

*Promiscuous Contextualities: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Problem of the Stereotype in the
Politics of Representation*

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Abstract

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My dissertation project deals with the problem of the stereotype in the sexualized racialization of African Americans in the U.S. since Reconstruction. The stereotype has thus far been primarily understood as a social psychological problem rectifiable only by correcting stereotypes as “false” representations in people’s minds. More recently, postcolonial and performance studies have focused instead on its deconstructive “productive ambivalence” and the theoretical possibilities of critically inhabiting the stereotype in parodic, disidentificatory performance. I argue, however, that these treatments remain corrective, invested in the idea that a *re*-presentation of the stereotype will “correct” it (as if this correction would quell its representational powers or that a pre-existing, non-stereotypical “reality” exists), while also seeming to be inadequate for understanding the stereotype’s paradoxical efficacy in the present moment’s hegemony of post-racial, colorblind, and/or multicultural discourses that purport to have moved beyond stereotypical thinking. *Promiscuous Contextualities* builds upon this stereotype scholarship and insights from woman of color feminism and 1980-90s cultural studies’ theories of representation to ask questions about the stereotype’s representational intractability. Promiscuous contextualization names a reading practice that takes as axiomatic that stereotypes’

empirical correction is impossible and so focuses instead on understanding *how stereotypes represent*. This project looks to cultural production as a site from which to develop a reading practice that dwells not on “undoing” stereotypes, but instead on understanding how their protean, often contradictory, representational logics – including deploying historical narratives to produce ahistorical “natural” definitions, producing and simultaneously disavowing their own truth value, and fixing bodies to particular social definitions while remaining themselves adaptable to changes in social attitudes – might reveal their role in the relations of power that instigate them, and, more broadly, their role in framing relations of desire and identity formation as well as historiography and historical narrative and other forms of scholarship that focus on racial, gender, and sexual formation.

To do so, this project tracks the role of stereotypes in the gendered sexualization of African Americans in the historical period between the post-Reconstruction era and the emergence of the African American Civil Rights Movement. The “American dilemma” of re-signifying black bodies from enslaved property to emancipated subjects involved a war of representation that forged America’s most dangerous and enduring stereotypes, such as the “Black Buck/Rapist” and the “Mammy.” The chapters progress as a series of interfaces between these stereotypes, how they are represented in cultural texts, and how these representations are engaged by scholars. I read these texts against the grain of their usual readings as correctives to stereotypes, readings that I argue are framed by particular understandings of stereotypes. Each chapter models a promiscuous contextualization of a cultural text while also showing how the texts perform their own promiscuous contextualizations of the stereotypes they engage. The first chapter reads James Baldwin’s *Another Country* as a theory and experiment in reading the

“Black Rapist” stereotype that makes apparent its inescapability within relations of interracial desire. Baldwin’s promiscuous contextualization maps the circulation of the stereotype in these relations and in so doing reveals the extent to which his audience must reconcile their complicity with the way stereotypes frame their reading practice. I then read Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* as a re-narrativization of the history that defines African Americans as “Primitive” Others to U.S. progress. In his re-historicization, Wright figures men as historical agents while continuing to define Black women as the gendered, sexual stereotype of the Mammy, as the “Primitive” Others to the now-progressive Black men. Re-contextualizing this feminist reading within the documentary discourse of the U.S. state reveals the problem of trying to undo the stereotype’s historical indexicality. The final chapter understands Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching pamphlets and speeches as the conditions of possibility for later work like Baldwin and Wright. I argue that most scholarship reads Wells’s anti-lynching writings as a de-bunking the Black Rapist stereotype, which requires centering this stereotype within the lynching narrative as “truthful” in ways that Wells seems to trouble. I read Wells as using evidence from the white press to carefully disarticulate the relationship between the material practice of lynching and the “Black Rapist” stereotype in order to show how the white press produces this relationship.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The Problem of the Stereotype in the Politics of Representation	5
Chapter One: Rufus's Refusal: The Problem of the Black Rapist Stereotype and the Relations of Desire and Power in James Baldwin's <i>Another Country</i>	39
Chapter Two: The Mask of the Mammy: Stereotypes and the Gendered Logics of Image and Text in <i>12 Million Black Voices</i>	134
Chapter Three: To Tell the Stereotype Freely: Ida B. Wells and the Problem of the Ideological Critique of the Black Rapist Stereotype	201

Introduction: The Problem of the Stereotype in the Politics of Representation

No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of *our* universe.

Walter Lippmann *Public Opinion*

Since the early 2000s, Charles “Chuck” Knipp has stirred controversy and protest with his drag shows. The controversy stems from the fact that his character Shirley Q. Liquor is an African American female performance persona played by Knipp, who is a white, gay drag queen. Performing in blackface drag, Knipp calls Shirley Q. Liquor the “Queen of Ignunce” and describes her as an “inarticulate black welfare mother with 19 children” (Collymore). Knipp’s act is spoken in a pronounced ungrammatical southern drawl, with most of the humor centering on the misuse and mispronunciation of words, including the popular catchphrase “How you durrin?” As part of his act, Knipp describes and sings about how Shirley Q. (as he refers to her) is a poor single mother on welfare who drives a Cadillac, drinks malt liquor, and smokes menthol cigarettes. She shops at “Kmark” and “Walmark,” visits her “gynechiatrist,” eats “Egg McMuffmans,” and “collard greens, ham hocks, and cheese.” Obviously modeled after the constellation of African American woman stereotypes, including especially the Welfare Queen¹, the character started as a joke on his mother’s answering machine in the early 90s before becoming a popular radio character (on the conservative talk radio shows of Ken “The Black Avenger” Hamlin and Michael Barry and on the nationally syndicated American Comedy Network). When asked to perform the character live in the late 90s, Knipp says he had “no idea how” (*Southern Decadence*) and first thought that “I’d just get up there with no makeup and do it like Rich Little” (Holthouse). However, he ultimately decided that “if I am going to perform this

character onstage, I'll have to get in drag and paint my face a different color" (*Southern Decadence*). The popularity of this blackface drag performance amasses Knipp a yearly income of between "\$70,00-\$90,000" from appearances (\$4000-\$7000 each, depending on travel time and distance), the sale of CDs of his songs and routines, tee shirts, and a line of popular baby bibs emblazoned with witticisms such as "Inmate" and "Who is my daddy?" His most popular songs include "Who is my Baby Daddy?" (sung loosely to the tune of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire") which lists the names of her "19 chirren" including Cheeto, Orangello, Chlamydia, and Kmartina (there is also an animated video to this song) and "Thank You for the Welfare" to the tune of "Thanks for the Memories." Critics say Knipp's is just another performance in a long history of blackface minstrelsy that parodies African Americans using exaggerated stereotypes and that Knipp is profiting from the "degradation" and "mockery" of black women and should be boycotted (Cannick). In the face of these critiques, Knipp contends that "it never occurred to [him] that doing Shirley Q. was in any way racist...Is she a stereotype of a bygone day? Certainly. But she's just real enough to cause what I call an 'anxious giggle' in most everyone who hears her perspective" (*Southern Decadence*) and that he doesn't think, "black people should be exempt from parody" because "[t]hat's a form of racism itself" (Wilson *Herald-Leader*). He also claims that what he does is not blackface because he uses "regular African-American lady brown foundation and all kinds of eye shadow. And I really like the pink wig" (*Southern Decadence*).

Since 2007, E. Patrick Johnson, the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University, has been touring college campuses and bookstores with a one-man performance piece called "Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the

South Tell Their Tales” in support and as a supplement to his ethnographic study *Sweet Tea: An Oral History of Black Gay Men of the South*. *Sweet Tea*, the book, collects interviews conducted between 2004 and 2006 with 63 gay black men between the ages of 19 and 93 (though most are between 26 and 45) from 15 southern states. On his website, Johnson explains that the project “challenges stereotypes of the South as ‘backward’ or ‘repressive,’ suggesting that these men draw upon the performance of ‘southernness’—politeness, coded speech, and religiosity, for example—to legitimate themselves as members of both southern and black cultures” and that they “deploy those same codes to establish and build friendship networks and find sexual partners and life partners” (Johnson). In the show “Pouring Tea” (which has since been expanded into the full length play entitled *Sweet Tea – The Play*), Johnson performs as some of the men he interviewed for the book, including the speech patterns, gestural communication, facial and bodily expressions and mannerisms, and speech disfluencies. He gives several reasons for wanting to do a performance. In a promotional video interview on his Northwestern website, Johnson describes the show’s impetus: “when I started to transcribe the narratives for the book I determined that a lot of the stories fell flat on the page and the reader wouldn’t really get a sense of how this person sounded, how they put stress on this word or that phrase...I said there has to be a way that I can sort of recreate the interview experience for the reader and that’s when I came up with the idea for doing the show” (Johnson). In another interview with the publisher promoting his book, Johnson elaborates on the show as another form of knowledge production:

I’m invested not only in the content of the story, but also how the story is told. In other words, I look at oral histories as performance. For me, it means something if someone pauses or hesitates when telling a particular story, or if they take delight in it. I also wanted to have a ‘living archive’ of these men’s stories—to have them share their stories

in their own words.

For Johnson it was important to show the performative and gestural aspects of his interviews, to show more than the written page could allow. Johnson also outlines some of the representational choices he made to frame this performance.

In the performance I don't fully embody the narrators whose stories I share, but rather focus on their voices, which I try to affect as closely as possible. Before I perform each narrative, I play a clip of the original interview so that the audience can hear the narrator speak in his own voice. I also include the questions that I asked each narrator in the performance so that the audience does not fully suspend disbelief. I use these performance techniques because I don't want the focus to be on me and on a performance, but on the stories.

While the techniques Johnson deploys – playing the interviewees' voices and sound bytes of the questions – works as a sort of caveat to each performance by marking its representative nature, the primary purpose is still to represent these gay black men “telling their tales.” While Johnson's project of representing these men in both the book and the performance is poignant and necessary work², the subtitle of the performance indicates Johnson's claims to literally “give voice to” and “speak for” a few of the “representative” gay black men of the South that he interviewed for his book. As he represents these men telling their tales, he concentrates on mimicking as closely as possible their voices, speech patterns, and gestures in order to perform *their* performative enunciations of their subjectivity and personality, effectively blurring the line here between aesthetic (mimetic “re-presentation”) and political (“speaking for”) representation. Johnson's book and performance work to reveal a life-world of Black gay male subjects that were a kind of absent presence to Southern life.³ This exposure of a thriving queer life-world

that may have only been possible in its pseudo-elision from Southern culture “challenges stereotypes of the South as ‘backward’ and ‘repressive.’” However, performing this “challenge” to the “stereotypes” of the South becomes a kind of performance of stereotypes, not only because his words and gestures rely on stereotypes of black gay men as well as a kind of stereotypically gendered gentility of “southernness” but also because the audience can only perceive his performance through the lens of *their* stereotypes of Black gay men of the South.

I am interested in these two performances of racial subjectivity because of the questions about the problem of the stereotype in the politics of representation they engender for me, including why stereotypes have not only survived but thrived in our so-called post-racial, multicultural, colorblind society in ways both obvious (Knipp’s blackface drag) and less so (Johnson’s performance of gay male sexuality). The differences between these two performances are vast, including the difference between their audiences and performance venues. Johnson primarily performs in university settings to academics and university students (though this will presumably widen now that it is a full-length play) while Knipp performs primarily in gay bars to gay men, though demand for Shirley Q. Liquor appearances by “wealthy white people” for private functions is increasing, which actually gives Knipp pause.⁴ Part of the difference is the performers’ own subject positions. Johnson is a gay black male professor of performance studies whose career has been spent thinking about race, gender, and sexuality as well as issues of representation and performance. Knipp is a gay white male nurse whose work as a drag queen comedian has increasingly becoming his main source of income and who wishes he was “more socially aware” and that he’d “gotten a PhD in sociology so that [he] could understand things on a really deep level” but who also feels that “comedy is a way to heal past

injustices, prejudices and hate. Laughter is healing” and that he “can work just as hard as any social activist to make this world” (Holthouse)⁵ and that his “comedy isn’t racist, nor am I. More than anything, my comedy makes fun of whites’ views of blacks” (*Southern Decadence*). Part of the difference stems from the relationship of the performer to the subjects he enacts. Part of why Johnson’s work is hailed as a “challenge” to stereotypes stems from the fact that he himself is a “southern born and raised gay black man”⁶ while Knipp’s representation of African American women as a gay white man is controversial not only because of his choice to do it in blackface⁷ but also because he is neither straight, Black, nor female. These are complicated issues about the burden of representation. Because Johnson is part of the same social group as the men he performs, doesn’t necessarily mean he can represent that group, let alone literally “speak for” them in his show. Likewise, while Knipp can’t speak about the experience of being black, as a white gay man he does have some experience with how whites stereotype African Americans. In the most generous (though, I think interesting in its possibilities) of readings, Shirley Q. Liquor could be read as a performance of what Knipp calls the “whites’ views of blacks”; as, in other words, a representative performance of an example of how whiteness “views,” and so understands, black femininity through stereotypes.

While I think any linkage of these two performances requires some discussion of the differences that influence the representational choices of the artists, I am less interested in comparing them at length than I am in exploring the ways that stereotypes affect both the performances and the reactions to them in ways that remain seemingly unexamined by the performers or their critics and supporters. Part of the impetus for this project came from seeing Johnson’s performance and wondering about the politics of representing, or “speaking for,” the men he interviewed.⁸ I was surprised that more people weren’t asking about the way his

performance seemed to require stereotypes to “act out” his interviewees. Toward the end of my writing I read about the controversy and eventual cancellation of a Shirley Q. Liquor appearance in Portland, OR, which brought up for me similar questions as Johnson’s performance had but in a whole new context. I was, of course, aghast at the racist representation of his blackface drag show but I was also unsatisfied with the way that Knipp’s critics (and, frankly, his supporters like RuPaul) discussed his show. To me, the performers, their critics, and their supporters all fail to attend to the representational logics of stereotyping and I’m most interested in how this lack of attention to the way stereotypes frame these representations affects not only the artists’ performances but also the audiences’ ways of reading the performance and the critics and supporters’ ways of discussing them. While Johnson gets lauded as a “challenge” to stereotypes and Knipp causes controversy as a racist reproduction of stereotypes, both performances rely heavily on stereotypes to enact their performative representations. Johnson mimics his interviewees’ stereotypically effeminate gay male speech patterns and gestures, speech patterns and gestures that actually also mimic the codes of femininity of the stereotype of the Southern belle. Similarly, Knipp “acts” like a poor southern Black woman, drawing heavily on stereotypically speech patterns, language use, activities, and attitudes of the Welfare Queen. At the same time, stereotypes frame the “reading” of these acts by their audiences (whether that audience is physically viewing the shows or not). Knipp’s humor relies solely on the fact that the audience recognizes the Welfare Queen he impersonates and Johnson’s performance gives voice to these southern gay men in part by inhabiting stereotypes of gay male mincing femininity, part of which includes borrowing stereotypical aspects of the Gentile Southern Belle. Both of these performances – for different reasons and in different ways – lead me to ask about how stereotypes shape the representation of racial subjects and how they sometimes differently shape

the way audiences react to and read texts that represent racial subjects. How does one account for the role of stereotypes in producing and reading representations of racial subjects, which, of course, also involves class, gender, sexuality, etc. definitions? To attempt an answer to these questions about the problem of the stereotype in the politics of representation and to understand my dissatisfaction and irritation with these performers and their various audiences' reactions, I first turned to prevalent theories of stereotypes and stereotyping.

The Corrective Theories of Stereotypes and Stereotyping

Since its introduction, the concept of the stereotype has had a somewhat paradoxical definition. The etymology of the term stereotype derives from the Greek *stereos*, meaning “firm, solid” and *typos* meaning “impression,” or a “solid impression.” This sense of the term characterizes well its use in the printing trade where a stereotype, or cliché, was a “solid plate of type-metal, cast from a papier-mâché or plaster mould (called a flong) taken from the surface of a forme of type” (*OED*). The stereotype mold is cast from the finished page image (the forme) and used to make many exact copies of a text without having to reset the type. Its etymology as a “solid formation” and the metaphoricity of its use in printing also work well to characterize its common understanding as a generalization, a social definition ascribing specific traits to specific social groups and working to homogenize that group, but belies the eventual poststructural understanding of stereotypes as requiring a constant “anxious” re-iteration. Though not the first to use the word in its modern sense,⁹ political columnist Walter Lippmann was the first to introduce the term as a critical concept for media studies and social sciences, especially social psychology. For Lippmann, stereotypes, according to the introduction to his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, are the “pictures in our heads” with which we make sense of the “world outside.”

Stereotypes are the way we “define first and then see” others (54-55). In his account, stereotypes are, on the one hand, necessary ways to make sense and order of the increasingly complex and complicated modern world through a process of categorization and typification of “what our culture has already defined for us” and “so consistently and authoritatively transmitted in each generation from parent to child that it seems almost like a biological fact” (55, 61).¹⁰ On the other hand, stereotypes are inadequate and biased generalizations, representations that lack “an individualised understanding” of other people that can change when “experience contradicts the stereotype” and which are easily manipulated by the media (59, 65). Lippmann’s analysis of stereotypes gets critiqued as paradoxical because he defines them as both inevitable, psychological (almost “biological”) methods of understanding the world and as potentially dangerously misused yet alterable and easily subverted on the grounds of their reductive prejudicial political uses.¹¹ However, I believe that critics miss the point of his definition; it’s not that Lippman’s paradoxical and contradictory definition of stereotypes “gets it wrong” but that this paradox/contradiction is the very definition of the stereotype. This paradox leads to the curious notion that stereotypes are both economical, rational “true” “facts” about the social world *and* irrational “untrue” misrepresentations deployed based on the ideological needs of the user. I understand these contradictory definitions not as a failure of Lippmann’s definition but, rather, as a contradiction necessary to the definition of the stereotype; part of the stereotype’s representational logic is to make partial, biased, historically specific social definitions *seem* like universal, rigid categories with which we understand the ‘world.’

To Lippmann, stereotypes are a conundrum for a healthy democratic society because while we need to make rational decisions about social issues, our knowledge of the social world is largely based on the stereotypical “pictures in our head,” which seemingly hinder rational

assessment. This conception of the stereotype remains a powerfully seductive mode of critique to this day. This conception of stereotypes as inaccurate generalizations lacking “individualized understanding” allows the critique of stereotypes that simply involves “correcting” their inaccurate representations, as if the “reality” that they mis-represent is any less produced than they are. This paradoxical definition of stereotypes being both inevitable, natural yet biased inaccuracies also allows common assessment that “stereotypes are always based on a kernel of truth” or that “of course, the stereotype doesn’t define *everyone* in the group but represents most.”

The cultural critique of stereotypes outside of the sociological or social psychological disciplines¹² has taken up an ideological critique of stereotypes to try to understand how they work. Richard Dyer’s 1977 work “Stereotyping” describes stereotypes as “mechanisms of boundary maintenance” that the “ruling group” uses to “fashion the whole society according to their own world-view, value-system, sensibility, and ideology” (29-30). Defining who is included and excluded depends on defining “instances which indicate who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes)” (29). Ruling groups maintain hegemony through the production of stereotypes as “natural” and “inevitable” (30). For Hazel Carby, while stereotypes appear ahistorical and unchanging and “to exist in isolation,” they are actually historically contingent and “depend...on a nexus of figurations.” They “function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations” (22). Stereotypes like the Black Rapist and the Jezebel depend on a network of stereotypes that define African Americans as hypersexual and disguise the social relations of racial domination (including its manifestation in the acts of lynching and institutionalized rape) with stereotypical definitions that scapegoat the victims of that racial violence. The ideological critique of stereotypes relies on revealing them as part of systems of domination that mark the boundaries of

inclusion and exclusion. For Dyer, the goal of the study of stereotypes is to erode the ways they “define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the ‘ideal’” by developing “alterative and challenging definitions of ourselves” (31). Carby implies that a tracing of the “nexus of figurations” in which stereotypes thrive will reveal the “objective social relations” that they “disguise” and that an analysis of their historical context might provide an understanding of how stereotypes use history to produce ahistorical definitions.

Knipp’s performance of Shirley Q Liquor is often read using this kind of critique. As a white drag queen making a living creating a character entirely out of the stereotypes that have been historically used to define Black women as “falling short” of the “ideals” of white society with no understanding of the historical violences they cover over, Knipp is merely another in a long line of those in positions of power that regurgitate stereotypes that define some as included and others as excluded from society.¹³ Johnson’s performance, however, is figured as the opposite, as recovering black gay men from the South who have been excluded from history through, among other things, stereotyping.

Scholarship on the stereotype from the 1980s and 1990s has shifted the analysis from a focus on the stereotype as a psychological problem of false, inaccurate, or ideological representations to an analysis of what Homi Bhabha calls “the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (67). Rather than correcting their misinformation or revealing their ideological underpinings, these analyses focus on outlining the representational logics of stereotyping and the processes by which the stereotype defines embodied subjects. Specifically, most focus on what Bhabha calls the stereotype’s “fixity,” a fixedness that paradoxically “vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (66). The stereotype’s “anxious” iterability

produces an “ambivalence” that allows stereotypes to adapt to new historical moments and cultural milieus and produces a truth-value in excess of what is empirically possible. Sander Gilman’s psychoanalytic theory of stereotyping calls this ambivalence the stereotype’s “protean nature.” For Gilman stereotypes begin to develop at the mirror stage as “coping mechanisms” necessary to allay feelings of inadequacy about our lack of control over our world (18). We stereotype those we “fear and glorify” using the “structures in society which provide status and meaning for the individual” to “project that anxiety onto the Other, externalizing our loss of control” and scapegoat those that cause us anxiety about our place in the world (15, 20). According to Gilman, the privileged “categories of difference” are mental illness, race, sexuality, which are “protean, but...appear as absolutes” as they establish “the illusion of order in the world” (25). Stereotypes are specific manifestations of racial, sexual, gendered, etc. social orders that appear “absolute” but are actually able to change with changing social attitudes and as we need them to ally our anxiety. Michael Pickering discusses how the stereotype’s fixity depends on social structures: “stereotyping imparts a fixedness to the homogenized images it disseminates” by making them appear, similar to Dyer’s point, “natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates” (5). When faced with what he calls the “dilemma” to stereotype another person or not, the stereotype decides for us in the affirmative while also invisibilizing that decision-making process. The power of the stereotype lies in its ability to “to deny any flexible thinking...in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds” by maintaining an “illusion of precision, of order, of the way things should be” and through a “denial of history” (3-4, 48). The stereotype is able to adapt by producing the illusion of an ahistorical “natural and given” truth by denying the history through which it was created.

For these theorists and others, the paradoxical representational features of the stereotype also provide the potential for its undoing. According to Bhabha, the “productive ambivalence” of a fixedness that must be “anxiously repeated” also reveals the “boundaries” and “enables a transgression of these limits from the space of otherness” (66-67). In the end, Gilman’s Lacanian analysis is in the service of an ideological critique as he suggests that studying the psychoanalytic basis of our use of stereotypes as they appear in texts can reveal “how ideologies...structure the world” throughout history (241). For Pickering, “emphasizing its paradoxical features” such as the imprecision of its “illusion of precision,” “provides a means of getting a critical purchase on stereotyping” (4). The subversive potential of the stereotype’s ambivalence really gets elaborated with the most convincing argument in José Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification.” Muñoz describes how the stereotype’s ambivalence allows for a “disidentification,” a parodic performance of the stereotype in which minority subjects can “recycle and rethink encoded meaning” and expose their “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” (95, 31). For Muñoz, the stereotype’s ambivalence allows for a kind of critical inhabitation of the stereotype that reveals their production within dominant discourse.

Shirley Q. Liquor is most often read as a racist representation, an “anxiously repeated” stereotype of Black women by a dominant, majoritarian white male figure. While, in these terms of stereotyping, because Johnson is also a “black gay man,” his performance is seen as a kind of disidentification in which he critically inhabits stereotypical figures of invisibilized gay black men of the South by inserting them into a tour of college and university campuses.

However, these “corrective” theories of the stereotype often don’t, in the end, deliver on all that they promise. Whether through correcting its false misrepresentations or revealing the ideological mystifications that the stereotype covers over or tracing the history of its production

or transgressing the boundaries its ambivalent iterability allows, these theorists all remain invested in the idea that there is a potential way “out” or “around” the stereotype and that some form of critical reworking, or re-presentation (a repetition with a difference), of the stereotype will provides its potential undoing. But stereotypes can’t really be understood within a rubric of “truth.” Attempting to show how stereotypes are misrepresentations that need to be proven false with more information assumes, first, that there are ways of correcting them and, second, that if only this new information is heeded, the entire population will automatically change its mind. Secondly, proving them false assumes there is a pre-existing, non-stereotypical “true” “reality” that stereotypes contradict and in which these subjects can be “correctly” represented, as if that were not as socially produced as stereotypes. Related to this are attempts to attribute stereotyping to either innocently or malevolently misinformed individuals who need correcting, which likewise assumes this correction is “true” and that these individuals will heed this correction. Strangely, the stereotype gets to be both “true” and “false.” I want to shift away from the losing battle of an empirical analysis of the stereotype’s truth-value to an analysis that starts from an understanding that part of the stereotype’s representational logics is that we always already know it is “wrong,” but an awareness of this fact doesn’t reduce its power to frame those it represents. Similarly, stereotypes are ideological, ameliorating racial (and gender, sexual, etc.) violence by scapegoating the victims of that violence. For instance, stereotypes of African American hypersexuality emerge to ameliorate the terrorist acts of the institutionalized rape of African American women during (and after) slavery and the lynching of African American men that were used to maintain the “color line.” However, while stereotypes may be a mystification of social relations, they cannot be de-mystified, or, rather, if the contradictions resolved by the stereotype are revealed, stereotypes would continue to define social figures. Finally, I am

unconvinced that Bhabha's "productive ambivalence" necessarily calls the stereotype's "fixity" into question or that the stereotype's "anxious" repeatability actually allows for a "transgression" of its "limits" that would or erode its authority. Likewise, I'm not so sure that Muñoz's disidentificatory parodic performance works for everyone to "rethink" the stereotype in a way that would interrupt its power to represent. You can't, in other words, theorize or write yourself out of the stereotype.

These analyses of stereotypes and stereotyping also seem somewhat inadequate for thinking about the way stereotypes work as representations or for explaining their tenacity and ability to survive and thrive into our present moment. The telos of this "will to correct" stereotypes changes the way the work of stereotypes can be analyzed and understood – if the final analysis is that they are somehow changeable, all work that engages the stereotype becomes a search for a way to avoid, change, or correct the stereotypes themselves *or* a way to change the minds of those that use stereotypes. This penchant for correction doesn't, I think, take into consideration how central stereotypes are to American culture. They are not, in other words, aberrant changeable practices but something more like an American "cultural logic" as Jacqueline Goldsby defines it to mean stereotypes "'fit' within broader, national cultural developments" and are "an articulation of the social world's organization at any given point in time" (6, 26). More importantly, I think these analyses fail to attend to the way that their wily representational logics keep stereotypes adaptable. A central question for this project is: what allows the stereotype to survive and retain its authority and efficacy in the present moment's hegemony of post-racial, colorblind, and/or multicultural discourses that purport to have moved beyond stereotypical thinking? Often work that focuses on the critical possibilities of re-presenting the stereotype forecloses an understanding of this tenacity; if the stereotype's

insufficiencies – its need to be “anxiously repeated” – is the mode of its undoing, then how does one account for the ways the stereotype’s insufficiency also describes its tenacious adaptability? I am not, however, suggesting that because they are so intractable, tenacious, and adaptable that we should discontinue critique and continue living in and through the racial, gendered, and sexual fantasies they deploy. Rather, I want to turn these corrective formulations on their heads. Instead of a critique that works to expound on the stereotype’s potential undoing, I want to place a critical emphasis on exploring what is to be done if we take seriously that the stereotype cannot be corrected, if we, in other words, refuse to look for a way out of the stereotype in favor of coming to an understanding of the stereotype’s centrality to American culture accentuating its intractability and resistance to critique. To unthink the fantasies that stereotypes conjure requires not simply finding ways to disprove, correct, or re-present them but to set aside these corrective methods of analysis and instead engage a deeper critical engagement with stereotypes as remarkably intractable phenomena. Rather than acquiesce to their protean adaptability, I’m suggesting we redefine the terms on which stereotypes are studied and engaged by working to explain the representational logics that undergird their tenacity and their resistance to critique.

Building upon a critical engagement with the insights of these corrective theories, this project understands racial stereotypes to be structures of knowledge within processes of racialization that come to be the salient ways of knowing the ‘Other.’ Stereotypes are cultural representations that become embedded in social formations, structures of power, and historical narratives in ways that come to define the entire context for our understanding of the subjects they represent. They are a form of power that the stereotyper deploys and with which the stereotyped subject must contend but always within the parameters defined by the stereotype itself, either by resisting the stereotypical definition (work on so-called “stereotype threat” has

engaged this idea), challenging the stereotyper's use of them, or by inhabiting the stereotype (as either the path of least resistance or critically as the theory of disidentification suggests). As they become "common sense," they take on a more tautological form ("All African Americans are hypersexual because all African Americans are hypersexual") and become increasingly more difficult to un-think. But they are not only tautological. A more focused definition might be that stereotypes are representational practices that deploy essentialist significations to categorize bodies and practices in an effort to fortify social hierarchies and distribute economic, social, and cultural capital in part by decontextualizing the social relations that warranted them. By decontextualize I mean something close to the what bell hooks describes in "Eating the Other": "Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (hooks "Eating the Other" 373). Like the processes of appropriation and "commodification of difference" that hooks describes here, the stereotype, as Pickering suggest, denies history, producing a definition that *seems* universal but that actually requires a historical background (to support their veracity) that must be then evacuated and decontextualized in the Barthean myth of the stereotype. I am convinced that engaging their resistance to critique is the salient way to move forward in the study of stereotypes and stereotyping and that this resistance is possible, in part, because of the very terms, approaches, and ways of defining the stereotype we've engaged. In other words, it is part of the very definition of stereotypes as mis-representation that these corrective theories assert and our subsequent reliance on the methods of critique that involve primarily proving stereotypes wrong and/or critically re-presenting them that enables their resistance to critique. Understanding their

resistance to critique and the way stereotypes work requires more attention to their representational logics than these corrective theories have provided. Rather than trying to “correct” stereotypes, I look to understand how each stereotype’s protean, often contradictory, representational logics – including deploying historical narratives to produce ahistorical “natural” definitions, producing and simultaneously disavowing its own truth value (a truth value, in other words, that we always already know is false), and fixing bodies to particular social definitions while remaining adaptable to changes in social attitudes – might reveal something about the ways stereotypes represent and define, contextualize and decontextualize different social figures as well as something about the particular relations of power and social formations that forged particular stereotypes. I believe a focus on the representational logics of the stereotype will also reveal something about how they circulate in the public sphere, and, more broadly, about the stereotype’s role in historiography and historical narrative, the relations of power and desire, and identity formation.

Promiscuous Contextualities

Rather than correcting stereotypes, my reading practice will theorize stereotypes by attending to their representational logics. *Promiscuous Contextualities* builds upon this stereotype scholarship and revisits insights from 1980-90s cultural studies’ theories of representation to ask questions about how the intractability and adaptability of the stereotype poses problems for its representation in theoretical texts and literary/cultural production. Promiscuous contextualization describes a reading practice that focuses on understanding how stereotypes represent by contextualizing the representational practice of stereotyping within the many and varied discourses and relations of power that elicited them, revealing the conditions of

possibility and the articulation of social relations that necessitate, produce, and reproduce a given stereotype.

The core of this practice will be forged from my understanding of the debates about representation in the 1980-90s, particularly the work of Kobena Mercer and Gayatri Spivak, which I feel were rendered outdated prematurely before a series of crucial issues could be addressed. Promiscuous contextuality heeds the warnings of both Mercer and Spivak about the conflation of what in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak calls the “two senses of representation, the difference between “a proxy and a portrait”:

representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy... These two sense of representation – within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other – are related but irreducibly discontinuous. (275)

In the introduction to *Welcome to the Jungle*, Mercer mounts a similar warning, noting that the “semantic ambiguity” of the term representation “turns on the tension between representation as a cultural or artistic practice of depiction, and representation as a political or legal process of delegation” (Mercer 18). Like the stereotype, the conflation of political and aesthetic representation in most theorizations of marginalized populations actually works to homogenize those being represented aesthetically – the “portrait” of a group comes to “speak for” the group – and elides particularities to make political gains. Following these theorists, this reading practice will be attentive to questions of enunciation and appropriation (“Who is speaking for whom?”) and context (“To whom is the text speaking?”) when reading theoretical, historical, and cultural texts and will engage multiple readings simultaneously to track how the stereotype represents and is represented. An attention to this conflation of the two sense of representation will curb the

predilection to the notion that “correcting” the “cultural or artistic practice of depiction” that is the stereotype will somehow automatically “correct” the “political or legal process of delegation” that the stereotype does. Attending to this warning is a way, for instance, to understand that the play with the iterability of stereotypes – that is, “anxiously repeating” or re-presenting stereotypes with a difference – in Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of the stereotype and in Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” will not necessarily result in the promise of “transgression” (Bhabha 66-67) or the exposure of their “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” (Muñoz 31)¹⁴ for everyone and that this transgression and exposure may not necessarily lead to a change in the way stereotypes affect one’s political representation.

The term “promiscuous contextuality” references Kobena Mercer’s insights on stereotyping and representation that his reading of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black gay men elicited. In his initial reading in 1987 essay “Imaging the Black Man’s Sex,” Mercer describes Mapplethorpe’s images as stereotypical objectifications of hypersexualization. While the “shock effect” of inserting racial stereotypes into the realm of “art,” that is, of inserting the black nude (usually poor) gay men into the institution of the museum/art gallery could be read as a subversion of sexualized racial stereotypes, for Mercer, Mapplethorpe relied so heavily on race to produce that shock that he “silently reinscribes the ambivalent disavowal found in the most commonplace of utterances, ‘I’m not a racist, but...’” (187). In this way, these images became merely a repetition of colonial racist fetishization. In his subsequent re-reading in the 1989 essay “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homosexual Imaginary,” Mercer realized the ambivalence he first read in these images required that more representational questions be asked not only about the photographic texts and author but also the reader of those texts and the historical context of that reading. Mercer re-evaluates the ambivalence of these images “not as

something that occurs ‘inside’ the text (as *if* cultural texts were hermetically sealed or self-sufficient), but something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers, relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific” (169-170). To attend to the “changes in context” that frame Mapplethorpe’s work, Mercer historically locates these images (and his reading of them) as part of the AIDS epidemic (including Mapplethorpe’s death from AIDS in 1989 and its impact on African American gay male culture); as part of the “culture wars,” including neoconservative attacks on the art funding; and as a function of a new understanding of the identification Mapplethorpe may have had with the models as part of an urban gay male “counterculture of modernity” (198). This re-reading highlights how the images might actually be read as ethnographic documents that “give voice” not only to “subordinate experiences, identities, and subjectivities” but also to those in the black gay male community devastated by AIDS due to their social subordination (194). Rethinking the shock effect of Mapplethorpe’s work as historically contingent and a product of the author’s *and* the reader’s subject positions, Mercer re-reads these images not only as a subversion of stereotypes but also as “a subversive deconstruction of the...dominant traditions of representation” (194). Mercer calls this insertion of images of Black gay male bodies into the art museum world Mapplethorpe’s “promiscuous intertextuality” or “promiscuous textuality” (187, 194). I want to suggest that Mercer’s re-reading practice performs a “promiscuous contextuality” of Mapplethorpe’s cultural texts. This alternate reading relies on rethinking his original answers to representational questions about appropriation – what Mercer calls “questions of enunciation...who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate?...[which] imply a whole range of political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference” (194). Initially reading

Mapplethorpe's insertion of these "commonplace stereotypes" into traditional western institutions of art as *primarily* appropriating black bodies, which figures the images as racial fetishes and delimits the subversive potential of their ambivalence, Mercer now sees the potential of these images to subvert racial types queerly by widening the concept of ambivalence and fetishism to include the author and readers, text and contexts. For him, these images are both racist and anti-racist, fetish and not, critique and reinforcement of stereotypes depending on the multiple (audience, historical, and aesthetic) contexts of those readings. Mercer's work holds in tension multiple readings that all need to be circulating as his theory of representation involves doing the genealogical work of tracking the circuits of power and conditions of possibility that produce these images as either racist appropriations and uncritical stereotypes or as queer subversions of sexual and racial typing with the "tactical use of homoeroticism" and a "strategy of artistic perversion" (200).

The ideas about my notion of promiscuous contextuality that I've learned from reading Mercer's reading of Mapplethorpe provide a model for how to "read" stereotypes and the texts that represent them. The idea of "contextuality" refers not only to attending to the warnings about conflating the "two senses of representation" and questions of appropriation but also attending to the different contexts of these attentions across the texts, authors, *and* readers of cultural texts, which are always already part of historical, cultural, and discursive formations. Being attentive to these issues requires a reading practice that asks the same contextual questions of theoretical (who is producing the scholarship and why); historical (how are subjectivities represented in history and do these subjects shape how history is understood and written); and cultural (how are subjects being represented in film, visual, literary, etc.) texts. For the scholar, this requires not simply locating oneself politically or noting one's privileges or being self-

reflexive in the introduction, but being self-reflection at all times and asking questions about the representational practice of one's works, thoughts, methods, citations, and examples.

“Promiscuous” obviously indicates the many and varied contexts that for which one must account in the theorization of stereotypes. I also want to indicate (at least) two other necessarily promiscuous aspects of my reading practice for stereotypes. First, I want it to indicate how stereotypes exist not “in isolation” but in what Hazel Carby calls a “nexus” or “network of figurations forming a complex metaphorical system” (20-21). The implications of this are that any understanding of stereotypes requires an understanding of their promiscuity, their multiple relationships with other stereotypes. Secondly, promiscuous refers to this project's focus on sexuality as a salient way race is regulated, always within the milieu of gender. A promiscuous contextuality is necessary to, for instance, analyze the ways that accusations of hypersexuality have been used to regulate African American men as an excuse to lynch and police men based on the threat of potential interracial relationships with white women and to regulate African American women as a legitimization of the institutionalized rape of women based on their supposedly irresistible temptation of white men.

Supplemental to my other points about these texts, the promiscuous contextuality of Johnson and Knipp's performances instigates questions about representation, appropriation, and stereotypes. How do we read these performances of racial and sexual minorities while attending to the representational politics at play? How do stereotypes frame and structure the text, the author, and the audience's reading practice? Is there a performance of racial subjects that doesn't draw somehow on stereotypes and what does that tell us about the representational logics or stereotypes and their centrality to how we relate to others? Do these particular performances resist/critique or reproduce the stereotypes they represent? Or both? What does it mean, for

instance, to perform ethnography as Johnson does? What kinds of knowledges does this performative representation of gay black men of the American south allow? What does it foreclose or elide? Part of an answer might look at the benefits of performing ethnography, including, as Johnson claims, producing a “living archive” and “bringing the subject to life” and allowing audiences to “experience for themselves” the objects of study as well as, perhaps, revealing an affective register of subjection. However, performance ethnography also constructs a hierarchy between the performing observer and those observed, often celebrating the performing ethnographer based on how well they literally “speaking for” and “become” the other. Mercer’s points about historical and authorial context seem pertinent here. Johnson is quick to point out that his own religious upbringing as Southern black gay male-ness gave him “access” and helped him “connect with these men” and “ask the right questions” because he “knew the culture and...the struggles that many of these men face” (“A Conversation”). This is undoubtedly true but it also produces Johnson as a privileged scholar of this subculture; this sameness of subjectivity is important but also works to elide the problems of “speaking for” others. Part of the stakes of asking representational questions of this particular study is that, while it does reveal life-worlds that have not been discussed, this revelation relies on the logic of the closet, as these men and this subculture “come out” in Johnson’s aesthetic representation, this “speaking for” might actually hamper their political representation or future negotiations of race and sexuality in those life-worlds by making those negotiations more public in this text.¹⁵

A promiscuous contextuality of Knipp’s act would allow us to ask about the controversy that his representation stirs that are both similar to and different than the questions asked of Johnson’s act. There are obvious differences between these performers’ subject positions, audiences, intentions, and performance spaces. One is a gay white male drag queen from the

South performing a poor Black woman for monetary profit to (primarily) gay men in gay bars, the other is a gay Black professor of Performance Studies from the South performing gay Black men of the South. Knipp's character is often critiqued for its racist representation of Black women. What is it exactly that makes Knipp's Shirley Q. Liquor act "racist" and/or "degrading" and Johnson's performance of gay men of the South "anti-racist" and/or "liberatory" when both rely so heavily on stereotypes to "speak for" other people? What is the difference between Johnson's traffic in stereotypes and Knipp's and how are their subject positions as authors and performers relevant to this question? Is Knipp's performance of Shirley Q. Liquor, like Mapplethorpe's work, both racist and anti-racist? Does his representation of the Welfare Queen somehow more racist than Johnson's performance of gay Black men of the South because Knipp is a white gay man? Or less? Knipp explains and defends his performance in many ways, including a kind of gay white male "diva worship" celebratory appropriation of black women and/or naïve identification with or fetishism of black people in general, ever since he "fell in love with black people when he was 11 and his all white school integrated" (Wilson). Like Mapplethorpe's relationship to his models being based on their shared sexuality and class, Knipp makes the point here that his representation of Black women is not racist because of the integrated social milieu he grew up in, provided him with a kind of connection and closeness to African American-ness that allows him to represent them. According to Knipp, Shirley Q. Liquor was created "in celebration of, not to downgrade, black women"; she is a "composite woman from a person I know and my own creativity... a composite of reverse stereotypes and cultural differences" (*Southern Decadence*) that Knipp has created from imitating his early caregiver Fannie Mae Turner (from whom his catchphrase "How you durrin?" and particular slow southern drawl comes) and the black friends he made from grade school through college.¹⁶

Knipp describes himself as an impressionist, a “mimic” who loves “speaking black English” and was “able to crack the code on private black speak” (Holthouse).

Finally, there are questions of audience. Is Knipp’s act more racist because of the audience difference between he and Johnson? How can we account for the various ways these representations are received depending on the attitudes, identities, and cultural knowledges of their various audiences? This question seems to stir some reticence in Knipp

Wealthy white people are starting to hire me for private parties, where I play the raisin in a bowl of oatmeal...from the way they interact with me, I can see that my being there as Shirley makes them feel it’s acceptable to openly mock black people in a way they otherwise would not, and that does cause me to have second thoughts. If what I’m doing is truly hurtful, then I need to stop. (Holthouse)

The *Rolling Stone* interviewer remarks that this quote shows how Knipp “knows, deep down, that any redeeming social value in his comedy depends entirely on the intentions of his audience, and whether they’re laughing with Shirley or at her” (Holthouse). Mercer’s understanding of the way readings change based on audience and the political uses of readers is relevant here – as his audience shifts from public to private, Knipp becomes cautious of the uses of his act by the audience. I believe we all should read stereotypes the way Mercer reads Mapplethorpe. Using Mercer’s contextualization of Mapplethorpe’s cultural texts as a model for reading stereotypes as cultural representations allows for the promiscuous contextualizations and questions necessary to understand the way stereotypes represent and get represented in texts. This reading practice also elicits further questions about how texts produce publics, the nature of publicity, and the meaning of resistance. These are the kind of questions, concerns, and irritations I attempt to engage in the readings of each chapter.

Chapter Interfaces

The chapters progress as a series of interfaces between the problem of the stereotype and its representation in various texts. Specifically, this project tracks the role of stereotypes in the gendered sexualization of African Americans in the historical period between the post-Reconstruction era and the emergence of what has come to be called the U.S. African American Civil Rights Movement. Stereotypes have been part of the cultural logics of American racial formation from its earliest processes. I understand slavery to be the conditions of possibility of America and the various discourses of racial science, anthropology, sexology, eugenics, etc. were fashioning stereotypes of Africans that defined them as primitive, hypersexual, and unable to govern themselves from the earliest days of the slave trade. The “American dilemma” of re-signifying black bodies from enslaved property to emancipated subject involved a war of representation that forged America’s most socially, politically, and culturally dangerous and enduring stereotypes at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, such as the “Black Buck/Black Rapist,” the “Jezebel,” and the “Mammy.” Unpacking racial stereotypes required discussing how sex and sexuality was used to produce, describe, and legitimize racial stereotypes and understanding that these stereotypes of sexualized racialization and racialized sexuality always occurred through gendered representations of bodies and practices. The promiscuous contextualization of the main texts in each chapter lead to understandings of the stereotype’s role in larger issues of racialization, racial history and historiography, identity formation, and the overlap between relations of desire and power. I work historically backwards because James Baldwin’s novel *Another Country* is a touchstone text for my thinking about the way stereotypes could be engaged and I also wanted to reveal how Baldwin and Richard Wright are part of the

legacy of the critical thought in earlier work like Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching writing.

In the first chapter I read Baldwin's *Another Country* simultaneously as a theory of stereotypes, a relevant analytical for unpacking stereotypes, an experiment that tests those theories and analytics, and as a useful model of my critical reading practice. While usually described as either a novel about the redemptive power of love to overcome racism or read for its frank portrayal of (male) homosexuality, I think James Baldwin's *Another Country* is more compellingly read as a literary theorization of the stereotype of the "Black Rapist." Unlike many analyses of the stereotype, Baldwin's representation of Rufus Scott focuses not on correcting this stereotype or on representing a "protest" figure that allows readers to more fully understand the plight of the stereotyped but, rather, makes apparent the intractability and inescapability of the stereotype as it produces its own authority to define, delimit, and disempower African American men. Rather than staking his anti-racist analysis of the stereotype on the possibility that its ambivalence allows for a *re*-presentation – a repetition with a difference – that will somehow "correct" the Black Rapist stereotype, Baldwin focuses on how the stereotype's intractability ensures its survival. To do so, his promiscuous contextualization maps the circulation of the stereotype in the circuits of desire and power that Rufus encounters and in so doing reveals the extent to which his audience's reading practice (of fiction and of bodies) relies on the stereotype to characterize Rufus, requiring the reader to reconcile his/her complicity with the stereotype. Baldwin was as interested in critiquing his white liberal readership's reliance on stereotyping as he was in immanently critiquing the way nascent forms of rights-based civil rights movements and other forms of identity politics took up the stereotype to challenge U.S. racial formation. Baldwin's model of analysis of the stereotype in this novel has profound implications for anti-racist critique and social justice work more generally.

In the second chapter I attempt my own promiscuous contextuality of Richard Wright's collaboration with Edwin Rosskam photo-textual essay *12 Million Black Voices*. This chapter's main cause for concern is the problem of the stereotype for historiography and historical representation. I read Wright's text as a re-narrativization of the American racial history that defines African Americans as the "primitive" constitutive other to a progressive United States. To do so, Wright re-figures African American men as historical agents of progress but does so by stabilizing gender and sexual stereotypes, figuring Black women as Mammies, the primitive other to the progressing Black men. Wright's argument about progressing from rural folk to urban industrialized citizens *relies on* figuring women as Mammies, as only ever racio-sexual stereotypes that are incapable of the kinds of progress men can accomplish. They are the constitutive other of African American men whose labor, in order to enter into what Wright calls "conscious history," must be compared to the fixed position of African American women in their positions as domestic labor, a fixity reflected in the unchanging stereotype of the Mammy, used to describe these women during slavery and during the time of Wright's writing. Wright's attempt at re-presenting this stereotype works so much within the discourses that have produced it that the results are the reproduction of different relations of power (shifting from race to racialized gender) in another form, a form that is similar to the original (a narrative of progress). Rather than correcting or undoing this stereotype of the primitive, Wright's text shifts the object of the stereotype from all African Americans to African American women, saddling them with the entire burden of that representation. However, contextualizing this feminist reading within the documentary discourse of the U.S. state reveals the slippery nature of the stereotype and the problem of trying to undo these historical representations and remove stereotypes that are indexical to that vast history. Heeding Mercer, my reading attempts to contextualize Wright's

texts not only within the aesthetic codes and conventions that it employs but also within the social, political, and cultural history of race in America and the role of the visual practice of documentary photography within that U.S. racial history, particularly its use by the U.S. government. Wright's insertion of African American images into the canon of FSA documentary photography changes that archive's representational politics.

The final chapter focuses on the way that Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching pamphlets engage the stereotype of the Black Rapist through her own kind of promiscuous contextualiation of the terrorist act of lynching. My reading of her work asks questions about the role of stereotypes in the racialization of the post-Reconstruction era as well as the role of stereotypes in certain strains of feminist revisionist histories that seek to reclaim women of color as historical agents. Wells's engagement with stereotypes, particularly the use of the Black Rapist stereotype in the terrorist practice of lynching, primarily gets read as a "de-bunking" that is necessary to quell the violence of lynching in America. Most scholarship reads Wells's anti-lynching writings as working to correct the stereotypes of Black men through a questioning of their truth-value. However, to claim that Wells debunks the falsity of the Black Rapist stereotype suggests that the stereotype operates to affirm the "truth" of identity and requires centering this stereotype within a narrative of lynching in ways that I think Wells's writings arguably work to trouble. I read Wells's rhetorical choices as a contextualization of the effects of the stereotype that does not assume but instead carefully disarticulates the immediate relationship between the material practice of lynching and the accusation of rape and the "Black Rapist" stereotype to reveal how its representational logics invisibilizes the stereotype. Wells's promiscuous contextualization accomplishes two things. First, the use of the white press as her primary evidence reveals that the legitimizing articulation of the act of lynching with the Black Rapist stereotype occurs

primarily in these periodicals. Next, she inserts the new White Delilah stereotype, a figuration of white women who consent to sex with Black men, into the network of figurations of the Black Rapist stereotype in an attempt to start its erosion. These two modes of analysis actually refuse to “disprove” the stereotype and reveal Wells’s understanding that because its falsity is always already an open secret, disproving the stereotype does little to interrupt its efficacy. Through these texts I model a promiscuous contextualization that I find necessary to understanding how stereotypes work in our present moment.

Note

¹ Throughout this dissertation project I use capitalization to mark these as titles of prominent American stereotypes rather than leaving them in lower case, which, when used over and over again, seems somehow to suggest that these are common attributes of Blackness rather than representational categories.

² The book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* does, as critics and Johnson have noted, rethinks certain myths about the repressive nature of the rural south (although, the fact that a study like this has yet to be done because, as Johnson notes, “no one has bothered to ask” actually does indicate, contra Johnson’s point, a certain form of repressive silencing). Johnson’s ethnography is an amazing compilation of stories and interviews and a wealth of information on a rarely-explored social formation (though one might ask if these men even want their social formation exposed). My representational questions are less about the book (though there are the usual editing, re-contextualizing, and observer interference issues involved with (particularly gay) ethnography) than with the accompanying performance piece, “Pouring Tea.”

³ In this interview, Johnson notes that “Everything taboo in the South is hidden in plain sight!” and that while “everybody knows the proverbial choir director is gay, no one talks about it. I hope that Sweet Tea will help begin the conversation in more direct ways” (Johnson UNC). Part of my concern is that Johnson has made the decision for these men to “begin” this “conversation.”

⁴ RuPaul is a famous defender of Knipp’s act. Some celebrities have hired Knipp for private parties, including Sela Ward and Ronnie Dunn of Brooks and Dunn who hired Knipp for their spouses’ birthday parties. Other self-proclaimed fans include the cast of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Patti LaBelle, Don Imus, Grace Jones, The Dixie Chicks, Naomi Judd, and the members of 2LiveCrew.

⁵ To which one critic, Lecia Brooks responds, “bullshit... You’re going to heal racial wounds by ridiculing poor black women and calling it God’s will? What arrogance!” (Holthouse).

⁶ Johnson claims his shared subjectivity also gave him “access” and allowed him to “connect with these men. It helped me ask the right questions because I know the culture and I know the struggles that many of these men face. I also think that if I had been a white gay man that I would not have had the access to many of these men. With me, they felt comfortable sharing” (“A Conversation”).

⁷ This choice is actually probably the most problematic aspect of his performance. He certainly elides or ignores the violent history of blackface minstrelsy when he claims that what he does is not blackface because he uses “regular African-American lady brown foundation and all kinds of eye shadow” (*Southern Decadence*) and that there is “no difference between his donning blackface and Dave Chappelle putting on whiteface to make fun of uptight white folks, or Eddie Murphy portraying stereotypical fat loud, black woman in *Norbit*” (Holthouse).

⁸ What does it mean for Johnson to *perform* his ethnography? The performance certainly does important critical work, including queering (or “quaring” in Johnson’s Southern dialect form of the verb used to indicate a queer of color critique) the institutional spaces that have historically worked, at least in part, to invalidate the “voices” with which Johnson is now filling American university auditoriums. What, though, does representing these men as a performance of their voices and narratives do for those represented? The performance seeks to “affirm” these men’s life-worlds and leave a “‘living archive’ of these men’s stories” but Johnson’s affirmation and archive may actually lead (whether intentional or not) to social, emotional, and physical violences from a potentially homophobic society who now know the cultural codes of this social group. This work is also a kind of economic exploitation as the representation of these men in the book, speaking tour, and full-length play increases, when all is said and done, Johnson’s own cultural, intellectual, and academic capital while doing little to increase the same for those represented. How does one balance what is gained from producing (and from viewing) ethnographic performances like Johnson’s with the epistemic violence of representing these subaltern figures?

⁹ According to Michael Pickering, it was used in a similar sense “by a late nineteenth-century periodical writer when he defined a nation as ‘a certain section of mankind having certain characteristics which have become stereotyped in the passage of generations’ and although he did not use the term, the American sociologist W.I. Thomas identified one of the major components of the classical view of stereotyping when he wrote... ‘the experts of the yellow press produce an essential untruth by isolating and over-emphasizing certain features of the original without getting clean away from the copy’” (16).

¹⁰ The economy of thinking afforded by our system of stereotypical knowledge is so important that Lippmann eventually declares that “there are uniformities sufficiently accurate, and the need of economizing attention is so inevitable, that the abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life” (60).

¹¹ In “The Role of Stereotypes,” Richard Dyer calls this paradox “the two problems of Lippman’s formulation – order (stereotypes) perceived as absolute and rigid, order (stereotypes) as grounded in social power” (12). The problem is that the stereotype can only be a “relatively stable boundaries and categories” used to order our worlds if it becomes an “enforced representation that points to a reality whose invisibility an/or fluidity threatens the received definitions of society promote by those with the biggest sticks” (16). Dyer reveals some contradictions between understanding stereotypes as rigid, unchanging categories that are only possible when undergirded with social – therefor historical and changeable – power. Michael Pickering locates a similar problem in his reading of Lippmann who he says “conceived of the stereotype in two opposed ways”:

On the one hand, he viewed stereotypes as inadequate and biased, as endorsing the interests of those who use them, as obstacles to rational assessment, and as resistant to social change. In this first, political sense, he contrasted stereotyping with ‘individualised understanding’... On the other hand, he regarded stereotyping as a necessary mode of processing information, especially in highly differentiated societies, an inescapable way of creating order out of the ‘great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality’... in this second, psychological sense, he equated stereotyping with broader patterns of typifying and representing, and indeed with out general means of thinking about making sense of the world and the peoples in it. (18)

¹² There is a vast wealth of social psychological scholarship on the stereotype. The stereotype has been a salient critical concept since the foundational work in social psychology Henri Tajfel and Gordon Allport and it remains so in the more recent work on “stereotype threat” begun by Claude Steele.

¹³ Jasmyne Cannick, a social commentator on African American issues and writer/contributor to BET and NPR, mounts this critique in her attempts to ban Knipp’s performances. Calling him a “white man who gets his rocks off making a mockery of us and our ancestors,” Cannick marks Knipp as nothing more than a “white man” in a dominant position of power trafficking in stereotypes (for his own financial gain) in ways that reinforce the Welfare Queen stereotype and reproduce the social position of black women as inferior (able to be mocked). Cannick also points out that the gay community supports this Knipp through ticket sales for a show that entertains with racist stereotypes that “degrade black women” (Cannick). Part of her critique is that, while Knipp’s portrayal may seem funny, for many “Black Americans poverty is reality and not entertainment.” She continues this article with a brief analysis of the history of racial violences that has lead up to why “a Black woman would be on welfare in the first place,” effectively revealing the social relations that the Welfare Queen stereotype upon which Knipp builds his character has elided.

¹⁴ Perhaps, for instance, the promises of disidentification are possible only for the kinds of performance artists like Vaginal Davis and Carmelita Tropicana that Muñoz reads.

¹⁵ A telling story about one of performances of an autoethnographic piece called *Strange Fruit* that he toured with before the *Sweet Tea* and “Pouring Tea” project illustrates the potential problems with representation and highlights how audiences with different cultural positions and

knowledges read representations differently. In an article that reprints the script of the performance¹⁵, Johnson describes the second night “populated with mostly gay black men” as “cold and despondent” compared to the first night whose audience was primarily “black women academics” (88-89). Johnson asked his friend about the audience reaction or lack thereof. His response “was telling: ‘I can’t believe you put our business in the street like that...The children don’t want all of those straight folks knowing out business. Some of us ain’t as out about that stuff as you are. We [are] *still* in the South, you know” (89).¹⁵ Johnson continues by theorizing this interaction:

I guess I knew, but hadn’t remembered. In the pseudo-liberal space of this “southern ivy,” I did not register the anxiety that a show such as *Strange Fruit* would create for black gay men whose lives are complicated by the hegemony of homophobia not only in black communities, but also in the South in general. My representation of aspects of ‘the life’ transgressed an unspoken contract among southern black gay men: never speak of our sexuality outside the boundaries of ‘our’ designated spaces. Therefore, responding favorably to my show and participating would have implicated them in its discursive meanings – i.e., interpellated them as ‘queer’...they had not come to terms with their sexuality in ways that would allow them to be comfortable even watching a performance about a black gay man’s experience – their experience (89).

Figuring these audience members as men who had not “come to terms with their sexuality” because they were not performing “out” as Johnson himself was able to do makes assumptions about what it means to be an “authentic” black gay man.

¹⁶ Celebrity drag queen RuPaul, who has worked with Knipp on films and CDs, agrees that Knipp’s act is “clearly coming from a place of love” (blog). In on blog post, Rupaul claims that critics who find the character “offensive” are “idiots” and that those who caused the cancellation of his 2002 New York show were “a group of unsophisticated barbarians with misguided rage” and a “self righteous lynch mob” whose contention that Knipp “re-enforces every racist stereotype” was “valid 40 years ago before there were black media moguls who make fun of black women and reinforce racist stereotypes” (RuPaul blog).

Chapter One:
Rufus's Refusal: The Problem of the Black Rapist Stereotype and the Relations of Desire and
Power in James Baldwin's *Another Country*

[T]he power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions.

James Baldwin *The Fire Next Time*

All that noise is about America, as the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth; and blacks, especially males, in America; and the burning, buried American guilt; and sex and sexual roles and sexual panic; money, success and despair.

James Baldwin "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood"

Racial liberals never theorized how to read; instead, they proposed sympathetic identification to be a quality inherent in race novels.

Jodi Melamed, "The Killing Joke of Sympathy: Chester Himes's *End of the Primitive* Sounds the Limits of Midcentury Racial Liberalism"

This chapter is about the way James Baldwin, one of the most prescient theorists of race and racism of the 20th century, theorizes stereotypes and stereotyping in his novel *Another Country*. Begun in Greenwich Village in 1948 and not finished until 1960 in Istanbul, *Another Country* was emotionally and physically difficult for Baldwin to finish. The novel tells the story of the interactions of four couples living "bohemian" lives in 1950s Harlem and Greenwich Village. In his application for a Ford Foundation grant to complete the novel, Baldwin wrote that *Another Country* "is based on the assumption that the two 'most profound realities' that the American citizen has to deal with are 'colour and sex'" (Campbell 134). Usually described as either a novel about the redemptive power of love to overcome racism or read for its frank portrayal of (male) homosexuality, I believe *Another Country* is more compellingly read as a theorization of the stereotypes that both produce and get produced at the intersection of race and sexuality in America. Baldwin's novel traces some of the ways that stereotypes of "colour and sex" work together to organize forms of disempowerment, discipline racialized bodies, and

delimit who gets access to the benefits of American citizenship. Baldwin's novel is also attentive to the role that gender (particularly masculinity) and class play in the sexualization of race and the racialization of sexuality. To describe his novel theory of stereotyping and racialization, this chapter will focus closely on the way Baldwin plays with stereotypes in the novel to reveal how his cultural text understands and represents stereotypes differently than not only other literary representations of stereotypes but also other forms of knowledge production that attempted to study how stereotypes work and why we use them such as, primarily, social psychology, sociology, and other social sciences. Baldwin's representations of stereotypes are different than the stereotypical representations in the "protest novels" he so famously critiqued. Likewise, it seems difficult to characterize *Another Country* as what we might call a "resistant text," authored by what Rey Chow calls a "protesting ethnic" subject. Rather than reading *Another Country* as a "resistant text," I read Baldwin's representation of Rufus Scott as a critical engagement with the stereotype's representational logics and the social, historical, and cultural conditions of possibility that allow this particular stereotype to emerge when it does and be deployed as it was. Rather than understanding stereotypes as false or inaccurate representations that need correcting, Baldwin's representation of Rufus traces how the representational logics of the stereotype of the Black Rapist work to reproduce its authority to define, delimit, and disempower African American men. Baldwin does so by mapping the circulation of the stereotype in the relations of desire and power that Rufus encounters, which works to challenge how his audience's reading practices (of fiction and of bodies) rely on stereotypical thinking. To reveal Baldwin's complex work with stereotypes, this chapter will read *Another Country* as: a literary theory and model for critically engaging stereotypes and processes of stereotyping and an object of analysis for other theories of the stereotype and the model for a reading practice attuned

to the stereotype's representational logics.

The Stereotype and the “Protesting Ethnic”

The insights of Rey Chow in *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* provides valuable insights for framing a reading of the way Baldwin engages stereotypes and ethnic representation in the novel. Although her book is a critique of contemporary Ethnic Studies in which she claims, through an analysis of U.S.-China trade relations, that the primary object of analysis for most current cultural criticism of ethnic representation is an ethnic subject that is always already understood as “protesting,” Rey Chow’s insights into reading ethnic representation provide some compelling ways to discuss how Baldwin engages stereotypes in *Another Country* as well as some ways to frame the stakes of his representation of the Black Rapist stereotype in this novel at this historical moment. Chow begins this monograph by unpacking the ways that transnational corporations and nations (particularly China and the U.S.) use human rights grievances to grease the wheels of global trade. According to Chow, we must “view the West and China as collaborative partners in an ongoing series of biopolitical transactions in global late capitalism, transactions whereby human rights, or, more precisely, humans as such, are the commodity par excellence” (20-21). In Chow’s main example, these transactions involve Chinese political dissidents being released in order to satisfy the liberal humanitarian demands of China’s Western trading partners. Once released upon demand, China receives Western business opportunities along with less critical rhetoric about the treatment of Chinese citizens and dissidents and Western companies get to be perceived as humanitarians while gaining access to China’s cheap goods and labor¹. For Chow, “what is being transacted” in this global commodification of human rights is “so-called ethnicity” as an “otherness, a

foreignness that distinguishes it from mainstream, normative society” and as a “relation of cultural politics that is regularly being enacted by a Westernized, Americanized audience with regard to those who are perceived and labeled as ethnic” (22). Ethnicity, then, becomes part of global trade negotiations, when the West represents China as the primitive, human-rights-violating Other to the West’s liberal and enlightened defender of human rights. China must be produced in the eyes of the U.S. audience as a “foreign,” “ethnic” “Other” *but* one that is seen as progressing toward the West’s moral high ground (which continues to figure the West as superior) so that that same American audience can benefit from cheap Chinese goods and labor guiltlessly (and so American business interests can continue to generate profit by selling produces to those Americans).

To Chow, these “commodified relations of ethnicity” are premised on the understanding of imprisoned Chinese dissidents as an “other” that is “held captive within his or her own culture whether dead or alive and that such captivity necessitates protest and liberation” (23). This example of the traffic in ethnicity prompts Chow to re-think “the complex genealogical affinities among ethnicity, capitalist commodification, and the spiritual culture of protest,” which culminates in, for me, her most provocative and useful claim that “contemporary articulations of ethnicity” figure the ethnic subject as always already a protesting, resistant subject; in other words, “*to be ethnic is to protest* – but perhaps less for actual emancipation of any kind than for the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation” (23, 48). For contemporary Ethnic Studies “in the age of globalization, ethnics are first and foremost protesting ethnics but this is not because they are possessed of some ‘soul’ and ‘humanity’ that cannot be changed into commodities. Rather, it is because protesting constitutes the economically logical and socially viable vocation for them to assume” (48). Ethnic subjects are always already protesting subjects

but protesting subjects for whom the necessary goal is not “emancipation” or “liberation” but a “vocation” in global capital.

Reading the ethnic as always already a protesting subject stems from what Chow sees as the interaction of two contradictory understandings of ethnicity in contemporary Ethnic Studies. The first tendency is universalist and sees ethnicity as “culture” and “performance,” as a “universal condition that can be found throughout human history” (31). The second tendency “tends to take an oppositional approach to the universalist assumptions” of the first paradigm and focuses on ethnicity as a “source of oppression” and “situates ethnicity amid major economic and geopolitical networks of power” (31). While the first tendency prescribes an ethnicity to everyone, the second understands ethnicity only as a marker of those marginalized populations for whom “asymmetries of power” have caused some form of material or representational violence. Despite their different approaches, according to Chow, these two methodologies “coalesce in practice to produce what is, strictly speaking, a *theoretical stereotype*: an inviolable human subject as such” (32). Both traditions rely on an essentialist human subject, which, for the first paradigm is always there in “ethnic customs and literary and cultural representation” and for the second is “what has to be redeemed and reaffirmed through a process of struggle” (32). What is missing for Chow in both of these methodologies is an understanding of ethnicity as structural, as part of “an already biopoliticized economic relation, whereby the very humanity attributed to ethnics is itself firmly subsumed under the process of commodification and its asymmetrical distribution of power rather than outside them” (32). What is missing, in other words, is a more critical questioning of the ways these networks of power relations produce “humanity” as a universal category that all subjects must either define and defend or strive to achieve.²

On the one hand, Chow's example of China and U.S. trade negotiations is an argument about how ethnicity is trafficked on the stage of global capital. On the other hand, her following discussion about the protesting ethnic subject is an argument about how agency is a historical category like any other. Chow reveals the lack of and need to historicize agency rather than base it on essentialist assumptions about a universal humanity that resides in us all. In what she critiques, the agency available to the ethnic subject is limited to a protesting agency. Most contemporary ethnic representation not only "speaks for" those subjects but also frames all those ethnic utterances as resistant protestations before they can even speak or represent themselves. That is, if the ethnic subject is always already represented and framed as protesting and resisting, as positioned in a particular critical stance toward capitalism, and as always a victim of various oppressions, then it becomes difficult for ethnic subjects to be read outside the frame of "protest," or to be "listened to" or to "speak for" themselves. Chow's chapter calls for a re-contextualization of ethnic subjectivity within Ethnic Studies and a radical historicization of the "human subject," that "theoretical stereotype" upon which the figuration of ethnic agency as only ever protesting is based.

Chow continues by showing how these insights about the study of ethnicity influence the way one reads "ethnic" representations in cultural production. She sees "two major tendencies in understanding the relationship between ethnicity and representation" (50). One tendency "treats ethnicity as a thematic concern" and the other understands ethnicity "as some kind of empowered agency 'resisting' the conventions of ethnic reflectionism" (51). According to Chow, the first tendency keeps "ethnicity at the level of more or less realist cultural content" (51). While "ethnic details and characters may make interesting stories, they do not necessarily tell us anything new about writing or the act of representation per se" and their "(sociological) appeal"

results in a “tedium” that allows readers to be able to “dismiss” these representations of marginalized subjects as something they already know, which “leaves intact the elitist notion that so-called great literature, by contrast is usually unpredictable and exciting because it transcends such tedious, culturally specific content” (51). For Chow, there needs to be a more “complex” reading practice for ethnic representation but “this, however, cannot simply mean placing the ethnic in the role of a resisting agent” (51). The second tendency of “reading ethnic texts on the basis of resistance – be it on the part of the individual protagonist, the ethnic group, subjectivity, or the text itself – has become so rhetorically formulaic that it is often incompetent to bring about any substantive intervention” (52). Missing is “an argument that is equally responsive to the materiality of ethnicity and the materiality of representation” (52). Missing, in other words, is an understanding of the way various discourses and representations of ethnicity produce subjects and affect those subjects’ experiences and opportunities.

While Chow’s work reads present-day U.S.-China relations as a critique of contemporary Ethnic Studies, my interest in Chow lies in how her insights into the reliance on this “theoretical stereotype” (an essentialist humanity) produces an ethnic subject whose agency gets circumscribed as only ever resistance and protesting are useful for understanding Baldwin’s critique of the protest novel and the instantiation of that critique in his novel *Another Country*. Chow’s contemporary analysis can be read back onto Baldwin’s similar ideas in order to ultimately reveal his novel representations and theory of stereotypes and stereotyping. In her work, not only is this “theoretical stereotype” a problem for representing ethnic subjects, but the stereotype is also a problem at both scales of her argument. In the first, stereotypes are the currency of this contemporary traffic in ethnicity. China gets stereotyped as human rights abusers, the primitive Other to the modern, enlightened West. At the second scale, ethnic

subjects are stereotyped as protesting and resistant to the social structures that oppress them. In other words, the “ethnic” at both scales is being stereotyped as having an agency that is always already and can only ever be read as protesting and resistant. This particular stereotype is a mode of representing and knowing the ethnic subject that has material effects, including the removal of rights and opportunities, disempowerment, and physical violence based on understanding them as always resistant. Understanding the work of the stereotype has something to do with unpacking the materiality of both ethnicity and representation and, vice versa, understanding the materiality of ethnicity and representation requires unpacking the representational logics of the stereotype. Chow seems to agree with this idea when she calls for a shift in understanding stereotypes in general:

Rather than viewing stereotypes as a problem in cognitive psychology – defined typically as mental structures of reflection – involving intergroup relations, I am primarily concerned with their function as a representational device, a possible tactic of aesthetic and political intervention in situations in which the deployment of stereotypes by dominant political or cultural discourses has long been a fact. I believe it is only by considering stereotyping as an objective, normative practice that is regularly adopted for collective purposes of control and management, or even for purposes of epistemological experimentation and radicalism, and not merely as a subjective, devious state of mind that we can begin to assess its aesthetic-cum-political relevance. (54)

Like many of the “corrective” theories of stereotyping discussed in the introduction, Chow believes the stereotype to be a potential “intervention” into the discourses that deploy them. However, for Chow, it is not ambivalence that provides the possibility for its undoing but how the stereotype’s “function as a representational device” that provides the possibility of

understanding the “undismissable yet persistently elusive relations between ethnicity and representation” (52). For Chow the “dangerous potential” of stereotypes is not primarily in their ambivalence or protean nature or in their “conventionality or formulaicness” but in their “capacity for creativity and originality” (58). Their danger is not, in other words, in their homogenizing and fixed representations that never change but in their ability to “creatively” produce new forms of racist representations. Their real danger stems from their ability to conflate these “two realms of representational truisms – the conventional and formulaic...and the creative and original/originating” in ways that make their unchanging, universalist definitions able to adapt to changing racial attitudes (58). Chow’s point that stereotypes utilize both formulaic and creative representational is an interesting way to think about the representational tricks of the stereotype, especially how stereotypes use historical evidence and traditional knowledges (the convention) to produce their fixed ambivalent truths even while adapting to historical change (the creative). Stereotypes work to define the other, whose rights, mobility, opportunities, and life chances are limited by not only their dominant-defined deviancies and “abnormalities” but also by more direct forms of power and violence channeled through the stereotype. In other words, the stereotype of the Black Rapist doesn’t just define the African American male as abnormal but also legitimizes the actions taken against him, including his premature death by lynching. This is the material effect of this stereotype. Part of the defense of a social structure’s discriminations is to define the stereotypical Other as only ever a protesting, resistant subject and prohibit improvements to their life worlds through any other recourse but the channels of “resistance” made allowable by the dominant regime of truth. That is, even if advancement occurs by African Americans, they are still primarily read as protesting the society in which they are advancing. While Chow makes clear that this is an aspect of contemporary

U.S.-China trade relations, it also clearly describes the figurations of African Americans in our contemporary racial formation (for instance, the racist right-wing figurations of African Americans “playing the race card” or representations of President Obama (and others) as “uppity”) and *certainly* describes the way African Americans were portrayed during Baldwin’s writing years, a stereotypical portrayal that Baldwin actively engages in the novel and in his reading of “protest novels.”

The Stereotype and the “Protest Novel”

Part of the understandings of stereotypes evident in *Another Country* can be seen in Baldwin’s early and most famous essay work, primarily the concerns about representation and “labels” he discusses in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Preservation of Innocence.” In his essay work, Baldwin seems to share similar concerns with Chow about the politics of representing ethnic subjects in literature. He was especially interested in producing literary production that refused to portray African Americans as only protesting subjects or victims of racial violence and stereotyping. While Chow’s focus is the representation of the ethnic subject on the stage of transnational capital, Baldwin’s understanding of African American stereotypes, particularly the Black Rapist stereotype, takes into consideration the reading practice that Chow suggests for understanding the ways ethnic representation should be unpacked. In the ongoing analysis of race and sexuality that he engages in his novels, Baldwin thinks critically about power relations and the politics of representation. Readings of some of his essays reveal not only his critique of American racial hegemony, but also his distrust of homogenizing narratives of identity; he was as consistently engaged in an immanent critique of racial identity politics of the time as he was of the white liberalism against which those politics fought.

Baldwin's oft-cited famous 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" published early in his career discusses concerns similar to Chow's warnings about reading representations of ethnicity. Like Chow, Baldwin is interested in unpacking the "accepted and comforting" representations of African Americans that abound in literature produced primarily for white liberal audiences. In the essay, Baldwin famously critiques Richard Wright's representation of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* for representing African American men in ways that are racist and stereotypical and so, palatable for his white audience. For Baldwin, Bigger is a stock character of a hypersexualized "protesting ethnic" whose "life is controlled by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through his violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (22). Bigger's agency, in other words, is totally circumscribed by his protesting "hatred" and "fear," which, ironically, results in his inhabiting the Black Rapist stereotype, the exact stereotypically "monstrous legend" that causes (white) others to fear him and that helps structure the social world that Bigger hates and fears. Simply put, the "hatred" and "fear" he feels because he is policed (in multiple ways) as a Black Rapist results in his becoming a Black Rapist and murderer, which, according to Baldwin's reading of Wright, then leads to the redemption of his manhood. Baldwin describes Wright's representation as another kind of "stock" figure of the angry, protesting Negro who "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" (23). So the character of Bigger is represented as circumscribed by two different but related stereotypes, as a Black Rapist, and as a protesting ethnic. Neither help to unpack Bigger's experience with racism because they

are both digestible to white liberal readers who are interested in representations of the African American other they can read about in “race novels” but not necessarily as interested in changing the racial formation from which they privilege.

The “protest novel” as Baldwin discusses it, then, is a strange blend of the two tendencies Chow sees in understanding ethnicity and representation, part “sociological,” representing “realist cultural content,” and part representation of an “ethnic in the role of resisting agent” in order to produce its protest. The protest novel’s blend of sociological and resistant representation works, in part, by “humanizing” African American subjects for the white liberal audience in order to make them understand the situation and convince them to change their racist ideas and ways. This humanizing tendency of protest novels also assumes, like Chow’s formulation of Ethnic Studies, the “theoretical stereotype” of the “human subject.” To do their work, protest novels must assume a universal humanity within the ethnic subjects they represent, a humanity that must somehow (in part by reading the protest novel) be revealed so that humane compassion will lead to racial tolerance. Baldwin warns us that although “the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed,” but, rather than portraying critiques of the American racial formation, protest novels, in their need to define experience in ways that are palatable to the American reading (and book buying) public, actually work to perpetuate racist racial formation by fostering the hegemonic consent necessary to “convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree” (20). He continues by discussing how protest novels enact and elicit readings in line with the “thematic concerns” Chow discusses in the reading of ethnic representations. In his most incisive claim, Baldwin writes:

The “protest” novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of

the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all. (19)

Protest novels “ramify” the “framework” of American racial structures as they reproduce rather than challenge the representation of African Americans as always-struggling, protesting victims of the oppressions of racist society. Furthermore, any “unsettling questions,” any actual critical representations of social formation are “titillating” yet “remote,” keeping the reader safe within his/her stereotypical thinking even as the reader gets a “thrill of virtue” from the head-nodding compassion for the oppressed the reader feels by having read a race novel at all. Far from launching critiques, this “passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning...categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl clutching the straws of our definitions” (19). Stereotypes thrive on this “passion for categorization” and I would suggest that the “chaos” and “limbo” to which Baldwin refers here could be read as the result of too heavy a reliance on stereotypes for understanding the Other. This “breakdown of meaning” is a result of trying to launch critiques of a racial formation by only ever representing African Americans stereotypically and as protesting ethnics so that the white liberal reading audience feel like they are a part of the cause and get a “thrill of virtue” without actually troubling their sense of the world or their stereotypical reading practice for texts and bodies. Baldwin’s argument is not only about the figures that the “protest novel” represents but also about the audience and the reading practice assumed by the protest novel. The reason

the protest novel uses these kinds of stock African American figures – both stereotyped and protesting – is so as not to disturb its public’s reading practice but to produce what my epigraph from Melamed’s calls a “sympathetic identification.” The white liberal reading public wants to read race novels to feel like they “know” the “problem” and, more than that, that they are doing something about it just by reading a novel. But those white liberal readers also don’t really want their reading practice disturbed by any actual critique of racism or the privileges they accrue as a result of their current racial formation. There is a circular logic to the protest novel. If these (stereotyped) stock figures (who are always protesting) are only in the service of making the white audience feel better about their white liberalness (able to nod their heads and “learn” about the effects of racism on the Black psyche), this seems to somehow use the stereotype to undo stereotyping. Baldwin reveals how the protest novel’s “passion for categorization” defines African American experience in specific ways so that it is understandable to its white readers and, for the sake of narrative, actually works to reinforce the representations of African Americans as only ever victims of racial formation.

Baldwin continues this thinking about ethnic representation in other essays as well. In the “Preservation of Innocence” (published the same year as “Everybody’s Protest Novel”) Baldwin suggests that it is the role of the novelist to question this “passion for categorization.” This essay attempts to show how the homophobic rhetoric that defines the homosexual as “unnatural” is less about “nature” or the “nature of man” than it is about condemning homosexuals because of religious reasons and the gender trouble they cause. Baldwin discusses the representation of homosexual men in contemporary novels to show the necessity for novelists to work beyond stereotypes. The essay ends with the warning that “if the novelist considers that they are no more complex than their labels he must, of necessity, produce a catalogue, in which

we will find, neatly listed, all those attributes with which the label is associated and this can only operate to reinforce the brutal and dangerous anonymity of our culture” (600). Reiterating the problems with the representational logics of the “protest” novel, Baldwin asserts that if writers define themselves solely through their social categories and stereotypes their resultant novelistic representations will be little more than a “catalogue” or lists of the “attributes” associated with those categories, much like protest novels usually become. He continues by describing what a novelist should strive to accomplish:

A novel insistently demands the presence and passion of human beings, who cannot ever be labeled. Once the novelist has created a human being he has shattered the label and, in transcending the subject matter, is able for the first time, to tell us something about it and to reveal how profoundly all things involving human beings interlock. Without this passion we may all smother to death, locked in those airless, labeled cells, which isolate us from each other and separate us from ourselves. (“Preservation” 600)

Baldwin calls here for novelists to take up a kind of radical contextuality in their literary representations; that is, his call to represent “human beings” in novels and not create characters through a “catalogue” of social categories and “labels,” will actually “tell us something about” those labels, those stereotypes, and the way they “interlock.” Rather than promoting these labels as categories of knowledge that allow us all to navigate our worlds (as stereotypes are commonly defined by their apologists), Baldwin reveals them for what they are: ways to “isolate” people from one another and “separate” them from themselves for the purposes of defining, hierarchizing, dis/empowering, and doling out opportunity, mobility, and life chances, unevenly, to us all. While Baldwin does have a certain investment in many of his writings (including *Another Country*) with something like a shared universal human-ness and “transcendence,” he is critical

of the universal human assumed by white liberal ideology into which African Americans (along with everyone) are supposed to transcend. “Creating a human being” for Baldwin is less about finding the kernel of essential humanity in each of us than it is about going beyond stereotypical representations and stock characterization in one’s writing. His “human being” is not, in other words, the universal subject of liberal democracy nor is it the “theoretical stereotype” Chow finds in most scholarship on ethnicity. *Another Country* exemplifies Baldwin’s attempt to “tell us something” about the labels, categories, definitions and stereotypes that define African Americans. What Baldwin offers us in these (and other) essays and in *Another Country* is a radical way of understanding and unpacking the power of stereotypes during his historical moment that doesn’t rely on figuring him or his characters in the position of “protesting Other” or figuring his writing as akin to the “protest novel.”

***Another Country* in the “Racial Break”**

Part of my interest in using Chow’s ideas to read Baldwin is a historical one. I want to understand and contextualize Baldwin’s writing as part of the historical moment when African Americans were coming into a particular kind of visibility as “protesting subjects” to a particular kind of American audience of racial liberals, who ostensibly supported the liberatory movements of African Americans but only up to the point at which their lives and privileges remained unchallenged and unchanged. This is not only a way to contextualize this novel but I do think this defines accurately the audience for whom the novel is intended, an audience of which Baldwin is the most critical and he feels must be most changed if any kind of racial equality is possible. Baldwin began writing *Another Country* in Greenwich Village in 1948 and finished in Istanbul in 1962, the year of its publication. According to James Campbell’s biography, the

writing of *Another Country* “was turning him into a mental and physical wreck. He was beginning to feel...that this was the novel he was destined to not survive” (128). The writing of the novel also happens to correspond with the years when Baldwin lived, literally, in another country, “the primary period of Baldwin’s expatriation – he moved to Paris in 1948 and remained there until returning home (though not permanently) in 1957” (Dievler 163).

The writing of the novel spans roughly a decade that includes what Howard Winant calls the “racial break” of the post-WWII years in which multiple historical, social, political and cultural transformations converged to force a change in U.S. and global racial politics. The articulation of America’s racial history with global politics was part of the conditions of possibility for this “racial break.” According to Winant, this “break” was a historical moment that required the dominant white supremacist racial formation to adapt to large changes at the macro and micro levels on a global scale, much like the U.S. racial formation had done previously during the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. World War I had “placed millions under arms for the first time: not only Europeans and white Americans, but Africans, African Americans, South Asians, and Caribbeans as well” (Winant 11). After the war, the newly formed League of Nations drastically redistributed the colonial territories of the defeated Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Conscription of Black soldiers and the slowdown of European immigrants into America coupled with the need for wartime labor that also increased the African American migration from the rural, agricultural South to the urban, industrial North. During WWI, African American soldiers serving in a segregated military had distinguished themselves overseas in the eyes of Europeans, which worried white officers. Having experienced somewhat humane treatment by the French military while at war, Black soldiers came home to an American society intent on putting them back in their place, one result of which

were the many urban race riots, often initiated by whites.

Between the wars, the new Communist government in Russia ushered in by the socialist revolution shared in the colonial spoils of WWI and instigated communist revolutions across the globe. The U.S. state's reaction to this, of course, was the Cold War mentality, a mixture of a fear of communism and racism that resulted in deportations, immigration restrictions, and the endorsement of eugenics as a social policy by the Supreme Court (Winant 13). At this time, there was also the boon of art, poetry, and literature by and about African Americans now called the Harlem Renaissance. The economic crisis of the American Depression (itself a racial project of the U.S. state in many ways, partly discussed in the next chapter) continued the migration of populations around America, including not only the movement of poor white and African Americans looking for work but also the forced repatriation of Mexicans by the U.S. government. Competition for jobs also increased racial violence (including an increase in lynchings) at this time.

At the same time, the rise of German fascism was a racist and imperialist state project that was intent on reviving old empires and creating new ones. Although WWII was an “antifascist war, an anti-imperial war (in part), and antiracist war (in part)” in which the U.S. and European Allied nations fought against the Axis's racial genocide and expansionism, to many German, Italian, and Japanese fascism's imperialist tendencies bore a striking resemblance to other European colonial projects (Winant 5). The racism of fascism's authoritarian regimes also put into relief the racisms of the democracies such as U.S., England, and France, whose democratic “freedoms” were at best disproportionately dispersed and at worst seemingly non-existent to those living in the throes of debt peonage in rural settings or on Native American reservations or in urban ghettos. In *The Fire Next Time*, published the same year as *Another*

Country, Baldwin has this to say about Americans' reactions to German fascism: "White people were, and are, astounded by the holocaust in Germany. They did not know that they could act that way. But I very much doubt whether black people were astounded – at least, in the same way" (*Fire* 53). Changes after WWI, the Great Depression, and the rise of fascism converged to cause a crisis for the colonial powers, calling into question and making difficult the maintenance of their colonies, including American colonial exploitation in the Philippines, Latin America, Puerto Rico, and Guam. There were newly emergent and continuing anticolonial and anti-racist movements around the world as "antiracist and anticolonialist activity also benefited during this same period from the crisis of the ruling regimes" (Winant 14). In the U.S., anti-racist social movements grew as the U.S. continued its Jim Crow racial politics.

For Winant, the "racial break" was the result of the years of challenges to the colonial racial formation; it was a "racial metamorphosis" and "profound shift in global racial logic, a crisis of world *racial formation*" in which a "complex of sociopolitical conflicts and adjustments...both modified and preserved the world racial system in our own era" (15). These transformations of racial formation involved the ways that the global racial logic adapted to 1) "the upsurge of anticolonial and antiracist movements," which were, in part, peopled by the minority soldiers and colonial subjects that been trained to fight the imperialist racist racial project of WWII's fascist powers reacting to their similar racist treatment after the war as well as anti-colonial and de-colonization movements that were reinvigorated, in part, by the perceived support of the Allied global superpowers' "resistance to Japanese in Asia and Germans and Italians in Africa" (5); and 2) "the consolidation of the cold war," in which the nations of the global south became proxies for armed conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. during which the U.S.S.R. made an international issue out of the U.S.'s domestic racial problems; and 3) the

“worldwide demographic transition,” in which the war effort’s need for labor instigated a migration to the Northern industrial cities in the U.S., military conscription resulted in the movement of bodies around the globe, colonial subjects moved to the colonizing nations for economic and other opportunities, and a migration from rural areas to urban areas happened worldwide (15-17). The racial break instigated a change in global racial formation that incorporated resistances and protests and adapted to the challenges and critiques of the racial politics of the colonial powers launched by antiracist and anticolonial movements. In other words, according to Winant, there was a shift in racial power structures as “racial hegemony replaced racial domination” (21).

Legal racial reform in the U.S. at this time was usually in name only or tempered by a lack of enforcement and/or a backlash of newly energized white-on-black racial terrorism. For instance, the *McCarran-Walter Act* of 1952 abolished race as a criteria of immigration but set quotas per nation that heavily favored northern European immigration while simultaneously giving the Department of Justice the right to deport those found engaged in “subversive activities.” The 1957 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision legally desegregated schools, even as de facto segregation continued and reactionary violence against African Americans increased. National news stories covered the results of the instability of racial formation. The 1955 Rosa Parks bus incident brought to national attention the continuing domination of Jim Crow laws and lynching had all but ended as a white supremacist terrorist practice until the nation was shocked by the murder of Emmett Till in the same year (and about which Baldwin wrote the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*). Meanwhile McCarthyism was targeting “un-American behavior,” targeting populations that they deemed a threat, including Communists, homosexuals, antiracist movement leaders and members, or anyone that might otherwise question the government. The

U.S./U.S.S.R.'s colonial and ideological aspirations also came to a head in the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. U.S. racial policy from this time and into the late 1960s was mostly focused on defusing and containing the demands of what were considered radical antiracist movements with legal concessions that *seemed* to adopt the more moderate demands of the antiracist movements but actually work to reinterpret and adapt the racial policies of the U.S. racial state while at the same time discrediting the more radical elements of these movements, coopting movement leadership, and paving the way for the bizarre mélange of colorblind and multicultural racisms we have today.

During the period of American racial history following the “racial break,” the U.S. continued to achieve its global economic and cultural hegemony. This political historical moment was dominated by the racial project of Cold War liberalism while also often figured as a point of emergence of what some have called the “short” African American Civil Rights Movement. Jodi Melamed describes the dominant ideology as “midcentury racial liberalism,” which was different than either the “new liberalism” of postwar America or the “civil rights movement,” but was a “framework of racial meanings and politics that sought to manage the exposure of domestic racial inequality as a major threat to U.S. global preeminence after World War II” (770). These threats included the already mentioned emergence of antiracist movements in the U.S. as well as anticolonial movements in both Asia and Africa whose critiques linked slavery to colonialism and revealed how race structured the U.S. state and society. After WWII, as it was forming a “complex combination of the old and new racial systems,” the U.S. was also “undertaking ‘moderate’ racial reforms in response to movement demands” so that it could “derail the more radical potential of the domestic antiracist movements that formed a leading edge of the break and acquired huge (indeed worldwide) political influence” (Winant 5). At the

same time the Soviet Union's use of the "racial inequality in the United States" as its "chief propaganda weapon in the ideological Cold War" (770). The U.S. state needed to produce the U.S. as anti-racist in the eyes of the world in the face of the Soviet critique of its racial hypocrisy and used moderate reforms and discourses of African American emancipation as examples of its progressive strides toward equality. The U.S. state was far more interested in producing itself as antiracist in the most efficient way possible than in mounting reforms for anything like equality, freedom, or emancipation for African Americans. "Midcentury racial liberalism" names the ideology that allowed America to show how by making African Americans "equal" citizens they could be a global leader. However, "in contrast to contemporary left, black nationalist, and anticolonial antiracisms, racial liberalism conceived of racism not as a matter of economics or politics but rather as primarily a problem of white attitude or 'prejudice,'" not a structural problem, in other words, but a problem of white psychology (Melamed 771). Related to the protesting ethnic is the "white liberal," who was also interested in racial equality and "changing its attitude" toward "Negroes" only if minority subjects are willing to assimilate into American culture in the ways that were recognizable to the white liberal and only if this new equality or attitude change doesn't cost the white liberal any of its economic, social, or cultural privileges.

Baldwin wrote *Another Country* during this historical moment in which racial formation processes were actively shifting and adapting to the demands of antiracist and anticolonial movements around the world but which were quickly dominated politically by ameliorating policies and attitudes of "midcentury racial liberalism." Part of how the U.S. state produced itself as anti-racist in the face of Soviet critique (an earlier and differently-intentioned version of the way the U.S. produces itself as humane against the human rights violations of China now that Chow describes) was by producing racial minorities as "protesting ethnics" for whom the U.S.

had already made and was still making progress. At this historical moment the African American subject was being taken up by American political discourse as a “protesting” subject whose protests for emancipation were being heard and rectified and whose liberation revealed to the new global order that the U.S. state’s anti-racist, even as Jim Crow laws and other racial violences continued. Part of the way the U.S. shifted its racial democracy into a racial hegemony was by working to produce a certain form of nationalist protesting ethnic subject with something like assimilationist tendencies. In this era before the African American Civil Rights movement solidified as such (at least according to its common historicization), a certain form of modern American protesting ethnic was being cultivated that understood that civil rights gains were premised on being folded into the state in ways that did not challenge racial formation too much or question what America was or was doing or how it was doing it too critically. In other words, the U.S. state was interested in a protesting ethnic that not only accepted legal reforms as a corrective to racial violences but one that also accepted the particular narrative of U.S. racial emancipatory progress of which these reforms were a large part. Protesting subjects can then be placated by legal emancipation by being made to believe that this legal emancipation is “a good start” or “better than nothing,” which allows the U.S. state to produce itself as anti-racist on the global stage, even as state racism continued to be the status quo.

The production of this protesting subject set the stage for racial reform in the U.S., delimiting the kind of work that was possible for social movements to do by predefining the recourse to the state and legal reform as the end result of protest and resistance. It also defined what historical agency looked like for African Americans and other U.S. minorities and shaped the very ways of thinking for antiracist social movements – civil rights/integrationist movements or Black nationalist/separatist movements – by making legal reforms the horizon of possibility

for any emancipatory struggle. While these are two common critiques of the civil rights movement, this production of a “protesting ethnic” also shapes the very historicization of the U.S. African American Civil Rights Movement by predetermining those events and struggles that would be added into the historical narrative of liberatory progress and those that wouldn’t be based on whether they were the kinds of protest that only challenged the racial state to the point of legal reform. I’m certainly not suggesting that all African American civil rights activists were placated by these legal reforms or that everyone working for civil rights came to believe that legal reform was the only option, but I am suggesting that this becomes the dominant way civil rights gets taken up at the time and that this moment is remembered as part of the U.S. Civil Rights movement in ways that actually misrepresents much of the antiracist work done at that time and tarnishes the brilliant luster of some of its critical thinking and cultural critique, including, Baldwin’s social analysis in *Another Country*. I am also suggesting that Baldwin was critically aware and insightfully critical of the potentially devastating effects that this production of protesting subject would have on civil rights movements that attempted systemic or structural changes other than legal reforms.

I have contextualized Baldwin’s novel with this particular version of racial history because I think the novel must be read as a critical analysis of this specific time period in which the processes of U.S. and global racial formation are in a state of flux that too often gets concretized into the narrative of progress that has become the U.S. African American Civil Rights Movement’s history. As WWII’s promises of integration gave way to the continued racial violences of Jim Crow America and they were being interpellated into the “protesting ethnic” paradigm that Chow describes, many African Americans were organizing in many different ways to challenge U.S. racial hegemony, including not only the well known boycotts,

sit-ins, and marches that protested segregation, disenfranchisement, exploitation, and racial violence but also lesser known groups such as those within the multiple African American women's movements. This "structure of feeling" of what comes to be called the U.S. African American Civil Rights Movement can be characterized as, in part, a war of representation occurring before the solidification of and investments in certain African American identity categories of the late 1960s (which have since been critiqued for their masculinist, sexist, and homophobic tendencies) and before the primary objective became rights-based claims on the state (which resulted in a resistance movement that "won" the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 but certainly no end to racism). Baldwin's work – especially, I argue, his treatment of racial and sexual stereotypes in *Another Country* – is what Raymond Williams might call a "pre-formation" (at the "very edge of semantic availability") of later immanent critiques of the problem with identity within these movements even as they are emerging (Williams 134). During this historical moment, Baldwin consistently questions and critiques what he calls the "passion of categorization" in both dominant discourses of race and racism (including white liberalism) as well as the various minority discourses and counter-discourses of race and racism prevalent during his lifetime. Baldwin's critique of identity is a critique of the problems with representation.

To include Baldwin's work of this time, including *Another Country*, into the narrative of progress that is called the U.S. African American Civil Rights Movement is spurious at best. Baldwin's work is certainly interested in offering a kind of emancipation or liberatory critique of U.S. racial formation and could certainly be included in the so-called "long Civil Rights Movement," which includes, really, all civil rights struggles since the beginnings of America. However, to retroactively figure *Another Country* (and his other work such as "Everybody's

Protest Novel”) as somehow part of the African American Civil Rights Movement as it is historicized now is so reliant on reading him as a part of a particular historical narrative of progress that much of the multi-faceted critique he is offering is lost. Reading this novel as a “civil rights protest novel” delimits its context in ways that bind its interpretation and restrict one’s ability to read the kind of theorization and critical analysis of stereotypes (and racial formation) that I find makes the novel and Baldwin so brilliant. I think reading it as part of this particularly nebulous moment of upheaval in U.S. racial history performs a more historically accurate contextualization and a much more interesting analysis of Baldwin’s understanding of his historical moment (that doesn’t, for instance, read Baldwin’s work as being framed with the assumption that legal reforms are the ultimate goal of all antiracist struggles). Baldwin also has a different diagnosis of racial power than either “midcentury racial liberalism” with its production of a civil rights movement based on the amelioration of the “protesting ethnic’s” demands for more or better political representation in the state would work toward more equality, freedoms, etc. for racial minorities in the U.S. *or* social movements whose anti-racist strategies involved the celebration of homophobic and sexist identity categories. By the time of *Another Country*’s writing and publication, the stereotype was coming into a particular kind of critical visibility. Most antiracist movements worked to either re-signify or re-present stereotypes with more positive or “better” ones – such as the “Black is Beautiful” movement’s re-signification of black bodies to something different than the definition of anti-beauty (that which was used to define white beauty) – or to un-do with more “correct” representations by proving their falseness through accentuating actions, behaviors, and practices that weren’t stereotypical or by critiquing their homogenizations by showing examples of how “not all African Americans are like that.” The problem with these approaches is that they don’t actually stop stereotyping from doing its

representative work or change the racial structures to which they are hinged. Baldwin's analysis of the role of racist symbolic representation such as stereotypes proves to be aware of the insufficiencies of these corrective methods of combating stereotyping and offers us another way to understand the work of stereotypes and stereotyping that takes into consideration their recursive relationship to the social structures that rely on them and upon which they rely.

My reading understands Baldwin's work as a much more critically aware model for understanding how stereotypes are more than a problem within the psychology of white people but work in relation to the racial structures of the time. Baldwin understood – and the novel *Another Country* is, to my mind, the primary example of his way of thinking on these issues – that intervening in the processes of stereotyping only at the level of representation doesn't work, or hadn't yet. He understood that garnering political representation is often a “colonizing trick” (to use David Kazanjian's term) in which equality has never been universal but is always only ever available to some and that corrective interventions in symbolic representation – that is, *re-presenting* in order to undo racist stereotypes – fail to account for the ways that the stereotype's wily representational logics incorporate new representations, never really separating the “old” stereotypes from the structures of power in which they are lodged and because re-presenting stereotypes rarely, if ever, works to curb their power to disempower. Baldwin's most theoretical insight into stereotyping occurs in this novel as he attempts to understand the complicated role stereotypes play in and between political and symbolic representation. For instance, this novel portrays Baldwin's understanding that stereotypes are a form of symbolic representation that define, in part, who gets certain forms of political representation as well as his understanding that stereotypes are symbolic representations that produce material forms of disempowerment as they authorize and organize the social relations between those racial, sexual, gendered, etc. bodies

they describe those who stereotype and rely on those descriptions.

The Stereotype of the Black Rapist

Another Country is Baldwin's anti-protest novel. Baldwin's representation of stereotypes is not "protesting"; it does not have a telos of liberating or emancipating African Americans from the oppression of stereotyping. It is, rather, a riveting example of a conscious engagement with the stereotypes of this historical moment that is also attentive to the problem of the stereotype in the politics of representation, or, in other words, how the stereotype's representational logics undergird its political deployment. I am convinced that an answer to my concerns about the inadequacies of the corrective theories of stereotypes for understanding stereotyping and the concerns Chow outlines about the politics of ethnic representation, producing knowledge about ethnic subjectivity, and stereotyping, lies in the way Baldwin engages stereotypes in this novel. To trace this engagement the rest of this chapter will focus on reading the promiscuous contextualization of Baldwin's the Black Rapist stereotype in his representation of the way the character Rufus Scott as understands, analyzes, and inhabits the stereotype that always already defines him. Rufus Scott is an African American jazz musician whose suicide is detailed in the first chapter of the novel, which is primarily focalized through Rufus. He is, in some way, connected to almost every other character in the novel as kin, friend, or lover and even after his suicide removes him from the diegesis of the novel, his memory remains central to almost every other character's negotiation of stereotypes. Baldwin's portrayal of Rufus Scott in *Another Country* is one of the most scathing and astute critiques of racial formation and is certainly one of the most critical and insightful analyses of stereotypes in all of literature and, perhaps, anywhere. Leading up to his suicide, Rufus is figured and can be read as encountering and

negotiating many of the sexual stereotypes that define African American men, primarily the hypersexualized figure of the brutal Black Buck, later called the Black Rapist.

The racial projects of racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes have always been building blocks of U.S. (and global) racial formation. Among other things, stereotypes have been deployed to mark those who are disempowered and disenfranchised and those for whom terms like liberty, freedom, and equality apply and those for whom they do not. They mark those whose civil rights and opportunities are limited, whose mobility is restricted, and those who have a “vulnerability to premature death” (to use Ruth Gilmore’s definition of racism). Stereotypes achieve this assignment of limitations by defining those they represent with characteristics antithetical to the social definitions of those who deploy the stereotype. In other words, the stereotype works as a negative definition of the stereotyper, producing a constitutive other to those doing the stereotyping, usually by defining the other as morally deviant as is certainly the case with Rufus. While race is certainly a salient social category through which “America” is lived, sexuality is a salient way that race is constituted in America. Sex, according to Foucault’s insight, “performs [a] function” that is “more practical than theoretical”:

It is through sex – in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality – that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility (seeing that it is both the hidden aspect and the generative principle of meaning), to the whole of his body (since it is a real and threatened part of it, while symbolically constituting the whole), to his identity (since it joins the force of a drive to the singularity of a history).

(155)

Sex is an “imaginary point” of power through which all subjects are categorized, disciplined and normalized. Sex and sexuality are also a point through which subjects are

racialized; sexuality is the modality in which race is lived as sex is part of the “eugenic ordering of society” which perpetuates and reproduces racial formation (Foucault 149). Sexuality regulates race and has always been a mode of racialization and a salient part of every African American (if not every racial) stereotype. In this way, African Americans (and other racial groups) become indices of the moral and sexual panic their racialized and stereotyped bodies indicate. This is also why racio-sexual stereotypes hold such power for legitimizing racial violence against African Americans. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the institutional racism of Jim Crow was policed, in part, by the threat of lynching of African American men (and some women)³ and the threat of sexual violence and rape of African American women. Racio-sexual stereotypes were used to legitimized these forms of racial violence, the Black Brute or Black Buck was a sexual threat to white women and the Jezebel was a sexual threat to white men, irresistibly tempting them into sexual acts. The Black Buck and Black Brute, according to Donald Bogle, are slightly different versions of the same stereotype. “Black brute” describes the “subhuman and feral” figure “on a rampage full of black rage,” a “barbaric black out to raise havoc” whose “physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed.” As an extension of the Brute, Bucks were “always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” who “articulated the great white fear that every black man longs for a white women” (13-14). The Black Rapist names a more specific term for this figure that both carries with it all the connotations of the Black Buck as well as adding the historical specificity of being part of the way lynching gets legitimize. The Black Rapist concept would have been slightly more prevalent during the time Baldwin was writing the character of Rufus. The hypersexuality of the Black Buck or Black Rapist is a part of the construction of what Pickering calls “a primary Other, the white phantasm of the Primitive” (51). The urge to

rape white women is a factor of the “animal urges” that are part of the primitive nature that remains uncivilized even by modern life in America. The conditions of possibility for the emergence of the particular form of the Black Rapist stereotype that Baldwin explores include the colonial anthropological and (racial) scientific definition of the Other as hypersexual (as clearly indicated through bodily markings), the challenges to U.S. racial formation of Emancipation, Reconstruction, and the “racial break,” which elicited white supremacist terrorist actions such as lynching, for which the Black Rapist was a legitimization. Though its use as a legitimization of lynching was at a decline during the historical moment of Baldwin’s writing, the Black Rapist as a threat to white women remained (and remains) a privileged stereotype for defining African American men as threats that must be dealt with and continued (and continues) to shape the way Americans “read” and “know” African American men.

The Black Rapist stereotype was part of the discourse on the “Negro Problem” at the time of *Another Country’s* writing and publication. The dominant discourse of the color line at the time was America’s so-called “sociological imagination,” which helped produce the “truth” of stereotypes in multiple ways. The discourse on racial, sexual and gender formation race in America was almost totally conditioned by anthropological, sociological, and biological sciences and most of these representations were shaped by the dominance of liberal ideology. One representative sociological text that reinforced African American stereotypes “social scientifically” and also worked to produce African Americans as protesting subjects is Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 classic *An American Dilemma*, a watershed text describing race relations in America. Myrdal’s main argument elaborated the contradiction between America’s racial segregation, inequality, and injustice and its liberal “American Creed” purporting liberty, equality, and justice for all. According to Myrdal, “Negro” is an index of this contradiction so

that the “Negro problem” is primarily a problem for white Americans, for whom the “Negro in America” represents “to the ordinary white man in the North as well as the South an anomaly in the very structure of American society” (lxxvii). For Myrdal this “Creed” was so prevalent that:

even a poor and uneducated person in some isolated and backward rural region in the Deep South, who is violently prejudiced against the Negro and intent upon depriving him of civic rights and human independence, has also a whole compartment in his valuation sphere housing the entire American Creed of liberty, equality, justice and fair opportunity for everybody. (lxxx)

Constructing racism as primarily a psychological problem for white people evacuates African Americans of the agency to understand their own positions, because they are, to Myrdal, “hampered and enclosed behind the walls of segregation and discrimination” and “do not usually spend too much of their mental energy on theorizing over the Negro problem” (29). In Myrdal’s study, African Americans can do little but wait until “America” (which, throughout the text, is discussed in opposition to the “Negro” population, so is understood to be “white” America) allows and enables them to achieve full citizenship.

The celebrated endpoint of the race problem discussed in Myrdal’s study is the integration and assimilation of African Americans into white American society. In the last section of the study, Myrdal concludes that if America “in actual practice could show the world a progressive trend by which the Negro became finally integrated into modern democracy, all mankind would be given faith again – it would have reason to believe that peace, progress and order are feasible...*America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity*” (1021-1022). This substantiates the American opportunity to become a global leader through their racial policies. Myrdal’s advice for America to “show the world a

progressive trend,” it seems, is to engage the kind of traffic in ethnicity that Chow describes. According to Myrdal’s conclusions, it was up to white Americans to “choose” to allow African Americans access to full citizenship and protection under the “American Creed,” which would, at the same time, restore “the world’s” faith that America has resolved its “dilemma” and lived up to its creed. What this implied, though, was that it was only white America that had a choice and that this choice would only be made if African Americans assimilated into white America, which could only occur if African Americans were willing to integrate into white America in ways defined by whites. The “problem” as characterized by Myrdal’s study was that African Americans were either unwilling to integrate themselves into American society *or* were so different from white Americans that assimilation was impossible *or* were simply unwilling to not inhabit the stereotypical roles ascribed to them by white American society.

Much of *An American Dilemma*’s pages are taken up with a sociological study of the cultural differences between the “Negro Community” and white Americans. The reasoning behind Myrdal’s exploration of these cultural differences was to ascertain blockages to assimilation, blockages that stemmed from flaws on the Black side of the color line. He concludes that, “since the whites are the dominant group, it is important for Negroes to determine what whites find peculiar about their culture” (956). According to Myrdal, it was up to African Americans to diagnose the problems in their community that made it so difficult for white Americans to include them into the “American Creed.” Most, if not all, of these differences were part of the legacy of the years of enslavement and the subsequent racial violences and exclusions perpetrated on emancipated African Americans. In one of the last chapters of the study, “Non-Institutional Aspects of the Negro Community,” Myrdal attempts to list the “differences in Negro culture which whites find most unusual and disturbing” (956).

These “differences” read as a list of African American stereotypes: “aggressiveness,” “emotionality and spontaneous good humor,” clothing, eating habits, speech, crime (especially rape and sex crimes), mental illness, recreation, and a “hatred of whites” (957-975). Myrdal’s stereotypical assumptions about the African American community combined with his assumptions about white American society’s willingness to now include and empower those they had already excluded and disempowered in so many ways to produce a study whose primary conclusion was that Black people in America are responsible for continuing the white supremacist racial formation. The tenor of the study and the result of its publication (along with other sociological studies of African American culture before and after it) was a pathologization of African American culture for its inability to integrate and assimilate into the white American society that neither admitted its complicity in their oppressions nor necessarily wanted them to assimilate. By defining the category of the African American as that which needed to overcome its “peculiarities” to be integrated into American society, Myrdal figures the African American as the other of American-ness, what he doesn’t quite comprehend is that the African American is the *constitutive* other of “America.” For Roderick Ferguson, this constitutive othering is sexual. In *Aberrations in Black*, a queer of color critique of sociology and literature, Roderick Ferguson reads *An American Dilemma* as being “inspired by heteronormative anxieties that constructed African Americans as figures of nonheteronormativity who could potentially throw American social order into chaos” (88). In this reading, “African Americans enter Myrdal’s framework as the antithesis of heteronormative American identity” (91). Myrdal’s list of stereotypical ways of being can be read as an example the ways the Other always gets stereotypes as the moral constitutive “antithesis” of those doing the stereotyping.⁴ As such, the African American cannot ever fully assimilate without redefining what it means to be “white” in America. For Ferguson,

this means that African Americans are never quite heteronormative. The result of Myrdal's study was to substantiate W.E.B. DuBois's "color line" by effectively defining the African American community as always *becoming* but never *able to be* part of the American nation.

Angela Davis famously unpacks the emergence of the Black Rapist in her essay "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist." In this essay, Davis attempts to construct the "regime of truth" that produced this stereotype, discusses the relations of power that required and reproduced its ambivalent fixity, unpacks its historical emergence to chip away at its oxymoronic historical universality, and reveals the social structures it upholds and that uphold it. Mostly a critique of the racist assumptions that undergird contemporary feminist scholarship on rape, Davis's essay also describes the historical emergence of the stereotype of the Black Rapist as primarily a terrorist tool of white supremacy deployed in the war of representation that is engendered when racial order and security are threatened: "The myth of the Black Rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justification" (173). The glory years of this stereotype begin during the frantic war of representation that was the post-bellum Reconstruction as "enslaved" bodies were being re-signified as "emancipated." As a way to legitimize the racial violence and terror necessary to keep freedmen subordinate, white men spread the fear that emancipated slave men, who had been civilized by the institution of slavery, would suddenly revert back to their primitive and savage urges to revolt and to rape white women.⁵ Davis cites Frederick Douglass's points to show how the myth of the Black Rapist was a "distinctly politic invention" of this specific historical moment and how the fabrication of these charges of rape can be shown through their change in frequency before, during, and after the war. According to Douglass, "Black men were not indiscriminately labeled as rapists during slavery" and during the

Civil War “not a single Black man was publicly accused of raping a white woman” when “this alleged rape instinct would have certainly been activated when white women were left unprotected by their men who were fighting in the Confederate army” (184). Also, initially, lynching was primarily done to white abolitionists and later: “the lawless killings of Black people were most often described as preventive measure to deter the Black masses from rising up in revolt” (185). It was only after these plots of mass destruction were realized as “fabrications that never materialized,” that the Black Rapist emerged as the legitimization for the use of the act of lynching by white supremacists to keep the racial status quo. Douglass’s evidence of the production of this stereotype shows ways that the Black Rapist is a version of the primitive that is molded out of the dominant ideologies of the time.

While her primary object of analysis is the emergence of the Black Rapist, Davis also describes how this stereotype connects to other sexualized relations of racial power in the U.S.: “The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous” (182). The main claim of Davis’s article is that these stereotypes became “common sense,” such a salient way of knowing African Americans that they framed legal and scholarly understandings of Black men even when Davis was writing this in the late 1970s. Hazel Carby would add more interrelated connections between racial and gendered stereotypes than Davis discusses here. In her chapter “Slave and Mistress,” Carby traces what she calls “the network of figurations” that forms the “complex metaphorical system...of the social relations of the South” (21). Part of this network included the way that stereotypes of Black women in antebellum South were defined in relation to the dominant gender ideology of white women of the time, “the cult of true womanhood.” The (rigid, misogynistic) ideals for white womanhood of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and

domesticity” became the negative definition of the slave woman. Furthermore, slave women’s hypersexuality manifested as “charm,” part of the “dark forces of evil and magic,” that tempted white male slave owners so much that they were “prey” and couldn’t resist slave women’s sexual advances. Thus, institutionalized rape (another terrorist tool of white supremacy) becomes understood not as a terrorist and economic tactic of slave owners (rape was both a tactic to dehumanize slave women and a way to produce more slave property) but the responsibility of the female slave, who is also blamed for the subsequent “threat to conjugal sanctity of the white mistress” (27).

Carby and Davis’s work shows how the production of this specific racial, gendered, and sexualized stereotype exemplifies many of the points about stereotypes I’ve elaborated. That is to say that the “myth of the Black Rapist” is a protean stereotype that emerges in similar but adapted forms at moments when the status quo of white supremacist racial “order” is threatened by the demands of the oppressed, such as the demands for freedom, equality, liberation, etc. made during multiple historical moments in the U.S. This stereotype was forged from the racial, gendered, and sexualized social structures of the times it was deployed, always the hypersexual primitive threat but manifesting within different “networks of figurations,” within different definitions of racialized masculinity and femininity and sexuality. Baldwin’s novel was written and set during a historical moment before the U.S. Civil Rights Movement cohered in the various ways it did. The myth of the Black Rapist, though no longer the legitimization of lynching it had been years earlier, made a resurgence at a time when a new kind of change to the racial formation was starting to emerge.

Rufus's Refusal

Baldwin's Rufus is certainly not an attempt to provide a portrait of an African American man that corrects the misrepresentations of the Black Rapist stereotype. Rufus is neither an example of a representation of a Black man that repairs the imprecise, mistaken, or deliberately false stereotype by simply re-presenting Black men as *not* rapists of white women nor is Rufus an example of a correction to the homogenizing tendencies of the stereotype, he does not reveal how "not *all* Black men are rapists." However, Baldwin also doesn't simply represent Rufus *as* the stereotype; he is not, like Bigger Thomas, a representation of a Black man that is palpable to the white audience because of his stereotypicality. I think the brilliance of Baldwin's literary theorization of this stereotype lies in this contradictory representation. That is, Baldwin doesn't allow the resolution of the ambiguous and contradictory representations of Rufus to settle into a facile stereotypical portrayal. While Rufus is most likely read as such, Baldwin's text doesn't produce a reading of Rufus as either stereotype or not stereotype – he is *not quite* both. Rather than relying on stereotypes to produce a representation of, for instance, a resisting, protesting black ethnic subject, Baldwin represents the stereotype in ways different than not only other literary texts (such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son*) but also other modes of knowledge such as science, social science, anthropology, (social) psychology, etc. He uses literature to, in some ways, respond to the way that these so-called science and social science discourses produce texts (such as Myrdal's) that have built and maintained stereotypes in the interest of disempowering African Americans as they are granted more legal rights, etc. His particular representation of Rufus as/as not a Black Rapist reveals and questions the representational processes of stereotyping. He traces the circulation of stereotypes in Rufus's relations of desire and power, revealing the ways stereotypes simultaneously frame sexual

longing and police racial subjects, while also providing insights into some of the myriad ways history produces stereotypes as they plug into social structures. He does this primarily by confounding the reader's ability to understand Rufus's definition as a Black Rapist as Rufus interacts with the people and places around him. He doesn't allow the reader to assume the racial, sexual, and gendered stereotypical definitions of Rufus but plays with the ways that sex, race, and gender intersect as he reveals the role stereotypes play how the characters in the novel (including especially Rufus himself) understand Rufus's interracial relationship with the Southern woman Leona along the role stereotypes play in the way Rufus is policed by both state and institutional power and the non-state power that circulates between people on the street.

Baldwin's mode of analysis of stereotypes and stereotyping achieves something different than the "sociological imagination" or the psychological explications of stereotyping or the "correcting" or resignifying of stereotypes done by liberation movements of the time. Not only does Baldwin refuse to correct a "false representation" or diversify homogenizations but he also offers an understanding of the representational practice of stereotype that is more complex, I think, than theoretical work that came after his. He plays with the ambivalence of Rufus's definition as a Black Rapist, however not, I think, in order to show, as Homi Bhabha suggests, that the reiteration of this ambivalence is also the potential site of the stereotype's undoing. Baldwin doesn't allow the stereotype to "fix" Rufus as a Black Rapist nor does he allow for a prescriptive "productive ambivalence" that calls that "fixity" into question and enables the "transgression of...limits" of stereotypical discourse "from the space of otherness" (Bhabha 67). In other words, Baldwin is not, I think, so sure that the re-iteration and repeatability made necessary by the ambivalence of the stereotype, including in Muñoz's "disidentifications," actually provides any really effective chance to interrupt the form or the content of the stereotype

or to ever really erode the authority of the stereotype. No matter how broken down by iteration the stereotype becomes, it still seems to hold its authority and still seems to remain adaptable to most historical changes that might threaten its power. Rather, in order to complicate the ways that stereotypes need to be understood Baldwin's mode of analysis entails playing with its ambivalence only so he can sketch its history, its circulation, and the relations of power and desire that produced and reproduce it. In other words, Baldwin is most interested in tracing the contextualities of a stereotype. Baldwin's mode of contextualization involves representing how Rufus sees the stereotype of the Black Rapist circulating in various contexts and in the various relations of power and desire that deploy this stereotype to define him and delimit his opportunities. I believe this call for context is an idea and method shared by Chow and Baldwin; Baldwin's project is not to "protest" but to critically contextualize stereotypes in order to attempt to understand how they interact with power, particularly attending to the ways that stereotypes are part of larger processes of systemic and structural domination. In the context of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin is, I think, less interested in assimilation into or separation from "white" society than in unpacking the power relations and the historical legitimizations behind specific modes of domination, realizing that modalities of power (such as race, sexuality, gender, and class) are always interconnected so that unpacking one requires attending to others.

To unpack the ways I find Baldwin accomplishing a contextualized representation of an ethnic stereotype, the remainder of this chapter is a close reading of Rufus's characterization in the novel that is organized around two connected sections in which I trace the way Baldwin plots the circulation of the stereotype within the relations of desire and power at different instances and sites and in the different publics that Rufus engages. I elaborate this reading because I think that close reading is how literature makes theory and I think that Baldwin's manipulation of the

Black Rapist through the accretion of details that describe the character of Rufus reveals insights into the representational practice of stereotyping that are different than other theorists of stereotyping, including those corrective theories discuss in my introduction. This allows Baldwin to elicit a different set of questions about the processes of stereotyping and about “writing and the act of representation per se” (Chow 51). Baldwin’s insights about stereotypes both require and force a close reading of Rufus, even as stereotypes attempt to resolve for the reader the need to close read bodies, in favor of the easier figuration that stereotypes allow us to have as we read bodies. Baldwin has something to reveal about reading and the role of stereotypes in our reading practices. Reading is framed by stereotypes. We, and certainly the audience at the time of publication, have the Black Rapist stereotype and its myriad representations (from social science, advertising, films like *King Kong*, and other literary texts, including especially *Native Son*) in mind as soon as we know Baldwin is a Black author or as soon as we read that Rufus is a young Black man. It is difficult to un-think or eschew this stereotype when reading *Another Country* even though the novel’s representation is questionable. The language and images of the novel support this reading but also works against it forcing the reader to reevaluate his/her stereotypical thinking and reading practice. In this way, Baldwin’s treatment of the Black Rapist stereotype in *Another Country* becomes a kind of theoretical praxis in which Baldwin reveals through his promiscuous contextualization of Rufus how our readings of bodies and texts rely on stereotypes by *enacting* his theory as he slowly makes readers aware of their reliance on and unwavering belief in the stereotype of the Black Rapist as they “read” Rufus.

In the opening pages of the novel Baldwin begins his description of the racial discourse and sexualized racial gendered stereotypes that define and discipline Rufus while also showing us Rufus's awareness of how others define him through these stereotypical categories. The novel opens with Rufus wandering around New York City, homeless and hungry, looking for somewhere to urinate while remembering various moments of his past. An abject Rufus, living on the streets for some time, had been sleeping in a movie theater on Times Square where "twice he had been awakened by caterpillar fingers between his thighs," where, in other words, men reached the salient stereotypical definition of Black men (3). Standing on Seventh Avenue becomes a bombardment of images detailing the way the city disciplines Rufus. Some of the images seem filled with threatening white figures – the avenue was "quiet" and "most of its bright lights out" except for "at corners, under the lights...small knots of white, bright, chattering people showed their teeth to each other" and "policeman...stomped their feet" (4). Some images seem to taunt Rufus with a list of what he cannot have due to his poverty – "taxis," "drugstores," "a hotel's enormous neon sign," the "names of movie stars" on Broadway marquees. There is also a strange image of "a sign advertising the chewing gum which would help one to relax and keep smiling"; an image that depicts an advertised commodity that seems to index both the dangerous "chattering" "teeth" on the street and also the prescribed reaction available to Black men in the face of these threats and taunts (famously apparent in the Sambo stereotype and the costume of blackface): "relax and keep smiling" (4). Finally, Rufus notes how "the great buildings, unlit, blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear, guarded the city that never slept" (4). Here the city becomes synecdoche of racist representations of Black masculinity – mention of the "phallus" calls to mind the stereotypical white fear (and desire) of the Black penis and mention of the "spear" calls to mind the stereotype of African American primitiveness. The use

of the conjunction “or” connotes their connection as difference but as they both describe the blackened (“unlit”) buildings that “guard the city,” so, too, do they describe Rufus, against which the (white) city must be guarded. Here it is as if the city’s buildings become the stereotypes that “guard” the (white) city from the racialized Other. “Beneath” these guardian buildings “Rufus walked, one of the fallen – for the weight of this city was murderous – one of those who had been crushed by the day, which was every day, these towers fell” (4). Continuing this image, Baldwin finally reveals the extent to which these guardian buildings called stereotypes feel – murderous, crushed, falling buildings – to an African American man living in the city like Rufus.

Meanwhile, in the paragraph directly following this image, Baldwin shows the first instance of Rufus’s double consciousness, his particular awareness of how others see him (which comes up many more times in the novel):

There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode subways all night long, why his stomach growled, why his hair was nappy, his armpits funky, his pants and shoes too thin, and why he did not dare to stop and take a leak. (4)

This long quote is interesting in the way it shows what Rufus thinks about himself and others. He knows that his life “condition” is a direct result of the “barriers” (as “perishable” as they are) between him and these “boys and girls,” whose whiteness can be inferred by their place at the “drugstore counter,” a spot notorious for its history of racial exclusion (as the experience at a New Jersey diner counter that Baldwin famously writes about in “Notes of a Native Son” details) and also refers back to a point on the same page when those “small knots of white, bright,

chattering people” who were “showing their teeth” had “vanished through the doors of drugstores” (4). Rufus also knows, however, that these “boys and girls” *know* that his life is defined by the difference between them and that, although they are unable to stand the “sight” of him, they know why he is homeless, hungry, dirty, and doesn’t even “dare” to “take a leak.” These “boys and girls” who can “scarcely bare” the knowledge of their own privilege are also aware of the dangers awaiting those who lack their privilege, like this poor, Black man who lives in a city guarded by racial stereotypes. From the opening pages of the novel, Baldwin informs us that Rufus is governed by stereotypes, that he’s aware of this, and that he’s aware that others know this about him, too.

“Erotic Confusion”: The Circulation of the Stereotype within Relations of Desire

Baldwin’s most sustained critical engagement with the stereotype of the Black Rapist is represented by the relationship between Rufus and Leona, which climaxes in a scene depicting their first meeting and sexual encounter. The pages leading up to this scene are peppered with language that sets the scene for their meeting and their subsequent doomed relationship. These pages teem with allusions, references, and images of eroticism and violence, fear and threat all describing the meeting of this interracial couple, an already threatening source of racial anxiety to most of America at the time. Baldwin notes their racial difference almost immediately; having just described Rufus’s experience as a black man in New York City, as soon as she enters the narrative, Leona is described as a “blonde girl” with a “colorless face,” a “Southern poor white” with “pale hair” (9). As a blonde Southern woman she is as white as she can possibly be, the perfect figure of white femininity to be guarded from being ravished of Black men. Following this description is one of the many small, brilliant, moments in which Baldwin represents the

complex relationship between Rufus and Leona's social positions. Along with her racialization, Leona's "colorless" complexion also references her own "colorblind" white liberalism, which gets elaborated a bit later during a moment when Rufus's racio-sexual threat to her (and all white woman) is also made obvious:

In the closed, rising elevator her voice had a strange trembling in it and her body was also trembling – very faintly, as though it were being handled by the soft spring wind outside.

He tightened his pressure on her arm. "Didn't they warn you down home about the darkies you'd find up North?"

She caught her breath. "They didn't never worry me none. People's just people as far as I'm concerned."

And pussy's just pussy as far as I'm concerned, he thought – but was grateful, just the same, for her tone. It gave him an instant to locate himself. For he, too, was trembling slightly. (13)

The main focus of this moment is the way that Leona's white liberal attitudes toward race get rerouted by Rufus into a discourse on gender in which "people's just people" becomes "pussy's just pussy." Rufus's defensive thoughts can be read as a recognition of his understanding of the standard critique of white liberal thought: to think that "people" of all races are "just people" requires a certain amount of (racial) privilege and that this equality is only true for those who hold some kind of racial power. It is interesting that Rufus negotiates this display of racial privilege by figuring Leona as "just pussy." The false equivalence of Leona's liberal understanding of race is immediately shifted in Rufus's head into a gendered stereotype in which all women are the same, not only the same but defined primarily (just as he usually is) through their sexual value and as their sexual organs. Rufus "tightens his pressure on her arm," which

can be reading either as controlling and violent or as doting and carefully helping her not fall or as a display of his sexual excitement. Whichever it is, the gesture seems to cause Leona to “catch her breath” (which is, again, an act whose intentions or reasons are not quite decipherable – Fear? Joy? Sexual excitement?) The scene’s dialogue starts with a question by Rufus about whether a “trembling” Leona (and, again, from the cold or fear or sexual excitement or all of these, we can’t tell) was “warned” about the likes of him, the “darkies” in the “North.” Leona answers with “people’s just people,” which Rufus parries in his thoughts with the demeaning gendered epithet “pussy’s just pussy” but also he feels “grateful” for “her tone,” which gives him “an instant to locate himself” because “he too was trembling” (13). The tragically beautiful bookending of this short scene with each character’s trembling is an example of one of the many times when the obvious gets defamiliarized by Baldwin. By the obvious here I mean that in the beginning of the scene a white woman is trembling in an elevator with a black man about which (*according to Rufus*) she should have been warned. Reading this with a reliance on Rufus’s definition as a Black Rapist, the language used (“tightened,” “trembling,” “caught her breath”) would appear as a sexualized threat in which Leona is in some kind of danger. By the end of the scene, though, having passed through a moment of sexism used by Rufus as a defense against racial liberal discourse, it is revealed that both are trembling. Whether this is from cold, fear, or excitement we still don’t know exactly, however it is actually suggested that Leona’s shaking is from the cold (since it is described as if “her body...were being handled by the soft spring wind”). We can also surmise that Rufus’s trembling has something to do with his feeling out of place due to Leona because her “tone” allows him to “locate himself.” So that, actually, if read very closely it is possible that if Leona is just cold and Rufus is suffering from something that dis-“located” him, it is Rufus who is most scared in this scene, which is almost the opposite

reading one assumes if one relies primarily on the frame of the Black Rapist while reading Rufus. Part of Baldwin's critique lies in his refusal to settle on one meaning of the descriptive words he uses, seemingly forcing the reader to figure it out on their own. However, his ambivalent descriptions are parts of scenes that actually seem to steer the definition first one way – in the beginning of the scene Leona seems to be (or should be) trembling in fear of “darkies” – then another – but later it *seems* to be due to the “wind” that “handles” her – and then another – Rufus is now trembling. It seems to be that Baldwin wants the descriptions, and by extension, the reading, to remain unsettled and questionable.

The slow, deliberate accretion of these details is part of the rigor and novelty of Baldwin's analysis of stereotypes. All of these images and descriptions of small moments and at times contradictory, unwieldy language show the reader part of how the stereotype retains its authority even in the face of contradiction. This accretion happens in the pages leading up to Rufus and Leona's first sexual encounter, an encounter that is made richer and more interesting when one notes the multiple, often contradictory, moments that frame it like the one I elucidated above.

We might call this mixture of contradictory images and language detailing Rufus and Leona's sexual affair part of the “erotic confusion” that Baldwin creates, a phrase he uses to describe the scene of their first meeting. While they are leaving the bar where Rufus was playing jazz together moments after they have just met, Rufus and Leona “moved with the crowd, which, with many interruptions, much talking and laughing and much erotic confusion, poured into the streets” (10). Depicting the feeling of sexual anxiety and desperation at closing time, the term “erotic confusion” also works as an appropriate descriptor for other aspects of the novel. Rufus's “erotic confusion” becomes apparent in the question “*Do you love me?*” he keeps hearing

“unbearably, endlessly, and variously repeated” as he accompanies the saxophonist who “humped the air” during his solo (8-9). Having to ask this question (which gets set off from the rest of the text by italics, except one set of three questions, which get different words emphasize in plain text, like so: “*Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?*”) already implies that Rufus is confused and questioning whether he is loved at all (at least by the target of the question). The fact that it is a moment between him and the saxophonist cause one to wonder if it is a question in general or, in some way, focused on the other musician. “Erotic confusion” describes Rufus and Leona’s whole relationship, which becomes a confusing mixture of what Rufus calls “their violence and their tenderness together” (26). This “erotic confusion” also describes well the form of the *Another Country* – often appropriately called jazz-like – in which the description of Rufus’s final moments are interspersed with his memories of his relationship with Leona and his definition as hypersexual. “Erotic confusion” might also be said to describe Rufus’s influence on other characters after his death, when Rufus appears as a kind of *memoire involuntaire* in others, usually during sexual encounters and usually at moments when other characters must reconcile themselves with theirs and Rufus’s stereotyping. This term can also be used to describe one of the salient ways that Baldwin’s unique representation handles the stereotype of the Black Rapist. Baldwin represents this stereotype in multiple contradictory ways. It is through the use of the “erotic” – particularly in his depiction of Leona and Rufus’s first meeting, flirtation, and first sexual encounter – that Baldwin causes “confusion” about the stereotype of the Black Rapist. My point here is that one can only read Rufus as a Black Rapist if one willfully ignores the details that call this facile definition into question and relies solely on that stereotype to pre-figure him. Instead Baldwin gives us the “erotic confusion” of scenes and images of threat and violence coupled with moments of tenderness, love, and eroticism that make

it difficult for the reader to settle on Rufus as an uncomplicated depiction of a Black Rapist.

There are many moments leading up to their first sexual encounter in which Baldwin describes Rufus and Leona with language and images indicating the text's mixture of images of violence, fear, and threat with images of tenderness, care, and flirtation. Many of the lines in the novel can be read in more than one way, but some seem to force a necessarily ambivalent reading, such as: "He smiled at her and touched her on the chin with his fist" (15). This line can, or really must, be read as a description of a moment of tenderness *and* of violence. This gesture of a smile and a "touch...with a fist" describes a caress, while also simulating a punch in the jaw. There are also moments that indicate Rufus's threat to Leona but end in moments of tenderness and care and flirtation. Listening to Leona talk about her life in New York while looking up at him with "her sad-sweet, poor-white smile," Rufus thinks, "again something warned him to stop, to leave this poor little girl alone; and at the same time the fact that he thought of her as a poor little girl caused him to smile with real affection, and he said, 'You've got a lot of guts, Leona'" (18). Here he acknowledges that he should leave the "poor little girl alone" while simultaneously acknowledging his feelings of "affection" and admiration – she's got "a lot of guts" – for her. A similar sentiment is expressed but seemingly in reverse just before they have sex: "Yes, he was high; everything he did he watched himself doing, and he began to feel a tenderness for Leona which he had not expected to feel. He tried, with himself, to make amends for what he was doing – for what he was doing to her" (21). Again Rufus's double consciousness is represented, revealing his awareness and hesitance about his interactions with Leona. Rather than his threat becoming tenderness, in this line, the "tenderness...he had not expected to feel" leads Rufus to think that he needs to make amends "for what he was doing to her," indicating, perhaps obviously, that Rufus understands himself as doing something less than

good to Leona. I think we have to read this, too, *because of* Baldwin's continual reminders that Rufus is aware and thinking about "what he was doing to her," as an effect of internalizing his own stereotypical definition. Otherwise, why would Rufus think of himself as threatening Leona just because they want to have sex with each other unless he, in some way, "reads" himself as a Black Rapist? One answer to this question is that he is aware not that he is the Black Rapist but that, defined as such by others, he is in danger of being perceived as such just by being in the vicinity of Leona. In these instances depicting "their violence and their tenderness together" Baldwin refuses to represent Rufus and Leona as playing the roles assigned to them by the stereotypes of the Black Rapist. At the same time, however, he also commits the reader to the stereotype by revealing its intractable authority as he refuses to *not* represent them as stereotypes. Rufus's awareness of how the stereotype frames their (sexual) relationship changes neither his violent nor tender actions toward Leona. What could easily become a "protest novel" depicting a Black man's refusal to engage in a relationship because of his awareness of the ways stereotypes shape interracial relationships becomes instead a narrative of a doomed relationship focalized through the African American man who is aware that he internalizes his stereotypical definitions yet continues to inhabit them.

The doomed nature of their relationship is prefigured during their initial encounter, by both Rufus and Leona and on the same page. During their flirtation, "from time to time Rufus found himself glancing upward at the silver ball in the ceiling" of the party they were attending, "always just failing to find himself and Leona reflected there" (17). They then head out to the balcony and, looking out across the river and seeming to "hear a faint murmur from the water," Rufus remembers a young boy who had drown in his childhood. Joining Leona on the balcony with fresh drinks, Rufus "threw back his shoulders, as though he were casting off a burden"

while Leona “was staring up the river, toward the George Washington Bridge” (17). This reference to drowning, Rufus’s “burden,” and the object of Leona’s gaze are all proleptic of Rufus’s future suicidal fall from the George Washington Bridge. Two instances on this page suggest the impossibility of Rufus and Leona’s relationship; while Rufus can’t see his future with Leona in that “silver ball,” Leona’s vision is trained toward Rufus’s future demise.

This representation of the doomed nature of their relationship also intermingles with Baldwin’s descriptions of the way Leona and Rufus’s stereotypical characteristics interrelate. Rufus’s stereotypical definition as genitalia (the one that guards the city in the opening pages) seems to get internalized as revealed by several moments in the text when Rufus comments on how much the focal point of his stereotype – his penis – is an object of hatred. During his first sexual encounter with Leona, he mentions that “the terrible muscle at the base of his belly began to grow hot and hard” (13). In a scene leading up to his suicide, while urinating he notes he is “holding that most despised part of himself loosely between two fingers on one hand” (83). Having been already defined primarily as a threatening black penis, Rufus himself now labels it as both “terrible” (which connotes both “filling with terror” but also a kind of sublimity, a “terrible” desire for the thing one fears) and “despised.” This internalized stereotypical definition also manifests later in their relationship in the way Rufus believes that Leona is only with him because of her fetishization of African American male sex. In one scene Rufus talks to Vivaldo about Leona:

“She loves the colored folks so *much*,” said Rufus, “sometimes I just can’t stand it. You know all that chick knows about me? The only thing she knows?” He put his hand on his sex, brutally, as though he would tear it out, and seemed please to see Vivaldo wince. He sat down on the bed again. “That’s all.” (68)

To Rufus, Leona not only fetishizes him and his “sex” but that her focus is “all that [she] knows about” Rufus. To Rufus, the stereotype of his hypersexuality seems to eclipse all the other potential ways Leona can know him. His description of Leona’s fetishization of his “sex” is another moment in which once again vilifies his penis. He grabs it “brutally, as though he would tear it out” seemingly suggesting a final solution to the “terrible” and “despised” thing that comes to be his only definition.

Within the same pages, Leona is depicted through the gendered stereotypes of women as objects of men’s control and as victims of men’s violence. She is characterized primarily as a victim of what is now called domestic violence perpetrated by her ex-husband and also her family. She tells Rufus about her husband: “I thought he loved me, but he didn’t – oh, I knew he was rough but I didn’t think he was *mean*. And he couldn’t of loved me because he took away my kid...he said I was an unfit mother because – I – drank too much. I *did* drink too much, it was the only way I could stand living with him” (23). Her husband and her mother and brother, who were “thick as thieves” (who steal her child), think Leona “ain’t never been good.” Leona’s reaction to that is “if people keep telling you you ain’t no good...you bound to turn out pretty bad” (24). This sentiment seems to resonate as a description of both her and Rufus, who becomes increasingly defined in his own mind as a Black Rapist due to the circulation of this stereotypical definition, constantly “telling” him he “ain’t no good.” After their first sexual encounter, Rufus says to Leona, “I don’t know what you going to say to your husband when you come home with a little black baby” to which she replies: “I ain’t going to have no more babies...you ain’t got to worry about that...he beat that out of me, too” (22). As an “unfit mother,” Leona fails to inhabit one of the most powerful female stereotypes. Because her reproductive potential is eliminated by her husband’s violence, Leona becomes even less able to

live up to her mother stereotype. However, as one reads her sexual relationship with Rufus, one wonders if readers of the day weren't actually in some small way relieved that she couldn't "come home with a little black baby"? At one point later in the text, Leona is pictured as a scared animal: "She was like a wild animal who didn't know whether to come to the outstretched hand or to flee and kept making startled little rushes, first in one direction and then in the other" (12). This portrait of fear paints Leona as hesitant to take Rufus's "outstretched hand," perhaps a reference to a hand in marriage. She is also darting around in "startled little rushes" which is, again, a kind of image that seems disconcerting as if Leona is twitching in a kind of indecisive fit or trance but also seems like a gesture that, when paused over and imagined a bit longer, might seem like a dance or the rhythm of sex. Describing Leona as animalistic is, of course, a common depiction of women as "closer to nature" rather than civilized or cultured.

As usual, though, Baldwin complicates both of these straightforward definitions – Leona as victim/controlled by men/animal and Rufus as hypersexual/rapist/Black penis. Rufus's accusation of Leona's fetishistic tendencies in the scene that ends their relationship brings all of these representations together. In this scene Vivaldo Moore comes to visit them in their apartment and, seeing that "Rufus had been beating her," warns Rufus that he could be "killed for this...all she has to do is yell...All *I* have to do is walk down to the corner and get a cop...They'd take one look at this situation and put you *under* the jailhouse" (55). After reminding Rufus of the threat of lynching he faces from the police – who will not take him to jail but will rather put him "under the jailhouse" – for having slept with and beaten Leona, Vivaldo tells Leona to get her things and come to his apartment. Leona's response to Rufus's expressions of dissatisfaction begins the scene:

"Oh, Rufus," Leona wailed, "Vivaldo's only trying to help."

“You shut up,” he said instantly, and looked at her.

“Everybody ain’t a animal,” she muttered.

“You mean, like me?”

She said nothing. Vivaldo watched them both.

“You mean, like me, bitch? Or you mean, like you?”

“If I’m an animal,” she flared – perhaps she was emboldened by the presence of Vivaldo – “I’d like you to tell me who made me one. Just tell me that?”

“Why, your husband did, you bitch. You told me yourself he had a thing on him like a horse. You told me yourself how he did – he kept telling you how he had the biggest thing in Dixie, black *or* white...It was her husband that ruined this bitch. You husband and all them funky niggers screwed you in the Georgia bushes. That’s why your husband threw you out. Why don’t you tell the truth? I wouldn’t have to beat you if you’d tell the truth.” (56)

Rufus’s jealousy of Leona is based on his assumption of her fetishistic attraction to Black men – “he says I’m sleeping with other colored boys behind his back and it’s not true” (55). During this violent ending to their relationship, Leona’s stereotypical depiction as a victim of men’s violence and control is used to explain her animalistic behavior and also becomes wrapped up in Rufus’s internalized stereotypical definition as hypersexual (55). Baldwin here demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the ways seemingly disparate stereotypes – such as those defining black men and those defining white women – are interconnected. It is obvious how the Black Rapist connects these subjects (as threat and victim) but Baldwin’s understanding of how stereotypes intermingle in less obvious ways is interesting. Baldwin’s representation of Leona as a victim-animal is interesting in the context of the prevalent representation of the racialized

Other as always, in some way, primitive and animalistic, which is part of the explanation and rationalization for the Black Rapist stereotype. While Rufus's stereotype defines him as unable to fight the animalistic urges to rape white women, Rufus figures Leona as an animal and accuses her of being the flip side of the Black Rapist, such an animal herself that she only wants big (and mostly black) penis. When Leona deploys a racial stereotype ("Everybody ain't a animal"), Rufus counters with a related sexualized, gendered stereotype in which Leona is an animal due to the way her husband treated her but also due to "all them funky niggers" that "screwed" her. Stereotypes make it *seem* like all "Others" (black men and white women) are "naturally" inferior, primitive and not able to be civilized. These different racial and gendered stereotypes intermingle through their sexualization in ways that work to legitimize each other – they are all interconnected as sexual threat, sexual victim, and sexual primitive – in ways that continually define those being stereotyped as, according to Bhabha, "object[s] of desire and derision," "fear and desire...phobia and fetish" (72). The way that Baldwin characterizes Rufus's understanding of his relationship with Leona – as "their violence and their tenderness together" – also works to describe the stereotyper's attitude toward the stereotyped other.

Moments like these build a complex narrative in which the racial and gender stereotypes that define Rufus and Leona are intermingled with moments of eroticism, violence, danger, and tenderness, a narrative, I argue, that Baldwin creates specifically to frame Rufus and Leona's first sexual encounter so that he can play with the stereotype of the Black Rapist. This encounter is shrouded in "erotic confusion" as Rufus both is and is not represented as a Black Rapist. The textual evidence in the scene seems to incontrovertibly represent Rufus as raping Leona, but only if the reader takes a stereotyping shortcut and focuses on only some of the details of the scene while ignoring others, a shortcut that I think is part of the representational work of the stereotype

that Baldwin is unpacking here. I include a long passage describing their first sexual encounter here so that the proximity of images and language of “violence” and “tenderness” can be seen.

She came toward him, holding her glass against her breasts. At the very last moment, standing directly before him she whispered in bafflement and rage, “What are you trying to do to me?”

“Honey,” he answered, “I’m doing it,” and he pulled her to him as roughly as he could. He had expected her to resist and she did, holding the glass between them and frantically trying to pull her body away from his body’s touch. He knocked the glass out of her hand and it fell dully to the balcony floor, rolling away from them. Go ahead, he thought humorously; if I was to let you go now you’d be so hung up you’d go flying over this balcony, most likely. He whispered, “Go ahead, fight. I like it. Is this the way they do down home?”

“Oh God,” she murmured and began to cry. At the same time, she ceased struggling. Her hands came up and touched his face as though she were blind. Then she put her arms around his neck and clung to him, still shaking. His lips and his teeth touched her ears and her neck and he told her. “Honey, you ain’t got nothing to cry about yet.”

Yes, he was high; everything he did he watched himself doing, and he began to feel a tenderness for Leona which he had not expected to feel. He tried, with himself, to make amends for what he was doing – for what he was doing to her. Everything seemed to take a very long time...He gently lowered them to the floor, pulling her on top of him. He held her tightly at the hip and the shoulder. Part of him was worried about the host and hostess and the other people in the room but another part of him could not stop the

crazy thing which had begun. Her fingers opened his shirt to the navel, her tongue burned his neck and his chest; and his hands pushed up her skirt and caressed the inside of her thighs. Then, after a long, high time, while he shook beneath every accelerating tremor of her body, he forced her beneath him and he entered her. For a moment he thought she was going to scream, she was so tight and caught her breath so sharply, and stiffened so. But then she moaned, she moved beneath him. Then from the center of his rising storm, very slowly and deliberately, he began the slow ride home.

And she carried him, as the sea will carry a boat: with a slow, rocking and rising and falling motion, barely suggestive of the violence of the deep. They murmured and sobbed on this journey, he softly, insistently cursed. Each labored to reach a harbor: there could be no rest until this motion became unbearably accelerated by the power that was rising in them both. Rufus opened his eyes for a moment and watched her face, which was transfigured with agony and gleamed in the darkness like alabaster. Tears hung in the corners of her eyes and the hair at her brown was wet. Her breath came with moaning short cries, with words he couldn't understand, and in spite of himself he began moving faster and thrusting deeper. (21-22)

Perhaps the most obvious thing about this passage is the violent and rape-like way that their sex is described. Just a quick survey of the language used in the passage paints a violent portrait of sex: “bafflement and rage,” “roughly,” “tears,” “tightly,” “forced,” “scream,” “sharply,” “power,” and “agony.” However, this language is accompanied by words implying care, too, like “tenderness,” “gently,” and “caress.” The dialogue and language continues to describe a scene of rape. Early in the scene Leona is shown resisting and trying to get away from Rufus’s sexual advances: when he “pulled her to him as roughly as he could,” he “had expected her to resist and

she did...frantically trying to pull her body away from his body's touch" (21). Rufus's reply to this is a somewhat classic response of the rapist to a struggling woman, knocking the glass from her hand, "he whispered, 'Go ahead, fight. I like it. Is this the way they do down home?'"

Leona is mostly depicted as crying or in pain. Directly after these words, Leona answers with a murmured "Oh God" and "began to cry," and "tears hung in the corners of her eyes" throughout most of this scene and once Rufus notes "her face...was transfigured with agony." Leona also makes "moaning short cries, with words he couldn't understand" but "in spite of himself he began moving faster and thrusting deeper" (22). That he continues "in spite of himself" seems to suggest that Rufus wants to respond to her cries in some way but instead begins to have "faster" and "deeper" sex.

The somewhat contradictory images of care and threat, of "violence" and "tenderness," continue throughout this passage as they did in the pages leading up to it. While Rufus "*gently* lowered them to the floor," he also seems to grapple with Leona and pin her forcibly when he "held her *tightly* at the hip and the shoulder" (my emphasis). When "he forced her beneath him and he entered her," he "thought she was going to scream," instead Baldwin writes: "But she moaned, she moved beneath him" (21). The conjunction "but" connotes a contrast between this sentence and the last, which indicates a more pleasurable experience for Leona than the scream Rufus anticipated upon entering her would indicate.

As their sex comes to climax, the language and imagery gets much more violent and much more racialized.

He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And, shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor the lynch mob arriving on wings.
Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon

between her thighs. She began to cry. *I told you*, he moaned, *I'd give you something to cry about*, and, at once, he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die. A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies. (22)

Again, the language – “cursed,” “weapon,” “cry,” “strangling,” “explode,” “die,” “he beat her,” “venom” – calls to mind a violent sex act. This passage also begins to reference the discourses surrounding the Black Rapist stereotype specifically as Rufus starts to think about how neither the “white God” nor the angelic “lynch mob...on wings” could stop him from having sex with Leona. Rufus marks the racial violence that would be the punishment for their interracial sex act and seems to blame Leona when he “curses” her, the “milk-white bitch.” This phrase is the second reference to Leona’s race in the sex scene (earlier her face was “like alabaster”) while “bitch” references Leona as a “wild animal.” This reference to Leona’s whiteness also clearly marks the reason the “white God” and the “lynch mob” are threats to Rufus as a Black Rapist. Leona begins to cry again, which Rufus responds to with an “I-told-you-so,” thinking “*I told you...I'd give you something to cry about.*” The description of his climax not only references Rufus’s future violence against Leona – “he beat her with all the strength he had” – but also references the effects of miscegenation (another fear of interracial coupling that legitimizes lynching) when his ejaculated semen is described as “venom” that will make “a hundred black-white babies.”

However, many details within this scene and this representation of Rufus and Leona complicate and make questionable any simplistic, straightforward reading of Rufus as a Black Rapist. Along with the somewhat ambivalent language I’ve already discussed, even within this violent scene, Baldwin uses grammar to call into question a reading practice that relies solely on

the fixed ambivalence of Rufus and Leona's stereotypical definitions. For instance, the line "he felt himself strangling, about to explode or die" is an example of some strange grammar that produces multiple meanings, whether they are perceived by a close reading or not. At first read, because "strangling" is a transitive verb that requires an object and because of the treatment of Leona, the line seems to suggest that Rufus "himself" is strangling Leona. It could be "he felt himself strangling" Leona, or simply "he felt himself strangling," as in he felt like he was being strangled or he was feeling what it feels like to be strangled. However, the grammar of this independent clause suggests otherwise. To diagram this sentence a bit, either "felt" is a linking verb that connects the subject "he" to its subject complement "himself." The phrases "strangling" and "about to explode or die" modify "himself." Or "He" is the subject, "felt" is the verb, and "himself" is the direct object, again modified by "strangling" and "about to explode or die." In any case, there is no reference to Leona in the sentence; the modifying phrase "strangling, about to explode or die" doesn't refer to Leona but to "himself," or Rufus, which complicates the initial reading. The fact that the sentence contains these two phrases and read in the context of a potential "lynch mob arriving on wings" seems to suggest that Rufus is feeling "strangled" and "about to explode and die." This kind of grammatical play just adds to the complication of representing Rufus's as a stereotype.

Reading the scene as rape and Rufus as a rapist is also complicated by the way Baldwin represents Rufus's feelings for Leona. I certainly don't want to make too much of a point of this, as if rapist who feels tenderness or remorse toward his target questions his definition of rapist. I am also not an apologist for Rufus's behavior toward Leona; later in their relationship he beats and rapes her: he "used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most" and "fled from the raped white woman and into the bars" and "had been beating her" (53-55).⁶ I do think,

though, that combined with the exhaustive list of other details, Rufus's "tenderness" toward Leona before and during this sex scene adds to the complication and ambivalence of his stereotypical representation as a rapist in this scene. In one part he feels unexpected tenderness and remorse for what he is about to "do" to Leona: "everything he did he watched himself doing, and he began to feel a tenderness for Leona which he had not expected to feel. He tried, with himself, to make amends for what he was doing – for what he was doing to her" (21). This remorse continues in his final act when, before he falls off the bridge to his death, "he whispered, *I'm sorry, Leona*" (88). After their sex scene, "he began to feel affection for her again" (23). A post-coital conversation on the balcony continues the "erotic confusion" that characterizes their sexual relationship. It begins with Rufus seeking a form of affirmation to alleviate this confusion: "He heard himself ask, 'Do you like me?'" (23).⁷ The scene continues with Leona's answer:

"Rufus," she said, "I really do like you. Please don't hurt me."

"Why should I want to hurt you, Leona?...What makes you think I want to hurt you?"

"People *do*," she said, finally, "hurt each other."

"Is somebody been hurting you, Leona?" (23)

Following this is the description of Leona's experience with her ex-husband and family. Rufus's question seems to indicate some interest in her, though also a hesitance since "hearing himself asking" indicates a kind of disconnect between his thoughts and what he is saying at the time. Rufus's question of affirmation from Leona, interestingly, turns into a pleading imperative (a bit of an oxymoron) by Leona not to be "hurt" and the statement that "people *do*...hurt each other." The many moments when Rufus shows affection or tenderness or this "erotic confusion" complicate reading him only as an African American man that is out to rape white women like

Leona.

However, for me, the two most compelling arguments that Baldwin is trying to complicate this seemingly obvious representation of Rufus as the Black Rapist is 1) that the narrative is ‘all in his head’; this narration is focalized through Rufus and, so, describes the scenes as he sees them, which often contradicts the action of the narrative and 2) that Leona consents to sex with Rufus in this scene. The focalization of most of the first section of the novel takes place through Rufus, which really jars the reader when he seems to commit suicide on the last page of the chapter.⁸ What is interesting is that Rufus is not only the focalizer of the narrative but of a narrative that describes a separation between himself or his thoughts and his own actions. Rufus describes many moments of his own awareness as he describes meeting Leona when he “sees” or “feels” himself doing things for reason he might not understand. As discussed, he shows remorse for what Rufus-as-stereotype does to Leona. In other moments, also already mentioned, “he found himself glancing upward” and “something warned him to stop, to leave this poor little girl alone; and at the same time the fact that he thought of her as a poor little girl cause him to smile with real affection” (18). These moments imply a kind of disconnect between what he thinks and what he does but also sometimes shows Rufus performing a kind of double consciousness theorization of the stereotype that describes him *even as he enacts it*. He must be considered, at least in part, a somewhat unreliable narrator. His unreliability can be seen if one separates Rufus’s descriptions of the scene from the action of the scene – if one reads for only what happens and brackets the images and language used to describe what happens, the scene is harder to read as a rape scene. What happens in the scene – they talk and flirt, they have consensual sex on a balcony, Leona cries, Rufus curses – though not without violent details, is much less likely to be considered a rape scene without Rufus’s

descriptive language. That is, *Rufus's description* of this scene and not their actions is what portrays him as a rapist. So, what does it mean that Rufus's description of his interactions with Leona portray him as a rapist? If nothing else, Rufus's questionable narration leads one to ask questions like: Is Rufus a rapist or is Rufus so conditioned to think he is by the power and authority of this stereotype that he has already, like most readers, figured *himself* as the stereotype of the Black Rapist as he begins this relationship with Leona? Is he ever able to be thought of as anything *but* a Black Rapist, *especially* within a scene in which he has sex with a white woman? Eliciting these questions in the reader is the way Baldwin suggests a new reading practice for analyzing stereotypes.

Most importantly, I think Leona's consent to sex with Rufus complicates incontrovertibly the figuration of Rufus as a Black Rapist stereotype. Leona expresses forms of consent and desire for Rufus several times leading up to and during the scene being discussed. In one exchange, noticing that "her eyes unmistakably called him," Rufus asks Leona, "You seen anything you want since you been in New York?" to which she replies, "'Oh,' she said, 'I want it all!'" (19). Rufus next question asks, "You see anything you want right now?" which is followed by this dialogue:

"Do *you*?" she asked faintly.

"Do I what?"

"See anything you want?"

After a moment of thought on the balcony, Rufus persists in his line of questioning:

"You never answered my question."

...

"You never answered mine."

“Yes, I did.” She sounded more plaintive than ever. “I said I wanted it all”

...

“Well, then, he whispered, “come and get it.”

She came toward him, holding her glass against her breasts. At the very last moment, standing directly before him, she whispered in bafflement and rage, “What are you trying to do to me?” (19-20)

Like most of the moments, this one shows Leona’s interest in Rufus but not without a twist at the end when her “bafflement and rage” leads to her questioning of Rufus’s intentions. Later, though, as their sexual encounter begins after a brief struggle, Leona murmurs “Oh God” and “began to cry” but “at the same time, she ceased struggling. Her hands came up and touched his face as though she were blind. Then she put her arms around his neck and clung to him, still shaking” (20-21). While “ceasing to struggle” is hardly evidence of consent, I do think her arms around his neck suggest some willingness. Later, she initiates his disrobing: “her fingers opened his shirt to the navel, her tongue burned his neck and his chest” (21). During intercourse, when Rufus enters her and expects a “scream,” Leona “moaned” and “moved beneath him” (21). Finally, after their sexual encounter is over, Leona reacts very positively even if Rufus is more reticent in his afterglow:

She touched him and he jumped. Then he forced himself to turn to her, looking into her eyes. Her eyes were wet still, deep and dark, her trembling lips curved slightly in a shy, triumphant smile. He pulled her to him, wishing he could rest. He hoped she would say nothing but, “It was so wonderful,” she said, and kissed him. (22)

Again, I’m not trying to suggest that Leona acted as if she “had it coming” or that since she “ceased struggling” she wasn’t raped. And I do realize the delicate and problematic nature of

making any argument that suggests there is consent of the target in what seems to be a rape scenario. However, the last sentence of dialogue and the fact that this scene was not only a one night stand but begins a more substantive, albeit variously violent and tender, relationship more than suggests that Leona is a willing partner to Rufus. The fact that the sex is consensual problematizes the representation *and* the *reading* of Rufus as the stereotype of the Black Rapist.

Furthermore, to figure Rufus as a Black Rapist requires figuring Leona as a victim of sexual violence, evacuating her of any agency in this sex scene. To read Rufus as only a Black Rapist is to ignore all the nuanced language and details that contradict that representation but is also to ignore the moments when Leona participates and consents to the sex they have on the balcony or, worse, to elide Leona's agency altogether.⁹ Figuring Rufus as a Black Rapist requires reading Leona as not sexually aroused in this scene and disallows other understandings of Leona, such as that perhaps she is actively living out her rape fantasies with this man she just met in a bar and that she might be participating in the fetishization of Rufus's stereotypical body parts and attributes. Likewise, while describing her as the victim of her husband and family's abuse clearly plants the seed of victim in the reader's head. However, the subsequent information that she *chose* to escape this violent relationship and move to New York City makes figuring Leona as without agency even stranger. Figuring Rufus as rapist and Leona as victim relies mostly on not unpacking the complicated knot of stereotyping that defines them both.

There is a lot of evidence in these pages that Rufus is, in fact, the Black Rapist whose target is the white woman Leona, but there is so much evidence against this facile representation within the same pages that it seems like willful ignorance must be deployed to settle on understanding him as such. It is the stereotype lubricates this (willful or not) ignorance of evidence against Rufus as a rapist. But Rufus is also fixed into the stereotype of the rapist,

which is ambivalent and protean enough to adapt to the information in the novel that works against that fixity. The stereotype helps to resolve Pickering's "dilemma" between stereotyping Rufus as a rapist or thinking critically about him and noting the details that contradict his definition as rapist.¹⁰ The production of Rufus as rapist works through the stereotype's contradictory representational logics as a historical universality, a denial of the history that relies on historical evidence to 'prove' its 'truth.' Reading the clues about his propensity to rape white women within the novel gets supported by the stereotype's 'natural' production of Black men as such, while the other clues remain uncorroborated. What Baldwin accomplishes in this novel, though, is to not allow the reader to rest easily on this fixed ambivalence, these resolutions, and these denials and to refuse to let the stereotype do its work of fixed ambivalence and historical universality. His constant bombardment of contradictory images of violence and tenderness, language and grammar, and evidence against Rufus's rapist definition in their sex scene (such as Leona's consensuality) that I've highlight here refuses to let readers assume the stereotype or the stereotype assume its representational form. At the same time, however, with this contradictory imagery, Baldwin also refuses readers the fantasy that the stereotype can be simply ignored or corrected. He creates an "erotic confusion" over the stereotype that renders it ambivalent but not in a way that allows for its un-doing or that allows readers to disavow their reliance on stereotypes based on their understanding of it as contradictory.

Baldwin follows this sex scene with a moment that characterizes Rufus's interactions with the white characters in the novel and simultaneously seems to name the novel's implied audience and explain the reason why he refuses to let his representation of Rufus help them work through their stereotypical assumptions. The afternoon after their sexual encounter (and one page later in the novel), Rufus's friend Vivaldo comes to visit and finds Rufus "still in bed and

Leona in the kitchen making breakfast” (24). Rufus “watched with delight the slow shock on Vivaldo’s face” upon witnessing this gendered performance of domesticity (24). To this look of horror, Rufus thinks “let the liberal white bastard squirm” (24). The point of Baldwin’s engagement with stereotypes is “let” those “liberal white bastard[s]” who read the novel and stereotype Rufus as a rapist “squirm.” And within the novel, Rufus does make the “liberal white bastard[s] squirm” as they are forced to reconcile their experiences and social position with Rufus’s.

Rufus and the “white liberal bastard[s]”

Rufus’s continual reappearance after his suicidal departure from the narrative of the text intimates his importance to the novel and to other characters. All of the white liberal characters in the novel are made to squirm by Rufus as the primary narrative arc involves the way everyone must reconcile themselves to the way they define him and their inability to escape their reliance on and complicity in reproducing the Black Rapist stereotype to define him. Rufus’s reappearances normally occur during acts of sex and usually remind the reader how he is an “object of desire and derision.” Interestingly, for the white liberal characters, the fear entails both the loss of their privilege (including their use of Rufus to alleviate their liberal guilt) and the fear that their dealings with Rufus will reveal their inability to overcome their racist assumptions. He is a fetish not only in the sense of being an object of desire but also because he indexes for white liberal characters the trauma of the contradiction of espousing the “American creed’s” tenets of equality for all while remaining privileged through racial hierarchies and tied to stereotypical understandings of racialized Others.¹¹

Rufus’s sister Ida Scott notes the way others define and use him. Commenting on Eric’s

friendship with Rufus, Ida discusses what she sees as the effects of the particular relations of desire Rufus enters. She concludes that Eric Jones, a white, gay man who had sex with Rufus, “may have wanted more from [Rufus] than he could give” and that

Many people did, men *and* women...He was terribly attractive, wasn't he? I always think that that was the reason he died, that he was too attractive and didn't know how – how to keep people away...People don't have any mercy. They tear you limb from limb, in the name of love. Then, when you're dead, when they've killed you by what they made you go through, they say you didn't have any character. They weep big, bitter tears – not for *you*. For themselves, because they've lost their toy...I know what I'm talking about. That's what most people mean, when they say love. (265)

Ida, then, actually uses Rufus herself in a different way as her analysis of his interactions with others becomes a way to define her strength: “When Rufus died something happened to me...I can't explain it. Rufus had always been the world to me. I loved him...He was my big brother, but as soon as I knew anything, I knew that I was stronger than he was” (413). Ida is also a kind of problem for the white characters in the novel as she continually critiques their white liberal understandings of how race and racism shape what happened to Rufus and happens to her.

Eric Jones is a white, gay man who doesn't really identify with the gay male culture of the time. For one thing, Eric loves and fetishizes Black men. This feeling began in his childhood when he was raised not by his busy parents but by Henry and Grace, a Black couple that worked for his family. A hug by Henry was the “first time he felt a man's arms around him, the first time he had felt the chest and belly of a man” (198). This early experience of interracial intimacy shaped his erotic life. Eric is now with the French boy Yves¹² but his sexual past includes LeRoy and Rufus. His first sexual partner, the teenaged LeRoy was “tall and very black”

whose life Eric made “more difficult” due to the difference in their racial and social position in their small Southern town (201-202). Rufus and Eric have a somewhat tentative, one-sided relationship. Eric had given Rufus a set of phallic cufflinks (they were “feathered arrows”) with the “money that was to have bought his wedding rings” “as a confession of his love,” which Rufus “*had never really liked*” but “had kept” (45, 249). Later Eric notices the cufflinks as earrings worn by Rufus’s sister Ida (whose homophobia blames Eric, in part, for the unhappiness that lead to Rufus’s suicide). While, Eric is important enough to Rufus to have thought of him, along with his sister Ida and Leona, during the final moments before his suicide, the description of their sexual encounter somewhat mirrors the depravity of the worst parts of Rufus and Leona’s relationship. Like Leona, Eric is Southern, and Rufus “despised [Eric] because he came from Alabama” and “perhaps he had allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely” (45). Like Leona, Rufus also felt “affection” for Eric but “affection, power, and curiosity all knotted together in him – with a hidden unforeseen violence” (46). Rufus

made Eric pay for such pleasure as Eric gave, or got. He remembered only that Eric had loved him; as he now remembered that Leona had loved him. He had despised Eric’s manhood by treating him like a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity. But Leona had not been a deformity. And he had used against her the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest. (46)

After this interaction, Eric “fled from Rufus, all the way to Paris” (45). After talking with Cass about the last days of Rufus’s life, Eric “felt very dull, very distant pain” that had “scarcely been bearable then” (237-238). The best Eric can do is to be with Yves, who reminds Eric “somehow,

somewhere, of Rufus,” although even this is questionable in the novel when Eric has a brief affair with Cass, who he “thought [he] could make [himself] fall in love with” (193). While Eric loved and fetishized Rufus, Rufus was unable to reciprocate (for reasons that are debated in a lot of scholarship) and in the end Eric isn’t quite able to dull the pain of Rufus.

In perhaps the most startling transformation, sex with Eric helps Vivaldo reconcile his guilt over how his inability to understand the color line makes him complicit in Rufus’s suicide. Dealing with this guilt also makes Vivaldo more open to his girlfriend Ida’s constant critique of his racial liberalism¹³ (which, of course, is also the reason for his guilt over Rufus).¹⁴ Vivaldo describes how he and Rufus were close friends that “slept together, got drunk together, balled chicks together...once or twice the same chick,” but “at the bottom of his mind the question of Rufus nagged and stung” for Vivaldo (61). This question leads to a memory of when Vivaldo had tried to sleep with a Black woman in Harlem but was interrupted by the woman’s accomplice who robbed him. In a mirroring of the Black Rapist scenario, this robber asks Vivaldo what he would do if “you found me with your sister...Come on, you know what *you* guys do” (64). The seeming silliness of the reference to lynching as a possible punishment for Vivaldo’s tryst with a Black woman forces one to ponder the question of lynching’s validity as the potential punishment linked to Rufus which has the legitimization of the stereotype of the Black Rapist. Later, in true white liberal fashion, although Vivaldo, “insisted that he and Rufus were equals...they were friends far beyond the reach of anything so banal and corny as color,” but he also realizes that “somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white” and “somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black” (133-134). A late-night drunken discussion about their love lives leads Vivaldo to remember and relate a story about one of the last time he saw Rufus alive. After Vivaldo moved

Leona away from Rufus to his apartment and was staying with Rufus, he saw Rufus looking at him and had a “feeling”:

I was afraid to leave him alone...I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened. I had a feeling that he wanted someone to hold him, to hold him, and that, that night, it had to be a man...I loved Rufus, I loved him, I didn't want him to die. But when he was dead, I thought about it, I thought about it...and I wondered...what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been – afraid. I was afraid that he wouldn't understand that it was – only love. Only love. But, oh, Lord, when he died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed, and held him. (342)

Interestingly, this confession of his (perhaps) internalized (perhaps) homophobic inability to reach out that “quarter of an inch” and “hold” Rufus as Vivaldo assumed he needed to be held leads directly into a series of looks that culminates in Eric and Vivaldo reaching past the “not a quarter of an inch [that] divided them” and having falling asleep together with Eric's head “on Vivaldo's chest” (344). The scene then shifts to Cass and Ida and after 30 pages, the next chapter begins with Vivaldo dreaming about Rufus and waking up with Eric. They then have the sex scene described in the most detail in the book in which Vivaldo penetrates Eric but, though “accustomed” to being the “giver of the gift,” then “surrendered to the luxury, the flaming torpor of passivity, and whispered in Eric's ear a muffled, urgent plea” which is clearly ‘Fuck me’ (385). The sex ends with Vivaldo repeating to Eric what Leona had said to Rufus, “It was wonderful” (387). Vivaldo's sex with Eric becomes a way to alleviate Vivaldo's guilt over not being closer to Rufus, which also allows him to “get something straight in [his] mind about [his] life with Ida”

(396). His vulnerability during sex with Eric seems to open Vivaldo enough for Ida to “strok[e] the innocence out of him” (431). The reference to masturbation in the word stroke seems all too appropriate for this scene in which Ida strokes the innocence of white liberal understandings of race out of Vivaldo and corroborates his realization that “he was a liar; had never loved Rufus at all, but had only feared and envied him” (413). Though certainly closer to a more critical understanding of race, Vivaldo is never really able to unpack the complicated knot of his own internalized homophobia and white liberal racism

Finally, Cass and Richard Silenski are the married “model couple” of the novel with children for whom Rufus is primarily the source of white liberal guilt and self-definition (246). Their somewhat progressive racial politics is stymied by their reaction to Rufus’s relationship with Leona. Cass has a somewhat sophisticated take on race and racism early in the novel. On the way to Rufus’s funeral, Vivaldo describes the connection he feels to Rufus’s family and African American culture: “They’re colored and I’m white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things and how can I make them know that?” (113). Correcting the liberal tendencies in Vivaldo’s assertions that his class equalizes racial difference Cass replies, “‘But they didn’t,’ she said, ‘happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened. But what happens up here...happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a difference’” (113-114). Cass seems here to understand racial difference and to understand that it is race that structures the experience of Rufus, Ida, and all African American experience. Upon hearing of Rufus’s death, Cass’s liberal guilt manifests: “how she wished, now, that she had stayed and talked to him a little longer” (106) while her husband Richard, whose racial politics are somewhat less progressive and whose racism lies a bit shallower under his liberalist tendencies¹⁵, declares his inability to like Rufus due to his treatment of Leona:

I didn't love Rufus, not the way you did, the way all of you did. I couldn't help feeling, anyway, that one of the reasons all of you made such a kind of – *fuss* – over him was partly just because he was colored. Which is a hell of a reason to love anybody. I just had to look at him as another guy. And I couldn't forgive him for what he did to Leona.
(106-107)

For Richard, Rufus seems to inhabit the stereotype of the Black Rapist a little too closely for his white liberalism to overcome. By the end of the novel, Cass's somewhat nuanced understanding of race recedes back to relying heavily on white liberal compassion and guilt, when Ida challenges her understanding of Ida's experience. Ida explains to Cass "there's no way in the world for you to find out, what it's like to be a black girl in this world, and the way white men, and black men, too, baby, treat you. You've never decided that the whole world was just one big whorehouse and so the only way for you to make it was to decide to be the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around, and make the world pay you back that way" (347). Cass's only reaction to this is: "How *can* we know it, Ida? How can you blame us if we don't know? We never had the chance to find out" (348). Later Cass critiques Ida for a form of 'reverse racism,' asking "Do you hate white people, Ida?" Ida's reply describes her experience being "stunted...and starved," watching her loved ones "die or go mad or go under," and ends discussing Rufus, which echoes Cass's early take on race and racism: "Vivaldo didn't want to know my brother was dying because he doesn't want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black" (351). However, Cass's understanding seems to waver a bit in her reply: "I don't know if that's true or not...but I guess I don't have any right to say it *isn't* true" (351). To this, Ida agrees. This somewhat reductive survey of Rufus's interactions with other main characters is meant only to show that Rufus's racial and sexual stereotype becomes a conundrum for everyone,

especially the “white liberal bastard” characters in the novel.

“Controlled by laws he did not understand”: The Circulation of the Stereotype within Relations of Power

In what comes before I’ve traced some of the ways that the stereotype’s circulation in relations of desire in Baldwin’s novel works to disallow the fixed ambivalence and historical universality of Rufus’s Black Rapist stereotype. This section thinks about the ways Baldwin simultaneously traces the stereotype’s circulation in relations of power and maps some of the ways that the stereotype is mutually constitutive with the social structures that it is used to police. Details that get represented along within the parts of the novel I’ve already engaged reveal how Rufus is disciplined by both state power – represented by the police and the military – and non-state power – represented by the (white) people on the street that Rufus encounters.

Before I shift to a discussion about the stereotype in the relations of power, I want to pause over a scene that demonstrates Baldwin’s attention to the fact that relations of desire and power are not always distinct but are often articulated. In the opening pages of the novel, Rufus “remembered Leona,” which was “also – somehow – to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father” (6). Remembering Leona was also to remember an overdetermined host of racial and culture practices, definitions, and events that defined his racial masculinity such as the geography of gender on “the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls on the stairs,” the sex and violence of “the juke box, the teasing, the dancing, the hard-on, the gang fights and gang bangs, his first set of drums...his first taste of marijuana, his first snort of horse” and the racial state in “the white policeman who had taught him how to hate” (6). It was also to remember “the beat,” his father’s definition of Black masculinity: “*A nigger...lives his whole life, lives and dies*

according to the beat. Shit, he humps to the beat and the baby he throws up in their, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine... The beat – in Harlem in the summertime one could almost see it, shaking above the pavements and the roof” (6-7). Rufus, however, joins the Navy and flees from the “beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart. Into a boot camp in the South, and onto a pounding sea” (7). To flee the “beat” of Blackness Rufus joins the Navy, an arm of the military dedicated to the defense of the white state that oppresses him (a “choice” many African American men made so as to escape the poverty to which their race relegated them). The military at the time is also an index of the failed promises of integration, as African American men that fought for their country in WW II had been given a taste of integration and a view of European attitudes toward race (during this racial war) and came home to find segregation and Jim Crow laws still enforced.

Upon first hearing Leona’s Southern accent – “She had said enough. She was from the South” (9) – Rufus recollects “his days in boot camp in the South,” in particular an incident in which he

felt again the shoe of a white officer against his mouth. He was in his white uniform, on the ground, against the red, dusty clay. Some of his colored buddies were holding him, were shouting in his ear, helping him to rise. The white officer, with a curse, had vanished, had gone forever beyond the reach of vengeance. His face was full of clay and tears and blood: he spat red blood into the red dust. (12-13)

The vivid colors of black, white, and red in this scene evoke the bloody consequences of the color line. Twice Leona reminds Rufus of his time in the Navy, first as she reminds him of the how the “beat” defines the Black masculinity that Rufus felt he had to escape and next as she reminds him of one of the most vivid scenes of white-on-black racial violence in the novel which

occurs in the Navy that Rufus initially joins to escape the “beat.” The curse of the white officer also prefigures the curses Rufus makes to Leona during their first sex scene. This episode is a good reminder that relations of desire and power articulate and work to produce and reproduce a stereotype’s legitimation. It is a good example of how the stereotype circulates in both relations of power and desire by showing that the stereotypes that circulate in Rufus’s personal relationships, for instance, are upheld by state power and vice versa. Interacting with Leona (who reminds him of his masculinity and of the police) already signals the Black Rapist stereotype to readers; it also reminds Rufus of how the state (the military) disciplined his racialized body through physical pain.

Along with representing Rufus’s experience of racial violence in the U.S. military, Baldwin also traces the circulation of the stereotype as deployed by the racial state through his representation of the police presence and institutional surveillance in the novel. That the police presence is somewhat innocuous when Rufus is alone, then intensifies in number when he is with Leona, and then seems to dissipate altogether in the action after his death reveals how it is the Black Rapist stereotype that is being used to police Rufus. Early in the novel, when Rufus is walking alone, a “policeman passed him, gave him a look” (3). On this walk, he notes at one point (in the paragraph already discussed ending with the buildings, blunt like the phallus, or sharp like the spear), “policeman and taxi drivers and others, harder to place, stomped their feet before them and exchanged words as they both knew with the muffled vendor within” (4). The gesture of “stomping their feet” makes the policemen seem aggressive and/or impatient. A bit later, to remember Leona is to remember “the white policeman who had taught him how to hate” (6). Directly following this statement Rufus, envisioning his sister Ida as “not merely the descendent of slaves” but a “monarch” when wearing the shawl he brought back for her from his

one of his Navy deployments, Rufus “thought of the whores on Seventh Avenue” and “thought of the white policeman and the money they made on black flesh, the money the whole world made” (7). Another suggestive juxtaposition of memories conjures an image of racialized sexuality from Baldwin that implicates the racial state in not only making “money...on black flesh” through the peculiar institution of slavery but also more contemporaneously when corrupt policemen steal from or pimp African American sex workers, or perhaps, just make money on them by garnering sexual favors from them and not paying.

After meeting Leona, the police become somewhat more threatening to Rufus. Leaving the club after their initial meeting, during the scene of “erotic confusion,” Rufus’s narration tells the reader that

the policeman strolled by; carefully, and in fact rather mysteriously conveying their awareness that these particular Negroes, though they were out so late, and mostly drunk, were not to be treated in the usual fashion; and neither were the white people with them. But Rufus suddenly realized that Leona would soon be the only white person left. This made him uneasy and his uneasiness made him angry. Leona spotted a cab and hailed it. (10-11)

Not being “treated in the usual fashion” implies a kind of benevolence compared to normal police violence, but being with Leona still makes Rufus “uneasy” and “angry.” Later, after they have sex, in reply to Leona’s question “What are your friends going to think?” Rufus replies, “Well, one thing, Leona, they ain’t going to call the law.’ He kissed her. ‘They ain’t going to think nothing, honey’” (23). Here Rufus marks their sexual encounter as a matter of police interest. When he is walking around homeless, Rufus “thought of walking to Harlem but was afraid of the police he would encounter in his passage through the city” (41). Finally, in the final

moments before his death, during his walk to the bridge “a policeman, standing under the light on the corner, was phoning in” (72). Rufus notes the police eight times in these seventy pages.

It is Vivaldo, however, that elucidates the threat to Rufus of this police surveillance and suggests this threat is based on his definition as a Black Rapist. Vivaldo scares Rufus once, telling him that Ida has “been to the police” while looking for him during his post-Leona disappearance. To which Rufus quickly responds, “The police are looking for me?” (47). Vivaldo is aware of the consequences for Rufus of being with Leona defined as he is to society. Vivaldo brings this up twice. As discussed briefly already, when Vivaldo finds Leona on the bathroom floor crying from having been beaten by Rufus, he admonishes Rufus thusly:

“You could be killed for this,” said Vivaldo. “All she has to do is yell. All *I* have to do is walk down to the corner and get a cop.”

“You trying to scare me? Go *get* a cop.”

“You must be out of your mind. They’d take one look at this situation and put you *under* the jailhouse.” (55)

This shows Vivaldo’s astute awareness that police intervention into his relationship with Leona will not result in Rufus’s arrest but most likely his death – he won’t be put *in* but “*under*” the jailhouse. After this scene, Vivaldo helps Leona leave Rufus, and, while walking her to his house, Vivaldo notices the police gaze: “A policeman passed them, giving them a look...He had never been afraid of policemen before; he had merely despised them. But now he felt the impersonality of the uniform, the emptiness of the streets. He felt what the policeman might say and do if he had been Rufus, walking here with his arm around Leona” (59). A bit later “his awareness of the policeman, prowling somewhere in the darkness near him, made the silence ominous” (60). Not only does Vivaldo not mark how his whiteness allows him to have “never

been afraid” of the police, but this moment also works to support his white liberal empathy and understanding that he is the “same” as Rufus and other African American men. He has now “felt” what the police would do to Rufus. The number of times the police are mentioned in the first hundred pages’ representation of Rufus compared to the fewer number of times in the rest of the novel after Rufus’s death shows how Baldwin understands this stereotype as part of the structural racism that polices Black men through the deployment of sexuality.

Baldwin is also careful to show how this disciplining surveillance also occurs amongst people on the street who aren’t policemen when he describes the raised eyebrows, and sometimes fists, that happen as a result of Rufus being seen with a white woman like Leona in New York’s Greenwich Village. Again, Baldwin notes that this phenomenon happens less in the first few pages of the novel, when Rufus is alone. At one point a “white couple, laughing, came through the doors, giving him barely a glance as they passed” (5). Later, in one of the bloodiest episodes in the novel, Jane, an on-again, off-again girlfriend of Vivaldo’s who Rufus has never liked, exclaims “Are you threatening me?” in a bar with the patrons who already “resented seeing [Rufus] there” (31). After Jane’s exclamation, Rufus and Vivaldo try to leave quickly but are attacked by the patrons, beat up, and thrown out the door.

The scene in the bar with Jane is actually a memory brought on by the surveillance and judgment of people Rufus notices when walking around the city with Leona and Vivaldo the day after their first sexual encounter. Rufus begins his analysis of this situation by noticing how people stare at them: “They encountered the big world when they went out into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; and Rufus realized that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy” (27). This leads to his thinking about the threat to him if he decides to stay with Leona:

He had not thought at all about his future with Leona, for the reason that he had never considered that they had one. Yet, here she was, clearly intending to stay if he would have her. But the price was high: trouble with the landlord, with the neighbors, with all the adolescents in the Village, and all those who descended during the weekends. And his family would have a fit. (27-28).

Rufus lists the various discriminations that will occur to an interracial couple at the time, including housing trouble, mistreatment by urban youth, and familial disapproval. He imagines Ida hating Leona and saying to him, “You’d never even have looked at that girl, Rufus, if she’s been black. But you’ll pick up any white trash just because she’s white. What’s the matter – you ashamed of being black?” (28).

Two encounters with strangers during this walk show how Rufus notices their judgment while Leona does not, which is also notice by Rufus. Baldwin describes one couple passing in great detail:

A young couple came toward them, carrying the Sunday papers. Rufus watched the eyes of the man as the man looked at Leona; and then both the man and the woman looked swiftly from Vivaldo to Rufus as though to decide which of the two was her lover. And, since this was the Village – the place of liberation – Rufus guessed, from the swift, nearly sheepish glance the man gave them as they passed, that he had decided that Rufus and Leona formed the couple. The face of his wife, however, simply closed tight, like a gate. (28)

Again, we only know what is happening through Rufus’s eyes. This particular interaction, too, is somewhat unthreatening since this ostensibly “liberated” man doesn’t threaten Rufus but only glances away “sheepishly.” Once they reach the park, though, when Vivaldo gets sidetracked

talking to a “large, good-natured girl, who was not sober,” Rufus notes how the attitudes of passers-by change when Rufus and Leona are alone (29): “Without Vivaldo, there was a difference in the eyes which watched them. Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm” (29). Without the escort of a white man, the language calls to mind a slave market. Those watching Rufus and Leona both “bound and free,” which seems to suggest both those that are still considered slaves and “bound” by social categories and those that are and have always been free, how, that is both Blacks and whites, stare at them as if they were either enslaved bodies being measured up for purchase or as if they were barnyard animals used primarily for breeding. This juxtaposition of images seems to reference again the “animal” descriptor of both Rufus and Leona while also representing, again, both the “fear and desire...phobia and fetish” surrounding the stereotype of the Black Rapist. The desire is that Rufus *should be* property (or that is the definition with which white America would be most comfortable) and the fear is that Rufus *could be* breeding white women and creating interracial babies and weakening the racial purity of America. This is followed by Rufus questioning his own insecurities and worries: “Leona gleamed before him and seem to be oblivious of everything and everyone but him. And if there had been any doubt concerning their relationship, her eyes were enough to dispel it. Then he thought, If she could take it so calmly, if she noticed nothing, what was the matter with him? Maybe he was making it all up, maybe nobody gave a damn” (29-30). Only to have his suspicions confirmed in the next sentences:

Then he raised his eyes and met the eyes of an Italian adolescent. The boy was splashed by the sun falling through the trees. The boy looked at him with hatred; his glance flicked over Leona as though she were a whore; he dropped his eyes slowly and swaggered on – having register his protest, his backside seemed to snarl, having made his

point.

“Cock sucker,” Rufus muttered. (30)

The “adolescents in the Village” that Rufus had feared earlier now get instantiated as an “Italian” boy, like Vivaldo, who was Rufus’s former screen from this kind of violence. The boy’s race is made obvious by the “sun” splashing his face. The boy’s reaction to Rufus and Leona is filled with both racial and gendered violence. His look of “hatred” is directed at Rufus while the glance that “flicked” over Leona as if exploring her with a snake’s tongue, which then positions her as a “whore.” Walking away, his protest is registered in the swing of his ass, which elicits from Rufus a retaliation of the homophobic slur of “cock sucker.” Leona defends “that boy” saying he’s “just bored and lonely” and that Rufus could “make friends with him real easy” (30). After this statement and after seeing the “tolerant smile[s]” of people watching Vivaldo laughing with the girl, “Rufus resented all of them...No one dared to look at Vivaldo, out with any girl whatever, the way they looked at Rufus now; nor would they ever look at the girl the way they looked at Leona. The lowest whore in Manhattan would be protected as long as she had Vivaldo on her arm. This was because Vivaldo was white” (30). Rufus’s understanding of the power of whiteness causes him to resent “all of them,” including those whose stares judge his body and his relationship and those who benefit from the privilege of not having to be judged in the same way. This day in the park ends with Rufus wanting “to get away from this place and this danger” and, once Vivaldo leaves with their friend Cass whom they met in the park, Rufus “felt a dull fear and a dull resentment, almost as though Vivaldo were deserting him” (38-9).

Finally, Rufus’s suspicions also fall onto Leona, which is one of the primary reasons for their violent relationship and break up. It is Leona’s simple-minded white liberalism instigates Rufus beating her. Leona had said “ain’t nothing wrong in being colored” to which Rufus

replied, “Not if you a hard-up white lady” (53). Leona slapped him twice after saying this and then “he slapped her” and “they fought all the time” (53). This leads to the humiliation of Leona as discussed above. This irritation with her colorblindness, though, gets coupled with a misplaced jealousy of Rufus based how he judges Leona *because* she is attracted to him, and by extension to Rufus, all Black men. His own internalized stereotyping makes Rufus accuse Leona of “sleeping with other colored boys behind his back,” which, according to Leona, is “not true” (55). Finally, on their walk after Vivaldo makes Leona leave Rufus’s apartment, Leona talks about how this sensitivity to how others perceived them in their relationship and his jealousy get mixed together.

“‘He says it’s me trying to get us killed.’ She tried to laugh. ‘He had a fight last week with some guy in the subway, some real, ignorant, unhappy man just didn’t like the idea of our being together, y’know? and, well, you know, he blamed that fight on me. He said I was encouraging the man. Why, Viv, I didn’t even *see* the man until he opened his mouth. But, Rufus, he’s all the time looking for it, he sees it where it ain’t, he don’t see nothing else no more. He says I ruined his life. Well, he sure ain’t done mine much good’” (58).

What is most important to note in this elongated scene is that, whether Rufus is paranoid or not, their relationship is always defined, at least in part, through the stereotype of the Black Rapist. Whether it is threatening or not, those that see Rufus and Leona together, including the readers of the novel, have to reconcile their ways of knowing and their feelings about this couple with their reliance on this stereotype to define Rufus (and Leona).

The disciplining of state and non-state, police and panoptic power has the effect of producing and shaping Rufus’s double consciousness. He is constantly aware of other eyes upon

him, for example, in the opening pages, walking around the city poor and needing to urinate, “he saw himself now, in his mind’s eye, shambling through this crowd to the bathroom and crawling out again while everyone watched him with pitying or scornful or mocking eyes” (5). As mentioned before, Rufus is aware – it’s “in his mind’s eye” – often of how he is defined as a Black Rapist even as he enacts that definition. He is also aware of the policing of his body and actions due to that stereotypical definition. In one telling moment, Rufus’s assurance of his self-knowledge is tempered by the looks of others:

She laughed. “You’re a funny boy” – she corrected herself – “a funny person. You act like you don’t know who you are.”

“I know who I am, all right,” he said, aware of the eyes that watched them pass, the nearly inaudible murmur that came from the benches or the trees (40).

As if to make sure that Rufus is unable to answer this question on his own – is, in other words, able to define himself – within the same sentence as his utterance of self-knowledge, he becomes “aware of the eyes that watched them pass” and the “nearly inaudible murmur” that whispers about them as they walk by. The double consciousness, this simultaneous self-awareness and awareness of others defining you, doesn’t, however, allow Rufus to escape his stereotypical definition as Baldwin makes clear here that the stereotype is tool of hegemony as it gets internalized and becomes part of Rufus’s *self*-definition.

A suicidal conclusion

I hope I’ve shown how Rufus is far from a stock character in a protest novel or a representative example of Chow’s protesting subject. Baldwin’s representation of Rufus is certainly not meant as re-presentation of the stereotype that reveals the correct “true”

representation of Black men and “the truth” about African American masculinity. He is, rather, a contradictory representation of the Black Rapist stereotype, inhabiting this stereotype but not quite, which is very different than the figures of victimhood that Baldwin describes in his critique of protest novels. Rather than being a stock figure of protest or a victim of racial violence or a victim of his own reactions to racism, Rufus is a figure through which Baldwin can map the power relations of this stereotype and can reveal the many ways others define and police Rufus and how Rufus is aware of his definitions and comes, in some ways, to define himself. But this mapping and revealing is not meant, like the protest novel, to make the audience (especially the midcentury racial liberal audience) feel like they have come to an understanding of the experience of African Americans within American racial formation while perhaps also being titillated by reading about the violence done (state and otherwise) to Black bodies. Unlike many representations of figures that are defined by and inhabit certain stereotypes, Rufus neither escapes his stereotype in some kind of redemptive ending nor provides an example of a legal (or otherwise) containment of aberrant African American sexuality. While you could read his death as containment, as an eradication of Rufus’s aberrant sexual threat, the way his death gets represented calls that simplistic reading into question.

I want to end by elaborating on Rufus’s self-awareness and how the description of the Rufus’s final moments actually accomplishes one of the main things I believe Baldwin wanted to accomplish with his representation of Rufus, which was to make “the liberal white bastard[s] squirm.” The pages leading up to his death summarize well the images I’ve already discussed. Baldwin describes the final moments before Rufus’s death as a bombardment of images that remind him of the policing he endures because of his stereotypical definition. Images referencing that “terrible muscle at the base of his belly” abound. While urinating, as I quoted

before, he “hold[s] the most despised part of himself loosely between his two fingers” as he reads the mixture of sexual and racist writing on the bar’s bathroom wall that reads like a surrealist poem describing Rufus’s life: “Suck my cock. I like to get whipped. I want a stiff prick up my ass. Down with Jews. Kill the niggers. I suck cocks” (83). On his way to the subway he encounters the policing eyes of many white people, including one “young white boy in a vaguely military hat and a black leather jacket” who “looked at Rufus with the greatest hostility” and the “train rushed into the blackness with a phallic abandon,” again referencing Rufus’s primary definition as a big Black cock (84). Even the architecture is panoptic: “tall apartment buildings, lightless, loomed against the dark sky and seemed to be watching him” much like the buildings that “guarded the city” in the opening pages (87). Just before his death his thoughts vacillate between his race (on the train there were “many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history” and “he was black and the water was black”); his family (“He thought of Ida”); and his sexual relationships (both hetero and non – “He whispered, I’m sorry, Leona” and “He thought of Eric”) (86-87). The repetition of the mantra “You took the best. So why not take the rest,” which appears in his thoughts periodically throughout this chapter, gets mention one last time (87). Given the plethora of sexualized images surrounding Rufus in the chapter and again in these last pages, this mantra becomes an enunciation of Rufus’s acknowledgement that he is not only defined through his deviant sexuality but also that this definition takes something from him. Many literary critics read this line as having to do with Rufus “peddling” his ass – as if the “best” that was taken was his black cock or his anal virginity or losing his heterosexual “innocence” by having sex with men.¹⁶ This reading seems slightly homophobic and I believe that the “best” that was “taken” has more to do with his agency and self-definition. That even as he knows he’s defined a Black Rapist, he continues to inhabit that

definition, but not quite. Finally, on the “bridge built to honor the father of his country,” the “wind took him, he felt himself going over” (87). There is an obvious allusion to the idea that America was somehow in part responsible for Rufus’s death. Most read this death as a suicide, as most do and with good reason as Rufus walks there and is alone at the time of death. It is interesting, though, that Baldwin describes as the “wind” taking him rather than as Rufus jumping. His agency in this “suicide” is, at least, questionable, which I think emphasizes the mutual role of American society and himself in this death.

The many stereotypical details Rufus notes on his trip to the George Washington bridge reveal his agency and his awareness of the way that race and sexuality defines him as well as his inability to escape his stereotypical definitions. He encounters these images, not as a victim, but as someone who understands how these social definitions work to police his body and keep him in a certain place in the racialized social structure of America. But to read his suicide as a failure or as just another tale of the death of an African American fictional character, is to ignore, I think, important distinctions about *why* Rufus decides to jump off the “bridge built to honor the father of his country,” which is also a symbolic act of defiance toward the country and racial formation that defines him (87). Baldwin describes this facet of Rufus’s suicide in a 1970 interview with John Hall:

He was in the novel because I didn’t think anyone had ever watched the disintegration of a black boy from that particular point of view. Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people.

(*Conversations* 104)

In response to this Hall asks if Rufus is “in control of his own destiny,” to which Baldwin replies,

“he was not in control of it; nobody is. It was simply too much for him, as it’s too much for many people, as it may prove to be in the morning, too much for you, or too much for me” (*Conversations* 104). It is, in other words, not necessarily only the obvious racial violences he endures that cause Rufus to decide to kill himself but, more importantly, his inability to escape the stereotype of the Black Rapist that seems to be the reason. Even as Rufus himself seems to theorize the stereotype’s effects and its circulation, he continues to inhabit and enact it in many ways. There is an agency to Rufus’s decision to kill himself – “partly responsible for his doom.” In other words, Rufus is not a figure of protest or of resistance, but of refusal. Rufus’s very name references this refusal in its resonance with both ‘refuse’ which encapsulates his position as trash within the racial formation of 1950s American and with ‘refusal,’ which insists on his agency within that racial formation.¹⁷ A more compelling reading of Rufus’s suicide is as a representation of his awareness of the inescapability of stereotypes and that one has to consider that, at least in part, his suicide must be read as a radical act that extricates him permanently from those social structures, a refusal to exist as the structures that would define and police him.

However, this reading is unsatisfying and even dangerous, suggesting that African Americans can escape racism through suicide. Baldwin’s *representation* of Rufus’s death is, though, another, second-order kind of refusal, a continuation of his refusal to allow his white liberal readership to settle on Rufus’s stereotypical definition. Baldwin’s refusal renders Rufus once again ambivalent but not, though, the kind of ambivalence that Bhabha suggests is the potential un-doing of the stereotype. The ambivalence of his suicide (is it an act of his agency or is white American responsible for his inability to live or, as Baldwin suggests, both?) coupled with the ambivalence of the stereotype Baldwin engenders in his contradictory imagery and Rufus’s awareness and inability to escape his definition of Black Rapist forces the reader to

realize the way their readings of Rufus rely on stereotyping. It seems to me impossible to read this novel's representation of Rufus without coming to some realization about the work of the Black Rapist stereotype and stereotyping more generally. While you perhaps cannot build a political movement on Rufus's refusals, they do elicit a reading practice that attends to the representational logics of stereotyping. However, again, I don't think Baldwin's intention is to just show readers how to change their minds about stereotyping, as if this were possible or as if that would do away with stereotyping. Rather, Baldwin mounts a critique of racial liberalism quite different than the standard critique that most often works to reveal the contradiction between a colorblind belief in the liberal "American creed" and the material reality of racism and racial privilege that structures America. Baldwin changes the minds of readers not through protest or through the "sympathetic identification" that Melamed discusses in the epigraph to this chapter but by forcing readers to question their reliance on stereotypes as part of their reading practice of Rufus.

However, Baldwin's representation of Rufus's suicide along with his handling of stereotypes is not actually about changing the minds of white liberals and everyone who relies on stereotypes (read: everyone) but about making the "liberal bastard[s] squirm." Part of this squirming must stem from the way Baldwin shows how claiming to adhere to a colorblind ideology when stereotypes circulate everywhere as the salient reading practice of racialized subjects requires a willful ignorance that perpetuates stereotypes. Part of the squirming stems from the change in reading practice elicited by Baldwin's representation of Rufus, which requires readers to reconcile their complicity with the stereotype. What perhaps makes the liberal bastards squirm the most is the fact that these reconciliations work unevenly; in fact, the novel ends with no one really feeling comfortable with themselves in relation to Rufus, which

refuses the white liberal demand for a redemptive ending for whiteness in “race novels” that critique white liberalism, supremacy, and/or privilege. Rather than reading the fact that the novel doesn’t tie up all its threads as a failure of the novel (which is a common critique), I see it as another kind of triumph for Baldwin, who realizes that racism in America doesn’t end (certainly not well for most) and cannot be represented in ways that allow for happy endings. Leaving the success of these reconciliation somewhat open-ended, leaving everyone’s relationship with Rufus somewhat problematic, disallows a “happy ending” for any of these characters or racial liberalism or stereotypers in general.

Notes

¹ Most important, though, is the maintenance of this transaction. China must “produce” a supply of political dissident commodities in order to fulfill the demands of the West that they release them periodically. China produces itself as a “barbaric,” “primitive” abuser of human rights in order to attract the business of the “enlightened,” “modern” West by, in part, making it feel more “humane” than China.

² The assumption of this universal humanity, for Chow, stems from a certain strain of Marxist criticism. Chow first argues that ethnicity and the commodification of labor are intimately linked in our contemporary society in what she calls the “*ethnicization of labor*,” which describes the processes in global capital whereby im/migrants become marked as both foreign ethnics and laborers and whereby the “ethnic as such stands in modernity as the site of a foreignness that is produced from within privileged societies and is at once defined by and constitutive of that society’s hierarchical divisions of labor” (34). Ethnicity is, in other words, “society’s mechanism of marking boundaries by way of labor” (35). She then suggests that most of the cultural work in Ethnic Studies today figures the ethnic as a protesting subject because of a reliance on Georg Lukács’s model of alienated labor and class consciousness (34). Lukács understands proletarian consciousness, or subjectivity, as grounded in “the materialist analysis of commodification – that is, in the very economic process of objectification and reification that he defines as ‘the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society’” (36). Because they feel “destroyed and dehumanized” by the commodification of their labor in capitalist society, the proletariat, for Lukács, occupies a “critical standpoint...and aspiration toward change” under capital; the proletariat is always “a figure of resistance” but also one of “ambivalence...*at once inside and outside commodification*” (36). Chow reads this ambivalence as stemming from how “labor itself – the very source of the proletariat’s humanity and soul – has been constructed by Lukács simultaneously as a historical process (what pertains to social practice) and as an a priori, originary condition (what transcends biology and distinguishes man

essentially from animals... ‘humanity’ and ‘soul’ are, for him, constituted by the implicit, ahistorical concept of labor-as-(human)-essence” (38). According to Chow’s reading, Lukács’s ambivalent figuration produces ethnicity as a modernist captivity narrative in which the oppressed must set free their humanity (their inner, ahistorical human essence), “whose salvation lies in resistance and protest, activities that are aimed at ending exploitation (and boundaries) and bringing universal justice” and who must progress from the captivity of oppression through self-awareness to liberation (47). For Chow, at the moment Lukács must theoretically account for and historicize the source of class consciousness and proletarian resistance, he relies on the ahistorical idealization of “labor,” “humanity,” and the human “soul.”

Despite its contradictions, this narrative remains one of the most influential analytical models for understanding “subjectivity-in-exploitation” and is the basis of “numerous contemporary versions of identity-based critical thinking” (40). Theorizing ethnicity for Chow is also troubled by the conceptual universal/particular ambivalence of the modernist understanding of the term ethnicity in which, on the one hand, everyone is ethnic and so we should tolerate all difference and, on the other, only certain people are ethnic, held captive by their particular (foreign) histories. This incommensurability is resolved by those who defined themselves as universally tolerant by othering, or ethnicizing, those who are deemed intolerant and so, “the ethnicity that vows to tolerate all ethnic differences, too, grounds itself in a fundamental act of intolerance” (41). In her example, then, of trade negotiations between the U.S. and China, China becomes ethnicized as those who are intolerant to even (and especially) their own oppressed ethnic subjects. To secure trade, the Chinese must “act as victims – to protest and struggle continually for what has been stolen from them – for the entire world to see” (48).

Reading Lukács’s model of class consciousness in, through, and against Max Weber’s ideas about the role of the Protestant work ethic in producing capitalist subjects allows Chow to historicize Lukács’s idealization of “humanity.” The “theoretical stereotype” that assumes an essential humanity that must be released from oppression through protest that leads to liberation is, in Michael Pickering’s words, a kind of “denial of history” that Chow argues Weber fills back in. Pickering defines the “stereotypical Other” as a “denial of history” that makes stereotypes seem universal. Like a Barthean “myth,” the “representation of cultural signs as essential types has a morally normative effect in rendering them as natural, absolute, and invariable” (48). To re-historicize the denied history of this “theoretical stereotype, rather than suggesting that labor and resistance are part and parcel of what it means to be human, Weber shows how they are “economic as well as theological in construct” and that the economic relations of capitalism subsume the theological tenets of Protestantism as “psychological sanction” of hard work (44-45). In Chow’s words: “Whereas the ‘soul’ and ‘humanity’ in Lukács function as that mysterious something that remains outside the worker’s existence as a commodity, Weber would put this very ‘soul’ and ‘humanity’ back in history – an entrepreneurial history, in fact, in which protest and struggle can be part of the route to worldly compensation, advancement, and validation” (46). For Lukács, then, resistance and protest are part of a progress narrative whose telos is the emergence of class consciousness, whereas for Weber this narrative is “what constitutes the efficacy of the capitalist spirit”; that is, “resistance and protest, when understood historically, are part and parcel of the structure of capitalism; they are the reason capitalism flourishes” (47). It is through all of these readings that Chow can make her final point that while ethnicity continues to be grounded in modernist narratives of protest and liberation, this narrative seems to be transforming into one in which what is “proclaimed to be human” must

also “take on the significance of a commodity, a commodified spectacle” so that “ethnic struggles have become...an indisputable symptom of the thoroughly and irrevocably mediatized relations of capitalism and its biopolitics”; ethnicity is inscribed as part of the spectacular workings of capital rather than part of its undoing (48). So, “it is incumbent upon us to understand the historical affinity between Protestantism and capitalist entrepreneurship as such, an affinity whose rationale may be ultimately paraphrased as ‘I protest, therefore I am’: the more one protests, the more work, business, and profit one will generate, and the more this will become a sign that one is loved by God” (49). For Chow, not only is the “ethnic” always figured as protesting his/her oppressive capture within an alienating capitalist social formation in order to escape it, but this protesting and resistance is, in fact, a lubricant for the gears of global capital that produce (indeed, are founded on) the oppressions s/he is protesting in order to escape.

³ According to the records of the Tuskegee Institute (the most complete source of statistics of lynching in the U.S.) the two decades with the most number of lynchings were the decade that Jim Crow Laws were passed, 1890-99 and the decade directly after the end of the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation, 1865-1869 (which is only a partial decade yet has far more lynchings than any other decade, at least 1500 people were lynched during those five years, including both African Americans and white abolitionists (who were one of the original targets of lynching)).

⁴ Sander Gilman elaborates the way that the stereotyped is always the “antithesis” of the “self” doing the stereotyping in his psychoanalytic analysis of stereotyping in

⁵ The idea that slavery kept Blacks from their primitive state has been prominent since at least since the 1889 book *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* by the Virginian historian Philip Bruce, which describes how slaves “cut off from the spirit of White society” regressed to a primitive state that “found something strangely alluring and seductive in the appearance of White women” (qtd in Giddings 27). According to Philip Dray, Bruce believed that the rape of white women was not only a sign of regression to a primitive state but “an expression of vengeance by black men against their former masters” (100). The Black man is “not merely content with the consummation of his purpose,” Bruce writes, “but takes that fiendish delight in the degradation of his victim which he always shows when he can wreak his vengeance upon one whom he has hitherto been compelled to fear” (qtd in Dray 100).

⁶ The scene when he “flees the raped white woman” ends with a reference to his suicide (“he was falling”) and his own acknowledgement that his violent behavior toward Leona and their relationship in general (which leads him to “pick fights with white men” as a kind of attack or and/or punishment by those accusing him of being a rapist) leads to his understanding of his situation as a “prison” in which he can’t call for help. I want to include this long quote as a footnote in the interest of full disclosure of details that work against my argument.

Sometimes, when she said that there was nothing wrong in being colored, he answered,

“Not if you a hard-up white lady.”

The first time he said this, she winced and said nothing. The second time she slapped him. And he slapped her. They fought all the time. They fought each other with

their hands and their voices and then with their bodies: and the one storm was like the other. Many times – and now Rufus sat very still, pressing the darkness against his eyes, listening to the music – he had suddenly, without knowing that he was going to, thrown the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, pinned her against a table or a wall; she beat at him weakly, moaning, unutterably abject; he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most. I was not love he felt during these acts of love: drained and shaking, utterly unsatisfied, he fled the raped white woman into the bars. In these bars no one applauded his triumph or condemned his guilt. He began to pick fights with white men. He was thrown out of bars. The eyes of his friends told him that he was falling. His own heart told him so. But the air through which he rushed was his prison and he could not even summon the breath to call for help. (53)

⁷ This question also refers back to the moment when Rufus hears repeatedly in his head the lyrics “Do you love me?” during a saxophone solo he is accompanying on the drums. He first hears: “*Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?*” and then the questions gets different emphases, “And, again, *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?* This, anyway, was the question Rufus heard” (8).

⁸ I say “seems to” here because Rufus never actually jumps off the bridge but rather “the wind took him, he felt himself going over, head down” (88).

⁹ Baldwin even gestures to the acknowledgement of something like Leona’s agency when he shows Rufus’s awareness of her potential agency early in their meeting: “Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off” (13). Since her agency – her “person” with a “story” – was “trouble,” he puts it out of his mind. This gets repeated after their sex when “he wanted to hear her story. And he wanted to know nothing more about her” (22).

¹⁰ Pickering’s main conceptual thrust in *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* is to shift the object of analysis from the evaluation of the stereotype’s truthfulness in the classical view to the analysis of the stereotype’s representational logics, which he names the “dilemma of stereotyping.” The “dilemma which the stereotype faces” is “to resort to one-sided representations in the interests of order, security and dominance, or to allow for a more complex vision, a more open attitude, a more flexible way of thinking. Stereotyping functions precisely in order to forget this dilemma” (3-4). The power of the stereotype is not that it answers this dilemma for us but that it mystifies and disappears the question “Should we stereotype this person or not?” altogether. When faced with an Other we don’t even stop to think about whether we should stereotype them or not; instead, our evaluative apparatus shifts immediately to stereotyping *because the stereotype’s representational logics make it the first and only option of evaluation*. In this way, stereotyping names a “short cut in representing a sense of order” and “attempts to deny any flexible thinking...in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds” because “the comfort of inflexibility which stereotypes provide reinforces the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed” (3). The denial of flexible thinking is always in the interest of upholding status quo of social hierarchies and power

relations. Stereotypes are always in the service of legitimizing those in power. Also, Pickering suggests that contradictions in stereotyping reveal what gets disappeared: “the paradoxical features of stereotyping are the visible traces of the condition of the dilemma it has attempted to make invisible, and this condition always connects back to the ways in which order and power interact” (4). The contradictions within the process of stereotyping, which for Pickering involves the stereotypes “illusion of precision in defining and evaluating people” as well as the idea that there is a choice in this dilemma (we can think more critically or we can rely on stereotypes) that is not really a choice because it gets made for us by the stereotype, reveal how the dilemma provides a way to trace the relations of power that necessitate and/or uphold any particular stereotype.

¹¹ For a longer discussion of this point see Matt Bell’s psychoanalytic reading of the novel in “Black Ground, Gay Figure: Working through *Another Country*, Black Power, and Gay Liberation.”

¹² LeRoy and Rufus are African American. Yves is Eric’s French lover who, though most describe as white, I find to be at least certainly racially ambiguous. He is described as having a “body...as brown as bread,” with “dark, salty odors” and “brown hair” above a “grave, brown, affectionate face” (184, 190). His eyes are described as “very black and bright” and “dark and enormous” (214, 222). These descriptors coupled with the fact that he is the only non-American in the novel imply a racialized body.

¹³ According to Vivaldo, “She never lets me forget I’m white, she never lets me forget I’m black” (340).

¹⁴ The connection between Vivaldo, Rufus, and Ida gets elaborated in one scene where Vivaldo and Ida are talking about Rufus and Eric. When Ida says that sex with Eric would “make [Rufus] as sick as he is,” Vivaldo defends them and says, ““You’re never going to forgive me, are you? for your brother’s death’... ‘I loved your brother, too, Ida. You don’t believe that, I know but I did. But he was just a man, baby. He wasn’t a saint.’” In defense to this comment, Ida the racial sexual violence white men, including Vivaldo, perpetrate on Black bodies: “I never said he was a saint. I’m black, too, and I know how white people treat black boys and girls. They think you’re something for them to wipe their pricks on” (324).

¹⁵ After being what Cass classifies as “attacked” by some “colored boys,” one of their sons asks Richard if the attack was racially-motivated: “Why would they want to do a thing like that, Daddy?...Is it because they’re colored and we’re white? Is that why?” Richard answers by saying, “the world is full of all kinds of people, and sometimes they do terrible things to each other, but – that’s not why” (243). Later, as the boys are being cared for by their mother in another room, Richard’s opinion changes: “Little black bastards...Why the hell can’t they take it out on each other” (244). With this epithet, he vilifies the black youths, simultaneously pathologizing them for not being able to adequately deal with “it”(able to be read as frustration at the violence of living in a society structured around their oppression) and advocating segregation (they should only be violent to “each other”). After professing the liberal equality of a “world...full of all kinds of people,” Richard’s racialized diatribe reveals how his views on race

are actually similar to how Myrdal constructs the “problem.” While ostensibly professing and believing in the “American Creed,” in reality Richard is incapable of thinking about race in America as anything other than a problem for whites.

¹⁶ Most famously, this is Eldridge Cleaver’s issue with Baldwin’s representation of Rufus in “Notes on a Native Son.”

¹⁷ The Latin translation, “red-haired,” also connects him to the redheaded Eric, with whom he has a sexual relationship.

Chapter Two:
The Mask of the Mammy:
Stereotypes and the Gendered Logics of Image and Text in *12 Million Black Voices*

The term stereotype comes to us from the milieu of print culture; however, in practice, one could argue that the stereotype became newly energized and solidified due to its prevalence and circulation in visual culture, particularly photography. Photographs make their (human) subject matter into pure representation, relying on stereotyping to make those representations intelligible even as the viewer/reader of those images relies on stereotypes to read them. Due to this reliance on typing, photography and visual culture is a privileged site through which to track the representational logics of stereotype. Photography had its heyday in America in the 1930s and 1940s, which was also a moment in racial history leading up to the crisis in America and global racial formation that Howard Winant calls the “racial break.” The interwar years involved black soldiers returning to race riots, the U.S. continuing its imperialist climb to global superpower, and the rise of fascism. During and after WW II, gender and racial politics in America were being challenged by the previously disenfranchised men and women recruited during the war effort being now asked to leave the workforce. The “racial break” came when anticolonial and antiracist movements solidified, the Cold War began, and populations migrated from the global South to the cities of the North. In *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, Richard Wright uses the history of this “Great Migration” as a way to engage the stereotypes that continued to define African Americans at this time. He is particularly interested in re-presenting the prevailing stereotypical discourse that defines racialized others as “primitive,” as the uncivilized, unable-to-progress constitutive Other to

America's narrative of civilization and progress. Wright's reliance on gendered stereotypes to continue to define African American women as primitive in order to re-present African American as progressing and civilizing and "men in the making" of American modernity is somewhat contradicted by the visual images chosen for the text. However, contextualizing this feminist reading within the documentary discourse of the U.S. state reveals the slippery nature of the intractable stereotype.

12 Million Black Voices is a photo-textual essay using photographs from the Historical Section-Photographic of the Farm Security Administration, whose primary function was to publicize the need and results of Roosevelt's 'New Deal' reform programs. This photo-text is a collaboration between Richard Wright, who wrote the documentary text and helped select the images, Edwin Rosskam, who arranged and designed the book, and the many federally-employed photographers whose pictures are included. One of many photo-documentary books produced in cooperation with the FSA, *12 Million Black Voices* is the only one that focuses primarily on a discussion and photographic depiction of the African American experience. The images in the text illustrate Wright's re-narrativization of African American progress into modern "historical consciousness." The relationship of word to image elicits a reading that centers on how the text enters into the visual discourse of race in America as well as how it re-presents racial stereotypes and re-views this state archive of images. This chapter will adopt some of Kobena Mercer's practices of reading black cultural production – particularly his insights on enunciation and contextualization – to engage a reading of the representational logics of Wright's text.

The “File”: The Conditions of Production of *12 Million Black Voices*

Executive Order 7027 established the Resettlement Administration (RA), whose primary responsibility was the relocation of dislocated and unemployed farmers, ranchers, and rural workers from the ‘Dust Bowl’ and other devastated farmlands to areas with better employment opportunities. The RA was headed by Columbia economist Rexford G. Tugwell, part of Roosevelt’s team of advisors known as the “Brain Trust,” and he chose his mentee at Columbia, Roy Stryker, to supervise the photographic section of the HS. The Historical Section (HS) of the Information Division was established in 1935 to educate the public and foster congressional support for the RA. The images commissioned by the Historical Section were meant to be used as visual evidence for “reports by a battery of economists, sociologists, statisticians, photographers, and other specialists” to be distributed in support of the RA programs that “assist the poorest farmers” (Fleischhauer and Brannan 3, 2). The RA programs resettled U.S. citizens (mostly to urban or newly created suburban centers); built and maintained migrant camps; and managed the land (including flood and erosion control). Other RA programs “helped establish rural cooperative enterprises, constructed three model suburban communities called greenbelt towns, and carried out rehabilitation programs that offered grants and loans to tenants and small farmers,” all of which functioned mostly to “ease the pain caused by structural changes already under way in American society” (Fleischhauer and Brannan 2). The RA also compiled an extensive archive of still photographs – the “file” as it came to be called – and “supplied copies of the pictures for news releases, put out a variety of internal and external publications, and prepared a wide range of exhibits” (Fleischhauer and Brannan 3).

In 1937, poorly funded as an independent agency with no legislative mandate and under attack for its “socialist” programs, the RA, along with the Historical Section, was folded into the

Department of Agriculture and renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA continued the work of rural relief and land-use administration while also focusing on the relief of poverty in more than rural, agriculture communities. Although Tugwell resigned at this point, Stryker stayed and continued the work of collecting photos with even more focus on publicizing the federal aid programs. Under Stryker's guidance at the FSA the file flourished to between 65,000 and 80,000 images¹ and had two related goals. The first, similar to its RA mandate, was to produce and distribute "project shots," photographs used to publicize and build public support for the 'New Deal' programs that were meant to alleviate the poverty resulting from the 'Great Depression.'² But because he "understood that pictures merely celebrating agency successes would build little support," Stryker also wanted the photographic images to represent "the problems the agency was trying to solve," the conditions of rural agriculture depression, drought, and mechanization in agriculture that had left workers jobless (Fleischhauer and Brannan 3). While at the FSA, though, the photographic subject matter expanded to include not only the conditions of rural poverty but also a new emphasis on "introducing America to Americans" by depicting the nostalgic ideals of "small town America" that Stryker thought would be regenerative for a society stricken by economic hardship. It also now had a new educative function of progressive reform that introduced America – particularly its changing working class – to the new values and new ways of being (and being managed) that were necessary in a corporate-run, technologically-advancing industrialized mode of production.

When the US entered World War II in 1942, the Historical Section entered its final phase. During the war, the section was reassigned to the Domestic Operations Branch of the Office of War Information and the subject matter changed to more propagandist images of, according to one of Stryker's famous "shooting scripts," "pictures of men, women and children who appear as

if they really believed in the U.S.” as well as “shipyards, steel mills, aircraft plants, oil refineries, and always the happy American worker” (Stryker and Wood *In This Proud Land*, qtd in Stange “The Record Itself” 4). Congress finally abolished the Domestic Operations Branch altogether in the summer of 1943 and by September of that year Stryker had resigned to head a documentation survey at Standard Oil Company (whose photographic archive depicting all the ways oil was necessary in America came to rival the FSA file). His final task was to make sure that the file was located at the Library of Congress (headed then by Archibald Mac Leash, who had published *Land of the Free* a book-length poem using FSA photography), where he believe its integrity would not be compromised by the OWI or news agencies. Although the FSA is not the only government agency that produced archives of still photography (the US Department of Agriculture, the Department of Interior, the Soil Conservation Service, the Works Progress Administration, National Youth Administration, and the Civilian Conservation Corps all have significant collections), Stryker’s housing of the FSA archive at the Library of Congress makes it the most accessible to the public.

During its term, the FSA not only produced the iconographic photography that would come to symbolize the particular American ideals of ‘dignity in the face of adversity’ during the Depression era but along the way created some of the most memorable and recognizable images of the 20th century and “redefined the idea of government publicity” while producing a state-sanctioned visual record of the nation at the time (“The Record Itself” 1). It also came to define the artistic and sociological style of social documentary photography in the U.S. As director, Stryker, according to James Curtis, “began to think of himself as a national historian accumulating images for future generations” and “believed that he had a responsibility to educate his public” (10). Stryker’s leadership – some say his total control – over the FSA archive took

many forms, including ownership, selection, and captioning. Photographers were not allowed to keep their own negatives; they became property of the US government and were mailed to Washington, DC to be developed at a central darkroom. Stryker shaped the file through the selection of the images that were to be printed as photographs – he is famous for “killing” what he considered bad negatives by punching holes through them. While most of these destroyed negatives were duplicate images or alternate views of similar subject matter, complaints from the photographers changed the selection process to allow them more input. Photographers were also responsible for the rigorous and researched captioning of their photos because “Stryker insisted that before a print could be placed in the file, it had to bear a detailed caption. Images could not stand alone. “‘The photograph is only the subsidiary, the little brother, of the word,’ he wrote late in life” (Curtis 10). After the photographers captioned the pictures, they were sent back to Washington for caption editing, mounted (with their captions), and organized in the “file” in to “lots” based on state and subject matter³.

Most famously Stryker wrote detailed “shooting scripts,” which were suggestions for the photographers of images that he thought would be newsworthy subjects or were needed to fill “gaps in the file” (which was the title of one script)⁴. These scripts would usually have a title stating a broad subject such as “The Small Town,” “Corn and Hogs,” and “The Cattle Industry” followed by a long list of suggested images in outline form ranging from “People on the Street” or “Homes” to more specific requests such as “Women and children waiting for the men” or “Show the better homes area and the area where the poorer people live – show types of homes” and “‘Shack town’ – try to get pictures of each town’s ‘slum’” to seemingly minute details such as “getting a sample of grain for testing” and “close-up of calf’s ear cropped and marked.” Some of the suggestions would have brief explanations: “Garage – This place has taken the place of the

livery stable as the meeting place of the town loafers, the ‘men-about-town.’ Very interesting pictures could be obtained at the garage” (Cohen 158-177). The scripts also “directed photographers to background reading and to local authorities and experts” and resulted in narrative threads that made it easier to offer “picture sets as complete photo-essays to newspapers and magazines” (Stange *Bronzeville* xvii). These scripts were, according to Roskam, “suggestions, not orders,” meant to be generative; Stryker encouraged “tangents” and the photographers to take images as they saw fit when in the field (Roskam 10). Some scripts were even written by the photographers and photo-editors at the FSA. While Stryker did not take a single photograph in the archive, he did establish a network of journalists, editors, and publishers to “ensure FSA photographs were widely seen” (“The Record Itself” 1) and hired some of America’s most famous photographers – whose talent and training far surpassed photographers in other agencies – including Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein (who worked with Stryker since his time at the RA) as well as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Walcott, John Vachon, Carl Mydans, Jack Delano, John Collier, and Edwin Roskam, who provided the “photo direction” for *12 Million Black Voices*.

Most of the photos in *12 Million Black Voices* were taken by FSA photographers – Russell Lee (27), Jack Delano (16), Arthur Rothstein (9), Marion Post (8), Dorothea Lange (7), and Roskam (6) – though several came from the Associated Press and other news agencies. The idea for the book was Roskam’s; having read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Native Son*, he became interested in producing a photo-textual book with Wright that would visualize the Chicago described in Wright’s novel. It is interesting that Wright was chosen to represent Chicago. He was, of course, chosen in part due to his fame as the author of *Native Son*, a novel that represents the trial of Bigger Thomas, an African American man who murdered and was accused of raping

a white woman. It seems likely that Wright was also chosen to write this text for the same reasons Baldwin famously critiques his novel, he had a “protest novel” that represented Bigger not only in the stereotypical ways (as a violent rapist) and sociological ways (as a product of his environment) his white reading public could understand but also as a violent product of his environment that the law, in the end, puts to death. Stryker was not really interested in the collaboration because he wanted to avoid any potential controversy and was more interested in images of white America because he “could make wider use of white than black images” (Natanson 66). After Roskam procured Viking Press as a publisher, though, Stryker supported the project. Roskam was a “visual information specialist” at the FSA and had been “hired solely to design exhibits and promote the use of agency photographs” but he was also responsible for publicity more generally and known for his detailed caption writing and photo editing as well as for creating the first organization system for the file (“The Record Itself” 1). To “promote the use of the agency photographs” included injecting the pictures into the public sphere by designing exhibits – both large museum exhibits and smaller exhibits in schools, libraries, town offices, etc. – as well as distributing photos to periodicals and planning and designing photo-books. Roskam had written and designed photo-textual books before his time at FSA and, while there, had produced *Home Town* with author Sherwood Anderson in 1940. Roskam asked Wright to provide the text of a book of photos and sent him a selection of FSA photos to pique his interest in the project. Wright, meanwhile, had already planned a project “for a series of historical novels telescoping Negro history in terms of the urbanization of a feudal folk” which would represent “the inner complexities and scars that take place when a people are torn away from one culture and are forced to adjust themselves to another” in order to “show in a foreshortened form that the development of Negro life in America parallels the development of

all people everywhere” (Kinnamon 43-45). This plan became the text of *12 Million Black Voices* when “by good luck Rosskam came along and suggested that I write the text for a group of pictures” (Kinnamon 44).

The research and gathering of the “group of pictures” that made up *12 Million Black Voices* was a two-step collaborative process. To gather the images in the first part of the book, Wright “visited Washington early in 1941 to select from FSA holdings, which covered most aspects of southern black agricultural life and labor, looking at thousands to choose the eighty-eight used in the book” (*Bronzeville* xv). While there, Wright and Rosskam worked together on picture selection. According to Wright in a radio broadcast in December of 1941, “Ed Rosskam and I looked at thousands of pictures to get the 90 odd we used in the book” (Kinnamon 43). The pictures for the depiction of the southern folk life came mostly from series of photographs by Dorothea Lange, Jack Delano, Ben Shahn, and others that were already archived in the FSA file. Wright called the file “one of the most remarkable collections of photographs in existence” and remarked that “if you want to get a comprehensive picture of the country, you should go through these files sometime. It’s quite an education” (Kinnamon 43). Most of the images for the last two chapters depicting African American urban life were taken during a two-week trip to Chicago by Rosskam and photographer Russell Lee. Because of the importance of this project, Rosskam left his usual duties at the FSA offices in Washington and took a rare photographic assignment while Lee left another assignment in San Diego just to make the two-week trip. Wright joined Rosskam and Lee briefly on their trip to Chicago, having already started writing the text.⁵ During their collaboration, Rosskam showed some of the images with his detailed captions to Wright while Wright shared with Rosskam drafts of his manuscript. Rosskam provided a wealth of research materials to Wright but another source of information and

guidance for the project came from Wright's friend, sociologist Horace Cayton, director of the Good Shepherd Community Center (who is thanked by Roskam in a note at the end of the book). Cayton provided the files that he and W. Lloyd Warner had gathered at the University of Chicago for their extensive study of black life in 1930s Chicago (sponsored, in part, by Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration). This study would evolve into *Black Metropolis* written by Cayton and St. Clair Drake with a methodological note by Warner and an introduction by Wright. Wright drew heavily on these findings to write the text for *12 Million Black Voices*. There was no "shooting script" for this particular assignment – the "logic of familiar FSA procedures, combined with Wright's and Cayton's guidance, apparently sufficed" (*Bronzeville* xviii). The images taken during this assignment also "filled a gap" in the FSA file; they "greatly increased the FSA's holdings of both African American and urban subject matter – they were, in fact, the project's largest organized coverage of city life." Only nineteen of the images were used in *12 Million Black Voices* and the rest were "apparently not circulated to media outlets" and "never appeared in print before the 1970s" (*Bronzeville* xvi)

For his part, Roskam "helped coordinate the Chicago coverage, arranged meetings with Wright in the summer of 1941 to coordinate an evolving pictorial layout with Wright's evolving text" (Natanson 244). His influence was felt most, though, in the design and layout of the book, which very much uses images to illustrate the written text. According to Nicholas Natanson, in fact, "Roskam was too single-minded in fitting – or bending – FSA pictures to the textual message" (Natanson 249). Natanson goes on to show that to make the images represent the text, Roskam manipulated photos quite a bit "through his visual-textual juxtaposition." He used images that weren't what the text described, such as using an image of a Maryland steelworker to illustrate one of the "Bosses of the Buildings" (on page 118) or the image of a farmer's hands

that illustrates the opening page of “Our Strange Birth,” which is actually a white farmer (on page 9). Roskam also used images out of context. For instance, he used one image of a mother and children from a series that had been shot in which the father was present to illustrate a “deserted” mother. He also airbrushed the little girl on page 110, removing her tongue that had been sticking out at someone, in order to make the image look more serious. None of these alterations of the images were atypical, or even particularly egregious, examples of how images are manipulated in the context of these photo-books or any use, really, of photographic images but all of this work by Roskam, according to Natanson, was in the interest of pairing “muckraking” images with Wright’s text that “raged and roared” (Natanson 247-254).

Wright, Sociology, Marxism, and *12 Million Black Voices*

In his writing of this text, Wright uses what Roderick Ferguson calls “an interesting intersection between sociology and marxism” as an epistemological lens through which to re-historicize the progression of African American economic, social and cultural formations from slavery through reconstruction to the migration to northern urban centers (43). A clue that Wright wants to produce an alternate history comes in the first line of the text: “Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem” (10). To (re)tell this “stranger” history (to a presumably white “you” (because of its difference from “us black folk”), Wright describes how the industrialization and urbanization of African American culture was “an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope”; simultaneously (as the penultimate chapter title suggests) a “death of the city pavements” and the conditions of possibility for class-bound solidarity through which racialized

oppressions would be overcome (11). *12 Million Black Voices* represents Wright's interest in sociology as a way of understanding African American experiences of industrialization and urbanization. The text shows both his interest in the Chicago school's analysis of urban life and the sociological potential for FSA documentary photography to visually represent that life. In his foreword to *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright acknowledges those who supplied him with the "majority of the concepts and interpretations upon which I have relied most heavily in the assembling and writing of this text," namely:

The Negro Family in the United States by E. Franklin Frazier; *Rum, Romance and Rebellion* by Charles W. Taussig; *Sharecroppers All* by Arthur Raper and Ira De A. Reid; *History of the American Negro People, 1619-1918* by Elizabeth Lawson; "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (from the *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume XLIV, Number 1, July 1938) by Louis Wirth; and *Black Workers and the New Unions* by Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell. (*12 Million* xx)

He gives special attention to Horace Cayton for "making available his immense files of material on urban life among the Negroes" and for "advice and guidance which made sections of this book possible" (xx). Wright would later write the introduction to Horace Clayton and St. Clair Drake's sociological analysis of African American urban life, *Black Metropolis*. In fact, in Michel Fabre's exhaustive list of Wright's reading, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers*, one entry reads: "On Nov. 30, 1944, Wright suggested the following books as 'important in order to know the American Negro': *An American Dilemma*; *Strange Fruit*; *The Winds of Fear*; *Rendezvous with America*; *Black Metropolis*" (Fabre 159). In the introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright discusses the influences of sociology on his own thinking and writing: "It was from the scientific findings of men like Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth

that I drew meanings for my documentary book *12 Million Black Voices*, for my novel *Native Son*; it was from their scientific facts that I absorbed some of that quote of inspiration necessary for me to write *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*" (Introduction to *Black Metropolis* xviii). Part of Horace Cayton's specific advice and guidance, according to David Bradley's introduction to the 1988 edition of the *12 Million Black Voices*, came in the form of discussions that helped Wright develop his Marxist analytic, specifically his "idea that the forces that affected black life in America were different manifestations of property ownership – the 'Lords of the Land' in the agrarian South and the 'Bosses of the Buildings' in the industrial North" (*12 Million* xv).

Along with the insights of sociology, Wright also uses what he calls in his working notes this "guiding Marxist concept" to write the text and choose the photos for *12 Million Black Voices* (qtd in Natanson 246). According to Roderick Ferguson, Wright "drew upon marxism and sociology to narrate the gendered and sexual transgressions inspired by industrial capital" (44). As capital worked to disorganize the gendered and heteronormative social, economic, cultural and familial formations both by feminizing the worker and providing the condition of possibility for women's growing social freedom, Ferguson asserts that Wright called for a "specifically masculine revolutionary agency to oppose that feminization" (45). While Wright ultimately becomes disillusioned with the revolutionary capacity of both sociology and Marxism for analyzing racialized oppression, the written text of *12 Million Black Voices* works to reinforce both the gendered logics of sociology's pathologization of African American women and the gendered division of labor that discursively limits the ability of women to move into the "sphere of conscious history," even as the photographs reveal something different. As Wright's text constitutes the black male laboring body as the privileged potential site for the development of a black modern consciousness, the images reveal – over and against the text that constitutes

their labor as a restriction to their ability to modernize – the emergence of black *women's* agency in attaining this consciousness.

The idea for *12 Million Black Voices* was based on an outline of “historical novels telescoping Negro history in terms of the urbanization of a feudal folk” in order to show how “the development of Negro life in America parallels the development of all people everywhere” (Kinnamon 44). Wright’s written text re-narrativizes a history of African American migration over and against the stereotypical discourses of African Americans prevalent at the time, particularly the stereotype that African Americans are the primitive past to white America historical present (and western civilization’s more generally). In this narration, Wright represents African American migration as a narrative of progress in which there is a “complex movement of a debased feudal folk towards a twentieth-century urbanization” (xix). Wright’s “complex movement” describes an overdetermined exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the urban centers of the North, from an agricultural to an industrial mode of production, and from a racial dictatorship to a racial democracy. Wright is also describing the movement from a “folk” to a “modern” black consciousness which “mov[es] into the sphere of conscious history” (146). This particular narrative of progress constitutes the figure of the black woman’s laboring body (represented as the Mammy stereotype) as immobile, undeveloped, and unprogressive. However, reading the visual history that emerges out of the photographs against the grain of the written history of the text reveals something quite different. Wright’s textual figuration of the black woman is, at moments, in tension with the photographic images chosen to illustrate the text. Often the photographic images and the written text reinforce each other, but just as often photographic images of women contradict the description Wright provides of their roles, intimacies, labor, and agency in attaining a historical consciousness. This chapter will, in

part, focus on three visual/textual constellations to reveal how gender stereotypes are stabilized in the service of unpacking racial stereotypes and to show the contradictions between the visual history and the gendered logics of Wright's written history.

To engage how gender delimits the negotiation of racial categories and the broader historicization of racialized subjects in this particular text, I want to first attempt to outline a critical reading practice that asks representational questions similar to the questions Kobena Mercer asks in "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." Mercer is interested in framing his analysis of cultural production by asking "the question of enunciation – who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate?" which for him "implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference" (181). Similarly, Michael Pickering's analysis in *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* calls for the unpacking of the historical foundations and permutations of stereotypes, of "what meanings matter, or are made to matter," which involves "dealing...not so much with the theoretical question of a knowable social or historical 'real' as with the experientially knowable consequences of symbolic representation...dealing with the questions of who is speaking of whom, at what cost and in what terms" (50-51). Wright's re-narrativization of African American progress can be read as an empowerment of African Americans, a rewriting of history that figures them as modernizing, rather than always already the stereotypical constitutive primitive other to industrialized America. To read this text, along with an analysis of its conditions of production as an FSA project, its content as a re-narrativization of American history, and its form as a photo-text, my main questions are also like Mercer's "question[s] of enunciation" that ask, like Pickering, "who is speaking of whom, at what cost and in what terms." For and to whom is Wright writing this

text? To ask this is to ask first, who is the audience or who are the audiences for the particular form and content of this knowledge production? Is it, for instance, meant to represent African American experience to African Americans? Is it meant to educate African Americans (and perhaps other minoritized populations) about how *some* racial subjects live? Or is it meant to reveal the conditions of living to audiences *other* than the African Americans it represents? Is it a reform or protest text meant to inform white populations about the living conditions of African Americans for the purpose of changing minds and moving them to some kind of action?

Wright's "We": Giving Voice to *12 Million*

One way to begin asking these questions is to unpack to whom Wright may be referring with his continual use of the pronoun "we." Wright's written text speaks for – gives voice to – the 12 million voices of its title through the use of the first person plural "we." Wright explains the use of this particular pronoun in an interview: "one of the reasons why I wrote *12 Million Black Voices* in the first person plural is because I was experimenting with the kind of form I would need for...future work" by which he means the historical novels he was planning to write (Kinnamon 44). He was searching, in other words, for a grammar appropriate for representing the "inner complexities and scars" of the "urbanization of a feudal folk." Not surprisingly this "we" has been a source of critique by many scholars. In "From Eye to We: Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, Documentary, and Pedagogy," Jeff Allred uses the "we" and the "you" it addresses as a starting point for unpacking the politics of representation involved in the reader that this text produces. For Allred, the text is important for its "experimental stance that seeks out new ways of seeing and saying *we*" that is critical of the underlying assumptions of *we, the people*; "*we* never simply issues from *the people*, the democratic totality of the republic' rather

Wright's *we* challenges received notions of geography, history, and identity" (550-1). Allred continues:

Moreover, in place of the *we* constituted by the nation's founding documents, *Black Voices* posits a set of antagonistic subject positions: a (white) *you* whose routine misrecognitions mistake the outer 'garb' for the inner self of the other and a (black) *we* who speaks to readers from the far side of the racial, social, and narrative divide. (552)

Focusing on the "pedagogical aspect" of the text, Allred asserts that "the *we* that narrates has something to teach an implied white readership about blackness" (557).

For other scholars, this first person plural voice is linked to Wright's Marxist analytic and interest in Communism. In her biography of Wright, Constance Webb quotes Wright elaborating this point:

It was not the economics of Communism, not the great power of the trade unions, to the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of experience of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. (119)

Wright's interest in communism was based on the potentiality of proletariat solidarity that would give a "functioning value and role" to African American experience. In other words, according to Leigh George, "the value of Communism for Wright...was its ability to provide him with a single, unifying account of black subjectivity" (George 51). Communism was a way to help explain and analyze African American identity and experience using the category of labor through a Marxist economic analytic and a way to overcome racism along with working class exploitation. Wright soon discovered that, in actuality, Communism spoke less for racialized

others than it did for a white working class and that racism was as prevalent in the labor movement as it was in America at the time and famously broke with the Communist party, like many other fellow travelers.

Leigh George and Nicholas Natanson call into question the gendered assumptions of a unified black collectivity and identity in Wright's text. George explores the changing signification of this *we*:

At the beginning of part 1, "Our Strange Birth," the 'we' is introduced to the reader as 'us black folk,' a unanimous, undifferentiated mass. However, despite this initial homogeneity, the voice is subsequently particularized, again and again, at various points throughout the book, continually slipping back and forth between collective uniformity and particular identity. Whether sexed, aged, within familial relations, or within an occupation, the identity of the 12 million black voices is constantly qualified, undercutting the universality of the black folk and the 'we.' Insofar as the voice of the narrative is unstable, it cannot be traced to any single identity within any finality. However, amid this identity crisis, black men mark an especially resonant site for the voice. (George 59)

The image on the title page of "Our Strange Birth" actually begins the undermining of this African American "identity" and the "universality of the black folk" as it is actually a photograph of a white farmer. Nonetheless, George mounts a familiar critique of identity categories that attempt to represent collectivities, namely that the identity assumed by the pronoun *we* in this text is necessarily impossible to universalize because it, too, intersects with multiple social categories that fragment any attempt to speak for a unified, homogenized group. Nicholas Natanson is in agreement that "it was a flawed 'we' in practice." Most "problematic"

for Natanson is the “adoption of the ‘we’ voice for the masses, past and present, northern and southern. Wright shifted, without acknowledging the implications of the shift, between an all-encompassing voice and an obviously male voice, between a cross-generational voice and an obviously parental voice” (Natanson 247). Natanson supports the idea that this *we* is decidedly not unified but is shaken and fragmented by many different categories, including especially, I would argue, gender. Whatever other class, geographic, generational, or familial categories it may indicate or signify, I want to focus on how the “we” throughout the text is most often male. This is evidenced by close attention to the grammar of the many times throughout the writing that “we,” “us,” and “our” are used to describe certain experiences, which are in contradistinction to the experiences listed that “women” have in the text. For one example, “When a gang of *us* was sold from one plantation to another, *our wives* would sometimes be kept by the Lords of the Land and *we men* would have to mate with whatever *slave girl* we chanced upon” (35, my emphasis). The sentence begins with an adverbial subordinate clause that includes the phrase “gang of us.” This “gang” quickly gets gendered in the two independent clauses that follow it. The subject “our wives” already indicates the masculinity of this *we*; the subject and object of the second clause – “we men” and “slave girl” respectively – continues the masculine gendering of the pronouns in this sentence. This is only one of many grammatical indications of the gendering logics of the text and the primary agents of social change in Wright’s narrative of progress are men.

The Mask of the Mammy: The Gendered Logics of Image and Text

The representation of African American women’s difference from African American men begins almost immediately with the gendered description of labor. A list of stereotypical African

American jobs is followed by images depicting examples of these with captions written by Wright. The images used to illustrate “the black maid,” “the black industrial worker,” “the black stevedore,” “the black dancer,” “the black waiter” and “the black sharecropper” gender the labor as the maid and dancers pictured are women and the industrial worker, the stevedore and the waiter are men. The sharecropper image shows a man and a woman, but soon after this image, in Wright’s analysis of the material conditions of post-Reconstruction African American economic formation, women get figured primarily as domestic laborers.

Wright describes the conditions of the post-Reconstruction economic formation of sharecropping by discussing how men “roamed” the land and women were immobilized by their relationship to domesticity, family and the home. While men were “glad to be free,” and “test[ed] that freedom” by “tramp[ing] from place to place for the sheer sake of moving, looking, wondering,” women, who “fared easier than men during the early days of freedom” and whose “relationship to the world was more stable than [men’s],” remained the “authority...of our families” and the “arbiter in our domestic affairs” (36). The reason, according to Wright, that women “fared easier,” had a more “stable” relationship to the world and had “authority” in their homes was their “enforced intimacy with the Lords of the Land” (37). Because women had “worked in the ‘Big Houses’ of the Lords of the Land and had learned manners, had been taught to cook, sew, and nurse,” they “enjoyed a status denied us men, being called ‘Mammy’” (36-7). Wright’s Mammy figure reduces black women and their experiences of slavery and of Reconstruction economic and labor formations into “symbols of motherhood” (37). For Wright, the Mammy figure is a gendered and sexualized racial type forged from the gendered knowledges, sexual violence, and labor practices black women experienced through their “enforced intimacy” with plantation owners during and after slavery.⁶ The text reconciles this

sexual violence with the history of migration it represents by describing how women benefited from these experiences. The sexual violence enacted on female slaves is not understood as gendered and/or racial violence but as part of what makes black women's experience under slavery *better* than men's. In Wright's figuration, slave women – through their “enforced intimacy” with their owners – are somehow able to use sexual violence to obtain their “more stable” relationship with the world by learning the domestic duties (“manners...to cook, sew, and nurse”) that allow them to “enjoy” the “status” of Mammy – a status that signifies, simultaneously, black women as “symbols of motherhood,” as the authority in matriarchal kinship systems, and as domestic laborers (always read as “easier” than the physicality of field work).

In Wright's text, the sexual “violation of the black female body in slavery” remains not only under-theorized as part of the structural violence of slavery's racial dictatorship but actually becomes part of how and why black women inhibit the emergence of a masculine Black consciousness. Women's experience of slavery and Reconstruction gets rendered not as necessary negotiations of gendered and racial violence, not as a symptom of structural violence, but as a threat to African American masculinity. The sexual violence enacted on the female slave body – “the Lords of the Land often took them for their pleasure” – becomes a problem for African American men: “During slave days they did not always belong to us...[w]hen a gang of us was sold from one plantation to another, our wives would sometimes be kept by the Lords of the Land and we men would have to mate with whatever slave girl we chanced upon” (37). There is no pretense in the written text that women are anything but objects that “belong” to men to be exchanged between them – whether the exchange is “enforced” or not, women are only the “wives” of slave men or “kept” by plantation owners or “slave girls...chanced upon” with which

wife-less male slaves “would have to mate.” Similarly, the “authority” afforded black women as the “arbiters” and heads of households because of their non-heteronormative status as Mammies is rendered a blockage to patriarchal power because only when they “were freed and had moved to cities where cash-paying jobs enabled” them were men able to “become the heads of [their] own families” (37). Here Wright continues the common pathologization of the matriarchal power that results from African American women surviving a gendered racial formation that limits their opportunities.

The photograph accompanying the textual figuration of the Mammy – captioned as “Rural Negro family on their porch” – is a “mask,” as Roland Barthes defines it, making the particular African American woman’s face it portrays “into a product of a society and of its history” (34). The photographic image epitomizes the text that epitomizes the Mammy as the salient experience of black women under slavery and Reconstruction. Representing the history of black women and black women’s labor through the racial and sexual type of the Mammy elides both the history of violence done to the black female body and the history of women’s labor other than domestic. In a reading of *12 Million Black Voices* used to discuss how Anne Petry’s fiction works against Wright’s depiction of women, Robin Lucy notes that this figuration of black women as Mammies “clearly obfuscates the articulation between economic control and the violation of the black female body in slavery while it also obscures the fact that, as Angela Davis writes, most black women, like men, were field laborers” (7). The written textual history in which slave women’s “enforced intimacy” with the “Lords of the Land” engendered black women’s multiply-determined definition as sexual object, “mother,”⁷ matriarch, and domestic laborer is in tension with the visual history told through the photographic images.

The Mammy as a gendered, racial and sexual type figures black women's labor as primarily domestic. In fact, Wright's Marxist analysis of African American labor practices adheres to an un-interrogated gendered division of labor as it is incapable of engaging women's labor as anything other than domestic. The photo accompanying this section of text would seem to corroborate this gendered labor history. The photo shows an elderly woman, sitting on the porch step, behind her is a young girl-child sitting on a chair whose face is in the shadows and a young boy-child staring down at the elderly woman's legs, wearing a cap, a coat and a shirt whose sleeves are too long for his arms. Though she is too old to be their mother, she is a "symbol of motherhood" keeping watch over the children. However, this photographic image epitomizing black women's domestic labor also works, on its own and in tandem with other images in the text, as a visual index of the histories the text works to elide. If the Barthean "studium" of this photo can be described as "entering into the photographer's intentions" of depicting black women's labor as purely domestic, the "punctum" of this photo, that "accident which pricks" the viewer and "disturb[s]" the studium, is the elderly woman's hands, which reveal her labor to be more than domestic (Barthes 26-7). The hands are large and worn, hands made strong by the physical labor of working in the fields. The image of her hands resonates with the photo that opens *12 Million Black Voices*. Captioned as "Sharecropper's hands," the photo is a headless portrait of a man holding a farm implement between large, dirty hands. While Wright's text works to define women's labor as primarily domestic, the images of the book, including the illustration of the "sharecroppers" in the textual and visual list that begins the book, show women laboring in the fields. Of the 15 images of people working in the fields, seven include women (pages 23, 24, 31, 52, 53, 80, 81).⁸ The history read out of the photographs against the grain of the written text works to undo the gendered logics of the written

history by revealing women's labor history to include, along with the domestic labor they "enjoyed" through their "status" as Mammy (a benefit of their sexual violation), their labor in the fields as slaves and as sharecroppers.

Wright's argument about progressing from rural folk to urban industrialized citizens *relies on* figuring women as Mammies, as only racialized sexualized stereotypes that do not progress. They are the constitutive other of African American men whose labor, in order to enter into what Wright calls "conscious history," must be compared to the fixed position of African American women in their positions as domestic labor, a fixity reflected in the unchanging stereotype of the Mammy, used to describe these women during slavery and during the time of Wright's writing. Work since *12 Million Black Voices* has uncovered the relations of power and regimes of truth and representation that would allow the stereotype of the Mammy to even be comprehensible. These works understand the Mammy stereotype as a legitimization of the violence – including "enforced intimacy" – done to African American women. According to Jane Campbell "The mammy stereotype, one which typified stoic endurance, was, of course, both limited and harmful, justifying abusive treatment of black women on the grounds that they were impervious to pain" (Campbell 20). Hazel Carby asserts in *Reconstructing Womanhood* that "the institution of slavery is now widely regarded as the source of stereotypes about the black woman," a point with which Angela Davis and Hortense Spillers would agree (20). These women of color feminist critiques engage the stereotype of black women's sexuality by unpacking the social relations and contradictions mystified by the stereotype as well as revealing how slavery is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the stereotypes of black female sexuality. In "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood" Davis analyzes how this stereotype also glosses the "institutionalized pattern of rape" which was "a weapon of

domination...repression whose covert goal was to extinguish women's will to resist" (23-24). This "weapon" was transformed into the idea that "slave women welcomed and encouraged the sexual attentions of white men" and through this stereotype "sexual exploitation" became "miscegenation" (25). Carby's work discusses how stereotypes of black women's sexuality reveal something about those that are *not* defined through that stereotype and can only be read in relation to, for instance, the social definition of white slave mistresses and the cult of true womanhood, which is defined, in part, as the opposite of black female sexuality. This reveals, as Homi Bhabha points out, that in a particular historical moment, the stereotypes seen as "positive and negative" might actually be part of the same circuits of power and rely on the same foundations of domination. It reveals, for instance, that the stereotype of black female sexuality and the cult of true womanhood are both part of a patriarchal plantation slavery system. A long quote from Carby's reading of Blassingame's *The Slave Community* brings out the power of genealogical critique in understanding the stereotype of black women's sexuality:

A slave women, he argued, could be 'neither pure nor virtuous'; existing in circumstances of sexual subordination, 'women were literally forced to offer themselves willingly' to their masters. The interpretive ambivalence evident in the juxtaposition of 'forced' and 'willingly' indicates the spectrum of representation of the female slave from victim to active collaborator and a historical reluctance to condemn as an act of rape what is conceived in patriarchal terms to be sexual compliance. It is not an exaggeration to state that the formation of stereotypes of black female sexuality has been reproduced unquestioningly in contemporary historiography even where other aspects of the institution of slave have been under radical revision. (Carby 21-22).

This quote discusses how the stereotype of black women's sexual availability figures rape as

compliance and resolves the contradictions in the definition of the “gentleman” slaveowner who rapes his slaves. For Saidiya Hartman, stereotypes of black women’s sexuality are also the constitutive other of white male slaveowners because they not only make “rape simply unimaginable because of purported black lasciviousness, but also its repression was essential to the displacement of white culpability” onto black criminality (79). These genealogies reveal how the conditions that make possible the stereotype of black women’s sexuality when these works were published in the late 1980s were actually the plantation slavery system and that the legacy of this stereotype shapes the stereotypes of deviant hypersexuality in African American women since then.

While these women of color feminist texts unpack these legacies, Wright’s analysis of racial stereotypes continues to fix women as only the stereotype of Mammies. The figure of the black woman as Mammy carries through into the chapter that describes the material conditions of African Americans after the migration to Chicago. Women’s labor remains, in the textual account, primarily domestic, which Wright claims makes black women “the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives” because “their orbit of life is narrow – from the kitchenette to the white folk’s kitchen and back home again” (131). The two images used to illustrate this text work well to make visible that “surrounding our black women are many almost insuperable barriers: they are black, they are women, they are workers; they are triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts” (131). The images are laid out in a two-page spread with the women in each image facing toward each other (132-133). One image shows an African American woman at home in a kitchenette with a young black male (perhaps a son or kin of some kind) while the other shows an African American woman feeding a white toddler in a suburban kitchen (depicting, among other things, the black woman’s

“enforced intimacy” with the “Bosses of the Buildings,” which are the Northern counterpart to the South’s “Lords of the Land”). The kitchenette is dirty – the lower walls are dark, the upper white stucco walls are dingy, the white kettle is stained with soot and the wood stove is black. In the other photo, as if the images are negatives of each other, the kitchen and all its appliances are clean and primarily white. The only similarity in the photos is that each Black woman is attending to a child and engaging in the domestic labor of caring for children; the “mask” of the Mammy continues to define the experience of the black women. The design of the image puts the figures at opposite ends of the photo layout, both looking down at the children who constitute a center, as if to show how their laboring bodies are part of their circumscription centering on their mothering care of the child. The two women are constructed as their own “insuperable barriers” that “anchor” and “restrict” their “movements.”

In Wright’s Marxist analysis of urban social formations, the gendered division of labor remains unchallenged as his narrative of progress describes African American industrialization, which he calls “the beginning of living on a new and terrifying place of consciousness” (99). In this “new and terrifying place of consciousness,” women’s domestic labor is figured as the same as it was in the South, while men’s labor practices become part of a modern industrial economic formation:

Our work inside the homes of the Bosses of the Buildings does not differ greatly from the work we did in the homes of the Lords of the Land. But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. (117)

This description is followed by a list of jobs held by men – “[w]e load and unload the ships and trains, demolish and erect buildings, wheel barrows of cement and sand, pound steel spikes into

miles of railroad track, lay brick, drive heavy trucks of lumber and gravel, butcher hogs and sheep and cattle, dig ore, and mine coal” (117-118). Black women are, in the words of Robin Lucy, “confined to the margins of historical change,” in part because “Black motherhood and domestic work” gets equated with “pre-revolutionary or pre-modern forms of consciousness since they were, in the urban environment, but permutations of the familial and economic roles of Black women in the South” (2, 6). Wright’s figuration of women’s labor roles as unchanged after the Great Migration defines them as non-progressive agents in the narrative of progress toward a modern Black consciousness. In fact, to Wright, “the consciousness of vast sections of our black women lies beyond the boundaries of the modern world, though they live and work in that world daily” (135). The figure of the Mammy, though she “live[s] and work[s]” in the “modern” world “daily,” is a stagnant historical constant.

The economic stagnation of their consciousness works in conjunction with other ways black women’s identities are figured as non-progressive. Wright’s text continues by saying that, in their “narrow” circumscribed “orbit of life,” the only outlet for “emotional security and the release of their personalities” is the church, which “they love...more than do our men, who find a large measure of the expression of their lives in the mills and factories” (131). In Wright’s account, in contrast to the industrial labor that typifies men’s productive engagement with modernity, religion becomes a way black women negotiate the modernity that they cannot enter by harkening back to the past. Black women’s religious expression is “nurtured in the close and intimate folk culture of the South”⁹ and the “store front” churches allow them to “perform their religious rituals on the fervid levels of the plantation revival” (134-5). Along with their religious connection to the past, black women are constructed *as* the past because it is the “elderly black women” who retain in their “withered bodies” the “burden of our folk wisdom” (37) and who are

“hungry for the South but afraid to return” (135). Black women, in the written text, cannot (in fact, don’t want to – after all, their lives are “easier” than men’s thanks to their connection to the Lords and Bosses) modernize and become part of the modern black consciousness that will lead to liberation.

Gendered Discourse of Nationalism in Wright’s Folk History

The gender stereotypes Wright relies on in his re-narrativization of African American history are not new or novel; this cultural representation of women had been circulating long before *12 Million Black Voices* was written. The representation of African American women as the un-progressive blockage to African American men’s progress toward modern historical consciousness rehearses the ways women have been represented in the gendered discourses of nationalism that have been revealed and critiqued by many feminist scholars. Women’s roles in relation to the nation have been engaged in varying degrees and senses by feminist scholars since, at least, Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Annette Kolodny and Carole Patemen to women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Angela Davis to more recent work by post-colonial and transnational feminists such as Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias, Anne McClintock, and Cynthia Enloe. Yuval-Davis and Anthias outline this critique most succinctly in *Woman – Nation – State*.¹⁰ In their introduction they list the five different ways “women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices”:

- (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities
- (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups
- (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture

(d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories

(e) as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles (7)

Enloe discusses the role of women in nationalist movements in a post/colonial context similarly: “women as symbols, women as workers and women as nurturers have been crucial to the entire colonial experience” (44). Paraphrasing and adding to Yuval-Davis and Anthias’s insights, Enloe maintains that the reason men put such “ideological weight” on “outward attire and sexual purity of women” is that “they see women as 1) the community’s – or the nation’s – most valuable *possessions*; 2) the principle *vehicles* for transmitting the whole nation’s values from one generation to the next; 3) *bearers* of the community’s future generations – crudely, nationalist wombs 4) the members of the community most *vulnerable* to defilement and exploitation by oppressive alien rulers; and 5) most susceptible to *assimilation* and cooption by insidious outsiders” (54). In these ways, women become the material and symbolic producers and reproducers¹¹ of the nation form and the national body. Women are figured here as both reproducers of the population and the keepers and transmitters (to their children) of national tradition, putting them in the somewhat temporally contradictory role of both the future (reproducing new national subjects) and the past (keeping and transmitting national culture to those subjects).

Wright’s depiction of African American men’s progressive march toward becoming (national) subjects with modern historical consciousness relies on his constructing African American women as the Mammy stereotype, a stereotype that indexes the gendered racio-sexual violences of the historical past of slavery. Wright reads the institutionalized rape and sexual

violence done to African American women in their “enforced intimacy” with slaveowners as a *benefit* to slave women and as a *violence* done primarily to African American slave men.¹² As such, African American women in this text are, as Yuval-Davis and Anthias and Enloe all claim, not only figured as the biological, ideological, and symbolic reproducers as well as the boundaries markers (similar to what Hortense Spillers calls “vestibularity”) of the African American collectivities, but are also figured (and vilified) as the (laboring, sexualized, violated) bodily reminder of the racial violences of slavery perpetrated on the entire “ethnic collectivity.”

Wright’s text exemplifies McClintock’s point that “colonized women” hold a particularly vexed position “as slaves, agricultural workers, houseservants, mothers, prostitutes and concubines of the far-flung colonies of Europe, colonized women had to negotiate not only the imbalances of their relations with their own men but also the baroque and violent array of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relations with imperial men and women” (6). Defining and discussing African American women only as Mammies not only marks how these figures have to “negotiate” their relationships with “their own men” and “imperial men and women” but also how their relationships with “imperial men and women” are part of what structures their other relationships. For Wright, this enforced intimacy provides the foundations to the Mammy stereotype, a stereotype that continues to get reproduced in ways that authorize the gendered labor of child caretaking that provides the income in the historical moment Wright engages, which leads to a further emasculation of African American men. These women’s position as Mammies is even further vexed as their labor includes taking care of white children and so presumably being part of the transmission and reproduction of the racial formation that figures them as inferior to the children they raise.

American Progress and the Stereotype of the Primitive

As mentioned, the salient stereotype Wright unpacks in this text is the primitiveness of African American men. Wright constructs a new narrative of African American (male) progress in order to interject into, or at least supplement, the narrative of progress of Western civilization, a narrative founded, in part, on the scientific racisms, colonial discourses, and visual racial discourse that figures racialized bodies and cultures as the “primitive” Other to the West since, at least, the beginnings of European colonization. The “Other” and its forebear the “Colonial Other”¹³ have always been defined as primitive to those that define them. In his book *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, Michael Pickering claims that the “white racial phantasm of the Primitive” is the “primary Other” because “particular stereotypical forms of non-European peoples have been based on the generalised construct of the Primitive,” a construct that is “very much a product of modernity and modern imperialism” (51). Further, while many theorists discuss the primitive stereotype, Pickering explains that “western societies classifying themselves as modern and civilised relied heavily on the contrast between their own sense of advancement and the idea of racially backward and inferior societies” and so, “those who were conceived as *inferior* in this way became *interior* to national identity in the West” (51). Anne McClintock describes how this phenomenon was understood as a “global Family Tree” in which “evolutionary progress was represented as a series of anatomically distinct family types, organized into a linear procession, from ‘childhood’ of ‘primitive’ races to the enlightened ‘adulthood’ of European imperial nationalism” (McClintock 359). The figure of the uncivilized/able primitive became the constitutive other of modern, civilized western culture. The stereotype of primitiveness was produced and deployed to describe and frame this Other and, to Pickering, becomes the ‘ur-stereotype’ on which most others are based. The stereotype of the

primitive can be seen as the salient racial stereotype because other common stereotypes can be seen as instantiations of the primitive stereotype. Stereotypes of hypersexuality, lower intelligence, violent tendencies, irrationality, and laziness were often attributed to their primitive, uncivilized “nature.” Even later “problems” associated with African Americans such as unfit living arrangements, unemployment, and perverse (matriarchal) family structures were often explained through the pathologization of African Americans as primitive – unable to be civilized and reformed – rather than analyses of the structural racism that produced these conditions. This stereotype circulates even today and structured the ways of thinking about African Americans at the time *12 Millions Black Voices* was being produced. Pickering also points out that “the stereotypical Other is a denial of history...an obstacle to change and transformation” and “stereotypes are history in drastic reverse” (48). Through this denial the logic of the stereotype produces its own hegemonic truth-claims through the ahistorical monumentalization of essentialist representations of bodies and groups that fixes those represented as *always* and *always having been* these definitions, making it seem as if these stereotypes are natural, eternal, and part of the “common sense.”

For Pickering, all stereotypes, including the stereotype of the primitive, can only be fully understood by historically unpacking their essentialist claims. The primitive is an especially important stereotype because it is the “ideological counterpart” to modernity as well as the foundation to most, if not all, other stereotypes. He continues his discussion of this type and the early racist discourses that produced it, including social Darwinism, eugenics, and theories of progress in which “geographical spatial distinctions became temporalised – translated into historical stages of progress towards the culmination of civilisational advance represented by Western society” and the “primitive peoples in faraway places were viewed as contemporary

versions of Europe's own ancestry" (54). Those figured as primitive were, in other words, the "contemporary versions" of Europe's past. The stereotype of the primitive is, then, a sort of double denial of history; while stereotypes in general disallow historical progress, the primitive is defined as the un-progressive (in fact, un-progress-able) Other to those doing the representing. That is, while the logic and form of the stereotype denies historical progress to produce the stereotype as eternal "truth," the content of this particular stereotype also denies the possibility of any historical progress to the figures being represented.

To re-signify the stereotype of African Americans as the constitutive primitive other to modern, industrial America, Wright re-writes America's history of progress to include African Americans. However, the text of *12 Million Black Voices* that describes this new narrative of progress only includes African American men. To challenge and undo one stereotype (the primitiveness of African American men) requires the deployment and reproduction of another (the primitiveness of African American women as Mammies). In order to write this new narrative of progress, the figure of the African American woman as Mammy has become the constitutive primitive other to the figure of the African American man who has begun the "complex movement...towards a twentieth-century urbanization" (xix) and is entering into the "sphere of conscious history" (146). Wright's othering of African American women relies on and reproduces familiar sexualized, gendered narratives of nation. Gendered stereotypes and the expectations and assumptions that circulate around those represented by these stereotypes actually make possible the way that Wright engages with the African American (male) stereotype of 'primitive.' His re-narration of (men's) progress shifts the primitiveness of African Americans solely onto the shoulders of women as evidenced by him in their domestic labor, an index to their role during the time of slavery. It is important to note again here that the

stereotype of the Mammy is a part of a legacy of the vilification and pathologization of African American women resulting from the perceived injury they have brought to the African American community because of the “status they enjoyed” due to their “enforced intimacy” as slave owners’ Mammies. This injury thought to be variously the harm done to men through their rape and sexual victimization as well as the perception that their lives are easier by working in the master’s house and by not taking care of their own families. This legacy of vilification and pathologization is prevalent at the time of *12 Million Black Voices*’ publication (and most famously in the Moynihan Report) and continues in the present, as the figure of the Mammy continues to define many African American women’s sexual personas, familial roles, and labor opportunities. As Mammies, African American women become not just a constitutive other but a blockage to African American men’s progress *due to* the way their “enforced intimacy” with masters is perceived by others.

In Wright’s written narrative of progress, women are not only *not* part of the new black historical consciousness but they are *hindrances* to it as they are figured as intimately linked to the rural, Southern, “folk” traditions from which the modern black subject must escape. If we can imagine black women’s labor as *non*-progressive (because it remains the same labor before and after migration) and their familial authority as *anti*-progress (because matriarchal kinship systems are depicted as a hindrance to African American (male) progress), then this account of religion and their figuration as bearers of “folk wisdom” and their nostalgia for their Southern pasts actually figures black women as *negative* progress (because their refusal to modernize by not letting go of the past reverses progress). This negative progress is due to how women are figured as part of the deviant, non-heteronormative social, cultural, and economic formations that impede progress, that which must be overcome to achieve the modern black consciousness that

will allow African American culture to enter into “conscious history.” Through their social, economic, and cultural stagnation after migration, their prescribed roles as mothers, their connection to the church, their continued adherence to “folk” ways, their continued longing for the South and relationship to Southern plantation bosses (including, I would add, the fact that their definition as domestic laborers in their new urban setting is part of the legacy of their “enforced intimacy with the Lords of the Land”), black women are, in this text, symbols of all that African American culture must escape to progress toward urban, industrial modernity. Not only has the feminine already been constituted as a threat to African American culture through the symbol of “Queen Cotton,” who is “dictatorial [like a king]...self-destructive, an imperious woman in the throes of constant childbirth, a woman who is driven by her greedy passion to bear endless bales of cotton, though she knows well she will die if she continues to give birth to her fleecy children,” but the figure of the black woman becomes the *antithesis* of the social change agent of the modern, urban, industrial masculine laboring body through which Wright believes African Americans will win “the right” to progress, or, as he puts it, “the right to share in the upward march of American life” (146).

Again, feminist critiques of women’s role in the nation have also noted this tendency to figure women as not only the keepers and transmitters of tradition but also as a blockage to men’s progress. For Enloe, reading women as historical blockage is not surprising because nationalisms are “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope.” While Enloe is theorizing colonial nationalisms, *12 Million Black Voices* can be read as a response to the “anger at being ‘emasculated’ – or turned into a nation of busboys” that has “been presumed to be the natural fuel for igniting a nationalist movement” (44). As discussed above this emasculation, according to Wright, was due to the “status” given

slave women of Mammy and the “easier life” that slave women lead based on their “enforced intimacy” with the “Lords of the Land.” This status was injurious to slave men because the slave women “did not always belong to” slave men but to the masters and because women became the “authority” in the household. McClintock explains how these gendered discourses of nation produce racialized gendered histories. In colonial nationalist discourse “history becomes shaped around two opposing directions: the progress forward of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason...from white, male adulthood to a primordial, black degeneracy usually incarnated in women” (McClintock 9).¹⁴ Historical progress, already part of the “masculinized memory,” now becomes a racialized narrative for which the Black woman is an example of the lowest form of degeneracy. McClintock continues this thought but discussing how, in discourses of nation, women become the way to resolve the contradictions of a “temporal anomaly within nationalism” (358). This temporal anomaly stems from the fact the nation is always “veering between nostalgia for the past and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past” (358-9). The nation must simultaneously produce itself as a modern project (always progressing onward and subsuming the cultural traditions of its past) *and* as a legacy of a shared origin in the past to which the nation must connect (through, for instance, national myths that define the “people”) and from which the nation must separate itself (as it progresses past the mistakes of its history). According to McClintock, this anomaly is resolved through gender definitions: “Women were represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity” (McClintock 359). It is this figuration of women that Wright produces in his new narrative of African

American progress.

What Wright does *not* describe in his text is the last way Yuval-Davis and Anthias claim women participate in the nation, “as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles.” However, once again, the visual history of the text is in tension with this written history; African American women’s role in “struggles” *are*, in fact, evident in the photographic images in the book. The textual and visual description of women as “the most circumscribed and tragic objects” belies other images in the document that show women as very much a part of African American cultural formations other than the home and the church, specifically they engaged in the “violent forms of dances in the ballrooms” (128). The pages that precede the description of women’s “narrow...orbit” and “restricted movement” include three photos of women dancing with men in Chicago dancehalls. These images of women in dancehalls contradict, at least, the idea that women’s mobility is limited to sites of employment or religious worship. According to these images, women’s “orbit of life” is somewhat less “narrow” than Wright’s text would have us believe and black women can clearly “release” their “personalities” in more places than church.

The book ends with, to me, the most startling contradiction between text and image and an image that works to challenge the depiction of women throughout the rest of the written text. The written text ends with these words: “We are with the new tide. We stand at a crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them...” (147). The photo immediately following this text shows a man – not moving – standing on a doorstep looking up at the sunlight. The caption informs the reader that this is the “Back yard of alley dwelling, Washington, D.C.” Reading it with the text, one could imagine this man is looking up hopefully heavenward toward

his maker or toward/for the enlightenment of the new black consciousness that this urban setting has made possible. While this reading is warranted, in this image the man is still, not “moving” as the text reads. Five pages before this one, though, is an image of protesters walking – moving from the left side of the photo to the right, with the bodies at each side flowing off the edge of the image – in front of the White House, carrying picket signs that read “Stop Lynching: Let the Real Democracy Prevail,” “Massachusetts Protests All Injustices,” and “Down with Dastardly Practices! Stop Lynching!” The signs also tell the viewer that these protesters come from many different state delegations (Missouri, Michigan, Massachusetts, Louisiana, and Kentucky are the visible parts of what can be assumed to be an alphabetical ordering of represented states). What is most noticeable is that these political activists from across the nation are all Black women. In fact, while there are photos of men in violent encounters with the law, the only image of organized political agency in the book is of this group of women picketing the White House in protest against the racial violence used to shore up the white supremacy of their racial formation. Even as the written text depicts Black women as hindrances to the narrative of African American progress toward racial equality, the visual text reveals the only progressive political action being carried out by Black women. Interesting, too, is that this particular protest is against lynching, a racial violence perpetrated and legitimized by the sexual stereotypes of African American men.

12 Million Black Voices contains two histories – one written and one visual – which occasionally contradict one another. The photographs in the book reveal a history that the written text, at best, denies and, at worst, elides. The written history of *12 Million Black Voices* documents an emergent structure of feeling of a modern black consciousness in which “men are moving” into the “sphere of conscious history” while black women’s agency and movement are “circumscribed” by the sphere of domesticity. What becomes emergent in the visual history,

however, is that – economically, socially, culturally and politically – it is the *women* that are moving.

Reading Mercer, Rereading Wright

In what comes before, I have attempted to unpack the gendered logics of Wright's engagement with racial stereotypes in his re-narration of racial progress in *12 Million Black Voices*. Starting my reading with Kobena Mercer's "questions of enunciation," I claimed that the subject pronoun "we" of Wright's text is primarily "speaking for" African American men, while also noting that the visual images can be read as counter to Wright's figuration of African American women as the non-progressive Other to the modernizing African American men. However, like Mercer, I want to make a "partial revision" of my reading because I've also "changed my mind" or rather, like Mercer again, I "can't make up my mind" about the ramifications of my reading of Wright's photo-text. What does it mean for me to critique Wright's depiction of women? More precisely, I engage my reading of Wright's engagement with stereotypes with Mercer's analysis of Mapplethorpe as a guiding framework, making me suspicious that mounting a feminist critique of Wright's text, though a relevant and necessary critical reading of the text that is supported by the visual rhetoric of the photographs, would be slightly limited in scope, if not inadequate and problematic. Not only does this single-minded reading not do justice to Wright's attempts to understand and unpack the racial formation of his time and the salient racial stereotype of "primitiveness," but it is also a somewhat anachronistic reading, holding Wright up to contemporary critical, theoretical (feminist) standards of today. My reading so far is also somewhat limited because it does not account for the multiple contextualizations that Mercer claims are necessary to read a text like this one. My reading is

inadequate because it is somewhat lacking analysis of what Mercer calls the “politics of race and sex in representation” surrounding this photo-textual essay.

I now want to go back to Mercer’s essay “Skin Head Sex Thing” to think more about his new “approach to ambivalence” and his re-reading of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of Black gay men as representations of stereotypes of African American male sexuality. Mercer’s main reason for re-evaluating Mapplethorpe’s images was a new understanding of aesthetic ambivalence “not as something that occurs ‘inside’ the text (as if cultural texts were hermetically sealed or self-sufficient), but as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers, relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific.” This approach “not only underlines the role of the reader, but also draws attention to the important, and equally undecidable, role of context in determining the range of different readings that can be produced from the same text” (169-170). Mercer’s revision engages a more nuanced, polyvalent reading of the ambivalence these images engender and insists that even strictly formalist readings need to engage the historical, political, and social context that surround them. In other words, Mercer’s revision situates cultural texts such as photographs within relations of power in order to call for a more sustained unpacking of the politics of representation surrounding them, including the way photographs are produced by different artists and the way they are read by different readers at different historical moments. His re-reading also understands that the stereotypes represented in images like Mapplethorpe’s can and will be deployed, read, and understood differently depending on the artist’s intention and positionality, the text’s circulation, and the reader’s positionality so that the same image can be read as both reinforcing and challenging stereotypes, depending on who is producing it, who is reading it and when and why it is being read. Mercer’s re-reading is a good model of a reading practice for

African American cultural production (or, in fact, any cultural production that engages modalities of power such as race, gender, sexuality, etc.), a model that includes how to ask questions about representation and which questions to ask. Mercer's reading practice does not reveal fixed, universal "truths" but rests within ambiguity as an intellectual space that provides many insights into stereotypes and the discourses of race, gender, and sexuality they plug into.

I want to linger here a moment on a brief discussion of his argument in order to trace some of the rhetorical and analytical moves he makes and to outline some of the conclusions he draws during his re-reading in order to engage some of the questions I have about my own reading of Wright's text. In his initial reading, Mercer's "formal analysis" of Mapplethorpe's images revealed how the models were "aestheticized and eroticized" objectifications of hyper-sexualized stereotypes of black men (171). Relying on an analogy to feminist critiques of visual representation (particularly Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on the subject) and psychoanalytic theory of fetishism, Mercer asserted that because Mapplethorpe and his models were both male, the traditional power relations between the passive, fetishized "looked at" woman and the active "looking" man shift to the racial difference between the artist and his black male models. The "tension" of their shared gender definition "transfers the frisson of difference" onto the "fetishization of black skin" and Mapplethorpe's "ironic appropriation of commonplace stereotypes...regulate and fix¹⁵ the representational presence of the black subject." The "formal work" of the conventions of art photography – including sculptural codes, codes of portraiture, and lighting/framing – work to evacuate the historical and social context of the images and "essentializes each model into the homogenized embodiment of an ideal type" (175), which produces a racist "fantasy of power and mastery over the other" (179).

The realization of shifting contexts surrounding Mapplethorpe's images, including

especially the fact that U.S. Senator Jesse Helms and the conservative right could deploy a reading like Mercer's to use as an accusation of racism to build their obscenity case against Mapplethorpe, elicits the revision of his reading. Mercer's re-reading is also shaped by changing contexts such as Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS in 1989; the retrospective of his work in the Whitney Museum (helping to define his importance as a visual artist); the political controversy over arts funding in which Mapplethorpe's images became fodder for the Right; and the emergence of new aesthetic practices among Black lesbian and gay artists in the U.S. and U.K. that called identity politics' representational strategies into question. Given these new political conditions, Mercer finds his formalist reading doesn't adequately account for the varied positions of the artist, readers, or the text themselves – the images become in Mercer's new reading not ahistorical texts (akin to a New Critical works of art) but moments of enunciation, which require questions of representation be asked about, as I've mention, “who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate” (181). For Mercer, rather than resolving the ambivalence in the images and rather than deciding on or “making up one's mind” about them, these new contexts and questions require that these images' ambivalence remain undecidable and unresolvable. His new reading opens up to this ambivalence and asks: do Mapplethorpe's photographs “reinscribe the fixed beliefs of racist ideology, or do they problematize them by foregrounding the intersections of difference where race and gender cut across the representation of sexuality?” (178-179)¹⁶

Mercer's answer to this question is both. My somewhat lengthy discussion below of how Mercer arrives at that answer is meant to highlight the intellectual path Mercer takes to define his (re-)reading practice and its results. Mercer's main point here is that unpacking the ambivalence of an image – that is unpacking the ways that images can elicit multiple, often contradictory

readings depending on who creates them, who reads them, and when and where – can reveal far more about the work of stereotypes and the cultural politics of representation at the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. To get to this answer requires for Mercer a complicated, detailed (re-)analysis of his reading experience with these images, an analysis that consciously elicits more questions than it answers. After taking into consideration these historical, social, and cultural contexts, he re-reads his formalist reading to downplay the analogy he sets up between male-female and white-black fetishization and to emphasize “the subversive homoerotic dimension in the substitution of the black male subject for the traditional female archetype” (178). While Mercer is interested in keeping in circulation his reading of these images as racial fetishism,¹⁷ his re-reading also notes the “reproduction of heterosexual presumption” and the assumed “homogenous racial and ethnic context” in the aspects of traditional feminist film theory that he deployed. He first engages himself as a reader. Assuming in the first reading that Mapplethorpe filled “the ideological category... ‘the white male subject’ to which the spectator is interpellated,” Mercer outlined his identifications as both “object and subject.” As a Black man he identified with the objectification of the models and as a gay man he identified with the author who desires those models (179). He displaced his ambivalent position as a reader “onto the text by attributing it to the author,” making his original claim that these images are racist objectifications of these models by this author (180). He then engages Mapplethorpe as an author/producer of these images because, for Mercer, Mapplethorpe’s life experience and positionality require the reader to dwell in the textual ambivalence and affect the possible cultural and political work these stereotypical representations can do. Mercer insists that the “‘death of the author’ thesis demands revision” because “the question of agency in cultural practices that contest the canon and its cultural dominance suggests that it really does matter who

is speaking” (181-182). Because of what they share as members of “urban gay male culture,” including the necropolitical historical position as persons with AIDS, Mercer emphasizes the homoerotic nature of the images and supplements his original reading as purely racial fetishes with a reading of the images as a subversion of the artistic canon and the institutions that produce that canon: “the Eurocentric character of the liberal humanist values invested in classical Greek sculpture as the originary model of human beauty in Western aesthetics is paradoxically revealed by the promiscuous intertextuality whereby the filthy and degraded form of the commonplace stereotype is brought into the domain of aesthetic purity circumscribed by the privileged place of the fine art nude” (187).

Once the positionality of the author, text, and reader are constellated in his supplemental reading, the salient point is that these images are not only a subversive undermining of racial stereotypes but are also “a subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms of the nude in dominant traditions of representation” (194). In the original reading, it was the work of the stereotype that “fixed” the models as objects; the author as the privileged position of the “white male subject;” and “the spectator in the ideological subject-position of the ‘white male subject’” (187). In his re-reading, the elevation of poor gay black men “onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal,” does not “reinforc[e] the fixed beliefs of the white supremacist imaginary” but “begins to undermine the foundational myths of the pedestal itself” (187-188). In the re-reading, images contain a fetishization of skin color at the same time as they critique homophobic and racist aesthetic conventions (and document a cultural group devastated by (homophobic and racist) AIDS policies). For Mercer, *all* readings – racist and anti-racist, homoerotic and homophobic – need to be circulating as his theory of representation involves tracking the circuits of power and conditions of possibility of author, reader, and text that

produce these images as either representations of racist stereotypes and appropriations of black bodies or as subversions of aesthetic ideals and sexual and racial typing (200). The importance of Mercer's re-reading practice is the focus on a "contradictory reading" that constellates multiple readings, insisting that to adequately engage Mapplethorpe's work requires a promiscuous contextuality that holds in tension simultaneous readings of the images as racist and anti-racist, as racist fetish and as anti-racist subversion, as critique and as reinforcement of stereotypes, depending on the historically, culturally, and politically specific contexts of author, text, and reader.

I will not attempt here to reproduce every step in Mercer's complex argument in my re-reading of Wright because the historical, cultural, and political contexts of these re-readings are vastly different. My re-reading of Wright's use of gender stereotypes is not the same as Mercer's re-reading of Mapplethorpe's racial stereotypes. I do, however, want to take some lessons from the reading practice Mercer elaborates. Mercer's re-reading is based on his realization that to unpack the way stereotypes are deployed in cultural texts and practices requires multiple contextualizations. The constellation of the different readings these different author, text, and reader frames engender allows Mercer to make new claims about the political work of Mapplethorpe's images and reveals the work of the stereotype's protean representational logics. Mercer's re-reading engenders questions like: What happens to our reading if this text is contextualized as part of the racial state? In other words, can we/how do we read it as an intervention into the narrative of progress produced, at least in part, by the FSA photographic archive from which it draws not only its material but also its production (there would be no *12 Million Black Voices* without the state)? Does this text rely on the same logics of typing and discourses of victimization and reform that FSA photography does or does it reveal the racial

politics of those discourses? Do the text and images of *12 Million Black Voices*, in other words, reproduce, challenge, or both racial stereotypes? What happens to its gendered logics when we read this photo-textual essay as intervening in larger visual discourses of race? One might also ask what it means to study this text today: which histories is one looking for? What might this tell us about our racial present?

Although Mercer does not press this point, I would argue that the ambivalence, the ability to read stereotypical images in seemingly contradictory ways (as racist fetish and as anti-racist critique of western civilization's aesthetic ideals), stems in large part from what Sander Gilman has called the "protean nature of the stereotype." This protean nature involves how stereotypes of the other "shift" from bad to good, vilified to fetishized, feared to desired. It also involves how stereotypes change over time even as work they do does not. The different available readings based on different contextualizations has everything to do with the way stereotypes can be read as similar and different and as evolving and changing throughout history even as they continue to define racialized bodies as inferior. While Mercer does discuss the representational practice of stereotypes, I want to suggest that it is part of the ideological and hegemonic work of stereotypes to produce ambivalence as a way to mystify their connections to structures of dominance (a mystification that occurs by producing stereotypes as 'natural') and as a way to foster consent to their truthfulness (by producing enough truth to be "common sense.") Since there is no "true" representation, it doesn't matter how much they are "proven" false, the point is to keep them in circulation as (perhaps even doubted) common sense. Ambivalence and contradictory readings keep stereotypes alive and in circulation, whether as true or false. Though his re-reading practice provides one of the best ways to highlight the wily representational logics of stereotypes, Mercer doesn't quite dwell enough on the power of stereotypes.

12 Million Black Voices in Visual Modernity

After Mercer, any reading of *12 Million Black Voices* as a photo-textual essay must be contextualized not only within the aesthetic codes and conventions that it employs but also within the social, political, and cultural history of race in America, particularly the role of photography within U.S. racial history. A robust promiscuous contextualization of this text, of Wright as its author, and of its multiple audiences is outside the scope of this chapter. Like most historicized readings, Wright's photo-textual essay should be read in the context of the historical moment of its production, especially the U.S. racial history of the early twentieth century, including how this photographic archive figures into the history I mention briefly in the opening paragraph. I think, too, that Wright's interest in and subsequent disillusionment with both sociology and Marxism/Communism is an important frame for understanding this text. One might also wonder at the politics involved in Edwin Rosskam's choosing Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*, to represent African America. A larger study might also involve a broader and deeper account of the multiple publics in which these images circulated, including a full analysis of myself as a reader of this text. While all of these are important frames, I want to focus on contextualizing the text itself within the racial histories of visual culture, including photography's role in reproducing racial stereotypes.

Before I contextualize my reading more specifically in relation to the visual practice of documentary photography, particularly its use by the U.S. government, I want to begin my analysis at the level of abstraction of what Robyn Weigman calls "visual modernity." For Weigman, this entails "the visible economy of race" as "an economy of parts that enables the viewer to ascertain the subject's rightful place in a racial chain of being." Wright's text can be

situated within “the visible” which “has a long, contested, and highly contradictory role as the primary vehicle for making race ‘real’ in the United States” (Weigman 21). More precisely, this text should be read as an enunciation and negotiation of stereotypes to explore how visual texts reinforce and reproduce the racial categorizations and logics that the privileged domain of optic knowledge has produced since the Enlightenment. Weigman’s constellation of visual culture, race, and modernity has worked to give, according to John Tagg in *The Burden of Representation*, photography (and the stereotype) the “power to evoke a truth” (Tagg 61). For Tagg, the truth-claims of photography need to be understood through the historical lens of how “photography in the nineteenth century was bound up with the emergence of new institutions and new practices of observation and record-keeping...central to the restructuring of the local and national state in industrialized societies,” bound up, in other words, with “a network of disciplinary institutions” (5). These disciplinary institutions were also “closely linked...to the formation of new social and anthropological sciences...which took both the body and its environment as their field...redefining the social as the object of their technical interventions” (5). Questioning the assumption of the “given and neutral” truth of the photograph’s realist mode of representation, Tagg asserts that photography’s claims to truth are dependent on relations of power that deployed the photograph as scientifically evidentiary. In her essay “Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology” in the collection *Only Skin Deep*, Jennifer González takes this point one step further to claim that photography is a particularly apt medium for the documentation and production of race because there is “a conceptual parallel between the ‘truth effects’ of photography and what might be called the ‘truth effects’ of race. Both kinds of ‘truth effects’ naturalize ideological systems by making them visible and, apparently, self-evident” (379). In fact, I would argue that, along with photography and race sharing “truth effects” as

González asserts, photography, race, and stereotypes share many representational logics – they produce their own truth, create that truth by creating naturalized and essentialized types, and work to make the bolstering of racial formation seem “self-evident,” as a kind of “common sense.” Photography’s visual realist, evidentiary “truth” was instrumental in producing the visual evidentiary “truth” of race using the “truth” of stereotypes.

This text also must be read more specifically as part of the visual discourse of racial science and its production and dissemination of racial types. Photography has a complex relationship with stereotypes and stereotyping. Photography emerged and proliferated simultaneously with the emergence of racial sciences and photographic evidence was tantamount in the production racial types and their attributes. Allan Sekula’s now canonical essay on the subject “The Body and the Archive” unpacks the relationship between photography, its collection as an archive of knowledge, and the classification of difference. Sekula argues that “photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to defined both the *generalized look* – the typology – and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology” (7). Photographs became part of the records of state apparatuses, institutional networks, and disciplines of knowledge (including the burgeoning fields of anthropology, criminology, psychology, and sociology) that worked in tandem to categorize those seen as different as also inferior. According to Anne McClintock, “for racial science, photography promised to provide mechanical and therefore objectively sound ‘factual’ knowledge about racial ‘types,’ ‘specimens’ and ‘tribes’” (McClintock 124). The production and classification of racial types stem from the earliest moments of racial science. Two examples germane to this chapter’s interest in racial stereotyping include the work of Thomas Huxley and Francis Galton. Huxley, a staunch supporter and advocate of Darwin’s theory of evolution, used photographs to depict how the

races lined up on an evolutionary continuum from primitive to modern. For Huxley, evolution mapped a theory of progress onto racial difference, which he called “Chief Modifications of Mankind.”¹⁸ Galton, cousin to Darwin and a founder of eugenics, first used photography in his racial hierarchy based on perceived intelligence. He is most well known, however, for his improvement to physiognomic typing, the composite photograph. Worried that using photos of individuals to represent types would lead to a focus on “exceptional and grotesque features” and “caricatures,” Galton superimposed multiple images so that common features showed through but unshared, individual characteristics remained underexposed (Sekula 44). The result was a blurred image that represented, for him, a more accurate representation of the statistical data on physiognomic differences (Sekula 42-50).

These two innovations are specific examples of the nineteenth century emergence of particular forms of “visual modernity” that I think must be taken into consideration as part of the genealogy of Wright’s 20C text. *12 Million Black Voices* must be read as engaging (while also being a part of) the legacies of early racial science’s use of photography, including the way that representational practices were invented and developed at this time. There are at least three ways Wright’s text can be seen as influenced by its racial science past. First, typology and stereotyping were early concerns of racial science and the primitive stereotype was among the first stereotypes produced in order to legitimize colonization as a civilizing mission. The use of photography produced and proliferated stereotypes, particularly of primitiveness – the “truth effect” of photography produced the “truth” of the racial stereotypes of primitiveness. Second, among the representational practices developed at this historical moment are not only the new ways the photograph was used as evidence of truth and technologically innovated but also the way that those uses and innovations also changed the way people “read” photographs

and the bodies they indexed. Not only did racial science's use of photography produce stereotypes but it also produced simultaneously a reading practice for photographs. I would argue that even as it cohered the multiple visual clues that became stereotypes of racialized bodies, it also made it impossible to read photographs *without* a reliance on these stereotypes because of the overlapping of their representational logics. It is as impossible to "read" a photograph without relying on stereotypes as it is to "read" a body without the same reliance. This is one way to understand Mercer's point about contextualizing the reader. The reader of Wright's photographs comes to this reading having been influenced by the production of racial stereotypes of primitiveness that was done using photographs in the nineteenth century. Lastly, the images used in *12 Million Black Voices* come from an archive that is also a legacy of early racial science's reliance on photography. These images are used to show the "truth" of the Depression and the "evidence" of the U.S. government's policies meant to alleviate poverty, a "truth" that is also racially inflected.

***12 Million Black Voices* and FSA Documentary Photography**

Even more specifically, the main contextualization of *12 Million Black Voices* must be the cultural, economic, aesthetic, and political history of documentary photography as produced, collected, and circulated in the archive of the Farm Security Administration – Historical Section. It must be read, for instance, in relation to the movement of the HS from the FSA to the Office of War Information (OWI), whose mandate was to produce a vision of a racially unified America to be used against the racist state formations of Germany and its allies. Much of the discussion of the FSA photo archive (and documentary photography more generally) involves a debate between reading them aesthetically or historically, which is also an epistemological argument

about whether to define them primarily as art objects (photographs as art) or as historical documentary images (photographs as (historical) truth). These photographs have certainly become historical records and enunciations of a particular historical moment and FSA photographers certainly deformed the old and defined the new codes and conventions for documentary photography – about subject matter, lighting, framing, etc. – that are still in practice to this day. The politics of representation that surround this archive include how – through both its aesthetic practices and its claims to historical truth – this archive relied on and reacted to, challenged and reinforced racial stereotypes in America. I am interested, in other words, in the “America” that is produced by this archive and how and what goes un- or under-represented in that production. Though the historical, social, and cultural context of its circulation, its intended uses, and its audience are vastly different than the Mapplethorpe images that Mercer reads, this archive provides the primary framework and context for reading Wright’s text, just as the “fine art nude” and the “Eurocentric character of the liberal humanist values invested in classical Greek sculpture as the originary model of human beauty in Western aesthetics” are the primary frameworks and contexts for reading the critical intervention Mercer sees Mapplethorpe’s images to be making in the western art canon. My interest, then, is in unpacking, at least a bit, some of the political work these FSA photos did (and still do), and how they do it, in order to understand the ways Wright’s text intervenes in that work (whether intentionally or not), specifically to engage the stereotypes that have been, at least in part, produced by the archive of documentary photograph from which he draws his inspiration and images.

John Tagg describes the emergence in the early 20C of the “discourse of documentary” as a “response to a particular moment of crisis in Western Europe and the USA – a moment of crisis not only of social and economic relations and social identities but, crucially, of representation

itself: of the means of making the sense we call social experience” (8). It was “bound up” with the economic crisis of the “The Great Depression” and the response of a “liberal corporatist plan to negotiate [that] economic, political, and cultural crisis” with the reformist programs of the New Deal administration, a part of which was the WPA and FSA photographic documentation of the crisis and its relief (8). In Tagg’s formulation “while it is also used as a tool in the major educational, cultural and communications apparatuses,” photography is also “itself an apparatus of ideological control under the central ‘harmonising’ authority of the ideology of the class which, openly or through alliance, holds state power and wields the state apparatus” (166). As part of the state, the ideological and hegemonic functions of these photos are many, including to mystify the role of ruling classes (and their state apparatus) in the creation of the Great Depression; to produce the state as that which helps its citizens out of this crisis; and to produce a narrative of progress documenting the ways that state policies were helping the poor out of the Depression. While FSA images were “part of the ‘New Deal’ administration” meant “to lend support to its programme by documenting the effects of the ‘Depression’ on the land and the agricultural labour force” as well as by documenting the ways the New Deal programs alleviated those effects, they were also disciplinary technologies that changed the way people understood, among other things, poverty and the poor, the U.S. government and the welfare state, *and* photography, including its potential uses and the reading practices it necessitated (Tagg 168). FSA documentary photography was a particularly powerful tool for the New Deal administration because it was able to define, using photography’s visual power, exactly what the people, the places, and the relief of Great Depression looked like.

The maintenance of the color line was a central interest of the “disciplinary institutions” and “new social...sciences” at this “moment of crisis” that Tagg asserts helped define the

conditions of possibility for documentary photography's representational power. Like the early racial science before it, the FSA archive was both shaped by and shaped stereotypes even as it was also being "read" (and collected) by those for whom stereotypes already shaped a visual reading practice. According to Pete Daniel and Sally Stein's introduction to *Official Images: New Deal Photography*, editors took the images photographers created and "selected those pictures suitable for their needs, often attempting to verify with *particular* images *general* New Deal stereotypes" (Daniel and Stein, xi). Given this, the FSA gave Americans an "official image" of poverty in America that was overwhelmingly white. The FSA archive generated an image of minoritized whiteness by developing an official (state-sanctioned) visual "type" of American poverty against which other images of Other's poverty could be read. These images did so, in part, by producing a visual sociology¹⁹ of Depression-era poverty in America, which resulted in producing stereotypes of the figure of "Depression-era American poor." In trying to understand the FSA photos as "historical sources," Lawrence Levine comments on the way this photographic archive relied on and propagated stereotypes. Because the captions rarely named the people in the photos,

We learn to know them not as individuals but as representations. Similarly, from the photographers of the 1930s we have inherited the images of people with precious little additional information. Again we come to know them as types: migrant farmers, sharecroppers, hoboes, unemployed men, desperate mothers, ragged children (Levine 25).

Part of the reason for this typology is because photography lends itself to producing types because photography makes people and bodies into pure representation. The creators of this particular archive are also interested in producing stereotypes of a very specific figure of American poverty, one that can be reformed and aided by New Deal state policies. These

specific types rise to prominence as stereotypes of “Depression-era poor” because they represent a racial type of victim-citizen who warrants help from the state due to their uncontrollable circumstances and the ‘dignity in the face of adversity’ with which they seem to endure these circumstances. This archive is a particularly powerful ideological tool as it actually became *indexical* of New Deal reform policies meant to alleviate a specific form of poverty. The images simultaneously represented a rural, agricultural, and mostly white figure of poverty and the work of the paternalistic New Deal welfare relief programs, even as it was also a part of the relief efforts by providing work to some people. In other words, this archive simultaneously produces an image of America, an image of American poverty, and an image of American welfare state relief of that poverty, all of which all but elided the symbolic (as well as political) representation of African Americans. For instance, canonical images from the FSA archive like Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” deployed already available stereotypes and ideological constructs such as ‘motherhood’ and drew on paternalistic reformist rhetorical and representational practices from earlier reform movements to do their affective hegemonic work (convincing the audience to consent to this version of America, poverty, and relief). But these canonical images of poverty were also officially visualizing for Americans what it “looked like” to be poor and, by extension, shaping new ways of thinking about who “deserved” relief from that poverty. This archive makes visible a (white) victim of circumstances beyond his/her control who is able to be helped by state policies and programs while also making *invisible* (literally, through its absence) a (black) figure whose circumstances are also beyond his/her control but who is seen as less able to be helped by the state because these circumstances are seen as most often their own fault (things would be better if they would get a job or get married and form a nuclear family with a male head of household or get and keep a better home, etc.) and become the evidence not of their

victimization but of their pathology. It is this milieu that Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* enters.

These stereotypes and this version of America had a large audience because of the far and wide circulation of these images in many genres, due in large part to the promotional work and exhibit design of Edwin Rosskam. The number of images of African Americans in the FSA archive was actually quite substantial. Natanson claims that "of approximately 60,250 noncolor prints taken in the continental United States under Resettlement Administration-Farm Security Administration auspices, 6,070, or 10.1 percent, included discernible black figures or dwellings," which is a "proportion...very much in line with representation of blacks in the continental United States population (9.8 percent in 1940)" (Natanson 66). While I'm not sure what the proportion of black to white images in the archive has to do with the proportion of black to white people in the population, this does give us a figure of how many images of African Americans were in the archive at all. However, the *circulation* of African American images was somewhat less wide and their usage was somewhat more problematic.

As I touched upon earlier, the photographs were free to use and appeared in many newspapers and popular periodicals such as "*Time, Fortune, Today, Look, and Life*" ("The Record Itself" 1). They were also exhibited at galleries and museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and were part of travelling exhibits that appeared in "schools, churches, and libraries, at fairs, expositions, and conferences, in department store windows and even, from December 1941 through much of 1942, above the main lobby of New York's Grand Central Station" (Natanson 212). According to Natanson, the "greater the likely percentage of well-educated or reform-minded viewers in an exhibit audience, the greater the tendency for FSA exhibit designers to incorporate black content" (221). The majority of these exhibits, like the books,

either didn't include black images or included images that were based on and reinforced already-existing stereotypical assumptions about African American culture.

There were also more than a dozen photo-textual books published between 1936 and 1943 that used FSA images (Natanson 212). According to Natanson:

The list spanned the scholarly (Herman Clarence Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*) and the popular (Sherwood Anderson and Edwin Rosskam's *Home Town*), the photo-dominant (Walker Evans's *American Photographs*) and the textually dominant (Arthur Raper and Ira Reid's *Sharecroppers All*), the passionate (Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *American Exodus* or Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*) and the utterly innocuous (Samuel Chamberlain's *Fair is Our Land*). (Natanson 212)²⁰

The list also included Pulitzer-prize winning poet and editor at *Fortune* magazine, Archibald MacLeish's 1938 *Land of the Free*, which he described in a note at the back of the book as a "the opposite of a book of poems illustrated by photographs. It is a book of photographs illustrated by a poem" (89). *Land of the Free* was one of the earliest photo-books to make use of FSA photos and the poem's anti-capitalist, populist rhetoric was toned down by Stryker and MacLeish to be more in line with the status quo of representing Roosevelt's New Deal ideals of reform, rather than a critique of the state. Among the most famous of photo-books was James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published the same year as *12 Million Black Voices*, which was not, in fact, an FSA project but actually began as a magazine piece for *Fortune*, shot while Evans was on leave from the FSA.

Circulating within all of these varied media, these images enter the public sphere as part of the ideological state apparatus. While questions of representation (including choice of subject

matter, lighting, setting, camera angles, photo selection, cropping) were certainly and continually asked by photographers of the FSA (including, famously, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks), these questions were always tempered by the function these photographs had for this state agency: to make the programs of the New Deal seem as if they were needed and working and, later, to produce American unity, including racial unity, during wartime. These images had to produce a specific audience and a specific public that was included in and would accept the America that was being forged in its images, an America in a Depression, containing poor, jobless class that were being helped by U.S. government policies. This revelation, though, had to also persuade its audience that its version of America was true and race was part of this persuasion. According to Natanson, Stryker lacked “enthusiasm about black subject-matter” because he “tended to see black material as notably less usable than white images” and “the Information Division as a whole could make wider use of white than black images” (61,66). As discussed, while the file had a substantial amount of African American images, their circulation was much less. In other words, their usability is a function of their represent-ability. Stryker’s lack of interest in images of blackness based on whether they were “usable” or not tells us something about the implied audience of these images. The FSA’s failure to use or even consider using African American images (until *12 Million Black Voices*) must be read as a question of representation, of what this audience was willing to accept as a representation of America. The representation of America circulating in these images failed to represent African Americans as part of those that were affected by poverty. What, then, does it mean that images of African Americans were elided from this imaging of America? What public audience is implied by Wright’s text? Is this the same public audience as the other FSA images? If so, is Wright’s text meant to become a corrective to this elision, a symbol of racial progress for the

FSA archive's circulation? My long and (perhaps overly) complicated reading of *12 Million Black Voices* has led to this question: how do we read Wright's reliance on (sexual) stereotypes of racialized gender as he attempts to re-present the stereotype of African American primitiveness given the contexts of this book's production?

Wright's Burdens of Representation

As a way to conclude, I'm not going to try to answer all these questions but only ask them, ponder the ambivalence of their possible answers, and ask more. This text is different than other photo-texts of its time simply because the main focus of its image and text is African American experience. However one reads it, *12 Million Black Voices*, with or without authorial intent, answers a dearth by adding African American images into the archive and, more importantly, the circulation of FSA photography. It fills, at least somewhat, what Angela Davis has pointed out as a "conspicuous sparsity of images depicting Afro-American life within the recorded history of photography" (220). According to Katherine Henninger, Wright's text

amounts to a re-narrativization of the FSA photos, which had been previously narrated in multiple ways for multiple causes, most often in ways that quite literally wrote African Americans out of the picture (Figure 3). Initially created in a spirit of expose and support for government economic programs, the photographs are remounted here as an explicitly racial critique of white colonialism of the black body and spirit. (588)

A text that fills a void like this in the public sphere – *especially* a text that claims to "speak for" 12 million voices – will always be read as a re-vision, resistant, or counter to those discourses it "corrects." A text such as this will always be overdetermined with representational expectations. These expectations include all the questions about the text's representations and the questions of

representation that this text elicits about the archive it enters – how are African Americans visually represented – as victims? as pathologized? as primitive? as resistant? Are these images stereotypes? What are the differences in these representations? Why the dearth? A text like this also elicits questions about the reading practices of its audience. What expectations are brought to the text’s representations? How do stereotypes frame that reading?

Wright’s insertion of African American images into the canon of photo-texts produced using FSA documentary photography does change that archive’s representational politics. At the very least it includes more representations of African Americans in the archive and gets African Americans represented, aesthetically if not politically. Inclusion in the archive, though, does insert African Americans into the ideological and hegemonic visualization of America as produced through the FSA archive’s circulation. Wright’s text adds African Americans to those affected by the Depression (if not yet figuring them as those that warrant as much help from the state as the canonical images of white poverty). This inclusion into the portrait of America also requires that the public audience of the FSA include African Americans into their vision of America (regardless of how they will be included by any given viewer). This inclusion also reveals the racial politics of photography in America, and certainly of the FSA archive. It calls into question the lack of circulation of black images and the overt ways that the images that did circulate most often were used to depict African Americans as racial stereotypes and as primitive. It also, I think, calls into question, in some way, how stereotypes are part of the reading practice we all use to read the images (and bodies) of the racial Other and the difficulty of changing this practice.

Although I am wary of drawing too many analogies between Mercer’s rereading of Mapplethorpe’s images and my reading of Wright’s photo-text, I do think some of Mercer’s

conclusions about Mapplethorpe's artwork also describe the political work that Wright's does by inserting African American images into the archive and circulation of the FSA, the U.S. state's documentary photography ideological apparatus. For Mercer, Mapplethorpe's images insert homoeroticism into the canon of the "artistic nude," which calls into question the sexist, racist and homophobic formal codes and conventions of that canon as it also critiques the "dominant traditions of representation" within the very institutions of Western civilization that produce that canon and define what is valued as beauty and art and what is not. *12 Million Black Voices's* insertion of African American images into the canon of "American documentary photography" calls into question (at least) the racist codes and conventions of the FSA archive's elision of African Americans as it also critiques the "dominant traditions of representation" and (state) institutions that produced that canon and define what is valuable within the imaging of "America." Both of these critiques also call into question not only the producers but also the readers of those canons, making them question their own positionality and racial assumptions. Jeff Allred claims that Wright uses these images "to confront an implied white readership with the inadequacy of its historically conditioned gaze." He asserts that "Wright's project...has little to do with concocting an adequate representation of blackness in all its internal diversity" but that he is rather:

attempting to intervene in a sphere of mass-produced representations such that the conditions under which these representations are routinely consumed become themselves the object of critical gaze rather than the invisible and normative position from which to evaluate representations of reality. (554)

According to Allred, Wright's images shift the focus from evaluation of the images to an evaluation of the viewer and his/her reliance on stereotypes and racial categories to read images,

and more broadly, to understand their reality. I would add that Wright's textual engagement with the stereotype of the primitive, his counter-historicization and neo-narrativization of African American progress also works to call into question 1) the narrative of American progress's reliance on the African American as a constitutive other; 2) this archive's role in producing and making visual that narrative; and 3) the prevalence of the stereotype of the primitive in the public audience of this archive.

But there are also burdens to all these representational expectations. There is a burden to counter-discourse. There is a burden to representing Blackness within the visual discourse of the state and to re-presenting African American history. As Stuart Hall reminds us cultural productions are "not necessarily good because black people make them...are not necessarily 'right on' by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience" (qtd in Mercer 204). Just because Richard Wright produces a text that inserts images into this archive and re-writes racial history does not mean that he necessarily achieves an anti-racist ideological or hegemonic change. As Mercer and Spivak warn us aesthetic representation and inclusion does not mean political representation and inclusion – because there are more pictures in this archive and circulating in the American public, does not necessarily mean that political change happens. Part of that public audience may remain racist and continue to read the images as examples of African American's primitive nature and as continuing proof of their pathological inability to modernize and/or be American. Adding images of African Americans into the canon of FSA images and their production of America doesn't necessarily call into question any of the structural problems of racism in America. In fact, adding images like this might be read as American racial progress, correcting past racist elisions by producing a multicultural, diverse American working class, at least within the archive and circulation of FSA photography.

The biggest burden of representation Wright takes on, though, is attempting to undo the stereotype of the primitive. While Mapplethorpe's ironic use of stereotypical images read in a historical, cultural, and biographical context forms a critique of those stereotypes, Wright's text works differently, by attempting to rework and re-present stereotypes. Wright attempts to rewrite the stereotype's historical underpinnings with an alternate historical narrative. He carries the burden of the vastness of the history, the "science," and the visual culture that has produced this stereotype and represented African Americans primarily as primitive. Wright does so, however, by using the "master's tools" of another progress narrative to reorient the American progress narrative that has figured racial minorities as primitive. To critique a stereotype, his re-narrative also relies on using the representational logics of the systems of knowledge that have produced (and reproduced) and been produced by these specific stereotypes, including not only progressive historiography but also sociology, Marxism, the visual rhetoric of early racial science, and documentary photography the U.S. government. The stereotype's protean nature allows for changes such as Wright's to occur but ensures that the stereotype stays embedded in the same systems of knowledge and representation as it continues to define the Other as inferior. The result for Wright's text is a reiteration of this stereotype with a difference, rather than all African Americans being defined and depicted as primitive, in Wright's text only African American women are. The stereotype is not undone but Wright's photo-textual history does reveal the problem of the stereotype, the problem of trying to undo these historical representations and remove stereotypes that are indexical to that vast history. Similar to critiques of identity politics and "resistance" discourse, Wright's attempt at re-presenting the primitive stereotype works so much within the discourses that have produced it in the first place that the results are the reproduction of the relations of power in another form (shifting from race to

racialized gender) and in a form that is similar to the original (a narrative of progress). Rather than correcting or undoing this stereotype of the primitive, Wright's text shifts the object of the stereotype from all African Americans to African American women, saddling them with the entire burden of that representation, even as the images of the texts portray them very differently.

Notes

¹ About 77,000 of these images were produced by the HS throughout its span in the RA, FSA, and OWI. Approximately another 11,000 were gathered from other sources.

² According to Nicholas Natanson's quantitative analysis of the FSA files in *The Black Image in the New Deal*, "nearly one-fifth of the RA/FSA photographs concerned subjects useful for agency promotion efforts: agency construction and land-clearing projects, activities in completed resettlement projects and migrant labor camps, rehabilitation and tenant purchase loan recipients on improved farms, clients being assisted by the agency's farm, home management, and medical advisors," which the photographers were "generally not enthusiastic about taking" (59-60).

³ This haphazard system was reorganized by Paul Vanderbilt when the file was transferred to the Library of Congress between 1944 and 1946. Vanderbilt first kept the original system intact by reproducing it on microfilm before setting up a classification system with major headings (such as The Land, Cities and Towns, People as Such, Homes and Living Conditions, Transportation, etc.), subheadings (such as Horses, Garages, Trucks, etc.) arranged by regional divisions (Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Great Lakes, South, Midwest, Southwest, Rocky Mountain and Great Basin, Northwest, California, and Mexico). For a detailed discussion and analysis of this system see the appendices of Fleischhauer and Brannan's *Documenting America, 1935-1943*.

⁴ For some examples of these shooting scripts and directive memos to the photographers from Stryker, see Stu Cohen's *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*.

⁵ According to Natanson, though, "Wright was not part of the FSA team in Chicago" (145). I suspect this discrepancy is based either on Stange's subsequent finding of evidence after Natanson's study or her broader reading of correspondence and interviews in the Archives of American Art held at the Smithsonian Institute.

⁶ In his essay "Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* and World War II-era Civic Nationalism," Dan Shiffman asserts that for Wright the "Mammy's celebrated maternal qualities were not timeless but linked tragically to her sexual victimization, her 'enforced intimacy' with masters."

⁷ I want to qualify the use of “mother” with Hortense Spillers’s thoughts on the subject: “Even though we are not even talking about any of the matriarchal features of the social production/reproduction – matrifocality, matrilinearity, patriarchy – when we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community” (80). While Spillers is discussing the work of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “celebrated ‘Report,’” Wright’s figuring of the black woman also “misnames the power of the female,” misnames the Mammy (a stereotype produced through racialized gender violence) as gendered power, in order to define, similarly to Moynihan’s conclusions, black women as the main blockage to African American assimilation in the U.S. and progress.

⁸ In two of the images the gender of those pictured cannot be made out (pages 39 and 50).

⁹ The resonance of this use of “intimate” with the “enforced intimacy” that structured their slave experiences is impossible to ignore.

¹⁰ This list is quoted in McClintock’s “No Longer in a Future Heaven” (both the essay and chapter version in *Imperial Leather*).

¹¹ The authors are careful here to unpack the meaning of the term “reproduction” to “locate” their work “in relation to the literature that deals with human and social reproduction.” According to Yuval-Davis and Anthias, “feminist literature on ‘reproduction’ has dealt with biological reproduction, the reproduction of labour power or state citizenship, but has generally failed to consider the reproduction of national, ethnical and racial categories” (8).

¹² Enloe notes how the sexual violence done to colonized women most often gets read by the men of their community thusly: “Many nationalists have assumed, too, that the significance of the community’s women being raped. . . is that the honor of the community’s men has been assaulted” (Enloe 62).

¹³ Though heavily contested, I think for the sake of this argument we can pinpoint, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant do, the origins of American racial stereotypes in colonialism. In *Racial Formation in the United States* Omi and Winant’s argue that the colonization projects of the 15th and 16th centuries were the conditions of possibility for the racial stereotypes as we know them today: “It was only when the European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere, when the oceanic seal separating the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ worlds was breached, that the distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear” (61). Thus, for Omi and Winant, “the conquest, therefore was the first – and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest – racial formation project” (62). This point is particularly pertinent to American racial stereotypes as it was, obviously, part of the colonial expansion, a part that included the racial project of the institution of slavery.

¹⁴ McClintock call this “anachronistic space,” which she defines as a trope in colonial discourse in which “movement through space becomes analogous to movement through time” and “geographical distance across *space* is figured as historical difference across *time*” (9, 40). As Europeans travelled to the colonies they felt they were going back in time and reverse happens

upon their return.

¹⁵ Mercer uses Homi Bhabha's ideas about "fixity in the ideological construction of otherness" and colonial fantasy in "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse."

¹⁶ He elaborates this point later when he writes: "Without a degree of self-reflexivity, black critiques of Mapplethorpe's work can easily be assimilated into a politics of homophobia. Which is to say, coming back to the photographs, that precisely on account of their ambivalence, Mapplethorpe's photographs are open to a range of contradictory readings whose political character depends on the social identity that different audiences bring to bear on them. The photographs can confirm a racist reading as easily as they can produce an anti-racist one. Or again, they can elicit a homophobic reading as easily as they can confirm a homoerotic one. Once ambivalence and undecidability are situated in the contextual relations between author, text, and readers, a cultural struggle ensues in which antagonistic efforts seek to articulate the meaning and value of Mapplethorpe's work" (192).

¹⁷ He is particularly interested in how this analytic helps explain the ways black men are stereotypically defined by their sex, especially the way that fear and desire of black men's sex and sexual organs structure their relationship to modernity (figuring them as the primitive) and civilization (figuring them as a threat to white male potency and a danger to white female purity, and so, civilization's racial purity.)

¹⁸ This comes from the name of Huxley's most famous treatise on race, "On the Geographical Distribution of the Chief Modifications of Mankind" from 1870 in which he classifies, hierarchizes, and maps the races of the globe.

¹⁹ This was even noted by the famous photographer Ansel Adams, who complained to Roy Stryker, "What you've got are not photographers. They're a bunch of sociologists with cameras" (qtd in Levine 25).

²⁰ Though outside the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to do a wider comparative reading of the politics of representation of Wright's African American-centered text and some of these other books using FSA images. For instance, it would be interesting to compare Wright's America with Edwin Rosskam and author Sherwood Anderson's collaboration *Home Town*, which depicts African Americans primarily as stereotypically silly or lazy or compare Wright's "we" to the "we" of Archibald MacLeish's poem in *The Land of the Free*.

Chapter Three:
To Tell the Stereotype Freely: Ida B. Wells and the Problem of the Ideological Critique of the
Black Rapist Stereotype

[W]hat we know about lynching has settled into narrative molds that are hard to break apart so that we might ask other kinds of interpretative questions.

Jacqueline Goldsby

Many scholars have noted the influence of Ida B. Wells's¹ work on the racial history of the U.S. One of her early supporters, T. Thomas Fortune, wrote in 1893 that "no history of the Afro-American of the future will be complete in which this woman's work has not a place" (Scruggs 38). Scholars also discuss Wells as a brilliant organizer who "understood the political economy of racism," which is evident in her successful calls for African Americans to boycott local white-owned companies and to migrate from Memphis in the face of the racial violence of lynching (James 352). Her analysis of the political economy of lynching is also evident in her successful campaigns to persuade British companies to put financial pressure on the cotton farmers of the American South to stop lynching. She is also noted for her feminist perspective on race, gender, and sexuality. Paula Giddings's now canonical book of black feminist history *When and Where I Enter* begins with a discussion of Wells's anti-lynching "crusade" and its contributions to the analysis of "race and sex in America."

Wells is perhaps most well known for her cultural work in the war of representation of African American bodies that took place in the debates surrounding lynching, particularly her attempts to change public opinion by critiquing white-owned newspapers' figuration of African American men as "Black Rapists" in order to legitimize the act of lynching. Her pamphlets, articles, and speeches are often discussed as providing models of analysis for the anti-lynching

and civil rights movements that followed hers. Joy James notes that Wells's "antilynching campaigns, as battles against racial-sexual terror, provided the model for twentieth century militant antiracist feminism" (James 348) while in *Eradicating this Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement, 1892-1940*, Mary Jane Brown claims that "in the following fifty years, concerned women of both races would join the battle to eradicate lynching using the structure Wells codified in *Red Record*" (Brown 8). While I would agree that Wells's work provides a distinct and valuable model of analysis of the Black Rapist stereotype, and especially its connection to the terrorist act of lynching, I believe her model is often misread, a misreading that, among other things, fails to account for the effects of stereotypes on readings of Wells's work. Stereotypes shape our readings of all texts, particularly texts that engage stereotypes explicitly but also the texts that represent those subjects defined by stereotypes (even if stereotypes are not being discussed in the texts). Stereotypes also frame our historicizations of texts and, I would argue, our understandings of history and our historiographies more generally. So, the particular ways we have come to theorize stereotypes and stereotyping in general, including the ways we have come to define and discuss the Black Rapist stereotype in particular, *necessarily* affects the way we understand texts that engage that stereotype. The conventional understandings of stereotypes and stereotyping I've called "corrective theories" in the introduction engenders an ideological critique of stereotyping that seeks to prove the stereotype "wrong" and reveal it as a misrepresentation that covers over social relations of racial violence. These particular understandings and their subsequent critiques shape most of the readings of Wells's anti-lynching writing. However, her analysis of the relationship between the Black Rapist stereotype and the act of lynching does something quite different than a purely ideological critique. The rhetorical choices she makes in her anti-lynching speeches and writings – including her

cataloging of the many and varied reasons given for lynchings other than rape, her use of the white press (against itself) as evidence to represent the “facts” of those lynchings, her demonstration of how the Black Rapist depends on a “network of figurations” that produces other stereotypes and social relations (rather than mystifying them), and her seemingly obsessive deployment of white women’s sexuality as the main proof against the rape accusation leveled at those lynched – perform a promiscuous contextualization that de-links the stereotype from the act of lynching in order to focus not on the stereotype’s ideological falsity but instead on the particular ways that the Black Rapist stereotype gets linked to lynching discursively, primarily in the white press, in order to legitimize this particular form of racial terrorism at this particular historical moment.

The Ideological Critique of Stereotypes and the Stereotypical Narrative of Lynching

Scholarly engagement with Wells’s analytical “model” of lynching from a variety of disciplines and historical moments most often has claimed in some way that the writings of her anti-lynching campaign work, in one way or other, to debunk, dismantle, undo, or correct the public’s opinion of the ‘myth’ of the Black Rapist stereotype’s misrepresentation of African American men. Biographical, rhetorical, and cultural criticism on Wells’s work has most often claimed that Wells debunks the stereotype through her descriptive cataloging of the [false] accusations of rape given as reasons for lynching and of the reasons other than rape that lynchings that were undertaken. This list of lies and alternative reasoning is necessary, so the analysis goes, to show that the stereotype is “wrong” in order to convince people that lynching is wrong. When Wells is taken up in the 1970s and 80s as part of a feminist “recovery” of African American women’s influence on American racial history, the linkage of the Black Rapist

stereotype and lynching is often emphasized. Bettina Aptheker claims that “Ida B. Wells and the Black women of the antilynching crusade insisted that the only effective challenge to lynching was one which disabused the Black man-as-rapist syndrome” (Aptheker 62). Likewise, in *When and Where I Enter*, her groundbreaking history of African American women’s “impact on race and sex in America,” Paula Giddings mentions that Wells was “undermining the stereotype of Black men” (31). In a 1971 article detailing Wells’s reaction to the Memphis lynchings that became the impetus for her anti-lynching campaign, David Tucker writes “the alleged propensity of black men for raping white women, Miss Wells said, was a myth created to protect the sexual pride of white men” (120). More recent scholarship continues the trend of accentuating how Wells worked to correct the Black Rapist stereotype. In her analysis of the “persuasive discourse of nineteenth-century Black women,” Shirley Logan agrees with Aptheker that Wells “recognize[ed] that any effective attack against lynching would have to be one that ‘disabused the Black man-as-rapist syndrome’” (77). During her rhetorical analysis of Wells’s writings, Jacqueline Royster writes that Wells was “energized to begin a campaign to counter misconceptions” (170). In *Written by Herself*, Frances Smith Foster describes how Wells “identified and discussed the logical conclusions and the alternative interpretations of the attitudes that portrayed all black males as inherently dangerous to white womanhood” (180). In her 1995 analysis, Gail Bederman remarks that Wells was “debunking the myth of the black rapist” as she made the “compelling case that lynching was entirely unmanly and uncivilized” (46). In *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, Paula Gunning claims that Wells worked “to contradict the ‘fact’ that lynching was an expression of white chivalry or that black men were naturally driven to rape white women” (Gunning 8). In the introductory blurb to Wells’s writing in the anthology *Words of Fire*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes that “Wells’s debunking of the myths of the chaste

Southern white lady, the brute black male rapist, and the immoral black female reveals insightful analysis of the role of sexual and racial politics in constructions of black womanhood and manhood in the United States” (Guy-Sheftall 69). Writing about “women and the American anti-lynching movement,” Mary Jane Brown asserts that *A Red Record* “created the format for all future anti-lynching activists by defining the problem, attacking the rape and lynching myth, and devising strategies of investigation and exposure of facts and statistics” and that “Wells began her crusade to disprove the time-honored falsehood that led normally law-abiding citizens to participate in or to give acquiescence to unsurpassed barbarism and disregard for the law” (Brown 8, 60). In a recent biography, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, Linda O. McMurry describes “Wells’s attack on lynch law” as “focused on refuting the prevailing notion that lynching was needed to defend white women from the lust of black men.” McMurry emphasizes her point by writing that “she was not the first to attack the rape myth, but she became the loudest voice for truth” (McMurry xv). Finally, in her study of the “cultural logics” of lynching, Jacqueline Goldsby claims that Wells’s “empirical refutation of the rape myth – popularized by *A Red Record* – has never been disputed since 1895” (103).

The above readings are undoubtedly influenced by the many and varied social, political, and cultural desires of the scholars at those particular historical, political, cultural moments. I end with Goldsby not only because her study is chronologically one of the most recent studies on Wells’s work but also because I think her term describes well the intention of her and other readings that read Wells’s writings as an “empirical refutation” of the ideological form that is the Black Rapist stereotype used to legitimize the accusations of rape that authorize the act of lynching. I also think Goldsby’s notion of the “cultural logic of lynching” actually works to understand Wells’s work as more than an “empirical refutation” of a particular stereotype by

shifting the salient way of thinking about stereotypes away from only ever an evaluation of their veracity. An immediate theoretical problem with these readings is that most of these studies of Wells rely on understandings of stereotypes that work within this true/false dichotomy. The point of these empirical refutations is to reveal the stereotype as a false mis-representation that can be 'refuted' and proven wrong given enough of the "correct" empirical evidence, which will then somehow change people's minds enough to end stereotyping and, by extension, the lynchings this makes possible, as if, somehow, there exists evidence that will disprove the stereotype for the entire American public or that, once the stereotype is somehow "proven" wrong, its power will dissipate for everyone everywhere and it will then somehow be rendered incapable of doing the representational work it had previously done.² The idea that a stereotype can be proven wrong also implies, as Michael Pickering suggests, that there is some kind of non-stereotypical "'reality-out-there' against which images and representations can be transparently measured and found wanting," a reality, in other words, that stereotypical misrepresentations somehow contradict and which will be restored once this contradiction is revealed (14). The logical conclusion to Goldsby and others' readings of Wells's work as an "empirical refutation" of the Black Rapist stereotype is that Wells's work is somehow correcting a reality corrupted by stereotypical lies with "true" evidence and that the goal of this correction is to somehow re-present stereotyped reality as a stereotype-free really real "reality-out-there" in which African American men are not assumed to be rapists of white women but are all just "human" and "equal" to other Americans as abstract citizens and universal subjects of liberalism. While Goldsby's point is actually part of a much more nuanced analysis of lynching, these readings are only possible given the understanding of stereotypes as refutable mis-representations of reality rather than as particular relations of power that accomplish their representational work regardless of

whether they are seen as true or false (or, more probably, both).

These readings of Wells as empirical refutations are also invested in a certain kind of ideological critique that reveals the “true” social relations mystified by the stereotype. Hazel Carby defines the stereotype as ideologically in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Carby understands stereotypes as part of a “whole network of figurations forming a complex metaphorical system that functioned as an ideological explanation of the social relations of the South” and that the “objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, or objective social relations” (21-22). Carby describes how stereotypes mystify the social relations of (gendered and sexualized) racial dominance by blaming the victims of racial violence. For instance, the white supremacist terrorist tactics of lynching and institutionalized rape are mystified with stereotypes of hypersexuality such as the Black Rapist and the Jezebel. These stereotypes make it seem like African American sexual deviance is responsible for lynchings (because Black men must be punished and deterred from molesting white women) and rapes (because Black women’s sexual “charms” are too much for white men to ignore). Carby’s ideological critique is careful not to simply reveal stereotypes as false representations of “an empirically proven ‘reality’” (22). For Carby, this notion of stereotypes as false representations fails to consider that this “reality” is as produced through historically and culturally contingent knowledge regimes as the stereotype that claims to mystify it. Her method reads texts not as “as reflections of ‘real life’ as it ‘was,’ but as *representing* and reconstructing history for us from particular viewpoints under specific historical conditions” (22). I find Carby’s method of analysis of stereotypes useful, even necessary, although her ideological critique, like most (including Goldsby and others’ readings of Wells) remains invested in a certain kind of re-presentation of stereotypes in which revealing

the social relations mystified by stereotypes will somehow lead to an understanding of how those represented by stereotypes (primarily, for Carby, African American women) resist their social definitions and/or will lead to the discontinuation of stereotypes based on the realization that they are “false” and covering over “real” social relations. What, though, happens when ideological critique does not result in disproving a stereotype or in changing public opinion? How do we understand the work of stereotypes when they continue to work to define certain subjects and delimit their opportunities even after they have been “demystified”?

This kind of ideological critique is based on the way stereotypes have been defined and theorized since their critical inception in what I’ve called in my introduction the “corrective theories of stereotypes and stereotyping,” all of which are invested in the idea that some form of re-presentation will fix stereotypes and stereotyping. If the stereotype is defined as an inaccurate mis-representation, it is little wonder that an ideological critique that reveals the truth the stereotype is hiding would be the chosen analytic. These particular understandings of stereotyping *necessarily* define not only the ways of writing or representing stereotypes in texts but also the ways of reading the texts that represent stereotypes. Ideological critiques of the stereotype, including these analyses of Wells’s engagement with the particular form of the Black Rapist stereotype, assume what I call the “stereotypical narrative of lynching.” The stereotypical narrative of lynching is the salient “narrative mold” Goldsby discusses in the epigraph into which “lynching has settled” that hinders “other kinds of interpretative questions.” The stereotypical narrative of lynching is the representation of lynching in which there is an unquestioned, immediate relationship between what I want to note as three distinct moments in the practice of lynching: the material act of lynching (the kidnap, torture, and murder of Black men and women), its legitimizing accusation of rape, and the Black Rapist stereotype that underlies, authorizes, and

makes possible that accusation. In this narrative (as it was produced in the white press and public sphere of the time), what Wells calls the “new cry” of Black men raping white women was the given reason – at least in part – for most lynchings. This accusatory cry was only possible by the stereotypical assumption that “all Black men were prone to the rape of white women,” which was based on the stereotypes that defined Black men as primitive and “naturally” hypersexual. I want to call this a narrative “stereotypical” for two reasons. First, in order to mark how this narrative’s linkage of the act of lynching, the accusation of rape, and the stereotype of the Black Rapist relies on the “true/false” dichotomy of stereotyping and that the stereotype of the Black Rapist is necessarily a kind of unquestioned “truth” center to this narrative, legitimizing both the accusation of rape and, through that, the act of lynching without needing its own legitimization. Second, I want to suggest that this “narrative” is “stereotypical” in that the Black Rapist stereotype is coterminous with this narrative of lynching and that since they (the narrative and the stereotype) were simultaneously produced to legitimize lynching during lynching’s heyday as a form of racial terrorism in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, the stereotype is also part of what shapes this narrative. This not only bolsters the stereotype’s “truth,” making the idea that black men are naturally prone to the rape of white women seem more like a natural fact but also makes this narrative seem like *the only way* to understand the relationship between lynching and the Black Rapist stereotype. That is, the narrative solidifies into a kind of stereotype itself, a hegemonic “narrative mold” that shapes all of our “interpretative questions” about lynching. While the Black Buck stereotype and stereotypes of primitive hypersexuality were, of course, prevalent before this time, I do think that the stakes of this stereotype changed when it was linked, in this narrative, to lynching as a legitimization. Furthermore, this narrative has become so much the “common sense” “truth” of

lynching that it continues to shape most accounts of lynching as they have gotten historicized in cultural criticism since then. Given this linkage of the stereotype to lynching in the “stereotypical narrative of lynching,” it is not surprising that Wells gets read as an “empirical refutation” or ideological critique of the Black Rapist stereotype. The reading of Wells’s work as correcting the Black Rapist stereotype in order to stop lynching assumes that lynchings are always already legitimized by the Black Rapist stereotype. This automatic assumption is, in some ways, part of the work of the stereotype. The Black Rapist stereotype not only makes us almost automatically assume all Black men are potential rapists of white women but also makes us almost automatically figure all lynchings as *only readable* through the Black Rapist stereotype, regardless of how “beyond” stereotypical thinking the reader of Wells’s work may be. It seems obvious and necessary to want to read Wells as revealing the power relations behind this stereotype in order to reveal lynching as the political terrorism it is rather than as the moral act of defending white women its apologists claim it to be. However, readings of Wells’s work as an ideological critique are somewhat too hasty and seem, to my mind, to have decided how Wells understands stereotypes before any reading of her work has even been engaged *because*, as I’ve tried to make apparent, of the way stereotypes and lynching have been linked in this stereotypical narrative that frames these readings.³

Ida B. Wells and The Cultural Logic of the Black Rapist Stereotype

Another way to read Wells’s work in a way that understands the Black Rapist stereotype as more than an ideological tool begins with Goldsby’s analysis of what she calls the “cultural logic” of lynching. In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, Goldsby explains that the customary way historians and scholars have analyzed the phenomenon of

lynching has only added to its understanding as a retrograde aberration in American culture and progressive history and that a “complex history of racial violence is concealed by our increasingly restricted use of the term ‘lynching.’ Like an archive, the word functions to *denominate* the violence, ordering and fixing its meanings in ways that delimit our capacities to interpret it” (11). Goldsby contends that while lynching has primarily been figured as “regional and aberrant,” in fact, “anti-black mob murders flourished as registers of the nation’s ambivalences attending its nascent modernism” (21, 24). She discusses how American modernity not only involved changes in daily life due to technological progress, the rise of mass culture, and the rise of monopoly capitalism but also included increased anxiety over national identity due to the advancements made by African American and women’s emancipatory movements and that lynching’s “power to oppress African Americans was intensified by its relations to cultural developments we ordinarily categorize as ‘modern.’” Goldsby develops her claim about lynching’s connection to modernity by suggesting that if “the events and inventions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth ushered in new ways of experiencing, conceiving, and knowing the self, world, and history” and changed “nothing less than the contours of experience and structures of knowledge itself,” then lynching must be read and historicized as a “cultural development that shaped the modern mind” (285). Rather than understanding lynching as only ever an aberrant and localized result of the economic strife of the Reconstruction South and/or as only ever a manifestation of irrational racisms, Goldsby asserts that lynching is part of mainstream American modernization, a “networked, systemic phenomenon indicative of trends in national culture” (5). However, lynching only “fit within the flow of American history for as long as it did because its cultural logic allowed us to disavow its connections to national life and culture,” which made it possible for lynching to be “integrated ‘secretly’ into the new regimes

and routines of American life” (27). The ability to disavow lynching’s connections to the state and the American way of life – for instance, defining as extralegal the many lynchings that were carried out or condoned (often by omission when nothing was done to stop or bring lynchers to justice) by judges, jailers, policemen, etc. – allows lynching to remain a viable terrorist tactic for white supremacy. For Goldsby, then, the racial terrorism of lynching is at the heart of American modernity, not “anomalous, aberrant, local, and anti-modern,” as a “spectacular secret,” condoned yet disavowed, informed by and informing everyday life in America (27).

Goldsby’s work on lynching, including in particular her reading of Ida B. Wells’s work, has been very useful to this project for understanding the ways the Black Rapist stereotype works within the cultural logic of lynching in America. The ostensible reasons given for lynchings by the lynchers are also varied, though rape is the most prevalent reason given. Some insisted that lynching was necessary to quell the black domination of the South and the U.S. fear of freed Blacks’ potential political power – being ruled by those you had enslaved – was often discussed in the white press. Likewise, lynching was seen as a warning against any possible insurgency, revolts, or riots, even though whites instigated most race riots. Proponents of lynching also claimed that this extralegal mob violence was necessary because the African American community harbored and hid those accused of crimes and they would never be brought to justice any other way. As it became more difficult to convince the public that black domination and insurgency was a real threat, another excuse to lynch was necessary. By far the most famous and culturally dominant, if not necessarily the most frequent, reason given for the necessity of lynching was the accusation of the rape of white women by black men. Giddings writes that “the charge was leveled so consistently against Black men, and came from such impeccable sources, that the whole nation seemed to take it for granted” (27-28). The accusation of rape that

legitimized the “ritualized murders of black Americans” was “rationalized by the mythology of black rapists obsessed with white females” (James 348). As I discuss in another chapter, the stereotype of the “Black Rapist” or “Black Buck” was considered an extension of the primitive nature of the African American. “Lynching in the American South depended to a high degree on depictions of black people as large children who could not control their own animal desires. In many contemporary white accounts, African Americans supposedly raped at every opportunity, especially when tempted by the presence of a normally unattainable, spotless, and totally virtuous creature, the white women” (Thurston 11-12). According to Williamson in *The Crucible of Race* the myth of the Black Rapist emerges in the late 1880s in order to legitimize the practice of lynching, though primitive hypersexuality had been attributed to Africans before then (Bederman 46). Angela Davis’s account holds the whites in Thurston’s “white accounts” more responsible for the creation of “the myth of the Black rapist” which “has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications” (Davis 173). Richard Wright characterizes the pervasiveness of the accusation of rape as a threat to Black men as “a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (Wright 455). Discussing its pervasiveness, Gail Bederman argues that “the explosion of interest in the ‘Negro rapist’...was another example of this burgeoning new attention to sexuality” that Foucault theorizes in *The History of Sexuality* (Bederman 49). The Black Rapist, like the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult, was an example of the Victorian obsession with sexuality, that “produced a variety of new, and sometimes contradictory, knowledges about sexuality, manhood, and power” (49). This obsession, as Foucault also points out at the end of the book, was one of the “devices of sexuality” when “racism took shape.” The Black Rapist

must be read as a “deployment of sexuality,” part of the “mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race” and the “eugenic ordering of society” (149). As with most social constructs, the production of this stereotype at this time took place in many disciplines and across different media, including racial “science,” sociology, and history (such as Philip A. Bruce’s *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* (1889)) and in art, literature, advertising, and the popular mass media of periodicals and newspapers.

Part of my contention is that the Black Rapist stereotype was and remains very much a part of the particular ways that “lynching has settled into narrative molds that are that are hard to break apart” and that inhibit “other kinds of interpretative questions” that would allow scholars to understand lynching and its place in American racial history differently. Part of those “narrative molds” is what I’ve called the stereotypical narrative of lynching in which the stereotype of the Black Rapist is the legitimizing reason for the accusation of rape that authorizes lynching. This stereotypical narrative is one of the “certain kinds of historical accounts” of lynching in which Goldsby tells us we have “become invested” (283). Situating lynching as more central to American modernity allows Goldsby to “investigate lynching’s connections to the past and present in order to distinguish between its causes and contexts more readily” and to understand lynching not as a backward form of Southern racial terrorism but as “an articulation of the social world’s organization at any given point in time” (26). Distinguishing between the “causes and contexts” of lynching is precisely what I argue Wells does that others don’t recognize because of their reliance on the specific narrative into which lynching has solidified. Scholarship that reads Wells’s work as correcting the stereotype rely on this stereotypical narrative and focus on the stereotype as a “cause” of lynching rather than understanding how its cultural logics make lynching more central to the white supremacy leanings of American culture.

These readings analyze Wells's work as an attempt to refute the stereotypical cause of lynching in order to somehow end lynching. These debunking readings of Wells fail to account for the ways that the centrality of lynching to American culture make it difficult to curb simply by showing how the stereotype is wrong. I read Wells's understanding of lynching as, however, more interested in the way that the Black Rapist is part of a vast web of stereotypes that are part of the cultural logics that make lynching possible as it happened in the U.S. and keep it a "spectacular secret" in American history.

Furthermore, the Black Rapist stereotype has always been an aspect of the cultural logic of lynching that Goldsby describes in that it is part of the ways the "disavowal" of lynching allowed it to "thrive[] as a social practice...to the degree that the violence could be integrated 'secretly' into the new regimes and routines of American life" and part of how lynching "seals itself off from scrutiny" (27). The Black Rapist stereotype, built upon the primitive, criminal hypersexual "buck," "beast," "brute," etc. stereotypes that came before it, was a way for the violence of lynching to be justified as a part of "mainstream" American culture, hiding racial terrorism behind accusations that fit squarely within the "flow of American history['s]" race, sexual, and gender formations and within the normative "trends in national culture" that condemned interracial sex (especially between black men and white women) as aberrant. Concerns about sexual impropriety toward white women by black men also covered over a host of other racial and sexual violences perpetrated by white men against black women, white women, and black men. As well as being a part of how lynching was a disavowed by the mainstream part of American cultural life, I also think that the stereotyping relies on cultural logics similar to those associated with lynching. The stereotype is a product of modernity emerging within the context of colonization and rising in representational frequency and power

along with the technological advancements in mass media in order to re-fortify separations between social classes and groups that were intermingling during the post-Reconstruction industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century. The Black Rapist is a “spectacular secret” of this time period, at once pervasive in American culture and yet able to be disavowed as “not really true” even as it legitimizes the accusations of rape that legitimize lynching, regardless of the actual reasons given. The stereotype could be read as the very conditions of possibility for the cultural logic of lynching Goldsby describes; it is the stereotype of the Black Rapist that allows the violent spectacle of lynching to be an open secret of American racial formation.

The cultural logic of lynching and stereotyping allows an understanding of how these readings of Wells fail to take into consideration the importance of how the stereotype’s “empirical” truth is central to American culture and, like race, a discursive production within multiple disciplines, genres, and relations of power such as, perhaps most obviously, the racial science of this period but also, as Wells’s work makes clear, within the mass media, particularly newspapers, that covered lynchings at the time. Analyses of Wells that describe her work as “debunking” stereotypes relying on the assumption of the stereotype as a central ideological “truth” to the stereotypical narrative of lynching, without understanding how the stereotype is both produced by and produces a kind of truth that draws from discourses of racialized sexuality and sexualized racialization prevalent before and during this historical moment. Put another way, to claim that Wells is debunking the falsity of the Black Rapist stereotype requires centering this stereotype within this narrative as “truthful” in ways that I think Wells’s writings actually work to trouble. Furthermore, the stereotype’s power does not stem from its believability; regardless

of whether stereotypes “are” or “seem” true or false, they still do their work of defining subjects and legitimizing actions (like lynching) aimed at certain subjects. In the words of Michael Pickering: “Resting one’s case on the empirical establishment of stereotypical error considerably underestimates the play of ideological forces set in motion by processes of stereotyping” (14). The focus on the truth or falsity of the stereotype that so often characterizes work on stereotyping and on lynching underestimates the ways that stereotypes do their representational work regardless of their truthfulness and the ways this truthfulness is produced in the linkage between lynching and stereotyping in the white press. Wells, on the other hand, focuses *not* on disproving the stereotype but on questioning the accusation of rape and revealing the stereotype as an effect of the way lynching is represented in the white newspapers of the time.

Wells’s engagement with lynching – starting from her very first writings – is, I think, a much more nuanced and complicated analysis than an “empirical refutation” or ideological critique of the Black Rapist stereotype, which is based on a much more nuanced understanding and definition of the stereotype than merely ideological. She was able, to reference her autobiography, to tell the stereotype “freely,” unencumbered by the stereotypical narrative molds that were being actively produced in her time and into which both lynching and theorizations of the stereotype have settled even more rigidly since her work was published. Wells’s work provides a contextualization of the Black Rapist stereotype that does not assume but instead carefully disarticulates the immediate relationship the white press builds between the stereotype, the accusation of rape, and the act of lynching in the stereotypical narrative of lynching. This disarticulation allows Wells to focus on how the linkage between the Black Rapist stereotype and the act of lynching emerges and is cultivated in the white press and how stereotypes circulate in public sentiment and are used to accomplish specific effects (such as authorizing the accusation

of rape). Her use of “true” “facts” from the white press as evidence not only disputes them but also and more importantly reveals how the white press recycled existing stereotypes to (re)produce and circulate the Black Rapist figure at the historical moment when an excuse for lynching was needed as it was being used against African American men (and women) to restore power relations that had been unsettled by Emancipation and the subsequent Reconstruction era enfranchisements. I’ve come to this conclusion primarily through a reading of her particular brand of critique of the white press’s representation of lynching that starts in her earliest writings about lynching and continues to develop in her longer speeches and pamphlets. Her analysis takes the form of a narration of the many and varied reasons other than rape that lynching happened and effectively uses the writing of the white press to challenge the white press’s account of lynching.

The “Lynching at the Curve”

The front-page coverage of the news coverage of the lynching of three of Wells’s friends in March of 1892 – what would come to be called the “Lynching at the Curve” – by the white-run papers *Memphis Weekly Appeal-Avalanche*, the *Memphis Daily Scimitar*, and the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* outraged Wells and would forever change her thinking about lynching. The editorial response Wells wrote to this coverage was among her first writings about lynching and begins her particular brand of critique of the white press and introduces the unique model of analysis of lynching and stereotyping she continues to develop throughout her anti-lynching texts. This editorial and a discussion of its aftermath are important enough to become the subjects of Wells’s first speaking tour and get included in her famous speech-turned-pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and in her most famous discussion of lynching, *A Red*

Record. The editorial reads:

Eight Negroes lynched in one week. Since last issue of the *Free Speech* one was lynched at Little Rock, Ark, where the citizens broke into the penitentiary and got their man, three near Anniston, Ala., and one in New Orleans, all on the same charge, the new alarm of assaulting white women – and the three near Clarksville, Ga., for killing a white man. The same program of hanging – then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.⁴

Along with her usual insistence on representing the violence of lynching (“shooting bullets into lifeless bodies”), this editorial also shows the emergence of her thinking about how and what lynching signifies and how the ostensible reasons given for lynching are most often not the reasons white mobs kill black men. Wells admits in her autobiography that her original thinking about lynching coincided with the common conception that they were punishment for rape. She assumed, like many, that it was “the white southerner’s chivalrous defense of his womanhood which caused the mob to destroy my paper” and that “like many another person who had read of lynching in the South,” she had:

accepted the idea meant to be conveyed – that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to the lynching; that perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life. (64)

The lynching of her friend Thomas Moss, however, brought Wells the revelation that she had

bought into the moral panic of rape as the reason for lynchings, believing the common sense idea that white men were unable to control themselves during the “chivalrous defense of their womanhood.” However, the fact that “Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Lee Stewart...had committed no crime against white women” had “opened [her] eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and ‘keep the nigger down’” (63-64). The lynching of prominent black businessmen who also happened to be her friends revealed to Wells that lynchings were carried out far more often for economic, political, and white supremacist reasons than for the ostensible reason of outrage over the moral depravity of rape. This editorial caused enough controversy that her paper’s offices were destroyed and she was forced to flee Memphis under threat of death and her own lynching. One response to her editorial in Memphis’s *Daily Commercial* paper read: “The fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. But we have had enough to it” (*Southern Horrors* 52). Her reaction to that controversy was to start her public speaking career with “Exiled,” a talk detailing her experiences after writing this editorial. It was so well received in New York that she was chosen for a speaking tour of English and Scotland the same year. In 1892, a longer version of “Exiled” became her first pamphlet *Southern Horrors*. I want to linger over a careful reading of this editorial and Wells’s subsequent writings about it not only because her thinking about this incident began her career and ways of thinking as an anti-lynching “crusader,” but also because I think this story as told in her speaking tours and as written about in her pamphlets is important as a frame for the methodology of her cultural critique of lynching and sets the ground for the reader to understand her unique analysis of lynching and stereotyping as it develops.

Throughout her career, Wells was a teacher, a journalist, a lecturer, and a clubwoman. The lecture “Exiled” was the culmination of her life, teaching career, and intellectual formation as an investigative journalist up to that point and was also the beginning of her particular method of anti-lynching analysis and activism. Her biography reveals her strength, growth, and passion as a social critic and community activist. She was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16, 1862 and her politically active parents placed a great deal of importance on education; in her autobiography, Wells writes, “our job was to go to school and learn all we could” (*Crusade* 9). At 16, her parents died of yellow fever within days of each other and Wells left Rust College and lied about her age to obtain a teaching job in order to keep her five younger siblings together. In 1882 she and two of her sisters moved to Memphis to live with an aunt and she get a better teaching job, where she taught for 7 years. During this time, Wells’s interest in public discourse and publishing were animated when she joined a lyceum of public schoolteachers who read together, wrote, gave recitations, and debated current issues. Wells was then asked to edit *Evening Star*, a periodical associated with this lyceum, which began her career as a journalist, editor, and writer.⁵

The “lynching at the Curve” tragedy “changed the whole course of [her] life” and brought Wells to the national attention of white America (*Crusade* 47). In 1891, she had been dismissed from her teaching position for “speaking out against the inferior quality of segregated black schools” and she became a full time journalist (Brown 58). She then invested her meager savings in an outspoken newspaper called *Free Speech*, helping to more than double its subscriptions and allowing her to make an income greater than her teaching salary had been. One of Wells’s “best friends,” Thomas Moss (known as “Tommie” to Wells) was a mail carrier who opened the People’s Grocery Store with his partners, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart,

near a white-owned grocery store “in the district know as the ‘Curve,’” a “thickly populated colored suburb” (*Crusade* 48). Most of the black residents of this Memphis suburb, who were friends, coworkers, and churchgoers of the owners of the new store, took their business to the Black-owned People’s Grocery. Having lost their near-monopoly on grocery trade in the neighborhood because of this new competition, the white owners were hostile to Moss and the other owners. A game of marbles between a group of white and black boys ended with “the father of the white boys whipp[ing] the victorious colored boy,” which was followed by the friends and family of the black boy avenging him by beating the white man. The white man and white grocers called for their arrest but “the case was dismissed with nominal fines” (*Crusade* 48). Unfulfilled with this verdict, the white men swore to retaliate by attacking the People’s Grocery one Saturday night. A lawyer told the owners that since they were “outside the city limits and beyond police protection they would be justified in protecting themselves if attacked” (*Crusade* 48). At closing, the armed guards they hired fired on several white men who were trying to get in the back doors and wounded three of them. The next day the white papers claimed that policemen had been shot while trying to apprehend criminals at the store. The next day about thirty black men in the neighborhood were arrested, including the owners of People’s Grocery. A group of black men including an African American military company, The Tennessee Rifles, guarded the men in jail from potential mob violence for two days but on the third night, though there had not been a lynching in Memphis since the Civil War, Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were removed from their cells by a mob, taken to a switch engine waiting on the tracks behind the jail, and transported a mile north of the city where they were all shot to death, using the steam whistle of the train to cover the sound of the gunfire. One of the men’s hands had been maimed and the eyes of another were gouged out. A mob ransacked the

grocery store, which was then closed by creditors and the stock sold at auction.⁶

These lynchings were really the catalyst for Wells's anti-lynching writing campaign; her reaction to the representation of the lynching in the white newspapers of Memphis began her analysis of the role of the Black Rapist stereotype in the act of lynching. Wells wrote articles about the lynchings that, like her article on her court case, advised the Black residents how to protest these acts of violence, including boycotting local white-owned businesses and Memphis's streetcar line and encouraging residents to leave the South for northern states where there would be more opportunities and less violence toward African Americans. Wells's many editorials following this lynching were, not surprisingly, lambasted in the white press and reviled by the white population of Memphis. Her editorial of May 21, 1892 above was the final straw for many of her white critics. When the article appeared Wells was en route to visit Frances Ellen Harper in Philadelphia, her life was threatened by men who "had promise to torture and kill her on sight if she ever set foot in Tennessee again," so she was forced to never return to Memphis (Royster 18). One white paper, apparently thinking the author was male, wrote that this "wretch" should be "tied to a stake at the corner of Main and Madison streets, a pair of tailor's shears used on him and he should be burned at the stake" (Duster 66). A "committee" also ransacked the offices and destroyed the printing press of the *Free Speech* declaring that anyone who tried to "publish the paper again" would be "punished with death" (*Crusade* 62). Her partner J.L. Fleming narrowly escaped with his life and blamed Wells's editorial for sparking the violence that destroyed the paper. After Philadelphia, Wells continued her trip to New York where she joined the staff of her friend T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Age*, writing exposés on lynching, including a long article on her exile from Memphis and the weekly column "Iola's Southern Field." While working for this paper, in October of 1892, two black club women planned a testimonial to honor

Wells's anti-lynching journalism, to mount a public protest by Black women over how Wells's treatment in Memphis, and to help raise money for the printing of the pamphlet that would come to be *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. The event brought together 250 of the leading African American women from around New England and raised \$500 for publishing costs. In her autobiography, Wells talks about the other three things this testimonial did: first, it was "the real beginning of the club movement among colored women in this country," having brought together many clubs and club women in one place at one time; second, it was the first of many lectures Wells would give; and third, it was the impetus for the meetings that resulted in Wells's invitation to tour England, which was "the beginning of a worldwide campaign against lynching" (Duster 81-82).

Often read as part of her campaign to disprove the "threadbare lie" of black male stereotypes, I read this brief editorial as the beginning of Wells's more nuanced and complex analysis of lynching in a number of ways. First, the editorial shows Wells starting an analysis of lynching that focuses less on disproving the "threadbare lie" of the stereotype than it does on questioning the accusation of rape. As I've said, I read her exposés of lynching as carefully disarticulating the act of lynching from the accusation of rape from the legitimization of both by the stereotype. Wells's analysis showcases and puts pressure on the accusation of rape, which reveals the stereotype as the conditions of possibility that allow the accusation of rape to be a warrant for the torturing and killing of African American men (and women). A focus on the accusation allows Wells to examine the power of the Black Rapist stereotype outside of a true/false dichotomy. Second, this editorial begins Wells's focus on the white press as the site that (re)produced the Black Rapist stereotype and cemented its linkage to the act of lynching.

Whether or not the Black Rapist stereotype was taken up as a legitimization of the mob violence of lynching before it was written about in white newspapers, the white press was the discursive site in which Black stereotypes of primitiveness, bestiality, criminality, and hypersexuality were recycled into the specific form of the Black Rapist stereotype deployed at this historical moment. Finally, this editorial begins Wells's thinking about what Hazel Carby calls the "network of figurations" in which stereotypes exist, an understanding, in other words, of the idea that stereotypes like the Black Rapist are not isolated social definitions but require a whole network of stereotypes to produce the circular representational logic that makes them believable even in the face of their obvious contradictions and un-believability. This focus on the network of stereotypes leads Wells to an analysis of the Black Rapist stereotype against-the-grain through an engagement with its necessary connection to both black and white (but especially white) women's sexuality. These points are all evident in this editorial and also get elaborated in her subsequent writings, particularly *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*.

In the editorial, Wells certainly *seems* to be attempting to disprove or debunk the Black Rapist stereotype, as common readings of her work assert, when she calls attention to the "new alarm of assaulting white women" and the "the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women," which "nobody in this section of the country believes." However, this is more than an "empirical refutation" of the Black Rapist stereotype, as the "new alarm" and "threadbare lie" actually denote the accusation of rape that warrants the act of lynching, not the stereotype that legitimizes this accusation. This insight leads me to reading Wells's texts as understanding lynching's anti-black terrorism, not by assuming the "stereotypical narrative of lynching" but rather by breaking in her writing campaigns the "narrative molds" into which lynching has cohered in this post-Reconstruction time. She does so in ways that engage the stereotype against

the grain of this stereotypical narrative through a careful disarticulation of the material act of lynching from the narrative of the accusation of rape from the representational practice of the Black Rapist stereotype that legitimizes and makes possible that accusation. Disarticulating the stereotype from the act of lynching means understanding that the *act of lynching* (murdering someone for a “crime” or indiscretion without legal sanction from the state), the (most often fallacious) *accusation of rape* of white women by black men, and the “truth” of the *stereotype* that black men rape white women are all separate moments in a particular narrative of the spectacle called lynching. In other words, it is not precise enough to say that the stereotype legitimizes the practice of lynching because it is actually the accusation of rape that provides the excuse for mobs of white citizens to capture and drag black bodies through the streets and torture, maim, murder, and then hang them for the public to see. The “new alarm” and “threadbare lie” refer to the accusation of rape leveled at black men as an excuse for lynching that works to elide the actual economic, political, and/or white supremacist reasons for this terrorist act.

This accusatory “lie” is also “threadbare,” according to Wells. Not only is Wells marking the accusation of rape as a lie but the very “lie” itself is already a “threadbare” one that “nobody in this section of the country believes.” Wells seems to indicate here that this lie was so “threadbare,” so flimsy and see-through, that the stereotypes that legitimated it were, in fact, insufficient to making the accusation of rape anything more than “threadbare,” that even this particular form of the Black Rapist stereotype of African American men that was so prevalent in white newspapers and American cultural discourse at that time was not even able to make these accusations of rape believable. However, the “alarm” was still raised and the stereotype still used within the white press (and other cultural texts) to try to prove this “lie” true, indicating that this stereotype’s truthfulness doesn’t actually affect its ability to legitimate the terrorist act of

lynching. In other words, the uproar over this editorial is not over how Wells revealed the stereotype as a false mis-representation because everyone always already knew it wasn't true – or, rather, it doesn't matter if they true are or not, they still legitimized lynching. The uproar in the white press over Wells's editorial that instigated the destruction of her paper and her exile from Memphis was over the fact that she *reveals the accusation of rape itself* to be a “lie” so “threadbare” that the actual political motivations of lynching are able to be seen right through it.

The focus on revealing the “lie” of the accusation of rape also sheds light on how the Black Rapist stereotype works. In the stereotypical narrative of lynching that Wells unpacks, the “truth” of the stereotype is the cause of the accusation and authorizes lynching through the logic that because “all Black men are rapists,” they obviously need either punishment or deterrence through lynching. Because they rape, they are lynch-able. One of the points of this narrative as it was produced at the time is to make the Black Rapist stereotype, which is an *effect* of the act of lynching (the stereotype comes to be used to explain the accusation of rape), seem like a *cause* of lynching (because Black men rape white women they must be lynched), which sets up a terrain of knowledge in which the stereotype is always “true.” Most analyses of this narrative of lynching proceed by “disproving” the stereotype and want to read Wells as doing so as well. But, Wells's focus on the accusation reveals it as an *effect* of the stereotype. If her focus is, as I suggest, revealing the erroneousness of the accusation of rape (through a catalog of other reasons for lynching as I'll discuss later), then the reason given for the act of lynching (rape) are being called into question, which necessarily requires a rethinking of the legitimization of that reason (the stereotype that “all black men want to rape white women”). If the “new alarm” of rape is a “threadbare lie” that “nobody...believes,” what, then, do we make of the stereotype that ostensibly legitimates that always already “threadbare lie”? If the accusation of rape is a “lie,”

how does one, then, analyze the stereotype that legitimizes it? If these accusations of rape are false, at least some doubt is thrown onto the stereotype or, rather, the reliance on the stereotype to legitimize the “threadbare lie” is necessarily called into question. Wells shifts the analysis of stereotypes out of the true/false dichotomy, effectively undoing the empiricism of cause and effect because she shows how the stereotype is not about empirically grounded. In this way, she moves the analysis away from debunking, undoing, or correcting the stereotype to an analysis that understands that the truth or untruth of a stereotype doesn’t change its representational power to represent African Americans as killable. The tenacity of the stereotype works through a special kind of common sense in which it no longer seems to matter whether you convince people to believe it or not because it represents regardless. If you can only understand the stereotype as empirically true or false, you miss what Wells reveals. She is not interested in disproving the stereotype because she is not interested in questions of truth. Rather, she is interested in revealing the power relations behind the accusation of rape itself, revealing the ways the “new cry” of rape is used to make lynching a possible remedy for the imbalance of racial power relations that occurs after emancipation. She shows how rape and the Black Rapist stereotype were part of a public sentiment or common sense about how sexuality is used to fortify the color line at a moment when it was wavering in favor of African American enfranchisement. In other words, the stereotype linked to the “new alarm” of the rape accusation legitimized by the Black Rapist stereotype is shown to be both instantiating and instantiated by the discursive field in which race and sexuality are inseparable at this historical moment. Her focus on the accusation of rape reveals how the act of lynching is not a punishment for a perceived violation of sexual impropriety perpetrated by Black men but, rather, a punishment for a perceived violation of racial hierarchy by African Americans. Lynching is not based on the

sexual impropriety perpetuated by African Americans on whites but on the racial impropriety perpetrated by white men on African Americans.

This editorial also begins Wells's engagement with the white press. The implied audience of this editorial includes the white press that ran her out of Memphis and had been instrumental in raising the "new alarm" about rape by reporting the "old threadbare lie" as truth by recycling and reusing prevalent stereotypes of hypersexuality and primitivism to produce a "new" form of the stereotype of the Black Rapist and linking it to the act of lynching. Wells challenges the white press for deploying and circulating this stereotype, trafficking in this "alarm," and purveying the "threadbare lie" as it discursively produces the stereotypical narrative of lynching as common sense, articulating the linkage between lynching, rape, and stereotype. Wells first uses white newspapers as evidence for her description of lynchings in the beginning of the editorial, then shifts the rhetorical mode from objective reporting of events to a warning and condemnation of the reasons given for those lynchings. The "new"-ness of this "alarm" indicates her astute awareness that the accusation of rape is a recent development, one that reworks and deploys the "old" fear of black men raping white women but as a new alarm raised in white newspapers at this particular historical moment. When discussing her experiences after this editorial the first chapter of *Southern Horrors* entitled "The Offense," Wells marks the timeliness of the production of this stereotype: "The thinking public will not easily believe freedom and education more brutalizing than slavery, and the world knows that the crime of rape was unknown during the four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one" (53). As in many of her sentences, her rhetorical choices and idea pairings are interesting. She begins this sentence with a bit of a quip dismissing a common notion about emancipation in a way similar to her dismissal

of the “threadbare lie” in her editorial, characterizing the common idea that slavery was better for African Americans than the “freedom and education” of emancipation as another “threadbare lie” when she asserts that the “thinking public” could not possibly believe it more “brutal” than slavery. This implies, of course, that only a non-thinking public could find this idea valid and accurate. Directly after throwing doubt on this common idea, Wells reiterates a famous point from Frederick Douglass’s “Why is the Negro Lynched?” essay when she asserts that the charge of rape was never leveled at black men during the “four years of civil war” when white women were left alone with slaves on plantations “at the mercy of the race.” Wells continues to discuss this idea in *A Red Record*:

During all the days of slavery, no such charge was ever made, not even during the dark days of rebellion, when the white man, following the fortunes of war went to do battle for the maintenance of slavery...Likewise during the period of alleged ‘insurrection,’ and alarming ‘race riots,’ it never occurred to the white man, that his wife and children were in danger of assault. (79)

These quotes reveal how the “threadbare lie” of the Black Rapist stereotype is, indeed, a “new cry,” a production of that historical moment that was not deployed in other moments when it seems like the “danger of assault” would have been higher. While the stereotype attempts to figure this accusation as embedded in the essence of Black men, Wells reveals the accusation of rape and the stereotype that legitimizes it as produced within a specific set of historical conditions. In so doing, Wells also shows that the practice of lynching actually required the emergence of the Black Rapist/Black Buck stereotype, not the other way around.⁷

Finally, the uproar over Wells’s editorial was also over her perceived insult to white womanhood, what Sandra Gunning characterizes as a “figurative rape of white womanhood”

(85). This editorial represents Wells's thinking about the way that stereotypes are embedded within networks, that no stereotype stands alone, and that the "new alarm" over the Black Rapist requires a re-figuration (however slight) of other stereotypes, including especially the stereotypes associated with the "cult of true womanhood." In this editorial example, Wells points out that "if Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction" and "a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." If, in other words, the alarm over black men's hypersexuality and propensity to assault white women becomes too publicly widespread, it is the perception of white (Southern) women that will be damaged. If white men "over-reach themselves" in their use of the "threadbare lie" and public sentiment and moral panic about the prevalence of black men raping white women becomes common sense, then the network of stereotypes will necessarily throw the common sense about the morality of white women into question. This is also interesting because this is a warning to white men about the damage that could be done to white women's reputations, showing an understanding on Wells's part that any damage done to the Genteel Southern Belles' reputations is also, and perhaps mostly, damage done to the white Chivalrous Southern Gentlemen's reputation.

I pause over a close reading of this editorial and Wells's discussions of this incident because, as I mentioned, it marks the beginnings of her unique analysis of lynching and stereotyping. Being included in multiple texts seems to suggest it is important not only as an example of her writing about lynching and as a documentation of the dangers she faced when she spoke out against lynching in the South but also as a methodological overture, frame, and roadmap for the rest of her writings about lynching. The rest of this chapter will read through *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* (and to a lesser extent her posthumous autobiography

Crusader for Justice) to further explore how Wells eschews the empirical and ideological critique of stereotypes in favor of a promiscuous contextualization that, first, elaborates the production of the stereotypical narrative of lynching in the white press and, second, explores the social relations that the Black Rapist stereotype produces by tracing the network of racio-sexual stereotypes it requires for its validity, including especially for Wells, those representing white women's sexuality.

“Misrepresenting the Race”: Wells and the White Press

Southern Horrors and *A Red Record* were both written as exposés of the way the white press represented lynching in America at the time, demonstrating Wells's uncanny discursive analysis of how the stereotypical narrative of lynching was almost entirely a product of the white press. One could easily characterize all of Wells's work as “about” the Black Rapist stereotype but because of how resistant the stereotype is to empirical critique and the complicated way that the Black Rapist stereotype was forged as part of the stereotypical narrative of lynching in the white press at this historical moment, Wells's analysis takes the form of a promiscuous contextuality that works to penetrate the stereotype against the grain. What I mean by this is that while Wells is certainly interested in exposing the Black Rapist stereotype for the discursive tool it is for the apologists of lynching and white supremacy more broadly, the way she accomplishes this is not a straightforward use of empirical truth to refute the stereotype, as most would describe her work. In fact, the way Wells goes about “disproving” the Black Rapist stereotype in her exposés is actually not to do so at all. Rather, she talks around the stereotype, constellating her discussion of how the white press relies on the Black Rapist in its lynching coverage with her list of the other reasons besides rape that lynchings are carried out.

As she is in her infamous editorial, Wells is almost certainly discussing the Black Rapist stereotype at other points in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*. In the preface to *Southern Horrors*, she writes:

This statement [meaning *Southern Horrors*] is not a shield for the despoiler of virtue, nor altogether a defense for the poor blind Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs...The Afro-American is not a *bestial race*. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service. (50, my emphasis)

When discussing the African American response to lynching, Wells explains that the stereotype has swayed African Americans many to believe in it.

Even to the better class of Afro-Americans the crime of rape is so revolting that they have too often taken the white man's word and given lynch law neither the investigation nor condemnation it deserved...(so frequently is the cry of rape now raised) it is in a fair way to stamp us *a race of rapists* and desperadoes. (*Southern Horrors* 61, my emphasis).

In *A Red Record*, Wells continues her description of the Black Rapist narrative:

Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood, and this charge upon the Negro at once placed him beyond the pale of human sympathy. With such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that the world has accepted the story that *the Negro is a monster* which the Southern white man has painted him...the Negro feels today that after all the work he has done, all the sacrifices he has made, and all the suffering he has endured, if he did not, now, defend his name and manhood from this vile

accusation, he would be unworthy even of the contempt of mankind. It is to this charge he now feels he must answer. (*Red Record* 78, my emphasis)

She also discusses the stereotype in her autobiography *Crusade for Justice*:

Hence came lynch law to stifle Negro manhood which defended itself, and the burning alive of Negroes who were weak enough to accept favors from white women. The many unspeakable and unprintable tortures to which Negro rapists (?) of white women were subjected were for the purpose of striking terror in the hearts of other Negroes who might be thinking of consorting with willing white women.

I found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded as a *race of rapists*, who were especially mad after white women. I found that white men how had created a race of mulattoes by raping and consorting with Negro women were still doing so wherever they could, these same white men lynched, burned, and tortured Negro men for doing the same thing with white women; even when the white women were willing victims. (*Crusade* 71)

Like the phrase like “new cry,” when Wells writes of the “crime” and “charge” and “vile accusation” of rape, she is not discussing the stereotype necessarily but rather the accusation of rape. However, terms such as “despoiler of virtue,” “bestial race,” “monster,” a “race of rapists” that name particular social figurations of African Americans certainly refer to the stereotype of the Black Rapist. These instances when Wells explicitly discusses the stereotype of the Black Rapist seem easy to read as part of a program to disprove the Black Rapist stereotype, especially if the stereotypical narrative of lynching remains unquestioned. I want to suggest, however, that while she is interested in challenging the stereotype, she is not actually interested in an “empirical refutation” in these quotes but in an exposition of how this stereotype gets solidified

in the public eye. For Wells it is clear that the stereotype of the Black Rapist was being produced and affixed to Black men by the “white man’s word” and “with such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that the world has accepted the story” because “in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded.” Wells’s reaction to this was not to simply say that this stereotype is untrue but to show how that it is a production in the public sphere by the white press, which makes it obvious that the stereotype is being used for particular purposes regardless of its spuriousness.

Wells also makes us aware of the fact that the spurious stereotype is a product of the white press’s production of the whole stereotypical narrative of lynching. Like the “Lynching at the Curve” editorial, most of Wells’s other writings were in reaction to the way the white press shaped the discourse of lynching. Wells engages the white press in a war of representation because this is the discursive site through which the public comes to understand the immediate linkage of the stereotype to the act of lynching as common sense. Her pamphlets, *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* use the white press’s descriptions of lynchings as evidence. The introductory chapter of *Southern Horrors* containing the editorial that I’ve discussed at length as a frame for Wells’s thinking also discusses the war of representation that occurred around that particular editorial. When she quotes the white newspapers’ threatening condemnation of her writing in the third chapter of *Southern Horrors* called “The New Cry,” she notes the power of the “new alarm,” including its effect on the press: “This cry has had its effect. It has closed the heart, stifled the conscience, warped the judgment and hushed the voice of press and pulpit on the subject of lynch law throughout this ‘land of liberty’” (*Southern* 61). Wells was well aware that true or not, simply raising the “cry” of rape drastically changed the way that lynching was discussed in the news and in public opinion. She was also aware that the way this happened was

by “warping the judgment” and silencing any potential critics of lynching in the “press and pulpit” by linking it inexorably to rape.

The most sustained engagement with the way the white press narrates lynching in *Southern Horrors* occurs in the chapter aptly titled “The Malicious and Untruthful White Press.” The chapter before ends with Wells claiming that the “mob spirit has grown with the increasing intelligence of the Afro-American” and has “thrown off the mask and with this new cry stalks in broad daylight in large cities, the centres of civilization, and is encouraged by the ‘leading citizens’ and the press” (*Southern Horrors* 62). After this indictment of the press’s role in instigating the “mob spirit” of lynching, Wells devotes an entire chapter to rehearsing the ways that white newspapers in Memphis had represented various lynchings, all of which solidified the stereotypical narrative of lynching that hinges on the Black Rapist stereotype. One paper discusses a “brutal outrage” in Alabama in which “three Negro scoundrels” “watched for an opportunity when the women were left without a protector,” revealing the “horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race.” The article continues with the insight that the “crime of rape is always horrible, but [to] the Southern man there is nothing which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of the white woman by a Negro. It is the race question in the ugliest, vilest, and most dangerous aspect” (62-63). Another article claims that “the violation of white women by Negroes” is the “outcropping of a bestial perversion of instinct” and that while the “Caucasian blackguard” is “seldom deliberately rough or offensive toward strangers or unprotected women,” the “Negro tough...is given to just that kind of offending, and he almost invariably singles out white people as his victims” (63). As evidence of Wells’s prior point about how “mob spirit” increases as the Afro-American intelligence does, this article states, “it is a remarkable and discouraging fact that the majority of scoundrels are Negroes who have

received educational advantages at the hands of the white taxpayers” (63-64). In her final example of the white press’s misrepresentations, Wells describes the economic reasons and circumstances surrounding the mob murder of her three friends during the “lynching at the Curve.” After her description she discusses how the “dailies and associated press reports heralded these men to the country as ‘toughs’ and ‘Negro desperadoes who kept a low dive’” (66). Wells then describes the reasons for the destruction of her paper after the “editorial which is construed as a reflection on the ‘honor’ of the Southern white women” came out: “Not content with misrepresenting the race, the mob-spirit was not to be satisfied until the paper which was doing all it could to counteract this impression was silenced...they would have lynched the manager of the ‘Free Speech’ for exercising the right of free speech if they had found him as quickly as they would have hung a rapist” (66). This last quote clearly states Wells’s claim that the white press “misrepresent[s] the race” as rapists in ways that the other quotes make obvious but also clearly shows Wells’s understanding of the ‘debates’ over lynching taking place in the papers as a war of representation in which she tries to “counteract this impression.”

The last chapter of *Southern Horrors* entitled “Self Help” outlines Wells’s ideas about what to do in the face of the lynching threat, which includes calling for the black press to counteract the misrepresentations of the white press. Along with emigration (the first thing she discusses in this chapter is how, after the “Lynching at the Curve,” “black men left the city by the thousands” (68)), economic boycotts (“The appeal to the white man’s pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience” (69)), and armed resistance (“a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home” (70)), Wells suggests that it will be necessary for the black press to change public opinion on lynching. She writes,

The assertion has been substantiated throughout these pages that the press contains

unreliable and doctored reports of lynchings, and one of the most necessary things for the race to do is to get these facts before the public. The people must know before they can act and there is no educator to compare with the press. (70)

Her call for support of the black press is another way to counteract the white press's production of lynching rests on the notion that "there is no educator like the press." Because the white press proves to be a "malicious" and "untruthful" containing "unreliable and doctored reports," Wells asserts that the black press must get the "facts before the public." As the white press produces a particular kind of audience with their narrative, Wells calls for the black press produce a new audience and change the narrative with what she calls "facts." These facts, though, are not contradictions of the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans but are instead meant to be re-narrations of the lynching scenarios depicted in white papers, which would necessarily call into question the white press's "malicious" stories and the stereotypes upon which these stories depend.

Her use and critique of the white press continues in *A Red Record*, which uses as evidence the "compilation of the statistics touching upon lynching" from the Chicago Tribune in "order to be safe from the charge of exaggeration" (82). Describing her method in *A Red Record*, Wells writes "the purpose of the pages which follow shall be to give the record which has been made, not by colored men, but that which is the result of compilations made by white men, of reports sent over the civilized world by white men in the South. Out of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned" and "Lest it might be charged that any description of the deeds of that day are exaggerated, a white man's description which was published in the white journals of this country is used" (*Red Record* 82, 93). In the chapter entitled "The Crusade Justified," Wells defends her use of the white press against potential critiques based on "vindictiveness":

If stating the facts of these lynchings, as they appeared from time to time in the white newspapers of America – the news gathered by white correspondents, compiled by the white press bureaus and disseminated among white people – shows any vindictiveness, then the mind which so charges is not amenable to argument. (*Red Record* 131)

Wells claims to use “white newspapers” as the source for her descriptions of lynchings so as not to be accused of bias but she also clearly does so in order to use the white press’s words as evidence against their biased representation of lynching and to show how the connection between the black rapist stereotype and the act of lynching is not an empirical truth but is discursively produced in the white press.

For Jacqueline Goldsby the use of the white press as evidence signifies Wells’s awareness of the way genres shape audience awareness of a subject. She claims that Wells parodies various genres of knowledge production – journalism in *Southern Horrors* and sociology in *A Red Record* – in order to reveal how these genres work to shape public opinion on lynching. For instance, in her reading of *Southern Horrors*, Goldsby notes that Wells’s career as an anti-lynching writer coincided with the professionalization of print journalism that formulated newspapers as the arbiters of truth. According to Goldsby, Wells “resented the capacity of the Memphis press to dominate public discussion” about the lynching at the Curve as they “functioned to ‘create’ not ‘report’ the event” (44-45). The immediate assumption between the Black Rapist stereotype and the act of lynching took place primarily in white newspapers, which reported lynching in great detail and “depicted lynching in ways that made the violence tolerable to the American public” and “biase[d] the reader’s response to lynching” (47, 93). Wells’s exposés on lynching “revised public debates about lynching as a tool of racial, gender, and class domination” as she “conclusively showed that the charge of rape so often levied to justify

lynching on ideological grounds was empirically untrue” (46). While this quote can certainly be read as in line with Goldsby’s earlier statements about the “empirical refutation” of the stereotype, Goldsby actually focuses here, much like I have been, on how Wells is disproving the accusation of rape as “empirically untrue.” Goldsby details how Wells uses journalistic form as an intentional rebuttal to the form the white press utilized to produce the stereotypical narrative of lynching and the Black Rapist stereotype. According to Goldsby, though, Wells did not stop her critique at the level of content but also wanted to bring attention to the ways that the journalistic form shaped the debate: “Wells’s arguments were seditious not simply because of what she said but because she framed those propositions in terms that challenged her readers to recognize how the styles of news writing shaped what they knew about lynching” (47).

Furthermore,

For Wells, anti-lynching debates were to be fought not only over what she often called the politics of ‘misrepresentation’: countering wrong facts and bad arguments with accurate information and morally just opinions. More profoundly, Wells’s pamphlets intimate that her interests lay as much with exposing the formal structures and modes of new discourse to the reading public, to show how journalism’s professional premises and aesthetic strategies organized what was possible to be known in public debates about the violence. (70)

For Goldsby, along with the use of evidence directly from white newspapers, the very form of Wells’s pamphlets “challenged” readers to recognize how the genre of journalism was actively “shaping” common sense notions about the act of lynching, or was, in other words, controlling the discourse on lynching. Likewise, *A Red Record* “parodies the patriarchal voice of rational objectivity” as it “parodies the discourses of American social sciences (particularly sociology) to

explore how paradigms of objectivity and empiricism functioned to produce and reinforce white Americans' simultaneous rage for and disinterest in lynching as a crisis of national concerns" and "links lynching's cultural logic to the very orders of proof so vital to the authority of scientific rationalism in American life" (82). Goldsby convincingly argues that Wells uses the generic conventions of journalism and sociology to include her voice into the discourse of race in America in order to reveal how these genres shaped the public's thinking about lynching. Her points about *Southern Horrors* are useful for an understanding of the ways that Wells actually uses the words of the white press in her analysis of the way this press produces a common sense stereotypical narrative of lynching. Goldsby's reading of *A Red Record* aligns well with my attention to the ways that Wells analyzes the Black Rapist stereotype not as true or false but as a hinge in the production of that narrative.

Along with Goldsby's points about her use of genre and Wells's own points about staving off the criticism of exaggeration, I believe one of the salient reasons Wells uses white newspapers' own writing and data against itself is to reveal how the white press's account of the stereotypical narrative of lynching is also "threadbare" and doesn't hold up even under the weight of its own evidence. The white press's articulation of this narrative produced the Black Rapist stereotype but not explicitly. Most newspapers didn't define and discuss the stereotype as such as much as they assumed it, or relied on it, to tell their stories about lynching. The press didn't really need to produce this stereotype because it was already recognizable as parts of other stereotypes of African American primitiveness, hypersexuality, and criminality. Although, as my historical footnote about lynching details, while the accusation of rape and its legitimization through the Black Rapist stereotype didn't become part of the lynching narrative until Reconstruction, it was an obvious recycling of older types. As newspaper articles and editorials

claimed that most if not all lynchings were carried out as punishments for particular rapes or as warnings against future rape, the *assumption* of the stereotype in these articles (rather than a more active discursive production of it) coupled with the recycling and re-use of already-existing stereotypes works to make the Black Rapist stereotype seem like a common sense, ‘natural,’ ahistorical scientific fact about Black men. To comment on and counter this assumption, Wells uses the same newspaper reports to compile her list of reasons *other* than rape that were given for lynchings in order to show how the assumption of the Black Rapist stereotype is a kind of “misrepresenting the race” by omission. Her work disarticulates the white press’s narrative linkage between the stereotype and the act of lynching while also making known how the white press attempts this articulation through, as Goldsby tells us, the particular genre of news writing, which produces a specific audience and public and a specific “narrative mold” for lynching.

One of the main ways that Wells uses this evidence from white newspapers to disrupt the very “narrative molds” that they have created is to suggest that the primary reason given for lynching in these papers – the accusation of the rape of white women by Black men – is not actually the primary reason lynchings occur. Wells spends the majority of both texts quoting the way the white press has represented particular lynchings before then offering alternative reasons other than Black men raping white women that lynchings occurred, which include that women were lynched, only about 1/3 of the lynched were actually accused of rape, no one worried about rape during the time of slavery, the Civil War, or the Reconstruction era when northern white women came to the South to teach newly freed slaves (*Red Record* 79-80). *Southern Horrors* does so first by discussing her experience with the “Curve” editorial that started it all, which, as I hope I’ve made clear, uses the same kind of analysis Wells continues in other writings. Her next chapters use newspaper stories to discuss how often the relationships between Black men and

white women are actually consensual even though they are figured or retroactively claimed to be rapes (“The Black and White of It”) and how the accusation of rape is a new cultural practice used to “palliate” and “excuse” the “heinous crime” of lynching in the South (“The New Cry”). One chapter continues her discussion about the “Lynching at the Curve” to show how rape was used to cover over a lynching done for economic reasons (“The Malicious and Untruthful White Press”) while another claims that too little is done to stop lynching because of the stigma of rape (“The South’s Position”). The majority of *A Red Record* (over half of the text) is made up of chapters that simply list the reasons for particular lynchings, most of which are not rape. “Lynch Law Statistics” consists of a compilation of lynching victims in the year 1893, grouped according to the reason for each lynching, including Arson, Murder, Burglary, Wife Beating, Alleged Poisoning Wells, Insulting Whites, along with, of course, Rape, Attempted Rape, Alleged Rape, and No Offense. Chapters called “Lynching Imbeciles,” “Lynching Innocent Men and Women,” and “Lynched for Anything and Nothing” are narrative accounts of specific cases of lynching, some of which involve rape, most of which do not. The assumption of the stereotypical narrative of lynching leads many readers and scholars of Wells’s work to claim that these tables and lists are her “empirical refutation” of the Black Rapist stereotype. However, Wells seems to have no interest in challenging the stereotype’s veracity or I feel sure she would have thought of more direct ways to counter the stereotype than undermining the production of the white press’s narrative of lynching. These lists of alternative reasons for lynching challenges the white press’s use of the Black Rapist stereotype not through testing its veracity or falsity but through revealing the ways the stereotype – true or false – is relied upon by the white press in its account of lynching and, furthermore, how the stereotype’s apparent unquestionable representation of African American men actually relies on a what Hazel Carby calls a “network

of figurations” of other stereotypes, including especially the Virtuous White Woman Victim.

“White Delilahs”: Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Virtuous White Women

Along with her careful explication of the ways the white press assumes and produces the stereotypical narrative of lynching, another of Wells’s insights that does not involve an ideological critique of the stereotype involves the way she traces what Carby calls the Black Rapist stereotype’s “network of figurations” in order to reveal the other stereotypes and social relations it produces, including especially those involving white women’s sexuality. As I’ve mentioned, Wells’s challenge to the stereotype is not about proving it false, but about showing its production in many ways. Wells’s reaction to the white press’s production of the stereotypical narrative of lynching, including its deployment of the Black Rapist stereotype, is not to critique this stereotype outright but to list reasons other than rape that lynchings have been carried out. It seems odd to counter the truthfulness of the Black Rapist stereotype, as many of the Wells “debunking” the stereotype readings do, with a list of reasons other than rape that lynchings occurred. Even if we accepted the idea that judging stereotypes as true or untrue works to change them, the facts listed by Wells don’t “disprove” the stereotype. For examples, the fact that sometimes black people were lynched for other offenses or that sometimes “imbeciles” are lynched or that sometimes white women actually consent to sex with black men, does little to “disprove” or even challenge the veracity of the Black Rapist stereotype. Wells’s promiscuous contextuality of the white press’s narrative of lynching is keenly aware that challenging the stereotype of the Black Rapist requires uncoupling the white press’s linkage of the stereotype to the practice of lynching and that this uncoupling requires an understanding of the “network of figurations” of other stereotypes and social relations that were produced in the

white press along in order to support the Black Rapist stereotype's authenticity.

While I remain convinced that her ideological critique of stereotypes is inadequate for understanding how stereotypes actually do their work, I do think that *within* her explanation of stereotypes as ideological, Carby provides an astute insight into the way Wells engages the Black Rapist in her work. Ideological critique does not allow for an understanding of the way that stereotypes don't always mystify, or cover over, social relations but also *produce* them. However, Carby's understanding that stereotypes exist within a "whole network of figurations forming a complex metaphorical system" and "appear to exist in isolation while actually depending on a nexus of figurations which can be explained only in relation to each other" suggests that any given stereotype's network of validations necessarily produces a whole array of social relations (20-21). For Carby, stereotypes are always part of a system of signification that weaves a web of recursive social definitions that make each definition seem like universal truths. Carby instructs us that any understanding of a given stereotype requires an understanding of its relation to the entire network of other stereotypes as well as an understanding of the racial and gender codes that connect and validate these stereotypes. While they appear "isolated" and ahistorical, universal and unchanging, they are, in fact, radically historically contingent. According to Carby, texts that represent stereotypes are not "reflections of 'real life' as it 'was'" but are, rather, "*representing and reconstructing history for us from particular viewpoints under specific historical conditions*"; reading stereotypes thusly allows us to "recognize the particular ways in which racism and black sexuality are articulated in the patriarchal system of the antebellum South" (22). The point for Carby is to map the various power relations that necessitate and compose any given stereotype in order to reveal what the stereotype mystifies. However, I would suggest that being read and discussed as *mystifying* social relations of violence

while, in fact, also *producing* a certain network of social relations is part of stereotypes' tenacity, part of their resistance to critique that ensures their adaptability and survival into the present moment.

Tracing the way this network of figurations produces certain kinds of social relations is part of what I want to call Wells's promiscuous contextualization of the Black Rapist stereotype, which she not only traces but also disrupts the Black Rapist network when she inserts a new kind of stereotype into the mix. Wells first maps how the linkage of the stereotype to lynching is cultivated in the white press through the press's assumption of a particular version of the "network of figurations" that the Black Rapist stereotype requires to become a common sense representation of Black men. The network includes a particular figuration of white man, white woman, and black woman stereotypes in relation to the Black Rapist. In her descriptive cataloging of the reasons other than rape that lynchings were carried out in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, Wells reads this network as it was produced in the press against the grain; unpacking the Black Rapist stereotype through an engagement with the way the white press doesn't exactly produce the stereotype explicitly but rather produces it as true through the *assumption* of the stereotype's truthfulness in its account of lynching. The underlying assumption of the stereotype in the white press's account of lynching works to reproduce the stereotype axiomatically, making it seem like so obviously true, one doesn't have to prove it at all. This is one of the ways their representational logics work to invisibilize the work of the stereotype in discussions of lynching. It is not so much that stereotypes mystify social relations, but that social relations (such as those involved in lynching) invisibilize the work of legitimization that stereotypes do as well as invisibilizing the way stereotypes need to produce a whole array of other social relations to augment their truth claims.

In both *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, Wells uses readings of the white press to trace the Black Rapist stereotype's "network" in order to show how the white press's constitution of the stereotypical narrative of lynching relies on solidifying not only the Black Rapist stereotype but an entire network of specific stereotypes. For instance, Wells's writing reveals how the insatiable Black Rapist stereotype as it was propagated in the white press relies on also producing particular forms of other stereotypes including especially the Victim (underwritten by the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood), the chivalrous White Male Protector/Avenger, and the seductive Black Woman Jezebel.⁸ Wells's promiscuous contextuality reveals the constellation of power relations involved in the white press's ability to rely on the Black Rapist stereotype in its account of lynching. Her power-mapping of this "network" works not only (or even primarily), as Carby might suggest, to reveal the ideological mystification of the social relations that warranted a particular stereotype but also (and primarily) to trace the ways stereotypes work within a web of legitimization in which the Black Rapist required the discursive construction of a Virtuous White Woman Victim that was so pure and innocent that the White Male Protector/Avenger was necessary to either save her from black men or avenge her defilement and also required the Jezebel through which the White Woman Victim's purity could be negatively define in relief and whose charms helped not only to explain white men's molestation of black women (which, in some way, also must have helped convince them that black men were doing the same to white women) but also whose irresistibility helped define the Black Rapist (as a consequence of pent-up urges created by Black men's constant temptation by the Jezebels, which, being primitive, they already had trouble controlling).⁹ One implication of this analysis that Wells exploits is that a change to one stereotype instigates a change to the others so that, for instance, when Wells points out that the white women "Victims" are often

actually willing and consenting partners in sexual relations with Black men, she is hoping for a ripple effect to happen that will change the understanding and public opinion of all the other stereotypes in this web, particularly the Black Rapist stereotype.

Carby's reading of Wells actually outlines her promiscuous contextualization of the Black Rapist's "network" and how Wells's "analysis of lynching provided us with a more detailed dissection of how patriarchal power manipulates sexual ideologies to effect political and economic subordination" (Carby 114). To Carby, Wells's analysis of lynching was "multifaceted" and focused on the ways that sexuality regulates race:

she situated the murder of black men historically within the whole spectrum of black and white social, political, and economic relations. But at its core, what was and has remained unique about Wells's theorizing is its dissection of sexual ideologies and mores. Early in her work, Wells indicted the miscegenation laws which, in practice, meant that black women were the victims of rape by white men who had the power to terrorize black men under the pretense of the protection of white womanhood. (111)

Carby continues by asserting that "central to the thesis of Wells, that white men used their ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to politically oppress the black male...Wells...was able to reveal how a patriarchal system which lost its total ownership over black male bodies used its control over women to attempt to completely circumscribe the actions of black male labor" (115). This reading describes the way the stereotypes within the Black Rapist's network work to support white patriarchy in two ways. First, white men's rape of black women gets elided by their performance of horror over the black man's possible rape of white women. Second, the control that white men lost over black men's bodies after emancipation gets reestablished through their control of white women. In other words, the Virtuous White Woman

Victim and its constitutive other the Jezebel become the cultural nodal points through which white men maintain racial domination over black men. This works through defining black women as morally inferior to white women so that white women are seen as worthy of protection from black men by white men as well as figuring white men as morally superior to black men so that their relationships with black women remain beyond reproach (or blamed on the Jezebel's irresistible charms) and their animosity and violence toward black men is justified through the presumption that Black men are all potential rapists. Throughout her writings, Wells challenges the ways the white press makes the Black Rapist central to the stereotypical narrative of lynching as a sexual stereotype that regulates race in part through the discursive construction and deployment of stereotypes of white and black women (including their interrelationship). Sandra Gunning characterizes Wells's mapping of the network when she writes "the pamphlet's repeated emphasis that a discussion of the lynching of black men must include a reexamination of restrictive American ideology about female virtue and injustice to black womanhood" (Gunning 84). Like Carby, Gunning reads Wells as promiscuously contextualizing the Black Rapist and lynching as part of American ideologies of white and black womanhood. Wells critiques the hypocritical use of the Black Rapist stereotype by white men both by discussing the fact that white men rape black women and calls for a re-imagining of the Black Rapist stereotype by suggesting, as was the cause of such controversy in her "Lynching at the Curve" editorial, that many of the cries of rape were, in fact, consensual sexual relationships between white women and black men. Wells understands that the strength of the white press's construction of the Black Rapist stereotype relies on their constant portrayal of white and black women's sexuality, which explains why one of the main thrusts of her argument in both *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* involves representing the fact that white men rape black women and her near-obsession

with what white women's sexual consent to black men reveals about their virtuousness.

Wells's brings up the past and continued rape of black women by white men at several points in both pamphlets, always as an aspect of this network of black and white gendered sexual stereotypes. In *Southern Horrors*, Wells ends "The Black and White of It" chapter, in which she discusses several instances of white women's consensual sex with black men, by discussing white men's sexual violence against black women. At one point she lists five reasons for a lynched man's innocence. Four of them were about the character of the white women in the case and the last one stated that "a large majority of the 'superior' white men prominent in the affair are the reputed fathers of mulatto children" (*Southern Horrors* 57). Later she sums up her discussion of white women's consent with a description of the network of stereotypes, or, more precisely the network of sexual relations – consensual or not – that have engendered these particular stereotypes: "Hundreds of such cases might be cited, but enough have been given to prove the assertion that there are white women in the South who love the Afro-American's company even as there are white men notorious for their preference for Afro-American women" (*Southern Horrors* 58). Wells interestingly equates here the rape of black women by white men with white women's non-rape sex with black men. One could read this easily as an indictment of white women's "notorious" "preference" for black men indicating another kind of rape, a rape that might be possible because of white women's social power over black men or the power that white women hold over black men because of the threat of the cry of rape.

Wells then ends this chapter discussing the lack of punishment that white men who "outraged" black women and girls receive to continue her argument that their concern is not rape per se but the rape of white women only. She first paraphrases her editorial, restating that "nobody in the South believes the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women" and that

this disbelief has created a “growing demand” among African Americans “that the guilt or innocence of parties accused of rape be fully established” (58). However, “the men of the section of the country who refuse this are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend” (58). Wells continues by quoting the governor of South Carolina Benjamin Tillman as a representative of lynching apologists everywhere saying that he “would lead a mob to lynch a *negro* who raped a *white* woman,” which, to Wells, is the attitude of all the “pulpits, officials, and newspapers of the South” (58). However, “when the victim is a colored woman it is different” (58). Wells then lists cases in which white men “outraged” black women with little or no punishment, including “three white ruffians” who assaulted a black girl and made her escort watch but were acquitted, a white man who brutally raped a young black girl and went to jail for six months and then became a police detective, a white man who attempted to rape a “neighbor’s cook” but was caught and not charged at all because “he was drunk and not responsible for his actions” and a lynch mob assembling to murder a black man accused of rape while ignoring a white man was “in the same jail for raping an eight-year-old” (59). Wells also discusses the hypocrisy of anti-miscegenation activists in the South: “The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women” (53-4). Her point in discussing these stories is to show that the bravado of white men’s “new cry” of rape cannot be taken seriously because it only pertains to white women.¹⁰

The hypocrisy of white men’s cry of rape is further detailed in *A Red Record* where Wells uses the network of figurations of stereotypes to discuss mixed race children as indices of racial violence against black women.

It is not the purpose of this defense to say one word against white women of the South. Such need not be said, but it is their misfortune that the chivalrous white men of that section, in order to escape the deserved execration of the civilized world, should shield themselves by their cowardly and infamously false excuse, and call into question that very honor about which their distinguished priestly apologist claims they are most sensitive. To justify their own barbarism they assume a chivalry which they do not possess. True chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power. (*Red Record* 80)

Again, Wells points out that “chivalrous white men” that “hide” behind the “cowardly and infamously false excuse” of the cry of rape to justify their lynching of black men actually care less about defending all women’s “honor” as they do white women’s “honor.” Questioning the definition of “chivalry” (which she mentions four times in this short three sentence passage), Wells provides the “faces of the million mulattoes in the South” as evidence of white men’s lack of consideration for the honor of either white women or black women.¹¹ These moments in Wells’s text are meant to reveal some of the ways white men cover up their rape of black women using the stereotype of the Virtuous White Woman Victim and the Black Rapist. During slavery, the institutionalized rape of black women could be justified economically, as the use of the reproductive capacity of slave women to produce more slave property for the plantation owner. Justifying the continuation of sexual relations, violent or not, between white men and black women became a crisis after emancipation. The complex of racialized gendered sexual

stereotypes worked to “shield” white men from incrimination in multiple ways. According to Robyn Wiegman, “the loss of miscegenation’s economic rationalization under slavery turns the question of interracial sexuality toward the more tension-wrought domain of sexual desire” and “the myth of the black rapist serves to compensate for this economic loss, transferring the focus from the white man’s quasi-sanctioned (because economically productive) sexual activities to the bodies of, quite literally, of black men” (Wiegman 84). Being defined as the moral opposite of the Black Rapist figured white men as above reproach for any of their sexual improprieties. Figuring black women as hypersexual Jezebels allowed white men to explain their rape of them as a factor of these women’s irresistible temptation and charms. The stereotypes of the Black Rapist and the Jezebel were also interrelated as Paula Giddings suggests, “historically the stereotype of the potent Black male was largely based on that of the promiscuous Black female. He would have to be potent, the thinking went, to satisfy such hot-natured women...released from the constraints of white masters, the Black man found White women so ‘alluring’ and ‘seductive’ because, according to [historian Philip] Bruce, of the ‘wantonness of the women of his own race’” (Giddings 31). Philip Dray remarks that “Wells understood that Southern whites, in their belief that black men were preoccupied with having intercourse with white women, were largely battling a monster of their own creation: the longstanding sexual access to black women that white men enjoyed” (Dray 70). Wells elaborates on this violence against black women in her autobiography, connecting the “sexual access to black women” to the “unthinkable” idea that white women might want the same access to black men:

All my life I had known that such conditions were accepted as a matter of course. I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, still continued without let or hindrance, check or reproof from church, state, or press until

there had been created this race within a race – and all designated by the inclusive term ‘colored.’

I also found that what the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinkable in white women. They could and did fall in love with the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls as well as black ones, but they professed an inability to imagine white women doing the same thing with Negro and mulatto men. Whenever they did so and were found out, the cry of rape was raised, and the lowest element of the white South was turned loose to wreak its fiendish cruelty on those too weak to help themselves. (*Crusade* 70)

Here, as in *Southern Horrors*, Wells places some blame on the institutions of “church, state, and press” for the continued rape of black women. She then traces the network of racialized sexual relations revealing another form of white male hypocrisy in how their falling in love with “the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls” was “all right” for them but white women “doing the same thing with Negro and mulatto men” was “unthinkable” and resulted in the “fiendish cruelty” of lynching of black men by the “lowest element of the white South.”

By far, the stereotype in which Wells seems the most interested in her account of the use of the Black Rapist in the white press’s narrative of lynching is the Virtuous White Woman Victim. The figure of the white woman is central to *Southern Horrors*, haunting even the sections in which it is not mentioned, and is an important frame to *A Red Record*, which contains a chapter discussing the white woman’s role in the accusation of rape and act of lynching. By inserting white women’s sexual agency into the discursive circuit of stereotyping, Wells challenges the Black Rapist stereotype by putting what she calls the “unthinkable” to white men – that white women “could and did fall in love with...Negro and mulatto men” – into discourse

(*Crusade* 70). Since interracial relationships between black men and white women could only ever (and by definition) be understood as rape, suggesting that white women consent to these sex acts calls into question the Black Rapist stereotype and its the network.

Wells discusses the Virtuous White Woman Victim stereotype in a few different ways in her writings. She notes how white men use this stereotype to justify their own actions against both black men and black women while she also discusses how the actions of white women often don't coincide with their stereotypical representations in many lynching cases. Along with the statement that no one would believe the "threadbare lie," in the "Lynching at the Curve" editorial Wells warns white *men* about ruining the good name of white women: "If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." In this brilliant insult to white men and women simultaneously, she notes the way women's reputation reflect on white men and in so doing Wells frames all of her anti-lynching work with the awareness that white men feel responsible for white women's actions mostly because it affects the way the men are perceived. In "The New Cry" section of *Southern Horrors*, Wells more blatantly accuses white men of using the protection of white women's virtue as an excuse for their violence toward black men when she describes various reasons for the racial violence blacks are subjected to in the South, including especially the South's resistance to "giving the Afro-American his freedom, the ballot box, and the Civil Rights Law" (60). After enumerating the ways the South repealed these newfound freedoms and enfranchisements, Wells describes how the Black Rapist is used to ameliorate the racial violence of post-Reconstruction South: "To palliate this record (which grows worse as the Afro-American becomes intelligent) and excuse some of the most heinous crimes that ever stained the

history of a country, the South is shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women” (*Southern Horrors* 61). Wells makes the astute point that the South’s use of lynching as a defense of “the honor of tis women” is an almost too obvious “screen” for the real reasons the South terrorizes its black populations. She states this idea again in the opening pages of *A Red Record*. After discussing how slaves were not killed because they were “valuable” as property of slave owners, Wells relates how after emancipation “a new system of intimidation came into vogue” in which black people were no longer beaten to keep them “subservient and submissive,” they were now “killed.” Compelled to “give excuses for his barbarism,” the Southern white man offered the quelling of race riots, the staving off of “Negro domination” at the ballot box, and, lastly, “that Negroes had to be killed to avenge their assaults upon women” (75-78). In this way “in order to escape the deserved execration of the civilized world,” Southern white men “shield themselves by their cowardly and infamously false excuse” of honoring white women’s virtuousness and protecting them from or avenging them after rape (*A Red Record* 80).

Along with revealing how white men use white women’s “honor” to shield themselves from criticisms about their barbarity, Wells seems most interested in painting the Virtuous White Woman Victim as lascivious as white men claim black women are. She does this in two ways: by accusing white women of having “bad characters,” lying about rapes, and tempting black men, and by pointing out that often instances called rape are actually consensual relationships. She mentions several times as a way to call into question the accusations of rape used to justify lynchings that the white women crying (or being made to cry) rape have bad characters and are as irresistibly tempting to black man as black women are to white men. While in our present moment we would be wary of Wells’s seeming “they are asking for it”/“blaming the victim”

defense of rape, given these cries are instrumentalized deployments of rape on a discursive level to justify racial violence – that, in other words, very few of these cries of rape actually ever involved sexual violence done to white women (though, obviously, some black men did rape white women) – *and* the figuration of the black women as Jezebel, as, in other words, always already “rape-able” by white men, this is an interesting tactic for Wells. She uses a famous Biblical allusion twice within the first few pages of *Southern Horrors* that begins to cast aspersions on white women; she claims that the facts she relates in *Southern Horrors* are “a defense for the Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs” (*Southern Horrors* 50). By calling white women the “Delilahs” to black men’s “Sampsons,” she suggests that sexual trysts between the two have more to do with white women not only tempting black men into sex but doing so in order to, like Delilah, betray them to the men who are in power. This also figures white women as morally suspicious in the same way that white men and women figure black women, as betraying temptresses. She reiterates this sentiment a bit differently at the end of the first chapter: “White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women” (*SH* 54). She declares that it is not rape but the temptation that black men give into that is the cause of lynching.

White women’s “bad character” also comes up when Wells repeats the same story about the particular lynching of Edward Coy in *Southern Horrors* and in more detail in *A Red Record*. Wells first describes the brutal torture and burning of Coy who maintained his innocence when being charged of rape. She then quotes the results of an investigation after Coy’s murder by “Judge Albion W. Tourgee,” giving five reasons to doubt that Coy raped the woman who accused him:

1. The woman who was paraded as a victim of violence was of bad character; her husband was a drunkard.
2. She was publicly reported and generally known to have been criminally intimate with Coy for more than a year previous.
3. She was compelled by threats, if not by violence, to make the charge against the victim.
4. When she came to apply the match Coy asked her if she would burn him after they had ‘been sweethearting’ so long.”
5. A large majority of the ‘superior’ white men prominent in the affair are the reputed fathers of mulatto children. (*Red Record* 123)

I’ve already discussed the last finding above. The first three reasons involve questioning the claim of the white woman in the case. The first involves her having a “bad character,” based on the fact that her husband was a “drunkard, so that not only is this woman being judged and found wanting, but that judgment is based solely on her being defined by her husband’s actions. Next she is suspected for lying for three more reasons. She was “criminally intimate,” according to public “reports” and gossip that was “generally known,” and she was “compelled by threats.” While this third reason removes some of her responsibility for lying due to being put up to it with threats of violence, the second reason continues the judgment of her character by calling her “criminally” intimate with Coy. This, then, makes the women into not only a sexual deviant but also a criminal for at least two reasons: she was in an interracial sexual relationship and she was in an adulterous affair. This accusation effectively defines this woman using the common stereotypes of African American women and men. Lastly, the man’s cry while dying indicates the woman’s consent to having sexual relations with the accused. In his final assessment, which Wells ends the section just quoting, Tourgee writes, “The woman was a willing partner in the

victim's guilt, and being of the 'superior' race must naturally have been more guilty" (122). This final analysis of the woman would probably be read as true by Southern whites, but certainly seems to be a sarcastic jibe in which the "superiority" of the white race is called into question through this white woman.

A Red Record is also peppered with stories of white women's bad character. As I've mentioned the bulk of this pamphlet is a list of instances in which rape was not the reason for a lynching. As such, its underlying claim is that the accusation of rape is not the primary reason for lynchings. There are many other reasons given as can be seen in the chapter titles, "Lynching Imbeciles," "Lynching Innocent Men and Women," and "Lynching for Anything and Nothing" but many of the reasons given involve what Wells sees as failures of white women to live up to the Virtuous White Woman Victim stereotype, particularly in the chapter entitled "History of Some Cases of Rape." In two examples, "A White Woman's Falsehood" and "Tried to Manufacture an Outrage" (stories repeated from *Southern Horrors*), Wells focuses on white women that lie about rape. In the first one, a white woman lied to her husband about her affair with a black man because the neighbors saw the man, she was scared of contracting a "loathsome disease," and she was scared of having a "Negro baby," explaining "I hoped to save my reputation by telling you a deliberate lie" (120). In the other a seventeen-year-old white woman was institutionalized because she was the "mother of a little coon," but refused to "reveal the name of the Negro who had disgraced her" (122). Wells's fascination with the bad character of white women stems from her deployment of these critiques of white woman as a way to paint them as having the some of the same stereotypical characteristics of black men and women (a tactic that almost got her killed). This calls into question the language and stereotypes used by white Southerners to define white women, which necessarily calls into question the whole

network.

Finally, Wells seems most interested in convincing her readers that often the “unthinkable” happens and white women consent to have sex with black men. A large part of *Southern Horrors* is taken up with evidence for her claims about white women’s consensuality. The first chapter discusses “The Offense” of her writing the “Lynching at the Curve” editorial; she quotes the white newspapers that threatened her and ends with the point that “the truth remains that Afro-American men do not always rape (?) white women without their consent” early in *Southern Horrors* (53, question mark included in original). Again, one can read Wells’s work in these two texts as some sort of engagement with the Black Rapist stereotype, and it seems to me Wells is most interested in challenging this stereotype with the claim that white women do not, as she puts it oxymoronically, get “raped without their consent.” This wording seems to want to imply that the interracial sex act between white women and black men is always already figured as “rape,” so much so that one can practically substitute “rape” to mean sex between white women and black men. In this phrase, then, Wells takes this seriously, using the word rape to signify this interracial coupling, which is not “always” “without” the “consent” of white women. She effectively makes this particular notion that all white woman/black man sex can only be understood as rape seem ridiculous as she writes that this rape is “not always” without “consent.” In “The Black and White of It” section of *Southern Horrors*, which is a collection of “a few instances to substantiate the assertion that some white women love the company of the Afro-American,” Wells continues her analysis of white women’s sexuality by representing consensual relationships between white women and black men that resulted in lynchings (*Southern Horrors* 55). These “few instances” take the form of a list of various stories of relationships between white women and black men including a woman who “ran away with

her black coachman,” one who “lived openly” with her black lover, one “in an intimate relationship with a handsome mulatto young colored man,” one who refused to reveal the father of her mixed race baby, and more (*Southern Horrors* 55-56). During an interview with the English newspaper *Westminster Gazette* (reprinted in *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* June 12, 1894), Wells outlines the scenario when black men are accused of rape, using the network of figurations as an analytical tool again:

You see, the white man has never allowed his women to hold the sentiment ‘black but comely,’ on which he has so freely acted himself. Libertinism apart, white men constantly express an open preference for the society of black women. But it is a sacred convention that white women can never feel passion of any sort, high or low, for a black man. Unfortunately facts don’t always square with the convention; and then, if the guilty pair are found out, the thing is christened an outrage at once and the woman is practically forced to join in hounding down the partner of her shame. (qtd in Tucker 120)

In this statement, Wells compares the fetishization of black bodies by white men and white women. The white man has never “allowed” white women to be attracted to or “feel passion for” (not “high or low” passion) black men in the same way as they are able to find black women “black but comely” (obvious the “but” here also makes known that “black” can never be seen as “comely” except as an exception). In this account, if the interracial sexual affair is discovered, according to Wells, the conventional reaction is to label it an “outrage” in which the woman is “practically forced” to corroborate this accusation of rape. In the opening chapter of *A Red Record*, “The Case Stated,” Wells frames the whole pamphlet with a statement explaining how it is that the very act of sex between white women and black men that proves rape: “The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and

a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is a proof of force” (78). Here she astutely points out again that the very fact of interracial sex between white women and black men is *defined* as “proof of force.” In another chapter, “History of Some Cases of Rape,” Wells again uses the lynching data collected by the Chicago Tribune to discuss some instances in which consent was given by white women. Wells begins this section defending again her right to critique white women:

It has been claimed that the Southern white women have been slandered because, in defending the Negro race from the charge that all colored men, who are lynched, only pay penalty for assaulting women. It is certain that lynching mobs have not only refused to give the Negro a chance to defend himself, but have killed their victims with a full knowledge that the relationship of the alleged assailant with the woman who accused him, was voluntary and clandestine. (117-118)

Wells facetiously remarks that lynchers firmly believe that “in no case has the accusing woman been a willing consort of her paramour” (118) before enumerating instances in which white women consented and then lied about being raped. This consent and recant tactic is represented by Wells in the two instances I discussed about white women lying about rape as well as in a section titled “Suppressing the Truth” which includes several quick stories of women consenting then recanting (including an eighteen-year-old in Philadelphia who was caught with a servant by her father) and a section titled “A Vile Slander with Scant Retraction” in which a white woman lies about a workman raping a young girl in the hopes of “frightening the Negro out of the country and thus balancing accounts” (127).

In answer to this figuration of all interracial sexual relationships between white women and black men as always already “proof of force,” Wells writes

In numerous instances where colored men have been lynched on the charge of rape, it was positively known at the time of lynching, and indisputably proven after the victim's death, that the relationship sustained between the man and woman was voluntary and clandestine, and that in no court of law could even the charge of assault have been successfully maintained. (*A Red Record* 78-79).

Wells is deeply invested in offering up the idea that white women consent to sex as a way to counter the discursive production of the Black Rapist as always already framing all interracial desire *and* all acts of lynching. Given the tenacity of the Black Rapist and the inability to even imagine any other sexual alliance between black men and white women, Wells's careful chipping away at the stereotype of the Virtuous White Woman Victim through a questioning of her character and her actions seems like an effective way to challenge the Black Rapist stereotype. Wells's use of white women's consent as a way to challenge the Black Rapist stereotype reveals her nuanced understanding of the way stereotypes work. Under the discursive knowledge regime that includes the Black Rapist stereotype, white women's consent to sex with black men is "unthinkable," that is, it is outside the possibility of comprehension. Framed by the Black Rapist stereotype, white women consenting to have sex with Black men is not possible because "All Black men are rapists." Wells attempts to show her readers what happens when the unsayable (white women's desire of black men) is inserted into the network of figurations; when, in other words, the Virtuous White Woman Victim is shown to fetishize and have sexual longings for black men just like white men do for black women. This insertion of white women's consensual sexuality into the network creates a new figure of the White Delilah, with characteristics of the wonton Jezebel but whose target is black men, an impossible figure for the network of stereotypes required for the stereotypical narrative of lynching as it was produced in

the white press. The Virtuous White Woman Victim also changes white women from a pure object – of the white male sexual gaze and control, of black men’s primitive need to rape – into a figure with at least some sexual agency who makes choices about her lovers. Inserting this new figure into the discursive field of what is knowable about lynching performs a kind of promiscuous contextuality that penetrates the network of figurations in order to disrupt it, or at least cause it to quiver a bit, and also reveals just how tentative these seemingly solid, “common sense” networks of stereotypes really are.

It is difficult for me to be able to understand Wells’s focus on white women’s sexuality as a “debunking” of the Black Rapist stereotype. Listing reasons other than rape given for lynchings and detailing instances of white women’s temptation of or consent to black men does nothing to disprove the stereotype of the Black Rapist. This is why I’m convinced that Wells is doing something more nuanced and interesting. First, she is de-articulating the white press’s linkage narrative in which the accusation of rape becomes, through this stereotype, the primary reason given for act of lynching. It becomes so primary that it is impossible to think about lynching without thinking about an accusation of rape *regardless* of the reasons given other than rape. Next, she also challenges the Black Rapist stereotype through a careful mapping and disruption of the rest of the network of figurations in which it abides. Her constant reminder that white women tempt black men, lie about being raped, and consent to sex with black men necessarily forces the reader to reevaluate the stereotype of the Black Rapist. If the Virtuous White Woman Victim isn’t so virtuous, then what do we make of the Black Rapist? And then what do we make of lynching in general? These are the questions Wells demands her readers to ask themselves. These two modes of analysis actually refuse to “disprove” the stereotype, understanding that its power lies not in its veracity because the Black Rapist stereotype continues

to be a way white men control white women, black women, and black men. The best we can do is a promiscuous contextuality of the stereotype that at least reveals the power relations that compel white patriarchy to produce stereotypes and to understand, as Wells does, that stereotypes in their network of figurations become one way that race, gender, and sexuality interact and that sexuality is framed by and frames these gendered racial stereotypes sexuality as it regulates both race and gender.

This chapter is an attempt to reveal how Wells taps into an understanding of the complicated ways that the “deployment of sexuality” and sexual stereotypes regulate race in ways that allow whiteness to produce blackness as eradicable in the post-Reconstruction era. Wells’s work on lynching demonstrates an astute understanding of the relationship between the two meanings of representation discussed in the introduction. She is keenly aware, and I think bases here analysis and rhetorical choices, on the notion that the cultural and aesthetic representation of African American men in the stereotype of the Black Rapist has everything to do with their changing political representation at that historical moment. The Black Rapist stereotype comes to define the very discursive terrain upon which what is even knowable or accepted as common sense about lynching and, I would argue, American racial formation more generally, can be discussed. While the stereotypes seem to lend themselves to ideological critique due to the ways they have been theorized and defined and the Black Rapist stereotype seems to lend itself to a particular kind of ideological critique due to the stereotypical narrative molds into which lynching has settled, Wells offers us something very different. The ideological critique of stereotypes meant to reveal the social relations they mystified relies on the premise that once we are free of stereotypes, liberal equality will reign supreme. Once, in other words,

Black men are no longer known as Black Rapists they will achieve the equality under the law of abstract citizenship. This seems not only impossible but also to fail to account for the tenacity and adaptability of the stereotype that comes from the cultural logics of the network of stereotypes they elicit. Wells's analysis seems aware of these logics and attempts to understand and disrupt stereotypes in ways differently than ideological critique or empirical refutation. I've also tried to show how the consequences of the way that stereotypes and social narratives frame not only discussions of sexuality, gender, and race but also our readings of texts like Wells's anti-lynching writings that represent stereotypes, or engage sexuality, gender, and race more generally. In this way the discursive construction of stereotypes and the narratives they underwrite come to frame our understanding of history so that we not only need to use history to unpack stereotypes but also have to unpack historiography as stereotypical, as relying on as yet unquestioned stereotypical narratives (which are so often produced in mass media).

Notes

¹ I use the name Ida B. Wells instead of Wells-Barnett because my focus is on her work done under that name.

² Several scholars of stereotypes make points similar to this. Richard Dyer writes that "righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them" (Dyer 27) while Michael Pickering asserts that "taking stereotypicality as indicative of a misinformed attitude, irrational value or inaccurate representation implies that there are always firm grounds for rectifying it" (11).

³ Readings that assume an immediate and ideological connection between the act of lynching and the stereotype of the Black Rapist are not, of course, surprising given the long history of discourse that connects the two. While it is impossible to know exactly how many African Americans were murdered by lynch mobs, there have been many estimates. The earliest statistics were kept by *Chicago Tribune* starting in 1882; the Tuskegee Institute began their tracking in 1829 and the NAACP didn't start its official records in 1912. According to Wells's *A Red Record*, during the thirty years prior to its publication "more than ten thousand Negroes have been killed in cold blood, without the formality of judicial trial and legal execution" (Royster 75). According to James Cutler's reading of the *Tribune's* statistics, between 1882 and 1903, there

were 3337 reported lynchings in the U.S, with mostly black victims and done mostly in the southern states. In 1928 the then general secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People put out a study entitled “Rope and Faggot,” based only on the lynchings acknowledged by white officials, which claimed there were 4951 people lynched in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck’s 1992 sociological analysis of southern lynchings, *A Festival of Violence*, states that “on the average, a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week, between 1882 and 1930 by a hate-driven white mob” (Tolnay and Beck ix).

The legal definition of lynching is “a murder committed by a mob of three or more persons” (Aptheker 60) or “the summary, extralegal executions of African Americans by groups (larger than three) of self-appointed public authorities” (Goldsby 16). In one of the earliest histories of lynching, Cutler defines it as “the practice whereby mobs capture individuals suspected of crime, or take them from officers of the law, and execute them without any process at law, or break open jails and hang convicted criminals, with impunity” and “summary and illegal capital punishment at the hands of a mob” (Cutler 1, 12). For most historians, the act of lynching involves murder in the form of extralegal capital punishment of a person charged with a crime. Though not condoned by the state, lynching often involved the local police who released the victims from the cells in which they awaited hearings or participated in the lynching itself. What makes the murder a lynching is that a mob carries out the attack. Though not part of these legal definitions, lynchings almost always involve some form of audience and some form of torture. The spectacularity of the event varies, with some lynchings taking place out of the public eye and some taking place in front of thousands of spectators. The torture involved ranged from fear tactics and emotional torture to physical beatings, stabbings, burning, and brutal forms of killing like strangling, dismemberment, or burning alive. Often photos were taken of the event, people stood for portraits with the tortured body, and souvenirs, including body parts, were taken by those involved or the crowd.

The zenith of lynching victims occurred during what Rayford Logan has famously called the “nadir of American race relations,” when the promises of Radical Reconstruction were largely retracted and U.S. racial formation was adapting to the re-signification of African American bodies from slave property to emancipated U.S. citizens. As a set of laws and policies meant to include the South back into the union and to enfranchise and provide governmental aid, through the Freedman’s Bureau, to newly freed slaves, the reconstruction period was also a period of the re-construction of Blackness. What it meant to be a Black subject in the U.S. was constantly changing and being debated on a national level in legal, literary, and scientific discourse as well as cultural production.

After the period of legal enfranchisement following Emancipation, there was a legal and social disenfranchisement, which effectively rescinded the few new civil rights and civil liberties African Americans had gained. According to Joy James, “after the aborted Reconstruction, through legislation and extra-legal violence as well as the rise of the convict prison release system, most southern blacks were forced into economic subservience and dependency” and “lynchings were part of a terrorist campaign in an undeclared racial war to destroy newly won independence of free black communities...whites sought to remove African Americans from economic and political power” (James 348). Legally, voting was hindered by poll taxes, literacy tests, and “grandfather clause” residency requirements to get around the 15th amendment’s protections. Jim Crow laws mandated de jure racial segregation and limited the movement and

access to public places and transportation as well as labor, housing, and educational opportunities for emancipated African Americans. By 1883 the Supreme Court had repealed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 and the repeal of the 15th amendment was a national debate even as the (white) women's suffrage movement called for the right to vote for women and other election reforms. Meanwhile, the Progressive Party politics that was so interested in social justice and environmental issues either turned a blind eye to racial strife or were actually sympathetic to the racist causes of the South. Along with legal disenfranchisement, white supremacy was refortified in extralegal activities such as lynching and racial violence perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist terrorist groups. During this time literary texts such as plantation novels and Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *Ku Klux Klan Trilogy*, including *The Clansman*, (famously made into the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*) represented antebellum life as idealized or emancipated African Americans as violent primitives. Likewise, "scientific" and sociological texts were continuing to discursively produce African Americans as primitive and savage, including especially as hypersexual beings incapable of controlling their libido.

The targets for the act of lynching also changed over time. The term lynching originated in the 1780s when Charles Lynch, a Virginia farmer and revolutionary started a "court" to punish and detain Loyalists and British sympathizers during the Revolutionary War. Lynching as a practice in the US was initially associated mostly with the murder of white people who had broken social mores, primarily as a form of "frontier justice" and during the antebellum period to threaten abolitionists along with other social groups such as Mormons, Catholics, and immigrants of all kinds. However, by the last quarter of the 19C "the tradition of mob violence had evolved into an integral part of southern culture" (Brundage 4). By this time, the practice of lynching was almost entirely focused on African American bodies. Jacqueline Goldsby notes that this "racialization of lynching" was connected to the punishment of slaves. While early lynchings had "statelike aspirations to govern" and "lynch mobs...were also noted for their decorum and restraint," the violence of the lynching of African Americans during the era of Reconstruction, according to Goldsby, was worse because of the brutality of slavery: "African Americans were terrorized and murdered with impunity because they had been excluded from the legal and moral frameworks that defined national citizenship at the end of the nineteenth century" (Goldsby 16-17). During the antebellum era the lynching of slaves occurred only in exceptional circumstances because slave owners would incur financial loss with the death of every slave; rather than killing them, difficult slaves were "sold down the river" to plantations in the southern Confederate states where conditions were more harsh. When a slave execution was warranted, owners preferred to let the state handle it because the government compensated them for state-executed slaves. During the Civil War, mob violence escalated as slaves were lynched as part of public spectacles of violence intended to quell slave insurrections during the war.

Many historians have debated the reasons for the campaign of lynching as it happened in the U.S. Many see it as a corrective to the racial order that was being eroded by Emancipation and Reconstruction. For W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "lynching in the American South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was but one manifestation of the strenuous and bloody campaign by whites to elaborate and impose a racial hierarchy upon people of color throughout the globe" (2). Lynching was "one of the extralegal devices used to secure the disfranchisement of Black men" in the face of their legal enfranchisement (Aptheker 60); "the tool of the new caste system being imposed by the South" (Giddings 26); and "intended to create collective

memories of terror and white supremacy” (Markovitz xxxvi). In her autobiography, Wells discusses her thoughts on the reason lynching became prevalent during her lifetime:

The more I studied the situation, the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income. The federal laws for Negro protection passed during Reconstruction times had been made a mockery by the white South where it had not secured their repeal. This same white South had secured the political control of its several states, and as soon as white southerners came into power they began to make playthings out of Negro lives and property. This seemed not enough to “keep the nigger down.” (*Crusade* 70-71)

Wells demonstrates a complex understanding of lynching as the South’s reaction to the U.S. government’s change to racial formation. She describes how the South was reeling socially and economically from the freeing of its slave population in which the “negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income,” along with an awareness that lynching was part of the “extra legal devices” necessary to “keep the nigger down” in the face of the state sanctioned “protection.” While these “federal laws for Negro protection” were meant to ease the transition to emancipation, once “political control” in the South was back in the hands of white lawmakers, they were “made a mockery,” ignored and broken by the Southern states. Meanwhile, according to Wells, making “playthings out of Negro lives and property,” was still not enough to dissuade African Americans and lynching became a supplement to other legal and cultural disenfranchisements.

While some scholars understand lynching as a response to the changing racial formation begun by Reconstruction enfranchisements, Tolnay and Beck point out that if this were true “lynchings should have declined precipitously after blacks were nearly completely disenfranchised by the early 1900s” (249). Likewise, Mary Jane Brown writes that lynching was “a mechanism employed to reinforce white supremacy and to keep blacks from political, social and economic equity; however its use not only continued, but grew beyond the time when black gains made during Reconstruction had been vanquished by legislation, black codes and Jim Crowism” (Brown 3). Lynching was meant to alleviate the social threat that was perceived by white Americans as a loss of privilege, power, and status after Emancipation. Lynching was also seen as a reaction to the new economic system in which slave labor became paid labor. “At the root of the postwar bloodshed was the refusal of most whites to accept the emancipated slaves’ quest for economic and political power” (Brundage 6). Lynching was part of a campaign of fear to keep labor and black-owned land cheap by demonstrating African American’s powerlessness in a system in which whites still owned the capital and the means of production. Brundage supports his points about the economic reasons for lynching by pointing out that during years when cotton prices were falling, lynchings increased (24). At the same time, in order to instill fear in freedman laborers, lynchings were perpetrated or supported by white workers who now had to compete for wages, which benefited white employers by effectively erasing any possibility of an interracial alliance of workers. It also curtailed any African American economic advancement: “an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized” (Giddings 28). To sum up, it was, in Brown’s words, “an expression of southern white determination to limit the civil, social and economic advancement of African Americans and was a mechanism of ratifying black disenfranchisement” (25). In all of these

instances, lynching was also seen as a warning to African Americans not to ask for too much (or any, really) emancipation and to not “rock the boat” of the status quo racial formation.

Lynching is also more than an act of violence; it is, in Goldsby’s words, “an act and a sign, a literal thing and a symbolic representation to which the violence refers” (Goldsby 42). The act of lynching was not only (or even mostly) a punishment, disciplining, or eradication of the lynched but also (most often and more importantly) a warning and a lesson for those left behind. The warning is not simply a display of the consequences for those that violated the color line but also a performance of white supremacy’s “symbolic representation” of the value of African American life and a “sign” of what is to come to those expecting equality and true emancipation. For Amy Louise Wood, “all the everyday humiliations and hostilities that black southerners endured during Jim Crow could, in fact, be distilled into the experience of lynching, so that it came to stand as the primary representation of racial injustice and oppression as a whole” (Wood 1). Lynchings were “always intended to be seen as a metaphor for race relations more broadly defined” or, more precisely, according to Jonathan Markovitz, lynching was meant to be understood as metonymic, the reduction of “southern race relations” to the act of lynching (Markovitz xvii). But lynching as metaphor was (and remains) a site of discursive struggle. There has never been a “single set of meanings attached to lynching,” but, rather, the material practice of lynching was always a site of representational and metaphorical struggle from the start. Lynching always indicated a war of representation between lynching apologists who attempted to figure lynchings as punishment for the rape of white women and anti-lynching activists who attempted to refigure lynchings as barbaric acts of racist terrorism. These were two of the factions that continually worked and reworked in various discursive sites what the act of lynching meant and “how lynching would be understood and remembered” (Markovitz 142). To Toni Morrison lynching has since become a “metaphor of itself” (*Race-ing Justice* xvi). She means by this that the term lynching has come to stand for the particular narrative that cohered around lynching during its height and gets deployed mostly to refer to the racism of that act as it was carried out at that time. For instance, when used by Clarence Thomas to defend himself against the allegations of sexual harassment brought by Anita Hill during his nomination hearings, lynching becomes a shorthand metaphor for any kind of indefensible racism but one that is divorced from the material violence of lynching.

Put another way, Morrison seems to be suggesting that lynching as deployed in more recent times has lost the indexicality it once had. Rather than metaphor, we might think of lynching as an “index” of racial terrorism as Charles Sanders Peirce defined it. For Peirce, indices are signs “which represent their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by virtue of real connections with them” (Peirce “A Sketch of Logical Critics” 460-461). An index is “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object” (Peirce “A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic” 291-292). The reference between a sign and its object is indexical when the sign is actually a part of that to which it refers. While concentrating too heavily on lynching as metaphor seems to separate the term from the act of violence, conceptualizing lynching as an index helps to connect the materiality of the act to its meaning, which seems almost inseparable. Lynching – the material act of mob torture and murder – is a sign that has a “real connection” to and that is “really affected by” the race, sex and gender relations and dominations to which it is also made to refer. The various, contested meanings of each lynching – whether defined as a necessary extralegal punishment for rape or barbaric racial terrorism fortifying the color line or a warning to African Americans or a

celebration of white supremacy – rely heavily on indexing the spectacle and performance of the torture and murder of black bodies. (Souvenirs from the lynched body – indices themselves of the lynching – taken by the crowds attest to the importance of the materiality of this act to its remembrance and meaning.) Along with often making specious connections, lynching is deployed metaphorically in ways that separate it from its bodily violence, which threatens to diminish the historical specificity of this particular form of racial violence and also works to fortify the narrative of lynching as a regional, aberrant racist act of the past. The stakes of understanding the metaphoricity and indexicality of the act of lynching involve the way “memories of lynching can be invoked in order to frame contemporary events” (Markovitz 145). To this day, the “cultural logic” of lynching and the package of racial violence and racial, gendered, sexual stereotypes elicited by invocations and representations of the lynching narrative as it has cohered continues to frame the way we understand race and racism in America, including framing the way we understand all representations of African American men and women specifically and the racial, gendered, sexual other more broadly in stories across mass media, literature, popular culture, television, visual cultural artifacts, art, performance, etc. Wells worked at the level of abstraction that understood lynching to consist of both the act of torture and murder and its subsequent metaphorization in the white press. This metaphorization was forced by the white press into the narrative mold of an immediate connection between the act of lynching and the Black Rapist stereotype but the cultural production of lynching and the Black Rapist in the press (as well as postcards and photographs, political speeches, academic and literary texts) only worked to discipline black bodies and threaten African American populations to adhere to the status quo racial hierarchies because they are indices of the act of torture and murder that is lynching. Wells was aware not only that lynching and the Black Rapist stereotype were actively being produced in the white press as part of a metaphorical warning but that this warning was made more severe by the indexicality of lynching. I am convinced that Wells’s analysis of the way the white press represented lynching and her response to its metaphorization has something to tell us about how to understand the way stereotypes work within this particular historical context and its legacies within the present moment.

⁴ I’ve quoted here the editorial as it appears in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*. Slightly different versions appear in her autobiography (a shortened paraphrase), her lecture “Lynch Law in All Its Phases” (again, a shortened version) and a slightly different editorial is reprinted in Mildred Thompson’s *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930*.

⁵ One of Wells’s first instances of civil disobedience became a state-wide news story and instigated Wells’s first article. In 1884, on a Chesapeake and Ohio and Southwestern Railroad trip back to Memphis, Wells was asked to move to the smoking section even though she paid for a first-class ticket. Refusing, she bit the first conductor who attempted to move her and then was physically hauled off the train by three men, while white passengers cheered. She sued the railroad company and won the case. However, the railroad company appealed, which was the first case brought by an African American to a state court after the Supreme Court invalidation of the Civil Rights Bill passed during Reconstruction. The success of her court case, prompted Wells to write an article for *Living Way*, a religious weekly, that discussed how Blacks should stand up for their rights. Wells lost the railroad’s appeal to the Tennessee Supreme Court (after

she refuses more money from the railroad if she would drop the case). This incident began Wells's career as a writer whose articles worked to change these post-Reconstruction era retrenchment, legal disenfranchisement, and segregation exemplified by her court case. Based on the success of her article about the case, Wells was asked to write a weekly editorial for *Living Way*. Using the pen name "Iola," her articles were so successful they were syndicated in newspapers around the nation. Harper named her titular character Iola Leroy after Wells's pen name, though, according to Jacqueline Jones Royster's introduction to *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, the name "may actually have resulted from a misreading of letters as they appeared in print. 'Ida' may have been perceived as 'Iola,' and it stuck" (*Southern* 16).

⁶ See *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by her daughter Alfreda M. Duster. For more biographical information see: Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (Giddings begins her now canonical work with a chapter on Wells), Dorothy Sterling's *Black Foremothers: Three Lives, We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Mildred Thompson *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930*, and Jacqueline Jones Royster's introduction to *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, Mary Jane Brown's *Eradicating this Evil: Women in the American Lynching Movement, 1892-1940*, Mia Bay's *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, and Paula Giddings recent biography, *Ida: A Sword among Lions*.

⁷ Certainly the stereotype itself is built upon earlier stereotypes of primitivism, hypersexuality, etc. but the particular form of the primitive stereotype that is the Black Rapist is a "new alarm."

⁸ Sandra Gunning describes this network as "the black rapist, the white rape victim, the white avenger, and the black woman as prostitute operate together with differing resonances" (Gunning 11).

⁹ We could continue this mapping noting, perhaps, black and white class stereotypes (such as Poor Whites who might be seen as a comparison to African Americans and Middle Class African American stereotypes used both to judge poor African Americans and as evidence of the inability of African Americans to ever really become civilized) that surely worked to augment the Black Rapist stereotype.

¹⁰ This was also a preoccupation with other anti-lynching activists of the time. Mary Church Terrell discusses the white man's access to black women's bodies before and after emancipation: "Though their period of bondage colored women were debauched by their masters. From the day they were liberated to the present time, prepossessing young colored girls have been considered the rightful prey of white gentlemen in the South, and they have been protected neither by public sentiment nor by law. In the South, the negro's home is not considered sacred by the superior race. White men are neither punished for invading it, nor lynched for violating colored women and girls" (Mary Church Terrell "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View").

¹¹ Trudier Harris challenges the idea that lynching was about preventing miscegenation when she writes "The notion that the white man was really trying to prevent 'mongrelization' of the white

race is just that – a notion. No such concern for racial purity defined his actions with black women; consequently, his objections to miscegenation were designed to control the behavior of black males and white females without interfering with his own sexual preferences” (Harris 20).

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