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Isadora Martins Amaral Castro

Black Manhood in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*: Racial Criminalization, Death, and the Myth of the Black Rapist

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Isadora Martins Amaral Castro

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fictional representations of black manhood in the novels *Native Son* by Richard Wright and *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin. Guided by the premise that black men have historically experienced unique and distinct forms of oppression in the United States, which give rise to a particular form of vulnerability, the work analyzes how Wright's and Baldwin's selected works engage with the themes of racial criminalization, subjectivity, death, and the so-called "myth of the black rapist," a cultural narrative that has been used to justify various forms of violence against black men since the 19th century. The investigation begins with a review of the historical processes linked to the anti-black punitive tradition that has permeated American society since its colonial origins and ultimately developed into contemporary mass incarceration. Discussions related to black manhood and death in the novels are then offered, adopting the perspective of African-American philosopher Tommy J. Curry, particularly his theoretical framework outlined in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*. The notions of *Black male vulnerability* and *Black male death*, as interpreted through Curry's work, serve as guiding principles for the proposed readings. Lastly, this thesis explores the myth of the black rapist and examines sexual violence and sexual vulnerability in the selected literary works. In parallel, the commonalities and divergences between the novels are observed throughout the work, oriented by the argument that *If Beale Street Could Talk* can be seen as a response to *Native Son*, with Baldwin engaging in a revision of the aspects he deems problematic in Wright's novel.

Keywords: black manhood; race; gender; James Baldwin; Richard Wright; racial criminalization; rape.

Resumo

A dissertação examina as representações ficcionais da masculinidade negra nos romances *Native Son,* de Richard Wright, e *If Beale Street Could Talk*, de James Baldwin. Guiado pela premissa de que os homens negros vivenciam e vivenciaram, historicamente, formas únicas e distintas de opressão nos Estados Unidos, o trabalho analisa o engajamento das obras literárias de Wright e Baldwin com os temas da criminalização racial, da subjetividade, da morte, e do chamado "mito do estuprador negro", uma narrativa cultural que serviu, desde o século XIX, como justificativa para diversas formas de violência direcionadas aos homens negros. A investigação tem como ponto de partida uma revisão dos processos históricos ligados à tradição punitivista racista que permeia a sociedade estadunidense desde suas origens coloniais e se desdobra no encarceramento em massa contemporâneo. Em seguida, são propostas discussões relacionadas à masculinidade negra e à morte nos romances a partir da perspectiva do filósofo afro-americano Tommy J. Curry, principalmente sua teoria delineada em *The Man-Not: The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood.* As noções de *Black male vulnerability* e *Black Male Death*, interpretadas a partir da obra de Curry, guiam as leituras das obras. Por fim, o trabalho explora o mito do estuprador negro, bem como a presença da violência e da vulnerabilidade sexual nas obras literárias selecionadas. Em paralelo, também são observados os pontos comuns e as divergências entre os romances, partindo do argumento de que *If Beale Street Could Talk* se apresenta como uma resposta a *Native Son* em que Baldwin engaja em uma espécie de revisão dos aspectos que julga problemáticos no romance de Wright.

Palavras-chave: masculinade negra; raça; gênero; James Baldwin; Richard Wright; criminalização; estupro.

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Introduction

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. In spite of the significant decline in prison populations in recent years, which owes in part to the decarceration efforts and other sanitary measures that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the rates of imprisonment in the country are higher than in any other nation. As of 2021, approximately 1.2 million people were held in federal or state prisons (Carson 7). Additionally, an estimated 70 million have criminal records, which means they have been at least arrested (Craigie et al. 6), and almost 4 million are under community supervision (probation or parole) (Kaeble 1). Millions more have at least one family member involved in the criminal justice system (Craigie et al. 9). Needless to say, incarceration impacts all areas of social, economic, and political life in the United States.

With a vast carceral apparatus that employs millions of workers who depend on high rates of imprisonment and deportation to secure an income, the criminal justice system has become the largest employment sector in the country (Hernández et al. 20). Its impact on U.S. democracy is also extensive. In forty-eight American states, felony convictions can result in either temporary or permanent disenfranchisement, which has caused 5.2 million people to be unable to vote in 2020 (The Sentencing Project). This issue disproportionately affects communities of color, especially those of African Americans and Latinos, who are the main targets of the disparities in the system. While one in every forty-four adults in the United States is disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, one in every sixteen African Americans of voting age is unable to vote for the same reason (Uggen et al. 4). Incarceration not only prevents these groups from electing the policy-makers who represent their interests through felony

disenfranchisement, but it also robs minority votes through "prison gerrymandering," as explained by Hernández et al:

> …whereas black prisoners in the faraway facilities of countless correctional institutions cannot vote, the white counties that corral them in those institutions get to use their bodies as political power. Eight house districts in the state of Pennsylvania simply would not exist if disfranchised prisoners were not included in the population numbers. (20)

In short, imprisoned individuals are counted by the Census as residents of the jurisdiction in which they are confined because of the usual residence rule. This practice not only impairs communities of color, but it also actively benefits white communities. According to Michelle Alexander: "Because most new prison construction occurs in predominantly white, rural areas, white communities benefit from inflated population totals at the expense of the urban, overwhelmingly minority communities from which the prisoners come" (188). And, as a result: "White rural communities that house prisons wind up with more people in state legislatures representing them, while poor communities of color lose representatives because it appears their population has declined" (Alexander 188).

Mass policing and incarceration affect people of color, especially black men, in many other ways. They are incarcerated at a higher rate than any other group: 2,203 per 100,000 inhabitants,—as opposed to 385 per 100,000 for white men and 979 per 100,000 for Latino men—meaning they are almost five times as likely to be incarcerated as white males (The Sentencing Project). For black males ages eighteen to nineteen, the rate is even higher: they are 12.5 times as likely to be incarcerated as white males of the same age group (Carson 23). In regard to sentencing, racial and ethnic disparities have also been observed. According to Cassia Spohn in her analysis of state and federal sentencing records, "Black and Hispanic

offenders—and particularly those who are young, male, or unemployed—are more likely than their white counterparts to be sentenced to prison; they also may receive longer sentences than similarly situated white offenders" (481). Her studies suggest that sentencing decisions and the harsher punishments received by these minority groups are not entirely explained by legal factors such as crime seriousness and prior criminal record.

These individuals' struggles do not end when they are released from prison. Ex-offenders in general are likely to face employment discrimination and research suggests that black ex-offenders are even more disadvantaged (Pager 40). This stigma also extends to black people who have not encountered the system: "Blacks are less than half as likely to receive consideration by employers than equally qualified whites, and black nonoffenders fare no better than those whites with prior felony convictions" (Pager 98). Devah Pager interprets these findings as a result of the high rates of incarceration among blacks and the disproportionated media coverage of black criminality, which, combined, "heighten negative reactions toward African Americans generally, irrespective of their personal involvement in crime" (98). In other words, the racial disparities in the criminal justice system feed the cycle of discrimination; the association of blackness with crime and violence materializes in unfair policing and surveillance practices that target black people and communities disproportionately, harsher punishments for black defendants, higher rates of incarceration for black individuals, and stigmatization and bias towards black Americans who have not had any personal involvement with criminality.

Mass incarceration and the disparities that have become emblematic of the American criminal justice system have gained more attention from both academia and the general public in the past decade. Numerous studies examine the structural disadvantages that have caused and continue to perpetuate racial inequality and the role of the carceral system in this equation.

Carceral state history has been described by the Organization of American Historians as "one of the most vibrant subfields of U.S. history" in the year 2022. This area of historical inquiry is also the departing point for the discussion I develop in the present work.

In the novels that constitute this thesis's literary corpus, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the criminal justice system—the law's force—emerges as an oppressive power that threatens the survival of black men. Their vulnerability within American society, in this sense, is illustrated by their susceptibility to racial criminalization and its various developments and consequences. Thus, both novels offer the opportunity to discuss the criminalization of black Americans in general and black men in particular, along with the country's extensive tradition of racialized punishment.

This thesis investigates the fictional representations of black manhood in the aforementioned novels. Throughout this work, I aim to demonstrate that, in opposition to what may commonly be assumed in and outside of academia, blackness *and* maleness combined generate a particular type of oppression for men of color within American society. In other words, black men are not protected by white patriarchy, nor does their affiliation to the biological marker of "male" guard them in any way from experiencing racist and gendered violence. The readings I propose for the selected novels show that Wright and Baldwin were attuned to this issue. In spite of their various points of divergence—an investigation I also develop in parallel to this central focus—the novels converge in representing black manhood as susceptible to racial criminalization, death, and sexual vulnerability, the three main axes of analysis this work examines.

Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and the selected novels

Native Son, published in 1940, stands as a seminal novel in 20th-century American literature. Richard Wright's narrative delves into the mind of the fictional Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old black man living in Depression-era Chicago[1]. Engulfed in the unforgiving concrete jungle, the protagonist and his family live in poverty in the "Black Belt," the city's segregated ghetto. Each of the novel's three books, "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate," progressively develops the conflicts that arise when Bigger becomes caught in a series of events that culminate in the killing of Mary Dalton, the daughter of a real-estate magnate by whom he is employed as a driver.

Book One characterizes Bigger Thomas, as later described by Wright, as "resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed" ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 523). Notably, a central aspect of Bigger's identity stems from the "lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him" ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 523). Being a black "native son," Bigger grapples with the complexities of his place within a social order that perceives him as barely human, which necessitates a delicate negotiation of belonging and exclusion. Consequently, Bigger's psyche is profoundly fragmented, governed by fear, and plagued by severe psychological disorientation. Rather than a clear-cut hero, Bigger emerges as an ambiguous figure, embodying the dual roles of "villain" and "victim." Many perceive him as a reproduction of the stereotypes that associate black men with violence, criminality, and anger. Wright purposefully probes into the psychology of what he terms the "Bigger type," as revealed in his account of the creative process in the essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born." Throughout his life, Wright encountered various individuals who served as prototypes for his protagonist, and he

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[1] In the period between the years of 1929 and 1939, the world saw the greatest economic depression in the 20th century, known as the Great Depression. Several countries were impacted by the decline of the United States economy, which was precipitated by the collapse of U.S. stock market prices. Due to its reliance on the manufacturing sector, which was the hardest hit, Chicago was particularly affected; unemployment and poverty skyrocketed and social and political instability rose in the city.

was captivated by the nuances and variations in the Bigger Thomas archetype. Despite the risks involved in portraying such a character, Wright was committed to representing the multi-layered dimensions of Bigger's existence, encompassing his private and emotional life, his social awareness, and his political reality. This inclusive portrayal extends, as Wright explains, to capturing elements that Bigger himself may not possess the conscious ability to articulate, highlighting the depths of his being and the intricacies of his experiences.

To this end, Wright employs in *Native Son* a third-person limited point of view. Throughout the novel, the author constructs "an elaborate linguistic fabric" that juxtaposes Bigger's voice and actions and the narrator's sophisticated descriptions of his thoughts and emotions (Tanner 413). While Bigger's direct speech demonstrates his inarticulateness, in Laura Tanner's words, his "awkward relationship with the master language," the narrator's voice "is defined by a smooth-flowing prose style that relies upon the complex use of balance and antithesis, compound constructions, and periodic sentences" (Tanner 414). This aesthetic choice has significant implications in the novel.

As John M. Reilly argues, Wright's choice of point of view and free indirect discourse is innovative in American realist fiction, in which subaltern characters, such as immigrants, non-whites, and working-class figures were almost always "presented in a frame story or through the mediation of a narrative voice firmly middle-class in its language, taste, and orientation" (46). Reilly continues:

> By distancing the narrative from socially subordinate groups distinguished by strong differences in dialect or appearance, by withholding explanation of their behavior, and above all by establishing a narrative viewpoint readily identifiable as old stock, formally educated, and more learned than frontier settlers, workers, and ethnics, these normative

> texts create an identification between readers and authors that expresses the monopoly of discourse by a ruling caste or class. That monopoly is exactly what Richard Wright aims to subvert in *Native Son* by use of a narrative point of view that draws readers beneath the externals of surface realism, so that as they are led into empathy with Bigger, they will be denied the conventional attitudes of American racial discourse. (46)

Thus, Wright's strategy is groundbreaking, disrupting the norms that prevailed in the American fiction of his time. By granting the reader access to Bigger's thoughts and emotions, he creates opportunities for empathy with a historically dehumanized subject.

Book Two of *Native Son*, "Flight," follows Bigger's journey as he grapples with the implications of Mary's death and formulates a plan to stage her abduction by sending a ransom note to the Daltons. His plan proves unsuccessful, leading him to flee with his girlfriend, Bessie, who tragically becomes a victim of his violent actions through rape and murder. The subsequent Book Three centers on the aftermath of Bigger's arrest, detailing the legal proceedings surrounding his case, including his trial and ultimate sentencing to death.

The publication of *Native Son* solidified Richard Wright's position as a prominent African American writer of his time. The novel quickly gained popularity, becoming a best-seller and receiving praise from the public and critics alike. Its enduring significance in African American literature is widely acknowledged, and it undeniably holds the status of a landmark novel. Renowned critic Irwin Howe highlights its impact, asserting that "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever" (356). Since its publication, the novel has garnered extensive attention from scholars who have examined all facets of the work, ranging from its politics, representations of womanhood, and exploration of spatial dynamics.

The most notorious among the novel's early critics was no one other than James Baldwin. In an essay titled "Everybody's Protest Novel," published in 1949, Baldwin interrogates what he calls the American "protest novel," a derogatory term for certain brands of fictional works that dramatize social injustice. The author highlights Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the classic anti-slavery novel, as an example of how such works perpetuate rather than disturb the status quo. Stowe's novel is criticized for its sentimentality, its excessive reliance on depictions of violence, and its "medieval morality" (Baldwin, *Collected Essays* 11). For Baldwin, the titular Uncle Tom represents the doctrine in which whiteness equates to virtue and blackness embodies evil. The character is defined by his forbearance. Tom is so, Baldwin argues, because "He has to be; he is black; only through this forbearance can he survive or triumph" (*Collected Essays* 14). Thus, humility becomes his path to salvation in the novel's philosophy. As such, Tom is "robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded" (14). Baldwin is equally ruthless in his critique of *Native Son*, which he includes in the same tradition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses…Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. (*Collected Essays* 18)

In 1964, Baldwin published *Notes of a Native Son,* which, as the title indicates, marked the softening of his stance toward Wright's novel. The collection of essays featured the 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" alongside "Many Thousands Gone," in which the author critiques Wright's most famous work again, nevertheless conceding that "no American Negro exists that does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull" (*Collected Essays* 32). Baldwin contends, however, that what Wright failed at was precisely representing the complexity of African American life beyond the protagonist's stereotypical characterization: Bigger, he argues, derives his force from being "the incarnation of a myth" (*Collected Essays* 27). In this sense, *Native Son* reinforces white America's fantasy of blackness, reinforcing stereotypical images of black men, and thriving on "the notorious national taste for the sensational" (*Collected Essays* 28). The novel lacks a necessary dimension of African American humanity, in Baldwin's view, represented by "the relationship Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" (*Collected Essays* 27). Baldwin sees as disastrous the fact that Wright was unable to capture the intricate techniques of survival black Americans have developed and the "complex group reality" of their existence (*Collected Essays* 30). As Lynn Orilla Scott writes, Baldwin's solution to "the trap of race representation" which *Native Son* failed to escape lies in "a commitment to representing the complexity of individual subjectivity as it evolves within the black family and community" (32).

Daniel Quentin Miller asserts that "Baldwin's entire career can be seen as an attempt to revise *Native Son*" (2). Similarly, Scott also identifies a signifying[2] relationship between *If Beale Street Could Talk* and what Baldwin named "the protest novel," in particular, *Native Son* (163).

[2] In this thesis, my use of the term "signifying" follows Lynn Orilla Scott's employment of this concept in *Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*. Scott adopts it in reference to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* as "a metaphor for black literary criticism" (233). Gates's theory explores how African American texts engage with their predecessors by employing patterns of formal revision and intertextuality (Scott 233). Scott considers this notion particularly helpful to understanding Baldwin's work in relation to African American writers that preceded him, as well as in relation to the author's own early work.

As I maintain throughout this thesis, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is in fact filled with signifying moves that confirm Baldwin's revision of Wright's best-known novel. The novels share a thematic concern with the criminalization of black Americans and present a similar perspective of black male vulnerability. They diverge, however, in how they represent the possibilities of resisting and overcoming the law's force. Another crucial distinction between Wright's *Native Son* and Baldwin's *Beale Street* is the latter's commitment to representing the "shared experience" of African Americans that "creates a way of life," which, as Baldwin highlighted, is lacking in the former. Appropriately, Baldwin's *Beale Street* centers on a black family's resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Published in 1974, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is Baldwin's fifth novel. The author's later fiction, namely, *Beale Street* and the novels *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *Just Above My Head* (1979), has received far less critical attention than earlier works such as *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956). As Scott observes, the final three published novels "have been dismissed as less interesting, less complex, and less aesthetically viable than his early works" (13). While *Beale Street* has recently gained renewed interest through its 2018 film adaptation, issues related to black manhood in the novel remain mostly overlooked, receiving limited attention in the majority of critical analyses. One notable exception is Ernest L. Gibson's study *Salvific Manhood: James Baldwin's Novelization of Male Intimacy*, published in 2019, which I reference many times throughout this thesis and revere for its rigorous and innovative consideration of the representations of black manhood in Baldwin's novelistic work.

If Beale Street Could Talk is narrated by nineteen-year-old Clementine "Tish" Rivers, whose soon-to-be husband, Alonzo "Fonny" Hunt, is falsely accused of rape and consequently

imprisoned. As Gibson notes, one of the distinctive features of *Beale Street* is its narrative voice, which "centers Black female vocality in ways that exalt an often marginalized subjectivity, and allows a surrogate voice for the voiceless Black male subject" (165). The novel's portrayal of black male vulnerability, as the author observes, is in itself a challenge to the "American prescriptions of masculinity in the 1970s" (165). Tish's perspective fulfills a dual role in the narrative, also affording the reader "the opportunity to focus on the secreted selves of Black men" (Gibson 165). While *Native Son* is marked by a claustrophobic point-of-view, located exclusively in Bigger, *Beale Street* is attentive to all of its characters, with Tish serving as a keen observer of their complex realities and relationships.

The novel focuses on the couple and their families' struggles as they fight against the legal system for Fonny's freedom. He is incarcerated due to an unfortunate incident with a racist police officer who fabricates a rape claim against Fonny as revenge for his refusal to submit to his authority. Following Fonny's imprisonment, the couple learns of Tish's pregnancy, which becomes a symbol of hope in the novel, as well as a source of strength for the couple in their battle to resist dehumanization. In this sense, *Beale Street* might be perceived, as it has been dismissively named, as merely a "heterosexual love story." But it is also much more. While Baldwin skillfully portrays the deep bond between Tish and Fonny, emphasizing their love and unwavering determination to fight against the injustices that threaten to tear them apart, the author also creates a layered narrative that transcends the boundaries of a simple love story. At the heart of the novel lies an exploration of racial injustice and systemic oppression, exposing the pervasive racism upon which the United States was founded and by which it continues to operate. Baldwin's vivid storytelling sheds light on the dehumanizing effects of unjust legal systems and the harsh realities faced by African Americans in a racially divided society.

Simultaneously, it also illuminates pathways to resistance and liberation, offering a possible avenue for freedom.

Mass incarceration and the politicization of crime

Katherine Beckett and Megan Ming Francis make an important distinction between the terms “mass incarceration” and “carceral state,” which are frequently found in carceral history literature and tend to be used interchangeably but in fact refer to different, yet often overlapping phenomena (434). Carceral State, they explain, is generally used “to call attention to the expanding role of penal institutions, broadly defined, in the lives of the poor and in communities of color” (434). This influence appears often in the form of increased surveillance and control of marginalized groups, without necessarily resulting in higher incarceration rates. Such is the case of New York City’s employment of broken windows policing and stop-and-frisk practices in the 1990s, which targeted minor crimes usually practiced by the urban poor, leading to an increase in petty offenses and misdemeanor court judgments. These measures contributed directly to “the innovation and expansion of court-based systems of control” and therefore to the expansion of carceral state power, although conviction rates decreased in this period (Beckett and Francis 435).

With rare exceptions, the concept of the carceral state is not defined by the authors who discuss the issue. This happens in part because it is not a closed concept, but one that is still evolving and being complicated by new discussions. According to Kayla M. Martensen, scholars of the carceral state, in general, are preoccupied with exploring “how carceral logic and carceral control expand beyond the prison” and how “the logics, practices, and technologies that regulate life inside prisons” are also largely present in social institutions that are not originally designed for punishment (Martensen 2). Per her definition, which was drawn from an analysis of the

common themes found in this literature, the carceral state is "a state that values a carceral logic, which identifies a variety of social problems—like homelessness, poverty, racism, homophobia, and immigration—as criminal problems that require a criminal solution" (9). Thus, mass incarceration is one feature of the growth of the carceral state, but not its entirety.

The concept of mass incarceration, according to Beckett and Francis, originated in the work of David W. Garland, who used the term *mass imprisonment* to address "the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population" and the rapidly growing prison populations in the United States (Garland qt. in Beckett et al. 434). Since then, the conversation has been broadened to include jail populations, and *mass incarceration* was popularized as the term to draw attention to the issue. Studies on this topic, in general, tend to focus on "the tail end of the criminal process," and are particularly interested in understanding "the policy developments that have fueled rising incarceration rates" (Beckett and Francis 434).

In the present thesis, the primary focus of the discussion is not mass incarceration nor the carceral state, but the broader history of the racialization of crime. Nevertheless, by examining the historical trajectory of racial criminalization, it becomes evident that mass incarceration is a significant manifestation and continuation of deeply rooted systemic racism within the criminal justice system of the United States. Examining the historical patterns of racial discrimination, from slavery and Jim Crow[3] to the present, allows for a comprehensive understanding of how race has been utilized as a tool for criminalization throughout American history. The objective is to illustrate the enduring nature of the legacy of racial criminalization and to underscore the far-reaching consequences of the processes that gave rise to the scenario outlined in the initial

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[3] Jim Crow was a system of racial segregation and discrimination enforced in the Southern United States from the late 19th to mid-20th century. During the Jim Crow Era, African Americans faced legal and societal segregation in education, transportation, housing, and public facilities. They also encountered voter suppression, economic disadvantages, and violence from white supremacists. This system persisted until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s challenged it, which led to the end of legal segregation and the increased pursuit of racial equality in the country.

pages of this introduction. Therefore, the following paragraphs discuss the historical roots of this phenomenon, with the goal of providing the reader with the contextual information that sets the stage for the discussion presented in Chapter One.

Analyzing the major trends in scholarship that account for the origins of mass incarceration in the United States, Beckett and Francis highlight the "racial politics perspective" as one of the best-known. Proponents of this framework emphasize the fundamental role of race in American politics, with a focus on "the electoral consequences of the civil rights movement, the changing partisan tactics adopted in this historical and political context, and the role of (racialized) rhetoric around crime and punishment" (Beckett and Francis 438). This approach champions the view that the embracing of the Civil Rights cause by the Democratic party was a critical moment that destabilized partisan dynamics in the United States. Until then, white Southerners' interests were represented mainly by Democrats since the end of the Civil War. With this shift, Republicans made social issues, prominently those related to crime, their top agenda. They framed their opposition to the Civil Rights movement as an issue of public safety, a strategy used to attract the more conservative voters "orphaned" by the Democratic party. Additionally, the GOP's approach (often referred to as "the Southern Strategy") also focused on stigmatizing the poor, mobilizing old stereotypes—frequently associated with blackness—of poverty and criminality as personal, individual failures, according to Beckett and Francis:

> From this perspective, the politicization of the crime issue and the promulgation of tough anticrime policies in the aftermath of the 1960s were also part of a conservative effort to enhance the state's social control capacity while weakening its commitment to social welfare (Beckett 1997, Beckett & Western 2001, Kohler-Hausmann 2017, Weaver 2007). The portrayal of poor people, particularly those who relied on welfare, as dangerous and

undeserving was key to this effort (Katz 2013). Crime and unrest were particularly useful for this purpose, as they portrayed the poor as not only undeserving but also dangerous (Beckett 1997, Gilens 1999, Katz 2013, Quadagno 1994). (Beckett and Francis 437)

Such portrayal of the poor as dangerous relied on "Racialized images and rhetoric highlighting the danger of street crime, the depravity and immorality of welfare recipients" which called for "tough responses to poverty-related problems" (Beckett and Francis 437). With time, Democrats also radicalized their discourse on crime, following in the same direction, in order to compete for swing voters, whose "weight and importance" are increased by the "winner-takes-all" decentralized, bipartisan dynamics:

> Comparative studies…show that racial politics are especially likely to affect penal outcomes in decentralized, federalist, and two-party electoral systems such as the United States (Downes 1988; Lacey 2008, 2010; Savelsberg 1994; Savelsberg & Powell 2019), where elites are incentivized to respond to the (perceived) sentiments and preferences of voters. By contrast, in more corporatist and centralized systems, decision-makers do not need to appear to be responsive to the public and tend to rely more on professional input in the development of criminal justice policy. Empirical studies examining international variation in the use of incarceration show that more centralized, corporatist systems are characterized by lower incarceration rates and thus provide support for this institutional perspective (Jacobs & Kleban 2003; Sutton 2000, 2004; Whitman 2003). (Beckett and Francis 438)

In the decades that followed the Civil Rights movement, especially after the Reagan administration's revival of the so-called Southern Strategy, the "national conversation about crime and punishment" was deeply transformed, which "heightened racial tensions and punitive

preferences, and triggered bipartisan competition to be toughest on crime" (Beckett and Francis 447).

Scholars have also given significant consideration to other four accounts of the origins of mass incarceration, which Beckett and Francis analyze and discuss. One of those accounts argues that there is a correlation between the rise of violent crime and penal expansion, and its reasoning is ultimately flawed because it ignores that the overall rates of violence, and especially the rates of white victimization, were either stable or declining while mass incarceration continued to rise. Black victimization rates, however, increased dramatically after the 1960s but also decreased during a significant part of the development of the ostensible criminal system of the United States. Thus, this thesis lacks credibility "given that exceptionally high rates of black victimization have been the norm rather than the exception throughout US history," therefore "it seems highly unlikely that rising levels of black victimization in the 1960s were the fundamental cause of mass incarceration" (Beckett and Francis 446).

Another perspective highlights the role of liberal politicians in the making of mass incarceration. Although it does offer relevant insights, this perspective is still insufficient to disprove the racial politics perspective, since the latter considers mass incarceration a bipartisan enterprise. Thus, illuminating the role of liberal administrations in the origins of mass incarceration only strengthens the argument that "the centrality of racial dynamics in the context of the two-party, winner-take-all system" essentially "encouraged Democrats and Republicans alike to be seen as tough on crime" (Beckett and Francis 446).

Finally, two other bodies of literature offer additional perspectives on the origins of mass incarceration. The first argues that mass incarceration developed as a neoliberal project, emphasizing the ways in which "neoliberalism, through its embrace of the market as a solution

for all policy problems, radically reframed governments' relationship to its poorest citizens" (Beckett and Francis 440). Loïc Wacquaint, for instance, argues that hyperpenality emerged as a response to the inequality fueled by neoliberal policies, essentially serving as a means for the elites to manage the social consequences of the impoverishment of the urban working class (Beckett and Francis 440). However, the "mass incarceration as neoliberal project" thesis is most valuable when it helps to explain how the profit-seeking private sector played a role in shaping the American legal and carceral apparatus, especially since the 1980s, through the privatization of government functions. Another perspective centers on the "changing cultural values and sensibilities" of late modernity as the cause for the rise of both crime rates and punitive responses. What these two perspectives have in common is that neither of them explains how cultural and political behaviors and practices that do not exclusively occur in the United States resulted in a scenario that is so unique to this country. Stated differently, how can we account for the fact that the United States has experienced incarceration on a mass scale in the wake of neoliberalism and late modernity but no other country that has had similar processes did?

In agreement with Beckett and Francis, I maintain that a phenomenon as complex as mass incarceration cannot be fully explained by a single perspective. Nevertheless, the racial politics lens still offers the most comprehensive view in terms of its consideration of a uniquely American anomaly. Its focus on the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and the politicization of the crime issue help explain the growth of incarceration rates across the country in the late twentieth century, following the revival of the Southern strategy in the 1980 presidential election, as summarized by Beckett and Francis:

> Measures enacted at the federal level in the 1980s and 1990s significantly enhanced funding for state and local law enforcement; incentivized more aggressive practices and

> policies; and, perhaps most importantly, encouraged the enactment of tough sentencing laws by the states. In this context, incarceration rates rose dramatically across all 50 states between 1980 and 2007. (438)

Hence, a comprehensive understanding of mass incarceration in the United States necessitates acknowledging its intrinsic connection to the history of racial oppression. By drawing this connection between the present scenario and its historical roots, I aim to offer a contextualization for my analysis of how the enduring anti-black punitive tradition of the United States is fundamental to the reading of *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk.* In Chapter One, I provide an overview of these processes, aiming to equip the reader with a foundation for the subsequent exploration of the issues of racial criminalization within the selected novels. An essential resource I rely on for this task is Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, which provides a biography of the idea of black criminality in the United States and explores the role of statistical discourse in the crafting of this pervasive cultural narrative. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* also offers important insights to this discussion.

Chapter Two focuses on the discussion of black manhood through a philosophical lens. I rely significantly on the work of African American scholar Tommy J. Curry, especially *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemma of Black Manhood*, published in 2017, which challenges the prevailing representations of men of color in both academia and American society. Curry argues that academic and cultural discourses on race and gender ignore the reality of African American men and perpetuate harmful narratives that obscure our understanding of the unique forms of oppression faced by this group. Given that Curry's contribution to the study of

black manhood is invaluable, *The Man-Not*, along with his other additional articles and published chapters I reference extensively, serves as a crucial source of inspiration for this thesis.

In my review of Curry's work, a significant theme that emerges is the existential significance of death in the context of black manhood. Taking this into consideration, my examination of the selected novels aims to explore the presence of death in their narratives, illuminating the intrinsic connection between the deaths of men of color and the way they are perceived by American society. Additionally, Abdul R. JanMohamed's *The Death-Bound-Subject*: *Richard Wright's Archeology of Death* appears as an essential source, providing a methodology that sheds light on the significance of the threat of death in African American literature and culture.

Finally, Chapter Three is concerned with the myth of the black rapist, a cultural narrative that has been used to justify various forms of violence against black men since the 19th century. In regard to this subject, Curry's *The Man-Not* also offers crucial insights. Curry traces the origins of this cultural trope to nineteenth-century ethnology, in which black men were depicted as brutes, savages, sexual deviants, and aggressors. Moreover, Curry focuses on the role of white womanhood in the crafting of this racist fiction, arguing that the construction of white women as "vulnerable to the Black rapist" served to "justify all sorts of punitive sexual acts against free Black men that indicated not only that they were unfit for freedom in the republic but also that their demise was necessary for the entrance of white women into the public square of governance" (*The Man-Not* 56). Similarly, Angela Davis also argues that the myth of the black rapist was "a distinctly political invention" (*Women, Race, and Class* 191). According to Davis, "The fictional image of the black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous" (*Women, Race, and*

Class 189). Thus, the myth of the black rapist served to conceal the sexual victimization of black women and to justify the lynching of black men. Lynching is understood by Davis as a strategy of racist terror in post-Civil War America, and her text provides relevant historical and statistical data to fulfill the objective of discussing the origins and endurance of this myth and the atrocities it has been used to justify.

Chapter One

Racial Criminalization and Subjectivity

> "I am what time, circumstance, and history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also, much more than that."
> —James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

Mass incarceration is a complex and far-reaching phenomenon that deeply affects various aspects of American society, including social, political, and economic spheres. In this chapter, we will explore its origins, specifically focusing on the historical process of the racialization of crime, in order to provide a contextual understanding of the interplay between crime, race, and gender. To situate the literary works central to this thesis within the broader context of racial oppression, it is essential to establish a historical overview. Therefore, we will begin our review from the Colonial era[4], tracing the significant processes that led to the escalation of mass incarceration during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The primary aim of this exploration is to create a backdrop for the examination of the issues presented in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, as both novels illuminate the experiences of black men and their responses to the enduring legacy of widespread criminalization imposed on black Americans. By analyzing their portrayals of black manhood and the characters' reactions, we gain insights into the matters of subjectivity[5] presented in these literary works. This discussion is developed in the final two sections of the present chapter.

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[4] The Colonial era refers to the period between 1607-1775, before the former thirteen colonies declared themselves an independent nation in 1776.

[5] In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self,* Linda Alcoff emphasizes the interplay between subjectivity and identity, arguing that "...our 'visible' and acknowledged identity affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience or subjectivity" (92). I use the terms "identity" and "subjectivity" interchangeably with the purpose of acknowledging this interplay. While I understand that they are not directly equivalent, my intention is to highlight the socially-constructed nature of both these notions.

As discussed in the introduction, it is impossible to account for mass incarceration in the United States without addressing its intertwined history with racial oppression. The roots of the association of blackness with criminality, however, extend far beyond the events that fueled the contemporary growth of incarceration in the country. As Elizabeth Hinton and DeAnza Cook argue, we must understand contemporary mass incarceration as “one historical moment within a much longer and larger antiblack punitive tradition” defined by “the habitual surveillance and incapacitation of racialized individuals and communities” (263). Drawing from the scholarship that investigates the extensive implications of racial bias against African Americans within the United States’s criminal justice system, they demonstrate that “it is impossible to disentangle institutional racism in America—past and present—from the simultaneous development of the nation’s criminal legal system” (264). Thus, their review will be the point of departure for our discussion.

1.1 The Construction of Black Criminality

The history of the mass criminalization of black Americans begins in the colonial period: “Since the origins of modern American policing and imprisonment, black people—free, enslaved, and self-emancipated—have consistently been the targets of unique forms of policing and confinement” (Hinton et. al 265). At that time, although most enslaved people did not have much formal contact with the justice system, prisons, and jails had a critical role in maintaining the authority of enslavers by inflicting punishments at their requests, as well as by housing incoming enslaved people before they were leased out or sold (Henderson qt. in Hinton et al. 266). Law enforcement in the antebellum South also originated in slavery, with the emergence of “slave patrols”:

> Charged with the responsibilities of slave management, insurrection suppression, and the maintenance of white racial and social order, slave patrollers served as the premodern predecessors for law enforcement practices that have shaped American history. Any person of African descent in the slave states who appeared to be outside of the control of a white master and failed to otherwise prove their free status could be seized and imprisoned by nearly any capable white civilian. (Hinton and Cook 266)

During the antebellum period, in the Northern free states, as well as in the Western and Southern regions, law-and-order systems, although "idiosyncratic and decentralized," "were all tightly bound to the enforcement of slavery, especially after the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850" (Hinton et al. 267). What law enforcement had in common in all regions across the country was its definition of the criminal—who it targeted and what it was meant to protect—which "fundamentally influenced the purpose and practice of police power, namely protecting white property and maintaining the social order by controlling the urban poor, enslaved Africans, and other marginalized groups" (Hinton and Cook 267).

The Black Codes, a range of restrictive laws that were put in place in former Confederate states after the end of the Civil War, played a key role in maintaining racial hierarchy after the 13th Amendment was passed. Most states still denied freed African Americans the right to vote, possess firearms, and testify in court; some states also carried penalties for interracial marriages, for people of color who assembled publicly after sunset, and even for those who did as much as falling "in the proximity of white residents in public," as was the case in Florida (Hinton et al. 268). Moreover, "vagrancy laws at the center of the Black Codes compelled newly freed men, women, and children to either enter into contracts with white employers as punishment or risk entering a system of incarceration administered by private industry, known as the convict-lease

system" (Hinton and Cook 268). In this system, convicts were leased out as cheap laborers to companies engaged in railroad building, mining, agriculture, and other businesses (Adamson 567). Since those companies had no incentive to keep them healthy or alive, "most laborers did not live long enough to serve a 10-year sentence" (Hinton and Cook 268). The convict-lease system was, as Douglas A. Beckmon has called it, slavery by another name.

During this period, "the convict population grew ten times faster than the general population" (Alexander 32). Convict leasing only came to an end in the first decades of the twentieth century, when white convicts began to be subjected to the same treatment on a larger scale:

> Penal authorities formed chain gangs and used convict labor to build the roads of the twentieth-century South. As both the convict-lease and the chain-gang systems expanded, white lawbreakers found themselves increasingly sentenced to the kind of hard labor that black prisoners had endured for decades. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the brutality of penal labor regimes became increasingly visible and the press began to depict such forced labor as a "national horror" and a threat to free laborers. (Hinton and Cook 269)

The decades following the end of slavery, the Reconstruction era[6], were the period that birthed the ideas of black criminality that continue to exist in American society today. Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime and the Making of Modern America* offers important insights into how statistical discourse between 1890 and 1940 forged the pervasive link between blackness and criminality which has come to impact every aspect of

[6] The period between 1865 and 1877 became known as the Reconstruction era, as the focus on rebuilding the nation after the end of the Civil War took front stage in the national debate. Overcoming the social, political and economic legacy of slavery and the problems that arose from the readmission of the 11 confederate states into the Union after the official outlawing of slavery was the aim of many federal government initiatives. They ultimately fell short in their goals, although some progress in civil rights was made during this period.

black life in America: “In all manner of conversations about race—from debates about parenting to education to urban life—black crime statistics are ubiquitous. By the same token, white crime statistics are virtually invisible, except when used to dramatize the excessive criminality of African Americans” (1). Among Muhammad’s accomplishments with this work is his demonstration of how the urban North was “a crucial site for the production of modern ideas about race, crime, and punishment,” (4) in opposition to what is commonly assumed in terms of white supremacy in the Northern versus Southern United States. Muhammad’s book raises important questions, such as “how did European immigrants—the Irish and the Italians and the Polish, for example—gradually shed their criminal identities while blacks did not? In other words, how did criminality go from plural to singular?” (5).

The answer is in the gradual shift, starting in the Reconstruction era, from a biological to a statistical discourse of white supremacy. By the time slavery had ended, approximately 4 million people had to be incorporated into American society as citizens, which could not effectively happen without threatening the prevailing power structures. Across the nation, many were concerned with the so-called “Negro Problem,” which, as Muhammad defines it, was “partly an extension of the reconstitution of new economic roles for new groups in society, partly a product of a growing belief that black people could not and should not be assimilated as truly free members of a white society, and partly a new intellectual synthesis of the two” (30). Supported by ideas of social and racial Darwinism, scholars sought to “prove” that blacks had no place in modern America as free citizens.

A key moment Muhammad reconstructs is the 1890 census, which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of slavery. This particular census was much anticipated, as it was expected to determine the black population’s fitness for modern life: “Since most

post-emancipation writers believed that slavery had sustained black people and protected them from their own defective biology and savage ways, this would be the first census to show how the race was truly faring on its own" (31). Statistical discourse on black criminality would come to the aid of the old "anecdotal, hereditarian, and pseudo-biological theories of race":

> Out of the new methods and data sources, black criminality would emerge, alongside disease and intelligence, as a fundamental measure of black inferiority. From the 1890s through the first four decades of the twentieth century, black criminality would become one of the most commonly cited and longest-lasting justifications for black inequality and mortality in the modern urban world. (Muhammad 20)

The census showed that black Americans were "a steadily declining population," which was read by scholars as a "movement towards extinction" that was "the natural fate of a primitive race, struggling to survive on its own in an advanced civilized society" (Muhammad 32). Statisticians such as Frederick L. Hoffman innovated by proposing that the increasing mortality rates in the black population were a result of their involvement with crime.

A crucial character in the process of "writing race into crime," as Muhammad names it, Hoffman published *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* in 1896. His book was the first to present a nationwide analysis of the so-called "Negro Problem" in terms of crime statistics and the most influential in the field in the early twentieth century (Muhammad 35). Hoffman relied on his status as an immigrant, which he argued granted him a place of neutrality in relation to Southern or Northern scholars, who were assumed to have personal investments in the slavery debate. As Muhammad puts it: Hoffman "...marketed himself as a clear-eyed, plainspoken, unbiased foreign observer of American race relations and demographic trends" (53).

Following in the footsteps of other scholars who claimed to be dispassionate and impartial to the race issue, "Hoffman combined crime statistics with a well-crafted white supremacist narrative to shape the reading of black criminality while trying to minimize the appearance of doing so," and as such innovating not only by being the first to present the data, "but also in setting the terms and shaping the frame of analysis" (Muhammad 51). His strategy of concealing typically Southern views of black inferiority and bestiality in the language of crime statistics that would appeal to white Northerner liberals paved the way for other race-relations writers across the nation who needed "to overcome the long-sought-after scientific goal of credibility within racial scientific discourse" (75). Hoffman's grim legacy is explained by Muhammad:

> Many white race-relations writers hoped to blaze a research trail to solve the Negro Problem by writing crime into race. In the process, they also hoped to save the nation by using black criminality as a rhetorical bridge to heal deep sectional divisions and distrust rooted in the postbellum era. These writers saw vital racial statistics as a pathway to certainty and serenity. Beginning with Hoffman, they wanted their fellow Americans to see the indisputable evidence of black criminality as the key to binding the nation together in a campaign to keep the "negro" in his place. (86)

Hoffman viewed the high mortality rates among black Americans as a sign of "the innate self-destructive tendencies of black people" (35) and insisted that it was useless to waste resources "on a vanishing race" (40). The contrast with his stance towards poor whites is stark. In his analysis of the growing incidence of suicide in white Northern communities, he concluded that "the stresses and strains of modern civilization were to blame" and no resource should be spared to solve the issue: "Hoffman interpreted whites' self-destructive behavior as a

consequence of a diseased society, not of a 'diseased manhood and womanhood' … On the white side of the color line, it would take nothing short of "emergency measures" to save modern civilization from itself" (Muhammad 41).

Race Traits was considered a major innovation for presenting the first-ever statistical study of "the negro criminal". Ultimately, Hoffman succeeded in "framing black criminality as a key measure of black inferiority in the same way that his peers and predecessors had done through anatomical measurements and mortality data," centering the issue "at the heart of the Negro Problem" (Muhammad 52). Hoffman is also credited with nationalizing the "Negro Problem" by being the "first modern race-relations expert to evince the statistical connections between black migration to the North, urbanization, and criminality" (55). He cautioned Northerners of the dangers of permitting those "undesirable characters" to crowd their cities, which would result in "a serious hindrance to the economic progress of the white race" (qtd. Muhammad 54). As Muhammad argues, marking black migrants as "dangerous outcomers" was essential to the European immigrants' assimilation into the "singular white race"; the comparison of the categories of "foreign-born" and "negro" was "foundational to the emergence of distinctive modern discourses on race and crime" (Muhammad 6). Therefore, Hoffman and his peers played a crucial role in dissipating the criminal identities associated with immigrants and shaping the enduring perception of black individuals as inherently prone to criminal behavior.

Moreover, as Muhammad maintains, scholars like Hoffman and his Progressive Era[7] contemporaries "used crime statistics to demonstrate the suffering of poor and working-class immigrants and native whites" while framing the equivalent data to dehumanize African

[7] The Progressive era in the United States was a period of social and political reform that spanned from the 1890s to the 1920s. Various social, economic and political issues that arose from industrialization, urbanization, and the rapid changes in American society were its focus.

Americans (Muhammad 273). This impacted directly the distribution of resources, social work, and even crime prevention efforts:

> Long before the late-model black drug dealer became public enemy number one, white bootleggers, drug pushers, pimps, common thieves, and thugs plied their trade in black communities alongside their black peers, but with the police on their side. Thoughtful, well-funded crime prevention and politically accountable crime-fighting secured immigrants' whiteness, in contrast to the experiences of blacks, who were often brutalized or left unprotected and were repeatedly told to conquer their own crime before others would help them. (Muhammad 273)

Of the same importance is the fact that this supposedly objective, unbiased, dispassionate discipline of statistics fueled discrimination, segregation, and violence against African Americans in the wake of the twentieth century. As Hinton and Cook explain:

> Considered an objective truth and a statistically irrefutable fact, notions of black criminality justified both structural and everyday racism. The racialized discourse of crime allowed white Americans to express preferences about living next door to black Americans, eating in the same restaurants, or allowing their children to socialize with children of color in public playgrounds. Taken to its extreme, ideas about innate black criminality sanctioned the terror of mob violence, or lynching, in the era of Jim Crow, whereby vigilante groups took "justice" into their own hands (269).

Michelle Alexander picks up where Muhammad left off with *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.* Published in 2010, her book is largely recognized as having brought the discussion of racial inequality and mass incarceration to the general public. Although Alexander was not the first to connect the current system of mass incarceration to the

long history of chattel slavery and racial subordination in the United States, her work has had the most impact in terms of mobilizing public opinion and influencing policymakers. Alexander has also been a major influence for scholars of the carceral state who reinterpreted her work and articulated insights that “have demonstrated the significance of federal and local crime-control policies, the role of police, and activism within black communities that both shaped and resisted the expansion of the US carceral-security state” (Hinton and Cook 262). Since its publication in 2010, *The New Jim Crow* has been contested and challenged in many of its aspects; nevertheless, it is still recognized as having brought forth relevant insights that illuminate the processes that produced racial criminalization.

Alexander’s claims in *The New Jim Crow* revolve around the notion that the contemporary system of mass incarceration serves as a caste system. In “the era of colorblindness,” she argues, it is no longer acceptable to use race as a factor for discrimination. Criminality, then, emerged as justification for marginalization. According to her, “...as a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow” (2). This form of racial segregation operates in a race-neutral language, with the label of “felon” being the one that justifies exclusion. Moreover, racial bias is encoded in the stereotypes that equate “criminal” with young, black, and male. Alexander considers mass incarceration to be a “race-making institution”: “Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals” (192). Fundamental to Alexander’s thesis is the argument that systems of discrimination do not die, they are “reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and

constraints of the time" (21). Thus, slavery was replaced by Jim Crow, which gave way to mass incarceration; one system collapses as another one appears.

Addressing the "birth" of Jim Crow, Alexander highlights that it emerged out of a deliberate effort from white elites to create opposition between African Americans and poor whites, in order to destroy their collaboration in a "multiracial, working-class movement" that was rising during Redemption (33). Northern liberals, "eager to reconcile with the South," abided by segregation (34). And so was the new racial order, Jim Crow, established:

> By the turn of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life, lending sanction to a racial ostracism that extended to schools, churches, housing, jobs, restrooms, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries. (Alexander 35)

There is no consensus regarding the exact end of Jim Crow and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, but, as Alexander details, by 1945 "a growing number of whites in the North had concluded that the Jim Crow system would have to be modified, if not entirely overthrown" (35). Among the factors that contributed to this belief was the growing political power of blacks who had migrated to the North and the influence of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), though many scholars consider that the most decisive aspect was the influence of World War II (Alexander 36). In short, given the nation's allegiance with the Allied Powers, the existence of a system like Jim Crow in the Southern United States could be a threat to the country's hegemony as a "leader of the 'free world'" (36). Additionally, there was concern over the possibility of communist influence over African Americans who sought social and economic equality. Thus, an attempt to end Jim Crow was

imposed from the top down by Supreme Court decisions across the 1940s and 1950s. Nonetheless, it was met with severe backlash from Southern legislatures, a movement that Alexander compares to the passing of the Black Codes after the end of slavery. As a result of those attempts, the Ku Klux Klan also responded and "reasserted itself as a powerful terrorist organization, committing castrations, killings, and the bombing of black homes and churches. NAACP leaders were beaten, pistol-whipped, and shot" (Alexander 37).

Without the insurgence of thousands of African Americans in a Civil Rights movement that reached its peak around 1963, Jim Crow would not have subsided. As Alexander highlights: "With extraordinary bravery, civil rights leaders, activists, and progressive clergy launched boycotts, marches, and sit-ins protesting the Jim Crow system. They endured fire hoses, police dogs, bombings, and beatings by white mobs, as well as by the police" (Alexander 37). Finally, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 brought forth a new era where "those committed to racial hierarchy were forced to search for new means of achieving their goals according to the new rules of American democracy" (40). And thus, mass incarceration was born.

1.2 "What I Killed for, I am"

Although Bigger Thomas's life before the events of *Native Son* is not explored much in the novel, what is known about the character suggests that his life story echoes that of many African Americans of his time. When the novel begins, it is known that Bigger has been in Chicago for about five years and that his father was killed in a riot in the South when he was a child. Like his creator, Richard Wright, and millions of African Americans, Bigger took part in the Great Migration, leaving Mississippi with his family in search of better conditions in the

urban North. What they found was far from a promised land: the family of four is overcharged for a one-bedroom, rat-infested apartment, in a "corner of the city tumbling down from rot" in segregated Chicago (*Native Son* 199). Bigger lives in poverty, but is constantly bombarded with the knowledge that whites around him live a life of glamor and luxury, a life he dreams of but knows is unattainable to him. In Gabriel N. Mendes's words, Bigger represents "the literary manifestation of the modern black individual, who, bereft of the cultural armament of his forebears, thrashes about in the hard, cold city, bumping against all the codes and mores erected to keep the unruly in place" (34). His characterization, as his creator explains, as "a symbolic figure of American life" ("How 'Bigger' was Born" 522) reinforces that *Native Son* is Wright's response to the "Negro Problem," as I will argue in the following paragraphs.

Cynthia Tolentino maintains that *Native Son* critiques "liberal interpretations of the 'Negro Problem,'" by which she refers mainly to the ideas championed by Progressives and Chicago School sociologists as a "challenge to the prevailing biological theories of racial superiority" (378). These liberal narratives of race that "have traditionally figured black Americans as the subjects and beneficiaries of racial reforms carried out by white Americans" (Tolentino 388), are countered by Wright with his perspective on black agency and autonomy. Building on Tolentino's argument, I add that other competing discourses on the "Negro Problem" are examined by the author in *Native Son*. In addition to liberal narratives of race, Wright dramatizes the power of traditional, pseudo-scientific notions of black inferiority, as well as discourses on black criminality, the latter of which end up prevailing as the main force in the novel.

Native Son delves into the power of discourse. The novel is generally seen as a work of naturalist fiction, grounded in notions of environmental determinism. It is possible to view it as

such, as James Baldwin has famously done, but as David Guest argues, "the determinism in the novel is less environmental than rhetorical" (84). While it can be argued that *Native Son* posits that society produces men like Bigger Thomas, who becomes a murderer as a response to feeling trapped in an environment of racial terror, his story is best understood as that of "a man made murderous by his society's ability to define him as such" (Guest 77). In other words, Bigger resorts to violence not merely as a response to the conditions of his environment, but mainly to the impossibility to define himself in any way. As Theodore Martin suggests, "Bigger's awareness of race as a concept made meaningful by criminalization" is what drives him to seek self-determination by committing "a crime even worse than what white society could imagine" (12). From the moment he enters the white neighborhood in which the Dalton house is located, he is aware that his presence registers as transgression: "Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody" (*Native Son* 49). Bigger's world affords him no other possibility: "There was just the old feeling, the feeling he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong" (*Native Son* 253). Thus, Bigger believes that his only path to self-assertion is through pushing further the stereotype of the black criminal, attempting to push the very boundaries defined for his existence.

Bigger Thomas's daily existence is characterized by a sense of hopelessness and frustration, which manifest as deep-seated resentment toward white society. To cope with the burdens of his life, Bigger engages in illicit activities, mainly petty theft, often in the company of his friends. He spends his days at the local poolroom, a site of gathering for his small community of young black men, where he seeks solace from the struggles he encounters. When presented with the opportunity to work for the wealthy Daltons, he perceives it as a possible path to upward mobility.

On his first evening as an employee of the Daltons, Bigger chauffeurs Mary, the couple's rebellious daughter, and her communist boyfriend, Jan, around Chicago. They are unlike any other white people Bigger had previously encountered: they profess an intense desire to relate to him as an equal, also ignoring the conventions that governed the interactions between black and white individuals in Jim Crow America. Their misguided sense of social progressiveness makes Bigger extremely uncomfortable, serving only to intensify the brewing tension within him. The contrast between Mary's world of opulence and privilege and his marginalized existence exacerbates his feelings of resentment and suspicion toward the couple.

As the evening comes to an end, Bigger finds himself caring for the inebriated Mary, who is unable to walk or stand still on her own. Bigger, who himself is also slightly intoxicated, carries the woman to her bedroom, dominated by a mix of fear and attraction. Placing Mary on her bed, he kisses her. The tension reaches its peak when Mrs. Dalton, Mary's blind mother, enters the room in search of her daughter. Bigger desperately covers the young woman's face with a pillow to keep her quiet, suffocating her to death. The incident propels Bigger into a series of complex developments that lead him to embrace the identity of a murderer.

Ironically, when Mary Dalton dies, Bigger is not yet a murderer or a rapist; her death is accidental and the result of the extreme despair that overtakes him when the threat of being discovered in Mary's bedroom arises. When Mrs. Dalton entered the room, "a hysterical terror seized him" (*Native Son* 97) because he understood the severity of the punishment that awaited him if he were to be seen. As Patricia Tuitt notes, Wright constantly evokes the metaphor of "the white blur" in the novel as representative of "the totalizing effect" of a force that governs Bigger's life. That force, for Tuitt, is the law and its violence, its complicity and engagement in the construction of "the myth of race" that defines humanity in terms of race and skin color

(205). In the bedroom scene, particularly, the "white blur" appears constantly, reminding Bigger of the probable outcomes of his transgression. At times, the "white blur" is the silhouette of the blind Mrs. Dalton, an evident symbol of justice itself. Hence, Mary's death is a direct consequence of this threatening force of the law that looms over Bigger. But the force that threatens his existence is not simply the black-letter law, that is, the written, practical law, but mainly the "white-letter law", as I. Bennet Capers suggests, the "societal and normative laws that stand side by side with, and often undergird, black-letter law but as if inscribed in white ink on white paper" (8). In this case, the white-letter law determines the boundaries which Bigger, as a black man, has trespassed by being in proximity to Mary, a white woman.

Despite the accidental nature of Mary's death, Bigger frames the event almost immediately as a murder: "He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman" (*Native Son* 100). On one hand, that affirmation comes from his knowledge that no other explanation for the accident would be accepted—"He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said" (*Native Son* 119). The choice for the terms "black murderer" and "white woman" emphasizes that this configuration already prefigures the roles of victim and aggressor. Understanding this scenario, a distraught Bigger attempts to conceal Mary's body by stuffing it in a furnace and beheading her corpse in the process. On the other hand, as Abdul R. JanMohamed argues, the decapitation of Mary constitutes a second killing: while the "first" was unintentional—Bigger accidentally suffocated her to save himself—the "second" murder "consisting of Bigger's decision to take Mary's body to the basement, and to burn it in the furnace, and to cut off her head when the entire body will not fit" is "quite deliberate and intentional" (98). Thus, the enactment of the "gruesome details of

the second murder" positions Bigger not as a mere victim of circumstances, but as a subject with agency, threading a fine line between "a victim and a monster" (JanMohamed 99).

That agency, however, is contaminated with the force of dominant discourse. Bigger's "second murder" of Mary demonstrates the degree to which his identity is overdetermined by his drive to fulfill the role society has ascribed to black male subjectivity. In Sabine Silke's words, Bigger enacts "the identity dominant discourse has molded," which leads him to "wholeheartedly accept that identity of negation and death as his 'true self'" (105). The "second murder," then, is what enables Bigger to assume this new identity.

Determined to fulfill the role of the murderer, throughout Book Two, Bigger replaces his overwhelming fear of the consequences of Mary's death with a sense of confidence. With this process, Wright illuminates how "criminalization precedes and produces ontology" (Martin 13). The murder of Mary takes on a significant meaning for Bigger, representing his autonomy and power. As the narrator explains: "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as a symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them [white people]" (*Native Son* 188). Prior to and during the events leading to Mary's death, fear controlled Bigger's actions and emotions. He often carried a gun and a knife with him, symbolic of his feelings of powerlessness and impotence. Now, the knowledge of his murder of Mary holds a different significance for him: it becomes the defining aspect of his new identity, surpassing what his gun and knife once represented (*Native Son* 170). This unimaginable act becomes the focal point of his sense of self:

> The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and the world he feared. He had murdered and created a new life for

> himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take from him. (*Native Son* 119)

Paradoxically, the "new life" Bigger creates for himself sets up the circumstances for his death. In this sense, Bigger's "act of self-creation" is an act of self-destruction. Hence, there's an oedipal quality to Bigger's trajectory, as Capers observes:

> After all, it is fear of the law's response that makes Bigger reluctant to even enter a predominantly white neighborhood, to even squeeze past the Dalton's housekeeper to enter the Dalton home, to even talk to Mary, to even shake Jan's hand or call him by his first name, to even make himself physically comfortable, to even help Mary to her room, to even be found in Mary's room. Perversely, it is the law's role in maintaining racial boundaries that results in Bigger suffocating Mary. As Barbara Johnson puts it, "Like Oedipus, it is through [Bigger's] efforts to *avoid* enacting the forbidden story that he inevitably enacts it (152)." (36)

The extent to which Bigger is entrapped in the narrative of the black criminal is also illustrated in the murder of Bessie, his girlfriend. Unlike what happened with Mary, when Bigger consciously decides to kill Bessie, he is calm and cold, and it is "as if the decision were being handed down to him by some logic not his own, over which he had no control, but which he had to obey" (*Native Son* 264). The reader is given the impression that his adoption of the "murderer" identity exceeds his own will; it is as if Bigger is performing a role or following a script, as the passage suggests. The force of the law and its capacity to define humanity is also expressed in the distinctions between how the character perceives the two killings. The murder of Bessie, a black woman, is viewed as far less consequential: "He had not thought of Bessie but once since his capture. Her death was unimportant beside that of Mary's; he knew that when they

killed him it would be for Mary's death; not Bessie's" (*Native Son* 351). Because Bessie, like Bigger, occupies a space of "bare life," being a subject whose life has no value under the logic of a racist social order, her murder does not carry the weight of a transgression, as Mary's death did. It is, then, framed as an unemotional and practical matter: "It was his life against hers" (*Native Son* 273). Confirming Bigger's reasoning, when he is arrested and tried, her corpse is used by the prosecution as merely "evidence" to prove he must have raped Mary, as he did with Bessie.

The elements discussed so far show how Wright constructs the idea of a "feedback loop of racial criminalization" (Martin 13). Even in his efforts toward agency and autonomy, Bigger remains stuck in the position American society has assigned to black males. As Silke suggests, Bigger's employment at the Dalton house, which sets up the circumstances that lead to his "self-creation" as a murderer, is what enables him to "make a man out of [himself]," as his mother had pleaded (*Native Son* 114). His process of becoming a black man, however, is determined precisely by the conditions through which society defines what it means to be black and male: a criminal.

When Bigger is arrested, the sensationalized media coverage of his case reinforces the idea of a feedback loop of racial criminalization. The projections made by Bigger at the time of Mary's death that he would be seen as a murderer regardless of what he said proved true. It is also significant that Bigger is assumed to be a rapist even though there is no evidence that the crime had any sexual motivation. In the news coverage of his arrest, he is described by the fictionalized *Chicago Tribune* as "a Negro killer," "a Negro sex-slayer," "an ape," "a beast," and "the brutish Negro" (*Native Son* 322-23). Aside from the fact that he is presented to the public as guilty before being tried, which marks his status as a subject without political rights, the language used to describe him is also heavily animalizing:

> He seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. In speech and manner he lacks the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people…He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed *out of place in a white man's civilization.*" (emphasis added; 323)

Here, we are reminded of the pseudo-scientific biological discourses of white supremacy used to legitimize the dehumanization of African Americans. Moreover, this passage evokes the so-called "Negro Problem." Just as crime statistics were used to justify structural and everyday racism, the editor of the *Tribune* uses Bigger's alleged crime to remind his readers that blacks are a potential threat to "a white man's civilization," save for those who conformed to white expectations of behavior and performed the archetype of the "harmless, genial, grinning southern darky." The editor of the *Tribune* appears to consider that African Americans can only exist as one of these two polar images.

Bigger is marked as an "other," at the margins of humanity. His affiliation with "a white man's civilization" defines both his inclusion and exclusion from it, as his story can easily be appropriated for ideological purposes and "refashioned into a racist myth" (Guest 91). In contrast with the way Bigger is described are the words used to refer to the victim: "It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered *little Mary Dalton*, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her…" (323; emphasis added). While Bigger is characterized as barely human, Mary's fragility is emphasized to evoke the myth of the black rapist, also a central issue in the novel, and a subject to which I return in Chapter Three.

In the pages of the fictionalized *Tribune*, Bigger also reads that "Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all Negros in parks, playgrounds,

cafés, theaters, and street cars. Residential segregation is imperative" (*Native Son* 324). This passage is a quote from a Mississippi editor who writes to the newspaper to inform about Bigger's early life in the South. As Clare Eby maintains, "Wright shows how the North follows rather than revises Southern stereotypes about black men" (126). This is reinforced by the editor's claim that Bigger, "despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature" (*Native Son* 324). The fear of miscegenation, as Eby notes, "evoking the threat of a mulatto nation" (Eby 126), along with the collaboration between Northern and Southern press is suggestive of the use of "black criminality as a rhetorical bridge to heal deep sectional divisions and distrust" that Muhammad highlighted (86).

Other than being appropriated as a justification for maintaining segregation, Bigger's crimes are also used as an "excuse to terrorize the black community" (*Native Son* 448), as "several hundred Negroes resembling Bigger Thomas were rounded up from South Side 'hot spots'" (*Native Son* 283), "several Negro men were beaten," and "Police and vigilantes…[searched] every Negro home under a blanket warrant from the Mayor" (*Native Son* 282). In these passages, Wright illustrates how criminality was evoked to justify the racial terror promoted by civilians and the state alike.

The newspaper article might appear to be an exaggerated fictionalization of racism, but it is, in fact, an almost verbatim quotation of a real article featured in the *Chicago Tribune* on May 27th, 1938, regarding the Robert Nixon and Earl Hicks case (Kinnamon 68). The two men were accused of beating a woman to death with a brick. Later, Nixon was also accused of other unrelated murders in the city. As Kinnamon informs, although there was no evidence of rape, the *Tribune* ostensibly publicized the murder as a sex crime. Nixon, likely because he was the

darker-skinned of the two, was the main target, being “referred to repeatedly as the ‘brick moron,’ ‘rapist slayer,’ ‘jungle beast,’ ‘sex moron,’ and the like. His race was constantly emphasized” (68). The *Tribune*’s description of Nixon was as follows:

> That charm is a mark of civilization, and so far as manner and appearance go, civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his out-thrust head and catlike tread all suggest the animal. He is very black—almost pure Negro. His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species. Mississippi river steamboat mates, who hire and fire roustabouts by the hundreds, would classify Nixon as a jungle Negro. They would hire him only if they were sorely in need of rousters. And they would keep close watch on him. This type is known to be ferocious and relentless in a fight. Though docile enough under ordinary circumstances, they are easily aroused. And when this happens the veneer of civilization disappears. (qtd. in Kinnamon 69)

Inasmuch as Wright’s use of the Nixon case “was that of a novelist, not that of a historian or journalist” (Kinnamon 68), his reference to real crimes—The Scottsboro Boys case and the Leopold and Loeb case, both highly publicized, are also referenced in the novel—remind the reader of the role public discourse has in shaping the imaginary of crime and criminality. Additionally, Wright’s appropriation of the case evidences how “white society racialized and sexualized Nixon” (Capers 17), demonstrating how black men, like the fictional Bigger and the real Nixon, are objects of a narrative constructed around race and gender, as I will further explore in upcoming sections. Moreover, the author’s critique of the press appears to be a reference to “the newspaper’s historical treatment of lynching, in which the white press in general and the *Tribune* in particular played significant roles” (Eby 127). The press contributed “to the lynching

furor by biased reporting, by inaccurate accounts, even by suggestive omissions" (Eby 127). Thus, Wright shows how the media perpetuated the enduring stereotypes of the black criminal and the black rapist and directly influenced civilian violence and lynching.

Finally, the aftermath of Bigger's arrest is narrated in the novel's final book, "Fate," which appropriately reinforces the idea that the criminalization of race (or the racialization of crime) only contributes to the very issue it supposedly tries to repel. In his death cell, Bigger tells his lawyer, Max: "I didn't mean to do what I did. I was trying to do something else. But it seems like I never could" (496). In acknowledging that his struggle for self-assertion was ultimately impossible—he never *could* do what he was attempting—Bigger comes to accept his fate, that is, his sentencing to death, and understand the true meaning of the killings. His famous "I didn't want to kill…But what I killed for, I *am*" (*Native Son* 501) suggests that his acceptance of his fate is linked to his comprehension that what he really *is* is the product of this feedback loop of criminalization. As Martin argued, "criminalization precedes and produces ontology" in Wright's vision (13).

As the previous section has shown, discourses on black criminality in the early twenty-first century severely impacted the everyday life of African Americans. Black crime statistics were used to justify discrimination on individual and structural levels and helped to dictate many aspects of African Americans' lives, from housing to schooling and employment. Marked as "a dangerous criminal population" (Muhammad 227), black citizens of the urban North faced structural inequality at every turn. Moreover, in 1930s Chicago, where *Native Son* is set, the Great Depression caused immense economic devastation, with the black working class, which was often treated as a surplus population, being hit the hardest. Amid this crisis, the local government responded with new policies of crime control in order to guarantee "civic order"

(Balto 58). Politics of law-and-order were put in place by Democratic politicians, according to Simon Balto, as a way to "demonstrate police effectiveness without costing much politically," as they targeted mainly the black population (58). Additionally, as Balto writes, "In the face of the Depression's ravages, Chicago criminalized human misery": a new Vagrancy Bureau made homelessness an arrestable offense, and people were routinely seized for being jobless, homeless or for stealing food and warm clothes to survive (68). In the Black Belt, the segregated South side of Chicago, vice economy rapidly grew and became a major source of income for thousands of African Americans in the city (Balto 71). As Muhammad details, white leaders supported the presence of vice districts in black communities, as it diminished the chances of these crimes occurring in white areas:

> …the relocation of a significant portion of white organized crime into black communities had become an all-too-familiar phenomenon.'White prostitutes and gamblers and vicious resorts' come into the 'Black Belt,' explained a black minister in Chicago, because 'it is black; they operate with more safety than they do in the white belt. That is true of every American city that I know of personally.' (Muhammad 226)

City officials were also often active agents in this movement: "Behind the borders of segregated black communities, many officials participated directly as patrons and protectors of illegal operations involving liquor, drugs, gambling, and prostitution" (Muhammad 227). Thus, not only were state agents more tolerant of crime in black communities, they often deliberately sponsored criminality in these areas for their benefit.

The pattern of discriminatory crime-fighting described in the paragraphs above is something Bigger Thomas is keenly aware of, as the narrator who voices his thoughts articulates: "Crime for a Negro was only when he harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white

property" (*Native Son* 383). In the first pages of the novel, when Bigger and his gang plan to rob a white business for the first time, he is reluctant to carry on with the heist because he is conscious of the fact that "injuring white property" would represent "a violation of ultimate taboo" and "it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them" (*Native Son* 14). He is so afraid of potentially facing the severity of the punishment reserved for black criminals that he attacks one of his friends because he felt "that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun" (*Native Son* 47). Conversely, Bigger and his gang mates are comfortable with robbing "their own people," "for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes" (*Native Son* 15). In essence, Bigger's and his pals' understanding of who they can and cannot target supports Jack Taylor's argument that Wright's position about the law in *Native Son* can be articulated in terms of Giorgio Agamben's notion of exclusionary inclusion: blacks "are included in the political order precisely by being excluded, that is, by being outside of the law" (Taylor 184). As those inhabiting the margins of the law, they are considered "bare life," or "life without political rights" (190); as such, their place in a racialized social order is determined by their disposability, their status as killable subjects.

Issues of class, which were central to the "Negro Problem," are foregrounded in *Native Son*. They are dramatized especially through the discussion of housing segregation, which is characterized as "the cornerstone of American apartheid" in the novel (Guest 94). This issue is best represented by the figure of Bigger's employer, Mr. Dalton, whose "warm and generous, tough but fair" rhetoric contrasts with the "predatory determinism" that drives his actions (Guest 93). A real-estate magnate who owns property all over Chicago, Mr. Dalton is also the owner of

the apartment building Bigger and his family rent. The Daltons, with their "very deep interest in colored people" (*Native Son* 53) allegorize the "liberal narratives of race" of the 1930s Wright critiques, as Tolentino argued (379). By donating thousands of dollars to African American charities and hiring black servants, they believe to be doing their part in the eradication of the "Negro problem" and never acknowledge the many forms in which they profit directly from the social and economic marginalization of people of color. When asked about why his company charges exorbitant rates from blacks and refuses to rent to them in any other area of the city, Mr. Dalton responds that "it's an old custom" (*Native Son* 378). When confronted directly about his hypocrisy, he appears to be sincerely confused:

> 'So, the profits you take from the Thomas family in rent, you give back to them to ease the pain of their gouged lives and to salve the ache of your own conscience?'
>
> 'That's a distortion of fact, sir!' …
>
> 'Mr. Dalton, do you think that the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived in one of your houses may in some way be related to the death of your daughter?'
>
> 'I don't know what you mean.' (*Native Son* 379)

As Guest maintains, "Mr. Dalton the slumlord" is "unaware of both the degree to which he benefits from racial oppression and the extent to which his livelihood depends on crime" (94). The Dalton heiress, Mary, also exemplifies the failure of white liberalism to grapple with the issue of racial integration. Her insistence on wanting "to know" and "to see how [black] people live" (*Native Son* 81) as Tolentino observes, symbolizes the ideas of progressive thinkers who believed that racism would simply be resolved if whites were more educated about black culture (393). Moreover, her hypocrisy is demonstrated in her and Jan's obliviousness to how their constant violations of the codes that regulated social interactions between blacks and whites—the

"white-letter law"—make Bigger uncomfortable as well as put him in danger. Whereas in the first half of their evening together, they ask Bigger personal questions, insist on sitting with him in the front seat of the car, proudly proclaim their desire to get to know "his culture" and refuse to let him address them with terms of authority, once their tour of the South Side is over, they "abruptly reassert the master-servant roles," as Drake notes (77). Mary and Jan expect Bigger to quickly revert to his servant role, to "return to his curtain of indifference" (Drake 77), as he drives around while they have sexual intercourse in the back seat. Mary's actions toward Bigger, in this sense, are not only reflexes of her naive perspective on racial equality, but they also signal her incapacity to perceive Bigger as fully human, treating him as an equal only when it conveniently serves her desire to see herself as progressive and rebellious.

Native Son underscores the influence of the rhetoric of black criminality in shaping Bigger's identity and his subjectivity. Bigger's resort to violence is driven by his inability to define himself outside the boundaries imposed by white society. Trapped in the stereotype of the black criminal, Bigger sees the murder of Mary Dalton as an opportunity for self-assertion and autonomy, embracing the identity that society has assigned him. Paradoxically, this act of "self-creation" leads to his own destruction, as well as fuels white society's fiction of black Americans as threats to civilization, reinforcing the cyclical nature of racial criminalization. Wright explores the issues of black autonomy and agency, demonstrating the possible results of confining black people to a position of objects rather than subjects in the production of racial narratives. In this sense, he interrogates the so-called "Negro Problem," which played a pivotal role in the emergence and endurance of the discourse of black criminality.

1.3 "This democratic hell"

Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Raimon observe that Baldwin's concern with the politics of the incarceration of people of color appears consistently across the different genres in which the author wrote. As they argue, Baldwin viewed prison as an institution that revealed the complex entanglement of race, gender, and sexuality (687). Daniel Quentin Miller further contends that the catalyst for the recurrence of this motif in his writing was the author's own experience of imprisonment (2). In 1949, Baldwin was detained in a French jail, on a theft charge that ended up dismissed for its insignificance: he spent eight days in confinement "because an acquaintance brought a stolen sheet into his room" (Miller 1). He attempted suicide in the aftermath of his release, narrowly escaping a premature death that would parallel the tragic fates of many of his characters. As Miller notes, those who meet such tragic ends in Baldwin's fiction often share a common background of imprisonment and relentless scrutiny by law enforcement, not coincidentally (2). Thus, a significant portion of his oeuvre was dedicated to examining the power dynamics within the legal system and elucidating how the criminal justice apparatus becomes a tool for the powerful to subjugate the marginalized. In this context, incarceration emerges as a mechanism of dehumanization, which the profound sense of powerlessness and humiliation experienced by many of Baldwin's characters illustrates. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is the novel in which this investigation reaches its pinnacle in all of his fiction (Miller 142).

Due to the attention it gives to oppressive structures of power, James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* has been regarded as the author's turn toward naturalist fiction, a tradition he has famously critiqued (Mills 51). *Beale Street* has also been named "Baldwin's protest novel" and dismissed for the simplicity of its narrative voice and departure from the lyricism the author is known for (Gibson 163). In fact, the novel is very invested in the dramatization of social injustice, but as Lynn O. Scott argues, it challenges African American protest tradition in many

of its aspects. The most prominent is perhaps its presentation of "injustice as a given, a constant condition against which the characters must respond," an evasion of the usual didactic framework of the protest novel (Scott 274). Unlike *Native Son* and other works often included in this tradition, *Beale Street* spares its audience of any direct or explicit accounts of violence, which evidences a signifying move of Baldwin's on his predecessor, Wright. Furthermore, *Beale Street* is a direct challenge to *Native Son* in its portrayal of black subjectivity. Baldwin's famous critique of Wright's novel in "Many Thousands Gone" focused on Bigger's lack of agency; appropriately, *Beale Street* addresses this issue by constructing a vision of a black masculine subjectivity committed to resisting "the capacities of the legal, judicial, and penal systems to define black men" (Miller 2). As I have argued in the previous section, Bigger's narrative is one in which racial criminalization erodes any real sense of self-determination, as the character spends most of the novel trapped in a cycle of re-enacting an identity determined by dominant discourse and used, in turn, to fuel racial oppression. Baldwin, contrarily, portrays diverse and nuanced responses to this same scenario, constructing a vision of black autonomy very much at odds with the character of Bigger Thomas. At the heart of *Beale Street* is the theme of survival, represented especially in the character of Fonny, who manages to persevere because of his genuine capacity for agency.

In *Beale Street,* as in *Native Son,* urbanity appears as an element that establishes the conditions for black tragedy. As Ernest L. Gibson suggests: "The concrete jungle—that unique space produced at the intersection of urbanity, poverty, and existential angst—presents itself as a site of gathering for a racially motivated and biased system" (170). Baldwin's choice of setting, New York City, highlights the convergence of urbanity and poverty in the production of a distinct space of vulnerability; the "City of Dreams," a symbol of influence and progress, is transformed

from the facade of the capitalist dream into a manifestation of the ubiquitous power structures that maintain racial, social, and economic hierarchies in place. In this sense, the urban North represents a false promise of freedom and equality, such as it did for a significant number of the African Americans who left the South in the Great Migration.

This violence is represented symbolically, based on the construction of an imagery of devastation that encapsulates the experience of the black and urban individuals of the lower classes: "The poor are always crossing the Sahara," Tish comments, after her trip to downtown Manhattan to visit Fonny in "the Tombs" (*Beale Street* 7). The desert represents both the prison grounds and the starkness of the life the characters withstand. Moreover, the metaphor of the Sahara introduces the theme of survival, while also articulating "the relationship between Black bodies and the prison–industrial complex" (Gibson 166):

> The Sahara is never empty; these corridors are never empty. If you cross the Sahara, and you fall, by and by vultures circle around you, smelling, sensing, your death. They circle lower and lower: they wait… And the lawyers and bondsmen and all that crowd circle around the poor, exactly like vultures. (*Beale Street* 7)

Hence, in *Beale Street,* the criminal justice system and its adjacencies operate both figuratively—as a metonymy for the many layers of the intermingling conditions of American society that maintain a racist social order—and literally, as the material means through which the criminal justice system isolates and dehumanizes those who encounter it. This is dramatized especially through the two black male characters who are incarcerated in the novel, Fonny and Daniel, whose experiences are marked by fear and loneliness.

Survival appears again in Tish's narration, when Baldwin presents another image of devastation, "the plague," symbolic of the impending threat of death that looms over black youth in the urban setting:

> Fonny had found something that he could do, that he wanted to do, and this saved him from the death that was waiting to overtake the children of our age. Though the death took many forms, though people died early in many different ways, the death itself was very simple and the cause was simple, too: as simple as a plague: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it… And perhaps I clung to Fonny, perhaps Fonny saved *me* because he was just about the only boy I knew who wasn't fooling around with the needles or drinking cheap wine or mugging people or holding up stores… (*Beale Street* 36).

Fonny, unlike the protagonist of *Native Son*, manages to escape "the death" figuratively and literally, despite the unlikelihood of black men surviving adolescence in the city. The distinction between Fonny and Bigger, reflective of the contrasting approaches of the two authors toward black masculine subjectivity, lies in Fonny's ability to confront the harsh realities of black American life and racial absurdity by establishing a genuine sense of identity and purpose. Furthermore, this identity holds a significant communal aspect, as Fonny draws motivation from his sense of belonging. Whether through his love for Tish, his bonds with the Rivers family, his connection with his stepfather and friends, or the hope symbolized by his unborn child, Fonny discovers strength in these relationships.

Additionally, despite his position as a vulnerable subject, a victim in need of salvation, Baldwin subverts this logic by endowing Fonny with the power to save. As Gibson argues:

> Fonny's salvific manhood is symbolically written within the text. His craft, that of sculpture, is a direct allusion to God as creator, and he wrestles with the wood or material in an eerie parallel to biblical creation stories. His struggle with loneliness reflects the detachment a god might feel in being separated from the world he created, for Fonny's world was indeed that of his own design. (184)

In *Native Son*, Bigger's violent acts are referred to as "acts of creation" (*Native Son* 466). By portraying Fonny as a creator in every sense, Baldwin seems to engage in a conversation with Wright once again. This becomes more significant considering that Fonny's identity as a creator emerges from his confrontation with an oppressive force symbolized by the educational system. As Tish recalls, Fonny was sent to a vocational school intended for children deemed "dumb" and in need of training for manual labor (*Beale Street* 36). Rejecting an institution that indoctrinates "kids to be slaves" (*Beale Street* 36), he steals materials from the workshop and employs them to fashion sculptures out of wood and stone, reclaiming the tools of his subjugation to forge a new path for himself. Through artistic expression, he discovers a profound sense of self, proudly declaring "I'm a sculptor... I'm a real artist" (*Beale Street* 86). While Bigger's "acts of creation" lead to his own destruction, Fonny's produce the opposite outcome: by crafting his own authentic identity and a strong sense of self, and constructing a "world of his own design," symbolized by the community he has cultivated and which stands by him during his imprisonment, Fonny ensures his survival.

Through his craft, Fonny "had found his center, his own center, inside him," but it is this same passion that "saved him," as Tish elaborates, that got him in prison: "He wasn't anybody's nigger. And that's a crime, in this fucking free country. You're supposed to be *somebody's* nigger. And if you're nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger" (*Beale Street* 37). Here, as Miller suggests,

"Blackness along with a will to define the self or to refuse to be 'placed' constitutes a 'crime,'" as in other of Baldwin's works (145). Fonny is arrested, after all, ultimately because he refuses to submit to Officer Bell's authority, causing the vengeful cop to frame him for a sex crime he could not have committed. As Miller argues, the label of the "bad nigger" is almost always synonymous with the criminal. In this sense, "Prison itself is not only a place to contain society's 'bad niggers,' but a way to cement their identities as such" (Miller 145). In *Beale Street*, this logic is undermined by Fonny's refusal to allow his identity to be determined by this experience. He comes to understand the true meaning of his condemnation:

> He is not here for anything he has done. He has always known that, but now he knows it with a difference. At meals, in the showers, up and down the stairs, in the evening, just before everyone is locked in again, he looks at the others, he listens: what have *they* done? Not much. To do much is to have the power to place these people where they are, and keep them where they are. These captive men are the hidden price for a hidden lie: the righteous must be able to locate the damned. To do much is to have the power and the necessity to dictate the damned. But that, thinks Fonny, works both ways. *You're in or you're out. Okay. I see. Motherfuckers. You won't hang me* (*Beale Street* 191-192)

The use of the terms "righteous" and "damned," located in the Christian doctrine, becomes relevant for the analysis of the subjectivity addressed here. Both these adjectives assume direct correspondence with two destinations: heaven and hell. Society, in this view, builds differentiations that select their fates. Fonny's trajectory challenges this doctrinal vision. First, precisely because the damned's hell is overcome by Fonny's survival of the prison experience. Secondly, and above all, due to the fact that his subjectivity calls this division into question, refusing an identification as a convict and demobilizing a logic that creates

enemies—even symbolically, such as the process that prison operates on black subjects—to justify the action and the power of dominant groups.

Fonny's survival thus relies on his capacity to transcend the imposition of an identity that American society, with the aid of its criminal justice system, forcefully assigns to black male bodies. His resistance to the subjugation of his subjectivity is further represented by the transformation he undergoes in prison, as Scott argues, when the artistic impulse that nourishes his identity converges with his identification as a member of a community, something larger than himself:

> Tish describes Fonny's transformation in prison: his eyes burn, 'like the eyes of a prophet.' He comes to understand his vocation as useful to others: 'Now. I'm an artisan,' he said. 'Like a cat who makes tables. I don't like the word artist. Maybe I never did.' With this new self-knowledge, Fonny plans to 'build us a table and a whole lot of folks going to be eating off it for a long, long time to come'... [H]is prison experience and the love that has sustained him through it transform his private artistic impulse into a vision of social consequence. The 'real artist' becomes the committed 'artisan,' making something of use, something to sustain the people who love and protect him. (Scott 177-78)

Fonny's transformation from artist to artisan, then, articulates Baldwin's "testimony to his own survival" (Scott 105). The novel thus functions as a parable of "how Baldwin came to understand his role as an African American 'artist,' which was to resist political and psychological oppression and to pass on the cultural resources of African American survival to others" (105). Fonny's survival—and the survival of the black community— in the author's vision, is dependent on the strength of this mutual collaboration in which the artisan sustains the

community and is in turn supported by it. Baldwin inverts the conventional logic by which artisanship is a lower, less prestigious form than "art," underscoring the potential it holds for social/communal value.

While Fonny manages to survive, the same cannot be said of Daniel, a contrasting example of a black man who was permanently affected by the experience of imprisonment and ultimately succumbed to the dehumanization he endured. Daniel is a friend of Fonny's who emerges "miraculously, from the swap waters of his past" (*Beale Street* 99). Tish recognizes "Daniel by the light in Fonny's eyes," a statement of the tenderness shared by the two men, observing that she "can see the extent he has been beaten" (*Beale Street* 99). They later discover that he had been out of prison for three months.

Daniel, who is described as "big, black, and loud" (*Beale Street* 98) is the perfect target for law enforcement—the ideal "scapegoat for whatever psychic transgressions need to be committed for racial and class hierarchies to persist" (Gibson 170). Because he is the image of what is associated with "reasonable suspicion"—young, male, and black,— he is stopped in the middle of the night, without any particular reason, in front of his house, and ends up arrested for possession of a small amount of marijuana. As Michelle Alexander explains, under the Fourth Amendment, police officers are required to have a warrant in order to stop and search an individual, which they are not legally permitted to do unless given explicit consent. Nevertheless, "All a police officer has to do in order to conduct a baseless drug investigation is ask to speak with someone and then get their "consent" to be searched. So long as orders are phrased as a question, compliance is interpreted as consent" (65). Thus, "consent searches" became a powerful tool deployed by law enforcement in the War on Drugs, one of the main catalysts of mass incarceration in the second half of the twentieth century.

As a victim of the War on Drugs, Daniel's story illustrates the processes through which, as Alexander describes, black youth are "swept into the system":

> Once swept into the system, one's chances of ever being truly free are slim, often to the vanishing point. Defendants are typically denied meaningful legal representation, pressured by the threat of lengthy sentences into a plea bargain, and then placed under formal control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole. Upon release, ex-offenders are discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives, and most will eventually return to prison. (17)

Daniel's example illustrates Alexander's words: after spending a night in jail, he is put in a lineup and identified as the robber of a vehicle he has never seen—the situation is rendered even more absurd by the fact that he does not know how to drive: "I guess they just happened to need a car thief that day," he speculates (*Beale Street* 109). Without the means to pay for representation, Daniel is assigned a public defender who "was really *their* lawyer… he worked for the city" (*Beale Street* 102). He is then pressured into entering a guilty plea in exchange for a lighter sentence and ends up serving two years in prison. Alexander explains that the practice of encouraging defendants to plead guilty is extremely common and hardly anyone in this scenario is afforded a trial. As Gibson argues, the system exploits Daniel's fear and "lack of familiarity with its various legal nuances" to render him prey (171). Daniel's loneliness and feeling of "being nobody," cements his "cooperation with an impending and forceful apparatus" (Gibson 171). Daniel's story also demonstrates how "Once swept into the system, one's chances of ever being truly free are slim" (Alexander 17). Throughout the course of the novel, he returns to prison again, this time without any prospect of release since "he has been booked on a narcotics charge" (*Beale Street* 128). When Hayward, Fonny's lawyer, is finally able to see Daniel, he

informs Tish that he has been beaten and likely drugged in prison. Later, he is moved to a prison upstate, which is implied to be a calculated maneuver to prevent his testimony in favor of Fonny, since he was in his company on the night the sex crime Fonny is accused of took place. The character's absence from the rest of the novel suggests that the law's force has succeeded in permanently isolating and removing him from his community.

Daniel's story illustrates the feelings of powerlessness and despair of those who are entrapped by the system, as he tells Fonny and Tish: "They were just playing with me, man, because they could. Because they can do with you whatever they want. *Whatever they want*…the worst thing, man, the *worst* thing—is that they can make you so fucking *scared*" (*Beale Street* 103). Even out of prison, Daniel remains perpetually afraid, as Tish observes: "He's a little afraid to leave, afraid, in fact, to hit those streets, and Fonny realizes this and walks him to the subway. Daniel…longs to be free to confront his life; is terrified at the same time of what that life may bring, is terrified of freedom; and is struggling in a trap" (*Beale Street* 106). Daniel's fear is not unjustified, as Gibson suggests:

> Daniel's arrest positions him as a vulnerable subject within the New York cityscape. As an inhabitant of the concrete jungle, his fate is often promised… The threat of carceral terror looms ever present in the space where the Black male body meets darkness. More than an abstract notion, the nighttime in Black urbanity constitutes a policed geography. New York's skyline, then, for Black men, shrinks as the promise of dreams and aspirations, while morphing into a direct reflection of technologies of power meant to keep Black bodies tamed and contained. (171-172)

The novel ends on a positive note, in spite of the tragic fates of Daniel and Frank—Fonny's stepfather whose suicide is presented in the final pages, which I will further

discuss in Chapter Two. The conclusion is intentionally ambiguous, as the reader is left to wonder whether or not Fonny has left prison on bail. The final lines are Tish's words: "Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And, from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries and cries… cries like it means to wake the dead" (*Beale Street* 197). Whatever interpretation the reader chooses, as Miller suggests, still leads to an affirmative ending that represents "the substance of Baldwin's faith in the future" (149). Fonny finds himself in a realm—whether tangible or imagined—where his artistic pursuits and loved ones converge. The space of the prison, not depicted in the setting, is thus defeated (Miller 149). If we embrace Scott's interpretation of *Beale Street* as Baldwin's "testimony to his own survival" and his blueprint for the survival of future generations of African Americans, the message becomes evident: black men, along with their families and communities, can succeed if they persevere in resisting the forces that seek to imprison them, literally and symbolically, and retaining their autonomy to shape their own identities. In this process, bonds of fraternity and love are essential tools for overcoming the promised fate of black men.

Chapter Two

Black Manhood, Death, and Dying

> "Black men, accepting their burdens of life, speak to one another with death as the medium of their exchange."
> —Tommy J. Curry, The Man-Not

In the previous sections of this thesis, the novels *Native Son* by Richard Wright and *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin have been explored in relation to the historical context of racial criminalization. The present chapter aims to further advance the discussion of these works by examining the issues they raise regarding manhood. To accomplish this task, the work of African American scholar Tommy J. Curry provides a crucial framework. In contrast to traditional depictions of black males in intersectionality theory and gender theory, Curry conceptualizes the black man in terms of vulnerability, susceptibility to death, and his deviation from the Western definition of "man." Thus, the initial focus of this chapter is to provide an overview of Curry's theory, beginning with a contextualization of intersectionality theory and its shortcomings in relation to the study of black manhood. Subsequently, Curry's framework is presented, emphasizing its significance in understanding the subject at hand.

Central to Curry's theorizations is the consideration of the suffering and deaths of black men as philosophical matters. He argues that these individuals are treated as fungible and disposable within American society and consequently subjected to various forms of victimization that they disproportionately endure compared to other groups. This issue has been largely overlooked in academia, particularly within gender studies, which tends to perpetuate white

society's racist caricatures of black manhood. Such portrayals reinforce the notion of black men as dangerous threats routinely used to justify their containment through incarceration and death.

Drawing on Curry's theory, the subsequent sections of this chapter offer analyses of the representations of black manhood in the selected novels with the primary focus on the thematic element of death. Through the application of Curry's framework to the reading of *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk,* death emerges as a pivotal aspect in Wright's and Baldwin's conceptualizations of black manhood.

The discussion begins with an investigation into Baldwin's perspective on the underlying sexual pathology of American racism. This reading highlights the interplay of power, gender, and race within the portrayal of black manhood in the novel. Subsequently, attention is directed toward the issue of suicide in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, embodied by Frank's character and his tragic death. This examination underscores how the intersecting factors of marginalization contribute to his brutal fate as an African American man. Finally, Wright's portrayal of black manhood through the character of Bigger Thomas is analyzed, with a focus on the literal and symbolic forms that death takes in his trajectory.

In sum, the primary objective of this chapter is to shed light on the complex relationship of death, violence, and black masculine subjectivity within the context of the selected novels. The application of Curry's framework to *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* allows for a deeper understanding of their representations of black manhood, ultimately contributing to a broader exploration of the dense issues dramatized in these novels.

2.1 Intersectionality and the Study of Black Men and Boys

Intersectionality theory is generally credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw and its origins can be traced to her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," which addresses the exclusion of black women "from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (Crenshaw 140). To account for the marginalization of black women, Crenshaw maintains, their position as subjects of multiple forms of discrimination must be considered:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women — not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (149)

Crenshaw's analytical framework for marginalization upholds that those who are disadvantaged on the basis of only one aspect—"race, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability" (Crenshaw 151)—may be able to access legal protection, as opposed to those who are multiply-burdened, who are left out unless "their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine" (Crenshaw 152). In the case of black women, it means that their subordination is only acknowledged, under the single-axis analysis, when it resembles the challenges faced by black men and/or white women.

Crenshaw's theoretical framework was originally conceived in the context of antidiscrimination law and feminist and antiracist politics (Carbado et al 303).

Crenshaw further developed her theory in 1991 with "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in which "she employed intersectionality to highlight the ways in which social movement organization and advocacy around violence against women elided the vulnerabilities of women of color, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities" (Carbado et al. 304). Since then, intersectionality has reached beyond the borders of United States academia and gained global and multidisciplinary engagement (Carbado et al 303).

Despite the common belief that intersectionality can be applied to any number of subjects, the theory remains at best ineffective, and at worst harmful to grappling with the disadvantages of men of color. As Tommy J. Curry's analyses in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* demonstrate, the essentialist notions of maleness that intersectionality presupposes confine black men and boys to a position that negates their vulnerability in American society and disregard the particularities of the oppression they face. Within intersectionality and gender theory in general, when black men are not interpreted as privileged for being biologically assigned the label of "male," their suffering is generically read as the consequence of racism: "While Black men suffer disproportionately more from police violence, incarceration, unemployment, and undereducation than whites and Black women, none of their disadvantage is thought to originate from being both racialized as Black and biologized as male" (*The Man-Not* 139). Thus, under the paradigm of intersectionality, their reality is obscured from theory.

The Man-Not, published in 2017, is a scholarly effort that advocates the dissociation of Black Male Studies from feminist gender studies and its establishment as an autonomous field. The book is Curry's justification for the foundation of the discipline, and as such, denounces the failure of previous scholarship—a part of which is black feminist scholarship—to acknowledge the singularity of the experience of African American men. In Ronald B. Neal's words, the product of the epistemological issues raised by Curry "implicates academia as an ally in black male trauma and death and charges that contemporary academics participate in a long intellectual history—over more than a century—that offers fodder and justification for the policing, containment, and punishment of black males" (247). The epistemic traditions of the humanities that "allow evidence to be discounted for personal experience," the privileging of the intuition of social dynamics over empirical study, is one of the main targets of Curry's denouncement (Curry, *The Man-Not* 116). "How black men and boys are imagined in academia," Neal continues, "is an extension of how they are perceived, policed, and contained as boogeymen in American society" (247). In order to understand the extent to which intersectionality fails the study of black men and boys, we must first address some of its problematic assumptions.

For Curry, because intersectionality is thought of and presented as an antiessentialist paradigm, its subscribers hesitate to name and question these notions within the theory (*The Man-Not* 200). Additionally, the fact that intersectionality has become synonymous with progressivism and pluralization shields it from any deeper criticism:

> …championing the study of "the Black woman," centering her experience in all conversations about race and gender, became a valued ideological statement where simply uttering the words *race, class*, and *gender* indicated the progressivism and

> rightness of the speaker and made critique impossible (since attacking intersectionality is attacking the subject placed at its center). (*The Man-Not* 220)

Among these notions, one that invites interrogation is the conceptualization of "woman," which Curry traces back to Catherine MacKinnon's dominance theory of female subordination. Crenshaw herself has acknowledged across her corpus that MacKinnon's work has greatly influenced her own. MacKinnon's theory defines womanhood as shared subordination to male dominance. Crenshaw, on the other hand, concedes that universalizing the category of woman is problematic, but still "fails to inquire into the limits that such a category imposes on the normative operation of man within the theory" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 210). MacKinnon defines "woman" as a class in terms of their susceptibility to rape and sexual violence from men, which Crenshaw's theory echoes. In intersectionality, "woman" is "an essential category of being that explains a particular subjugation" (Curry, "Decolonizing the Intersection" 135).

Furthermore, in her attempt to draw attention to intra-racial rape, Crenshaw relies on "racist theories of Black male savagery and criminality," especially the notion that black men use rape and patriarchal violence to control and subjugate black women:

> While this may be a now popularly accepted feminist ideology, it was rooted primarily in the subculture of violence theories about Black men's compensatory masculinity, not any concrete scientific evidence. To get the results it desires, intersectionality must not only describe the sexual vulnerability of women and girls in the Black community but assume *as fact* that Black men rape purely for patriarchal power, as white feminists have previously theorized. In constructing sameness with white women "as women," intersectionality consequently constructs sameness between Black men and white men as "men" and "patriarchs." (Curry, "Decolonizing the Intersection" 136)

One may wonder what alternative explanation Curry offers for the violence practiced by black men. Firstly, he draws attention to the fact that "Intimate partner violence is an extension of the violence found in neglected communities, which enters homes through the psychology and interpersonal relationships of men and women affected by economic, political, and various other environmental traumas" (*The Man-Not* 115). He also emphasizes that research shows that differently from what happens in white communities, intimate partner violence (IPV) in black communities is "exceptionally defined by bidirectionality" (*The Man-Not* 120), concluding that:

> In Black communities, there is no fixed perpetrator or victim: Black men and women can be both simultaneously and often are. In this sense, bidirectionality signals that Black IPV is rooted in mutual victimization and violence; these patterns consequently socialize men, women, and children into cycles of mutual conflict in which perpetrators cannot be directly marked. (*The Man-Not* 120)

The violence men of color endure, however, is often "explained away by suggesting that Black males are so dangerous and violent that they could not possibly be victims or that they deserve the violence imposed on them" (*The Man-Not* 122). Moreover, the fact that black men are thought to be violent and predatory obscures their sexual vulnerability. This is also a consequence of the thinking that they are criminal, hyper-masculine, or hyper-sexual. The pervasiveness of these stereotypes leads to the internalization of their vulnerability by society at large, that is, it "empowers anyone to act against Black men and boys without fear of punishment" (*The Man-Not* 116). Because they are always conceived as perpetrators, the sexual victimization of black boys is largely ignored or denied: "This overdetermined envisioning of the Black boy makes even his empirical suffering (his stories, the actual facts of the matter)

imperceptible to the general public and academic audience alike" (*The Man-Not* 125). Furthermore, as Curry's research on the topic demonstrates:

> [B]ecause of the stereotypes that view Black males as only perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence, Black men and boys are left without treatment for their trauma or amelioration of the mental anguish caused by abuse. It is this untreated and unacknowledged history of sexual trauma that manifests itself as violence against intimates later in life. (*The Man-Not* 125)

Another issue at the heart of the problematic representation of black men within gender theory and intersectionality studies is the practice of viewing black manhood through the optics of mimesis. By "theories about Black men's compensatory masculinity," Curry refers to concepts such as the mimetic thesis of black manhood, "a theory based on the idea that Black males aspire to imitate white masculinity and produce a culturally peculiar facsimile of white patriarchy in response to their negation under anti-Black racism" ("Decolonizing the Intersection" 136). A popular idea in feminist ideology, the mimetic thesis can be traced to the work of bell hooks, who has, throughout her corpus, theorized black masculinity[8] as an emulation of white patriarchal behavior. Curry highlights her theorization in *We Real Cool* as a source of this claim. It is essentially based on the argument that "the history of racism and Jim Crow segregation gave rise to Black hypersexuality and forced Black men to construct a compensatory phallic identity" ("Decolonizing the Intersection" 137). hooks theorizes black masculinity as a consequence of the failure to achieve "real manhood," which is said to produce an emulation of white patriarchal violence. In this view, black men are motivated by their incompleteness, an "oedipal drive

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[8] Curry uses the term "black masculinity" almost exclusively to address the depiction of black males in gender theory and intersectional theory, which I replicate here to signal my position in regard to how damaging these conceptions can be. Thus, as Curry does, I adopt the term "black manhood" to refer to the lived experience of black men and "black masculinity" to refer to how they are generally portrayed within theory.

toward the father right of white masculinity," a view in which black males are "reduced to their phallic aspirations for selfhood," and implies that they "seek to dominate others to compensate for their subjugation" (*The Man-Not* 10). This thinking produces caricatures of black men that strip them of any agency or capacity to define themselves against white patriarchal oppression. Unlike black women, who "are interpreted within group-based identities opposed to patriarchy, and committed to liberation," black men "are thought to crave the position of white men and his possessions, deluded by patriarchy's power to offer economic and political advance and cultural recognition" (Curry, "Killing Boogeymen" 3). As Andrea Hunter and James Davis highlight:

> Studies of Black women emphasize how out of oppression a unique definition of womanhood was forged, one in which adversity gave rise to strength. However, the discourse around men and oppression focuses on the stripping away of manhood. It is a perspective that casts Black men as victims and ignores their capacity to define themselves under difficult circumstances. (qtd. in Curry, "Killing Boogeymen" 3)

Furthermore, these tropes that "produce frameworks that are set within disciplines and have become the cornerstone of intersectional literature and various feminist theories" lack empirical validation (Curry, "Decolonizing the Intersection" 149). They tend to be based on the theorists' observations, intuition, and personal experiences and echo enduring racist stereotypes that have existed in American society for centuries. As mentioned above, these conceptualizations of black masculinity replicate pseudo-scientific and racist criminology theories of the twentieth century, under which black men were viewed as inherently deviant, sexually predatory, and violent.

As Curry maintains, black men are theorized as they are imagined:

> Because we do not understand the actual reality of Black males, we conceptualize them as they are imagined—ruled by the stereotypes masquerading as theory—and remain trapped by the narratives of Black males as problems. Instead of being viewers invested in the complexities of Black male life, theorists embrace the racist caricatures of Black men as concepts. Consequently, Black males are written into gender theory as the dangers the academic theorists fear—the stereotypes by which Black men and boys are represented within society. (*The Man-Not* 129)

Rather than being considered victims of structural oppression, black men are often viewed as the social problems they are victimized by (*The Man-Not* 130). Both in theory and society, they are marked as violent, hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual, and predatory; in Curry's definition, they are seen as "boogeymen" rather than real and complex human beings, that is, as "a fear-inspiring entity that haunts life and at any moment can threaten death to other Blacks" ("Killing Boogeymen" 3). A study of black manhood that does not reduce these subjects to racist stereotypes and myths must, as Curry writes, go "beyond the confines of black masculinity" (*The Man-Not* 129). Thus, a framework that does not equal black manhood to a compensatory search for patriarchal power or privileges caricatures of super-predators over the lived reality of black men is crucial for a serious study of black men and boys.

2.2 *The Man-Not:* Studying Black Male Death

When gender is evoked in conversations about systemic oppression, it is often synonymous with "woman." In this logic, black men are an advantaged minority, the assumption being that gendered subordination is exclusive to those assigned "female" at birth. In reality, *maleness* is socially defined by patriarchal power, which is reserved for white men.

Considering the history of colonization and enslavement in the Americas, it must be established that "The colonized/racialized subject was denied gender precisely to define the boundaries between the content of the human and the deficit of those racially speciated" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 6). This does not mean these subjects were not sexually differentiated, but that they were assigned different roles and designated "female" and "male," but not human. Thus, Curry proposes, adopting Sylvia Wynter's theorization[9], the black man's affiliation is to the category of *genre,* not *gender.* While both mean "kind," the former "asserts that historical social orders, defined by the biologic marker of sex, are in fact synonymous with the historical and sociological location of Black males," while the latter "expresses how the register of nonbeing distorts the categories founded upon white anthropology or that of the human" (*The Man-Not* 6). Hence, in an attempt to capture "the sociological, historical, and ontological weight of black manhood," Curry proposes that the black man be theoretically formulated as a "Man-Not," his category of *genre* (*The Man-Not* 9). Male-not-ness marks his distance from the Western MAN, reinforcing "the meaning Black maleness has in the grammar of racism, its discursive logics, that legitimates and subtly produces the logics of (genocide)/violence" (*The Man-Not* 188).

Another fundamental concept in Curry's framework is *Black male vulnerability,* a term he uses to convey "the disadvantages that Black males endure compared with other groups; the erasure of Black males' actual lived experience from theory; and the violence and death Black males suffer in society" (*The Man-Not* 29). It is also meant "to capture the Black male's perpetual susceptibility to the will of others, how he has no resistance to the imposition of others' fears and anxieties on him" (*The Man-Not* 29). The optics of vulnerability allow us to articulate that the black man is not only denied humanity: he is also denied existence. Being "defined by

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[9] See Sylvia Wynter. "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues", *Voices of the African Diaspora* 8, no.2 (1992):13.

his distance to MAN," he is construed as "a brute, a savage", he is "made into horror", and as a consequence, he "is met with death, the effect of disposability and fungibility, because in the minds of others…he represents death" (*The Man-Not* 34). This formulation refers not only to how black men are scapegoated within American society but to something akin to a genocidal program in which they are the primary targets.

The Man-Not opens with the assertion that "This America makes corpses of black males," introducing one of the fundamental themes of the work. Curry's book constantly reminds us, through a myriad of real-life examples of black men abused and murdered at the hands of state agents and vigilantes, that deaths within this particular group are a normalized routine in American society. As a consequence, the public is "desensitized to the corpse of the Black male" (*The Man-Not* 177). Paradoxically, in academia, they are "viewed only as the corpse": their deaths are only considered when they can be ascribed numeric value, and are usually interpreted in generic terms, as the effect of racism, without further interrogation into what horrific conditions produce this scenario. In Curry's words, "The repetitive deaths of Black men are thought to be inconsequential to how we frame the life and study of this ever-expiring subject" (*The Man-Not* 140).

Curry insists that the problem that results in black male death is one of definition: "He possesses no character apart from the imposition of the ideas others thrust on him. Black men and boys are literally perceived as the dangers and fears that others project on them…the Black male is known by the potential he has to be a rapist, a murderer, or a thief" (*The Man-Not* 169). This imposition with which black men are constantly faced gives rise to a unique form of expression, a subjectivity that is forced to position itself in resistance:

> He defines himself for himself against a world that condemns him for being…He is killed for what he is taken to be in this world, and the struggle with this reality exacts a cost on his mental and physical self. He lives against the will society has for his death. He invents concepts that sustain him. His anger toward the world generates a place of construction where music, writing, and his very being are positioned against the order of society that continues to breed oppression and empire. (*The Man-Not* 169)

The solution lies in recognizing black manhood in its complexity, diversity, and dynamicity. In other words, we must understand that black manhood is "a proactive and adaptive identity that anticipates and reflects upon obstacles and barriers placed before Black men" ("Decolonizing the Intersection" 150). Furthermore, understanding the novels of Richard Wright and James Baldwin as representative of these "places of construction" enables a reflection on the experience of black manhood beyond the stereotypes offered by gender theory. Taking this into consideration, I propose a reading of the representations of black manhood in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Native Son* that holds death as a point of departure. In short, my analyses of these works set out to explore the presence of death in the narratives, approximating these portrayals of black manhood to the theorizations of Curry.

In Wright's case, his entire fictional work demonstrates an obsession with death: a large number of his short stories and novels feature gruesome murders, lynchings, and violent struggles (JanMohamed 1). In the autobiographical *Black Boy,* he comments on how the constant and unpredictable threat of death was perceived by his eleven-year-old self: "I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings" (74). The ubiquitous threat of lynching determined how black people lived, as the smallest violation of Jim Crow etiquette could

provoke this form of punishment. As JanMohamed suggests, Wright's experiences manifested consciously and unconsciously in his fiction, to the extent that the entirety of his career was "dedicated to looking at the world through the eye sockets of the skull" (JanMohamed 24). In a sense, Wright found in the exploration of death a way of keeping himself alive.

In Baldwin's work, death takes a different form: as Sarah Beebe Fryer observes, he "casually incorporates suicides in nearly all of his novels" (21). His fiction, which is known to be inspired by his own experience as a black man in twentieth-century United States, as Fryer argues, articulates the author's intuitive grasp of the conditions that produce despair and result in the high rates of suicide among his demographic.

2.3 "The white man's got to be the devil"

Regarding the sexual configuration of racism, Curry adopts Frantz Fanon's conceptualization of the black man as a phobogenic object: "The Negrophobic man, the white man fearful of his imagination of Blackness—of the Nigger—interprets the Black man as the embodiment of his forbidden sexual desire" (*The Man-Not* 89). In other words, the synergistic effect of "desire and terror" inspires "fear in the mind and lust in the loins of the white man" (89). Curry provides a reading of Eldrige Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* that underscores the common ground between the memoir and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* particularly in what concerns their notions of the sadistic motivation of the white male racist. Drawing from Cleaver's articulation of the "white man's homoerotic obsession with Black male flesh," he posits that prison exists as an extension of this logic: it is "a physical manifestation of the racist architecture the white race uses to construct and punish the Black male for its desire of him" (*The Man-Not*

90). While Baldwin does not elaborate on the institution of prison in such specific terms in the novel, a similar idea permeates *If Beale Street Could Talk.*

Officer Bell, a symbol of state power in the novel, embodies the white man's lustful desire for the black male body and the violent reaction that succeeds it. The vindictive police officer who sets up Fonny's arrest is described as walking "the way John Wayne walks" and having eyes "as blank as George Washington's eyes" (171). His association with mainstream heroes of the United States positions him as representative of something that is American in its essence—Bell embodies the sexual perversion of a quintessentially American brand of racism. Recounting his encounter with Fonny, Tish emphasizes the sexual terror in Bell's attack on the black male body: "Bell's eyes swept over Fonny's black body with the unanswerable cruelty of lust, as though he had lit the blowtorch and had it aimed at Fonny's sex…*I'm going to fuck you, boy.* Bell's eyes said" (172). Bell's racism is also murderous, as we learn from Enerstine, Tish's sister: "I can prove that he murdered a twelve-year-old black boy, in Brooklyn, two years ago. That's how come he was transferred to Manhattan" (120). According to Lynn O. Scott, Bell is a recurring figure in Baldwin's fiction: he also appears as Lyle Britten in *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man" (266). Scott's consideration of the issue is somewhat vague, as she concludes that Bell represents the pathology of American racism. In contrast, Curry's analysis of Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man" offers a more profound examination of the dynamics inherent in the white man's homoerotic fascination with the black male body. By juxtaposing *If Beale Street Could Talk* and the short story, we gain insight into the exploration of this theme within the novel.

Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man," published in 1965 as part of a collection of the same name, opens with Jesse, a white deputy sheriff who is unable to achieve an erection when

attempting to have sexual intercourse with his wife. The story continues through a series of flashbacks in which the sheriff recalls episodes of extreme violence against black men he witnessed which provoke a physical reaction in him, including the first time his father took him to a lynching. As a child, he understood that there was “an allure to killing and castrating” a man of color, as he watched the arousal of the crowd and of his own mother, who appeared to be mesmerized at the sight of the man’s suffering (*The Man-Not* 149). His memory of the castration is the following:

> The man with the knife took the nigger’s privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. (Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* 345)

These recollections incite his libido; the story ends as Jesse tells his wife “Come on, sugar, I’m going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger” as he “labored harder than he ever had before” (*Going to Meet the Man* 347). According to Curry, Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” is “an origin story of white masculinity—the generational inheritance of white patriarchy through the castration of the Black male” (*The Man-Not* 149). More than a desire for the black male body, Curry maintains, there is a homoerotic lust for the castrated black male corpse—the means through which the white man transforms his fantasy into reality. It is the destruction of the “black male beast” that allows the white boy to become a man. Curry elucidates the layers that make up this dynamic:

> Murder, the death of the Black male body, is the ritual of transference for white men. As with the charred body left in the wake of his first lynching, Jesse believes that he can embody—through castration—the sexual potency of the Black male. This embodiment allows him to overcome his sexual lack, the hereditary inadequacy and flaccidity of his father's white penis. The white man who murders the Black man attempts to be MAN, since he has shown the superiority of being the white mind over the Black male body. Killing Black men is an attempt to reduce the number of Black phalluses that can cause white men anxiety and worry. The death of Black men arrests the yearning white men have for their flesh and phallus. They remove the penis to signify their domination of the Black male body—thus making him a lifeless corpse and not man. (*The Man-Not* 150)

Although Baldwin's exploration of the issue is not as extensive in the novel as it is in the short story, *Beale Street* revisits this theme. One example is found when Daniel recounts his arrest: he tells Fonny that he had marijuana in his back pocket "And so they pulled it out, man, do they *love* to pat your ass" (*Beale Street* 107). Moreover, in his description of the trip to the station in the police van, Daniel remembers that a black boy, younger than himself, had been picked up on the way. He was clearly suffering, Daniel affirms, recalling that he had "his arms wrapped around himself, and sweat is starting to pour off that cat" (*Beale Street* 108). He continues:

> And I think to myself, Now, the cops who put him in this wagon know that this dude is *sick*. I *know* they know it. He ain't supposed to be here—and him not hardly much more than a kid. But the mothers who put him in this wagon, man, they was coming in their pants while they did it. I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even *get* his dick hard, without he hear some nigger moan." (*Beale Street* 108)

Evoking the idea of a pathologic white sexuality that is intertwined with racial domination and sadism, Baldwin returns to his exploration in "Going to Meet the Man." Furthermore, he draws a clear connection between the sexual dimension of white supremacy and the power structures that guarantee a racialized social order. Characters like Officer Bell and Jesse, who are law enforcement agents and therefore wield authority and control in their communities, represent the perversion of those who have institutional power—however minimal—and the means through which they ensure their dominance, psychological terror being their most treasured weapon.

In *Beale Street,* police officers represent more than just the lower-rank agents of the criminal justice system; their presence on the streets and their close interaction with the community become means for the assertion of their tyranny. As Daniel Quentin Miller notes, "Bell seems to have absolute power because his dominion is the public setting of the streets, but he also has the ability to survey or even (with the aid of a search warrant) invade the home" to arrest Fonny (144). Miller observes that even in young Tish's mind, police officers were perceived as "the ultimate authoritative figures within the criminal justice system": after a childhood incident when she accidentally hurt Fonny, the young girl was terrified because "Geneva said…the police would come and put [her] in the electric chair" (*Beale Street* 12). The notion that police officers are allowed to kill without legal process is shown to be more than just childish naivety, as we learn that Officer Bell has in fact killed a black boy, seemingly without any major consequences (Miller 144).

Baldwin's depiction of white masculine sexuality approximates it to the formulation of the black man as a Man-Not. As Curry's analysis of "Going to Meet the Man" illuminates, Baldwin interpreted "white masculinity as dependent on the castration and death of Black men

and boys" (*The Man-Not* 150). Understanding white masculinity in relation to the cultural inheritance of lynching and castration creates a differentiation between white and black men that destabilizes the notion of shared maleness and experience of patriarchy. Borrowing from Curry, it can be said that this speciation proposed in Baldwin's short story "disrupts the unified narratives of privilege and masculinity by differentiating the histories of Black males…the sexual violence they survived, from those of white men" (*The Man-Not* 150). In this sense, Baldwin represents black manhood as Man-Not-ness. As discussed, *Beale Street* strengthens this notion, with Officer Bell and the policemen who arrested Daniel further exemplifying the titular "Man" whose origin story is explored in the short story. Thus, if Cleaver viewed the prison as the physical manifestation of the mechanisms through which white men punish the black male for his forbidden desire for him, Baldwin, in turn, perceived police officers as the embodiment of these same constraints: they operate as the ultimate agents of white supremacy, those who deliver its message and uphold its power dynamics.

2.4 "The promontory of despair"

If Beale Street Could Talk is primarily concerned with black male vulnerability. By foregrounding the theme of incarceration, an issue that disproportionately affects black men, the novel evidences its preoccupation with the forms of oppression particular to these individuals within American society. Baldwin explores different modes of confinement, both literal and symbolic, that plague black manhood. The characters of Fonny and Daniel embody the vulnerability of black men to the police state and the criminal justice system, as I have previously argued. An additional character is also central to the novel's portrayal of black male

vulnerability: Frank Hunt, Fonny's stepfather, who commits suicide in the aftermath of his son's imprisonment.

As Curry argues, the ways black men die reflect how they live. Whether it is in the hands of the police, white vigilantes, or by suicide, the deaths of black men are often a consequence of how they are perceived within society, a product of the stereotypes in which they are entrapped, or of the conditions they are forced to endure. As a result, death becomes an important element in the architecture of black male subjectivity; the "capture within nonbeing," the state of being constantly confronted with one's death, of living against society's will for one's death, produces a specific mode of thinking (*The Man-Not* 140). In light of this theorization, I analyze the character of Frank in *If Beale Street Could Talk* as an example of how racialized and gendered oppression can affect the core of an individual's existence. As the following paragraphs will hopefully demonstrate, Frank's demise can be attributed to the intersecting factors of his racial and socio-economic marginalization, along with the unjust incarceration of his son that exacerbates his prevailing feelings of powerlessness and isolation. Through this character, Baldwin also demonstrates how far the criminal justice system can reach, the destructive power it has not only over those incarcerated but also through the havoc it wreaks in removing loved ones from their families and environments.

Despite being overlooked by most commentators of *Beale Street*, Frank represents a fundamental piece that connects the novel to the rest of Baldwin's fiction. As Ernest L. Gibson argues, it is through this character's storyline that Baldwin advances his exploration of salvation as an object of manhood in the novel. Gibson champions a reading of Baldwin's novelistic work as a "continued exploration of how men save each other or, tragically, how they refuse or fail to do so", of which *Beale Street* constitutes the fifth installment (6). His investigation illuminates

how the author constructs black male subjectivity as "inadvertently plagued by loneliness and denied a space of vulnerability" (15). Furthermore, it posits that the intimacy between men, the space of the fraternal, holds the potential for salvation in Baldwin's novels. More than a heterosexual love story, *Beale Street* aims to capture "the complexity of male emotion, vulnerability, and intimacy" (Gibson 163). Baldwin reminds us of the variety of reactions men of color can have in the face of systemic oppression, demonstrating the diversity and complexity of black manhood and its intricacies. In *Beale Street,* the character of Frank is doubly-functional: through him, Baldwin makes another iteration of the trope of tragic black manhood that appears across his fiction, while also advancing his philosophy of the power of male intimacy and the disastrous consequences of its denial or absence (Gibson 163).

Through Tish's narration, we learn that Fonny and Frank share a bond in which consanguinity is inconsequential: "Mr. Hunt, Frank, didn't try to claim him but he loved him—loves him" (15). They are both outcasts in the family: Mrs. Hunt, "a Sanctified woman," along with her two daughters, Fonny's older sisters, despise Fonny and neglect Frank. The family fights constantly and their household is a place father and son are always attempting to escape: "Between the mother's prayers, which were more like curses, and the sisters' tears, which were more like orgasms, Fonny didn't stand a chance. Neither was Frank a match for these three hags" (37). According to Tish, Fonny would always seek refuge in her family's house, and Frank too would go there often, pretending to be looking for his son. While the three women are light-skinned, Fonny is much darker, which is presented as the main reason for their rejection of him. The mother and sisters appear to seek an association with whiteness, which is demonstrated by how boastful they are of their fair skin and the value they place on social ascension. Frank's love for his son is the reason he chooses to cope with such a dysfunctional

family dynamic, as Fonny tells Tish: "Hadn't been for me, I believe the cat would have split the scene. I'll always love my Daddy because he didn't leave me" (17). Thus, from the earliest moments in the novel we are made aware of Frank's loneliness, his love for his son, and his reliance on Fonny as the source of human intimacy and connection in his life. Frank is also known to have lost the tailor shop he previously owned and to have become an alcoholic; for Tish, "It was much worse for him than it was for Fonny… Neither of them, anyway, as you can see, had any other house they could go to. Frank went to bars, but Fonny didn't like bars" (37). While Fonny found ways to cope—he found "his own center, inside him"—Frank had none of the same mechanisms, descending into despair when deprived of proximity to the one person who represented the source of his strength.

The crisis that leads to Frank's suicide is precipitated by the absence of Fonny, which creates a "symbolic space-in-between men," in Gibson's terms, a "fraternal crisis" (7). Moreover, in Gibson's reading, Frank's plight is also rooted in a larger issue that concerns black manhood. He offers as evidence a skillful analysis of Fonny's recollection of the sexual encounters between his parents the son has overheard. What he describes is a form of sadomasochistic role play where Frank impersonates Mrs. Hunt's "Lord." In Gibson's analysis, the scene evidences Frank's fractured manhood:

> [Mrs. Hunt's] religiosity becomes a site of powerlessness for Frank. As a critic of religion, he does not live up to Mrs. Hunt's ideal of Black manhood and lives with the truth that he is not enough to bring her "sexual ecstasy." Consequently, when they make love, he assumes the persona of Mrs. Hunt's Lord and shares with the reader the painful wound of his manhood…as one reads, it is clear that Mrs. Hunt receives extensive pleasure from Frank's performance of Jesus. However, this scene tells a different story

> for the vulnerable Frank. The fact that he has to perform as another man…suggests a lack within his own manhood. (Gibson 180)

Gibson argues that Frank desperately seeks to “reclaim or redeem a fallen manhood” through his use of physical violence and violent rhetoric, as he slaps his wife and repeatedly calls her a “bitch” during sexual intercourse (180). There is no consensus among commentators of the novel in regard to what this scene is meant to convey, but Gibson’s reading is certainly a convincing one. He views Frank as a character “whose very core is affected by racial oppression,” suggesting that his inner conflict entails a “greater struggle with Black male agency somewhat compounded by his son’s fight against structural corruption” (182).

Critics such as Robert J. Corber have also commented on the gendered nature of Frank’s struggles. To Corber, the character symbolizes “the destructiveness of patriarchal masculinity” (183). The critic highlights the scene when Tish’s announcement of her pregnancy is met with the pious Mrs. Hunt’s curses, to which Frank responds by knocking his wife down with the back of his hand. In Corber’s view, Frank’s gesture represents “a violent assertion of his manhood,” an interpretation that seems much more linked to the racist stereotypes of black men Curry’s studies explore than to an attentive reading of the scene. Corber’s account appears to be so infected with the notion that men of color use violence as a means to assert their manhood that he ignores the lines that follow Frank’s aggression toward Mrs. Hunt. It is significant that Sharon, Tish’s mother, comes to Frank’s defense by saying “Did you forget that it was Frank’s grandchild you was cursing?... I know *some men and some women* who would have cut that weak heart out of your body and gladly gone to hell to pay for it” (69; emphasis added). The author seems to be suggesting the opposite of what Corber claims: by having Sharon, who symbolizes female strength and autonomy within the novel, support Frank, he signals that we should not view this

particular action as a display of patriarchal or dominance-driven brutality. Rather, Baldwin directs us to the same forgiveness he appears to show toward the character. Sharon's statement implies that Frank's violence towards Mrs. Hunt is not motivated by a desire to assert himself as a patriarch—as she declares that "some women and some men" would have done worst— but a reaction to Mrs. Hunt's attack on the object of Frank's uttermost love and affection.

Additionally, the novel makes clear that Frank resents his wife and daughters for doing little to help Fonny and even aiding the prosecution in their case against him: "the D.A's office is in constant touch with the Hunt family—that is, the mother and the two sisters—and their position appears to be that Fonny has always been incorrigible and worthless" (132). A later dialogue between Frank and Joseph offers an explanation for his treatment of Mrs. Hunt that suggests his resentment of her is related to her rejection of her husband and her son: "And I thought she loved [Fonny]—like I guess I thought, one time, she loved me" (125). In this sense, it seems more appropriate to read Frank's aggressiveness as a manifestation of his despair and frustration resulting from his marginalized position within society and aggravated by the unjust imprisonment of his son and his family's refusal to collaborate for his release.

Corber believes that Frank's presence in *Beale Street* is the product of Baldwin's change of mind after his interview with feminist poet Nikki Giovanni in 1971, a contemptuous exchange that he describes as follows:

> The interview quickly turned testy when Giovanni raised the topic of domestic violence: 'I don't understand how a black man can be nothing in the streets and so fearful in his home, how he can be brutalized by some white person somewhere and then come home and treat me or [my] [m]other the same way that he was treated.' Citing his stepfather's struggles to support him and his eight half brothers and sisters as evidence, Baldwin

> explained the violence in terms of black men's lack of access to patriarchal privilege: 'You know, a black man is forbidden by definition, since he's black, to assume the roles, burdens, duties and joys of being a man.' (Corber 182)

Contrary to Corber's claim, I argue that Frank is not a fruit of Baldwin's rethinking of these dynamics, but a continuation of his argument in the interview. The author continues to "bear witness to his stepfather's pain and humiliation" (Corber 183) by approaching a character such as Frank with empathy rather than judgment or disapproval. Baldwin's reasoning in his dialogue with Giovanni suggests an alignment with Curry's elaboration of the black man as a Man-Not when he states that "a black man is *forbidden by definition"* to occupy the place of the white patriarch. Correspondingly, the novel seems much more inclined to depict Frank as a victim in need of saving than an aggressor seeking to assert his manhood through violence. Frank's acts of violence may be the result of a sense of powerlessness, but nowhere does Baldwin imply that they represent an attempt to dominate and subjugate women; on the contrary, the novel seems to suggest that they are motivated by a profound sense of despair. Whether or not the reader approves of Baldwin's attempt to explain violence, his characterization of Frank seems much more invested in constructing a nuanced and complex portrayal of black manhood and vulnerability than in a didactic use of the character.

Fonny's racially motivated incarceration not only condemns Frank to a life without love but also reinforces the father's sense of powerlessness as a black man living under a racist social order. This sentiment is also present when Frank shares his impressions of the lawyer the family hired to represent Fonny, when he declares: "you know I don't want my boy's life in the hands of these white, ball-less motherfuckers. I swear to Christ, I'd rather be boiled alive…But we all in the hands of white men" (*Beale Street* 65). It is also evidenced in Frank's displacement of his

anger onto his daughters, to whom he yells: "You two dizzy *off-white cunts*, get the fuck out of my face, you hear?" (*Beale Street* 190; emphasis added). As Gibson suggests, Frank's evocation of whiteness "reflects a connection between his mounting powerlessness and the racially absurd" (182). After shouting at his daughters, he begins sobbing. His gesture of covering his face with his palms and shedding tears on the table, this physical representation of his anguish, conveys "the severity of his pain and how helpless he feels in the world" (Gibson 182). All of these reinforce that Frank's fragility, as well as his bouts of aggressiveness, are inextricably linked to his sense of powerlessness as a marginalized subject deprived of the only meaningful human connection in his life.

The character of Joseph, Tish's father, complicates the novel's representation of black manhood. In contrast to Frank, he embodies black male strength and resilience. However, Baldwin is careful to note that Joseph "has a certain advantage over Frank" since he has not had any sons, because if he had had, "they might very well be dead, or in jail" (*Beale Street* 123). To be the father of a black male means to love someone who is constantly under the threat of death or at the mercy of racial absurdity. In this sense, parents who bring black men into the world are often denied intergenerational continuity, as the ubiquitous powers of white supremacy loom over their progeny and their legacy. As Julie C. Suk observes, the novel also references this issue in Tish's description of the white lawyer, Hayward's, office: "There were trophies and diplomas on the walls, and a large photograph of Hayward, Senior. On the desk, framed, were two photographs, one of his wife, smiling, and one of his two small boys. There was no connection between this room, and me" (*Beale Street* 93). Thus, the novel comments on how white families "enjoy…the bliss of an intact nuclear family, unbroken by the disruption of incarceration" (Suk 270).

Moreover, Joseph represents more than a "model" for healthy black manhood. His optimism is often contrasted with Frank's delusion to reinforce the idea that in a society that abides by racial absurdity, a marginalized subject's survival depends on union and community. Joseph draws his strength from the bonds of love and cooperation he shares with his family, which Frank is deprived of. Frank, who had no one but Fonny, cannot muster the strength to continue living when denied access to the only person who affords him access to intimacy and love. Thus, it is also through the contrast with Joseph that we can apprehend that Frank is the most vulnerable character in the novel; every other character has someone to rely on but him.

Throughout the novel, Joseph encourages Frank to fight for his son's freedom, and to some extent, he appears to succeed. The two men resort to stealing from their workplaces to gather money for Fonny's legal fees. A helpless Frank seems to find his strength through Joseph's encouragement, though he makes clear that Fonny's incarceration intensifies his sense of powerlessness: "I don't even know how I'm going to get him out. I'm sure one hell of a man" (126). Thus, Frank's impotence to an oppressive system is directly linked to his capacity to define himself as a man. Once again Joseph reminds him that they need to resist and manages to restore Frank's hope: "Frank finishes his drink, and straightens his shoulders. 'You right, old buddy. Let's make it'" (126). The tenderness they share is best illustrated at the moment Tish announces her pregnancy. She notices that Frank's eyes have left hers and gone in search of her father's:

> Both men went away from us, sitting perfectly still, on the chair, on the sofa: they went away together, and they made a strange journey. Frank's face, on this journey, was awful, in the Biblical sense. He was picking up stones and putting them down…When he returned, still in company with my father, his face was very peaceful. (*Beale Street* 68)

Other exchanges between Joseph and Frank appear to produce the same peacefulness that Tish describes. Thus, their relationship is one that holds the potential for salvation, if we adopt Gibson's theory of salvific manhood. Tragically, salvation does not come to fruition, since Frank commits suicide after being caught stealing from work. Once he is also under the threat of being incarcerated, the impossibility of fighting for his son's freedom represents a death sentence.

Plastas and Raimon have also noticed the importance of male intimacy in Baldwin's fiction. As they argue, for the author, "one antidote to male-on-male violence exists in the very recuperation and intensification of homosocial intimacy and love both outside and inside prison walls. Men's love for each other, Baldwin contends, can overcome the horrors that await" (690). In a sense, the relationship between Joseph and Frank illustrates this. A better portrayal of this dynamic, however, is the bond shared by Fonny and Daniel. When the two friends are reunited—before Fonny is arrested and after Daniel's release from prison—their relationship becomes a site of healing and comfort for the most vulnerable of the two men. Daniel, who was raped in jail, confides his experiences to Fonny:

> Sometimes, when Daniel spoke, he cried—sometimes Fonny held him. Sometimes, I did. Daniel brought it out, or forced it out, or tore it out of himself as though it were torn, twisted, chilling metal, bringing with it his flesh and his blood—he tore it out of himself like a man trying to be cured. (*Beale Street* 106)

Tish's description establishes Daniel as another example of black male vulnerability in the novel. His story demonstrates how the black man's "susceptibility to the will of others" can permanently damage him. According to Tish, Daniel's victimization changed him forever: "He would never, never, never again be the Daniel he had been" (*Beale Street* 174). But he is

fortunate to find, in Fonny's love for him, a space where a cure is possible. As a salvific male figure, Fonny "held him up just before he fell" (*Beale Street* 174).

Curry's considerations on the high rates of suicide among black men position suicide as a reaction to the obstacles imposed by racial oppression and capitalism. Referencing Hebert Hendin's *Black Suicide*, he argues that the "future orientation" of black men can be severely limited by the "various threats to Black males' lives, their constant vulnerability historically to violence and death" (*The Man-Not* 180). In this sense, suicide emerges as an escape from dehumanization. For him, futurity, or the capacity to project oneself into the future, is linked to whiteness:

> The future is embodied by whites; it is what makes their genders complementary and reproductive, necessary to civilization and the continuation of white humanity…For the Black male, death is possibility. It offers an end to the tragedy, a life beyond the confines, what DuBois celebrated as escape from this world for his son. (187)

Curry refers to DuBois's "Passing of the First Born", in *Souls of Black Folk*, where the author reflects on the premature death of his ten-day-old child: "...my soul whispers ever to me, "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free". No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood. Fool that I was to think or wish that this little soul should grow choked and deformed within the Veil!" (DuBois qt. in *The Man-Not* 140). For DuBois, then, "death was an escape from the tragedy of living as a Negro boy" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 140). For many black men, particularly those who are poor and therefore profoundly alienated from American society, suicide is also viewed as an escape, an alternative to an existence marked by social death:

> Violence and despair combine to vacate Black life from the activity of living for males of the subordinate racial group. This perspective manifests not as an individual pathology but as a group condition. For Black men, suicide manifests as an internalization of the conditions Blacks suffer generally. Many black males think there is no future because their present is defined by such loss (*The Man-Not* 180).

He is careful not to imply that black women who live under similar conditions do not struggle with the same levels of despair. Rather, he means to draw attention to the fact that "over the past two decades the educational and economic mobility of Black males has worsened such that suicide emerges as a particular worry for this group" (*The Man-Not* 180). A similar phenomenon, Curry informs, took place in the sixties and seventies, a period when suicide rates among black males grew dramatically (*The Man-Not* 179). In light of this information, it is not a stretch to speculate that this might have influenced Baldwin's depiction of suicide in his work.

In *Beale Street*, Frank's suicide is not just the result of a personal crisis but is rooted in the larger issues of capitalistic and racial disenfranchisement. In this sense, Baldwin views black male suicide "not as an individual pathology but a group condition." Frank's inability to protect his son from an oppressive legal system that targets black males indiscriminately, his incapacity to afford legal representation for Fonny, and the degree to which racial absurdity effaces him, all link his suicide to systemic oppression. His fractured manhood emerges as contributing factor, an element that aggravates the sense of impotence that leads to his suicide.

To conclude, it is pertinent to underscore two key aspects concerning the discussion proposed in this section. Firstly, Frank's trajectory reinforces Curry's view of the vulnerability inherent in the black male experience. Fonny's stepfather encapsulates a profound sense of abandonment that gradually erodes any semblance of a potential horizon. As a consequence,

despair and violence culminate in his ultimate demise. This interplay sets the stage for the second point this section set out to explore: a comprehensive exploration of Baldwin's conception of black manhood as Man-Not-ness cannot ignore the complexity of Frank's character. His presence in the novel must not be overlooked if one seeks to explore the struggles of marginalized individuals and the social forces at the root of their isolation and exclusion.

2.5 "The corpse still lives"

Bigger's trajectory in *Native Son* is shaped by race, gender, and their complex positioning in American society. Throughout his journey, the presence of death emerges as a pivotal element that manifests in two significant dimensions. Firstly, Bigger's death (his sentencing to capital punishment) directly results from the oppressive constraints placed upon black men, rendering their existence virtually impossible. Secondly, as the specter of death looms over Bigger's very being, his subjectivity is profoundly shaped by these circumstances that envelop his existence as a black man.

Literal Death

According to Elizabeth J. Ciner, the struggle for self-possession in Wright's fiction is a quest for adulthood—more specifically, manhood, given that all of the author's protagonists, with one exception, are men (126). She observes that the author's three first published books reference "non-adults" in their titles—*Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son*, and *Black Boy*. Ciner concludes that "Black males are perpetually 'boys' in the eyes of 'the man' in Wright's world" (127). In the case of *Native Son*, Bigger is in fact deprived of manhood, with the most significant form of this deprivation being represented by the impossibility of existence imposed on black male bodies. In other words, Bigger's journey toward manhood is perpetually made impossible

by his condemnation to the electric chair. As Jack Taylor suggests, the imposition of the death penalty on Bigger is a result of him being "reduced to a beast below the law who is ultimately a threat to civilization and the white community" (194). Consequently, Bigger's quest for manhood fails primarily because he is not granted the possibility of being regarded as human in the first place. This is the case not just because he is black, but specifically because he is a black man.

During Bigger's trial, Buckley, the prosecutor, refers to him as a "half-human black ape," (476) "a bestial monstrosity," (476) a "black mad dog," (477) a "rapacious beast," (478) and a "maddened ape," (480) evoking an imaginary that is inextricably linked to black manhood: his dehumanization is encoded not only in terms of race but also of gender. Buckley's plea for capital punishment, its justification, and his choice of language, find their meaning in Curry's words: "The Black male—the Nigger—was constructed as the white race's antipodal monstrosity, a sexual threat to the very foundation of white civilization if its savagery was not repressed" (*The Man-Not* 4). Bigger, as an inheritor of a culture that has historically viewed black men as rapists of white women and used this as a justification for castrating, lynching, and murdering them, is subjected to this logic. Thus, executing him becomes a matter of protecting (white) society from a beast, a predator. Buckley insists that Bigger must die in order for the community to be safe:

> I urge this [the death penalty] for the protection of our society, our homes and our loved ones. I urge this in the performance of my sworn duty to see, in so far as I am humanly capable, that the administration of law is just, that the safety and sacredness of human life are maintained, *that the social order is kept intact*, and that crime is prevented and punished…And I know of no better way to discourage such thinking than the imposition

> of the death penalty upon this miserable human fiend, Bigger Thomas. (*Native Son* 475; emphasis added)

Naturally, the “sacredness of human life” necessarily excludes Bigger, since he is viewed as a non-human. Additionally, Buckley makes clear that Bigger’s death is a matter of disciplinary punishment: by imposing on him the harshest form of punishment, the state will ensure that other blacks do not dare to commit similar crimes and, especially, that a racialized social order is guaranteed.

When the trial begins, Buckley’s speech is supported by an inflamed mob outside the courthouse screaming “Kill ’im now!” and “Lynch’im” (*Native Son* 433). As we learn through Bigger’s lawyer, Max, the trial was rushed in an unprecedented way to allow the defense little time to prepare, as well as made sure to occur “while the temper of the people is white-hot” (*Native Son* 436). Additionally, the State’s Attorney suggests repeatedly that Bigger is guilty of other crimes as a strategy to agitate the public. Max also emphasizes that “Crimes of even greater brutality and horror have been committed in this city…But none of that brought forth the indignation equal to this” (*Native Son* 448). In his argument for mitigation of punishment, the lawyer also cites the real Loeb and Leopold case. In one of the many “crimes of the century,” two German-Jewish wealthy college students, Nathan Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb, kidnapped and murdered a fourteen-year-old boy in Chicago. The two defendants were spared the death sentence, and their trial was marked by the discussion of capital punishment as retributive rather than transformative justice. Max’s defense speech, as David Guest notes, was heavily inspired by Clarence Darrow’s, who represented Leopold and Loeb. His strategy, in fact, is almost a replica of Darrow’s. Wright’s reference to the case is an evident commentary on the differences between how white and upper-class young men are perceived by society and the state in comparison to

those who are black and poor. It signals an ironic contrast, in David Guest's words: "In Bigger's world, as in that of Leopold and Loeb, the rich do not hang, and racial tension threatens to erase the line between the criminal justice system and the lynch mob" (79). Bigger's trial and his conviction illustrate Curry's words:

> He is raced and sexed peculiarly, configured as barbaric and savage, imagined to be a violent animal, not a human being. His mere existence ignites the Negrophobia taken to be the agreed-on justification for his death. This fear, or cultural intuition, expressed toward Black males calls on this society to support the imposition of death on these bodies and offer consent for the rationalizations the police state presents to the public as its justification for killing the Black beast, the rapist, the criminal, and the thug. (*The Man-Not* 131)

Bigger's condemnation is also significant because it happens at a crucial point in his process of transformation. If Book Two is concerned with how the criminal identity allowed Bigger to articulate himself in relation to the world for the first time, Book Three maps a final stage in his journey "from a life of non-personal, inarticulate existence—fed by a vortex of feelings that hot-wired him for violence—to one of articulating his new-found personhood through speech and action" (Sullivan et al. 420). If Bigger's process of achieving personhood represents the beginning of his transformation from *boy* to *man*, the tragedy is that he faces the death penalty before he is allowed to complete it.

Symbolic Death

Aimé J. Ellis considers Bigger Thomas a foundational archetype within American culture, a fundamental piece that bridges the gap between "the folkloric 'baaadman' narratives of the nineteenth century and the contemporary representations of hustlers, gangstas, and

gangbangers of the late twentieth century" (18). Ellis credits Wright with producing the most eloquent challenge of "the one-dimensional understandings of deathly violence and death-defiance most often attributed to the lawless and anti-authoritarian 'bad nigger'" (18). Wright's Bigger Thomas, he argues, offers a key to understanding these black masculine subjectivities that were produced by a legacy of historical and political subjection to racial terror and state violence. In this context, death defiance and deathly violence emerge as means through which black men, particularly the urban and poor, attempt to resist domination.

Ellis's analysis of *Native Son* draws attention to the black male homosocial subculture depicted in the novel through Bigger's interactions with other impoverished black men. This emphasis highlights the profound impact of death and violence on their psyches, which serve as reactions to the dehumanization they endure. Thus, Bigger's outbursts of rage and his propensity for violence emerge as expressions of his struggle to assert his humanity. Moreover, the bonds he shares with these young men also create a guarded space that functions doubly: as a site of community that "allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight" as well as create "an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys" (Ellis 26). In this sense, these relationships embody the same complexity of Bigger's character: they function as a site of both "self-destruction" and "self-discovery," an ambivalence that is reflected in his behavior (Ellis 29). This ambiguity is a significant demonstration of the way Wright complicates the stereotype of the "black brute," locating Bigger's humanity precisely at the motivation for his most violent and brutal actions.

Bigger Thomas, as Ellis persuasively asserts, serves as a vehicle for understanding a certain kind of black masculine subjectivity. In fact, Richard Wright crafted this character and placed him at the center of *Native Son* with this objective. According to Abdul R. JanMohamed,

Wright's characters are not meant to be understood as "idiosyncratically individual subjects," but rather as representative of specific collective subject positions (33). Thus, Wright's portrayals of black manhood serve as an exploration of a black masculine subjectivity that is shaped by the omnipresent specter of death.

JanMohamed foregrounds this argument in the monumental *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death.* This study argues that Richard Wright's oeuvre is a systematic excavation of the site of formation of the "death-bound subject," the individual "who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2). In his analysis of Wright's protagonists, the author develops a framework that allows the understanding of how deeply ingrained the threat of death is in African American subjectivity. JanMohamed's methodology reaches beyond the works of the author of *Native Son* to argue that there exists a "tradition within African American literature and culture that continually and systematically meditates on the effectivity of the threat of death as a mode of coercion"—slave narratives, contemporary novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and even "the lyrics of rappers such as Tupac and Biggie" participate in it (JanMohamed 3).

To elucidate how the threat of death functions in Wright's novels, JanMohamed articulates a "dialectic of death" that revolves around the concepts of social-death, symbolic-death, and actual-death. Actual-death, as the name suggests, is the biological end of life; it "functions simultaneously as the necessary precondition of social-death *and* its potential negation" (17):

> …the possibility of actual-death is the precondition for the slave's social-death in that it is the slave's desire to avoid that possibility, that is, his fear of death, that forces him to "agree" to become a slave, a socially dead being. However, if the slave is willing to die, if

> he is willing to risk actualizing his postponed death, then that actualization will totally negate his social-death or his enslavement. Symbolic-death, in contrast to these other forms of death, is constituted by the death of the slave's subject-position as a socially dead being and his rebirth in a different subject-position. (17)

Symbolic-death, as JanMohamed explains, depends on the use-value of death: "...the slave can approach his freedom only by utilizing the use-value of his death" (18). In other words, because the slave master can appropriate the value of his life, the enslaved person's only path to freedom lies in the distinction between voluntary and involuntary death, which grants him "minimal but crucial autonomy" by making his death something that cannot be appropriated by the master (19). Caught in this dialectic of death, the subject's position is an aporetic one: "*The death-bound-subject's "life" is thus defined by the need to avoid the possibilities of life as well as the possibility of death.* This is the aporetic zone occupied by bare life, a zone between the status of "flesh" and that of "meat", neither quite alive nor quite dead" (19). Expanding Agamben's concept, JanMohamed focuses on "the subjectivity of that bare life", which is determined by "the (im)possibilities of life and the (im)possibilities of death" (10). That is also the focal point of Wright's excavation.

JanMohamed argues that *Native Son* essentially maps a "movement from one form of death to another" (84). Understanding the kitchenette shared by the family of four at the beginning of the novel as a "death-cell," he maintains that Bigger's movement from one death-cell to another traces his journey from social-death to symbolic-death (JanMohamed 85). Thus, the narrative essentially develops the process through which Bigger gains consciousness of his social-death and attempts to unbind himself from it by appropriating the use-value of his

death. This notion is articulated clearly by the narrator: "As long as he could take his life into his own hands and dispose of it as he pleased…he need not be afraid" (*Native Son* 70).

As previously discussed, Bigger's inner world until the events that take place after Mary Dalton's death is encapsulated in the word *fear*. This emotion serves as the guiding force of his behavior and his actions. Upon reflecting on Mary's death as an act of creation and the catalyst for a "new beginning," Bigger experiences a transformative shift in perspective. This newfound outlook replaces his previous fear, specifically the fear of death, with a profound sense of liberation: "The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him" (*Native Son* 170). Inasmuch as the killing of Mary will result in his own death, it is what renders him free in the sense that it sets the conditions for his symbolic-death, that is, the acceptance of his fate in Book Three. In other words, by accepting his death Bigger dies on his own terms: he is reborn in a different subject-position, no longer socially dead, before his actual death.

Of equal importance to this reading is the fact that *Native Son* possesses an expressionist quality: in order to unveil the unconscious workings of Bigger's subjectivity, Wright adopts an aesthetic that structures the novel in the form of a dream. As JanMohamed argues, a variety of its elements are "at the mercy of a logic and an economy of dreams"—to name a few: "the temporal and spatial structure of events, the overlaps in intentions, the forms and content of knowledge, the attitudes, etc. of the narrator and the characters as well as…elements of the plot and the ubiquitous presence of specular relations between the characters" (JanMohamed 77). These specular relations are perhaps the most important when considering the actions that bring Bigger to his symbolic-death.

Within the pages of *Native Son,* virtually every character is paired with a counterpart who represents a mirror image, with distinctions based on gender or race, or both. Pairings such as Mary Dalton (female/white) and Bigger (male/black), Mary Dalton and Bessie (female/black), Mr. Dalton (male/white) and Bigger's mother/Mrs. Thomas (female/black), Gus (male/black) and Blum (male/white) exemplify this device. The fates of these characters intertwine, reflecting and echoing one another in a series of interconnected events and actions. For instance, Bigger beats Gus out of fear of robbing Blum's store. Both Mr. Dalton and Mrs. Thomas lose their children to death as a result of Bigger's actions. The rape and murder of Bessie by Bigger produce a negative image of Mary's killing. Finally, Bigger and Mary meet the same fate (death) and are bound by a dynamic of murder-suicide where his act of suffocating her (mimicking his own sense of stifling) ultimately leads to his own demise. These specular relations reproduce the logic of dreams, in which individuals assume symbolic and interchangeable positions.

In this sense, Bigger's accidental killing of Mary serves as the unconscious manifestation of his desire to murder her and therefore confront/provoke his own death. In fact, Bigger's "murder" of Mary—here understood as her dismemberment and disposal of her body—is clearly linked to his own death. When he returns home after the catastrophic events at the Dalton house, Bigger has a dream in which he is walking down a street holding a large package "so wet and slippery and heavy that he could scarcely hold onto it" (*Native Son* 189). He opens it to find his own severed head, described as gruesomely as Mary's. This scene appears to confirm that Bigger perceives the killing of Mary as a form of suicide.

In conclusion, the many deaths encountered by Bigger significantly suggest Wright's treatment of black male death as an existential issue. By making death a determining force in Bigger's subjectivity, one that manifests itself as a murder/suicide, as JanMohamed's study

revealed, Wright's portrayal of black manhood is in concordance with Curry's theorizations. Bigger's "literal death" also reveals the proximity between Curry's and Wright's conceptualizations of African American manhood: perceived as a Man-Not, the protagonist of *Native Son* has his quest for manhood perpetually made impossible. Trapped in a realm where manhood is unattainable, Bigger relies on deathly violence in pursuit of a means to assert his humanity.

Chapter Three

Rape and the Myth of the Black Rapist

On June 6th, 1944, George Stinney Jr. became the youngest person to ever face the death penalty in the United States. The black boy of fourteen years old was accused of murdering 8-year-old Mary Emma Thames and 11-year-old June Binnicker. George became a suspect after a witness reported having seen him in conversation with the two white girls who were gathering flowers near his house. George, who was approximately 5 feet tall and weighed under a hundred pounds, was believed to have fatally assaulted Emma and June with the intention to rape them: the victims sustained severe injuries and both their skulls had been fractured. One month after his arrest, he was tried and convicted of murder with intent to rape, by an all-white jury that deliberated for a mere ten minutes. As unlikely as the crime seemed, the consensus was that a boy so slight he appeared to have not yet reached puberty was a rapist and a killer. Seventy years after he was executed in the electric chair, the case was ruled a wrongful conviction.

The absurd story of George Stinney Jr. illustrates the potency of the myth of the black rapist. One of the most enduring cultural narratives in the history of the United States, the fiction of black men as bestial and hypersexual rapists of white women was used to justify horrific lynchings, tortures, and even capital punishment. Between the years 1930 and 1967, 455 men were executed for rape, out of which 405 were black (Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" 24).

As Angela Davis writes, "The myth of the black rapist has been methodically conjured up when waves of violence and terror against the black community required a convincing explanation" ("Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" 25). The claim of rape served as a

convenient pretext to sustain the underlying motives behind many of these acts of violence. This narrative was fueled by the popular depictions of black men as "brutes," "beasts," and "savages," which gained prominence in the decades following the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution[10]. During the institution of slavery, the prevailing images associated with blackness and maleness were of "buffoonery, blissful ignorance, and juvenile angst," endorsing the dominant belief that black people were childlike and in need of control and guidance, and thus advocating the notion that slavery was a paternalistic institution (Smiley and Fakunle 352). The end of slavery brought forth the perspective of political, social, and economic rights for newly-freed black individuals, who now represented a threat to white supremacy. Fear of black mobility, in this sense, led to a refashioning of the depictions of black men, this time as rampant rapists and violent criminals.

As discussed in the previous chapter, lynching was intimately connected with the sexual anxieties of white men; ritualistic castrations were the means through which they sought to assert their dominance over the black male body. Fraudulent rape charges were commonly used as justification for this brutal practice due to its effectiveness in mobilizing angry mobs. Moreover, lynching also had its roots in white men's fear of economic rivalry from black men. It served, then, as a form of reasserting "the social and economic place of all actors—male and female, black and white—in the hierarchy as dictated by white men" (Eby 131). As Robyn Wiegman argues, the ritualized deaths of black men offered "the means for (re)articulating white masculine supremacy within the social and economic specificities of slavery's abolition" (446). Wiegman elucidates the intersecting factors of citizenship and gender revealed by the practice of lynching:

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[10] The 13th Amendment, passed in 1865, made slavery and involuntary servitude illegal, except as punishment for a crime. In 1868, the 14th Amendment granted citizen status to formerly enslaved people, ensured them equal protection under the law, and prohibited the states from depriving "any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." The 15th Amendment to the Constitution, in 1870, barred race discrimination in voter laws, granting African American men, but not women, the right to vote.

> In the disciplinary fusion of castration with lynching, the mob severs the black male from the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus, and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, his (masculine) potentiality for citizenship. While this imposition of feminization works to align the black male, at the symbolic level of the body, with those still unenfranchised, it is significant that the narrative means for inciting and explaining the mob's violence takes the form of an intense masculinization in the figure of the black male as a mythically endowed rapist. Through this double staging of gender where the hypermasculinized rapist must "become" feminine through ritualized castration, lynching inhabits and performs the border crossings of race, sex, and sexual difference. (446-447)

The myth of the black rapist, like lynching—the most brutal and extreme of its consequences—was essential to the enforcement of gender and racial hierarchies. The emphasis on the protection of white womanhood represented an attempt to control the sexuality of white females as well as to conceal the victimization of black women, who were historically subjected to sexual violence (Guttman 170). Rape was systematically used as a form of punishment and coercion during slavery. In Davis's words: "[T]he right claimed by slave owners and their agents over the body of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over black people in general. The license to rape derived from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery" ("Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" 25).

Far more obscured, however, is the fact that black men were also largely victimized by sexual violence during and after slavery. White women, too, yielded power over black men and "used rape to dominate Black male slaves" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 93). As Curry explains: "white

women would coerce Black men into prolonged sexual relationships, routinely raping them for their own sexual pleasure" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 93). In the Reconstruction era, the "mythology of white female vulnerability to the Black rapist" was also instrumentalized by white women to garner political power (*The Man-Not* 95). They were not only bystanders in lynchings but made "deliberate and calculated efforts to make their experience and presence the rallying point of white supremacist violence" (*The Man-Not* 95). As Curry argues:

> Instead of simply being passive witnesses to the unfolding of white supremacy, white women developed sexual agency within the allegedly repressive parameters of Victorian asexuality through their domination of Black males. By aligning their aspirations for political power alongside white patriarchy's need to stamp out Black manhood, white women were able to be recognized publicly as enforcers of the racial order in an effort to control the barbaric lasciviousness of Black men while using Black male bodies for their sexual pleasure under the protection of white-supremacist dogmas maintaining that no white woman could ever sexually desire a Black male. As such, the myth of the Black rapist was not only a racist fiction telling of a rampant Nigger-beast craving the flesh of white women but also a deliberately accepted mythology perpetuated by white women to conceal their violence and rape of Black men. (*The Man-Not* 97)

Understanding the historical sexual vulnerability of black men requires destabilizing the "distant and extricate position from which white womanhood is usually theorized," as Curry writes (*The Man-Not* 95). Their complicity in perpetuating, sustaining, and exploiting the myth of the black rapist is vastly documented by black thinkers of the Jim Crow period such as anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells:

> Throughout Wells's corpus on lynching, she documents cases of white women pursuing black men and the men's surrender to the advances for fear of being accused of rape. This fatalist paradox wherein black men under duress were forced to have sex with white women for fear of being accused of rape often resulted in the black male victims being lynched as a *rapist*. (Curry, "He's a rapist" 135)

Enslaved black men were also sexually exploited by white men, as Thomas A. Foster discusses in *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men*. Foster highlights that "white men, especially masters and overseers, could and did assert sexualized control over enslaved men's bodies" (85). According to him, "Sexual abuse and exploitation of a wide variety of forms occurred under slavery as white men enacted and asserted their power over enslaved men in many situations" (115).

The abuse and exploitation took mainly the forms of forced coupling and reproduction, "fetishized objectification and direct sexual contact" (Foster 85). The sexual vulnerability of enslaved black men was also materialized in the "social and cultural denigration of their bodies, which were objectified, fetishized, degraded, and abused" (Foster 113). In consonance with Curry, the author argues: "Enslaved men's genitalia were groped, scrutinized, imagined, and even tortured, all because black men's sexuality was symbolized by their genitals and thought of as a source of power—a strength that had to be possessed or put down (113)".

Thus, the sexual violence experienced by black men during slavery took many forms, extending to "objectification and fetishization, coerced reproduction, relations with white women and men" (Foster 116). In this sense, Foster underscores the importance of understanding sexual exploitation beyond rape and broadening the scope of what is understood as sexual violence in relation to enslaved black men.

The lynching of black men for the crime of rape was more than the most brutal manifestation of racial hierarchy in the United States. Borrowing from Curry, once again:

> The lynching of black males was not only an example of the most extreme violence of the US racial order but also a spectacle intended to unite white men and white women as the patriarchal rulers of America's sexual regime. Both a white woman's imagined vulnerability to the black rapist and the ability to castrate him empowered her to be an overseer of patriarchal violence against black men. This symbiosis of the white man and white woman against racialized men made patriarchy the dominant racial logic that simultaneously protected white womanhood and justified the violence of white manhood ("He's a Rapist" 137).

The sexual vulnerability of black men is an issue that arises in both *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. One of the primary reasons these novels were chosen for analysis in this thesis was the relevance of the rape accusations that led to the protagonists' imprisonment in both novels. In this sense, both of these works examine the historical myth of the black rapist. The significance of this point of analysis lies in the fact that this racist mythology configures a form of oppression that targets explicitly black men, precisely because it exploits a form of vulnerability imposed on black male bodies on the basis of their race *and* gender.

The present chapter aims to demonstrate the converging and diverging aspects of these novels in their reinterpretations of this myth. Furthermore, my analysis will explore how rape is depicted in these works, its significance, and its function in the portrayal of black male vulnerability.

3.1 “Not what one did to women”

Richard Wright viewed the myth of the black rapist as having a fundamental part in American cultural trauma. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” his account of the creative process behind *Native Son*, he identifies it as “a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (532). For Wright, there was no doubt as to what “social reality or dramatic situation” he would write Bigger into for “life had made the plot over and over again” (532). In his words: “Any Negro who has lived in the North or the South knows that times without number he has heard of some Negro boy being picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with ‘rape’” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 532). Wright also comments on the disciplinary nature of lynching and its underlying justification, rape: “...if a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is called ‘rape,’ that catchword which has garnered such vile connotations that it can raise a mob anywhere in the South pretty quickly” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 512). As this section will demonstrate, rape as a catchword that encapsulates contradictory meanings, or as a figure, is a recourse employed by the author throughout *Native Son*.

According to Kimberly S. Drake, the myth of the black rapist functions as a “primal scene” of black manhood, the “central determining factor in black male identity” in Wright’s fiction (29). Lynching constitutes a Freudian “primal scene,” as the witnessing of this “spectacular event” initiates “the subject into a crucial aspect of identity” (Drake 50). In other words, as a spectator of the violent ritual of lynching, the black male is interpellated into his racial position. Drake maintains that Wright’s early fiction, particularly the novella *Rite of Passage*, the short story “Big Boy Leaves Home,” along with the novels *Native Son* and *Lawd Today!* (written in the 1930s but not published until 1963) work toward the development of

Wright's own theory of racial trauma. This theory, she maintains, is dialogic: "...originating in slavery-era emasculating violence, Jim Crow stereotypes, and lynching, the trauma generates an equally violent response in its victims which serves to further solidify racial stereotypes and exacerbate the response to them" (Drake 56). In the context of *Native Son*, the acts of both literal and symbolic rape committed by Bigger are manifestations of this trauma response. They result from the cultural legacy of lynching and castration and the pervasive myth of the black rapist. They are manifest also in Bigger's feeling of being emasculated and violated. Richard Wright skillfully addresses this issue in the novel by presenting a series of rape scenes that gradually escalate in both explicitness and brutality. In the process, he also reworks the mythology of the black rapist.

As Drake notes, Wright challenges the concept of rape throughout the novel, emptying out its meaning, "loosening [it] from its literal moorings" to reposition it as a metaphor for something else (57). In the early pages of *Native Son*, the author establishes sexual violence as a metaphor for Bigger's oppression, as the character tells his friends: "They don't let us do anything…the *white* folks…Every time I think about it I feel like somebody is poking a red-hot iron down my throat" (*Native Son* 20). Here, racist and capitalist disenfranchisement embody "the symbolic phalluses of white masculine power burning in Bigger's throat" (Wiegman 457). Bigger later tells Max: "You ain't a man no more…*They* [white folks] *after you so hot and hard* you can only feel what they doing to you" (*Native Son* 408-40; emphasis added). In this passage, Bigger equates manhood with autonomy and "posits the white world, so 'hot and hard' against him, as castrating" (Wiegman 457). Thus, rape and castration become images of the black man's position in a white supremacist society. As JanMohamed argues, Wright seems to suggest that black manhood is "formed as e(masculine)ated—that is, as both castrated and raped" (112).

The first instance of sexual violence dramatized in *Native Son* is the symbolic rape/castration of Gus. In Book One, Bigger and his gang mates plan to rob a white business—the chosen target is "Old Blum's" store—for the first time. When Bigger presents the idea of the heist, all of his friends consent, except for Gus, who is hesitant. The plan both excites and terrifies Bigger, primarily due to his understanding that committing a crime against a white person would represent "a violation of ultimate taboo," "a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them," and a "trespassing" into incredibly dangerous territory (*Native Son* 14). As Wiegman observes, the language of violation Wright uses here encodes Bigger's fear of robbing Blum's store "in the same terms of the mythic encounter between a black man and a white woman" (460). This conflation of robbery with rape suggests that economic competition is at the heart of the mythology of the black rapist.

The disjunction between Bigger's drive to go on with the crime and his "fear of whites" causes him to feel "divided and pulled against himself" (*Native Son* 27). Unable to suppress his anxiety, Bigger devises a scheme: by finding a pretext to fight Gus, he would cause him to abandon the plan, rendering the endeavor impossible. He uses Gus's tardiness as a justification to deliberately provoke and assault him. Wright adopts a distinctly sexual language to describe the attack:

> Gus was very still, resting on his knees…Gus turned over to rise, but Bigger was on top of him, with the knife open and ready.
>
> 'Get up! Get up and I'll slice your tonsils'...
>
> 'Get up!' he said.
>
> 'Please, Bigger!'
>
> 'You want me to slice you?'

> He stooped again and placed the knife at Gus's throat… Bigger was not satisfied; he felt his muscles tightening again… Slowly, Gus stood. Bigger held the open blade an inch from Gus's lips.
>
> 'Lick it,' Bigger said, his body tingling with elation. (*Native Son* 42-43)

When Doc, the owner of the poolroom in which the altercation takes place, asks Bigger to leave, he slashes the pool table, pulls out his gun, and points at him, asking "Don't you like it?," (45) a question that also seems reminiscent of the rapist-victim scenario.

The scene is packed with dense symbolism that condenses a variety of meanings and functions in the narrative. On one level, it parallels and foreshadows the absent "rape" of Mary and the actual, brutal rape of Bessie. As Matthew Elder observes, this scene is also thematically connected to other events in the novel through "key verbal signals" (39). One such signal is represented by the mention of Bigger's "tense muscles," which find release when he is "satisfied," a recurring image throughout *Native Son*. On the symbolic level, Bigger performs a dual action in his assault on Gus: by threatening to slice his tonsils, he "symbolically and phonetically" evokes the threat of castration—the slicing of one's testicles—together with the symbolism of enforced fellatio, "a figure of circularity and self-containment" which "dramatizes the synchronicity of emasculation and silencing" (Silke 109). The scene alludes to the ritualistic castrations of black men in lynchings, representative of their political and social silencing, and links rape and castration.

The relevance of this scene is enhanced by the novel's insistence on Bigger's gun and knife as "phallic symbols that he uses to compensate for his sense of powerlessness or his e(masculine)ation," as Abdul R. JanMohamed observes (91). More significantly, in performing the castration/rape of Gus, as JanMohamed argues, Bigger also symbolically castrates and rapes

himself. By replacing his fear of crossing the racial border (by robbing Blum's business) with the attack on Gus, Bigger is self-mutilating by repressing his "desire to get out of his confinement in a space circumscribed for him by racism" (JanMohamed 91). This instance also reflects the bifurcation of Bigger's subjectivity, "whereby one part of him collaborates with the racializing structure, against the other profoundly rebellious part" (JanMohamed 91). The narrator articulates this notion by emphasizing that Bigger felt "divided and pulled against himself" (*Native Son* 27). At the core of Bigger's rape/castration of Gus is his fear of crossing the racial border, of venturing into a territory where he, already symbolically castrated, could potentially face literal castration or lynching. In this sense, the scene enforces the novel's employment of "rape" as a figure for the oppression of black men.

The novel continues to reference castration when, after the events in Doc's poolroom, Bigger goes to the Dalton house for his job interview, bringing along his knife and gun to "give him a sense of completeness" (*Native Son* 48). His reasoning is that "in order to get to the Dalton house, he would have to go through a white neighborhood. He had not heard of any Negroes being molested recently, but he felt that it was always possible" (*Native Son* 48). As JanMohamed argues, the ambiguous use of "molested" here suggests Bigger's fear of being raped, while the need for a "sense of completeness" is implicitly a fear of castration (95).

Bigger's encounter with Mary Dalton advances the novel's displacement of the concept of rape and begins its exploration of the myth of the black rapist. Mary's first appearance takes place right before the confrontation in the pool room, when Bigger goes to the cinema with Jack, another one of his gang mates. Before the movie starts, they watch a newsreel in which Mary Dalton is introduced as part of a "*little collection of debutantes*" that "*represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth and over fifty of America's leading families*" (*Native Son* 34). She is

presented not only as a sexual figure but also as a symbol of the white world and capitalist power. As Sandra Guttman maintains, Bigger's attraction to Mary upon watching the newsreel, before he has even met her, suggests that the myth of the black rapist diverts and sexualizes "black male rebellion and dissatisfaction," as "the will to possess the white woman substitutes for the desire to overthrow white supremacist society" (172). The object of Bigger's and Jack's desire, in reality, is the social and economic power Mary represents. Wright's employment of the newsreel, then, shows how "this link between political and sexual desire is maintained by an American mass culture aiming to transform the collective political unrest of the black male community into a less dangerous form" (Guttman 172).

When Bigger meets the flesh-and-blood Mary, she is quite different from what he expected. That is because "all of the white women he had met" until then had "a certain coldness and reserve" and "stood their distance" (*Native Son* 67). Mary, differently, "waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways" (*Native Son* 67). Bigger quickly discovers that Mary is in no way similar to the image of purity and innocence he has learned to associate with white womanhood. Rather, she is a sexually active woman, who drinks and engages in political activity, as shown by her involvement with the Communist Party. Mary's characterization as transgressive in itself is already a revision of the myth of the black rapist, as she challenges the symbolic construction of white womanhood as innocent and virginal, in need of perpetual protection.

Moreover, as Claire Eby notes, Wright seems to suggest that "Bigger was emasculated by his contact with Mary far more than he was aroused" (132). Thus, Wright's reworking of the mythology of the black rapist places the white woman in a position of power in relation to the black man. In the context of the novel, the white woman is harmed, but that harm is not

motivated by lust nor does it take the form of rape. Bigger kills Mary, after all, out of fear of being discovered in proximity to a white woman, knowing that any interaction they had could be read as "rape." It is important to keep in mind that the novel is set in the Jim Crow era: in the southern United States, where Bigger comes from, black men were criminalized and lynched for so much as looking at a white woman for longer than thirty seconds, a crime named "eyeball raping" (Curry, *The Man-Not* 97). In this sense, Mary poses more danger to Bigger than the opposite.

Towards the end of the evening, Bigger finds himself in the situation of having to carry the inebriated Mary to her bedroom. To readers in the twentieth century, this particular scene may seem suggestive of sexual assault. Bigger carefully positions Mary on her bed, and as their faces draw near, she initiates a forward movement, seemingly intending to kiss him. Despite Mary's nearly unconscious state, Bigger proceeds to engage with her in this interaction. It is evident, however, that Wright did not intend it to be read as rape—hence the fact that the action is initiated by Mary, in her movement toward Bigger's face. Additionally, there is no suggestion that Bigger intends to rape Mary; rather, it is implied that he desires consensual sex with her. As Guttman notes, Bigger positions the woman's body "so that it seems as if she is actively responding to him" (178). Drake adds that Bigger is "playing at" consensual sex by manipulating "her like the pliable, receptive doll of his fantasy" (77). Mary eventually responds, appearing to manifest sexual desire too. What Wright intends to show here is the disastrous effects of a black man and a white woman interacting in the most prohibited form of taboo.

While Bigger does not rape Mary nor has sexual intercourse with her, the scene is filled with sexual tension and imagery, reaching its highest point when he suffocates her out of fear of being discovered by Mrs. Dalton, Mary's blind mother, who unexpectedly enters the room. As

Drake suggests, the spectral Mrs. Dalton is "a figure for the ghost of 'injured' Southern womanhood" that causes the trauma of lynching to appear before Bigger's eyes (78). Just as when he "raped" Gus, "his muscles [were] flexed taut as steel," "flexed so taut they ached" (*Native Son* 98). Covering Mary's head with the pillow, Bigger "grew tight and full, as though about to explode," (97) holding his breath until she let out a "long slow sigh" (98).

This scene, too, condenses a complex intermingling of layers. On one level, the stifling of Mary mimics Bigger's own feeling of being suffocated by white society. His smothering of Mary also inverts the race-class hierarchy: Bigger is positioned on top of her, their bodies "locked back into the dialectic of place—of above and below," as Guttman notes (179). Whenever she tries to rise up, that is, to re-establish her place above him in the social order, he pushes "downward with all of his weight" (*Native Son* 98). To Guttman, this is where Wright invokes rape (179). The actual significance of rape here, however, lies in its connection with the scene of the rape/castration of Gus. By covering Mary's face with a pillow, Bigger performs what he had earlier rehearsed with his attack on Gus, whose tonsils he threatened to slice: he effectively silences her. When he disposes of Mary's body in the furnace and beheads her in the process, he literally slices her throat, a scene that is described in lengthy detail. The gruesome dismembering serves as a lynching scene, as Silke argues, that is metonymically linked with rape, "thus substituting for the crime Bigger does not commit" (110). Wright constructs a thread in which rape, castration, and lynching are interconnected. Read together, the two symbolic rape scenes suggest that Bigger is acting out the cultural trauma of lynching and the myth of the black rapist.

Furthermore, the replacement of sexual desire with death adds more complexity to the novel's argument. JanMohamed's reading reveals the intricate dynamics of the myth of the black rapist and its role in the sexualization of the racialized individual:

> The displacement of libido from sex to death seems to imply, within the racialized universe that Wright is exploring, that sexual relations between a black man and a white woman can be *thought* but never *consummated*; that the attempt to consummate that desire will inexorably transform it into a death throe; that this desire is so profoundly policed by the threat of death that, in its attempt to manifest itself, it will transform itself into its own prohibition; that the inculcation of this desire and its prohibition are two aspects of the same phenomenon and, together, are central to the production of the impossibly contradictory position of the e(masculine)ated subject. (96-97)

The "rape" of Mary serves two purposes: firstly, it re-works the myth of the black rapist. Wright makes clear that Bigger's desire for Mary is political, produced by society's symbolic construction of the white woman, not an inherent lust for the white body as the mythology implies. He affirms that such desire is fabricated, but also made impossible, unattainable, by the same powers that inculcate it into the castrated black male subject through both the taboo of interracial relations and the association of white womanhood with political and economic power. As Bigger later confirms in his conversation with Max, he "felt like having [Mary]" because "I knew I oughtn't've wanted to" (*Native Son* 406). Bigger's confusing sexuality, materialized by the intermingling of fear and violence that takes the form of sexual impulse, is a symptom of that construction. Secondly, the "rape" of Mary repeats the rape of Gus: both draw on the symbolism of silencing and castration, reinforcing the idea that Bigger is enacting his own trauma of symbolic castration and rape. Moreover, both are motivated first and foremost by his fear of crossing the color line or being caught trespassing on the border erected to guarantee racial hierarchy, which symbolizes his emasculation. In *Native Son*, that line is so palpable that it is

almost material. As Bigger tells Max: "They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line…and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you" (407).

The novel's redefinition of rape reaches its culmination with the murder and rape of Bessie Mears, the most violent and literal dramatization of this action in the story. Bigger convinces Bessie, his girlfriend, to help him use Mary's "disappearance" to stage a kidnapping and receive ransom from the Daltons. Although he does not initially tell her he is responsible for Mary's absence, she becomes suspicious. When he finally confesses to having accidentally killed the woman, Bessie confronts him with something he had suppressed from his consciousness. She says: "Honey, don't you see?...They'll say you raped her" (*Native Son* 262). The narrator describes Bigger's reaction: "So deeply had he pushed it all back into him that it was not until now that its real meaning came back. They would say he had raped her and there would be no way to prove that he had not. That fact had not assumed importance in his eyes until now" (*Native Son* 262). As Silke argues, Bessie's "insight into the significance of his acts… resonate with the voice of white culture and its prohibitions," which Bigger processes as a violation (108). Her words trigger his literal redefinition of the concept of rape:

> He stood up, his jaws hardening. Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape.

As the passage suggests, Bigger embraces the familiar mold of the black rapist, claiming responsibility for the rape of Mary which he has not committed, at least in the literal sense. Moreover, Bigger redefines his concept of rape as "not what one did to women": if killing a white woman equals rape (and by Jim Crow codes, any other interaction with a white woman could also be read as rape), the word is empty of its original meaning. As JanMohamed argues, the act becomes a trope that "functions as the center of a specular world characterized entirely by the metonymic spread of 'rape'" (111). As such, rape is the result of all interracial relations involving black men: whenever he approaches the limits of the racial border, Bigger is either the victim or the perpetrator, subject or object, of rape. Rape becomes, as Silke suggests, a "process of an enforced passage from one identity to another" (106). Through the "rape" of Mary, Bigger is initiated into his new identity which he consolidates by actually raping Bessie.

Regarding Bigger's redefinition of rape, JanMohamed maintains, Wright "stages a peculiar negative mirror image between castration and rape: the threat, the reality, and the fear of symbolic castration are all rearticulated here as the ubiquity of symbolic rape" (JanMohamed 112). In the process, rape also becomes an act of self-defense (he was forced to rape "every time he looked into a white face"), the result of a build-up of fear and despair ("when he snapped it was rape") and an insurrectionary act, "a rebellion against powerlessness" (Silke 108).

After Bessie confronts Bigger about how the killing of Mary will be perceived, he forces her to join him in hiding. His impulse to rape her stems from the same feeling that drove him to violate Gus and Mary: fear. The scene parallels the previous two, depicting Bigger's profound stupor that drowns out Bessie's voice, her pleas of "don't, don't, don't" grow increasingly distant as the tension reaches its peak:

> The loud demand of the tensity of his own body was a voice that drowned out hers. In the cold darkness of the room it seemed that he was on some vast turning wheel that made him want to turn faster and faster; that in turning faster he would get warmth and sleep and be rid of his tense fatigue. He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted. He flung the cover back, ignoring the cold, and not knowing that he did it. Bessie's hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding. He had to now. Imperiously driven, he rode rough-shod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of the resisting wind. *don't don't don't Bigger*. And then the wind became so strong that it lifted him high into the dark air, turning him, twisting him, hurling him; faintly, over the wind's howl, he heard: *don't Bigger don't don't*. At a moment he could not remember, he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted. (270)

As Guttman observes, the rapes of Mary and Bessie are linked and differentiated by the opposing images of fire and ice that dominate the scenes—in the former, Bigger is overtaken by a "sheet of blazing terror" (*Native Son* 102). Their subsequent deaths, too, are connected on the basis of the distinction of how the bodies are disposed of and discovered. After raping Bessie, Bigger bludgeons her to death with a brick, turning her face "into a sodden mass that gave softly…to each landing blow" (*Native Son* 274). He disposes of her corpse by throwing it in an air shaft, where it is later discovered, beginning to rot. Mary's, on the other hand, is discovered when the reporters find her ashes in the furnace. Her "disembodied return," contrasted with "Bessie's undeniably physical half-frozen, rotting corpse" signals "the different ideologies of

white and black female sexuality—those of the ethereal, asexual white woman and the sickeningly fleshy, promiscuous black woman," as Guttman argues (185). Furthermore, like with Mary, Bigger promptly forgets the sexual impulses that preceded the killing of Bessie. In both instances, his focus shifts immediately to the murders, as they hold the most significance by symbolizing his defiance against white society. To my mind, this emphasizes the notion that sexual violence is an involuntary response of Bigger's, deeply ingrained and reminiscent of his trauma, both personally experienced and culturally inherited. It is a knowledge he immediately suppresses because it is unbearable to contemplate.

The rape and murder of Bessie have been assigned different meanings and significance within the novel. As mentioned, in Guttman's reading, it reveals Wright's careful attention to society's opposing treatment of the victimization of white women and that of black women. Her analysis underscores how the myth of the black rapist served to obscure the historical rapes of black women by making white womanhood excessively visible. The most literal representation of this dynamic takes place during Bigger's inquest when Bessie's disfigured body is used as "merely 'evidence'" that he must have raped Mary (*Native Son* 383). Silke reads the rape of Bessie as Bigger's reaction to her "becoming a castrating force" by reminding him that he would be accused of raping Mary (112). What he does to Bessie, in this case, does not fit his own definition of rape, inasmuch as he sees himself as violated, not a violator. This inversion represents a parody of the "fictions of rape, written over and over by American cultural practices," wherein black women's sexual violation is rendered invisible (Silke 116). Wiegman, too, maintains that Bessie's victimization, which is linked to Mary's formally and thematically, crafts "the African American woman's death as the ricochet effect of the white woman's pedestaled superiority" (462).

Finally, Drake's and JanMohamed's readings of the rape of Bessie point in the same direction. For Drake, it represents Bigger's surrender to the black rapist stereotype, that is, the complete overtaking of trauma over his identity (82). JanMohamed views it as symptomatic of the entrapment of Bigger's psyche, along with his value system, in a logic in which "literal rape becomes Bigger's response to symbolic rape; the literal rape of Bessie becomes his negation of his own symbolic rape" (112). As the discussion developed in the present section has proposed, the novel links Bigger's acts of sexual violence to the practices of racial terror historically employed by white society to subjugate black men. The novel insists that Bigger's crimes "existed long before" they occurred (*Native Son* 456). The implication is that Bigger's crimes do not have to exist at all in order for him to be guilty; similarly to how racial criminalization and the threat of death act on Bigger's subjectivity, the rhetoric of the black rapist imposes itself so strongly in his reality that he is not able to escape it; he ends up unavoidably acting out the forbidden story.

Through the portrayal of Bigger as the archetypal "beast," coupled with the suggestion that his transformation into the stereotype of the black rapist is rooted in a blend of cultural and personal traumas, Wright humanizes a subject that has historically been dehumanized. In alignment with Curry's position in *The Man-Not*, Wright's depiction of black manhood and the myth of the black rapist compels us to perceive black men who engage in deathly violence not as deviants, but rather as individuals who require treatment and compassion instead of solely criminal punishment. Rather than attributing their violence to an inherent lust for aggression, we must acknowledge they possess a history, together with a series of sociological and economic factors that exist behind these behaviors.

3.2: "I began to see the reality of rape"

Like *Native Son, If Beale Street Could Talk* is filled with rape rhetoric. How this issue is handled in Baldwin's novel, however, appears to continue his revision of Wright's best-known work. While both engage with the mythology of the black rapist, Baldwin's is much more invested in a depiction of rape as a complex issue, materialized by the author's representation of sexual violence in its different forms and various possible victims. His interrogation of the myth, thus, distances itself from Wright's redefinition of rape, which at times risks affirming the very logic it critiques. As Nathaniel Mills informs, Baldwin "faulted Wright for attempting to reclaim blackness in terms produced by racist ideology" (66). By choosing to portray Bigger as both a rapist and murderer, even with the aim of exploring the conditions that produce such individuals, Wright faces the possibility of being perceived as endorsing racist ideology, as this depiction potentially strengthens a stereotype of black manhood. What the two novels share, nonetheless, is their appropriation of sexual violence as a trope for political and social disenfranchisement.

As discussed elsewhere in the present work, within the racist social order of the United States, black men have been historically overburdened with a myriad of negative stereotypes: "the Macho, the criminal, the liar, the rapist, the murderer, the thug, the deadbeat father, the abuser, the misogynist, the beast, the beast cub, the super-predator," to name a few (*The Man-Not* 197). As D. Marvin Jones maintains, the black male does not exist: "he" is a social construct. In other words, "The black male has become metaphorical, a way of personifying social and historical forces, of painting a pariah's face on the problems of drugs, disease, or crime" (Jones 2). In addition, as Curry argues, the black man is "deprived not only of an identity, but also a history and existence that differs from his brute negation" (*The Man-Not* 6). In *Beale Street,* Baldwin resists and subverts the racist ideology of the dominant discourse about African

American men. That subversion appears, as discussed, in the character of Fonny, who refuses to be defined by white society's narratives. It is also illustrated in the story of Daniel, a character who embodies the position of social and sexual vulnerability of black men. As mentioned previously, Daniel is raped in prison as well as forced to watch "nine men rape one boy" (*Beale Street* 174). As Patrick Elliot Alexander informs, prisoner-on-prisoner rape in incarcerated male populations is often a practice of racial degradation (52). Sexual abuse, in this scenario, is routinely condoned and legitimized by those in charge of guaranteeing the prisoners' safety. The complicity of jail guards and administrators in Daniel's sexual victimization, thus, serves as a representation of how racial hierarchy is enforced behind bars (Alexander 52).

Unable to hold back his tears, Daniel confides to Fonny and Tish the "unnamable thing" he cannot overcome. Ernest L. Gibson presents a compelling reading of his testimony:

> Daniel's rape signifies both a violation of humanity and the forever tortured physicality of Black manhood. As a text, his body engenders historical narratives of racial terror, scripts of how white supremacy garnered power through sexual violence, and the inescapability of psychic–corporeal memory. In stating how he would never be who he once was, Tish captures the permanently altered state of Daniel's racial and gendered ontology. His humanity, penetrated and punctured, is not fully recoverable. (174)

Baldwin, unlike Wright, does not position the black man as the rapist, but as the victim, pointing to the history of the sexual victimization of African American men. Tish's account of Fonny's experiences in prison further illustrates this point. According to her, Fonny is "placed in solitary for refusing to be raped," and "loses a tooth, again, and almost loses an eye" (192). As Alexander suggests, Fonny is brutalized as a form of punishment for his refusal to comply with the jail administrators' "agenda of racialized social control" (52). Thus, prison emerges as a sight

of institutionalized sexual violence and racial terror. Fonny's confrontation with Officer Bell, which foreshadows his arrest, is also replete with suggestions of sexual victimization. In the ever-surveilled streets of Baldwin's New York City (said to have "the worst cops"), Tish is sexually harassed by a "greasy, Italian punk" while entering a bodega. Fonny comes to her rescue: he "grabbed the boy…knocked him to the ground…kicked him in the balls and dragged him to the sidewalk" (*Beale Street* 136-137). Seeing the commotion, the racist police officer, Bell, approaches the scene:

> I was sure that the cop intended to kill Fonny; but he could not kill Fonny if I could keep my body between Fonny and this cop; and with all my strength, with all my love, my prayers, and armed with the knowledge that Fonny was not, after all, going to knock *me* to the ground, I held the back of my head against Fonny's chest, held both his wrists between my two hands, and looked up into the face of this cop. (*Beale Street* 137)

Tish's conviction that "the cop intended to kill Fonny" carries the weight of the historical (and, unfortunately, contemporary) racial violence perpetrated against black men, especially in what concerns police brutality. By positioning herself as a barrier, she assumes the role of the protector, using her womanhood to disarm the cop. Her act of defiance (looking "up into the face of this cop") highlights her resistance. In *Beale Street,* female subjectivity guards and protects black manhood. Alternatively, one may also perceive this moment as an act of emasculation for Fonny, who is unable to protect himself and his soon-to-be wife and is criminalized for doing what is expected of men in general.

As Gibson observes, Tish's "blackness, the peculiar marker of burden within the American racial narrative, dilutes the power of womanhood granted by the same system of white male patriarchy" (175). The safety of Fonny, at least for the time being, is thus ensured by the

intervention of the Italian market owner, a white woman, who voices support for the couple. Prior to this crucial moment, the police officer repeatedly refers to Fonny with the demeaning term "boy," a reflection of racial and power dynamics, also symbolic of the cop's attempt to emasculate Fonny. The situation, as Trudier Harris suggests, constitutes a "symbolic rape" (59). Later, on another encounter between the two, Bell's lustful gaze—as discussed in section 2.3—promises to penetrate Fonny: "*I'm going to fuck you, boy*, Bell's eyes said" (*Beale Street* 172). Thus, as Harris points out, "as long as Fonny will not submit, Bell uses the system to "fuck" him" (60). Upon receiving information regarding the rape of Victoria Rogers, a Puerto Rican woman, (allegedly) committed by a black man, Bell coerces the victim into singling out Fonny in a lineup intentionally designed to feature him as the only black individual. Fonny's imprisonment, then, as Alexander argues, is exemplary punishment for his refusal to submit to Bell's state-sanctioned sexualized racial terror (52).

After the conflict with Bell, Fonny tells Tish: "Don't ever try to protect me again. Don't do that" (*Beale Street* 140). As Gibson observes, the metaphor of rape is significant to understanding Fonny's plea: "His Black male vocality becomes the means by which he resists the raping of his Black male body, the only way he can truly protect his fragile subjectivity in the racially absurd" (177). Just as in *Native Son*, rape and emasculation threaten to erase vocality. In *Beale Street,* however, rape is also "what one does to women." Tish, too, is a victim of sexual violence, and like Fonny, she "refuses to be raped." She describes an incident with Bell that took place while she was walking the streets alone, yet somewhat protected by the crowded environment. He tails her until she confronts him by walking in his direction. She looks into the officer's eyes: "It was not like looking into a man's eyes. It was seduction which contained the promise of rape. It was rape which promised debased revenge" (173). Bell's violating gaze,

again, threatens to rape another black person. As Alexander argues, Bell's sexualized form of racial terror recovers a "strategy of gendered social control and racial-political repression" deployed by enslavers, as argued by Angela Davis:

> Davis makes the case that beyond enforcing his control over Black women's sexuality and reproductive autonomy, the master's rape of enslaved women was a tool of terror intended both to reinforce their purportedly "natural" place of racial and gendered inferiority and to wound the masculinist pride and resistance sensibilities of the plantation's enslaved men. (Alexander 54)

Thus, Bell also stages his revenge on Fonny by attempting to rape his fiancée. This time, however, Bell's attack is not restricted to his gaze, as Tish recounts: "I was suddenly his: a desolation entered me which I had never felt before. I watched his eyes, his moist, boyish, despairing lips, and felt his sex stiffening against me" (*Beale Street* 174). As Alexander maintains, Tish resists being raped by using her "voice and mind to reclaim her body" (55). Significantly, her account of the violence she experiences is told in first person, not mediated by any narrator or third-party advocate. Moreover, she explicitly tells Bell "I'm not afraid", as well as protects her bodily integrity by refusing to allow this experience to destroy her: "I blotted it out of my mind" (*Beale Street* 174).

Furthermore, Tish presents this testimony amidst a sequence of events centered on sexual violence. The sequence begins with Fonny's initial meeting with Bell, as recalled by Tish. It is followed by Tish's narration of her mother's journey to Puerto Rico to locate Victoria, the woman who claims to have been raped by Fonny. Victoria's story, another noteworthy moment in the novel's depiction of sexual violence, will be further explored in upcoming paragraphs. Tish goes on to describe her and Fonny's distinct encounters with Bell, during which he threatens

sexual assault—in Fonny's case, symbolically, in Tish's, literally—on both of them. Immediately after Tish's account of the conflict with Bell, she reveals that Daniel was raped while in prison, a conversation that takes place just moments before the police raided their home and arrested Fonny. This sequence, exhausting the rape rhetoric, is intended to emphasize the idea that Fonny's imprisonment and the circumstances surrounding it also constitute a symbolic rape.

The second and final part of the novel, *Zion*, opens with a detailed account of Fonny's moments in solitary confinement—where, as we later learn, he was placed for "refusing to be raped" (*Beale Street* 192). The scene focuses on Fonny masturbating in his cell. Struggling with loneliness and powerlessness, he "wonders what the whole world… is doing without him, why he has been left alone here, perhaps to die…He lights a cigarette…His prick hardens. Absently, he strokes it, through his shorts" (*Beale Street* 179). Aaron Ngozi Oforlea suggests that "Fonny's masturbation scene is a transgressive act that pushes against the social beliefs that African American men are unlovable and are incapable of loving themselves" (179). Thus, it depicts Fonny steading "himself in his own sense of self" (Oforlea 179). Nathaniel Mills views this moment as suggesting the idea that Fonny "draws on his manhood for strength" in order to survive his imprisonment; nonetheless, "Fonny's penis is hard, but the greater rigidity of the prison's "steel and stone" wins out" (Mills 66). To Mills, Baldwin is implying that "Black manhood, however virile, is a poor match for the potency of the repressive state" (Mills 66)[11]. Whatever reading one decides to foster, the scene enforces the connection between Fonny's oppression and his manhood. The black man, imprisoned on the pretext of a rape charge—echoing the long-standing myth of the black rapist—is subjected to forces that

[11] This analysis is part of Mills' reading of *If Beale Street Could Talk* as Baldwin's revision of Black Nationalist ideology, in which masculinity is viewed as a form of resistance. This scene, particularly, is thought to be a gesture to Eldrige Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. Fonny masturbating in his cell is paralleled with Cleaver's project, described as a "tragicomic struggle to construct a black heterosexuality…within the highly homosocial, homosexual prison" (66).

symbolically rape him, as well as relentlessly threaten to literally rape him. His sexual vulnerability, in this sense, is emphasized.

Finally, the novel's depiction of sexual violence is also furthered by Sharon's meeting with Victoria. Critics have successfully argued that this character's presence in the novel represents Baldwin's confrontation with U.S. imperialism (Norman 122). The young Puerto Rican woman, who was led to testify against Fonny, the man she sincerely believes to be her rapist, flees the country after he is arrested. While Victoria is at the center of Fonny's victimization, the novel does not vilify her: Baldwin makes it clear that her accusation was not a deliberate lie, but rooted in the fact that "Fonny was presented to her as the rapist and it is much easier to say yes than to try and relive the whole damn thing again," as Enerstine tells Tish (*Beale Street* 118). In fact, Baldwin grants us access to the depth of Victoria's trauma by showcasing her anger and despair when Sharon continually pressures her to retract her testimony:

> Sharon grabs her again and touches the crucifix.
>
> "Daughter, daughter. In the name of God."
>
> Victoria looks down at the hand on the cross, and screams: a sound like no sound Sharon has ever heard before. She breaks away from Sharon, and runs to the door, which has remained open all this time… Doors open. People begin to appear…One of the older women in the hall comes to the door, and takes Victoria in her arms. Victoria collapses, weeping, into this woman's breasts. (*Beale Street* 170)

As New York Times editor Alisha Harris has argued in an article titled "How #MeToo Changes *If Beale Street Could Talk,*"[12] Victoria's conflict is reflective of Baldwin's belief that systems of oppression are interconnected. Fonny was incarcerated because he attempted to

[12] In: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/27/movies/if-beale-street-could-talk-metoo.html

protect Tish from the white man who harassed her in the store. His imprisonment is the result of a woman's rape, with Officer Bell seizing the opportunity to implicate Fonny as a means of retribution. Fonny is kept in prison as the woman flees the city, potentially aided by the prosecutor's office as a strategy to delay his trial. Ultimately, Fonny's incarceration stems from a racist system that utilizes its legal and carceral apparatus to perpetuate oppression.

Victoria's identity as a Latino immigrant symbolizes Baldwin's preoccupation with cross-ethnic solidarity. Importantly, he rewrites the mythology of the black rapist, making both the black man and the brown woman its victims, illustrating how the suffering of people of color is exploited and instrumentalized by the powers that govern American society. Victoria's very real victimization, after all, does not matter to Officer Bell, the prosecution's office, or anyone who holds the power to keep Fonny in prison. The myth, thus, serves the purpose it was devised to fulfill: to assert the places of all individuals in the hierarchy dictated by white men (Eby 131).

One may read Baldwin's attention to the victimization of women as another of his signifying moves on Richard Wright's *Native Son*. While Wright acknowledges the sexual vulnerability of women of color, he never concedes them a voice; as he puts it, these women characters were given "no more reality…than that which Bigger himself saw" ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 538). In this process, as Silke suggests, rape as "(a figure of) violence and disempowerment of (black and white) women…gets dismissed, deleted, sacrificed, dis-figured along the way, and culminates in images of (Mary's) decapitation and (Bessie's) effacement" (106). Baldwin, in contrast, carves out the space to represent the suffering of women of color, affording them a place, next to his own vulnerability as an African American man, where the vulnerability inherent to the racialized female subjectivity too is recognized and validated.

Final Remarks

In 2013, Hilton Als published *White Girls*, a powerful exploration of culture, gender, race, and otherness. This outstanding collection of essays contains a remarkable passage with particular significance to this thesis in which Als offers an insightful look into his experience as a black man, worth quoting in full:

> No narrative preceded us. We were not 'menchildren' in a promised land, as Claude Brown would have it. We did not consider ourselves as having 'no name in the street,' as James Baldwin did himself. We did not suffer the existential crisis that afflicts some male Negro intellectuals, as Harold Cruse presumed. We did not have 'hot' souls that needed to be put on ice, as Eldridge Cleaver might have said. We were not escapees from Langston Hughes's 'Simple' stories. We were nothing like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, nor did we wear white masks, as Frantz Fanon might have deduced, incorrectly. We saw no point of reference in *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*, by Cecil Brown. We did not see the point of Sammy Davis Jr.'s need to be loved by not one but thousands, as detailed in his autobiography, *Yes I Can*. We were colored but not noirish enough to have been interesting to Iceberg Slim. We were not homies in the manner of John Edgar Wideman's young proles floating around Homewood. We were not borne of anything Nathan McCall or Ishmael Reed, in his recent books, certainly, might deem worthy of talking about. In short, we were not your standard Negro story, or usual Negro story. We did not feel isolated because we were colored. We did not want to join the larger world through violence or manipulation. We were not interested in the sentimental

> tale that's attached itself to the Negro male body by now: the embodiment of isolation. We had each other, another kind of story worth telling. (34-35)

I open this concluding section with Als's words to emphasize that no overarching narrative can capture the entirety of the black masculine experience. Black manhood defies homogeneity. Rather, it presents itself as an amalgamation of diverse, dynamic, and intricate layers. Thus, no singular story can convey its whole. Guided by this premise, the present thesis has strived to adhere to the historical and, to the best extent possible, factual aspects of the lived reality of black men in the United States. Inasmuch as a perspective that stresses the challenges and obstacles commonly faced by black men has been privileged in the present work, it is also crucial to point out that black manhood extends far beyond "the sentimental tale that's attached itself to the Negro male body," as Als put it.

The present thesis aimed to explore the connections between race, gender, and criminalization in the fictional representations of black manhood in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Working with such a complex subject matter and analyzing such significant literary works in African American literature have certainly presented considerable challenges. The selected novels allow for a variety of readings from several angles, many of which have been explored throughout the decades of critical analysis these works have amassed. Additionally, gender and race, in particular, are hardly homogenous affairs: instead, they constitute turbulent landscapes where opposing notions are in constant conflict. In this sense, I would like to highlight that the discussions of these issues carried out in this research have by no means exhausted the possibilities of consideration. Among the various other potential avenues for inquiry, I highlight the issues of criminalization among non-black communities of color, with special attention to Latino men, who constitute one of the

fastest-growing demographics in US prisons and jails. Moreover, concerning *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, issues related to their representations of religion and of womanhood also offer opportunities for comparative studies of the two novels.

The primary goal of Chapter One was to investigate the matters of racial criminalization and black masculine subjectivity in the selected novels. As I have argued, *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* engage with the longstanding legacy of the criminalization of black Americans in their portrayals of black manhood. However, they do so with contrasting approaches: whereas *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas is entrapped in a feedback loop in which black men are viewed as criminals and potentially driven to criminality by their lack of chances for self-definition, *Beale Street*'s Fonny Hunt remains grounded in his sense of self-possession and autonomy despite the violence he endures. This difference is representative, I have intended to show, of Baldwin's revision of Wright's novel. Wright is committed to exploring the psychology of a character who embodies the most extreme consequences of social exclusion, isolation, and racial criminalization, implicating American society in his construction as such. Thus, *Native Son* is profoundly invested in its denouncement purpose. Baldwin, in turn, challenges his predecessor by refusing to "reclaim blackness in terms produced by racist ideology" (Mills 66). He does not shy away from realistically depicting the most tragic aspects of racial oppression, but also firmly delineates a pathway for other African Americans to survive this abhorrent scenario.

Notwithstanding their divergences, both works represent black manhood as profoundly vulnerable to criminalization. The centrality of this theme in the novels can be understood as an articulation of the vulnerability inherent in the experience of black men in the United States. By

focusing on an issue that disproportionately affects black males, the works shed light on the fact that African American men's gender affiliation does not protect them under white patriarchy.

My investigation of the representations of black manhood in the novels continued, in Chapter Two, with the introduction of Tommy J. Curry's theories. This author's remarkable body of works emerges as an essential resource for discussing the complexities of black manhood and its particular experiences of marginalization. Curry adopts a multi-disciplinary approach to grappling with "the sociological, historical, and ontological weight of black manhood" (*The Man-Not* 9). By reviewing his work and following his framework of the Man-Not, I sought to demonstrate the necessity of his perspective for a comprehensive understanding of the reality of black men.

A cardinal theme in *The Man-Not* is the denunciation of the failures of feminist theory, especially intersectionality theory, to accurately represent black manhood and discuss its reality beyond the stereotypes and caricatures offered by white supremacy. The notions behind what has been studied as "black masculinity," as Curry explains, prevent our understanding of the vulnerabilities inherent to the experience of black men in the United States:

> These theories diminish the actual vulnerabilities of Black males by over-determining Black male life via the stereotypes of the Black male's aspiration to dominate and his alleged danger to others. By holding that Black males are dangerous, lusting after the power to dominate others, gender theory and popular intellectual works actually deny the intrinsic value of Black male life and assert that all social problems endured by or involving Black men—whether their deaths at the hands of white police or vigilantes or the violence in their communities or homes—actually emanate from their nature. (199)

When the project that eventually became this thesis was initially conceived, one of the primary motivations for undertaking this research arose from my personal observation that a majority of the gender and race-focused works in literary studies I had encountered in my academic journey addressed womanhood, often under the paradigm of intersectionality. Black men, in this context, were not rarely perceived as an "advantage minority," and the violent tendencies or behaviors of certain black male characters were commonly interpreted as manifestations of patriarchal assertion, echoing the mimetic thesis of black masculinity that originated in bell hooks' works. Therefore, when I first encountered the work of Tommy J. Curry, his scholarship resonated with me profoundly and served as a key source of inspiration. Throughout the present work, I strived to apply his perspective to the field of literary studies, aiming to contribute to the diversification of perspectives within this area of inquiry.

The exploration of death as an existential issue was central to my analysis of the depictions of black manhood in the novels. Drawing on Curry's insights, I intended to read the presence of death in *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* as significant of the particularities of the marginalization black men face. The first reading approximated James Baldwin's portrayals of manhood to Curry's analyses, which revealed the common ground between these authors' approaches to black manhood and white manhood. Baldwin's commentary on the sexual pathology of American racism, which appears first in the 1965 short story "Going to Meet the Man" and continues into *If Beale Street Could Talk,* situates white masculinity in the context of the cultural inheritance of castration and lynching, showcasing its dependence on the suffering and death of African American men.

The subsequent analysis section focused on the character of Frank in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Frank's suicide and the circumstances surrounding it, as I hope to have

demonstrated, are direct consequences of his marginalization as an African American man. This aligns with Curry's argument that suicide "manifests not as an individual pathology but as a group condition" for black men (*The Man-Not* 180). Through this discussion, I intended to highlight the importance of this often overlooked character to the novel's portrayal of black male vulnerability, which might initially appear to be exclusively located in the characters of Fonny and Daniel.

The final section of Chapter Two was dedicated to the exploration of death in *Native Son*, highlighting its presence in two distinct dimensions in the novel. First, an analysis of the causes of Bigger's "literal death" was presented with the argument that his sentencing to death, which permanently interrupts his quest for manhood, is a result of his dehumanization as a black man. He is viewed by the State as less than human, characterized as a beast, and explicitly animalized. This is a product not of "generic" racism, but of gendered violence against black men, given that he is described in language that encodes the stereotypes historically associated with black manhood. Secondly, the impact of the threat of death on Bigger's subjectivity was considered, a discussion that relied on the indispensable insights of Abdul R. JanMohamed's *The Death-Bound-Subject* to argue that Bigger's killing of Mary Dalton represents a form of suicide that stemmed from a desire to break free from social death.

Finally, Chapter Three aimed to investigate both novels' engagements with the cultural myth of the black rapist, as well as to analyze how rape and sexual vulnerability are portrayed in the narratives. In both works, sexual violence is employed as a figure for the oppression faced by black men. In *Native Son*, however, Wright's redefinition of rape risks dismissing the sexual victimization of women, particularly women of color, who suffer the most brutal fate in his

novel. In *Beale Street*, Baldwin signifies on Wright again by portraying sexual victimization as a complex issue that afflicts various types of victims.

Regarding the mythology of the black rapist, it is relevant to emphasize that this racist fiction is far from a relic of the Jim Crow era. As Curry argues, *black masculinity* is still thought of in relation to several tropes that "rely for effect in savage heterossexualism" (*The Man-Not* 198). The executions of black men by the state and vigilantes, as the author highlights, suggest that black male death is intimately connected to these cultural narratives. CalvinJohn Smiley and David Fakunle's study "From 'brute' to 'thug': The demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America," for instance, shows how even posthumously, black men victimized by law enforcement are portrayed by mass media as culpable for their own deaths. These findings strengthen the argument that "post-racial" America is far from a reality and justify the need for continued discussions surrounding the legacy of historical myths like that of the black rapist.

Ultimately, this thesis is hoped to contribute to the existing scholarship on black manhood in the works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin. It intended to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the representations of black manhood in *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, adopting a perspective that challenges the prevailing narratives that still hold influence within and outside of academic discourse. Furthermore, this research also strives to promote the work of Tommy J. Curry to Brazilian readers, as his insights and perspectives on black manhood are not widely discussed in the country. By engaging with Curry's theories, this study seeks to enrich the scholarly dialogue surrounding black manhood and contribute to broadening the scope of critical conversations within the literary studies academic community.

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