ALTERNATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN AMERICAN LITERARY NATURALISM

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this finished project to this man’s best friends, Montana and Jackson, for two reasons. First, because neither of them will ever read it, and so will never indulge in the impulse to let the deficiencies of its content reflect back upon the author’s person. Secondly, the time I spent in completing this project was time taken away from them, away from the woods and trails we call both home and sanctuary. Thank you, boys, for your companionship and patience with me over the years. Your loyalty means more to me than you will ever know.
This project asserts that male Naturalist authors were not “hypermasculine” acolytes of strident manhood, but instead offer alternative constructions which they portray as less traumatic and more cohesive than prevailing social notions of normative male behavior. I maintain that the rise of the concept of manhood advocated by Theodore Roosevelt in the early decades of the twentieth century contributed to this misconception, for it generated a discourse of “manly” individualism which became equated with socially acceptable performances of masculinity for many Americans. My first chapter illustrates the gradual evolution of an individualistic, violent, and strident concept of manhood, which I label “strenuous masculinity,” through the rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt. The second chapter explores the ways in which Stephen Crane’s fiction illuminates the trauma and confusion inherent in strenuous concepts of manhood. Many of Crane’s stories, like “Five White Mice,” demonstrate the failure of individualism,
while others, like “The Open Boat,” document a more positive construction of what I call “homosocial manhood.” In my third and final chapter, I attempt to prove that Richard Wright’s early texts showcase a range of possible outcomes of black male attempts to stand up to racial oppression. I document that *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* both depict a continuum of confrontation, with individual violence on one end of the spectrum and non-violent group protest on the other. Furthermore, because individual resistance is consistently equated with the suffering and death of the protagonists, my project implies that strenuous manhood also fails to provide a site for effectual and sustainable opposition to the negating forces of racial oppression.
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Introduction

Mark Twain once said, “It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so” (“Mark Twain” 1). Like many of his anecdotes, Twain’s observation reminds us of the necessity of revisiting commonly-held beliefs. This study originates from a similar conviction; specifically, that the dominant scholarly assumptions regarding the portrayal of masculinity by male authors writing in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism are misguided. For decades, much of the literary criticism surrounding Naturalist texts has attacked a particular version of male behavior in the “adventure” stories that make up a large segment of the work by authors such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Wright, as “hypermansculine”. These prevalent approaches (outlined further in this Introduction and discussed individually in future chapters) operate under the assumption that texts by the aforementioned writers promote a rugged, violent individualism, a masculine swagger of sorts which is to be performed and maintained in the face of an indifferent universe and extreme physical duress. Moreover, this belief in the hypermasculinity of Naturalistic texts has become so widespread that it infects and colors the perception of the entire tradition, including stories by Dreiser, Steinbeck, and other writers not immediately associated with the fantastical adventure settings or overt confrontations with the natural world.
And yet, even though I disagree with this line of reasoning, it is an attractive intellectual supposition. Consider both the settings and protagonists of some of the more famous and recognizable texts of the “classic phase” of Naturalism (many of which were published within a decade or two of one another, between 1895-1910)\(^1\): McTeague brutally beats his wife to death, only to die handcuffed to the corpse of his best friend in the middle of Death Valley; the struggles for survival in London’s Klondike or Wolf Larsen’s primal fury on the decks of the Sea-Wolf as it sails the Pacific Ocean; the blood and death that permeate the war fiction of Crane and, later, Hemingway. These tales take place at the margins of civilization, in the midst of the alienation and horror engendered by the recognition of Nature’s indifference to the fate of humanity. Their protagonists, usually male, often revert to a primal, survivalist mentality which relies on individual action and, frequently, violence in their attempts to carve out some semblance of order and agency from the chaos which surrounds them. Faced with a preponderance of these rugged settings and atavistic male heroes, it should be no surprise that many critics have adopted the assumption that these texts were promoting a rugged and violent masculine individualism as a necessary tonic for the decadence and sterility of civilization.

Many Naturalist authors did incorporate depictions of “strenuous” masculinity within their texts, for reasons which will be examined further in this introduction and

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\(^1\) Here I adopt Donald Pizer’s understanding of distinct “phases” within the Naturalist “tradition:” classic and late. My authors of creative fiction, Crane (classic) and Wright (late) serve as apt representatives of Pizer’s criteria for each phase, as laid out in *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (1982).
throughout the first chapter. But what is seldom questioned and even less often explored is why these vigorous, individualistic, and violent performances so often utterly fail these men. If these stories were truly meant to be assertions of the swaggering, rough and ready type of strenuous life advocated by Teddy Roosevelt and other men at the *fin de siècle*, why do they almost always end with the “hero” chained to a dead man in Death Valley, massacred by Indians in Alaska, or knifed in the back in a barroom brawl? If these authors are actually defending the popular construction of masculinity, would they not show some positive outcome, some version of the survival of the fittest or triumph of the will to power? Of course they cannot, at least not if they want to uphold the Naturalist experiment advocated by Zola and Flaubert. And yet perhaps that is another reason to look beyond past assumptions about the versions of masculinity available within these texts.

The premise of this study is relatively straightforward: I assert that many authors throughout the tradition of American Literary Naturalism were using their fiction to explore, among other things, the various outcomes of different social constructions of masculinity prevalent within the dominant popular culture of their era. My purpose is to

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2 Countless studies have attempted to define Naturalism and differentiate it from other American literary “movements,” like Romanticism and Realism. In fact, there hardly seems to be a single book written about American Literary Naturalism that does not include in the introduction at least a cursory synopsis of the current state of the debate. For example, Jennifer Fleissner and John Dudley include pages of discussion over what constitutes Naturalism in their introductions before arriving at their ultimate arguments and both seem to appropriate other critical approaches (Dudley adopts Pizer, while Fleissner synthesizes Amy Kaplan and Lee Clark Mitchell). Erik Link’s recent study attempts to reshape the debate by linking it to Romanticism, which is really just an appropriation of Malcolm Cowley’s 1947 article. My project is not interested in delineating the boundaries of Naturalism, simply because the exclusionary contours of
expose these competing constructions of masculinity and, most importantly, to look at the ways in which male Naturalist writers from different class and ethnic backgrounds and the genre’s “classic” and “late” phases seem to satirize the dominant social discourse of individual masculinity and privilege a more communal, homosocial masculinity in their fiction. I assert that these authors set up competing versions of male behavior within given scenarios - a hotel during a blizzard, a lifeboat, a ski trip, etc. - in order to illustrate the multiple competing constructions of manhood available to their readers.

Furthermore, these textual moments prompt said readers to evaluate the ultimate outcomes of different gender scripts in ways that ultimately make certain actions appear more or less attractive than others held up for comparison. In other words, employing several different gender performances across same-sex characters often places actions into dialogue with one another. What is remarkable is when a character’s fate and/or failures are exacerbated by their adoption of a particular type of masculine gender role. Finally, there is always the potential that the text might invite the reader to privilege whichever gender performance receives the least resistance, achieves the most gain, or avoids punishment or trauma. Therefore, different constructions of gender behavior within an individual text can function in a way that influences a reader to privilege one literary classification do not affect the premise of my argument. It makes relatively little difference to me if academics understand American Literary Naturalism as a distinct artistic “school” or “movement” or if they view it as a subset of Realism. However, I will play along with the critical mandate of the field in noting that I do view Naturalism as a “tradition,” a distinct, yet related, type of Realism that is comprised of relatively disparate texts that are connected by the prevailing theme of determinism. These texts are not linked by a certain time period or ideology; I view modern writers, such as Annie Proulx, to be as Naturalistic as writers during the “classic phase” of the tradition (1890s-1910s).
construction over another. By comparing the outcomes of these competing constructions of masculinity, I hope to illustrate the ways in which the texts are able to assert non-dominant ideas about gender. In nearly every “phase” of the Naturalist tradition, one sees short fiction which articulates the possibility of different models of male behavior, ones which prove to end less badly than competing stories. It is my intention here to look at both positive and negative examples of this claim from one author in each of the phases of the Naturalist tradition. This should demonstrate that competing depictions of male behavior which privilege more connected, communal, and homosocial version of manhood over individualistic, strenuous models are not limited to isolated authors or time periods; rather, they run throughout the entire Naturalist project.

I am especially interested in exploring moments within short stories of American Literary Naturalism in which same-sex characters, specifically male, act out more homosocial conceptions of manhood. I argue that writers of the period we now call American Literary Naturalism offer representations of male life which complicate and critique the existing homogeneous constructions of violent individualism or strenuous manhood. Here I intentionally adopt Roosevelt’s phrasing in order to differentiate my understanding of the prevalent social construction of “vigorous” masculinity from the

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3 The spatial limitations inherent to the genre of short story pressure the subtext of gender, constricting depictions of behavior into a specific moment which often begs a given performance. Consequently, the “art of the glimpse” in short stories provides an interesting contrast with the longer and more fully developed depictions of gender behavior in the novel. Consequently, this study will explore a representative novel alongside several short stories by both literary authors, in order to gain a complete understanding of the way in which male gender roles are critiqued and complicated in both mediums.
terminology employed by other historical critics. Yet, rather than glorifying and asserting a homogenous vision of manhood, I suggest that many texts within the tradition of American Naturalism, and specifically the novels and short stories of Stephen Crane and Richard Wright, place competing constructions of masculinity into dialogue with one another. Because these stories function to critique the dominant narratives of the triumph of the individual will by privileging bonds of friendship, cooperation, and communication, they essentially explore an alternative construction of manhood, a more homosocial understanding of masculinity.

The failure to acknowledge the potential critique of individualism in these texts is all the more startling, considering the many socially acceptable venues for male bonding that existed at the end of the nineteenth century in America. Historical scholarship of the last two decades firmly establishes a plethora of male spaces which were designed to facilitate homosocial interaction. Jeffery Hantover examines the rise of youth organizations, like the Boy Scouts of America, which explicitly attempted to instill a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie in their members. Mark Carnes explores the explosion of fraternal orders in the last decades of the 1800s, finding their primary purpose to help initiate their members into manhood (93-127). Stuart McConnell notes that for veterans’ associations like the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the memory

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4 For example, Anthony Rotundo terms this construction “passionate manhood,” while Michael Kimmel refers to it as “Self-Made Manhood.” Although my understanding of this construction has been greatly influenced by these two scholars, I feel that the phrase “strenuous manhood” is more appropriate for my intents and purposes, for it more closely aligns this construction to the behaviors modeled by Roosevelt himself, a persona against which writers like Crane and Wright were directly reacting and explicitly critiquing.
of their martial sacrifices was a powerful site for male bonding (97). Amy Greenberg explains that “ Merchants could self-identify as militia members or join socially-exclusive men’s clubs. Southern gentlemen upheld dueling as a key expression of their own culture of honor” (10). Regardless of their specific audience, these social institutions (along with other sites of male interaction such as sex-segregated education, temperance societies, etc.) helped men make sense of the increasingly alienating effects of market capitalism by giving them a safe place to develop homosocial bonds of support and affection. 

In this study I intentionally use the term *homosocial manhood* for both its denotative potential to describe bonds between men or within male groups and the connotative associations which Eva Sedgwick gives the term by claiming “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1). When I use the word *homosocial* in this study, the connotation I desire to evoke is one of group-oriented epistemology and experience, where men/male characters respond to challenges and

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5 Nina Silber’s study reminds us that the perception and performance of gender roles differed in important ways between the North and South during the nineteenth century. However, the final decade of that century saw an emergence of a more homogenized media culture which represented gender in increasingly static terms, hence my generalizations here. Silber’s study actually reinforces my approach in noting. “The health and well-being of the nation demanded the coming together of seemingly fractured forces throughout the society” (162). I propose that increasingly homogenized gender roles were one such force by the 1890s.

6 Sedgwick explains “homosocial” as a word often used in academic contexts, “where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). Sedgwick goes on to note the oppositional purpose of the term, in that it also serves to distinguish between homoerotic male desires.
exterior threats by relying on established homosocial bonds. This more communal form of manhood values interaction between men as a way of gaining information about the world, asking for advice, and using friendship networks to secure privilege. In other words, a communal masculinity values talk over action, debate and exchange over violent response, and interpersonal bonds over individualism.

The fundamental methodology I will use to support my argument will be a comparison of the constructions of manhood discussed by cultural historians, like Michael Kimmel and Anthony Rot undo, to the depiction of men and male behavior in the works of Theodore Roosevelt, Stephen Crane, and Richard Wright. By applying the observations of these theorists, I hope to test the assertion of a homogenous construction of masculinity and also to complicate such claims by proposing that many of the texts of Naturalism depict more than one construction of masculinity. In fact, the texts seem to invite both contemporary and modern readers to compare the versions of male behaviors which the characters adopt and act out. In doing so, I would argue that they also

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7 Sedgwick also notes the oppositional purpose of the term *homosocial*. In this study I intentionally use the term *homosocial manhood* for both its denotative potential to describe bonds between men or within male groups, but also because of its connotative associations which Sedgwick gives it by claiming “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1).

8 I term this alternative construction *homosocial masculinity* in order to differentiate it from Rotundo’s phrase *communal manhood*, which evokes a different social construction altogether.

9 My revaluation is necessary considering that scholars in many academic fields flirt with assertions of hegemonic gender mores, even while simultaneously acknowledging the diverse array of gendered experiences throughout American history. For examples of this tension, see Greenberg, Rotundo, and Hoganson.
implicitly privilege homosocial connections between men over the more individualized constructions. Yet accepting this argument not only affects the way we read and understand Naturalist texts; it also has far-ranging implications for the contemporary interest and understanding of modern masculinity.

I

Manly Obsession: The Study of Masculinity as Identity Reclamation or Social Critique?

In recent years, interest in “Maleness” has exploded in American popular culture. It should be no surprise, then, that the rise in social interest has followed and/or mirrored to some degree the recent increase in academic discussion of masculinity and gender. The emergence of Men’s Studies in the 1980s and 90s as a sub-discipline within gender studies writ large can be seen as both a symptom of and a catalyst for this popular interest. Many critics have made the claim that popular cultural concern over the rise of feminism within the Academy created a sort of backlash effect that led male scholars of gender to begin to “push back” and use the tools of feminist inquiry to examine their own experience. Other critics have cast the rise of Men’s Studies in somewhat more benign light. These scholars accredit the recent interest in Men’s Studies to the groundwork laid

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10 It is important to note that there are several gender scholars who see the separation of Men’s Studies into a sub-set of feminism or gender studies as highly problematic. Karen Kilcup’s article offers an alternative explanation to the traditional perception of gender. Kilcup asserts that current literary criticism has severed male and female traditions in writing to such an extent that reintegration is nearly impossible (1).

11 This point is addressed in detail within Bryce Traister’s article, as well as in R. W. Connell’s book, The Men and The Boys.
by Feminist scholars in the 60s and 70s. In their view, Feminist scholars began to use New Historicist critics, like Michael Foucault, and Deconstructionist scholars, such as Jacques Derrida, to explain the social forces complicit in stratifying and separating facets of human experience into accessible categories and “types.” The acknowledgement that the female gender experience was one that was increasing socially constructed and determined by its institutions became so foundational, so important that scholars began to apply it to the lived experiences of men, as well as women. Yet, whether it is viewed as a defensive gesture against or an appreciative extension of Feminism, the point remains that the academic community has remained divided and occasionally leery of this renewed interest in the masculine.

One example of the critical ambivalence to the field of Men’s Studies can be witnessed within Bryce Traister’s article, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies.” In this piece, Traister attempts to document and reconcile the useful and illuminating elements of Men’s studies with the more problematic and

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12This approach forms the entire premise of the Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden collection. It is important to reinforce the debt any current scholarship on gender owes to the academic production of second-wave feminist theorists. It would be impossible to explore this line of critical inquiry without their analysis as a foundation. It would also be impossible to engage masculinity as a distinct topic without the precedent within gender studies to look at textual representation in isolation before applying analytical conclusions more broadly. Having noted that, it is also easy to adopt a sort of “separate yet equal” tunnel vision when discussing masculinity as a social construction. I am equally guilty as other literary critics of pursuing scholastic interests in isolation, and creating a greater potential to gloss over or even fail to fully recognize the implications arguments posited may have across gendered experiences. While this is a study of masculinity, it is one that rests on studies of female representations within these texts and one which could not be so narrowly focused without the large amount of excellent scholarship on these authors already in existence.
potentially misguided approach within the field. It is an uneasy synthesis, to say the least, and Traister never seems able to quiet the nagging suspicion that all of this focus on masculinity may ultimately amount to nothing more than phallogocentrism in a new guise. One of Traister’s earliest critiques of Men’s Studies is that it focuses perpetually on the heterosexual male experience (and the dominant version at that) (275).\(^\text{13}\) The major interdisciplinary studies of the 1990s, including the works by Rotundo, Kimmel, and R. W. Connell, all immediately notified their readers that these were studies of the hetero male experience. It has only been in recent years that homoeroticism has begun to play an important role in serious academic study of masculinity.\(^\text{14}\) Consequently, any modern study should and must also explore the full range of the homosocial continuum Sedgwick establishes in *Between Men*, this discourse included. While my textual analysis will be over stories in which the male characters identify and are constructed as heterosexual, the potential for homoerotic actions and the ultimate effect they may have in supporting alternative masculinities or subverting dominant version will provide much analytical insight into the argument asserted here, especially within the second chapter.

\(^{13}\) That is not to say that there have not been notable exceptions to this claim. One notable discussion of homosexuality and its effects on heterosexual gender mores before 2000 is Elaine Showalter’s book, *Sexual Anarchy* (1990). Certainly, critical groundwork had already been laid for this level of inquiry at least a decade before Traister’s article. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential books, *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, were both published a decade before Traister’s analysis.

\(^{14}\) Several excellent studies have made compelling arguments for the existence of male homoerotic desire within Naturalist stories. For example, Denise Cruz claims that texts of Naturalist writers like Norris, “articulate different versions of same-sex desire: [e.g.] the more recognizable stereotype of the effeminate ‘invert’ in *Vandover* and the strong, burly hypermasculine model in *McTeague*” (490).
My own understanding of the social construction of gender has been informed by a synthesis of the recent critical trends within the interdisciplinary fields that we might call gender studies. In the past four decades there has been a wealth of scholarship that addresses gender as a social, political, and historical construction. These studies see the popular understanding of what it means to be a “normal” man or woman as a creation of the culture and time in which one lives. Gail Bederman serves as representative of this view when she notes that:

The ideological process of gender – whether manhood or womanhood – works through a complex political technology, composed of a variety of institutions, ideas, and daily practices. Combined these processes produce a set of truths about who an individual is and what he or she can do, based upon his or her body. [...] And with that positioning as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ inevitably comes a host of other social meanings, expectations, and identities. (7)

Now this insight cannot explain the totality of the processes involved within the gendered experience because, while they certainly do exert incredible influence over individuals and establish the range of behaviors available to them, they are all-determining.\(^{15}\) Rather,

\(^{15}\) Connell and Kimmel articulate the point made here in their critiques of “hegemonic masculinity” and the cultural attempt to forge consistent gender construction. Connell reminds his readers that, “not many men actually meet the normative standards [of masculinity]. [...] The number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend” (M 79).
this understanding of the cultural construction of gender roles must be synthesized with the understanding of gender as performance.

While the understanding of gender as a performance is not the only important critical trend in gender studies, it is one which underpins many presumptions regarding the ways in which people acquire and perceive their own gender identity. According to Judith Butler, “that gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted” (141). That is to say, biology does not dictate certain responses inherently; rather, it is the actions themselves which create one’s identity. Butler offers a lens through which to examine texts in which the understanding of gender does not match up with the expectation of gender binaries. Yet Butler’s work has also created a wider application to the study of literature, for it draws attention to the performance of gendered actions in even the most standardized heterosexual characters. Viewing personal identity as role enactment is important, for it signifies a point at which the audience becomes aware of the constructed-ness of their own gendered experiences. Perhaps this is why

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16 Peter F. Murphy’s introduction to *Fictions of Masculinities* offers a good example of the typical approach to literary texts through sex-role theory and Butlerian performance methodology. Here, one notes that the adoption of gender as performance and of the political and social value of the analysis of sex roles is taken as a given; the author finds no need to defend his mode of inquiry or justify his approach. This seems typical of literary analysis and of earlier sociological studies of masculinity. Today, one finds a great attempt to distinguish between these and more “post-structural” accounts of gender identity formation primary within the scholarly production of the “social sciences,” which have led the interdisciplinary foray into the study of manhood.
“sex-role theory” is still the prevailing analytical approach within the literary criticism “wing” of Men’s Studies.¹⁷

Even critics of “gender as performance,” such as Connell, note that role theory offers some analytical insights. Connell finds that looking at gender performance “is apt for situations where (a) there are well-defined scripts to perform, (b) there are clear audiences to perform to, and (c) the stakes are not too high (so it is feasible that some kind of performing is the main social activity going on)” (M 26). I argue that these caveats are precisely why an understanding of gender as a performance and/or negotiation of competing, socially-defined gender roles works so well within the American Literary Naturalist tradition. Naturalism does offer well-defined scripts to perform because one of the hallmarks of Naturalist literature is the “case-study,” journalistic style in which scientific “truths” are tested in “real-life” scenarios. Most of the works in the Naturalist tradition examined here were written for white, middle to

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¹⁷ The sex-role theory of gender identity has begun to draw fire from some of the sociologically-oriented researchers within the field. One of the more outspoken opponents of sex-role theory is R.W. Connell. Connell casts a critical gaze on Butler’s notion of gender identity as the performance of a role or series of roles determined by exterior social pressures. Connell praises the practical application of performance studies (such as the success that sex-role theory has had in girl’s education), while also faulting it for a supposed lack of academic rigor (M&B 18). Connell says that the “intellectual weakness of sex-role theory” is that its focus on normative performance “gives no grasp on issues of power, violence, or material inequality” (M&B 18). Connell fears that performance theories miss complexities within masculinity and femininity and labels it “unsatisfactory” because it offers limited potential for political change (M&B 18). While Connell’s critiques are a result of his particular concerns over the state of sociological work, which has a different audience and ultimate purpose than literary criticism, some of his objections are representative of the shortcomings of a performative account of gendered identity and must be taken seriously, including resistance to binary formation and his assertion that there are many types of masculinities (M 36).
upper-class adult Americans with some educational background. More importantly, as Howard and Mitchell document, these naturalist texts depend on eliciting a specific response within the audience. Finally, I would argue against Connell’s assertion that the stake of performance must not be too high. In Naturalist texts, the ultimate effects are often dire and commonly involve matters of life and death. Yet what better way for the author to highlight the traumatic effects of these deterministic gender constructions than by ratcheting up the stakes?

As insightful and pertinent as the understanding of gender as performance continues to be, it does not help us fully understand why individuals chose among the varying “roles” or performance models available to them at any given time. According to sociologist Michael Kimmel, “men subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men” (GL, 47). Kimmel’s observation seems to gesture towards a necessary extension of adaptation of the understanding of performance advocated by Butler and others. Yes, individuals perform gender roles that have been constructed by social forces, but not without an active audience who shapes the way they perform as they try to anticipate

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18 Influential studies of the Naturalist audience include: June Howard, Alfred Habegger, and Amy Kaplan. Howard points out that Naturalistic texts have a narrative arrangement that views “brutal” determined characters through the eyes of middle-class observers who are supposedly exempt from determinism, but frequently bound by spectral paralysis. Kaplan’s book attempts to negotiate the various social contexts that helped to shape this literary movement (as intimated by the title). Habegger’s argument hinges on his assertion of a primarily female audience for the realist novel. In the preface, he describes the act of reading as allowing a girl to “try on” the various manifestations of conventional gender roles available to her (ix), which seems to anticipate the understanding of gender as performance posited by Judith Butler almost a decade later.
which actions will meet with approval and which will be met with disgust, confusion, or even anger. Consequently, “masculinity is largely a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men” (Kimmel GL 47).

In his preface to *Manhood in America*, Kimmel explains that men (especially white, straight men) have been the “superordinate” group for so long that both they as individuals and their culture have not really explored the various “masculinities” available to them, nor the ways in which these social expectations orient and determine their experiences. “At the same time, though, all American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we measure ourselves” (MA 4). This construction of proper male behavior, while not completely static, became entrenched as part of the largely subconscious process of personal identity formation. Kimmel explains that, “beginning in the early part of the nineteenth century, the idea of testing and proving one’s manhood became one of the defining experiences in American men’s lives” (MA 1). The fear of peer rejection or even violent confrontation drives many to adopt the most stereotypical gendered actions, creating a myth or fantasy of homogeneous gender conformity that further serves to validate a dominant cultural construction.

Now this “literal fantasy” may become codified in a somewhat subconscious fashion, a sort of gradual adaptation to new socio-political forces or constraints. In some ways the Antebellum, Gilded Age ideals of manhood could serve as more representative of a gradual social adaptation to a religious-economic milieu than a concerted attempt to refashion gender mores. Yet a society’s understanding of normal gender behavior can be
shaped through a direct, concentrated effort to highlight and accentuate whatever behavioral virtues may be seen as desirable. Conscious efforts to reshape gender mores can be found particularly in the American fin de siècle of the nineteenth century.

II

“Gender is the way Social Practice is Ordered”: Shifts in the Construction of American Masculinity at the end of the Nineteenth Century

Several critics document a conscious attempt to reshape the understanding of ideal male behavior in the final decades of the nineteenth century. E. Anthony Rotundo explains the development of American manhood before 1900 through three phases. Prior to the nineteenth century, American men oriented their lives around their perceived duty to family, community, and cultural groups. Rotundo terms this communal manhood because “a man’s identity was inseparable from the duties he owed to his community. He fulfilled himself through public usefulness more than his economic success, and the social status of the family into which he was born gave him his place in the community more than his individual achievements” (2). Yet around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the understanding of a man’s role and value in his community underwent a drastic change. Gail Bederman notes that because of the decline of entrepreneurial business prospects in the financial crises of the 1870s and 80s, “Victorian codes of manly self-restraint began to seem less relevant. Increasingly, middle-class men were attracted to new ideals – ideals at odds with older codes of manliness” (13). So as the economic and social climate began to shift in the United States, the prevailing gender mores could

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19 Connell, Masculinities, 71.
not direct the individual man to perform his gender identity satisfactorily. Consequently, his script needed to change.

Yet, the new ideal set of male behaviors did not just emerge *ex nihilo*; it was culled and shaped by more working-class gender expectations already in circulation. This new understanding of male behavior (termed “Self Made Manhood” by both Kimmel and Rotundo) emerges as a part of the larger social upheavals in government, consumer culture and a market economy, and the growth of the middle class (Rotundo 3). Rotundo explains that:

> In this new world, a man took his identity and his social status from his own achievements. [. . .] ‘Male’ passions were now given freer rein. Ambition, rivalry, and aggression drove the new system of individual interests, and a man defined his manhood not by his ability to moderate the passions but by his ability to channel them effectively. (4)

It is this “up by the bootstraps” individualism which comes to characterize the rest of the century, and Rotundo notes that the vestiges of Self Made Manhood remain in the contemporary understanding of a man’s social role.21

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20 According to Kimmel, “Even the term *self-made man* was an American Neologism, first coined by Henry Clay in a speech to the U.S. Senate in 1823. Defending a protective tariff that he believed would widen opportunities for humble men to rise in business, he declared that in Kentucky ‘almost very [sic] manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising, self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor’” (*MA* 19).

21 Several scholars have also noted the tendency towards asserting dominant social constructions of masculinity at the expense of a more nuanced discussion that places various models of manhood into conversation with one another. There have been attempts to move away from the more “universal” tendencies of Kimmel and Rotundo.
Elaine Showalter provides an excellent analysis of the construction of masculinity and the social anxiety regarding the rise of the New Woman and female power, which manifested itself in a crisis of masculinity (8-11). Her analysis is especially helpful in establishing the normative assumptions regarding “proper” gender behavior, while also exposing the existence of the social margins.\textsuperscript{22} Still other critics demonstrate that ideological institutions illustrated the way they felt a “real man” should behave through depiction of heroes in popular fiction, editorial reports in newspapers, and idealization of certain historical figures and narratives. While this attempt to shape male behavior may not have been reached by a cultural consensus and was only one competing narrative about male behavior available in print culture, critics have shown that there was a conscious attempt by various state and private institutions to promote a certain type of male behavior through adventure fiction.\textsuperscript{23} Regardless of their ultimate purpose, these “male romances” constructed masculinity according to the traditional motifs of muscular

\textsuperscript{22} Showalter also exposes the intense fascination in and horror towards homosexuality and its inevitable relationship to the male club-culture prevalent at the time (13-14).

Christianity, adventurous manhood, and patriotism/imperial duty. Consequently, it seems clear that by 1899, a variety of social factors had converged and permanently shifted the public’s perception of what it meant to be a “real” man in America. Yet this new perception did not just influence the public writ large; it also had an impact on the new type of journalistic fiction emerging in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

III

The Origins of the Emphatically Male Genre of Naturalism

I assert here that Naturalism’s emergence and popularity was due, in part, to its exemplification of these new social constructions of manhood. What is most important to the confines of this study is Naturalism’s role in shaping, popularizing, and/or critiquing the dominant understanding of male gender roles in the last one hundred and twenty years. Mark Seltzer labels Naturalism the “emphatically male genre” of American Literature (147), and it is no coincidence that the literary tradition that has been derided as one of the most “hypermasculine” in American history originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when both male and female gender roles were in flux and new male gender roles were emerging from fear of Victorian “effeminacy”. Alfred Habegger notes that Naturalist authors like Norris, London, and Crane are “interested most of all in depicting men under conditions of intense struggle, whether in war, in the capitalist

24 For a variety of articles addressing topics from the effect of Muscular Christianity on national identity to the rise of Christian Socialism, see Hall.

25 Bederman’s book discusses a variety of these social movements in detail, especially in the intersections of this new perception of masculinity and notions of race and discourses of civilization. See her chapters on Hall, Roosevelt, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Seltzer explores the Boy Scout movement and its ultimate influence, in combination with Hall’s pedagogy, in creating a discourse about the male body as a site of consumption.
economic system, on the frontier, or anywhere else away from the constraints of female civilization” (65). Here, Habegger documents the strenuous settings of many Naturalist tales, while simultaneously gendering these spaces as exclusively male because they exist “away from the constraints” of the feminine. It is certainly no accident that London writes a novel like The Sea-Wolf (1905) with a vigorous male protagonist (Wolf Larsen) in the midst of Teddy Roosevelt’s calls for a masculinity rooted within the “strenuous life”. But while they acknowledge that Naturalism was a gendered response to the prevailing discourse of the age, many critics have ended their critical inquiry with an assumption of a “battle of the sexes” mentality that shortchanges the responsive project of many of these authors.

The particular novelty of my argument lies in its departure from recent studies of gender and masculinity in American Naturalism. Two recent works on Gender and Naturalism are notable, both for their recognition of the centrality of gender to this tradition and for their willingness to challenge conceptions about the Naturalist project. Jennifer Fleissner is skeptical about assertions of Naturalism as hypermasculine, but only because she believes that the foundations of Naturalism are in male authors writing about female characters and experiences. Fleissner’s argument places “the modern women’s story at the center of a genre typically seen as the most hypermasculine in American literary history, and part and parcel of a broader cultural moment considered wholly its equal in clamorous ‘virility’” (6). I applaud Fleissner’s attempt to shift the discussion of Naturalist texts beyond traditional gender assumptions. Fleissner explains that there is a critical impulse to present naturalist themes as either fatalistic or nostalgic and claims that
nostalgic “naturalism goes along with a renewal of what Roosevelt called ‘the strenuous life,’ returning masculine power and adventure to a vitiated modernity by rediscovering the freedoms and struggles associated with a still wide-open, untarnished natural landscape” (6-7). In fact, I will show how Naturalism works to critique the hypermasculine gaze constructed by its subject material in support of less nostalgic views of U.S. imperial history and the ideology of Manifest Destiny.

John Dudley sees the Naturalistic project as a reaction against the aestheticism of Realism and local color, and European literary trends. Dudley asserts the “rhetoric of masculinity,” in response to the “effeminacy” of popular fiction, as the true legacy of naturalist writers. He claims that “writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London explicitly defined themselves and their work in rigid contrast to the effete ‘literary’ qualities cherished by an American intellectual establishment that they viewed as increasingly dominated by ‘decadent’ English authors and critics” (MG 4). The major premise of Dudley’s study is that Naturalist writers employed conventions of strenuous masculinity in order to distinguish themselves from a more effeminate literature. Dudley goes on to clarify: “simply put, naturalists [. . .] sought to define themselves and their literary endeavors in direct opposition to an ‘unmanly’ vogue of decadent aestheticism” (MG 4). Yet Dudley does not challenge the supposition that the Naturalists employed a hypermasculine discourse; in fact, this assumption is foundational to his argument. Dudley’s book explores why they adopted a strenuous masculine discourse, not whether Naturalist texts actually support such an assumption.
Furthermore, Dudley’s claim that Naturalists employed a masculine definition of the writer does not attempt to distinguish between various constructions of masculinity present within Naturalist texts. In fact, Dudley states that “an obvious legacy of this generation of naturalists surrounds the construction of a hypermasculine definition of the writer” (MG 5). I agree with Dudley that there is a strong interest among many Naturalist authors about manly behavior and the defiance of social institutions and/or natural forces. Yet this focus belies the inherent possibility that, in writing about manhood and the male experience, many of these authors may be critiquing (as opposed to asserting) it. In my reading, this tradition can only be considered “hypermasculine” if it celebrates and advocates a homogenous construction of violence, patriarchal order and rule, and male superiority and power. The fragility and anxiety of these masculine rituals is especially revealed when they are read as products of a strenuous masculinity. Adherence to a vigorous code of manhood requires that an individual be able to project the ability to respond to exterior threats with subjugating violence and at least the performance of individualism. Neither of these values lends itself well to the projection of the camaraderie and support necessary to gain admittance into a masculine group, but they were (and in many ways still are) required as visible proof of a man’s masculinity nonetheless. However, Dudley ignores the possibilities of male community and the implied reaction against the strenuous constructions of masculinity current at the end of the nineteenth century in America.

To be sure, some Naturalist texts do seem to privilege a strenuous script of manhood. However, I argue here that many of the texts considered “hypermasculine”
actually include this construction in order to document its shortcomings. To borrow language from Zola, the depiction of strenuous manhood is part of “the text’s experiment,” and the experiment ends when a character decides to act out a dominant construction of gender or to resist and find power within an alternative performance. Many Naturalist writers are noted for their irony, their subtle criticism of the very values their characters seem to espouse. Reading Naturalism as a knee-jerk reaction against effeminate threats seems to be too literal an approach. It is as if Teddy Roosevelt’s fears of effeminacy then became the clarion call for “manly” writers who wrote fevered defenses of the glories of the strenuous life. Yet, to adopt that view may be to deny these artists the potential for ironic commentary that has been understood as one of their most distinctive features. It seems infinitely more plausible that these authors knowingly employed the prevailing gender discourse of their day (including strenuous manhood) in order to test its ultimate social effects and to offer alternative commentary.

Although they are few and far between, there have been critics who admit ironic subversion as a possible rationale for the Naturalist’s depiction of male gender roles. One such example would be Daniel Worden’s discussion of the function of male gender roles within dime novel westerns. Worden’s recent study is in some ways akin to my own project in its critical impulse and apparatus, and warrants commentary. In his article, Worden asserts that,

Masculinity offers a site for protest, a way of channeling power into unconventional publics and subjects. Rather than finding evidence of the dominant chauvinism of late nineteenth-century America through
masculinity, I wish to uncover the workings of masculinity that move against dominant currents of American culture and politics. (36)

Here, Worden explains that although many recent studies of masculinity have associated masculinity in the late nineteenth century with “jingoism and imperialism,” texts of the popular, working-class culture allow their characters to “adopt masculinity to produce alternatives to those very institutions of power” (36). I, too, feel that a variety of texts from this period portray different version of manhood in order to critique, satirize, and push back against dominant social constructions of gender. However, I think that this can be witnessed within the artistic literary production of the period, as well as without. In fact, I would assert that the competing models of male behavior found in writers like Crane and Wright represent the active dialogue taking place within popular culture writ large. While Worden and I share the same interest in recovering the various gendered scripts available to men during this period and exploring their employment as a subversive response to the dominant constructions, I find this phenomenon to be pervasive throughout the texts of the Naturalist tradition. I will argue that non-hegemonic constructions actively competed with dominant narratives of manhood, especially within literary texts.

Parse these critical studies down to their fundamental arguments and one is left with a simple, common assumption: all of these authors see Naturalism as a response to the gender discourse of the era. Today it may seem convenient to imply that they acquired these attitudes from the “most hyper-masculinized genre in American literary history” (Fleissner 6). However, as I will attempt to show, they also were able to place this
dominant model of masculinity into dialogue with other versions of male behaviors in ways that force the audience to compare the merits and outcomes of both systems. I argue that the literary production of the Naturalist tradition offers a point of departure from the glorification of individualism and a rugged, violent, imperial masculinity depicted in the popular media of dime novels, silent films, political speeches, and male clubs and organizations.

IV

Organization and Application of Analysis

Ultimately, this study will employ a similar organizational pattern in its three chapters. First, I will use each author’s textual production to establish his viewpoint on a masculinity rooted within individual action. Second, I will contrast that attitude with the author’s depiction of communal bonds between men within their texts. This should immediately help to establish whether they privilege strenuous masculinity as the proper site for male identity formation or if they think that personal identity is best formed within a peer group. Finally, I will explore each author’s textual production for depictions of Otherness. While I could just contrast individualism and community within these texts, that would lead the reader to a simplistic view and/or binary of these values within Naturalistic texts. Community is never formed without some sort of exclusion and, as Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” reminds, we should know “whom we were walling in or walling out” in a discussion of homosocial community. Consequently, I will look for a textual depiction of the Otherness binary, of an “us/them” mentality within
the production of these authors in order to come to a more developed understanding of
the “hypermasculine” stance of American Literary Naturalism.

In order to document the validity of this assertion, it will be necessary to establish
an understanding of the strenuous manhood which these authors complicate and react
against. My first chapter explores the ways in which the dominant social understanding
of proper male behavior changed in the final decades of the nineteenth century. I
document this change by comparing Victorian male gender roles and expectations to
those emerging in the 1880s and 90s through critical studies of a variety of gendered
social institutions. Consequently, I turn towards an analysis of the historical persona of
Theodore Roosevelt in order to provide a clear example of the repercussion of this new
concept of manhood in public discourse. The first chapter shows that the changes to the
concept of manliness, witnessed in a variety of social institutions and illustrated in the
figure of Roosevelt, had an effect on internal race relations, individual conceptions of
adequacy, and external foreign policy decisions. I specifically explore the cry for
vigorous masculinity in the memoirs and speeches of Teddy Roosevelt in order to
demonstrate that the “proper” response in the face of forces of nature, perceived physical
threat of violence, and even foreign policy maneuvers was envisioned to be stubborn
resistance, hubristic bravado, and individualized action.

In order to illustrate the Naturalist complication of homogenous assertions of
strenuous manhood, I will need to highlight the presence of competing models of
masculinity within a given author’s works. I plan to do this via textual comparisons. For
each of my subsequent chapters, I will take two or more texts from a given author and
place their representations of manhood into dialogue with one another. Through this approach, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which these texts actually critique strenuous masculinity by highlighting the trauma suffered by those characters who act out that gender construction. On the other hand, I will show that the characters defined by a more community-oriented, relationally integrated construction of manhood - whether coexisting in the same story or appearing in other tales by the same author - are better adjusted and suffer less physical and/or psychological trauma. In other words, I will pair various stories that view and critique individualized masculinity with others (by the same author) that seem to assert or support a more homosocial vision of manhood.

My second chapter will examine homosocial masculinity in a novel and three short stories by Stephen Crane. I first examine Crane’s best-known text, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). This book provides perhaps the most accessible example for an outside readership and works well for my argument because Henry Fleming is so clearly influenced by the social institutions of his upbringing and mimics the construction of masculinity into which he and his fellow soldiers have bought. Yet this construction causes Henry terrible psychological trauma; he cannot live up to this code of bravery and courage and spends the majority of the novel wandering through a wasteland of death and despair. It is not until Henry is able to rejoin his community and participate as a member of the overall unit that he finds any sense of fulfillment. My second chapter then compares two of Crane’s well-known short stories, “The Blue Hotel” and “The Open Boat,” to his more obscure stories, like “Five White Mice,” in order to show the ways that some stories privilege group-oriented male bonds over the violent, individualistic
paranoia fostered by strenuous manhood. This textual analysis illustrates how traditional Western constructions of masculinity have a negative impact on Crane's male characters, causing isolation, violence, and fear, while destroying essential survival ideals like trust and community. By observing both the ways in which men vocalize or perform idealized gender roles and the confusion inherent in conforming to a set of social expectations, this study illuminates a clear pattern of psychological damage created by adherence to the dominant understanding of manhood in the period.

My third chapter will move my argument further into the modern era by exploring the representation of strenuous manhood in the writings of African American authors. Toni Morrison observes one of the problematic elements surrounding critical approaches to works by African-American authors: “To notice [race] is to recognize an already discredited difference; to maintain its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (257). The supposed desire for inclusion in the dominant cultural body has informed much of the criticism surrounding the portrayal of masculinity in the fiction of Richard Wright. These understandings point to Wright’s politicization of masculinity and violence in the attempt to establish black manhood by “taking back” the masculinity that has been symbolically and/or literally cut away from Wright’s characters by white antagonists. However, this approach to Wright often ignores the author’s early short fiction and approaches his characters through a white, dominant understanding of masculine desire.

Wright’s earliest short fiction collection, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1939), clearly illuminates the necessity of community values in the formation of adolescent manhood.
These stories, among the first Wright ever published, demonstrate the failure of individualism and violence and of the senselessness of black attempts to appropriate dominant cultural masculinity. I will establish the unique considerations of black masculinity in the beginning of this chapter, before turning to an analysis of Wright’s earliest fiction. I will discuss the ways in which the first story in the original printing, “Big Boy Goes Home,” ironically highlights the failure of individual action to produce results. I will then show that the only black characters that seem to successfully regain manhood do so outside of the frame work of “white” manhood through their acceptance of group interests and the sacrifice of individual prestige and identity. Consequently, I assert that Wright attempts to construct communal masculine values through depicting the failures of appropriating dominant forms of masculinity in stories like “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and “Big Boy Leaves Home,” as well as his early novels, such as Native Son (1940). I will then place this observation into comparison with the positive depiction of homosocial black masculinity in his stories “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star.” This final chapter will help me to establish the relevance and consequences of my study.

Ultimately, these implications resonate beyond the confines of this brief analysis. If one accepts that a part of the Naturalist project is to showcase the array of natural and social forces aligned against the individual and their indifference to his/her fate, and one realizes that socially prescribed gender roles are one of these determining institutions, then one must face the conclusion that Naturalistic texts are deeply invested in illuminating the trauma and crushing oppression of confining mandates. These texts
show that the thematic impulses of Naturalism (the challenge of and eventual submission to existential determinism, the failure of individual action, the lack of personal agency, the opposition of the natural world, etc.) cannot function to celebrate strenuous masculinity, for the simple fact that expectations of gendered behavior are one of the social forces that defeat hope and agency and limit personal experience.
Chapter One
Theodore Roosevelt and the Transformation of American Masculinity

It would be difficult and even facetious to try and pin down a specific date upon which the emerging construction of strenuous masculinity became codified socially. However, there is an event which illustrates the social acceptance of new male gender roles and bears witness to an American male audience’s adoption of a different understanding of proper gender behavior. On April 10th, 1899, Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech on the virtues of “The Strenuous Life” to the elite members of the all-male Hamilton club in Chicago. This speech, given just three months after the publication of *The Rough Riders* (1899), Roosevelt’s best-selling memoir of the Spanish-American War, espouses the benefits of the lifestyle Roosevelt consciously cultivated in order to bolster the public’s perception of his own masculinity. According to Bederman’s analysis, “[T.R.] urged the men of the American race to live the sort of life he had modeled for them: to be virile, vigorous, and manly, and to reject overcivilized decadence by supporting a strenuously imperialistic foreign policy” (193). It is worth noting that

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26 This is due, in part, to the difficulty in finding consensus about when these cultural expectations actually originated. Several studies indicate that the social adoption of a “strenuous” code of masculine behavior was adopted as early as the decade immediately following the Civil War. DeSpain observes the desire to “counterbalance” the emerging mores with more Victorian codes of moral restraint as early as the 1870s (59). Regardless of when they began to coalesce, a more individualistic, rugged conception of manhood was firmly entrenched by the beginning of the twentieth century, and I assert that Roosevelt was, more than any other public figure, representative of this shift.
Roosevelt’s speech does not primarily focus on masculinity; rather its immediate concern is with the “big stick” type of foreign policy for which Roosevelt became (in)famous. However, the entire rhetorical foundation of the speech rests upon masculine symbolism and metaphor. The success of the speech in galvanizing imperialistic foreign policy hinges upon his audience’s acceptance of the “strenuous” male roles he applies to international affairs.

What is of primary importance here is that this speech could not have been so influential unless its audience could accept these relatively new gender mores as true. In other words, the speech is an important signifier of the shift in gender roles because the male audience has to accept Roosevelt’s version of manhood in order to be persuaded by his gendered rhetoric. And they must have, if the increasing dominance of this type of masculinity in American culture in succeeding years is any indication. Gail Bederman notes that, “contemporaries ultimately adopted his phrase ‘the strenuous life’ as a synonym for the vigorous, vehement manhood Roosevelt modeled,” thus showing that they understood the link between this type of masculine behavior and the public sphere (193). As Bederman argues, Roosevelt came to represent a specific type of masculine performance in the eyes of the American people.

27 Of course, Roosevelt had plenty to say about femininity as well. While Roosevelt’s attitudes towards women do not inform this particular study, several recent articles revisit the President’s views towards women. Max Skidmore argues that Roosevelt was a staunch defender of Women’s suffrage and equality within the workplace, for as police commissioner of New York City he was the first to hire female staff members and policewomen and because a women’s right to vote was a part of his Bull Moose platform. Rob Hardy also examines Roosevelt’s writings for evidence of female influences in his life and finds an animating tension between masculine and feminine impulses to be among his dominant characteristics. Kathleen Dalton’s biography explores female influences within the president’s personal and political life.
Scholars agree that Roosevelt is emblematic of the cultural shift to a strenuous, individualistic type of manhood. Here I will use Roosevelt’s understanding of ideal male behavior as a way to elucidate a culturally dominant version of masculinity which influenced Naturalist writers. Roosevelt’s dissemination of his understanding of manhood throughout the popular media of his age cannot be denied. Roosevelt’s texts function as a sort of magnifying lens that enables readers to understand the dominant social mindset regarding what it means to be a “real” man at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Like a mirror, they also reflect popular assumptions about how American men should conduct themselves. In other words, Roosevelt is an apt starting point for this discussion because the rhetorical strategies employed within his speeches and memoirs both magnify and reflect the era’s prevailing attitudes about hetero-normative manhood.

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28 Recent critical approaches to Roosevelt and the ideology of masculinity have attempted to reconcile or at least explain the dichotomy between the masculine and feminine sides of Roosevelt’s character. Sarah Watts’ recent biography explores Roosevelt’s assertions of masculinity as a lifelong reaction against the “dark and feminine self” Roosevelt feared. Accordingly, she sees his “vision of manhood” as a reaction against, or suppression of, his feminine side. Rob Hardy also examines Roosevelt’s attraction to the feminine and argues that his masculine posturing was mere performance. According to Hardy, Roosevelt’s own model of male behavior, his father, combined both masculine and feminine qualities, which Roosevelt actively accepted as constituting “persistent dualities of his adult personality” (178). These studies are informative, for they illustrate the pressure which the value systems of the Gilded Age (like the gendered concept of “separate spheres”) continued to exert on American culture. In other words, they view Roosevelt’s understanding of masculinity as a representation of preexisting male gender roles.
Roosevelt’s rhetorical production has not received enough critical attention in recent years. This omission is startling in the light of the influence Roosevelt’s works held over his contemporaries. For example, his wildly popular memoir of the Spanish American War, *The Rough Riders* (1899), went through twelve printings between 1899 and 1911 alone (Auchincloss 878). As an editor of *Outlook* Magazine, Roosevelt had access to a large audience of middle-class, educated Americans. Roosevelt’s writing was in great demand from major periodicals, including *Scribner’s, The Century Magazine,* and *Atlantic Monthly,* and many of his historical narratives and memoirs, including *The Rough Riders* and *An Autobiography* (1913), were serialized within their pages (Auchincloss 877). His speeches are of considerable literary merit because of their use of rhetoric. My study reads Roosevelt’s memoirs and speeches as cultural artifacts and rhetorical products glorifying strenuous manhood. I will use Roosevelt as a model of a pervasive construction of masculinity at the fin de siècle by: comparing the late nineteenth-century understanding of masculinity to that which immediately preceded it, approaching Roosevelt’s memoirs as propaganda promoting his doctrine of masculinity, examining the gendered rhetoric of his speeches, and, most importantly to the confines of this study, exploring the points of contact, agreement, and dialogue between Roosevelt’s ideas and the writings of Naturalist authors in the U.S. Through historical analysis and

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29 The exception that proves the rule would be Charles Fenton’s article. Published in 1959, it does present Roosevelt as a literary author on par with other American Presidents and public figures. However, Fenton’s criterion for the “man of letters” is dated and phallocentric and critics have not substantially revised his defense of Roosevelt’s textual contributions to American Literature in over fifty years.
close readings, this study will present Roosevelt as an example of normative American masculinity with which Naturalist writers would contend well into the twentieth century.

In fact, I see the historical and media persona of Roosevelt as so instrumental to the creation of the modern concept of masculinity, that I label it “strenuous manhood” in this study. Consequently, the phrase “strenuous manhood/masculinity” here refers to the type advocated and modeled by Roosevelt, an idea of maleness based within a belief in the supremacy of individualism, the state of action, and the necessity of physical force and/or violence. The popular understanding of what it means to be a “real man” was not always based on a strenuous construction, however, and Roosevelt is emblematic of that cultural change.

I

Embracing “Passionate Manhood” at the American Fin de Siècle

Numerous scholars have already documented the shift in gender roles and expectations which took place around the turn of the nineteenth century in great detail.

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30 Most critics see the phrase, “the strenuous life,” as a term of Roosevelt’s creation. According to Bederman, “When Roosevelt originally coined the term ‘the strenuous life’ in an 1899 speech, he was explicitly discussing only foreign relations. [. . .] yet the phrase ‘the strenuous life’ soon began to connote a virile, hard-driving manhood, which might or might not involve foreign relations, at all” (184). I do not mean to imply that Roosevelt invented the concept of strenuous manhood, however. Recent scholarship clearly illustrates the influence that emerging cultural and philosophical movements had on the development of such an ideal. For example, see Patrick Dooley’s discussion of the influence that William James’ ideas about “the strenuous mood” had over Roosevelt’s thinking.

31 Consider studies of gender in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Bederman, Amy Greenberg, Kristen Hoganson, Michael Kimmel, John Pettigrew, Joseph Pleck, and Elaine Showalter in evidence of this generalization. For distinct study of
However, because my own argument rests so heavily on these assertions of shifting gender roles, it is necessary and instructive to pause and ruminate on the newly dominant construction of masculinity solidifying in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Most studies of gender roles in the early-middle nineteenth century in America focus on the existence of socially-prescribed and separate “spheres” of influence or behavior assigned to men and women during the Victorian era. Sarah Watts reminds her readers that, “middle-class Victorians made sense out of the world through a complex system of categories [. . .]. European philosophers and scientists arranged the great binary categories of human existence – civilization and savagery, purity and pollution, male and female, energy and fatigue – into hierarchies of progress and degeneration” (32). Consequently, Victorian understanding of “proper” gender roles and interactions followed the same divisive impulse. According to Linda Kerber, middle-class mores advocated for “natural spheres” of activity for the two biological sexes, spheres which were seen as separate in the public realm, but which actually overlapped in the realities of family and domestic life. Politics, business, security, and defense were understood to be

traditional gender roles in Victorian America, please note “Sexuality, Class, and Role in 19th-Century America” by Charles E. Rosenberg, or Anthony Rotundo’s important book.

32I follow the trend in historical scholarship in using the term “Victorian” to describe middle-class cultural attitudes in America between the 1830s and 1880s. However, it is necessary to note that the term most accurately applies to British culture during this period and that social mores in these two countries, while related, are markedly different. For a discussion of the British understanding of “proper” gender roles and sexual behavior in the period, see Richard Dellamora. Andrew Dowling’s study focuses especially on the British notion of manliness and its relationship to the artistic production of the period. Elaine Showalter and Eva Sedgwick both discuss normative assumptions regarding gender roles in England during this period.
elements of the man’s “place” in society, while culture, education, religion, morality, and home management were part of the woman’s world.

Many scholars claim that domesticity was the normative understanding of womanhood during the Gilded Age. The dominant ideology of a “woman’s sphere” had the potential to isolate women. Amy Greenberg observes that, “Domesticity idealized women as virtuous domestic beings who could change society for the better through their positive moral influence on their husbands and children, while simultaneously demonizing women who worked outside of the home” (7). According to Sara Watts, men “Preferred their wives and unmarried daughters to remain inside the home in order to provide a moral haven for men who were forced to venture into the cutthroat professional or business world” (82). Consequently, social perceptions of womanhood, like those regarding masculinity, contained contradictory impulses. On one hand, women were restricted by the “imperial isolation” of the home. However, their elevated moral status in society also allowed women to exert pressure upon certain social issues. Greenberg explains: “women played key roles in many of the most significant moral and social reform movements [. . .] including evangelical and anti-slavery reform, and, most notably, the Woman’s Rights movement” (7). Yet interactions between the sexes were ultimately characterized by an assumption of patriarchal dominance that was exacerbated by developing concepts of male superiority and aggressive physicality.

The dualistic understanding of normative gender roles placed pressure on both men and women to conform to increasingly polarized and unrealistic set of expectations.

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33 For a discussion of imperial isolation in the antebellum period, see Mary Ryan.
Arnaldo Testi notes that men were characterized as “aggressive, independent, and self-sufficient,” while women were viewed as “virtuous, altruistic, fragile, and sensitive” (1511). Beliefs in the essential purity of womanhood followed these assumptions of feminine vulnerability and sentimentality, contributing to assertions of masculine dominance and the denial of female sexuality. Watts claims that “Men viewed women as subordinates, [while] upper and middle-class women served to protect the family and civilization from the very society created by men, who, in turn, expected the women to be gentle, graceful, dainty, and nurturing, and above all, uninterested in and even ignorant of their sexual possibilities” (82). Consequently, the purity demanded of most women in the domestic sphere assumed that men be able to restrain their own desires and actions.

While the Victorian age valued individual accomplishment over one’s service to the community, it also privileged self-restraint. Although the social acceptance of individualism had been increasing since the end of the eighteenth century, Victorian society was still anxious about giving male passions free reign. Rotundo explains that for the Victorians, “Individual desire threatened social ties, unchecked competition raised the specter of destructive personal conflict, and self-assertion without social control posed a real possibility of anarchy. As the public world of the individual emerged, a new set of

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34 This brief discussion of the “separate spheres” is highly reductive and merely meant to function as a summary of the most prevalent cultural assumptions of that time. Yet this overview mimics the approach taken in several recent articles which explore shifts in American gender roles in the nineteenth century. For example, see Testi’s article. There he gives a concise summary of Victorian cultural assertions, along with the “cracks” in this façade which became increasingly more visible as the century progressed (1511). The introduction to Showalter’s book provides a concise discussion of normative gender roles in the Victorian era. For a more thorough discussion of Victorian notions of gender and their rhetorical impact, see Kerber.
social arrangements arose alongside of it to provide moral order” (22). These arrangements basically set women up as the moral center of society, thus freeing men to pursue their own selfish desires, further solidifying the system of “separate spheres” (Rotundo 24). Consequently, the family unit came to be perceived as one of the only checks on unrestrained male behavior in the Victorian era.

An important part of this subjugation of personal desire was the emphasis placed on a man’s obligation to his home life. Elaine Parsons writes that, “Throughout the country, in these years [Victorian era], advice-manual writers, political leaders, reformers, and pundits of all kinds asserted that true men did not spend their evenings together [. . .] but rather spent time within their family circle” (289). In other words, many institutions practically (and literally) preached that a man’s duty was to his household, both economically through his work in the public sphere, and domestically in his free time spent away from the demands of public life. However, changes in gender mores only amplified the pressure on individuals to perform normative gender behaviors. Greenberg reminds that, “The economic and social upheavals that transformed the practice of womanhood and an equally profound effect on the practice of manhood, as did, of course, the new challenges to the gender order posed by female activism and the elevation of women through domesticity in the 1840s and 1850s” (8). In an increasingly stratified society, the performance of manhood began to acquire a physical aspect as a way to release anxiety and reestablish male dominance.
Victorian prohibitions against physical violence began to erode as men spent more and more time away from their families and with peer groups of other men. Of course, increased aggression was not merely the result of increased male contact. It grew out of the Victorian instinct for stratification and binary classification. Watts explains this shift in noting, “The more concerned the Victorian Bourgeois grew with protecting its own moral interests against degenerate behavior, and the more desperate it became in its search for social order, the more it accepted social violence as morally justified” (18). Scholars such as Jean Lutes back up this observation in documenting the rise of lynchings and mob violence in America during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, aggressive behavior began to be more acceptable as typical male behavior, thus absolving men from their communal duties and marking a transition away from Victorian mores of acceptability. Consequently, Anthony Rotundo observes that, “by the end of the 1800s, men were prone to view struggle and strife as ends in themselves” (226). In other words, the careful balance between personal mastery and social achievement so valued by the Victorians largely dissolved under the emerging pressures of an increasingly modern world.

The rise of market capitalism and the increasing industrialization of American life also had an effect on the perception of the individual’s obligations to social institutions. Paul Rego begins his book by observing: “Alexis de Tocqueville, traveling through

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35 Julia Grant and Parsons both give further evidence that men began to spend less time with their families. Parsons indicates that this was a direct result of the rise in consumer Capitalism in America as the increase in urban, industrial production and finance capital forced men to work long hours out in the public sphere, while Grant seems to see a decrease in family time more as a direct consequence of the divisive “separate spheres” mentality.
America in the 1830s, observed that democracy worked here because most people were able to balance competitive individualism with their concerns for their local communities” (1). However, Rego goes on to show that the massive economic changes occurring in America after the Civil War doomed this delicate balance, thus changing the nature of democracy in America. Tocqueville’s statement is particularly resonant when applied to a variety of social institutions in America, beyond its democratic political structure. Tocqueville observes that America “worked” because its people were able to temper their individualism through an ethic of social obligation. But by the end of the nineteenth century, civic duty was redefined as individualism itself. Watts explains that middle-class Americans believed that, “though the nation was growing and becoming stronger, it had specifically modern diseases: effeminate behavior softened its fiber, and consumerism lured it into selfishness and ease” (23). For example, Rotundo documents that the primary feature of what he calls “communal manhood” was the duty that men felt to their communities and families. By the early part of the nineteenth century, these values had become conflated with a stronger social mandate of personal identity, resulting in what he terms “Self Made Manhood”. The primary feature of masculinity at the time Tocqueville tours America, then, would have been this same balance between individualism and communal duty. However, by the end of the century, all of this changes and individualism becomes valued for its own sake within male behavior.

Although nothing is ever complete or fully codified within the sphere of culture, cultural concerns and anxieties allow us to hypothesize about the increasing dominance of certain social public perceptions. Parsons reminds readers that, “it is impossible to pin
down standards of male behavior in the late nineteenth century. Such ideals are always contested and variable, and this period was a particularly volatile one for gender prescriptions” (283). This observation is prescient and reminds the reader that it is potentially misguided to make too sweeping a generalization about the perception of gender in a culture over one hundred years ago. In fact, this point somewhat drives my own study, for this project originated in part out of a desire to complicate the standard assumptions regarding the masculine project of Naturalist authors. Yet, it is possible to identify a variety of social catalysts which contributed to the shift in the public perception of manhood. In general, the strongest instigating factors were: the acceptance of Darwinism within the scientific community, the fears of cultural degeneration due to over-civilization, the expansion of a market economy, and changes in the perception of boyhood and the education of young men. My ultimate purpose in this section is to illustrate the convergence of social factors which lead to an adoption of a vigorous, individualistic, action-based, violent conception of male behavior, which I will call “strenuous masculinity”.

The rise of the theory of Darwinian evolution played an instrumental role in shifting the concept of masculinity towards violent individualism. According to Rego, “After the Civil War, the American reading public became enamored with the Darwinian theory and was eager to explore any political, economic, or sociological idea that was rooted in Darwinism” (8). This interest in Darwin’s understanding of change and adaptation and Spencer’s notions of the survival of the fittest matched up with some of the popular Victorian notions of manhood and religious belief in the value of hard work
and restraint. Rego further observes that, “the ethic of Social Darwinism, like the Puritan ethic, valued hard work, self-restraint, and self-reliance. Leisure and waste would result in failure. Differences between Social Darwinism and traditional conservatism notwithstanding, the fact remains that the former became a tool of the latter” (9). So, for all its potential erosion of religious authority, Darwinism became aligned with conservative social forces, based upon their shared affinity for individualism and laissez-faire economic practices. Yet Darwinism was also influential in justifying social beliefs in force and action as necessary deterrents to the ennui and effeminacy which many saw as inevitable results of upper- and middle-class decadence.

The doctrine of the strenuous life became the prevailing model of manhood in a world determined by force. Matthew Evertson observes that “Roosevelt’s wilderness stories tend to affirm his progressive notions of Darwin, evolution, heredity, and the restorative powers of nature” (3). But by the waning decades of the nineteenth century, Darwinism and Spencerian notions of the “survival of the fittest” had begun to lose their immediate novelty and appeal, but the belief in the grand march of evolution was so firmly entrenched in the rhetoric of the age that it colored much of the discourse surrounding social progress. For example, even Theodore Roosevelt had

[A]bandoned Darwinian evolution, which to him seemed too random and directionless, in favor of a Lamarckian view wherein human acts constituted the raw factors of evolutionary progress. Roosevelt situated himself in history and created in himself not a mythical hero, but a man
compulsively performing real acts to revitalize other white men for reasons of state. (Watts 12)

So while Roosevelt did not believe in a direct application of natural selection or evolutionary determinism, he did see the world as an historical evolutionary clash and struggle between groups or races of men who vied against one another to populate the earth with their seed. The discourse over racial purity became intertwined with that of masculinity, as white male virility became seen as the anecdote to social devolution.

One of the most animating influences upon the development of a rough, aggressive model for male behavior was born from the cultural and even scientific fears over the supposed degeneration which might befall an overcivilized nation. Simply stated, increased belief in Darwinism sparked concerns that highly developed societies would succumb to their success, in that their offspring would not be hardy enough to subjugate the necessary factors instrumental in continued progress. According to Watts, popular opinion held that,

This weakening could begin anywhere, proceed incrementally, inflict small losses, and culminate unexpectedly in racial decline, emasculation, or death. As a synergistic metaphor of decay, the ‘general lowering of standards’ necessarily unified its antidotes, making national survival dependant on the combined effects of ‘race hardening,’ territorial expansion, and assertive manliness. (35)

The belief in the devolutionary potential of effete, decadent societies who had lost the ability and/or will to fend off an array of “natural” forces aligned against it was pervasive
and became a favorite rallying cry for many different social institutions. For example, in his speech, “Manhood and Statehood,” Roosevelt uses a historical analogy with ancient Greece in order to articulate a common racial anxiety of the period: if white supremacy was not maintained, the country would degenerate to the point that it would be unable to protect its own sovereignty. Roosevelt claims that, “With the Greeks race unity was sacrificed to local independence, and as a result the Greek world became the easy prey of foreign conquerors” (Roosevelt *M&S* 115). Here, Roosevelt employs a *post hoc* logical fallacy – because racial purity was sacrificed and the Greek civilization toppled, the lack of racial purity must have caused their demise. For Roosevelt and others, then, there was a moral imperative for reproduction, discrimination, and subjugation of “Other” races, one directly linked to the understanding and perpetuation of civilization itself. Yet, for all of the virtual worship of the glories of this concept, the unflagging faith in the virtues of civilization produced deep anxieties within the American psyche.

At least some of the anxiety over the perceived weakening of American civilization was a product of the tumultuous transformations occurring within the marketplace and the larger economy. Watts explains that, “the rise of new wealth and a large class of landless wage earners reduced the importance of place and family and elevated a distinctly modern anonymity and rapacity in business dealings. Such changes disrupted old social relationships and diminished the economic agency of the individual male” (29). Yet, even more importantly, the disruption of community mores eroded the Victorian belief in the need for restraint of the passions, so the pursuit of economic success became increasingly belligerent and aggressive. Furthermore, Watts notes that,
“although male success was defined primarily by achievement in the world of work, men went beyond market imperatives and infused competition into every aspect of manly life [. . .] like fathering children, converting nonbelievers, and physical exercise” (30). In other words, changes in the climate of the business world became the catalyst for a shift in the way men saw their place in society. Rather than duty owed to the larger community or responsibilities toward individual family units, men increasingly defined themselves according to successes they were able to wrest from other men.

This rapid and drastic expansion of a market-based, consumer economy built on the values of competition had other unforeseen effects on the cultural fabric of American life. As individuals from lower class backgrounds rushed in to fill the various new stratifications of the market economy, they were placed into more frequent contact with the upper and middle-class professionals who were their superiors and, occasionally, peers. Yet, the anxiety surrounding the frequent exposure to men from different socio-economic backgrounds coincided with fears of the effeminizing influence of European decadence and ennui. The fears of male weakness and loss of virility became a stronger force than the risk of degeneration of class, especially in America, which had propagated the myth of social mobility for decades. This begrudging admiration of the physical strength and vigor of the working classes gradually led to an acceptance of social values once regarded as uncouth and barbaric. Elaine Parsons explains that,

Though middle-class, urban, Eastern men formed the backbone of support for this “passionate manhood” or “masculinity,” the masculine exemplars they celebrated were often quite different from themselves. In particular,
those sympathetic to the cult of masculinity often found themselves unexpectedly admiring, even emulating, uncivilized “savages,” unrefined workingmen, and coarse Westerners. (283)

Yet this emulation also meant that in order to compete with these “types,” men needed to cultivate a different set of “virtues.” Consequently, those who could adapt and develop rugged skills early on would, in theory, be more likely to succeed than those who eventually acquired them through experience. The need to devolve and acquire more rough-and-tumble virtues led to an increased emphasis on the education and development of boys in ways which radically altered the perception of childhood.

Several critics have explored the role education played in the development of this new construction of ideal male behavior.36 Julia Grant’s excellent analysis of the shift in the social discourse surrounding the perception of “real boy” behavior that took place from the 1880s-1920s succinctly illustrates the pace of these changes in socially-asserted behavior models. She explains that, through the influence of social psychologists like G. Stanley Hall, within one generation the understanding of stereotypical boy behavior underwent a transformation from a model passive, childhood innocence to a “little men,” rough and tumble sentiment (830). In fact, this change seems to have solidified quite rapidly. Consider that in his speech “The Strenuous Life,” Teddy Roosevelt admonishes his crowd by making the assumption that they would not let their male children grow up to be weaklings. He claims: “Who among you would teach your boys that ease, that

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36 For an excellent study of internalization of social gender roles in childhood education and development please see Doug Thompson.
peace, is to be the first consideration in their eyes?” (Roosevelt 11). Clearly, by the final year of the nineteenth century, a peaceful, sedate boyhood was derided and undesirable.37

It is not a coincidence that representations of both ideal boy and manhood began to move away from the upper classes to the working classes. Bederman notes, “Throughout the nineteenth century, many working-class men had embraced a ‘rough’ code of manhood formulated, in part, to resist the respectable, moralistic manliness of the middle-class. This rough, working-class masculinity had celebrated [...] values like physical prowess, pugnacity, and sexuality” (17). Traits previously assumed to be uncouth became the new social “virtues” for boys and men alike. Mathew DeSpain explains that, “Terms like ‘bully manhood’ and ‘strenuous life’ became vogue as they entered the national lexicon [at the turn of the twentieth century]. Popular perceptions about what a strong nation or individual’s character entailed were wrapped up in such images” (53). One can see that as upper and middle class men adopted the more “physical” attributes of working class men, expectations about “proper” male behavior shifted radically. This rapid change in perception of what it meant to be a man also affected notions of the correct way for America to conduct foreign policy and respond to

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37 The perception of gender and the performance of masculinity obviously differ between age groups. Norms regarding boyhood are different from those of adolescents, adult men, and elderly men. I merely mention the shift in the normative expectations of boyhood to illustrate their rapid evolution. While I occasionally evoke a different age group in support of a point, this study is fundamentally concerned with young to middle-aged adult males, simply because this age range mirrors that of the protagonists and/or audience of the texts discussed within these chapters.
perceived national security threats. Scholars such as Rotundo and Grant concur that the change was not cosmetic or gradual. It occurred in little more than a generation and dramatically altered every facet of the public performance of masculinity.

These articles document the ways in which changing perceptions of boyhood and acceptable adolescent male behavior directly impacted understandings of how grown men should also act. But this is not to say that men were behaving precisely like grown-up boys. In fact, one can see an interesting “double-standard” of sorts begin to emerge in this period, a tension which informs the role of the “real man” and which contributes to the types of anxiety documented in short fiction from this period. While boys were encouraged to socialize in “gangs” in order to develop leadership skills and their sense of masculinity, grown men were admonished to be individuals. As Parsons documents, one of the most highly regarded attributes described by rural, Midwestern saloon-going

38 Hoganson points out that imperialist politicians increasingly employed metaphoric comparisons between boys and men in order to justify their views towards expansionist policies. According to Hoganson, “imperialists brandished a national manhood metaphor. The youthful republic had become an adult, they declared, and should assume the responsibilities of a mature man. Rather than dwelling on the childish past, the nation should manfully shoulder its new obligations” (157). This metaphor was ultimately used to “depict imperial policies as the inevitable result of manhood” (158).

39 For an in-depth discussion of the ways in which parental and institutional expectations regarding normative boyhood behavior changed from the 1880s-1930s, see Grant. Her piece highlights G. Stanley Hall’s instrumental role in shifting the discourse surrounding male education away from “civilization” and towards “savagery”. Fears of effeminacy began to drive educators and parents to cultivate more “primitive” virtues and activities (such as roughhouse play, fighting, gang mentality, bullying, etc.), which Bederman connects to beliefs in racial evolution. As future leaders of the “highest” race, the thinking went, young white boys needed to be able to physically dominate the “lesser,” more primitive races, which could not be accomplished unless they, too, were accustomed to savagery in its physical manifestations.
men (the precise demographic Crane describes in “The Blue Hotel”) was “minding one’s own business” (285). By this they meant both taking care of one’s concerns, dependents, etc., as well as staying out of the concerns and affairs of others. This primary male “virtue” is evidence that a cultural construction that valued individualism had already been established within the popular mindset before the end of nineteenth century.

The shift from assumptions that male behavior should be sedate, restrained, and sterile to the advocacy of the violent, passionate individual did not occur overnight, just as the emerging code of conduct did not completely supplant the previously existing one. Rather, the two existed side-by-side in the minds of many American men for over a generation. Yet these somewhat contradictory notions of manhood made for strange bedfellows.40 These competing notions of normative masculinity did lead to internal and external conflicts of identity. However, the pressure to conform to two different versions of manhood manifests itself in interesting ways within popular culture. For example, DeSpain notes that leading heroic symbols of American manhood, such as Kit Carson, were often described according to qualities that would help readers see their idealized rugged and violent individualism, as well as their empathy and restraint. DeSpain notes that,

Part of crafting a morally restrained, self-controlled Carson hero resulted from societal concerns that self-made manhood was perhaps too

40 I mean this quite literally. The notion of “civilized,” sedate, urbane manhood had been a construct of the Victorian era, but as the nineteenth century progressed, these values began to be associated with homosexuality. Scholars have documented various reasons for this transfer. Showalter links it to the Oscar Wilde trial and the “naming” or identification of alternative male gender behavior with homosexual desire.
combative, too self-seeking, possibly too rough, and that unchecked individualism could lead to unbridled behavior unless reigned in. Responding to these social currents, some authors purposefully added more stoic and genteel traits to Carson’s manliness as a counterbalance. (59)

This passage is instructive for two reasons. First, it reminds us that the performance of gender is never fixed or static. It is a fluid exercise that depends more upon the subjective response of individuals to exterior stimuli than a rigid script from which one reads. Furthermore, the script from which one’s gender behavior emerges is itself comprised of multiple drafts, versions that overlap but are not always compatible. Consequently, one could choose to adopt restraint in a given situation and violence in another. Secondly, the mythification of Kit Carson shows that there were times in which both of these responses would have been socially acceptable.

Suffice it to say that in the late 1890s, much like today, typical male conduct and mores centered on notions of self-reliance and trust, physical strength and virility, ability to subjugate and dominate the “Other,” and the supremacy of the individual will over the collective good. At the same time, this construction was rife with fracture points, such as the tension between individual will and collective responsibility or the group socialization of boy culture versus the individual isolation of adult manhood. Yet even though an individual man’s personal experience varied, the cultural definition of heroic behavior began to shift to a model based on control:
Theodore Green has described the typical hero from 1894 to 1903 as an “idol of power.” Greene found that the traits most often depicted in presenting these men were those used for the mastery of others or of the physical environment. Half of all the heroes’ relationships were portrayed in terms of their dominance (as opposed to love, help, cooperation, and so forth). (qtd in Rotundo 238)

These traditional traits were given new expression through the exploding popularity of the Western genre in the late 19th Century. These popular novels propagated romanticized, idealized figures that embodied traditional, chivalric virtues of self-reliance, righteous violence, and aggressive domination.41

The opportunities available to urban, middle-class men to demonstrate this constructed prowess, however, were rapidly diminishing at the turn of the 19th century. As the Western frontier became domesticated and settled and more and more people relocated from the rural settings to urban locations, many men were removed from social rituals designed to facilitate expression of these masculine mores.42 Instead, these “venting” activities were increasingly replaced with sedentary reading of idealized and fictitious accounts of western “true men” in popular media; from newspapers, to magazines, to dime novels, Victorian men were constantly bombarded with unobtainable

41 An important discussion of the idealized masculinity of western heroes may be found in Henry Nash Smith’s article and Laura McCall’s introduction.

images of masculinity. Henry Nash Smith notes that the popular western novel “throws
the hero back on himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is . . .
alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe” (169). The effect that the emulation of
individual isolation had on the public perception of manhood was disastrous and still
reverberates today. Kimmel observes, “Interestingly enough, these common
characteristics – violence, aggression, extreme competitiveness, a gnawing insecurity –
are also the defining characteristics of a compulsive masculinity, a masculinity that must
always prove itself and that is always in doubt” (93). Although cut off from opportunities
to express these idealized (and completely fabricated) masculine traits, many men, white
and black, middle and working-class, still internalized this impossible code of conduct
which practically dictated violent expression of physical desire. Furthermore, they
internalized this ethic because it was increasingly the one most commonly modeled by
the political establishment and print culture.

II

A Rooseveltian Framework of “Bully” Male Behavior

Suffice it to say that there was a direct shift in the values espoused as normative
and desirable in American men, as well as the visible proof of their manhood which men
were expected to exhibit in their public performances of this new understanding of
masculinity. I argue that Theodore Roosevelt is an excellent symbol of the emerging
construction of strenuous masculinity, which is evident in the gendered rhetoric he
employs in order to establish himself as the model of American manhood at the end of
the nineteenth century. Roosevelt’s attempt to shape the public discourse on the proper behavior of real men according to a personal belief in strenuous manhood is one of his enduring legacies. Louis Auchincloss claims that, “Theodore Roosevelt is one of the few presidents whose life, or at least the public image of his life, is even more important historically than his accomplishments” (TR 1). Specifically, this study examines the public persona and constructed masculine identity of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt worked hard to forge himself into the very image of the masculinity which he was advocating. Therefore, his memoirs and speeches provide evidence of an attempt to shape a public appreciation for the same understanding of masculinity as that which informed his own gendered identity. This section is primarily interested in exploring Roosevelt’s public masculine persona as a symbol of the adoption and widespread acceptance of strenuous manhood as a normative male gender identity. To do this, I will

43 While many critics have explored Roosevelt’s assertions of masculinity, much of the recent critical discussion surrounding Roosevelt and gender has centered upon the ways in which his understanding of masculinity informed his decisions on isolated political and social events. For example, Bederman’s chapter on Roosevelt enables readers to see the ways in which gendered rhetoric can work to justify imperialist political ideologies, as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hoganson’s book expands upon this thesis, illustrating gendered rhetoric as the primary catalyst for the Spanish-American wars of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Dunaway’s article connects hunting, photography, and masculine anxiety to Roosevelt’s assertions of the strenuous life in order to negotiate the effects of modernity.

44 Recent critics explore the connections between Roosevelt and American masculinity without discussing the influence Roosevelt had over the popular conception of manhood. For example, Rego’s book views Roosevelt’s understanding of masculinity as the primary avenue for negotiating the tension between his belief in individualism and collectivism, but does not look beyond Roosevelt as an individual and discuss his influence as a public figure. The fact is that most recent studies of Theodore Roosevelt do not approach his public writings and speeches as reflections of either the shifts in heterosexual masculine gender construction outlined previously in this chapter, or as an influencing factor upon this shift.
use Roosevelt’s memoirs and speeches to document his ideal type of man, his doctrine of the strenuous life, and his understanding of the tension between the individual and community.

There is, perhaps, no better example of the public performances of masculinity which American men used to support their masculine identity in the final decades of the nineteenth century than Theodore Roosevelt. In fact, by the time he became President of the United States of America in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was generally viewed as the model of American Manhood. Roosevelt considered himself a true “self made” man according to criteria instructive to the understanding of the dominant construction of masculinity which solidified in this era. For example, Roosevelt had been a sickly child, weak and asthmatic. Mario Dinunzio explains that after completing the Grand Tour of Europe in 1869, “doctor’s advice and the encouragement of his parents led him to begin a regimen of bodybuilding exercise, hoping to build resistance to the asthma and other afflictions” (10-11). Certainly, Roosevelt’s idolization of his father (whom he describes in his Autobiography as “the best man I ever knew”) caused him to attempt to emulate the man’s physical constitution and character. Yet David McCullough notes that, even during his Harvard years, “he was no more a model of good health than he was a strapping physical specimen” (161). Still, his father insisted that he exercise vigorously, even writing to him at college to demand a complete description of his daily regime (McCullough 166). Roosevelt would continue to try to live up to his father’s combination of “strength and courage with gentleness” even after Roosevelt Sr.’s death during his son’s sophomore year at Harvard (AA 9). Even so, Roosevelt’s early views on
proper male behavior are characterized by the tension between vigorous endeavor and studious reflection.

The salient point here is that Roosevelt’s boyhood and early adult life seem to show a boy who was raised under more Victorian values of manhood. His parents encouraged his quiet, scholarly appreciation of the natural world and peaceful, sedate interactions with his siblings. As a boy, Roosevelt clearly appreciates this upbringing, writing, “When I think of [our familial happiness], and also of my intimacy with you all (for I hardly know a boy who is on as intimate and affectionate terms with his family as I am), I feel that I have an immense amount to be thankful for” (qtd. in McCullough 165). Roosevelt’s relatively dehabilitating physical condition played a critical role in the development of his mental faculties by making him a voracious reader, a studious observer of history, and an amateur naturalist (AA 270-74). Yet these attributes were not enough on their own, nor did they allow Roosevelt to assert his identity as a man. In fact, they actually contributed to the view, propagated by early political opponents, of Roosevelt as a “dandy,” a foppish intellectual who had passionate and honest intentions, but not the necessary “spine” and vigor to carry out his reformist ideals in the real world of men.

This association with effeminate weakness became so politically damaging and personally galling that Roosevelt bought a ranch in South Dakota and set about redefining himself as a frontiersman and cattle rancher. While his political duties never allowed him to reside solely on the frontier, Roosevelt did spend the majority of his time over eighteen months on the ranch between 1883 and 1885 and emerged with an
independent, virile, “rough rider” image, an identity he fostered and perpetuated throughout the rest of his political career. The outbreak of War with Spain further entrenched this cowboy mentality and supplied Roosevelt with the political capital he would need to become Governor of New York, then Vice President of the United States of America, and finally, President upon McKinley’s assassination.

Roosevelt understood the utility of the performance of a certain type of masculinity, a confident, rough-around-the-edges, aggressive swagger, which would both validate his virile manhood and challenge the masculinity of his older, more urbane opponents. Hardy explains that, “the clear implication is that Roosevelt worked at proving his masculinity because his nature normally inclined him to gentler pursuits” (185). But Roosevelt the man makes a conscious choice to reject these increasingly outdated understandings of male behavior in favor of a masculine identity whose foundations exist in the restless attempt to prove one’s worth through direct competition and continual action.

Roosevelt’s attempt to reconstruct his personal identity according to a strenuous performance of maleness ends up paying out a large dividend in the form of public and political capital. As Fehn notes, “TR’s masculine persona and rhetoric, moreover, ‘touched a nerve’ among men unsure of their place, as women increasingly demanded a public role in American politics” (52). Watts demonstrates that Roosevelt consciously promotes his construction of masculinity to the media (and, therefore, culture writ large) in order to both validate his construction, and to set himself up as a “poster boy” exemplifying the vision of manhood he advocates. Ultimately, Watts claims that this
exposure solidifies the public’s perception of Roosevelt as an authentic symbol of the American male: “Throughout nearly three decades in the public, Roosevelt occupied a pivotal role as America’s most important cultural broker of masculinity, embodying both an ideal type and the contemporary national mood” (25). In fact, by the time he became president, he is viewed as the example of the “bully” manhood whose performance he worked so tirelessly to perfect. Watts remarks that, “Roosevelt drew men’s sense of belonging into his own personal version of manliness and inscribed it in new and modern ways on the nation’s collective mind” (2). In other words, Theodore Roosevelt’s own personal understanding of masculinity is both representative of the larger national discourse surrounding manhood, and (through media representation of his persona) a yardstick by which other men measured their own performance. Furthermore, I argue that Roosevelt did not merely assert vague notions about what it meant to be a man that he had absorbed throughout his experiences; rather, he systematically and deliberately attempted to shape the public discourse surrounding manhood through his own literary and rhetorical production.

Roosevelt’s conscious attempt to shape the understanding of male gender roles in his area informs his earliest forays into the literary world. Matthew Evertson notes that, “Modern readers may forget that before he made his fame as a Rough Rider, Governor, or President, Roosevelt was most widely recognized and admired for his four-volume study of settlement, the *Winning of the West*, and for his frequent first-person accounts of his life as an outdoorsman and cattle rancher” (2). Evertson goes on to frame Roosevelt as a literary realist and praise his, “genuine skill in capturing the detailed description and
excitement of life pared down to its basics” (2). Roosevelt does have a faculty for telling a good story. He uses foreshadowing to create suspense, employs vivid detail to recreate a sense of place, and crafts the development of his narratives to place the events within a larger historical context. Roosevelt is also particularly adept at highlighting personality traits and social values which he finds instructive, a descriptive faculty that is not wasted on his depictions of the men of the West.

Roosevelt holds ranchers and hunters in high esteem and continually refers to them as the apex of a new type of American masculinity. In his speech, “Manhood and Statehood” (1901), Roosevelt claims that a frontiersman’s, “traits of daring and hardihood and iron endurance are not merely indispensable traits for pioneers; they are also traits which must go to the make-up of every mighty and successful people” (116). In *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) Roosevelt notes that:

“There was not only much that was attractive in their wild, free, reckless lives, but there was also very much good about the men themselves. They were [. . .] frank, bold, and self-reliant to a degree. They fear neither man, brute, nor element. They are generous and hospitable; they stand loyally by their friends and pursue their enemies with bitter and vindictive hatred.

(82)

These are the same attributes which Roosevelt would later come to advocate in his “doctrine of the strenuous life.” Yet, it is important to remember that Roosevelt does not see these values in the abstract; for him, real men live their lives according to these ideals every day. Roosevelt holds himself as one of these same men; in describing them, he is
also describing himself. Roosevelt claims that, “Many a time I have hunted with them, spent the night in their smoky cabins, or had them as guests at my ranch,” which indicates that he believes that he was accepted by these men (RLHT 82). Dinunzio claims that, “The hard life of tending and driving cattle, sleeping outdoors, and enduring the often bitter Dakota weather was therapeutic for Roosevelt. [. . .] In the process he won the respect of the hardened cowboys who had initially greeted him with condescending labels like ‘four-eyes’ and ‘dude’” (17). The rest of the chapter entitled “Frontier Types,” consists of stories about Roosevelt’s direct interaction with these men, interlaced with his own deeds and conduct while out on the frontier. Consequently, this chapter functions to establish both desirable male conduct and Roosevelt’s own performance of these male virtues. This “hero-worship” also serves a political function, for it allows Roosevelt to present himself in a certain light without sounding too arrogant. So, through his numerous publications on American history, to his self-aggrandizing biographies and accounts of his exploits, Roosevelt was able to consciously craft the public’s perception of him around a myth of strenuous manhood.

Roosevelt’s accounts of his exploits function as a kind of propaganda for a particular construction of rugged masculinity. Roosevelt’s most popular and widely recognized memoir was The Rough Riders (1899), a first-person account of his exploits as leader of the First Volunteer Calvary Regiment in the Spanish-American War. Published less than one year after the campaign, the book (along with the sensationalist newspaper accounts of the regiment) catapulted Roosevelt to national fame and was partially responsible for his eventual nomination to the vice-presidency. In The Rough
Riders, Roosevelt continually glorifies a certain kind of man, one who performs his duties without complaint, endures hardship, and faces death with honor:

They were a splendid set of men, these Southwesterners – tall and sinewy, with resolute, weather-beaten faces, and eyes that looked a man straight in the face without flinching. [. . .] In all the world there could be no better material for soldiers than that afforded by these grim hunters of the mountains, these wild riders of the plains. (22)

Here, Roosevelt highlights the bodily traits of men accustomed to life in the wilderness, to hardship and depravation. Nina Silber asserts that, “Roosevelt formed the rough Riders in the interest of promoting nationalism over sectionalism, giving special prominence to western men who came from an environment which was supposedly conducive to a virile and athletic constitution” (182). I would only add that, in doing so, he establishes an ideal type of male performance, which he expounds upon throughout the book by linking the type to a set of masculine virtues.

The chief manly attribute Roosevelt promotes in his narrative is the desire for battle and danger. For example, as the regiment steams towards Cuba, Roosevelt observes that, “the men on the ship were young and strong, eager to face what lay hidden before them, eager for adventure where risk was the price of gain” (RR 56). Roosevelt continually admires the zeal for adventure exhibited by the men of his Regiment, as if it was a natural part of the outdoorsmen’s character. Roosevelt says that,

All earnestly wished for a chance to distinguish themselves, and fully appreciated that they ran the risk not merely of death, but what was
infinitely worse – namely, failure at the crisis to perform duty well; and they strove earnestly so to train themselves, and the men under them, as to minimize the possibility of such disgraces. (RR 40-41)

However, his men were clearly taught to look forward to battle in the same way that they were instructed in other martial virtues. Roosevelt reveals that,

Every officer and every man was taught continually to look forward to the day of battle eagerly, but with an entire sense of the drain that would then be made upon his endurance and resolution. They were also taught that, before the battle came, the rigorous performance of the countless irksome duties of the camp and the march was demanded from all alike and that no excuse would be tolerated for failure to perform duty. (RR 41, my emphasis)

This passage presents the reader with a contradiction in Roosevelt’s narrative and a glimpse into the propagandistic function of Roosevelt’s memoirs. Previously, Roosevelt states that the eagerness for battle comes naturally to his troop of outdoorsmen. Yet, he also notes that they were taught to anticipate battle and withstand hardship. In other words, the love of battle does not come naturally to these men; it must be instructed into them. The shift from natural traits to instructed orders reveals two things: namely, the real possibility that the exuberance with which Roosevelt praises the character of the men in his regiment is mere propaganda, but also that the strenuous attributes he so cherishes can supposedly be taught to young men.
Furthermore, Rough Riders exposes his propagandistic purpose through its inconsistencies and omissions. Besides the example noted above, there are several places where Roosevelt contradicts himself in The Rough Riders. For example, as Roosevelt collects his volunteers, he describes the hardships they will face and gives them the opportunity to withdraw from service. He claims that, “Not a man of them backed out; not one of them failed to do his whole duty” (Roosevelt RR 21). Yet the Library of America’s edition of the text includes an “Appendix A: Muster-Out Roll,” which lists no fewer than ten men as deserters. Of course, the memoir contains absolutely no mention of anyone deserting from the regiment. It would have been bad publicity. The point is that Roosevelt does not merely report his memories of his time commanding a volunteer regiment in The Rough Riders. Rather, he consciously shapes and crafts the narrative to illustrate and extol his doctrine of the strenuous life.

Roosevelt also denies that anyone in the regiment even exhibited unmanly behavior, such as a cry of pain when wounded. He claims, “In no case did the man make any outcry when hit, seeming to take it as a matter of course [. . .]. With hardly an exception, there was no sign of flinching” (RR 75). Roosevelt later goes on to claim that

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45 This omission is all the more striking when one remembers that Civil War memoirs were quite popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These accounts were often oriented towards the regiment, rather than the individual writer, and usually attempted a realistic portrayal of battle and army life. Roosevelt’s memoir undoubtedly draws on the popularity of the genre, which makes his rhetorical decision to omit any mention of the realities of regimental life in a volunteer cavalry unit, such as desertion or of cries of the wounded, all the more obvious. For an excellent analysis of Civil War battlefield memoirs and letters home, see James McPherson. For a discussion of Union veterans groups and their attempts to market war experience, see Stuart McConnell. For a provocative look at the evocation of gender roles to promote Reconstruction, see Nina Silber.
none of the wounded in the field hospitals made any cries of pain, even though he
documents their horrific wounds in great detail. Perhaps this discrepancy is due to
Roosevelt’s personal experience in the campaign; Dinunzio reminds that “Roosevelt
came out of the battle [for San Juan Hill] with only a scratch where a bullet grazed his
arm. This in a struggle where the Rough Riders suffered among the heaviest casualties of
any cavalry unit in Cuba” (26). But by denying these men expression of pain or grief (the
Rough Riders suffered a disproportionate amount of casualties due, in large part, to
Roosevelt’s zeal in making sure his men saw direct combat), Roosevelt sanitizes warfare,
presenting it in chivalric terms of honorable struggle. He does not grieve for the fallen,
nor does his narrative relate any of the fears, anguish, or frustration which would have
been a natural part of a trench war conducted in the tropics during the full heat of
summer. In this sense, Roosevelt’s widely popular memoir, The Rough Riders, functions
as propaganda for a certain type of strenuous male performance. In his version of war
there are no tears for fallen comrades, no shrieks of pain, no grumbles of those suffering
with disease and heat exhaustion. There are only individual feats of courage and bravery,
Displays of martial gallantry, and trials to be manfully and silently endured. This denial
of the trauma and horror of the conflict continues even in recent accounts, testament to
the success of Roosevelt’s rhetorical project.46

46 For example, Alejandro De Quesada’s (respected scholar and leading authority on
Spanish-American subjects) account of the Rough Riders leaves out any discussion of the
toll of the conflict on the soldiers and reasserts Roosevelt’s claim that the men did not
even cry out in pain when wounded. The proof for this fantastical claim comes from his
extensive quotation of The Rough Riders.
Consequently, one of the many rhetorical functions of *The Rough Riders* is to establish an ideal masculine type and set of associated virtues (rugged individualism, unflinching bravery, and violent action) which he will perform, especially under duress. Then, Roosevelt uses the campaign to illustrate that his ideal set of men, cowboys and outdoorsmen, exemplify a strenuous masculine performance in the Spanish-American War. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Roosevelt conspicuously places himself among them throughout the endeavor, so that the reader sees him as a fellow member of this idyllic manhood. By the end of the conflict, Roosevelt claims of his regiment: “They knew I would share every hardship and danger with them, would do everything in my power to see that they were fed, and so far as might be, sheltered and spared; and in return I knew that they would endure every kind of hardship and fatigue without a murmur and face every danger with entire fearlessness” (*RR* 136). Roosevelt establishes a reciprocal relationship between himself and the soldiers serving under him in his regiment, which equalizes their experiences of the war. Yet, as an officer, Roosevelt was simply not on the same level as his troop, a distinction which he felt necessary to establish and reinforce early in their training for “the maintenance of proper discipline” (*Roosevelt RR* 33). The constructed sense of inclusion helps Roosevelt appear as “one of the boys,” in the mind of his readers.47 In other words, *The Rough Riders* serves as a

47 Although my analysis focuses on the greater rhetorical purpose of Roosevelt’s inclusive stance here, several historians interpret such assertions as a necessary quality of leading troops in a democratic society, especially within a military body composed primarily of volunteers. For example, James McPherson study of the Civil War explains that an arrogant officer will lose the respect of men who view themselves as essentially equal to, if not better than, their superiors, who have been distinguished merely by a temporary title (56-59).
piece of gendered and political propaganda for strenuous masculinity and contributes to the masculine mystique surrounding Roosevelt.

Another way that the reader can see Roosevelt as an object of masculine performance is in the ways in which other men described the time they spent with the “real” man. Interestingly enough, their adoration holds true even when the men were not a part of Roosevelt’s generation but older and, presumably, more informed by previous cultural constructions of more restrained male behavior. The famous naturalist and nature advocate John Burroughs accompanied Roosevelt (then President) on a trip across the country and into Yellowstone region (which Roosevelt would make into the first National Park). Burroughs, who was getting along in years by this point in his life, was a generation removed from Roosevelt, but still seemed to view him as a paragon of American masculinity. In his book, *Camping and Tramping with Roosevelt* (1907), Burroughs exalts Roosevelt’s embodiment of “male” virtues:

The President unites in himself powers and qualities that rarely go together. Thus, he has both physical and moral courage in a degree rare in history. He can stand calm and unflinching in the path of a charging grizzly, and he can confront with equal coolness and determination the predaceous corporations and money powers of the country. He unites the qualities of the man of action with those of the scholar and writer, - another very rare combination. He unites the instincts and accomplishments of the best breeding and culture with the broadest democratic sympathies and affiliations. [. . . ] He unites great sensibility
with great force and will power. He loves solitude, and he loves to be in the thick of the fight. [. . . ] He is doubtless the most vital man in the continent, if not the planet, to-day. He is many-sided, and every side throbs with his tremendous life and energy. (59-60)

One must recall that it is the naturalist John Burroughs who pens this description, not some Republican Party clerk looking to draft new fundraising propaganda. In fact, Burroughs’ age actually helps temper this adoration a bit, in that Burroughs specifically juxtaposes Roosevelt’s embodiment of the “best breeding and culture” as a “scholar and writer” with his “great force and will power.” Other, more partisan descriptions do not make an attempt to describe the careful balance between the older, Victorian constructions of masculine roles such as refinement and constraint with the new, more aggressive values such as physical strength and endurance.

Burroughs’ description serves another function besides the instructive list of Roosevelt’s perceived virtues and strengths. It also shows the extent to which Roosevelt had succeeded in branding himself as the representative of American manliness. Watts explains the popular adoration of Roosevelt according to the perceived benefits the president offered the nation: “Roosevelt was the first president to articulate the shared anxieties of his generation, and he provided its first seemingly coherent response to the cultural dislocations of modern society” (2). As they travel by train through the Midwest countryside, Burroughs is continually impressed by the popular response to Roosevelt, noting: “The crowd always seem [sic] to be in love with him the moment they see him and hear his voice. And it is not by reason of any arts of eloquence, or charm of address,
but by reason of his inborn heartiness and sincerity, and his genuine manliness” (21; my emphasis). In other words, these crowds (and Burroughs himself) do not see Roosevelt’s manhood as an affectation; instead, they view it as an inherent virtue and an attribute which sets him apart and above others. In labeling his version of masculinity “genuine,” Burroughs/the crowds construct Roosevelt as a symbol of American masculinity, privileging his performance above other competing versions. It is worth noting, furthermore, that Roosevelt did nothing to discourage this perception of his character; in fact, he actively promoted this sentiment through his gendered rhetoric.

Roosevelt’s speeches contain the clearest representations of his project to shape the conception of masculinity. Roosevelt’s speech, “The Strenuous Life,” illustrates several of the new precepts of the emerging construction of vigorous masculinity, values which became codified and still linger on today. When Roosevelt speaks of the strenuous life, he refers to a construction of masculinity Rotundo labels “passionate manhood.” This understanding of male behavior values action over speech/diplomacy, exertion over patience, violence over passivity, and the individual over the communal. This vision of the ideal man appears to be quite different than the Victorian model which preached the restraint of the passions as the true mark of any man. Roosevelt claims that in America in the last decade of the nineteenth century, “we do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort [. . .] who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life” (13). Roosevelt does not shirk from upending previous notions of manhood, and he is able to turn his direct challenge of former gender roles into a redeeming quality of the new mores he advocates. Just as the
strenuous man must not back down from confrontation, so too must the new gender
dynamics of manhood not avoid but welcome and cherish conflict, for confrontation tests
both man and social value system alike.

I would like to draw attention to several key values Roosevelt admonishes the all-
male crowd to adopt. “The Strenuous Life” pushes its audience towards the adoption of
the (here and after gendered masculine) “virtues” of physical violence, constant action,
and individualism. I assert that these values become the hallmarks of a “strenuous
masculinity” hereafter, a construction of heterosexual male gender roles that shaped the
literary output of the era and which have remained prevalent ever since.

Among these new appropriate behaviors for men were actions that would have
been antithetical to previous Victorian codes of masculinity. One of the most abrupt
shifts in the social perception of ideal male behavior is the advocacy of physical violence
which became prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century in America. Watts
explains that:

By the 1880s, the mounting psychological and social crisis of modernity
led to a growing acceptance of male violence. As many bourgeois men
grew increasingly tainted with dandyism and effete intellectualism, they
began to value previously unacceptable forms of violent behavior [. . .].
Eastern men began to romanticize aggressive male endeavor and to
appropriate its symbols, its rhetoric, and its psychological rewards. (6-7)

Watts helps to illustrate how fears about social progress led to a rejection of intellectual
refinement. Individual adventure and, if necessary, violence began to be seen as the
remedy for the ills of society. The movement away from models of self-restraint, a defining characteristic of Victorian masculinity, and towards a “rough-and-tumble” manhood of physical conquest was deeply rooted in the adoption of a more working-class form of masculinity and the fears of male degeneracy prevalent at the time. Hoganson explains this movement as a product of a Darwinian approach to the political area, especially in the area of foreign policy: “according to the Darwinian explanation, jingoes’ tendency to regard international affairs as an area of intensifying struggle led them to conclude that Americans needed to be tougher in order to compete. They viewed war as an opportunity to build the fighting virtues that allegedly were being undermined by industrial comforts” (12). Roosevelt himself once wrote to a friend that, “In strict confidence, I should welcome any war. The country needs one” (qtd in Garraty 44). Public discourse becomes increasingly infused with an aggressive tone, and Roosevelt capitalizes on this sentiment in his speech.

One gains immediate insight into the power and appeal of the appropriation of the rhetoric of violence from the very beginning of “The Strenuous Life.” In the opening lines of the speech, Roosevelt advocates “the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach the highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil” (1). Any analysis of the speech must acknowledge its context within U.S. foreign policy and relations.48 However, Roosevelt’s choice to

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48 There are numerous studies which address the geopolitical context and imperialistic effect of Roosevelt’s speech. Hoganson’s book takes the push towards U. S. imperialism and situates it within the national discourse of strenuous masculinity in ways that further
situate this type of discussion within gendered language, metaphors, and rhetoric indicates his desire to situate this oration within a larger cultural context as well. If we read his speech as a set of strategies designed to combat political anxiety regarding U.S. military and diplomatic power, then we can, too, recognize it as encoding another set of strategies designed to alleviate anxieties regarding male behavior, power, and patriarchal status. The two need not be mutually exclusive and cannot be separated or even differentiated here.

Roosevelt’s speech illustrates this belief in the necessities of violence in two ways: through claiming the benefits of national military conquest through warfare, and through allegiance to the life of strife. Roosevelt reminds his assembled audience that America could have circumvented the terrible financial, physical, and emotional costs of the Civil War by evading conflict: “We could have avoided all of this suffering simply by shrinking from strife. And if we had thus avoided it, we would have shown that we were weaklings, and that we were unfit to stand among the great nations of the earth” (SL 18). Here Roosevelt equates desire to avoid conflict with weakness, weakness that leads to national shame.

Yet outside of this immediate context, he also sees American men as facing a choice of whether or not to value physical aggression. Roosevelt’s answer is a resounding yes, predicated on the claim that to not respond to perceived threats with reinforce the broad point (this vigorous masculinity was both firmly established and the dominant social construction of masculine gender roles) made here. Consider her seventh chapter, “The National Manhood Metaphor and the Fight over the Fathers in the Philippine Debate,” for discussion over the male-development discourse Imperialists adopted in order to justify their foreign policies.
actual violence is to betray oneself as weak and sterile. Roosevelt admonishes his listeners: “Above all, let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical, [. . .] for it is only through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness” (30). Roosevelt’s closing lines note that only through strife, through conflict, can the nation win the great competition for international prestige and status. Consequently, we need to read these admonitions as personal appeals to the masculinity of the gathered male crowd to not back down from physical threats, but to meet them with force and violence, just as the nation would defend itself in the case of an attack.

One of the most easily accessible and reinforced points in Roosevelt’s speech could be his constant assertion of the life of action. Roosevelt believes that leisure necessitates that its beneficiaries provide some type of social service. He states, “Wisely used leisure merely means that those who possess it, being free from the necessity of working for their livelihood, are all the more bound to carry on some kind of remunerative work” (Roosevelt SL 12). For Roosevelt, leisure means that one is not required to work for their livelihood. Yet, rather than freeing them from obligation, Roosevelt asserts that their wealth further obligates them to a life of social action. The strenuous man is one who constantly strives towards some goal, one who uses even his

49 Of course, another way to reinforce this point would be to explore Roosevelt’s own appetite for big-game hunting. Although it is not directly mentioned in the speech (and thus not directly addressed here), hunting and the figure of the “sportsman” played an important role in the visual discourse of masculinity within popular culture in the early twentieth century. Dunaway notes that “as a vigorous, manly activity, hunting offered modern men a chance to reignite the embers of aggression smoldering inside their effete bodies. Longing for intense, violent experience, they anxiously recognized the symptoms of degeneration” [as] the atrophy caused by [. . .] overcivilization” (216).
leisure to accomplish socially remunerative goals. In fact, these individuals face an even
greater social obligation once freed from toil for mere survival, for they are the ones who
have the time and resources to accomplish great things. In this view, individuals cannot
go about merely “busying ourselves only with the wants of our bodies (Roosevelt SL
21),” while the “country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous
endeavor” (29). The previous generation of self-made men may have carved out empires
in industry and lifted themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps, but Roosevelt claims
that personal accomplishment for the sake of material comfort is a form of degeneracy
and weakness. Here, Roosevelt demonizes those of the upper classes who do not labor for
the lower. Interestingly, the admonishment reads like a middle-class appropriation of
working-class experience. Like many politicians, Roosevelt has a keen faculty for
addressing the particular hopes and expectations of his given audience. Yet unlike many
of his contemporaries, Roosevelt consistently praises the lifestyle of the working classes.
As discussed in the previous section, Roosevelt holds farmers, cattlemen, and pioneers as
models of true manhood and praises the hard work and humble lives of the rural poor in
his speeches. With this, he tries to shift the goals of individual men away from the
commodification of the Gilded Age and towards personal ambition and individual
achievement.

One of the most important shifts in the perception of normative male behavior in
American history involved the assertion of the individual over the concerns of the
communal. Roosevelt certainly did not invent this change, nor was he responsible for
implementing it; it was already a part of the social fabric by the end of the nineteenth
However, Roosevelt’s speeches work to solidify individualism as the preferential state of ideal masculinity. In fact, Roosevelt sees the State’s role not as providing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for the collective, but rather as creating conditions under which individualism may flourish. In his essay, “Promise and Performance” (1900), Roosevelt claims that,

Wise legislation and upright administration [. . .] above all, can give to each individual the chance to do the best work for himself. But ultimately the individual’s own faculties must form the chief factor in working out his own salvation. In the last analysis it is the thrift, energy, self-mastery, and business intelligence of each man which have most to do with deciding whether he rises or falls. (69)

Roosevelt may have been a great social reformer, but, above all, he clearly sees the role of government as fostering the conditions of individual success. For Roosevelt, it is the strenuous masculine virtues of “thrift, energy, self-mastery” which will determine ones’ fate, not community action or government intervention. As he declares in “Promise and Performance”: “the individual’s own qualities of body and mind, his own strength of heart and hand, will remain the determining conditions of his career” (69).

Whether asserting the preference for the solitary male citizen or the value of individual needs over group concerns, Roosevelt’s version of manhood elevates the value of the individual will to new heights and solidifies its dominance in the public discourse.

Rotundo documents this shift in great detail, which becomes the entire premise of his introduction and first chapter.
The most obvious example of the preference for the individual over the communal is Roosevelt’s now famous maxim that “as it is with the individual, so it is with the nation” (SL 17). Nearly every parable he tells to enforce his point locates the individual response to the exterior threat he describes. Consequently, individual identities become synonymous with the nation itself. In “Manhood and Statehood” Roosevelt declares that, “it is the merest truism to say that the nation rests upon the individual [...] upon individual manliness and womanliness, using the words in their widest and fullest meaning” (119). I read this passage as indicative of a fundamental contour of Roosevelt’s thinking. In context, Roosevelt assumes that the individual is the foundational unit of the American republic, the primary unit of the polis. Furthermore, the good of the nation is dependent upon one’s “individual manliness,” or the degree to which one embodies the ideal of American manhood (or womanhood, conversely) as it is broadly defined. Just as the individual is representative of the entire nation, so too does one’s performance of masculinity embody the national character.

Roosevelt’s speeches provide excellent examples of his gendered rhetoric and attempt to influence the audience’s perception of masculinity and model himself as a living exemplar of the ideal American man. One should see the assumption of individualism in Roosevelt’s speeches as overwhelming evidence that the male crowd would already have adopted individualism as a value system in order for the speaker’s rhetorical choices to have any effect over them. But this is not to say that Roosevelt is silent on the necessity of male community. In “Brotherhood and the Heroic Virtues,” Roosevelt claims that it is “of the utmost benefit to have men thrown together under
circumstances which force them to realize their community of interest, especially where the community of interest arises from community of devotion to a lofty ideal” (123). Here, Roosevelt praises the circumstances which force men to work together towards a common goal, especially a goal based upon a universally-held belief or ideology. Yet what happens if that goal is individual interest, as it seems to be in most of Roosevelt’s writing? As I will discuss in the next section, rather than seeing the nation as a collective, a community of people motivated by common concerns and bound together in allegiance to shared values, laws, and institutions, Roosevelt instead locates the spirit of the nation within the representative (read: white male) individual. The tension between the “community of interest” and the ideal of individualism is present in many of Roosevelt’s speeches and presents a unique challenge to any attempt to represent his understanding of proper male behavior. However, the strain of reconciling these seemingly oppositional ideals further shows proves Roosevelt to be an apt symbol of American masculinity at the fin de siècle.

III

“Acting in Combination”: Roosevelt and Community

In examining the emphasis of individualism within Roosevelt’s doctrine of the strenuous life, it is easy to assert that his focus on individual action negates any emphasis on community. Yet this assumption is not entirely correct. Roosevelt does promote a sense of community for the nation, just in a different sense than is usually implied by the notion of communal bonds. In his speech, “National Duties,” addressed to the Minnesota State Fair on August 2nd, 1901, Roosevelt outlines the primary obligations of the
American people. Here, as in so many of his other speeches, Roosevelt starts with a general anecdote and then expands his point of view to encompass the interests of the Nation. Roosevelt begins by praising the pioneer spirit of the previous generation:

The men who with axe in the forests and pick in the mountains and plow on the prairies pushed to completion the dominion of our people over the American Wilderness [. . .]. They have shown the qualities of daring, endurance, and far-sightedness, of eager desire for victory and stubborn refusal to accept defeat, which go to make up the essential manliness of the American character. (ND 129)

The list of qualities constituting the “essential manliness” of Americans follows the same virtues attributed to his doctrine of the strenuous life. Yet, Roosevelt goes on to describe a series of obligations which each citizen has, which helps to define his understanding of communal bonds. Roosevelt asks that, “every father and mother here, if they are wise, will bring up their children not to shirk difficulties, but to meet them and overcome them; not to strive after a life of ignoble ease, but to strive to do their duty, first to themselves and their families, and then to the whole State” (ND 130). Thus the reader is forced to wrestle with a seemingly important contradiction within Roosevelt’s political texts: on one hand, he forcibly advocates for individual action; yet, on the other hand, he

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51 It should be noted that the beginning of “National Duties” echoes the sentiments expressed in Fredrick Jackson Turner’s famous address, “The Frontier in American History” (1893), which asserts that all of the virtuous qualities of Americans (ambition, egalitarianism, innovation, democracy, etc.) had their genesis in the white people who conquered the frontier.
justifies his doctrine by claiming that such action is in the best interest of the collective
group, which he always refers to as the State or the Nation.

For Roosevelt, the necessity and virtue of individual action is always the primary
concern. Consequently, an individual’s obligation is to themselves and to their immediate
family unit. Yet clearly, Roosevelt believes that, as citizens, individuals had an
obligation to the State and so, to one another. In “Manhood and Statehood” Roosevelt
claims that “each of us has not only his duty to himself, his family, and his neighbors, but
his duty to the State and to the nation” (119). In “National Duties,” Roosevelt goes on to
describe the individual’s ideal interaction with fellow citizens as a concerted effort
towards a common goal. He claims that, “besides each one of us working individually,
all of us have got to work together. We cannot possibly do our best work as a nation
unless all of us know how to act in combination as well as how to act each individually
for himself” (Roosevelt ND 131). So, for Roosevelt, it is not enough that each man adopt
the doctrine of the strenuous life and learn how to best act for his own individual well-
being. Rather, the true man will be sure to direct his personal efforts to the good of
himself and his family, as well as to the greater good of American society as a whole.

Elsewhere, Roosevelt explains the necessity of service to the greater community
as a spirit of brotherhood. In doing so, he equates an element of male gender
performance (camaraderie) with abstract concepts of national identity. Silber helps to
place this impulse into a larger historical context in noting, “In the 1890s a growing body
of politicians and intellectuals also highlighted the connection between masculinity and
the nation. […] Manhood became more than just an individual expression of gendered
characteristics; it also came to symbolize something noble, abstract, and principled” (166). In his speech, “Brotherhood and The Heroic Virtues” (1901), Roosevelt claims that, “the realization of the underlying brotherhood of our people, the feeling that there should be among them an essential unity of purpose and sympathy, must be kept close at heart if we are to do our work well here in our American life” (122). Roosevelt recognizes the political necessity of civic cohesion and attempts to foster such a public sentiment. In an essay originally published in *Century*, “Fellow Feeling as a Political Factor” (1900), Roosevelt claims that:

> Fellow-feeling, sympathy in the broadest sense, is the most important factor in producing a healthy political and social life. Neither our national nor our local civil life can be what it should be unless it is marked by the fellow-feeling, the mutual kindness, the mutual respect, the sense of common duties and common interests, which arise when men take the trouble to understand one another, and to associate together for a common object. (31)

Here, Roosevelt marks social empathy as an essential value for the well-being of the State. Furthermore, he states that it is developed when individuals voluntarily join together for a higher purpose or cause.

Yet it is interesting that, for all of his public rhetoric about the need for fellow-feeling and acting in combination, Roosevelt’s primary motive is the development of a deeper sense of patriotism and national pride. In “Fellow-Feeling as a Political Factor,” Roosevelt is quite explicit about the ultimate function of civil solidarity:
I do mean to say that in the long run each section [of the country] is going to find that its welfare [...] is indissolubly bound up in, the welfare of other sections; and the growth of means of communication, the growth of education in its highest and finest sense, means the growth in the sense of solidarity throughout the country, in the feeling of patriotic pride of each American in the deeds of all other Americans – of pride in the past history and present and future greatness of the whole country. (32)

This passage highlights a rhetorical attempt to negate individual identities and construct a shared understanding of self based upon citizenship (at least white, male citizenship). Roosevelt pushes his audience to feel pride in their identification with America. He claims that national pride naturally grows along with greater communication and education.

Of course, a natural question would be as to how the greater good of the State is conveyed to the individual actors. In “National Duties,” Roosevelt goes on to identify the ultimate goal of community action as the process of law and governance: “The acting in combination can take many forms, but of course its most effective form must be when it comes in the shape of law – that is, of action by the community as a whole through the law-making body” (131). Here, Roosevelt suggests that there are many ways for individuals to act together in the best interest of the State, but the primary way should be via the legal institutions already in place. Since it is a civic duty to act in combination, and the most effective way to do this is by participating in the rule of law, a good citizen shows his community duty when he votes. Interestingly enough, individuals acting
together, united towards a common goal, are ultimately symbolized by another individual: the elected representative.

Ultimately, the emphasis on individual agency underpins Roosevelt’s most inclusive and brotherly speeches. In “Fellow-Feeling as a Political Factor,” Roosevelt relates an anecdote about how he came to a realization of the equality of the American experience:

My first intimate associates were ranchmen, cow-punchers, and game-hunters, and I speedily became convinced that there were no other men in the country who were their equals. Then I was thrown in with farmers, and I made up my mind that it was the farmer upon whom the foundations of the commonwealth really rested [. . .] by this time it dawned on me that they were all pretty good fellows, and that my championship of each set in succession above all other sets had sprung largely from the fact that I was very familiar with the set I championed, and less familiar with the remainder. (34)

So it is the individual’s association with a certain group which makes him more likely to respect said group. Roosevelt’s tacit acknowledgement of subjective favoritism may be a reason why he advocates for sympathy across the spectrums of American society. Yet, this fellow-feeling is still based upon a subjective identity with a given community, and is consequently just as individualistic as any other associations which that person chooses to make. Roosevelt, in other words, stops short of embracing communal values. Instead, he suggests that groups of individuals “act in combination” towards a subjective “ideal”. So
when Roosevelt seems to promote a group ethos, he is actually encouraging people to work alongside each other towards a goal that each of these individuals holds dear.

Setting Roosevelt’s immediate political purposes aside, the important thing to note in this reading is that individualism is constantly stressed throughout these speeches. Even when Roosevelt directly addresses the need for and virtue of community, it is relegated to the margins, whereas individual action is given primary distinction. Directly before the previous passage on acting in combination, Roosevelt explains that, “after all has been said and done, the chief factor in any man’s success or failure must be his own character – that is, the sum of his common-sense, his courage, his virile energy and capacity. Nothing can take the place of this individual factor” (ND 130-31). As discussed in the previous section, Roosevelt’s essays promote individual rights over collective concerns and equate ones’ character with the performance of masculinity. So while Roosevelt does claim that acting in combination with one’s neighbor’s is a duty for every citizen, it is subservient to the necessity of the individual action mandated within his doctrine of the strenuous life.

Consequently, the apparent paradox of justifying an ethic of individualism through the concerns of the State or collective is easily brushed away for Roosevelt. His solution is simple. The individual’s primary obligation is to developing their own individual character, including their intelligence, courage, masculine strength, and skills. They should use these virtues to accomplish work in whatever capacity they are able. One’s time and accomplishments should be used to accomplish things for oneself and one’s family; additionally, one has an obligation to one’s neighbors. Yet, these civic
duties can be best understood as the obligation towards the State, in the sense that the best way to act in combination with other citizens is to work in establishing and maintaining the rule of law. Because the direct maintenance of the law is accomplished by individual elected officials in America, acting within a community also involves selecting individuals who are best able to use their manly character to determine the course of the Nation. This circular reasoning begins and ends with the necessity of a sense of character, a masculine ethos, deeply rooted within individualism.

Furthermore, Roosevelt maintains that, unlike previous civilizations, in America it is possible to preserve racial integrity while also defending individualism. In “Manhood and Statehood” he claims that “we have preserved the complete unity of an expanding race without impairing in the slightest degree the liberty of the individual. [...] At last we grew to accept as axiomatic the two facts of national union and local and personal freedom” (116). The “middle ground,” so to speak, between interests of the collective and individual rights is in the “ideal” that is shared by the individual members of a social group. As in the passage above, the concepts of individual freedom and collective responsibility are also tied up in the “complete unity of an expanding race”. In other words, one of the most unifying ideals for Roosevelt was the notion of racial purity. In the next section, I will show how Roosevelt used misguided notions about race and Otherness to defend his vision of American masculinity.
IV

Roosevelt and the Racial Other

It cannot be stressed enough that the entire project of “re-masculinizing” the country embarked upon by Roosevelt and others was supported by fears of the racial Other, of less civilized, inferior races which many men felt threatened the future progress and prosperity of the nation. Silber observes: “That which was ‘truly American’ was increasingly defined in racial terms, as the destiny of a race of striving, active, vigorous – and white – individuals” (158). By locating the spirit of the country within each individual (white) male, Roosevelt also exposes one of the most misguided and pernicious justifications for his aggressive, imperialistic rhetoric. Sara Watts explains that, “Roosevelt’s racial concerns cast whiteness as integral to his theory of national manhood. The possibility of evolutionary racial backsliding popularized by the era’s social Darwinists led white men to fear that humans and apes shared common ancestors and that nonwhite populations posed a threat to white racial hegemony” (24).

Justification for this worldview was easy to come by at the end of the nineteenth century in America. Social Darwinism supposedly gave scientific basis for the alienation and outright oppression of groups deemed “unfit” by dominant society. Bederman explains that Roosevelt hoped that “through this imperialistic evolutionary struggle, he could advance his race toward the most perfect possible civilization. This, for Roosevelt, was

52 Mark Dyer’s biography is still considered the definitive study of Roosevelt’s attitudes towards race.
the ultimate power of Manhood” (171). Of course, this definition of manhood excluded everyone who was not a white, northern European, protestant male.

For Roosevelt, then, adopting rhetoric which enflamed fears of the racial Other was a strategy that could help illustrate the necessity of adopting his performance of manhood, and the end would justify the means. Consequently, Watts’ observation that, for Roosevelt, “Identity was formed at the point of exclusion,” becomes essential to an appreciation of the impact Roosevelt had in shaping the popular conception of manhood and even national identity (34). Watts remarks that “Roosevelt promoted the ideas of social control theorists like [Lamarkian Edward A.] Ross because they provided a means to reestablish control over an increasingly pluralistic society” (57). Furthermore, “Ross and Roosevelt infused political discourses with new racial terms – race suicide, race consciousness, race war, race prejudice, and race question – terms that heightened the self-awareness of white racial identity, contributed to whites’ sense of racial exclusiveness, and raised the specter of inevitable racial conflict” (Watts 57, author’s emphasis). Roosevelt actively differentiates between “civilized” men, and the “barbarian,” stoking fears of the racial Other throughout his rhetoric in order to justify his call for a new type of male behavior. Therefore, the racial Other becomes absolutely

53 Consequently, Skidmore’s assertion, “One should remember that TR’s practice generally was considerably more prudent than his language” (40) rings somewhat hollow, for it is his public persona and rhetorical constructions which were so influential, not necessarily his private actions outside of the media limelight he seemed to crave so much.

54 Several recent studies explore Roosevelt’s interaction with racial minorities within specific contexts in interesting ways which seem to support Roosevelt’s ingrained racism, while also acknowledging his capacity for respect and occasional admiration of individuals, especially those who lived up to his perception of the strenuous life. For
fundamental to his understanding of manhood; for, without one, there is not as strong of a case for the other.

Roosevelt, along with the majority of white men of his era, formed his male identity through the understanding of the way a “real man” was supposed to behave, and also in opposition to the way “savages,” “barbarians,” “primitives,” “degenerates,” etc. were understood to act, at least according to conventional wisdom. One of the distinctions which Roosevelt and other imperialist politicians made to rationalize the subjugation of the “other” races, all of whom were constructed as inferior to white Anglo-Saxon manhood, was their supposed savagery. Silber explains that, “The white race, explained racial theorists in the 1890s, had advanced to the most civilized stage yet known to exist. Whites, in fact, seemed to be the only race truly capable of promoting an advanced ‘civilization,’ one that progressed beyond the savagery and barbarism of other peoples” (175). To be white was to be, in the discourse of the age, at the pinnacle of the evolutionary process and a part of the vanguard of civilization. In fact, Watts views the “civilization-savagery dichotomy” as the most essential to Roosevelt, as it encompassed all other metaphors, because every arena of life could be construed as advancing or inhibiting social progress. As a result, a central precept of the strenuous life is the necessity of preserving American masculinity in order to keep the “barbarians at the gates” from overwhelming the racial purity of the nation, thus contributing to its devolution. Yet the aggression veiled in this observation also highlights an interesting example, Mark Braley discusses Roosevelt’s interactions with segregated black army units in the Spanish-American war.
belief of the period: to be truly civilized, one must employ violence against savage peoples.

Roosevelt’s conception of strenuous manhood advocates the use of force as the primary means for subduing the lesser races. In “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt maintains that, “in the long run civilized man finds he can only keep the peace by subduing his barbarian neighbor; for the barbarian will yield only to force” (14). In other words, Roosevelt believes that violence is justified, as long as it is employed in the subjugation of racial inferior individuals. Greenberg explains that “Middle-class men were encouraged to embrace their animal nature, to improve their physical strength, and to develop their martial virtues so that they could successfully compete with men of less-refined classes and races” (9). In this view, the superior race needed to employ the same brutality with which they characterized the other races as inferior in order to maintain their rightful dominance and preserve civilization. Yet white aggression was perceived as justified because it was supposed that the superior race would only employ violence in a righteous and restrained manner. Watts claims that “Roosevelt, like most men of his class, understood us to signify the select, fraternal, collective body of white male citizens, those men capable of expressing primal passions in a civilized manner” (23). This seeming contradiction inherent in the expression of savage passions through civilized rituals runs through most of the emerging gendered institutions (e.g.: The Boy Scouts of America, the rise of collegiate and professional sports, the cultural obsession with bodybuilding, etc.) of the era.
With these representations in mind, it is easy to characterize Roosevelt as an example of jingoistic and racist American foreign and domestic policy intent upon keeping white, patriarchal authority firmly entrenched and making sure that all other groups stayed in their place under the boot heel of white supremacy. Yet Roosevelt apologists maintain that the man himself was often quite appreciative and kind to marginalized individuals and was quite friendly with a variety of people from other ethnic backgrounds. For example, Roosevelt had Booker T. Washington to the White House, making him the first President to invite an African American leader to a state dinner. For all of Roosevelt’s bombastic rhetoric regarding the threat of racial degeneration, he was, at times, willing to view members of other racial groups as individuals and even as friends.

In fact, Roosevelt implies that one cannot simply judge another by presumed stereotypes attributed to their perceived ethnic origins. When describing the hostility between white ranchers and Native Americans in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*,

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55 However, one must remember that Roosevelt did win a Nobel Peace Prize in 1905 for negotiating the end to the Russo-Japanese War and was instrumental in pushing for a second convention at The Hague, with the goal of promoting world peace (Tuchman 274). These details serve as further reminders of the complexity of Roosevelt’s worldview.

56 To be fair, there are a few scholars who defend Roosevelt’s attitude towards race. Max Skidmore claims that Roosevelt’s rhetoric on race “was a product of his time, certainly, and in his time racist attitudes were more overt than today. But he had no use for the crude racism of his contemporaries” (35). However, Skidmore’s attempt to excuse Roosevelt’s attitude by comparing it to the most bigoted characters available seems graspingly apologetic and as much a product of the modern era as those who would not place Roosevelt’s rhetoric in its proper historical context. Besides, adopting the attitude of “that is just the way things were back then,” misses an opportunity to revisit the rationale for these attitudes at that time and explore contemporary parallels that might become indicative of a return to lamentable stereotypes and oppression.
Roosevelt himself notes that, “the chief trouble arises from [. . .] the tendency on each side to hold the race, and not the individual, responsible for the deeds of the latter” (105). Here, there seems to be an acknowledgement of the fallacy of generalization, as well as further proof of Roosevelt’s emphasis on individualism in all aspects of public life. The issue with racial stereotyping, according to Roosevelt, is that individuals are not being judged by their own merits, which is problematic for his doctrine of the strenuous life. Roosevelt’s statement here, like the tension between Victorian and strenuous male performance in his personal life or individualism and the collective good in his speeches, betray a fracture point in the façade of the doctrine of the strenuous life he tried to faithfully perform. Roosevelt is, at times, willing to acknowledge a complexity of human interaction beyond scope of his rhetoric. He is obligated to defend the meritocracy of individual action, which is undermined by racial stereotypes. Yet, he is also all too willing to fall back on the “party line” and pick up the banner of strenuous manhood and racial purity.

Immediately after his acknowledgement of the fallacy of stereotypes in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, Roosevelt goes on to engage in the categorizing tendency he has just condemned. Roosevelt claims that, “even the best Indians are very apt to have a good deal of the wild beast in them; when they scent blood they wish their share of it, no matter from whose vein it flows” (107). The proximity of these two statements (within two paragraphs of one another) further illustrates the apparent paradox noted above: how can a man who publicly insisted on the inferiority of all other races also acknowledge that such generalizations are responsible for the majority of the ill will between them? I find
Roosevelt’s discussion here (in a chapter entitled “Red and White on the Border,” nonetheless) to be indicative of an overall mindset that remains relatively constant throughout his textual production. For Roosevelt, individuals need to be held responsible for their actions; failing to do so would result in injustice. Therefore, it is important evaluate people by their actions, be they red, black, brown, or white. The notion of individualism would presumably judge individuals by their actions, not by preexisting suppositions about behaviors assumed to be common to a Race. However, Roosevelt also believed that other racial groups were genetically inferior and less evolved than white Americans. Consequently, while it was not just to hold an individual legally accountable for supposed behaviors, it was only natural to assume that they would, in fact, exhibit those traits.

The distinction between needing to judge individual actions and condoning racial stereotypes seems to be based upon the sphere in which this judgment occurs. On the personal level, Roosevelt can admit that stereotypes are unjust and incorrect, because they lead to violent chaos and injustice. But in the public sphere, at the macro-level, prescribing traits to an entire race of people is perfectly acceptable, because the characteristics are generally true (at least in Roosevelt’s view). For example, Roosevelt gives his reader the aforementioned passages in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*: if faced with an individual theft of horses, presuming that certain local Indians committed the crime because Indians are natural thieves is unjust and could (and certainly did) lead to the death of innocents. However, Roosevelt can make a general statement that all Indians are blood-thirsty because, in his worldview, Native Americans were less evolved,
and therefore naturally closer to animal instincts and savagery, than whites. In other words, the distinction is between these Indians and all Indians. In a specific case, such as the theft of horses, those in question, Native Americans or not, should be judged according to their individual actions and merits. In a general case, such as how all Native Americans should be expected to behave, it is only natural (in Roosevelt’s view) to make suppositions based upon the eugenically evolutionary science of the age. If this seems to be a case of semantic hair-splitting, it was quite prevalent and the way Roosevelt sees the world.

Because Roosevelt frames civilizing conquest of the Other as an essential masculine duty, opposition of the Other takes on a gendered significance. In “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt mocks those American politicians who do not wish to occupy the Philippines, claiming that anti-imperialists believed that “we should merely turn them over to rapine and bloodshed until some stronger, manlier power stepped in to do the task we had shown ourselves fearful of performing” (16). Here, as elsewhere, Roosevelt links manliness to strength and direct action. In an interesting rhetorical move, he ties rape and bloodshed to the lack of military occupation. Furthermore, this gendered and racial aesthetic was increasing propagated by the popular, and even literary, American print culture.

V

The Impact of Rooseveltian Manhood on American Literary Naturalism

One of the most overlooked of Roosevelt’s contributions to American culture is the effect he had on the literary production of his time. Roosevelt, himself a prodigious
author and historian, shaped the American literary landscape according to his image of “the national character” in unprecedented ways. Watts notes that Roosevelt “understood the role of a national literature. More importantly, he assumed personal responsibility for creating a masculinized narrative of America’s role in civilization’s progress, and he enlisted himself as one of its heroes” (26). Roosevelt’s belief in his personal responsibility for shaping the portrayal of manhood presented in the media and popular literature of his age had an influence over the setting and plotlines of a vast number of works. Specifically, the tradition of American Literary Naturalism would have been profoundly different were it not for the influence of Roosevelt.

Although the earliest novels widely considered to be a part of the tradition of American Literary Naturalism followed a recognizable European model, at least in terms of plot development, later novels were increasingly set in more dangerous and exotic locales. Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills*, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* are all urban novels which explore the determined existence of middle to lower-class characters, much like the novels of French Naturalists like Flaubert and Zola. However, the works of Norris, London, and even Crane increasingly depicted scenes straight from the script of the strenuous life.

In Patrick Dooley’s opinion, “the age of heroism, expansion and exploration, notably the polar expeditions, inspired Frank Norris’ 1900 arctic adventure tale, *A Man’s Woman* and Jack London’s celebration of life *in extremis*, in his Klondike stories like ‘To Build a Fire,’ *The Call of the Wild* and in *The Sea Wolf*, all appearing in the first decade
of the 1900s” (162). While Dooley’s understanding of the cultural genesis for these tales of adventure is correct, strictly speaking, he misses perhaps the most important catalyst for the formation of these stories and, more importantly, their enthusiastic reception by an eager audience. Roosevelt’s construction of strenuous masculinity is so engrained and publicly accepted by this time that it begins to seep into the vigorous stories by these young authors. By the time London publishes *The Sea Wolf*, the necessity of proving one’s masculinity becomes the driving engine of the novel’s plot. So the question remains as to what caused so drastic a change in the understanding of normative male behavior in less than one generation? The answer seems to be the emergence of Theodore Roosevelt as a culture figure and masculine model, a gendered presence within American culture that still resonates to this day.

In the March 2005 issue of the *New Criterion*, cultural critic Harvey S. Mansfield establishes Theodore Roosevelt’s “manliness” as central to his politics and ultimately to his historical and political influence. Mansfield’s admiration of Roosevelt’s “assertive manliness,” seems clear, as he sees in it a welcome contrast to the “sensitive males of our time who shall be and deserve to be nameless” (5). While Mansfield’s near hero-worship of strenuous masculinity seems at best problematic and at worst dangerously misogynistic and racist (especially when one examines what Roosevelt’s brand of masculinity actually represented to those it marginalized), it does serve as a stark reminder of the influence Roosevelt’s gendered rhetoric and consciously modeled lifestyle continue to have over the perception of what it means to be “manly” in America within certain segments of society. Yet perhaps this influence is to be expected after all,
for Roosevelt was a part of one of the most drastic changes in the social perception of normative masculinity in American history.

By the end of the nineteenth century, American social perceptions of normative male behavior codified around a construction of vigorous manhood with especially violent and individualistic implications. While this change may not have taken place within the last decade of that century, the 1890s are when the construction seems to finally shake off the last vestiges of Victorian ideas of self-restraint and becomes the dominant construction of heterosexual masculinity. Consequently, Roosevelt’s texts reflect the ways in which this assertive, striving, combative understanding of manhood had become so prevalent that its evocation became a rhetorical strategy in its own right. This implies that “The Strenuous Life” was so well known and accepted that the mere mention of manhood in the socio-political realm would have conjured up a shared set of assumptions for the men in the assembled audience, associations which would have proscribed a set of responses and behaviors, the performance of which would have been increasingly hard to resist. In fact, several authors writing in this period seem to explore the results or consequences of just such potential defiance.

In this chapter I have attempted to hold up Roosevelt as a definitional figure, one who helped to shape a national narrative about proper male behaviors. In this sense, the influence of Roosevelt’s doctrine of the strenuous life and its implications for American male identity infuses popular media culture, including the literary production of Naturalist writers. Roosevelt’s brand of manhood is something with which the writers of this period must contend. However, contrary to many scholarly assumptions, not all
Naturalist authors accept and promote Rooseveltian male performances in their texts. Consequently, the remaining chapters will document the potential critique of strenuous masculinity in the works of Naturalist authors previously understood as instrumental in the dissemination of this “vigorous” construction. I assert that a wide variety of authors, from the classic phase of Naturalism to the late Naturalists writing immediately before the Second World War, actually complicate the brutish, violent understanding of male behavior in ways never before acknowledged. In fact, this critique lies at the heart of the Naturalist tradition, for the genre is essentially defined by the lack of human agency and the failures of individual action, central tenets of a strenuous masculinity. Therefore, Roosevelt becomes a touchstone for my reading of Stephen Crane and Richard Wright, as the figurehead for the conception of maleness they work to expose and complicate.

More importantly, Roosevelt functions as a framing figure for the rest of this study. If fact, my assertions will be successful if Roosevelt’s presence practically looms overhead of the Naturalist authors to follow, so essential is he to the understanding of masculinity against which they respond. The subsequent chapters will both confront the Rooseveltian model of manhood and illustrate the ways in which Stephen Crane and Richard Wright complicate and satirize the popular concept of strenuous masculinity. I will approach both of these authors in similar ways. Both chapters will offer analysis of the authors’ most recognizable novel, as well their short fiction, in order to showcase the futility of individual action and privilege a construction centered on homosocial community. Both will explore the function of Otherness in these texts, highlighting the juxtaposition of the impulses of inclusion and exclusion to explain its role in the
formation of male identification with a community. However, while the second chapter will contain greater depth of discussion regarding the failures of individualism in the fiction of Stephen Crane, the third chapter will delve into the complications inherent in the construction of masculinity within racial identity. In other words, the second chapter will clearly demonstrate the existence of a strong critique of strenuous masculinity and an alternative construction based upon homosocial community, while the third chapter will elaborate this thesis, as well as complicate it through the addition of another factor informing identity formation.
Chapter Two

“The Youth Leaned Heavily on his Friend”:
Alternative Constructions of Masculinity in Stephen Crane’s Fiction

One of the most interesting and debated statements in Stephen Crane’s iconic novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), belongs to the young protagonist in the final pages of the book. As he sits ruminating over the events of the past two days, Henry Fleming’s internal narrative voice declares, “He was a man” (135). What Henry means by this statement is highly debatable, as witnessed in the critical ink that has been spilled addressing this question since the novel’s publication. A close reading of the text creates an assumption that Henry views his deeds on the second day of battle through the rose-colored lenses of glory and heroism that he adopted in his reading of the martial struggles of antiquity as a younger boy. Viewing the story from this perspective suggests that Henry comes around “full-circle,” back to the view of war which leads him to join the

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57 The course of this debate is also determined by which edition one chooses to employ. Here, as in the rest of this study, I utilize *The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane* for my close readings and textual analysis. This edition includes the “Final Chapter” and the rest of the passages expurgated for the first Appleton edition as supplements to the published version. However, some critics, including Alfred Habegger, use the Binder edition (Norton, 1982) of the text, which attempts to retain the story as it appeared in the original manuscript, before it was edited and published. This pre-publication manuscript adds ambiguity to Henry’s claim of manhood, however, for there Henry precedes his declarative statement by asserting that his confrontation with “the Great Death” was for the others, not himself. This version makes his claim to manhood much more selfish and ironic than the first published (Appleton) edition.
Union army in the first place. Another reading would be to see this statement as ironic; that Henry’s deeds are not “manly” because they were never motivated by an altruistic higher duty or sense of honor, but result from his survival instinct taking over. This primal response is attractive because it seems most in line with Crane’s assumed Naturalist project and is consistent with common approaches to most of the author’s other work. However, this ironic view also assumes that Henry’s narrative persona, his voice, has been adopted by an outside narrator, one who becomes a mouthpiece for Crane himself.

Regardless of how one reads that passage, both interpretations rest on assumptions about how Henry understands courage, honor, and duty and the relation of these virtues to the idea of maleness itself. In other words, it is hard to postulate what Henry means by “he was a man,” without first having some idea about who or what a

58 Donald Pizer gives the most coherent, recent rationale for reading Henry Fleming’s declarative statement literally in his article, “Henry Behind the Lines and the Concept of Manhood in The Red Badge of Courage.” Here, Pizer gives four reasons why Henry has “earned” his mantle of manhood, all of which revolve around Henry’s realization of and participation in the painful and universal realities of the human condition.

59 In his article, Michael Schaefer claims that “the ironic interpretation is accurate” because (among other things) Henry never adopts the sense of compassion so instrumental to Crane’s understanding of true manhood (104). Schaefer claims that, “Henry operates out of vanity,” rather than a clear moral sense, which limits his ability to fully enter into his own claims of manhood (105).

60 Anni Scacchi also notes that, “Fleming’s becoming or not becoming a man does not imply the questioning of the notion of manhood, but only a questioning [. . .] of popular versions of masculinity which became dominant at the turn of the century” (108). I agree with the latter part of this assertion, but not the first. Rather, I see the dilemma as a questioning of the notion of manhood itself, which he has learned through these versions of masculinity popularized during the period in which he writes the piece. It is not an either/or proposition, for there are simultaneous repercussions.
“man” really is within the context of the novel’s time period. Coming to an educated understanding of this key phrase, then, means first confronting Henry’s perception of his own masculinity and reconciling it with the understanding of manhood prevalent within the ranks of his fellow soldiers, the adoring men and young ladies of small Union towns, his mother, officers; in short, the social discourse of gender as a whole. This chapter will explore Crane’s presentation of masculinity, specifically his depiction of alternative versions of male identity formation and performance.

I argue that Stephen Crane’s fiction offers representations of male life which complicate and critique the existing homogeneous constructions of vigorous manhood or “the strenuous life.” Rather than glorifying and asserting a homogenous vision of manhood, I suggest that many of the novels and short stories of Stephen Crane place competing constructions of masculinity into dialogue with one another.61 Because these stories function to critique the dominant narratives of the triumph of the individual will by privileging bonds of friendship, cooperation, and communication, they essentially support alternative constructions of manhood, including more homosocial understanding of masculinity. These stories, then, present their readers with possibilities of male behavior which critique the concept of Rooseveltian masculinity prevalent in this period.

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61 I am not the first to note the structural pattern of oppositional dialogue in many of Crane’s works. R. W. Stallman’s introduction to Crane’s biography asserts this tendency (xxiv-xxvii) and Pizer claims that “almost all of Crane’s major fiction [. . .] is that of a rhythmic movement of alternative emotional or moral conditions” (FWH 280). I would merely add social conditions (in the sense of socially asserted gender roles) to this list, an instinct which Pizer seems to share in his exploration of the “rival codes” of the male and female spheres of influence in George’s Mother.
In this chapter, I will document Crane’s nuanced representation of masculinity in a variety of ways. First, I will examine Crane’s relationship with Roosevelt, in order to establish the author’s exposure to the ideology of strenuous manhood. Second, I will provide a close reading of Crane’s most familiar text, *The Red Badge of Courage*, which will document the failure of masculine identity formation grounded within individualism and the success of homosocial bonds of camaraderie. Third, I will use several short stories, including “Five White Mice,” “The Blue Hotel,” and “The Open Boat,” from Crane’s *Tales of Adventure* to highlight the rejection of violent individual action and the depiction of homosocial male bonds. Finally, I will juxtapose the impulses of group formation (exclusion and inclusion) to demonstrate Crane’s acknowledgement of the problems inherent in any cultural construction of male identity. While Crane’s fiction critiques the strenuous male gender roles of the end of the nineteenth century, he is also careful to document how alternative constructions of masculinity based within homosocial community also presents the potential for trauma and alienation, due to the exclusionary impulse present in the group’s foundation. These techniques will demonstrate the author’s vision of “proper” male behavior and identity formation that is quite different than the ideals advocated by Roosevelt. However, Crane has been traditionally linked with Roosevelt’s view in the past, perhaps due to the setting and subject matter of his most famous stories, coupled with the personal relationships he had with many of the staunchest defenders of the strenuous vision of manhood.
I

Critical Assumptions Regarding Crane’s Adoption of Rooseveltian Masculinity

As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, scholars have already examined the changes to the popular perception of gender at the end of the nineteenth century. While most of these studies note that the new assertions of strenuous masculinity and more individual, assertive male gender roles were not universally accepted or embraced, few have actually looked towards the literary production of this period for evidence of alternative constructions. In fact, most gender critics still view American Literary Naturalism as somehow complicit in the propagation of the more imperialist, violent, and individualistic strain of masculinity which came to dominate the social discourse of the final decade of the nineteenth century in America. Certain criticism of Stephen Crane has included the author in this phenomenon, asserting that his

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62 Studies of gender during the final decades of the nineteen century have been numerous and exhaustive. For a cursory overview of the recent trends in scholarship across disciplines, see the introduction and first chapter of this study. The most directly applicable criticism may be found in Gail Bederman, Michael Kimmel, Anthony Rotundo, and Elaine Showalter.

63 This is not to say that these critics do not have a valid point; however, it is the totalizing tendency of their claim with which I take issue. Carol Green’s foundational article on Crane could be considered representative of the types of viewpoints to which I refer here, along with Habegger and Seltzer’s work. As previously discussed in the introduction, Fleissner also summarizes the critical assumption of a “hypermasculine” performance of male behavior in her book, while Dudley accepts the assumption so completely that he uses it to support the argument of his book.
consistent depiction of male violence and the martial settings of many of his tales only reinforced the gender ideology of the period.\textsuperscript{64}

One of the reasons that so many critics see a connection between Crane’s depiction of masculinity and the “bully manhood” advocated by Roosevelt is the connection these two figures had in their personal lives.\textsuperscript{65} Scholars can point to at least three different occasions in which the life paths of these men intersected. First, Matthew Evertson documents Crane’s familiarity with Roosevelt’s wilderness tales published in magazines like \textit{Century}. In fact, the issues containing “Battles and Leaders of the Civil War,” which played such an important role in his composition of \textit{The Red Badge of Courage}, also featured several prominent Wilderness tales by Roosevelt (Evertson 8). It is quite probable that Crane read these wildly popular stories, especially given his own

\textsuperscript{64}For a wholly negative approach to Crane’s western fiction, see Raymund Paredes’ “Stephen Crane and the Mexican” in \textit{Western American Literature} (Spring 1971). Schaefer notes that Paredes offers the strongest denunciation of Crane in the entire body of his criticism (148). Here, Paredes feels that Crane is a racist, misogynist bigot who truly asserts the romanticized masculine codes of his popular culture.

\textsuperscript{65}A variety of scholars have tried to link Crane’s body of work to Rooseveltian ideals. Many critics, like John Dudley, see an implicit link between propaganda in support of the Spanish-American War and Crane’s own enthusiastic journalism covering major battles. For example, most of Crane’s biographers (including Stallman, Thomas Beer, etc.) present an anecdote about Crane’s participation in the battle for San Juan Hill. According to solders, Crane, a non-combatant reporter, picked up a gun and helped to repulse a charge of the Spanish infantry during an especially crucial moment. Roosevelt was supposedly told of the event and later used the anecdote as evidence of the superiority of the American male to his Spanish counterpart. While historians debate the validity of these claims, they could serve as further evidence of the assumptions surrounding Crane’s performance of male identity.
affinity for wilderness writing in his early career.\(^{66}\) Secondly, scholars know that

Roosevelt was present at a meeting of the New York Lantern Club in 1896 and requested
to meet Crane personally (Stallman 215).\(^ {67}\) A small article described the reopening of the
Sign O’ the Lantern Club, where Crane, a charter member, “read one of his characteristic
stories” (\textit{NY Times} 8). The article notes that Theodore Roosevelt and Hamlin Garland
were in attendance. Crane’s niece, Helen, says that, “he could talk all night with
Theodore Roosevelt […] about the virtues of the Single-Tax or the genius of Flaubert”
(qtd in Stallman 45). Stallman documents that, “Crane sent a signed copy of \textit{George’s}
\textit{Mother} [1897] to Roosevelt” and that Roosevelt wrote him back, asking for a signed
copy of \textit{The Red Badge of Courage} because he liked “that book the best” (218). Finally,
the two figures came together in the “Dora Clark affair.” Roosevelt was the Police
Commissioner of New York City at this time and his “beat” was the Bowery, an area
Crane knew intimately well from his writing of \textit{Maggie}. Crane wrote to Roosevelt

\(^{66}\) Evertson documents the similarities between Roosevelt’s Wilderness tales and Crane’s
early stories and Sullivan County sketches in great detail.

\(^{67}\) Stallman’s meticulously researched biography of Stephen Crane is the most thorough
historical study of the author to date. The text attempts to discuss the elements of
Crane’s life and their eventual relationship to and depiction in his fiction. This biography
represents an important improvement over the deeply erroneous volumes of Beer and is
an invaluable tool for traditional biographical interpretation. Yet, there have been letters
published since Stallman’s publication, so some of the correspondence is out of date.
Linda Davis’ recent biography presents a view of Crane fully informed by the recently
discovered correspondence of the author. This text finally separates fiction from the facts
about Crane’s ribald life and attempts to establish the superiority of his short fiction over
his novels and poetry. Unlike older approaches, Davis’ biography does not spend time
linking details about Crane’s life to events to the author’s creative production, which
functions to provide her audience with a better understanding of cultural influences on
the author’s body of work than previous studies.
complaining of the behavior of the police in Madison Square Garden (Stallman 218).

One evening, an acquaintance of Crane’s was arrested in his company for supposedly soliciting a policeman. Crane defended this girl’s honor in court, but Roosevelt sided with the policeman’s version of events and ignored all communications from Crane from that point on (Stallman 221). Clearly, these men were acquaintances. Yet, as Evertson notes, “despite the fact that [. . .] Roosevelt makes several brief but pivotal appearances in the Crane biography – Crane’s relationship with Roosevelt and the influence that T.R may have had upon his own writing and career have gone relatively unexplored in literary scholarship” (2).

Most critics who do notice a connection between Crane and Roosevelt fixate upon the supposed connection between the “strenuous life” espoused by the President and the “heroes” in Crane’s Tales of Adventure. However, Evertson attempts to show that Crane’s depiction of characters who are living the vigorous life often function to subtly critique values of heroism (2). Yet Evertson observes Crane playing with the convention of heroism only, while I think that this “playing” with the script of male ritual and behavior has more far-reaching implications. Furthermore, the fragility and anxiety of these masculine ceremonies is especially revealed when they are read as products of a strenuous masculinity. The contemporary code of manhood required men to project the ability to respond to exterior threats with a performance of violence and individualism. Neither of these values lends itself well to the projection of the camaraderie and support

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68In A Man’s Game, for example, Dudley claims that Crane’s characters in these short stories are representative of American men living the “sporting life” (55).
necessary to gain admittance into a masculine group, but they were (and in many ways still are) required as visible proof of a man’s masculinity nonetheless. Crane’s irony functions to test and critique the boundaries of conventional notions of masculinity itself, not just the understanding of heroism.

Recent critical works have continued to view Crane as conformist, and have failed to admit the author’s revolutionary contributions to the gendered “questions” of his day. For example, John Dudley ignores the radical implications of Crane’s gendered “project” in fixating upon the author’s supposed vision of the artist’s role within society. Instead, he claims that Crane adopts “the metaphorical language of masculinity in an attempt to resolve the problem of the passive artist as mere spectator. The struggle to become an interpreter, to create meaning from the chaos of nature, is, for Crane, the proper enterprise for the naturalist writer – a challenge made more difficult when one confronts the hollowness of the masculine rituals” (Dudley 16). Dudley’s identification of Crane’s vision rings true and I see my project as an extension of his argument of the centrality of gendered themes within Crane’s texts. However, I believe that Crane also plays with and critiques dominant cultural gender norms, rather than merely creating a space for a masculine concept of the artist. For example, Crane does seem to reveal the intrinsic “hollowness” of masculine rituals at the end of the nineteenth century, but he accomplishes this by contrasting them against the security of the homosocial community in which the initiate wishes to participate. They appear hollow against the backdrop of the stability and inclusivity of the articulated, defined male group, because even participating within the rituals themselves is no guarantee that the supplicant will be
granted access into the desired community. It is this “next step” that is missing from the excellent analysis of these scholars.

The lack of recognition of the central role of group identity is a glaring omission, for it shifts the way that readers approach Crane, especially regarding his depiction of gender. For example, Michael Schafer claims that the “expression of human solidarity” is what makes the realization of the futility of human action bearable and what helps his characters assert order in the midst of chaos (“Heroes had no Shame…” 4). However, I assert that Crane’s expression of masculine solidarity is, in fact, the same thing as the “subtle brotherhood” so praised and admired by the narrator in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Although Crane certainly privileges community in his work, he does so not only as a philosophical comment on the necessity of using interpersonal bonds as a way to confront the realization of human futility in life, but also as a critique of prevailing notions of what it means to be a human being, and more specifically, a man.

II


*The Red Badge of Courage* is generally considered a literary masterpiece, even in its initial contemporary reviews. However, some reviewers considered the author’s depiction of the war as juvenile and bitterly opposed what they viewed as Crane’s satiric representation of soldiers. One such critic was General A. C. McClurg, who in the April edition of *The Dial*, roundly castigates the novel for its depiction of the combatants, complaining that:
The hero of the book, if such he can be called, was an ignorant and stupid country lad without a spark of patriotic feeling or soldierly ambition [. . .]. He is throughout an idiot or a maniac and betrays no trace of the reasoning being. No thrill of patriotic devotion to cause or country ever moves his breast, and not even an emotion of manly courage. Even a wound which he finally gets comes from a comrade who strikes him on the head to get rid of him; and this is the only “Red Badge of Courage” (!) which we discover in the book. (qtd in Stallman 182)

This critique can be considered representative of those relatively few reviews which did not praise the novel because it fixates upon a particularly provocative claim; namely, that the hero is not heroic. Yet General McClurg directs his complaint not against the literary style of the piece, but against its depiction of “manly courage.” In other words, McClurg’s primary issue with the text seems to be grounded upon its depiction of “proper” male behavior in the face of violent death. Henry Fleming, in the General’s words, acts like an “idiot,” and a “maniac,” throughout the novel and betrays an “ignorant” disregard for patriotic devotion. McClurg’s complaint is that Henry is not a good, “manly,” role model. He exhibits fear, runs in terror from the battlefield, contains no patriotic zeal, and so forth. As contrarian as the general’s comments may seem today, they are not disingenuous. In fact, they represent a valid critique of the text when placed within a proper analytical context. That is to say, if one views the “correct” type of male soldierly behavior to be comprised of such specific virtues as “patriotic feeling,” “soldierly ambition,” “devotion to cause,” and “manly courage,” then Henry Fleming is a
protagonistic failure indeed. But this view is rather provocative if one accepts the 
generally held conclusion that *The Red Badge of Courage* is a story about a boy’s 
transformation into a man and the trauma and peril he encounters along the way. 
Consequently, it is first necessary to ascertain Henry’s own understanding of what it 
means to be a man.

At the opening of the novel Henry is a “regular” boy; he reads stories of martial 
prowess and daydreams about the glories of battle. While he realizes these idle thoughts 
are mere fantasies, he also endows them with formative meaning. Henry Fleming had 
“dreamed of battles all his life – of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with 
their sweep and fire” (29). Dreaming of battle implies some sort of wish development 
and hope for eventual fulfillment. Battle is fantasy here and in that fantasy world “he had 
seen himself in many struggles” (29). Yet outside of his daydreams, Henry knows that 
the martial world is not reality, even as he exists in the eternal limbo of the soldier’s 
camp. He laments, “He had long despaired of witnessing a Greek like struggle. [. . . ] 
Men were better, or more timid” (30). This passage is revelatory, for it helps the reader 
to understand Fleming’s own perception of manhood. Henry wants to “witness” battles 
of heroic proportions, not necessarily participate in them. Yet, he also immediately 
confides that modern man is either better than this primitive “throat-grappling” instinct or 
they are more subdued. Consequently, the narrator leads the reader to see temerity as the 
opposite of restraint of the passions. For Henry Fleming, in the 1890s, men can be 
“better” than bloodlust, or they can be timid. Henry does not wish to act out this fantasy, 
however. He wants to see it, to be sure, but he never comments on actually participating
in the scenes he describes. The text notes that “he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds” (30). Henry’s voyeuristic tendencies follow him throughout the novel and this passage foreshadows his existential crisis throughout the story; what is one to do when the picture can no longer be merely observed, when the scene becomes event?

Interestingly, the narrator describes Henry’s mother, rather than a male figure, as the embodiment of logic and restraint. It is his mother who articulates the clearest set of guidelines for what it means to become a man and acknowledges the perils of that journey. His mother “could calmly seat herself, and with no apparent difficulty give him many hundreds of reasons why he was of vastly more importance on the farm than on the field of battle” (30). She expresses concern for his material comfort and then warns him against the dangers of choosing the wrong peer groups. Finally, she admonishes him to

69 Carol Green’s article is representative of the common critical view that Crane’s female characters are no more than hollow shells. Green’s tone is critical of Crane, and seems to view him as stereotypically male, or at least as representative of a young male perspective towards women. Perhaps most significant to the argument here is her claim that, “Women, too, fall prey to members of their own sex; there is not among them the loyalty of brotherhood that Crane, the ‘preacher’s kid,’ created as a faith. It was that capacity for loyalty that redeemed men; without it, all women – not just the prostitutes who fascinated Crane – were fallen women” (2). Yet this passage seems to complicate that understanding, for it is his unnamed mother who is described according to Victorian male gender roles of restraint, calm emotions, steadfast belief, and ethical motivation.

70 Karen Kilcup’s interesting book chapter provides some clarity to the juxtaposition of gender roles present in the interaction between the mother and Henry. Her discussion attempts to outline the changing perceptions regarding the masculine and feminine literary traditions and ultimately offers an alternative explanation to the traditional perception of gender. Kilcup asserts that current literary criticism has severed male and female traditions in writing to such an extent that reintegration is nearly impossible (1). However, reading Henry’s mother in the manner suggested here illustrates Crane’s attempt at integration of gender roles, perhaps warranting further scholarship.
take the example of his father. “You must allus remember yer father, too, child, an’
remember that he never drunk a drop of licker in his life, and seldom swore a cross oath”
(32). So proper male behavior, at least in the home and at the beginning of the novel,
becomes equated, not with war and martial bravery, but with temperance and piety. Yet,
Crane’s decision to embody older forms of Victorian manhood in the only female
character in the novel serves to highlight the irony of mother’s advice, as her ideals are
outdated and clash with emerging constructions of individualism. Consequently, Henry
rejects them and adopts an understanding of manhood popular with his peers.

Henry lies about his age, defies his widowed mother’s wishes, and abandons her
to solitary toil on the farm so that he may indulge his military fantasies. His primary
rationale is not patriotism, concern for the injustices of slavery, or even a desire to test his
own personal mettle when he runs away to join the Union Army. Rather, his concern
seems to revolve around the way his service will be viewed by his peers. Henry’s
motivations involve the sighs of young girls, the way that the “brass buttons” on his
uniform make him feel important, and the speeches and dinners given in the honor of the
volunteers as they travel to the front. He does not mention any type of military training,
nor does he dwell upon much of his camp life before the fateful battle depicted in the
text. Rather, his ruminations are on what brought him to that place and his fears of
performance.

Henry wants to perform the script of proper male behavior within this martial
context and he spends much of the first three chapters trying to feel out what should be
expected of him. Marching with his peers, he realizes that, “there were iron laws of
tradition and law on four sides. He was in a moving box” (23). He acknowledges that
the expectations of his gender, just like those of his uniform, are trapping him within a
cell of tradition. He constantly interrogates the other young men in his regiment,
questioning their boasts of bravery and comparing their outward shows of bravado to his
own internal struggle with fear. In fact, Henry initially only compares his own anxiety
with the other soldier’s loud assertions of their future prowess in battle. He feels horribly
depressed by concerns that he will run away from the future battle and begins to isolate
himself, perhaps as a defense mechanism so that his young friends will not discover his
shameful fears.

It is not until Henry is confronted with an actual war experience that he begins to
extricate himself from his imposed isolation, and the strong feelings of camaraderie that
he has for his fellow soldiers displace his anxiety and help him survive the first onslaught
of enemy soldiers. Yet, before long Henry again reverts back to personal introspection
and mental isolation. He continually places himself apart from the soldiers with whom
he just fought. This individualism proves disastrous to his self-image, however, for at the
resumption of the battle and the renewed charge of Confederate soldiers, Henry breaks
into a run and flees the scene. He spends the next several chapters wandering the
battlefield, alone with his thoughts and totally absorbed by his own feelings of cowardice
and shame. He misreads several opportunities to rejoin the community of men, opting
instead to wallow in his own misery. However, in one of the novel’s more blatant
ironies, he is eventually guided back to the camp of his own regiment by another
wounded soldier, who selflessly gives Henry his time and support to help him reach a male community that offers him aid and succor.

When Henry awakes in camp on the second day, he is figuratively and literally a new man. His peers do not challenge his lie about his head wound and do not seem to know that he ran away from the battle. Other soldiers are also changed as a result of their first experience under fire, all of which prompts Henry to renewed evaluation and introspection. In the battle of the second day, Henry performs well; he does not run and he is commended twice for “bravery”. He creates a deep bond with the “loud” soldier and they both survive the day’s combat.

Here we are confronted with two competing versions of male behavior: isolated individualism and homosocial community. In other words, *The Red Badge of Courage* actively places two available social narratives of what it means to be a man into dialogue. While Crane himself may not have been acutely aware of the implications of this contrast, his text ends up privileging what I call here a “homosocial” version of manhood. The reader is led to this conclusion via a two-pronged approach, for the text first forces he/she to confront the failures of individual action within the text, and then also to recognize the success of deeds which build community. By the end of the story, then, the audience has compared two models of male behavior: one which has failed to provide the protagonist with anything besides emotional trauma, and the other which seems to help him integrate or negotiate social interaction on a much more satisfactory level. This analysis will follow the text’s organization model, first exploring the failures of individualism before turning towards the successes of communal models of manhood.
The reader is confronted with the failures of individual action in myriad ways, but especially through Henry’s isolation, confusion, verbal disruption, and his mental distraction. Henry is characterized by his extreme individualism throughout the entire piece. He is always apart from others in his regiment. He often wanders off to sulk, ponder his actions, etc. This isolation contributes to his paranoia throughout the piece. Henry deeply resents that he is (or so he thinks) the only one questioning his own personal fortitude. After he runs away from the battle, Henry spends long hours wandering around by himself. This does not ease his mind or help him reconcile his actions with his own self-image. It only serves to deepen his depression and resigns him to despair. Habegger observes that “Crane’s narrator sneeringly calls attention to the callowness of his daydreams and self-exculpating rationalizations, particularly when he is wandering in isolation” (FW 185). In other words, Henry’s physical isolation reflects his existential and emotional individualism, both of which alienate him from his fellow soldiers and contribute to his own self-doubt and fear. Habegger is correct in that the reader does view Henry’s misguided exultations and philosophical musings as absurd and hyperbolic. They do nothing to help him adjust to the traumatic scenes he encounters or to deal with the realities of war in any positive way. Instead his isolation and individualism perpetuate his lonely anxiety.

Furthermore, this individualism breeds confusion for Henry. He never seems to know what is going on: “He found that he could establish nothing” (13). He is perpetually confused as to what direction he should wander. He is conflicted about whether or not to rejoin the fighting. Crane clearly uses these scenes to highlight Henry’s
lack of agency; but given the boastful, confident, assertive form of masculinity which Henry sees modeled by his fellow soldiers in the first and third chapters of the text, his confusion contrasts sharply with a version of manhood asserted within his peer group. This juxtaposition is no accident and functions to illustrate the continual failure of a Rooseveltian idea of masculinity. This mental confusion is also manifest in Henry’s verbal paroxysm and awkward silences.

For someone who has so many philosophical views on the human condition and his immediate experience, Henry is socially non-communicative. He can rarely voice his own opinions coherently. His conversations with others (as opposed to his constant internal dialogue) are regulated to clunky curses and slang. He has lots of ideas in his head, but when he tries to express them to others, he seldom seems able to control his speech: “His tongue lay dead in the tomb of his mouth” (59). Habegger also identifies this quality, describing it as a “flagrant inarticulateness, so pervasive and obvious in the novel” (FW 194). Later Henry feels that he is the only one who understands the true nature of their martial struggle and longs to cry out and reveal his insight to the column of marching soldiers; however, he remains silent. He can only stutter, “Why – why – what – what’s th’ matter?” (57). As the words die on his tongue, his noble, lofty thoughts (his “philippic”) stay inside his head. Green notes that: “Men understand

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Habegger argues that this expressive inability is the fundamental characteristic of the novel. He states, “The Red Badge is about, not grace, but silence under pressure – about the need felt by men fighting for their lives to refrain from expressing themselves and to stifle other men’s more open self-expression” (FW 187). One could make the same claims about most social hierarchies structured like the military. I find that the men do express their feelings throughout the piece, at least to one another. That Henry does not
without speaking, as they do in the stress of battle in *The Red Badge of Courage* and others of [Crane’s] war stories” (7). Yet, one could also read the silence in these war stories as a product of the confusion and male desire to hide personal fear instead of a mysterious bond of mutual comprehension. In fact, a great irony in *The Red Badge of Courage* is that none of the men understand one another.

Another characteristic that marks the failure of Rooseveltian individualism is his philosophical abstraction. Henry wanders around daydreaming of the actions he would like to see himself perform, imagining the remarks/opinions of his fellow soldiers, assuming different roles in the battle, etc. However, Henry rarely does anything. He is just swept along by the events occurring around him. His individualism leads to isolation and this isolation leads to existential impotence. In fact, Henry’s narrative persona ruminates: “The most startling thing was to learn suddenly that he was very insignificant” (101). He cannot perform these abstractions because he is an individual and cannot determine his own action. He must become a part of a larger entity in order to participate in determining action. All of Henry Fleming’s great philosophical insights into himself and his fellow soldiers are essentially meaningless because they do not resonate. He has no agency and so is essentially impotent. Henry’s daydreams do not even exist outside of his own consciousness. His insights are sterile because they are a product of his own self-absorption.

While this famous story aptly showcases the failures of individual action that already had begun to morph into the strenuous manhood by the last decade of the participate in this solidarity of complaint until the second day is somewhat remarkable and further illustrates his own isolation and abstraction.
nineteenth century, it also draws the reader’s attention to the many successes of communal (inter)action within the tale. That is to say, the text does not just depict failure; there are moments of triumph and final claims of integration and identity formation. So the reader confronts a text that seems clearly satiric and ironic in many places, but also depicts a protagonist who does at least seem to be better-adjusted and more developed by the end of the book. I would reconcile these differences by categorizing the “successes” within the piece and then comparing them to the failures in individual action outlined above. Again, it seems that the type of communal actions which prove successful for Henry can be categorized into a few types of experiences: camaraderie, negotiating death, compassion, and healing.

One of the earliest examples of the success of actions in creating a homosocial community would be Henry’s recognition of the “brotherhood of arms” he implicitly feels at the end of his first true military combat experience. When his regiment is first attacked, Henry immediately, “Became not a man but a member. [. . .] He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire” (34). During the first battle, the narrator notes that, “There was a consciousness always of the presence of his comrades about him. He felt the subtle battle-brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting. It was a mysterious fraternity, born of the smoke and danger of death” (35). Historical studies echo Henry’s motivations in the previous passage and give further support for the homosocial concepts of male interaction during the Civil War. For example, James McPherson’s excellent study of the factors which compelled civil war soldiers to face death in battle does not find performances of
strenuous individualism to be a significant factor in motivating soldiers. His fourth chapter, “If I Flinched I was Ruined,” discusses the notions of courage in the letters of civil war soldiers. He finds that, while ideals of honor and bravery were important concepts to these men, they were not commonly related to notions of male identity during that period. In other words, men did fight to avoid looking like cowards, but not because running from battle damaged their own perception of manhood. Rather, they feared appearing as a coward to their comrades. The fear of letting down a peer group is a homosocial concept, not an individual one. Conversely, the desire to prove oneself as worthy in the eyes of a peer group is one of the most important motivating concepts in both the Civil War and this novel. In chapter four, after the company has held off the enemy’s charge, the men all share in a camaraderie that has previously been lacking from Henry’s life: “Upon his fellows, he beamed tenderness and good-will” (39). Anna Scacchi notes that this esprit de corps forces Henry (as well as the reader) towards the adoption of “a very different notion of identity from the mythic one he cherishes: the times of warriors and Greeklike [sic] struggles are past, and modern warfare is based on a new kind of heroism, where the individual has to learn to become a member of the group” (109). This is the primary lesson Henry learns (but does not immediately internalize) from combat, one that is mirrored and developed even further on the second day. Finally, this “brotherhood” extends beyond the experiences of the battlefield, as illustrated in the ways in which Henry is confronted by death.

Another way that the novel illustrates an alternative to the dominant construction of individual masculinity is in the way that Henry responds to death. When Jim Conklin
(“the tall soldier”) dies, Henry and the “tattered soldier” stand together in a bond of appreciation and sorrow over his struggle. This recognition of and identification with the suffering and death of his friend is conveyed by the narrator, who relates that, “The youth had watched, spell-bound, this ceremony [. . .]. His face had been twisted into an expression of every agony he had imagined for his friend” (56). This is a much more positive interaction with death than when Henry is alone, blindly wandering through the forest, and encounters the dead man in the bower. There, he is petrified and afraid: “he stopped horror-stricken at the sight of a thing. [. . .] the youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was, for moments, turned to stone before it” (47, my emphasis).

When Henry is alone, his revulsion and fear at the sight of a decomposing corpse lead him to deny that figure its humanity. However, he is not looking at a mere thing, but at a dead man. His paralysis reflects his inner inability to register the former humanity of the dead man. Here, sharing the confrontation with death with the tattered soldier, he is sad: “his heart seemed to wrench itself almost free from his body at this sight. He made a noise of pain” (Crane 56). Henry’s cry is one of empathy for his friend; his pain is because he has lost a comrade. He is not rendered immobile like the encounter in the woods. Rather he rages and shakes his fist towards the heavens in mute rage at this death (58). In his previous encounter with death, Henry was terrified and mute, as if frozen by the horrible realization of his own insignificance. Yet, Henry has been awakened to empathy by death here, all because he faces it within a community.

One of the most important virtues modeled in the novel is what may be called the compassion of camaraderie. Schaefer notes that many critics do not “take into account
Henry’s lack of one emotion that for Crane is central to both manhood and heroism: compassion” (107). I agree that Henry lacks this emotion until the very end of the book, when he is made miserable through his memory of how he abandoned the tattered soldier to his own death. But that is not to say that compassion is not modeled as a positive attribute within the story. In fact, the most positive character in the piece functions as the physical embodiment of compassion. The “cheerful soldier” finds the wounded Henry and guides him (like Virgil leading Dante) through the maze of men and regiments to his own company. This selfless generosity has a magical quality to Henry: “the man of the cheery voice seemed, to the youth, to possess a wand of the magic kind” (Crane 74).

Henry allows himself to totally rely on another individual to determine his experience for the first time in the text: “The youth with the chin on his breast stood woodenly by while his companion beat ways and means out of sullen things” (Crane 74). It is no accident that this transformation occurs after Henry receives his “red badge of courage” at the end of a rifle butt wielded by a fellow soldier (70). Up until this time, Henry is totally immersed in his own mental abstraction. In some ways, he seems to get some “sense” knocked into him by the Crazed Soldier. Henry never thanks the Cheerful Soldier or even sees his face, but he is depicted as a benevolent guiding force. In other words, the wound creates a condition of reliance. Henry is forced to drop his individualism and rely on another, as he is physically unable to determine his actions any longer. So the material conditions of his “red badge” finally mirror his true existential state. Crane, then, shows the reader that Henry’s understanding of manhood actually separates him from true knowledge and acceptance of his metaphysical state. His ethos of
individualism perpetuates the childish assumption that he matters in the universe. It is not until he is forced to let go of this individualism that he is led to an accurate understanding of his role as a member of the soldierly body.

Another testament to homosocial bonds as a better model for gender identity is in the healing power of the group. Once Henry returns to his regiment, he is greeted with pity and relief, and the narrator notes that, “the youth leaned heavily on his friend” (76). They are genuinely glad to see him alive and he is cared for and given sustenance and rest by Wilson (78-80). He finds comfort with the group, and confusion and isolation whenever he is removed from its care. Staggering back into camp under the guidance of the Cheerful Soldier, Henry tells the sentries no less than three times that he was “separated from the regiment” (76). That fairly obvious statement is one of the few things he says at all before he goes to sleep that night, marking separation as a salient feature in his confused mind. When he finally makes it back to his regiment via the Cheerful Soldier he immediately adopts the language of group identity: “He gave a long sigh, snuggled down into his blanket, and in a moment, was like his comrades” (79).

Habegger explains that, “One of the discoveries Fleming makes is that he is more afraid of being isolated from his group than of facing combat as a part of it” (FW 187). This is true, but the connection is not merely motivated by fear alone. The affinity he feels for other members of the regiment grows throughout the story (especially with Wilson, as evidenced in their performance on the second day, including the self-sacrificial struggle over carrying the flag, which will make the bearer an easy target). Terms like “comrades” and “brothers” are increasingly used to describe the regiment and/or his
fellow soldiers as the story progresses, further illustrating his adoption of a group identity.

Consequently, *The Red Badge of Courage* shows that individualism only isolates, while the group provides rest and comfort. Habegger explains that, “Fleming has learned how to follow, how to work with others, how to be a strong and sturdy member of his outfit, but these adjustments seems to entail the comforting illusion that there is a great friendliness out there. The passage says that to become a man is to become one with a group in a rather thoroughgoing sense” (*FW* 186-187). Habegger seems to feel that, “there is good reason to feel uneasy” about Henry’s transformation and about the communal ethos he seems likely to adopt at the book’s closing, which is fully observed in the critic’s equation of “comforting illusion” to “friendliness” or community. I, on the other hand, see this conclusion in a relatively positive light. By creating a character who exists in such extreme isolation (which he learns from the social construction of masculinity that he picks up from the macho posing of the soldiers before they are placed into battle), Crane gives a scenario that shows his audience the disastrous effects of the contemporary constructions of masculinity. The narrator describes the regiment awaiting battle on the front lines standing “as men tied to stakes” (93). Yet, we can think of this observation metaphorically, with the stakes representing a construction of masculinity that “grounds” or chains them to their fate as soldiers. They cannot obey their survival instincts to run and also be viewed as men within their social structure or society as a whole, as Henry’s own experiences illustrate. However, his actions on the second day of
battle actually privilege communal bonds between men as a means of survival and a way to negotiate individual and collective trauma.

This is further illustrated in the intense shame and regret Henry feels at the very end of the book. As he looks back on his recent actions, his only regret seems to be that he abandoned the Tattered Soldier in his time of need as he was dying. Henry is not ashamed that he ran, but rather that his self-absorption and isolation caused him to break the brotherly bonds of camaraderie and support and leave a dying man who needed his help. Consequently, by the end of the book Henry is more concerned with his relationship to the group than with the masculine myths he has attempted to mimic and embody. This shows the ways in which communal masculinity is made to seem more attractive than individualized manhood. *The Red Badge of Courage* certainly illustrates the disastrous effects of an individual ethos on the psyche of a young man and the reader’s movement towards an appreciation of the salve of male community. Yet, this text only initiates the discussion of these themes in Crane’s work. Many of his later short stories, especially those collected in his *Tales of Adventure*, continue to explore the trauma that adopting the values advocated in the strenuous life has over individual men, while simultaneously holding them up in comparison to depictions of male community.

### III

“What Does it Mane?”: Depictions of Masculinity in Crane’s Short Fiction

Pizer observes that, because of Crane’s relatively short lifespan and period of artistic development, his works must be appreciated both for their individual merits, as well as transitional pieces that showcase the process of his artistic maturation. According
to Pizer, “More than is true of most authors, the critic is required to grasp both the individuality of a specific work and its role as a bridge for the immediate past to the near future” (FHW 227). Consequently, it is important to acknowledge a continuum of the themes and motifs in Crane’s earlier work within the later pieces he composes. This mandate is especially true in speculations on Crane’s approach to male gender roles and performance.

Yet, while Pizer and Morgan both interpret Crane’s body of work according to a process of artistic development, I feel that Crane’s stories contain nuanced depictions, and even ironic contradictions, of his common themes. In other words, rather than viewing his body of work as a progression towards maturity, I see his stories as a testing ground in which competing forces within his themes are placed into dialogue with one another. Although critics have noticed Crane’s depiction of communal masculinity in several texts, they fail to fully explicate his conscious attack of “strenuous” gender roles, a crucial gap in Crane criticism which this section will attempt to fill. Male characters are often immediately defensive and aggressive around other males in Crane’s short fiction, which I believe represents the destructive influence of contemporary male gender expectations, as well as the author’s assertion of a different type of male gender role based upon comradeship and homosocial community.

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72 Pizer’s article does use the “gender coding of experience” to link Maggie, George’s Mother, and The Red Badge of Courage in a continuum that show’s Crane’s development as a writer. However, he does not move beyond Crane’s first three novel in his analysis, nor does he observe the link between Crane’s understanding of male community and the gendered discourse of “vigorous manhood” prevalent in Crane’s contemporary culture.
While Pizer seems willing to acknowledge the failure of the rituals of manhood in Crane’s work, he stops short of any discussion of what Crane might be holding up in their place. In his article “From Home to the World,” Pizer explains that in Crane’s novel *George’s Mother*, “the masculine codes of the world – of the gentleman and of power – have been discovered to be either false or potentially self-destructive” (284). Yet, on the very next page, Pizer claims that, “George’s defeat also expresses one of Crane’s central ideas about the human condition in any social context, since George’s fall results from his effort to establish his selfhood and find satisfaction in life within the limited possibilities of the false and even self destructive codes of belief which his society has presented him” (285). I agree that the social codes of behavior present to both George and to Crane’s other male protagonists are destructive, but I do not interpret this destructive influence as the sole cause of the characters’ “fall” or failure. Rather, I see Crane’s fiction as a presentation of options available to characters in the construction and negotiation of their identities. Some options, like the strenuous construction of masculinity prevalent within popular culture, prove to be traumatic, while others seem to help these male characters negotiate the apathy of the universe and the realization of the insignificance of their own lives.

Consequently, it seems crucial to revisit the implications inherent in Crane’s depictions of masculinity within his short western fiction, for in these brief pieces the reader only receives a moment of conflict, which is precisely the moment in which an individual might revert to unconsciously internalized behavioral models. Crane’s short western fiction illustrates how strenuous constructions of masculinity have a negative
impact on Crane’s male characters, causing isolation, violence, fear, and resentment, while destroying trust and community. This section will illustrate these assertions by documenting the confusion and violence which ensue from conventional gender expectations within Crane’s short fiction, here represented by “The Five White Mice” and “The Blue Hotel.” Finally, my focus will shift to an alternative construction of masculinity rooted within homosocial community which Crane seems to offer in “The Open Boat”.

Crane’s short stories often contain scenes of conflict, confusion, and violence. Upon close reading, however, it seems apparent that the prevalence of these scenes is indicative of an attempt to demonstrate the destructive influence of masculine behavior. It is certainly not coincidental that fear, confusion, and violence ensue whenever Crane’s characters attempt to appropriate conventional male roles. In “The Five White Mice” (1898), a western story about a young man known as the New York Kid, the young protagonist attempts to integrate into masculine society by participating in traditional strenuous male behavior. Set in Mexico City, the story centers on the exploits of the New York Kid within two sets of male communities. The tale opens in the American bar Casa Verde. The New York Kid is part of an assembled group of seven European men who begin throwing dice and gambling in order to pass the time. The game soon becomes heated, however, as more and more elaborate bets are proposed. Finally, after dinner, drinks, cigars, and the like have all been wagered and divided, someone suggests that the wager for the final game be a private box at a visiting circus. Saddled with a string of ill luck, the New York Kid ends up rolling with a drunken man to see who will pay for the
circus. With four aces on the bar and one roll remaining, the Kid begins to assert his identity with the group of assembled men, confidently asserting that he will roll the necessary ace: “Instantly he was presiding over a little drama in which every man was absorbed” (Crane 42). The New York Kid here asserts his individualism and personal identity as a “sporting man.” His mock bravado and challenges to the other men illustrate the individualism that is a part of the “script” of male behavior which he has internalized and attempts to act out. His swagger and confidence unnerve the men around him, who will not dare to match his wild claim of fifty dollars that he has the ace. When the Kid reveals that he does not have the required ace, the assembled men break out in a vociferous roar at their triumph. The bartender mocks their refusal to bet on the last die: “‘why, there isn’t one liver to every five men in the outfit. That was the greatest cold bluff I ever saw worked’” (43). While the Kid loses the group wager and has to pay for the excursion to the circus, he does succeed in establishing his individual identity among these men. For the rest of the evening, they all crowd around and discuss the dice game and his final throw. However, this is not the only male community within which the Kid interacts; his status among his friends also suggests a conscious attempt to appropriate strenuous masculinity and individualism.

After leaving the circus, the New York Kid separates from the group to find his friends, the ‘Frisco Kid and Benson, who had initially begged him to join them in an

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73 As with The Red Badge of Courage, all citations for the short stories in this section are from Tales of Adventure, Volume V of the University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane. This volume attempts to establish the definitive editions for Stephen Crane’s diverse body of work. A compilation of the works of respected Crane scholars, Bowers’ edition looks at all manuscripts, noted fair copies, and variations in early editions, and will be used as the definitive edition for my analysis.
evening of carousing. When the New York Kid finds them, they are both staggering drunk. Their infantile behavior sets the sober Kid as the leader and gives him authority over his incapacitated friends, just as the strenuous masculinity advocated by Roosevelt set Anglo-Saxon Americans over the rest of the “inferior races” of men in the world. Strenuous masculinity was a way to resuscitate the manhood of overcivilized men so that they could more appropriately bear the “white man’s burden.” As the only sober member of the group, the Kid gains leadership and moral authority over his peers; “his face was luminous with virtue,” while Benson “submitted himself woodenly to the direction of his friend” (45). As the Kid attempts to steer two inebriated friends home to sleep off the effects of their frivolity, they stumble into a similar group of Mexican men. Both of these male communities immediately attempt to establish dominance through aggression. The Kid’s inebriated friend eagerly accepts the “Mexican’s” offer to fight and the six stare each other down in a dark alley, each awaiting the other’s move. Although the New York Kid has not caused the argument, he cannot remove himself from the situation without forfeiting his masculinity: “A combination of honorable manhood and inability prevented him from running away” (Crane 49). The Kid’s refusal to flee the scene indicates the effects of the popular masculine code he has internalized; he would rather resort to violence than defuse tension by abandoning the hostile environment. This intellectual posture could be right out of one of Roosevelt’s speeches and illustrates the Kid’s attempt to follow the script of strenuous masculinity.

The New York Kid eventually diffuses the situation by brandishing a revolver, reverting to a violent threat instead of verbal diplomacy. In fact, during the entire
protracted scene there is virtually no communication between the two groups. These men are so conditioned to the gender expectations of this marginal frontier that they immediately revert to violent and aggressive behavior at the slightest suggestion of a physical threat. Although he is young, naive (he initially forgets he even wears the revolver), and inexperienced, and was raised in a cosmopolitan, urban setting, the New York Kid appropriates conventional gender roles of confrontation and assertion of individual will through physical confrontation. He has been taught these roles from a young age. In fact, Kid notes, “he might have turned out to be a man and have been liked by his father,” linking his father’s affection to the Kid’s ability to perform a male role properly (41). Moreover, the choice to brandish the revolver becomes a signifier of the conscious acceptance to act through perceived gender expectations of his era.

The Kid’s anti-social gesture of deadly force, however, also exposes the confusion and misunderstanding that occurs as each character acts out a gendered script of behavior which they neither value nor are aware. Through the reinforced behavior of the male group environment (witnessed in the saloon scene on 40-41) the Kid actively adopts the attitudes of the other men around him. This unquestioning acceptance is fine initially; the Kid is accepted by the male companions in the saloon and even enjoys a bit of distinction and renown. It is only as this charade of manhood reaches its inevitable conclusion -- aggressive struggle to achieve dominance -- in the alleyway, that the Kid perceives its problematic elements. These masculine roles practically dictate violent conflict over any imagined attack on the complete sovereignty of the individual will, which leads to confusion as these individuals engage in confrontation without perception
of the cause. Consequently, this story showcases the logical extremes of the strenuous construction of masculinity that was gaining social credibility in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

The Kid has no comprehension that his antagonists are just as frightened and vulnerable as his group. Without this knowledge he immediately reacts within the traditional gender constructs which compose his social education. The Kid’s instant reliance on aggression, dominance, and violence nearly gets him killed. Yet, as the two groups face off across the brandished revolver, the bravado of manhood melts away and he realizes the communality of feelings they share: “Thus the Kid was able to understand swiftly that they were all human beings. They were unanimous in not wishing for too bloody a combat. There was a sudden expression of equality” (Crane 50). As the layers of masculine persona are laid bare, the Kid becomes aware that the “Mexicans” share in his fear and confusion. Rather than creating compassion and relief, however, this understanding causes him to revert back to a masculine role of aggression and exploitation of weakness, thus fully illustrating the complete irrationality and destructive influence of conventional male behavior. “He was bursting with rage because these men had not previously confided to him that they were vulnerable. The whole thing had been an absurd imposition. […] And, after all, there had been an equality of emotion – an equality: he was furious.” (Crane 51). The Kid’s reaction illustrates the lack of understanding and compassion inherent in gender roles based upon a strenuous individualism. His emotional disgust may imply that communication would have
diffused the situation. However, his response simply documents that these men are not supposed to understand or care about one another, not even in a general human sense.

Again, this reaction indicates the problematic nature of gender roles which promote violent behavior over communication and understanding. Shocked by his realization that all of the other men feel the same, inexpressible fear, the Kid again reverts to the exact same aggressive behavior that prompted this misunderstanding, because he literally does not know any better. He has been raised in a society which has left him no alternative to violence. Holton reinforces the Kid’s cultural conditioning in asserting that in “Five White Mice” the conflict lies “between two uncomprehending groups of people whose failure to understand one another is the result of their social conditioning” (22). I would emphasize the gendered nature of the social conditioning observed here. Severed from the ability to communicate by the reversion to conventional gender roles, these men are only able to threaten each other as they each attempt to assert their own individual will and strength over one another. The strenuous construction these men initially act out is a front, a script from which they read that almost sends the group headlong into a violent confrontation. It is only when they recognize the common instinct of fear in one another that they back down from this posturing and avoid violent confrontation. What is more, the instantaneous distrust of other men also reinforces the corrosive environment of male interaction when based upon the constructs of a strenuous masculinity.

Male characters are often immediately defensive and suspicious around other males in Crane’s minor short fiction, which I believe represents the destructive influence
of strenuous gender roles. For example, the short sketch, “One Dash - Horses” (1895), documents an American’s immediate distrust of all the men in a Mexican village where he seeks respite. Richardson’s approach into town is cautious, as is his sleeping position on the floor facing the only door. However, his fears are realized when other men attempt to take his belongings and possibly his life. Come daybreak Richardson immediately flees for his life and reaches the safety of the Mexican *rurales*. The general tone once Richardson enters the village seems to dictate immediate distrust and suspicion. The depiction of tension upon entering into a “civilized” setting in which male encounter is possible is not unique to this particular short story. In the civil war sketch, “A Grey Sleeve” (1895), a Union general approaches a house on the outskirts of a battlefield with immediate distrust because he notes a glimpse of men’s clothing in an upstairs window. The mere indication of a male presence causes the general to storm in a rage (“The captain angrily kicked open the door”) and demand physical confrontation with the male presence (174). Once again, Crane’s male character reverts to distrust and suspicion when faced with the suggestion of male contact, just as in “One Dash-Horses.” Failure to understand other men in a community often leads to fear and the threat of violence.

Although rarely engaged by critics, these minor sketches mirror the incredible paranoia, miscommunication, and fear which pervades one of Crane’s richest tales, “The Blue Hotel” (1898). The story is set in the Nebraska town of Fort Romper, a small prairie community proud of its growth and future promise of all of the amenities to be found in the cities of the urban east. The most prominent feature of this town is the pale-
blue Palace Hotel, which visually assaults all who travel though the area. The first page of the story places the scene of the tale into sharp contrast with the rest of the town (if not world). “Pat Scully, the proprietor, had proved himself a master of strategy when he chose his paints,” because they set his establishment apart from the lived experience of most of the Eastern visitors (Crane 142). Consequently, the Hotel becomes a liminal space set off from the “real world.” It is fitting, then, that the hotel comes to host a group of men intimately engaged in the same exclusionary process. For they, too, attempt to set themselves apart. Unlike a mere coat of paint, however, their difference is marked through access to a male community.

The entire narrative of “The Blue Hotel” dramatically illustrates the failure of conventional masculinity promoted by popular culture. The plot of the tale involves the interactions of three visitors, the Swede, the cowboy, and the Easterner, with the inhabitants of Fort Romper, primarily the Irish proprietor of the hotel, Scully, his son, Johnnie, and ultimately a gambler at the local saloon. The Swede, fresh from the big cities of the East, believes that he is in the violent “wild west” depicted in dime novels and approaches the other characters with fear and trepidation. What is particularly interesting is that the Cowboy notes that the hotel is not even part of the mythical West. “This ain’t Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebraker” (146). Scully even discusses the modern innovations planned for the Fort Romper community with the Swede (324). Jamie Robertson asserts that since the story is not actually set in the West but rather in the civilization of a pseudo-East, “the hellishness-the cowardice, the fear, the cheating, the hypocrisy, the greed, the violence-of this story is the product not of the
West but of the civilization of which Scully is so enthusiastic” (122). This observation is critical to this study, for it illustrates that the gender roles promoted within the popular fiction were not a reflection on regional masculinity, but simply a medium for the dissemination of strenuous gender roles to the public at large.

The five main characters attempt to negotiate a state of utter confusion and bewilderment throughout the entire text. In perhaps the most relevant example of the destructive power of conventional gender roles, the Swede constantly suspects the other men of plotting to commit violence and treachery against him due to the exaggerated understanding of the West that he has gleaned from reading dime novels, which often depicted manhood in romanticized, violent terms. Robertson notes that Crane’s characters “participate in the conventions of popular Western fiction,” which I here apply to gender mores as well (244). This conception prompts the Swede to act out in a paranoid fantasy, which ultimately leads to violence. Eventually, his behavior becomes so erratic that he is banished from the hotel and wanders into the saloon, where his drunken boasting gets him killed. The irony lies in the fact that the Swede’s fears, which are so out of place and unwarranted, ultimately create his death under precisely the same circumstances found in his paranoid delusions.

It is Scully who initiates the creation of (although not necessarily continuation within, as we shall see) a male community within the hotel. Each morning and evening

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74 For a discussion of the idealized vision of strenuous masculinity presented in dime novels at the end of the nineteenth century, see Joseph Church. For a nuanced and provocative discussion of the possibilities of alternative constructions of masculinity within dime novel westerns, read Daniel Worden. The depiction of masculinity in the major western dime novels of the late 19th-century is specifically discussed in Henry Nash Smith’s article.
the proprietor goes to the train station “and work[s] his seductions upon any man he might see wavering” (142). The text elaborates upon Scully’s persuasive “seductions” in its description of the three men he catches on the day of our story: “Scully practically made them prisoners. He was so nimble and merry and kindly that each probably felt it would be the height of brutality to try to escape. […] It was notable that throughout this series of small ceremonies the three travelers were made to feel that Scully was very benevolent. He was conferring great favors upon them” (143). Yet these little amenities have a secondary, unobserved function as well, for they serve to draw these strangers into a community, a shared experience that is only heightened by the confinement they endure within the hotel under the ministrations of Scully. Interestingly, community breeds satisfaction: “In a hearty voice Scully announced the presence of a blizzard. The guests of the blue hotel, lighting their pipes, assented with grunts of masculine fulfillment” (144). This passage offers the reader the first equation of male community with contentment. The giant “godlike” stove has become their master and they its worshipful devotees. So this male community has been drawn together not just by the rhetorical skill of its opportunistic leader, nor by ministering to the need of weary travelers, but also by the fulfillment of animalistic desires for food, warmth, and human company. It is a community that becomes even more distinguishable through the reactions of the one man who consistently attempts to place himself outside of it, the Swede.

While the other men sit around the humming god of a stove, the Swede remains “aloof”. He does not exhibit interest in the card game like the others do, nor does he attempt to engage them in conversation. Sue Kimball notes that the Swede is “the only
one of Scully’s newly arrived guests who is immediately excluded from the brotherhood of man, never becomes a true member of the group” (426). Strictly speaking, this is true. However, it has less to do with the refusal of the group to accept him into it, as Kimball suggests, and more to do with the Swede’s conscious attempt to hold himself apart from the male community. Kimball interprets the Swede’s erratic actions as a failed “attempt to insinuate himself into the hotel’s microcosmic community of men” (426). Yet, those same actions could be read instead as proof that the Swede wants nothing to do with male community in the first place. Consequently, one is able to read the character of the Swede as a depiction of a man whose personal identity has been constructed around the myth of the strenuous masculinity advocated and modeled by the heroes in dime novels and the public figures of the Eastern cities who appropriated the rhetoric of western manhood (like Theodore Roosevelt).

Traditional approaches to the Swede often present him as a catalyst for the ensuing confrontational violence. According to William Johnsen, “The Swede [. . .] provokes the other inhabitants of the Palace Hotel to violent antagonism” (282). While the Swede’s behavior does create confusion and bewilderment in the men assembled in front of the stove at the blue hotel, I am not so sure that the Swede’s actions create the ensuing violence *ex nihilo*. Rather, it seems possible that the violence becomes a symptom of the Swede’s exclusion from the male community for the hotel parlor. Johnsen goes on to observe that “we are shown, not told [. . .] that the Swede is such an insufferable masochist (we all know such cases) that one can no longer defer giving him what he deserves” (282). In fact, the editorial aside which Johnsen just cannot resist
immediately transports his claim outside the fictional realm of the story and into the lived experience of his reader. Yet this transaction does not mandate that Johnsen’s reader reach a similar conclusion. Instead, it is the Swede’s constant assertion of his individualism and his rejection of male community that precipitate the violent end Johnsen asserts “he deserves.”

The Swede’s actions, however, are ultimately determined by the gender constructions which he has internalized from media culture. According to Jeffrey P. Hantover, “Masculinity is a cultural construct and adult men need the opportunity to perform normatively appropriate male behaviors. [. . .] Masculine anxiety can arise when adult men know the script and wish to act but are denied opportunity to act” (288). When the Swede arrives, he brings with him a very specific set of expectations, derived from hyper-masculine accounts of physical aggression and violence; he knows the “script.” Joseph Church notes that “the anxious and drunken man mentally clings to an explicit, well-codified model, to a script which prescribes dialogue [. . .] and action” (99). He attempts to assert this strenuous, confrontational worldview on the cozy community of the hotel, which leads to confusion and violence. The other men in this group initially react with an attempt at understanding and acceptance: “It seems to me this man has been reading dime novels, and he thinks he’s right out in the middle of it – the shootin’ and stabbin’ and all,” the Easterner observes (Crane 152). The depiction of violent individualism in dime novels was so prevalent, that the Easterner assumes that they are where the Swede acquired his performance. Church explains that the Swede arrives at the town, “thinking he is in the bloody wild west of his dime novels and aiming to prove
his manhood. At first he is frightened at the prospect, but after getting drunk he begins to force his violent fantasy upon the others until, shortly thereafter, he is killed in a fight” (99). This observation is somewhat true, although at least initially the Swede does not seem overly desirous of proving anything, let alone his manhood; he is too afraid of being killed. It is not until Scully tries to make him feel like he is part of this community of men (through shared family stories and bottle of whiskey) that the Swede begins to assert his own individual masculine identity. It is as if the Swede, warmed by overtures of friendship, finally gains enough confidence to act out the bravado of strenuous masculinity modeled by his guidebook to the American West: dime novels. From supper onwards, the Swede becomes more and more aggressive until his challenge to the masculinity of the other men becomes unbearable.

Faced with an unrelenting barrage of traditional gender signifiers, the Easterner, cowboy, and Johnnie eventually revert back to a search for dominance as a way to counter the confusion the Swede has created. The proprietor’s son, Johnny, aptly represents this observation: “I’ll fight any man what says I cheat!” (Crane 153). Johnny desires to establish his importance in the group and he is the first to appropriate conventional gender roles to initiate his position: “What did you say I cheated for? I don’t cheat and I won’t let any man say I do! (153). This statement leads to a brutal, savage brawl which the other men watch on and cheer, a struggle which has been completely precipitated by the confusion and aggression of the culturally misguided Swede. Yet it is this fight which clearly marks the Swede as an isolated individual and, although he wins the fight, he is not portrayed as a victor, but as an outcast. The
narrative irony surrounding the Swede marks him as if with a brand: “There was a splendor of isolation in his situation at this time which the Easterner felt once when, lifting his eyes from the ground, he beheld that mysterious and lonely figure, waiting” (161).

The other male characters are also represented by their degree of confusion and disorientation. In “The Blue Hotel,” none of the men really understand each other. The entire story is marked by the extreme paranoia of The Swede who distrusts all others. The proprietor of the hotel, Scully, continually cries out “what does it mane?,” as they try to decipher the Swede’s antisocial actions (148). The Easterner also tells the Swede bluntly “I don’t understand you” when pressed for support (146). The Swede’s initial social reticence is met with a wall of confusion, alienation, and resentment, and these five men repeatedly attempt (and fail) to relate to one another through conventional strenuous gender roles. It takes the Easterner much reflection over a span of months to come up with his explanation of the events of that day, which are still ultimately incomprehensible to the cowboy.

What is most interesting about the Swede’s death is that it is prompted by a complete lack of understanding and only occurs because the Swede attempts to engage another group of men according to the traditional gender roles which he has learned from popular culture and which have been reinforced, at least in his mind, by the brawl. After

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Contrasting the group behavior of men to women in Crane, Green notes, “When men gather in Crane, they are seen to understand each other and to possess and comprehension of the large issues that precludes any unnecessary conversation” (5). This seems to be a vast oversimplification of male group dynamics in Crane’s short fiction. In fact, Scully’s confused lament of “what does it all mane?” could serve as the refrain for the entire story.
the fight, the Swede leaves the hotel and wanders through the blizzard into the town of Fort Romper, where he encounters the male oasis: a local saloon. According to Parsons, In rural areas, the homosociality of the saloon was, if possible, even more pronounced than in more anonymous urban areas. Male camaraderie in spaces like saloons helped working men to maintain their sense of manhood. As they drank, swore, smoked, gambled, told bawdy and exaggerated stories to one another, and sang maudlin tunes together, they confirmed one another’s identities as men. (285)

The tangible sense of homosociality is quite apparent in other Crane stories, such as “Five White Mice.” However, in “The Blue Hotel” Crane actively plays with the expectations of his readers and thwarts the conventions of brotherhood surrounding this all-male space.

Here the reader sees a similar pattern emerge in the saloon as in the cozy parlor of the hotel. Rather than confirming the male identity through exuberant fellowship and male rituals, like the card playing around the stove of the hotel, the Swede is immediately aggressive towards the men in the saloon: “Don’t you try to shut me up. I won’t have it. I’m a gentleman, and I want people to drink with me. And I want ‘em to drink with me now. Now – do you understand?” (168). He feels confused by the lack of response that he elicits and so continues to engage in the same aggressive behavior which has landed him in the saloon: “Listen hard then. See those men over there? Well, they’re going to drink with me, and don’t you forget it” (168). The Gambler and other men cannot understand the Swede and his aggression becomes even more threatening in their
confusion: “‘You won’t drink with me, you little dude? I’ll make you, then! I’ll make you!’ The Swede had grasped the gambler frenziedly at the throat, and was dragging him from his chair” (168). The Swede has just dominated the men in the hotel by reverting back to the gender behavior he has internalized from popular fiction. Perhaps confident in his new appropriation of the western hero, he attempts to engage the men in the saloon with the same “Wild West” masculinity. Consequently, the Gambler seems to have no choice but to react according to these same gender roles and kills the threatening stranger in defending himself. Instead of conforming to the “code” of homosociality surrounding the saloon environment, the Swede violates the subtle brotherhood of this male space because he acts out the construction of strenuous manhood too literally. His adoption of violent individualism is disastrous and leads to his death, confirming that Crane was using this tale to satirize the Rooseveltian notion of strenuous masculinity.

Through the depiction of gender behavior in his western stories, Stephen Crane ironically engages the popular perception of masculinity in his day, calling into question the utility of such a worldview. Throughout these pieces the characters critique the social environment which has caused them so much confusion and created so much pain and violence. This evaluation is especially articulate in the final section of “The Blue Hotel.” Ruminating on the effects of the Swede’s masculine bravado, the Easterner states, “Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, the five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede . . . you, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement” (171). The Easterner realizes that the Swede’s death is the result of a social system which promotes an idealized,
unobtainable masculinity, one that always culminates in confusion and violence. More importantly, the Easterner may also feel a collective guilt at participating in the marginalization of the Swede, denying him access to a male community and, thus, resigning him to wander into town and die at the hands of another male group. This reading would also support the claim that Crane sets up homosocial community as an oppositional construction of masculinity because the Easterner’s guilt is the result of their failure to include the Swede within their group. If Crane was upholding a sense of Rooseveltian masculinity, the Swede’s attempt to determine his own fate would be noble. Consequently, the futility of his death establishes Crane’s critique of strenuous manhood.

This discourse documents the destructive influence of conventional gender roles as catalyst for violence and confusion among the male characters within Stephen Crane’s short fiction. While it may seem misguided to assert that the author consciously constructed his narrative around this specific issue, the pervasive examples certainly seem to support the presence of a social critique. Church claims that, by using “the lowly dime novel and its incarnation, the Swede, to gain entry into the dominant culture [. . .] Crane advances disturbing reflections on the culture’s ideals” (101). I agree with this assertion, although I see Crane’s critique as one of the failures of the models of strenuous manhood prevalent in the popular culture (like the dime novel). Furthermore, this argument is quite plausible, for nearly all of Crane’s short fiction documents the destructive nature of traditional male behavior and its isolating impact.

One of the most exciting themes to emerge in Crane’s seminal piece of short fiction is the assertion of “brotherhood” or “comradeship” as a way to counter the futility
of individual action and the indifference of the natural world to human experience. This
tale is absolutely critical to the argument posed here, for without it, all we would have to
take under discussion would be ironic depictions of strenuous masculinity ending badly.
There would not be anything set up as a viable option to the prevailing construction,
however, so the protest would read more like satirical mockery for its own sake. Yet, the
inclusion of “The Open Boat” within Crane’s Tales of Adventure series of short stories
gives the reader access to an alternative construction of masculinity after the reigning
culture script has been exposed as foolish and futile. Furthermore, Crane’s contemporary
audience would have been aware of the circumstances surrounding the story’s
composition, which would have given its themes and values heightened credibility.

One thing it is important to stress is that this tale is basically a “true” story, in that
the events leading up to the confinement of four men to a lifeboat off of the coast of
Florida actually occurred to Crane. This narrative, then, is actually a memoir of sorts; it
is an observation regarding real events and real feelings. The name of the ship (The
Commodore) is the same; the basic vocations of the men are the same. The story was
published a mere six months after Crane published his eyewitness newspaper account of
the sinking of the commodore in national papers.76 This contextual background serves to
establish “The Open Boat” as a poignant and relative example of the tension between
individualism and homosocial masculinity because the story does not take place in a
fantastic, constructed setting. Events occur within the story that mirror Crane’s real-life

76 Crane’s journalistic account of the incident, entitled “Stephen Crane’s Own Story,”
appeared in the New York Press on January 7th, 1897, while his story “The Open Boat”
was first published by Scribner’s Magazine in June 1897.
experience. His audience would have been quite aware that Crane lived through a shipwreck and was marooned on a lifeboat for over forty-eight hours. His fictional narrative could have been read by his contemporary audience as more of an impressionistic account of real-life events than artistic fantasy. Consequently, Crane’s presentation of a homosocial community becomes an assertion, not a mere depiction. In other words, describing an event through both a journalistic account and a piece of fiction indicates that Crane must have been using the later to convey something more than a mere sense of the event.

Furthermore, Crane himself explained the impetus behind the fictional representation of his actual experience as an attempt to pay homage to an authentic masculine performance. In his New York Press report of the actual shipwreck, Crane explains that, “for my part I would prefer to tell the story at once, *because from it would shine the splendid manhood* of Captain Edward Murphy and of William Higgins, the oiler” (SCOS 94, my emphasis). Crane frames this piece of journalism as socially instructive; the readership should pay attention to these figures because they act as “real men.” Yet these characters in particular do not function as representations of strenuous individualism in Crane’s fictional account of the incident. Rather, they serve as poignant

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77 Crane’s subtitle “A Tale Intended to Be after the Fact: Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*,” lends credibility to this assertion. If Crane had not desired that his contemporary reader make a connection between the story they were about to read and the newspaper accounts of the sinking of the *Commodore*, it seems unlikely that he would have mentioned the ship by name. Elliot contends that the subtitle, “presents the story as if it were a journalistic account” (1).
illustrations of the power of comradeship and male community, of the bonds of homosocial manhood.

The story opens with four men packed into a tiny lifeboat which is being tossed on the seas in a heavy surf. The group consists of the injured captain of the original ship, the cook, the correspondent, and the oiler. The men are so intent on the tasks aiding their survival that “none of them knew the color of the sky” looming ominously overhead (TA 68). The boat, described as smaller than a bathtub, threatens to sink at the slightest movement, its sides mere inches above the freezing water. The men have to row constantly to keep the boat heading into the rolling waves and must bail incessantly to keep the weight of the incoming water from sinking the small vessel. They keep at this labor all day and night in hopes of being rescued by someone on the shore, which they can see in the distance. Finally, after more than forty-eight hours of exposure to the brutal elements, they decide to risk destruction of their tiny craft and make a break for the shore. The boat capsizes in the pounding surf and the current threatens to sweep the men out to sea and a certain death. However, all reach the shore except the oiler, who drowns, despite the fact that the detached narrative voice describes him as the strongest swimmer.

Previous scholarship over “The Open Boat” views the text as a masterpiece of American Literary Naturalism and stays close to the predominant themes of this literary tradition. Mark Elliot explains Crane’s interest in the Darwinian implications of the European realists and claims, “In a perfect metaphor of the forces of nature versus the struggles of man, Crane makes the men on the boat a symbol of the heroism of simple human endurance against an indifferent universe” (2). So, for Elliot and others, the boat
becomes a symbol of the human struggle against Nature. Yet, I assert that this symbolic relationship can be read on another level as well.

While these traditional approaches to Crane’s most famous short piece offer valuable insight into the Naturalist project of the author, they misinterpret a crucial element of the tale: the depiction of the male community within the boat. This is not to say that the importance of relationship that develops between the men in the boat has gone unnoticed in the academic realm. David Halliburton describes these men as “importantly connected,” but attributes that collectivity to “an organization” which changes along with the conditions of their survival (236-37). Elliot links Crane’s writing style to the community in the boat in noting that:

Crane creates a kind of collective consciousness for the crew by alternating the perspective from which the tale is told, which included each of the crew members as well as the vantage point of an objective observer. Often, it is not clear whose point of view is predominant at a given time. In this way the reader is given the sense that all of the crew members share similar feelings about their predicament. (2)

It is the uniform point of view which Elliot sees as symbolic of humanity. While a common narrative perspective can be interpreted in that fashion, this reading skips over the process which causes the four individuals in the boat to identify as one entity. Both critics’ discussions of male community illustrate important motifs which Crane weaves into his body of work. However, they do not explore the link between the formation of this community and the understanding of what it means to be a man for these individuals.
Despite all of the discussion of the relationships between the men trapped in the boat, critics have not acknowledged Crane’s radical departure from the attitudes about male behavior prevalent in his society nor approached this tale as a metaphor for an alternative creation of male identity more generally. I see this story as a clear illustration of Crane’s presentation of an alternative construction of masculinity to his contemporary readers through: the narrative assertion of the importance of community, the potential for homoerotic connections between the men, the recognition of community as the state of nature, and the opposition construction of an “Other” in order to create a group identity.

The critical neglect of gendered repercussions here is somewhat perplexing, for the narrator clearly articulates the importance of the homosocial relationship that develops in the midst of this ordeal. The narrative persona remarks:

> It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him. They were a captain, and oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, and they were friends – friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree than may be common. (73)

This brotherhood becomes decidedly less subtle here, as the reader’s attention is drawn explicitly to its recognition. Yet it is truly a homosocial bond, all the more so because no one in the boat brings it up. This is an opposite process for the narrator, who forces the audience to acknowledge its existence, almost as if it were such an important aspect of the story that he/she cannot allow it to escape unnoticed. For this brotherhood is integral
to the story, so much so that the correspondent describes it as the most important aspect of this survival experience:

It was more than a mere recognition of what was best for the common safety. There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heartfelt. And after this devotion to the commander of the boat, there was this comradeship that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. (74)

There are two significant ideas present in this section, ideas which reveal Crane’s understanding of the function of brotherhood. First is the fact that the mutual affection in the boat goes beyond a survival instinct or a shared destiny. Based on the repeated refrain of, “no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it,” one could surmise that the camaraderie asserted by the narrator was a construction of his/her imagination or analysis, an interpretation of human actions that had seeped into the journalistic presentation. Yet, the narrator’s explanation of the correspondent’s thoughts on the matter clearly establishes that this is not the case. While the feelings of affection are unspoken within the community in the boat, they are deeply felt nonetheless.

Moreover, these pregnant silences provide an interesting comparative touchstone back to the other texts analyzed here and, more importantly, function in different ways in each tale. The Red Badge of Courage shows a marked lack of communication between the men. Henry Fleming is nearly inarticulate throughout the entire tale. “Five White Mice” goes on to demonstrate the inevitably violent results of failures of communication
and attempts to enact strenuous masculine roles. Interestingly, Crane shows that violent aggression is also a production of miscommunication in “The Blue Hotel,” perhaps suggesting that the performance of Rooseveltian manhood leads to social conflict because that construct values aggressive action over reconciliatory communication. And yet this logical conclusion is further complicated in “The Open Boat,” for in the scene described above, the four men do not need to communicate, for “each man felt it warm him.” In other words, Crane’s body of fiction suggests that silence is textured differently in various masculine contexts. In the first three stories, there is a strong need to communicate in order to negotiate the threat of violence present within male interactions grounded within a strenuous code of manhood. However, “The Open Boat” occurs within a male community in which the threat of violence exists externally, in the natural world. These men are aligned in a common struggle for survival against Nature. Consequently, they have no need to fear one another and no immediate need to express themselves. In fact, the reader witnesses their complete lack of fear in the intimate physical interaction within the male group, further solidifying their integration within a male community.

It may be necessary to pause here and acknowledge another important aspect of homosocial manhood in the story and in heterosexual male behavior more generally: homophobia. Several scholars within the emerging field of Men’s Studies rightly lament the assumption of heterosexual experience when describing “men” and the lack of critical attention to the ways in which homophobia and homoerotic behavior inform constructions of masculinity. Certainly, one would be remiss to undertake a study of
masculinity without also acknowledging the fear, confusion, and violence that often accompanies male physical interactions. In “The Open Boat,” the shared experience of survival causes the men to bond deeply and create strong emotional ties. These feelings of mutual affection create an atmosphere of serenity and cheer in the boat, instead of the panic and trepidation that often accompanies extremities of experience and survival (73). Yet these feelings remain unexpressed among the men. The cynical correspondent’s revelation that the camaraderie in the boat was the best aspect of the experience allows the reader to attribute the reticence to acknowledge the strong feelings of affection in the boat to restraint grounded in homophobia, rather than fleeting exuberance.

There is a certain affection present throughout the story which speaks to a narrative longing that is both a symptom of nostalgia and of unacknowledged desire. As the correspondent takes his turn at the oars late into the night, he “looks down at the two men sleeping underfoot. The cook’s arm was around the oiler’s shoulders, and, with the fragmentary clothing and haggard faces, they were the babes of the sea” (83). The tenderness of this description and linking of these two figures to gentle babes speaks volumes for the homosocial attraction the narrative persona feels towards this community. This would then also explain why the narrator points out that, “they sat together in the same seat, and each rowed an oar, then the oiler took both oars; then the correspondent took both oars, then the oiler; then the correspondent” (72). Here one observes close, intimate contact between two men, who alternately share the same space, then spell one another, in order to spread out the physical burden of the hard toil of rowing the boat. Yet the very next paragraph details the great care the man had to take in
switching seats in the tiny vessel, in order to keep it from capsizing: “it was all done with the most extraordinary care. As the two sidled past each other, the whole party kept watchful eyes on the coming wave, and the captain cried: ‘look out, now! Steady, there!’” (72). Now, of course, the care these men exhibit and the captain’s admonition for care are a direct product of the precarious state of the tiny boat within the heaving seas; one misstep or slip and the vessel could capsize and the men drown in the frigid, shark-infested waters. However, this scene functions on another level, one which both affirms the existence of a homosocial community while also offering a critique of a system of manhood based upon these bonds.

The existence of potentially homoerotic descriptions within the story function as further evidence of the departure that Crane takes from the established gender mores of his era. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eva Sedgwick argues that in the last third of the nineteenth century people began to be categorized according to identifying characteristics and that the designation of homosexual vs. heterosexual, which was based solely on sexual behaviors or actions, created an unrealistic binary (2). Sedgwick shows that homosocial male relationships operate on a spectrum that vacillates between the relational and the erotic. An essential part of maintaining homosocial relationships for heterosexual men involves denying the homoerotic potential of strong feelings of affection for other men.78 The care the correspondent and the oiler exhibit as they switch

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78 In Between Men, Sedgwick explains that, “to draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically displaced” (1-2).
positions within the boat could be read as a metaphor for the care heterosexual men take in balancing the intensity of their feelings for other men with the display of affection.

There is certainly homoerotic potential in the description of this balancing act in the boat: “first the man in the stern slid his hand along the thwart and moved with care [. . .]. Then the man in the rowing-seat slid his hand along the other thwart. It was all done with extraordinary care” (72). Without indulging in too graphic a narration, suffice it to say that this could be read as a passage out of male erotica with the substitution of anatomical body parts for the “thwart.” While care must be taken to avoid blatant misreading of any text, scholars in Queer Theory have established the subconscious coding of homoerotic attachment within heterosexual authors writing about deep bonds of male friendship, such as the ones the correspondent admits in this text.79 I wish to acknowledge the potential approach as further evidence that Crane here posits an alternative construction of masculinity based within homosocial community rather than the strenuous performance advocated during his time and modeled by public figures such as Teddy Roosevelt.

Perhaps the clearest example of the assertion of homosocial community in the story is in the correspondent’s rumination over an old poem he learned as a schoolboy.

79 Scholars of American literature might also recognize the close affinity this passage shares with a famous scene from Melville’s Moby Dick. After Stubbs has killed a whale and harvested its sperm, the men go into the hold and break up the chucks of fat with their hands (see Chapter XCIV). The scene of a group of men located within a homosocial community (a boat), sitting in “sperm,” hands occasionally touching and squeezing as they work through the sticky mass, is often cited by Queer Theory critics and lends itself to the same interpretive impulse posited here. These scenes share a spirit of tenderness and contentment which, I assert, could be considered a hallmark of homosocial communities and which may function to critique the prevalent understanding of strenuous masculinity.
While rowing in the dead of night, the correspondent suddenly remembers the following lines of an old, sentimental poem:

A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers;
There was a lack of woman’s nursing, there was a dearth of woman’s tears;
But a comrade stood beside him, and he took the comrade’s hand,
And he said, “I never more shall see my own, my native land. (85)

Prior to his experience in the boat, the correspondent could not have cared less about the soldier’s plight, and this disassociation he used to feel is symbolic both of the indifference of the natural world to the plight of humanity and the lack of empathy often associated with value systems based upon individualism (such as strenuous masculinity). The correspondent recalls his total indifference to the plight of the soldier in the poem as a schoolboy and reflects “now, however, it quaintly came to him as a human, living thing. [. . .] it was an actuality – stern, mournful, and fine” (85). Certainly, the correspondent sympathizes with the soldier’s fate and the indifference of the natural world to human death. The narrator notes, “He was sorry for the soldier of the Legion who lay dying in Algiers” (86). His empathy seems based within the solidarity he feels in the soldier’s fate. But one can also read his recognition of the essential humanity contained in those lines as an appreciation for the male connection validated by his comrade’s hand that seems to allow the soldier to reconcile himself to his fate and helps him confront his death with dignity. Here, the correspondent comes to a renewed appreciation for the homosocial community within the boat and acknowledges the primary role it plays in helping him survive.
More importantly, though, the correspondent’s epiphany illustrates a male community’s function as a counterbalance to the unsympathetic chaos of nature. Elliot observes that:

Crane uses the incident to question the possibility of human understanding of nature, and to pose a definition of heroism constituting a selfless brotherhood in the struggle for life. Under adverse circumstances, the men experience a rare connection as fellow beings united in their helplessness before the power of nature, and in their silent recognition of its indifference to their struggles. (3)

Here Elliot, like myself, identifies the rhetorical purpose of the story as assertion of “brotherhood,” but he fails to consider the implications of the setting of the piece alongside his observation. Crane places these men in a survival situation outside of normal social institutions. Consequently, it could be argued that, by contrasting the primal state of nature to homosocial community, Crane implies that male community is a type of survival mechanism that can help to counter the existential hostility of nature. In this reading, the hollow male gender roles of individualism alienate men from one another, for individualism is a social construct, an exterior determining force that exhibits pressure over individuals and strips away their agency. Homosocial communities, however, give these men some small measure of agency when faced with an indifferent or hostile universe (even if the control gained is limited to the type of reaction one has when confronted with this realization). The Naturalist critique of strenuous masculinity is quite similar to the one which Wright poses through his short fiction nearly four
decades later and which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, Crane does not merely point out the importance of homosocial community in this story; he also illustrates the process by which it is formed.

IV

Otherness, Dynamic Opposition, and the Communal Response

The narrative voice in “The Open Boat” constantly directs the reader’s attention to the ways in which the four men in the boat forge a sense of community or “comradeship” out of the mutual recognition of the extremity of their situation. The repetition of this observation in the story creates a sense of inclusion among these men denied to the reader, so that the reader becomes a spectator, a voyeur who can, like the narrator, hover above the scene, but not participate directly in any of the events described. While critics like Dudley address this phenomenon as Crane’s commentary on the role of the artist, I see the reassertion of inclusion as an important key that may unlock Crane’s perception of the processes by which male community is created. I argue that the assertion of natural inclusion and identification within a group of men and the subsequent separation of the group from “Other” outside figures is integral to the creation of male community, a process which Crane offers up as an alternative to the strenuous masculinity advocated by the popular culture of Crane’s age.

Yet this group dynamic, this homosocial community, really only seems possible when the group is able to create a sense of inclusion by defining themselves in opposition to the Other. The construction of an Other, racial or otherwise, in order to better understand and defend a group’s self identity, is not a new trick. While ‘Otherness” is
most often associated with Postcolonial approaches involving race and/or ethnicity, the process by which one group excludes another and uses a prohibitive list of characteristics to help define themselves appositionally applies to a wide spectrum of group behaviors.\(^8^0\) Walter Lippman explains that human beings participate in the acquisition of knowledge through the connotations and/or associations which people make between objects and ideas, between new information and past experience.\(^8^1\) He asserts that human beings are fundamentally unable to grasp difference or appreciate distinction when encountering a new element or experience. That is, since humans acquire knowledge by association, when an experience exists outside of their frame of reference it appears, at least initially, as an abstract blob or group (55). Furthermore, when people try to ascribe meaning onto

\(^{8^0}\) Specifically, my use of this term does not mean to imply that there are significant racial or ethnic factors at play here. Race does play an important part in some of Crane’s fiction, although it is usually discussed in the context of his short story/novella The Monster or in some of the Western tales set in Mexico. For a good general discussion of Race in Crane, see Schaefer’s Reader’s Guide. There, Schaefer categorizes the critical response to Crane’s depiction of race in three primary ways: those who see race as a minor motif subservient to the text’s interest in “human responsibility (250),” those who see Crane’s views as a product of his culture, and those who accuse him of furthering the most pernicious racial stereotypes.

\(^{8^1}\) Current cultural critics often assert that much of human experience has been constructed by social forces. This intriguing view gained critical favor in the 1970’s and 80’s in America, and so seems to be a relatively novel understanding of human interaction. However, most individuals fail to realize that these views were asserted by other thinkers of previous generations. For example, one of the most foundational writers in the field of social psychology, the journalist and political advisor Walter Lippmann, expressed this view in his groundbreaking work, Public Opinion (1922), which contains insightful explanations of stereotyping and the social construction of knowledge that were articulated nearly fifty years before they became adopted views in among mainstream academics. Lippmann’s ideas are specifically employed here because he was a contemporary of Roosevelt and Wright (and Crane, if the young author would have lived beyond his twenty-ninth birthday).
something new or different, they often fall back upon definitions which already exist for them in culture. That is to say, just as humans construct knowledge by association, so too does culture construct knowledge for us by providing existing associations with which we are unfamiliar. As individuals are immersed within a given culture for long periods of time, they usually accept a dominant cultural mindset without too much thought.

Consequently, an assumption seems "right" to an individual because those around them view it as normative and true. So the brain creates a sense of reality that conforms to its set of expectations, much like an individual adopts viewpoints prevalent amongst those people, institutions, etc., with which it regularly interacts.

Scholarship shows that the binary differentiation between “us” and “them” is a fundamental part of human behavior and provides the basic foundation for stereotypes and exclusionary behavior since time immemorial. But “The Open Boat” is the third

82 Lippmann interprets this phenomenon by noting that, "When distant and unfamiliar and complex things are communicated to great masses of people, the truth suffers a considerable and often radical distortion. The complex is made over into the simple, the hypothetical into the dogmatic, and the relative into an absolute" (47). As people become more and more accustomed to these normative roles and constructions they begin to form expectations regarding certain things. Lippmann explains this phenomena through familiar objects with which humans routinely interact:

    When I pick up a tennis ball, I expect it to bounce, but when I pick up a golf ball, I do not expect the same results. Now I do not continually test each tennis ball and golf ball to prove this, I just assume all will act the same. Consequently the human mind begins to invent a reality that conforms to the existing constructions which it has already internalized. (Lippmann 58)

Lippmann finally asserts that the absolute key to the role that stereotypes play in the construction of group identity is the distinction between the instinctive perception of something and the rote acceptance of pre-existing constructions as organic perceptions.

83 Hayden White explains that throughout human history, “the sensed difference between the ‘we’ and ‘they’ is translated into a difference between an achieved and an imperfect
Crane story in which one sees the necessity of projecting Otherness onto individuals as a basic premise for the creation of a male community. It is as if Crane’s texts imply that empathy is only based upon a real or perceived solidarity with another’s fate, so that it becomes indistinguishable from one’s own. This projection of Otherness is so instrumental to the creation of these male communities that Crane demonstrates their genesis in two separate ways.

In “The Open Boat,” male bonds are forged through mutual suffering, the realization of existential futility against the natural world, fear, exhaustion, etc. However, they are deepened through the shared experience of exclusion and derision of those who are not enmeshed within the same life and death struggle. These men draw strength and endurance from their shared identity as a community of survivors, and they deepen their bond by castigating the life-saving crews on shore for not rescuing them.

Lippman explores the similarities between the terms "stereotype" and "ideal," noting that ideals are often seen as good things, but in reality simply refer to those things held in the absolute. He states that, "Our stereotyped world is not necessarily the world we would like it to be. It is simply the kind of world we expect it to be" (69). Lippmann is right that an attack on our stereotypes falls like an erosion of foundational truth, for it challenges our constructed vision of reality. Since we have defined ourselves in association with or opposition to these constructions, stereotypes often inform our sense of identity. When our assumptions about reality are questioned, our very identity is in doubt.

Myriad critics note the importance of “comradeship” to “The Open Boat.” See Dudley, Goetsch, Halliburton, Pizer, and Schaefer. Unfortunately, these critics do not attempt to tie the importance of male fellowship to the flux in gender roles occurring in American society during this period.
(even though they do not seem to actually exist) (351). In other words, here the male communal ethos functions in opposition to a perceived Other. The Other does not get to speak or participate in this transaction. They have no knowledge of their exclusion and are not particularly affected by it in any real way.

The first sign of an exclusionist impulse in the story comes when the correspondent is taking his turn at rowing the small craft. The young man’s physical exhaustion is beginning to take its toll and he “wondered ingenuously how in the name of all that was sane could there be people who thought it amusing to row a boat. It was not an amusement; it was a diabolical punishment. [...] He mentioned to the boat in general how the amusement of rowing struck him, and the weary-faced oiler smiled in full sympathy” (74). This scene shows both the process by which individuals outside of this immediate experience are castigated for their peculiar views and/or actions in order to solicit a sympathetic affirmation of a shared experience (in this case the misery of rowing). In this story, Crane both illustrates the benefits of a construction of masculinity based upon homosocial community and then goes on to show the process by which that male community is able to form naturally.

The clearest example the formation of a group identity through the exclusion or Others outside of a common, defining experience is seen in the four men’s belief that they are about to be rescued. The shipwreck has occurred relatively close to shore, which the men can see as they row closer and closer. The men wait for a life saving station crew to come out and rescue them, rather than running the risk of the boat breaking apart in the high waves if they were to try and take the dingy ashore. As they come closer to
land, the men can see figures on the coastline that seem to recognize their plight. The
men in the boat remark: “Look, There’s a man on the shore! [. . .] Now he’s stopped.
Look! He’s facing us! He’s waving at us! [. . .] Ah, now we’re all right, Now we’re all
right! There’ll be a boat out here for us in half of an hour” (78). However, their hopes
soon turn to doubt as they realize that, for all the commotion on the shore, no one there is
actually trying to come out and help them. The men in the boat have become an
attraction for the guests at a nearby hotel, who signal them from shore, but do not
understand the nature of their situation. The men remark:

“Now there is quite a mob. Look! Isn’t that a boat?”

“Where?” Oh, I see where you mean. No, that’s no boat.”

“That fellow is still waving his coat.”

“He must think we like to see him do that. Why don’t he quit it? It don’t
mean anything.” [. . .]

“He’s an idiot. Why aren’t they getting men to bring a boat out?” (80)

The men begin to insult those on the shore for their lack of comprehension of the gravity
of their situation. In other words, they create some characteristic which they understand
to be a shared, defining characteristic of the Other (in this case, a lack of knowledge) and
use it as a way to denigrate them. By nightfall, with still no sign of help from those on
shore, the men have grown bitter and violent. One remarks, “I’d like to catch the chump
who waved the coat. I feel like soaking him one, just for luck” (81). As disappointment
regarding the lack of actions by the other people on the shore sets in, the men blindly
grope for a panacea to salve their disappointment and despair. The immediate remedy is
to cling to the group identity they have constructed as fellow sufferers and to the homosocial affection they have for one another. The next comfort they reach for is the denigration of those outside their experience who they perceive as having failed them. By creating an Other upon which to project their disappointment and bitterness, the group identity grows stronger and the male community deepens.

In “Five White Mice,” however, the stakes of Otherness are much higher. The New York Kid reacts to the Mexican “greasers” according to preconceived notions based upon a national mindset that viewed Hispanics as inferior racial others. Dudley states that, “In these stories, Crane reflects the typical westerners’ contempt for Mexicans, who form a part of the hostile landscape that serves as the background for the Anglo characters’ confrontations with their own fears” (“The Manly Art . . .” 121). These men are characterized by their hostile intentions and naked aggression, witnessed in their immediate challenge to fight. The Kid’s feelings of superiority make sense, given that we can read his character as a stand-in for the construction of strenuous masculinity promoted by Roosevelt and others in the culture.

From this vantage point, white American men like the Kid were pushed to do their racial “duty” in subjugating the “inferior” races of men, which is precisely the

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86 Several other critics have commented on the racist characterization of Hispanics in Crane’s Western fiction. Raymund Paredes’ essay could be considered representative of this view, by asserting that Crane reinforces negative stereotypes of Hispanics as villainous racial others. This view is so influential that many critics seem to adopt it without question, even when noting that his view could be somewhat reductive (Dudley 63). However, recent scholarship has begun to push back against this assessment of Crane. Juan Alonzo notes that, “Crane is less concerned with deriding the Mexican than with deflating the myth of the Western hero, which he achieves through an unprejudiced depiction of Mexican characters” (380).
impulse that drives the Kid’s actions (along with a healthy dose of self-preservation). In fact, it is this exclusionary impulse which drives the potential violence and aggression in the conflict. It is the fear of the unknown, the fear of the Other that pushes the New York Kid towards violence, and the Mexican’s gripping of the knife becomes emblematic of an attempt to assert his manhood (contained in the phallic symbol of the knife) over the white man. Yet, under this strenuous mindset, the projection of Otherness onto an outside group does not function as a way to forge group identity (as it does in “The Open Boat”), but as a justification for violent action against the inferior Other. In other words, what is provocative about Crane as an artist is his ability to adopt and relate different worldviews based upon the narrative viewpoint established in the tale. In “The Open Boat,” a story grounded in an alternative construction of male homosocial community, the projection of Otherness onto an outside group functions to help forge a coherent group identity and camaraderie based upon a shared experience. In “Five White Mice,” however, the projection of Otherness, especially in the classic form of fears of the racial Other, functions as justification for violent subjugation rather than the formation of personal or group identity. Crane shows the readers the ways in which constructions of masculinity inform a basic human impulse like the separation and exclusions of individuals into preexisting categories of expected behavior.

In “The Blue Hotel,” the construction of male community is in a constant state of flux, because the formation of group identity is attempted via two conflicting catalysts: inclusion and exclusion. The hotel proprietor, Scully, attempts to make all his (male) guests feel a part of his homey, frontier, small-town community. Even the way he drums
up business at his hotel speaks to this impulse: “It was Scully’s habit to go every morning and evening to meet the leisurely trains that stopped at Romper and work his seductions upon any man that he might see wavering, gripsack in hand” (142). One morning, “Scully performed the marvel of catching three men” (142). Not waiting for people to come to him, Scully gets men to stay at his hotel through boisterous hospitality and guilt. With these particular men, “Scully practically made them prisoners. He was so nimble and merry and kindly that each probably felt it would be the height of brutality to try to escape” (143). Scully does not attempt to build community simply by capturing guests, however. This would only speak to his attempt to make an economic profit. Rather, his actions once the guests have checked in to his hotel showcase an attempt to build a group identity.

Scully constructs a male community by way of inclusion, by making each individual feel like he is special member of the hotel. When the three men enter the hotel and get checked in, the proprietor’s little mannerisms and attentions make the men feel as if he is providing special amenities. Crane writes, “It was notable that throughout this series of small ceremonies the three travelers were made to feel that Scully was very benevolent. He was conferring great favors upon them. He handed the towel from one to the other with an air of philanthropic impulse” (143). Later, when the Swede attempts to leave the hotel due to his paranoid fantasies, Scully chases him upstairs and, with a mixture of friendly conversation, whiskey, and tender revelations about his dead child, convinces the Swede to stay. Interestingly, Scully attempts to create a bond with the Swede by meditating upon a feminine object, in this case a picture of his deceased
daughter. Locked into a construction of strenuous manhood, the Swede assumes that he is in a violent “Wild West” town and fears for his life. Scully attempts to counter this mentality by showing the Swede family pictures: “There was revealed a ridiculous photograph of a little girl. She was leaning against a balustrade of gorgeous decoration, and the formidable bang to her hair was prominent. The figure was as graceful as an upright sled-stake, and, withal, it was of the hue of lead” (Crane 150). Scully intends for the picture to demonstrate the domesticity of his family home, and help the Swede see that Fort Romper and the Blue Hotel are safe, civilized spaces. The Swede, however, does not even look at the picture, for he is too intent on keeping his eye on the shadows in the room (151). Consequently, Scully eventually abandons his attempt to construct community through domesticity and instead turns to a more masculine ritual: a bottle of whiskey.

Meanwhile, as Scully and the Swede are getting good and drunk upstairs, the cowboy, Easterner, and Johnnie are forming their own male community downstairs. This male group, however forms in the more “traditional” way: exclusion. Their conversation around the stove centers on the Swede’s strange behavior and the Easterner explains that the difference between the men in the room and the Swede upstairs is that the Swede lacks knowledge of the reality of frontier life due to his belief in the lurid depiction of the West found in dime-novels. This lack of knowledge provides the defining element necessary for exclusion and these three men immediately begin to separate themselves from the Swede from this point on. The cowboy remarks, “This is a queer game. I hope we don’t git snowed in, because then we’d have to stand this here man bein’ around with
us all the time. That wouldn’t be no good” (152). Johnnie responds, “I wish pop would throw him out” (152). The desire to exclude the Swede is clear and provides the glue that binds these three men together around a common cause for the rest of the story. As is previous stories, the men use the Other in order to forge their community: they define their identity in opposition to the Swede’s erratic and ignorant behavior. Yet, unlike “Five White Mice,” the foil is not based upon race or ethnicity. Nor do these male communities define themselves as masculine in opposition to women or femininity. Instead, here the oppositional force is the strenuous construction of masculinity – the construction which the Swede attempts to perform. For although the Swede is not representative of a traditional binary (an “unmasculine” Other), he enacts a version of male behavior that conflicts with the group identity of Johnnie, the cowboy, and the Easterner.

When the Swede and Scully emerge from upstairs, the impulses of inclusion and exclusion clash almost immediately. The male group around the stove has formed their identity through the exclusion of Swede and derision at his ignorance. Consequently, they cannot abide his air of confidence with Scully or ownership once he comes downstairs. “‘Say’, said Johnnie, ‘this makes me sick. Why don’t you throw ‘im out in the snow?’” (153). His father, Scully, responds, “‘Why, he’s all right now.’ ‘Well,’ said Johnnie to his father, ‘he may be all right now, but I don’t see it. Other time he was scared, and now he’s too fresh’” (154). Scully’s efforts of inclusion have run up against the exclusionary instinct of the other men. These two attempts to create identity clash until exclusion eventually wins out. Kimball claims that the Swede is “the only one of
Scully’s newly arrived guests who is immediately excluded from the brotherhood of man [and] never becomes a true member of the group” (426). However, I think that her claim is a bit hasty. The Swede seems to have the same opportunity to become a part of the male community which forms in the hotel. In fact, Scully goes out of his way again and again to make him feel included. Their behavior at the supper table, however, reveals that Scully has succeeded in forming a type of male community, but one consisting of himself and the Swede alone.

By the end of dinner, the Swede’s riotous behavior has increasingly alienated him for the rest of the men, including Scully, whose attempt at inclusion is wearing thin. The Swede, however, continually attempts to insert himself into the other group of men, a group formed upon the exclusion of his same person. He insists upon a game of cards after dinner (155) and, although it begins well enough (initially it is described as a “cozy and friendly scene”), it soon devolves into violence when the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating (156). The fight that ensues helps solidify the group identity, and by the end the victor, the Swede is cast out of the group of men and wanders off into the blizzard and his eventual death.

In this story, Crane provides his reader with an opportunity to evaluate the two different methods of establishing group identity, inclusion and exclusion. More importantly, Crane’s story documents the failures of a method when it is not followed by all of its members. Crane seems to be implying that formation of a community cannot occur through a conscious effort of one of its member (like Scully), but is something that happens out of a shared experience and/or reaction to external stimulus by individuals
(like the three men downstairs). Regardless of the process of formation, once group identity is established, it cannot be appropriated by Others outside the group unless the members will it. When they do not, violent resistance and banishment occur. While Johnnie loses the fight, it is still an attempt at exclusion, and he succeeds in the effectual removal of the Swede from the hotel. Here, male community is something that sustains its members, while dooming those outside of it to their individual fate. Had the Swede been able to enter into this male community in the beginning of the story, it seems unlikely that he would have been knifed in the fight with the gambler, as he would have never been forced to leave the hotel. It is the exclusion from the group as an Other that ultimately leads to the Swede’s death. This functions as a sober reminder that, while male communities can ultimately offer a more positive construction of masculine identity than that of strenuous manhood, it is not without a price, for the process by which group identity is created often involves the distinction of those within the group from the Others. This, in turn, often leads to a desensitization regarding the fates of those external to the group. In other words, while Crane’s fiction offers a subtle critique of the strenuous male gender roles of the end of the nineteenth century, he is also careful to show how an alternative construction of masculinity based within homosocial community offers a similar potential for violence, due to the exclusionary impulse present in the group’s foundation.

Unfortunately, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the role that Otherness plays in the construction of personal identity within Crane’s work. One exception would be Dudley, who, in the second chapter of this book, A Man’s Game,
briefly explains the function of exclusion in Crane’s tales of adventures. For Dudley, differentiation between insider and outsider status in Crane’s short fiction is symbolic of the negotiation Crane himself experiences as he maneuvers between his role as artist and his sense of manhood. Dudley believes that Crane’s depiction of outsiders, “reflects both the difficult negotiation between insider and outsider required of Crane’s ideal artist and the problematic notions of masculinity on which this negotiation metaphorically relies” (58). Here, as he does through his book, Dudley attempts to connect Crane’s ironic narrative voice to his difficulty in reconciling his sense of manhood with his identity as an artist (who was socially coded as effete). Yet this conclusion requires one to accept the notion that Crane adopts a strenuous construction of male gender roles and strives to embody a vigorous code of conduct in his own personal life. This assumption is not one this study is willing to make. In fact, it seems clear that Crane was more than willing to mock the strenuous construction of masculinity Dudley assumes he adopts, and does so at nearly every turn. Besides, even this cursory discussion of otherness clearly centers on the individual’s negotiation of insider and outsider status as a way to resolve their personal identity.

87 Dudley does eventually admit the exclusionary function of Otherness briefly in discussing “The Open Boat,” but does not adequately follow up on his observation or connect it to the social construction of manhood in any real way. He does note the stratifying function of gender in the story through, “The creation of an all-inclusive feminine Other, useful primarily for the definition, through opposition, for the brotherhood in the boat” (71). The juxtaposition of “all-inclusive” Other with the oppositional (and therefore, inclusive) brotherhood belies the lack of critical thought that has been put into this important relationship.
Conclusion

In this second chapter, I found that Crane’s fiction illuminates the trauma and confusion inherent in the performance of vigorous male scripts. Instead, Crane privileges an alternative construction of personal male identity based within homosocial bonds. I showed that Crane’s texts must be approached comparatively, that stories must be read in conjunction with one another to appreciate an aggregate social message. In other words, some stories, like “Five White Mice,” show the failure of individualism, while others, like “The Open Boat,” represent the positive outcomes of group action. I also explored the ways that inclusion in and exclusion from male groups function to build personal identity and appropriated the postcolonial discourse of Otherness to illustrate the relational process of identity formation and male performance. The purpose of this chapter was to prove that the assumptions about male authors writing in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism were wrong; that they were not “hypermasculine” acolytes of strident manhood, but, in fact, offered alternative constructions which they portrayed as less traumatic and more cohesive than prevailing social notions of normative male behavior.

One can better appreciate the nuance of my position by comparing my argument to another recent article that posits a similar reevaluation of Crane. William Morgan notes that some of Crane’s later short fiction, “records Crane’s ambivalence toward the strenuous ethos of white masculinity that Theodore Roosevelt championed and came to embody” (63). Moreover, Morgan asserts that, “during the final four years of Crane’s life, he increasingly turned away from a masculinity ethos of self-control, physical
virility, and racial conquest and toward one of communal care, intersubjective 
compassion, and responsibility” (64). However, my primary departure from Morgan 
would be in his assertion that the adoption of a community ethic only occurred within the 
last four years of Crane’s life. In my estimation, Crane’s willingness to challenge the 
dominant construction of male gender roles may be witnessed throughout his entire body 
of work, from the Red Badge of Courage to “The Open Boat”. Furthermore, this 
challenge is most pronounced within his best writing, not just in the more local-color 
oriented sketches and tales of Whilomville. I agree with Morgan when he notes that “The 
Monster suggests that the recession of the domestic and the emergence of the strenuous is 
a cultural pattern Crane not only records, but also questions, qualifies, and at least 
partially repudiates” (69). Yet, unlike Morgan, I see this as a hallmark feature of nearly 
all of Crane’s developed fiction. This differentiation is essential, in that it provides the 
foundation for an extended exploration of this questioning, qualification, and repudiation 
in short fiction from some of the most prominent American authors writing in the 
Naturalist tradition. Consequently, I see my own study as an extension and a more 
nuanced development of the excellent observation found in Morgan’s analysis; an 
application that spans over four decades of American short fiction and attempts to shift 
the narrative surrounding the depiction of masculinity within American Literary 
Naturalism away from castigation and towards a more nuanced appreciation of the 
multiplicity of masculine constructions which exist within even the most overbearing 
cultural constraints.
Stephen Crane remains a provocative, influential, and misunderstood Naturalist author precisely because he actively wrote against the new gender mores of the period in ways that complicate assertions of a hegemonic cultural perception of normative male behavior. John Clendenning writes, “Always the ironist, Stephen Crane cannot be pinpointed, defined, or categorized. Once he seems to take a position, affirm a belief, express a philosophy, he will soon reverse it, confound it, deny it” (23). While many of his tales seem relatively straight forward, scholars continue to find symbolic richness in Crane’s stories. However, Clendenning reminds readers that, “Nothing illustrates Crane’s pluralism better than his tendency to revisit scenes, themes, and characters, and to revoke them. There is no closure in Crane: each story provokes another story, each vision a revision” (23). The pervasive examples of alternative depictions of masculinity, both negative and positive, certainly support Clendenning’s assertion regarding Crane’s revising vision. My argument clarifies Crane’s ironic subversion of dominant male gender roles and is important to future scholarship on the author and the perception of his position within American literature and the modern classroom. Through my reading, one may clearly see Crane for the revolutionary author he truly was; an artist who was not afraid to challenge the cultural establishment of his day and who advocated a new understanding of gender behavior that could lead American society back towards virtues of social compassion and communal insight. This may be a way to both read and teach Crane, for through this understanding the author may become regarded as a more subversive artist and social critic.
Chapter Three

Richard Wright’s Early Fiction as a Rejection of the Racial Oppression of Strenuous Manhood

This chapter attempts to illustrate the assertions made in the previous sections through the lens of African American masculinity. I will continue to show, as I did in my discussion of Stephen Crane in chapter two, that authors writing in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism critique the dominant construction of strenuous masculinity advocated by Theodore Roosevelt. However, I will also complicate this dynamic in considering the additional deterministic factor of racial oppression by supporting my assertions through the writings of Richard Wright, arguably the first African American author to experience national literary success. Here, I will examine the early fiction of author Richard Wright for evidence of an alternative construction of personal identity based within group affiliation. I will specifically argue that Wright’s first published works, Uncle Tom’s Children (1938) and Native Son (1940), both illustrate the failure of constructions of strenuous masculinity to successfully order the lives and experiences of African American men. As a result, these texts both ultimately privilege an alternative vision of manhood predicated upon identification with the larger group, especially within the context of resistance to racial oppression.
I

Black Masculinity: a Brief Historical Overview

It is important to this argument to contrast white stereotypes and fears of black maleness against the homosocial constructions employed in the conscious attempt to re-shape black manhood by Richard Wright\textsuperscript{88}. This is a necessity because, as Amber Hendricks explains:

In the African-American community, there is often a call for black men to stand up and “be men.” The ideal is to accept the patriarchal image of the hard working, all-powerful, and woman-dominating man. [. . .] The constant striving for re-emasculcation [sic] is what drives the words and actions of the black male. He must declare he is a man whatever way possible because he has been rendered powerless by the system that decides the identity. (82)

Here Hendricks observes the deterministic effect of social constructions over personal identity formation. As discussed in chapters one and two, strenuous constructions of masculinity based on a code of violent, individual male behavior of the type modeled by

\textsuperscript{88} One could pull back even further here and first discuss views held in America toward race itself at this time, the broad outlines of which are here assumed to be common knowledge. Suffice it to say that America was (and still is) a racist society, at least according to Banton’s definition: “[racism] refers to the efforts of a dominant race group to exclude a dominated race group from sharing in the material and symbolic rewards of status and power” (qtd in Hall 104). Of course, the validity of the cultural concept known as “Race” is still being debated by postmodern critics. Robert Young’s article contains an excellent summary of the most important viewpoints in this ongoing discussion and offers insights into the necessity of acknowledging cultural construction of distinction as an operating concept over terminologies such as “narratives of specificity” (343).
Theodore Roosevelt became the socially accepted mode of “normal” male behavior in the early twentieth century. According to Anthony Rotundo, this gender perception evolved to the point where, “ambition and combativeness became virtues for men; competitiveness and aggression were exalted as ends in themselves. Toughness was now admired, while tenderness was a cause for scorn” (6). This strenuous view of masculinity claimed personal courage, physical force, and the assertion of individual will as the defining virtues of “real men,” and these dubious values became the normative set of expectations for male behavior in society. Martin Green observes, “Defining courage exclusively as a virtue (at least if one understands virtue in a morally transcendent way) makes it something that shows itself negatively, a way of responding to other people’s initiatives. We are shown our hero not being afraid, not backing down from threat, not crying out under torture – always reacting to an enemy’s initiative” (5). The belief in the necessity of reacting to threats resonated throughout all elements of society; it became the standard by which “normal” male behavior was defined and championed and provided a set of criteria against which deviation was judged and marginalized. Furthermore, because men were expected to react to exterior threats with violence, any perceived threats to patriarchal power, including female encroachment into traditionally male gender roles and assertions of individualism by marginalized ethnic groups, were increasingly met with aggressive rhetoric and/or behavior. Consequently, strenuous gender expectations contributed to American racism and sexism, forming the basis of a white patriarchal system of oppression and subjugation.
The view of manhood by African American males (hereby referred to as “black masculinity”) has always been informed by the understanding of the dominant (read white) culture. Martin Summers states, “Hegemonic discourses of manliness clearly shaped how black men in the early twentieth century thought about themselves as men. [. . .] These men found it difficult to move beyond the definitions of manhood as they were articulated by dominant culture of late-Victorian society” (14). White culture, in other words, wrote the proverbial script of male behavior that all men, white or black, were expected to perform. Theresa Runstedtler reminds readers that, “prevailing ideas of citizenship and the nation were intertwined with images of white manhood” (62). So dominant (white) culture asserts one form of acceptable masculinity -- a man must stand out among his peers and be an individual, defend himself against threats by force, and assert his will and desire over those of the group through aggression -- but limits the possibilities of this expression to whites.

Identifying a dominant performance of masculinity according to race is quite problematic for those human beings who are denied the most basic manifestations of

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89 Of course, it should be noted that the following generalizations are neither meant to be exhaustive nor particularly nuanced. The ways in which African American men understood their own male identity were far more subjective than the ways in which black manhood was portrayed within the popular media culture between 1890-1940. However, scholars have established that Wright’s fiction was intended for a white audience (for more on the implications of Wright’s intended audience, see Caleb Corkery). Consequently, I will focus on the perception of black masculinity held by Wright’s white audience in this section.

90 Both Rebecca Cooper and James Smethurst discuss the influence of popular media culture in shaping the ideals of the protagonists in Wright’s body of fiction. Their work so firmly establishes popular media culture as a deterministic factor in Wright’s texts that I do not discuss it here in detail.
these ideals. Black men of this time are forbidden to even speak to a white man unless spoken to first, approach or even look at white women, and referred to as “boy” by white men. Jeffery Geiger notes, “Almost any active expression of black male desire runs the danger of retribution and even annihilation” (203). Here, Geiger identifies an important point: it is the “active (or public) expression” of will that is denied black men. They are expected to be men, but denied the public performance of male behaviors. Or, as Jeffery Leeks remarks: “Put another way, how does one construct a social identity in which the civic, legal, and social policies, all of which define black masculinity in relation to white patrimony, render black men invisible?” (Leek 69). Again, Leek’s question is one of “social identity” or the public performance denied these individuals. Black men could, however, enact a strenuous construction of manhood upon other black men, women, and children. The reality of the constraints on public behavior implies the development of a dual identity in black men, a line demarcated by the particular sphere in which a performance occurs, rather than the type of behavior enacted. Furthermore, black men ran the risk of their private actions informing their public behavior. The potential for the public performance of a strenuous black manhood was so great, that it created further anxiety about the notion of black masculinity within dominant white society.

It is sadly ironic that, even though they were cut off from public expressions of normative male behavior, black men are seen as having an excess of certain behaviors which in white men could be viewed as virtues: strong sexual desire, capacity for violence, etc. Leek explains that, “The prevailing social construction of black masculinity in the twentieth century (as well as the twenty-first century) has been
predicated on the myths of black intellectual inferiority and sexual prowess. Despite social and cultural data that present a more complex narrative of black male experience, these myths abound” (59). These stereotypes have also contributed to the denial of normative manhood; as Martin Summers notes: “the ever-present threat of lynching and mob violence, which purportedly sought to police an aggressive black male sexuality and often incorporated the horrific act of castration, made any assertion of independence or brazen behavior a potentially perilous action” (3). So in the Jim Crow South, if not everywhere in America well into the twentieth century, simply acting like a man in public could get a black man killed or maimed. A black man could not perform the basic tenets of strenuous, white manhood (individualism and direct action) without facing violent repression from whites who wanted to keep him in his “place.”

It is not an exaggeration to state that the decades encompassed in this study, 1890-1940, were particularly dangerous and humiliating times for African Americans. Riche Richardson explains that, “An age of reaction [to black emancipation and the Reconstruction of the U.S. South] arose by the 1890s, marked by an upsurge of lynchings and a notable increase in caricatured images of blacks in American material culture” (Black Masculinity and the U.S. South 24). So the rise of strenuous masculinity

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91 Jean Lutes’s provocative article sheds necessary light on the relative lack of accounts of lynching in the literary journalism of the Jim Crow South. Lutes observes that, “this influential model of authorship emerged at the same time that mob violence against black men accused of raping white women hit its highest point. A rich body of scholarship has demonstrated that journalism shaped literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in multiple and sometimes surprising ways” (457). Lutes shows that at the same time mob violence against African Americans explodes in America, journalism and reporting reaches the height of its literary influence. Yet, newspaper accounts of lynchings from this time are virtually non-existent or ridiculously biased against the
coincided with an increase in the murder of black individuals and mockery of black culture. To vastly oversimplify, black men in the time period encompassing the Naturalist tradition were viewed according to two oppositional stereotypes of assumed behavior by white social institutions. Ronald Hall explains that two stereotypes emerged for African American men and that “both were initially developed by Europeans to secure their position in Western society and simultaneously denigrate Africans for purpose of subordination” (106). One was that of the infantilized black man, the “boy” of racial slurs; the other, the myth of natural physical superiority and sexual prowess.

For many reasons, none of them good and most involving defending the myth of white racial superiority, black men were depicted as mentally, morally, and emotionally inferior to white men. The pseudo-science of eugenics popular at the time gave supposed proof for the infantile mental capabilities of black men, who were understood to have the intelligence and intellectual capacity of children (or women, who were also infantilized in media culture). Black men were kept “in their place” by fears of violence, coupled with the belief in their inferiority, of which they were reminded in petty ways by innumerable slights and assaults of their human dignity.

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African American victims of these “race riots.” Lutes’ article exposes the way which a particular conception of violent individualism (like the type advocated by Theodore Roosevelt) was used to inflame national anxieties about disempowered social groups.

Hall claims that the drive to “prove” racial inferiority was (at least in its infancy) a uniquely American impulse and is still a characteristic of American racism, due to a perpetual subconscious desire to justify racist attitudes and social prejudice (105). Consequently, Ronald Hall calls for continued research into supposed genetic differences between racial groups, claiming that only in this way will humanity finally be convinced of the fallacy of categorizing human beings into arbitrary groups based solely upon physiological traits (105).
Yet, although they were patronized as mental inferiors and children, black men
were also understood to be physically superior to white men in nearly every way. Ronald
Hall explains that the stereotypes of “the brute defined Africans as primitive,
temperamental, violent, and sexually powerful [. . .]. The brute stereotype in particular
was effective in conveying Africans’ mental dullness and lack of self-control” (106).
Black men were (and still are today) assumed to have a genetic, natural propensity for
athletic prowess. This admiration for African American accomplishments in the
sporting world, however, fed fears of violence. Runstedtler explains that the concept of
the New Negro was based upon an appropriation of strenuous masculine values gleaned
from the white dominant culture. Yet, in order to act out this particular construction of
masculinity, prominent New Negroes, such as boxers Sam McVea and Jack Johnson, had
to go over to France. Even there, their comparative freedom was grounded in their fame
due, in large part, to their fetishistic objectification as primal specimens of the exoticized
Other. So, the black male’s supposed link to primitive manhood was feared by white
Americans and commoditized by white Europeans. Runstedtler explains that, “McVea
was a quintessential New Negro – tough, determined, and independent. Yet regardless of
such positive stories, the African American boxer’s popularity with French fans
ultimately stemmed from his embodiment of primal black masculinity” (63). Since Black
men were supposedly superior to white men in the primal world of athletic competition,
they were often seen as inherently more brutal and primitive which, combined with their
assumed mental incapacity, gave rise to the portrayal of the “half-crazed” Negro.

93 For a discussion of the role of sports in asserting black masculinity, see Theresa
Runstedtler’s article
As moral will and intellectual fortitude were Victorian requirements for self-control, black men (whom society did not see as fully capable of these restraints) were furthermore understood to be licentious and full of a predatory, primal sexual force. Richardson aptly describes highly sexualized stereotypes surrounding black manhood as:

A myth that cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed them as inherently lustful and primitive. It was rooted in the growing panic about racial intermixture in the South that emerged after slavery ended, reflected in the region’s obsession with protecting white womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynching in the region. (BMS 4)

The belief that all black men possessed predatory, uncontrollable sexual passion was used to hold them at proverbial arm’s length as social miscreants, outsiders to “normal” male behavior and religious and/or moral restraint.

And so the combination of violent, sexual power with mental incapacity became an animating fear of the black masculine, one which was increasingly used as justification for the brutal suppression of African American dignity and freedom. Simply put, black men were (and still are) held to a perverse standard of behavior which clashed with the script of strenuous masculinity which popular media culture glorified and advocated to all men in this period. For while white teenagers internalized a code of vigorous masculinity which promoted violent aggressive behavior when faced with exterior threats, young black men were killed every day for performing such a script. While white men listened to speeches advocating individualism, black men were denied
an individual masculine identity. Referred to as children (hence the term “boy), viewed as subhuman, and kept in their “place” by repressive legal and paramilitary force, black men were denied social recognition of their manhood and essentially emasculated.

II

Critiques of Wright, Then and Now

It is due in large part to this conception of black men as brutishly violent that so many African American artists and critics opposed the depiction of Richard Wright’s male protagonists in his early fiction. In her 1938 review of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, author Zora Neale Hurston vehemently opposed the violent masculine persona in the stories (32). 94 Jerry W. Ward, Jr. notes that “[Hurston’s] observation about the gendered nature of Wright’s fiction might be thought of as the initial salvo for severe feminist or womanist criticisms of Wright’s alleged misogyny. She found the concentrated emphasis of the violence in black life to be excessive” (346). Certainly, Hurston articulates a criticism of Wright’s first published collection which resonated with other African American authors, including some of Wright’s own friends. 95 James C. Hall remarks that,

94 For a recent discussion of the depiction of black masculinity within Hurston’s body of work, see John Lowe.

95 For more on the debate between Wright and Hurston, see James C. Hall, whose article explores the pedagogical implications of teaching Hurston and Wright alongside one another in the undergraduate literary classroom, and argues that their instruction should not be simplified to a “zero-sum game,” where one writer’s approaches and theories are seen as more important than the other. Rather, both should be seen as major writers who represent competing currents of thought within the African American artistic community of the time period (82).
If Hurston’s attack on both the idea and performance of *Uncle Tom’s Children* was a brief and acerbic intervention in the overdetermined field of 1930s literary politics, it was certainly reperformed or revisited with striking regularity for the next forty years or more. In many ways, Hurston’s outrage foreshadowed related attacks from Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. (81)

Like Hurston’s initial piece, these reviews found fault with two important themes in Wright’s collection. First, Hurston and others lamented the level and tenor of violence in the stories. Their primary concern was that Wright’s characters would be read by a white audience as proof of the validity of pervasive stereotypes of African American men as brutish, uneducated, violent criminals. James Baldwin’s famous “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) attacked Wright for contributing to the racial stereotypes of the day in portraying violent, sexually motivated black adolescents. Yet I do not read Wright’s protagonists as symbolic of the totality of the black male experience in the Jim Crow South, simply because they all resist their subjugation in Wright’s early fiction. Wright himself notes in “How Bigger Was Born” that he seldom witnessed defiant resistance in the South when he was a young man. Rather, I read his protagonists as case studies in the adoption of dominant (which I read as white, strenuous) constructions of masculinity. In this light, Wright seems to present his reader with a range of probable outcomes for attempts at individual resistance by black men.

Second, Wright’s contemporaries expressed concern that his fiction did not champion black racial solidarity as an alternative to the humiliations of social
segregation. Baldwin laments that in Wright’s early fiction, “a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship the Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life” (35). Even modern critics who are willing to acknowledge some level of community in Wright immediately qualify their observations. For example, Hall observes that, “community is certainly present” in Wright’s early fiction, but then steps back in noting, “but for Wright that community must be relentlessly qualified with attention to the detrimental effects of capitalism and modernity” (83). I, however, do not think that representations of community in Wright are absent to the same extent as other critics have claimed. In fact, I see Wright’s early fiction as functioning to place different types of communities into dialogue with one another. It seems clear that a comparison of Wright’s earliest fiction reveals the author’s deep appreciation for the complexities of homosocial and racial interaction and ultimately privileges group solidarity as a stable site for personal identity formation.

Recent critical approaches to the depiction of masculinity in Wright’s body of work have begun to recognize the complexity inherent in the intersections of masculinity, violence, resistance to oppression, and despair displayed within Wright’s fiction. For example, Lucien Agosta’s article addresses the critical misconception of “Fire and

96 Yet most of these re-readings only explore Wright's novels, especially Native Son, and few, if any, take into account the entirety of Wright’s early body of work in their analysis. Perhaps even more disappointing is the complete lack of discussion of Uncle Tom’s Children within these critical revisitings, even though it offers up one of the clearest illustrations of the potential for resistance contained within homosocial social bonds between black men.
Cloud” as a mere vehicle for communist propaganda, especially in its concluding scene of racial harmony, an event unparalleled in Wright’s body of work.\textsuperscript{97} Agosta claims that \textit{Uncle Tom’s Children} functions as a microcosm of the possible conclusions to interracial interactions in the Jim Crow South (125-26). However, I think that it is more accurate to approach the story as Wright’s attempt to illustrate the inherent possibilities for resistance to be found in the synthesis of three powerful factors in the construction of individual identity: race, class, and gender. Ward interprets Wright’s fiction as a “catalyst for critical social thinking about the historical nature of those American experiences that provide evidence of change as well as evidence of continuity or a stasis in the deep structure of human relationships” (347). Yet Ward and I depart at one essential point, for while Ward sees Wright’s work as employing racial themes solely, I assert that Wright consciously depicts the attempted appropriation of normative white masculinity in order to showcase the inaccessibility of even the most basic behavioral scripts (such as gender performance) to black men.

Some critics point to Wright’s politicization of masculinity and violence as evidence of an attempt to establish an aggressive black manhood that might “take back” the masculinity that has been symbolically stripped (or literally cut) away from Wright’s characters by white antagonists. Laurel Gardner’s work explores the progression from

\textsuperscript{97} Much of the scholarship on \textit{Uncle Tom’s Children} has focused upon Wright’s association with the Communist party and its ideological influence over his early work. Larry Marshal Sam’s article is representative, in that it explores the short story collection through details from Marxist doctrine. There is a wealth of scholarship concerning Wright’s views towards capitalism and commercialism. Recent critical approaches to capitalism in Wright include Laurel Gardner.
fear to anger in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, highlighting a traditional interpretation of this collection. Gardner’s reading of the collection proposes that Wright depicts physical violence as a necessary act of resistance against racial oppression. She states, “For Wright, physical violence was a natural and inevitable way to affirm one’s self and dignity in response to hatred and oppression. [. . .] Wright employs a progression of violent acts to show a range of courage and will to assert selfhood in his oppressed black protagonists” (Gardner 420-21). While I agree that Wright’s collection showcases a spectrum of black male responses to white terrorism, it is more accurate to propose that *Uncle Tom’s Children* illustrates a range of responses and/or types of resistance to white hatred and oppression, a spectrum which includes physical confrontation, as well as community cohesion and non-violent group solidarity. Although Gardner praises the creation of individual identity “in their challenges to whites” (Gardner 421), the protagonists assert more than just selfhood; they assert an identity which extends beyond the mere individual and incorporates a group ethos that becomes far more potent than isolated individual resistance.

In focusing solely on individual violence and defiance, Gardner perpetuates the misconception often leveled at American authors in the Naturalist tradition: that these authors advocated strenuous masculinity replete with an assumption of violent response to perceived physical threats. While Wright certainly illustrates this view at certain points in his novels and short stories, it is not the totality of his vision. At the very least, given the violent, grotesque deaths of the other protagonists, *Uncle Tom’s Children* does not make individual violence an attractive option, regardless of how heroic individual
characters are in the face of inevitable torture. Other stories, such as “Fire and Cloud,” explicitly reject this understanding of manhood and resistance. Furthermore, Wright’s exploration of resistance through a continuum seems to privilege the formation of personal identity grounded within group solidarity because it is one of the few stories in Wright’s body of work which does not end in the violent death of the protagonist.

III

“Freedom Belongs t’ the Strong:” Group Masculinity and the Failure of Individualism in Richard Wright’s Early Short Fiction

The conditions under which Richard Wright began publishing his first pieces of fiction contained all of the aforementioned tensions and understandings of black manhood. Wright grew up in Jim Crow Mississippi and Tennessee and knew the tenuous condition of black masculinity firsthand. In fact, conditions were so stifling and dangerous that he eventually left the South and moved to Chicago in 1927. It was in this

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98 Recent critical studies of Wright and black masculinity pay special attention to the impact of place in his work. Through his examination of George Fuller’s drama, A Soldier’s Play (1981), Riche Richardson raises the role geography plays in the perception of African Americans and black masculinity in particular. Richardson reminds of the “politics of exclusion” and reveals “how geography shapes definitions of blackness” (7). Her book explores the intersections of black masculinity and geographic locale from the Antebellum South to modern day and “examines the construal of black southerners as inferior and undesirable models of black masculinity within such racial hierarchies based on geography” (2-3). In recognizing the multiplicity of pressures exerted on individual perceptions by cultural representations of blackness and manhood, Richardson provides a more nuanced view of identity formation than most. To oversimplify, black men from the South have historically been portrayed as less educated, more violent, and as having poorer social skills and manners than their Northern counterparts within dominant media culture.
environment that he began writing and publishing his early fiction and his first collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, was released in 1937.

Wright’s short fiction collection, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, clearly illuminates the necessity of community values in the formation of adolescent manhood. These stories, among the first Wright ever published, demonstrate the failure of individualism and violence and the senselessness of black attempts to appropriate dominant cultural masculinity. As a result, *Uncle Tom’s Children* exposes the failure of strenuous masculinity, at least in constructing a stable and healthy personal identity for African American men. Instead, Wright reveals that the choices available to African American men faced with social oppression articulated in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” violent resistance or feeble subservience, actually constitute a false dilemma. Rather, the only black characters that seem to successfully regain manhood do so outside of the framework of “white” manhood through their acceptance of group interests and the sacrifice of individual prestige and identity. Here, I will illustrate Wright’s depiction of the failures of appropriating dominant forms of masculinity found in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” and “Big Boy Leaves Home,” and then compare this strenuous construction of manhood to the positive depiction of homosocial black masculinity offered in “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright and Morning Star.”

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99 One way that Wright intimates this futility is through the comparison of black maleness to that found in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While this chapter does not explore the implicit comparison between Stowe’s famous piece of protest literature, Cynthia Wolff discusses the notions of white and black manhood displayed by Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.
Uncle Tom’s Children illustrates a fundamental reality and nearly inconceivable frustration of black male experience, a tension articulated in a different context by Jeffery P. Hantover: “Masculinity is a cultural construct and adult men need the opportunity to perform normatively appropriate male behaviors. . . . Masculine anxiety can arise when adult men know the script and wish to act but are denied opportunity to act” (288). All of Wright’s stories in Uncle Tom’s Children document this anxiety. In every story (with the exception of Wright’s later addition, “Bright and Morning Star”) Black men react to white violence with force, but their action is always negated by the overwhelming counter-reaction of social oppression.

The individual appropriation of violence in response to personal oppression is represented quite consistently in Wright’s early short fiction. Without exception, every story in which black male protagonists react with violence, even in self defense, ends in tragedy or an erasure of that individual from their immediate community, usually by death or exile to another part of the country. It is only in those stories like “Fire and Cloud,” in which black men resist individual violent response to injustices and physical threats by the white community in favor of group protest, that the characters escape these fates. While I am not suggesting that Wright’s body of work completely rejects violent action, it seems apparent that his early fiction works to expose the failures to participate in white notions of masculinity, due to the lack of access to normative male performance and violent responses by the white cultural establishment, a point Michael Johnson echoes in noting, “Wright demonstrates that the rituals of masculinity. . . are denied to black men” (15). This reality is present for nearly every protagonist in Wright’s early
body of work. Furthermore, the initial stories in Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* portray this fundamental struggle to appropriate meaning within a system that denies participation at the most elementary levels. These men desire to move from nonbeing to differentiated individuality. Any attempt to “generate meaning,” however, results in violent death, for these black men have adopted the prevailing cultural understanding of masculine individualism and force-oriented response and so create their meaning along these normative lines; this expression always results in the overwhelming force of the dominant white culture as it tries to “protect” itself from the behavior which it has engendered.

The first two stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children* offer insight into this claim, for they both depict protagonists who defend themselves against white aggression and must ultimately flee from lynch mobs\(^{100}\). These stories also work well within the confines of his discourse, for they serve to highlight Wright’s development of a homosocial masculinity as he moves from a negative example which necessitates a shift in masculine values, to a positive example of what those same values might ultimately be. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the title character successfully defends himself and Bobo from a white man who shoots their other friends, but then must hide like an animal in a hole and watch as Bobo is burned alive. In “Down by the Riverside,” during the attempt to save his

\(^{100}\) I rely on the restored text of the 1940 second printing of *Uncle Tom’s Children* established by the Library of America throughout my analysis of Wright’s first short story collection. This edition is preferable, as it restores changes and deletions demanded by the initial publisher. The inclusion of the essay “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and the additional story “Bright and Morning Star” provide this version with the selections Wright initially intended it to include, and are thus important to this discussion of Wright’s projected influence on the identity formation of African American males.
family from rising floodwaters, the protagonist defends himself from white gunfire, killing a white man, and then is shot by soldiers as he tries to flee his lynching. Regardless of how men are supposed to respond, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” makes it very clear that black men must respond through subservience and prostrate fear if they “want to be healthy” (11).

In considering the responses and scenarios that Wright portrays in this collection, a pattern becomes clear.101 The edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* analyzed here appears as Wright initially intended it, with the “Ethics of Living Jim Crow” as the opening piece (Rampersad 297-298).102 Subtitled “An Autobiographical Sketch,” the essay explains Wright’s “education” in the role and place of a black man in the Jim Crow South. In heart-rending detail, Wright recounts the different jobs he had as a young man and the scenes of violent, brutal oppression which he witnessed or directly suffered himself at the hands of white men.103

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101 Of course, this collection is not the only place where Wright articulates his vision of African American resistance predicated on communal bonds and values. In a “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” for example, Wright encourages African American writers to create group ethos within their art as a way to foster racial solidarity and promote a common identity founded upon shared experiences of racial oppression.

102 The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” was initially published by Viking in *American Stuff: WPA Writer’s Anthology* in 1937. Wright always wanted it to appear in Uncle Tom’s Children, so much so that he offered to pay for the costs of including it (and “Bright and Morning Star”) in the 1940 edition of the short story collection. The publisher (Harper and Brothers), however, eventually agreed to absorb the costs.

103 Critics have also explored Wright’s return to the scene of past oppression in detail. Randy Jasmine links Wright’s return trip to the Jim Crow South as a young man to his depictions of place in “Long Black Song” and *Native Son*, identifying the impact that place and geography have on Wright’s protagonists. Although outside of the context of this study, the juxtaposition of Southern Black masculinity in *Uncle Tom’s Children* with
The collection illustrates the two responses to white intimidation available to black men of the time. They can either smile and look the other way or resist and suffer violence, if not death. In his essay, Robert Nowatzki notes that throughout American history, “[African American’s] fight for self-determination was more likely to end in violent death than liberty” (59). The fundamental reality Nowatzki explains shaped daily behavior of countless African Americans for generations. It determined the responses available to black men and limited their personal agency.104 Wright states that, as a black man in the Jim Crow South, “I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live” (13). Here, Wright references something akin to the “double consciousness” to which W.E.B. Du Bois refers in The Souls of Black Folk. The fundamental tension between the private and public performances of masculinity, as well as the adoption of and limitation on strenuous manhood, could be aptly understood as a dual role. Yet Du Bois’ classic explanation of black masculinity places a limit on a

104 In this sense, race was another form of determinism over the lives of this racial group, one of the many reasons Wright was attracted to authors in the Naturalist tradition. For a recent discussion of African American contributions to the tradition of American Literary Naturalism, see John Dudley’s book. There are both obvious and good reasons that African American authors adopted and adapted the conventions of American Literary Naturalism to depict the “stuckness in place” (to borrow an apt phrase from Jennifer Fleissner) of their lived experience in America. Indeed, one could argue that the entire spectrum of great African American writers, from Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and Claude McKay, to Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, James Baldwin and beyond, have employed naturalism or its dominant themes to aid their depictions of the black community. Dudley notes that, “The imprint of naturalist discourse, therefore, on the African American literary tradition reveals both the power of American literary naturalism as an opportunity for expression and the profound contradictions and anxieties that have defined the genre from its inception” (18).
fundamental possibility in Wright’s early fiction because it limits the reader’s understanding of the available masculine performances to two options. I, however, propose that Wright uses his fiction to explore the boundaries of black masculinity and works toward a new construction of masculinity based on communal values.

Moreover, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” seems to clearly establish Wright’s personal opposition to both of these responses and consequent search for a means of resistance which would preserve black dignity, while avoiding bloodshed. This intention appears transparent, as it is voiced by Wright’s narrative persona in the autobiographical sketch, when he recalls the potentially dangerous implications of male interaction in a southern elevator:

It is a southern custom that all men must take off their hats when they enter an elevator. And especially did this apply to us blacks with rigid force. One day I stepped into an elevator with my arms full of packages. I was forced to ride with my hat on. Two white men stared at me very coldly. Then one of them very kindly lifted my hat and placed it on my armful of packages. Now the most accepted response for a Negro to make

105 In “Black Matter(s),” Toni Morrison observes one of the problematic elements surrounding critical approaches to works by African-American authors: “To notice [race] is to recognize an already discredited difference; to maintain its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (257). The supposed desire for inclusion in the dominant cultural body has informed much of the criticism surrounding the portrayal of masculinity in the fiction of Richard Wright. From the very beginning of his career, Wright was deeply interested in the depiction of black masculinity through the physical body. Geiger explains, “For Wright, the black male body is the exemplary site of the contest, disruption, and emergence of African American identity in what might be called his highly personal vision of the South” (197).
under such circumstances is to look at the white man out of the corner of his eye and grin. To have said: “thank you” would have made the white man think that you thought you were receiving from him a personal service. For such an act I have seen Negroes take a blow in the mouth.

Finding the first alternative distasteful, and the second dangerous, I hit upon an acceptable course of action which fell safely between these two poles. I immediately—no sooner than my hat was lifted—pretended that my packages were about to spill, and appeared deeply distressed with keeping them in my arms. In this fashion I evaded having to acknowledge his service, and, in spite of adverse circumstances, salvaged a slender shred of personal pride. (UTC 15)

This precarious balancing act aptly defines the very tensions Wright navigates in this collection. Subjugation, even if it leads to some form of assimilation, is distasteful, while outright resistance is dangerous.106 Since “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” frames the entire short story collection, it is clear that Wright is attempting to place this concern in the reader’s mind before they encounter the stories themselves.

Consequently, Wright’s essay implies that there must be a third avenue for the expression for black masculinity, one which will not lead to certain death, nor end in abject humiliation. The limits of the “dual role” give his reader insight into a primary

106 The claims made here, however, apply to what has been termed “Wrightian” notions of resistance and struggle. The process of masculine identity formation which black men must undertake is subjective and variable and changes in later eras of American history. For a discussion of black masculinity in literature after Wright, consider Keith Clark. His study uses Wright’s work as a starting point and explores how later black male authors, such as Baldwin, Gaines, and Wilson, address “Wrightian” notions of manhood.
motif within *Uncle Tom's Children*, one which animates and drives much of the plot progression of the stories. Furthermore, I contend that Wright actually articulates three possible outcomes instead of the two intimated in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow”: black men can become the stereotypical “Uncle Toms” and participate in their own subjugation, they can resist their own marginalization (and thus be destroyed/negated), or they can adopt a community ethos and resist the group’s subjugation. This third way involves a middle ground where a black man might be able to “salvage a slender shred of personal pride,” while simultaneously preserving his life and bodily well-being. In other words, Wright’s experience in the elevator establishes the necessity of a new form of resistance to racial oppression that can function to assert individual identity while safeguarding the individual’s life. As I will show, *Uncle Tom’s Children* actively privileges the final condition, for it illustrates the only avenue of resistance that does not immediately lead to violence and death. By steering the focus away from individual resistance and towards communal action, Wright seems to anticipate the tactics utilized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other leaders of the American Civil Rights movement twenty years later. By showing the violent deaths of those characters who attempt to adopt a strenuous construction of masculinity, Wright critiques a script of manhood that was denied to African American men. However, Wright also fills the space created by this critique with an alternative construction of identity formation based upon interpersonal bonds and a community ethos that is somewhat akin to the one Crane seems to advocate in his short stories. Consequently, both of these men can be viewed as rejecting Rooseveltian individualism in favor of homosocial bonds between individuals.
When observed as a whole, the stories of *Uncle Tom’s Children* seem to evolve from the assertion of normative (white) constructions of masculinity, which always lead to violence, death, and exile in the beginning stories, to the depiction of a more communal masculinity, of male virtue defined by a conscious surrender of individual interest for the realization of group concerns and identity created by one’s function within the group.

The first title in the initial publication of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” illustrates the inherent futility of adopting dominant cultural constructions of masculinity. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the title character responds to the murder of his friends by a white man with a normatively appropriate show of self-defense and force. In the beginning of this story Big Boy and his friends, Bobo, Buck, and Lester, enjoy the forbidden pleasure of a swimming hole on a white man’s property. On the way to the swimming hole, Big Boy asserts his individuality in the group by fighting all three of them at the same time (Wright 24). Big Boy is able to hold off the assault of the others by enacting violence on Bobo, not relinquishing his hold until the others submit. He uses this triumph to educate the others in what may be seen as an articulation of normative masculinity: “‘Yuh see,’ began Big Boy, ‘when a gang a guys jump on yuh, all yuh gotta do is jus put the heat on the one of them n make im tell the others t let up, see’?” (*UTC* 24). The “heat” he asserts here is violent force utilized to dominate the other men, which signifies that he has internalized the normative male value of promoting individuality by force. This sense is also illustrated in Big Boy’s reaction to the murder of two of his friends at the swimming hole.
When Big Boy and his friends are discovered naked at the swimming hole, he is unwittingly thrust into a situation of self-defense. Upon seeing the four black boys naked in the water, the young white woman who has discovered them calls out for the assistance of her male companion, Jim. He responds by shooting Lester and Buck in the back as they attempt to flee (UTC 30-31). The man confronts Bobo and Big Boy with the rifle lever, but Big Boy manages to wrest it away from him, initiating a violent showdown:

[Jim] spoke quietly.

“Give me that gun, boy!”

Big Boy leveled the rifle and backed away.

The White man advanced.

“Boy, I say give me that gun!” . . .

The man came at Big Boy.

“Ahll kill yuh; Ahll kill yuh!” said Big Boy. (UTC 32)

Big Boy shoots the white man and runs away with Bobo. These two young men have been forced to react in self-defense against the violence of white oppression. However, this adoption of normative male response does not gain them status, autonomy, or self-determination, and not because they have committed murder (recall that the white man killed two of their friends in cold blood first). If anything, it takes away all forms of agency from them. As they leave, Bobo’s first reaction is to remark “Theys gonna lynch us,” a self-fulfilling prophecy, at least for him (UTC 33). Bobo immediately notes that their fates are now sealed; they will die for participating in the strenuous male response to aggression: self-defense.
By killing Jim, Big Boy establishes himself as an individual quite literally; the death of the white man sets him outside of the black community, which is obvious when he runs home to his family, who summon their leaders. Big Boy pleads with them to tell him how to escape before the inevitable lynch mob forms. Elder Peters agrees with him and rejects suggestions to hide Big Boy in the church, out of fears that this would implicate the entire black community. One hand, the congregation’s willingness to hide Big Boy indicates recognition of his defiant act and strenuous male performance. Yet this sentiment is overruled by Big Boy’s ultimate exile (a banishment for which he begs). Although some wish to shelter the young man, he must ultimately leave in order to protect the group’s well-being. Consequently, Wright suggests that adopting the precepts of strenuous masculinity, individualism, and violent response against physical threats leads to alienation from the group and violent oppression from white society.

Just as Big Boy’s heroic resistance forces him to ultimately flee his family, so too do the constrictions placed on black male performance produce other distortions of the male script. Members of a dominant cultural group may not often consider what it actually means to live in a society which defines gender according to a specific set of rituals, expectations, and response, yet actively controls which groups have access to this role. One apt metaphor for this process of appropriating white forms of masculinity can be seen in the “hunt” ritual or rite of passage central to many European, white cultures.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{107} Michael Johnson places this scene in a larger historical and cultural context: For the white hero of the hunting ritual, to succeed in the hunt is metaphorically to take one’s predetermined place in the social order as a member of the gender, race, and class of the dominant culture. It is to become a man according to the dominant culture’s definitions of
Yet, rather than use the ritual of the hunt as a step toward manhood, Wright constructs a narrative in which young black men are not only kept from participating as hunters, but become the object of the hunt themselves. Big Boy and Bobo participate in the hunt ritual, but only as the objects of the search. Johnson asserts that, “[Wright] constructs narratives that illustrate how the black man’s participation in the archetypal ritual of the hunt is more likely to be as the hunted than as the hunter” (16). While Big Boy successfully evades the white lynch mob and its dogs by hiding in a clay oven set into a hill, he is forced to watch the mob find Bobo, tie him to a stake and burn him alive. Johnson observes that, “[Big Boy] is immediately faced with the reality of his situation – that his newfound identity will not be accepted or allowed in the South” (158). This observation is precisely the point: without a clear alternative to the reality of physical negation, Big Boy can only leave the social system in which he has been denied participation. Big Boy is unable to create meaning out of these events, and his only recourse is to go into a voluntary exile, to escape from a culture which refuses to give him the understanding he seeks by denying him the same expression of manhood which it has actively fostered throughout his life. In this sense of self-determination, individuality is stripped away by these events, as he comes to face the reality of his tenuous situation; he is then forced to create a new identity of extreme individualism in response to these events, the individual will to live and to survive outside of these cultural norms. This manhood. The act of violence central to the hunt functions as a rhetorical figure that conceals this process of interpellation, the work of ideology. (151)
exile helps to illuminate Wright’s critique of the attempt to adopt dominant strenuous constructions of masculinity by African American men.

Other stories in the collection serve to further illustrate this point. In “Long Black Song,” the protagonist, Sarah, is assaulted by a young white gramophone salesman while her husband, Silas, is away for an extended trip to sell the year’s cotton harvest. Lonely and sad, Sarah’s hospitality to the young white salesmen seems to furnish him with an excuse to force himself upon her body. Although she initially resists him, Sarah eventually submits to the young man and the passionate song throbbing within her spirit. Silas returns home shortly after the white man leaves and becomes suspicious of his wife’s behavior and of the various objects which he finds in their bedroom. Enraged by the thought of his wife’s infidelity, Silas immediately begins to act out the script of dominant, patriarchal manhood. His understanding of his wife as his property becomes evident as he decides to “fix her good” using physical violence. When he attempts to whip Sarah for her infidelity, the reader sees that a black man is able to enact the script of strenuous male violence, so as long as the performance is directed towards a marginal figure without social power, such as a another black man, woman, or child. Silas is able to appropriate violent masculinity as long as a woman is its object, just as Big Boy is perfectly able to use violence to establish a position of dominance within his peer group, provided that his African American buddies bear the brunt of it. However, it is when Silas (or Big Boy, for that matter) attempts to act out the script against a white man that his inability to access the dominant performance of manhood becomes painfully clear.
When the salesman returns to collect payment for the gramophone he has left at
the house, Silas kills him and waits for the inevitable lynch mob. He does not have to
wait long. Although he kills several of them, the white mob succeeds in setting the cabin
on fire and burning Silas to death while Sarah watches helplessly from the woods. After
killing the salesman, Silas realizes that his death at the hands of a lynch mob is inevitable.
Consequently, his appropriation of the dominant culture’s construction of strenuous
masculinity ironically negates the individual identity he claims when he revenges himself
(and possibly Sarah) on the body of the white man. Yet this act of personal assertion
does not function as a self-actualizing experience. Instead it negates Silas. He
immediately claims, “‘Now its all gone. Gone . . . Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothing.
Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothing. It don make no difference which way Ah go’
(UTC 152, author’s emphasis). The dominant constructions of strenuous masculinity
advocated in the media culture of the era practically dictated violent response to
perceived threats against one’s person and/or property, a mindset which would have
definitely included women in this period. Yet, although it served as the standard by
which black men measured their own actions and defined manhood, black men were
denied participation in the public performance of vigorous manhood. To behave like a
“real man” would get a black man killed, as Silas so potently illustrates. He realizes that
he has nothing, that dominant social institutions will strip his agency and possessions

108 It is quite possible that Wright’s criticism of African American attempts to adopt
“white” masculinity contained a deeply personal element. According to Tara Green,
Wright’s uncle, Silas Hoskins, “appears to have been the model for the Silas character in
Wright’s ‘Long Black Song’” (43). Wright’s Uncle Silas was murdered by white men for
his “courageous defiance of the rules regarding economic prosperity for blacks,” an event
he recounts in his autobiography, Black Boy (Green 43).
away. Everything Silas uses as a marker of his individualism (his land, his labor, his woman, his life) has been or will be taken away by the inevitable lynch mob. Again, Johnson helps to place this into perspective: “Wright expresses an ambivalence about Black men and the myth of regenerative violence” (16). While this prescient observation is true in the context of the specific rituals described, Johnson’s assertion of Wright’s ambivalence towards the utility of violence seems to be representative of the critical misunderstanding surrounding much of Wright’s work. Wright’s texts are ambivalent towards the utility of violent action, but especially so when depicting the group’s ultimate adoption of the technique as a catalyst for social change.

Consequently, there is a vicious cycle which exists in this society and which Wright seems intent on portraying in his early short fiction. The solutions to this tension, as noted above in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” only perpetuate this cycle. Caught between social negation and impotence or exile, his characters all must choose between resistance and flight. But although individual resistance is futile and always results in violence, group demonstration creates a tension which is strangely constructive in light of the negating alternatives. The only other form of recourse is to develop a new set of expectations and characteristics for black masculinity, criteria which would not be informed by the gender constructions of the dominant culture and so effectively subvert the cycle. I argue that the final piece in the initial publication of Uncle Tom’s Children, “Fire and Cloud,” represents this attempt to assert a new understanding of black manhood rooted in a more communal form of masculinity.
“Fire and Cloud” is unique in Wright’s early collection of short fiction because it seems to capture the author’s own assertions regarding the necessary course of action for a black social-protest movement. This is the only story in this collection that does not end in the death of one of the primary characters. “Fire and Cloud” also depicts a positive example of successful resistance against the white patriarchal social structure.

Tara Green claims that, “‘Fire and Cloud’ focuses on the struggle of a father whose dignity is linked to his need to achieve independence from social forces, which he has allowed to define his masculine identity” (55). However, I assert that the story is also unique in that his success comes not from adopting or even subverting normative masculine behavior; rather, Reverend Taylor is able to resist subjugation by assuming a male role aligned with the concerns of the greater community and with the power of the group. Rather than assert his own individuality through violence or subversion of the normative white masculinity, Taylor inverts masculine identity formation and instead loses his individual will among concerns for the many. In this sense then, “Fire and Cloud” clearly illustrates the triumph of communal masculinity over normative individualism through Taylor’s role reversal, guidance to his son, Jimmy, and ultimate identification with the group demonstration.

The story centers on the figure of Reverend Dan Taylor, a poor, uneducated farmer who learned to read and write from his wife, and who feels called by God to lead

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109 “Fire and Cloud” was initially published in *Story Magazine* in March of 1938. Wright had entered it into a contest for the members of the Federal Writer’s Project sponsored by that periodical, where it won a prize of five hundred dollars. However, there are differences between the magazine version of the essay and the one published in the short story collection. This analysis follows the book version initially published in 1938.
his local black community. He has served as the minister of the local black church for several years and is awarded a measure of respect from the white community leaders, who seem to view him as a kind of “Uncle Tom” figure. However, his congregation is starving and he cannot secure them aid from anyone in the white community.

Complicating his distress, the local communist party representatives, Hanley and Greene, have planned a protest march for disenfranchised white and black rural poor and need Taylor’s support to guarantee a large turnout. The Mayor, Police Chief, and paramilitary Industrial Squad leader, however, have caught wind of the march and show up to intimidate Taylor into denouncing the gathering. Facing dissention from some in his own congregation, including Deacon Smith, who serves as informant to the white leaders, Taylor decides to march with his congregation. Consequently, he is kidnapped by a group of white men, who drive him out into the country and whip him into unconsciousness. Taylor manages to stumble back into town and marches with his community, who, along with the poor white contingent, swell the protest to over five thousand people. The local police force dares not confront a crowd so big, and the story ends with Taylor extolling the virtues of strength through numbers. In fact, this is one of the only short stories in Wright’s body of work which does not end with the violent death or social negation of the black protagonist. “Fire and Cloud” is a unique text, if for no other reason than it is a positive story, one that articulates some measure of hope. Its striking divergence from the rest of the stories in the collection is made all the more visible by the shift that occurs midway through the text.
In the beginning of “Fire and Cloud,” Reverend Taylor seeks to reaffirm his tentative social status as a way to assert his individuality and masculinity according to normative gender expectations. Taylor has successfully negotiated several compromises with the white leadership in the past, including saving a young man from a lynch mob. However, even though the minister notes that he has gained some sort of respect from the white community, his conversation with the mayor and police officials makes clear that any authority he has gained as the representative of the black community has been given to him by the white power structure, not earned by the his own merit. “‘Dan,’ began the mayor, ‘its not every nigger I’d come to and talk this way. Its not every nigger Id trust as Im about to trust you.’ The mayor looked straight at Taylor. ‘Im doing this because Ive faith in you. Ive known you for twenty-five years, Dan. During that time I think Ive played pretty fair with you, haven’t I?’” (UTC 181). The mayor’s remarks make it clear that Taylor’s influence has been granted to him by the white power structure, and can also be taken away at any time. The mayor notes, “Dan, you’re a leader and you’ve got great influence over your congregation here.’ The mayor paused to let the weight of his words sink in. ‘Dan, I helped you get that influence by doing your people a lot of favors through you when you came into my office a number of times’” (UTC 185). This scene clearly illustrates that Taylor has gained nothing as an individual; any concessions to the black community have been given through his position, not as a result of his personal efforts. He has just functioned as an unwitting participant in the white social structure’s repression of the black community. The mayor further notes that “I thought my way would be much better. After all, Dan, you and I have worked together in the past and I
don’t see why we can’t work together now. I’ve backed you up in a lot of things, Dan” (*UTC* 181). The mayor’s plea for Taylor to use his “influence” is completely subverted by his reminder that the minister has only gained that position through his own good graces and by being responsive to the demands of the white power structure.

In other words, the mayor, Chief Bruden, and the paramilitary “Red Squad” leader, Lowe, wave the “bait” of normative gender expectations in front of Taylor: they want him to assert his will over his parishioners and to use his individuality and control (they say “leadership”) to dominate the black population. These men approach Taylor with a decision between the proverbial “carrot or the stick”. If he uses his individual will to bend the desire of his church members, they will reward him with the ultimate goal of normative masculinity: influence and control. However, if he refuses them, he will be cut off from any future access to social power. Instead, they will enact their masculinity on him, rather than through him, as the mayor so clearly notes. The carrot will disappear and all that will be left is the stick itself. The latent violence inherent in the approach quickly rises to the surface when Taylor will not clearly affirm their demands.

Even though the mayor continually claims to be asking Dan to “do the right thing,” it becomes obvious that the entire meeting is nothing more than a thinly veiled threat (*UTC* 185). As a black man, his situation is only secure if he “plays” along with the agenda of white society. The tenuous nature of his position is clearly illustrated by Lowe’s comment that, “You will be sorry when you find a Goddam rope around your neck!” (*UTC* 185). While these leaders may have granted Taylor some access to the dominant forms of manhood, the threat of violence in Police Chief Gruden’s response
illuminates the true nature of Taylor’s marginalized state: “A niggers a nigger! I was against coming here talking to this nigger like he was a white man in the first place. He needs his teeth kicked down his throat!” (UTC 186). The Chief rails against speaking to Taylor as if he were a “normal” man. While they signify Taylor’s lack of agency through race here, it is clear that the underlying cause of his degeneration is that Taylor has no access to normative constructions of masculinity. He cannot assert his individual will against them, nor can he violently usurp their power. Clearly, these men do not view the minister as a man of any authority which cannot be stripped away by the mere force of their will.  

Perhaps the clearest example of the futility inherent in black participation in white constructions of masculinity in “Fire and Cloud” occurs in Taylor’s interactions with and direction of his teenage son, Jimmy. Jimmy is a headstrong, emotional young man who continuously asserts his individuality against racial oppression through traditional masculine constructs of violence and anger. Kimmel notes, “the quest for manhood—the effort to achieve, to demonstrate, to prove their masculinity—is one of the animating experiences in the lives of American men” (6). Throughout the story, Jimmy

110 Of course the threat of lynching suggests all the ways race and gender are tangled up together—so many lynchings, whatever the “crime” of the victim, entailed sexualized violence, suggesting that black masculinity is always threatening to white men. One way to read the mayor’s remarks are as erotic threats—one could easily hear him using this language to coerce a woman into sex, and the reminder that whatever status Taylor has is a virtue of his connection with the mayor also seems tied to a gender structure that situates women as “accessories” to men.

111 For a discussion of the depiction of paternal relationship and the impact of absentee fathers in Wright’s body of work, see Tara Green’s second chapter: “Richard Wright’s Fathers and Sons.”
functions as a sort of Hermetical messenger, who shows up to inform his father about varying attitudes among the different groups. What is most germane to this discussion, however, is Jimmy’s consistent preparation for competitive violence. As a young man, Jimmy seems quite eager to prove his manhood via the definition of the dominant culture. That is to say, Jimmy seems to have internalized the “message” that real men defend themselves against perceived physical threats and respond to oppression with violent action. Jimmy informs his father, “N lissen, Pa . . . Ahma git Sam n Pete n Bob n Jack n some mo boys together sos ef anything happens” (UTC 163). Here Jimmy frames the threat against the black community in gendered terms in claiming that he is going to seek out reinforcements to counter the threat of white violence. This response will presumably involve violence and the gun Jimmy has mentioned before.

It is also important to note that Jimmy objectifies his own friends (“my boys”) and that these figures only appear in the story as people who Jimmy can command. In other words, even though Jimmy seeks to counter the threat of violence by enlisting the help of his friends, he is not contributing to a sense of community, but to dictating his will to his followers. Jimmy states, “But we cant let them ride erroun n talk big n we do nothing!” (UTC 163). Jimmy does not appear to be concerned with actual violence, but with being shamed by letting the white community “talk big” without providing proper resistance. This pose of Jimmy’s is a classic example of a traditional adolescent adoption of the dominant white culture’s perception of manhood, and Wright seems to use Jimmy as a mouthpiece for strenuous masculinity. In this sense he seems to mirror the initial relationship of Taylor to his parishioners. Although the minister listens to his
congregation and even attempts to provide for their needs, he still leads them through his individual will. Taylor is horrified by his son’s desire for violent resistance and responds accordingly: “Lissen here, son! You do whut Ah tell yuh t do! [. . .] Yuh go tell them boys t do nothing till Ah see em, yuh here me? Yuh young fools fixin t git us all murdered! (UTC 163). The minister correctly understands the reality of the black community’s marginalized situation, and so his response is based both in an attempt to preserve his life and manhood from the sexualized violence of lynching, as well as the very lives and communal structure of his parishioners. Green explains that “Taylor will teach his son that he can define his manhood despite racism, and the community is the location where he is able to uplift himself” (55). Green’s observations regarding Taylor are germane. Jimmy, however, only cares about performing the gender roles as they are articulated by the dominant culture. He responds to his father’s command with reluctance: “‘We just a waal git killed fightin as t git killed doin nothing,’ said Jimmy sullenly” (UTC 163). Jimmy resists his father’s efforts to keep him from acting out the male “script” as it has been conveyed by white culture.

Perhaps the clearest and most damning critique of the black male attempt to construct identity through acceptance of normative gender expectations in “Fire and Cloud” is witnessed in Reverend Taylor’s final conversation with his son Jimmy after he has been whipped by a white intimidation squad. Unlike Silas, Mann, and Big Boy, Taylor does not react to his personal negation by adopting the myth of strenuous masculinity prevalent in the dominant culture. His strong denunciation of violent action and even personal resistance is quite evident in the advice he gives his son and his refusal
to let him gather his friends and resist white oppression. Taylor’s constant admonitions to his son clearly reject strenuous masculinity and its ethic of individual action and violent resistance against perceived threats. Upon seeing his father’s raw and bloody back, Jimmy is understandably indignant and desires to take immediate, violent retribution against the white oppressors. Taylor, however, knowingly responds, “Yuh cant do nothing, son. Yuhll have t wait. . .” (UTC 207). Jimmy responds to his father’s accurate understanding of the situation with indignant refrain of many of the stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, if not in Wright’s entire body of work: “Wes been waitin too long! All we do is wait, *wait!*” (207).

Jimmy’s statement is a call to action, a frustrated cry of despair against the social injustice of the black life in America. What is most telling, however, is Jimmy’s solution to the waiting: “Ahma git mah gun n git Pete n Bob n Joe n Sam! Theyll see that they cant do this t us!” (UTC 207). Jimmy responds to the violence that has been enacted upon the black body of his father with the promise of more violence, and in doing so articulates one of the primary markers of normative gender expectations. When injustice has occurred or physical harm is imminent, “real men” respond through force. Although this reaction seems to be almost immediate and certainly understandable to a male audience informed by the same set of gender expectations, it is ultimately a threat which can never be fully accomplished, as Wright continually points out in the other stories of this collection. Black males, especially the youthful adolescents that are often cast as protagonists in his stories and novels, are consistently denied access to the constructions of masculinity promoted by dominant white culture. These messages of manhood are so
foundational to identity creation, so pervasive, that these young men internalize them all the same, although they are not permitted to act them out.

However, the observation that personal defense or resistance by force is ultimately futile in these stories does not mean that the ultimate solution is to accept the oppression. Jimmy articulates the necessity for some type of struggle: “Thas the reason why they kill us! We take everthing they put on us! We take everthing!” (UTC 207). While Reverend Taylor affirms his son’s desperate observation, his admonition to Jimmy speaks volumes regarding the necessity of a new perception of resistance and masculine ethos. “Don be a fool, son! Don throw your life er way! We cant do nothing erlone!” (UTC 209) Jimmy still responds via a strenuous masculine impulse; he does not want to live “like a dog” and rejects action that does not include manly assertions of individual will through force (UTC 207). However, Taylor continues to plead with his son for the necessity of a new understanding of masculine duty.

“Fire and Cloud” ultimately asserts the necessity of a new understanding of manhood based on communal values and the needs of the group over those desires of the individual. Taylor comes to an understanding of what needs to be done in response to his whipping, the concerns of the black community, and racial oppression in general. He states, “We gotta git wid the people, son. Too long we done tried t do this thing our way n when we failed we wanted t run out n pay-off the white folks. Then they kill us up like flies. It’s the people, son! Wes too much erlone this way! Wes los when wes erlone!” (UTC 210). This passage illustrates the argument of this discourse in two ways: first, Taylor shows the futility of individual action in noting that individuals have tried to assert
their own will with no effect (“Too long we done tried t do this thing our way”).

Secondly, the only hope for successful resolution or at least resistance to oppression lies in placing the needs of the community before the individual will (“Wes los when wes erlone”). Taylor continues to strip away his son’s acceptance of normative gender construction, with its focus on individual will. He confesses to Jimmy, “Ah been wrong erbout a lotta things Ah tol yuh, son. Ah tol yuh them things cause Ah thought they wuz right. Ah tol tol yuh t work hard n climb t the top. Ah tol yuh folks would lissen t yuh then. But they wont, son! All the will, all the strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people!” (UTC 210). Here Taylor admits that he has tried to instill the dominant cultural understanding of manhood: work hard, assert yourself above others, and get others to acknowledge your will and follow. Through this new realization, however, Taylor tries to forge a new communal sense of masculine duty in his son. “N Thayll keep on killin us less we learn how t fight! Son, it’s the people we mus gid wid us! Wes empty n weak this way!”(UTC 210). In this new understanding, individuality is weakness and strength lies in the will of the group.

The greatest example of the need for communal masculinity probably lies in the ending of “Fire and Cloud”. Taylor leads most of the local black community in a protest demonstration through town. They meet up with a small representation of rural poor whites and march singing past the gathered police and military agents to the center of town, where Taylor confronts the mayor and tells him to address the black community himself: he will no longer serve as his mouthpiece or assert his will over the group (UTC 219-220). The assembled multitude produces an emotional response in the minister: “A
baptism of clean joy swept over Taylor. . . . This is the way! he thought. . . . He mumbled out loud, exultingly: ‘Freedom belongs t the strong!’” (UTC 220). The violent resistance that the mayor and paramilitary establishment have promised does not materialize as they stand in fear of the surging throng. As Taylor loses his identity in the throng, he experiences relief and a new sense of power and joy. As he gives up agency over his own actions and turns the concerns of the parishioners over to the will of the group, he is relieved from his powerlessness and impotence in the face of racial oppression. The pressure he cannot control alone melts away in the sea of voices, and the isolation he feels is lost in his connection to a higher cause. His life has a purpose, and even his whipping and humiliation serve a noble end: galvanization of the masses. Here, in the last story of *Uncle Tom’s Children* as it was initially published, the frustration and despair created by normative gender expectations is replaced by the strength and triumph of a communal masculinity. In a final test of this theory, it is important to note that this is literally the only story in the collection that does not end with death or exile of the protagonist.

Certainly, many critics have interpreted this story as a rather heavy-handed diatribe in support of Communism. Wright’s activity within the Communist party at this time makes this understanding a very attractive option, and I am not trying to deny this reading nor negate the author’s political message and motives in his fiction. However, it does seem interesting that this verbal debate between a father and son takes place using highly gendered language. In despair, Taylor laments to Jimmy, “N ef Ah so much as talk lika man they try t kill me” (UTC 209). While this is not the only instance in which
these men express themselves through their understanding of manhood, it clearly illustrates that this conversation is not simply about the organizing of the masses, but also concerns their perceptions of what it means to be a man and the ways in which men should respond to threats to that masculinity. It is also important to note that this debate occurs within a completely male space; Taylor insists that his son lock the door to keep his mother out and refuses Jimmy’s attempts to inform her of his wounds (UTC 207, 211). In denying female intervention and insisting that his son listen to his understanding of the necessary response to his whipping, Taylor situates this conversation within a context of masculinity. He actively attempts to construct a new response to white oppression in his son through gendered terms. While the intention may illuminate Wright’s political agenda, it certainly demonstrates a conscious attempt to engage that public discourse in gendered terms. And yet it seems somewhat natural that a story which advocates the power of a mass movement to simultaneously advocate a construction of masculinity grounded within group identity rather than individual action. Here, Wright affirms the group as a site for political resistance, as well as masculine identity formation. At the very least, this story shows that Wright sees a strong link between masculine and political identity, and if one is to assert the author’s association with Communist political ideology, it seems quite possible that those considerations would have informed his understanding of gender construction to the same degree.

In this section, I have argued that *Uncle Tom’s Children* clearly illuminates the necessity of community values in the formation of black manhood. I observed that these stories, among the first Wright ever published, actually demonstrate the failure of
individualism and violence to determine individual identity and successful resistance to racial oppression. In fact, the only black characters who seem to successfully regain their manhood in the collection do so outside of the framework of “white” masculinity through their acceptance of group interests and the sacrifice of individual prestige and identity. I have specifically documented the ways in which Wright exposes the fallacy of attempts to appropriate a “strenuous,” individualistic, and resistant masculinity, such as the kind asserted and modeled to white men by Teddy Roosevelt a generation earlier. While Wright’s collection does display a range of black male reactions to white terrorism, I think that it is more accurate to propose that *Uncle Tom’s Children* illustrates a continuum of responses and/or types of resistance to white hatred and oppression, a spectrum which includes physical confrontation, as well as community cohesion and non-violent group solidarity. Yet, the views I asserted above represent only one channel of resistance to the cultural constructions that exert pressure on African American people in this collection.

Furthermore, Wright’s short stories illustrate a range of possible responses to the personal negation of racial oppression, an important nuance which has been overlooked in critical approaches to this collection. While I have proposed reading Wright’s early fiction as a reaction against the precepts of strenuous, white masculinity, I now wish to complicate this assertion by shifting my critical lens to a related element of identity formation that offers important support for my overall argument. Instead of limiting my focus to Wright’s depiction of gender roles, I will also include elements of Postcolonial criticism and identify the intersections between gender and race within his earliest work.
Comparing Wright’s depiction of gender to that of Otherness within *Uncle Tom’s Children* will further illustrate the collection as a range of possible outcomes to different performances of black masculinity, one that highlights a spectrum of resistance to racial oppression.

**IV**

**The Function of “Otherness” in Wright’s Early Fiction**

Richard Wright was not afraid to attack the notions of white supremacy directly. According to Ward, “Wright [. . .] held that whiteness was one of the dehabilitating forces of history, and it occupies the center of his target” (346). This is an important observation, because it establishes Wright as an oppositional figure of resistance, one who writes, not just to expose the fallacy of African American caricatures, but to attack the very notion of white superiority and privilege. In his introduction to Wright’s short story collection, Richard Yarbrough notes that, “Wright viewed the attempt by whites to break the spirits of Southern blacks, to make them complicitous in their own oppression, as perhaps the key racist imperative; and he resisted as doggedly as he could” (xi). This passage establishes Wright’s fiction as a site of resistance. Consequently, Wright is intimately involved in deconstructing the ways in which white privilege is asserted and maintained, overtly in the Jim Crow South, as well as more subtly and discreetly in the North. According to James Latham, “Historically, blackness has been defined by white
culture in biological and/or cultural terms and usually deployed in way that included marginalization, stereotyping, and essentialist binary oppositions” (5). As in much of human history, the primary method by which whites asserted their superiority was through marginalizing racial “Others” seen as different than, and eventually, oppositional to, the essential notions of “whiteness” itself.

Furthermore, the concept of “whiteness” itself and the standards of normative behavior associated with it (and set in opposition to the Other) were as set or fixed as the behaviors the dominant society used to define Otherness. For example, although Stephen Crane’s fiction illustrates that the celebration of strenuous white manhood was not as universal as has been assumed, Theodore Roosevelt’s rhetoric hints towards a more uniform fear of the racial Other within white society. If white society did not always agree on what “being a man” should entail, they did share the assumption that, whatever it was, it was different than acting like “them.” Consequently, proper white behavior was defined more easily through comparisons to assumed black behavior. Lale Demirturk explains that, “within a racial paradigm where space, race, and personhood are closely linked with each other, whiteness operates by marginalizing blackness. The white self-conception is bound within the repudiation of the black Other, while the social space allocated to the black Other determines the position of the Other as nonconformist” (281). While differentiation was used by whites to define and defend power, I assert that Wright depicts it as a way to articulate opposition. To be relegated to the margins of society, to be viewed as Other in opposition to cultural norms, is to already occupy a place of resistance against the dominant culture. In other words, if one must live his or her entire
life separated from “normal” society, their entire existence will be unable to conform to the standards set by that dominant culture, for no other reason than that they (as Other) are used to define that what dominant society is not. Just the simple act of living, of existing is, in this view, an act of resistance.

It is this reality of black life as resistance which I wish to explore in this section. In order to illustrate the resisting position of the Other, I will focus on just one type of social marginalization used to differentiate between dominant and subordinate: access to the performance of normative masculinity. Specifically, I will explore the ways in which *Uncle Tom’s Children* subverts the marginal position of racial Other, functioning instead as a site for resistance to oppression. I will show that exclusion serves an important function within Wright’s short fiction, and is just as important to the development of a community-based masculinity as a sense of inclusion. Through the act of exclusion, individuals are able to forge a sense of identity and challenge the dominant construction of masculinity. I assert that the stories of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, such as “Big Boy Goes Home” and “Fire and Cloud,” document the formation of communal masculinity through the manipulation of the Otherness discourse in ways which give African American protagonists access to the dominant construction of masculinity without directly challenging or confirming its prejudiced viewpoint.

In “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” Wright refers to performances of identity which could be termed “Subjugated Black Man” and “Human Being Striving for Recognition of his Personal Identity.” In this sense, Wright himself establishes a binary between subjugated Other and independent individual. I argue that *Uncle Tom’s*
Children functions as Wright’s exploration of the range of possible manifestations of the Otherness discourse. Each of the stories in Wright’s collection approaches and depicts the function of Otherness in differing ways, so that by the end, the reader has effectively experienced the negational process of Otherness in a variety of different forms and, more importantly, has been lead towards an acknowledgement of the possible appropriation of Otherness as an exclusionary impulse within the black community itself. This assertion can be easily tested and illustrated through a cursory glance at the stories making up this early collection.

“Down by the Riverside” offers one of the clearest examples of the negation of individual identity inherent in the definitional process of Otherness. The story takes place in the midst of a raging flood that threatens to sweep away the rural home of Mann, his pregnant wife, Lulu, and young son, Peewee. Mann has sent his mule with his brother, Bob, so that he might sell it and procure a boat to help the family escape the floodwaters which have been rising for four days to the safety of the hills. To complicate matters further, small-framed Lulu is in labor with a child that she cannot physically deliver without medical intervention. When Bob arrives with the promised boat at last, the family discovers that he has stolen it from the Heartfields, a particularly antagonistic white family. Unable to flee to the anonymity of the woods, Mann braves the current and rows his family towards town in order to get Lulu medical attention. Along the way, however, they pass through the Heartfields’ property and Mann shoots and kills Heartfield to keep him from murdering everyone in the boat. Although they make it into town, Lulu dies in labor, Mann is forcibly impressed into servitude, and his mother and
Peewee are sent to the hills by the whites. After laboring to save the inhabitants of the hospital and rescuing the remaining members of the Heartfield family, Mann is killed by soldiers for shooting Mr. Heartfield.

Through its rendition of the nightmare scenario which Mann and his family must endure in order to attempt to find safety from the natural elements, “Down by the Riverside” effectively depicts the marginalization of black men by all aspects white society, including young children. The family rows into town to procure medical attention for the dying Lulu, but Mann gets disoriented and ends up on the Heartfield property. They hail the residents of a partially submerged house, and Heartfield comes out. Throughout their tense, brief conversation, Mann is continually objectified and his entreaties for help are met with escalating verbal and physical violence. As Mann and his family attempt to escape from the Heartfields’ property, Mr. Heartfield shoots at them for the theft of his boat. Mann returns fire with his pistol and kills Mr. Heartfield. As they row away, Heartfields’ young son adopts his father’s negating language, screaming, “‘Stop, nigger! [. . .] You bastard! You nigger!’ (UTC 81). Throughout the entire piece, Mann is never referred to as anything else besides “boy,” “nigger,” or “coon” by the white characters, even though he consistently identifies himself by name. “Down by the Riverside,” then, functions as an example of the typical way in which categorization of a disempowered social group as Other leads to the negation of individual identity and the resulting assumption of extremely limited social value or worth. This story, in other words, represents one side of the Otherness spectrum or continuum, a kind of reminder and object lesson in the personal trauma inflicted upon human beings through
marginalization and the denial of gendered identity. As clear demonstration of the individual degradation imposed by designating a group as Other, “Down By the Riverside” equates blackness with Otherness. “Big Boy Leaves Home,” however, flips this relationship, using the grotesque account of a lynching to portray white as Other.

At the beginning of “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Big Boy is part of a male community consisting of four teenage African American boys: Buck, Bobo, Lester, and Big Boy. These young men construct their group identity through a variety of shared experiences: they make up lyrics to crude limericks and play the “dozens,” imagine ideal meals and favorite foods, languish in the sun, wrestle with one another, and even engage in a bit of flatulence identification. In short, they behave precisely like most other boys their age, comfortable within the security of the group. When their lazy wanderings bring them to Harvey’s swimming hole, they bolster their group identity by speculating on “old man Harvey’s” impotence. Through the exclusion of the property owners who limit access to the swimming hole to whites, these young men construct a defense mechanism against their marginalization and simultaneously affirm their group identity. Due to the focus on these young men and the lack of other characters in the first section of this novella, the reader perceives the teenage boys as the primary group; those who intrude on the happiness and harmony of their band of brothers are then constructed as Others within this story.

By the end of the story, the reader bears observes the final destruction of group identity in the discovery, torture, and murder of Bobo by the white lynch mob. The sheer horror of the spectacle and the grotesque rendering of the individual white persons
constituting the mob basically ensure that the audience member continues to identify with
Big Boy, who must bear witness to the traumatic event, since he is hiding in a nearby
hole in the ground. Furthermore, the incensed whites are never identified at the
individual level, which adds to their depiction as Them, the opposition, the true Other.\footnote{Richardson observes that Charles Chestnut and other Realist authors also used their portrayals of mob violence to subvert common assumptions regarding black masculinity, explaining that “the mob is brutal, bestial, and utterly irrational, qualities ordinarily stereotypically associated with blacks in the white-supremacist mind” \textit{(BMS 30)}.} Their glee at torturing and burning alive another human being is inhumane, and Wright
seems to painstakingly subvert the common traits ascribed to black persons and assigns
them to the white participants in the mob. “Big Boy Leaves Home,” then, illustrates the
arbitrary nature of depictions of Otherness, and shows that all groups of people contain
the capacity to behave in ways which separate them from their essential humanity.

However, in “Long Black Song,” Wright illustrates two different reactions to Otherness
side-by-side, as if in dialogue with one another, further confirming the collection’s
illustration of a range of possible reactions to the Otherness binary, as well an alternative
construction black manhood.

In “Long Black Song” the reader confronts two different African American
reactions to white aggression. Through their different responses to Sarah’s physical act
with the white salesman, Wright indicates two divergent views towards the exclusionary
impulse of the Otherness binary. Silas’ autonomous identity as a man is negated by
Sarah’s sex act with the salesman, even though there is relative ambiguity about whether
it was even voluntary. Silas cannot forgive Sarah’s supposed infidelity with a white man, as he views white society as antithetical to his very existence. Silas screams, “Gawd! Gawd, Ah wish alla them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill them all!” (UTC 152, author’s emphasis). Consequently, he wishes for a reciprocal excluding act, for God to wipe his oppressors off the face of the earth, just as he will be removed from existence in the anticipated wave of violence. Silas’ imprecation establishes a binary between his life and manhood and that which diametrically opposes it. He laments, “‘The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!’ (UTC 152). Silas recognizes his impotence and marginalization here, so that his impassioned denouncement of “white folks” is also a cry of resistance. In other words, Silas resists this categorization of Other and the resulting loss of agency and sense of masculinity. Sarah, however, does not seem to view interactions between the races according to this same binary.

Sarah equates the experiences of white and black men, thereby avoiding a construction of personal identity based upon marginalization. After pleading with Silas to run away from the anticipated lynch mob with her, Sarah reflects on the symbiotic

113 Although the scene breaks before the actual sex act takes place and right at the moment when Sarah stops fighting the young white man and answers “her body’s call” for physical intimacy, she does resist him and beg him to stop initially. He never stops, even though Sarah continually says “naw” to his physical advances. The “‘no’ means no” definition of sexual assault taught to today’s youth would certainly define this scene as a rape, yet Sarah does not seem to view it as such, for she never describes it that way to Silas. Her apologies for the sex act also indicate a stronger sense of personal agency than is indicated textually in the preceding scene.
relationship between the races: “Somehow, men, black men and white men [. . .] were all a part of that which made life good. Yes, somehow, they were linked, like the spokes in a spinning wagon wheel. She felt they were. She knew they were. She felt it when she breathed and knew it when she looked. But she could not say how” (UTC 154). Here, Sarah equates black and white men according to their essential masculinity, as integral to the balance of life. She feels the link between these male groups intrinsically. Yet, she cannot explain how black and white men are connected precisely, as she knows no relational evidence for the connection; only her instinct and feelings suggest this to be true.

I propose reading Sarah’s comments as recognition of the social construction of Otherness. Silas assumes that black and white are natural binaries, that his marginalization is inevitable. Martin Green explains that, “when one person either desires or dominates another, a reciprocal action occurs whereby the second person either resists, or accepts the position of being desired or dominated, or, on the other hand, seeks a position of desiring or dominating a third” (7). The reader observes this phenomenon at work in “Long Black Song.” Silas both resists and attempts to physically dominate Sarah by whipping her. Unable to act out the script of strenuous masculinity in public, Silas enacts it in private by beating his wife and generally treating her as a piece of property. This extreme masculine stance is a reaction against the public denial of his masculinity.

Ultimately, Silas’ plea is that the negation of his masculinity identity be reversed and applied to his natural antagonists, white culture. However, Sarah realizes that the black/white binary is a construct of human institutions and that, in reality, black and
white people are just as interconnected as any other human group. As such, white antagonism appears to Sarah as a lamentable product of constructed antipathy, rather than the natural state of things, as Silas believes. Sarah muses, “Yes, killing of white men by black men and killing of black men by white men went on in spite of the hope of white bright days and the desire of dark black night and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer and the deep dream of sleeping grey skies in winter. And when killing started it went on, like a red river flowing” (UTC 153). Sarah’s use of natural images and metaphor to describe her sorrow indicates that the violence between black and white men is a violation of the natural order. Sarah claims that killing occurs in spite of the emotions related to different phases of nature, signaling that killing exists in opposition to the natural and spiritual order of the world. Violence is (to borrow an applicable metaphor from Yeats) a “blood-dimmed tide” that, once loosed, washes over everything in its path. The resulting shootout between Silas and the white lynch mob illustrates her observation, for, although Silas kills at least four men in the standoff, he is burned alive inside of the home that symbolized his identity as an individual and as a man. Unlike “Down by the Riverside” and “Big Boy Leaves Home,” which only illustrate the exclusionary process of the Other binary, “Long Black Song” seems to portray Otherness as a subversion of the natural order and as a human reaction as deplorable as violence itself. Consequently, “Long Black Song” demonstrates the constructing manhood via exclusion (just like strenuous violence) is a faulty proposition. Furthermore, it is the first story to indicate the possibility of inclusion or, at the very least, of the construction of male identity divorced from the negation of human value of other groups.
The final story in the original publication of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, “Fire and Cloud,” offers a very different view on the possibilities available to the black community and seems to anticipate the types of non-violent protest techniques utilized by leaders of the African American community, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the American Civil-Rights struggles in the twentieth century. Reverend Taylor initially appears to participate in the same exclusionary negation represented by Silas in “Long Black Song.” The story opens with Reverend Taylor dejectedly walking home to face his congregation after being refused aid from the white Relief agency. Taylor subconsciously sings an old rhyme as he walks, a folk song which aptly reflects the prevailing status of the black community in the Jim Crow South:

A Naughts a naught [. . .]
N fives a figger [. . .].
All fer the white man [. . .]
N none fer the nigger. (*UTC* 157)

Taylor’s nearly-unconscious singing of this folk song seems to articulate his own negation at the beginning of the tale. At the very least, it signifies his tacit acknowledgement of his marginalization by singing a lyric that recognizes the marginal social position of his people.

Another example of Taylor’s personal negation can be seen in his lack of agency and knowledge. He is confused about what to do and his attention is pulled from many different angles. Members of his congregation, the deacons of his church, the Mayor, Police Chief, and Red Squad leader, and the two communist party collaborators all await
his return. He continually worries about what he should say, how he should act, and what
course of action he should advise to his congregation.

Yet, unlike Silas, Mann, and Big Boy, Taylor does not react to his personal
negation by adopting the myth of strenuous masculinity prevalent in the dominant
culture. His strong denunciation of violent action and even personal resistance is quite
evident in the advice he gives his son and his refusal to let him gather his friends and
resist white oppression. In fact, even after Taylor is kidnapped, beaten, whipped, and
humiliated, he does not succumb to a spirit of hopelessness (like Mann), become resigned
to his fate and marginalization (like Big Boy), or engage in violent defiance of his
oppression (like Silas). Rather, Taylor begins to realize that his own identity, like the
white people’s view of him as Other, simply does not matter. All that is important is his
presence within a group of people. In a sense, then, Taylor appropriates the essential
impulse of the Otherness discourse (lumping diverse human beings into a group and
ascribing to them assumed behavior based upon cultural prejudices) in a positive way.
Rather than resisting his identification with a group, he celebrates it, and “takes the power
back” from those who would marginalize the group and his own manhood. The group
becomes that which allows him to resist. As a site of resistance, the group is much more
powerful than his individual will and actions could ever be. However, when one reads
the second and subsequent editions of Uncle Tom’s Children, all which include “Bright
and Morning Star” as the fifth and final selection, the underlying assumptions governing
a continuum of resistance become quite clear.
It is in “Bright and Morning Star” that the reader finally receives a picture of interactions between racial groups untainted by the assumption of inferiority or other markers of Otherness. Sue’s son, Johnny-boy, provides the clearest vision of the necessity of racial inclusion and harmony in the story. When Sue relays Reva’s warning to Johnny-boy, she cannot resist a motherly word of caution about the recent people Johnny has been welcoming into the floundering party: “‘Yuh know, Johnny-Boy, yuh been takin in a lotta them white folks lately’” (UTC 233). Johnny’s response clearly reveals his personal devotion to a political ethos of inclusion: “‘Ah knows whut yuh gonna say, ma. N yuh wrong. Yuh cant judge folks jus by how yuh feel bout em n by how long yuh done knowed em. Ef we start tha we wouldn’t have nobody in the party. When folks pledge they word t be with us, then we gotta take em in’” (UTC 233). Johnny’s claim that individuals cannot judge people based on a subjective feeling about them seems starkly contrasted with the ways in which black people are treated throughout the entire collection. As a result, his remarks illustrate the movement beyond black

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114 “Bright and Morning Star” did not appear in the first edition of the Harper publication of Uncle Tom’s Children. According to Rampersad, Wright sent the story, “for inclusion in the first edition of Uncle Tom’s Children, but Harper and Brothers rejected it. The story was first published in a literary supplement to the May 10, 1938, issue of New Masses and was later collected in Edward O’Brian’s Best Short Stories of 1939 and in The Fifty Best American Short Stories 1914-1939” (298). In fact, the publisher’s initial reticence to include “Bright and Morning Star” as the final story in the collection as Wright had intended was due to the anticipated reaction of a white readership to the brutal torture and murder of a mother and son depicted in the story, as well as the text’s support for the Communist Party. Yet Wright’s insistence that it be included (he offered to personally pay for the costs of adding it into the collection in the second edition) further illustrates my reading of the collection as Wright’s depiction of a range of possible responses to white oppression.
manhood as resistance and indicate the possibility of a masculinity grounded in identification with a group consciousness instead of individual action.

More importantly, this contrast is placed in sharper relief when held up in comparison with the reactions of the other black male characters in the short story collection, and even the immediate reaction of his own mother. Sue insists that none of the black members of the party could have told because “Ah know em” (*UTC* 233). Johnny however, refuses to entertain an us/them binary regarding party membership. He responds, “‘*our* folks! Ma, who in Gawds name is *our* folks?’” (*UTC* 234). She protests at his unconditional inclusion, but Johnny insists, “‘Why is it gotta be *white* folks?’ he asked. ‘Ef they tol, then theys jus Judases, thas all’” (*UTC* 234). Johnny rejects racial signifiers, which establishes his representation of a vision of the world free of the dominant/Other binary. His vision also indicates that he does not view his own masculinity as dependent upon strenuous ideals like resistance and individualism. Rather, he sees his role as a man to be dependent upon the success of the group.

Consequently, “Bright and Morning Star” gives the reader a glimpse into what a construction of manhood independent of the exclusionary impulse of Otherness or strenuous constructions of masculinity might look like. Johnny dies in this story, but he does not betray his comrades. Sue has the opportunity to betray the white members of the party, to flee and save herself. Yet Sue does not let her beating at the hands of a white man, nor her intimidation and betrayal of the identity of her comrades, return her to subjugation. Her vengeance for Johnny’s torture defends the ideals his character embodies. While the story does not end happily, it does conclude in triumph. In the end
of the story, as she awaits the bullet, Sue defiantly shouts, “‘Yuh didn’t git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it!’” (*UTC* 263). While her defiance directly refers to the mob’s failure to gain the names of the party members, it can also be examined in a more general context. The Sherriff and his men have failed to continue to divide the oppressed and marginalized. Their violence has not subjugated Sue or Johnny. In this context, Sue’s dying words articulate the power of possibility, of a vision of human bonds that are not shaped by identity-negating binaries or social constructs, but which are grounded within affection and shared experiences.

Through this collection of stories, Wright exposes the failure of a vigorous form of masculinity, at least in constructing a stable and healthy personal identity for African American men. Instead, due to the oppression of white society and the misguided ethics of such a construction, Wright reveals that the choices available to African American men faced with social oppression articulated in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” violent resistance or feeble subservience, actually constitute a false dilemma. Exploring the various reactions to the discourse of Otherness in these tales illustrates a third possibility based within the formation of a group identity, or more correctly, the creation of masculine identity rooted within a group. Consequently, Taylor, abused and humiliated like all of the other male characters, retains his essential dignity and is able to lead his people triumphantly. Johnny can defy white lawmen and lynch mobs alike with impunity, because his identity is not self-contained, but based within a higher ideal and purpose, the good of the party.
The implications of this study on the critical perceptions of Richard Wright’s early short fiction are significant. Here I have presented these stories as a continuum of resistance, with individual violence on one end and non-violent group protest on the other. Consequently, one can approach these stories as illustrations of the different probable outcomes of resistance to racial oppression in the Jim Crow South. Since the distinctions between “us” and “them” are essential to the perpetuation of bigotry and social segregation, Wright’s texts must confront the Otherness binary. *Uncle Tom’s Children* illustrates Wright’s recognition of the importance of positive identity creation for individual black men. Furthermore, Wright shows that masculine identity can be constructed upon notions of group interest, rather than individual resistance. This discussion, then, defends my assertions that Wright’s early short fiction functions to challenge the adoption of strenuous masculinity by black men and instead privileges the construction of black male identity grounded within group affiliations.

Yet the overall argument and analytical strategies employed here apply to other texts in Wright’s early body of work as well, including his most famous and recognizable text, *Native Son*. Yet, critical approaches to *Native Son* often pander to the same misconceptions and stereotypes of the author as *Uncle Tom’s Children*. In fact, *Native Son* is so often used as the lens through which *Uncle Tom’s Children* is viewed that it becomes essential to address it in detail as well.
V

Bigger’s Masculine Identity in Native Son

The character of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native Son does not evoke sympathy, nor does he strike any common chord with the human spirit. He is designed to represent everything low, base, and primal within the soul of humankind.\textsuperscript{115} He is, much to the chagrin of James Baldwin, meant to symbolize the spiritual, emotional, and physical condition of the black man in America. His character consciously mimics some of the most ridiculous and exaggerated stereotypes of Wright’s time. He cultivates a depraved view of women throughout the text, objectifying and abusing Bessie to raise his own level of self-esteem. Bigger is a murderer, no matter how accidental the circumstance, and he attempts to ransom the dead girl under the very noses of the Daltons, who are also his employers. I propose that Bigger is actually a negative example of the failure inherent in any attempt to appropriate dominant cultural constructions of strenuous male behavior by black men. In other words, I see Native Son as a cautionary tale to those in the black community who would advocate individual violent resistance, as well as to a white society that privileges strenuous masculinity while denying black men any avenue of identity formation outside of violent resistance.

\textsuperscript{115} Cynthia Willett views Bigger as “represent[ing] the valorization of the will to power as strength, hardiness, and proud defiance” (213). Yet approaching the story through a Nietzschian lens only highlights its elements of domination in light of violent resistance. Willett goes on to assert that, “Bigger manifests what Nietzsche portrays as will to power in its most primitive, uncultured, and brutal phase” (213). This development comes closer to a recognition of the Bigger’s function as a negative role model, rather than a positive depiction of violent resistance so often supported by literary critics, but it is not explicit.
Wright’s portrayal of black manhood in *Native Son* has sparked much controversy throughout the years, with many influential leaders of the African American community protesting the portrayal of black men as violent, misogynistic sociopaths.\(^{116}\) However, James Baldwin’s critique of Bigger does very little to illuminate the response to the confinement of black masculinity that Wright’s character represents through his symbolic castration from political and social power at the hands of the dominant hierarchy. The few critics willing to explore the depiction of masculinity in Wright’s work limit themselves to a discussion of *Native Son* grounded within a view of the author as misogynistic or, at best, a peddler of hypermasculine swagger.\(^{117}\) Mootry’s article is

\(^{116}\) See Baldwin and Hurston’s famous denunciations of *Native Son*, which are representative of the criticism levied against Wright by his African American contemporaries for his portrayal of violent black masculinity.

\(^{117}\) Aime Ellis is one such critic willing to assert an alternative interpretation of Wright’s depiction of young black masculinity to the hypermasculine model most commonly asserted by Wright’s critics. Ellis astutely recognizes that “Bigger was immersed within a defiantly oppositional black male subculture that not only sought to ensure his survival but also struggled to preserve his humanity” (183). While I agree with her overall argument, I differ from Ellis’ view in subtle but important ways. I view Bigger’s “gang” as a form of resistance, but not to racial marginalization, to determinism itself. I do not read the male community as a successful mechanism in the preservation of his humanity, simply because it fails in its intended purpose. Rather, I read the gang as an illustration of the distortion of male community by the assertion of individualism and self-fulfillment. While the purpose and the function of a homosocial community is as Ellis claims, the hope and integration promised dies when its members revert to the script of strenuous masculinity, as Bigger does. Wright does not elaborate upon the potential for resistance offered within the bonds of black community, at least within the singular context of *Native Son*. However, if one takes into account his entire body of work (especially in light of the analysis previously offered in this chapter) it becomes relatively clear that he was quite aware of the opportunities for resistance offered within black male homosocial bonds. In other words, it is possible that Wright did not include such recognition of black community in *Native Son* because he had already explored those relationships in detail in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, which had been published just two years before his novel. In other words, I would counter Ellis (and by extension, Baldwin) by
indicative of the typical critical stance on the depiction of male gender roles within Wright’s body of work. She claims that, “Wright’s heroes [. . .] are all of a piece. Narcissistic, they value the company of men above all; they are childless; and they define themselves in opposition to women, either by using them, by perceiving themselves as being used by them, or in extreme situations, by transmuting the impulse to love to the impulse to violence and even death” (82). Mootry’s observations hold true for some of Wright’s protagonists some of the time. However, it is an exaggeration to claim that they value male companionship above all else; certainly Bigger Thomas rejects all human companionship as often as he is able, especially after the first thirty pages of the novel. Furthermore, Bigger’s anger is a result of his complete helplessness to gain any power within the white social structure, and his violent outbursts are actually an attempt to regain the innate sense of masculinity that has been stripped from him since the day of his birth.

Gardner’s traditional reading of Wright’s early fiction interprets the author’s first published novel, Native Son, as an extension of the message of violent resistance supposedly advocated by Uncle Tom’s Children.\textsuperscript{118} She claims that, “No longer content

\textsuperscript{118} Although there has been lack of scholarship concerning Wright’s short story collection in recent years, Wright’s other early work has not suffered the same fate. Critical discussions on Wright’s first novel (which immediately proceeded Uncle Tom’s Children in publication), Native Son, have exploded in the last decade. Over thirty percent of all of the pieces ever composed on this story have been published within the last nine years. And yet, for all of the critical interest in Wright’s most famous and popular novel, hardly anyone has written about the constructions of masculinity depicted in the text, at least outside of the narrow context of resistance through violence (e.g. Laurel Gardner’s
to show blacks as pathetic victims of white hatred, Wright created a character who represents the evil that the white world creates in its oppression of blacks” (432). The validity of this viewpoint depends on the reader’s acceptance of Bigger Thomas as some type of role model, or positive example of violent resistance. Gardner claims that, “For Wright, physical violence was a natural and inevitable way to affirm one’s self and dignity in response to hatred and oppression. [. . . ] Wright employs a progression of violent acts to show a range of courage and will to assert selfhood in his oppressed black protagonists” (Gardner 420-21). However, it is not clear that the reader is intended to view Bigger sympathetically. While the audience can understand the variety of social forces which determine Bigger’s actions and ultimate fate, I feel that it is a stretch to view Bigger as a triumphant representation of resistance.

I think that it is important to recognize that Wright’s protagonists, like Crane’s, are not meant to model desirable behavior to their audiences. Fiction in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism illustrates the extremities of the human condition, the crushing distortions of determinism on the human soul. As June Howard and Lee Clark Mitchell discuss, Naturalistic fiction tries to provoke horror in the reader, so that they are motivated to confront the various social mechanisms which determine human existence. When, strive as they might, protagonists are still crushed under the boot heel of fate, the reader should become introspective. It seems rather obvious that they would not try to emulate the same actions and mindsets that led fictional characters to their disastrous reading, which proposes that Wright depicts violence as a necessary act of resistance against racial oppression).
conclusions. Here I hope to shed light on Native Son’s redeeming message of the importance of masculine identity formation based within a group ethos through a discussion of the failure of strenuous masculinity in the novel, the initial failures of limited community, and the final assertion of homosocial group identity at the end of the novel.

Bigger has been symbolically castrated by the dominant white social structure. Trudier Harris notes that, “the figure of the emasculated black male has occupied a secondary if not primary role for ‘the antithesis of all protest and discontent’” (31). Bigger’s life consists of the response to circumstances beyond his control; he will never determine his own experience or accomplish a personal goal. In the introduction to Exorcising Blackness, Harris observes that, “Black males were especially made to feel that they had no right to take care of their families to any degree beyond that of bare subsistence, and no right to assume any other claims to manhood as traditionally expressed in this country” (x). Bigger’s employment opportunities, what he eats, and where he lives are controlled by the mandates of white men. He is intensely aware of this captivity, and laments: “We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail” (NS 20). His constant social captivity literally cuts off any illusions of self-worth or personal independence.

The mother links Bigger’s economic failures to his male identity when she states: “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (NS 8). Bigger is acutely aware of these limitations on his ambitions and abilities. Bigger’s
intense desires to accomplish something as a man are broken before he even reaches
adulthood. His state of powerlessness leaves him feeling frustrated and he channels his
rage into violence against his own friends. Yet this private performance of strenuous
manhood has often been interpreted as a perpetuation of black-on-black violence, as
opposed to a symbol of resistance.

Baldwin centers his critique of *Native Son* on its potential to perpetuate an anti-
social stereotype among the black male community. “Indeed, within this web of lust and
fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other’s slow,
exquisite death . . . the longing making heavier the cloud which binds and suffocates
them both, so that they go down into the pit forever” (18). He understands that whites
already conceive of black men in these violent and misogynistic terms and he fears that
the reinforcement of this type of behavior within literature will only fuel the fires of
racial hatred and difference. This sentiment is quite understandable and his fears may be
well-founded, especially considering the prevalence of these stereotypes within modern
popular culture. Baldwin’s objections, however well-intentioned, are based within the
results of a problem and not its causes. Wright consciously crafts his novel around the
realization that the black man is actively cut off from all avenues of success and self-
determination. Edward Guerrero expresses this sentiment in stating:

It has come to be a cruel charade that in a culture where material wealth is
the highest measure of self-worth, and that defines “manhood” foremost as
the ability to provide economically for one’s self and family, the very
means achieving such a narrowly mapped “manhood” (or any measure of
self-esteem) are systematically and institutionally kept beyond the reach of all too many Black men. (273)

Bigger may not be able to fully comprehend the root cause of his anger and frustration, but he subconsciously knows that he will never be given the opportunity to work for the goals and lifestyle he desires. This personal realization is made painfully clear in the sidewalk conversation Bigger has with Gus, where he complains, “Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don’t they let us fly planes and run ships” (NS 20). Bigger must rise above the limitations placed on his life by white society; he must become “bigger” than his confining destiny. Bigger’s mother echoes the opinions of society when she states: “Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!” (NS 9, emphasis mine). In order to facilitate this change, Bigger must first regain his sense of manhood.

Bigger regains his self-respect through Mary Dalton’s desire for him and his resulting violence towards her person. Bigger does not need to physically possess this wealthy heiress; her drunken advances towards him convince him of the fact that he has control over her. The narrator remarks that: “Her dark eyes looked at him feverishly from dark sockets. Her hair was in his face, filling him with its scent” (NS 81). Her murder, though accidental, removes him from the constraints placed on his fellow black men. He is now above the white men and their laws. He has taken an object of their desire and cinematographic worship and disposed of it. Throughout the rest of the novel, Bigger appears detached from the rest of society. He no longer speaks to his old pool hall
friends, nor does he interact with his family (NS 298). Bigger has supposedly taken back his own masculinity through his violence toward a white body.

Bigger’s conduct, although reprehensible, is a conditioned response to the alienation of power and opportunity in society. Young boys, from the time they are able to process and retain information, are constantly bombarded with images of male violence in response to challenges to their authority, social position, and masculinity. The Westerns and “action” films of Wright’s era projected this notion of domination and violence through their subject material. The social environment behind this work, which is set in the turbulent days before World War II, would have been informed by the martial spirit and war hysteria that was a trademark of the government propaganda during the forties. Bigger’s reactions against his lack of power are simply a product of his society.

Though the popular entertainment in Chicago during the 1940s would have been completely geared toward a white audience, its message would have been digested by all, fostering an even deeper sense of resentment and injustice in those who desire access to these forbidden privileges. Carol E. Henderson notes that, “This discourse (of the

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119 I consider Vincent Perez’s article to be essential reading for discussions surrounding media culture and Wright. Perez explores Wright’s disgust with and rejection of mass media (as represented in The Outsider [1953]), as well as its presence and influence within Wright’s early texts. Perez claims that, “media culture becomes almost synonymous with modern urban culture,” in Wright’s body of work (147). Yet, Wright himself was deeply enamored with the cinema (spending two years working on the script for the movie version of Native Son, in which he was cast as the lead role) and Twelve Million Black Voices (1941) is a piece of visual media (151-52). James Smethurst recognizes the integral role which cinema plays within Wright’s fiction, and his provocative article explores the affinities between the portrayal of Bigger Thomas by print media in the novel and the depiction of monstrous villains in the horror movies of the 1930s and 40s. Smethurst argues that Wright is able to posit a more effective cultural critique by employing well-known tropes of marginalized but somewhat sympathetic monsters popularized by media culture.
hypersexed, violent black male), predicated on maintaining certain racial, political, and sexual boundaries, is rooted in a desire for power—in the form of economic and political supremacy” (139). Bigger appropriates this “typical” male behavior in his actions throughout the first and second books. He reacts to these confining social forces in the manner that society has deemed desirable; the problem lies not in the nature of the reaction, but in the very act of resisting itself. Bigger, like many black men, has been removed from the sources of power and control in his society. His effort to take some control back, even just over his own life, represents a serious threat to the dominant white hierarchy.

Bigger’s attempt to create a personal identity founded upon self-determinism actually functions to break the bonds of racial confinement and to re-assert his claim to manhood. Henderson notes the importance of reclaiming manhood among the black community, stating, “Thus, the return to the masculine is a restorative effort . . . for many believe the race’s ability to act in its own best interests, be they political or otherwise, hinges on the systematic restructuring of the African American male identity” (140). Bigger’s actions, though violent and desperate, may be witnessed as typical behavior of an adolescent male attempting to assert his own will over that which controls him. The metaphor dissolves under its failure, however, for the price Bigger is forced to pay for his temporary freedom again severs him from the source of his manhood.

In fact, both Bigger’s individual actions and their resulting consequences are similar to Big Boy’s behavior in “Big Boy Leaves Home.” In this sense, Bigger Thomas is an amplification of Big Boy. It is almost as if Wright takes his previous character and
expands him, presents him as “bigger” than his previous story could. Consequently, the previous discussions of Big Boy’s failure to regain personal agency through the killing of a white person and his resulting exile and social alienation would apply to Bigger Thomas as well. In fact, that is precisely what happens to Bigger in *Native Son*; he seems to reclaim his masculinity through violence, only to become more abject and disconnected than before.

In escaping from this confinement of his male identity, Bigger also removes himself from the society and human interactions that white men control. His act of defiance necessarily results in alienation. It is this alienation that seems to bother Baldwin the most when he states, “The failure of the protest novel lies within its rejection of life” (18). Baldwin understands that when white readers identify black men with Bigger’s behavior, they will limit their social opportunities even more severely. However, it is essential to recognize that Bigger is not intended as a model of “proper” black male behavior. He functions as a warning, an illustration of the insustainability of race relations in the 1940s and the mounting tension between the dominant male gender roles promoted by media culture and the lived realities of black male life. It is important to recognize that Bigger’s violent behavior is not necessarily a characteristic ingrained into his very nature or psyche. As Max astutely realizes, Bigger reacts to insurmountable social confinement in a typically masculine way: “I’m defending this boy because I’m convinced that men like you made him what he is” (*NS* 292). In other words, Bigger’s actions reveal his desire to recover male identity.
Most importantly, these actions are all selfish, violent displays of the type of individualism and assertive masculinity deemed “strenuous” in the confines of this study, so when I talk about the failures of Bigger’s conception of manhood, I am, in reality, speaking of the failures of strenuous manhood. Bigger Thomas is perhaps the most poignant critic of strenuous masculinity in all of American literature, precisely because he plays out its script so unconsciously and completely. Bigger is the main reason Wright himself is cast as a misogynistic author. Yet, *Native Son* functions as an indictment of the very construction it supposedly advocates because Bigger is clearly a monster and because the audience members would never actually model their behavior after his actions. Bigger (and by extension, the concept of strenuous masculinity he enacts) is not heroic; he is a cowardly bully who hurts others to keep himself from feeling fear or confusion. Bigger is not admirable; in following in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism, he is an object of horror, one designed to force the audience into introspection and spark a change in the determining social institutions that could shape such a character. I assert that one determining influence which Bigger directs the reader to reexamine is the construction of male gender roles around the myth of strenuous masculinity presented in the political and media culture. Bigger functions as a “negative example” of manhood, a personification of what not to do and a figure to avoid becoming.

In the novel’s first section, “Fear,” the reader is introduced to Bigger Thomas through his participation within two social groups: the family structure and a male community. Yet both of these communities fail Bigger. Bigger is only able to grope
towards some level of recognition of his strong desire for personal agency once is has escaped from the constraints of his mother’s household and his street gang.

Consequently, it does seem rational and even easy to suggest that Wright’s novel denigrates the value of communal bonds in favor of a strenuous form of individualism. Yet, such an assumption suggests a surface reading of *Native Son* and neglects Bigger’s own insights into his desires. Although Bigger is the protagonist, it is relatively clear that the audience is not meant to identify with the character and emulate his actions. Bigger’s actions do not provide the reader with a pattern of behavior to model; only to avoid. Moreover, the failure of community in freeing Bigger from the constraints of determinism is placed into question by the entrance of Max in the third and final book. Consequently, a more thorough analysis is still required in order to fully appreciate the conflicted depictions of the value of homosocial community within this text. I will begin by exploring the failures of Bigger’s social groups in the beginning of the novel, and then compare and contrast this depiction with his feelings of alienation and longing once he has been arrested and jailed.

Bigger begins the novel as a participant within two distinct forms of community. The tale begins inside of Bigger’s rat-infested one room tenement apartment, where he shares a bed with his younger brother next to the one occupied by his mother and sister. As the eldest son in a single-parent family (his father having been killed in a “race riot” in the South when he was a child), Bigger occupies the traditional role of the “man of the family.” He is expected to protect his mother and siblings from the rat, and succeeds in killing it. But the grotesque way in which he teases his sister, Vera, with the corpse of
the vermin until she passes out suggests that Bigger may have adopted the male gender role of familial protector, but not of nurturer. Furthermore, his mother constantly reminds Bigger of his failures as provider, another traditional male role. So the reader immediately views Bigger through the lens of male gender roles and their gaze focuses on his inability to provide for and nurture his family group. Rather than the group failing Bigger, I think that the text directs the reader towards Bigger’s lack of participation within the group structure and his rejection of traditional male gender roles. This same type of pattern repeats itself in Bigger’s interactions with his other primary community.

Like Wright’s short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” *Native Son* begins with the protagonist’s immersion within a homosocial community. Critics have been drawn to this section of the novel for good reason: it is one of the only places in the novel where Bigger interacts with other African American men. As soon as Bigger escapes from the tiny apartment and its crushing expectations and smothering guilt, he heads off to find solace within his “band of brothers.” However, Wright’s depiction of this male group subverts many of the existing constructs of male homosociality. At first glance, Bigger’s interactions with Gus, G. H., and Jack seem to complicate my assertions regarding an alternative construction of masculinity around homosocial bonds. However, like Crane’s

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120 Ellis reads Bigger’s gang as a symbol of resistance to racial oppression, which indicates an acceptance of the “myth” of Richard Wright’s defiant project prevalent within literary criticism. Ellis’s explicit purpose is to “rethink Bigger’s relationship with other black males in *Native Son* and to explore how poor urban black males created racial community” (183). Yet it is somewhat ironic that this rethinking be predicated on the fundamentally misguided notion of violent resistance that my study works to dispel. Ellis does not account for Wright’s critique of strenuous masculinity. Instead, she seems to assume that Wright would advocate for a violent, individualistic form of male performance for purposes of resistance.
male community in “The Blue Hotel,” Bigger’s gang provides evidence of the disruptive force of individualism asserted within a homosocial context. In other words, just like Crane, Wright’s fiction showcases an entire range of outcomes or consequences of male behavior. And, like Crane, Wright’s texts expose the failure of constructions of masculinity based upon the myth of the strenuous life advocated by Roosevelt. These authors both articulate an alternative possibility in the creation of individual identity based upon the individual’s position within a group of peers. Yet, they also illuminate the incompatibility of asserting individualism within a group context. The depiction of gender roles within the body of work of these authors is much more nuanced than has been previously acknowledged, for they both weave narratives that challenge existing perceptions of manhood and offer up alternative constructions, only to complicate those possibilities further before finally presenting a more unified vision of positive identity formation.

With the recognition of Wright’s complicated and nuanced depiction of homosocial community firmly in mind, it may be necessary to revisit Amie Ellis’ work in more detail. On the surface, Ellis seems to articulate a similar argument to the one posited in this study. However, a more careful examination of her argument reveals an important point of divergence in our views of Wright’s representation of homosocial community within Native Son. Simply stated, Ellis views Bigger’s gang in a positive light, as an example of community-building, while I see it as failing in its attempt to accomplish such goals. Ellis’ provocative claims deserve replication here, so as not to misinterpret her context:
Indeed, Bigger’s friendship with Gus, G. H., and Jack – from the warm, intimate exchange “on the block” to the violent rituals that build “reputation” and mask fear in the neighborhood poolroom to the homoerotically suggestive masturbation incident in the movie theater – illustrates the continuity, cohesiveness, and complexity of the defiantly oppositional black male cultural practices, practices that have historically functioned as a means for forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment. [...] Indeed, these urban homosocial spaces represent sites of black male community that foster the development of black male identities against (though largely informed by) an environment of racist repression and negation. (185)

I agree with the principle of Ellis’ overall argument: homosocial communities were important sites of resistance against social marginalization for young black men. However, I do not see the section of the novel in question as actually functioning in this way, simply because Bigger’s gang is a male community without cohesion because its members, and Bigger especially, are still acting out the script of strenuous masculinity in ways which irreparably fracture the unity of the group, negating its unifying purpose.

Ellis reads the masturbation scene and fight in the pool hall as an illustration of “the continuity, cohesiveness,” etc. of defiant black male cultural practices that sustain a sense of community. I, on the other hand, recognize these scenes as failed and/or aborted attempts to accomplish the goals she lists. I assert that Wright complicates the construction of homosocial masculinity in Native Son by illustrating the limits of male
community when its members attempt to interact according to notions of strenuous individualism. So just like the anger, confusion, and violence which erupts in Fort Romper when the Swede tries to interact within a male community by acting out a script of “Wild West” swagger and violence adopted from the pages of dime-novels, so too does Bigger’s gang fail to function as a “means of forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment” (Ellis 185).

Furthermore, it seems to require a leap of faith to conclude that Bigger’s interactions with his friends are a constructive example of the sustaining ability of community, for the simple reason that they all contain a subtext of violence, domination, and humiliation. Ellis claims that “it is from within this private and guarded space of black male homosociality that they struggle to create a sense of agency, self-worth, and meaning, and space from which they as black men attempt to carve out their own humanity” (188). Yet in the very next sentence, Ellis comments on Bigger’s frustration and anger. I assert that homosocial communities are supposed to function in the way she suggests and that they contain the potential to serve as a site of resistance to oppression. However, in this particular instance in this particular novel, this male group does not “work” or function correctly because the ethos of individualism is still Bigger’s primary instinct. Without rejecting his selfish, individual desires and privileging his own actions, Bigger is and remains frustrated and angry, a clear indication of Wright’s rejection of strenuous masculinity. In other words, Ellis does not acknowledge that a male community predicated on the script of strenuous male gender roles is doomed to failure because it is not a true “band of brothers” like the integrated and sustaining homosocial community in
“The Open Boat”. Bigger’s gang does not keep him from becoming a monster because their bond is based on individual competition rather than mutual respect and self-sacrifice. However, I do not mean to imply that Native Son rejects the formation of individual identity upon group solidarity. It is just that Bigger’s gang is not the correct example of this in Native Son. It is only after Bigger’s actions, which are all predicated on strenuous masculinity in the first two books, fail to help him determine his own life and place him in jail facing the death penalty that Wright’s vision of community emerges.

The third book of Native Son has been viewed as an afterthought by critics who have suggested that the novel really reaches its climax, and even its ultimate resolution, in the capture of Bigger Thomas at the end of the second book. However, Wright’s novel is not a detective thriller; it contains a deep social message that would be lost without relating Bigger’s incarceration and trial. In fact, my own argument concerning this text, that Native Son ultimately privileges homosocial community as a stable source of male identity formation, would not be possible without the shift that occurs within the protagonist as he sits in his jail cell waiting to die.

Captured and incarcerated, Bigger has ample time to reflect on his deeds, which leads the reader to a deeper understanding for the motives driving his course of action. Furthermore, it is only in this final book that Bigger becomes aware of the disconnection between the way he has viewed the world around him and the true reality of his existential situations. Even more provocatively, Wright leads his reader through a similar realization, in that they become aware that the narrative persona, which has been faithfully relating Bigger’s point of view throughout the entire novel, has been presenting
them with a line of reasoning that is no more accurate than any of the other misguided assertions that have governed the protagonist’s behavior thus far in the text. Consequently, the reader faces alternative courses of actions along with the protagonist. I assert that Wright may have constructed this alternative path as a way to articulate a different vision of African American resistance to racial oppression in the 1940s, a vision that he does not state explicitly, but which is displayed organically through a revelatory process. For example, Bigger realizes that he has been wrong about Jan’s intentions and must face the reality of a world that does contain at least a handful of white persons who are genuinely invested in racial equality when he meets Max (NS 289-90). Bigger’s entire existence within the black community has been predicated on his assumption of individualism and predatory self-fulfillment. Yet, when his family arrives at the jail cell to see him, Bigger faces the impact his actions have had on them and the black community as a whole: “He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer. No matter how much he would long for them to forget him, they would not be able to. His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit” (NS 298). While it may seem rather mundane to the reader, the concept that he is an inextricable part of his family’s life is totally novel to Bigger, who spends nearly every second of interaction with his family trying to escape from their smothering demands and realities of their dehabilitating poverty. Bigger’s understanding that he is a part of a community, like it or not, is intensely important; not only to the understanding of this particular text, but to all of Wright’s early fiction.
Bigger’s talks with Max awaken an awareness of his deep loneliness and isolation. He begins to hunger for human affirmation and contact as he begins to cast off the individualism and selfishness which has choked his previous relationships. Bigger wonders,

If he reached out with his hands and touched other people, reached out through these stone walls and felt other hands connected with other hearts – if he did that, would there be a reply, a shock? [...] And in that touch, response of recognition, there would be a union, identity, there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all of his life.

(NS 362)

This scene exposes Bigger’s deep longing for a personal identity based within a community of equals free from the competition of individualism. He needs this “supporting oneness” and views it as the missing element of his life. The narrator relates, “Another impulse rose in him, born of a desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun’s rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun” (NS 362). Bigger’s desire for unity is so strong that his mind must create a metaphor for his need in order for him to be able to fully access it. His longing is so deep that it can only be related to the audience in a stream of consciousness, a flood of barely articulated desires.
Here one sees Wright’s vision of positive identity formation realized within the strength and affirmation of unified group. Just like Sarah in “Long Black Song,” Bigger’s vision negates individual identity, focusing instead on the qualities people (and in both cases, specifically men) share in common. Like Uncle Tom’s Children, Native Son exposes the failure of strenuous individualism and of homosocial communities grounded within white constructions of manhood popularized by Theodore Roosevelt. The only positive and redeeming vision Wright presents in both texts is of the formation of personal identity based upon one’s identity within a group of people.\textsuperscript{121}

VI

Conclusion

In this third and final chapter, I have attempted to further illustrate the various claims of this study. I was initially drawn to Wright’s fiction out of a fascination with the way in which the concept humans call “reality” is built by a given culture. Wright’s use of irony and directing of his reader towards an inevitable acknowledgement of social injustice create an analytical climate ripe for confrontations with the essential patterns that compose the human experience. I have tried to prove that, far from being a hypermasculine misogynist, Richard Wright actually appreciated and depicted the

\textsuperscript{121} Charles Scruggs also reads Native Son as a polemic for the human need for community, which he sees as symbolized through the figure of The City in Wright’s novel. He claims, “The novel’s main theme is not man versus society, in which Bigger is a heroic or anti-heroic rebel in the Romantic tradition. Its real theme is as old as the Greco-Roman world; man’s need for human community and, in this case, the city’s failure to provide it” (125). However, Scruggs ultimately concludes that Bigger rejects human community because he rejects Max’s humanistic vision of proletarian strength. I, however, see Bigger’s longing to join a “vast crowd of men” as indicative of his desire for homosocial community. This is why he keeps calling after Max as the lawyer walks away on the final page of the novel; he wants male company in the face of death.
nuanced constraints of socially prescribed gender roles throughout his early fiction. Far from asserting a single strenuous, violent form of masculine resistance, these early texts showcase a range of possible outcomes of black male attempts to stand up to racial oppression. I have documented that *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* both depict a continuum of confrontation, with individual violence on one end of the spectrum and non-violent group protest on the other. Because individual resistance is consistently equated with the pain, suffering, and death of the protagonists, I have asserted that it (and constructions of male identity based upon resistance) fails to provide effectual and sustainable opposition to the negating forces of racial oppression. However, both texts also gesture towards group solidarity, and since the stories/textual moments based upon this theme are the only ones that contain any measure of hope and do not end with death and humiliation, I have asserted that they are actually privileged as sites of positive identity formation.

My defense of this radical departure from common critical assumptions concerning Wright’s fiction has been layered. First, I offered close readings of depiction of masculine behavior within the stories and essays of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, in order to show the failure of individual violent resistance in stories like “Big Boy Leave Home,” and the success of non-violent group protest and community action in “Fire and Cloud.” I then compared the character’s response to the negational process of Otherness in each of the five stories in Wright’s first collection, so that I could illustrate a similar conclusion (Wright’s text privilege communal identity over individualism) in the context of race, not just gender. I feel that this “two-pronged” approach has firmly established
the validity of my claims against the misassumptions far too prevalent in the scholarly work on this important American writer, influenced as it has been by the attacks of Wright’s contemporaries. Finally, I used a similar set of strategies in my reading of Wright’s seminal work, *Native Son*. In that section I illustrated the failure of individual actions to resist personal negation, the ineffectiveness of homosocial community based within individual violent resistance, and the ultimate promise of a more unifying, affirming identity grounded in group solidarity. This was intended to provide greater depth and breadth in the support of my argument, by illustrating my observations in multiple texts and literary genres within Wright’s body of work.

It is my intention and hope that these sections establish an alternative reading of the depiction of masculinity within Richard Wright’s early fiction, one that might help to shift critical focus away from an assertion of violence and lack of group solidarity and towards new possibilities and appreciation of the nuanced response to personal negation and racial oppression contained within his work. Furthermore, I think that recognition of Wright’s appreciation for black male identity formation based within alliance to the community is essential when one acknowledges the extent to which the misinterpretation of his fiction has been appropriated by modern media culture. Even though Wright’s fiction illustrates the failure of individual violence in resisting oppression, the common belief that his stories celebrate assertive confrontation of oppositional social forces has perpetuated some of the most pervasive stereotypes of black men into modern society.

For example, recognizing the complexity of the depiction of masculinity within Wright’s early body of work is especially crucial towards an appreciation of the
manifestation of the “Bigger-esque” persona that has become rampant among today’s Black cultural icons. Within the last decade, this image of violent, misogynistic behavior has been actively adopted and promoted in popular films, lyrics of rap music, and self-images of basketball stars, in direct response to the social confinement that these black men have been subject to throughout their lives. I assert that while stereotypical images of black men as violent, brooding, power-starved, egomaniacs have indeed abounded since Wright’s novel, these images have been embraced and cultivated by leading members of black popular culture. I believe that these men have consciously embraced this image, in order to protest the historical confinement of masculinity and the castration from political and social power at the hands of white society. The glorification of life on the violent streets of the ghettos and housing projects has developed into a metaphor for the strength and resiliency of black males. This behavior not only establishes their individuality and self-image within the social and economic hierarchy, but also defines them as male. This ritual embracing and gendering of violent and anti-social behavior is an integral part of modern popular culture which supposedly functions to symbolically empower and elevate previous victims of social and legal repression. Yet, too often celebration of individual agency within the black male community becomes an excuse for violence against peers and women. In Wright’s stories, Silas and Big Boy are able to act out the script of white, violent masculinity against other African American men, women, and children without fear of repercussion but face violent death if they turn that performance against whites. In the same way, modern African American men can kill one another with relative impunity, just so long as their violence does not spill over and
threaten respectable white society. Consequently, adjusting the perception of Wright’s depiction of masculinity could perhaps draw attention to the ultimate trauma and failure of modern attempts to cultivate a more strenuous script of acceptable male behavior within the black community.

Though the amount and variety of featured and supporting movie roles has increased throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the majority of these roles still inextricably link black masculinity with violence and misogynistic behavior. Edward Guerrero succinctly defines the paradoxical social position of the black celebrity when he observes:

While Black men have consistently been held in the lowest social esteem and relentlessly stereotyped as a group, a few have been simultaneously elevated as “exceptions” and worshiped as accomplished individuals, movie stars, and sports icons. This representational gambit has served dominant society well. . . . Postmodern racism tries hard not to be “personal.” Most in that vast consumer audience are personally distanced from social inequality’s systematic workings, as they look to high profile black celebrities for psychic comfort and assurance that the society is making racial progress. (271)

While black men are literally becoming more visible in society, their presence does nothing to relieve the social confinement that their urban counterparts face daily. Todd Boyd observes that:
America loves their Black entertainers when they behave “properly” and stay in their place. These entertainers are socialized at an early age, live under a microscope, and are constantly held to the expectations of a mainstream society that has no understanding for the fact that not everyone shares the same worldview. (65)

Though Guerrero and other critics go on to lament the casting of black men into violent movie roles, one should consider how these “Bigger-types” characters actually function to reclaim the masculine identity that has been stripped away by the dominant white culture. Actors, such as Samuel L. Jackson, Denzel Washington, and Lawrence Fishburne, consistently accept roles rooted firmly in traditional masculine behavior. These movie characters ultimately rely on the projection of machismo and a strong sense of individuality to overcome obstacles and achieve goals. Though these characters may participate in occasional stereotypical behavior, they have reclaimed the masculine space, even if only on the silver screen. These characters symbolically fight against the social castration of power.

Perhaps the clearest example of the reclamation of masculinity through the adoption of the “Bigger-role” may be witnessed in the personas adopted by rap musicians. Modern rap music exults violent behavior, including assault, arson, and homicide. Women are often viewed as objects to be maltreated, abused, and discarded. These men often display their wealth in the most flagrant ways and spend exorbitant amounts of money. Todd Boyd notes the significance of this conduct when he states:
This is why you hear so many rappers talk about things like “getting’ theirs,” “stacking chips,” “making’ cheddar.” These are all metaphors for making the most money you can, so as to further distance yourself from the “playa haters” of the world. This is their critique of capitalism. They exploit the concept to its fullest, thus making a mockery of it. (66)

The key to this behavior involves the visible position these men hold within society. Their constant presence on MTV, award shows, and basketball games means that millions of Americans, especially youth, are exposed to images of men who proclaim their success, and power, and lack of fear within a society. Many of these artists have been involved in crimes and violent behavior, yet this only propagates their status and power. They effectively proclaim that they have stopped simply trying to exist within a hostile culture. These images proclaim that Black men are actively pursuing power and social control and that they are not afraid to use violence if necessary.

This appropriation of the “Bigger” behavioral pattern is also illustrated within the professional basketball community. Basketball stars, such as Jason Williams, Latrell Sprewell, and Kobe Bryant, have all participated in violent and misogynistic behavior in the last decade. These violent actions symbolize the resistance to the dominant value system. Todd Boyd articulates this social defiance, stating:

In other words, the individuals in question have decided not to buy into the propaganda of America, which has always been articulated by those in power and is seldom applicable to those who live on society’s margins.

So, when you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you
say, “I don’t give a fuck,” you then become empowered, liberated controller of your own destiny. This is certainly the case in basketball, because the players make enough money to be able not to give a fuck, as money is the ultimate source of liberation in capitalist America. (66)

The demonstration of monetary excess is not the only way black athletes rebel against the confining social hierarchy, however. Many times the frustration of having the economic ends of society without achieving recognition and respect boils over into violent indignation. This conduct reveals the limit of commercial success, for as money fails to secure power, violence attempts to wrest it away from its guardians.

The glorification of violence has developed into a metaphor for the strength and resiliency of black males within the entertainment media. This ritual embrace and gendering of violent and anti-social behavior is supposed to function as a protest against social confinement. Yet, one wonders how successful it has ultimately proved. The pervasive stereotypes of black men as less intelligent, more athletic, less articulate, more sexual, etc. still exist today. Perhaps Zora Neale Hurston’s initial criticism of Uncle Tom’s Children has been proven correct. Or perhaps critics have asserted Wright’s supposed vision of violent resistance so completely and effectively that it was accepted and adopted by the popular culture.

Regardless of its cause, the myth of the necessity of individual violence as redeeming and necessary to the formation of a proud and unconstrained black masculinity have been mixed up with the teachings of Malcolm X, the Black Power movement, and even “blaxploitation” films to produce version of strenuous masculinity that is viewed as
acceptable and even laudable by modern popular media culture. Yet, as this analysis of Wright and other Naturalist authors has illustrated, conceptions of manhood predicated upon violence, aggression, and strident individualism are destined to fail. Perhaps it would be better to reevaluate both the current media climate and past literary production in light of Wright’s nuanced understanding of the options and possibilities of group identity in shaping male identity. This reappraisal does not require as radical a shift as some might fear. Certainly, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr rejected the fallacy of individual violence and armed resistance in favor of non-violent group protest. And even the first African American President, Barack Obama, has predicated his public persona on the hope and promise of national solidarity instead of narrow individualism. Perhaps, then, the American discourse on race and gender has come around “full circle,” back to the notion of Nation which Theodore Roosevelt advocated so forcefully at the beginning of the previous century.
Conclusion

This dissertation attempts to establish the presence of an alternative construction of masculinity in the fiction of Naturalist male authors. By examining the dominant construction of strenuous manhood embodied by Theodore Roosevelt and comparing it to the more homosocial representations of male behavior in the fiction of Stephen Crane and Richard Wright, I underscore the complexity of male identity formation and attack the myth of Naturalist hypermasculinity. Consequently, this study contributes knowledge to the fields of Men’s Studies and American literature, and applies Postcolonial and gender theory in unique ways.

The literature on the performance of masculinity within the tradition of American Literary Naturalism generally views the movement as complicit in promoting strenuous manhood. As Fleissner notes in her recent study of gender and American Literary Naturalism, most male authors in that tradition have been viewed as “hypermasculine,” a stereotype which has distorted the scholarship regarding their textual production. The critical assumption is that male writers in this tradition, such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Wright, composed tales that glorified and asserted the rugged individual violence and aggression championed by public figures and the media culture. My project originated from the belief that these prevailing critical assumptions were incorrect. I assert that this misconception is primarily due to the rise of the concept of strenuous masculinity advocated by Theodore
Roosevelt and an over reliance on the sensationalist biographical information surrounding Naturalist authors. Instead of being acolytes of a hypermasculine, strenuous manhood, I argue that many of these authors actually advocate an alternative construction of masculinity which privileges the interests of the group over individualism.

This study would not, could not, be of much value without the previous academic studies providing its foundation. Gail Bederman claims that, “Race, gender, and power – these were the defining attributes of the discourse of civilization” at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (217). This dissertation illustrates that race, gender, and power also govern the process of personal identity formation. Bederman’s argument is inductive, in the sense that she takes observations of specific individual actions (Ida Wells’ protests against lynching, for example) and moves towards generalized conclusions about the concept of civilization as a national, and even western, ideal. My claims here are deductive, in the sense that I have attempted to distill a small portion of the excellent recent scholarship on these three concepts – gender, race, and individual power or agency – into a critical consensus and have used these generalizations to explore the literary products of specific authors and public figures. However, this brief discourse is also intended to function as a complication of, and a challenge to, assumptions that have been current for far too long. In order to expose and counter these claims, I employ two primary methods.

First, I explore the shift in the popular conception of what it means to be a man and normative gender expectations at the end of the nineteenth century in America. In
the first chapter I illustrate the gradual evolution of an individualistic, violent, and
strident concept of manhood, which I label “strenuous masculinity,” that supplants
Victorian male gender mores of restraint and honor in the final decades of the nineteenth
century. I then use the rhetorical products of Theodore Roosevelt to provide a time frame
for the social adoption of this concept of male behavior and to illuminate the various
facets of this ideal. I further complicate these notions by comparing Roosevelt’s public
justification for strenuous masculinity, the health and progress of the Nation (which is a
group ideal), to his emphasis on individual action. Finally, I examine Roosevelt’s notions
of race, and link them to his concept of individualism, as well as the group identity of the
Nation, pointing out that strenuous masculinity becomes an integral part of the process of
social marginalization through the Otherness binary. The goal of this chapter was to
establish the conception of manhood which Naturalist writers supposedly advocate, so
that I could have a concrete ideal against which to compare the behavior of the male
protagonists in their fiction. I also thought it necessary to show the latent tension
between the justification of group interest and the resulting impulse towards extreme
individualism, so that I could examine its resolution by Naturalist authors.

I began this project with the view that the fiction of Stephen Crane offered the
most accessible and clearest examples of my overall assertion: that, far from being
“hypermasculine,” male authors in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism actively
challenged the construction of strenuous masculinity in even their most rugged tales of
adventure. My second chapter links Crane to Theodore Roosevelt in order to document
Crane’s first-hand knowledge of the type of strenuous masculinity which Roosevelt
advocated and personally embodied. I then hold up the recent critical assertions about Crane’s depiction of gender roles in order to expose them to the light of my observations and achieve clarity through the process of differentiation. My claim that critics have not fully appreciated Crane’s ironic and nuanced presentation of manhood presents an accessible test case for my project: *The Red Badge of Courage*. Here I find that Crane’s fiction illuminates the trauma and confusion inherent in the performance of vigorous male scripts. My close reading of Crane’s famous text illustrates the failure of a construction of personal male identity grounded within a belief in individualism and violence. Furthermore, I show that Crane privileges a construction of masculinity rooted in homosocial bonds of male camaraderie in his novel. I demonstrate that Crane’s texts must be approached comparatively, that stories must be read in conjunction with one another to appreciate an aggregate social message.

In the second chapter I also examine both *The Red Badge of Courage* and several of Crane’s short stories, such as “Five White Mice,” “The Blue Hotel,” and “The Open Boat,” for evidence of the failure of strenuous masculine ideals such as individualism, violent aggression, and personal agency. I then apply my core argument (that texts from male writers within the tradition of American Literary Naturalism offer alternatives to the dominant construction of strenuous masculinity) to Crane’s later short fiction, showing that his stories represent a spectrum of possible outcomes to the performance of male gender roles. Specifically, I examine “Five White Mice” as a cautionary tale to those young men who might take the mandates of Rooseveltian masculinity too seriously. Secondly, I use “The Blue Hotel” to document the awkward juxtaposition of individual
and community-based masculine gender performance, showing that the violent
individualism is only excluded by homosocial communities. I then present “The Open
Boat” as a positive example of my argument, illustrating the beneficial, supportive
affirmation of male identity through identification within a group of men. In other words,
some stories, like “Five White Mice,” show the failure of individualism, while others,
like “The Open Boat,” represent the positive outcomes of group action. Finally, I expand
my discussion towards the exclusionary impulse of the Otherness discourse. I also
explore the ways in which inclusion in, and exclusion from, male groups functions to
build personal identity and I appropriate the Postcolonial discourse of Otherness to
illustrate the relational process of identity formation and male performance. This chapter
proves that male authors writing in the tradition of American Literary Naturalism were
not always “hypermasculine” acolytes of strident manhood, but, in fact, offered
alternative constructions which they portrayed as less traumatic and more cohesive than
prevailing social notions of normative male behavior.

In my third and final chapter, I try to prove that, rather than being a
hypermasculine misogynist, Richard Wright actually understood and depicted the
nuanced constraints of socially prescribed gender roles throughout his early fiction.
Instead of asserting a single strenuous, violent form of masculine resistance, these early
texts showcase a range of possible outcomes of black male attempts to stand up to racial
oppression. I document the ways in which *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* both
depict a continuum of confrontation, with individual violence on one end of the spectrum
and non-violent group protest on the other. Because individual resistance is consistently
equated with the pain, suffering, and death of the protagonists, I assert that violence (and constructions of male identity based upon it) fails to provide effectual and sustainable opposition to the negating forces of racial oppression. However, both texts also gesture towards group solidarity, and since the stories/textual moments based upon this theme are the only ones that contain any measure of hope and do not end in death and humiliation, I argue that the group ethos becomes privileged as a site of positive identity formation. I offer close readings of depictions of masculine behavior within the stories and essays of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, in order to show the failure of individual violent resistance in stories like “Big Boy Leave Home,” and the success of non-violent group protest and community action in “Fire and Cloud.” I then compare the character’s response to the negational process of Otherness in each of the five stories in Wright’s first collection, illustrating a similar conclusion (Wright’s texts privilege communal identity over individualism) in the context of race, not just gender. Finally, I use a similar set of strategies in my reading of Wright’s *Native Son*. In that section, I illustrate the failure of individual actions to resist personal negation, the ineffectiveness of homosocial community based within individual violent resistance, and the ultimate promise of a more unifying, affirming identity grounded in group solidarity. The intent of the final chapter is to provide greater depth and breadth in the support of my argument, by illustrating the presence of my observations in multiple texts and literary genres within Wright’s body of work.
The implications of my study reach beyond the confines of this brief analysis. Not only do these texts offer alternative constructions of masculinity to the strenuous conception of manhood prevalent within the media culture of the period, they also establish the entire tradition of American Literary Naturalism as complicating the performance of dominant gender roles. If one accepts that a part of the Naturalist project is to showcase the vast array of natural and social forces aligned against the individual and their indifference to his/her fate, and one realizes that socially prescribed gender roles are one of these determining institutions, one must face the conclusion that Naturalistic texts are deeply invested in illuminating the trauma and crushing oppression of any restraining forces. These texts show that the thematic impulses of Naturalism (the challenge of and eventual submission to existential determinism, the failure of individual action, the lack of personal agency, the opposition of the natural world, etc.), cannot function to celebrate strenuous masculinity, for the simple fact that expectations of gendered behavior are one of the social forces that defeat hope and agency and limit personal experience.

Naturalist texts are cautionary tales of sorts. They often depict human life in extremis. Perhaps it is the rugged setting of many of these tales that prompts some critics to read them as celebrations of rugged individualism. Yet, as undergraduate readers often recognize, part of the power of these stories lies in the extreme pathos they evoke. Naturalistic texts generally end badly. They depict human suffering and brutality. There is seldom hope among the ruins, especially in the early, “classic phase,” of the tradition.
Consequently, one must be careful of arguing that Naturalistic texts advocate things directly. For example, most critics, students, and readers would probably recognize that Frank Norris’ novel *McTeague* (1899) does not promote avarice, even though human greed and lust are important themes in the novel, impulses which most of the characters perform to some degree. Yet, if it is obvious to even the most casual reader that this text can depict human actions without championing them, why do trained, professional readers seem to forget this when discussing the depiction of gender in the novel? Readers are supposed to be horrified by McTeague’s brutal treatment of Trina, not to replicate his spousal abuse. The audience is directed towards disgust and repulsion in response to McTeague’s brutish violence towards his family and friends, not admiration of it. However, certain critics still see Norris as a “hypermasculine” writer because his protagonist is violent, misogynistic, and atavistic. I propose that we should read Norris’ novel, and by extension many works within the tradition of American Literary Naturalism, as a warning of the types of behavior possible and perhaps even probable when one succumbs to the determining social forces (such as sensationalized representations of stylized male behavior) arrayed against humanity in the modern world. Perhaps individuals neglect to read with an eye towards irony, or perhaps serious discussions of interpreting Naturalistic texts have been placed by the wayside within critical circles.

Part of the problem is that recent critical discussions of American Literary Naturalism spend so much time debating the correct way to classify these texts, that the actual process of reading and responding to these stories is neglected. Recent studies of
Naturalism have addressed questions of classification, including is Naturalism an offshoot of Romanticism or Realism? Is it its own, distinct genre of American Literature? In fact, there hardly seems to be a single book written about American Literary Naturalism that does not include at least a cursory synopsis of the current state of the debate in the introduction. For example, Jennifer Fleissner and John Dudley include pages of discussion over what constitutes Naturalism in their introductions before arriving at their ultimate arguments, both of which appropriate other critical approaches (Dudley adopts Donald Pizer’s understanding of a tradition characterized by different distinct phases, while Fleissner synthesizes Amy Kaplan and Lee Clarke Mitchell’s view of Naturalism as an extension and development of Realism). Erik Link’s recent study attempts to reshape the debate by linking it to Romanticism, but he really just appropriates Malcolm Cowley’s understanding in his 1947 article. Approaching Jack London’s stories as more representative of French Romanticism than American Realism (as Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin argues) is an interesting proposition. However, it is not an argument that necessarily reorients an understanding of the human experience related within London’s texts.

The point here is that the conversation surrounding the Naturalist tradition has become stymied by rather passé questions of classification. Perhaps this instinct derives from negative reactions to the subject material over time. For example, contemporary authors thematically linked to the Naturalist tradition, such as Annie Proulx, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo, have been castigated for both their “evocative,” “edgy,” and “muscular” prose in terms similar to those used to attack earlier Naturalist writers.
(Myers). So by arguing that Naturalism belongs in an establish category of “literature,” scholars reaffirm the artistic legitimacy of the tradition. Or perhaps questions of classification persist merely because a definitive consensus has not been reached. Yet, regardless of the underlying reason, the resulting lack of focus on thematic implications within the works has contributed to a deficit of scholarly attention to the texts of this period. In other words, while scholars of other areas in American Literature concentrate of cultural implications of textual analysis, the study of Naturalism seems handcuffed to stale notions of canonical categorization. Furthermore, the pervasive impulse to pigeonhole these texts contributes to a lack of interest in the stories; some undergraduates might wonder as to the point of reading scholarship on Naturalism if all it seems willing to discuss is literary labeling. However, the neglect of both critical and popular interest in the artistic production of the fin de siècle is somewhat startling, considering the similarities between American culture then and now.

For all their obvious differences, certain elements of American masculinity in the current period are strikingly similar to the orienting concerns and perceptions of the fin de siècle. For example, Civil War veterans were often looked to as exemplars of masculine courage in the early decades of the twentieth century. In “Brotherhood and the Heroic Virtues,” Roosevelt praises an assembled crowd of Union veterans in Burlington, Vermont for “your strength of steel, your courage of fire” (122). Stephen Crane, too young to have witnessed a Civil War battle firsthand, still uses the conflict as the setting for his exploration of fear, isolation, courage, and community: The Red Badge of
Courage. Richard Wright’s texts all wrestle with the results of the struggle to free African Americans from chattel slavery; in fact, his own father was a freed slave.

Modern culture also employs hindsight in constructing its heroic exemplars of idealized behavior. Today, American culture often invokes the “greatest generation,” the men who fought in World War II, as paragons of manly courage and stoic endurance. Filmmakers, such as Stephen Spielberg, revisit the conflict to tell their stories about desirable male behavior. Spielberg’s reproductions of World War II, such as Saving Private Ryan and Band of Brothers, are complicit in promoting overly simplistic notions of “the good war” in which wholesome, honorable male virtue conquers the evil Nazis and class or ethnic divides. These films celebrate the violence enacted upon the bodies of the enemy, while simultaneously condemning the aggression of the other side as brutality, much in the same way that Roosevelt promoted white male violence as the only way to subdued the savagery of lesser races. The harkening back to a supposed “golden age” of manhood also informs the belief that masculinity is in a perpetual state of crisis.

Another similarity between modern American manhood and its fin de siècle counterpart is the notion that the performance of “true” manhood is under attack or dissipating into decadent decay. In the early twentieth century, the rise of the New Woman movement, temperance unions, and societies for racial progress gave rise to fears that the white male patriarchal system of social authority was eroding. The hysterical reaction became understood as a “crisis of masculinity” and American men used such anxieties to bolster support for the strenuous construction of manhood.
Similar anxieties continue to exhibit themselves today. In the summer of 2010, *The Atlantic* published an influential article by Hanna Rosin lamenting, “The End of Men.” *Newsweek’s* cover story on September 27th, 2010 (entitled “Men’s Lib” nonetheless) highlights the decline of male employment, earnings, and education, and claims that, “Some men have turned to old models and mores of manhood for salvation” (Dokoupil and Romano 44). The article goes on to describe lifestyle magazines, “full of stories about affluent urbanites wearing hunting garb, buying designer axes, and writing about the art of manliness on blogs with names like (ahem) the Art of Manliness” (Dokoupil and Romano 44). And yet it is difficult to understand the high emotions evident in this anxiety without first identifying the popular conversation surrounding masculinity, both then and now. Exploring the different constructions of manhood present within even the most totalizing discourses helps the reader recognize the roles that fiction plays in the social conversation concerning “proper” gendered behavior.

Furthermore, this study models the ways in which re-evaluating the depiction of masculinity within the artistic production of Naturalist authors could serve to counter any modern resurgence of confrontational maleness in modern society. The *Newsweek* article seems to acknowledge this necessity in noting that, “suggesting that men should stick to some musty script of masculinity only perpetuates the problem” (Dokoupil and Romano 44).

Extending this study further could illustrate the ways in which the modern male experience has been directly and tangibly shaped by the dominant constructions of masculinity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Michael Kimmel’s
recent book, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2008), documents the denial of responsibility, feelings of entitlement, and desire of immediate gratification that have become the hallmark of modern American masculinity (at least in men up until their late thirties). Future scholarship might trace Kimmel’s observations back to similar behaviors advocated within Roosevelt’s doctrine of the strenuous life. I project that such a study would discover that modern individualism is much more nihilistic, devoid of the ethical mandates that supposedly justified such behavior in the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, an alternative view would be that modern individualism merely represents one logical extension of the Rooseveltian doctrine.

While this dissertation has not approached questions regarding the influence of strenuous masculinity upon modern conceptions of manhood, there may be a need to complete that transaction in future scholarship. Then, as now, the assertion of strenuous manhood has come under increasing pressure in both popular and artistic representations. Certainly, the ways in which certain sub-cultures in modern American society (such as African American urban males discussed in the conclusion to chapter three) have appropriated the mythos of violent individualism lends support to critics of this model of male behavior, and with good reason. Regardless of how they are framed, the same anxieties regarding appropriate male reactions and behaviors continue to act themselves out before the consuming public in the primary story-telling genres of our age, as they did in the texts of the Naturalist tradition decades ago.
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