From American Anatomies: 
Theorying Race and Gender 
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3 The Anatomy of Lynching

When Matt lowered his eyes he noticed the ribs had been caved in.

The flesh was bruised and torn. [The birthmark] was just below [Willie's] navel, he thought. Then he gave a start: where it should have been was only a bloody mound of torn flesh and hair. Matt went weak. He felt as though he had been castrated himself. He thought he would fall when Clara stepped up beside him. Swiftly, he tried to push her back. . . . Then Clara was screaming. . . . Matt pushed [her] to go, feeling hot breath against the hand he held over her mouth.

"Just remember that a car hit 'im, and you'll be all right," the patrolman said.

"We don't allow no lynching round here no more."

Matt felt Clara's fingers digging into his arm as his eyes flashed swiftly over the face of the towering patrolman, over the badge against the blue shirt, the fingers crooked in the belt above the gun butt. He swallowed hard . . . catching sight of Willie between the white men's legs.

"I'll remember," he said bitterly, "he was hit by a car." — Ralph Ellison, "The Birthmark" 16-17

Lynching is about the law—both the towering patrolman who renarrates the body and radically claims it as sign of his own power—and the Symbolic as law, the site of normativity and sanctioned desire, of prohibition and taboo. In the circuit of relations that governs lynching in the United States, the law as legal discourse and disciplinary practice subtends the Symbolic arena, marking out a topos of bodies and identities that not only defines and circumscribes social and political behavior but also punishes transgression, from its wildest possibility to its most benign threat. Operating according to a logic of borders—racial, sexual, national, psychological, and biological as well as gendered—lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject—monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return. The overdetermination of pun-
ishment in the lynching scenario demonstrates its profoundly psychological function, reinforcing the disciplinary range of white power that initiates the violent mechanism in all its complexity. How we understand this complexity—how we might approach the tableu of torture, dismemberment, and death that shapes lynching's specifically racialized deployment—provides the locus around which this chapter is organized and makes possible a discussion of the interesting relations of race and gender in U.S. culture.

In particular, this chapter extends the consideration of questions of the visible by focusing on the sexual economy that underlies lynching's emergence as a disciplinary practice for racial control at the end of the nineteenth century. Here, the de-commodification of the African-American body that accompanies the transformation from chattel to citizenry is mediated through a complicated process of sexualization and engendering. Not only does lynching enact a grotesquely symbolic, if not literal, sexual encounter between the white mob and its victim, but the increasing use of castration as a preferred form of mutilation for African-American men demonstrates lynching's connection to the socio-symbolic realm of sexual difference. That this realm pivots on scripting the body as a visible terrain is perhaps an incontestable assertion in the mid-1990s, given the proliferation of feminist attentions both to the structure of the gaze and to corporeal identities.¹ And yet, feminist theory's lengthy and crucial exploration of the visible economy that governs sexual difference has most often remained stranded within a reduction of the body to the figure of woman. To challenge this reduction and to become disloyal to feminism's moratorium on reading the category of men as anything other than patriarchal privilege—such motives underwrite this chapter's pursuit of the symbolic and specular anatomies of lynching, where differences among men are so violently foregrounded that one can no longer cling to the rhetorical homogeneity attached to the masculine in feminist and patriarchal discourses alike.

But why such disloyalty? After all, in the first heady decade of the contemporary women's movement, the assumption of masculinity as an undifferentiated position aided feminism's articulation of its own political subjectivity. Indeed, the representation of men as the common enemy worked to disrupt, at least provisionally, the arena of women's primary social bonding: the heteronormative. By bringing into question women's allegiances to men as products of heterosexuality's compulsory production, feminism made imperative political solidarity among women. Sisterhood became powerful, and the personal (with its multiple aspects of the everyday) took on a decidedly political signification. Like all utopic myths, however, this one of women's common sisterhood was quite fleeting, as the difficulties of political organization and differences among women once again to challenge the foundational rhetoric of women's common oppression.² In the process, the concept of men as the common enemy was necessarily transformed to account for the way women's political solidarities often transgressed the sacrosanct boundaries of gender, especially in the cultural context of white racial supremacy.³ Because all men do not share equally in masculine rights and privileges—because some men are, in fact, oppressed by women of the prevailing race and class—assumptions about power as uniformly based on sexual difference (men as oppressor, women as oppressed) have been pressured to give way.

Lynching provides a crucial locus for exploring the implications of this necessary end of "man" by drawing out the contexts and crises of racial hierarchies on the form and function of late-nineteenth-century patriarchal relations. In the turn toward lynching as a white supremacist activity in the post-Emancipation years, we might recognize the symbolic force of the white mob's activity as a denial of the black male's newly articulated right to citizenship and, with it, the various privileges of patriarchal power that have historically accompanied such significations within the public sphere. The disciplinary-fusion of castration with lynching makes this symbolic force a distinctly visible relation, not simply because of the public performance that attends the torture, but more important because of the corporeal interchange between genitals and skin. In the lynching scenario, the stereotypical fascination and abhorrence for blackness is literalized as a competition for masculinity and semen-power. In severing the black male's penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallic and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male's (masculine) potentiality for citizenship.

Although this imposition of feminization works to align the black male, at the symbolic level of the body, with those still disenfranchised, it is significant that the narrative means for inciting and explaining the mob's violence takes the form of an intense masculinization in the figure of the black male as mythically endowed rapist. Through the discourse of the black male rapist, racial difference is cast not simply as sexual, but as a heightened sexual perversity. This figuration of blackness as primitive sexual appetite calls up a long associative history in Anglophilic culture where, as my previous discussions suggest, white supremacist discourses adjudicate the relations of domination and colonial imposition by shifting attention to the
sexual dynamics of the scene of conquest onto the bodies of those conquered. In the United States, the particular necessity of this shift in the late nineteenth century may seem obvious, as the loss of miscegenation's economic rationalization under slavery turns the question of interracial sexuality toward the more tension-wrought domain of sexual desire. The myth of the black male 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, quite literally, of black men. Located there, within the "logic" of an excessive hypermasculinization, the black male's claims to citizenship—voting rights, employment, and more abstract privileges of the patronymic—are violently denied.

This is not to suggest that lynching as a disciplinary practice has been confined to the bodies of black men, even if it does recognize that the very consciousness of lynching in U.S. culture figures decisively around them. Black women were routinely lynched, burned, and summarily mutilated, and their public campaign against such terrorism was itself crucial to the political articulations of African-American resistance in the early twentieth century. This chapter's emphasis on both the cultural narrative and practice of lynching as a particularly contentious site for extrapolating the competing logics of patriarchy and white supremacy might best be understood as an analysis of the mechanisms through which the corporeal violence attending black female bodies has been expelled from public view. Such expulsion is perhaps best epitomized by Clarence Thomas's invocation of the lynching metaphor during his confirmation hearings, which simultaneously produced and reiterated the cultural memory of lynching as terrorism solely against black men. The difficulty, some might say the impossibility, for Anita Hill to signify as a body that had also been violated by white supremacist practices, that had been similarly defined historically in sexually discriminatory and inhumane terms, demonstrates the zero sum of political currency against which black women have routinely fought. In this context, a critical exploration of lynching that does not foreground the violence leveled against black female bodies might seem to risk, at the very least, political irresponsibility.

But as I have suggested in the previous chapter and as I hope to elaborate throughout the remainder of this study, the productive function of the discourse of sexual difference as an increasingly deployed mechanism of racial signification and control attaches in ways to black male bodies that are crucial to a feminist politics of antiracist struggle—to a feminist politics that is not simply invested in bringing the black woman into critical view, but which traces the historical and theoretical contexts that shape her absence and that speak more broadly to the intertwining relationship between patriarchy and white supremacy. While we may know that the double burden of race and gender oppression accounts for the historical elision of the black woman from "blacks and women," and white we may routinely cite the political structures of race and gender in which the black woman has been forcibly and violently caught, the specificities and historical contingencies of these relations remain in many ways to be explored. Toward that end—but bound to a different, perhaps circuitous methodological focus—this chapter analyzes the interplay between the myth of the black rapist and the disciplinary mechanism of lynching and castration as a negotiation, through discourses of sexual difference, of the threat of African-American enfranchisement in the post—Civil War years. The gender asymmetry of this enfranchisement defines a difference between black women and black men that has important consequences for both the narrative and disciplinary (re)structuring of social power in the late nineteenth century.

It is in this context, too, that we can approach the variously gendered discourses of black liberation struggle in the twentieth century, where the cultural configuration of the black male's difference from white masculinity as a matter of sexuality and gender has most often focused liberationist critiques of white supremacy. Black Power discourse in the 1960s, for instance, turned repeatedly to the historical legacy of race and gender in order to define and articulate a strident black masculinity, one that worked specifically to negate lynching and castration's cultural and corporeal effect. In the attempt to "heal the wound of my Castration" (Soul on Ice 189), as Eldridge Cleaver framed the black male's struggle against the symbolic weight of white supremacy, Black Power asserted the priority of the black phallus and thereby reclaimed the imposition of feminization that has historically attended power relations between black and white men. At the same time, Black Power crafted the rhetorical figure of the white male as an unmasculine one. As Imamu Baraka claimed in 1966, white men are "trained to be fags" (Home 216). By consigning the white male to the feminine, Black Power rhetoric inverts the representational economy of lynching and castration, articulating the space of the "real" masculine solely for the black male himself. The threat that this inversion poses to the cultural framework of white masculine power cannot be underestimated, as Black Power quite rightly read lynching and castration as disciplinary mechanisms saturated by the hierarchical logic of sexual difference.

In this regard, Black Power's overemphasis on masculinity and black
male entitlements might be viewed less as a simple re-creation of patriarchal logic than as an extrapolation and, to some degree, politically resistant intensification of America's intersecting legacy of race, sexuality, and gender. At the same time, of course, Black Power's rhetorical inversion—to assert the black phallus in the context of metaphorical and literal castration—elides black liberation struggle with a universal masculine position, thereby displacing both the specificity and legitimacy of black female articulations of political disempowerment, as well as a variety of claims from African-American sexual minorities. Most important perhaps, the equation between a nationalist black liberation struggle and masculine rights reveals the framing terms of citizenry and civil entitlements on which the constitutional documents of this country depend. To read the anatomy of lynching from this perspective, both in its disciplinary practice and in its enduring centrality to anti-segregationist and post-segregationist significations, is to occupy, in however provisional and irretrievably partial ways, the complicated contestations in which race, sexuality, and gender are enmeshed.

Marking the Body

The corporeal inscriptions of race and gender that underlie the lynching and castration scene can be located in a compelling shift in the production of difference in U.S. history, based, as my preamable suggests, on changing material conditions in the post–Civil War years. While an elaboration of these conditions is crucial to understanding the disciplinary practice of lynching, I want to begin the discussion on more literary terrain. As readers familiar with nineteenth-century U.S. literature no doubt have recognized, my opening epigraph from a 1940 Ralph Ellison short story bears the same title, “The Birthmark,” as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s now-canonical endeavor, first published nearly a century earlier in 1843. In the relationship between the two stories, we witness not only the symbolic weight given to the production of the body as the essential site of difference but also the translation of castration from the metaphors of the feminine to its literalization in the dismemberment of black men.

In each story, the figure of the birthmark establishes a system of corporeal inscription that links the body to cultural hierarchies of power: Hawthorne’s birthmark being the “crimson stain upon the snow” (369) of the beautiful Georgiana, while Ellison’s is the mark below the navel of a young black man, Willie. Significantly, both marks evoke castration. Georgiana’s “bloody hand” (370) functions as symbol of her femininity; Willie’s mark, through its disappearance into the “bloody mound of torn flesh and hair” (16) evinces his literal castration. While the antebellum story depicts the white female body as coterminous with sexual difference, Ellison’s piece rearticulates the symbols of gender and castration at the site of the black male body. Such a rearticulation is made possible by the shifting relations of race and sexual difference in the late nineteenth century, where Emancipation’s theoretical effect—the black male’s social sameness—is symbolically mediated by a disciplinary practice that seeks to literalize his affinity to the feminine. The intertextual connections between these two figurations of the birthmark offer an initial locus for tracing the highly sexual and gendered dimensions of difference that inhabit the anatomy of lynching.

In Hawthorne’s parable of sexual difference, Aylmer, a man deeply committed to science, marries a beautiful woman, Georgiana, only to find that a small birthmark on her left cheek drives him mad. This “visible mark of earthly imperfection” (359), as he calls it, symbolizes in his mind her “liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death” (370), those traditional attributes of the feminine that align her with materiality, the body, and the culturally abject. Through her articulation as quintessential difference, Aylmer’s own psychological and scientific quest for transcendence begins. As the “frightful object” (371) that is cause of his “horror and disgust” (372), the birthmark carries the symbolic task of defining castration, not simply Georgiana’s own, but the specter of Aylmer’s as well. In what we might now call a paradigmatic scene of gender instruction, Aylmer’s obsession with Georgiana’s difference enables him the fantasy of his own universality and inherent completion and, in this, he escapes at least briefly the possibility of his own descent into material and mortal being. Georgiana’s difference serves, in short, as Teresa de Lauretis might put it, as the very ground of Aylmer’s representation, as “the looking-glass held up to man” (Alice Doesn’t 15).

But while Georgiana’s imperfect image grants Aylmer the fantasy of his own unbounded power and sets him in struggle with “our great creative Mother” (374), she remains the objectified spectacle of his desire, forever tied, in Laura Mulvey’s terms, “to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Visible Pleasure 58). In her function as the pivotal figure in Aylmer’s subjective construction, Georgiana’s ontological discreteness is wholly sacrificed, her alienation and negation so pervasive that we can hardly be surprised to know that “[n]ot even Aylmer . . . hated [the birthmark] so much as she” (379). In this, Georgiana’s complicity with her own destruction is complete, for she has no means of constructing herself outside the place he has assigned for her. In the final stage of the story, when
the enigma represented by woman and linked to the secrets of the natural world seems overcome, when "the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek" (386), Georgiana exhales her parting breath, leaving Aylmer with a dead but now perfect woman.

In the project of restoring woman to perfection, Hawthorne's story serves as a paradigm for the relations of sexual difference that underlie a variety of nineteenth-century discourses in which the recourse to the body and its ascribed interiorities takes center stage. In the context of increasing cultural anxieties about "women's place" in the emergent public sphere and within the developing disciplinary mechanisms of modern medicine and science, the reduction of woman to her anatomy provides the difference against which masculine disembodiment can be achieved: the rationality of the mind surpasses, even as it appropriates, the physical limitations of the body. As my previous chapter has demonstrated, contestations over the disembodied privileges of the public sphere are not limited to gender, as feminist and abolitionist struggles throughout the nineteenth century simultaneously threaten a pervasive redistribution of bodies in social space, while industrialization increasingly pressures the dissolving agrarian-based slave system. From this perspective, the disembodied abstraction of masculine priority is as raced and classed as it is gendered, and the enunciation of the feminine in the domestic serves as well to shape a bourgeois ideal from which the majority of women of all races are displaced. In Hawthorne's story, these race and class differences are inscribed in the contrast between Aylmer and his dark and dirty aide, Aminadab, on one hand, and in the figure of the birthmark as an imperfection embedded in the flesh of the beautifully fair Georgiana on the other. Sealed in the assumptions of domestic ideals and white feminine beauty, Georgiana's desire to undo the difference and disgust of her birthmark mark her as both affiliated with and differentiated from the white masculine and its achievement, through her, of disembodied abstraction. In the final turn of the story, in the moment of her perfection-in-death, even Aylmer must confront both the impossibility of retrieving the feminine from castration and the myth of his subjective construction: that the specter of his own castration can be averted through her.

To the extent that the female body functions in Hawthorne's story to defer masculine castration by becoming its embodiment, it shares more than a coincidental affinity to the castrated body of the black male in Ellison's text written nearly a century later. For Ellison's literalization of castration pursues the logic of sexual difference from Hawthorne's foregrounded realm of masculine and feminine to that of racial difference and its inscription of corporeal and social division. In the process, the relationship between the body (as the designated site of certain specifically visible differences) and abstracted disembodiment (as social and subjective entitlement) can once again be seen. Most important perhaps, by depicting the black male within a symbolic system contingent on the discourse of sexual difference, Ellison's "The Birthmark" articulates the way lynching and castration stages the black male's relationship to masculine power itself.

Published the same year as Richard Wright's Native Son, Ellison's brief and little-known story opens at the scene of an accident, as Matt and Clara prepare to identify a body that has been purportedly hit by a car. But their brother, Willie, has been beaten and lynched, his face so thoroughly disfigured they must seek his birthmark, located beneath the navel, for positive recognition. In searching for the mark, Matt discovers castration instead: "where it should have been was only a bloody mound of torn flesh and hair" (47). This discovery establishes the interplay between birthmark and penis that activates the narrative's symbolic structure, allowing us to read castration as the remedy for the symbolic birthmark, the penis, that "flawed" black men. Such a remedy becomes necessary in the social transformation from enslavement to freedom, where the measure of the African-American's claim to citizenship is precisely his status as man—a status evinced by the penis, but ultimately rewarded in the symbolic exchange between penis and phalus. In castration, the correspondence between penis and phalus—between the masculine body and its potential for a dis-corporated power—is denied, and the symbolic realm of the phalus reveals its construction within the materialist determinations of white racial supremacy. This is not to say that the penis and the phalus are equivalent to one another, but to assert the opposite, that in the post—Civil War years, the contradictions between patriarchy and white supremacy are so deeply intensified that the irrecusable of phalus to penis must be repeatedly staged.

In Ellison's "The Birthmark," the relations of corporeal differentiation among male bodies functions through the familiar framework in which the feminine is cast as the visible difference against which masculine disembodiment is achieved. In the scene of racial hierarchies among men, however, the black male body takes on the "castrated" determinations of the feminine, becoming the site of both sex and sexual difference. For instance, when Matt searches for the birthmark and finds castration instead, it is significantly the symbolic structure of sexual difference that serves to
identify Willie, his "being"—reduced now to sex. Such a reduction enhances the subjective boundaries of white masculinity which, in its status within the story as the law, evinces the conflation of white male disembodiment and socio-symbolic power directly. The black male's signification as sexual and corporeal, however, averts the potential exchange of penis for phalus and, in this negation, he is placed within (consign to and disciplined as) the feminine. As in Faulkner's *Light in August*, castration literalizes the association of "womanishnegro" that binds together the racial, sexual, and gendered (147).

While the affinity between the castrating marks in Hawthorne's and Ellison's stories demonstrates the dynamic of sexual difference at work in each, I am not positing these affinities as a full account of the political and ideological investments that underlie lynching and castration. Indeed, by ascribing the black male fully to the feminine, one runs the risk of reiterating the Lynch scenario's cultural effect without further illuminating the historical and ideological mappings of race and sexual difference through which this effect has been achieved. For while U.S. culture has rather routinely posited the black male in relation to the feminine (as in the emasculated icons of nineteenth-century minstrelsy and their twentieth-century comic counterparts), race and sexual difference are not the same. If the phallic lack characteristic of the feminine must be physically and psychologically inscribed in order to deny the black male the primary sign of power in patriarchal culture, then his threat to white masculine power arises not simply from a perceived racial difference, but from the potential for masculine sameness. In the context of white supremacy, we must understand the threat of masculine sameness as so terrifying that only the reassertion of a gendered difference can provide the necessary disavowal. It is this that lynching and castration offer in their ritualized deployment, functioning as both a refusal and a negation of the possibility of extending the privileges of patriarchy to the black man.

In Ellison's "The Birthmark," this refusal is graphically depicted in the story's final image of the body of the castrated black man lying, bloody and brutalized, "between the white men's legs" (17). For here the black male body is figured in its relation to the power and privilege of white masculinity, becoming in its dismemberment the bearer of the white phalus's meaning. Through the gendered positionality of castration and their relation to the patriarchal symbolic, then, the conflict presented by the African-American's masculine sameness is violently arbitrated in favor of the continued primacy of white masculine supremacy. To read the symbolic transposition of the birthmark from the stain of white femininity in Hawthorne's tale to the threat of the black phallus in Ellison's is to excavate not simply the powerful disciplinary function of race and sexual difference but their historically imbricated production.

**Birth of a Nation**

The political effect of the Lynch scenario presented by Ralph Ellison in his brief but evocative story relies on the reader's awareness of the broader cultural context of "race relations" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a context in which the system of economic, social, and political organization was profoundly altered by the African-American's emergence from slavery to (potential) citizenship. As a response to the ideological incommensurability between white supremacy and black enfranchisement, lynching marks the excess of discourses of race and rights, serving as a chief mechanism for defining and reinforcing white supremacist power in the post-war years. After all, the emancipation of five million slaves was neither a widespread cultural recognition of black humanity nor the proud achievement of the democratic ethos. As the late nineteenth century's turn toward the Ku Klux Klan and mob violence makes clear, the transformation from slavery to "freedom" was characterized by a recirculation of cultural hierarchies in which terrorism provided the means for defining and securing the continuity of white supremacy. The rise of black lynchings in the years following the war is indicative of a broader U.S. attitude toward African-American entrance into the political order: greeted by a few as the manifestation of a liberal ideal, "freedom," even for those literally disenfranchised, was far from the reigning social reality.

For the *New Masses* reader in 1940, the narrative of disembark and murder, overseen by the figure of the law, marked the repetitiveness of white supremacist discipline that greeted the "free" black subject in the 1860s, and it continued to reiterate his or her secondary social position throughout the twentieth century, including the present day. Both mainstream and alternative newspapers regularly ran stories documenting the scenes of violence, often offering graphic detail of the practices of torture through which the entire African-American population could be defined and policed as innately, if no longer legally, inferior. Such accounts extended the function of lynching as a mode of surveillance by reiterating its performative qualities, carving up the black body in the specular refraction of slavery's initial, dismembering scene. For Trudier Harris, who has
studied the legacy of lynching for African-American writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the imposition of a violent, bodily destruction worked "to keep Blacks contained politically and socially during the years of Reconstruction...convey[ing] to [them] that there was always someone watching over their shoulders ready to punish them for the slightest offense or the least deviation from acceptable lines of action" (Exercising Blackness 19). What constituted "acceptable lines of action" for the newly emancipated slave depended, of course, on whose perspective was being articulated. In the conflict between a South deeply shocked by its lost hegemony and the slaves' euphoric desire to grasp for themselves the rights and privileges of citizenship, the full panorama of racist violence emerges as the defining conditions of "America" (as ideological trope and national body) itself.

For this reason, we might understand the end of slavery as marking in fuller and more complex ways the birth of the nation, where one of the questions that divided the delegates at the Continental Congress in 1776 was finally settled in favor of a rhetorical and legal, though not altogether economic or political equality. As the rise of lynching in the post-war years indicates, this birth brings into crisis the definitional boundaries of "nation" that were implicit in the early constitutional documents: here, issues of generation, inheritance, and property rights are theoretically unmediated from their equation with the white masculine and made available, at least in the abstract, to a new body of citizens. The effect of this transformation is the dissolution of a particular kind of patriarchal order, for while the slave system ensured a property relation between laborer and master, and discursively and legally bound the African-American to the white father through the surname, emancipation represents the literal and symbolic loss of the security of the white patriarch and an attendant displacement of the primacy of the white male. The many documented reports of slaves changing their names in the first moments of their freedom and the thematic value of naming itself in the African-American cultural tradition are indicative of the significance of the material and metaphorical eclipse of the white father's patronymic embrace.

For the nonproportioned white male, the Civil War and Reconstruction represent important transformations in the historical articulation of a white underclass consciousness, offering on one hand the recognition of specific class-bound political interests, while often postulating free African-Americans as competitors to the economic survival of the white working class. Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor to the White House, was a particularly prominent national spokesman for the racially inflected interests of nonproportioned whites. As Eric Foner discusses in his important reconsideration of the Reconstruction era, Johnson, having grown up in poverty himself, identified with the Southern yeomanry. "He seems to have assumed," writes Foner, "that the Confederacy's defeat had shattered the power of the 'slaveocracy' and made possible the political ascendency of loyal white yeomen. The freedmen had no role to play in his vision of a reconstructed South" (Reconstruction 18). Like other poor whites, Johnson saw slaves as complicit with their masters in maintaining economic and political power over non-slaveholding whites. In this scenario, Foner writes, "[The most likely result of black disfranchisement would therefore be an alliance of blacks and planters, restoring the Slave Power's hegemony and effectively excluding the yeomanry from political power]" (ibid.). Johnson's inability to read the class interests of poor whites as aligned with the emergent black citizen—as in fact a multiracial underclass exploited by a feudalistic agrarian or developing free market system—demonstrates how a class-conscious social vision can work in complicity with white supremacy. Such a contradiction contributed to the political fragmentation of the post-war years, producing violent reprisals toward the emancipated slave from both the white yeoman and the planter class.

In these reprisals for offenses more often imagined than real, lynching was a primary disciplinary tool that took on over time an ideological narrative, as I have indicated, that both propelled the white crowd to action and defined the methods of torture subsequently imposed: that of the mythically endowed rapist, the flower of civilization (the white woman) he intended to violently pluck, and the heroic interceptor (the white male) who would restore order by thwarting the black phallic insurgency. But in the early decades of the nineteenth century, lynching significantly did not function within this constellation of racial and sexual encodings. Instead, as Trudier Harris discusses, it was a component of the system of frontier justice, operating in lieu of a legally sanctioned trial, and consisting of a variety of punishments—most often whippings—without the final denouement of death. In fact, before 1840, writes James E. Cutler in his study of the history of lynching in the United States, "the verb lynch was occasionally used to include capital punishment, but...[to] Lynch had not then undergone a change in meaning and acquired the sense of 'to put to death.'...It was not until a time subsequent to the Civil War that the verb lynched came to carry the idea of 'putting to death'" (Lynch-Law 126). And it was not until that time as well that lynching became associated almost exclusively with acts of retribution against the legally free population of African-American subjects.

While the turn toward lynching as a racially coded practice owed its exis-
tence, as I have suggested, to the transformations attending Emancipation, its relationship to citizenship as a broader economy of the body in U.S. culture is significant as well. As I have discussed, the white male citizen of Enlightenment thought drew his particular suit of rights and privileges from the rhetorical disembodiment of the citizen as a social category. Within this category, in Lauren Berlant’s words, “the generic ‘person’” (“National Brands/National Body” 112) provided the abstraction necessary for replacing the historically located body with a national identity. As she explains:

The American subject is privileged to suppress the fact of his historical situation in the abstract “person”: but then, in return, the nation provides a kind of prophylaxis for the person, as it promises to protect his privileges and his local body in return for loyalty to the state. . . . The implicit whiteness and maleness of the original American citizen is thus itself protected by national identity. . . . (113)

In other words, it was the repression of the specific racial and gender markers of privileged identity—of whiteness and maleness—that characterized the figure “American citizen” and inaugurated its rhetorical definition as an inclusive social body. In this constitution of the citizen as a disembodied entity, bound not to physical delineations but to national ones, the white male was (and continues to be) “freed” from the corporeality that might otherwise impede his insertion into the larger body of national identity.

For the African-American male subject, on the other hand, it was precisely the imposition of an extreme corporeality that defined his distance from the privileged ranks of citizenry. With the advent of Emancipation and its attendant loss of the slave system’s marking of the African-American body as property, lynching emerged to reclaim and reassert the centrality of black male corporeality, deterring the now theoretically possible move toward citizenry and disembodied abstraction. Through the lynching scenario, “blackness” was cast as a subversive (and most often sexual) threat, an incontrovertible chaos whose challenge to the economic and social coherency of the nation could be psychologically, if not wholly politically, averted by corporeal abjection and death. That lynching became during Reconstruction and its aftermath an increasingly routine response to black male as well as black female attempts at education, self- and communal government, suffrage, and other indicators of cultural inclusion and equality attests to its powerful disciplinary function. As the most extreme deterriorization of the body and its subjective boundaries, lynching guaran-

... the white mob’s privilege of physical and psychic penetration, granted it a definitional authority over social space, and encoded the vigilant and violent system of surveillance that underwrote late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century negotiations over race and cultural power.

The Offense of Sex

But why the charge of rape as the consolidating moment of lynching’s justification? Why this sexualization of blackness as the precondition not just for mob action, but for lynching’s broad cultural acceptance and appeal? The answer to this, like any historical accounting, is less apparent than the many contexts in which the evidence of lynching’s sexualization appears. If we begin where I have suggested, with the narrative of rape (and its culmination in lynching) translating the crisis of Emancipation from economic to sexual and gendered terms, we encounter a very powerful means through which black men and the entire black community could be psychologically and physically contained. Most important, we witness the way the rape narrative simultaneously recognized and subverted the African-American male’s theoretical equality in the sexual, political, and economic spheres. As those familiar with the late nineteenth century well know, the rape mythos, as an overwhelmingly southern response to enfranchisement, challenged the kind of social reform orchestrated by the Freedman’s Bureau. The patriarchal logic of the dominant culture became the defining mechanism for organizing the newly freed slave: not only did the bureau appoint the husband as head of the household, assigning to him sole power to enter into contractual labor agreements for the entire family, but also it fought for the allotment of land for every freed “male,” while granting only unmarried women access to this domain (Foner, Reconstruction 87).

In these pronouncements—as in the routine gender segregation attending voting, jury duty, the holding of political and Republican party office—the official program of Reconstruction understood the freedom of black men to entail a “natural” judicial and social superiority over African-American women. The nineteenth century’s determination of public and private along strict gender lines thus provided a definitional structure through which social space and familial roles were shaped for a population no longer denied the right of maintaining family bonds. Nevertheless, while the patriarchalization of the black family served to institutionalize it within the gender codes prevalent in white bourgeois ideology, thereby securing the black family to the formal dimensions of white social behav-
ior, many whites were decidedly threatened by the definitional sameness accorded former slaves. The loss of one patriarchal organization of social life—that of slavery—and its replacement by the seeming egalitarianism of a masculine-dominated black family, then, had the effect of broadening the competitive dimensions of interracial masculine relations, especially as the black male’s new property governance over black women threatened to extend its range of power to women of the dominant group as well.

It was in this climate that the mythology of the black man as rapist emerged, working the fault line of the slave’s newly institutionalized masculinization by framing this masculinity as the bestial excess of an overly phallic primitivity. In the contours of Western racial discourse, of course, the primitive sexual appetite associated with blackness was not a new articulation at the end of the nineteenth century, but its crafting in the highly stylized and overdetermined narrative structure of the rape myths—along with the sheer frequency of its deployment—marks a particular historical configuration of the sexual and gendered in their U.S. relation to issues of race and nation. Thus, while the slavery period often envisioned the Uncle Tom figure as the signification of the “positive good” of a system that protected and cared for its black “children;” once emancipated, these children became virile men who wanted for themselves the ultimate symbol of white civilization: the white woman. The transformation of the image of the black man from simple, docile Uncle Tom to violent sex offender characterizes the oppositional logic underwriting the representational structure of black male images in nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. culture, a logic in which the discourse of sexual difference—from feminized docility to hypermasculinized phallicity—comes to play a primary significatory role.

South Carolina Senator Ben Tillman demonstrates this oppositional logic in his 1907 speech before Congress, when he argues for the abandonment of due process for blacks accused of sex crimes against white women:

[T]he white women of the South are in a state of siege. . . . Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her. . . . Shall men . . . demand for [the demon] the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine. . . . Civilization peels off us. . . . and we revert to the . . . impulses . . . to “kill! kill! kill!” (“The Black Peril” 181-182)

In proposing mob retaliation against the defilers of white womanhood, Tillman assures his listeners that he does not hate blacks by recalling “the negroes of the old slave days . . . the negroes who knew they were inferior and who never presumed to assert equality” (183). These blacks, with minds like “those of children,” posed no sexual threat, as was witnessed, according to Tillman, during the Civil War when “there is not of record a solitary instance of one white woman having been wronged” by the 800,000 black men left on plantation land (181, 184). Only with Emancipation does rape follow; “the negro becomes a fiend in human form” (185).

In figuring the rape myths in the context of economic and political transformation, Tillman reveals not only the force of the threat of black masculinization that accompanied emancipation but also the necessary negation of the threat that the turn to the rape charge fulfilled. In politicizing the bestial excess of black masculinity, however, Tillman establishes a racialized opposition between civilization and primitivity that significantly breaks down, in the face of the black brute, as the white man loses his civilized veneer. Like skin, civilization “peels off us” and only an aggressive impulse to kill remains. In the ethos of nineteenth-century racism, the seeming reduction of the white man to such barbarity, to the violation of his own civilized system of law, is rationalized by the figuration of the white woman, that pivotal player in the rape mythology. Through her emblem as the keeper of the purity of the race, white men cast themselves as protectors of civilization, reaffirming their role as social and familial “heads” and their paternal property rights as well. The white man thus maintained a position of superiority, as Trudier Harris observes, “not only in assigning a place to his women, but especially in keeping black people, particularly black men, in the place he had assigned for them” (Exercising Blackness 20). In this way, the mythology of the black male rapist simultaneously engineered race and gender hierarchies, masking the white male’s own historical participation in “miscegenating” sexual activities, while ensuring his disciplinary control over potential sexual—and one might add, political—liaisons between black men and white women. Within the context of nineteenth-century abolitionist and feminist movements, the necessity for disrupting such potential bonds was important indeed.

Still, the central figuration of the white woman’s sexuality in the rape myths must be understood as a displacement of the deeper and more culturally complex relation between black and white men. As Harris writes, “[t]he issue, then, really boils down to one between white men and black men and the mythic conception the former have of the latter” (Exercising Blackness 20). Such a mythic conception works through the sexualization of
blackness, in which as Frantz Fanon says, “the Negro is fixated at the genital” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 165). Caught there, within the framework of a subjectively reductive sexualization, the phallicized black male displays the anxieties and contradictions underlying the “logic” and disciplinary practices of white masculine supremacy: in reducing the black male to the body and further to the penis itself, white masculinity betrays a simultaneous desire for and disavowal of the black male’s phallic inscription. To put this another way, the white male desires the image he must create in order to castrate, and it is precisely through the mythology of the black male as a mythically endowed rapist that he has effectively done this.

In the process, the creation of a narrative of black male sexual excess simultaneously exposes and redirects the fear of castration from the white masculine to the black male body, and it is in the lynch scene that this transfer moves from the realm of the psychosexual to the material. Harris’s descriptive account of the sexual undercurrent of lynching and castration is telling in this regard:

For white males . . . there is a symbolic transfer of sexual power at the point of the executions. The black man is stripped of his prowess, but the very act of stripping brings symbolic power to the white man. His actions suggest that, subconsciously, he craves the very thing he is forced to destroy. Yet he destroys it as an indication of the political (sexual) power he has. . . . (*Exorcising Blackness* 22)

In this destruction of the phallic black beast, the white masculine claims the hypermasculinity that his own mythology of black sexual excess has denied him, finding in sexual violence the sexual pleasure necessary to uphold both his tenuous masculine and white racial identities.

Because lynching negates the black male’s most visible claim to masculine power, Harris describes this ritual punishment as a “communal rape” (*Exorcising Blackness* 23), a description that inscribes within the lynching and castration scene the relations of power and disempowerment at work in the disciplinary practice most associated with sexual difference: male sexual violence toward women. Through the rape metaphor, the emasculation of the black male undertaken in lynching and castration emerges as the imposition of the binary figuration of gender, with the white masculine retaining hegemony over the entire field of masculine entitlements, while the black male is confined to the corporeal excess of a racial feminization. But, as I have suggested throughout my discussion and as my reading of *Native Son* will demonstrate in particular, it is important to maintain the distinction between the imposition of feminization onto male bodies and the historical framework of the feminine as part and parcel of being born female. Such a distinction enables us to understand the force of the discourse of sexual difference as it constructs and contains hierarchical relations among men without negating the specific materiality of gender oppression that accompanies women’s variously raced positions in U.S. culture. In other words, the imposition of feminization onto male and female bodies is not, politically, theoretically, or historically, the same.

While castration may function as a means for enacting a gendered difference at the site of the black male body, it is also the case that such a practice of dismemberment enabled a perverse level of physical intimacy between the white male aggressor and his captive ex-slave, pointing to an underlying obsession not simply with gender sameness, but with a broader range of sexuality as well. Harris’s report that “[i]n some historical accounts, the lynchers were reputed to have divided pieces of the black man’s genitals among themselves” allows us to envision the castration scene as more than the perverse sexual encounter offered by the rape metaphor (*Exorcising Blackness* 22). In the image of white men embracing—with hate, fear, and a chilling form of empowered delight—the same penis they were so overdeterminedly driven to destroy, one encounters a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic at the very moment of its most extreme disavowal.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has discussed in *Between Men*, the male bonding relations that characterize patriarchal structures in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American cultures depend on the panic image of the homosexual, whose same-sex desire provides the disciplinary terms for normalizing heterosexuality in its compulsory formation. From this perspective, we might understand the lynching scenario and its obsession with the sexual dismemberment of black men to mark the limit of the homosexual/heterosexual binary—that point at which the oppositional relation reveals its inherent and mutual dependence—and the heterosexuality of the black male “rapist” is transformed into a violently homoerotic exchange. “The homosociality of this world,” Sedgwick writes in a discussion of the late Renaissance that is applicable to the history of Anglo and African men in U.S. culture, “is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination” (66).

In such a volatile and sexually charged realm, the mythology of the black male as rapist functioned to script the deeply disturbing transformations in U.S. racial relations in the late nineteenth century within the double registers of sexuality and gender, thereby granting to the white mob that
captured and controlled the black body the psychological power of arbitrating life and death. In choosing death and accompanying it with the most extreme practices of corporeal abuse, whiteness enhanced its own signifi- catory lack, filling the absence of meaning that defined it with the fully corporeal presence of a hated, feared, and now conquered blackness. The extremity of punishment in the lynching and castration scenario thus provided the necessary illusion of returning to the lost moment of slavery’s totalized mastery—a moment never actually “fall,” though yearned for, indeed frantically sought after, through the disciplinariness of random mob violence.

White Beauty, Black Beast

The transformation of the economic into the sexual and its implications for reading gender and race emerge most fully in Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), our literature’s most compelling story of the black man caught in the mythology of the rapist. Revolving around the fated life of Bigger, his employment by a liberal white family, his accidental murder of their daughter, Mary, and his subsequent flight and trial, the novel demonstrates what Wright considers the definitive pattern of U.S. race relations. As he writes in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” “[a]ny Negro . . . knows that times without number he has heard of some Negro boy being picked up . . . and carted off to jail and charged with ‘rape.’ This thing happens so often that to my mind it had become a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America” (xxviii). In Native Son, such uncertainty is explicitly linked to masculinity and to the competitive dimensions of black and white masculine relations. In the opening scene, for instance, Bigger’s mother characterizes her son’s failure as masculinity: “[w]e wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (22).

Through the metaphors of emasculation, Wright simultaneously reiterates the disciplinary function of the rape mythos, while couching that function as symptomatic of African-American alienation in U.S. culture more broadly. As Bigger tells his friends: “[e]very time I think about it I feel like somebody’s poking a hot-iron down my throat . . . We live here and they live there . . . They got things we ain’t. They do things and we can’t!” (23). In figuring segregation, racism, and poverty as the “red-hot iron down my throat,” Wright casts Bigger’s oppression in highly sexual and phallic terms, marking the force and effect of white supremacy as a negation of masculinity: “[y]ou ain’t a man no more.” Bigger finally says, “[White folks] after you so hot and hard. . . . They kill you before you die” (326, 327). Being a “man” is thus equated with freedom and power, and the white world, so “hot and hard” against one, acts as the ultimate castrator of black claims to traditional manhood.

With the charge of rape, this pursuit—“the white folks after you so hot and hard”—becomes overtly sexualized, as the elaborate scene of Bigger’s chase and capture demonstrates. Here, with Bigger trapped on a roof by white men wielding a fire hose, Wright depicts the white men’s success as a horrific sexual encounter: “[t]he rushing stream jerked this way and that. . . . Then the water hit him. . . . He gasped, his mouth open. . . . The water left him; he lay gasping, spent. . . . The icy water clutched again at his body like a giant hand; the chill of it squeezed him like the circling coils of a monstrous boa constrictor” (251). In the contrast between the white men’s exaggerated phallic power and Bigger’s gasping submission, Wright reveals the sexualization of masculine relations underlying the rape mythos: in capturing Bigger, the white men—nearly eight thousand searching the city—have extended their own phallic reach beyond the confines of their bodies, laying claim to their property and paternity rights not merely by demonstrating ownership of white women but by forcing the black male to also submit to their masculine sexual supremacy. As the prosecutor, Buckley, says in his plea for the imposition of the death penalty: “[e]very decent white man in America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heel the woolly head of this black lizard” (373).

Significantly, Wright offers Bigger’s resistance to this disciplinary submission as an acceptance of Mary’s death as a conscious act: “[t]hough he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her” (101). In accepting responsibility for Mary’s death, Bigger sees himself not simply as refuting white masculine authority, but as gaining an advantage that had eluded him before: “[t]he knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score” (155). Through his destruction of the objectified symbol of white male rule, Bigger no longer needs the knife and gun, traditional symbols of masculinity, that had initially accompanied him to the Dalton home: “[w]hat his knife and gun had once meant to him, his knowledge of having secretly murdered Mary now meant” (141). For the first time he feels “a confidence, a fulness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act” (111).

Bigger’s acceptance of Mary’s murder and his consequent sense of free-
dom are particularly meaningful when viewed in terms of an earlier and seemingly insignificant event in the novel. Before setting out for the Dalton home on the day of Mary’s accidental death, Bigger gathers with friends at Doc’s poolroom to discuss plans for robbing Blum’s Delicatessen. While the men had pulled other “jobs,” this was to be their first robbery of a white man and therefore “a violation of ultimate taboo . . . a symbolic challenge of the white world’s rule over them, a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to” (18). The language here of “violation,” “taboo,” and “symbolic challenge” scripts the robbing of Blum in the same terms as the mythic encounter between a black man and a white woman, pointing once again toward that more fundamental conflict that lies at the heart of the mythology of the black male as rapist, drawing an equation between castration (both symbolic and literal) and the form of violence most overtly gendered in U.S. culture. By characterizing the psychological effects of racism as rape, Bigger inverts the cultural rhetoric of the mythology of the black male as rapist, drawing an equation between castration (both symbolic and literal) and the form of violence most overtly gendered in U.S. culture. In the process, however, Wright casts the black male as rape’s sole social and sexual victim, thereby establishing for Bigger an unqualified difference from the feminine that ultimately evacuates his affinity with black women altogether. By expelling the feminine in this way, Wright features Bigger as the universalized emblem of black oppression, a universalization shaped by and predicated on the discourse of sexual difference as a negotiation of racial differences among men.

Although Wright’s method of foregrounding the masculine stakes at work in the rapist mythos is depicted at the expense of both black women and the feminine more generally, his novel refuses the more traditional structure of male bonding that Sedgwick has defined, in which “the spectacle of the ruin of a woman . . . is just the right lubricant for an adjustment of differentials of power (among men)” (Between Men 76). This we witness in the final moments of the novel when Bigger makes an attempt, through his lawyer Boris Max, to connect with Jan, the white boyfriend of Mary Dalton. “Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello” (392), Bigger says, shifting from the servile “Mister” to the more familiar. But in his hesitation and in the novel’s stark depiction of the chasms that separate white men and black, this attempt to form male bonds is a dim contrast to the image of 1930s progressive politics that was offered earlier in the novel where “a strong blinding sun sent hot rays down . . . in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men . . . melt[ing] away the many differences” (335). In the failure of male bonds to serve their utopic function, Native Son marks the extremity of hatred and violence that upsets the black male into the patriarchal province of the masculine. While it does not critique that initiation without reiterating the logics of sexual difference on which the masculine establishes itself, the novel nonetheless demonstrates the stakes of race and gender that capture Bigger in the definitional nexus of rape, lynching, and castration that Wright so defiantly wants to explore.
Throughout the twentieth century, black male writers have repeatedly turned to the figuration of the black rapist as both a protest and warning, purposely revising the mythic encounter between black men and white women as part of a challenge to the history of mutilation I have discussed above. Where Wright would cast Bigger Thomas's subjective and social crisis as the crime of blackness that precedes and ensures the crime of rape, Ralph Ellison's 1952 meditation on absence and invisibility moves the focus from the black man's sexual criminality to the white woman's. This shift in the production of a counterdiscourse on the rape mythos demonstrates a crucial reconfiguration of the impact and meaning of the black rapist in the second half of the twentieth century and points to the kind of rhetorical trajectory that Black Power discourses in the 1960s would themselves take.

In Invisible Man, two scenes in particular explore the sexual tensions that underlie the anatomy of lynching, demonstrating through their contrast the rhetorical revisions of the rape mythos from which black discourses in the latter part of the twentieth century would proceed. In the prelude to the "Battle Royal" in chapter 1, the town's prominent white civic leaders offer to the gaze of a group of young black men "a magnificent blonde—stark naked" (18). The sight of the white woman drives "a wave of irrational guilt and fear" (19) through the invisible man, the historical weight of the taboo against his looking at a white woman serving as the ultimate entertainment for the white men. In this positioning of bodies, we witness the representational strategy encoded in the rape mythos: through the specularization of both the white woman and the black man, the white man is empowered to "look," constructing the circuit of desire in which the body of the white woman serves as the mechanism for hierarchizing the space of looking among men. More important perhaps, such a configuration of bodies enables the white male spectator to displace his own desire for the black male body into a heterosexual frame, allowing the white men, for instance, to gaze at a young black man's erection (20) without defining a homosexual erotic position. Desire, power, and dread between black and white men are thus circulated in an asymmetrical paradigm of looking orchestrated across the body of the naked white woman.

Articulating his relationship to this scene, the invisible man is initially poised between two possibilities: identifying with the white woman as similarly exploited by the white men or invoking gender differences to distance himself from her. When he first sees the white woman, the protagonist admits that his guilt and fear are mixed with a strong desire—"[I]had the price of looking been blindness," he says, "I would have looked" (19). In looking he feels, on the one hand, a desire forged through the recognition of similar roles in the circuit of white masculine desire—"I wanted . . . to go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body"—and, on the other hand, a desire formed by hate, by the need "to spit upon her," on her yellow hair, on her "face heavily powdered and rouged" (ibid.). Detached, empty, a crass portrait of the white man's civilization—a "small American flag tattooed upon her belly"—the white woman elicits ambivalence: "I wanted . . . to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where . . . her thighs formed a capital V" (ibid.). Even in the context of this ambivalence, his commentary culminates in a moment of recognition: "I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys" (20).

For the invisible man, this recognition cannot be sustained, and by the later stages of the novel, his encounter with the white woman will transform "the terror and disgust in her eyes almost like my own" into an extreme form of disavowal. This transformation occurs during the narrative's focus on the Brotherhood, that Marxist collectivity that seems destined to miscomprehend the complexity and significance of white supremacy as it competes with, contradicts, and confirms a capitalist mode of production. Here, the invisible man decides to sleep with a white woman to garner information about the Brotherhood, but unlike the earlier encounter, the white male gaze is now positioned beyond the frame of the scene. Instead, the circuit of desire pivots on her arousal at the thought of rape: "[I]threaten to kill me if I don't give in. You know, talk rough to me, beautiful" (507), she coos, confessing that "ever since I first heard about it, even when I was a very little girl, I've wanted it to happen to me" (508). Through the white woman's reiteration of the black man as phallic beast, the protagonist overcomes his earlier and momentary recognition of her position as pawn and object of white men. Now it becomes the white woman who "had me on the ropes . . . [S]he thinks [I'm] an entertainer" (509), a metaphor that hardens back to the Battle Royal where "we stood with our backs against the ropes" (22), where the spectacle of black bodies is "part of the entertainment" (17). Now the white woman has assumed the position of mastery: "[I]lie back and let me look at you against that white sheet. You're beautiful . . . [I]like warm ebony against pure snow. . . . I feel so free with you" (509).

In describing the source of her feelings of freedom—"I can trust you . . .
you're not like other men. We're kind of alike" (509) — the white woman speaks the possibility suggested by the invisible man's recognition in the earlier scene. But the context of this speaking necessitates its disavowal, for invisible Man founds the black man's liberation not on a social similarity with white women (or any women for that matter) but on the assertion of masculine sameness. By contending that the black man differs from other men, the white woman, in the throes of her sexual perversion for rape and physical abuse, ensures the opposite rhetorical effect: affirming not differences among men but their mutual and masculine sameness. This sameness is made possible by the extremity of the white woman's sexual and sexualized differences — her narrativization of and desire for rape. It is this reconstruction around difference and sameness that is pivotal in Invisible Man, necessitating, when the white woman intones, "Come on, beat me, daddy — you — you big black bruisey," that the black man responds by slapping her and writing with lipstick across her stomach: "Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus Surprise" (511). The joke of rape, which emerges as the secret fantasy of the white woman and the actual source of her sexual desire, constructs her as wholly alien to the black man. Through this alternation, the earlier sense of a mutual terror and disgust is averted; the invisible man now directs his disgust to the white woman, thereby reasserting not simply his gender difference from her, but the hierarchical power of his masculine position as well.

But why privilege that early moment of recognition? Is there nothing politically challenging about the black man's representational inscription as distinct from — perhaps even opposed to — the white feminine? In thinking about these issues, my assumption is that the moment of recognition early in Invisible Man is a powerful demonstration of how the sexual/textual dynamic of interracial masculine relationships functions first to stage black male desire for the white woman and then to punish the black male for that desire as part of reasserting and codifying white masculine sexual and social supremacy. Such supremacy and the circuit of desire interrelate on the mutual commodification and corporeal inscription of black and female difference. But in the novel's later relocation of the tensions of masculine sameness and racial difference at the sole site of white female bodies, Ellison's Santa Claus scene simply inverts the Battle Royal's nexus of race and gender, as well as its critique of the dynamics of the rape mythos, thereby establishing the mutual exclusion of — and indeed contestation between — "blacks and women." Such exclusion has serious consequences for black women, whose sexual specificity is negated whenever racial equality

is cast, as it was in Native Son, in opposition to gender. The focus on the white woman in the later scene, in other words, evacuates Ellison's critique of the white male anxiety of masculine sameness that underlies, as I have been arguing, both the rape mythos and the lynching and castration scene.

This focus and its effect come to be repeated in radical black thought of the 1960s, where the ritualization of black mutilation characteristic of lynching and castration proved a crucial material and representational site around which anti-segregationist struggle proceeded. For Black Power, in particular, the mythology of the black man as rapist and the repeated sexual negation that accompanied the rape charge was central, offering a context in which black nationalist demands were simultaneously articulated and refined. Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, for instance, emphasized the reclamation of black masculinity as the usurpation of white supremacy by crafting the rape of the white woman as the prototypical insurrectionary act (26). By defining black masculinity in the context of symbolic and corporeal phallicization, Cleaver along with others asserted the primacy of a black phallic power, threatening not only the "sanctity" of white womanhood, but more important, the closed circuit of masculine relations on which U.S. patriarchal structures depend. In this way, Black Power marshaled the fear-induced imagery of black men as violent and potent to assert to white culture a bold and resistant political production, one that appropriated the fear that underwrote the mythology of the black rapist in order to recast the passive resistance school of civil rights reform. Thus articulating a political agenda of nationalist power, Black Power asserted black masculinity as co-terminous with racial emancipation.

In the process, the image of black men was rescued from the emasculating history of enslavement and mutilation — what Cleaver calls "four hundred years minus my Balls" (Soul on Ice 189) — and the specter of a white masculine feminization was raised instead. As I stated at the outset, the work of Imamu Baraka is especially illustrative in this regard. Inverting the representational economy that depicts the black man as either literally or metaphorically less than a man, Baraka aligns feminization with whiteness, defining white men as "effeminate and perverted" at one point and more directly as "fags" at another (Home 220, 216). By choosing homosexuality to characterize white men, Baraka highlights what is for him their cultural and procreative nonproductivity, and in this, he locates the struggle between black and white men primarily in the body. Physical strength, in other words, emerges as the black man's claim to both power and a natural masculinity, while heterosexuality and reproduction become the essential
components of virility. The white man, devoid on all counts, is metaphorically impotent: "[Life and creation (of life) are equally terrifying to the white man]. ([Imagine] [t]he stuffing of the genitals into the mouth ... making a man destroy his powers to create, destroying his seed, and his generations)" (Home 232).

But while Baraka captures the sexual jealousy that in part underlies the psychological motives for the mutilation of black men, his reinscription of the biologizing logic of gender posits creation as a singularly masculine production: future generations are contained in male "seed." As such, sperm functions as the definitive marker of the black man's superiority, for he "can send out no other kind of seed. And that seed, anywhere [even in white wombs], makes black" (Home 233). Appropriating reproduction as a masculine enterprise, Baraka relies on the discourse of sexual difference to redefine, through inversion, racial hierarchies among men. By doing this, the black masculine emerges once again as symbolic stand-in for black humanity itself:

[T]he white man has tried to keep the black man hidden. . . . These were heathens that were brought over in the slave ships, or savages, or animals . . . definitely not men, not human. And when the possibility arose that these animals really might be men, then the ballcutoff ceremony was trotted out immediately. . . . So the white man has tried to cover black people's humanity. (emphasis added, Home 226)

This movement from "black man" to "black people's humanity" conceives of the "human" only in terms of the struggle of the masculine itself. It was this masculinization of the discourse of black power that concerned Michele Wallace in her once-controversial study, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, a feminist rereading of the consequences of such a gendering of the black struggle on not only black men but, more specifically, black women. Published in 1979, Black Macho analyzes the sexism at the heart of the Black Power movement where, in the now infamous phrasing of Stokely Carmichael, black women were told to lie prone for the revolution. Arguing that this macho originated in white culture, Wallace views the black man as having "lost [his] grip on a black perspective, [and] as he lost track of his original intentions, and adopted a white perspective . . . he began to think . . . he was not a man" (77). By refuting those cultural historians who have viewed the black man's role in slavery as a completely "unmanly" one — unmanly precisely because black men did not have traditional patriarchal rights over black women — Wallace challenges what she sees as Black Power's implicit lament: "that the black woman, [the black man's] woman, was not his slave, that his right to expect her complete service and devotion was usurped[,] that [she] was, after all, the white man's slave" (23).

In particular, Wallace is concerned with the ideological and political fracturing that arises when black disenfranchisement is cast in terms of a denied masculinity, as the capitulation of Black Power to patriarchal notions of masculinity consequently cast the black woman as matriarch, willing helper to the black man's cultural castration. As Wallace writes, black women had a hell of a history to live down. We had been rolling around in bed with the slave master while the black man was having his penis cut off; we had never been able to close our legs to a white man nor deny our breasts to a white child; we had been too eagerly loyal to our white male employer . . . cleaning his house with love and attention while our man was being lynched. . . . We had not allowed the black man to be a man in his own house. We had . . . questioned his masculinity . . . driven him to alcohol, to drugs, to crime . . . because our eyes had not reflected his manhood. (Black Macho 22)

In constructing the black woman as complicit in the larger project of black male oppression, Black Power failed to capture the complexities of race and gender and ironically reaffirmed, through inversion, the very ideologies of difference that had entrapped black men. To cast this in other terms: black nationalism's negotiation of its relationship to white masculine supremacy transferred the problem inherent in the disjunction between masculine sameness and racial difference to the site of gender.

Inouching this writing of race across the body of sexual difference as, simply, the black man's adoption of white masculine ideals — as opposed to "his own black-centered definition of manhood [where] his sense of himself was not endangered" (Black Macho 79) — Wallace inscribes an essential, natural black masculinity that even she, in the preface to the 1990 revised edition, has come to disavow. For the antagonism between black men and black women underlying nationalist rhetoric in the twentieth century is more than the black man's "choice" between a white perspective and a black one, between a seemingly destructive masculinity and a constructive counterpart (81). As Wallace rearticulates, "[T]oday I understand the problem as one of representation." (xix). In the context of both Wallace's refragmentation and the analytic contours of this study, we might begin to understand the historical confluences through which Black Power's representation of
the African-American male was wrought. In its seemingly willful negation of the black woman and in its reiteration of patriarchy's privileging of "manhood [as] more valuable than anything else" (79), Black Power demonstrates its place within—and not, as it may have hoped, against—the structure of hierarchies among men.

Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien's meditation on black masculinity is an instructive gloss on the complexities of race and gender that underlie the cultural contexts in which contestations between black and white men emerge:

Our social definitions of what it is to be a "man," about what constitutes "manliness," are not "natural" but are historically constructed. . . . The dominant definitions of masculinity, accepted as the social norm, are neither the products of a false consciousness imposed by patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal systems of male power and privilege constantly have to negotiate the meaning of gender roles with a variety of economic, social and political factors. . . . So, its [sic] not as if we could strip away the negative stereotypes of black men, created by western patriarchy, and discover some "natural" black masculinity which is good, pure and wholesome. ("True Confessions" 6)

As a construct within the discourse of patriarchy, black masculinity cannot be posted as outside the historical nexus of gender relations, as something essential awaiting the removal of white supremacy and patriarchy. Its content is contingent, as we have seen, on a negotiation between the various categories of difference that structure U.S. culture.

In this sense, Black Power's writing of the black male across the body of gender is no cultural anachronism, but is a broader representational strategy that has operated with increasing force since the early nineteenth century. While Wallace is indeed correct to see this writing as a highly misogynistic formation, such an articulation of black liberation struggle must also be read in its historical challenge to the exclusionary logic of white masculine power: that is, in rewriting the rape mythologizing in the 1960s, black radical thinkers assaulted white supremacy's investment in patriarchal discriminations, redefining the beauty—black beast scenario and making claims for a black masculine power that America in the late 1970s and 1980s would spend much time, in both popular and political culture, disavowing. From the political perspective of the 1990s, of course, the either/or nature of race/gender struggles have more than reached their impasses, and it is in the context of critical thinking about these impasses, about their mutual and binary exclusions, that this study is itself engaged.

Another Willie

The enduring power of the black male rapist mythos is perhaps best witnessed in the contemporary era in the specter of Willie Horton, the convicted black male rapist used in George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign to signify the potential danger of Democratic party control. Through the figure of Willie Horton, Bush challenged the toughness of his opponent, Michael Dukakis, whose penal reform program in Massachusetts was reportedly responsible for putting a rapist back on the streets. Bush's get-tough discourse, deployed here in the context of a test of masculine strength between white men, functioned to align racism with the broader and perhaps more nefarious fear of national decline—that fear so well orchestrated by David Duke and other political spokesmen for white supremacy. Bush's need to quickly disaffiliate himself from race baiting in the 1992 presidential campaign in light of both Duke's tactics and his popular support (which are not unconnected) has been one of the more enriching ironies of contemporary politics. But it also points to the historically aphasic conundrum in which we live, where the narrative scenario of black disempowerment following Reconstruction can be renewed as the fear-invoking context for organizing various levels of white supremacist activity.

In this sense, the image offered by Ralph Ellison in "The Birthmark"—where the body of that seemingly fictional Willie lies dismembered and suspended between white male legs—occupies a symbolic range quite arresting in its historical diversity. For Bush, in fact, the representation of the black male as sexual threat functioned as the phantasm of his own phallic potential, providing the framework for escaping the limitations of corporeality and thereby making possible his ascension into the highest position the disembodied abstraction of citizenry in U.S. culture can offer. More recently, of course, Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearings brought the contexts of disembodied abstraction, political ascendency, and racial difference to the foreground, forging a political crisis quite stunning in its specular deployment. But where Willie Horton was cast as the new BIGGER THOMAS, Clarence Thomas was saved from this fate by the necessity implicit in certain aspects of post-segregationist relations of race. Here, Bush marshaled the specter of the black male to signify his seeming commitment to civil rights reform, the integrationist image of Clarence Thomas functioning to simulate America's transcendence of its history of race and racism and hence its achievement of that mythic, endlessly invoked possibility: democracy.

Even the integrationist text cannot dispet the history of the black male's sexualization, though it may serve as the context for seeming to overcome
it. As my discussion in this and the previous chapter has suggested, the tension between corporeality (blackness) and citizenship's abstraction turns ultimately on the sexual. In the Clarence Thomas case, Anita Hill's accusations served to return the question of the black man's ascension to abstraction where it has routinely been: in the realm of the sexual. And once there, Thomas found himself invoking the very context of race that his legal and political affinities worked so thoroughly to renounce, citing the history of the black body and its symbolic and literal markings. In leveling his charge against the proceedings as a "high-tech lynching," Thomas placed himself within that history and sought to distance himself from it, simultaneously defining his corporealization within the logic and social organization of white supremacy, while establishing abstraction (to be a justice) as the only route for undoing the history that the Lynch metaphor recalled. In the context of the hearings, the overwhelmingly white masculine gaze that served to define and arbitrate this racial/sexual conflict—that ludicrous panel of empowered white men—demonstrated once again the nexus of white dread and desire that oversees the representational field of black sexuality. From "long dong silver" to The Exorcist's pubic hair to the rumors concerning Hill's antimale lesbianism, the white masculine gaze indulged its own powerful production of racial discourses at the intersection of sexuality and gender.

It is important to emphasize the shifting terrain of this production as part of the negotiation of power that marks and defines the realm of the social, for the contextual relationships that undergird the imbrication of differences are not transhistorically the same. For Clarence Thomas, the shifted locus of his sexual threat from white to black women (and his ultimate confirmation) indicate the post-segregationist context in which this political conflict itself dwelled. In an ironic reconfiguration of political passions, the conservative Republican party found itself defending as normative the sexual subjectivity of a black man wed to a white woman. Now the criminality of blackness as sexual perversity was constructed solely as the black woman's sexual and ethical infidelity, and the politics of the visible took another turn in the refiguring of bodies and identities within America's newly fashioned integrationist terrain. How we understand this reconfiguration is part of the challenge of defining both the political and political resistance in the contemporary era, and it moves us toward questions of integration and racial representation that will be explored in the following chapter. For much like George Bush's attempt to solidify his own civil rights investments through the nomination of Clarence Thomas, the black
Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject." On the importance of rethinking the public/private dichotomy altogether, see Seyla Benhabib and Duccia Cornelli, eds., Feminism as Critique; Dorothy O. Holly and Susan M. Reverby, eds., Gendered Domains; and Janet Sharistanian, ed., Beyond the Public/Domestic Dichotomy.

23. See, for instance, Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, and Deborah Gray White, Ain’t I a Woman.

23. The Moynihan report is, of course, the primary contemporary source for the popularization of the discourse of the black family’s matriarchal failure. For critical commentary on this, see Angela Y. Davis, Women, Race, and Class; Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow; Michele Wallace, Black Mao and the Myth of the Superwoman; and White, Ain’t I a Woman. See also “Scapegoating the Black Family,” a special issue of The Nation.

24. While a full bibliography of the texts adopting this strategy is impossible to provide here, some of the most critically important include Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood; Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought; Davis, Women, Race, and Class; bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman and Feminist Theory; Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, eds., Theorizing Black Feminisms; Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow; Gerda Lerner, ed., Black Women in White America; Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds., Conjuring: Cheryl Wall, ed., Changing Our Own Words; and White, Ain’t I a Woman.

25. The trope of bringing to voice and visibility the black woman has been routinely used as a way of framing contemporary calls for rethinking the historical erasure of black women from both feminist and patriarchal cultural narratives. While this study does not argue against such a project, it does explore the contradictions of visibility, being the vehicle for both the cultural inscription of a host of corporeal inferiorities and the methodological practice through which disciplinary knowledge has been linked to a liberating, democratic transcendence. While we might recognize the significance and imperative of retrieving the black woman from marginality, the metaphorical weight of making her “visible” carries with it the commodity’s historically shifting, but racially coded, determinations.

3 The Anatomy of Lynching

1. In various theoretical registers, but most predominantly the psychoanalytic, sexual differences have been explored as corporeal. That is, the body’s seeming visual differences establish the logic of feminine inferiority that underlies Western cultural productions. In feminist film theory, for instance, the female body as a visual icon has been posited as the “stake” of masculine subjectivities, and the circulation of this body—its fetishistic display—has been defined as one of the primary characteristics of Hollywood film. In philosophy and literary theory, feminists have investigated at some length the implications of the body as the grounds of feminine difference, and a number of emergent cultural studies projects look to the corporeal as a kind of disciplinary terrain through which femininity has (and is) both socially and psychically scripted. While work in this area is prolific, see especially Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight; Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter; Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies; Constance Penley, ed., Feminism and Film Theory; Linda Singer, Erotic Warfare; and Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., The Female Body in Western Culture.

2. Contrary to the way the narrative of feminism is currently being written by a variety of feminist scholars, the question of differences and of the impossibilities of commonality and sisterhood are not new issues on the theoretical or political horizon. As I discuss at length in chapter 6, feminism in the nineteenth century was an equally contested site for the consideration of differences among women, as analogies between free white women and African-American slave women frantically reveal. Racial differences among women, in short, are currently the repressed content of American feminism in our readings of its origins in the early nineteenth century.

3. While the distinction between symbolic castration and its literal enactment is undoubtedly significant and in many ways incommensurate, I have located the two together here in order to understand how the circulation of the lynching narrative, in relation to and apart from actual acts of torture, nonetheless bear a similar disciplinary function. The ideological script of lynching as castration thus produces at the level of representation a psychic reality and material force that are equally weighty.

4. But while black women may be absent from the cultural narrative that defines and sanctions lynching, their intellectual and political work against mob violence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular was crucial to broadscale African-American communal resistance. On this, see Hazel Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era.” On women’s anti-lynching struggle, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Revolt against Chivalry. For a broader consideration of the cultural narratives that underwrite the black woman’s excision from the myth of the black rapist, see Waheeza Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels.” Lubiano’s analysis is constructed in the context of Clarence Thomas’s use of the lynching metaphor. In Split Affinities, Valerie Smith considers the implications of these configurations for black women and their relationship to feminism.

5. During final revisions of this chapter, I encountered James R. McGovern’s Anatomy of a Lynching. While similarly interested in the practice of lynching, McGovern’s book focuses on the specificities of the Claude Neal case and is therefore more singularly focused than my discussion here and less wed to poststructuralist and feminist theoretical concepts. But it is significant—and certainly not coincidental—that the concept of anatomy figures centrally in his discussion as well.


9. The 1992 acquittals of the white Los Angeles police officers who beat a black male suspect, Rodney King, unconscious demonstrate that the figuration of the law that Ellison depicted in 1940 continues to function as the disciplinary mechanism for instantiating and perpetuating white supremacy. One might even venture to say that the decline of the Lynch mob in the second half of the twentieth century has less to do with real advancements in white supremacy’s abatement than with the incorporation of the mob’s tenor and function within the legal and law enforcement systems themselves. See Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*.

10. In *On Lynching*, Ida B. Wells-Barnett presents her argument against lynching by repeated attention to newspaper accounts. See also Harris, *Exorcising Blackness* 1–19.

11. D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* is perhaps the classic example of the hysterical tie between the African-American’s social participation and the discourse of the black rapist. Here, in a film that literally transformed the technical achievements of American filmmaking, the glory and order of the Old South are contrasted with the devastation and ruin wrought by the Civil War and its aftermath. The picturesque racial harmony of the slave system gives way to massive black corruption, as the seemingly innate bestiality of the ex-slave wends its way to the surface. As blacks descend into laziness and drunkenness, they seize the polls and disenfranchise white citizens before finally laying sexual claim to white women. In the film’s finale, as Donald Bogle writes,  “a group of good, upright Southern white males . . . wearing sheets and hoods . . . [defends] white womanhood, white honor, and white glory . . . restor[ing] to the South everything it has lost, including its white supremacy. Thus we have the birth of a nation” (Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammyes, and Bucks 12). See also Alan Cassy, “The Films of D. W. Griffith,” and Michael Rogin, “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision.”

12. The most famous name change, of course, is Malcolm Little’s shift to X. On the significance of naming to the African-American literary tradition, see both Kimberly W. Benston, “I Yam What I Am,” and Michael Cooke, “Naming, Being, and Black Experience.”


14. See also Hall, who writes that “the proportion of lynchings taking place in the South increased from 82 percent of the total [of executions] in the 1890s to 95 percent in the 1920s; over the same periods the proportion of lynched victims who were white decreased from 32 percent to 9 percent. Lynching had become virtually a Southern phenomenon and a racial one” (*Revolt against Chivalry* 133).

15. Because of the relationship between the public and private in the post-war years—and its contrast to gender roles within the slave community—Angela Y. Davis has argued that the “salient theme emerging from domestic life in the slave quarters is one of sexual equality” (*Women, Race, and Class* 18). Michele Wallace concurs with this, finding that through emancipation, black men were encouraged to adopt white patriarchal roles and practices (see *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* 17–33). On the particular impact on black family structure in the transition from slavery to sharecropping, see Susan A. Mann, *Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality*.

16. As Hall writes in *Revolt against Chivalry*, “The ideology of racism reached a virulent crescendo, as the dominant image of blacks in the white mind shifted from inferior child to aggressive and dangerous animal” (133).

17. The inversion of the black male rape mythos is complete in *Native Son* with the burning and decapitation of Mary Dalton, which I read as a symbolic castration because of the way it foregrounds disembowelment on one hand, while demonstrating the sense of power that accrues to the agent of violence on the other. Of course, the critical force of Wright’s novel is that Bigger does not have the power of the law behind him, which means that Mary’s decapitation is not analogous to lynching and castration, no matter how overtly evocative it is of these disciplinary practices.

18. For a discussion of the role of black women in *Native Son*, see Trudier Harris, *Native Sons and Foreign Daughters*.

19. Baraka [LeRoi Jones] has often portrayed the white man and, significantly, black men who are in his terms pro-white as effeminate or homosexual. See, for example, the white and black police in *Police*, the white father in *Home on the Range*, the white professor in *The Slave*, and Karolis and Poots in *The Toilet*.

20. The consequences of Baraka’s reading of cultural sexualities is most apparent in *Madheart*, one of four black revolutionary plays published under the tribute, “All praise to the black man.” This piece, featuring five players designated by symbolic association—Black Man, Black Woman, Mother, Sister, and Devil Lady—is organized around the exorcism of the white woman from the mind of Black Man, which enables Black Man to embrace both blackness and his inherent masculine power. Significantly, the white woman serves as the lust symbol of the white world, the emblem of Black Man’s emasculation and the source of a cosmic filth (imaged by her genitals as a “stale pussy” [69], “an old punctured sore with the pus rolled out” [73]). By constructing white culture as devoid of the masculine, as significantly the realm of penetrated vaginas,
Baraka is able to claim the masculine wholly for Black man; as he says at play's end, "I am the new man of the earth" (84).

In opposition to the pollution of devil Lady, Black woman serves as the life force for black masculinity—"Touch me if you dare," she says. "I am your soul" (74). Transforming the Freudian question, "What does woman want?" into "What do you want, Black man?" (75), Black woman offers herself: "I'm real and whole. . . . And yours, only yours, but only as a man will you know that" (81). This "only as a man" is accomplished by a graphic display, as Black man "wheels and suddenly slaps her across the face" (81). In the taking of his patriarchal rights, Black man orders: "I want you, woman, as a woman. Go down. (He slaps again.) Go down, submit, submit . . . to love . . . and to man, now, forever" (82). Her response: "I . . . I submit . . . I am your woman, and you are the strongest of God. Fill me with your seed" (82–83). In his wielding of authority as a "man," Black man demands the traditional powers of domination over "his" woman. While this scene, as critic Charles D. Peavy explains, "might appear somewhat brutal," it is "the final phase in the achievement of Black man's identity. In the past, Black woman has seen Black man humbled. . . . He could do nothing then, but . . . now . . . he must assert himself. . . . He must symbolically (and physically) dominate her so that he can become her man, and the strongest of God" ("Myth, Magic, and Manhood in LeRoi Jones' Madheart" 172).

21. Robert Staples's analysis of the slave economy epitomizes such a reading:

   The black man's only crucial function within the family was that of sitting the children. The mother's role was far more important than the father's. . . . The husband was at most his wife's assistant, her companion and her sex partner. He was often thought of as her possession, as was the cabin in which they lived. It was common for a mother and her children to be considered a family without reference to the father. (Quoted in Wallace, Black Macho 18)

See also Nathan Hare, "The Frustrated Masculinity of the Negro Male," and Robert Staples, "The Myth of Black Matriarchy."

22. See Nina Burleigh, "David Duke."

4 Bonds of (In)Difference

1. Most people will recognize here my play on George Bush's presidential election theme in 1991—the thousand points of light connecting him the volunteering program of self-sacrifice needed to replace government entitlements.

2. In its defense of broad economic and political transformation, the integrationist strategy functions in contemporary visual culture within the realm of the spectacle, thereby displacing the question of multicultural participation in the economic and productive aspects of film and television. To be sure, Hollywood remains in the hands of predominantly white producers, directors, and actors, even as the rhetoric of integration heralds a cultural viability of multiplicity.

3. Robena Mercer and Isaac Julien, like Robert Stam and Louise Spence in "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," are skeptical about the practices of social integration that interpret the "positive" image as the sign of democratic inclusion (see "Introduction: De Margin and De Centre"). They emphasize instead how the terms of inclusion and exclusion or positive versus negative carry little political utility for describing and critiquing the various forms that white supremacy can take. Indeed, it is precisely through the use of inclusionary rhetoric and representational positivities that the current recuperative strategies of U.S. cultural production have gained their most damaging political force. See also Marlon Riggs's film Color Adjustment in which the history of African-Americans on television is traced from within the context of the problematics of the "positive" and "negative" image. From a slightly different perspective, Michele Wallace takes up these issues in Invisibility Blues 1–10.

4. In presenting this list, I am trying to make a case for the cultural "hegemony" of interracial male bonding narratives in the 1980s, even as I recognize that such narratives, as Leslie Fiedler has suggested in Love and Death in the American Novel, are traditional components of the literary canon—that is, nothing wholly new on the American representational scene. But I would place Fiedler, as I argue in the following chapter, within the integrationist strategy that these films for me evince, thereby understanding their proliferation in contemporary culture and their mapping in post-1960s cultural criticism as historically linked enterprises.

5. Michele Wallace's work on the implications of sexual difference within black power discourses and organizational structures in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superman, discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrates the difficulties of forging a political movement against white supremacy when the interconnections of sexism and racism are ignored.

6. Like others engaged in interpretations of contemporary popular culture, I am anxious about our critical methodologies, especially the conditions under which we choose texts as paradigmatic examples of broader cultural forces and meanings. Such anxieties, as I have suggested in earlier discussions in this book, are not new, though the realm of the popular, given its sheer proliferation of texts, renders insufficient the traditional practices of literary criticism where our faith in canonicity and author study, for instance, help to alleviate the epistemological questions that underwrite this particular discipline and its modern anxieties. Not that literary study can protect itself from such issues any longer, but it seems to me that a chapter such as this one particularly begs the question of how and for what political purposes the critic pursues a historicizing cultural narrative. Certainly the films that I discuss bear no intrinsic "value" as cultural objects,