Leake, "Humanizing the Inhumane: The Value of Difficult Empathy," Ibid.: 175-185. For the study of narrative empathy, see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007). See also ibid., "Narrative Empathy," *Toward Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts:* 61-93; and "Novel Readers and the Empathetic Angel of Our Nature," *Rethinking Empathy*: 21-33.

[42]Patrick Colm Hogan, ibid., 142-4.

traumatic and ethical dimensions of empathy where we paradoxically find our own consciousness through the superimposition of the Other's consciousness onto ours.[43] Empathy had early influenced Freud and his development of psychoanalysis;[44] thus it is not surprising that his concept of the unconscious invites what Eric Santner would call a "pyschotheological" reading where neighbor-love is possible not because of our mutual familiarity but because of our respective, singular "strangeness," our traumatic unconscious making us a "stranger" to ourselves.[45] Elsewhere, Santner imagines neighbor-love as our recognition of the "*creaturely"* in the Other—the uncanny "traumatic kernel" of the unconscious that reveals the Other's "(dis)organized" ego-formation.[46] According to Santner, we can define neighbor-love as turning toward this being who, like us, "is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it" (xii, xiii). How might Blacks' recognition of the alien—be it the Freudian uncanny or the Santnerian creaturely—in the so-called Whites—reactivate their own meta-cultural memory of alienation in Egypt and trouble any easy dismissal of the latter as enemies, them, or racialized other? How do the midcentury Black writers navigate the trauma resulting from the clashing of opposing ethical forces—one based on group belonging and the other based beyond the borders of identity politics—to generate neighbor-love?

Inasmuch as the postwar passing novels frustrate any easy either-or reading of race,

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[43] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy, 1916.* Trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), 11, 89.

[44]See Hammond and Kim, Introduction, *Rethinking Empathy*, 6.

[45] Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenweig* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 3-4.

[46]Ibid., *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), xiii.

sex, gender or other identity categories, the concept of the neighbor is especially useful in reading these works and the ways in which they ruminate on the possibility of love between Blacks and Whites whose individual identities are both curtailed by, and yet exceed, the socio-political labeling of race. As Reinhard theorizes, there is a model of love that can accommodate the complex politics of modernity, "a love both beyond and not-beyond the political," and its locus is in the political-theological "figure of the neighbor—the figure that materializes the uncertain division between the friend/family/self and the enemy/stranger/other."[47] As Reinhard defines elsewhere: Deeply rooted in the ethics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and generating diverse interpretations in the Western philosophical tradition and critical theory, the concept of the Neighbor for Reinhard is expansive—a neighbor, taking its meaning in the English language as one who is " 'nigh' (denoting proximity in time or space)" and " 'boor' (a dweller or place of dwelling…)"— can be as distant and impersonal as proximate geographical nation-states, as technical as a mathematical-set theory, or it can be as intimate as one's romantic partner or as creaturely as an animal.[48] Even from its Judeo-Christian vector, the Neighbor and the injunction to love this figure need not be an ethereal, disembodied theology. In the rabbinic tradition, for instance, a neighbor can be one's wife and sexual intercourse with her an example of neighbor-love (Reinhard, "Neighbor" 708). The Neighbor is a paradoxical concept that, in its near impossibility to be pinned down and numbered, can be pinned down. From the technical field of mathematical set theory, the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou, for instance, theorizes a "political collectivization" of proletarian neighbors who can be counted as such, who

[47] Kenneth Reinhard, "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor," *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18

[48] Ibid, "Neighbor," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin et al. (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2014): 706-712.

defy traditional boundaries of any geographical proximity or nationality (Reinhard 711).

As can be seen from the foregoing definition, the usefulness of the concept of the Neighbor in reading the postwar White-presenting or passing novels is in its flexibility to capture the profound ambiguities and multi-dimensional complexities of their characters and the feasibility of loving the Neighbor who seems profoundly elusive, unaccountable and uncountable but who in fact can be identified and enumerated. Moreover, the theologico-ethical dimensions of the Neighbor can illuminate our understanding as to why, even in the most obviously unlovable (or unloving) characters in these novels, such as Lil Gramby in Petry's *Country Place*, Arvay Henson in Hurston's *Seraph,* or the transgender figure in Baldwin's *Giovanni's* Room, we sense a demand for love, or falling short, demand, in the least, to be accounted for ethically as alien beings much in the way we each are. In other words, even in the characters who seem the least deserving of our love, these novels leave us with vexing narrative residues, a traumatic kernel in their thematics that paradoxically impels us to reconsider our withholding of neighbor-love.

Blacklisted No More: Literary Historical Overview of Postwar Racially-Anomalous and Passing Novels

Up until recently, postwar Black novels depicting racially-ambiguous characters or those that openly explore the theme of passing suffered from a paucity of critical attention or from from unflattering labels of uncouth protest, assimilationism, or naïve universalism. The contemporaneous critical reception of the racially-anomalous novels can be divided generally into two camps: those who disparaged the movement as the Black writer's capitulation to the White mainstream on one end, and on the other, those who applauded it as a kind of creative liberation or even maturation of the Black artist to depict universal humanity. Robert Bone

discounts these novels as amounting to nothing more than an "understandable yet unsophisticated…assimilationist" "propaganda" protesting Blacks' readiness for "integration."[49] For Bone, these novels collectively underscore their writers' enslavement to Whiteness and their betrayal of the Black community: "Conscious avoidance of race is not freedom; it is merely an inverted form of bondage" (249). Invoking the same metaphor of freedom, Richard Gibson, writing for the *Kenyon Review* in 1951, argues the opposite: What the Black writer needs liberation from is not raceless fiction but the pressure to write solely about race from "the Professional Liberal" who assumes that the Black artist "cannot possibly know anything else but Jim Crow, share-cropping, slum ghettoes, Georgia crackers, and the sting of his humiliation, his unending ordeal, his blackness."[50] It is against this literary ghettoization, Gibson argues, that the Black writer "would do well…to finding a way over that wall" (Gibson 255). In either case, we can see that the Whiteness in these novels is taken as given without considering the possibility of Black writers troubling that Whiteness, much less their innovative albeit often subtle use of passing as key narrative strategy.

As for novels that deal explicitly with the theme of racial passing, scholars of African American literature had little to say. For instance, Bone brushes Savoy's *Alien Land* off as a work playing on "the tragic mulatto stereotype" (*Negro Novel* 159). The categorical dismissal of the narrative strategy of passing is perhaps not surprising given the longstanding critical bias against racially-passing narratives (especially works predating the Harlem Renaissance). As it was, many midcentury Black readers and critics were wary of postwar "white-life fiction" as

[49] Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958; Rev. ed., 1965), 168.

[50]Richard Gibson, "A No to Nothing," *Kenyon Review* 13 (1951), 255.

being “a version of literary ‘passing’” that seemingly turned its back on the Black community and its collective “struggle for civil rights in favor of personal gain” (Watson 8). Hence the outright theme of racial passing would have been unpalatable.[51]

With the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in the subsequent decade and its advocacy of cultural nationalism, the mid-century novels featuring White-presenting or passing characters lapsed into silenced obscurity. The vanguards of Black nationalism—LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse and others—“reject[ed] the achievement of virtually every Negro writer of any significance, be it Wright, Baldwin, or Ellison” on their alleged ideological kowtowing to White America.[52] Even as passing persisted in one form or another, by the 1970s, “many African Americans perceived passing as either a relic of the outmoded past or the worst form of treachery.”[53] Even in the less polemic atmosphere of the 80s and 90s, the so-called white-life novels of the postwar years have mostly been ignored. In his comprehensive literary history *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1988), Bernard C. Bell breaks with his critical predecessors and pays closer attention to these novels from mid-century, even taking the time to close read novels such as Demby’s *Beetlecreek* that he considers thematically “nonracial” and hence beyond “the distinctive Afro-American narrative tradition.”[54] Yet Bell, too, like most critics before him, takes the Whiteness of these characters for granted; and in his assumption that

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[51]The term white-life fiction was first coined by Fikes Jr., one of the first commenters to lament the proliferation of seeming-raceless fiction in the postwar era. See “The Persistent Allure.” For the study of long-standing critical bias against pre-Harlem Renaissance narratives on racial passing, see M. Jiulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 1-6, 106-8.

[52]C.W.E. Bigsby, ed. *The Black American Writer.*Vol.1: Fiction (Deland: Everett/Edwards, Inc.1969),16-7.

[53] Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2014), 263. See also Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*: *Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2012), 1.

[54]Bernard C. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* Amherst (University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 189-191, 180).

White-centered novels are "nonracial," he ironically bolsters the liminal power of Whiteness that makes it so dangerous—as I will discuss shortly, its passing as both race and non-race (and hence monopolizing universal humanity).

Attentive to the racial indeterminacy in midcentury Black novels, literary scholars in recent years have highlighted the race consciousness of their authors. In *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998), Claudia Tate includes two novels from this period (Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Wright's *Savage Holiday*) in her post-Freudian psychoanalytical reading to demonstrate how African American writers have variously deployed Whiteness as a censor-evasion strategy to explore the multivalent Black subjective desires—the "repressed and unspoken" private longings and fantasies—that have been deemed taboo or politically inexpedient for the Black subject.[55] Following Tate's lead, Jarrett takes an inclusive approach to the definition of Black American literature and reads many works from the postwar era that had been literary outliers.[56] While Jarrett, like Tate, unveils the ideological underpinnings in the making of African American literary tradition, he further contextualizes the marginalization of various Black-authored postwar novels by showing how the African American canon is fraught with a history of exclusion while focusing primarily on what he calls "racial realism"—writings that insist on mimetic fiction that targets racial conflicts, uplifts and politics—at the expense of other subject matters (*Deans and Truants* 14-6).

On the heels of Jarrett and Tate, a number of scholars have zeroed in on various postwar Black novels' deconstruction of Whiteness and their participation in the larger tradition of

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[55] Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 12, 13-14).

[56] See Jarrett, ed., *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (New York: New York UP, 2006).

African American thought. In *The Souls of White Folk* (2014), Veronica T. Watson devotes a chapter to reading two seemingly raceless novels of the postwar era—Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* and Hurston's *Seraph*—and argues that by debunking the essence of White womanhood and exposing its fraught construction, these writers have contributed to a distinct and prolific tradition in African American letters which she calls the "literature of white estrangement" (5).[57] Like Watson who identifies Hurston's *Seraph* as participating in the larger African American literary tradition of theorizing Whiteness, Stephanie Li situates the novel firmly within the Black linguistic tradition of signifyin(g)—Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Black linguistic uniqueness characterized by "repetition with a difference" and "a difference encoded through intertextual relationships"; Li contends that Hurston interrogates how White characters appropriate Black English for their exploitative purpose, revealing in the process the hegemonic reinforcement of White patriarchy.[58]

Exceptional in its exclusive focus on the marginalized midcentury novels, John C. Charles's *Abandoning the Black Hero* (2013) takes New Historical approach to reading seven novels from this period and argues that far from portraying Whiteness unproblematically, these midcentury novels use the "expansive moral and cultural authority" vested in Whiteness as a "strategy of critical agency" to gain what he calls "racial privacy," or the freedom to bypass the

[57] Watson argues these texts "challenge the myths and mythologies of Whiteness and the meanings that are ascribed to it within American society at various historical moments by forcing readers to confront regressive, destructive, and often uncivilized 'nature' of Whiteness as it is constructed in their worlds" (68-9).

[58] Stephanie Li, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 36, 44. For Hurston's treatment of Whiteness, class and gender, see Laura Dubek, "The Social Geography of Race in Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee," African American Review* 30.3 (Fall 1996): 341-351. For a reading that interfaces the paranoia of whiteness and the 20th-century anthropological notions of eugenics, see Chuck Jackson, "Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics," *African American Review* 34.4 (Winter 2000): 639-660.

professional and creative limitations inherent in their positionality as Black artists.[59] This racial privacy affords the postwar novels—and their novelists—the means to deflect the condescending sympathetic gaze from "suffering Black 'others' and *toward* troubled and troubling White subjects that often unsettle, disturb, and even queer normative understanding of 'whiteness,' and white heteropatriarchy in particular" (Charles 8-9).

My study partakes in this ongoing revisionist conversation; and like these recent scholars, I believe that the insights of the critical Whiteness studies are essential in reexamining Black-authored White-presenting or passing novels of the midcentury. In *White*, Richard Dyer argues that the power of Whiteness derives from its "invisibility" and "ubiquity"; by ignoring "white racial imagery" surrounding us, we become complicit in the cultural hegemony of White supremacy.[60] For Blacks whose historical and personal preservation were deeply enmeshed in surviving White racism, analyzing and mastering the Whiteness of Whites was not an option but a necessity; as the historian David Roediger points out, "from folktales onward African Americans have been among the nation's keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior."[61] I concur with Roediger that the scholarly community has been remiss in denying Black writers their "expertise about whites," which explains why such "serious 'white life novel[s]" of the midcentury by Petry, Baldwin, Wright and others have "left very little impact on American criticism" (8).

Mindful of Toni Morrison's thesis of the permeation of "Africanist presence" in White

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[59] John C. Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013), 6, 8, 10.

[60] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2, 3.

[61]David Roediger, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schoken Books, 1998), 4.

American literary imagination (from Poe, Melville, to Hemingway),[62] this study posits the following axiomatic question: If Blackness thus haunts White-authored literatures that are ostensibly devoid of race (and Morrison would argue that we have been trained to empty these novels of their racial contents), then how can we assume race—both Blackness and Whiteness—does not haunt or have a traumatic presence in the racially-anomalous or White-passing novels penned by postwar Black writers? Indeed, as in the case of White writers who might consciously resist racial themes only to be confronted by the ghosts of race, for Black writers, the haunting of race may be inevitable at the subliminal level. Ann Petry articulates this inevitable haunting of race thus: Notwithstanding the myriad of differences, Black writers have a common theme," namely, "[*w]e write about relationships between whites and blacks because it's in the very air we breathe. We can't escape it.* But we write about it in a thousand different ways and from a thousand different points of view."[63]

While recent scholars have largely read the element of Whiteness or racial duality in the midcentury Black novels as focus of racial critique, co-option, or deconstruction, none to date has read them from the focal point of passing, a critical gap that obfuscates the abundance of intersectional love and empathy that pulsate throughout the pages of these works. The critical oversight is due in part to the limitations of the scope of Whiteness studies which focuses exclusively "on black critiques of white supremacy" without "allowance for the more ambiguous

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[62] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary* Imagination (New York: Vintage Book, 1993). In her influential monograph that broke opened the field of whiteness studies, Toni Morrison argues that we uphold today as classic American literature that claims to be free of race, is in fact teeming with it; and its constructions of the American character and ideals (e.g., "individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell") are possible paradoxically because of that "Africanist presence" (*Playing in the Dark* 5). For Morrison, the question is not how this is possible but how it would be otherwise, considering the thorough permeation of race in this country and its rootedness in American history.

[63] John O'Brien, ed., *Interview with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 73; emphasis added.

implications of such phenomena as cross-racial identification and sympathy" (Charles 16). Indeed, as Charles points out, readers who expect to find volleys of "sustained assault on the wide-ranging, deleterious effects of white supremacy in American society" would be surprised to find that many postwar Black novels "are often as sympathetic in their treatment of white characters as they are critical" (6). In addition to narratives that explicitly explore the theme of passing (such as Willard Savoy's *Alien Land*), Black-authored anomalous novels of the midcentury can and should be refracted from the lens of passing; for both narrative strategies presciently interrogate Whiteness and expose its insidious power of invisibility and claim to universality.[64]

This study demonstrates that passing's destabilization of Whiteness (and race in general) clears the path for ethical and empathic love across the boundaries of race, sex, gender, and class. Even as they deconstruct the privileges of Whiteness and expose the fallacies of White supremacy, the collective agenda of these postwar novels is not one of mere retribution or reverse-hatred. Rather, these novels reveal the ethico-theological implications of race as socio-political or even psychic construct. What moral obligations do Blacks have to Whites who have, whether cynically or unknowingly, invoked the primacy of Whiteness to persecute or otherwise marginalize Blacks? How does passing's deconstruction of the essential self—whether racial, sexual, or gendered—further complicate any clean distinctions between Black and White, us from them, neighbors from strangers? Savoy's *Alien Land* offers an excellent case in point. When the protagonist's Caucasian mother Laura Roberts passes as Black, she learns that she is too White to be accepted by the Black community yet too Black to retain her beloved White

[64]Some anomalous fiction was published with the racial identity of their authors obscured (e.g., Petry's *Country Place,* Hurston's *Seraph*, Yerby's *Foxes of Harrow*); we can say mainstream publishers and at times these writers themselves had a hand in performing what we can call authorial passing.

family and friends. After her death, we find that the only true friend who steps forward to comfort her now motherless son is her childhood friend Dorcas, whose racial status as White should put her in the arbitrary category of foe, stranger, or "them."

While Charles's study touches on many of the critical coordinates that I connect in this study, I believe that our selected tropes—passing and neighbor-love in my case versus sympathy in his—yield a distinct reading of the postwar novels with often radically divergent implications. For instance, working within the affective framework of sympathy with its impulse toward domination and power manipulation, Charles's interpretation carries the potential to reduce the postwar Black writers' project to a disingenuous pretext to execute reverse-oppression or retributive dominance.[65] If the privilege of Whiteness is destabilized so as to elevate Black privilege, what do we make of the sundry moments in these postwar novels where Blackness, too, is deconstructed or troubled? Given that Freudian psychoanalysis pervaded the postwar milieu, how might the political theology and ethics extant in the Freudian concept of the unconscious—the exciting yet dangerous and even "monstrous" provenance of our desire—and the recognition of "the neighbor" as likewise being imbued with this unwieldy unconscious, help clarify the crosscurrents of repulsion and affection that flow between racialized characters of the postwar novels?[66] For instance, Arvay, the protagonist of Hurston's *Seraph,* is hyper-defensive

[65]Charles relies on the affective trope of "sympathy," both in the standard OED definition of "fellow-feeling" and "identification with," as well as in the political sense of dominance and control (17). By this Charles means that "though sympathy is avowedly egalitarian in its intention, it may also have the effect of bolstering rather than eliminating hierarchy and difference—a dynamic that is particularly evident in the contexts of slavery and colonialism" (17). To be able to sympathize with the downtrodden, in other words, is "a paradoxical mode of power" in that "sympathy produces the very inequality it decries and seeks to bridge" (Amit Rai qtd. in Charles 17). In short, for Charles, the postwar Black writers' mobilization of sympathy both works to undermine White supremacy by bridging the Black-White divide with fellow feeling and by activating discursive agency for Black writers to gain power over Whites (17-8).

[66]See Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3-4.

of her racial Whiteness; yet when implored by a young Black girl to identify publicly as her mother, Arvay declares the girl her daughter despite the stigma of miscegenation and her own racism. How might the historical contextualization of passing in the postwar era and our understanding of African American cultural affiliation with the Biblical Israelites of Exodus and the attendant commandment of neighbor-love help us recognize alternate models of inter-subjectivity or inter-relationality as imagined by postwar Black writers?

Midcentury Inflections of Passing—Racial, Intertextual, Sexual and Gender: Chapter Overview

My dissertation analyzes three iterations of passing in the postwar decade: Chapter One identifies passing in its most recognizable form in Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* (1949). Due to the prominence of racial passing in this novel, it has been generically mislabeled as Richard Wright-influenced protest fiction and grouped apart from anomalous fiction of the postwar era. I believe that the label of protest fiction belies the complexities of this novel that reaches beyond racial suffering, protest or uplift. Its relentless defiance of reductive racial binarism and its complication of the very concept of race places it instead in intimate proximity with Black anomalous fiction and warrants an inclusive reading. The novel offers an excellent case study of how a Black American writer from the postwar years takes the motif of passing in its most conventional form (Black-to-White racial passing) and imbricates it with layers of complexities—racial (both inter- and intra-), gendered, psychological, philosophical, and above all, unflinchingly ethical. Savoy's novel reveals that far from monolithic, passing is gradated (in terms of duration and degree), bilateral (passing works both ways: Black-to-White and the reverse), and thoroughly paradoxical.

While reading Savoy's novel, I keep a close comparative eye on its generic predecessors, especially Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and William Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). My reason for singling out these works is that like Savoy, Johnson and Chesnutt introduce a phenomenon we infrequently encounter in a passing tale—a male character who passes—thus offering us a useful montage of masculinity and passing. Mindful as I am about the areas in which Savoy's novel overlaps with its male-passing literary antecedents, I am especially interested in those points where it diverges from Chesnutt and Johnson, and what those divergences signify.

Savoy's revisionist narrative confronts us with the urgent connection between passing and the ethics of neighbor-love, and the implication of passing as the site of gender-power struggle and negotiation. As noted by Robert Stepto, *Alien Land* showcases a male protagonist whose interracial parentage—a Black father and a White mother—is the exact reversal of the expected genealogy. This apparently simple move radically alters the ethical landscape of the passing novel. In previous passing novels the passing character has no moral accountability to his White relations as there is no (positive) relationship there, familial or otherwise (the usual pattern is a father who never acknowledges his paternity whether in public or in private and then either dies—quite conveniently—or by and large disappears from the narrative). In this scenario, then, Whites are more of an abstraction than one's flesh and blood, and one's biological ties to them more a source of angst and enmity than anything else. In Savoy's novel, not only is the White side of the family consistently present throughout the protagonist's journey of passing (or "dual passing")[67] but the maternal family members' love and compassion befuddle the politics of

[67] Here I'm borrowing Baz Dreisinger's term that denotes passing as the default state of being, where a character goes from either Black to White and back again. See Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 139. Other "dual-passing" narratives from this time period would be Langston Hughes's short story, "Who's Passing for Who?" (1952), in *Langston Hughes:*

Black-White racialism that is predicated upon the logic of "us" versus "them," or friends versus enemies. Indeed, the novel complicates any wholesale notion of racial essentialism by accosting us at every turn with this ethical deadlock: By passing for Black, Kern denies his White family; by passing for White, he denies his Black family—with the added burden of betraying the entire Black race. My intertextual reading of *Alien Land* with the novels by Chesnutt and Johnson illuminates Savoy's uses of racial passing that overturn its essentialist foundation, thereby pressing the ethical urgency of Black-White love grounded in the ethics of the neighbor.

In Chapter Two, on Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), I contend that Hurston deploys what I call "intertextual passing" or "textual trespassing" so that her "Black" novel—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)—makes a haunting presence throughout her "White" novel, thereby effectively making the "Black" novel (*Their Eyes*) infiltrate or trespass the universe of the "White" novel (*Seraph*). Each novel involves a woman's journey to discover her womanhood complete with near-identical emblems to mark the respective protagonist's sexuality and the journey of self-discovery (fruit trees, horizon, and the sea); and both Arvay and Janie share uncanny resemblances in their choice of problematic love interests. From the striking narrative voice that resonates in near-identical pitch to the twinning semiotics of threatening landscape (the sinister swamp where Arvay's first-born son dies in *Seraph* and the flooded Muck that eventually claims the life of Tea Cake in *Their Eyes*), the two novels are conjoined beyond the reaches of coincidental parallelism. This deliberate mirroring of the two novels leads me to configure this literary aesthetic as intertexual passing. To be sure, intertextual passing is not

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Short Stories, ed. Akiba Sullivan Harper (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997). Also, Ralph Ellison, perhaps the most prominent American writers (Black or White) of the postwar decade also wrote a "dual-passing" novel in his posthumous work *Juneteenth* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

exclusive to Hurston's *Seraph* as it also occurs in *Alien Land* (Savoy's intertextual dialogue with Chesnutt and Johnson) and, as I will show, *Giovanni's Room* (Baldwin's critique of his contemporaries, Willard Motley and Chester Himes). However, given the degree to which Hurston invokes *Their Eyes* in *Seraph*, the latter is a text that is most striking in its aesthetics of intertextual passing.

I posit that Hurston's last published novel is a daring narrative that is ahead of its time in interrogating Whiteness and exposing it as a socio-political fiction. In thus deconstructing Whiteness, what Hurston endeavors is far from racial retribution or reverse-hatred but part and parcel of her engagement with the possibility of neighbor-love in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, rather than *Seraph* being antithetical to the vision of love we see in *Their Eyes,* Hurston further interrogates the thematic of love explored in the earlier novel—whether self-, romantic, or communal. This time, however, she goes beyond the Black-communal scope to the interracial. In *Seraph,* Hurston contemplates the possibility of a genuine love between Blacks and Whites. I read this interracial love as the Judeo-Christian neighbor-love based on key biographical details from her life and given Hurston's thoroughgoing knowledge and dedication to the Biblical chapters Leviticus and Exodus. I read *Seraph* alongside *Their Eyes* to show how the two novels work synergistically to reveal how love can be a kind of madness that complicates or dis-eases our notions of sex, gender, and class. An intertextual reading of the two works further reveals how paradoxically, this "madness" can beget the love for one's neighbor, or neighbor-love, in all its contradictory senses.

At the same time, the aesthetics of intertextual passing operates to broadens the scope of the two novels. One of the charges lodged against *Seraph* is that the novel is too insular; it says nothing about Black folks and their culture. Similarly, as Richard Wright has leveled, *Their Eyes* is too insular and apolitical because it largely leaves out White folks and their racist ways.

For Hurston, intertexual passing was an aesthetic move to interface the two worlds—Black and White—and bring them together in ethical amity without succumbing to what she saw as the pressure to turn literature into political tracts. In short, the aesthetics of intertextual passing is Hurston's answer to the Black artist's dilemma with her chosen generic medium of literary realism. As I will elaborate further in the chapter, this literary genre proved to be highly volatile and even treacherous for midcentury American writers but perhaps especially so for midcentury Black American writers; for literary realism's allegiance to verisimilitude—or holding up the mirror to reality—can collaborate insidiously with the reality of structural and everyday racism.

The significance of this intertextual passing is two-pronged. By mirroring the two novels, Hurston breaks down the barrier of literary segregation and forges a dialogue toward intercommunal empathy and reconciliation. At the same time, the writer invokes the subversive aesthetics of intertextual passing to capture the Black existential angst and ambivalence in the face of pervasive structural racism of her natal American south and the U.S. at large that tends to reduce passing in any form as capitulation or divisiveness. Hurston's depiction of the paradoxes of romantic love in both novels replicates the paradoxes and potential pitfalls of interracial neighbor-love.

In Chapter Three, on Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), I argue that the author's subversive deployment of sexual and gender passing and his larger commitment to neighbor-love across discrete boundaries become clear when we read the novel against the grain of its literary forerunners—Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947) and Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1952). Baldwin's engagement with Motley and Himes goes beyond aligning himself in a complementary constellation with them in exploring homoerotic desires or counterhegemonic masculinity. Rather, through *Giovanni's Room,* he accomplishes two concomitant goals: to

participate in the Black literary tradition of passing and the motif of the prison narrative; and to critique and revise Motley's and Himes's tendencies to perpetuate homophobia and sexism. While all three writers treat the tabooed theme of male same-sex love with different levels of sympathy and affirm their commitments to a pluralistic identity beyond the boundaries of identity politics, Baldwin underscores Motley's and Himes's narrative shortcomings. When we read *Giovanni's Room* intertextually—as a revisionist narrative against sexism and homophobia—we can see how the novel is not just about queerness or race, or even the combination of the two: Baldwin meditates on extending neighbor-love to non-hetero- or gender-normative men and women (regardless of their race) even as the author exposes their complicity in White patriarchal heteronormativity.

I argue that Baldwin uses the trope of passing as a generative vehicle of love and extends and implores empathy—the key component of neighbor-love—across multiple loci of identity. Defying categorical exclusivity, he champions coalitional identity beyond identity politics that recognizes our shared complicity and accountability in the perpetuation of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Yet his message is not one of recrimination but one of self- and neighbor-love founded on empathy and the mutual recognition of our shared vulnerabilities, transgressions, and regenerative possibilities. While Baldwin extends this intersectional identity across socio-economic class and national boundaries, my chapter will concentrate on his portrayal of the interlocked struggles of sexual and gender identities (and the racial thread that binds them). I fill a critical gap by teasing out Baldwin's narrative response to both Motley's and Himes's aforementioned works: What is missing in much of the critical debate on *Giovanni's Room* as well as *Knock* and Cast is the discussion of women's rights apposite the issue of (queer) male sexuality. I put the spotlight on the seldom-discussed female or feminized characters in

Baldwin's novel—Hella, David's mother, Aunt Ellen, and the transgender at Gillaume's bar—and interrogate how these figures critique the problematic characterization of Emma, the central female character in *Knock* and her subsequent sacrificial death in the service of heteropatriarchy, as well as the feminized queer male character Dido in *Cast,* who likewise dies upholding the norms of heteromasculinity.

In his revisionist novel, Baldwin traces the ways in which people on the sexual and gender margins—namely, queer men and women (queer or straight)—have been complicit in each other's entrapment and cultural marginalization. While the author holds both men and women accountable for the perpetuation of their reciprocal oppression within the racist, hetero-sexist universe, he lays out hope that transcendence is possible in our ability to empathize and to love our fallible neighbors as we learn to love our flawed selves. Remaining true his conviction of our androgynous identity—that men and women are integral to one another—Baldwin performs the Black feminist project of updating his African American literary predecessors' prison narratives to make room to account for the female neighbor.

By underscoring the varied and complex uses of passing in three post-war African American novels, my dissertation broadens the scope of the definition of passing and its sedimentation in the African American literary tradition. It sheds a much-needed spotlight on the neglected corners of the postwar decade where some Black writers channeled the aesthetics of passing beyond the typical trajectory of race shame or betrayal and imagined the possibility of passing as a vexed yet generative metaphor for intersectional love. By excavating the neopassing narrative impulses embedded in various midcentury Black novels, this dissertation creates a bridge between the overshadowed yet vital decade with contemporary narratives on neo-passing. Thus Danzy Senna's acclaimed neo-passing novel *Caucasia* (1998) would do well to be in

conversation with Willard Savoy's proto-neopassing novel *Alien Land* (1947) where both protagonists face the ethical dilemma of dual passing: Which beloved family members do you alienate by passing for White? For Black?

Further, by centering and illuminating Black-authored, racially-ambiguous novels that—perhaps with the exception of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*—have stood on the margins of what constitutes the African American literary canon, my dissertation interrogates the tendentious politics of the larger American literary canon formation and the factor of race that plays into our generic labeling and practices of literary segregation. I use an intertextual methodology to show that far from being apolitical, these texts are historically and aesthetically prescient, transgressing cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s to a much more expansive and nuanced notion of human relationality and social justice.

In advocating the ethics of the neighbor that defies identity politics to offer love across borders of race, sex, gender, class, and nation, the midcentury Black novelists of this study also transgress the perimeters of African American literature into a timely interdisciplinary conversation with a broader range of ethnic American literature and world literature. For instance, the ethics of the neighbor as imagined by midcentury Black writers complements what King-Kok Cheung has called the "ethics of care"—a way of relating that combines the Confuscian concept of "*ren,*" the human kindness that transcends blood relations, and "the feminine ethics" of reciprocal, contextual, and interdependent care. Chinese American writers such as Shawn Wong, Li-Young Lee, and Russell Leong have channeled the ethics of care in their respective works of fiction to account for intersecting identities of gender, race, class, and nation.[68] Through their overlapping ethical vision, therefore, Savoy, Hurston and Baldwin can

[68] King-Kok Cheung, *Chinese American Literature without Borders: Gender, Genre, and Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 142-4.

enter into dialogue with Wong, Lee, and Leong as kindred spirits.

The significance of my dissertation goes beyond the realm of African American literature or American literature and into ethnic studies in breaking down the still dominant paradigm of us versus them that makes the question of loving the other as one's equal so harrowing. The dissertation serves as a caveat for critics to eschew narrow ideological criteria in judging literary texts that invoke nuanced narrative strategies to envision a world without borders.

Finally, my dissertation title, "Alien Love," attempts to capture the various nodes of neighbor-love—including political, ethical, and psycho-theological—in postwar African American novels. I find the term "alien" to be useful in underscoring the tension built into this collective narrative project of loving the racialized other as oneself. On one hand, alien love can connote foreignness, distance, hostility; on the other hand, alien love is suggestive of love as alien, that is, love as constitutively strange, excessive, and traumatic. From this light, the insider-outsider/native-foreigner binary is collapsed, where we are no longer securely on the inside contemplating love for the alien on the outside, but we ourselves are alien inasmuch as the capacity to love is born within us.

As Baldwin puts it, love is "a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth" (Baldwin, *Fire* 341). To tap into that daring for change and growth—that is, love—we must hazard into the terrifying, inner-most recess of our being that houses both love and "murder" (341). It is a traumatic place in the unconscious that Whites are too terrified to confront. Therefore, they project their "unadmitted" and "unspeakable… private fears and longings" unto Blacks. A possible way to channel love instead of murderous hate is through the trope of passing: "The only way he [a White person] can be released from the

Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power" (*Fire* 341-2). Indeed, for Baldwin and some midcentury Black writers, passing has the potential to serve as a vehicle to access the ethics of the Judeo-Christian neighbor-love. I believe Baldwin recognized the ethics of passing extant in the Biblical commandment of neighbor-love. Characterizing Jesus as "the man from Galilee" and thereby accentuating the liminal ontology of his Jewishness, Baldwin emphasizes the verse from Matthew 25:40: "*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it onto* me" ("Open Letter" 784; original emphasis). Significantly, the context of this New Testament verse is where the disciples of Jesus respond in bafflement how this can be so when they have never seen Jesus literally abject: "…Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?"[69] When Jesus likens the abject person in need to himself and exhorts that the disciples' treatment of the "least of these"—the lowest of the of the low, perhaps the most alien and alienating of all neighbors—as being done unto him, he is in a sense implying that he has been—and will continue to—pass as the stranger/neighbor in need. We can say Jesus is using passing as an ethical blackmail to activate neighbor-love. It is a love that threatens to bring out the mutual alien in the self and Other—and hence their uncanny kinship—through passing.

[69] *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version (Oxford UP, 1998), Matthew 25.44.

Chapter 1

Genre, Gendered Passing, and the Ethics of the Neighbor: Interfacing Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* with Chesnutt's *House* and Johnson's *Autobiography*

"Mid-twentieth century reinvention of the 'passing novel'": Introduction

Whether penned by Black or White authors, in traditional passing novels and films leading up to and including 1949, the narrative arch tends to adhere to a rigid formula. Certain factors are so naturalized (e.g., the acceptance of the one-drop law that deems mixed-race individuals as essentially Black no matter how White they appear) that they elide any considerations of possible contradictions or complications extant in the storyline involving passing.[1] As Valerie Smith notes, these works "presuppose that characters who pass for white are betrayers of the black race," leaving no room for interpreting passing in subversive or any other light; moreover, whereas "the logic of these texts for the most part condemns passing as a strategy for resisting racism," Black females who pass are singularly punished with their future options foreclosed while their male counterparts are granted some measure of reprieve (43,44-5).

Among these contemporaneous narratives on passing, Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* (1949)

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[1]Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing," *Diacritics,* 24.2/3, Critical Crossings (Summer-Autumn, 1994), 43-57. Smith uses two contemporary films (Julie Dash's *Illusions* and Charles Lane's *True Identity*) as case studies of works that revise the classic passing narrative by "invoking and subverting traditional uses of the [passing] narrative" ("Reading" 52). Smith counts Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* among those traditional passing tales that impose a rigid and over-determined trajectory on the characters who pass (see footnote on p.43), meaning Savoy's novel accepts racial essentialism as a given; passing is an act of betrayal to the black race and capitulation to white racism; and that passing is unidirectional from black to white. As the reader will see, in this chapter, I argue that quite to the contrary, Savoy's novel achieves all the hallmarks of the revisionist narratives of passing Smith applauds in the two films she cites: Before the emergence of *Illusions* and *True Identity* in the 1990s, Savoy's novel in 1949 has already accomplished the revisionist task of 1. troubling the so-called essential boundaries of black and white, thus exposing the construction of race, whether blackness or whiteness; 2. borrowing Smith's assessment of *True Identity*, Savoy's novel reveals that "passing is discontinuous; it does not conform to the all-or-nothing model upon which the passing plot typically depends"; that is to say, a character can pass intermittently for strategic purposes without committing oneself to blackness or whiteness; and lastly, Savoy's narrative of passing implies that passing is "not…automatically" indicative of "betrayal of the race" (Smith 55).

stands apart. Narrated in the first-person voice that resonates with the one we hear in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the basic plot of Savoy's debut novel seems in keeping with the traditional thematic of passing: It is a story of a biracial male protagonist who begins his racial career as Black but after several starts and stops and ultimately confronted with the insufferable danger—and degradation—of being Black in a racist world, passes for White (similar to the Ex-Colored Man whose tipping point is the witnessing of a gruesome lynch scene, for Kern Roberts, it is the witnessing of the scorched and abject body of his uncle Jake). Yet to view this novel as simple addition to the traditional passing narrative would be a misreading.

Savoy radicalizes the infrastructure and economies of the passing novel, re-calibrating it to underscore ethical ramifications of passing that have heretofore eluded the literary radar. As Robert Stepto aptly points out, Savoy's work "is remarkable as a mid-twentieth century reinvention of the 'passing novel.' "[2] *Alien Land* offers an excellent case study of how a Black American writer from the postwar years takes the oft-used trope of passing in its most conventional form and imbues it with reinvigorated layers of complexities—racial (both inter- and intra-), gendered, psychological, philosophical, and above all, unflinchingly ethical. In doing so, Savoy's novel reveals that far from monolithic, passing is gradated (in terms of duration and degree), bilateral (passing works both ways: Black-to-White and White-to-Black), and relentlessly paradoxical. In this paradoxical space of passing, Savoy's novel pressures the ethics of passing; if prior authors have focused on the abuses of passing, the author redirects the focus to the *uses* of passing, specifically, to the question of whether passing and love can coexist, or perhaps more daringly, whether passing can beget love.

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[2] Robert B. Stepto. Foreword, *Alien Land* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2006), xviii.

While reading Savoy's novel, I keep a close comparative eye on its generic predecessors, especially William Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). I single out these works from sundry other passing novels antedating *Alien Land* because like Savoy, Johnson and Chesnutt introduce a phenomenon we seldom encounter in a passing tale—a male character who passes—thus offering us a rare montage of masculinity and passing.[3] In contradistinction to these preceding passing novels, however, Savoy's revisionist narrative confronts us with the urgent connection between passing and the ethics of neighbor-love, particularly, the kindred love between the historically embittered Black- and White-Americans, and the implication of passing as the site of gender-power struggle and negotiation. In *Alien Land*, Savoy disrupts the conventional trajectory of passing as a means to an end, and instead foregrounds passing in the present progressive. Passing is thus wrested from the tyranny of the final outcome, the reductive racial identification, and situated instead in the transitional, fluid, and visionary realm of the becoming that defies ontological sedimentation. The author imagines passing as a kind of play, one that is at once profane and ethical, and in that paradoxical playfulness, desecrates the dogmatic religiousness of American racism and the construction of race that this race-as-religion sanctions. Savoy undertakes the daring project of using the trope of passing as the agent of love, one that conveys that kindred love between Blacks and Whites is not only a possibility but a moral imperative; and that art and the artist can play a redemptive role in orchestrating this neighbor-love.

[3] Irrespective of the authors' gender, in passing narratives of the post-Reconstruction period, the preponderance of characters involved in passing are female. See M. Giula Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 107.

Alien Land and the Protest Genre: Literature Review

Savoy's debut novel was well received by its contemporary reviewers and garnered great financial hopes for its publisher Dutton (Stepto, Foreword vii). Yet for all the initial accolade and excitement, *Alien Land* went out of print after the first edition and was only recently reissued in 2006.[4] What this means for the Savoyan scholar is that there is considerable critical overgrowth that we must first clear, as it were. There are two general challenges that can detract us: first, the paucity of literary criticism; and two, what criticism there is, is largely off the mark.

A contemporary of Savoy, Robert Bone, in his influential study *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), has only one line to say about *Alien Land*: that it has a "tone of torment" and that it is "a novel of passing which makes use of the tragic mulatto stereotype."[5] By classifying the novel under the genre of what he calls the Richard "Wright School" of "urban realism," Bone sounds a certain death knell for the debutant. For Bone, these "imitators" of Wright—unlike the maestro himself—"seldom rise above mere sensationalism," whether their content be to protest "Jim Crow" racism on one end or urban ghetto or other "social" issues on the other (158). These novels "often amount to a prolonged cry of anguish and despair" with no "sense of form" or "thematic line. With rare exceptions, their style consists of a brutal realism, devoid of any love, or even respect for words. Their characterization is essentially sociological," designed to convince the "white audience…to alter its attitude toward race" (158).

Over the years, this damning label of "the Wright School" has stuck with Savoy's novel. Beyond citing Bone's scathing assessment of urban realism and agreeing with him

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[4] See Northeastern University Press edition; ed. Richard Yarborough.

[5] Robert Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958; rev. ed., 1965), 159.

that most of the writers of this genre are "mediocre," the literary historian Roger Whitlow, writing in 1974, has even less to say about *Alien Land* than Bone's meager one sentence—to writ, none but the title of the novel (115, 117).[6] Whitlow then dismisses most of the so-called urban realist writers as monotonal and incapable of "transcend[ing] the mere reporting of accumulated sociological observations"; the writers "had exposed virtually every form of the filth, corruption, and depravity of urban slums, and there seemed no place else for the 'urban realism' movement to go—and so, it died" (120). Thus for Whitlow, urban realism is an even more reductive genre than Bone's account: It comes down to nothing more than protesting the plight of Blacks in urban ghettos. The problem with equating Savoy's novel with this generic version is that it is shockingly wrong. For *Alien Land* is not at all about urban slum life; the life depicted in the novel is that of Black (and White) middle class.[7]

More recent criticisms have questioned such limited (and limiting) reading of "the Wright School" and with it, the usefulness of this categorization itself; nevertheless, this has not translated into any substantial or substantive reprisal of Savoy's work. In his comprehensive literary history of African American novels, Bernard C. Bell, for instance, writes that novels that have typically come under this label differ so widely in their "naturalistic vision…that the

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[6] Roger Whitlow. *Black American Literature: A Critical History* (Totowa: Helix Book, 1984; Totowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1974).

[7] A striking irony in the scholarly reception of Savoy's novel is that like his biracial character who struggles between being too Black or too White at the wrong time, Savoy, too, has been deemed either too Black or not Black enough. For instance, one senses that for Whitlow, the problem with the Wrightean protest novels (and therefore Savoy's) is that it is perhaps too Black; that is to say, unlike the accomplished Black writers (such as Ralph Ellison and William Demby) whose characters are "only incidentally black" (124), the formers' are calculably so. This is on one hand. On the other, Savoy is perhaps too White or in any case not Black enough. This is the case for the 1973 publication of *Living Black American Authors: A Biographical Directory* which painstakingly includes an exhaustive list of all living American Black writers—even ones "who failed to respond to the questionnaires and could not be located in any sources" (Shockley and Chandler x); yet absent is Savoy's name and information. One wonders why Savoy, who died in 1976 in Washington D.C., is not included in this thoroughgoing literary roster.

concept of a “Wright School’ is at best misleading.”[8] While taking care to analyze several writers, both major and lesser known, of the questionable Wright School to substantiate his case, Bell has nothing to add about Savoy beyond echoing Whitlow, Bone and others that the novelist is “generally identified as being strongly influenced by Wright” (*Afro-American Novel* 167).

Most recently, Stepto has come closest to offering a serious reading of Savoy; yet he likewise accepts the long-held view of *Alien Land* as protest fiction. As previously mentioned, the critic does credit the novel for its many groundbreaking aspects. For one, he correctly recognizes that the passing we see performed in the novel is anything but conventional; indeed, by reversing the expected biracial genealogy of White-father and Black-mother and by making the progeny of this interracial union male instead of female, Savoy achieves an original narrative that “advances the modern fictive project” of African American letters (xviii, xvii). Stepto is further impressed by the novel’s frank treatment of interracial sex and love that is daringly bold for its time—one that is not sensational, “inevitably violent or criminal,” but “disarmingly human” (xvi). Yet for all that love, Stepto’s verdict is that Savoy’s is a “remarkable…protest novel” (xviii).

The problem of reading *Alien Land* as protest novel is that this generic label precludes us from seeing the larger picture of Savoy’s narrative project. The novel’s psychological depth and its labyrinthine of ethical paradoxes are beyond the scope of the protest mode. The novel’s overarching theme is not to protest the plights of Blacks in the hands of Whites nor to chronicle the evils of racism; neither is it a rally call for Black solidarity or racial uplift. The limitation of the protest genre, Savoy implies, is that this platform leaves no room for what truly matters: love.

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[8] Bernard C. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 167.

Indeed, in diametric opposition to Bone's sweeping diagnosis that Savoy's novel is "devoid of love," I would contend that it is actually the overabundance of love that generates the ethical quandaries in the protagonist's journey of traversing the racial landscape. As this chapter will show, the irony of labeling *Alien Land* as a protest novel is that the novel deliberates at length on the strengths and shortcomings of racial protest and ultimately rejects it as a tenable solution. In its place, it contemplates a more ethical, kindred mode of relationality, something I am provisionally calling the ethics of neighbor-love in passing.

Protesting the Label of the Protest Genre in *Alien Land*

Before we can fully appreciate the novel's aspirations for kindred love between Black and White, we must disabuse the novel of the generic label of the protest fiction à la Richard Wright; for the protest-fiction label, as do the proverbial trees in a forest, would blindside us from seeing the bigger project of the writer, which, as I have previously emphasized, is no less than kindred love and ethical relationality between the two races. If previous critics have diagnosed the overarching temperament of the novel to be one of protest, it is not altogether confounding, as *Alien Land* is certainly replete with scathing critique of White America and Black Americans' plight within it.

A prominent element of the protest genre in Savoy's novel is its roster of villainous White characters chock full of racist venom, whose egregiousness would make them worthy peers of Stowe's Simon Legree or Douglass' William Covey. We have Tom Meeker, the "poor White trash" epitomizing covetousness, envy, bigotry and deceit. Taking advantage of his privileged White status and Uncle Jake's kindness and magnanimity, Meeker pressures the Black carpenter to build him an intricate cabinet in record time, while rudely mouthing "Now looky

here, boy" to the craftsman whom he is soliciting on credit (*Alien* 235). Not only does Meeker renege on his payment but has Jake arrested for being a "troublesome n[---r]" (299).

If the novel jeers at this Tom Meeker by giving him an ironic surname (Meeker is a far cry from meekness) and further satirizes Southern white racism by endowing him with a terrible misnomer "SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN" (234), then it one-ups itself with the name and character of the local sheriff of Valley View—one Bill Noble—an ignoble criminal and abuser of his authority who, given his lecherous desire for Uncle Jake's wife Paula, is all too happy to have a ready pretext to arrest Jake and summarily lynch him. He then decides it a fun sport to dump Jake's mangled and charred corpse in front of the yard for Paula to witness and gather; under specious context, he then takes her under custody so that he may "ma[k]e good his boast" to rape her (301).

The sequence of events thereafter is as tragic and appalling as any narratives in protest literature: The novel hints that Paula, shortly after being sexually violated, mutilates Bill Noble's genitals: "[A]s life jetted out of him beyond the power of man to staunch its flow—he knew that…he could never be a man again, even if he had lived" (301). The passage goes on to briefly sketch how Noble draws his gun and manages to fatally wound Paula, and it ends with Paula's taunting and defiant laughter at Noble who realizes at that moment that "she had intended even the pistol" (301); meaning, she had calculated before castrating him that she would die, and that dying is preferable to living as a "white man's woman" (301).

In addition to the cast of White characters who would be second-to-none in any Black protest fiction, Savoy's novel evokes themes and scenes reminiscent of the protest novel *par excellence*, viz, Richard Wright's *Native Son.* The Jeff Mason murder case and the ensuing courtroom scene bears a striking resemblance to the climactic courtroom speech of Boris Max.

As in the case of Bigger Thomas's slaying of Mary Dalton, in Jeff Mason's fatal assault of Laura Roberts, the reader knows first-hand that he *is* guilty of the crime; and while the crime itself is reprehensible, what the respective novels argue is how these men, for the virtue of being Black in racist America, are victims of injustice and inequity. If Bigger is the victimized poster child of his environment, Jeff Mason is made a pawn to media sensationalism and political opportunism: "Before a week had passed the trial had become, in fact, a test of 'white supremacy'," attracting a carrion of politicians who vie "to make political capital of the case (60). In the wake of the Mason trial, the White public sentiment turns to racial scapegoating: "The angry tide of feeling swung from Jeff Mason to include all Negros" (61).

While the distinct parallels between Savoy's text and Wright's groundbreaking novel underscore the former's deep concern with, and commitment to, the iniquities targeting Black Americans, Savoy's work emphasizes the shortcomings of social protest and refuses to accept the protest genre as the sole forum of expression (whether politically or artistically) for the Black community; it warns us against the one-size-fits-all approach to race relations, and instead, challenges us to cut deeper into the issue at hand; that is, not stopping at why Whites persecute Blacks but to complicate the very category of race itself. As Stepto notes, Savoy was an admiring reader of Franz Fanon (Foreword xv). And indeed, we can read Savoy's novel alongside Fanon's *Black Face, White Mask* to show that Savoy recognizes the limitations of the protest genre. As the early Fanon adumbrates, Blacks' attempts to protest one's humanity or to "prove" their intellectual equality to White racists is symptomatic of Black psychic alienation and ironically perpetuates the "vicious cycle" of that very racism they are protesting.[9]

[9] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 10.

One of the preponderant tendencies of the protest genre, the novel implies, is that it recycles much of the overgeneralization, prejudice, and collective hatred that White supremacy perpetrates. The novel illustrates this in the Jeff Mason case. In light of the case becoming a fodder for White racism and opportunism, the Black community and press face tremendous hardship; journalistic accuracy or veracity of the allegation (whether Mason is guilty as charged) is "not the prime issue at hand" and becomes secondary to the Black community's collective struggle "to preserve the few shreds of personal dignity which they were accorded" (*Alien* 62). In short, the Black press no longer takes interest in the truth of the Mason case; by the virtue of his being Black and being assailed for his Blackness by the White society, Mason must be defended. Justice for an individual or her family—in this case Laura Roberts and her family—takes the back seat. Accordingly the Black media begins its relentless attack on the credibility of Kern, the key witness to his mother's assault (62).

In assiduously narrating the moral dilemma Kern faces as the primary witness to his mother's assault, the novel cautions against the simple us-versus-them reading of race relations. The moral dilemma that Kern faces is no less than ensuring justice is done for his mother—this would be his personal duty as son and moral duty as human being—yet the novel shows how this filial, basic human duty runs against the grain of political and racial justice for the Black collective. Kern's harassment does not stop with the Black press but extends to his home, neighborhood, and school. At home, the boy encounters the accusing gaze of his housekeeper Nettie for whom the "Negro press" is the "gospel" (62). In the neighborhood, the situation is no less hostile as he is "ganged by two older boys on his way from school" for his courtroom testimony. Kern understands that "his first bloody nose and a black eye" is the consequence of "having tattled on Jeff Mason" (65). In the throes of Laura's death and amidst the public turmoil

and outrage both Black and White, Kern continues to face a mounting trauma: Upon entering public school, he becomes the victim of school-yard bullying for his role as his mother's witness. Classmates "called him a 'tattle tale'" and ostracize him; soon thereafter, he learns that "The Freedom League [the fictionalized version of NAACP] sponsored the defense of Jeff Mason" (63). Given that no less than his father, Charles, is the president of the League, one can only imagine Kern's deepening trauma and the moral paradox facing the Roberts family.

Indeed, the novel exposes us to riddles of ethical predicaments and ironies that lay bare the shortcomings of the racial protest model, beginning with the choice (an unbearable one) that Charles must make: to legally defend the very man who is accused of having raped and murdered his own wife, whose guilt he can ascertain given his knowledge of his son's probity (the primary witness in the assault). Yet by all outward appearances and certainly in his actions, Charles minimizes this dilemma; he unhesitatingly suggests that the Freedom League defend Mason: "I would have the League intervene and supply counsel" (64). While Charles's ready advocacy of the Mason defense and his unwavering support of Black racial uplift bolsters his position as a great leader of the Black community, his steely neglect of his own emotions or the psychic health of his traumatized son, as well as his negation of personal and moral duties to render justice for his late wife, all leave an unsettling question mark in the minds of the reader to accept Charles and his protest mode as the novel's answer to the American race question. We can say Charles's approach to the problem of race is cool "logic" (196), which leaves no room for affect, and in this ironic way, as we will see, he becomes a strange bedfellow to Chesnutt's *uber*-rational John Walden Warwick, as they both sacrifice love, family, affect for a larger cause.

Through Charles and Kern's father-son dynamics, the novel critiques the restrictive prescription of the protest genre as the sole vehicle for Black literature. Charles, standing as he

does for social protest, believes there is no room for Blacks to pursue art or literature. Deeming his son's literary aspirations to be impractical at best and racially irresponsible at worst, the father pushes Kern to pursue a more political or sensible career. Upon getting the news of Kern's admission into the prestigious Evans Academy for young writers, the father scorns his son's writing endeavors with the "cold fact" that "writing is not a vocation which offers security to a Negro youth" (148-9). Up until the end of the novel which presages the beginning of reconciliation and mutual acceptance between Father and Son, Charles disapproves of Kern's artistic pursuit. Kern has had to pursue his literary dreams despite his father's disapproval. We recall, for instance, the young boy's first passing, so-called, involves a White-only theater, the Hippodrome, where Kern pays to watch a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Charles focuses exclusively on passing as a negative concept and not on the artistic curiosity that attracts Kerns to the theater. "A whole race is being segregated and *you* wanted to see Richard Evans in *Hamlet*!...You knew the policy of this theater…you are a traitor to your race. I have only contempt for traitors" (141-2). To Charles's accusation of racial escapism, Kern rejoins, "I wasn't trying to escape anything, sir—I just wanted to see a play. I didn't mean to pass as white" (142). In this dialogue, we see that the father and son have different interpretations on passing. For Charles, passing is a stable category to which Blacks can either resist (good) or resort (bad). Indeed, for Charles, anything resembling Black-to-White passing reeks of racial irresponsibility, capitulation, and treachery. For Kern, as we can glean above, passing is a much more fluid, liminal space where one is not necessarily aligning oneself as either Black or White and whose act cannot be easily labeled as racial escapism, treachery, or even subversion.

Unlike Charles who accepts passing as a given, in his action, Kern questions and

complicates the very category of passing. What exactly is passing when one can thus "pass" without identifying oneself in racial terms, and for a marked-period of time in a dimmed space where the spotlight is elsewhere on the stage? What about the irony of Blacks' contributing to the perpetuation of racial segregation by refusing to pass or viewing passing narrowly as a negative act? In what ways is passing, paradoxically enough, a politically responsible act? The novel raises these questions not only by placing Kern at the White-only theater but also placing at least one other notable and politically important Black-community member in the same space. Kern proceeds to tell the incredulous Charles that he has spotted the wife of Reverend Sharp, "an important figure in the Freedom League" at the theater, to which Charles calls him a liar but knows deep down his son's integrity and that "Kern was not telling a lie" (143).

In addition to the case study of Charles Roberts to reflect on the limitations of the racial protest model, the novel reveals through the case of Kern himself the pitfalls of the model if taken to its logical extreme. For a time, the young Kern flirts with the polarizing realm of race relations, alternating between Black protest and White supremacy, learning in the end the undesirability and the morally destructive ends of both. Shortly after returning from the aborted studies at the Evans Academy, Kern refashions himself as an angry Black man for a time, embracing the program of protest model of Blackness. "Each white face he passed, bigot of whom he read or heard, became the imaginary subject of minutely detailed and horrible torture. Within his own mind, Kern rehearsed many times the holy inquisition which he would like to carry on against discrimination and segregation—and against the white men who were responsible for the outrage" (195). He even looks to become his father's protégée of sorts. Upon returning from Evans, "Kern plied Charles at every opportunity for information about the League and its activities, read and reread books and pamphlets on 'the problem' "(195). And the result

of this new schooling is the devastation of his humanity. He begins to disassociate himself from all things “White,” including his family and friends, and he trains himself to see things in Manichean terms: People are no longer judged by the virtue of their individual and nuanced human qualities—they are merely Black or White, friend or foe, good or bad. He trashes the letter he receives from his friend Paul at the Evans Academy; he then later writes his friend a racialist letter of good bye: ‘So I guess it will be better if I go with my people and you go with yours” (210-11). He even begins to distance himself from his maternal grandmother who has been his surrogate parent figure (in Charles’s virtuous absenteeism); he curtly drops her a “short note in which he had said he would not come back to [her home in] Northport again” (266).

Kern learns soon enough that the Black racialist program of hate, much like its White-racist counterpart, clashes with lived experiences; that is, the sundry decent White folks in Kern’s life contradict his newfound categorical condemnation of all Whites. Despite his newfangled schooling in racial protest, Kern “didn’t hate Dorcas [his late-mother’s best friend], though. Nor his grandmother—nor ‘Old Henderson’ [the writing teacher at Evans]. But all the others” he did (210). This mentality is very much like the White racist mentality where the familiar Blacks are “good folks,” but all other Blacks are categorically bad. By designating decent Black folks as exceptional “Pet Negroes,” the logic of white racism is to refuse to critically reevaluate its racial prejudice even in the face of contradictory evidence.[10]

We should pause here, however, and note that Kern’s hate-induced brand of Black

[10] See Zora Neale Hurston, “The ‘Pet Negro’ System,” *Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles* (New York: The Library of America, 1995): 914-921. According to Hurston, “The Pet Negro System” of the South is where Whites can favor and even love a Black person who is given a status as exceptional being for their decency and good qualities, and as such, are spared of the typical racist treatments. Yet however much “affection and respect” the “pet” Black may garner, it “in no way extend to black folk in general” (“Pet Negro System” 916). Hurston informs that “the Negroes have their pet whites” and the operation works much in the same way as the pet-Black logic. In short, the pet system “works both ways” (916-7, 915).

racialism (which is the inversion of White racism) is not what Charles and the Freedom League stand for; neither Charles nor the Freedom League promote racial hatred or contempt but justice for Blacks. The novel, while incisively underscoring the side effects of racial hatred and racial divide that the model of political protest can cause, is nonetheless sympathetic toward Charles and the Freedom League's agitation for racial justice. It recognizes the slippery slope of the cause that Charles champions and the tremendous difficulty of fighting for the dignity and humanity of Black Americans. When Kern begins his career as an angry young Black man, Charles senses that the "very violence of Kern's anger" is the result of the "full measure of his hurt" in the hands of White racism (*Alien* 196). If Charles narrowly delimits the range of career options for Black youth and privileges "cold hard facts" and logic (196) over affect or love, it is not due to any innate character deficit but to the personal sacrifice that he feels one must make for racial justice. That he would very well have been the loving and encouraging father had it not been for American racism can be espied by the fact that, despite his staunch disapproval of Kern's writing aspirations, to the teenager's great surprise, the father presents him with a book on literary craft one Christmas (254).

Ironically, it is when Kern goes to the extreme and caricatures himself as an angry Black man and accompanies Charles to the Freedom League convention that the son learns about the noble vision of hope that drives the League and its racially-diverse members. "The League was, for Negroes, a desperate hope, born of hopelessness and the eternal human need for at least one inviolate hope" (202). Charles Roberts looms tall as the leader who becomes the "symbol" of this hope (202). In the words of the "editor of the *New York Graph*," the Freedom League convention is unparalleled in its abundance of "hope and faith in the ultimate goodness of mankind" (203). Following the editor's laudation, the convention concludes with a prayer (204). The religious

imagery here—the closing prayer and the invocation of "hope and faith," which are two of the three cornerstones of the Judeo-Christian virtues, makes the absence of the most important of the three virtues all the more stark: love.

Reading Savoy vis-à-vis Johnson and Chesnutt

In order for us to better appreciate Savoy's radical overhaul of the passing novel and his audacious program of neighbor-love, we should spend some time on its select narrative predecessors. As we will subsequently discuss, whereas in Savoy's novel we confront the kinship and the attendant ethical urgency for interracial love, in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), there is no love lost between Blacks and Whites and biracial familial ties are tenuous, fleeting, or sketchy at best.

In Johnson's *Autobiography,* the unnamed male protagonist is reared single-handedly by his Black mother and has hardly a relationship with his White father. The latter is more of a spectral figment than anything like flesh and blood, and while on occasions he seems to harbor some inklings of kindred love for his young child, the novel makes clear that social opprobrium and the White sire's own acculturation will forestall the development of a meaningful filial relationship. The protagonist is twelve years old when he meets the father for the first time, and the meeting is shrouded in a dreamlike ambiguity and haze: On one afternoon the boy returns from school to see a mysterious derby hat that throws him into a state of disorientation. Upon facing the strange man, the young boy

> looked at him with the same feelings with which I had looked at the derby hat, except that they were greatly magnified. I looked at him from head to foot, but he

> was an absolute blank to me until my eyes rested on his slender, elegant polished shoes; My mother broke the spell by calling me by name and saying: 'This is your father.'[11]

The unnaturalness of this father-son relationship is almost palpable from the boy's perspective: The father is a disjointed figure whose parts are larger than the whole: first the derby hat, then the well-polished shoes. In spite of the momentary solidarity ushered in by music, the father-son bond fails to develop further as the protagonist never sees him again save on one other occasion when chance brings them together as strangers in a Paris opera house (Johnson *Autobiography* 105).

The closest we get to the possibility of interracial love and reconciliation is in the relationship between the Ex-Colored Man and his future wife; however, this relationship is vitiated and ephemeral. While passing as a White business man, the protagonist meets his future wife who is apparently "as white as a lily" and also dressed "in white. Indeed, she seemed to me the most dazzling white thing I had ever seen. But it was not her delicate beauty which attracted me most; it was her voice, a voice which made one wonder how tones of such passionate color could come from so fragile a body" (153). Here Johnson intimates the possibility of love between Black and White that can transcend racial divide through art—specifically, music. The future wife is a caricature of White femininity; yet there is "color" in her, that is to say, her musical prowess, and this mutual passion for music is what brings the two together. Johnson leaves us with little doubt that this, however, is a fleeting dream, as she is introduced near the end only to be killed off at childbirth. All that we are left to trust are the narrator's words that the

[11] James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (United States: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC 2007), 27, 26.

marital years have been "supremely happy" and that "no cloud ever came to mar our life together" (163). After the wife's untimely death whose "loss" is "irreparable" to the narrator, the broken man forswears further pursuit of love and "social life" and gives over his life entirely to the singular care of his children (163). In a kind of vertiginous state of existence he then muses, "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (163).

Ironically, the perfect union the narrator boasts of having had with his ethereal wife, the life of supposed clarity sans the "clouds" to "mar" their happy matrimony, is one effectively cocooned in obscurity and haze; for beyond the brief summary of her dazzling Whiteness, we know nothing about her that fleshes out the human in her; and doubly ironic, in the aftermath of her death, when the Ex-Colored man laments his guilt-stricken liminal life where nothing is any longer real or credible to him—including his very past journeys and travails as a Black man, we sense that really, this is nothing new, that this cloudy, surreal life has defined his marriage to this spectral figure of a woman all along. If the narrator's father is all object and materiality—he is the derby hat and big shiny shoes—then the narrator's wife is a celestial figure writ large. In their extreme super- and sub- human qualities, neither the celestial wife nor the absentee father emerges as real human we can love. In the end, Johnson's novel concludes with an essentialist schism and no remedy to bridge that racial rift.[12]

Unlike the respective male protagonists in Johnson's *Autobiography* and Savoy's *Alien*

[12] I return to the comparative reading of the respective endings of Johnson's novel and Savoy's to underscore the latter's overhaul of the essentialist tendencies of traditional passing narratives. See my section titled "Race as Religion and the Profanation of Race in *Alien Land*."

Land, in Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, the protagonist embroiled in racial passing is a female. Yet what makes this novel relevant to the aforementioned male-passing novels is that John Walden Warwick, the brother of the tragic protagonist Rowena, makes a career of passing as White. His reason is for selfish, opportunistic gain. As Donald B. Gibson points out, Warwick is "a complete pragmatist who will do whatever is necessary to achieve his ends. He is cold, calculating, and manipulative; his feelings (if he has any genuine feelings) are entirely surface."[13] Even as Warwick claims the White South as "the land of his fathers" (Gibson 15), the novel does not reveal anything endearing or redemptive about the relationship between Warwick and his White relations to make his decision to throw in his lot with the White world a sympathetic one; for Warwick, the White-family connection is but a calculated means for upward social mobility. He marries an orphaned and only daughter of Confederate plantation slaveholders, which gives him alibi and a start in the White world. As she is free of relations to pry perchance into his obscure past, his pathway to great riches and Whiteness is secure. And as conveniently, the White wife dies, leaving him "[r]ich in his wife's right" (15).

Neither is Warwick's ties with his Black family any less tenuous. In fact, what is peculiar about Warwick is that he just about disappears from the novel as Rowena's post-passing dilemmas and conflicts compound. At Rowena's death, there is no word of her brother or his whereabouts; we have no idea what Warwick makes of Rowena's death or whether he feels any moral responsibility toward her tragic ending. As suddenly as he appears in the lives of his mother and sister after ten years of absence, the reader can only assume that Warwick's life continues par for the course. The last we know of him is when he returns to Patesville to visit the

[13] Donald B. Gibson Introduction, *The House Behind the Cedars* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), xvi.

convalescent Rowena (after she is spurned by George Tryon), and he figures that though Tryon is honorable enough to keep Warwick's racial makeup a secret, he should probably forsake the "cherished…ambitions" of pursuing politics in the future."[14]

Whatever the etiology of his selfish individualism, Warwick's presence warrants no love nor is he capable of giving genuine love. Thoroughly trained in cool opportunism, he will dissemble affection when fitting his own purpose. Perceiving personal benefit in having the beautiful and White-presenting Rowena by his side, he is not above using guilt and guile against their mother so as to pressure her to severe ties with her daughter. Mis Molly tearfully begs, "'Don't take Rena, John…How would you like to lose yo'r one child?'" (17). Yet her plea for empathy falls on deaf ears, for a short while later in the same scene, Warwick drives in the dagger of maternal guilt: "Of course, mother,...I wouldn't think of taking Rena away against your wishes….Of course she will have no chance here, where our story is known….Here she must forever be—nobody!" (18). Even his homecoming has not been one planned by love of his mother and kin but by misadventure and chance, a business meeting nearby that tempts him to be "overmaster[ed]" by "impulse" (19).

Against the narrative tapestries of Chesnutt's Warwick and Johnson's unnamed narrator, we see how distinct the fabric of Savoy's passing novel is. In previous passing novels the passing character has no moral accountability to his White relations as there is no (positive) relationship there, familial or otherwise; Whites are more of an abstraction than one's flesh and blood and

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[14] Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 122. As calculating, opportunistic, and logical to a fault as Warwick is, the novel does make clear that this may not be due to his innate constitution but more to the racist society that has made him so. The reader is aware of the dramatic irony of his comment that he and his sister are "new people" (Chesnutt, *House* 57), individuals who have no ancestral bedrock to lean on or a soil from which to spring forth; indeed, as carefully as he has built his life as a successful White man, deep down, he is a fearful, lonely man who cannot feel at home but as a perpetual "foreigner" in his "adopted land" (45).

one's biological ties to them a source of angst and enmity than anything else. Conversely, in Savoy's novel, the White side of the family is not only concrete and present throughout Kern's journey of passing (or "dual passing"),[15] but the maternal family members' love and compassion befuddle the politics of Black-White racialism that is predicated upon the logic of "us" versus "them."

For the most part, the White characters in Savoy's novel are complex, multi-dimensional beings who cannot be easily dismissed in the name of race; in fact, they are often times the source of human love (the "simple human kindness") that the novel implores. Laura Roberts (Kern's mother) is perhaps the prime exemplar of such nuanced, sympathetic White character. Though she is murdered early on in the novel, she is nothing like the ghostly, enigmatic mothers (White or Black) we see in other contemporaneous passing novels; one recalls the shadowy mother of the unnamed narrator in Johnson's *Autobiography* or the grown Ex-Colored man's "lily white" wife who dies at childbirth; nor is Laura anything like Warwick's Southern-belle White wife who also dies shortly after birthing their son in Chesnutt's *House*. Though her life is cut short by violence, Laura is a richly fleshed-out character with whose internal struggles and ethical dilemmas we cannot help but empathize.

Indeed, one of the crucial ways in which Savoy interrogates racial binarism is through the marriage dynamics of the protagonist's parents and the gender power struggle as revealed in their respective experiences of passing. The father, Charles Roberts, is light enough to pass himself and has done so, until the disillusionment of having served the racist America during the First

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[15] Here I'm borrowing Baz Dreisinger's term that denotes passing as the default state of being, where a character goes from either Black to White and back again. See Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 139.

World War impels him to then pass on passing, so to speak, and become Black again. Now equating passing with cowardice and racial betrayal, he promptly stands up to his father-in-law (a judge and his legal mentor), moves his wife and son to the segregated Washington D.C. and becomes a prominent legal and political advocate of Black rights.

Ironically, however, Charles's ethics, grounded as they are on the prevailing either-or model of race, recycles much of the oppressiveness of White patriarchy. As various critics have noted, there is a gendered dimension to passing; when White males pass for Black, they are "claiming their manhood by transforming a private passing enterprise into a public identity. In other words, they turn the 'feminized' enterprise of passing into a masculine one by reallocating their identities from the private to the public sphere" (Dreisinger 7). White-to-Black passing, moreover, can easily devolve into a sexist, "masculinist" project.[16] Charles's reclamation of Blackness has this masculinist quality, in that his rise to power (at least within the Black community) is in inverse relation to his wife Laura's loss of power and agency.

In compliance with Charles's edict, Laura must sever ties with her parents and friends for their Whiteness. Even her childhood bosom friend Dorcas who lives locally is off limits, as Charles expressly forbids her to have any contact with Whites. Yet as a "Black" woman, she has no friends; the Black community sees her as a perpetual "interloper" who has robbed authentic Black women of a suitable marriage partner (*Alien* 37). Her husband himself reminds her that she is a "White" woman at every turn yet expects (or more precisely, dictates her) to live as Black whether the Black community accepts her or not. She lives in a no-man's land racially speaking, with no family contact, no friends, and essentially no husband, for Charles, so wrapped up as he

[16] See Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 16.

is in the race struggle and "The problem," has become "almost a stranger" to her (38). "Instead of comfort and understanding, he gave her the Freedom League—and a daily consciousness of its fight to protect Negroes against prejudice and discriminations. Laura could and did understand the need for the fight. She applauded its goal. But the never-ending absorption with 'the problem' in all its varied forms, the constant impulse to hate which she felt about her, were sickening" (38). Ironically, while Charles champions the fight against discrimination and prejudice outside of the home, he discriminates against his own wife; no matter how Black she lives her life, he reminds her that she is "white, you must remember" (37).

We can truly begin to empathize with the depth of Laura's ethical predicament when we call to mind the Washington D.C. race-riot incident: Only a month into her new and lonely life as a Black woman in the nation's capital, Laura finds herself "[c]aught on a downtown street with the infant Kern when fighting began between whites and Negroes," and she makes a desperate decision to seek shelter in a segregated White hotel, the only kind there were at the time in D.C. (37). As the wife of a prominent Black civil-rights leader, she has a political obligation to be Black; yet this political responsibility, most would agree, pales in the face of her moral duty as a mother to protect the life and limb of her infant son. Maternal imperative notwithstanding, the local Black community lashes out its condemnation: "In the harsh aftermath of emotion, Negroes had thoughtlessly accused her of 'passing' for white when the acid test of principle had come. 'But Charles,…I had a baby in my arms. What could I have done? I couldn't come home. It wasn't safe' " (37). By calling the Black community's judgment "thoughtless," we can sense Savoy's sympathies lying with Laura's decision to take refuge in a White-only hotel. We should also note the ironic invocation of the word "principle" here and the questions of the ethics of (anti-)passing it raises: How ethical is it to refuse to "pass" when one is able, when one's life or

the life of one's charge is in danger? How ethical is that racial consciousness that demands allegiance from its members even at the cost of the life of an infant?

Laura is caught in the crossfire of racial strife, and one can say she is the victim of both White- and Black- racism. Yet the novel establishes her as the embodiment of passing (as we recall, she passes for both Black and White) and the love that can be bridged in that passing. In the scene of her last outing with her son to meet Dorcas at the symbolic park bridge, we recall a poignant passage:

> They were mother and son. A stranger, *passing* them as they hurried along the footpath, would have known that in the *moment of passing*….The curve of their mouths and the bones that shaped their faces were beyond question of one blood, and the oneness of inflection which marked their speech and gesture was too singular to have another explanation. (38; emphasis mine)

In this novel of (and on) passing, the repeated reference to passing here is noteworthy. Passing carries a double meaning here: passing as in hurrying along, and how even a quick, brief glance of a stranger would recognize the kindred spirit of mother and son. But passing can also imply racial passing. In the second reference to the word passing, the meaning remains ambiguous. It is not clear whose "moment of passing" this is, whether the passerby's or that of the mother and son. It could be referring to Laura and her son Kern's ontological, racial passing. But the passage deliberately remains vague as to whether they are passing as Black or White, rendering the politics of racial identification a futile project of paranoia. In its stead, what is instantaneously apparent even to the fleeting glance of a stranger is that the woman and child are kin and are united in singular love in that ambiguous passing.

Yet Laura is not the only so-called White character who embodies love in this novel.

Margaret Adams (Laura's mother) stands as a remarkable harbinger of love and reconciliation. She could easily and understandably harbor anger and even hatred toward Charles for the untimely death of her daughter and for causing the years of separation from her daughter and her grandson, her sole "reason for living" (169). Yet it is Grandmother Adams who reminds Kern about Charles's integrity and exhorts her grandson to "make peace" with his father (317). Significantly, Grandmother Adams is the steward of Kern's artistic opus and the novel's *raison d'être.* In fact, and significantly, it is the two White women—Grandmother Adams and Kern's future wife Marianne—to whom his manuscript is entrusted; without their love, nurturance, and stewardship, the novel would not have come about at all (as the novel is really about Kern writing the novel of his life). If Kern has entrusted his novel manuscript—one that intersects passing with neighbor-love—to Grandmother Adams, it is aptly so; for she reminds her grandson that the two most important virtues in the world are "humility—the need for kindness" and "love for one's fellows" (310).

Standing on ethical par with these so-called White women are sympathetic White males of the novel, including "Old Henderson," the kind headmaster of the Evans Writing Academy; Kern's classmate Paul at the same school who doggedly reaches out to befriend Kern even after the latter is exposed as being Black; and Grandfather Caleb Adams whose noble humanity even Charles Roberts, despite his self-induced estrangement from the Adams family, cannot deny. At the news of Caleb Adams's death, Charles acknowledges in tears that the deceased was "a very great man" (145).

The Model of Kindred Neighbor-Love and the Hegelian Dialectic Subjectivity

Given the novel's investment in the humanity of its White characters and its sensitivity to

ethical complexities that resists an either-or reading of the protest model, we must search deeper for the novel's thematic project and intent. In the "Dedication" page, Savoy offers his work to the future generations of American children "*in the fervent hope that at least one shall be brought to see more clearly the enduring need for simple humanity.*" These words express the author's overarching narrative vision, and they offer a master key into unlocking, amidst the various twists and turns of the narrative arch, the central meaning of the novel, beginning with its title. According to Stepto, the novel's title refers largely to the geopolitical space of the American South and Black Americans' place within it; thus "alien land" pertains to the ways in which Blacks "can be alien, and alienated" in the Southern soil (Foreword xi). This is true, partially. For alien land is more than a physical or political terrain but a psychic, ethical landscape that both hinders and impels us to neighbor-love. Savoy's exhortation for "simple humanity" here is synonymous with the novel's oft-quoted invocation of "simple human kindness."[17] Given that "kindness" etymologically bespeaks of kinship, relatedness, nearness, "near relationship" and the "natural affection arising from this," including "tenderness," "fondness," and "love" (OED), I make the transference that "the enduring need for simple humanity" in the "Dedication" speaks of the imperative to love those who are nigh—our neighbors. The novel is replete with the trope of aliens and alienation—estranged family, estranged friends, estranged psyche. To regard the novel as a mere political exposé of the racism of the American South (or even the United States at large) would be an incomplete reading of the novel's vision. In the same "Dedication" page Savoy emphasizes that the "*story is <u>not</u> that a man went to live in an alien land, <u>but</u> that something fearful drove him to make the journey in the face*

[17] Among numerous appearances of this phrase throughout the novel, consider the following: "No matter what the material gain [of the economically struggling South], unless there is also an increased goodness of spirit, unless there is something richer in the soul than makes itself felt in the faces and in the eyes, in simple acts of *human kindness,* you have nothing. That's the commodity [of truest worth]—*simple human kindness*" (*Alien Land* 258).

of every instinct which was his" (*Alien;* underline mine); meaning, this novel wants us to read "alien land" as an ethical, psychological terrain replete with paradoxes. This is a story of a man who journeys to find simple human kindness—neighbor-love— despite the alien forces without and the alien forces within himself that make that love so terrifying.

We have seen previously how Charles is a man not without sympathy and clearly meritorious in many regards; he is an outspoken leader whose advocacy of social and racial justice is only equaled by his passionate conviction. Yet as we have seen, he is too deeply mired in ironic and ethical morass and alienating in his psychic repression to serve as role model for the young Kern or the future generation of American children that the dedication page of the novel beseeches. If Charles Roberts is not the novel's ideal role model for future American generations, who is? The novel's answer is Jake Caufield, or Uncle Jake, the husband to Charles's sister Paula and Kern's uncle by marriage.

Ironically enough, Uncle Jake is Charles sans the latter's privileges and prestige. Where Charles is descended from a generation of Northern middle-class family, Jake is the grandson of a Southern slave; where Charles is pale in a society that privileges Whiteness, Jake is dark; where Charles is a white-collared professional and a famous political leader and a man of brain, so to speak, Jake is a working-class man—a carpenter—leader of no official following and a man of brawn. Yet still and all, this man, whose outward appearance is the near opposite of Charles Roberts, is the one that the novel elevates as the champion of neighbor-love and the ideal forerunner for Kern and future American generations.

Savoy's novel invites a classic Hegelian reading of the master-slave dialectic in the back story of Uncle Jake and his ancestors, thereby thrusting us full force into the imperative of loving our neighbors for the sake of our interdependent consciousness. As related by Uncle Jake, he is

the descendent of a grandfather who, living during the antebellum years, is manumitted once the slave master “Ol’ man Bryant” recognizes the man’s humanity as extant in his handiwork.

> Ol’man Bryant told him—"You are an artist, Frederick. An artist must be free if he is to create. You are a free man from this day...I ask only that you spend as much of your life as you can in creating some small bit of beauty, and that you pass that gift on to your sons.”…[T]hat was the beginning of our heritage. Freedom and a devotion to the creation of beauty. (260-1)

We recall that the watershed moment in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is the slave’s first-hand relationship with his creations; as interdependent as the master and slave are in their respective subjectivities, the latter has the upper hand in that his selfhood is confirmed by the direct fruits of his labor. The master, on the other hand, ironically lives in a parasitic state of bondage and dependence on the very being whom he objectifies—the slave—by relying on, and robbing the servant of, the fruits of that consciousness-building labor.[18] The ethical implication of the Hegelian dialectical tale is that oppression of the Other (whether institutionalized oppression as in slavery or the less blatant form as in twentieth-century American racism) is unsustainable (and unconscionable) because our subjectivity is essentially tied in with the subjectivity of the other. But Savoy goes further by emphasizing the power of art to beget and beseech neighbor-love. As a third-generation carpenter, Uncle Jake sees as his duty to make art with his hands; and as he makes right by every “piece of wood” he uses to make that art, “I must be honest with my fellow man” (*Alien* 261). What Uncle Jake envisions, then, is the kind of art that fosters human fellowship and freedom, and that is what

[18] Michael Allen Fox, *The Accessible Hegel* (New York: Humanity Books, 2005), 122-124, 120.

makes this art a thing of beauty.

Here, we should note that Jake's definition of freedom goes beyond the literal and into the psychological inter-subjectivity. From the literal standpoint, Jake has no need to bother with keeping his house "free of bondage," as slavery is long behind him regardless of the actions of the old master Bryant. The freedom he is bound to is the freedom of ethical responsibility to do right by his fellow humanity. It is in line with the Hegelian paradoxical concept of freedom that is distinct from "license," which we can imagine as "unrestricted freedom, or freedom that is amorphous, anarchic, directionless, and therefore ineffectual. *Freedom*, on the other hand, is focused liberty that exists within a structure of rights, privileges, rules, expectations, trust, and cooperation—in short, within an ethical and political community" (Fox 126, 127). It is the freedom that recognizes our un-freedom, so to speak; it is the freedom that harkens to our inter-subjective indebtedness.

Hence despite the glaring racism of the American South, Uncle Jake cannot relinquish the heritage of his ancestors, which is grounded in the ethics of neighbor-love and the recognition of the mutual indebtedness of our respective consciousness. In response to Charles's question as to why Jake would remain in the oppressive South when he would do so much better elsewhere—more money, more safety—Jake explains that his is a "heritage" of "Freedom and a devotion to the creation of beauty"; Jake feels morally responsible to use his artistry to support his struggling Southern neighbors—Black and White—and the South itself. After contemplating "at first one palm and then the other of his work-hardened hands," Jake continues. "I've made enough to be able to help some others less fortunate. You might say I'm sort of pledged to stay and see something through" (260 261).

And true to his pledge, Jake has done more than right by his neighbors. As a landlord to

his neighbors, the Hartleys, Jake practices sharecropping in its most equitable form, one where the sharecropper benefits more than the landlord: The Hartleys get to keep most of the labor proceeds and give Jake just enough "to pay the taxes, with a little something left over" (227). It is a mutually dignifying economic arrangement that raises the Caufield-Hartley relationship from that of a fraught landlord-tenant to loving neighbors and kin. Rather than looking to exploit, Jake looks to expand the prosperity of his neighbors, which he believes would enrich him too, even by a "tenth share more" (229). This is why Mrs. Hartley, upon parting with Jake and Kern, can wholeheartedly advise the lad, "Stick with Jake, son—you won't go far wrong" (230).

Nor is Jake's goodwill toward his neighbors directed by the color-line. During a Sunday service, while the rest of the congregation chimes in with the preacher's retributive prayer for God to punish the White racists—those "mighty white things"—and have them "*falling' inter thuh bloody sea,*" Jake and his wife Paula eschew participation: "Jake sat motionless, his head bent and his eyes closed…[Paula] was staring down at her gloved hands. Neither of them had joined in the chanting supplication" (268). Jake's and Paula's somber body languages suggest that the Caufields commiserate with the suffering and tribulations that have given rise to the Black congregants' ill-will against their White antagonists. Notwithstanding their empathy, Jake and his wife cannot cast their lot with punitive justice, for they have pledged themselves to neighbor-love that bypasses the boundaries of race.

While Jake stands for love of humanity and is optimistic (in the Hegelian sense that when given the choice, the spirit will do the right thing), we would err to conclude that Jake is naïve or that he is unrealistic. He is deeply critical of the racist striations of the American South and its complicity in its own economic plight. Jake is first to acknowledge, "The seed of hate in [the South] is deep buried—God alone knows when it will be unearthed" (244). Jake's

assessment of the South's economic problem is unapologetically level-headed: both internal (Southerners' backward attitude holds them down from progress;) and external (the nation's insufficient support of the South). Critiquing the antiquated ways of the South, Jake speaks in a "biting tone" to point out to the young Kern, "You're looking at all's left of the plantation days, young feller…This is our heritage—at its worst civilization's been shut out. White and colored, our way of life comes from a bygone day" (227). Yet Jake's interest in the economic health of the South is genuine and color-blind: "Men don't change their ways of thinking easy, and for generations the whole country has made the South sort of an economic slave. That's hurt us all—white and black" (257).

Neither is Jake's policy of neighbor-love incommensurable with political activism. Unlike the young Kern who is perhaps too young and inexperienced to understand the value of political activism (" 'The League—the League!' it was like a shouted battle cry. He was sick of it!"), Jake understands the critical need for the League: "One of the best things ever happened to Negroes—that League" (239). While Jake's ethics of neighbor-love founds itself on Judeo-Christian theology, it is very much grounded in, and to, the material world. Far from religious fatalism or passivity, it is an ethics of human proactivity and initiatives to usher in socio-political change. Jake explains it best when he points out, "God's good. Very good. But we have to do something ourselves" to bring about "Change," however "slow" it may be (271).

Jake's model of love is not one of Christ-like sacrificial resignation (as we see in Stowe's Uncle Tom). Jake stands for love, but he is no Uncle Tom. He will fight, and he will even blaspheme God when his human dignity is besieged. If Uncle Tom's love is not one of neighbor-love but one of otherworldly love (he loves God more than he loves humanity), Jake's, we can say, is one of human love (he loves humanity more than God). Thus when Bill Noble and his

gang threaten to desecrate his humanity by ogling to ravish his wife Paula, Jake vows to fight for his manhood and for his family. "But when white men try to take my woman…when any man touch her, he robs me of something I gotta have to live. He makes me an animal…When he reach for my woman," he adds, "I kill him with these two hands!" The "something" that is so essential for Jake that makes homicide the necessary recourse to protect are two-fold: his human-love (of which his love for his wife Paula being its acme) and his humanity. And unlike Uncle Tom, Jake will blaspheme God if robbed of these essential things. "An' you, God—I believe in you these years. I say you do the right thing always—hah! You don't like my killing him? Then damn you—you come down here an' stop me" (275). As devout as he is in his Judeo-Christian faith, Jake loves humanity more: Between choosing God or choosing his wife Paula, Jake "could give up no greater thing than his belief in God for the love of this woman [Paula]" (276). What makes his faith in neighbor-love all the more compelling and poignant is this very vulnerable humanity.

Yet for all that, for all his simple human kindness to his neighbors, his vision of freedom and beauty, for his noble character and his love of humanity, Uncle Jake faces a fate even bleaker than that of Uncle Tom's. Where Uncle Tom is brought home mortally injured but at least in one piece and dies serenaded by the saintly Eva, Uncle Jake comes home mutilated, downsized to a grotesque, charred carcass. It is not a stretch to say that Jake's commitment to the ancestral land and his love of the neighbors of his native South collude with his violent death. Immediately after Jake's death Kern views Jake's policy of love as one of defeat and his project of neighbor-love and commitment to artistic legacy as futile, and it is tempting for the reader to agree with Kern. For even as Jake has loved the South and has worked so hard to engender neighbor-love between Blacks and Whites, devoting much of his adult life to mutual socio-economic uplift; for all his plans to pass on his land and his craft to his descendants, he dies

childless, scorched beyond recognition. His name Jake is further ironic in that he is given the name of a Biblical figure blessed with twelve tribes of Israel, whose progenies are as prolific as the stars in the sky. All the while, Savoy's Jake dies childless, his body defiled. Yet Jake is the artistic forefather to Kern and perhaps to Kern's children and their children; Jake may be representative forerunner to all artists who create love with the tools of their trade.

Uncle Jake's life and death, far from representing the futility of his model of neighbor-love, stands as a testament to its abiding power: However his prayers of having his "own son" one day to "teach" the "lessons" of creating love through art (261) seems to have been dashed, we can say that in the figure of Kern, the novel materializes that son that Jake has wanted to apprentice and train as future artist. Jake uses his hands to create work of art; Kern uses language. Significantly, while living with Jake and Paula in Valley View, the adolescent Kern is drawn to Jake's workshop. I want to close read one such moment when Kern is especially feeling downcast and dejected when he enters Jake's workshop:

> He watched Jake take a long slender piece of wood from the rack above his bench and run his hands fondly up and down its grain….Then he saw Jake's hands turning and shaping the wood until it began to take on the soft curves of a chair leg and saw Jake's hands brush over it in a caress that wiped away the soft, powdered dust from its surface. Then, as he had known he would, he heard Jake begin to hum a low melody….Tension loosened in [Kern that he had carried from his traumatic days at Evans Academy]…"I seem to think better when I am working—sort of eases me." Jake didn't look up. He hummed another song. Kern had known he would say that. He had known too that he wouldn't look up and that he would, in a moment, hum another song. "Roll Jordan Roll." (262)

This passage signifies the synchronicity of minds; as if by telepathy, Kern knows Jake's every move, can predict his every word and every song, and each man's tension subsides jointly. Through the careful study of, and identification with, Jake at work in his medium of choice (carpentry), Kern is consoled, true; but he is also inspired to search deeper into the source of his own tension and angst: the suspension of his own writing craft since his abrupt departure from Evans. In other words, watching Jake commit himself to his craft of choice reminds Kern of his need to do the same. Jake's relationship with his raw material evokes a mood of romantic love-making; From his "fondling" touch to his gentle "caress" that brings to life the "soft curves of a chair leg" which once was a lifeless wood stump, we can sense how the older artist models for the younger the ideal relationship one should have with one's art form. In this way, the novel reminds us that Kern is Jake's artistic progeny; though their artistic medium may be different, they are united in their creativity and the vision of love that creativity engenders.

Ethics of Neighbor-Love and Psycho-Theological Analysis

At this time, it behooves us to delve into the motive and nature of Kern's creative-writing journey. Why does he turn to the writing of his passing, and what does he find there? I insist on interfacing passing and writing, for in the act of writing the metafictional novel of his traumatic life, Kern surmises the uncanny presence of neighbor-love, one that is at once alienating and binding in that very alienation. If fear impels Kern to flee the South post Uncle Jake's and Paula's deaths and pass as White, this fear has much to do with his drive to write. To his father's condemnation that he is a "coward" for passing and reneging on his "responsibility to your race," the young Kern retorts, "I have a responsibility to the realization of what I am or may be" (14).

The young man in trembling and “fear” declares, “I can’t go back! I won’t lose this last chance to write—to be myself” (15).

Five years into his passing, the more mature Kern continues to be driven to write. But this time, it is largely fueled not by fear but love. Upon returning home from his unanticipated encounter with Jerry, a bartender in a Harlem bar, the *raison d'être* of his calling as a writer of neighbor-love presents itself to Kern in uncanny internal revelation:

> It was so *simple* and urgent that it astonished him. It was so big that it dwarfed anything else he had ever thought of. It was so honest that it frightened him.…Man’s most criminal act is his *simple* inhumanity to other men—his unreasoning refusal to acknowledge in other men the existence of heart and soul and dreams such as his own…He looked with a new and fierce anger at the force which had driven him to flight from the Negro race and realized, dispassionately, that he would never have run, had it not been for the ‘thing’—for the fearful, in-pressing, bruising tension of life as a Negro…Then, in the *simplest* words he knew, Kern sat before his typewriter and began to describe this force—imagining the returns it might have brought to men had such energy been poured into deeds of *simple kindness*. (28-9; emphasis added)

I have emphasized here the word “simple” (and its variants), because its recurrence in such intimate proximity warrants a closer study. The OED informs that etymologically, simple originates from the Latin *simplus* or *simplex*, where the first part of the Latin *simplus,* or *sem*, means “one” (Greek cognate: *ἁπλόος* , *ἁπλοῦς*), and the second part of the Latin *simplex,* deriving from *plicāre,* means “to fold” (Greek: *πλέκειν*). “Simple” then means “one-fold,” as opposed to multiple folds (as of folding of the paper), hence “simple.” Yet simple, it turns out, is anything

but. As elucidated by Peter Auski, the OED provides no less than sixteen different meanings of the word, and even today, the word simple has a dizzying array of valences to practitioners of different disciplines.[19] We can strip away at all the layers, down to the primordial, unadorned first fold of the word, and we are still faced with the "ambiguities of simplicity" (Auski 6). In short, the word simple is suggestive of the irreducibility of the one, or the singular. Returning to Kern's project of recuperating "simple [human] kindness," then, what does it mean to pursue something that is thus irreducible? Recalling that "kindness" defines kinship, nearness, relatedness and the "natural affection arising from this," including "a feeling of tenderness or fondness; affection" and "love" (OED), what does it mean to be kind—both in terms of affection and our nearness— to such ineluctable something in our fellow human beings? And how is love, like the concept of the simple, so basic yet complex? This is where it would be helpful to invite Eric Santner's thoughts on neighbor-love into our conversation.

In *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, Santner brings two influential German-Jewish contemporary thinkers Sigmund Freud and Franz Rosenweig into collaboration to argue that read jointly, their works shed light on what it means to, and how it is possible for us, to love our neighbors as ourselves without collapsing unbridgeable differences or falling prey to facile platitudes of multiculturalism or presumptuous "global consciousness" which predicates our love on the basis of our thoroughgoing knowledge of our neighbors.[20] According to Santner's reading of Freud and Rosenweig, the Judeo-Christian Biblical injunction to love our neighbors is not predicated upon our knowledge of our neighbors (whether kind, loving, lovable or what not);

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[19] Peter Auski, *Christian Plain Style: The Evolution of a Spiritual Ideal* (Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), 3-4.

[20] Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenweig* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5-6.

neither are we to love our neighbor for his/her identity in the world (whether racial, gender, professional, religious and so on); rather, the injunction to love our neighbor derives from that neighbor having an unconscious—like my unconscious—that is an alien to itself, entrenched in its own impossible pursuit of *jouissance*—the Lacanian term describing our paradoxical and inscrutable drive for pleasure in pain, or pleasure amidst pain (6-7, 36-37). Revitalizing Rosenweig's original term, Santner calls this the "metaethical self" that cannot be stripped away to its lowest denomination; the meta-ethical self is by nature irreducible, it is the "excess," the remainder, the "too-much" that defiantly remains and refuses to fall neatly in line with any one identifying force (71-3). According to Santner then, we love our neighbor because after all the outward layers are peeled off, we encounter in our neighbor an alien unconscious—like our own—with all its excess and "touch of madness" that makes our neighbor a "disoriented" stranger to her own being (82). As an answer to Freud's rhetorical question about why we should love our neighbor then, we can say this: "the Other to whom I am answerable *has an unconscious*, is the bearer of an irreducible and internal otherness, a locus of animation that belongs to no form of life" (82). We love our neighbor, because of the irreducible alien in her.

The revelation that dawns on Kern Roberts, then, is the imperative to strip away all the outward layers of our being, our identities in the world, so as to discover therein our simple human kindness, or our love for the neighbor that is not based on our sameness or identitarian attributes but based rather on our mutual overabundant strangeness and irreducibility (the paradox of human simplicity). This seems a tall order, and hence no wonder that Kern feels the revelation towers over and "dwarfed anything else he had ever thought of" previously. But this tall order, the passage articulates, "frightened" Kern not in its infeasibility but in its "honest[y]" and do-ability, or rather, its ineluctability: "It was so *simple* and urgent that it astonished him."

If, continuing on Santner's theme of our untoward psyche, we are all each of us driven by our crazy-making *jouissance*, how is it possible for us to open ourselves not just to the ethical care of, but the love of the Other? To echo Freud (sans the edification of Rosenweig), "Why should we do it? What good will it do us? But above all, how shall we achieve it?"[21] After all, "My love is something valuable to me which I ought not to throw away without reflection" (*Civilization* 66). The answer is, paradoxically enough, fulfilled in its own injunction.

Love of the neighbor is not a directive but indicative of the human psychic condition (Santner, *Psychotheology* 68). The Judeo-Christian commandment, being what it is, a commandment, already carries its own fulfillment in its very injunction. This is due to the temporal collapse between the grammatical *"imperative* and *indicative*" in the commandment to neighbor-love (68). As Rosenweig observes, where the simple indicative, after its "whole cumbersome" deliberation, is already faded into the past tense, the imperative to love

> is wholly pure and unprepared-for present tense, and not prepared-for alone, but also unpremeditated. The imperative of the commandment makes no provision for the future; it can only conceive the immediacy of obedience. If it were to think of a future or an Ever [*Immer]*, it would be, not commandment or order, but law. Law reckons with times, with future, with duration. The commandment knows only the moment; it awaits the result in the very instant of its promulgation. (qtd. in Santner 68-9)

The dwarfing revelation that occurs to Kern must have this "magic of the true voice of commandment," for the imperative to write the story of simple human kindness strikes him as both "urgent" and shockingly "simple." As neighbor-love is a commandment fulfilled in the

[21] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 66.

instance of its own iteration, there is some level of passivity on the part of the auditor. All that is required on the part of the commandee is being receptive to it. Accordingly, returning to the scene of Kern's revelation, the dawning of the imperative to neighbor-love has an element of passive beholding, like movie-watching. Consider the moment leading up to the revelation: "In the darkness he dropped into the big easy chair and draped his legs over one chair arm. His thoughts almost made pictures on the screen of darkness before him. Bit by bit the full impact of what he was thinking broke on him" (*Alien* 28).

In the end, writing the traumatic story of his passing forces Kern to see himself as both subject (as evanescent as it may be) and subjected (the ethical dilemma of passing: Is he capitulating and hence subjecting himself to White supremacy, or is he declaring his subject-hood in that passing?). It is a painful soul-searching, one that torments him even while it gives him the only reason for living. What Kern's life plays out and the life that he writes about is a meta-fiction, a play on passing that brings attention to its own act of passing and thereby exposing its own passing endeavor. It is a passing that passes to write about that passing, which is a far cry from cowardice. It is what I call a visible passing, a paradoxical phenomenon that is both passing and not passing at the same time. An example of this visible passing is Kern's first "passing" at the Hippodrome Theater where he passes in a space where passing is redundant (because it is a darkened space where the focus is on the act on the stage and not on the spectators). It is not an act of capitulation and not exactly a political protest either. What the passing act in the theater and the passing Kern enacts later in life reveal are the subtleties of passing and the subtleties of the Black identity. Savoy's vision of the subjectivity of passing invokes the Hegelian subjectivity of becoming, the fluid, phenomenal self that is anything but static, a being in motion, traversing (passing and trespassing) in space in the quest of becoming.

The Hegelian subject's focus is not so much the destination or what is (being) but a fluid passing of becoming. And it is in this fluid space of the present-progressive that Savoy's protagonist espies self-love and the possibility of neighbor-love.

Race as Religion and the Profanation of Race in *Alien Land*

In *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben extends Walter Benjamin's ruminations on Christianity *cum* capitalism[22] to theorize that, unlike Benjamin who distinguishes between genuine (viz., ethical) religion versus mechanical and guilt-bound cult religions, all religions are fundamentally alienating and even anti-ethical in this alienation of the human. This can at first seem confounding; for we presume religion to bring us closer to God, to each other, and to what we aspire to be the ethical life. Yet the evacuation of the human is inherently inscribed in its very term, in that, as Agamben's etymological exegesis shows, "The term *religio* does not derive…from *religare* (that which binds and unites the human and the divine). It comes instead from *relegere*, which indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention" we must make between the divine and the human and "the separation between the sacred and the profane"; hence, "*Religio* is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct."[23] We can thus define religion "as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common

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[22] For the reading of Walter Benjamin's essay fragment "Capitalism as Religion," see Werner Hamacher and Kirk Wetters, "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion," *Diacritics*, 32.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2002), 85. Benjamin indicts capitalism (and its coterminous Christianity) as "parasitic" "cult religion" that feeds off of the perpetual cycle of guilt, indebtedness and atonement it incites in its constituency (85). Like other pagan proto-religions predating it (e.g., Greek polytheism), Christianity with its "guilt economy" of capitalism "raised the doctrine of original sin to the status of a dogma and extended this logic into the furthest reaches of its systems of faith, thought and behavior," effectively foreclosing any room for individual exercise of freedom or self-direction apart from compulsory acts that answer to the dictates of omnipresent and ubiquitous elicitation of guilt. As freedom with its attendant self-agency is the prerequisite of genuine religious faith and social ethics, Benjamin concludes that Christianity *cum* capitalism is "prereligious and protoethical" (85).

[23] Giorgio Agamben *Profanations,* trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books 2007), 75.

use and transfers them to a separate sphere. Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation also contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core" (74).

Agamben's definition of religion can be useful in our understanding of race; for as Benjamin pressures the pathology of guilt pulsating from capitalism by reading it as a kind of religion, I want to pressure the problematics of race by reading it too, as a religion, with all the separating—and separatist—tendencies that Agamben adumbrates. Race as religion explains why, despite the incontrovertible truism of today that race is a socio-political construct; despite there being no phenotypic traits or essential qualities that can possibly define a person as being of a certain race; despite the growing (and gnawing) presence of mixed-race individuals and the sundry projects of passing that threaten to frustrate and expose any kind of racial ontology; in short, despite its undeniable fiction, race remains to be real. Race is at once factitious and factual, because it operates not on carnal logic, but on the religious one of faith. As propitious as the religion of race seems in its ability to mobilize an essential group identity and intra-racial unity, it, like all religions, works to demarcate prohibited boundaries, spheres, identities. Reified in its sacred sphere where no humans can reach, the religion of race forbids us from using our world and the objects in it (including our bodies and our creativity) in any other way than the ritualistic ones that serve its interest.

Yet if race is akin to Agamben's conceptualization of religion—the rigid boundaries that alienate us from ourselves, each other, and the things of the world—it is not insurmountable; it can be breached via "profanation." According to Agamben, profanation is returning (something or someone) to common human use through contact (or contagion) or play (physical or wordplay). "[I]f 'to consecrate (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, 'to profane' meant, conversely, to return them to the free

use of men” (Agamben73). The first mode of profanation (i.e., contact) is effected when something or someone who has been set aside for ritualistic sacrifice cannot be offered as such and must be returned to the human realm due to “a profane contagion, a touch that disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified” (74). The second mode of profanation (through playing—including wordplay) occurs “by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or rather, reuse) of the sacred” (75). There is nothing careless or thoughtless about the play of profanation; rather, the iconoclastic power of the profane play can introduce “new dimension of use, which children and philosophers give to humanity…Just as the *religio* that is played with but no longer observed opens the gate to use, so the powers [*potenze*] of economics, law, and politics, deactivated in play, can become the gateways to a new happiness” (76).

If race indeed can be imagined as religion (with its concomitant policy of reification, separation, alienation), how can we imagine the profanation of that religion of race, and how would this profanation return the sacred to common use and thereby usher us to the “gateways to a new happiness”? Is profanation the simple overturning of religion, a byword for secularization? According to Agamben, that is not so. “Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another” (77). Rather than simply reversing the power flow from God to human (secularization), profanation “deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized” (77).

What Savoy effects in *Alien Land* is to wrest the trope of passing away from its sacred sphere of religion and return it to common use, making it a vehicle of profanation that can mobilize the ethics of neighbor-love and human relatedness (or human-kin-ness). We have seen previously how Savoy’s passing novel strikes a dramatically different chord from preceding

passing novels involving male characters. One of the remarkable ways in which the writer diverges from his authorial antecedents is precisely in his profanation of the religion of race. I want to reintroduce key moments in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography* as a comparative case in point.

In Johnson's novel, passing is one of impasse at best, and one of defeat—a costly sacrifice and religious heresy—at worst. The eponymous character's decision to pass occurs after witnessing a brutal lynching in the South; and at first glance, Johnson's narrative seems to construe race as a socio-political fiction as opposed to a fundamental, sacred ontology. After tremendous gut-wrenching introspections and inner-debates, the Ex-Colored man decides to "forsake" his Black "race" and attempts to console himself by likening his choice to one who by necessity of self-preservation must "forsake one's country" (Johnson, *Autobiography* 148). Given how in theory a person can reside in, and embrace, more than one country of residence in one's lifetime (and also hold dual citizenships), the parallel between nation-state and Blackness seems to underscore the contingent identity of the latter. The narrator then tells himself that in action, he will neither avow nor disavow his Blackness; neither would he "claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would;" for "it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead" (148). The narrator makes clear that this "label of inferiority" is just that—it is not that Blackness is naturally inferior but that it is a demeaning brand that White racism has cast on Blackness. He further clarifies that his motive to thus pass—or make his racial identity an *impasse*—is not due to the paucity of "larger field of action or opportunity" for Blacks, but the "unbearable shame…at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (148). This passage makes it difficult to see Johnson as ascribing the power of

religion to race, as he seems to cast all notions of race and passing in ironic light (after all, if one cannot be singled out as being of particular race, and if one does not openly identify himself as White, is he "passing?).

Yet by the end of the novel, Johnson implies that the project of racial impasse fails—the unnamed narrator clearly passes for White—and that this is a terrible bargain, one that comes at an exorbitant cost. He loses his identity—he gives up his artistic talent—music, and delves into the arid land of "white man's success": making "money" (150). The Ex-Colored man's resultant life of perpetual guilt and doubt are understandable given the novel's suggestion that one's racial identity is a sacred one, an essential covenant as sacrilegious to break as one of religious covenant.[24] In the passage that concludes Johnson's novel, what becomes palpable is the proximity of race—specifically Blackness—to religion. While the speaker seems to gesture toward race as a narrative construct by observing how Booker T. Washington and other prominent Black leaders are "making history and a race" (163), the overwhelming tendency and mood here is one of Blackness as a sacred essence, most akin to religion. For one, Washington and other Black leaders are likened to the New Testament apostles (post-Pentecostal) whose

[24] While the critical consensus maintains that Johnson's Ex-Colored man is an unreliable narrator whose words are often ironic (often without his own knowledge) and not to be taken at face value, most critics view the tone in the ending of the novel as offering a rare moment of sincerity, self-awareness, and even racial subversion. See Howard Faulkner, "James Weldon Johnson's Portrait of the Artist as Invisible Man," *Black American Literature Forum* 19.4 (1985): 147-51; Robert E. Fleming, *James Weldon Johnson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 40; ibid*.,* "Irony as Key to Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," American Literature* 43.1 (1971): 83-96; Stephen M. Ross, "Audience and Irony in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," CLA Journal* 18.2 (1974): 198-210; and Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., "Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," American Quarterly* 32.5 (1980): 540-58. M. Jiulia Fabi, on the other hand, views the ending as yet another parodic act on the part of the narrator; she reads the ending as an example of the Ex-Colored man's "most successful exploitation of the culture of his mother's people for purposes of self-aggrandizement" (*Passing,* 99). The point of my footnote is to underscore how, whether the critics have read the unnamed narrator's tone as ironic or sincere, none of them take issues with the religious significance of the passage as I believe we should.

force and credibility are not so much in their eloquence but in their conviction and "faith" (163). And like the early followers of Christ (and Christ himself) who preached the paradox of life everlasting in death, the Ex-colored man notes the paradox of how these Black leaders, for adhering to "the eternal principles of right," will stand as "victors even though they should go down in defeat" (163).

Intensifying the religious mood of the passage is the narrator's lament over his "sacrificed talent," a phrase which is deeply imbedded in the Biblical realm. The etymology of the word "talent"—defining "mental endowment; natural ability," goes back to the New Testament and to the Parable of the Talent where Jesus tells the story of the servant who is chastised by his master for dawdling with his talent and not investing in it (OED). As it is already apparent in Jesus's own parable of the talent, we can further trace the word talent to define a monetary system or the weight of money (OED). Thus the Ex-Colored man's talent is a God-given gift which he has vanquished, or "sacrificed." The unnamed narrator commits the double sin of not merely squandering his God-given talent (the parable of the monetary talent), but he commits further folly unto God, mocking him by sacrificing that which God has given him to cultivate by exchanging it for monetary gain. In other words, rather than using his God-given talent—his "birthright" (163)— to make a sacrifice pleasing unto God, the narrator uses the same talent to sacrifice—cut out—God himself. If "Blackness" or the musical talent in that essential Blackness is a talent (a God-given gift, his birthright), the narrator has sold that gift to purchase the religion of Whiteness and its capitalistic money-making enterprise (in the Benjamin sense of capitalism as religion), thus committing religious heresy. Thus in the case of the Ex-Colored man, his Blackness is a divine gift which the narrator feels weighed down by and myopically sells for the weight of gold (in his

own words, the narrator ends up "an ordinary successful white man who has made a little money"). It is an unfortunate bargain, for what the narrator has done, based on Johnson's Biblical allusions, is a sacrilege—a divine betrayal—of the worst kind: religious heresy. By turning his back on his "mother's people," then, the narrator has done much more than betraying the Black race—he has betrayed God. Betraying one's Blackness, then, is akin to religious apostasy.

There is yet another Biblical allusion at work here, namely, of Esau and his selling of his birthright for a bowl of porridge to his brother Jacob. The analogy here compares Blackness to religion, namely, Judeo-Christianity, and what's more, Blackness to the chosen religion and the inchoate holy nation of Israel. For Esau, the heir-apparent, to have succumbed to the temptation and renounce God's divine promise to the enterprising Jacob and his "mess of pottage" (163) is beyond devastation, and for Esau, only life of agony and torment awaits. Accordingly, the tone we hear in the Ex-Colored man is despondent and funereal. Like the Biblical Esau, we can foresee the bleak outlook of Ex-Colored man's remaining days. Significantly, too, within this logic of race as divine "birthright," his love of his children that keeps him sheltering them from their Black heritage is tinged with dubiousness and sinfulness—he is denying them too, of their God-given birthright. According to the logic of Judaic religion, there is only one chosen people—children of Israel—and Esau's children have no place in the holy banquet.

What Savoy, in contrast, seems to do is to wrest race away from its reified, religious status to the place of everyday use, to borrow Alice Walker's well-known short story that explores the eclectic fabric of Black American heritage.[25] Savoy "profanes" race—both Black

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[25] Alice Walker, "Everyday Use," *Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973): 47-59.

and White—and in this profaned space, he contemplates the possibility of neighbor-love that defies the color-line. At this time, we should recall the pivotal role play has in Agamben's concept of profanation. Accordingly, in Savoy's novel, theatrical play occupies a critical, life-preserving position. The Deep South (as seen in the fictional Valley View, Alabama) is a god-forsaken soil, the alien land proper; yet hope still lives on, and the keys to that hope are creativity, art, play, and the collective human will to preserve these things. Walking home in the hostile neighborhood, Kern would pause "to study the tiny gold key he now held in his hand,…sign of membership in the Playhouse fraternity" (277). He is "delighted" by the key not only because of its charming, aesthetic sight of dazzling red enamel on gold (277), but because of what the key stands for—endurance and flourishing of art through time despite the harsh soil of racism. "Now his name too would be added to the long roll of other Valley Viewers who had held membership on the Playhouse rolls as far back as 1871" (277).

If the fictional Kern Roberts is thus conscious of making his name and leaving his mark in the roster of Black American theatrical tradition of Valley View, it can very well mirror the writer Willard Savoy's determination to leave his mark in the tradition of African American literature. To be more specific, in *Alien Land,* Savoy sets out to radicalize the passing genre by revising—profaning—what is perhaps the most famous of all passing narratives of the post-Harlem Renaissance era—Johnson's *Autobiography.*[26] The ending of Savoy's novel hearkens so palpably to that of his predecessor's work that it behooves us to read them side by side. To begin,

[26] Echoing Robert E. Fleming, M. Giulia Fabi notes, though the initial publication of Johnson's novel received lackluster critical and general response, by the second publication in 1927, it "emerged as the only pre-World War I novel to become 'one of the most influential books' of the Harlem Renaissance (*Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* 91). As does Savoy's novel, other passing novels of critical note such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Jessie Fausett's *Plum Bun* have also been informed by Johnson's seminal novel, and it continues to have "an indelible imprint on the history of black American literature" (Fleming, *James Weldon Johnson* 41).

we recall that near the ending of Johnson's novel, the narrator is at Carnegie Hall contemplating the great lives of Black leaders ("small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race"). Similarly near the end of Savoy's novel, the narrator, upon leaving the Supreme Court where his father Charles has just given his opening speech, "wondered what it might have been like had he [Kern] stood and fought. Had he been one with that tiny band of men—the Whites and Washingtons, DuBois and Wilkins and Douglass—men who gave their whole lives to the fight for a race" (*Alien* 320). But where the curtains of Johnson's novel fall with the narrator in dejection, defeat and isolation, a grim casualty to the lost cause of passing, so to speak, the closing curtains drape Savoy's Kern Roberts in full transit, passing through traffic-congested space yet securely keeping about him life, playfulness, and love. To put this in the grammar of ontology: If one can say that whereas Johnson's Ex-Colored man is what has *become* of passing (*Being* as a completed task, thus a static identity), Savoy's Kern Roberts is what is *becoming* of passing (*Being* as a present progressive, thus a dynamic identity, present to change). For clarification, consider the passage near the end of the novel where the father and son reunite outside of the Supreme Court chamber after so many years of estrangement:

> There was only a little time left after the spectators had pushed out into the hall. Time enough for Kern to make his way through the shifting, forming groups, and grasp his father's hand as he stood among the host of well-wishers, the merely curious, who clustered about him. Their hands met in the press of the crowd, and their eyes, and recognition struck instantly between them, spanning the years that had passed as though they were nothing. Their hands held and their eyes held…[and] the one word with which he had never addressed Charles surged up

> to his lips, 'Dad.' He felt his father's hand tighten on his own in a sudden, hurting grasp, and was glad he had used the word. (319)

The word "passed" here should give us pause. This is perhaps the one passage in the entire novel where we see genuine love between father and son. It is the first time Kern is able to call his father by that name, and the most affectionate Charles himself has ever been to Kern. That the one genuine moment of love between the father and son occurs thus in ways of passing (passing through space and time, passing through crowds of traffic, passing of racial identity) underscores the possibility of love in passing. The inclusion of the word passing here also calls to mind the scene of love between Kern and his mother much earlier in the narrative, when even in "passing," a stranger can perceive that the two are mother and son (38). In this way, both in and through passing, the novel brings to full circle the son's honoring of both parents and their respective heritages, Black and White. What Kern recognizes and what his father understands now is this: That the fight for "simple human kindness"—which Charles himself has implored in his Supreme Court opening argument (318) and which his son Kern has longed for in his journey through alien land—has more than one contour, more than one way of being, and in passing too, that love of kindness, kinship, and neighborliness is possible.

This kind and kindred love notwithstanding, the father-son passage also enacts the tenuousness of the recognition of love and kinship in passing. The passage pulsates with the fleeting nature of time, the temporal uncertainties and impermanence. The father and son must find each other in the midst of "shifting" clusters of bodies that barricade them from each other. Rather than indicating that the father and son embrace each other, the text denotes the precariousness of their love in the face of these spatial and temporal vicissitudes and contingencies by metonymically having their hands meet and their eyes recognizing each other.

This is the final Hegelian moment in the novel where the father and son recognize their respective subjectivities and their mutual interdependence. Like the master of Uncle Jake's grandfather who cannot but acknowledge his bondsman's legal autonomy once he recognizes the latter's subjective autonomy in his artisanship, so does Kern recognize, for the first time, perhaps, his father as an artist like himself where like Kern, Charles uses the tools of language to build a world, a narrative of Black subject-hood in the face of racist America. Too, in this final Hegelian moment of recognition, the father and son set each other free which is, like passing, paradoxical, for it is the moment that we recognize our un-freedom; that is to say, our freedom is borne by the weight (or gaze) of others without whom we are naught.

The final passage of the novel, while denoting the uncertainties of what the future holds, chooses to seize time in the here and now to behold the love immanent in this messianic time:[27]

> But now, at this instant, there was the warm knowledge that the ends had been joined. That his father understood and there was no more bitterness…He still felt his father's hand in his…. For a moment, as he stood in the late-afternoon sunlight, before a taxi stopped, Kern wondered what it might have been like had he stood and fought. Had he been one with that tiny band of men—the Whites and Washingtons, DuBois and

[27] Messianic time here refers to Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of time that is nonlinear and anti-teleological; rather than focusing on the outcome or the ends of time (or historical events), messianic time thrives in the grapping of (or the grappling with), the transitory here-and-now, or the present time. Benjamin calls this the "now-time" that marks the "messianic freezing of events" (qtd. in de la Durantaye 45). de la Durantaye, Leland. 2008. " 'Homo profanus': Giorgio Agamben's profane philosophy," *Boundary 2* 35(3): 27-62. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3172833. As de la Durantaye puts it, "This vision of messianic time is thus one that is clearly not concerned with waiting for some state of affairs to come about, or with reaching some point located in the future, but is, instead, focused on how we experience our historical present" (45). For sustained study of messianic time, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

> Wilkins and Douglass—men who gave their whole lives to the fight for a race. *The moment passed*, and he felt calm assurance that for himself the *bargain with Life* had been a good one—*a fair one*. His father knew that.
>
> (320; my italics)

Here we see Savoy profaning the religion of race via wordplay. Savoy's deliberate use of the loaded word "fair" here exemplifies playful daring; equating "fair" with "good," he dares the reader to bring to mind "fair" with "White." It would be understandable and even expected of the reader to be alarmed by the word "fair" here (and in such close placement with another loaded word, "passing"), for if there ever were a loaded word in this novel, it would be the word "fair."[28] There is, to be sure, nothing fair about racism and the racist system that divides people against people, family against family, individuals against justice. Yet fair also means, indeed, good and beautiful; it can mean a conduct or action "free from bias, fraud, or injustice; equitable; legitimate, valid, sound" (OED); fair can mean all these things in spite of White racism's attempt at hijacking the word and singlehandedly "staining," or rather, bleaching, may we ironically add, the meaning of the multipronged word. Additionally, the word "fair" carries the meaning of transient, peripatetic marketplace with accompanying sources of fun and entertainment (*viz.,* the carnival fair). Together, the term "fair" "bargain" suggests a mundane marketplace transaction where one comes out having negotiated a good deal. Who then, if given the choice, would not opt to strike a fair bargain? In the end, the text implies that passing can mean many

[28] In the trial of his mother's murder, the Black janitor cannot receive an equitable deliberation for his foregone guilt of assaulting a White woman; the White presses, we recall, pounce at him even before the commencement of the trial for committing "injury to the *fair* name of the Nation's Capital" (*Alien* 63; my italics). A pre-trial judge casually mouths how Jeff Mason's crime is a "*dark blot* on the *fair* name of the Nation's Capital," and how only the utmost prosecution "can erase this *stain*" (60; my emphasis). On the other side, the Black community led by Mason's defense team has argued that no Black person so accused can receive "a fair and impartial trial" (80). In short, Mason's trial ends, the novel mocks, "in fair and impartial" way (89).

things, can auger multitudinous ramifications—just as we have seen in Savoy's pregnant word choices—but one thing is clear: This passage witnesses Savoy approaching the concept from that of playful daring—profanation. The mood of playful daring further permeates this passage, for the ironic use of the word "passing." Whereas we expect the word to describe Kern (or his life), the passage playfully inserts the obvious instead—a moment's passing, or the passing of time.

In the larger context of the narrative, the "fair" "bargain with Life" here refers to Kern's decision to pass. It is reminiscent of Johnson's Ex-Colored man's sacrificing of the birthright for a bowl of porridge; yet in Savoy's text, there is no dejection, no sense of loss of the sacred. Nothing sacred is lost in this "bargain," as the term invokes a workaday market bartering—not with God, but with a certain "Life."

Thus the ending of Savoy's novel is strikingly similar with Johnson's, and hence we cannot but notice the differences. Where Johnson's novel ends in defeat, loneliness and isolation (despite the narrator being a father to two children, we know next to nothing about these children; the brief sketch we have of them is one of infantile fragility; they can hardly be reassuring companions to the grown narrator who is bereft of companions his own age), we find Savoy's protagonist surrounded by love of father, returning home to his wife and daughter, with memory of his loving grandmother alive in his heart and the touch of his father's hand still fresh in his mind. The "bargain" he strikes, if it is a mess of pottage, does not preclude him from his father's blessing and election; far from it, the father, like the Biblical Isaac, touches the arm of his son and gives him his blessing—Kern Roberts, then, is both Esau and Jacob, or neither Esau nor Jacob. He is the son who gets the porridge and the blessing, a profane retelling of the birth of the nation of Israel.

CHAPTER TWO

Their Eyes Were Watching Seraph: Intertextual Passing and Neighbor-Love in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*

"God made them duck by duck": Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston was well versed in the Bible from early girlhood, thanks in equal parts to her mother, Lucy Ann, and to young Zora's own mischievousness. "I came to start reading the Bible through my mother," Hurston recalls. One day, after giving her daughter "a good licking" for her sassy mouth, the mother grounded the wayward child in a room where the only reading material was the Bible. "I happened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested."[1]

Drawn in by the underdog story of David and "searching for more Davids," Zora eventually chanced upon Leviticus, perhaps the least narrative of Biblical chapters and daunting in its supernumerary Mosaic precepts and laws, all of which the precocious child devoured: "There were exciting things in there to a child eager to know the facts of life" (*Dust Tracks* 595). Deeply smitten, she even enlisted a friend to join in on the reading, and they "spent long afternoons reading what Moses told the Hebrews not to do in Leviticus" (595). Like the young Miriam in Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* whose childish negligence and gossip ironically inaugurate the rise of the nation of Israel, the young Zora thus stumbled into her love affair with the Bible through her childish misadventure.[2] Yet what started out as an exciting story

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[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in *Folklore, Memoirs & Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 595. My subsequent analyses of the text will refer to this edition.

[2] Unlike the Biblical rendition, in Hurston's *Moses,* Moses's deliverance of the Israelites come about because Miriam loses her baby brother due to negligence, then to get out of trouble, she fabricates a lie that she saw Pharaoh's daughter picking up her baby brother. Thus begins the gossip among the Israelites that later legitimize the Egyptian Moses's leadership among them. See Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 44-51.

book took a deeper hold. "In a way this early reading gave me great anguish through all my childhood and adolescence. My soul was with the gods and my body in the village" (595). This anguish for what she felt was her higher calling could not be provincialized; her passion for Biblical stories never left her, as she went on to pen two Moses narratives, a short fiction, "The Fire and the Light" (1934) and a historical novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939).

In adulthood Hurston refused to align herself with any formal religion as she yearned for the "comfort of all my fellow men" too much to find reasons to distance herself from them (764). While she was thus irreligious and often ironically irreverent, her spiritual training was deeply informed by the African-American folk culture and Judeo-Christianity of her childhood (756). This chapter focuses on Hurston's particular devotion to Leviticus and spotlights its central commandment: loving the neighbor as oneself.[3] If Willard Savoy's commitment to race-defying neighbor-love becomes clearer when we read *Alien Land* against its literary antecedents—Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*—Hurston's meditation on the possibility of ethical love between the races becomes illuminated when we read *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) in light of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

The ways in which *Their Eyes* marks its presence in *Seraph* are so pervasive and persistent that many critics have had to wrestle with its implications.[4] Both novels involve a woman's journey to discover her selfhood, complete with near-identical symbolisms to mark the

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[3]"Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD (KJV, Lev. 19.18); "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt…"(Lev. 19.34); "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23.9)

[4] Most recently, Stephanie Li tries to make sense of the intertextual pairing by way of signifyin(g); i.e., *Seraph* declares itself as part of the African American literary tradition by talking (with a difference) to *Their Eyes*. Stephani Li, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 36.

respective protagonist's sexuality and self-discovery (fruit trees, horizons, and the sea); and the two share uncanny resemblances in their choice of love interests. Perhaps the most remarkable of the textual overlaps is the shared narrative voice itself. As Hazel Carby points out, not only does *Seraph* include "many phrases and sentences that evoke the language" of *Their Eyes,* at times, "the language is identical," resulting in an eerie reading experience where "[t]he rhythm and syntax of Hurston's black folk haunt the reader throughout the novel."[5]

Despite the remarkable links between the two novels, critics have tended to discount *Seraph* as a comparative exercise in how little the author cared for her White characters or how attenuated her artistic talent became when she stopped writing about Black folk.[6] What makes *Seraph* a seeming outlier in the Hurston oeuvre is not just the dominant presence of Whites. The protagonist Arvay Henson Meserve is a deeply-troubled Southern woman with manifest racism; equally alarming, Hurston seems to promote gender essentialism and patriarchal dominance. Arvay is raped by her future husband Jim Meserve only to look back on this troubling moment with fondness; and at the novels' end Arvay realizes that the greatest joy of her life is to be a wife and mother. As Nathan Grant puts it, *Seraph* is a "problem text" and an "unusual departure" for the writer whose canonicity has been founded on valorizing female agency and empowerment.[7] For the critic, even as the novel predominantly showcases White characters, it

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[5] Hazel V. Carby, Foreword. *Seraph on the Suwanee*, by Zora Neale Hurston (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), ix.

[6] For the view of Hurston's portrayal of Whites as artistic disaster, see Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," Introduction, in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing,* ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 21; and Hemenway, *Biography* (307-8, 314). For Hurston's disaffection with white folks, see Stephanie Li, *Playing in the White;* also John C. Charles*, Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013), 164-5.

[7] Nathan Grant, *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 95.

does not bode well for “black agency” (Grant, *Masculinist Impulses* 95). Arvay and Janie may both seek love, but the former “appears to represent womanhood as it should *not* be, a condition traditionally and completely dependent on a masculine control of economics and environment” (95). How do we reconcile this Hurston and her seemingly backward gender politics with the feminist visionary of *Their Eyes*? How does the reading of *Seraph* complicate and deepen our understanding of the preceding novel? Rather than writing off—and racially segregating—these troubling gender dynamics and retrograde domestic desires in Hurston’s last novel as the author’s excoriation of White masculinity or femininity, what does the inter-textual reading of the two novels reveal about the author’s conceptions of gender and racial identity and politics?

This chapter argues that Hurston’s last published novel is a daring narrative that presciently interrogates Whiteness and exposes it as a socio-political construct.[8] In deconstructing Whiteness, however, what Hurston endeavors is far from racial retribution or reverse-enmity but integral to her engagement with the possibility of neighbor-love in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, rather than viewing *Seraph* as being antithetical to the vision of love in *Their Eyes,* I contend the writer further interrogates the thematic of love explored in the earlier novel—whether self-, romantic, or communal. This time, however, she goes beyond the Black intra-communal to the interracial in that in *Seraph* Hurston contemplates the possibility of ethical love between Black and White. I read *Seraph* alongside *Their Eyes* to show how the kernels of what disturbs us in *Seraph* are already present in the preceding novel, especially in terms of problematic gender politics and domestic desires. Read synergistically, the two novels reveal how, for Hurston, romantic love can be a kind of madness that complicates or dis-eases our notions of sex, gender, and class. *Their Eyes* performs what I call intertexual passing or textual

[8] See Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero*, 15-6. Li also reads *Seraph* as an early (and Black) exemplar of Whiteness studies, *Playing in the White.* (10-13).

trespassing, where it strategically re-peoples *Seraph* with key tropes, characters and scenes eerily evocative of itself. The larger implication of this intertextual (tres)passing is the authorial invocation of the reader's heightened empathy for the unlikely White characters and the recognition of the theme of female empowerment we see in *Their Eyes* as continuing in *Seraph* through the trope of motherhood and the subversive agency of maternal empathy. The intertextual-reading practice reminds us how the madness of love seen in both novels can paradoxically beget perhaps the most ethical of all loves—neighbor-love; the intertextual passing of the two works accomplishes this by exhorting us to do onto one neighboring text what we would onto the other, reading both novels with empathy, sensitivity, and historical awareness.

At the same time, the aesthetics of intertextual passing operates to broaden the scope of the two novels. Read separately, *Seraph* and *Their Eyes* seem racially and politically discrete; the former is about Whites and the latter about Blacks. Intertexual (tres)passing serves as Hurston's aesthetic move to interface the two worlds without succumbing to what she viewed as the collapsing of literature and politics. It is her answer to the Black artist's dilemma with her chosen medium of literary realism, a volatile and even treacherous genre for midcentury Black writers given its inherent mirror quality that can reflect and thereby perpetuate the topographies of racism, sexism and other societal ills. In its fealty to verisimilitude ("portraying life as is"), literary realism could be complicit in perpetuating inequitable realities. Its replication of reality has the potential to normalize social injustices. Through the inter-texual symbiosis of the two novels, Hurston performs a kind of generic passing where despite the constraints of literary realism and despite the pressure from the Black intelligentsia to write politically-driven fiction, she manages to be political by being artistic.[9]

[9] In important ways, Hurston's artistic vision coincided with that of her younger contemporary, Ralph

This chapter will tease out Hurston's autobiography so as to establish her commitment to the Levitical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19.18; 19.34) and the Exodus commandment to love the stranger through empathy (Exod. 23.9). Doing so will reveal Hurston's deconstructive views of race (both Black and White) and her conviction that fiction of race obfuscates the path to neighbor-love. In her unmatched folksy witticism, race gets in the way of seeing how God has made us, not race by race, but "duck by duck" (*Dust Tracks* 731).

"The World is a Family of Hurstons": American Race Relations and Ethics of the Neighbor

How would Hurston the artist have interpreted the cornerstone of the Judeo-Christian ethics of loving one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19.18) and loving the stranger as oneself (Lev. 19.34) against the backdrop of the racial dynamics of the twentieth-century United States? Would she have interpreted the injunction against vengeance narrowly, as applicable to Black people only, or would she have read it broadly as applicable to all regardless of race? How would she have taken in the verse from Exodus 23.9 where the reason given for not oppressing but rather loving the stranger is that the Israelites "know the heart of a stranger"—or know the "feeling" of a stranger, to quote from the New American Standard Bible version— and thus we can ethically empathize with being a stranger in a strange land?[10]

Hurston was famously indirect; her modus operandi was almost always "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick." To get at the answer to our questions, we must trace her indirect leads.

Ellison, who understood the paradox that "Novels were perhaps most political when their authors remembered to keep in mind that their job was to write fiction that conveyed the truth of life as experienced and not to turn out sociological or political tracts." Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 60.

[10] Many contemporary versions of the Bible translate "the heart" as "feelings" of the stranger thus making clearer that neighbor-love is based on empathy. E.g., New American Standard Bible: "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt. Cf., New International Version: "…you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners."

A salient text where Hurston implicitly engages these key Biblical passages is her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942),[11] where she defines the Biblical neighbor broadly and not exclusively to fellow Blacks. The illumination she has sought since girlhood sparks within the grown writer when she realizes that race gets in the way of knowing the heart of the individual: "Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck…. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people….So I began to laugh at both white and black who claimed special blessings on the basis of race" (*Dust Tracks* 731). For Hurston, combating White racism is only grappling with the surface; we must debunk the fiction of race and find an alternate model of relationality outside of the racial us-versus-them logic. "I do not wish to deny myself the expansion of seeking into individual capabilities and depths by living in a space whose boundaries are race and nation" (Appendix 786).[12] Even as the pressure to categorize Blacks into a monolithic identity is strong

[11] From the time of its publication, Hurston's autobiography has generated suspicion by critics of African American letters due to its racially conciliatory tonality. See Robert E. Hemenway, Introduction, Zora Neale Hurston *Dust Tracks on A Road: An Autobiography*. Ed. Robert E. Hemenway (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), xxxiv, xxxix. Similarly, Walker sees *Dust Tracks* as the "most unfortunate thing Zora wrote," because by and large, "it rings false," especially when it comes to Hurston's expressed affections for her White "'friends,'" whom "she could not have respected" (Foreword xvii). I suspect Hemenway's and Walker's discomfiture with *Dust Tracks* as revealing more about the critics' historical milieu than it does about Hurston's own sentiments. I take what Hurston has to say in her autobiography seriously, and I am informed by both the published and the excised versions. The published version left out a key chapter where Hurston is pointedly critical of American racism and hypocritical politics, and Western imperialism and intellectual/religious bigotries. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*: Appendix, in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings*, 787-93. As her recent biographer Valerie Boyd has noted, what we consider to be odd in *Dust Tracks* has more to do with our generic expectations than Hurston's integrity. Hurston's approach is what we would call a memoir today (a genre which did not exist in her time). Like a memoirist, Hurston sought to "capture not the letter of the life, but the spirit of it." To dismiss the book" "as nothing more than a pack of lies" would be as wrong as it would be for us to dismiss her Black male contemporaries—Langston Hughes and Richard Wright—who also wrote memoir-like autobiographies in the similar time period [*Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 355].

[12] There are three chapters in *Dust Tracks* that were either excised in the final version or underwent significant editorial redaction. In many instances, the publisher (Lippincott) rejected Hurston's more "harsh criticisms of whites and of American democracy," and demanded a rewrite. M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: UP of Florida), 176. As West points out, "The earlier versions reveal an aspect of Hurston's persona concealed by the published version, showing her to be a politically aware woman willing to speak her mind" (177). My own reading of *Dust Tracks* will be informed by both the final published version as well as the bowdlerized chapter manuscripts.

and compelling, Blackness, like Whiteness, is no essence but a construct. Consider this remarkable passage: "I maintain that I have been a Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman….There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all" (*Dust Tracks* 733). Within the U.S. racial binary schema, Hurston would not have been seen as anything but Black. Yet even if she has no choice in determining her race or the option of not claiming one, she painstakingly deliberates that she has chosen Blackness three times in her life. What she is doing here is not different from Arvay's claim to Whiteness; Hurston claims Blackness deliberately as if by choice, thereby revealing that Blackness, like Whiteness, is not innate but a socio-political contingency.

In relation to Leviticus 19.18, Hurston would not have viewed Blacks exclusively as "the children of [her] people" but would have welcomed Whites as neighbors. The same Biblical injunction commands one from "bear[ing] any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." In the expurgated chapter of her autobiography,[13] she uses humor to illustrate how she bears no grudge against the descendants of slave holders while declaring her independence from being held hostage to the historic trauma:

> [T]here seems to me to be nothing but futility in gazing backward over my shoulder and buking the grave of some white man who has been dead too long to talk about. Neither do I see any use in button-holing his grandson about it. The old man probably did cut some capers back there, and I'll bet you anything my old folks didn't like it. But the old man is dead. My old folks are dead. Let them

[13] For the brief history of the editorial excisions of *Dust Tracks*, see n10.

> wrestle all over Hell about it if they want to….I have business with the grandson as of today…. It is ridiculous for me to make out that I'm Old Black Joe and waste my time rehashing his problems. That would be just as ridiculous as it would be for the Jews to hang around the pyramids trying to get a word with Old Cheops [the Pharaoh]. (Appendix 787)

While some readers may be rankled by Hurston's ostensibly cavalier treatment of the slavery past or label her politically naïve, what she does here is use humor to deflate the bloating of White power.[14] To bicker with "some [dead] white man" is to bring him back to life and thereby giving him undue power over one's life. To be humorously dismissive of him as being "dead too long to speak about" shuts out his voice and seals his fate. It is an indirect reclamation of one's agency and voice. She recognizes that to harbor bitterness or grudge against White slaveholders and their progeny is to relinquish her power: "To me, bitterness is the under-arm odor of wishful weakness" and "the graceless acknowledgement of defeat" (*Dust Tracks* 763).[15]

Here and elsewhere, Hurston's use of humor is also a gesture of reconciliation in recognition of our shared humanity. She remarks on the subversive and mutually humbling aspects of humor: "My sense of humor will always stand in the way of my seeing myself, my family, my race or my nation as the whole intent of the universe….Some of [God's] finest touches are among us, without doubt, but some more of His masterpieces are among those folks who live over the creek" (765). By the same token, she acknowledges the limitations of the use

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[14]Hurston's provocative dismissal of slavery past has earned her not a little critical ire. See for example, David Headon, "'Beginning To See Things Really'": The Politics of Zora Neale Hurston," in *Zora in Florida,* ed. Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 29.

[15] There is no easy answer to how we can reconcile Hurston's position with making whites responsible for historical wrongs via reparation (as white America has done for Japanese-American internment); while Hurston has left no explicit thoughts on the concept of reparation either way, my preliminary conjecture is that racial enmity or bitterness does not need to be synonymous with Black American demands for reparation.

of humor—or any device— to achieve "justice" in the "absolute": "We are too human to conceive of it" (765). The solution lies not in exhuming the past wrongs but in spearheading proactive changes today. "I am all for starting something brand new in co-operation with the present [White] incumbent. If I don't get any cooperation, I am going to start something anyway" (787). These changes will not focus on the tragic, but rather on daring things regenerative and equitable—again, through humor: "The world is not just going to stand still looking like a fool at a funeral if I can help it. Let's bring up right now and lay a hearing on it" (787).

As Leviticus 19.34 commands, we should love the stranger as ourselves, but the reason has all to do with our ability to empathize with the suffering of alienation (being a stranger in Egypt). In the final chapter of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston writes, "Being an idealist, I too wish that the world was better than I am….My inner fineness is continually outraged at finding that the world is a whole family of Hurstons" (766). As she expounds more pointedly in the publisher's excised version of the same chapter, the world is deeply flawed—from Judeo-Christian religious biases and Western colonialism to the hypocrisies of the U.S. race relations and policies.[16] Yet to acknowledge the people in the world as her own, to implicate herself in its failings, is to turn the erstwhile anonymous "world" into yourself. This kindred love is based not on the neighbor's loveliness but based paradoxically on his/her imperfections that harken to our own marks of the alien, the Hurston-ness within us.

This echoes Kenneth Reinhard's rabbinical exegesis where the injunction to love the neighbor derives not from our commonalities or shared human ideals but from our "self-

[16] See Hurston *Dust Tracks on a Road*: Appendix, 787-93.

difference."[17] Explicating the original Hebrew scripture, Reinhard argues that the contextual and syntactical interchangeability of "neighbor," *re'a* (Lev.19.18) and "stranger," *ger* (Lev.19.34) in conjunction with "the particle *kimokha*, 'as yourself'" (which is "suggest[ive of] a certain *incommensurability* that marks the limit of any act of comparison") reminds us of our own internal alien difference, our mutual strangeness, "and transforms the neighbor into the exception to its own universalization; the neighbor emerges from this resonance as a singular figure, an excluded element, the aggregation of which can never equal a totality" ("Ethics"). In opening up the infinite possibilities of the neighbor not in racial totality but in alien singularity—not human by human but duck by duck—Hurston's thoughts echo Reinhard's concept of neighbor-love as the "*infinitization of the universal*" (Par. 13-4, 20).

Notably, the only two places in the Bible where we get the rhetorical formula "'love x as yourself'" occur in Lev. 19.18 and Lev. 19.34, thus denoting the inseparable connection between the self and the stranger/neighbor (Reinhard, "Ethics of Neighbor"). Hence the paradox of loving one's neighbor as oneself is that it is also an injunction to self-love. If we withhold our love from the other who is so much like us (in our strange desires, our singular-alienation), then what we are doing is withholding love from ourselves. In the expunged earlier version of the same chapter, Hurston once more invokes the ethical imperative of loving one's fallible neighbor for the sake of our own fallibility, the Egypt within. Hurston holds no romantic view of the intrinsic nobility of the oppressed. It would be erroneous to believe "that the darker races are visiting angels, just touristing around here below. They have acted the same way when they had a chance and will act that way again, comes the break" (Appendix 793); meaning, the oppressed often

[17] Kenneth Reinhard, "Ethics of the Neighbor: Universalism, Particularism, Exceptionalism." *The Journal of the Society for Textual Reasoning* 4.1 (November 2005).

become the oppressor when given the chance. This is not a cynical view but one of empathy. We extend the grace of love to the stranger/neighbor precisely for their kindred fallibility: "[T]he world is a whole family of Hurstons" prone to "selfish" "justice" (787).

In Search of Zora Again: Literature Review of Hurston's *Seraph*

If the contemporary White reading public's reception of Hurston's third and last published novel was "neither overwhelmingly negative nor positive," it was nonetheless one of the author's most commercially successful work.[18] By virtue (or seeming vice) of showcasing largely White protagonists—Florida "crackers" and their lives in the first-half of the twentieth century—the novel promptly alienated the contemporaneous Black readership (as it seemed to be irrelevant to the African American community and its experience), and only served to confirm the contemporaneous Black intelligentsia's suspicion of Hurston as a racial exploiter and opportunist (West, *Hurston and American Literary Culture* 228). Previously Black critics at least took the time to review her works, however begrudgingly.[19] When it came to *Seraph* and its Southern "cracker" world, there would be no reviews, only exasperated silence.

Even after Alice Walker's famous literary resurrection of Hurston and her works in the

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[18] M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (United States of America: University Press of Florida, 2005), 215. For a detailed account of the novel's critical reception, see ibid., 215-221.The novel "sold 3,000 copies within days of publication," and the publisher (Scribner's), considered the book a "success." Virginia Lynn Moylan, *Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade* (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 42, 43.

[19]Consider Alain Locke's tepid nod to Hurston's storytelling gifts but chastising her for being too superficial and not digging "deep" enough to write "motive fiction and social document fiction" in *Their Eyes*; Ellison's disparagement of the same novel as a "calculated burlesque"; and Richard Wright's scathing verdict that *Their Eyes"* carries no "basic idea or theme" other than casting "minstrel" characters to make "'white folks' laugh." Alain Locke, Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Opportunity* (June 1, 1938) *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present.* Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 18; Ralph Ellison, "Recent Negro Fiction," in *New Masses* 5 (1941), 211; Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," [Review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*], *New Masses* (October 5, 1937), *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, 16, 17.

mid-1970s, *Seraph* has, up until recently, garnered mostly disparaging critiques from the students of African American letters if it came under any critical attention at all (West 214-5). Much of this scholarly silence (and silencing) has had to do with the novel's apparent reticence on the issues of race in general and the issues pertaining to Black lives in particular. Mary Helen Washington views Hurston's choice of White cast as "admirable" in "intention," but creatively disastrous in effect ("Woman Half in Shadow" 21). Or as Walker sees it, *Seraph* is a "reactionary, static, shockingly misguided" and "timid" work that "is not even about black people which is no crime, but *is* about white people who are bores, which is."[20]

In recent years, scholars have begun to revisit Hurston's last published novel; and this time they are not put off by the use of Whiteness in the text but in many instances, being very much attuned to it. Claudia Tate reads the use of Hurston's Whiteness as the psychic vehicle through which the author explores repressed fantasies and subject matters deemed taboo for Black subjectivity. She proposes that the novel "offers a critique of fixed racial identities and patriarchy by making these themes the butt of its jokes."[21] Using the term "joke" in the Freudian sense of censor-evasion, Tate concludes that the joke that Hurston plays on both White and Black readers is her insistence on the "indeterminacy of race and the refusal, indeed the inability, of this novel to validate absolute racial distinctions among black and white dialect, culture, and people" (*Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* 170).

In contrast, John C. Charles argues that in *Seraph*, Hurston attempts fictionally to redeem the racially oppressive South but "ends up producing a utopian plantation romance,

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[20]Alice Walker, Foreword. "Zora Neale Hurston—A Cautionary Tale and Partisan View." *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* by Robert E. Hemenway (London: Camden Press Ltd. 1986), xvi.

[21] Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 153.

marked above all by interracial sympathy," an unrealistic and paternalistic tale that, ironically enough, she herself cannot tolerate (*Abandoning the Black Hero* 20). In the end, "Hurston's contemptuous representation of the 'crackers' derails her attempts to deploy southern interracial sympathy, as she obliquely expresses the rage" against White racism that "she steadfastly rejected throughout her career" (Charles 21). She ends up projecting all the "negative qualities usually associated with African Americans onto the poor whites. This move allows her to avoid… producing black suffering for white liberal consumption" (21)

Most recently, Veronica T. Watson and Stephanie Li read the novel as an early vanguard of contemporary Whiteness studies and interrogate the intersecting politics of gender, class, and Whiteness.[22] Watson focuses on the novel's exposé of the vexed construct of genteel White femininity whereas Li argues that "Hurston locates black difference" in *Seraph* "by signifyin(g) upon her earlier treatment of key themes" in her identifiably Black novels and illustrating how Whites appropriate Black vernacular for patriarchal hegemonic purpose (Li, *Playing* 36, 44).

My study partakes in this ongoing revisionist conversation; and as many recent critics have done, I too keep a close eye on Hurston's complication of the concept of Whiteness. My reading, however, departs from the scholarly chorus of negative inflections. For instance, based on Tate's psychoanalytical reading, Whiteness is reduced to a joking mouthpiece to talk about Blackness, with the joke culminating in the revelation that "[t]hese white folks are black!" (qtd. in Li 36). In Li's linguistic reading, Hurston's aim in her longest novel is largely to impugn White characters— Whites exploiting Blacks and their linguistic and cultural productions; the ills of White patriarchal hegemony; the undesirability of White middle-class femininity, and so on. From Charles's sympathy reading, the novelist ends up projecting all the negative

[22]Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

Black-racial stereotypes onto Whites, thus reducing Whites to scapegoats of authorial rage. In contrast, I maintain that the writer is not exploiting one group for self-gain or the benefit of another group—that is, that Hurston critiques White oppression without foreclosing the possibility of interracial dialogue and reconciliation. My critical intervention centers on Hurston's meditation on the possibility of loving the White neighbor despite her manifest flaws. Hurston succeeds in extending that neighbor-love through empathy.

The narrative empathy studies scholar Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" which "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading"; empathy works both at the affective ("feeling") and cognitive ("thinking") levels.[23] Recent advances in neuroscience have located the region of our brain where "mirror neurons" trigger empathic responses leading to "emotional contagion" where we engage in "automatic mimicry" or "spontaneously matching feelings" with one another ("Narrative Empathy" 61, 63, 67). Typically being highly empathic people themselves, narrative writers deply empathy strategically as a "rhetorical" tool with a target readership in mind (71, 82).[24] "By using their powers of empathetic projection, authors may attempt to persuade readers to feel with them on politically charged subjects" (82). Keen calls this "*authorial strategic empathizing,*" and she theorizes three types: "*Bounded strategic empathy*" targets "in-group" identification; "*ambassadorial strategic empathy"* broadens the

[23] Suzanne Keen, "Narrative Empathy," in *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts,* ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas, 2010), 62, 68. For further reading on authorial strategic uses of empathy, see *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 121-143.

[24] Psychological testing measures [such as Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)] have shown that "fiction writers as a group scored higher than the general population on empathy" (Keen, "Narrative Empathy" 79). For further reading on this clinical study, see Marjorie Taylor et. al, "The Illusion of Independent Agency: Do Adult Fiction Writers Experience Their Characters as Having Minds of Their Own?" *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 22 (2002/2003): 361-80.

target audience beyond the in-group with the goal of "reaching and swaying the feelings" of a chosen out-group to generate "*their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end*; on the other hand, "*broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities.*" This third category "employs a universal tool (language) to reach distant others and transmit the particularities that connect a faraway subject to a feeling reader" (83-5).

If in *Their Eyes* Hurston targets empathic experience of and for an in-group audience (Black readers), the intertextual synergy of *Their Eyes* and *Seraph* endeavors to generate broadcast strategic empathy where the two novels' structural, thematic, and linguistic similarities invite both Black and White readers to feel together in shared human experiences and vulnerabilities.[25]Through the deployment of intertextual passing, Hurston attempts to manipulate the neural pathway of "emotional contagion" that triggers empathy by activating "our physical and social awareness of one another" so that the ideal reader of *Their Eyes* (readers of color and perhaps some progressive Whites) can recognize the mirroring of the two novels which may then trigger the reader's mirror neurons to respond to *Seraph* empathically as they would with *Their Eyes*. Patrick Colm Hogan would call this reading practice an example of "situational empathy" that transcends categorical loyalty of the "ethics of defense," allowing the emergence of the universal "ethics of compassion."[26] This heightened empathic position can alert us to the reiteration of the theme of female empowerment in *Seraph* through the trope of motherhood

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[25] Studies have shown that for the majority of readers (including those with low empathic level), "perceived similarities encourage empathy" (Keen, "Narrative Empathy" n89).

[26]Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 137-8.

and the power of maternal empathy.[27]

Fiction of Whiteness and the Intertextual (Tres)Passing of *Their Eyes* in *Seraph*

As recent critics have concurred, *Seraph* is no less mindful of race than *Their Eyes,* as instantiated indirectly through the internal turbulence, fear, and insecurity of White characters as well as through the semiotics of external landscapes. The novel invokes Whiteness only to deconstruct it, exposing its claim of essential superiority as labile fiction.

From the start, we can see in *Seraph* that Whiteness is a kind of passing. The novel opens at the turn of the century in Sawley, Florida, a small town peopled with poor White folks. Though theirs is a segregated town with an all-Black town next door (similar to the Eatonville of Hurston's childhood), the two races have minimal contact; their socio-economic status as poor White "crackers" makes their claim of essential Whiteness especially tenuous and threatens to put them closer to the "'contagion' of blackness."[28] For the protagonist Arvay Henson, this contingent vulnerability of Whiteness is an excruciating cross to bear. At the novel's opening, she—young, poor and female—is already weighed down by insecurity and self-doubt. Arvay's last stronghold for power is the privilege of Whiteness. But this Whiteness is not a given

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[27] For previous treatment of *Seraph* and motherhood, see Carol P. Marsh-Lockett, "Whatever Happened to Jochebed? Motherhood as Marginality in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the* Suwanee." *Southern Mothers: Facts and Fictions in Southern Women's Writing.* Ed. Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1995): 100-110. Whereas Marsh-Lockett views motherhood in *Seraph* as ineffectual failure and passive victim under the weight of systematic abuses of patriarchy and capitalism (102-6, 109), I read the trope of motherhood in Hurston's novel in a more empowering and subversive light.

[28] Bas Dreisinger, *Near Black*: *White to Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachussets Press, 2008), 21, 22. From the 1830s on, White America has viewed "blackness…as being contagious, transmittable via proximity," whether that proximity is defined as geographical, interpersonal, or sexual nearness. Given the "social and economic nadir" they experienced post-Reconstruction, the fear of the Black contagion was especially real for poor Whites (*Near Black* 21, 22).

but a performance one must stage—and pass.[29] Accordingly, one day she stands up before her church members and pledges to give herself to God and become a "missionary" to the "heathens" to "warn them of the dangers in which they stood in their ignorance, of a burning and everlasting Hell" (*Seraph* 602). What her speech leaves out as is the fate of the "heathens of China, India and Africa" once saved. For her and the White congregants, it is inconceivable to imagine these heathens "wallowing around on the heavenly chairs, nor ankling up and down the golden streets….Fancy meeting a Hindu, with his middle tied up in a dhoti and with white head-rag on, around the Throne, or singing in the Choir!…He ought to consider himself pretty lucky to get saved from Hell" (602, 603).

Arvay's pledge to renounce her life for God, upon closer examination, is a claim to power, the religious power of Whiteness.[30] It is a public performance, a proof positive of her Whiteness; and as the passage suggests, a hackneyed speech that "followed a usual pattern" that many a person vying to pass as White has given before her (*Seraph* 602). One critic sees Arvay's missionary fervor as setting her apart from Whites and marking her as the racial other, "aligning her with the black community," and that it is when she later abandons her religiosity that Arvay moves away from being "black" to being white (Li 43, 44). I cannot disagree more. As soon as Arvay stands up and conjures up a world of difference between herself (the knowing missionary) and the ignorant heathens, she becomes White, and this Whiteness can have the magical propensity to turn her youth—heretofore an Achilles' heel of her insecurities— more into a

[29] Elizabeth Binggeli also reads Whiteness as identity of passing contingency in *Seraph.* Elizabeth Binggeli, "Hollywood Wants a Cracker: Zora Neale Hurston and Studio Narrative Culture," in *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston,* ed. Deborah G. Plant (Santa Barbara, California; Denver, Colorado; Oxford, England: Praeger 2010), 43-4.

[30] For a critical reading that theorizes Whiteness as religion (of materialism), see Martin Japtok," 'The Gospel of Whiteness': Whiteness in African American Literature," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 49.4 (2004): 483-498.

seductive force: "Arvay, young and white" (*Seraph* 602). This performance further reveals that the purpose of the missionary is not to raise the heathens to the celestial level of the saved White souls but to recreate heaven in the image of the racist American topography: Heaven, too, is segregated; no turbaned Indian need apply to the heavenly choir or dare walk the streets paved in gold. The knowledge the missionary is to bring to the heathens is the awareness of the missionary's Whiteness and their own alterity in light of that Whiteness. Ironically, then, it is the missionary who needs the heathens. The former needs to be saved from the nagging doubts about their superiority, their inherent Whiteness, and it is near the heathens that they feel validated—their Whiteness enacted and reinforced. Yet this is an unbearable nearness, in that Whiteness, even as it is confirmed by the presence of the subalterns, cannot by its very nature abide things non-White: hence rushing to Africa to save the heathens but barring them from heaven's gate proper. The passage suggests that Whiteness cannot be a constant state of being but rather an act one must perform (hence passing), which in turn can engender anxieties and racist projections in the actor.

At various junctures in Hurston's novel, Whiteness emerges as a kind of neurosis and its claim of supremacy something akin to an atavistic madness.[31] Consider Earl, Arvay's first-born son, as a case in point. In Earl, the mother fulfils her wish for an essential Whiteness, and the result is ironic and monstrous. At birth, Earl embodies Whiteness almost literally: "The hair and eyelashes were perfectly white. [Earl would grow up to] be a blonde" (*Seraph* 660). Even in her maternal devotion, Arvay senses that there is something "defect[ive]" and amiss about the newborn (660-661). The novel further implies that there is insatiable violence bundled up in this

[31] For a psychoanalytic reading of the history of White racism, see Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory.* New York: Random House, Inc. 1970.

child from the start. Earl does not "simply accept [the breast] as most children did"; [b]ut always he seized upon the breast," "attack[ing]" it "ferociously" (661). Arvay views Earl's deformity as the "punishment for the way I used to be" (of secretly desiring her pastor and future brother-in-law Carl Middleton while claiming to renounce her life for God), and in a way, she has an unwitting point (662). Earl is the offspring of her religious escapades insofar as her aspiration for religion is conflated with her aspiration for Whiteness.

Ironically, this symbolic Whiteness eventually hurts her as much as it will the racialized Other. As we have noted, Earl begins his life attacking at the breast, and he grows into young manhood only to attack his nearest neighbors' daughter, Lucy Ann Corregio. This pivotal rape scene involving Earl is the inversion of the Black-rapist stereotype, where Arvay's ghastly White son attacks a girl whom Arvay considers nonwhite due to her mixed heritage (Lucy Ann's father is Portuguese and her mother is an American Southerner from Georgia).[32] By having Arvay counting the Corregio women among "African savages [and] not to be treated white" (817), and by placing the Corregios in the back house previously occupied by a Black family, Hurston suggests that by association, the Corregio family is like so many Black victims in the stranglehold of White violence. By having the White Earl sexually assault Lucy Ann—whom Arvay considers Black—the novel implies that White America's paranoia of Black violence is a projection of its own seething violence.

Hurston's deconstruction of Whiteness, however, is far from a project of racial revenge or recrimination. The author deliberately sets up Arvay, easily unlikeable and racially hyper-

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[32]For critical reading of Earl's affiliation with Blackness and "nineteenth-century stereotypes of Black masculinity," see Watson, *Souls of White Folk*, 95-6. See also Laura Dubek, "The Social Geography of Race in Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee," Arican American Review* 30.3 (Fall 1996): 341-351; and Chuck Jackson, "Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics," *African American Review* 34.4 (Winter 200): 639-660.

conscious, as a testing ground for the Judeo-Christian ethics of neighbor-love. Given the pervasive palimpsest of *Their Eyes* in *Seraph*, I want to prefigure passing into the conversation and imagine *Their Eyes* as passing—or what I have called intertextual (tres)passing into/of *Seraph*. Carby is right that “Hurston was concerned with establishing more than linguistic similarities between white and black in the South; she was actively trying to demonstrate her ideas of cultural influence and fusion in her novel” (Foreword ix). The way Hurston effects this fusion is through intertextual passing of the recognizably Black novel into the recognizably White text. The narrative parallelism elicits a kind of ethical reading practice akin to neighbor-love: doing unto one neighboring text what we would do onto the other. It is this intertextual neighborly passing that complicates any hasty dismissal of Hurston’s deconstruction of Whiteness as ultimate vilification of the White characters.

Perhaps the most obvious metaphorical parallels are Janie’s pear tree and Arvay’s mulberry tree. Both are symbolic of the female protagonists’ sexual desire, fertility, and self-fulfillment. Recall how it is by the pear tree that Janie yearns for love: “Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life…Where were the singing bees for her?”[33] Similarly, the mulberry tree is Arvay’s “sacred symbol” (*Seraph* 877) of her budding self-discovery and sexual awakening. The mulberry tree is a “cool green temple of peace” where Arvay’s childhood dreams reside and also a place of her sexual exploration. The first time Jim visits the tree, it is she who is “dragging Jim along with her” (632). Consider the sensual and fertile language of the following passage: “They entered the place under the tree and

[33] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 11. My subsequent reading of the novel will refer to this edition.

stood there hand in hand, almost hidden from the outside by the low-hanging, supple limbs…She stood looking up through the new green leaves, punctuated by tiny fuzzy things that looked like green, stubby worms. Those were the young mulberries coming on" (632). Like Janie's pear tree, Arvay's mulberry tree is the leitmotif of her organic progress in the search for selfhood and fulfillment.

Like the twinning of the fruit-tree symbols, Janie and Arvay share near-identical love interests. Despite the difference that Janie marries thrice while Arvay marries once, Arvay's husband Jim Meserve embodies all three of Janie's husbands: Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, and Tea Cake. Logan and Jim use similar chauvinistic diction. Logan declares himself master over Janie with the edict, "You aint' got no particular place. [Your place] is wherever Ah need yuh" (*Their Eyes* 30). Jim, in turn, says, "A woman knows who her master is all right, and she answers to his commands" (*Seraph* 629). Then there is Jody Starks, Janie's ambitious and driven second husband, that Jim resembles at times.[34] Jody, the pompous gloater of his own accomplishment, places her on a pedestal so as to display her as the trophy of his material success. Forbidding Janie from speaking at his mayoral inauguration, he declares, "She's a woman and her place is in de home" (*Their Eyes* 40-41). As far as Jody can see, Janie's sole purpose in life is to be "a pretty doll-baby"; Janie's attempt to be his equal is impossible as "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (67). During the early days of courtship, Jim, a "Jody Starks-like go-getter and self-made man,"[35] similarly tends to primp Arvay in public like a delicate trophy,

[34] Hazel Carby likens Arvay's marital woes to Janie's her struggle for selfhood under the domineering control Jodie Starks. See Hazel V. Carby, Headnote, "Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)," in *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*, ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett (New York: New York UP, 2006), 262-3.

[35] Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport: Praeger Publisher 2007), 120.

"some precious play-pretty that might break in two" (*Seraph* 616). In his private thoughts too, Jim sounds indistinguishable from Jody. He believes that women are "not given to thinking no how…That was what men were made for…" (694). Both Jim and Jody objectify their spouses.

Despite his sexism, Jim Meserve comes across as a sympathetic character as some critics have pointed out, much more so than Arvay.[36] This has to do with his mirroring of Tea Cake, Janie's last husband and true love. Like Tea Cake, Jim unites communities in his easy-going way and his adaptability. He is close to the Black community and often invites its culture into his life (Black friends serenade his wedding; he captains a shrimp boat with mixed-race crew, and so on). Like Tea Cake does for Janie, Jim encourages Arvay to break out of her shell and mingle with her community. He introduces Arvay to activities she has never engaged in before, and Arvay's mother, Maria Henson, takes note of this immediately during their courtship: "Out and gone nearly every blessed night….If it ain't a cane-grinding, it's a candy-pulling. If it ain't that, it's a peanut-biling. If it ain't a peanut-biling, it's a square dance, and you never used to dance" (*Seraph* 636). We learn that in none of these novel activities has Jim "forced [her] to go along"; he simply enjoyed "social doings" (636). Like Tea Cake, Jim encourages Arvay to expand her horizon.

Reminiscent of Tea Cake who pulls Janie into the gritty, laborious yet joyfully egalitarian life of the Muck, Jim challenges Arvay to truly experience life aboard the shrimp boat and not just parade through it like a delicate "play-pretty" he has erstwhile expected her to be. He tells her, "Them high heels and that narrow skirt ain't suitable" for the shrimp boat life, implying that he no longer wants a mate who will merely preen around cutting the delicate mistress. If she

[36] For perhaps the most sympathetic reading of Jim Meserve, see John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

is to live with him, she will need to tackle life with all its dirt and ruggedness. “Jim bought a pair of the blue jeans that the fishermen wore, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots” for Arvay to wear (892-3). The work clothing foreshadows a more egalitarian life and marriage than the two have shared previously. In this way, Jim resembles Tea Cake; but as we have seen earlier, Jim also bears the flaws of Jody and Logan. Jim is not unlike Tea Cake who, even as he champions Janie’s personhood, is himself replete with inconsistencies.

First, there is the problematic incident of Tea Cake slapping Janie upon hearing the news of Mrs. Turner’s light-skinned brother. Tea Cake “whipped Janie” because “it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession” (*Their Eyes* 140). As outrageous as this might appear to the modern reader, we must of course contextualize “that Hurston’s narrative takes place in a relatively violent southern society of the 1930s, where many people, men, women, and children of both races, frequently experienced physical abuse from their loved ones, beginning with whippings as children, and offered the same in return” (Lowe, *Jump at the Sun* 186). We can further defend Tea Cake by arguing that Janie herself physically attacks him too when she finds him with Nunkie (186).

While we can thus mitigate his spousal abuse, what remains puzzling is Janie’s own silence. Unlike Tea Cake whose action can be better understood in the historical context, Janie’s reticence becomes all the more baffling when we consider her personal history. Even before fully acquiring the power of her voice, Janie has consciously resented Jody when he slaps her. At that moment, she realizes that “[s]he wasn’t petal-open to him anymore” (*Their Eyes* 67). Far from condoning Jody’s action, Janie dwells on the impact it makes on her and witnesses how it has “shattered” her “image” of him (68). Barbara Johnson argues that this is “a crucial turning point in Janie’s relation to Joe and to herself,” where she learns the division of language as metaphor

and metonymy and really "begins to speak" the language that enables her to "grow in power and resistance."[37]

If that is so, it is all the more problematic that Janie has nothing to say about Tea Cake's domestic abuse, nor is she able speak out against the Muck men's admiration of his spousal abuse. The silence is even more disturbing when we consider that it is coming from a woman who, during her marriage to Jody, has had the courage to vocalize her condemnation of the townsmen's woman-beating. If Janie's verbal retaliation to Jody is a progress in her journey to gain voice, then her silence here is a sign of regression, for she is consciously caving in to Tea Cake's patriarchal domination—he is the uncontested "boss" in the relationship.

Tea Cake thus shares traits with Starks, Killicks, and Meserve in his view of Janie as his possession. After word gets out that he has slapped Janie a few times, Tea Cake explains to the Muck folk, "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it" (*Their Eyes* 141). This is not very different from Killicks's rhetoric that Janie "ain't got no particular place" but that her place is "wherever Ah need yuh" (30). Both men see Janie's place in the world to be relational to theirs and never independently. Tea Cake boasts to the village men that he is Janie's superior: "Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause *she* done nothing'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (141). Unlike Starks who at least has a reason—however unwarranted—to slap Janie (ill-preparing his meal), under Tea Cake's rule, Janie need not do a thing; he is apt to beat her every time he has to prove to someone that he is in control.

What the beating incident also makes us second guess is the general reading of Tea Cake

[37] Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Black Literature and Literary Theory,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984), 212. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. concurs with Johnson that it is after Jody's slap that Janie acquires the power of voice, the "awareness of this willed figurative division" and the "exhilarating double-consciousness." It is Janie's "master[y] of metaphor" and the renewed "fluen[cy] in the language of the figurative" that empowers her to "speak out against [Eatonville] men's opinion about the merits of [wife] beatings." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 205, 206.

as the champion of Black folk heritage who rejects Western standards of success and aesthetics. We detect moments in the novel where he seems enamored by bourgeois values and Western standards of beauty, undercutting his image as the steward of Black folk heritage. Witness the conversation he has with the men of the Muck community soon after beating his wife. The men consider Tea Cake "lucky" to have a wife whose skin is light enough to show the marks of all her beatings (141). They go on to privilege the light-skinned Janie over her darker-skinned sisters by joking that the reason they have "quit beatin' mah woman" is because their complexion is so dark they "can't make no mark un 'em at all"; the men then enviously congratulate Tea Cake for having a "tender woman lak Janie" who wouldn't "holler" in protest but "just cries" (141). To this, Tea Cake promptly answers, "Dat's right" (141). That he makes no effort to discourage the men's colorism is troubling when we recall his role in driving Mrs. Turner out of the Everglades for being "color-struck" and for hating "black folks" (141).

Not only does Tea Cake internalize White aesthetics but also capitalistic standards of success. He spirits Janie away from her bourgeois home and moves them into the egalitarian ethos of the Muck yet is very proud of the fact that she is *not* one of the folk but a woman with bourgeois means and background: "Mah Janie is uh high time woman and uster things," he declares. "Ah didn't git her outa de middle uh de road. Ah got her outa uh big fine house. Right now she got money enough in de bank tuh buy up dese ziggaboos and give 'em away" (141). Thus what he finds to be meritorious in Janie has much to do with her class status.

In terms of Janie's own inconsistencies, we have already discussed her selective submission to domestic abuse. There is also her overdependence on Tea Cake for her self-definition. Janie cannot seem to do anything without Tea Cake's directions. It is *he* who tells her it is permissible for her to partake in game playing and lying sessions, and it is *he* who tells her

she should leave the house and work along side him out in the field. Tea Cake does not *ask* Janie if she wants to plant beans alongside him; he *tells* her she will: "'[Y]ou *betta* come git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women—so *Ah* won't be losin' time comin' home'" (127; my italics). Tea Cake's wish is her command, as she promptly gets "ready to pick beans along with Tea Cake" right "the very next day" (127). Whereas in her previous relationships Janie has questioned or challenged the men's commands, with Tea Cake, she is compliant. Insofar as her dependent relationship with Tea Cake goes, Janie does not appear markedly different from Arvay's dependence on Jim.

The paradox of Janie's journey for selfhood continues at the end of the novel. On one hand, her return to claim her place in Eatonville, bringing with her the seeds from the Muck, may symbolize a feminist "self-affirmation and self-expression" as well as the promises of "future growth" and gender equality.[38] As Janie is telling the story of her journey to Pheoby, one might also say that the former embraces *signifying,* the Black oral tradition of "indirect expression" to touch on risky or volatile subjects.[39] One can then say that Janie *signifies* to Pheoby on the controversial issue of Black women's independence, self-worth, and the right to happiness. And it does seem to have a positive effect, as Pheoby decides as a result of listening to Janie's story that she will be more assertive with her husband Sam (Lowe 195-6).

But there are worrisome ironies in the ending of the novel to disrupt this egalitarian reading. Although Janie returns to the folk community of Eatonville, she quickly passes through its members and promptly pronounces her difference from them by sequestering

[38] Susan E. Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender In the Work of Zora Neale Hurston.* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 79.

[39] Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995, 86, 87.

herself in the "sparkly white" house that Jody has built for them (*Their Eyes* 44). Though she seems to have rejected bourgeois materialism after Tea Cake's death being that she has "given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant" (182), nowhere in the ending does Janie allude to doing away with her plantation-like house that towers over the Eatoville shacks. In fact, she has a renewed fondness for it. As she tells Pheoby, "'Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom" (182). Many Hurston scholars have commented on the affirmative nature of this final imagery: "Of course [Tea Cake] wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking….She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulders" (184). Lowe points to the fish-net reference and Pheoby's earlier comment about having Sam take her fishing to suggest that this is a positive picture of Janie as the Apostle Peter who will spread the good news of "woman's power" (*Jump at the Sun* 196) The problem is that the passage emphasizes the inseparable connection between Janie's net-pulling and the posthumous influence of Tea Cake. If she is indeed akin to Apostle Peter, then she is still Tea Cake's subordinate (as Peter is to Jesus), someone who tells the good news not of woman's empowerment but of Tea Cake's divinity, his "love and light" (*Their Eyes* 184).[40]

Janie's critique of the Eatonville oral tradition is also problematic. She lodges her complaints about the villagers' carping tongue: "'Dem meat-skins is *got* tuh make out they's alive. Let 'em consolate theyselves wid talk. 'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans

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[40]As Mary Helen Washington concedes, "Hurston…puts Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization, and independence, but she also places Janie in the position of romantic heroine as the object of Tea Cake's quest, at time so subordinate to the magnificent presence of Tea Cake that even her interior life reveals more about him than about her" (Foreword, *Their Eyes* xiv).

when yuh can't do nothin' else….It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (183). Though the message here seems affirmative, the irony is troubling. Janie discounts one of the vital weapons the folk community has to combat racism and affirm their existence—the oral tradition. She is not solely singling out the negative aspects of oral expression (such as talking that promotes sexism within the Black community), but she is arguing that all modes of talk amount to nothing if "yuh can't do nothin' else." What Janie advocates is talking that measures up in action ("You got tuh *go* there to *know* there"). Yet the irony is that she is able "tuh *go* there" only because 1) her Caucasian features—such as her long hair and light complexion—made her the idol of her men starting with Logan, Jody, to Tea Cake; and 2) she had the financial means to be mobile. The average folk of Eatonville who have neither her physical traits nor the financial means may never be able to "go there tuh *know* there" and must indeed "consolate theyselves" with their oral heritage. Yet Janie dismisses this vital tradition as not "amounting tuh uh hill uh beans." While Janie preserves the oral tradition of the folk by narrating her story to Pheoby, she simultaneously rejects its merit. While her shortcomings and biases may be less glaring than Arvay's, the two share enough vulnerable traits to keep us from valorizing one in spite of her flaws (Janie) while vilifying the other because of hers (Arvay).

As in the tumultuous love shared by Arvay and Jim, so in Janie and Tea Cake's romantic relationship, what emerges is the picture of the paradoxes of love, as a kind of redemptive madness, one that is at once life-threatening and life-giving. The flood scene is a case in point. When Janie's life is jeopardized as hard wind carries her away and into the torrents of the flood, Tea Cake notices "a cow swimming slowly" by with a "massive built dog…sitting on her shouldersand shivering and growling. The cow was approaching Janie" (157). Here, the mad dog represents Tea Cake; Janie later recalls that the sinister look in the eyes of her dying lover

reminded her of the murderous glint in the eyes of the rabid dog (175). Janie, in turn, represents the cow. Hurston aligns Janie with the Egyptian deity Isis who "was associated with the flood, and her symbol was the cow (Lowe 195). As if to make the connection between Janie and the cow even more pronounced, the imagery continues with Janie holding onto the tail of the cow. Significantly, it is Tea Cake who entreats her to do so, for this is the only way she can be saved. Hence the paradox: Tea Cake himself creates the deadly alignment (Janie and the dog) that he must risk his life to sever. At the figurative level, Tea Cake's direction for Janie to be one with the cow is telling of his view of Janie: She is at once the goddess Isis (cow) *and* the beast of burden (cow). On one end, she is an exalted goddess whom he must worship; on the other, a subservient beast that he is justified in controlling. The polar extremes underscore Tea Cake's ambivalence toward Janie as his romantic equal.

Tea Cake's symbolic oppression of Janie has much to do with the paradoxes of romantic love. Consider the following passage: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be *crushing scent* out of the world with his footsteps. *Crushing* aromatic herbs with every step he took….He was a glance from God" (101-2, my emphasis). Tea Cake is Janie's divine ideal, the pollinating bee she has dreamed of since girl-hood; however, his sweetness is tinged with violence and destruction. He repeatedly "crushes" the things that are strutted about his path. Janie herself admits that as she looked down at the face of the bruised and beaten Tea Cake, she felt a "self-crushing" kind of love (122). Again, this hints at an element of self-destruction. The main difference between Janie's rejection of her former husbands' oppression and Tea Cake's is that the latter cloaks it in a sweetness she finds irresistible. Even the textual link between Tea Cake and God is suspect; for nowhere does the text portray God as a benevolent force but one that incites defiance. Hurston explains that as the

hurricane swept through the Everglades, the people's "eyes were watching God" (151). Their posture here is that of defiance and even contempt, eyeing God to catch His next move. Another figure associated with God is Jody Starks. With his "I-God"s, he is a self-proclaimed creator. In short, if Tea Cake is a kind of god to Janie, then this only intensifies his dichotomy. He may provide a new and exciting life to Janie, but one wonders what vital part of her he takes away in return and may explain why the novel decides he must die if Janie is to live.

My reading of *Their Eyes* is not to diminish Hurston's endeavors to define the Black female self within the folk paradigm and the author's validation of Black cultural expressions. It is rather a reminder that what we do for *Their Eyes*—how we read Janie and Tea Cake and other supporting characters with empathy, sensitivity, and historical awareness—we should also do for Arvay, Jim, and the people in their narrative world. For Janie too, like her intertextual counter-part Arvay, is inconsistent; she too, is at various junctures misled and insecure; Tea Cake has his chauvinistic tendencies as Jim does. The similarities between these characters—Janie and Arvay; Tea Cake and Jim— beckon us to be equitable in our interpretations. As we extend our sympathies to Tea Cake and to Janie despite their myriad flaws and faults, we must do so for Jim and Arvay.

The two novels also share the semiotics of threatening landscapes that symbolize the madness of racism. Recall for instance, the flooding of the Muck in *Their Eyes* ushers in the first invasion of White racism into the novel where White men forcibly conscript Tea Cake to bury the dead (Blacks). This racist landscape turns Tea Cake himself into a rabid monster who threatens Janie's life (ironically after saving her life from the rabid dog in the flood), and Janie must shoot her beloved husband to save her own life. The irony, of course, is that it is Tea Cake who has taught Janie to be a good shot.

Let us now examine the swamp in *Seraph*. The swamp incites repulsion-attraction in Arvay, and it serves as the symbol of White panic. She both "hated and feared" it yet feels "sympathy with [it]" (776). Ironically, Arvay has viewed the treacherous "beast" (the swamp) to be the greatest threat to her son Earl, but it turns out to be the boy's secret stomping ground where he is seen "ducking and dodging down in there…playing sort of hide and seek" (776, 733). In this way, the text aligns the threatening landscape of the swamp with Earl, the walking symbol of Arvay's White panic. The picture of the White Earl playing hide and seek, becoming visible and invisible in a swamp that generates both repulsion and attraction in his mother, is an apt metaphor for the melancholia of race. This game of "conferring visibility (who is white, who is black; who is visible, who is not)" suggests that the American racial imagination "is thus 'stuck' within the Moebius strip of inclusion and exclusion: an identification predicated on dis-identity. It is a fear of contamination that works itself out by contamination."[41]

The violent flooding of the Muck (and the unleashing of racist intrusion) in *Their Eyes* parallels the violence of the swamp in *Seraph.* Like Tea Cake and the rabid dog that bites its madness into Tea Cake, Earl is described as a mad dog. Foreshadowing Earl's sexual assault of Lucy Ann Corregio, as soon as the Corregios move into the back house, the text transfigures Earl into a sexualized mad dog: He lets out "whimpering yelps" that Arvay mistakes for a "dog" (710). "Earl, with unseeing eyes, was…running like a hound dog hunting for the scent…Whining and whimpering and making growly noises in his throat from time to time" (710). The irony of Earl's death further binds the two novels. Like Tea Cake's ironic ending of dying in the hands of his beloved Janie, so is Earl shot to death because he has taken aim at his own father, Jim.

Balancing out the threatening semiotics are similar imageries of redemption at the end of each novel. The closing of *Their Eyes* evokes a mosaic of redemption with the horizon, the sea,

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[41] Anne Anlin Cheng, "The Melancholy of Race." *The Kenyon Review* 19.1 (Winter, 1997), 58.

and sunlight. The novel famously ends with the vision of Tea Cake "prancing" into Janie's view and lighting her darkness (the grief, the horrors of the past) "with the sun for a shawl…The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace….She called in her soul to come and see" (*Their Eyes* 184). In *Seraph*, Hurston treats us to the vision of the horizon, the sea, and the dawn lighting upon Arvay and Jim aboard their new seafaring life. "The sunlight rose higher, climbed the rail and came on board. Arvay sat up… and switched off the artificial light overhead, and…made the sun welcome to come on in, then snuggled down again beside her husband" (920). The sun motif in Hurston's life and writing "symbolizes spirit and spirituality" as well as "consciousness, and sometimes…the human heart" (Plant, *Biography of the Spirit* 14, 40). In both novels then, the sun evokes hope and redemption for the organic self (the candlelight paling before Tea Cake's sunlight; the artificial light blotted out by the sunlight that greets Arvay). More importantly, the similar imageries reinforce the twinning of the respective narratives.

Finally, I want to return to the idiomatic similarities of the two works. As a writer committed to literary realism, Hurston strove for verisimilitude in her depiction of Southern White characters, and she wanted to paint "a true picture of the South."[42] Hurston based her White characters' speech pattern on her research into the Florida turpentine community (Lowe 281-2). In her letter to her editor, Hurston relates how she was surprised by the linguistic similarities between southern Whites and Blacks; and she attributes the history of their common idiomatic practices to Elizabethan English. As Hurston saw it, the vivacity and colorfulness of Southern Black vernacular did not derive from Africa but from the Elizabethan English that the

[42] Hurston's letter to her Lippincott editor Burroughs Mitchell, October 2, 1947 (Kaplan, *Life* 561).

Southern White folks retained. Notwithstanding the controversial aspect of this stance, in penning *Seraph* with its Eatonville-like voices, “Hurston repudiated theories of the uniqueness of black linguistic structures” (Carby, Foreword viii). In rejecting the linguistic purity of the Black idiom, Hurston was “actually merely endorsing what was overwhelmingly accepted as fact at this time by linguists and folklorists” (Lowe 281, 282). Contrary to what some critics argue, therefore, in giving voice to the idiomatic expressions of her Southern characters in *Seraph*, Hurston is not simply putting White masks to Black faces. What we hear in the novel is the well-researched voice of the “poor backwoods white Floridians” (Lowe 282) whose humanity the writer was determined to depict on their own terms. Yet at the same time, by having *Their Eyes* serve as a palimpsest in *Seraph*—from the twinning fruit tree metaphors, threatening landscapes, similar love interests, to resonating diction—Hurston indirectly integrates the two segregated worlds, White and Black.

“For Ye Know the Heart of a Stranger”: Empathic Maternal Love for the White Neighbor

Intertextual passing performs the connectedness of Blacks and Whites without directly imbricating them. Through broadcast strategic empathy, the (tres)passing of *Their Eyes* beckons us to think twice about casting stones at Arvay or Earl or taking vindictive pleasure in their nakedness stripped of the specious garb of Whiteness and implores us to find a way to love these strangers as ourselves. Recalling Leviticus 19.34 and Exodus 23.9, the key to that neighbor-love is empathy. We can then see that the female empowerment and love in *Their Eyes* find a resonant chord in *Seraph*; in the latter, Hurston channels her filial love for her own mother Lucy Hurston and her dying wishes and invokes the trope of motherhood to imagine female empowerment and subversive maternal empathy to engage the ethics of the neighbor.

Let us illustrate with Earl and his mother, Arvay. Earl as aforementioned, is the living embodiment of Arvay's crippling racism, and Hurston dramatizes this through the Black-rapist inversion. Yet in aligning Earl so closely with the Black-on-White racist stereotype, Hurston accomplishes more than just reversing the stereotype; she highlights the similarities between Earl and the stereotyped Black man. They are both disabled by racialization, assailed by a crippling legacy not of their own making (Earl, as Arvay's symbol, enters the arena of life as someone's byproduct without agency; Blacks enter life in the U.S. with stereotypical scripts. In thus conflating the disabled Earl with the Black-male stereotype, Hurston implicates racism as disability.[43] To be sure, the writer is not implying that Black men are innately deformed or that Whites are naturally monstrous rapists; neither is she claiming a false equivalency between the respective experiences or travails of Blacks and Whites. The point of the inversion of the rapist-stereotype is perhaps that the real monstrosity lies in racism's crippling effect on individuals and society. Physically deformed and mentally disabled, Earl hobbles through his short life as the disturbing symbol and outgrowth of his mother's psychic nightmare. He faces the kind of death that too many Black men have faced—pursued and gunned down by a posse of White vigilante.

The rapist inversion which turns Earl into an assailed Black man necessarily turns his mother into a Black mother not unlike many a Black mother encountered in African American

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[43] American History is replete with instances where discrimination was meted out, especially based on the conflation of "non-white 'lower' races" with physically or mentally "defective individuals" as groups who were "evolutionary laggards or throwbacks." Racist Whites "often defined African Americans' supposed inferiority as a collection of defects, including a propensity to feeblemindedness, mental and physical illness, impaired reason, even deafness, blindness, and other disabilities resulting from 'constitutional deficiencies." Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 67, 4. For the critical race study that has spearheaded the interrogation of the interrelated overlaps or intersectionality of various nodes of identities such as race, gender, class, and disability, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women," *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that formed the Movement*. Ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (New York: New Press, 1996): 357–83.

fiction of the Jim Crow era.[44] For those who are familiar with the narratives of Black son's flight and the Black mother's plight and suffering, it would be a hard sell for Hurston's ideal reader to be quick about condemning Arvay for risking her own life to see her son flee the vengeance of the coming vigilantes. We can feel her terror and trembling when the White mob storms into her home demanding to know the whereabouts of Earl. Arvay's presence notwithstanding, the men swear, "Aw to hell with [calling the sheriff]!"—for they will mete out homegrown justice themselves. "We know who did it. What we need is a posse to run the so-and-so down and string him up….Let's go, men!" (*Seraph* 729). Lucy Ann who was heretofore linked to Blackness (by Arvay and others who share her racist views) now becomes the epitome of White virtue ("a clean living, pretty white girl") in the bellicose rhetoric of the White mob who threatens no less than a summary lynching. In this moment, Hurston turns the inverted Black-rapist stereotype right-side up again, but with a twist: The Black male is indeed the rapist, Except the assailed Black male is the White Albino Earl.

Arvay, who is now by proxy the inverted Black mother, does what other Black mothers before her have done: support the flight of the persecuted son. Arvay bids him to make haste. "Don't lose no time, son, like this. Run!" (730). Loving the stranger as oneself in this instance would be to feel Arvay's maternal suffering because scores of Black mothers' hearts have also felt that pang. To have a White son assailed by the lynch mob would have given Hurston's

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[44] To illustrate, in Richard Wright's short story "Big Boy Leaves Home," the eponymous character skips school one day to go swimming in a segregated watering hole by the woods. He ends up killing a racist white man in self-defense who charges at him and his friends with a gun, falsely claiming that the boys have attempted to rape his white wife. Big Boy rushes home frightened and shaken and pleads with his mother Lucy, "Ma, don't let em git me…" (37). At this point, Lucy knows nothing about the details except that Big Boy had gone swimming in the segregated watering pool, and yet she learns all there is to learn when she hears him mumble "the white woman" (36). Whether her son is guilty or not, the racist myth of the Black rapist and the violated Southern honor is case sufficient to lead to her son's lynching. Her mother's heart prompts her to cry out, "Run fas, Big Boy!" (37). Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," in *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).

contemporaneous White readers (*Seraph's* target audience) some pause and a sense of what it would feel like to be that Black fugitive son, that grieving Black mother, trapped in a racist world.[45]

Even as Earl has symbolized the monstrous pathology of Whiteness (its nascent violence, fear, and paranoia), we have seen how Hurston's inversion of the Black-rapist stereotype paradoxically invokes empathy for Earl and Arvay. While Arvay's struggle to retain Whiteness pales in light of Black individuals' existential, life and death struggle, we can yet—through the novel's identification of Arvay with Black mothers— relate to her feelings of racial alienation and struggle to protect her child and his humanity. However abject his short life may have been, the final image of Earl is one where his humanity is restored. After first vehemently denying the violent death of her son, approaches Earl's corpse after Jim urges her to "give him your love" and "the look of peace" (739). To her surprise, it is ironically Earl who offers Arvay that final look of peace that allows her to begin her maternal mourning, acceptance, and healing: "She saw the many wounds in the chest. Slowly, she lifted the veil of the Spanish moss that covered the face and gazed. Somehow,…[t]he weak but handsome face was unmarred and was inhabited at last by a peace and a calm.…Arvay bowed her head and said softly, 'Yes, now you can toll the bell. Toll the bell for my boy, somebody, please'" (739).

In this moving passage, Earl returns from the land of violence back to being a personable young man, some mother's beloved child. Despite the torrent of bullets having riddled his chest, Earl's face is spared—he is yet recognizably human. In this way, Hurston's novel, while

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[45] Lowe also conjectures that Hurston may have "wanted to demonstrate to white people what a lynching might be like for a white mother if her son were accused of rape" (*Jump at the Sun* 309).

bearing witness to his racist violence, nonetheless dignifies the man's humanity in his passing. The novel makes it difficult for us to withhold—through the authorial identification of Arvay with the Black mother— our own empathy toward Arvay and her son even as their faults are many and even as they are easily unlikeable.

In a scene that occurs shortly before the Earl-rape scene, the text foreshadows Arvay's inversion into the suffering Black mother and thus prepares us to extend our empathy. This episode involves her youngest son, Kenny and his best friend, Belinda Kelsey, who happens to be a Black girl. The two children are still too young and innocent to know about the racial system, and they spend their days frolicking in friendly competition. One day, a White trucker teasingly challenges Kenny with the question, "Whose little boy are you?"; the child proudly names his father and adds, "My Daddy can lick any man in the world!" (702-3). The man then turns to Belinda with the same question, and the little girl, not to be outdone by Kenny, declares herself "Miss Arvay's little girl, that's who" (703). Though innocently spoken, Belinda's claim of kinship implicates the White woman of the most unthinkable crime in the racist White world: racial miscegenation. For this reason, the text tells us, "Both the truck-driver and Arvay had their mouths wide open for a minute and couldn't close them" (703). While the man expects Arvay to flatly disavow the girl's claim of kinship, she defies expectation and claims Belinda as her own: " 'Yes indeed, Belinda is my little girl,' Arvay said with conviction" (703). The text relates that what has prompted Arvay to her surprising courage is the recognition of our mutual need for love and the empathy that derives from that need: "Arvay saw Belinda about to cry and understood. Belinda valued her and counted on her care and wanted to be loved by her. *Arvay knew that feeling*…It was worth something to Arvay to see Belinda's happy and triumphant look" (703; my emphasis). Though this incident itself does not culminate in Arvay's lasting redemption, it does

set the stage for Arvay's incremental development as one who will dare to the occasion of neighbor-love. It is a moment that demands transgressing her White status through subversive maternal empathy.

I want to bring to mind another such moment of dual empathy generated by the symbol of motherhood where the text implores for our empathy for the protagonist by way of her own empathic lead. This moment involves Arvay's fulfillment of her mother's dying wishes. Upon returning to her maiden home after many years, Arvay finds Maria dying in bed in a rat-infested home without any food or support. She learns that rather than helping their mother, her sister Larraine's family has been squatting there "hanging around just like turkey buzzards," feeding off the old woman's monthly allowance sent by Arvay (851). With Larraine and her husband, Carl, intercepting her letters to Arvay (to let her know how sickly she is), the mother has hung hung onto life, hoping to see her younger daughter once more: "I lasted out until my baby child got to me. I begged my God to spare me" (850).

In her decrepit and forlorn deathbed, Maria shares her last wish with her daughter: "Arvay, I know that I don't amount to much. Just one of them nothing kind of human things stumbling around 'mongst the toes of God….My footprints'll be erased off before my head is hardly cold. But….I would dearly love to be put away nice, with a heap of flowers on my coffin and a church full of folks" to bid "me 'farewell.'" (853). Even as Maria knows her neighbors' indifference, her last wish is to "make pretend-like I'm mighty missed" (853). Shortly after Arvay eagerly makes her promise, Maria dies: "Arvay solemnly folded her mother's tired arms, and was fishing two pennies out of her change purse to close the eyes. She sobbed as she leaned over and performed the rite, not for the passing of the old woman who was old and tired, but that the eyes she was closing forever had looked upon so little that had been joyful" (853-4).

This is a key moment in the narrative when Hurston beckons our empathy for Maria and her daughter. The mother's last wish suggests that more than anything, what she has longed for in life was communal love and care from her neighbors. Even if it is simulated, "make pretend-like," even if she has to have her daughter fabricate an intricate funeral to approximate this dream, Maria longs for the reaching out of hands to bid her farewell on her forever journey. At this point in the narrative, Arvay has just separated from her husband (largely due to self-sabotage) without whom she feels devoid of identity or self-worth. Yet the tears she sheds are not for herself—not for her beleaguered marriage nor for her personal loss of a mother—but for the fellow being whose life has been a "lonesome visit" without any friends or neighbors to call upon in love (854). Through Arvay's empathy for her mother, who has lived her life with so little joy, we can yet empathize with Arvay's humanity even as her character is flawed. We are, in a sense, called upon by Arvay's empathic lead to be her loving neighbor, the kind of neighbor whom Maria has never known, the kind of neighbor who might have given weight to her evanescent footprints and dignified her time on earth.

Through ironic circumstances, the novel grants Maria much more than her wish; she gets a celebrity burial and her memory commemorated in perpetuity. One Bradford Cary II, the town's leading banker and aspiring politician, pounces on her death as an "opportunity" to shore up his public reputation and proffers his service, all expenses paid (868). Through his means and influence, Banker Cary immortalizes Maria as the town's "most *respected"* and beloved matriarch (861). Arvay hasn't a clue about the politician's cynical motive, but the end result is positive nonetheless. The ground that stood Maria's rat-infested home is transformed into a communal park and refuge, the first of its kind—a "play and pleasure park, mostly for the young'uns," with the mulberry tree—symbol of love in the novel—protected and "given[n]…

every care" and her homestead offering respite and communal bonding she has longed for in life (880-881). This is one of the rare moments in the novel where Arvay's literal-mindedness serves her well. She unknowing turns the joke on the politician, for the real irony is that someone lacking in irony such as Arvay is able to make good use of a political opportunist and fulfill her mother's last wish and much more.

Significantly, Arvay's filial wish-fulfillment is Hurston's expression of neighbor-love to the White protagonist generated by the memory of her own beloved mother. This memory recalls a traumatic turning point in Hurston's own life—her mother Lucy Ann Hurston's death scene. Gravely ill, Lucy Ann beckoned young Zora to her bedside and confided her dying wishes to her favorite daughter. As Hemenway explains, for some reason, the mother "symbolically reject[ed] the folklore of her village," imploring Zora not to let the neighbors carry out such rituals as pulling the pillow from under her head or covering the clock and the mirrors (*Literary Biography* 16). As she does in the Maria death-bed scene, in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston depicts her mother's final moment with tenderness and pathos. Against the actions of the townsfolk who prepared her last rite against her wishes, the mother, who was no longer able to speak, "looked to me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice" (616). Unlike Arvay, Zora—being only fourteen at the time—could not fulfill her mother's dying wish, and it haunted her for the rest of her life. "What years of agony that promise gave me!...No matter what the others did, my mother had put her trust in me….That hour began my [spiritual] wanderings." (*Dust Tracks* 616, 618). Even as Hurston understands that as a mere adolescent, she could not have taken on the entire community and her father, the guilt over the broken promise was nonetheless soul shattering for her.[46]

[46] Lucy Ann Hurston was Zora's inspiration and her guiding light, one who defended her young daughter's "storytelling habit" and insatiable curiosity from disapproving family members (Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows* 40). It

From this biographical standpoint, we can feel the magnitude of Hurston's gift to Arvay in empowering her to keep her promise to Maria. This is a gift of empathy generated by the trope of motherhood and an expression of neighbor-love. Knowing how it feels to be a spirit wandering in the sorrow of a daughter's unfulfilled promise to her mother, Hurston offers Arvay something she herself had to do without: the grace to mourn the loss without the undue burden of guilt. It is then in neighbor-love that Hurston writes the following passage: "Arvay felt sad at her mother's death, but she returned from the cemetery with happy satisfaction. A sacred promise had been kept. A dying plea had been granted. Maria, who had lived on scraps and crumbs all her life had been put away like a queen" (*Seraph* 869). Arvay may wander in the strange psychic landscape of insecurity, anxiety, and guilt; but when it comes to her mother's memory, thanks to her own empathy and thanks to Hurston's authorial empathy inspired by the love of, and for, her own mother, Lucy Ann, Arvay can be at peace knowing that she has fulfilled a "sacred promise."

This redemptive mother-daughter empathy notwithstanding, we confront a phalanx of critics who have voiced their displeasure with Arvay. She is simply too unlikeable.[47] I want to imagine an alternate perspective and propose that it is perhaps Arvay's manifold unlikability—her sexual neurosis; her nagging doubts about her worthiness to be loved; and her corresponding stinginess about giving love; her paranoia about her class status; her recurrent insecurities about her Whiteness—that she emerges as the neighbor whom we are ethically bound to love.

Eric Santner's concept of the "creaturely" can be helpful in understanding Arvay's strangeness which is at once a source of our alienation from her and a possible segue-way to

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was Lucy who encouraged Hurston in her spiritual development (Plant, *Biography of Spirit* 14). It was Lucy who instilled in Hurston the qualities of optimism and daring: "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to jump at de sun. We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground" (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 572).

[47] See Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero;* Hemenway, *Literary Biography*; Li, *Playing in the White*; and Walker, Foreword, among many.

neighbor-love. The term “creaturely” is synonymous with the Freudian “uncanny,” that “traumatic kernel” in our unconscious that persists after our subject formation. It is in “becoming responsive [and] answerable” to this unbearable “creaturely expressivity” of the Other that we can begin to enter into the dimension of neighbor-love.[48] Neighbor-love can emerge through our recognition of the other as one who “is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense do and do not belong to it.” Our “responsiveness” to this “ ‘otherness’ of the neighbor,” the “burden” he/she bears, reminds us of our own alien unconscious, or “burdensome excitement—of unconscious *jouissance”* (Santer, *On Creaturely Life* xii). At the psycho-theological level, then, we can empathize with Arvay the alien being, for we too are creatures with an uncanny unconscious, who carry the burden of the alien within us. To love Arvay is not unlike expectant motherhood that recognizes the foreign being growing within us yet to love the inner-alien as part of ourselves (carrying a child, like having an unconscious, is both a burden and a non-burden, indeed a kind of “burdensome excitement.”) It is motherhood’s ability to navigate such channels of pregnant paradoxes and uncanny nuances that Hurston foregrounds the maternal trope in *Seraph* as the viable vehicle for inter-racial dialogue, healing, and perhaps inter-communal rebirth.

Envisioning Hope of Rebirth for the New South and Neighbor Love

In *So Black and Blue*, Kenneth Warren pressures the unrelenting ironic interdependence of Black identity and the American South. For so long seen “as a monolith of backwardness and embarrassment,” the South became, increasing after 1960s onward, the possible bedrock

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[48]Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), xiii.

of Black culture and survival in the minds of leading artists and scholars sympathetic to Black cultural integrity.[49] The critical shift from the Black-lack thesis (that the totalizing experience under the closed-system of slavery has left Blacks with no counterculture) to the nurturing and distinct-Black counterculture thesis had the ironic corollary of ushering in the renewed interest in the study of the heretofore much maligned American South—not just Black culture but Southern culture as a whole (Warren 75). In this way, the recovery of Black culture and the recovery of the American South ironically joined forces. Ellison in the midcentury and Du Bois at the beginning century recognized this cultural interdependency: "If somehow the Negro were magically to disappear, then the *all* of American culture and the specificity of southern culture would have to disappear as well" (65; italics in original). But the irony goes both ways: "If America and, more specifically, the 'South' were likewise to disappear, then would not the Negro as a discrete identity have to follow suit?" (65).

In *Seraph,* Hurston anticipates this inseparable and paradoxical conjoined fate of the American South and Black identity and invites a closer study of the South and its people. Writing more than a decade before the sympathetic swing of the critical pendulum, she was hopeful of the New South's potential to shake off its legacy of racial turmoil and move into the future with dignity. In the face of the negative image of the South, Hurston was partly writing a "love song" in *Seraph* to her native Florida, "a beautiful frontier land moving powerfully into the modern age" (Lowe 261, 263). She was not naïve about the daily racial tension and Jim Crow double standards; but as we can glimpse from her 1938 essay "The Pet Negro System" and in her deep friendships with Southern White folks, Hurston maintained hope that the South was not

[49] These would include Ralph Ellison, Eugene Genovese and Houston Baker. Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 74-78, 81.

devoid of humanity and that inter-racial dialogue and progress were possible.[50]

In the "The Pet Negro System," Hurston addresses the largely Northern-White readership of the *American Mercury* to share what she considered the confidential "inside picture" of the workings of the race system in the American South.[51] A large swath of Southern Whites, while outwardly espousing their racist views, manage to forge doggedly loyal friendships with individual Blacks they consider blameless and worthy ("Pet Negro System" 915-6). To justify their interracial affection while maintaining their racist cosmology, these Southern Whites label their Black friend (whom they love blindly) with the denigrating name of "pet" while "in no way extend[ing] this affection to black folk in general" (916). Similarly, Blacks also have a pet system where their favorite White folks are an exception to the hostile Whites whom they deplore (916-7). In other words, this mutual "petting system" is an "underground" friendship that is an open secret and one based on exceptionalism (918). The dehumanizing label serves as a kind of alibi for Black and White folks to love one another without incurring social backlash: "The Negro who loves a white friend is shy in admitting it because he dreads the epithet, 'white folks' nigger!' The white man is wary of showing too much warmth for his black friends for fear of being called 'nigger-lover,' so he explains his attachment by extolling the extraordinary merits of his black friend to gain tolerance for it" (921).

Critics tend to read this essay with the main takeaway as the denigrating racial/racist

[50]For Hurston's friendship with Southern Whites, especially Southern women, see Anna Lillios, *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2010). For her interracial friendships in her lesser-known final years, see Virginia Lynn Moylan, *Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade* (Gainseville, Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2011). See especially Chapter 3, "Sara Creech and Her Beautiful Doll: Belle Glade, 1950-1951" (65-86).

[51] Zora Neale Hurston, "The 'Pet Negro' System," in *Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings: Mules and Men, Tell My Horse, Dust Tracks on a Road, Selected Articles* (the United States: The Library of America, 1995), 921.

situation of the South (and some have pointed out how Jim and Arvay demean their friend Joe by turning him into a pet Negro).[52] While Hurston insists she will neither judge the system as "good" or "bad" but that she is only "trying to explain it," she soon reveals that the system has something salvageable: "It may be the proof that this race situation in America is not entirely hopeless and may even be worked out eventually" (919). As she puts it, "Friendship, however it comes about, is a beautiful thing"; not only is it a "great and heartening tribute to human nature" in that "[i]t will be bound by nothing," but this wayward boundlessness has the potential to foil the racist status quo and effect social change, as "this friendship business makes a sorry mess of all the rules made and provided" (919-920).

What Hurston emphasizes is not so much that Blacks are dehumanized and how they retaliate in kind, but that the very logic of the pet Negro (and also its white corollary) implicates the illogic of racism at large and how within the patronizing face of the pet system, there exists love that can turn that racialized Other into a human neighbor and friend. Established to perpetuate racism and supremacy for Whites and racialist enmity and distrust for Blacks, the pet race system paradoxically reveals by its own logic that interracial love is not only possible but that it is already being enacted everywhere in the South. Hurston muses, if love were inimical between the two groups, then there would be no reason for the existing law on miscegenation. The law is there because Blacks and Whites are already breaking that law by loving (921). In Her words, the whole "pet" system "makes no sense. It just makes beauty" (921).

In *Seraph*, Hurston presents us with redemptive qualities in her central White characters that harken to the possibility of a regenerative future for the American South. In this light, Jim

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[52] See, for instance, Grant who takes this view in *Masculinist Impulses*, 95-9

Meserve warrants a closer scrutiny. Despite his many faults, Hurston establishes him overall as a sympathetic character. As Lowe has convincingly argued, central to Jim's redemption is his sense of humor: "He joyfully uses the exuberant resources of folk culture, black and white, to persuade, cajole, charm instruct, and protect his family, friends, and employee" (*Jump at the Sun* 260). It is his sense of humor that brings him into the inner circle of the Black community to share "cross-racial fellowship" (260). It is also his sense of humor that distinguishes him from the literal-minded and deeply racist Arvay. Lowe cautions us not to take Jim's sense of humor literally; otherwise we would be as wrong as Arvay whose lack of humor "results in a lack of identity, confidence, pride and creativity" (260).

Granted, Jim has had ways to go in purging himself of racism. At least early in his marriage he has needed the alibi of the "pet Negro" system to explain to the world—and to Arvay—why he loves his Black friend Joe Kelsey and the Kelsey family: he has to make excuses that Joe is "different from every other Negro I ever did see" (*Seraph* 653). Jim has trouble generalizing his love for the Kelseys toward other Blacks, as can be illustrated in one scene where he finds himself "critical" of a Black employee because he was "not Joe" (639). Yet in his ironic and humorous irreverence toward religion, we can entertain hope for the future Jim to be free from the disease of the political theology of White racism. As we have seen in the novel, religion is implicated with White racism; Jim's habitual and persistent mockery of the Southern White Christian practices is a positive trait that sets him apart. From the onset of their courtship, Jim sees through Arvay's religious façade and pokes fun at it. After the mulberry sex scene and on their way to elope, Jim declares, "'Arvay Henson!...The apostle to the heathens!' Then he chuckled some more...No need for you to go proaging clean around the world no more looking for no heathen to save, though" (649). In this novel where the missionary is a code word

for White supremacy, Jim's humorous mockery cuts deeper than meets the eye. Arvay thinks Jim is "making fun of her," but what Jim is really doing is making fun of the institution of Whiteness that desperately needs to hunt down some heathens whose racialized Otherness can vouch for the supremacy of Whiteness. We have already seen how Arvay conflates the Christian religion with Whiteness and its claim of supremacy. Jim's humorous profanations clash head-on with her literal-minded religiosity, causing much of their marital woes.[53]

However tenuous his influence on Arvay and however resistant she is to rewriting the master narrative of racism, Jim does help Arvay's positive development. After her marriage to Jim, Arvay stops attending church, and "she shows no regret or even reflection over the loss of her religious fervor" (Li, *Playing in the White* 44). Arvay's move away from religion is significant and promising, for as we have already seen, Arvay's racism and racial anxiety are deeply entrenched in her ties to institutionalized Christianity of the White South.

Perhaps the most palpable and visible example of Jim's positive effect on Arvay's growth can be contrasted by the setting in which we first meet Arvay and the environment in which we bid her farewell. When we first encounter Arvay, she is giving a speech in a segregated White church in a segregated White town about giving up her life for missionary work (which again is a coded performance for her claim of Whiteness). At the end of the novel, she willingly joins Jim aboard the precarious life of the shrimping boat with all its danger, dinginess, and excitement. Most significantly, this social space differs entirely from her segregated White

[53] In fact, their first argument occurs when Jim jokes about the story of Cain and Abel. According to Jim's sacrilegious version, "Cain's first crime was not killing his brother Abel but in not having no sense of humor" (*Seraph* 659). Had Cain not been "so chuckle-headed," he "never would have up and scorched a stinking, rotten cabbage under God's nose for no sacrifice….How come he couldn't have made God a nice cool salad and took it to Him?" (659). Arvay reacts with shock and rage at this tale of profanation, but the perceptive reader would not make Cain's mistake of lacking a sense of humor and not laugh along with Jim. Jim's irreverent humor is not just about eliciting laughter; it is also about using humor to get us to question, challenge, and possibly rewrite the status quo, the established master narrative.

world, in that it is interracial with "mixed crews" and "more colored captains than white" who freely mingle with one another (893). Here, Jim exposes Arvay to what was previously an unbearable proximity to Blackness and Otherness, which threaten Arvay's claim to Whiteness. It is a "mighty uncertain" world that exposes racism and bigotry as extravagant nonsense as different races and cultures must rely on one another and cooperate for survival; after all, the seafaring life warns of "so many ways that a man could…lose his life" (894). It is a world where the antidote to the daily exposure to perils is a good doseof humor, which though simple as it sounds, has been Arvay's sore deficit till now. She learns, for instance, that captains and crew alike "all cursed out the owners" and made them the brunt of a joke should anything go awry aboard the fishing vessels. Jim, himself the owner of three boats, maintains his sense of humor and nurtures it in others by generously "cuss[ing]" his "ownself out" (894). Whereas the old Arvay would have been enraged with racist indignity when the Black captain of *Kenny M*. curses at Jim—the boat's owner—the new Arvay "joined in her husband's laughter" (894). This is the first time that the couple shares a joke; their ability to laugh at themselves together speaks not only to their readiness to take themselves—and their Whiteness—less seriously but also to their openness toward the Other. The passage also reflects Jim's own growth and shedding of the "Pet Negro system" as he calls the commander of *Kenny M*. respectfully as "the captain."

In this way, Jim and Arvay discover a life where racial differences are subordinated to transracial cooperation for survival and enjoyment. While this oceanic world is clearly an ideal space detached from landed—that is, systemic—racism, it marks the author's vision of hope for New Southerners like Jim to bring along even the stodgiest of kin to meet that future. In the figure of Jim, the writer represents a "member of that liberal class which has always existed in

the South in a minority, who believed in the benefits of the Union and advancement."[54] She rejects the Manichean portrayal of Southerners; for as "confusing" a "picture" as this may be, Southern folks—both Black and White, are complicated: "[h]igh-mindedness and savagery" dwelling within them "side by side" (Kaplan, *Life in Letters* 561).

Hurston's text places faith in Jim—despite his many flaws— as the exemplar of the New South that can buck its pathological Whiteness and advance into a livable future. This is why the novel plots Jim to clear the swamp surrounding his homestead (which as we have seen is emblematic of the violence and pathology of Whiteness) and in its stead, build a modern infrastructure (*Seraph* 776). Significantly, Jim clears the swamp for Arvay's sake; seeing how it "worried" her, he pushes himself for twenty years "working as hard as [he] could to get to the place where [he] could get it cleaned off for [her]" (839). The profit he helps his son-in-law to reap from the deal is secondary to her "comfort" (840). By commissioning the younger generation to clear the swamp, Jim helps clear Arvay's mind in more ways than he perhaps consciously imagines. It is a symbolic clearing of a space in her mind that has been overgrown with White panic and racism. It is a clearing of a path for a new way of relating with her neighbors across the color-line. The sun sets behind the "swamp monster"—the monstrosity of White racism (where its emblem Earl played and died)—and a new "horizon…opening" before Arvay's ambivalent eyes (776). The opening enables her to see the sun over the swamp for the first time—that is, the clearing of the swamp gives her room to gain a new insight. The "opening" that "spread north and north" along with the Black workers who are "singing, chanting, laughing" (776) as they break open this new path reminds us of antebellum Black

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[54] Hurston's letter to Burroughs Mitchelle, October 2, 1947. Carla Kaplan ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters.* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 561.

slaves and fugitives who masked their defiance and hope for freedom in their spirituals and looked to the north star as their guiding light to a new horizon of freedom. This auspicious image suggests that along with Jim's help, Arvay will need the support of Black neighbors to clear the path toward the new insight.

To be sure, Jim has his own inner-swamp, not so much in racism but in sexism. Trapped in the tradition of chivalry where he feels his expression of love is to protect, pamper, and provide, he ironically encourages Arvay to become undesirable to him in her helplessness and dependency. He wants Arvay to think independently and develop into her best self for their mutual fulfillment; yet his excessive pampering undermines her personal growth. For much of the novel, Jim struggles in the trap of chauvinism that not only backfires on him but also hurts the woman he has dedicated his life to serve and love. A prime example involves the snake scene, which causes the greatest fissure in their marriage. One day, Jim tries to show off his manliness by surprising Arvay—who has a terrible case of snake phobia— with the "biggest diamond back" clenched in his hand; but his masculine display backfires when the snake slithers out of his grip and attacks him with a deathly stranglehold (828). Choking for breath, he desperately sputters out for Arvay's help, but she freezes with paralyzing "[f]ear" and "went into a kind of coma" (830). This is not surprising, in that up to this point in their marriage, Arvay has been called a "baby-child" whose daily "pleasure" is guaranteed by marrying herself "a man" (665). This relationship dynamic infantilizes Arvay and evacuates her agency. As critics have noted, this scene is a classic display of phallic power, where Jim symbolically asserts his power over Arvay;[55] but when she reacts predictably, it nearly kills him.

In the ensuing blowup we further observe how Jim's ambivalent sexism damages both

[55]See Hemenway, *Literary Biography* 311.

marriage partners. On one hand, Jim concedes that the snake handling was his idea to "do something big and brave and full of manhood" that would "win" Arvay's "admiration and compliments and a big hug around his neck" (836). On the other hand, he expresses grave disappointment that Arvay did not muster courage and come to his rescue: "Maybe you couldn't of done one thing to help me, but you could of showed what you was made of by trying" (836). The contradiction here, of course, is that at the same time he expects and encourages Arvay to be a passive cheerleader of his masculine dominance, Jim realizes when the couple faces a moment of crisis—induced by his own foolhardy masculine display—that he has wanted a strong, proactive partner all along. This is why he tells Arvay that while he does not doubt Arvay's love for him, "I don't want [your] stand-still, hap-hazard kind of love.…You love like a coward" (837). Yet nothing up to this point in their relationship has prepared Arvay for her to step outside of the docile role; as far as Arvay has figured in her mind, Jim has married her to "love" and "sleep with," her whole duty as a wife being only to "love him good, be nice and kind around the house and have children for him" (631). She has concluded all along that in Jim's eyes, she is "dumb." It is only after the snake crisis that she hears from her husband that this is a faulty perception: "Naw, you ain't dumb, Arvay. You got plenty of sense if you would only use it" (836). Jim complains that Arvay has never visited him on his shrimp-boat business to "see what I was doing, or trying to do, and you never have said once that you realized that I was scuffling like that to place you higher up" (839). Granted, Arvay has been totally oblivious to, and profoundly un-interested in, learning about Jim's daily toils in making a living for them (whether in the Turpentine logging community, or the Citrabelle citrus-farming business, or the shrimp-boating enterprise). However, by simultaneously babying Arvay and exalting her as a "king's daughter out of a [fairytale]," Jim ends up compounding Arvay's already challenged sense of self

and turns her into the figure of helplessness he now finds lacking in light of the vision of the independent and assertive womanhood who will give him a "knowing" and "doing" kind of love (837). Like Tea Cake's vacillation between two extremes of Janie as the goddess Isis and a domestic beast (cow), Jim at once pivots Arvay to the elevated level of a fairytale princess and the condescending level of a baby, thereby revealing his ambivalence concerning women's agency. Not only does his sexism damage Arvay, but it hurts him as well, as underscored by the phallic manqué. Like Tea Cake, Jim's saving grace in spite of his struggles with sexism is that it does not spring from a malevolent heart but a heart made vulnerable by love.

Nonetheless, perhaps the most damning case against Jim concerns the rape scene, which threatens to subsume his character and credibility. [56] However, when we examine it in the context of Arvay's deep sexual repression and his own misguided notions of manhood, we begin to see the ambiguity of the rape scene, the context of which is such that some critics have gone so far as to doubt that it is rape.[57] First, Arvay's neurosis is so extreme that it is difficult to gauge how she would have reacted to any sexual overture. As reviewers and critics have recognized, Hurston, who was familiar with Freud, heavily channeled Freudian psychoanalysis in her depiction of Arvay.[58] The protagonist's regular seizures and fainting fits (which magically disappear after having sex with Jim) are manifestations of her neurosis, owing to sexual repression. It develops soon after her sister is pregnant with her second child, after Arvay "dream[s] dreams" about

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[56] Stephanie Li, for instance, compares Jim to the historical White sexual violation of Black women (42, 52-3); Watson categorically labels Jim Arvay's "rapist/husband" (86).

[57] Lowe, for example, takes this view (*Jump at the Sun* 284). For other similar readings on the ambiguity of the rape charge, see Li, *Playing in the White*, n204.

[58] Claudia Tate points out that Arvay's "masochistic disposition" aptly reflects the psychoanalytic literature of the 30s and 40s detailing female masochism (156-7). Hurston was well familiar with Freud from her Harlem Renaissance days on (Lowe, *Jump at the Sun* 273).

Larraine and Carl's "darkened bedroom" (*Seraph* 609). Arvay's sexual repression is such that in order to fantasize, she must pretend she is in a passive, dreaming state where she is forced by "Some imp of Satan" that "grab[s] hold of her and drag[s] her" to "see and hear" the couple's copulation "from beginning to the end" (609). In order for Arvay to be sexually engaged, she must deflect her desire and turn it into a violence committed against her wishes. During Jim's first call to her home when the subject matter turns in the direction of marriage (and implied sex), Arvay conveniently passes out in a fit. "Jim was studying the behavior of the girl very closely" (626) and sees through her act. In contrast to the failed suitors before him, Jim refuses to go along with her neurotic performance but jolts her awake by spraying turpentine in her eyes. (626). Though Arvay feigns outrage, she feels a "stirring feeling inside" toward Jim, who thus abruptly dispels her sexual repression (629).

From the vantage point of Hurston's contemporary readers White and Black, the rape scene itself provides enough ambiguities that would have complicated a simple verdict. The passage reveals that as Jim tore off her clothes, "Arvay opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. Her mouth was closed by Jim's passionate kisses, and in a moment more, despite her struggles, Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet" (645). While the twenty-first century readers informed by the insights of the #MeToo Movement would know this constitutes rape as Arvay has not given explicit verbal consent (her mouth is literally shut by Jim's kisses), the 1940s readers, associating Arvay's case with the classic Freudian neurosis as they would, would have likely wondered how much of the sex scene is forced and how much of it is mutual. Bolstering that skepticism would be the oxymoron of a "pain" that is "remorseless sweet" as well as the fact that the second time they engage in the sex act (in the same scene) Arvay clearly welcomes it. The second time around begins with Jim hugging Arvay and kissing her:

“Unconsciously, Arvay’s own arms went up and were locked around Jim’s neck,” a gesture that Jim welcomes (646). The text goes on to indicate something revealing about how Arvay truly feels about Jim’s sexual prelude: “Jim’s urging was altogether unnecessary. Some unknown power took hold of Arvay. She pressed her body tightly against his, fitting herself into him as closely as possible” (647). The second sex act, unlike the first, is fairly straight forward in the couple’s mutual and reciprocal affection. Yet despite the second sex act clearly being mutual, the post-coital Arvay labels the whole thing “rape,” charging, “All I know is that I been raped” (649). Arvay sexually desires Jim but cannot have intercourse with him unless it’s “rape.” Even after she willingly reaches out to him, she is fearful of her sexual desire, which makes her grateful for the force of his weight pressing down upon her—the force abates her fear, for it deflects her desires and creates at least the optics of rape. Years later, sitting under the mulberry tree (the location of the controversial rape scene), Arvay arrives at perhaps a more honest place about the rape charge and relishes the “memory inexpressibly sweet. No injury that she could conjure up could stand up beside the ecstasy that she had felt here” (720). The phrase “conjure up” is telling—Arvay may have concocted the rape charge as an alibi for her unbearable sexual enjoyment.

Jim’s propensity toward sexual violence notwithstanding, the text, as it does with the Black-rapist inversion of Earl, prepares us to extend our sympathy for Jim by closely aligning him with the Black-male figure, Joe Kelsey. After riding his horse adrift in his “soul” search to “work out” and salvage his “engagement” with the deeply-insecure Arvay (637), Jim decides to take his betrothed sexually by force after seeking his trusted Black friend Joe Kelsey’s advice that “women folks will love you plenty if you…Make ’em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in their mouth and ride ’em hard and stop ’em short” (640). The intimacy

between Jim and Joe underscores how if Jim were Black, White America would label him a rapist regardless of the ambiguities or complexities of the situation. Given Jim's close linkage to Blackness (Joe Kelsey as his best friend, his ties to the Black community and culture, the Black-inversion of his son Earl), Hurston's ideal Black reader would be mindful of this racist double standard but also sympathetic to Jim despite his misguided sexuality. As for Hurston's ideal White reader, the novel's message is ironic, As in the case of the rapist-inversion of Earl, Jim too is a Black rapist, except he is White; thus White America's stereotyping of the rapist-Black male is a projection of its own internal violence.

In the end, Hurston's novel cautions against passing easy judgments. We can condemn Jim's sexual misconduct without condemning his humanity. This is especially true, the text seems to say, when it comes to love, given its paradoxes. As in the case of neighbor-love where loving the neighbor is an expression of loving oneself, romantic love operates paradoxically. As can be gleaned from Jim's ambiguous surname "Meserve," love is a paradoxical servitude where serving another becomes self-serving. This concept of love as self-serving surrender is maddening for Arvay who often sabotages her marriage due to this fear: "God, please have mercy on her poor soul, but she was a slave to that man!" (720). In contrast, Jim seems to embrace the paradox of love. He tells Arvay, "Love is a funny thing[.]…Seems like that one person gets next to your heart, and you can't shake 'em loose no matter which way you twist and turn. You just got to go on serving 'em all your born days" (758). Yet Jim's remarks belie the treacherous pitfalls that adhere to the paradoxes of love. As much as it can be self-empowering, it can entrap one into self-endangering madness. We have seen this in the snake scene where the phallic symbol (that Jim hopes would thrill and pleasure Arvay) backfires and nearly kills him. We have seen this in Janie who gains her feminist voice only to lose it at critical

moments when she finds herself in a self-injurious love with Tea Cake.

This brings us to the ending of the novel, which as I have previously described, involves Arvay afloat on the ocean with Jim as the sun rises above them. It is a symbol of hope and a new beginning. It has also been a heated point of critical contention and not a little bafflement. Arvay realizes that her greatest joy is being a mother and a wife: "Her job was mothering….No matter how much money they had or learning, or high family, they couldn't do a bit more mothering and hovering than she could…Jim was hers and it was her privilege to serve him" (920). After pausing to greet the sunlight that "climbed the rail and came on board," Arvay continues, "Yes, she was doing what the big light had told her to do. She was serving and meant to serve" (920). Various critics have decried her revelation as female subservience and domestic failure.[59] If Hurston has intended to portray Arvay as doomed in her marriage and motherhood, the novel is certainly replete with powerful symbolisms that undercut this doom. For one, Hurston's seafaring metaphor "reminds us of the magnificent opening line of *Their Eyes*: 'Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board'" (qtd. in Lowe 327). There is also the striking symbolism of Jim risking his life to launch the ship (meaningfully named *Arvay Henson*) over the bar in the darkness of dusk so that Arvay "could see the sunrise on her first trip out" (Lowe 329). The "crossing of the bar" symbolizes Arvay's rebirth, where she "finally breaks free from the enclosing shell of death-into-life into the teeming world of the sea" (330). Like Tea Cake before him, Jim is "'piloting' a woman to a rebirth," but the final push must come from Arvay herself—"[u]ltimately only Arvay can perform the 'birthing.' Now and only now, can Arvay also become Arvay Meserve, serving others by honoring herself" (330). The birthing metaphor is

[59] See Grant, *Masculinist Impulses* 95; Hemenway, *Literary Biography* 310-3; Li, *Playing in the White* 60. While acknowledging the complexity of the "sexual politics" of the novel, Carby too, concludes that Arvay's domestic resolve means she is left in the end with "frustrated and unsatisfied desires" (Headnote 264).

significant, as we have seen how the novel suggests maternal empathy as a generative and and subversive source of neighbor-love. If we are disturbed by Arvay's gladness to serve her husband—which is also self-serving—we must also recall that Janie shares a similar sentiment as she holds the dying Tea Cake in her arms: "She thanks him wordlessly 'for giving her the chance for loving service'" (qtd. in Lowe 333). If one is baffled that Hurston does not offer Arvay "the attainment of a truly independent selfhood" (Hemenway, *Literary Biography* 313), we must also remember that neither does Hurston offer Janie that perfect attainment: *Their Eyes* ends with Janie vowing to live by Tea Cake's memory, which is not altogether an independent state: Her future depends on *his* memory. Even as Janie's selfhood does not fit the feminist bill perfectly, we do not conclude her journey doomed. Why then should we judge Arvay's journey of selfhood any differently?

My position is closer to M. Genevieve West who recognizes that Hurston's views on marriage and romantic love "are more complex" than our contemporary feminist reading allows (*Hurston & American Literary Culture* 209). West, like Ann duCille, reads Arvay as making a "calculated choice" to play the role of the conventional female partner that she knows Jim would want, and thereby indirectly gaining the upper-hand (210). For duCille, the ending of the novel does not spell Arvay's doom; rather, it is a place where Arvay recasts herself "as an actor in a marriage *she* wants to maintain" by enacting a "calculated, seeming submission," where her "surrendering" ironically becomes "a claiming…of self."[60] As duCille notes, "condemning Arvay's choice" of domesticity "carries with it an implicit devaluation of the domestic realm" (*Coupling Convention* 138). Thus when we rebuke Arvay as the negative exemplar of how a

[60] Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 141.

woman shouldn't be, we are devaluing what she approaches as her "job." In rejecting motherhood and matrimony as the wrong career to pursue, we may be saying more about our own ideological worldview and may have little bearing on Hurston's choice to present Arvay as someone who embraces domesticity as her choice. Yes, Arvay is very different from Hurston, who pursued a professional path as writer, scholar, and public speaker. Hurston was married three times, had no children, and was happiest when she was working. That she makes someone like Arvay her novel's heroine need not be from a condescending or disparaging position. It speaks more about Hurston's respect and empathy for each woman's life choices and respective search for self-fulfillment.

Passing Over the Binary of Art Versus Politics: Intertextual Passing as Generic Passing

In a sense, Hurston's aesthetic choice of intertextual passing to examine the possibility of love between Blacks and Whites is also generic passing, a subversive move that sidesteps the collapsing of art and politics. Hurston, writing *Seraph* in the midcentury, confronted the generic assumption of African American literature as one primarily politically-driven about racial suffering, protest, or uplift.[61] Borrowing Gene Jarrett's term, to the "deans" of African American letters (including Du Bois and others) who expected their Black contemporaries to follow in this political tradition, Hurston was the "truant" who did not show up for the roll call. She adamantly resisted literature becoming a political propaganda no matter how noble the cause. In her posthumously published 1938 essay "Art and Such," she objects to race politics eclipsing the artist and her art form. She is outspoken concerning the dilemma of the Black artist who is inspired to "sing a song to the morning" yet is weighed down with self-reproach for not writing

[61] See Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1-7.

about race matters to the “detriment of art.”[62] Hurston suggests that accepting “Race and its sufferings” as the sole theme for the Black writer has less to do with ethical imperative than it does with conformity to external pressure: “Ought I not to be singing of our sorrows? That is what is expected of me and I shall be considered forgetful of our past and present” and “some will even call me a coward….I will write of a lynching instead” (“Art and Such” 908). If the paean to the break of dawn is bold and daring in opening up new possibilities and novel ways of seeing, the artist’s choice to subordinate art in the service of “Race champions” is not progressive but ironically conventional, expedient, and even cowardly: “[I]t is the line of least resistance and least originality” (908).[63]

Hurston’s fealty to literary realism explains why, despite possible objections from Black readers, the writer insisted on leaving in Arvay’s derogatory use of the N-word. As she explains in her letter to her editor of Scribner, “I am objective in my observations, and I know, as they know honestly, that the heroine would have certainly used that word” (Kaplan 555). It was this level of fidelity to realism that pushed Hurston to risk making her protagonist potentially unlikeable. In the same letter, she herself complains about Arvay’s slowness to change: “I shall

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[62] Zora Neale Hurston, “Art and Such,” *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs & Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 908.

[63] This was Hurston’s problem with Richard Wright’s *Uncle’s Tom’s Children,* which Hurston reviewed in the same year, 1938. Wright’s story collection was protest literature *par excellence*, setting the bar of social realism; to the contrary of Hurston’s claim that literature of racial protest is “unread by everybody” outside of the Black community, Wright became an internationally acclaimed bestselling author (with the publication of *Native Son*). It is safe to say, however, despite its huge success, Hurston would not have been impressed. For Hurston was profoundly critical of “Race Consciousness” wholly annexing art; in this case, “what was produced was a self-conscious document lacking in drama, analysis, characterization and the universal oneness necessary to literature. But the idea was not to produce literature—it was to ‘champion the Race’” (“Art and Such” 911). As Richard Yarborough points out, in her review of Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Hurston further recognized the “violent male perspective” that typically inhere to the Wrightean social protest—in protesting the injury racism inflicts on Black manhood, what gets bulldozed is the sexism that affronts Black women (perpetrated by White and Black men alike) within this patriarchal racist order. See Yarborough, Introduction. *Uncle Tom’s Children* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993): xxvii-xxviii.

bring Arvay along her road to find herself a great deal faster. I get sick of her at times myself" (Kaplan 557). Yet the writer did not feel at liberty to have Arvay do anything that is out of her character. Hurston incisively sensed that it would take decades—perhaps a lifetime—for someone with Arvay's degree of inferiority complex to overcome her shortcomings.[64] Similarly, if Black characters do not take a more central or dominant role in the novel, again this is due to her choice of generic medium.

Clearly Hurston's generic choice left her with challenges, specifically, the dilemma of presenting unflattering depictions of Blacks could perpetuate racist stereotypes. It is certainly problematic that Joe Kelsey calls himself part of the Meserve family ["We Meserves'll look after one another" (*Seraph* 828)], which harkens painfully to the slavery past when the slave had to take the master's surname. In the context of the novel, Joe is defining himself as part of the family—"Uncle Joe" in Arvay's words—who will look after the young Kenny who is currently surrounded by Northern "strangers" (828). However, given the legacy of slavery, there is no comfort but only suspicion of further denigration in the familial term uncle (which was also an antebellum appellation for older black male as well as harkening to the controversial figure of Stowe's Uncle Tom). It further raises the issue that even as a successful businessman and a well-to-do family man himself, Joe is still bound to the beck and call of what can easily appear as White domestic service. It is equally disturbing that Joe advises Jim to treat women sexually as brutes of labor who must be broken in. There could be various reasons behind Joe's sexist advice. It is possible that he himself may not prescribe to violence against women but only

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[64] As typical of a highly-empathic and gifted writer, Hurston may have also felt her characters were taking on lives of their own beyond authorial control or manipulations. Taylor et. al would call this the "illusion of independent agency, or IIA. See Taylor et. al, "The Illusion of Independent Agency," 361.

"describe[ing] the power that Joe knows Jim already possesses"; it is also possible that Joe is calculating to curry favor with Jim through shared "male privilege" (Li *Playing* 42). In the end, regardless of Joe's true motive, his violent remark can easily play into White racists who can use his comments to stereotype Black men as more sexually aggressive than White men (as Jim himself is guilty of assuming); it can also play into the stereotype of the virulent Black male raping White women. Ironically, Joe, who as a Black man is in danger of being lynched, "*cannot"* dare use the word "rape"; yet in the context of advising Jim, he gets to articulate the word with impunity (Grant, *Masculinist Impulse* 98). As Grant observes, we may therefore be witnessing Hurston's "deft critique of masculinity as coupled with racial terror"; but it is not without the risk of appearing to "sacrifice…black male agency but also specifically employ… white masculinity to do it" (99). In her endeavor to portray the "true picture" of the South, then, Hurston leaves these troubling details in, details which the Black deans would have deemed a negative reflection on the race.

In *Black and White Strangers*, Warren articulates the complicated and complicit relationship of the American literary realism and the issues of race; that is, the problematic of literary realism to combat racism due to the genre's inherent logic which could end up being complicit with racism.[65] In her focus to depict verisimilitude of life, the writer of literary realism could reinforce racist realities. But as Warren cautions, it is no solution to keep Black and White literary traditions segregated in the name of cultural purity or particularity; for even as Black and White strangers claim "a *sui generis* account of [their] own heritage," the inconvenient truth is that "the Other insists upon emerging in unexpected and embarrassing places" (Warren, *Black*

[65] Kenneth W. Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). Pp. 2-9.

and White 10). In other words, race is a subtext even in those American works that putatively eschew race, and we would overlook this cross-racial presence if we focus narrowly on Black difference (10).

We cannot discount Hurston's last novel because it mainly features Whites or because it includes potentially negative details about Blacks. We will then miss how Hurston, despite the inherent limitations of literary realism, uses the ingenious device of aesthetic intertextual passing to bring the two strangers together and into a dialogue of kinship. Rather than offering facile solutions to the dilemma of Black representation, Hurston uses the trope of passing—with its paradoxical and ambiguous inflections—to capture Back America's ambivalence and anxiety about the feasibility—or even the desirability—of this interracial reconciliation. In the end, intertextual passing allows Hurston to talk about race without talking about race, her way of being political by being artistic.[66]

"Whether it pleases you or not, you are my sister": Conclusion

At its core, *Their Eyes* is a love story, the kind of love, as Walker rightly points out, that is not limited to the romantic but inclusive of self, others, and the community.[67] To say this novel passes into *Seraph* is to argue how this expansive love infuses its sister text, and together they create another kind of love—neighbor love. It is perhaps not surprising that the source of inspiration for both is identical.

When Hurston famously wrote *Their Eyes* in Haiti in six feverish weeks (!), her inspiration was her turbulent romance with Percival McGuire Punter, the love of her life but also

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[67]Alice Walker, "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now," Dedication. *I Love Myself When I am Laughing* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 2.

a man deeply overcome by insecurity, jealousy, and chauvinism.[68] Like Tea Cake who was modeled after him, Punter was many years Hurston's junior (Hurston was 44 and he was 23), and while intelligent and charismatic himself, he was threatened by her wit and "begged" her "to give up [her] career, [and] marry him" (*Dust Tracks* 747). Unlike Arvay or even Janie, Hurston was a fiercely independent woman whose happiness came from working; yet she found herself attracted to Punter who, like Jim Meserve and Tea Cake, was prone to ironic chauvinism: "He meant to be the head, *so help him over the fence!*" (746).[69] Even as that vulnerable "manliness" was deeply endearing to Hurston, it "made us both suffer" (746). Like Arvay and Janie, Hurston found herself swept up in the madness of love that was exhilarating yet self-injurious. The threat to her selfhood reached a climax when, like Tea Cake, Punter used physical force against Hurston—"No broken bones, you understand, and no black eyes"—but enough to force her to reassess the relationship and realize that she was losing herself in the madness of love: "Then I knew I was too deeply in love to be my old self. For always a blow to my body had infuriated me beyond measure…But somehow, I didn't hate him at all" (748). She did not hate him, because, as she does Jim Meserve and Tea Cake, Hurston understands that however malignant sexism is, it does not necessarily define the man's humanity and is often symptomatic of the man's inner-suffering and insecurity. In the end, even as she was "hog-tied and branded"—her words—in love with Punter, she tore herself away from him because she could not relinquish her writing and career to matrimony (qtd. in Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows* 273). But back in 1936, on a Guggenheim Fellowship to Haiti and with their passionate love affair behind her (the distance which Hurston welcomed as a ready "chance to release him, and fight myself free from my

[68] Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows,* 271-275.

[69] A strong woman who can hoist a man over the fence may not want or need a man to rule over her—thus the irony.

obsession"), she was unable to carry on her anthropological research for the thought of her estranged lover. So she turned to writing a love story that, while the "plot was far from the circumstances" of her own romantic relationship, Hurston "tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him" (*Dust Tracks* 750). This love story was *Their Eyes* (750).

This same tenderness, passion and love Hurston also infused into *Seraph.* In her correspondence with her editor, Hurston, while not naming Punter, compares Arvay's nagging self-doubts and insecurities to those that aggrieved him: "He had a good mind, many excellent qualities, and I am certain that he loved me. But his feeling of inferiority would crop up and hurt me at the most unexpected ways" (Kaplan, *Life in Letters* 558). Later in the same letter, Hurston acknowledges that her former lover and Arvay are hardly unique, that many individuals, including Hurston herself, are racked by feelings of self-aversion and self-doubt (Hurston reveals that she had an "overwhelming complex about my looks"). "That is why I decided to write about it" (558). Ironically, then, Hurston's own experiences with her aborted love affair and her own self-alienation gave birth not just to one but two novels on love. They are, in a literary sense, fraternal twins, one Black, the other White.

Against the history and the ongoing pressure for representative Black literature on one hand and the call for universal raceless literary trend on the other (where the growing view, even among the Black elite intellectuals such as Alain Locke, was to view African American literary tradition as a developmental bildungsroman where the pursuit of the universal was the attainment of Black "cultural maturity"),[70] Hurston ventured to write about centrally White characters not because she subscribed to the developmental view of African American literature or as a racial

[70]Alain Locke, "Self-Criticism: The Third Dimension in Culture," *Phylon* 11.4 (1950). See also Thomas D. Jarrett, "Unfettered Creativity: A Note on the Negro Novelist's Coming of Age," *Phylon* 2.4 (1950), 313, 315.

accommodationist gesture, or simply to make money. With the conviction that race (both Blackness and Whiteness) is fiction, she believed she was as much credentialed to write about White lives as she was about Black. Indeed, being Black, one can say, made her an expert—perhaps more so than Whites themselves—about the fiction of Whiteness.[71] In *Seraph*, Hurston exposes the invisible claim to universality monopolized by Whiteness while debunking its essentialist claim. Based on her commitment to the Biblical ethics of neighbor-love (as we can infer from *Dust Tracks*), I have argued that Hurston's exposé of Whiteness as a socio-political and psychological construct is secondary to her primary vision of imagining the ethics of the neighbor beyond racial borders. A literary realist, Hurston's challenge was to find an aesthetic means to imagine empathic love beyond the color-line without compromising her artistic sensibility. The paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in the trope of passing allow her to imagine this vexed interracial love without facile simplification. Hurston transforms Whites from strangers to neighbors and extends love to them via intertextual passing and empathy generated by the trope of motherhood.

Hurston dedicated *Seraph* to the fellow Florida writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Feeling a kindred bond with the White writer she had recently met, Hurston wrote, "Whether it pleases you or not, you are my sister."[72] She appreciated Rawling's ability to "empathize with her characters, particularly her black characters" (Lillios, *Crossing the Creek* 3). "You *looked* at them and saw them as they are, instead of slobbering over them as all of the others authors do"

[71] See Roediger, David R. ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White.* New York: Schoken Books, 1998. Print.

[72] Qtd. in Anna Lillios, *Crossing the Creek: The Literary Friendship of Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings* (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 3.

(qtd. in Lillios 3). The affirmation of sisterhood may or may not have been welcomed by the White writer. At the time Rawlings received Hurston's letter, the former was not above racial bigotry (25). Even as her friendship with Hurston challenged her to dig deeper into herself and ultimately moved her profoundly to champion Black-civil rights causes in later years, Rawlings suffered from racial ambivalences (27). For Anna Lillios, "Hurston's sincerity is [also] ambiguous" and raises the question of whether the Black writer is masking herself here ("the 'puttin' on ole massa'") (4). Based on my own reading, however, I take her claim of sisterhood to be genuine but with a Hurstonian twist. It is the claiming of kinship and love that challenges and chastises with that love—Hurston will claim Rawlings as her sister "Whether it pleases [her] or not." In other words, Hurston will not ask for Rawling's permission in the matter. As James Baldwin would do in the 1950s, Hurston dared her White kin with love. The ethical onus of accepting or rejecting that love would be on the White stranger/neighbor.

Loving the Female Neighbor as One's Queer Self:
Reimagination of Motley's *Knock* and Himes's *Cast*
in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

When one begins looking for influences one finds them by the score. I haven't thought much about my own, not enough anyway; I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech—and something of Dickens' love of bravura—have something to do with me today; but I wouldn't stake my life on it.

--James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other.

--James Baldwin, "Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood"

The Inconvenient Ethics of "Love Everybody": Introduction

In the foregoing chapters we have seen how Hurston and Savoy maneuver passing and intertexuality to underscore their commitment to the ethics of neighbor-love beyond the prescribed boundaries of race and identity politics. Both authors invoke the trope of passing in radical and original ways: Hurston deploys the narrative strategy of intertextual passing whereby *Their Eyes Were Watching God* makes a haunting presence in her ostensibly White novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* with the overall goal of creating an empathic bridge between the Black-White racial divide. In *Alien Land,* Savoy seemingly deploys the theme of passing in the conventional sense of racial passing only to recalibrate it, subverting the racial essentialism undergirding traditional passing narratives. I have illuminated this point by juxtaposing Savoy's novel with two narrative antecedents, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Charles Chesnutt's *House Behind the Cedar*. This final chapter will show how James Baldwin, another midcentury Black American novelist, interfaces sexual and gender passing in *Giovanni's Room* (1956) to compel the intertextual dialogue of neighbor-love.

In the "Autobiographical Notes" that opens his collection of essays *Notes of a Native*

Son, Baldwin tersely describes his experience of being called to the pulpit at a remarkably young age: "When I was fourteen I became a preacher, and when I was seventeen I stopped. Very shortly thereafter I left home."[1] The restrained rhetoric soon gives way to the deep irony that caused him to renounce institutional religion: Even as it offered solace and love to the downtrodden urban folks like his family—including his volatile stepfather and his impressionable boyhood self—the Black church revealed its "mask for hatred and self-hatred" by excluding White folks from the roster of neighbors to be loved. For Baldwin, the Judeo-Christian "edict of 'love everybody'" was nonnegotiable and universal: It "meant *everybody*."[2]

As excerpted in the first epigraph of this chapter, Baldwin goes on to acknowledge, again in a muted and ironically understated fashion, that his Judeo-Christian training may have had "something to do with" informing his literary craft and vision. The irony, of course, is that in a sense Baldwin never left the pulpit; he merely exchanged the outwardly religious with the outwardly secular. As Bernard W. Bell has observed, Baldwin brings to bear a pervasive "biblical imagination" to most of his novels; and if Richard Wright's singular obsession is with the "terrifying possibilities of hatred," Baldwin's is the inverted counterpart—"the terrifying possibilities of love."[3]

For Baldwin, the possibility of love emerges from the locus of the Judeo-Christian ethics of the neighbor, and this love is terrifying for its preemptive and radical premise that turns self into stranger, stranger into kinfolk, and perhaps God himself into a perpetual threat(ener) of passing. In the essay "Open Letter to the Born Again," the scripture Baldwin recurrently cites is

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[1] James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 5.

[2] Baldwin, qtd. in Douglas Field, *James Baldwin* (United Kingdom: Northcote House Publishers Ltd 2011), 77.

[3] Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 219.

Matthew 25:40: *"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*[4] Baldwin follows, "That is a hard saying. It is hard to live with that. It is a merciless description of our responsibility for one another. It is that hard light under which one makes the moral choice" (785). Significantly, the context of the cited scripture is where Jesus implies that he will be passing incognito as one "hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison" and will retroactively carry out his judgment based on how we do or do not "minister" onto him (KJB Matthew 25:44). This parable is fraught with ethical conundrums, including the extent to which one can be held responsible for actions deriving from ignorance or unawareness.[5] This parable also foregrounds the subversive use of passing where the act of passing serves as the bellwether to gauge one's moral health and where passing becomes a kind of providential blackmail to activate neighbor-love. By inviting a reading of Jesus as a performer of passing who blackmails us to loving one another, Baldwin construes the possibility of locating love and redemption in the trope of passing.

In *Giovanni's Room,* Baldwin uses the trope of passing as a generative vehicle of love and extends and implores empathy—the key component of neighbor-love—across multiple loci of identity, whether sexual, gender, race, class, or nation. Defying categorical exclusivity, he champions coalitional identity that recognizes our shared complicity and accountability in the perpetuation of racism, sexism, homophobia. Yet Baldwin's message is not one of recrimination but one of self- and neighbor-love founded on empathy and the mutual recognition of our shared vulnerabilities, transgressions, and regenerative possibilities.

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[4] James Baldwin, *Collected Essays,* 784 (italics in original).

[5] "…Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?" *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version (Oxford UP, 1998), Matthew 25.44.

As this chapter begins with reference to Baldwin's literary influences, it identifies two Black-American authored novels of the postwar era as having informed—or more accurately, provoked—Baldwin's fiction: Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947) and Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1952). Both of these novels cast non-Black characters as central actors, and both deploy the narrative strategy of the prison motif that harkens to the broader tradition of the African American captivity narratives to explore the tabooed subject of homosexuality and the intersectional struggles of people on the sexual and racial margins. By reading *Giovanni's Room* side by side with these now-obscure novels, I argue that Baldwin's novel situates itself firmly in the tradition of African American literature (even as he interrogates its identity politics) and that this novel revises the limitations of Motley's and Himes's treatment of gender and sexuality. While Baldwin extends intersectional identity across socio-economic class and national boundaries, my chapter focuses on his portrayal of the interlocked struggles of sexual and gender identities (and the racial thread that binds them). Doing so helps me tease out Baldwin's narrative response to both Motley's and Himes's aforementioned works and fills a critical gap: What is missing in much of the debate on *Giovanni's Room* as well as *Knock* and *Cast* is the discussion of feminism apposite the issues of (queer) male sexuality.

Baldwin exposes his literary forerunners' folly of gender and sexual short-circuiting in the service of hetero-masculinity: in Motley's case, the sacrificing of the female even as he acknowledges women's entrapment within the heteropatriarchal system; and in Himes's, the sacrificing of the homosexual male even as he lays out the possibility of male same-sex love to break free from the metaphoric prison of homophobia. Channeling and updating these prison narratives, Baldwin traces the ways in which people on the sexual and gender margins—namely, queer men and women (queer or straight)—have been complicit in each other's entrapment and

cultural marginalization. While Baldwin holds both men and women accountable for the perpetuation of their mutual oppression within the racist, hetero-sexist universe, he lays out hope that transcendence is possible in our ability to empathize and to love our fallible neighbors as we learn to love our flawed selves. Remaining true his conviction of our androgynous identity—that men and women are part of each other (see epigraph)—Baldwin performs the Black feminist project of re-visioning his African American literary predecessors' prison narratives to make room to account for the female neighbor.

From Raceless (White) to Black Queer Canonicity

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* struggled upstream against the homophobic tides of the 1950s but was surprisingly well received by White mainstream `reviewers.[6] They generally applauded the up-and-coming young writer for going beyond Black issues, presuming, based on the Whiteness of the protagonists and supporting characters, that the novel was "raceless."[7] As these critics would have it, Baldwin's second novel was a "curious little detour" from the author's thematic mainstay of race.[8] Their focus, instead, was the novel's "assured and sensitive treatment" of homosexuality (Campbell 104).

Proponents of African American letters, on the other hand, generally saw the book as irrelevant to the Black experience,[9] and with the emergence of the Black Arts Movement of the

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[6] James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991), 104.

[7] Robert Bone, in his influential *The Negro Novel in America*, uses the term "raceless" to categorize novels like *Giovanni's Room* that are written by African American authors that lack identifiably-Black central cast of characters ([New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958; rev. ed., 1965], 178-185).

[8] Quoted in Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 9.

[9] Robert Bone, for example, opines that the novel is Baldwin's "most intimate" and "painful" attempts at exploring the theme of "homosexual love…with an all-white cast of characters and a European setting" (*Negro Novel* 236). Bone reveals his displeasure of Baldwin's supposedly white (homosexual) novel by disparaging the work as presenting washed-out, "bleached" "colors" and "sterile psychic landscape" (226).

ensuing years, the novel and the novelist drew increasing castigation. Eldridge Cleaver famously eviscerates Baldwin (and his homosexuality) by accusing him of self-hate and Black-hate and "the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites."[10] Cleaver mocks, longing to become White and "acquiescing in this racial death-wish, Negro homosexuals [such as Baldwin] are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man" (*Soul* 100). As Consuela Frances, David Ikard, Josef Armengol and others have pointed out, Cleaver spoke from a place of Black cultural nationalism that equated African American masculinity with heterosexuality and prioritized the Black patriarchal worldview that expelled Baldwin as a racial sellout and an emasculated deviant.[11]

The emergence of Gay and Lesbian studies in the late 1980s and queer theory in the 1990s have helped propel Baldwin's novel into its current literary canonicity in the field of queer studies. Using Cleaver's homophobic invectives as a rallying "touchstone," queer-theory scholars eagerly reengaged "Baldwin's sexuality and the sex and sexuality in his books."[12] However, *Giovanni's Room*'s newly-minted status as quintessential queer text came at the cost of eclipsing the novel's concerns with race (much less gender or class). This has much to do with historical context of the 1990s in which queer studies took root.[13] Similar to the founding of

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[10] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice,* 97.

[11] See Consuela Frances, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010* (Rochester New York: Camden House, 2014), 15; David Ikard, *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007), 51-2; Josep M. Armengol, *Masculinities in Black and White: Manliness and Whiteness in (African) American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93. See also Field, *James Baldwin,* 129.

[12] Frances, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin,* 62.

[13]It "emerged in the academy as the intellectual counterpart of another activist movement, namely that of ACT-UP, an AIDS activist group, and its offshoot group Queer Nation." See E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, "Introduction: Queering Black Studies/'Quaring' Queer Studies," *Black Queer Studies,* 5.

Black studies, queer studies, given its activist origin, championed queer sexual identity to the exclusion of other nodes of identities (Johnson and Henderson 5).[14]

Even as Baldwin's reputation has recovered from the caustic denunciation of Black nationalism and much of his oeuvre reclaimed into the African American literary tradition, *Giovanni's Room* continued to be viewed as non-Black (or insufficiently Black). Dwight A. McBride traces the reason for this silencing in the institutional bias of African American studies that prioritize racial discourse exclusively and the "politics of respectability" that demand exemplary Black representations (i.e., heteropatriarchal) to combat racism.[15] The programmatic bias is not surprising considering the historical development of Black studies.[16]

Given that "black studies historically avoided sex" while "queer studies avoid race" (Johnson and Henderson 7), Baldwin's simultaneous concerns with race and sex in *Giovanni's Room* would thus remain quarantined in bifurcation until cultural studies and Black queer theory scholarship in recent years would force them to recognize each other as kin. The emergence of two key books in particular have unleashed the floodgate of reassessing *Giovanni's Room* from the intersections of multiple identity positions, including race, gender, sex, and class. Dwight

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[14]As Marlon B Ross informs, the principally sexual reading of Baldwin also finds its impetus in the homogenizing bias of the closet paradigm that caters to the ontological experiences of white, middle-class queer men ("Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," *Black Queer Studies*, 161-189).

[15] McBride, "Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies," *Black Queer Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 70-1. "Politics of respectability" is a term McBride borrows from Kali N. Gross, "Examining the Politics of Respectability in African-American Studies," *University of Pennsylvania Almanac* 43.23 (April 1, 1997).

[16] Emerging in the era of "the Civil Rights and Black Power movements" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the field of Black studies placed issues of racial identity at the forefront of its program by "the dominant black male leadership" (Johnson and Henderson 3).Bolstered by heterosexual black-male centric discourse, black studies began to experience side effects including exclusionary policy (of race only) and the subordination of black women's experience [including black Lesbians who faced both inter- and intra-sexism and homophobia (Johnson and Henderson 3)]. Cleaver and other cultural nationalists' labeling of homosexuality as a "white disease" (qtd in "Intro" 4) placed black studies in an uneasy, if not antagonistic positionality with queer studies.

McBride's edited volume of essays, *James Baldwin Now* (1999), has disabused the bifurcation of race and sexuality in Baldwin's text and argued that we must wrestle with Baldwin in all his "complexity, locating him not as exclusively gay, black, expatriate, activist, or the likes but as intricately negotiated amalgam of all of those things."[17] Further bridging the race-sex discursive divide was the publication of *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005). As the volume's editors E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson envision, the goal of the project is to champion "mutually liberatory goals" and shared survival by underscoring the "dialogic/dialectic 'kinship' " of black and queer identity categories (Introduction, 6).[18]

In *Masculinities in Black and White: Manliness and Whiteness in (African) American Literature,* Josep M. Armengol further deconstructs the race-sex, Black-White binaries in *Giovanni's Room* by arguing that race—especially Whiteness—plays a central role in the novel and that the text speaks about race through sexuality.[19] Utilizing the perspectives of both Black queer studies as well as the then-newly emergent field of Whiteness studies, Armengol posits that Whiteness depends on its hegemonic power by transposing itself as heterosexuality and masculinity and casting Blackness and homosexuality as interchangeable (*Masculinities* 17, 94).

In *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (2014), Matt Brim also advances a Black-queer theorization of race as inherently implicating "gender, sexuality, and class" (McBride qtd. in Brim, *Queer Imagination* 20). The critic proposes reading Baldwin as having a "queer

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[17] Dwight A. McBride, ed., Introduction, in *James Baldwin Now* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

[18] By pressuring the conflicting tensions of the two identities, the critics "want to *quare* queer—to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of extending its service to 'blackness'" with the ultimate goal of embracing "the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of 'queer' while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker 'black'" (Johnson and Henderson 7).

[19] Armengol, *Masculinities in Black and White*, 4-5, 17.

imagination"—that is, an expansive and inclusive conceptualization of selfhood that is based not on the assumption of "static sameness and difference" but rather on his belief in the "unrecognized, painfully assimilable otherness within the self" (10-1).

These recent scholarly voices have contributed to the unpacking of Baldwin's complex commitment to multi-pronged, intersectional identities and his defiance of generic and traditional boundaries of what constitutes the African American novel versus the White mainstream counterpart. However, even with these advances in the Baldwin scholarship, more needs to be done, particularly with Baldwin's treatment of gender and issues of feminism in *Giovanni's Room.* As Douglas Field informs, there is a paucity of critical attention paid to "Baldwin's characterization of white women including Leona in *Another Country* or Hella in *Giovanni's Room*."[20] Beyond Trudier Harris's trailblazing *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (1984), there has been no sustained reading of women in Baldwin's fictional work, Black or White.[21] Field adds elsewhere that even as love is "one of the most prominent themes" of Baldwin's work and his oeuvre "preoccupied with explorations of love," it has often been overlooked or misunderstood by critics (Field 85). I welcome Field's challenge by examining *Giovanni's Room* from the lens of neighbor-love. How does neighbor-love play out in the novel? How does passing complicate neighbor-love? Specifically, what does the novel have to say about the love for the female neighbor?

I build on David Ikard's Black feminist reading of Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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[20] Douglass Field, *James Baldwin*, 89.

[21] Moreover, in light of the critical insights of black queer studies and whiteness studies, I believe it is time to reassess Harris's unflattering assessment of the sexist Baldwin and the subservient black-female portraiture given that Harris assumes, based on the apparent absence of "black characters," *Giovanni's Room* is a white novel and immaterial to her study. Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. n213-4. For Harris's views on Baldwin's subordination of his black female characters, see Introduction, 1-11.

(1953) as a useful model to reading *Giovanni's Room.*[22] Ikard argues that Baldwin provides an incisive lens to interrogate the ways in which Black patriarchy is maintained by both male subjugation of its women and women's own (unintentional) contribution, in combination with the social hindrances that impede "most [Black] women from breaking free of this complicity" (*Breaking the Silence* 22-3, 50). Ikard reads Baldwin's first novel to establish the writer as an early practitioner of what the critic calls the Black male feminist criticism—championing the agency of Black female subjects by portraying women not as hapless victims but as "complex individuals who—like their male counterparts—struggle to come to terms with the realities of their subordinate social status" (50). As Ikard focuses exclusively on heterosexual Black women and their relation to patriarchy without factoring in Baldwin as a "queer black man" (Brim 158), I qualify Ikard's term and argue that in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin brings to bear a *quare* male-feminist criticism, the *quare* denoting, as Johnson defines, "an epistemology grounded in the body" that, even as it is "strategically galvanized around" the lived experiences and the embodiment of racialized, sexualized and/or gendered identities, it is "committed to interrogating identity claims that exclude rather than include" ("'Quare' Studies" 135, 136). Whereas *Go Tell* is exclusive to Black women's experience, in *Giovanni's Room*, the author uses the *quare* male feminist criticism to include a broader coalition of women (whether straight, gay or queer, Black, White or other) into the dialogue of the ethical conundrum of neighbor-love.

Baldwin's Engendered Neighbor-Love and Empathy

Female empowerment is at the core of Baldwin's project of the theologico-political relationality of neighbor- love. As his biographer David Leeming tells us, it was the central woman in Baldwin's life—his mother, Berdis Baldwin—whose concept of "love" would largely

[22] David Ikard, *Breaking the Silence*: *Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana

"inform his later life."[23] Significantly, this maternal love was grounded in the ethics of the neighbor: "I don't know what will happen to you in life. I do know that you have brothers and sisters,'' the mother would tell the adolescent Jimmy. "You must treat everyone the way I hope others will treat your brothers and sisters when you are far from them" (9). Berdis Baldwin's teaching of the golden rule is one that extends beyond the typical empathy for others through self-love. It is an expansive and painstaking version that envisions neighbor-love as nurturing act of kinship, one that transforms the Other from a stranger to one's sibling.

In "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor," Kenneth Reinhard imparts the insight that the ethics of the Neighbor houses an inherent female structural relationality that can help us begin to imagine the infinity of neighbors (Baldwin's "everybody") we are called upon to love based not on hierarchical or totalizing dominance but on singular yet egalitarian contiguity.[24] Predicated on the logic of the not-all, women exceed generalization, essentialization, or representation; in the "not-all" of female sexuation there resides the paradoxical agency of "*choice to choose,* the decision not only to take responsibility for the irrevocably past choice that brought a woman into the open community of women, but also for the infinite series of contingent decisions that follows from it" (Reinhard 58, 56). While it would be rash and naïve to

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State University Press, 2007).

[23] David Adams Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 9.

[24] Proposing the political theology of the neighbor as a complicating supplement to Carl's Schmitt's political theory of the sovereign state of exception and using the Lacanian theory of female-subject formation that operates in the logic of "not-all," Reinhard distinguishes between male and female subjectivity. While male sexuation functions, like the Schmittian model of political theology, as a closed, top-down system of substitution (where one man—the Freudian primal father or the God-like sovereign—is at the top of the hierarchy binding those below to the rule of law but is himself an exception to that law), in the formation of female sexuation, women are "*radically singular,* not examples of a class or members of a closed set, but *each one an exception*…to an open set, an infinite series of particular women, into which each woman enters 'one by one' " ("Toward the Political Theology of the Neighbor," *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political* Theology (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 58.

say the female-infused political theology of the neighbor alone would automatically mobilize love to effect change (as Reinhard defines, love is "the production of something new"), what is empowering in Reinhard's Lacanian reading of "woman's sexuality" is that it enables us to imagine the "idea of *infinity*" (60-1)—universal neighbor-love—in the radically singular (Love your neighbor *as* yourself is not the same as love your neighbor because they *are* you). Hence in Reinhard's reading of the female as neighbor *infinitum* yet singular, we can begin to tabulate Baldwin's commitment to loving "*everybody*."

In addition to its feminist tonality, Baldwin's definition of neighbor-love seems to incorporate empathy as one of its key elements. In a 1965 televised interview, Baldwin conceptualizes love as an "active" force "like a fire…something which can change you...a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of what a human being can do, and become, what a human being can do to change the world in which he finds himself." [25] Baldwin's comparison of love to such traumatic and potentially devastating force as fire yet something transformative and life-affirming has an uncanny register in the concept of empathy that points to how our exercising of empathy can be at once monumentally difficult (How do we identify with characters who are unlikable or morally defunct?); dangerous (How might empathy, like its cousin sympathy, reinforce dominant ideologies and neurotypical biases?); but also promises pro-social potentials (How might reading literature generate empathy, and how can this translate into the real world?).[26] Elsewhere, Baldwin writes, "Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up" (*CE* 221). As an

[25] James Baldwin, *Conversations with James Baldwin,* Standley, Fred L. and Louis H. Pratt, eds. (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 48.

[26] For further reading on the historical overview of the sundry valences of empathy (ethical, political, literary), see Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Introduction, *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*, 1-17. See also Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

example of this love, Baldwin declares something that is baffling at first blush: "No one in the world…knows [White] Americans better or, odd as this may sound, love them more than the American Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here" (*Conversations* 221). How is it that Blacks can love their oppressor without it dissolving into what Cleaver has interpreted as self-hate and Black-hate? If empathy is a key component of Baldwin's love, it is possible, as one can empathize with a wide range of people, including those who are unlikeable or unlovable and those who are different from us.[27]

Baldwin's Conversations with Motley's *Knock on Any Door* and Himes's *Cast the First Stone*

While Baldwin did not write any formal reviews of either Motley's or Himes's "White" novels, he, as some recent critic have aptly observed, registered the pioneering subject matter of homosexuality and their respective treatment of the prison theme (Baldwin's lifelong preoccupation). Motley's *Knock* was a massive bestseller in its day (it shot up to the *New York Times* best-seller list and stayed there close to a year) and was often compared favorably with Wright's *Native Son*.[28] It boasted of various editions (even a graphic novel) and was made into a

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[27] For the study of inter-/intra-group dynamics of empathy, Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003); for the case study on empathizing with unlovable/unloving subjects, see Rebecca N. Mitchell, "Empathy and the Unlikeable Character: On Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's Thérèse Raquin, *Rethinking Empathy*: 121-133; see also Eric Leake, "Humanizing the Inhumane: The Value of Difficult Empathy," Ibid.: 175-185. For the study of narrative empathy, see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); see also Ibid., "Narrative Empathy," *Toward Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts:* 61-93; and "Novel Readers and the Empathetic Angel of Our Nature," *Rethinking Empathy*: 21-33.

[28] Craig S. Abbott, "Versions of a Best-Seller: Motley's "Knock on Any Door," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America,*81.2 (June 1987), 176-7. See also Thomas D. Jarrett, "Recent Fiction by Negroes," *The English Journal* 43.8 (Nov., 1954), 419-425; G. Lewis Chandler, "Reviewed Work(s): *Knock on Any Door* by Willard Motley," *Phylon* 9.1 (1st Qtr., 1948), 92-94; Clarence Major, "Open Letters: A Column, *The American Poetry Review* 4.4 (July/August 1975), 22; Thomas D. Jarrett, "Sociology and Imagery in a Great American Novel," *The English Journal* 38.9 (Nov., 1949), 518-520; Nick Aaron Ford, "Four Popular Negro Novelists," *Phylon* (1940-1956) 15.1 (1st Qtr., 1954), 29-39. For the most recent literary analyses comparing

movie starring Humphrey Bogart (Abbot, "Versions of a Best Seller" 176, 184). Even as he resented being pigeon-holed by race, by the 1947 publication of his novel, Motley was considered a "patriarch to younger Black writers"; and well into the 1950s, he was a formidable literary figure who inspired the next generation of aspiring Black writers, including Frank London Brown.[29]

Set in the Great Depression, Motley's *Knock* portrays the life of Nick Romano, a first-generation Italian American, from his idyllic early-childhood as a devout Catholic altar boy to a hardened criminal convicted of murder at age twenty-one. All is well until his twelfth year when financial misfortune forces the family to move from the suburb of Denver to the slums of Chicago. From petty theft to prostitution to armed robbery, Nick's life spirals downward, until he meets and marries one Emma Schultz whose love sparks the possibility of redemption. However, he is unable to consummate that marriage (due apparently to his homosexual experiences), and Emma commits suicide. Her death seals Nick's doom, and his tragic life culminates in his killing of an amoral cop which sends him to the electric chair.

Motley's novel was an instant bestseller and hailed as great American novel, elevating its author to the status of such definitive naturalists as Wright, Dostoyevsky, and Dreiser (Abbott 177). Early reviewers and critics have focused largely on the environmental determinism that impacts Nick Romano's downfall while minimizing the novel's concerns with matters of Homosexuality or race.[30] No critics have given much attention to the central female character,

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Motley's and Wright's novels, see M. E. Grenander, "Criminal Responsibility in "Native Son" and "Knock on Any Door," *American Literature* 49.2 (May, 1977), 221-233.

[29]James R. Giles and Jerome Klinkowitz, "The Emergence of Willard Motley in Black American Literature," *Negro American Literature Forum* 6.2 (Summer 1972), 31, 33.

[30] See for example, G. Lewis Chandler's review in *Phylon* where he claims "the race question, subordinated and incidental, is not even tertiary in importance" in *Knock* (92). The critic then proceeds to read the narrative as an

Emma; if they do discuss her at all, then they summarize her as a "good girl."[31]

Notwithstanding the parallel explorations of the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender, Motley's and Baldwin's novels have failed generally to elicit a comparative reading. As John C. Charles points out, this has much to do with their seemingly incompatible generic differences: Motley's is in the tradition of naturalism and social protest whereas Baldwin's novel is considered modernist and apolitical.[32] While Charles broaches the important comparative dialogue and sheds light on the three writers' (Motley, Himes, Baldwin) meditation on queer masculinity, he elides—much as the other critics do—the significance of Emma in the novel, a costly oversight; for it is precisely Motley's portrayal of Emma as the submissive and docile woman who sacrifices her life for the redemption of Nick's humanity that Baldwin revises in *Giovanni's Room*, in the figure of Hella and her unfulfilling relationship with David.

Baldwin met Chester Himes through Richard Wright in Paris in the early 1950s. Baldwin and Himes were never close friends, but the two got to know each other through periodic, heated conversations over café meals (Leeming, *Biography* 93).[33] The following passage from

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environmental deterministic fiction in the tradition of Dreiser, Wright, and Steinbeck (93).

[31] Marion Thompson Wright, "Review: Society at the Bar; Reviewed Works(s): *Knock on Any Door* by Willard Motley," *The Journal of Negro Education* 17.1 (Winter, 1948), 73.

[32] John C. Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2013), 89-90. Grouping them under the literary aegis of the midcentury "white-life" novels, Charles establishes the groundbreaking task of interfacing the two texts (alongside Himes's *Knock*). He argues that these novels (by Motley, Himes, and Baldwin) underscore how the racist heteropatriarchy of the postwar decade imprisoned the full expressions masculinity and how these novels, to varying degrees, find subversive redemption in male same-sex love (19-20, 89).

[33] In his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt* (1972), Himes also memorializes his first encounter with Baldwin, as does Wright and Baldwin, all three presenting different (and often conflicting) versions. See James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991), 64-8.

Giovanni's Room most likely alludes to Himes: Baldwin has his protagonist David realize that "prison" is a state of mind and not merely a literal setting, and recall once meeting a writer "who was celebrated because he had spent half his life in prison. He had then written a book about it which displeased the prison authorities and won a literary prize. But this man's life was over….I remember thinking that, in effect, he had never left prison, prison was all that was real to him, he could speak nothing else" (*Giovanni's Room* 164). The real Himes served close to eight years for armed robbery, and he began his writing career with a prison novel shortly after his release from the Ohio State Penitentiary in 1936. This was *Cast the First Stones*, his actual first novel, although it was not published until 1952 after undergoing heavy editorial excisions and emendations.[34] In keeping with Baldwin's account of the fictionalized writer who pens his own prison experience, Himes's novel is a thinly-disguised semi-autobiography that has been read as an exposé of the corruption and brokenness of the prison industrial complex.[35]

Cast tells the story of the White nineteen-year old Jimmy Monroe who serves a twenty-five-plus year sentence at the Ohio State Penitentiary for armed robbery. Given the privileges of his middle-class background and the familial and educational resources it endows, Jimmy (with

[34] Thomas Alan Dichter, "An Extreme Sense of Protest Against Everything: Chester Himes's Prison Novel," *American Literature,* 90.1 (March 2018), 112 and also 136n. The unexpurgated and restored version of *Cast* was posthumously published in 1998 as *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*. As various critics have noted, the posthumous restored version is considerably more affirmative of male same-sex love and the compatibility of queer sensibilities with concept of masculinity. See Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero,* 90, 104-5*;* see also Clare Rolens, "Write Like a Man: Chester Himes and the Criminal Text Beyond," *Callaloo* 37.2 (Spring 2014), 432-3, 438-440.

[35] In addition, the theme of passing in *Giovanni's Room* may have found ample inspiration in the backstory to the publication of Himes's "White" prison novel. He may have heard directly from Himes himself in Paris that *Cast* was originally written with significant Black cast of characters, including a Black protagonist and his Black love interest; rejected by publishers in this version, Himes merely replaced the Black characters with the White, leaving every other element the same as in the original manuscript. See Charles 105; Rolens 443; Stephen O. Murray, "An African American's Representation of Internalized Homophobia During the Early 1930s," *Journal of Homosexuality* 34.1, 32. For the account of Himes changing the race of the major characters to improve his publication odds, see James Lundquist, *Chester Himes* (New York: Ungar, 1976). In a sense, then, the novel was passing—passing off Black love and the Black prison experience as White—as a means to get published. In Baldwin's mind, this would have been an instance of how the motif of passing can be a subversive and generative vehicle of love.

the unswerving support from his mother) is able to successfully appeal his draconian prison term after serving a third of it and is paroled to a work farm, a transitional place before being released. Himes spends the first two-thirds of the novel illuminating the ins and out of the racially-integrated prison culture: its corruption, violence and abuse, but also its subversive diversions and survival mechanics, including Jimmy's queer romance. The remainder of the novel focuses on the homoerotic coupling of Jimmy and his main love interest, an "effeminate" character named Duke Dido. On the eve of Jimmy's commutation, Dido hangs himself, and the novel ends with Jimmy walking away from the prison gates.

By the time of the publication of *Cast*, the reading public was well familiar with the genre of prison narratives and memoirs, and in inverse proportion to the cultural impugning of homosexuality, it eagerly devoured stories of same-sex intrigues and exposés.[36] Even as the book was received as part of the popular genre of prison narratives, a minority of reviewers recognized the iconoclastic potential of queer sexuality in Himes's work, leading one critic to acknowledge that as leery of homosexuality as he (the critic) is, the novel is "highly original" in its "account of this love affair…I've never read anything like it…" (W.R. Burnett qtd in Charles 96). For the most part, the novel's popular reception was "mixed…with most reviewers typically offering moderate praise for what seemed to be its authentic representation of prison life" (Charles 94).

Perhaps because of Himes's established status as a Black protest writer and his eventual disavowal of the novel's autobiographical elements,[37] early literary critics tended to read *Cast* as

[36] Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 56-7, 103-4.

[37] By the time Himes stated his denial in his first autobiography *Quality of Hurt* (1972), he was firmly established as a masculine writer of hard-boiled Black detective fiction and would likely have felt any personal association with queer sexuality professionally compromising. As it was, Himes's identity as a Black man meant that the White mainstream already perceived him as "'deviant,' nonheteropatriarchal, and unfree" (Charles 100, 106).

a protest novel encased in the prison setting while downplaying the homoerotic elements.[38] In recent years, two critics have homed in on the necessary logic and urgency to read Himes's *Cast* comparatively with Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room.* In "White Fantasies of Desire," Marlon Ross establishes Himes's *Cast* as the African American predecessor of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and argues that these writers' depictions of same-sex love and "fantasies of white male desire" are not an aberration but a continuum in the tradition of African American literature and "the cultural complexity of African American desire itself."[39] In *Abandoning the Black Hero*, Charles opines that overall, despite Himes's deep ambivalence and homophobic anxiety about same-sex masculinity, *Cast* (especially read alongside his posthumous version *Yesterday*), remains a vanguard in its offering of queer love and relationality as a counter-model to heterosexual manhood and state violence (96-97, 100-4).

Yet Charles and Ross both overlook the radical ways Baldwin diverges from Himes and revises his prison narrative. Baldwin is not merely joining forces with Himes in "recasting the same-sexuality as a site of masculine regeneration," as Charles puts it (*Abandoning* 20), but he rejects the sacrificing of the homosexual in the service of heteropatriarchal stability.

Knock* and *Cast* as Thematic Kin of *Giovanni's Room

In Motley's *Knock*, Baldwin finds a textual precursor that envisions trans-racial, trans-

[37] Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero*, 105; Rolens, "Write Like a Man," 443; Murray, "An African American's Representation," 42.

[38] Stephen F. Milliken, for example, argues that the one and only theme of *Cast* is the prison; for "prison permits the writer who attempts to describe it with total accuracy no second overriding concern." See Stephen F. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1976), 160.

[39] Marlon B. Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," McBride, Dwight A, ed. *James Baldwin Now* (New York and London: New York UP, 1999). 24.

ethnic counterculture to challenge racist and classist status quo. The human goodness we witness despite the sordid environment of crime, poverty, and urban slums is often found in interracial or intercultural friendships.[40] What makes Motley's novel a trailblazing harbinger of *Giovanni's Room*, however, is undoubtedly the exploration of same-sex friendship and love refracted through the lens of the prison motif. Motley shows the humanity of Owen, Nick's queer lover and steadfast friend who takes him in at his lowest and who stands by Nick's side on the eve of his execution: "Owen had been so damned decent to him"; with Emma dead, "[h]e was the only real friend he had" (*Knock* 295).

While the novel stakes its ground firmly in literal prison spaces (from reform schools to medium-security prison to death row), it explores heteropatriarchy's figurative imprisonment of women and men (regardless of their sexuality). Consider the following scene that depicts Emma as figuratively imprisoned: After Nick returns home from his nightly sexual dalliances, he finds Emma "sitting by the window gazing out. When he saw her something reminded him of himself staring through the bars in jail" (294). Nick's comparison of Emma as himself looking out through the prison bars suggests a glimmer of dawning insight in Nick that heteropatriarchy hurts both women and men; and shortly thereafter, the novel offers some hope of this recognition further when Owen exhorts Nick to "Go home," implying that Nick must face Emma and be forthright with her about his sexuality (296). Prompted by Owen, Nick returns home and finds Emma in her prison cell: "Emma sat in the kitchen near the double windows, looking out" (296). After some understandable difficulty, Nick confesses: "'Do you know why I can't be a real

[40] One such relationship is between young boys Tommy (White) and Sam (Black) in a Chicago reform school. The incident that hardens Nick for criminal life at age fourteen occurs when he witnesses this same Tommy who, after being captured running away with Sam, is beaten senseless (the boys have wanted to flee from the culture of racist bullying).

husband to you?...I was no good from the time I was sixteen. There were men and women. A lot of them" (296). The chapter's final imagery solidifies their interconnected plight: "They sat staring out the window. That minute went on an hour, a day, a year" (297). Even as the effects of the heteropatriarchal prison are detrimental and insidious—eroding their sense of time, reality, and bearing—the passage augers some hope in the couple's joint attention and shared perspective about their interlocked struggle.

Like Emma and Nick, Owen, the novel's explicitly homosexual man, is also trapped, as suggested by the scene of his final visit with Nick in death row. Nick keeps him at arms-length with his "hard-boiled" masculine stance and a condescending smirk that makes Owen feel demeaned (481). Given the discrepancy of the men's looks (Nick's smugness and "pity" for Owen; Owen trembling in fear) the scene ironically implies Owen as the one figuratively behind bars. Nick distances himself partly because he is "afraid" of the gaze of the prison "guards outside" who might suspect Nick's queer predilection; and indeed, in the safety of his solitude, Nick is able to acknowledge his fondness for Owen who has been loving and "decent" (481).

Despite Nick's private reaffirmation of his affection for Owen as well as the strong homoerotic/homosocial strains that characterize male interactions in the novel, the same scene reveals the author's ambivalence about same-sex love in casting Owen as trapped in his homosexuality and his extended hand of friendship being rebuffed.[41] The homophobic reading of Owen finds its fuel in the novel's sanitized narrative where homosexuality is muted. Earlier we have heard Nick confessing to his wife that he has had sex with "men and women" and thus

[41] As Kunzel informs, inmates during the midcentury who were suspected of homosexuality were punished by segregation, shame, and withholding of privileges (*Criminal Intimacy* 69-70). On the eve of his death, none of these consequences should matter to Nick; yet he cares to hide his homoerotic feelings for Owen from the prison guards, because what is at stake is not Nick's literal life, but something more indelible and apparently sacred: his (heterosexual) manhood.

he is "no good." In a novel with a heavy investment in environmental determinism, it would be easy to dismiss homosexuality as an external social ill that makes one "no good" as opposed to a desire intrinsic in Nick. Allowing for the difficulty of publishing a story with openly affirmative homosexual content, Charles considers *Knock* a pro-same-sex and egalitarian novel; but what he overlooks is the book's disempowerment of women that directly undermines that egalitarian, countercultural reading. Baldwin, I argue, radically revises this sexual asymmetry.

To the extent that Himes's novel plays out entirely in a prison setting, it is perhaps an even more obvious antecedent than is Motley's novel to Baldwin's exploration of the prison motif in *Giovanni's Room.* Himes himself knew that given the structural racism inherent in the United States, one cannot talk about the prison system without encompassing race. In his letter to Wright, Himes shares his soon-to-be published *Cast* and adds, "This book is a simple story about life in prison; maybe the boys can stand the truth about life in a state prison better than they can stand the truth about *life in the prison of being a Negro in America*" (qtd. in Rolens, "Write Like a Man" 444; emphasis added). Suffice to say Himes was well aware of the "parallel between the prisoner and the black American" (Rolens 444).

Himes, like Motley before and Baldwin after him, harkens to heterogeneous and marginalized voices, but these voices in *Cast* take on a kind of cacophonous, inverted democracy, or what Justus Nieland has called "noir humanism"—the "convergence of psychologizing tendencies at midcentury" that laid bare "a universalizing, quasi-anthropological picture of the human condition as marked by pervasive emotional insecurity."[42] Reading Himes's novel *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Nieland defines Himes's brand of noir humanism as one that

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[42]Justus Nieland, "Everybody's Noir Humanism: Chester Himes, *Lonley Crusade* and *The Quality of Hurt*," *African American Review* 43.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2009), 277.

highlights human inhumanity that symptomatizes the violent exposure of the hypocrisy and folly of postwar democratic liberalism ("Everybody's Noir Humanism" 277, 280). Indeed, we can say that in *Cast,* Himes subscribes to something like noir democracy in his satiric mockery of humanity's viler tendencies that cut across one's ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender or class. In the novel, we see this most graphically in the scene involving the immediate aftermath of the devastating prison fire. In the conflagration, all outward differences melt away, rendering racial demarcations and other categorical divisions absurd and grotesque:

> The gray prone bodies got into my eyes. White man, black man, gentile, Jew. The old and the young, the lame and the sound. Some used to be bankers, some politicians, some sneak thieves, some racketeers. Just gray humps on the bare ground now. Whatever they had been, or had ever dreamed of being—whatever their race or their nationality or their background—that foot of greenish vomit hanging from their teeth made them all alike. (*Cast* 153)

Here Himes presents us with a grotesque inversion of the classic myth of the American melting pot. To expose the racial double standards of the postwar rhetoric of democratic ideals, Himes recasts the American dream as an infernal nightmare. In the chaos of the fire, all racial pretensions and human propriety are stripped away: All are equally depraved, even if they are not equally victimized. Black and White convicts join hands to loot the belongings of the deceased: "[T]he cells were full of them, white and colored convicts rummaging in the ruins, like maggots in a piece of rotting meat" (161).

The most direct parallel between Himes's and Baldwin's novels is the exploration of queer romance; for all its coyness about same-sex love, Himes's novel is, as Charles points out, "pathbreaking" in treating the subject matter. Jimmy's romantic love for Dido has the potential

to rehabilitate the calloused and angry heart of his hyper-masculine self. In perhaps the most lyrical and poignant passage from the novel, we feel the pulse of this transformative love. Dido gives Jimmy a fresh perspective to appreciate the beauty and renewal of life even in the most unlikely places such as the prison:

> The fresh green sprouts of grass touched me and the buds on the trees and the robins, when they came…The convicts marching down the sidewalks which split the new green grass, and the rainbows after the showers, touched me. And the words which came back to me from somewhere in the past: 'And God made hope to spring eternal from the human heart.' There was newness in the spring which touched me, and an oldness in the prison which touched me….There were people there beyond the walls whom I couldn't see who touched me; ardent young lovers and flowers beginning to bloom. (299-300)

This poetic passage, reminiscent of Whitman's "Song of Myself," speaks of the possibility of queer love's regenerative power to give one perspective, empathy, connection, continuity; prison is no longer a space shut out from the rest of the world and history. In accordance with this newfound viewpoint, the two lovers engage in conversations about queer love. Echoing Giovanni's heartfelt speech defending same-sex love to the sexually-ambivalent David, Dido expounds to his homophobic lover Jimmy that there is nothing wrong with same-sex love; what actually *is* wrong is our learned negative response to it (291). Even as the heavily-edited novel reassures the reactionary reading public that the two lovers share only one passionless kiss (just before Jimmy's release from prison), Himes manages to circumvent editorial censorship with the insertion that the kiss "had a great tenderness" (344).

In the Service of Heteropatriarchy: The Engendering of the Sacrificial Woman in Motley's *Knock* and the Sacrificial Killing of the Homosexual in Himes's *Cast*

Returning to Motley's novel, this chapter contends that without analyzing the key female character Emma, we would have an incomplete reading. As we will see with Baldwin, Motley, too, grasps that women are central in the discussion of social inclusivity and coalition-building across the axes of sex, race, and class; yet unlike Baldwin, Motley sacrifices women for the sake of hetero-masculine redemption. While the novel shows heteropatriarchy imprisons both women and men, through his symbolic regeneration as Christlike figure, only Nick is able to exit that metaphoric prison, and only through the perpetual ensnarement of Emma who bears the novel's burden of feminine stereotype and sentimental idealization.

Both structurally and thematically, Emma emerges as an essential foil to the development of Nick's character. She is paramount to unpacking the larger theme of the novel, which is roughly divided into three sections: the first part narrating Nick's life before Emma (Chapters 1-49); the second introducing her character (Chapters 50-3); and the third unfolding Nick's life with- and post-Emma (Chapters 54-92). The novel attends to no other characters aside from Nick as insistently as it does his future wife, to the extent of allowing us to hear her backstory in her own voice. Section Two departs from following Nick's life and opens with the voice of the third-person limited perspective (Emma's) that painstakingly charts her upbringing: her poor German-immigrant origin, her father's death, and her neglected childhood under an alcoholic and cruel mother. Even as her voice is cut short with the merging of Emma's and Nick's lives in Section Three, Emma's life—and more significantly, Nick's fate—become inexorably linked, and we cannot read the rest of Nick's life without reckoning with her. Indeed, the climax and ending of the novel cannot occur without factoring in Emma. Even after her death (or *especially* after

dying), Emma becomes Nick's moral compass, his conscience.

The novel suggests that like Nick Romano, Emma is also a victim of her environment. Raised in a bleak and penurious background, Emma becomes a voracious reader from an early age, her reading habits defying gender expectations: "Her favorite books were boy's books," especially "Ralph Henry Barbour books about boy's schools and academies where they won football and baseball games on the last page" (224). Yet as she enters puberty, she falls in line with gender norms that prioritize female beauty and conventions of female domesticity: Looking at her muddied self-reflection in the "rainwater," she worries about her future prospects being that "she was so darn plain looking" (226). Emma then begins her escape into "romanticizing about herself," conjuring up "stories" about herself as a sacrificial, "tragic figure," someone like "the Lily Maid of Astolat" (227). She pours herself into romance novels, "nice love stories about pretty girls and handsome heroes" in order to assure herself "that somewhere [there] was the wonderful boy she would marry" (230). Thus Emma's avid book reading does little to prepare her for a better life; far from empowering her to face and overcome the harshness of her reality, it only provides escapism and sentimental fantasy.

While it can be argued that Emma's stereotypically feminine desires are not nature but the external, sexist pressure on the female body,[43] her subsequent narrative telos overwhelmingly suggests that no level of environmental factors can override nature, and her nature is one that seems quintessentially domestic, docile, and self-sacrificing. One can make the argument that

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[43] For feminist reading of societal pressure on the female body contemporaneous to Motley's time, see Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*. For updated, twenty-first century reading on the same, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1993 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Motley does not intend Emma to be representative of the ideal or even typical femininity, as the novel features smatterings of female characters who do not fit the stereotypically feminine bill, including Nick's rambunctious and independent Aunt Rosa (who makes her own living and remains unmarried for a long time) as well as Nick's older sister Ang, who grows up in the same harsh environment as her brother but is able to hold her own without falling into a life of crime like her brother or dying a tragic victim like Emma. However, the novel pays scant attention to these women and their lives; they essentially disappear from the rest of the novel after Nick meets Emma and are referenced briefly on the eve of his execution (*Knock* 496). In contrast, the novel's structure and overwhelming focus on Emma make it clear that she is the noteworthy and exemplary woman we must take heed. And Emma as the novel's exemplary woman is the acme of domestic and dependent femininity. While Nick serves time for robbery, "The days were as cruel to Emma. She went to work. She came home. She went to night school, doggedly, three times a week. She dreaded going home, cooking, getting into the large and lonely bed" (291). Looking at her dog who greets her at home, Emma—without a tinge of irony—finds his fidelity to her "heartbreaking," because it reminds her of her dogged faithfulness in "waiting for Nick" (291). For Emma, her docile loyalty is as natural as a dog's love for her master. When her female friends take her on outings, Emma insipidly goes through the motion; yet she gets no enjoyment out of female companionship: "Her lips even laughed with them. In her mind there was no smile, no laughter" (291). For her, the year apart from her husband is as unnatural and incomplete as "[b]read without butter. Sleep without rest. Death without dying" (291).

Thoroughly internalizing the ideology of the primacy of heterosexual marriage, Emma is ready to sacrifice her life for it. No matter how emphatically Nick tells her he cannot be sexual with her, she stays, declaring that her love for him is "all I know. That's all that matters" (298).

No matter the factual evidence corroborating the failure of her marriage, Emma lays out hope that perhaps Nick would somehow learn to love her as a heterosexual husband. Lying in bed next to him, she blames herself for Nick' homoerotic turn ("What have I done?"), asks God to "help him," then turns to Nick and begs, "Couldn't we try? Couldn't you…?'" (299).

When her hope for Nick's sexual conversion becomes a lost cause, she dies beautifully, like the scores of sacrificial heroines of her relished romance novels; and by thus sacrificing her life for the sake of offering Nick his freedom (from matrimony), she ultimately becomes his moral compass. Her death scene reads like a page out of a sentimental Victorian romance. When Nick returns home from work the next night, he is met by this quaint picture:

> She lay on the bed in her blue housecoat. Her lips were parted slightly, as if she smiled…Her lips stood up pink from her ashy-white face. They were the pink of rose petals….Her lashes drooped down from [her closed eyelids], over her white cheeks. Her hair was mussed on the neatly spread bed coverlet. It was in a cloud about her head. She was all hair and eyes.…The shade was drawn down to the sill…In their vase on the dresser the lilacs drooped on their stems. (305)

The technical cause of her death is carbon monoxide asphyxiation (Emma has left the gas oven on), but there is nothing ghastly about her death, only sentimentality (from the mood-setting "shade" to the properly mournful yet fragrant "lilacs"). In fact, what we witness here is close to an erotic female portraiture with her flowing hair spread across the pillow, her "slightly" "parted" lips, and the descriptions of her "ashy-white face" contrasted by "pink" lips the color of "rose petals." Her ashy-white coloring appeals to the Victorian beauty standard that celebrated the features of tuberculosis patients (known in the Victorian period as the "consumptive look," it

glorified bloodless white faces, blushing lips, silky hair and dilated eyes).[44] Motley's exoticization of Emma's corpse is right in line with the long-standing romanticization of female death in the Western cultural imaginary.[45] The author completes this sentimental death scene with her prodigal husband kneeling and embracing her lifeless body "with his face pressed against her neck and her still breast" (306). Weeping in profound regret and sorrow, Nick chants, "I did it, Emma. I killed you" (306), a line Motley ensures to become the moral refrain throughout the rest of the novel.

Later in the climactic courtroom scene, we understand the novel's motive of killing off Emma. Through her sacrificial death, Emma quickens Nick's conscience, his prelapsarian innocence, which serves to redeem his humanity. Nick almost gets away with the murder of Riley, the corrupt police officer, but the guilt he feels at Emma's death and her self- sacrifice impel him to confess his crime and take responsibility for his actions. For the bulk of the trial, with his good looks and smugness, Nick mocks the criminal-justice system, mesmerizing the jury and nearly swaying it to acquit him eagerly and even "gratefully" (434). It is only the reference to Emma's suicide (which the prosecutor stumbles across by happenstance) that shakes Nick off his nonchalance and throws a gut-wrench into his conscience. As the trial wears on, his guilt over Emma breaks him: "Nick fought the tears. His insides crumbled together like a dried leaf in the fingers of a fist" and "broke like the string on a guitar snapping" (436). Sensing vulnerability, the prosecutor goes in for the kill and pounces at Nick until he confesses: "Yes!—I

[44]See Carolyn A. Day, *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.) Also see Michael Barrett, "How a Generation of Consumptives Defined 19th-century Romanticism," *Aeon*, 10 April 2017; Emily Mullin, "How Tuberculosis Shaped Victorian Fashion." *Smithsonian.com.* 10 May 2016.

[45] For the psychoanalytical study of the cultural obsession with, and the aestheticization of, the female corpse in Western imaginary, see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York and Manchester: Routledge, 1992).

killed that goddamn cop! I'm glad I killed him!" (437-8).

Nick's fiery confession ushers in his defense lawyer Morton's dramatic and powerful closing argument that both minimizes Nick's crime and elevates his situation from a sensational idiosyncratic murder to a universal human tragedy, one that can befall on any *man*: "The young man at the table is all that counts. He is on trial for his life!" Through Morton, the novel conveys the message that Nick's killing of the corrupt cop is justice served, not crime: "On one side… Nick Romano. On the other, the..."greed, lust for power, dishonesty, ambition of the vilest sort, bigotry" (449). Reminiscent of the Bigger Thomas trial scene in Wright's *Native* Son, Morton then charges "Society"—that is—"you and me," of being the "guilty party" and declares Nick an "innocent" victim of his environment (443, 451-2).[46] Within the internal logic of the novel, Morton is right in a sense that Nick is innocent; having now redeemed his humanity thanks to Emma's sacrifice (which serves as the only "crime" of which Nick is truly guilty), he has regained his childhood innocence.[47]

Before his imminent death, Nick takes on a Christ-like aura, highlighting the ultimate redemption of his humanity. The night before execution, Nick orders "more [food] than he could possibly eat, so that when he had gone down to the death chamber, the other prisoners could have what was left" (485). He then shepherds his mournful prison mates to his side and beckons them in "a pleading voice" to partake in this last supper with him. His fellow inmates consecrate this modern, secular version of Christ and the Last Supper with proper solemnity and reverence, with their "heads down" and in somber compliance (487). The Christ-like allusion explodes into a crescendo in Nick's death scene where the narrative conflates the illumination of Nick's

[46] Early readers of the novel have also made the connection between the respective courtroom scenes in Motley's and Wright's novels. See for example, Grenander, 223-227 and Ford, 33-4.

[47]Even as Morton frees Nick of all personal responsibility with his thesis of environmental determinism, it

electrocution with the radiance of the sanctified halo: “The spotlights came on brilliantly over the chair. At angles their beams struck across each other and encircled the chair like three lariats thrown. Flooded it in one great spotlight. He, in the circle of light” (502).

This completes the mission of Emma’s narrative life: to sacrifice herself to become Nick’s moral compass that frees him; even as his body is sentenced to death, he regains his humanity and redemption. Their deaths, while equally premature, are not identical in social value. As articulated by the defense-lawyer, Nick’s life is both universal and singular; his being is important—it is “all that counts.” As for Emma, her being is a footnote of a “good girl.”

The novel’s fatal flaw is making Emma simply too good for the world; she is too ethereal, too angelic, too saintly to be a real woman. The scene of Nick’s carceral dream encapsulates the placement of Emma on this impossible pedestal. It is a harrowing dream, one where Nick finds himself trapped inside a squalid, yellow room:

> The walls were yellow, the floor and ceiling yellow…Yellowness was everywhere like oil, sickly, thick, congealing. It was really a solid yellow cube with him in the middle of it. In his hand he held a huge key. The end was broken off….On a higher level of yellow cube was Emma. She stood on a precipitous, smooth-sided vertical with a flat and narrow top. There were no steps up to her. At the foot of the cube, far below her was a yellow sea of crashing waves….There was no boat to make the crossing in. There were no steps, not even broken ones, up to her height. She had slowly shrunken to a doll size. She sat, swollen like Buddha; then dried, shrunken like a mummy. Her eyes looked, sadly, down from the cube top, across the yellow sea at him. (292)

The dream reveals that Nick and Emma are both trapped, imprisoned by their uninhabitable

environment (the color yellow filling in for the toxic setting). The color symbolism is noteworthy here, for historically, America associated yellow with decadence, excess, homosexuality, fin de siècle feminism, impurity and alterity (twentieth-century U.S. policies against Asians as the "yellow peril").[48] Remarkably, then, the color yellow, as it symbolizes warring factions and internal contradictions, reflects Motley's narrative ambivalences and contradictions about same-sex love and the rights of women: The color yellow stands for both queer pride and homophobic bigotry; it serves as both the color of early feminism and feminism as alien and suspect.

The broken "key" in Nick's hand seems to suggest that indeed, the key to overcoming this contradictory environment is the heterosexual love between Nick and Emma (the key as the phallic bridge); yet Nick's sexual aberrance (bisexuality) blunts that key, rendering it impotent. The imagery of Emma is at once a damsel in distress who is trapped atop a precipice and a Christ-like figure who rises above the sea beyond the matters of mortals or a "Buddha" on the path to Nirvana. Either way, Emma is simply too good for the world; no mortals can scale her "height," as there are aptly no "stairs." Yet she is also an abject figure, a "shrunken…mummy," and an inhuman object of play ("doll"). In short, the novel's extreme portrayals of Emma leave no room for her basic humanity.

Although Himes's prison novel explodes the myth of heterosexual normativity, the 1952 version, the only one Baldwin would have been privy to, ultimately fails under the staggering weight of its hetero-masculine valorization and chauvinism. Overwhelmingly homophobic and

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has an ironic effect of regenerating Nick's conscience, softening his heart that has been hardened heretofore by his turbulent and corrosive environment: Bowing his head in contrition and no longer "playing to the jury or the crowd now," he feels "ashamed of himself and his whole life" (453).

[48] Jürgen Wolter, " The Yellow Wall-Paper': The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses," *American Studies* 54.2 (2009), 200-2.

heterosexist, *Cast* forecloses any viable future or sustainable counter-narrative for women or queer men. Himes reinforces the then-predominant view of prison as an unnatural, exceptional space that can lead heterosexual men to resort to homosexuality out of desperation. The United States in midcentury ushered in a renewed urgency to tame prison sex for all its manifestations of human sexual fluidity and categorical instability.[49] One of the ways it attempted to diffuse the threat of prison sex was to introduce the notion of "circumstantial homosexuality" (referred variously as "pseudo" or "acquired") where individuals who were heterosexual would engage in homosexual conducts under unnatural and excruciating circumstances until such time as they were removed from the carceral setting (Kunzel 52, 97-8). Himes's novel gives credence to the heterosexual despair that would give rise to such circumstantial homosexuality.

Throughout the novel, Himes ensures that the reader understands that the majority of the inmates—most importantly, the protagonist Jimmy—are heterosexual men who desperately long for women. The inmates eagerly look forward to movie days, including the "blind" inmates who "sat down front" of the movie screen. "The only convict who stayed away from the pictures were dead convicts" (*Cast* 216-7). Jimmy shares that the best thing about the movies are "women's voices" (217). Even the virtual presence of women is morally edifying: "They made us softer, more human…Oh, they did a lot for us, morally, spiritually, emotionally. But they hurt us too. You have to leave all that beautiful make-believe and come back to the cells and dormitories…

[49] From its establishment in the nineteenth century, American prisons housed inmates who engaged in same-sex activities; while the foregoing century explained prison sex as a moral failing, the psycho-medical model of the twentieth century began to harness one's identity to one's sexual object choice, hence the solidification of the hetero-homo binary model of human sexual practices (Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy* 1-2, 31-2, 76). Unsettling this sexual binary in the midcentury included the shocking implication of the 1948 Kinsey study (which implied human sexuality not as a polar binary but a gradient spectrum) and the escalating paranoia of Cold War culture that deemed homosexuality as a national-security threat alongside communism. See Kunzel 92-3.; see also Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America.* Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993), 7-9. See also ibid., *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 10-12.

Worst of all you had to come back to yourself" (217). The passage foretells that without the moral and emotional guidance of women, these men are prone to violating the natural codes of conduct. Jimmy's suicidal depression that ensues movie days provides a ready alibi for his subsequent romantic coupling with Dido; one can conceive of—and subsequently write off—same-sex love and prison sex as a natural response to an unnatural circumstance and emotional duress.

In a tragi-comic vein, the novel relates how the inmates—many of them hardened convicts and tough, alpha males—will turn to naive or extreme measures to fulfill their longing to be patriarchal providers. Jimmy tells the story of a "colored boy called Fofo," who, after coming into unexpected pension windfall, promptly "sent to Alabama for his [estranged] wife… and had her set up housekeeping in the city. Then he got the ugliest, blackest fag in prison and set up housekeeping for himself inside" (209). Apparently, the moral of Foto's story is that as soon as he has a chance to be a man, a provider in the traditional sense, that is what he does; and even in the unnatural setting of the prison, he will try to replicate the gendered division of labor. Foto is predictably betrayed by his faithless wife, and even his kept "fag" ends up beating him in the head with a "hockey stick"; Jimmy humorously adds, "But [Foto] was a good-natured old boy and he didn't let it worry him a bit" (210). Foto does not mind the domestic betrayal and abuse; what matters to him is that he was able to reenact, even temporarily, the patriarchal role.

Himes's prison narrative replicates much of the sexist, gendered hierarchy in the world of midcentury America. By 1920s onward, the American prison system had amassed an intricate vocabulary of engendered codes for "sexual types" and their attendant "expectations about sexual acts and roles" (Kunzel 63).[50] The most stigmatized group in the carceral setting was

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[50] Sitting atop of this engendered hierarchy was the "wolf" or "jocker," the heterosexual male engaging in circumstantial homosexuality; below was the "punk" or "kid," typically a young and naïve heterosexual who were

associated with females and all things feminine.[51] In *Cast,* masculinity is equated with heterosexuality, and this "wolf" status is privileged and rarefied. "Everyone was either a wolf or a fag. The wolf is the so-called male of the species, a rare and almost obsolete animal. The fag is the female. And there were those who did not want to be associated with the fags, but were not actually wolves, who were loosely classified as wolverines, which was what most of the wolves were when it came to the test" (*Cast* 78). Himes ensures the reader understands that Jimmy is the rarefied and privileged wolf by having him relate how a male nurse attempts to seduce him during his stay at the prison infirmary. After labeling the nurse "neither a wolf nor a wolverine but just a pleasant bitch who had a crush on me," Jimmy promptly distances himself from the nurse's homoerotic overtures by condemning the hospital ward as "a rotten, lousy joint" for accepting "degeneracy as one does normal sex"; he claims that he "hadn't been in prison long enough to see it from that view…I felt polluted. I felt as if I had fallen into a cesspool" (78, 79).

To Jimmy's wolfish masculinity, Dido takes on the traditional feminine role: helpless, dependent, subservient, melodramatic and morally superior.[52] Without the masculine Jimmy Monroe, Dido cannot go on living in the tough prison environment: "I knew he needed me to

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"vulnerable to sexual coercion [by wolves] because of some combination of small physical stature, youth, boyish attractiveness, and lack of institutional savvy" (Kunzel 63-5). The wolves and the punks may engage in "pseudo-homosexuality," but were distinct from, and not to be conflated with, the stigmatized lot of constitutional gender inverts (or true homosexuals) who were called "variously as queers, fairies, and pansies" (59). For this latter group, the necessary prerequisite was their assumption of the "gender persona" and the "social and other cultural roles ascribed to women" (Chauncy, qtd in Kunzel 60).

[51] By the 1930s, the defining trait of the pathology of male homosexuality was effeminacy (Kunzel 78). These terms were not uniquely prison concepts but reflective (in a feedback loop) of the larger "urban working-class communities of the period" as well as the migrant working-class or hobo culture (62, 66). Even America's middle-class youth, such as the teenage Chester Himes (who hailed from suburban Cleveland), were well familiar with the prison gendered-argot (Kunzel 67).

[52] As the historian Eugenia Kaledin notes, "The desirable character traits of the normal—mentally fit—women in the midcentury were "submissive, dependent, emotional, and subjective" [*Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 184]. The institutional education of women emphasized cultivating "moral values" in women in the assumption that like their nineteenth-century counterparts, the midcentury women were primarily in charge of edifying social morality (Kaledin 52).

hold him up. I was like his heartbeat; without me he was dead" (310). On the eve of his impending release from prison, the thought of the helpless Dido worries Jimmy: "I felt very scared for him. I couldn't imagine him making it without me" (318). The novel makes clear that Dido is a what the sexologists of the earlier decade would have labeled a "constitutional invert," someone who is born in the wrong body or the "third sex," as Jimmy himself concludes, based on his reading of contemporary psychology: "Poor little kid, I thought, too bad he wasn't a woman. He had a woman's fascinating temperament, with a man's anatomy" (299). Perhaps befitting the stereotypical hysterical female of the midcentury, Dido comes with the pedigree of having "been in the asylum," and Jimmy finds him to be a "a little crazy….He was so unstable and theatrical that everything he did seemed posed" (299).

Like Nick's scorned wife Emma in *Knock* who must die to preserve Nick's heterosexual conscience, so must Dido, who has taken on the female role in the absence of women, die in order to obliterate the homosexual stain of Jimmy's past. The melodrama of Dido's death the morning of Jimmy's prison departure harkens back to Emma's sacrificial death and anticipates Baldwin's revisionist ending of *Giovanni's Room.* Jimmy himself understands that Dido dies for his sake: "I knew, beyond all doubt, that he had done it for me….to give me a perfect ending… Along with the terrible hurt I could not help but feel a great gladness and exaltation" (345). By sacrificing his life, Dido proves his moral valor by bolstering Jimmy's worthiness to the world. His sentimental act of taking his own life locates him in the tradition of the sentimental heroine extending back to Aeneas and Dido. Jimmy's complete resolution here (with his full acceptance and even boastful "exaltation" and "gladness" he feels at having a feminine being die for him) demands a critical interrogation. Why must Dido die? First, he dies so as to boost Jimmy's paternalistic ego and sense of possession, as Jimmy would be his last and "only" lover (345). The

second reason is perhaps more disturbing: As Charles explains, Dido dies, because he "functions as an abject vessel of homosexuality" who, like Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject corpse," must be "expelled from the narrative" so as to free Jimmy from his homoerotic past on his way to resume life in the heteronormative world (103). Most disturbingly, there is not a tinge of self-accountability or remorse Jimmy feels toward his lover's sacrificial death.

Also anticipating Baldwin's deployment of the trope of passing, Himes puns on passing, but in this novel, passing is rendered ineffectual and impotent. The night before his release to the work farm, Jimmy wrestles with his romantic ambivalence toward Dido: "It'll certainly be tough on him. He really loves me…But now I'm going on…*I hoped I had given him something in passing*" (344; my emphasis). Here, Jimmy uses passing to mean temporal transience or chance happenstance. For an avowed heterosexual who has engaged homo-erotically with Dido and others, Jimmy's willful omission to reflect on the elephant in the room—his own sexual passing—is glaring. The novel's final scene captures Jimmy walking out of the prison gates on his way to "freedom," and momentarily pausing to think "how Dido would never *pass* through those gates again in life. I could feel myself beginning to cry again inside" (346; emphasis added). Yet that moment is preciously fleeting—indeed, passing, as the next instant, at the sight of seeing the morning light, "I quit thinking about Dido" (346). Like his total lack of self-accountability or reflection concerning Dido's death, here Jimmy seems completely oblivious to the golden opportunity (offered by the wordplay "pass") to reflect on the redemptive potentials of same-sex love he has experienced with Dido in his own sexual passing. In good times, Jimmy has promised to keep Dido's request to visit Dido's mother post-prison release. The ending of the novel gives us no possibility of this prospect in its language of finality: All things Dido are dead and behind Jimmy. The ending of the novel manages to offer us some hints about his future

outside of the carceral state as the novel has Jimmy walking out into the world at sunrise toward the work farm. “Just before climbing into the truck I turned and looked back at the prison. You big tough son of a bitch, you tried to kill me but I’ve got you beat now,… Because the farm was the way to freedom” (346). The imagery and thematic here are reminiscent of African American captivity narratives; minus Jimmy’s scatological diction, the scene can easily parallel Douglass’s famous victory over Covey. Even as the novel thus gestures to broaden the prison theme to capture the systematic oppression of marginalized groups—in this case, African Americans—it ends on the cynical motto of every *man* for himself. Even as the final passage provides us glimpses of Jimmy’s fighting spirit and victory over the prison system, it forecloses any self-reflection or insight about his homoerotic desires or the lives of the marginalized he leaves behind.

Baldwin’s Revision of the Male Prison: Hella and the Woman Question

On the heels of Motley and Himes, Baldwin too explores the many iterations of imprisonment, and the prison metaphor would continue to haunt the writer for years to come.[53] *Giovanni’s Room* passionately calls out for our meditation on the various symbolisms and implications of captivity, beginning with Giovanni’s room as a prison and his last hour in a literal prison cell; David imagining himself as Giovanni living out his last moments in prison; from the arrested mind that entraps the body (recall David’s feeling trapped in his “dirty body”) to the big rented house in the south of France as yet another captive space. Unlike Himes who invokes the thematics of African American captivity only to reserve freedom for one

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[53] “Prisons and prisoners were a significant part of Baldwin’s personal experience. They also served him as a dominant metaphor” in many of his fiction, and Baldwin also wrote essays advocating for prisoners and prison reform (Leeming 323, 359).

hypermasculine male, Baldwin, as Corber argues, harnessed his double minority status as Black gay man to advocate for a coalitional "community" and "political solidarity" to fight against the interlinked oppressions of "racism, homophobia, and sexism" (*Homosexuality in Cold War America* 5). Against the grain of the standard reading of *Giovanni's Room* that elides the study of the female characters, I propose a reading that captures Baldwin's *quare* male feminist perspective that recognizes the role of women within the economy of that prison theme. Baldwin reveals that the male prison is actually co-ed—men and women are captive neighbors under the thrall of the heteropatriarchal paradigm. Whether in league with or against one another, women and men are inextricably conjoined. To extricate ourselves from the binds of racism, sexism and homophobia, Baldwin implies, we must commit to both sexes and to Blacks and Whites. To that end, I attend to the peripheralized female voices in the novel, particularly Hella's (as she is a fascinating character in her own right with her many paradoxes and inconsistencies and also because she is a critical line segment that completes the novel's love triangle), as well as other female or queer characters who are rarely discussed, if ever, such as David's deceased mother, Aunt Ellen, and the transgender figure at Guillaume's bar.

To confront the intersection of the woman question ("the problem that has no name") with the queer question ("love that dare not speak its name")[54] head-on, we must enter the confounding space of Giovanni's room, the novel's signature prison metaphor. When we unpack the symbolism of Giovanni's room, we discover that it is more than a queer prison—it is a gendered and sexualized prison that that houses captive females in tandem with queer males.

[54] "The problem that has no name" is the phrase Betty Friedan uses (and also one of her chapter title) to encapsulate "feminine mystique," the postwar decade's cultural indoctrination of women to equate real femininity with domestic subservience and complacency (*The Feminine Mystique* [New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1984],). "Love that dare not speak its name" is a long-standing code term to characterize homosexual/queer love, made especially famous by Oscar Wilde's sensational trial involving his romantic relationship with Lord Douglas, the latter who penned that line in a verse (Kunzel 47-8).

From the start, we know the room is a converted "maid's quarter," a squalid place for working women on the lowest social rung.[55] It is fittingly "near a zoo" (*Giovanni's Room* 191), the proximity making Giovanni's room seem like a "cage" (191) and its inhabitant a wild animal that must be contained and cast as an exotic and dangerous spectacle. As various critics have observed, Giovanni being ensconced in this room is thus symbolic of homophobic oppression, but there may be broader implications. The novel's situating Giovanni in a maid's quarter near a zoo highlights the interlocked implications of class, race, gender and sexuality.

Giovanni's room is riddled with contradictions. It is at once a threatening, decrepit, and stifling space he wishes to break out of, yet also a space that he takes refuge in and attempts to make livable. Giovanni tries to rehabilitate the room, but he ironically contributes to its continued oppressiveness and disrepair: To ensure "privacy," Giovanni "kept the windows closed most of the time; he had never bought curtains"; rather, "he had obscured the window panes with a heavy, white cleaning polish" (124). Hence Giovanni's remedy for privacy comes at the cost of deflecting any outside light to enter his life. Giovanni's painstaking efforts to beautify the room and make it livable has paradoxical qualities. As he tells David, "All day…I worked, to make this room for you" (200). Yet the room is a menacing space Giovanni must "push back" to thwart being crushed by the "encroaching walls," and he longs for David "to destroy this room" and rescue him (167, 127). These conflicting qualities speak in part to Giovanni's contradictory position as both the oppressor and the oppressed, contributing to his own homophobic oppression by aiding and abetting misogyny.[56] I want to illustrate by analyzing the wallpaper of his room,

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[55] James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: The Dial Press, 1956), 191.

[56] "Gay male conundrum" is the term Brim has coined to capture the paradox of queer men who, even as they are marginalized by heteropatriarchy, in turn marginalize women through sexism (*James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* 167, 172-3).

which the novel overloads with pregnant symbolism:

> One of the walls was a dirty, streaked white where he had torn off the wall-paper. The wall facing it was destined never to be uncovered and on this wall a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses. The wall paper lay on the floor, in great sheets and scrolls, in dust. On the floor also, lay our dirty laundry, along with Giovanni's tools and the paint brushes and the bottles of oil and turpentine. Our suitcases teetered on top of something so that we dreaded ever having to open them and sometimes went without some minor necessity, such as clean socks, for days. (124)

The significance of the quaint wallpaper depicting a man and woman walking through a Victorian garden is two-fold. First, there is no place for same-sex love within this homophobic world. Second, whether Giovanni accepts it or not, his fate and struggle as queer man is tied in with women's struggle for equality and justice. The juxtaposition of Giovanni's cluttered belongings—his tools, his dirty laundry, his luggage—with the depiction of the old-fashioned man and woman is no coincidence. As we will see shortly, for Giovanni to clean house, he needs to sort out the compulsory gender roles of both men *and* women.

Indeed, the archaic wall paper and the imagery of Giovanni tearing parts of it is reminiscent of Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper," a reminder that the novel injects itself into the feminist discourse about women's entrapment in the male-dominated world and the former's struggle to break out of that oppression.[57] If Giovanni is caged in a maid's room, Gilman's

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[57] The most likely edition of the "Yellow Wallpaper" that would have been available to Baldwin would have been William Dean Howells's edited volume, *The Great Modern American Stories: An Anthology* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920).

female narrator is locked up in a nursery; and if Giovanni's wallpaper houses the quaint Victorian couple, Gilman's narrator's wallpaper reveals a woman—or women—behind "bars," "shak[ing] to break free" (Gilman, "Yellow" 329, 330, 333). Giovanni, as a queer man, is entrapped in the heteropatriarchal world just as Gilman's female protagonist; yet Giovanni is also implicated in perpetuating that entrapment: We see him trying to beautify the room somehow by leaving that part of the old-fashioned wall intact, which ironically destroys him. As David describes, Giovanni's room is "frightening" not because of its chaos and disarray, but because there is something retributive and penal about it: "it was a matter of punishment and grief" (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 126). The punishment, the passage seems to imply, is two-fold: self-punishment and punishment of women by default of bystander apathy. Giovanni leaves intact the wallpaper "with its distant, archaic lovers trapped in an interminable rose garden" (127). Completing this picture of forced rosiness is the artificial "*yellow light* which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex in its center" (127; my italics). Gilman's story also showcases an "old-fashioned" rose garden, but in place of the heterosexual couple engaged in a socially appropriate stroll, Gilman's garden has the narrator walking, sitting, and lying on the grounds alone (without being escorted by her doctor spouse who deems her unwell); later in the story, the garden path accommodates the symbolic woman behind the wallpaper who surreptitiously manages to "creep[…] all around the garden" (Gilman, "Yellow" 326, 333). Both stories suggest an element of surveillance that uses terror to enforce gender and sexual conformity: In Gilman's story, the narrator deciphers a "recurrent spot where the [wall]paper pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down…unblinking eyes are everywhere" (324). In Baldwin's novel, David observes that the quaint wallpaper is policed by "staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire, and the ceiling which lowered like the clouds out of

which fiends have sometimes spoken" (*Giovanni's* 127).

The casting of the color yellow on Giovanni's wallpaper is not only the novel's allusion to Gilman's short story, but also a reminder of the remarkable carceral dream scene in Motley's *Knock* where, as we recall, Nick and Emma are enshrouded in a yellow room with Emma placed on an impossible height, which is at once a pedestal of worship and a precipice of doom. Here the parallel suggests that unlike Motley who redeems Nick by killing off Emma as a sacrificial victim, Baldwin leaves no opening for Giovanni (or David, for that matter) to redeem his queer sexuality at the cost of women. The room, in short, is partially of Giovanni's own doing; Giovanni is both the prisoner and the prison-guard. So long as he turns a blind eye on female entrapment, he ensures his own demise.

Recognition of the Struggles of the Marginalized Neighbor as One's Own: Interjoined Fate of Race, Sex, and Gender

Baldwin's novel invokes neighbor-love across the boundaries of identity categories by inflecting nonheteronormative struggle as intertwined with struggles of women and people of color. In his reading of Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country,* William J. Spurlin argues that "Baldwin questions models of political solidarity and resistance based on one's membership in a particular community…and looked at the ways in which a variety of oppressions intersected with one another."[58] In *Giovanni's Room*, we can already see Baldwin's recognition of the intersectional struggles of people on the margin. The symbolic way Baldwin underscores this is in his superimposition of the images of the female genitalia onto queer or racialized male characters, thus triangulating and implicating misogynistic panic with homophobic and racist

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[58] William J Spurlin, "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality," *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York University Press, New York & London: New York University Press, 1999), 110.

panic. For example, during his first same-sex experience with his boyhood friend Joey, David's initial response is one of overwhelming "tenderness"; thankful that "we gave each other joy that night," David does not hesitate to call his sexual encounter with Joey "the act of love" (*Giovanni'*11). David's reminiscence suggests that this feeling of love does not stem from momentary lust but from something more lasting and genuine: Even in retrospect, his coupling with Joey stirs in him all the intensity of that affection: "To remember it so clearly, so painfully tonight tells me that I have never for an instance truly forgotten it" (11). Yet during the lull of that initial ecstasy, David begins to dissect Joey's "brown" and "sweaty" material body (11), hinting that Joey may be colored. The possible racial difference then creates a paradigm shift, where Joey somehow becomes a source of fear and shame, making David feel "monstrous" (12). It is Joey's skin color that causes the homophobic wheels to turn, and David finds himself aghast that he could engage sexually with his friend: *"But Joey is a boy.*" Rather than equal partners in love, David begins to perceive their relationship in terms of lopsided gender-power dynamics: "I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists" (12). Joey's body, racialized and materialized into disaggregated parts ("thighs," "arms," "fists"), now takes on the suspect quality of a woman's body, with its propensity to entrap the male penis (and more):

> That body suddenly seemed *the black opening of a cavern* in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would *lose my manhood.…I was ashamed*. The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness…*Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me*, *my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black full of rumor, suggestion, of half-hearted, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words.* I thought I

saw my future in that cavern. (12; emphasis added)

The reference here to his parents is no coincidence. The racialized Joey is linked not to his father but syntactically and imagistically to his deceased mother, in that both the mother's and Joey's bodies are threatening "black cavern," instilling shame and terror in David. Spurlin observes "how homophobia and misogyny intertwine in culture, though one is not reducible to the other" ("Culture" 107); and the interlinkage of sexism and homophobia are what Baldwin captures here. Not surprisingly, shortly after the Joey sex scene, David introduces his family tree and commences to talk about his mother this way: "My mother had been carried to the graveyard when I was five. I scarcely remember her at all, *yet she figured in my nightmares*, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, *straining to press me against her body*; *that body so putrescent*, so sickening soft, *that it opened*, as I clawed and cried, *into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive*" (*Giovanni's* 15; italics added). Like David's description of Joey, David paints here the image of the mother as a cavernous and carnivorous body that threatens his manhood. In keeping with the terrifying image of the mother as the threatening, putrid corpse, the memory of his love affair with Joey also gets buried within him "as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse" (23).

David's multi-pronged anxiety toward homosexuality, women, people of color, and the resultant dehumanization of the erstwhile beloved is not indicative of his idiosyncratic failing—it is an indictment of the larger heteropatriarchal culture that induces trauma and the evacuation of love. Baldwin's novel establishes that from his early childhood, David is systematically trained in a culture of oppression, one that is simultaneously masculinist, homophobic and racist. From the outset, David's upbringing reveals a narrative world haunted by power struggle between the sexes. Raised by his father and his paternal aunt who are locked in a struggle for dominance,

David has known that somehow the source of their "battle had everything to do with my dead mother" (15). Indeed, the mother plays a paradoxical role: She may be dead, but she is omnipresent, a force that refuses to be ignored. Accordingly, in David's childhood home, the "mother's photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all" (15). The domestic gender-power struggle is played out between David's father and the father's sister (Ellen), with the father attempting to silence his wife's memory and Ellen attempting to give her deceased sister-in-law a voice: "My father rarely spoke of [his wife] and when he did he covered, by some mysterious means, his face; he spoke of her only as my mother and, in fact, as he spoke of her, he might have been speaking of his own. Ellen spoke of my mother often, saying what a remarkable woman she had been" (17-8). The father's discomfiture on the topic of his deceased wife hints at some level of guilt and wrongdoing. Further, his refusal to grant her any identity other than that of a "mother" (and his vague collapsing of his own mother with his deceased wife) is suggestive of his attempts to tame the threat of her agency (which even death cannot terminate) through maternal domestication. In contrast, Ellen keeps her sister-in-law's memory alive and counterbalances her brother's reductive maternal label by acknowledging her as a "woman."[59]

On the surface, the child David's feelings of malaise and fear toward his mother and her proxy Aunt Ellen, combined with his identification at various times with his father seem to

[59] Ellen here echoes Aunt Florence in *Go Tell it On the Mountain* who tries to protect her sister-in-law against the chauvinistic wrath of her brother. In *Breaking the Silence*, Ikard argues that Baldwin portrays Florence as a black feminist "who openly defies male authority and rejects self-sacrifice"; Baldwin traces the difficult path Florence must navigate when the black church (her primary source of community support) is largely male-centered. To reject the sexism of the black church would "alienate her culturally and require that she suffer her life-threatening cancer (read: patriarchal resistance) alone. Baldwin's rendering of Florence demonstrates the dangers of political and cultural isolation. Even though she is equipped with important knowledge about patriarchy, Florence still needs a community from which to draw strength and support" (24-5).

support the then widely-accepted reading of Freudian psychoanalysis on the etiological implication of motherhood and homosexual aberrance.[60] Yet closer study of David's upbringing debunks the overbearing mother and the ensuing homosexual-son myth; it is the father (or more broadly, the patriarchal social order) that has created the myth of the stultifying mother for its own hegemonic agenda. First, David's mother has been long dead (since he was five), and thanks in part to her husband's silencing of her memory, we hardly know anything about her or her past interactions with her son. We do know, however, sufficient details about Ellen, who is disapproved by her brother. When Ellen dies, David's father tellingly conflates Ellen with his wife, suggesting that Ellen and David's mother share similar qualities: "Years later, when I had become a man, I tried to get my father to talk about my mother…He spoke of my mother, then, as [if he were] speaking of Ellen" (19). The two women are, at least in the mind of the father, cut from the same fabric. Hence by analyzing Ellen's character, we can infer what kind of woman David's mother was and the traits of her character that would have thus incurred her husband's wrath and erasure.

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[60] May G. Henderson thinks that Baldwin "was aware of, and to some extent drew on, the notion of homosexuality that links it with unresolved Oedipal desire, as theorized by Freud in 1910 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*" and subscribed to the "then popularized contemporary notions linking homosexuality to maternal fear and fixation" ("James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" 306). The midcentury era's mother-blame continued with the publication of Irving Bieber and his teams' developmental psychoanalytical text *Homosexuality* that links it with unresolved Oedipal desire, as theorized by Freud in 1910 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*" and subscribed to the "then popularized contemporary notions linking homosexuality to maternal fear and fixation" ("James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" 306). The midcentury era's mother-blame continued with the publication of Irving Bieber and his teams' developmental psychoanalytical text *Homosexuality* (1962) which attributed homosexuality to " 'close-binding mothers' who demasculinized their son and thwarted the development of their heterosexual drives, and detached, hostile fathers" (qtd. in Spurlin "Culture, Rhetoric and Queer Identity" 108). As Betty Friedan relates, by the 1950s, Freudian pop psychology was ubiquitous, and "Oedipal conflict and sibling rivalry became household words" (*Feminine Mystique* 189). What emerged from this culture of parlor psychologizing was the mother-blame game: "It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything. In every case history of troubled child; alcoholic, suicidal, schizophrenic, psychopathic, neurotic adult; impotent, homosexual male; frigid, promiscuous female; ulcerous, asthmatic, and otherwise disturbed American, could be found a mother" (189).

What comes to the foreground is that Ellen is a complex woman who resists conventional feminine labels. Apparently well-read and educated, she is older and unmarried, living with her brother and helping raise his son. While her constant knitting and her single status makes her seem like a sexually-repressed spinster (in the Victorian hysterical sense), she is hard to pin down in her over-the-top, dramatic presentation that calls to mind a drag queen: She is "over-dress[ed], over-made up…with too much jewelry everywhere, clanging and banging in the light"; and on par with her theatricality, she frequents "the movies a great deal" (16). Contrary to the expectation of her station to be the prudish-spinster type, she, not to be outdone by her brother's "strutting like a cock before" the female guests, "flirted with the men in a strange, nerve-wracking kind of way" (17). In all this, her primary role is to police her brother: "Ellen always seemed to be watching him as though she were afraid he would do something awful, watched him and watched the women….There she was, dressed, as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood,…the cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards" (17-8). This is a picture of a predatory and powerful woman whose sexuality is not docile and inviting but threatening to men. She will turn the tables on the objectification of the male gaze and "watch" them instead, with "blood" on her lips and killing on her mind. That Ellen is always in the "wrong color" (18) is also suspect; elsewhere, David comments on her complexion as "a little darker" than her brother's (16). Her threatening and unconventional womanhood (she is no fair lady) associates her with the racially marginalized. In short, if the mother is anything like Ellen, she is a transgressive woman who harbors unconventional attitude toward gender roles which her husband would have found frightful.

Queer Complicity in Sexism and Interrelated Homophobia: A Critical Re-appraisal of Giovanni

One of the key differences between *Giovanni's Room* and the novels by Himes and Motley is that Baldwin does not countenance the uncritical romanticization or victimization of women or queer men. Unlike Himes's Dido and Motley's Emma who become sacrificial victims of the heteropatriarchal world, there are no easy victims and no romantic sacrifices in Baldwin's novel. The author shows how heteropatriarchy is able to maintain its status quo not only through its own cultural coercion but by the assistance of the very groups it marginalizes—specifically the queer male community and women themselves.

Giovanni's misogynistic attitude toward Hella demands a closer scrutiny.[61] He repeatedly calls her a "little girl" and thereby attempts to diminish her credibility, intellect, and autonomy. Condescendingly, he questions her mobility and decision-making skills by ridiculing her solo trip down to Spain to contemplate David's marriage proposal: "[T]hat silly little girl of yours, wandering all over Spain….What does she think she is doing?" (117). Giovanni adds gratuitous descriptions of her as a stereotypical, domestic female with characteristically enfeebled brain: "But you [think you] can have a life with Hella. With that moon-faced little girl who think babies come out of cabbages—or frigidaires" (208). Here again we see Giovanni's sexism in high relief: He judges Hella for her poor looks ("moon-faced"), trivializes her as juvenile ("little girl"), and diminishes her intellect by mocking her ignorance of human reproduction. He subscribes to the sexist stereotype of the consumeristic woman in the kitchen (cabbages and frigidaires) that Betty

[61] Since the novel's ascendency in the queer literary canon, the critical tendency has been to read the novel's namesake in an unquestioningly heroic light. Whether characterized as a Christlike figure, gay/queer hero, or the embodiment of coded racial minority, Giovanni has monopolized much of our critical empathy, and the danger of this is that it is done at the cost of withholding empathy from other characters. See Henderson "James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room,*" 313; Chancy "Brother/Outsider," 182; Armengol *Masculinities in Black and White,* 111; Brim *James* Baldwin, 61.

Friedan has exposed in *The Feminine Mystique*.[62]

Giovanni's antipathy toward Hella stems only partially from his romantic rivalry with the fiancée of his love interest; for his denigration of Hella encapsulates his larger devaluation and objectification of women. In response to David's comment that Giovanni doesn't "seem to have a very high opinion of women," the latter scoffs: "Oh women! There is no need, thank heaven, to have an opinion about *women*.…I perhaps don't like women very much, that's true" (*Giovanni's* 116). Even as he avows unconvincingly that he "respect[s] women—very much" (117), he immediately contradicts himself by mocking "these absurd women running around today, full of ideas and nonsense, and thinking themselves equal to men—*quelle rigolade!*" (117). The remedy for these uppity women, Giovanni quips, is for them "to be beaten half to death so that they can find out who rules the world'" (117). In answer to David's question if these women "like to get beaten," Giovanni boasts, "I don't know if they liked it. But a beating never made them go away" (117). His advocacy of woman-beating and misogynist rhetoric may be chalked up to some level of facetious bravado or what Eve Sedgwick calls "homosociality"—levels of bonding between men that "traffic in women" and "use" them as alibi or pretext to forge that male rapport.[63] Yet it is undoubtedly disturbing that Giovanni uses woman-beating to elicit casual laughter and that he cavalierly demeans them as masochistic inferiors who come abegging to be abused.

In the case of Giovanni's chauvinism, we can see how misogyny can easily become a strange bedfellow to self-abnegating homophobia. Given his contempt of the female, it is not a

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[62] See Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 17-19.

[63] Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 25-6.

big leap for Giovanni then to despise those qualities that are traditionally ascribed to the female, including effeminacy in queer men.[64] The scene that ensues Giovanni's termination from Guillame's employment captures one such moment filled with sad irony. Just as David suddenly finds Giovanni contemptible for being vulnerable and not "strong" (read: masculine) for collapsing into his arms and sobbing after being fired by Guillaume (154), Giovanni finds Guillaume contemptible for the latter's vulnerability: He tells David how "disgusting" Guillaume is and how he finds his former boss's cross dressing and effeminacy loathsome and enraging. "I do not know why, but the moment I saw him like that, I began to be angry. He looked at me as though he were some fabulous coquette—and he is ugly, ugly, he has a body just like sour milk!" (155-6). To be sure, the novel makes clear that Guillaume lacks many redeeming qualities—he is manipulative, deceptive, mendacious, and there is evidence to suggest that he uses queer sexuality not in the service of *Eros* but rather to exert dominance and control.[65] Yet it seems Giovanni's issue with Guillaume here has mainly to do with his transvestite theatricality and its metonymical connection to the female and the feminine (recall Giovanni's association of the bar owner and the lactating female—"sour milk"; also his later focus on Guillaume's feminine robes and his strangling of Guillaume with the "sash" of that robe].[66] Giovanni's homophobic pejorative of Guillaume as "a disgusting old fairy" (156) reveals the younger man's antipathy toward the feminine, for the pejorative "fairy" in the midcentury denotes a pathological homosexual who takes on the demeaning gender traits of the female (Kunzel 59-60). Subsequently,

[64] Sedgwick aptly observes that "homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so," for it is not only "oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but…it is oppressive of women" (*Between Men* 20).

[65] In her seminal feminist *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), Susan Brownmiller has read rape as primarily driven by desire for power and control (not sexual lust).

[66] For alternating pro/anti transgender reading of *Giovanni's Room*, see Matt Brim, 77-86.

Giovanni levels the same sexist, homophobic expletive against other queer men, including his lover David. Speaking of his own still-born son, Giovanni speculates that it would have grown up to be "a wonderful, strong man, perhaps even the kind of man *you* and Jacques and Guillaume and all your disgusting band of fairies" seek and fantasize (205).

Giovanni's bigotry toward queer effeminacy is problematic, not only because it is a kind of self-hate, but because it robs the queer male community of one of its subversive tools to survive the hetero-centric environment. As Corber illustrates, the effeminate gay male was not just the target of Cold-War homophobia and bigotry. "It is important to note that the stereotype of the feminine gay man was not simply externally imposed by a hostile society but that gay men strategically (re)appropriated the stereotype to make themselves visible to one another and to the dominant culture" (*Homosexuality* 65). Or in the words of another critic, "So while it may be true that gender inversion operated as a dominant cultural trope with which to mark gay men, it is not reducible to its homophobic usage by the dominant culture" (Spurlin 109). In other words, the men at Gillaume's bar—the much-maligned "*les folles*" who make threatrical ado's of their queerness—may be co-opting the gay stereotype for their own use in finding courtship and love. For Giovanni to ridicule Gillaume's effeminacy so patently is to deny one of the only subversive means for the gay community to communicate, communalize, and perhaps even protest the larger homophobic culture.

Hetero-Sexist Compulsory Passing and Baldwin's Re-Appropriation of Passing to Generate Empathy

In both Motley's and Himes's novels, we have seen how sexism and homophobia are enmeshed. Emma's life is worthy solely insofar as she sacrifices it to redeem Nick's hetero-sexual manhood. Similarly, in *Cast*, in lieu of a "real" woman, the feminine Dido must die to

absolve Jimmy of the homosexual stain. In Baldwin's novel, Giovanni is hardly alone in his misogyny and interrelated homophobia. Hella emerges as excellent helpmeet in the vicious cycle of heterosexist complicity. While the critical tendency has been to focus on David's sexual passing, I want to foreground what appears to be compulsory gender passing in Hella's case. In contradistinction to Motley and Himes who remain reticent on the matter, Baldwin implies that one of the tools used by heteropatriarchy to maintain its hegemony is to exert coercive pressure for individuals to pass as traditional male or female, failing which can generate deep anxiety, self-doubt, and even self-loathing.

Early on in the narrative, we sense that Hella's dependence on marriage to define her *raison d'être* is an act, a passing, for her lone travel to Spain (to sort out David's proposal) suggests she has the impulses of an independent woman. Yet upon her return when she senses David seeming to backpaddle, she tries to reassure him by defining herself as wife and mother: "I'm not really the emancipated girl I try to be at all. I guess I just want a man to come home to me every night…I want to start having babies" as "it's really all I'm good for" (180). Hella's rhetoric of feminine domesticity is soon betrayed by her feminist recalcitrance and lays bare her ambivalence about having to pass as a dependent lesser sex. In a biting rejoinder to David's incredulity that it would not be "so hard being a woman" as long as "she's got a man," Hella retorts, "Hasn't it ever struck you that that's a sort of humiliating necessity?...to be at the mercy of some gross, unshaven stranger before you can begin to be yourself[?]" (182).

It is this sense of compulsory subservience that pressures her to accept David's proposal: "I began to realize it in Spain—that I wasn't free, that I couldn't be free until I was attached—no, *committed*—to someone (185). In this novel with its salient prison motif, we must underscore the definition of commitment in the sense of institutional incarceration or lock-up. In her avowal of

domesticity, Hella unveils that she is passing as such: "'Oh, I'll be doing other *things*,…I won't stop being intelligent. I'll read and argue and *think* and all that—and I'll make a great point of not thinking *your* thoughts—and you'll be pleased because I'm sure the resulting confusion will cause you to see that I've only got a finite woman's mind, after all" (185). In other words, she will be just intelligent enough to be nonthreatening to her husband's sense of manhood yet dim-witted enough to be loveable. Yet in announcing her duplicitous scheme, Hella ironically demonstrates her wit. In the next comment, she unravels the promises of subservience: Laughing at David, she condescendingly adds, "Don't bother your head about it, sweetheart. Leave it to me" (185). This rather manly comment undermines her putative position as the lesser sex.

Her ironic self-awareness of her gender passing notwithstanding, Hella, like Motley's Emma, is nonetheless vulnerable to the heterosexist equation of female normalcy to heterosexual domesticity. Hella panics as she senses David's distancing of himself and pleads, "I don't care what you do to me. I don't care what it costs. I'll wear my hair long,…give up cigarettes,…throw away the books,…Just let me be a woman,…It's *all* I want" (237). As in Emma's case, Hella's desperation to pass as a conventional woman is understandable given the historical context where the gendered "double standards of mental health" meant that women faced the impossible choices of presenting themselves as intelligent and independent and "thus be 'deviant in terms of being a woman,' or 'to behave in the prescribed feminine manner, accept second-class adult status, and possibly live a lie to boot' " (Kaledin 184; Broverman et al. qtd. in Kaledin 185).

Like Giovanni whose sexism conspires with self-injurious homophobia, Hella's struggle and ironic collusion with the system that works against her means that in her desperate ideation of heterosexual domesticity, she implicates herself in perpetuating homophobia. For instance, her antipathy toward Jacques results from his being openly queer. "I really can't stand that man. He

gives me the creeps" (191). But beyond Jacques' "outrageously and offensively effeminate" salutation (187), there doesn't seem to be any other tangible reason for her aversion.[67]

The Ethical Injunction of Neighbor-love and the Test of Passing

Baldwin puts the difficult injunction of neighbor-love to the test by transposing the trope of passing as a moral litmus test. In place of Jesus who comes passing as the abject neighbor, Baldwin uses the transgender figure at Guillaume's bar as a kind of profane prophet who threatens with ethical blackmail to activate neighbor-love; in the process, the author lays bare the dual vectors of homophobia and misogyny. The fateful night David meets Giovanni at the bar, the apparition of the transgender seemingly appears out of nowhere. In David's words:

> It looked like a mummy or a zombie…of something walking after it had been put to death… It seemed to make no sound; this was due to the roar of the bar, which was like a roaring of the sea… It glittered in the dim light; the thick, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick…it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume. The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix; the shirt was covered with round, paper thin wafers…He had been eating garlic and his teeth were very bad. (59)

The passage overloads the transgender figure with exaggerated grotesqueness and abjection *par excellence,* and it is not terribly shocking that David would be repelled. Visually discordant in

[67] Her scapegoating of Jacques is ironic, of course; little does she know that it is actually Jacques who has been pressing David to be ethical with her by being forthright about his attraction toward Giovanni. "Are you going to write to Hella about this night and this morning?" To David's defensive position that this is not his problem, Jacque gives him a look of "despair" and reminds him that David's deceit will hurt Hella, Giovanni, and David himself: "It's not…what it is to *me*. It's what it is to *you*. And to her. And to that poor boy, yonder" (80).

clashing accessories, stinking of contradictory odor (garlic and gardenia—the homosexual symbol in Hollywood), and indeterminate of gender and sexuality, the transgender figure bombards us with sensory overload, throwing our bearing off-kilter. They present themselves as a test case of what the empathy studies practitioner Eric Leake has termed "difficult empathy," where the reader is confronted with the question of whether to empathize with people who are different from us or who are seemingly unlikeable or repulsive.[68] Yet the power in this difficult empathy has various implications: Whereas easy empathy demands no ethical exertion (as it is fueled by our desire to identify with likeable characters) and can easily devolve into objectifying pity and self-affirmation as we "attempt to remake the other in our own image," difficult empathy reminds us that empathy is always a stretch, a "reaching out," an approximation of the other's perspective, which prevents "totalizing" collapse of differences and helps us recognize the "disturbing qualities that we share with others, qualities that are common to humanity and do not represent the best of us" (177, 178). Even if we were to withhold our empathy, difficult empathy forces us to confront our own biases, our own foregone judgements as to what constitutes empathy and who warrants it. Baldwin's text here defamiliarizes empathy so that we can attain it anew.

Baldwin imbues this transgender figure with theological valences, underscoring the symbolic case study of the test of passing and neighbor-love. Wearing a prominent crucifix and a shirt adorned with "wafers" (which call to mind the Christian Eucharist), the transgender serves as a kind of profane prophet who correctly foretells David's future guilt and suffering. They ask David to buy them a drink, which he refuses. "His face crumpled in the sorrow of infants and of

[68] Eric Leake, "Humanizing the Inhumane: The Value of Difficult Empathy," *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*: 175-185.

very old men—the sorrow, also, of certain, aging, fragile, child-like beauty. The dark eyes narrowed in spite and fury and the scarlet mouth turned down like the mask of tragedy…'You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told you so'" (60). Given the veracity of the transgender's prophesy and the tragic beauty of this figure, we are witnessing, as Charles aptly observes, the encounter between David and the apparition of his future self (126). I venture further that the transgender—with their oxymoronic post-life excitations, sensory surplus, and their faces of all ages—materializes, in the Lacanian-psychoanalytical sense, David's own alien unconscious that instantiates a demand for love of the self *and* the stranger/neighbor for our mutual excess or "too muchness," as Santner may describe.[69] For Santner, the portal to neighbor-love is not through totalizing familiarity with the Other, but through the instantiation of our interdependent defamiliarization—or what he characterizes as "undeadening…vitality"—of our respective unconscious. That is, neighbor-love is possible because of the alien unconscious of the Other, which, like the transgender, catches us off guard to confront us with our own unwieldy unconscious that, again like the transgender's apparition, reeks of oxymoronic "*undeadening*" "surplus vitality," "too-much" of disturbing level of inscrutability (*Psychotheology* 31, 36). When we turn to this stranger and "acknowledge" her/his singularly alien unconscious that speaks to our own strangeness within, we move away from facile universalism or "global consciousness" where love is purported because everybody is known and their identities predetermined, to a more ethical place of "universal-in-becoming" where we love the singular being who paradoxically renders us strangers to ourselves and who, like our own unconscious, is saddled with "uncanny, excessive 'life' that comes to human beings by virtue of its thrownness

[69] Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenweig* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

amidst enigmatic messages" (23, 7, 37).

The transgender figure's feminine qualities auger the infinite possibilities of love that can connect discrete people and groups as neighbors beyond any prescribed socio-political borders or identity categories. In describing the transgender, David chooses the neuter pronoun "it" which is meant to be denigrating, but it visually captures the gender, sexual and even racial indeterminacy of this figure (*Giovanni's* 58).[70] The only other "undead" figure is David's mother, who as we recall, torments David even from the dead. The transgender's description is also eerily similar to the portraiture of the mother's proxy, Ellen, whom the child David has found "threatening" with her rouged lips and "a cocktail glass" she is about to "reduce…to shards" (17). The significance of the female association with the transgender is that, based on Reinhard's reading inspired by the philosopher Alain Badiou, the female subject position is what ties humanity's connection to love; it is through the feminine logic of "not-all," that we can mathematically arrive at an "*infinite* set of possibilities of social inclusion and association distinct from the [masculine] principles of representation, equality, and totality" ("Toward a Political Theology" 62). It is the female (proto-) subjectivity that can supplement the reductive relationality of "the political to the love of the neighbor" (Reinhard 63). Unlike its male counterpart, female positionality, given its "generic" composition, allows for coalitions and community ties ("*neighborhoods"*) that are politically inclusive without "being determined by citizenship, nationality, or any other legal or autochthonous status" (63). Indeed, the transgender scene of Baldwin's novel is much more inclusive than love exclusively for the feminine or the woman; the image of the roaring sea in the transgender scene also invokes Giovanni, as at one point the

[70] In the screenplay version of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin specified that a Black actor play the transgender figure, which would be the "only speaking black part" of the cast (Campbell 254).

novel describes Giovanni's room as a place where David "underwent a sea-change" (123). Hence the transgender symbolizes the intertwined struggles of individuals with non-conforming gender, sexuality, and race and the possibilities of neighbor-love to bind them as a political set.

The transgender is evocative of Biblical narratives where angels of God or prophets come passing as strangers demanding neighbor-love (usually seeking sustenance such as a drink or food).[71] Here, the transgender prophet asks for a drink even as they have a glass in hand (the redundancy which announces that this is a test); David refuses, thereby failing the test of neighbor-love. As Jesus promises to pass as the "least of these" to test our neighbor-love, in the figure of the transgender, we see the fulfillment of the threat (and the threatening magnitude) of neighbor-love and the failure to empathize.

Love for the Queer Neighbor, Love for the Female Neighbor

Where Himes's *Cast* and Motley's *Knock* fall short, Baldwin's novel achieves a redemptive vision of catholic love for the queer male *and* female neighbors. The author ransoms Giovanni from the heterosexual male prison and refuses to allow him to die a victim or a martyr of heteropatriarchy; nor does the novel allow Hella from becoming David's sacrificial alibi *a la* Motley's Emma. Even as their literal fate is inauspicious—Giovanni dies, Hella departs love-shorn, and David faces solitariness—the novel dignifies their complex humanity, their respective agency and joins them through empathic invocation.

We can trace Baldwin's love for the queer neighbor in the context of the progress David

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[71] The Judeo-Christian Bible abounds with such narratives, including Abraham and Sarah's charity toward angels of God who appear as sojourners (Genesis 18:1-15); Prophet Elijah testing the impoverished Widow at Zarephath **(**1 Kings 17:7-16)**;** and New Testament scriptures that circle back to the testing of neighbor-love in passing: "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (NKJV, Hebrews 13:1-2); **"**For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (NKJV, Matthew 25:35).

makes in his journey toward empathy by the novel's end. Witness David's imagining himself as the condemned Giovanni. Significantly, David's rendition of Giovanni's perspective is both a daring act of passing, defiance and love for the queer neighbor. If Himes's Dido sacrifices himself to help erase Jimmy's homoerotic past and smooth his path back into heterosexual manhood, Baldwin's Giovanni goes down fighting and holds the homophobic world guilty of duplicity and bloodshed. But in order for Giovanni's legacy to be one of queer belligerence and vindication and not one of homosexual martyrdom, he will need David's neighbor-love by way of vicarious imagination and revision.

In the immediate aftermath of Guillaume's death, the "scandal" of the deceased's queer identity "threatens…to rock the very foundations of" the heteropatriarchal order of the French state, and it frantically searches for a "victim" to scapegoat (*Giovanni's* 219). David wryly observes that the good, "simple citizens" who call out most vociferously in "bitter outrage" to condemn Giovanni "and anxious to see justice done and the health of the state preserved" are the so-called heterosexual men of status who solicit sex with openly-gay men whom they official scorn and castigate (219). Dissembling their cynicism and hypocrisy, the so-called heterosexual citizenry finds a ready scapegoat in Giovanni the "foreigner," and in joint forces with the press, "with every day that he was at large,…became more vituperative against him and more gentle towards Guillaume" (220). As the official record would fictionalize, Guillaume was an upstanding (heterosexual) citizen of "sterling qualities," and his "name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol of French manhood" (220). In direct contrast, the press portrays Giovanni as a "depraved" "criminal" of the "dullest kind, a bungler" who murdered Guillaume to rob him yet ended up taking no money due to his own dim-wittedness (224). Giovanni himself never

confesses the motive: “Why was too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell” (224). Giovanni, who heretofore has been vocal and unapologetic about the legitimacy and dignity of same-sex love, is rendered doubly voiceless—voiceless through grief (of his lost love David) and voiceless through the press that would surely censor him should he utter the love that cannot be named as the motive. Additionally, the passage puns on the color black to underscore the media’s attempts to divest Giovanni’s agency through racialization. All that David can see in the newspaper mugshots of Giovanni is that he “looked young, bewildered, terrified…And it seemed, as it had seemed so many times, that he looked to me for help” (224).

Given David’s ambivalence about his own sexuality, he could have very well taken the path of least resistance: remain silent and thus complicit with the French public in vilifying Giovanni as the alien-villain among them. David’s retelling of the murder scene and the why of it all (the motive) is an act of neighbor-love; for it gives voice to the voiceless Giovanni: “I may have been the only man in Paris who knew that he had not meant to do it, who could read *why* he had done it beneath the details printed in the newspapers….I heard his voice again and saw the vehemence of his body and saw his tears” (225).

David’s version is flawed, to be sure, revealing, as Brim points out, unsettling aspects of his transgender-phobia.[72] However, what David’s narrative rendition seems to spotlight are Guillaume’s sexual hypocrisy and cynicism. Unlike the transgender figure who has faith in the sacredness of queer love, Guillaume uses his economic status and social stature for sexual exploitation, dominance and humiliation. First Guillaume, donning a “theatrical dressing gown,” sexually assaults the downtrodden Giovanni (227). After having his way, Guillaume changes into the attire of a “business man” and resumes mocking Giovanni as to why he deserves to be fired

[72] See Matt Brim p. 84-5.

(228). Guillaume is a pseudo-transgender who *uses* cross-dressing for sadistic control. Having resumed the proper heterosexual attire, Guillaume, like the good heterosexual citizenry who pursue openly-gay men by night but condemn homosexuality by day, proceeds to reduce Giovanni's humanity into a transactional commodity: "And Guillaume is in seventh heaven and begins to prance about the room—he has scarcely ever gotten so much for so little before" (229). David, in empathic reenactment of the scene, does not allow Giovanni to be reduced thus to a sexually-violated commodity of heteropatriarchal duplicity. When Guillaume utters "one mockery too many," he "unleashed something" in Giovanni "he cannot turn back," and the latter fatally strikes his predator (229). Hence through David's empathic reenactment, Giovanni is able to break free from the homophobic official chronicle and tell his own counter-narrative. While in the end Giovanni faces death like Dido and Emma, the tonality and signification are different: Dido and Emma face a resigned death, one where they offer themselves as sacrificial offering on the altars of hetero-sexual masculinity. Giovanni's, on the other hand, is a defiant death—an execution sans final words of remorse but rather an indictment of heteropatriarchy. In this way, Baldwin mirrors Motley's and Himes's narratives but rewrites the ending that defies homophobic, sexist complacency.

Alongside Giovanni, Hella too walks out of the male prison (which also imprisons women) with her life and spirit intact. After witnessing David's queer assignation with a sailor, she does not succumb to the passive, sacrificial life of Motley's Emma, who will stay with her husband no matter the cost; nor will she end her life for David's sake. We do not know Hella's ultimate fate, but the novel hints at the possibility of her feminist awakening. She begins to question the heterosexist script that real men are the ones who take charge of dependent women: "But if women are supposed to be led by men and there aren't any men to lead them, what

happens then?" (242). It seems Hella has read the same books that has indoctrinated Motley's Emma about heterosexual norms and how to be a nonthreatening, diminutive woman; yet unlike Emma, Hella begins to question the authority and credibility of the dominant discourse: "There's a difference between little boys and little girls, just like they say in those little blue books. Little girls want little boys. But little boys--!...I'll never again, as long as I live, know *what* they want" (243). Hella's tone here is ironic mockery; her emphasis on the diminutive "little" underscores her awareness that the heteropatriarchal expectations about human sexuality and gender roles are simplistic and reductive. Notwithstanding the internal struggle and ambivalence Hella has about the disillusionment of the heterosexual myth, she will no longer be the feckless "little girl" as labeled by Giovanni but a "terrifying woman," albeit a "cold, brilliant, and bitterly helpless one"—David's words—for the time being (243). The last image we get of Hella is her hyper-conscious awareness of "getting out" of the big house—the metaphoric prison—refusing to be escorted by David and driving away in a taxi by herself.

The neighbor-love the novel grants Hella and Giovanni it also extends to David. Sundry critics have interpreted the mirror scene near the end of the novel in a redemptive way.[73] And rightly so, for David facing his unvarnished, nude self in the mirror is the beginning of self-acceptance and self-love; he is face to face with himself—with all his internal contractions and vulnerabilities:

> The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a

[73]For example, see Armengol, *Masculinities in Black and White,* 111-2; Myriam J. A. Chancy, "Brother/Outsider: In Search of a Black Gay Legacy in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*," *Genders* 26 (1997), 185; Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York UP, 2001), 88.

> mystery… It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation… I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife…Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh. (247)

The paradox of salvation through the corrupt body tells us that the point of self- and neighbor-love is not because we are flawless and unimpeachable but precisely because of our blemishes. This paradoxical moment is also one of hope that, beginning at the individual psycho-theological level, social change is possible despite our corrupt state. The passage continues with the reminder that the injunction of neighbor-love begins with self-love: "I move at last from the mirror and begin to cover that nakedness which I must hold sacred, though it be never so vile, which must be scoured perpetually with the salt of my life. I must believe, that the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it" (248). We can say this is a moment of recognition for self-care and the ethical responsibility to the self. It also speaks to the ethical responsibility David has toward his queer neighbor Giovanni and his acceptance of this responsibility as he merges his body with Giovanni's.

But there is another mirror scene in the novel that critics have largely overlooked, capturing Hella, David, and a queer figure, creating a tableau of the integral connection of sexuality and gender, men and women. This scene is where Hella walks in on David frolicking with a sailor in a queer bar. "We faced the mirror…In the mirror, suddenly, I saw Hella's face. I thought for a moment that I had gone mad, and I turned. She looked very tired and drab and small" (238). Hence collectively, these two mirror scenes reflect all three characters: David, Giovanni, and Hella, capturing their interconnected struggle and fate and the recognition of the ethical responsibility David has to all three. We can say the mirror scenes also reflect Baldwin's

revision of mirroring moments in Motley's *Knock* and Himes's *Cast.* In *Knock*, the condemned Nick wishes in vain that he had a mirror to self-reflect: "He wanted—awfully—to see himself. Look at himself. He wanted that more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. He sat on the edge of the cot, looking around the dark cell wild-eyed, for something with which to see himself. Some reflecting surface…Nothing reflected back" (*Knock* 481). Reading this moment symbolically: Given Nick's inability to self-reflect, it would be impossible for him to reflect on Owen and Emma as neighbors to be loved and not sacrificed. In *Cast*, Jimmy uses the contraband mirror as tool of love for a time (to communicate with Dido when they are housed in separate cells), but ultimately, that mirror affords Jimmy no self-reflection (he never turns the mirror to look at himself); he only uses it to look at others. The final vision Jimmy's mirror reflects is the dead body of his lover Dido (*Cast* 344). Lacking self-reflection, Jimmy cannot see his queer neighbor in the light of love and life but in the darkness of repudiation and death.

The ending of Baldwin's novel is a drastic revision of the respective novels by Himes and Motley. *Giovanni's Room* ends with this image:

> And at last I step out into the morning and I lock the door behind me...And I look up the road, where a few people stand, men and women, waiting for the morning bus. They are very vivid beneath the awakening sky, and the horizon beyond them is beginning to flame. The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back to me. (248)

Notice here that the new day is dawning for men *and* women. The passage presages a cautious

hope with the sky just beginning its "awakening," but it is no less promising and empowering, as even this thin sliver of morning can cast a vivid light on the diverse body of people who await David to join them on the morning's journey. The insipient "flame" that forms in the horizon augers love, as we recall Baldwin saying elsewhere that "love is fire." If love is fire that lights the sky and reflects all the men and women we are ethically bound to love, it is indeed a "hard light under which one makes the moral choice," as I have quoted Baldwin at the beginning of this chapter. The magnitude of that ethical responsibility to our neighbors can surely generate ambivalence, and it is no wonder David feels weighed down "with the dreadful weight of hope." Even as David tries to exculpate his guilt over forsaking Giovanni and distance himself from the memory of his lover's tragic downfall (which the symbolism of the torn letter illustrates), the passage ensures that David will always be held accountable to his neighbor (the wind blows some of the torn pieces of Jacques's letter back to him). We recall that Baldwin's and Himes's novels end with a similar image: Both protagonists walk out of their respective prison cells (literally for Jimmy, and figuratively for David) into the early morning light that awaits them. But whereas Jimmy leaves with no trace of Dido to haunt him, Baldwin safeguards that for David, there will be a paper trail—an ethical blackmail of sorts—that will always threaten and haunt him. The ending of *Cast* offers no room, no accountability for anyone else—men or women, queer or straight—save for Jimmy (which is suggestive of the primacy of individualism and the theme of the lone individual—most likely a heterosexual man—against the world). Motley's Nick, for all his everyman appeal, gets transformed into a Christlike figure and in his death (and through the sacrificial death of his wife Emma) is expiated of the business of the mortal (including the need to love anybody). In contrast, the final scene in Baldwin's novel witnesses David weighed down by the paradoxical burden of terrible hope, forever accountable

to the memory of Giovanni (no easy death will come to rescue David), walking toward his male and female neighbors who wait for him to partake in a shared journey of humanity.

Accounting for the Androgynous Davids: Conclusion

To imagine Baldwin reading Himes's novel alongside Motley's *Knock on Any Door*, we need only look at the title: *Cast the First Stone* is the Biblical reference to Jesus who chastises the villagers for hypocritically adhering to the Mosaic law by attempting to stone to death a prostitute, Mary Magdalene, who later becomes Jesus's prominent female disciple.[74] Ironically, Himes's gender-inclusive Biblical title is in stark contrast to the content of the novel that has no major female characters. And even if we were to grant that this is understandable given the setting of the novel (male penitentiary), the representation of gender in the novel, as we have seen, perpetuates the disempowerment of women (and non-gender conforming men). While Motley foregrounds the significance of women by his key structural placement of Emma and in giving her a voice to tell her own story, he builds her up only to be a worthy sacrifice on the heteropatriarchal funeral pyre. As I have shown, the key differences between Baldwin's novel and these preceding novels is that Baldwin interrogates the ways in which the male prison (whether literal or metaphorical) is really a gendered one that holds both men and women captive and one that operates not only through cultural coercion but through the insidious enlistment of the captives to serve as prison guards. By eventually freeing Giovanni, Hella, David—all culturally vulnerable individuals—from the prison of heteropatriarchy and victimhood, Baldwin's revision stresses the interlinked fate and coalitional responsibility people on the margin—racial minorities, women, queer men and transgenders—have toward one another.

[74] "So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (KJV John 8:7).

Baldwin's commitment to men and women, queer and straight, Black and White, was at the heart of why he wrote the novel in the first place. As his biographer James Campbell relates, what motivated Baldwin to write *Giovanni's Room* was the "need to work all the 'Davids' he had ever known out of his system: whatever divided them, more united them. David was a composite of several different boys *and* girls he had known" (101). Baldwin wrote from a sense of personal urgency to understand these composite, androgynous Davids—their secrets and revelations— and it was a paradoxical study from the start; for Baldwin, it was a matter of personal survival—"to save his life," to quote Campbell (101)—that he had to figure out how the male and female Davids of the world can survive together in the ethics of neighbor-love.

The love of the neighbor Baldwin narratively extends to the male and female characters of his novel is remarkable and indeed demanded Baldwin's daring and courage, for it was not an easy love for him to give. Like Giovanni and David, Baldwin himself was drawn to masculine men, at times berating or otherwise distrustful of effeminate manhood; that he himself embodied that effeminacy goes to show how much he struggled with his own queer sexuality.[75] At various moments, Baldwin, like Giovanni, slipped into patriarchal diction when engaging his lesbian counterparts (e.g., Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni) or other such powerful women regardless of their sexual orientation (Margaret Mead).[76] David's and Giovanni's animosity toward queer effeminacy may very well speak of Baldwin's own internal ambivalences about effeminate gay men and transgender individuals.[77] But whatever Baldwin's own ambivalences and personal inconsistencies about queer identity or women's rights, the novel imbues the queer male—David, Giovanni, Jacques—the nameless transgender at the bar, as well as the ostensibly heterosexual,

[75] See Leeming, 45-6.
[76] Brim, 160, 162-3.
[77] See Field, 49-50; also Brim, 84-5.

White woman Hella (alongside Aunt Ellen and the nameless mother) with dignity and human pathos that demand our empathy and love, even as their flaws cut deep. In a way, then, Baldwin is exorcising his own ambivalences—whether sexual, racial or gender—in the pages of *Giovanni*'s *Room*, and the lesson of empathy and love for the marginalized neighbor is one Baldwin has had to learn right alongside his readers. Baldwin's aspirations in life was not only to be called a "good writer" but an "honest man" ("Autobiographical Notes" 9). In *Giovanni's Room*, he exemplifies both.

Epilogue:
Reprising Passing and Neighbor-Love in the Time of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter

In May 1963, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, freedom rider Jerome Smith, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s emissary Charles Jones and other civil rights activists sat down with the Attorney General Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy in his New York flat to protest the ongoing systemic racism, discrimination, and violence against African Americans. For Baldwin and his cohort, the foundation of Black justice and equity was not political but rooted in "moral dimensions that transcended the particular concerns of the day," cutting to the very core of the nation's character.[1] What they demanded from Kennedy was nothing less than the ethical reanimation of the soul of the nation, beginning with the White House setting an example by acts of love: President Kennedy, for instance, taking the hands of a "black child" and shepherding him/her to school in the Deep South (Leeming, *James Baldwin* 223). RFK attempted to allay the tension and thwart their demands for such "moral commitment" by invoking a rosy yet unlikely picture of the future when "a black man could be president in forty years" (Leeming 224).

That seemed a pipe dream in 1963; but with the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009 and Vice President Kamala Harris in 2021, the country indeed has witnessed what was then unimaginable. With such monumental milestones, in an age when the theme of passing seems so anachronistic and arcane, what relevance does the study of the post-World War II-era Black novels on passing have today? What can mid-century White-presenting or passing novels by Black authors teach us in the traumatic age of residual Trumpism, Covid-19, and the Black Lives Matter movement? Notwithstanding the variegated differences between the postwar era and the current times, the two historical moments have striking parallels that provide us with

[1] David Adams Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 233.

lessons to live by. Indeed, the study of postwar Black novels on passing and the ethics of the neighbor have never been more serendipitous or urgent as today when we find ourselves besieged by devastations of the Covid-19 pandemic, racially-motivated police- or extrajudicial brutalities and the resounding cry for justice by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

The ravages of the pandemic age harbor strong undercurrents of racial tensions and advocacy for racial justice, tying Savoy, Hurston, and Baldwin's postwar era with ours. The 2020 year has placed anti-Black racism in high relief with the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many others whose crime had been living while Black. Arbery, for instance, was performing the mundane task of jogging when he was accosted and shot point blank by White vigilantes—a father-son duo—who later claimed without evidence that Arbery was trespassing and burglarizing the White neighborhood.[2] As of this writing, as the nation reels afresh from the trauma of the George Floyd death (with the murder trial of Derek Chauvin), the city of Minneapolis has made the shocking headline of yet more police violence: the senseless death of the 20-year old Daunte Wright, whose life was taken by a cop who allegedly mistook her gun for a Taser. These atrocities committed against Black Americans, men and women whose lives were taken or threatened at various prosaic rituals of daily living—sitting behind the wheel, jogging, sleeping—should awaken us to what the writers under study would have known all along: The degree and extent of violence perpetrated against Blacks renders the term "racism" too generic to capture its virulent strain. Their deaths are redundant examples of anti-Blackness – the systemic devaluation and dehumanization of Black lives throughout the history of the United

[2] Brad Schrade, "GBI Reviewing Additional Video Footage in Ahmaud Arbery Case." *AJC Atlanta. News. Now*, 10 May 2020, www.ajc.com/news/crime--law/gbi-reviewing-new-video-footage-ahmaud-arbery-case/xvSWFTbaD0k9cr80R7CTnL/.

States.[3] That the police officer responsible for the murder of Wright is a White female underscores the gender dimensions that coalesce with anti-Blackness which writers studied in this dissertation interrogate. Even if we were to believe that Officer Kimberly A. Potter fired her gun when she intended to use a Taser, her case still raises the specter of the violent Black-male stereotype that Hurston explores in *Seraph*. How entrenched is this racial stereotype in the dominant cultural imaginary that a 26-year veteran who has trained fellow officers in safety protocols pull the trigger on her gun instead of a Taser?[4] How threatening is the Black male stereotype that she has to discharge—whether a gun or a Taser—at a man who is driving *away* from her?

To a lesser degree but harkening nonetheless to the intersection of anti-Blackness and sexual violence against Black men is the case of Christian Cooper, an Ivy League graduate and avid bird watcher whom a White woman named Amy Cooper (no family relations) accused of assaulting her in New York's Central Park.[5] Insofar as Cooper did not lose his life, his case may be less egregious, but it is still an example of the ongoing prevalence of the Black rapist stereotype. The only way Amy Cooper was able to call 911 and repeatedly emphasize how an "African-American man" was "threatening [her] life" was because she fits readily into the stereotypical script of the imperiled White woman in close proximity to a predatory Black man (quoted in Nir). That she had her dog unleashed in a prohibited park area and that Christian Cooper, after pleading with her in vain for compliance with the law, offered her dog a treat so as

[3] Kihana Miraya Ross, "Call it What It Is: Anti-Blackness." *The New York Times,* 4 June 4 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html.

[4] Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Julie Bosman, "Police Officer Who Shot and Killed Daunte Wright Was Training Others," *The New York Times*, 13 April 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/minnesota-officer-kim-potter-resigns.html.

[5] Sarah Maslin Nir, "How 2 Lives Collided in Central Park, Rattling the Nation," *The New York Times,* 14, June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/nyregion/central-park-amy-cooper-christian-racism.html.

to distract the animal from disrupting the local bird sanctuary are irrelevant to the White woman. As Christian Cooper later observed, "What she did was tap into a deep vein of racial bias,… certain dark societal impulses that she, as a white woman, facing in a conflict with a Black man, that she thought she could marshal to her advantage" (qtd. in Nir).

Insofar as justice for Blacks are concerned, fairing worse than the Black male is perhaps the Black female. As Savoy has interrogated the asymmetrical gender dynamics in Black Americans' fight for justice (recall Charles Roberts's condescending treatment of his wife Laura who is ostracized by the Black community and neglected by her husband even as she has renounced her White family and friends to live her life as a Black woman), so we must stay vigilant about the gendered hierarchy in the age of BLM. For instance, whereas the violence against Floyd has opened the floodgate of national and international indignation and outcry against police brutalities against Blacks, Taylor's death (which preceded Floyd's death by two months) not only did not garner such outpouring of public outrage or attention, but her name continues to "remain…largely disconnected with the broader national conversation" about anti-Black racism.[6]

The age of the Covid-19 pandemic, while exposing the stark reality and extent of anti-Blackness, has carried haunting traces of the thematic of passing, eliciting much food for thought regarding compulsory or inadvertent versus intentional passing and the porousness of boundaries in general. Not unlike the fictional *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where alien virus seeds into, and rapidly overtakes, unsuspecting human subjects because aliens betray no mark of their

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[6] Alisha Haridasani Gupta. "Why Aren't We All Talking about Breonna Taylor?" *The New York Times,* 4 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/breonna-taylor-black-lives-matter-women.html?referringSource=articleShare.

passing, so has Covid-19 circulated stealthily among us, heightening our fear and paranoia that asymptomatic carriers of the virus pass among us, their presence more threatening than those with outright symptoms; that we ourselves at any given moment (regardless of our vaccination status) can be such unwitting passers compound the anxiety of the times. The precarious state of our epidemiological ontology (are we passing as virus-free when we are, unbeknownst to ourselves, infected?) that can exacerbate the proliferation of the virus has surely taxed us, body and mind. Our collective sense of malaise over the passing of the Covid-19 virus provides us with some basic groundworks, however imperfect the analogy, to understanding the deep-seated anxiety, ambivalence, or outright self-contempt felt by various characters in the Black-authored passing novels of the midcentury. In *Seraph,* Arvay Henson Meserve surmises—however faintly in her case—Whiteness as a contingent identity that she must perform and "pass" in order to claim (which generates self- doubt and paranoia). In *Alien Land*, Kern Roberts collides full force with the ethical dilemma of passing for either Black or White (passing for Black demands renouncing his beloved White family while passing for White is to turn his back on his loving Black family). In *Giovanni's Room*, Helga and David perform compulsory gender and sexual passing that unwittingly aids and abets the heterosexist system that disenfranchises them.

While the novel coronavirus has made a mockery of boundaries of nation-states, jumping international time zones and infiltrating unsuspecting bodies irrespective of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sex or other identity categories, it has nonetheless sounded the abyss of the nation's inveterate nativism, xenophobia, racism, and policy of rigid border delineations that perpetuate interracial enmity. Amidst the raging pandemic, Donald Trump doubled down on building the Mexico-U.S. border walls, vowing to keep out the "tsunami of illegal"

immigrants that was supposedly sweeping into the U.S. with drugs, crimes, and poverty.[7] Branding the novel coronavirus as a "foreign" enemy, Trump gave it the xenophobic nomenclatures "Wuhan disease" and "Chinese virus," and used the pandemic as a pretext to promote his White nativist policy of shutting down the U.S. borders to prospective non-White immigrants, political refugees, and asylum seekers and actively enforced the infamous policy of separating approximately 5,400 children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border (Miroff et al).[8] So has the U.S. historically doubled down on the Black-White binary, frenetically building walls of racial categorization and corralling divergent people into a monolith.[9] And similar to the history of passing in the U.S. that has revealed the dominant culture's obsession with and anxiety about racial classification (particularly the Black-White binary), Covid-19 has had distinct racial fault-lines that further broaden the chasm between the White mainstream and communities of color. Covid-19 has affected Black and Latino communities disproportionately, and twice as many Black Americans have died as a direct result of the virus than Whites.[10] In the hands of White nationalist sympathizers, these statistics, rather than being read as systemic inequities that have made African Americans particularly vulnerable to the virus can be used instead as a justification to blame and scapegoat Black community members, that it is "not our

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[7] Nick Miroff et al, "Trump put up walls to immigrants, with stinging rhetoric and barriers made of steel and regulation," *Washington Post,* 31 Oct. 2020. www.washingtonpost.com/ immigration/trump-immigration-walls/ 2020/10/31/e43453cc-09a3-11eb-991c-be6ead8c4018_story.html.

[8] See also Evan Lieberman, "Risks for 'Us' or for 'Them'? The Comparative Politics of Diversity and Responses to AIDS and Covid-19," *Social Science Research Council,* 14 May 2020, https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy-and-pandemics/risk-for-us-or-for-them-the-comparative-politics-of-diversity-and-responses-to-aids-and-covid-19/.

[9] An example of the nation's insistence on the system of Black-White binary is the prevalence of the "one-drop rule" that deemed people of Black-White ancestry as Black no matter how White they appear.

[10] Diya Chacko, Sam Schulz, "Coronavirus Today: LA's antibody mystery," *Los Angeles Times,* 5 June 2020, https://www.latimes.com/science/newsletter/2020-06-05/antibodies-jobs-protests-racism-coronavirus-today.

problem" that Blacks are courting the virus with their recklessness and irresponsibility (Lieberman). Indeed, social scientists and journalists have sounded the alarm that like the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, the Covid-19 pandemic carries the threat to be remembered as a "Black epidemic," exacerbating the nation's deep-seated policies of insider-outsider divide."[11]

RFK may have been prescient in foretelling the reality of the first Black U.S. President—and exceeding even what he surely would have imagined as hyperbolic, the election the nation's first Black female Vice President in 2020—but what he failed to predict was that belying the idealistic vision of the first Black president in forty years, the country would remain mired in anti-Black racism, bigotry, discrimination, and violence. When he told the incredulous Baldwin and his civil rights cohorts that Black Americans had hope as his Irish-immigrant ancestors too, had faced discrimination yet risen to great heights in this country (thereby implying that the Black American experience was basically equivalent to the Irish American experience), RFK failed to recognize the anti-Black racism that systemically singles out Black Americans as *less-than* among all minorities, racial or otherwise. As Baldwin was quick to school the Attorney General, all minority experiences are not the same, and the fact that "the black man, as the present meeting illustrated, was 'still required to supplicate and beg you for justice' " proved just that point (Leeming 224).

Indeed, despite the signs of progress and change, we may be closer to the darker days of the postwar America than we would care to admit. At the close of the disappointing meeting with RFK, Lorraine Hansberry remarked that "she was deeply concerned about the state of a

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[11] See Lieberman. See also Michele L. Norris, "The 'us' and them' pandemic shows America is still impervious to black pain," *Washington Post*, 21 May 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/21/us-them-pandemic-shows-america-is-still-impervious-black-pain/.

civilization which could produce the now famous photograph of a white policeman standing on the neck of a black woman in Birmingham" (Leeming 224). After Floyd, we in the twenty-first century have seen this picture repeated with a White cop's knee on a Black man's neck in Minneapolis. Black Americans continue to live in fear of their lives and face anti-Black racism on a daily basis.[12]

When Savoy, Hurston, Baldwin and other Black writers of the postwar decade utilized the motif of passing in their White/mixed-race characters, they were in a sense making a strategic decision to bypass the towering wall of anti-Black racism in order to broach the tabooed subject of interracial neighbor-love. As Claudia Tate theorizes, Black writers—including Hurston—have deployed Whiteness in their novels to explore topics that are deemed too risqué or inopportune for Black subjectivity.[13] Given the nation's intrenched anti-Blackness, the postwar African American writers of this study may have calculated that narratives with White-presenting characters have a better chance at getting published as well as succeeding at conveying the message of interracial neighbor-love to readers White and Black. As Hurston points out in *Negro Digest* (1950), White publishers, whose primary goal is profitability, eschew books depicting middle- and upper-class or well-educated Blacks endowed with "high and complicated emotions" because it is not what appeals to the White readership.[14] Long viewing Blacks as a museum "exhibit" of static and morbid stereotypes and not human beings, the general White

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[12] See for example, Ernest Owens, "I Have Not Missed the Amy Coopers of the World: The video of a white woman threatening a black man in Central Park illustrates exactly why I'm so relieved to be spending more time inside," *The New York Times,* 26 May 2020, *www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/opinion/central-park-amy-cooper-racism-covid.html.*

[13] Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 153.

[14] Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *Folklore, Memoirs, & Other Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 951, 953.

public cannot “conceive of a Negro experiencing a deep and abiding love and not just the passion for sex”; or that Blacks “can and do experience discovery of the numerous subtle faces as a foundation for a great and selfless love, and the diverse nuances that go to destroy that love as with others” (Hurston, “What White Publishers Won’t Print 953). In other words, thoroughly inculcated in the culture of anti-Black racism as they are, White readers would be put off by—if they can even begin to imagine—Black characters contemplating such profound concept as the ethics of neighbor-love. In the same essay, Hurston hints as to why African American readers in turn would likely be averse to Black characters advocating love for Whites. Speaking of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Hurston praises the book as “written in the deepest sincerity” and “opening the wedge for better [interracial] understanding” (954). Yet “many Negroes denounced” the novel “because of the title…without ever reading it” (954). Hurston and fellow Black writers of the midcentury understood that the general Black readership would have been thus acutely leery of anything suggestive of racial effacement, accommodation, or capitulation. The literary strategy of passing, then, allowed Hurston, Baldwin, Savoy and others to trespass into the prohibited space of interracial love and kinship while keeping anti-Black racism at bay.

Indeed, what this dissertation highlights is that these writers, even with the staggering weight of systemic anti-Blackness and such scanty progress to give them fuel, have demonstrated courage, wisdom, prescience and vision to aspire to the ethics of interracial neighbor-love, knowing how we are interdependent, for better or for worse. Dr. Anthony Fauci, in his commencement speech to the graduating class of the traumatic year 2020, remarked, “Now is the time, if ever there was one, for us to care selflessly about one another.”[15] In his inaugural address

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[15] Colin Dwyer, “The Coronavirus Crisis: Anthony Fauci: ‘Now Is The Time…To Care Selflessly About One Another,” *NPR.org,* 23 May 2020, www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live- updates/2020/05/23

to the nation, President Biden also invoked the language of the ethics of the neighbor: "We can see each other not as adversaries but as neighbors."[16] Fauci, a senior immunologist and the chief presidential medical advisor, and Biden, the politician, can speak of neighbor-love because it is no esoteric theology but a sound and pragmatic public health policy: Our very survival may hinge on it.

What the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us, the postwar writers in this study surmised all along: To love the neighbor *is* self-love and self-preservation, for we are as strong and sound—or as weak and stricken—as they. The moral commitment and the acts of neighbor-love that Baldwin and others demanded in the 1960s are not some sentimental platitude but pragmatics of collective human survival. This is why in the same commencement speech, as Baldwin and his Black civil rights party implored RFK in 1963, Dr. Fauci could emphasize "moral" leadership as key to helping us survive the dark times of the novel coronavirus pandemic (Dwyer). Social distancing, wearing masks, adhering to the stay-at-home orders—we do these things to protect ourselves as much as our neighbors, and we in turn rely on our neighbors' safety practices to stay healthy and virus-free. From the onset, the novel coronavirus pandemic has reminded us how the neighbors we are beholden to are not limited to our local communities or national boundaries but far reaching across the hemispheres. The virus, originating Wuhan, a city in a remote Chinese providence of Hubei, defied national and continental boundaries, and with breathtaking swiftness and insidiousness, wreaked havoc on lives far and near, bringing Italy, Brazil, India, the United States and countless others together in stunning terror, mourning and paralysis. The pandemic

/861500804/anthony-fauci-now-is-the-time-to-care-selflessly-about-one-another.

[16] Joseph R. Biden, "Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden," *The White House,* 20 January 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/.

has reminded us how interconnected our global humanity is, and that what happens 7,000 miles away has clutched our lives as if with an iron fist. Today, ten nations have access to 75% of available vaccines, and it is estimated to take four years at the current rate to inoculate the entire world population.[17] As the U.S. is one of the ten nations to be so fortunate, we could brush this off as not our problem; yet that would be a short-sighted policy as the longer the world neighbors remain unvaccinated, the more mutations the virus can undergo; and it is uncertain how effective the current U.S. authorized vaccines would be against these mutant variants (Morelli). Added to this is the probability that the optimal efficacy of these vaccines wanes in about 6 months. With so many unanswered questions, we are as safe as our global community members are safe. Hence the pandemic has taught us that even at the most pragmatic level, acts of neighbor-love—from helping with food, shelter, extra masks, and now hopefully the shipment of surplus vaccines abroad—is self-serving and self-preserving.

This dissertation may focus on the postwar Black novels, but the implications of the project of neighbor-love as envisioned by its writers reach beyond the realm of Black-White dichotomy. For instance, the provenance of anti-Black racism is also responsible for the hatred against Asians. Spurred on by Trump's xenophobic scapegoating of Covid-19 as the "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus," and "kung flu,"[18] individuals of motley racial and ethnic backgrounds—including those with White-nationalist leanings and Black Americans themselves— have committed escalating violence against Asian Americans. These atrocious acts by some African

[17] Jim Morelli, "Study: Moderna immunity wanes 6 months in but still protective," *Boston25News.com,* 11 April 2021, www.boston25news.com/news/health/study-moderna-immunity-wanes-6-months-still-protective/L4KSK6SP3VG3ZEM6J3PHAQRHXM/.

[18] "Donald Trump calls Covid-19 'kung flu' at Tulsa rally: Civil libertie groups have warned use of terms such as 'Chinese virus' can inspire racism against Asian Americans," *The Guardian,* 20 June 2020, *www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/20/trump-covid-19-kung-flu-racist-language.*

Americans in collusion with White supremacy resonate with what Baldwin has exposed in *Giovanni's Room*: the ironic pitfall of people on the margins being complicit in each other's societal persecution and marginalization. As the recent Atlanta shooting has demonstrated, White supremacy respects no racial boundaries; anti-Black racism consorts with anti-Asian violence.[19]

The Trump rhetoric of the Wuhan or China Virus is no more the problem or responsibility of the Chinese or Asians as Black Lives Matter is no less the responsibility of all people, Whites, Blacks, Indigenous, or other people of color. Our neighbors near and far, whether by relations of blood, nationality, culture, or planetary humanity, are no more aliens than we are all psychic aliens. Our moral imperative to hope for light despite the despair of night; our ethical duty to each human neighbor Black, White or Other; and our obligations to pass on that hope to our future generations interconnect the postwar age with ours. This epilogue concludes with the prophetic words of Baldwin that captures this very sentiment:

> [O]ne must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places….Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.[20]

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[19] In a pandemic year already replete with series of escalating violence against Asian Americans, the massage-spa massacres in Atlanta, Georgia that left eight people dead (six of them Asian women) are undoubtedly the worst incidences of anti-Asian violence in recent memory in the U.S. history.

[20] James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 705-6.

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