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SOUTHERN NOIR:  
APPROPRIATIONS AND ALTERATIONS OF A TWENTIETH-CENTURY FORM

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

BOB HODGES

May 2011

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## ABSTRACT

Southern noir conjoins the two seemingly antithetical words. The word noir conjures images of cheap films about detectives, criminals, and luckless men scurrying across a city at night with expressionistic shadows, a foreboding sense of doom, and seductive femmes fatales nipping at their heels. The understanding of noir as a symptom of urban modernity inextricably linked to cities and cinema stands in stark contrast to the traditional understanding of the south as rural, retrograde, and a repository for all the antiquated, “coercive forms of human society” in labor and social practices (Greeson 3). This study contends that certain works of twentieth century southern literature and film can be understood as a part of the popular form of noir. Southern noir becomes an alternate way to conceptualize the darkness of much of southern literature and film while promising to better explain the origins of noir and its racialized, chiaroscuro style as springing for the colonial experiences of the plantation economy. This study examines William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* as an early fracturing of the noir narrative, the William Wyler film *The Letter* (1940) as a film noir operating in the global southern imaginary, and three stories from Richard Wright’s *Eight Men* as parodic reappropriations of noir narratives for black protagonists. Southern noir provides an opportunity for the productive meeting of scholarship from both southern and noir studies and the beginnings of a reevaluation of two of the most distinctive narrative productions of twentieth century America: southern literature and film with romans noirs and films noirs.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Gloria Green Hodges, who started her master's degree after I started mine and finished before me. Despite her degree being eminently more practical than mine, she has supported my academic career and been the best of mothers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot repay my advisor, Jay Watson's patience with my multiple drafts of stilted prose and unclear argumentation. Awkwardness or vagaries remaining do so in spite of his efforts. My readers, Katie McKee and Ben Fisher, deserve many thanks for their time and support throughout the past three years. Susan Donaldson, College of William & Mary, generously allowed me to cite a forthcoming essay of hers. I benefited from interactions with several other professors: Ted Ownby, Justin Nystrom (now at Loyola University New Orleans), Karen Raber, Jason Solinger, Deborah Barker, Mary Hayes, and Jaime Harker. Even more helpful has been support from my fellow graduate students: Travis Rozier, Kevin Fitchett, Sara Olsen, Josh Lundy, Andrew and Lindsey Abernathy, Rachel Smith, Jesse Wright, Charles Mock, Jordan Youngblood, Joseph and Helen Thompson, Bill and Katie Boyle, Ben Gilstrap, Amy King, Omar Gordon, Hillary and Thomas Richardson, Dave and Corie Miller, Ann Marie Schott, Suzanne and Joe Farmer, and many others. My best friend, Matt Williams, proofread the entire thesis out of morbid curiosity. Danielle Brudi, Gray DeArmoun, Jonathan Ingram, Nick Riggs, and Elliott Robertson evidenced an interest in my work beyond the call of friendship. My other best friend, Sarah Shrum, made me laugh at myself when needed. My father, Chuck, my brother, Drew, and my grandmother, Ann Green, remain encouraging despite academia transforming me into an irreligious leftist. My grandmother, Margret Hodges, and my uncle, Ronald Hall, died during the writing of this thesis and are greatly missed.

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## Introduction: The Case for Southern Noir

Over the past five years the many connections between films noirs and romans noirs with southern narratives have become more apparent. The 2010 anthology *The Best American Noir of the Century* included short stories by southern writers James Lee Burke and William Gay as well as a novella by Tom Franklin. Barry Hannah discusses in a 2006 article for *Oxford American: The Southern Magazine of Good Writing* the pleasures of teaching noir fiction and how he includes two classic examples of southern literature, Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) and Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973), in his course on noir novels alongside canonical noir texts by Dashiell Hammett, Patricia Highsmith, Chester Himes, Jim Thompson, and Charles Willeford, all writers born around the margins of the south (50-53). Hannah notes that he and Larry Brown "shared the same publisher in France, Gallimard, in a line called *Série Noire* [sic]" (51). The imprint *Série noire* specializes in noir fiction and also translates other southern writers like Harry Crews, Chris Offutt, and James Sallis. The 2010 film *Winter's Bone*, set in the poor white, methamphetamine-manufacturing, underworld of the Missouri Ozarks, became a critical darling and won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. The film adopts Daniel Woodrell's eighth novel from 2006 which garnered comparisons to Mark Twain, Faulkner, and Charles Portis. Woodrell sets his crime novels either in his home country of the Ozarks or in a fictional Louisiana bayou city, and he dubs his style "country noir" in the subtitle to his fifth novel, *Give Us a Kiss* (1996).

Woodrell's subtitle conjoins the two seemingly antithetical words in a telling fashion and works similar to how I see southern noir operating. The word noir conjures images of cheap films about detectives, criminals, and luckless men scurrying across a city at night with expressionistic shadows and light play, a foreboding sense of doom, and deadly seductive femmes fatales nipping at their heels. The understanding of noir as a symptom of urban modernity inextricably linked to cities and cinema stands in stark contrast to the traditional understanding of the south as rural, retrograde, and a repository for all the antiquated, "coercive forms of human society" in labor and social practices (Greeson 3). However, this study takes the curious, and at first glance perhaps frivolous, position that certain works of twentieth century southern literature and film can best be understood as a part of the popular form of noir. Southern noir becomes an alternate way to conceptualize the darkness of much of southern literature and film. On the other hand, southern noir promises to better explain the origins of noir and its racialized, chiaroscuro style as springing for the colonial experiences of the plantation economy. Southern noir provides an opportunity for the productive meeting of scholarship from both southern and noir studies as well as the beginnings of a reevaluation of two of the most distinctive narrative productions of twentieth century America: southern literature and film with noir.

Two principal yet opposing objections to this critical scheme come to mind. Jacques Derrida critiques the erecting of genres (or presumably subgenres), for "as soon as genre announces itself...one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity" by violating generic integrity (57). On the other hand, noir seems to be a vague and amorphous concept with no easy definitions other than Justice Stewart's test for

pornography. Indeed James Naremore argues that the work of Raymond Durgant, one of the earliest critics of noir, “not only collapses distinctions between high art and Hollywood, but also obliterates every other historical or generic boundary. Ultimately, noir drifts like a fog across the whole of western culture, threatening to dissolve any trace of identity and difference” (31). These two disagreeable poles of rigid and nonexistent identities established, the study can now position itself as a moderate effort struggling to achieve a hybrid concept of southern noir that can be useful but not restrictive.

Despite this rhetorical moderation, I remain leery of the potential in using the terms southern or southernness which might imply “the South and its history are ‘facts’ and ‘entities’ that remain intact in and impervious to literary representation” as Michael Kreyling, a scholar of both southern literature and Ross MacDonald’s noir detective fiction, explains (xi). The term “southern noir” should not be interpreted as describing the collision of some immutable sense of southern identity with the forms of noir. I avoid capitalization of the nouns and adjectives south, southern, gothic, and noir so as not to suggest monolithic concepts with clear and exclusive definitions. As befits the conflicted, ambiguous, and shadowy nature of many of the standard works of these traditions, their precise boundaries remain hard to delineate. The term “southern noir” provides a way to document the connections between depictions of the south and the (inter)national context of noir in a more efficacious way than the clichéd terminology southern gothic, as well as a way to understand the continued proliferation of associations between southern narratives and noir. Positing the existence of southern noir does not entail maintaining some distinct southern identity on the basis of noir tropes or that noir should be understood in exclusively southern terms.

The introduction proceeds in three parts. The first explores the concept of southern gothic and its current critical disfavor. The second sketches a definition of the idea of noir and how southern noir offers an alternative to the potential exceptionalist pitfalls of southern gothic. The third surveys recent trends in noir scholarship and previews how later chapters will deploy these to better understand a commonly studied novel and a neglected film and collection of short fiction.

## 1. Out of the Past; or, The Southern Gothic

Ellen Glasgow first used the term southern gothic in a 1935 essay to condemn William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell for their combination of realism with gothic tropes to produce a literature that was “irresponsible, crude, childishly morbid, and akin to fairy tales...a betrayal of both the realist tradition and the traditional Gothic” (Palmer 120-21). Leslie Fiedler characterized the cumulative effort of white southern writers in the wake of Faulkner and Caldwell to grant the south “the symbolic values attributed in the earliest years of the gothic to Italy. Against a background of miasmatic swamps and sweating black skins, the Faulknerian syndrome of disease, death, defeat, mutation, idiocy, and lust continues to evoke in the stories of these writers a shudder once compelled only by the supernatural” (*Love and Death* 475). For Glasgow and Fiedler white southern writers exploit and/or sensationalize the gothic, negative images of the south in the American popular mind to use for horror fiction, and for Glasgow such sensational moves undermine the potential of realist fiction for reform.

Molly Boyd’s conception of gothicism in the south opens up the canon a bit to allow black southern writers like Harriet Jacobs, Charles W. Chesnutt, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Alice Walker to claim a place in what Fiedler specifically described a form practiced by white southerners. Boyd sees southern gothic as a fictional mode employed by “modernist writers of the Southern Renaissance, characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility” playing off of southern myths (311). In contrast to this definition, Boyd views the formula for British gothic fiction as established by Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* where “a delicate female sensibility is

subjected to the onslaught of elemental forces of good and evil within a plot designed for suspense in which sanity and chastity are constantly threatened” (312). This formula also poses “the expectation of the supernatural,” even if it must be the “explained supernatural” of Ann Radcliffe who popularized the form almost thirty years after Walpole (Sage 146-48).

Clear aesthetic and narrative parallels exist between the form of southern writing Fiedler and Boyd describe and the British gothic tradition of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both deploy lurid sensationalism, both dwell on the potential ruin or decay of a culture, both take place in exotic and alien settings, both explore grotesque bodies and abnormal mental states, both forms have significant uses of black humor and pastiche, and both aim at provoking or revolting the reader into some sense of horror or terror. Yet for all of these parallels, the term “gothic” remains inadequate to describe the forms of southern writing Boyd and Fiedler dwell on for three reasons and undesirable for a couple of related reasons. On a most superficial level, the British gothic almost always incorporates the supernatural or the apparent supernatural as a vital part of its effects. Southern gothic, so-called, rarely suggests the supernatural or the apparently supernatural, and such reference rarely moves past the level of figurative or metaphoric description, i.e. Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* as a “man-horse-demon” with a “faint sulphur-reek” or the stranger in *The Violent Bear It Away* looking “as if he had refreshed himself on blood” (Faulkner 4; O’Connor 472).

The second reason gothic seems an inadequate term for the forms of southern writing under discussion is that southern gothic does not always deal with the onslaught of forces against a delicate female sensibility. That is not to argue that females never

suffer in a southern gothic or that gender is not a central consideration, but that the traditional gothic role of persecuted maiden inadequately describes the female characters of this study: Temple Drake, Julie Marsden, Leslie Crosbie, and Maybelle Houseman. The third reason southern gothic appears inadequate in relation to British gothic is that British gothic primarily dislocated the anxieties of gender and political unrest of contemporary Britain onto southern, Catholic Europe. Fiedler's description remains aware of the irony of white southerners themselves using the spectacle of their south as an object to inspire horror in national print culture. Fred Hobson takes note of the irony as well, remarking that "the 1920s assumptions about southern religion, race, violence, and general benightedness remained in force for at least the next half-century, the difference being that after the 1920s it was chiefly southern writers, not northern ones, who reinforced and popularized the image" (125).

Southern gothic can be seen an undesirable category for literary studies because it reinforces a mindset determined to ferret out alleged southern distinctiveness, whether salutatory or malign, from the rest of the nation. This obsession with distinguishing the south from the nation helps construct "the South's oppositional image—its gothic excesses and social transgressions [that have] served as the nation's safety valve: as the repository for everything the nation is *not*, the South purges contrary impulses. More perceived idea than social reality, the imaginary South functions as the nation's 'dark' other" (Goddu 76). Jennifer Rae Greeson summarized her notion of "our [the nation's] South" as "essential to conceptualizing 'the United States' as a new national form" (3). This construction of a south exceptional from America in its gothicism, benightedness, and savagery has received much criticism. Teresa Goddu argues against the limiting and

“imaginary” category of southern gothic that imitates British gothic’s anxiety displacements and “for an opposing, *American* gothic tradition that refuses to bury race prematurely in the South” (76). Goddu refers more, though not exclusively, to nineteenth century practices of American gothic, but her comments also take into account the use of southern gothic tropes in twentieth century portrays of the south.

The grotesque provides one of the key features of the south’s gothic image, and a new generation of critics have resurrected Glasgow’s complains about the ineffective politics of gothic tropes including grotesqueries. Mab Segrest in *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* articulates the most common criticism of southern gothic by observing “that the grotesque characters who populate southern literature only marginalize the already marginal” (qtd. in Yaeger 24). Susan Donaldson might speak for a couple of generations of southern literary critics bored with “considering the stereotypes and the clichés associated with Southern Gothic and the whole host of myths defining the image of ‘the benighted South,’ as George Tindall aptly calls it,” when she documents Eudora Welty’s aversion to the term (Donaldson “Spectacle”). The ossification of southern gothic and grotesque tropes into stereotypes has made them a rare subject of consideration by scholars.

Despite these negative and stereotypical implications of southern gothic and grotesqueries in much literary criticism, critics like Donaldson, Patricia Yaeger, and Leigh Anne Duck have recovered constructive critical uses for the clichéd terms southern gothic and grotesque. Donaldson mobilizes scholarship on the gothic and gender to examine some of Faulkner’s and Welty’s short stories and conclude that both writers in different but connected ways represent “regional anxiety about rapidly changing gender

roles in the first half of the twentieth century” through the macabre spectacles of the stories’ female characters. Among Yaeger’s manifesto-like call for a southern studies paradigm shift is a nineteen-point list of new categories with which to consider southern literature. Point sixteen posits that “the grotesque is not just another trope designed to confirm our belief in the South as ‘the Sahara of the Bozart’ but a technique for positioning texts at the edges of southern disorder, and that this disorder is worth studying because it has become an American habit of disorder as well” (13). Yaeger elucidates ways the grotesque can be performed by southern writers for radical ends and to symbolize “the ways in which conservative white southern populations deal with change,” to create bodily reproductions of “official terrorism,” to envision the horror of whiteness or of being white, or to “take on the stripe of segregation” and divide bodies into halves (27-31). Duck elucidates Yaeger’s reading of segregation onto grotesque, southern bodies by positing that the specters of southern segregation and impoverishment encouraged “representations of the imagined temporal divide between the region and the larger nation” (8). Her reading of Faulkner contends that the gothic modernism of his work suggests “not a simply backward culture but one in which individuals damage themselves and others by avowing an absolute split in time and refusing to engage in more nuanced investigation of the past and present” (159).

Yaeger and Duck explicitly bring to the foreground the south’s relationship with the rest of the nation while not eliding “the distinctness, even where not absolute, of southern practices” (Duck 2). I, however, want to revise this understanding of southern gothic and consider sensational representations of the south from the late 1920s on, not as a regional imitation or variant of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century forms of

supernatural fiction, but as a species of noir. This revision does not seek to reject the admirable work of scholars like Donaldson, Yaeger, and Duck to make the category of southern gothic relevant. Instead, I seek to expand on their work and offer a way to consider the grotesque, the abnormal, the violent, and the alienated in southern fiction within a context that avoids using those facets of southern fiction as an argument for regional distinctiveness or disavowing their connection to the national experience.

## 2. Somewhere in the Night; or, Attempting to Define Noir and Southern Noir

Noir is most commonly used in the term “film noir,” which can variously signify a style, a series, a genre, a form, or a cycle of American films from the nineteen forties and fifties. Those historical boundaries do not however incorporate significant American and European predecessors to the concept from the thirties and miss the international proliferation of aspects of noir style, themes, and plots in hundreds of films after the supposed end of noir in the late fifties. The term originated with French critics viewing American films after the end of World War II and coining the term film noir to account for what they saw as an increase in the visual and thematic darkness of these films. These themes include “claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism,” and films noir often express them through “antitraditional cinematography and *mise-en-scene*...distortions and disruptions created in the lighting and camerawork” that emphasize chiaroscuro lighting and shadows in off-center, canted compositions (Place & Peterson 65 & 69). Many critics, beginning with Eric Lott, have read “film noir’s relentless cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks” as “constantly though obliquely invok[ing] the racial dimension of this figural play of light against dark” (543). Noir’s stylistic and thematic focuses on darkening characters takes on a racial tint that underscores the centrality of race to the American and southern imaginations.

When discussing the concept of noir this study expands Naremore’s increasingly influential position in *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* that film noir and hence noir singly is an idea more than a rigid generic or quasi-generic definition. Naremore cites J. L. Austin, Derrida, George Lakoff, and Ludwig Wittgenstein against “the

Aristotelian notion that categories are made up of items with common properties” and argues for an understanding “that *film noir* functions rather like big words such as *romantic* or *classic*” so that there remains no “‘right’ definition—only a series of more or less interesting uses” that can mobilize “specific themes” (5-6). The idea of noir has applications for several genres in different narrative media and historical periods.

Christopher Breu locates the origins of the noir aesthetic back in various cultural forms of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century including “stories of social banditry,” “sensationalist city mysteries and urban guidebooks,” “gothic true-crime narrative[s],” “racial melodramas,” and “the popular literature of (intracontinental) empire” (27-37).

Breu’s formulation allows an examination of noir as it manifests itself in American forms that engage the construction of both black and white masculinity in cultural narratives, issues with particular relevance to southern literature. Southern literature generally and Breu’s genealogy of noir share at least two common ancestors in the racial melodramas of writers like Thomas Dixon and earlier frontier novels featuring banditry and outlawry like William Gilmore Simms’s *Richard Hurdis; or, the Avenger of Blood. A Tale of Alabama*.

An even more decisive connection between the negativity of noir and the violent and alienated fictions of some southern modernists also exists. This study is not the first to recognize affinities between a southern literature and noir. An article in an online noir fan magazine published in 2003 notes the series of linkages in the “Hardboiled Thirties” between the emergences of hardboiled detective and noir fiction, the revival of naturalism, the creation of hardboiled proletarian novels by writers like John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck, and the marketing of Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell as southern

gothic writers (Robison). To understand the connection Robison asserts but does not have the space to really explore or justify requires first to understand the connections between modernism and noir.

Naremore looks at the French context from which the idea of noir first emerged. He finds certain tendencies “noirlike in the established tradition of modern art” and notes the affinities between high modernism and film noir, “characterized by urban landscapes, subjective narration, nonlinear plots, hard-boiled poetry, and misogynistic eroticism” as well as a sense that both are “ambivalent about modernity and progress” (41-45). A major touch point for Naremore’s argument is Andreas Huyssen’s account of “the gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior...in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century” providing the impetus for understanding the “paranoid view of mass culture and the masses, [and] the modernist aesthetic itself” as looking “more and more like reaction formation” (Huyssen 53 and 62). Rabinowitz simplifies Huyssen’s argument down to modernism “staging a tough-guy fight against femme-fatale mass culture” (Rabinowitz 6). Naremore’s argument should not entail simplifying high modernism as causing noir, but Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland have argued that the consolidation of noir tropes in the thirties provided one response to the perceived “exhaustion” of high modernist experimentation (2-4).

Both French critics and the caprice of the publishing market affected the groupings of modernist southern texts with texts identified as noir. Naremore documents how French thinkers elaborated “several of the most important themes of existential philosophy...through readings of Dashiell Hammett, Chandler, and James M. Cain, who were often bracketed with Wright, Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Faulkner” (23).

The existentialism of many French critics influenced their championing of noir and modernist writers like Hammett, Wright, and Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams used the connection to postulate “a common link” among southern writers like Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and himself with French existentialism (42). On the other end of respectability, David Earle’s study on the packaging and marketing of modernists texts in paperback form explains how writers marketed as “‘backwoods’ pulp fiction” included noir novelists like Jim Thompson as well as canonical works of southern literature like O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and many Faulkner novels (197).

The resulting stew from these associations may appear excessive with a plethora of hard to define terms for literary styles including modernism, naturalism, proletarian writing, and existentialism. The point is not to demonstrate southern fiction’s multiple possible relations with other literary forms, but to show that an association of southern literature and film with the idea of noir does not have to mire itself down in a different form of southern exceptionalism. When the violence, alienation, and grotesque abnormalities of southern fiction stand with the comparable features in noir, then southern renaissance fiction begins to look less like a national aberration and more like a regional response to cultural shifts in mid-twentieth century America. Furthermore, Rabinowitz characterizes “the formula for noir” as encompassing “guilt, knowledge, desire, deceit, vengeance, a past weighing heavily on the present, and a lone man,” and in her study of Richard Wright’s 1953 novel *The Outsider* she suggests that this noir formula “provides a frame for understanding African-American experience” (90). Southern noir offers a shared framework that can permit joint considerations of some works from three often separated areas of southern narratives: modernist texts of the

southern renaissance, sensational southern film, and the African-American revolt in southern letters.

To some extent this study's sharp preference for considering southern noir in lieu of southern gothic erects a false dilemma. Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton wrote the first book-length study of film noir and the only one contemporaneous with the emergence of the idea of noir; they consider emblematic qualities of noir like the "oneiric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel" (qtd. in Naremore 19). Naremore remains unsatisfied with his translation of the French word *insolite* as bizarre and maintains the original has connotations with the gothic and Freud's uncanny (283). Carlos Reyes uses this fact to conclude "that the generic affinities between noir and Gothic" suggest gothic as "an occluded literary 'mother' which destabilizes the usual gender identifications of film noir" (76-77). Indeed, many critics have latched onto the potential for both the terms gothic and noir to signal the destabilization and dissolution of identity categories and boundaries especially of race and gender. On one hand gothic pleasure is identified as a perverse "pleasure of terror [in] its destabilization of the illusion of coherent identities" while critics of noir posit that "behind this free-floating anxiety of noir is a primal anxiety over borders and boundaries that manifests itself in specific fears and phobias of race, sex, maternity and national origin" (Noble 165; Oliver and Trigo xiv). These results could lead to the conclusion that both terms signify with sufficient vagueness to be manipulated for whatever critical agenda is at hand. To justify this binary, I appeal again to the position that noir describes certain violent, alienated, and abnormal characteristics of southern fiction better than the category of southern gothic.

Noir lacks the clichéd image of degradation in the southern context that gothic has, and it opens the way for easier national and international connections.

### 3. The Devil Thumbs a Ride; or, What Noir Studies Offers Southern Studies

This study examines the noir aesthetics and connections of works by two canonical southern writers, William Faulkner and Richard Wright, as well as the early example of film noir, *The Letter* (1940), directed by William Wyler. Many critics have variously tackled Faulkner's depictions of race and gender in *Sanctuary* as well as the novel's connections to the forms of noir, but the first chapter seeks to combine these considerations. *Sanctuary* came out in 1931, two months before Dashiell Hammett's penultimate novel *The Glass Key*, and the pulp stylistics of Hammett and other *Black Mask* writers of hardboiled, noir fiction influenced Faulkner's attempt to write a bestseller. The early thirties were an early point in noir's development before subsequent novelists like James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler codified the American roman noir in the late thirties. This codification provided a major factor in the emergence of film noir in the early forties. Faulkner's novel serves a major touchstone in the development of noir because of how *Sanctuary*, in typical Faulknerian fashion, toys with and fractures the emerging noir narrative and archetypes. *Sanctuary* has an obsessive sense of verbal blackness with constant references to shadows, darkness, etc., and the novel use of this aesthetic anticipates films noirs' racializations of their characters. The novel's doubling of its ostensible detective and its ostensible gangster-villain explores the associations of white hardboiled masculinity with black masculinity, homosexuality, and misogyny. After showing Horace Benbow and Popeye as failed hardboiled characters, the novel depicts the traumas Temple Drake undergoes as part of a process that renders her a hardboiled femme fatale by the end of the novel in contrast to readings of the novel that focus on Temple's ruin, abasement, and "deplorable" perjury.

The middle chapter provides a transition from the considerations of racially inflected noir in Faulkner and Wright. *The Letter* (1940) was the second collaboration between director William Wyler and leading lady Bette Davis. The film is a melodrama shot in a noir style with Davis playing an adulterous femme fatale undergoing blackmail after killing her lover. Calling it a southern noir might seem odd given that *The Letter* adapts a W. Somerset Maugham short story of Singapore and the plantations of British Malaya. The film draws heavily however from Wyler's and Davis' prior collaboration, *Jezebel* (1938), which also presented Davis as a morally and racially tainted aristocrat but in antebellum New Orleans and on a Louisiana plantation. *The Letter* recapitulates *Jezebel*'s use of racial blackness with a more overt noir visual style and applies it to the British colonial project in Malaya. Unlike her plantation mistress in *Jezebel*, Davis's character in *The Letter* is marked by her encounters with Chinese workers and entrepreneurs instead of African-American slaves. While both films keep an association of blackness with racial taint, Davis in *The Letter* absorbs a different set of stereotypical qualities from her time in the plantation tropics. *The Letter*'s appropriation of southern racial codes for a global, colonial setting provides an early example of a global imaginary for the plantation south in American film. The film also exists as part of an alternative genealogy for film noir running through a film adaptation of *Sanctuary*, *Jezebel*, and *The Letter* itself. These films provide a direct link among the plantation, southern racial codes, and the emergence of film noir.

The last chapter considers what happens when Richard Wright, a native southerner, tackles the northern or European urban environments typically associated with noir settings in three pieces from his neglected, later story collection *Eight Men*.

Paul Gilroy has claimed that *Eight Men* provides the most complete version of Wright's views on black and white masculinity, and Wright's noir devices are essential for Wright's portrayal of masculinity in these three stories. The first, "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," recast a black workingman's experience in Washington, D.C. as noir narrative, marked by shadow imagery and alienation. Wright's story demonstrates the potential femme fatale status of white women for black men and undermines the southern rape complex. The second, "Man of All Work" continues the trend of enmeshing a black male protagonist in a confusing, dangerous white space. The protagonist cross-dresses and must confront associations whites place on black maids that result in the story's noir situation of presumed adultery, shooting, and hush money. The third, "Man, God Ain't like That," continues the second story's concern with the way noir narratives allow white observers to misread and misconstrue the actions of blacks. Whereas *The Letter* offered a colonial noir appropriating southern conventions, "Man, God Ain't like That" offers a southern writer constructing a postcolonial noir marked by parody and subversion. Wright's three stories collectively show how using noir narratives featuring black protagonists draws attention to the racial devices and appropriations that characterize noirs featuring whites.

Over the past fifteen years scholarship on noir from Megan Abbott, Breu, Fay and Nieland, Lott, Naremore, Oliver and Trigo, Rabinowitz, Jans Wager, and others has incorporated developments in whiteness and masculinity studies as well as considerations of noir's relations to modernism and global culture to enliven the interrogation of noir texts. These strategies differ somewhat from approaches taken to consider race and gender as paramount in southern literature or the global perspective often assumed in the

new southern studies. An application of these noir studies tactics allows approaches to southern fiction through different perspectives. This project shows both what is noir about southern literature in regards to the blackening of white characters and the alienated experience of black characters in the shadowy world of white supremacy, but it also shows what is southern about noir through the influence of Temple Drake on the fates of future femmes fatales and the model of a southern plantation film dictating an early film noir. Southern noir, bound up in considerations of race, gender, colonialism, and modernity, can both explain and expand conceptions of southern and noir fiction and film in national and international contexts

## Chapter I: Faulkner Noir:

### Verbal/Visual Blackness, Hardboiled Homosexuality, and the Femme Fatale in *Sanctuary*

#### 1. *Sanctuary* as Noir

*Sanctuary* occupies an intriguing cross-point between the critical positioning of Faulkner in the canon of literary high modernism and a school of lowbrow, hardboiled noir writing that was emerging contemporaneous with the novel's 1931 publication. Benjamin Fisher suggests the persuasive possibility that mystery writer F.I. Anderson influenced Faulkner's femmes fatales and disillusioned romantics (*Frederick Irving Anderson* 7, 9). Walter Wenska demonstrates the indebtedness of many elements of *Sanctuary* to a cycle of four short stories by Dashiell Hammett starring the nameless hardboiled detective, the Continental Op. The pulp magazine *Black Mask* originally published these stories, and Knopf combined the stories to create the 1929 novel *The Dain Curse* (47-48). Wenska argues for "Faulkner's indebtedness...to the lords of popular culture—Dashiell Hammett, Max Brand, and Raoul Whitfield" as a rebuke to critics bent on rehabilitating *Sanctuary* as modernist experimentation in response to Faulkner's declaration that the novel "is a cheap idea, because it was deliberately conceived to make money" (Wenska 35; Faulkner 321-22). Wenska singles out Noel Polk for overemphasizing the novel's debt to T. S. Eliot, Sigmund Freud, and James Frazier (35). In fairness to Polk the description on the back cover of the corrected text of *Sanctuary* he edited for Vintage lists hardboiled detective fiction as well as Eliot, Freud,

and mythology as influences on the novel. Subsequent to Wenska's article Polk has written on the influence of crime fiction in Faulkner's work and has even argued that *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) represents a more advanced utilization of detective story themes than *Sanctuary* (24). Polk's claim about *Absalom, Absalom!* revisits the assertions of André Malraux's 1933 preface to the French translation of *Sanctuary* that identifies both the novel's "detective story atmosphere...without detectives" and its "sordid gangsters who are sometimes cowardly and weak" (92). Malraux concludes that "*Sanctuary* is the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story" (94). Malraux anticipates the proliferation of arguments in the last twenty years and in three languages by critics like Andrew Wilson, Giliane Morel, Richard Gray, Scott Yarbrough, Maggie Gordon, Christophe Gelly, Markus Koch, and Daniel Barth who have all related *Sanctuary* to detective story and noir forms and archetypes.

Malraux's descriptive conjoining of lowbrow stories of detectives and gangsters with a venerated literary form (Greek tragedy) anticipates my first major contention about *Sanctuary*. Critics like Wenska and Gordon often treat the confluence of *Sanctuary* with noir as a surprising, unexpected, or "peculiar comparison" for a modernist of elite reputation like Faulkner (Gordon 53). I submit that a conjoining of modernist and noir themes should not be surprising and can shape an appreciation of *Sanctuary*. Several significant examples of noir scholarship over the last ten years contextualize noir as a phenomenon in the modernist tradition. As discussed in the introduction, James Naremore demonstrates the pervasive affinities between high modernism and film noir with both "characterized by urban landscapes, subjective narration, nonlinear plots, hard-boiled poetry, and misogynistic eroticism" as well as a sense that both are "ambivalent

about modernity and progress” (41-45). Naremore confines himself at this point to film noir, but his comments apply equally to romans noirs he discusses by writers like Hammett, Graham Greene, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler.

Positioning *Sanctuary* as a roman noir might seem premature given that in 1931 many of the novels and films most associated with that title had yet to be produced. If scholars conceive of film noir as a historically bound cycle, then they normally date its contours at around 1940-1959. Except for Hammett, most writers, including Cain and Chandler, whose novels and stories provided the basis for the films noirs of the forties, would not produce romans noirs until after 1931; Greene and Cornell Woolrich did write novels prior to 1931, but these novels were more “literary” efforts. Yet, the work of Lee Horsley demonstrates that the themes of noir do not have to be rigidly confined to the decades of the thirties, forties, and fifties or to the medias of visually dark films and the hardboiled source material they adapt. Horsley expands on Naremore’s observations and opens her study by asserting that literary noir provides “one of the most durable popular expressions of the kind of modernist pessimism epitomised in *The Waste Land*” (1). She cites Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) as direct forebears to which the works of noir writers like Hammett, Greene, and William Lindsay Gresham allude. Horsley’s first analysis takes Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) as a prototype text of literary noir “with its ironic presentation of the perceptions of guilty and vulnerable characters, its non-linear structure and inconclusive ending,” and she concludes that Conrad’s novel of espionage and terrorism reveals:

what has broken through an apparently secure social structure is the criminality, cruelty and brutality which in the noir vision are always there.

They are not just the “dark secret” of respectable society but an inescapable part of it, only thinly disguised by civilised pretence. The dispersal of guilt, the instability of roles, and the difficulties of grasping the events taking place all mean that there can be no “simple solution.” Even if there is a gesture in the direction of a happy ending, the group reformed is damaged and cannot return to prior innocence. It is in the nature of noir that guilt never disappears, and any resolution will be coloured by the “cynical, existentially bitter” attitude that is generally taken to be one of the hallmarks of noir. (2, 12)

Horsley’s definition stresses disenchantment in the face of the hidden yet prevailing social norms of guilt and cruelty. Such a definition rejects conceiving of noir as a mode exclusive to popular writing and film or urban settings and maintains that “like the visual style of *film noir*, the hard-boiled style is only one means of expressing the noir vision” (Horsley 7).

This noir vision of pervasive futility and despair haunts *Sanctuary*. Horace Benbow faces brutal disillusionment after Temple Drake’s perjury and Lee Goodwin’s conviction, and he cries as sister Narcissa Benbow Sartoris drives him home. Horace, his disagreements with Narcissa and his earlier verbosity forgotten, appears broken and reduced to near-silence as he repeats three variants of “It was nice of her” (292). Popeye, in a classic noir trope, escapes hanging for the murders he committed, but he resigns himself to a wrongful conviction and death sentence for the murder of small-town Alabama deputy being “hung on you [Popeye] by a small-time j.p.!” (314). Popeye’s erroneous execution anticipates drifter Frank Chambers’s escaping trial for killing his

lover's husband then being condemned for his lover's accidental death in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). Leslie Fiedler and Wenska contend that Faulkner borrowed this motif of wrongful yet "deserved" execution from Hammett's Continental Op story "The Golden Horseshoe," published in a 1924 issue of *Black Mask*, where the Op frames a killer for a murder he did not commit in order to maintain "justice" for the murder the killer did commit ("Pop Goes" 86; Wenska 43-44). Executing murderers for the wrong murder often provided a way for noir narratives to skirt the censorious requirements of the Hays Production Code, but in practice these ironic reversals deflated any sense of justice by depicting the workings of the legal system as arbitrary. The noir sense of fatalist resignation dominates Horace's failure, Lee's wrongful rape and immolation by the Jefferson mob, and Popeye's legal lynching. This resignation extends beyond the failures of the legal system to the last lines of the novel as Temple and Judge Drake flee from the dark summer of Mississippi to the Jardin du Luxembourg in autumnal Paris where images of gray and imprisonment predominate ("dead tranquil queens in stained marble mused"); the novel's final words have the father and daughter duo observing the onset of "the season of rain and death" (316-17).

In his case study of the emergence of noir and hardboiled short fiction in the early twenties issues of *Black Mask* Christopher Breu posits the overarching negativity of these stories as a key feature of noir. Breu compares this negativity to Theodor Adorno's readings of "the resolutely negative modernism" of Arnold Schoenberg and Samuel Beckett and posits that both noir and the autonomous modernist text serve "as a negation of the present economic and social order and, in their very refusal of any positive resolution or affirmative meaning, as an index of a utopian order to come" (43). Breu

further qualifies a distinction where “the negativity of the noir narrative inheres more in the kinds of fantasy staged by the form and the deformation of various generic conventions that this produces rather than in the resolutely abstract and formal negativity of modernism” (43). Following Breu’s position, Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* occupies an intriguing intersection point where the similar albeit non-equivalent negative energies of modernism and noir circulate.

The novel offers scathing depictions of lynching and its legal form of capital punishment, the pedestalization of “pure” white womanhood, endemic governmental corruption, Prohibition, etc., but also sees corruptions extending even to the more obvious victims of those wrongs: Temple, Popeye, Lee, Ruby, and her baby. This broad indictment recalls Adorno’s observation that when “committed literature” turns its attentions to atrocities it tends to blur “the distinction between executioners and victims...which of course is generally not quite so uncomfortable for the executioners” (189). Faulkner’s novel, an explicitly commercial work aimed at a popular audience and subject to this blurring tendency of committed literature, appears as the antithesis of Adorno’s vision for the autonomous, modernist work. However, I will demonstrate below that *Sanctuary* participates in Breu’s schema of noir by “deform[ing] the generic contours of the crime or gangster narrative, opening it up to the possibility of a range of more resolutely critical meanings” (43). *Sanctuary* actually goes further than noir’s deformation of crime narratives by deforming and playfully fracturing the conventions of noir itself as they were developing in the late twenties and early thirties. *Sanctuary*’s resolute refusal of the rules of the popular forms and the resolute negativity Horace meets at the end of the narrative make the novel more akin to Adorno’s autonomous modernist

text than initially apparent. Horace's feeble and ineffectual attempts to right the wrongs of the narrative result in a noir epiphany that an early Faulkner scholar describes as "the discovery not of evil but of the shoddy foundations of his vision of a moral and rational universe, supported and sustained by the institutions of the church, the state, and the law" (Vickery 105).

Beyond Horace's and the novel's noir epiphany, *Sanctuary* engages with the more commonly associated plot structure of the noir form. Nicholas Christopher renders a model of film noir where:

*It is night, always. The hero enters a labyrinth on a quest. He is alone and off-balance...A woman invariably joins him at a critical juncture, when he is most vulnerable. In his eyes she may appear to be wreathed in light, beatific—a Beatrice...Or duplicitous—a Circe...Often she is a hybrid of the two, whose eventual betrayal...is as ambiguous as her feelings about him...His antagonists are figures of authority, legal [and/]or criminal, that loom out of his reach...On rare occasion—and here the woman may play the role of Ariadne in the myth of Theseus, leading him out as well as in—he reemerges into the light with infernal (but often unusable) tools to apply in the life he left behind. But scarred as well, and embittered, with no desire to return to the labyrinth, even were he equipped to do so. (8)*

Christopher's model deploys Greek mythology specifically to account for three features of noir: the protagonist, the women he encounters, and the darkened setting. The labyrinth Christopher has in mind is the modern American city, and in *Sanctuary*

Memphis as in much of Faulkner's fiction can serve as "the heart of corruption, the amalgamated Sodom and Gomorrah of the mid-South, the very symbol and substance of the evils of modernity" (Williamson 429). Williamson's point that Memphis epitomizes modernity's evils deserves special emphasis. Positing Memphis as the sole heart of corruption in the ironically titled *Sanctuary* is problematic given that the novel offers little sanctuary from rape and other violence anywhere, and certainly no relief is to be found in the city's nominal antitheses: the abandoned rural plantation or the small town of Jefferson. Nonetheless Temple's imprisonment in Miss Reba's Memphis brothel and Popeye's and Temple's initial view of the gray city with its "smoke-grimed frame houses" that are "set a little back in grassless plots, with now and then a forlorn and hardy tree of some shabby species—gaunt lop-branched magnolias, a stunted elm or a locust in grayish, cadaverous bloom" do suggest a bleak, decaying urban modernity (142).

Reading Memphis as the noir labyrinth of *Sanctuary* poses intriguing implications for diagramming the plot according to Christopher's model. Horace as the detective, of course, tries to locate Temple as a witness for Lee's murder trial. His inquiries eventually lead him to purchase word of her whereabouts in Reba's brothel from state senator Clarence Snopes, and he visits there to hear Temple's account of her rape. Temple's story disturbs Horace deeply, so much so that after leaving Reba's "he did not even return to his hotel. He went to the station. He could get a train at midnight" (221). Horace's understated flight finds him back in Jefferson being made ill by converging visions of Temple, his stepdaughter Little Belle, and himself. In this sense Horace fits the mold of the noir protagonist undone by his failed quest into the labyrinthine city, and

further devastated as the knowledge he gains there and the later intrusion of the Memphis lawyer follow him back to the small town, domestic spaces of Jefferson.

Yet, if the genders in Christopher's description are reversed, then his summary could just as well apply to Temple as a noir protagonist. Like Horace she makes a journey into Memphis, and she stays there entrapped and lost for far longer than he (around a month). Temple finds herself under the control of a force beyond herself: the disciplinary regimes of the brothel. She finds herself enmeshed in a triangular relationship with two *hommes fatals*, Popeye and Red, leading to murder. A few days later she next appears on the witness stand in Jefferson at the behest of either her father the judge, Popeye's Memphis lawyer, or both. In the ambiguous end of the novel Temple appears in Paris, free from the physical danger represented by Popeye and at least temporarily free from the scandal. On the other hand, Temple's father has seemingly trapped her in another labyrinthine structure, the Jardin du Luxembourg, and she appears scarred by the infernal knowledge she gained in her ordeal at the Frenchman Place and the Memphis brothel.

Instead of Horace or Temple, one could even put Popeye forward as the noir protagonist in this model. Descriptions of Popeye's "vicious depthless quality of stamped tin" or his eyes as "two knobs of soft black rubber" suggest associations with modernization and mechanization, as does his discomfort with nature and his identity as a Memphis bootlegger (4). Such associations with urbanity conflict with Christopher's model of the noir protagonist as a man who plunges into the labyrinth of the city. Yet *Sanctuary's* final chapter changes this perspective by presenting a developmental profile of Popeye's parentage and early childhood. Popeye comes from Pensacola, Florida,

which although a port town only had a population in his birth year of 17, 747 according to the 1900 census, about a sixteenth the size of New Orleans and only three times the size of Oxford. Chapter 31 allows a view of Popeye as a noir protagonist from a smaller town, with his fate determined by environment and the consequences of hereditary syphilis; he moves “from Mobile and then New Orleans and then Memphis” seeking occupations for his violent proficiencies (309). Intriguingly enough this profile only gives us an overview of Popeye’s parentage and his first five years; the narrative elides everything from a five-year old Popeye being “sent to a home for incorrigible children” for cutting up a kitten to his emergence as a fully formed bootlegging gangster (309). The deformed, psychotic child as a man now possesses all of the trappings of hardboiled masculinity: smoking, dark suits, quick violence, and laconic, slang-laden speech patterns. As with most noir protagonists, a woman, or a violent desire to control a woman, occasions his eventual downfall since he refuses to alibi himself for killing an Alabama policeman because he was killing Temple’s lover and his surrogate Red the same night. He meets his ridiculous fate with resignation and an exasperated repetition of “for Christ’s sake.”

*Sanctuary* positions all three of the main characters in the emerging plot structure of noir in the best tradition of how Faulknerian narrative “merges characters and plots, repeats stories with subversive differences, dislocates chronology to question causality, and refuses to supply customary endings” (Phillips 104). The result is a playful fracturing of the emerging noir narrative. The novel also entertains various other noir tropes, and for the rest of this chapter I will discuss *Sanctuary*’s complicated interactions with visual blackness, hardboiled masculinity, and the character of the femme fatale.

These three facets of noir intertwine with the novel's noir disillusionment as well as its fracturing of the noir plotline. These visual and gendered aspects of noir predate *Sanctuary* in the popular culture of the late twenties, but Faulkner wrote the novel before they became codified in the more rigid plot structures of Cain's and Chandler's novels later in the decade and the emergence of films noirs of the forties and fifties. The way *Sanctuary* complicates these tropes before they become consolidated makes it a rich text for understanding the development of noir in America as well as demonstrating that acknowledging a popular culture influence on Faulkner helps increase the richness of his narrative patterns and contributes to a more complex understanding of his modernism.

## 2. *Sanctuary*'s Verbal/Visual Blackness

*Sanctuary* is a black novel in the most literal of senses. The word black or derivatives of it occur throughout the text at least 87 times, dark or derivatives 68 times, and shadow or derivatives 43 times. Clearly not every usage of these words is significant, and the narrative attaches many of these words to Popeye. Nonetheless the effect of this verbal shadow-play casts a noir effect over the acknowledged cinematic quality of *Sanctuary*'s prose; Peter Lurie describes how "representational strategies in *Sanctuary*...draw attention to their resemblance to a modern, technical, and increasingly visual mass culture" (8). An early description of Horace comes as Ruby "saw him, in faint silhouette against the sky, the lesser darkness: a thin man in shapeless clothes; a head of thinning and ill-kempt hair; and quite drunk" (16). The fragmentary syntax of the sentence is ambiguous, but it suggests that Horace's figure makes the night sky appear to Ruby as "the lesser darkness" and provides a prose description of what would become classic noir iconography.

During the night of Temple's terrorization at the Old Frenchman Place shadows become a frequent motif. The novel notes the tin lamp lighting Ruby's kitchen and Temple sees the baby that can "be distinguished only by a series of pale shadows" (62). As Temple bends to inspect the baby "her shadow loomed high upon the wall, her coat shapeless, her hat tilted monstrously above a monstrous escaping of hair" (62-63). A few pages later she flees from Tommy as he brings her dinner: "Between blinks Tommy saw Temple in the path, her body slender and motionless for a moment as though she was waiting for some laggard part to catch up. Then she was gone like a shadow around the corner of the house" (66-67). The descriptions of Temple's shadow looming high on the

wall conjure an expressionistic visual out of a horror movie, while recalling the dark and disheveled figure of Horace that Ruby observed a few days prior. The image of Temple as a fleeing shadow, albeit a shadow with particular attention paid to details of her body, recurs throughout the novel from her first appearance, “her long legs blonde with running, in speeding silhouette against the lighted windows of the Coop...vanishing into the shadow beside the library wall” (28).

Critics have often maligned the 1933 film of *The Story of Temple Drake* and its insufficiencies as a *Sanctuary* adaptation; Richard Gray declares it “watered down to the point that...it...bore only the most passing, feeble relationship to *Sanctuary*” (“They Worship” 261). Yet one of the elements the film unquestionably gets right is its visual reproduction of the novel’s verbal shadow-play. Karl Struss, the film’s cinematographer, had collaborated with famed horror directors F. W. Murnau and Rouben Mamoulian, and he later worked on the film noir *Journey into Fear* (1943) co-directed by Orson Welles. Deborah Barker describes the work of Struss for the film

in creating deep blacks for night shots, as in the accident scene with Temple and Toddy [Gowan Stevens]. Struss was also willing to use total darkness for dramatic effect, as in the scene when Ruby puts out the only source of light in the room and we, like Temple, hear rather than see Trigger [Popeye] come into the room. When Trigger attacks Temple in the corncrib, the scene again fades to black, and we hear her scream. (164)

Such use of shadow and darkness to conceal and highlight filmic action becomes identified as one of the most recognizable features of later films noirs. Even though noir as a film cycle is not thought to begin until around 1940, the periodic use of what Marc

Vernet terms “‘expressionist’ lighting” dates back in American film to around 1915 and such “‘noir’ lighting also owes its perpetuation to the gothic film, whose ambience and décor (an old house or mansion without electricity) allows effects of darkness to be played upon” (9-10). Vernet’s article lists many thirties films that visually or plot-wise anticipate film noir in the next decade (though they seem to lack the forties and fifties films’ consistently bleak tone). *The Story of Temple Drake* is not mentioned, but as the quote above demonstrates it easily could be seen along with some of the other films Vernet lists as an influential work of proto film noir.

Several film noir critics, including Paul Schrader, Janey Place, and Lowell Peterson, read visual style as the defining characteristic of film noir, creating “a visually unstable environment in which no character has a firm moral base from which he can confidently operate....Moral values, like identities that pass in and out of shadow, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn” (Place and Peterson 69). Thus the visual darkness at different points enveloping Horace and Temple in the novel or Temple in the film can connote shifting moral ambiguities. This explanation of the film’s expressionistic lighting and the novel’s evoking of such lighting, however, does not seem satisfactory. It is not clear which actions Horace or Temple perform at the above mentioned junctures that warrant the term “moral ambiguity,” and such a reading runs the risk of becoming reductive and simplistic. Furthermore, Alain Silver jokingly posits “that it is formalist mumbo-jumbo to ‘detect’ alienation lurking beyond the frame line in a vista of the dark, wet asphalt of a city street” (3). A recent trend in noir scholarship helps answer the potential oversimplification of reading noir solely in visual

terms. Eric Lott has argued the visual and implicit moral blackness of noir is infused with

racial tropes...literalized and dissipated; or rather, since both racial and moral senses here are metaphorical, it shows us how elusive yet coherent is the metaphorical character of racial definition. Such slippages indicate, then, the ready use-value and real centrality of racial tropes despite their emanation from the margins of white texts and Caucasian lives. (544-45)

This implicit infusion of racial tropes in film noir visuals “represents blackness [both] as extreme and threatening otherness internalized by whites and as desirable difference externally” (Wager, *Dames in* 31). The blackening of a character’s appearance can either connote corruption configured in racial terms or suggest an appealing visual intermediacy and ambiguity. Lott’s and Jans Wager’s theorization of how noir visual style is tinged with a racial cast allows the verbal shadow-play of *Sanctuary* in regards to a drunken Horace and a sexualized Temple to be both ambiguous and pleasurable while suggesting moral and racial blackness along with the danger of the Old Frenchman Place. This racialization of shadow-effects becomes even more pronounced when the narrative applies it to Popeye, whose “blackness,” as John Duvall notes, “is queerly positioned between figurativeness (he’s really white) and literalness (other characters identify him as black)” (Duvall 41). This conflation of a hardboiled white male with blackness leads into my analysis of the different types of hardboiled masculinities found in *Sanctuary*.

### 3. Hardboiled and Homosexual Elements of *Sanctuary* as a Popular Narrative

The racialization of shadows in *Sanctuary* becomes most pronounced in regards to the white Popeye, whom many readers understandably mistake for a black man on the first read-through (Duvall 38-39). The novel associates Popeye with darkness from the start, his eyes “of soft black rubber,” his face concealed by cigarette smoke, “his tight black suit,” his skin’s “dead, dark pallor,” and Horace’s association of Popeye with “that black stuff that ran out of Bovary’s mouth” (4-7). Tommy later clarifies that Popeye is “the skeeriest durn *white* man I ever see...I be dog if he ain’t skeered of his own shadow” (19-20). Yet even as Tommy clarifies for the reader that Popeye is “*white*” (albeit with ethnic inflections), he plays on the racial myth of the bulging-eyed, superstitious, cowardly black man, as do the descriptions of Popeye’s eyes as rubber and the punning nature of Popeye’s name. As Sondra Guttman suggests, the character of Popeye conjures up an even more racist myth, one that leads to the lynching of Lee: “the rape of a rich, white woman by a lower-class, ‘black’ man...reinscribes the gender and racial ideologies that supported the plantation economy...through paradoxical, racially doubled, and ambivalent images of masculinity” (15-16).

Breu’s novel reading of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* emphasizes his “relation to contemporaneous fantasies about white masculinity” instead of “to interwar constructions of black or miscegenated masculinity” (21). While Breu reads Christmas as embodying fantasies about hardboiled white masculinity, he also sees *Light in August* making explicit “the racial borrowing that informs the construction of hard-boiled masculinity and that structures the negativity of the noir narrative” from “the ideological figure of the black rapist” (136). This complicated borrowing process has the hardboiled

white male connected to “its shadowy double in the figure of the transgressive and primitivized black male” rapist on the basis of their shared opposition to middle-class, Victorian versions of white masculinity, an opposition which includes both the divergent figures of the hardboiled detective and the hardboiled gangster (Breu 36). Both Barker and Guttman have offered insightful readings of the economic dimensions underpinning *Sanctuary*’s construction of Popeye as a “black” rapist, but what does not seem to have been mentioned is the construction’s interdependence with Popeye’s projection of hardboiled white masculinity.

*Sanctuary* suggests the interrelation of the black male rapist and the hardboiled white male, but what does the blackening of the hardboiled male represent? Duvall contends that for Faulkner’s “white characters’ ‘blackness’ almost always signals sexual dissonance” or the mapping of “primitivism onto nonheteronormative white masculinity” (63). The rest of this section considers the affinities between Popeye’s hardboiled characterization and Horace’s similar fantasy structure to the hardboiled male with James Polchin’s and Duvall’s arguments for the queerness of Popeye’s and Horace’s identification with Temple’s penetrated body, so that “[l]ike Horace, Popeye uses Temple Drake to project his own self into a sexual relationship with a man” (Polchin 156). Polchin contextualizes *Sanctuary*’s popularity as a product of how the novel capitalizes on the contemporary vogue for psychological explanations of homosexuality and presents Popeye and Horace as two representative types of the male homosexual. This explanation provides an alternative to the dominant explanation of *Sanctuary*’s popularity inhering in its repurposing of hardboiled detective and noir tropes.

These two explanations for *Sanctuary*'s popular appeal can reinforce one another, however. Faulkner's blackening of the hardboiled white male Popeye into a rapist longing to be penetrated himself posits the hardboiled male as a homosexual. Misogyny provides the common linkage for the hardboiled white male and the male homosexual. Wenska notes Popeye's similarity to his contemporary, the hardboiled gangster Rico Bandello from W.R. Burnett's bestselling novel *Little Caesar* (1929); like Popeye, Rico has no use for women but possesses a dandyish concern for his hair and dress (Wenska 50). Noting the "distinctively antifeminist, even misogynistic animus" of hardboiled narratives has become almost a critical cliché, while "the figure of the homosexual misogynist" has frequently provided a dismissive explanation for queer male desire (Cawelti 279; Woods 339). The novel presents Popeye and Horace as misogynists; Popeye makes frequent disparaging references to Ruby and Temple as whores, and Horace's more nuanced, philosophical misogyny dwells on "that feminine reserve of unflagging suspicion of all peoples' actions which seems at first to be mere affinity for evil but which is in reality practical wisdom" (201).

The hardboiled, homosexualized Popeye's persecution, rape, and subsequent imprisonment of Temple have dual significance. Popeye fears the association of Temple with "education and independence, two important ingredients for the 1920s New Woman" while envying the sexual freedom (to be penetrated) that this New Woman status implies (Barker 150). Before her rape and subsequent imprisonment in Reba's brothel Temple is continuously running, riding in cars, and remaining in motion in ways suggestive of the freedom and mobility associated with the image of the twenties new

woman. Gray observes that the novel's depiction of Temple running "suggests the quality of elusiveness, even evasiveness, that surrounds her" ("*Sanctuary*" 85). Her initial encounters with Popeye and the Old Frenchman Place suggest conflicts with him over her independent elusiveness, as when she contemptuously asks Tommy, "does that black man [Popeye] think he can tell me what to do?" (42). Shortly thereafter Temple sees "Popeye watching her" and she continues to run "without stopping" (43). Popeye's first verbal response to Temple after a simple "no" is to instruct Gowan Stevens to assert control and "make your whore lay off of me, Jack" (49).

Popeye rapes Temple after she curtails her mobility by hiding in the crib of the barn. The last image the narrative provides before cutting away from Temple's rape shows her lying on the boards of the barn "tossing and thrashing" (102). Ruby then sees Popeye driving away with Temple in his car, but Temple appears frozen and static within the motion of the car: "The face did not turn, the eyes did not wake; to the woman beside the road it was like a small, dead-colored mask drawn past her on a string and then away" (104). After Popeye's capture and rape of Temple, he "sets Temple up in Miss Reba's house of ill-repute in order to control, protect, and above all watch her" and establishes the brothel as "a labyrinth of locked doors, prying eyes, and inquisitive ears...based on the principal of constant, ubiquitous, nonreciprocal surveillance" (Watson 53-54). Jay Watson compares Popeye's use of the brothel to Michel Foucault's understanding of Jeremy Bentham's concept of the Panopticon with its "hierarchized, continuous, and functional surveillance" as a key transformation of disciplinary practices in the eighteenth century that "by its very principle...leaves no zone of shade" (Foucault 176-77).

If Popeye is a hardboiled homosexual, then the lengths he goes to in order to maintain surveillance and discipline of Temple and have her participate in a heterosexual coupling appear odd. Reba describes how after Popeye beat Temple he would “shut her up and wouldn’t let her leave the house. Having the front of my house watched like it was a.....” (256). Reba later clarifies ““I been running a house for twenty years, but this is the first time I ever had anything like this going on in it. If you want to turn a stud in to your girl...go somewhere else to do it. I ain’t going to have my house turned into no French joint”” (258). Reba and Minnie discover that Popeye would watch Temple’s and Red’s copulation, “hanging over the bed, moaning and slobbering like a—” with “a kind of whinnying sound” (231, 258). Duvall points out that Popeye’s whinnying is a “nonsignifying noise” and the narrative gives no reason to presume that Popeye identifies with Red instead of Temple in the act. (42). If anything the novel’s positioning of Popeye as abnormal and deviant suggests he identifies with the penetrated Temple. Reba’s conversation with her female guests never directly states Popeye’s homosexuality, but lines like “It’s against nature....There’s a funny business somewhere” and “Maybe he was cheering for them....The lousy son of a bitch” suggest a disgust for Popeye that goes beyond a distaste for voyeurism (255-56, 259). Given the variety of voyeurism and snooping about that occurs in the brothel during the novel from a variety of characters including Reba, Minnie, Virgil, Fonzo, and state senator Clarence Snopes, it would be odd for Reba to be so shocked by the concept of voyeurism. However, the misogynistic and homosexual overtones of keeping a female imprisoned solely to be copulated with in order that the captor can feel vicariously penetrated would be enough to outrage Reba and her guests.

Polchin theorizes that Popeye's captivity of Temple demonstrates "a further appropriation of social power by Popeye to achieve a certain status—namely heterosexuality" (153). Keeping Temple as his girl does allow Popeye temporary status as a heterosexual sugar daddy, but it also offers a secret outlet for his desires and a place to keep these desires under control. If Temple is the object of Popeye's sexual identification, then casting his disciplinary gaze on her also keeps his own desire to be penetrated secret and confined to Temple's room in the brothel. The novel presents Popeye as a hardboiled homosexual. His desire to restrain and violate Temple is a product of the misogyny attributed to homosexuality and hardboiled masculinity, as well as a means of using a pliable and controllable proxy for his own desires.

Popeye may seem to be the novel's only hardboiled male protagonist, but he certainly is not the novel's only male homosexual. Horace makes a curious double for Popeye. John Irwin notes that "the opening scene in the novel also evokes Popeye as Horace's distorted mirror image," and Polchin reads this twinning as sign of their sexual interest in and kinship with one another (Irwin 222, Polchin 151-52). Horace's status as a failed husband and professional situates him in a discourse of masculinity that emphasizes his failings as evidence of homosexual longings. Furthermore, Horace presents another failed archetype as Carolyn Porter explains: like "Hammett, whose work he admired, Faulkner portrayed a sordid and violent underworld, but instead of sending in a Continental Op or a Sam Spade to combat the forces of evil, Faulkner sent Horace Benbow, the glassblowing, impotent, and incestuous aesthete he had imported from *Flags in the Dust*" (60). For Porter the reason Horace fails is that "his idealized devotion to justice renders him incapable of facing up to what Hammett's detectives always have to

recognize eventually—not only the deep and constitutive corruption of the world but also their complicity in it” (60). Although Porter references Hammett, what she wants from Horace is an admission similar to Phillip Marlowe’s famous “Me, I was part of the nastiness now” (Chandler 764).

While Horace is certainly not hardboiled, he attempts to suppress and disavow his desires bear a marked resemblance to how that process operates for the hardboiled detective. Megan Abbott observes that Marlowe as a hardboiled detective engages sexual otherness, including posing as a homosexual, in *The Big Sleep* (1939), as “a surreptitious process, offering anxiety and often pleasure—pleasure that is redoubled when followed by self-righteous or guilty expulsion of that otherness” (48). At the end of *The Big Sleep* Marlowe follows his famous admission about his role in the nastiness by associating death with the possibility of redemption: “Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn’t have to be. He could lie quiet in his canopied bed, with his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting....[I]n a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep” (Chandler 764). Marlowe’s recognizes his tainted complicity in concealing the murder of Rusty Regan, the son-in-law of his employer, the old man, and it strengthens Marlowe’s determination to keep the old man free of that guilty knowledge.

In another notable scene from *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe finds his employer’s younger, nymphomaniac daughter naked in his bed. He takes her home and returns to his apartment where “the imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets. I put my empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely” (Chandler 709). Popeye faces his desire to substitute himself for Temple’s penetrated

body by creating a disciplining space where he can reenact the fantasy repeatedly while keeping the fantasy concealed and controlled. Marlowe's response a few years later is to toy with the fantasy (he has flirted with the daughter), then expel the desire in moral indignation. Horace undergoes a similar process of surreptitious entertainment followed by revolted expulsion after retreating from Memphis in the wake of hearing Temple's narrative of her rape. Like Marlowe, Horace begins by fantasizing about the redemption and sterilization offered by death: "Better for her if she were dead tonight...For me, too. He thought of her, Popeye, the woman, the child, Goodwin, all put into a single chamber bare, lethal, immediate and profound....And I too....Removed, cauterised out of the old and tragic flank of the world" (221). Upon arriving back in Jefferson, Horace picks up a photograph in which "Little Belle's face dreamed with that quality of sweet chiaroscuro" (222). This image in the context of what he has learned about Temple's rape, makes Horace nauseous and he vomits as his thoughts merge himself, Belle, and Temple under the hand of Popeye with "the shucks set[ting] up a terrific uproar beneath her thighs" as "[s]he watche[s] something black and furious go roaring out of her pale body" (223).

Joseph Urgo makes a veiled argument that Horace is not vomiting in the lavatory but masturbating or desiring to, as he "has found Temple's story as erotic as it is criminal. He also has discovered a potentiality within himself which places him in collusion with a rapist" (442). The details in the text are scant, but I do not see very much to corroborate Urgo's interpretation that Horace may be masturbating to a mental image of Temple/Little Belle/himself raped that he finds erotic. The emphasis on Horace's stomach and his "plung[ing] forward...and lean[ing] upon his braced arms" suggests nauseated vomiting (223). Yet Urgo does seem to have zeroed in on the source of

Horace's nausea as recognition of his own erotic desire, and Duvall and Polchin expand on Urgo's point to suggest that Horace fantasizes about his own anal penetration (Duvall 43; Polchin 154). The passage's shift in pronouns from masculine to feminine as well as the "black tunnel" imagery implicates Horace's body in the penetration. Furthermore, their shared sensations of Temple and Horace suggest that Horace fantasizes about taking Temple's place rather than Popeye. Horace retreats to the bathroom when he realizes "what that sensation in his stomach meant" (223). The sensation comes from the "cup of coffee...for it lay in a hot ball on his stomach," which duplicates Temple's description of "that hot little ball inside you that screams" when her dread gets the better of her and she begins taunting Popeye to "just go on and get it over with" (221, 218). Horace, like Marlowe, finds pleasure in fantasizing about forbidden sex, then in expelling the possibility self-righteously, in Horace's case through vomit.

Popeye, like his creator, is "hard-bellied," but it is Horace who participates in a tradition of toying with sexual otherness and uncontrollable desires (322). The figures of Popeye and Horace Faulkner link the popular narratives of misogynistic hardboiled masculinity and pathological homosexuality. The addition of homosexual associations with blackness compounds the already mixed character of the hardboiled white male with his racial borrowings from white conceptions of black masculinity. Faulkner's blend of hardboiled and homosexual characteristics in the figures of his ostensible detective and gangster helps further fracture the noir narrative he presents in *Sanctuary*.

#### 4. Becoming the Femme Fatale; or, Hardboiling Temple Drake

Having examined the trajectories of the male noir protagonists of *Sanctuary*, I conclude by turning to the representation of their displaced desire: the femme fatale, Temple Drake. Temple has been identified as such by several critics including Richard Gray, Scott Yarbrough, and Susan Donaldson. Donaldson finds the effect of Temple's rape narrative on Horace to be "as powerful a preview as one could hope to find of the disordering impact of femmes fatales upon masculine authority in many of those dark films and thrillers of the 1940s and 1950" (8). Gray's and Yarbrough's conceptions of Temple as a femme fatale, although both intriguing and well thought-out, differ significantly from each other, and this split mirrors a larger split in noir scholarship in thinking about the femme fatale.

What Gray finds intriguing about Temple as a femme fatale is how she resembles lead female characters in noir films like *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Born to Kill* (1947) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949), where "a female protagonist enters the *noir* world" ("*Sanctuary*" 85). Gray sees Faulkner's intriguing twist on this "woman menaced" formula as the "curious" "doubling" that occurs between Popeye and his victim, both in their physical appearance and their elusiveness ("*Sanctuary*" 87). A description of Temple quoted above describes her face as a "dead-colored mask" suggesting a similar coloring to Popeye's "dark pallor" and the "queer, bloodless color" of his face (4-5, 104). Temple appears as "a small childish figure no longer quite a child," while small Popeye is "a man of under size" (4, 89). Gray is explicitly not trying to say that this twining of Popeye and Temple implies moral equivalence, but Gray does see her femme fatale status intertwined with her victimhood. Gray's approach bears strong resemblances to Jans

Wager's revision of the concept of the femme fatale. Wager acknowledges that traditional use of the term implies that what is fatal about the femme "refers, of course, to the male victim of her wiles" (*Dangerous Dames* 15). Wager instead emphasizes how the femme fatale's "resistance" to "patriarchal authority" will "almost always prove fatal to her[self] as well," thus making the femme fatale victim to her own transgressions (*Dangerous Dames* 15).

While both conceptions of the femme fatale under discussion view it as a partially empowering performance, the other, classic position focuses more on the trouble this figure provides for the males encountering the femme fatale. Yarbrough quotes part of a passage from Mary Anne Doane that emphasizes the femme fatale as the "*carrier*" who "overrepresents the body ...because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness. In a sense, she has power *despite herself*" (Doane 2). Doane's account captures well the novel's previously mentioned obsessive attention to Temple's elusive yet voyeuristically detailed body, in particular her legs as the symbol of her mobility. In Yarbrough's reading of *Sanctuary* Temple is not punished for being a femme fatale, she becomes a femme fatale because of her victimization. Her rape and imprisonment make her recognize the power of male desire for her body, and she begins to appropriate this sort of power as a survival strategy.

The Yarbrough/Doane conception of femme fatale status as a learned mastering of an involuntary attribute maps better onto *Sanctuary*'s depiction of Temple than the staged and tragic transgression of the Gray/Wager model. Temple does not begin *Sanctuary* as a femme fatale, she begins as a college girl "not yet quite a woman" thrust into a terrible situation (89). The traumas of her terrorization, rape, and imprisonment

result in her slow conditioning into a femme fatale, capable of using her body and her position as a privileged example of southern womanhood to strike back at one of the men responsible for her situation. The femme fatale provides the closest female equivalent to the hardboiled white male, and Temple's process of becoming hardboiled finds her assuming the "tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by [her] detached, laconic utterances and [her] instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions" (Breu 1).

An early example of this process comes when the frightened Temple attempts to sleep in the bedroom Ruby offers her and finds that "[o]n the wall hung a raincoat and a khaki-covered canteen" (69). The trenchcoat had become an accepted part of the hardboiled white male wardrobe before *Sanctuary's* composition; Louis Wolheim plays a trenchcoated, bootlegging gangster in the Howard Hughes-produced silent film *The Racket* (1928), and Ricardo Cortez and Robert Elliott sport trenchcoats when playing Sam Spade and his police lieutenant nemesis in the first film adaptation of Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1931). Temple's sight of the raincoat and the khaki canteen suggests the military origins of the trenchcoat, and her action of removing her dress, then putting the raincoat "on over her own coat" indicates her desire to insulate herself against the threatening sexual violence of the Old Frenchman Place (70). Temple latches on to this accoutrement of hardboiled masculinity and longs for the shell-like, prophylactic insulation against the world that Breu describes as the province of the hardboiled white male. Temple later explains to Horace her fantasy of having a chastity belt to protect herself and to impale Popeye, and "[t]hat was why I got the raincoat and put it on" (217). For Temple, the protection offered by the raincoat-cum-chastity belt is fleeting, as Van

takes “hold of the raincoat upon Temple’s breast and rip[s] it open” and Popeye appears to grope her through the torn garment (74). Nonetheless, Temple’s fantasy here is suggestive of the persona she eventually masters.

When Temple fantasizes and plots about escaping the brothel with Red, she grips a pistol several times. She leaves the pistol behind, but while leaving the brothel “she [thinks] of the pistol with acute regret, almost pausing, knowing that she would use it without any compunction whatever, with a kind of pleasure” (230). Temple fantasizes about assuming the phallic symbol of the gun and the role of a hardboiled male, free to carry the gun in public and to quickly and pleasurably resort to its use. Temple arrives at the Grotto without a weapon, however, and in Yarbrough’s words since she is “unarmed...she turns to the innate weapon of her body, the sexuality she has divorced from her true self by use of the masquerade” (60). The novel describes Temple’s attempt to seduce Red into killing Popeye, as she “grind[s] against him, dragging at his head, murmuring to him in parrotlike underworld epithet” (239). Yarbrough is correct that Temple uses her body and sexuality and that it fails, but Temple also deploys words that she has learned to parrot, the epithets of the underworld. Temple’s learning process here suggests the results of her enmeshment in the Memphis underworld, and it foreshadows her later, more effective deployment of words at Lee’s murder trial.

Temple’s testimony at the climax of the novel condemns Lee to death and represents Temple harnessing the power of the southern rape complex and her position as a southern woman to kill a man. Yarbrough describes Temple’s perjury “in line with her conformity to the femme fatale archetype,” and he posits that “she can and will exact revenge against that which has harmed her--the systematized patriarchy...that has so

spurned her. She uses her body strategically, this time relying on the ‘myth of sanctified womanhood’ in an entirely different fashion” (62). While Temple uses patriarchal assumptions to gain revenge for the crimes against her, it is worth remembering Urgo’s point that Lee was also going to rape Temple and is hardly an innocent victim (440). Temple’s courtroom testimony presents her as having mastering the performance of the femme fatale and knowing how to manipulate the male mob of Jefferson into taking revenge on at least one of the men who have wronged her.

Despite this moment representing the most powerful point for Temple in the novel, a tendency remains to take Horace’s and the rest of the courtroom audience’s impression of Temple at face value and see her as a shell-shocked victim, a “ruined, defenseless child” in the words of Eustace Graham, the District Attorney (288). Temple’s “detached and cringing” attitude that focuses on the back of the courtroom can as well suggest disinterest and boredom with the proceedings as shock. But Temple does not weep, faint, or use any of the excessive emotionalism expected of rape victims, and her disinclination to making a spectacle itself suggests a hardboiled lack of affect. Temple’s dress in the courtroom scene also does not suggest the tarnished, shocked virgin of the southern rape complex, but a lavishly dressed femme fatale. She wears a “black hat” with “a rhinestone ornament,” carries “a platinum bag” that her father later kicks to the side, wears her coat open “upon a shoulder knot of purple,” has “her mouth painted into a savage and perfect bow,” and her “long blonde legs” are visible (284). These details visualize Temple in the luxury and sensuousness attributed to the femme fatale, and the details, along with her identification of her home as Memphis, i.e. the brothel,

create a dissonant image of female sexuality against that of the stereotypical violated virgin.

Since Temple presents herself at Lee's trial as associated with a Memphis brothel, it appears strange that the Jefferson mob is still willing to rape and lynch to preserve her honor. One reason might be that the mob's fervor overlooks minor details such as the victim's lack of resemblance to the innocent, virtuous, and virginal girl expected by southern mythology. The more probable explanation is that Temple understands exactly the reasoning behind the southern rape complex, which a Kinston driver articulates as follows "[w]e got to protect our girls. Might need them ourselves" (298). Temple emphasizes her sexuality and desirability through her dress choice on the stand in order to excite both a desire for her and thus a desire for revenge among the on-lookers. The following dialogue amongst the traveling drummers emphasizes Temple's success in her project as a femme fatale:

"College girl. Good looker. Didn't you see her?"

"I saw her. She was some baby. Jeez. I wouldn't have used no cob"

(294).

Most femmes fatales find themselves punished and/or killed at the end of classic noirs, yet most noirs often end bleakly, with epiphanies about universal guilt and corruption. A paradox exists here, since the femme fatale often provides one of the prime figures of evil in the noir narrative universe, yet the Hays Production Code mandates that she must be punished because of its proviso against characters getting away with murder. The end of *Sanctuary* can fit this schema, since the epilogue presents Temple and her judge father in scenery dominated by images of grayness, imprisonment, and death. Yet

the final twist of *Sanctuary*'s fracturing of the noir narrative shows Temple having come away from the trauma of her rape and imprisonment changed but not destroyed.

Temple's final action after yawning in boredom is to take "out a compact and open...it upon a face in miniature sullen and discontented and sad. She closed the compact and from beneath her smart new hat seemed to follow with her eyes the waves of music" (317). The emphasis on Temple's sullen boredom suggests a detached attitude similar to the one she displayed in the courtroom and further marks Temple as having achieved her fantasy of hardboiled insulation against the male violence she has encountered. Temple as a character has been gazed at and fantasized about by a variety of male spectators throughout the novel, most dramatically by the male mob near the end. Her simple act of gazing at herself in her compact serves as emblem of Temple's necessary concern for appearance in order to exercise the power of her body as a femme fatale. Like Popeye's imprisonment of her in the brothel in order to cultivate the appearance of heterosexuality and keeps his desires controlled, Temple's self-directed gaze demonstrates the internalization of discipline necessary to perform the hardboiled role. This internalization is one element in the learned process of becoming a femme fatale that is Temple's response to the practices of violation and discipline to which she has been subjected, by Popeye and others, throughout this roman noir.

Temple as femme fatale does not arrive at the end of *Sanctuary* defeated or punished but with mastery of her body and her performance. She has successfully assumed the sort of hardboiled position that has failed her male counterparts, Popeye and Horace. This empowering and subversive end for Temple creates one of the most intriguing and historically important fractures in *Sanctuary*'s noir narrative. *Sanctuary*,

early on in the development of noir narratives, calls attention to the racialization of noir shadow-play and posits the hardboiled male as a homosexual. But Faulkner's depiction of the relative triumph of a femme fatale has the most impact on subsequent noir narratives. The way Temple survives *Sanctuary*'s narrative is not exactly copied in the film adaptation *The Story of Temple Drake*. However, like the original novel, the film does not kill Temple off to punish or purify her. Instead, the film gives Temple the agency to testify against Trigger and redeem herself. This dramatization obviously does not pose an overt challenge to the southern rape complex, but the film's narrative allows Temple to survive and redeem herself (with Stephen Benbow's coaching) and thus avoid the conventional outcomes for "ruined" rape victims: humiliation, shame, and death. This unorthodox move along with the relative explicitness of the film, caused an uproar that resulted in the Hays Production Code and insured that femmes fatales in future noir films would be punished or killed. Thus, Temple, by assuming the power to kill a man, the hardboiled detachment, and the control over her body that characterizes the femme fatale, indirectly determines the course of her successors in later noir narratives.

## Chapter II:

### The Global Plantation South and Early Film Noir in William Wyler's *The Letter*"

If the insufficient punishment of Temple Drake at the end of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) and its film adaptation *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933) gave the Hays Code incentive to dictate that the fates of subsequent femmes fatales would be more reliably punitive, then murderous plantation mistress Leslie Crosbie as played by Bette Davis in *The Letter* (1940) should be seen as one of the victims. Director William Wyler and screenwriter Howard Koch adapted *The Letter* from W. Somerset Maugham's short story (1924) cum play (1927) of the same name set in British Malaya during the early twentieth century. Maugham avowed the realism and ambiguity of Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov as his model for the short story form, so "The Letter" leaves Leslie in an equivocal state after being acquitted for the murder of her former lover (Maugham vi-xiv). Leslie, then, astonishes her lawyer, Howard Joyce, by briefly revealing the contortions of "fiendish passion" from her "no longer human" face before again repressing them as "your hand would smooth a crumpled paper" (215-16). The Hollywood conventions of the women's melodrama and the requirements of the Production Code forced Wyler and Koch in *The Letter* to use an ending where the wife of Leslie's lover murders Leslie for revenge, so that the murderess does not go unpunished. Years later Wyler referred to the censorship at work in the coda as "silly" (Kantor, Blacker, and Kramer 51).

Beyond this tenuous causal link between the bowdlerized film adaptations of two interwar literary works, Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Maugham's "The Letter" share intriguing plot similarities. Patriarchal readings of their plots both show a white male lawyer gradually uncovering the covert, racialized, sexual corruption of a white femme fatale in and around exotic cities with reputations for vice, Memphis and Singapore. The lawyers face a sense of disillusioned implication as their societies smooth over the femmes fatales' transgressions and accept them back into the community. Oceans separate the ruined plantation houses and urban brothels of the American south from the Chinese Quarter underworld and colonial rubber plantations of the Pacific Rim, but both locales participate in a global southern imaginary of plantation economies.

Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee position "[t]he fallen plantation...mythic repository for the shifting specters of our national wrongs" as a center of American cinema's construction of the southern imaginary (4). I posit that the 1940 film of *The Letter* as an early example of a global southern imaginary; the film links its portrayal of British Malaya to the tropes of cinematic portrayals of the American south. The portrayal of colonial plantation economies in both *The Letter* and the decadent version of the southern imaginary stresses pampered white aristocrats lording over a sensuous laboring class of racial others, whether black slaves or Chinese coolies. R. Bruce Brasell articulates a chronotype of "Humid Time" for southern film, and "Humid Time" can symbolically link the oppressive heat of tropical and subtropical weather to the stifling, repressive social climates engendered by plantocratic régimes from British Malaya to the American south (308-11). *The Letter* as a film production offers a global mix as a Jewish director from Alsace helms an American adaptation of an English writer's story set in

colonized Malaya that invokes the racial codes of the American south through noir visual stylization. This chapter divides its analysis up into three sections to explore this global southern noir film. First, I consider the colonial context of *The Letter* and its depiction of a plantation economy. Second, I examine the resonances of viewing *The Letter* within the cinematic southern imaginary in tandem with other Wyler and Davis southern plantation films. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how *The Letter*'s noir depiction of race and gender under colonialism provides an underacknowledged and integral example of early film noir that demonstrates the style's understudied links to plantation and colonial narratives.

1. “Too Bad Rubber Won’t Grow in a Civilized Climate”:

The Colonial Context of *The Letter*

The above quotation comes from a white bartender in a Singapore club during *The Letter* and underscores British Malaya’s role as the world’s leading supplier of natural rubber, a fact never far from the screen in the film. *The Letter* begins with credits superimposed over shots of a nocturnal plantation, rubber trees, exotic gardens, the full moon, dark clouds, etc., and then the camera shows the sign “L Rubber Co., Singapore, Plantation No. 1.” The film’s famous opening scene consists of two shots disguised as one long tracking shot over the initially peaceful plantation at night. The camera begins by tracking slowly down the trunk of a rubber tree, following the dripping progress of the milky latex being tapped from the tree. The shot continues to pan over other rubber trees and buckets full of latex before moving from the raw materials to the human labor force. The camera languidly pans past a series of ostensibly Chinese laborers (who speak Filipino) relaxing and making music in the night under their thatched huts. The focus of the camera movement shifts a third time, now to the locus of management, the plantation house.

A shot rings out from the big house, disturbing the peace. A white man in a dark jacket, Geoffrey Hammond, staggers out onto the porch, and Leslie Crosbie, a white woman dressed in a mix of both white and dark clothing, follows him out with her smoking revolver. The camera cuts to terrified reaction shots among the workers and some animals, then it returns and moves towards Geoff as he collapses down the stairs to the ground. Leslie coolly empties the rest of the revolver’s chambers into his corpse. A cloud bank momentarily blocks the moonlight and bathes Leslie and the corpse in

shadow. After a moment or so of silence Leslie orders “the Head Boy” (played by Japanese actor Tetsu Komai) to summon her husband, the manager of the plantation off supervising at the number four plantation site.

Soon Leslie gives her account of the shooting to her husband Robert, their lawyer Howard, and a district officer. Leslie recounts how their mutual friend Geoff came by for an unannounced evening visit, drunkenly propositioned her, and then attempted to rape her. All three men believe Leslie reacted admirably under the circumstances, but they take her to Singapore so she can be legally cleared in a trial. While the whites are preoccupied the Head Boy sneaks off into the shadows, and returns with the “ultimate comic-strip apotheosis” of a dragon lady (Anderegg 103). She is Geoff’s Eurasian wife (played by Danish-American actress Gail Sondergaard), and the Head Boy (presumably a relative) shows her the corpse laid out in shed under dying stripes of rubber. Mrs. Hammond shuts her eyes, and the camera cuts away before she cries.

Leslie awaits trial in a Singapore jail, but Howard feels optimistic that producing “evidence that Hammond was married to” a woman of mixed European and Asian heritage will be sufficient to acquit Leslie. Howard’s sycophantic and scheming Chinese law clerk Ong Chi Seng reveals that Mrs. Hammond possesses a letter from Leslie imploring Geoff to come visit her on the fatal night and casting doubt on both Leslie’s story and her status as an upstanding example of white womanhood. Ong evocatively (and perhaps deliberately given his depiction as scheming) intones to Howard that the letter offers the case “a new complexion.” Howard confronts Leslie about the letter, and she faints before admitting to writing it and imploring Howard to purchase it. Howard desires to spare his friend Robert, and Leslie and he develop a plausible story of an

innocuous but inconvenient letter she had forgotten to mention that should be bought as a precaution so as to not complicate Leslie's acquittal. Robert agrees to foot the bill unaware of the amount, and Howard and Leslie meet Mrs. Hammond and Ong in Chung Hi's opium-besotted Chinatown curio shop to pay off the blackmail.

Leslie is acquitted, but Robert discovers the almost complete drain of his savings, demands to see the letter, and is devastated. Leslie admits that she had been having an affair with Geoff for years and has killed him over her jealous hatred for his Eurasian wife. Robert tries to forgive her, but Leslie declares "[w]ith all my heart, I still love the man I killed!" Afterwards in the Production Code mandated coda she wanders out into the garden and is assassinated by Mrs. Hammond and the Head Boy. Immediately after Leslie's murder a native policeman detains the two killers for acting suspicious.

The major critical debate about *The Letter* concerns to what degree the film perpetuates racist, colonial stereotypes. The three individualized Chinese characters and the woman of mixed-ancestry all cooperate as a more or less cohesive whole. The Head Boy abandons his plantation job in order to begin assisting Mrs. Hammond, and Ching and Ong use Mrs. Hammond's possession of the letter for a profitable blackmail scheme that gives them both much on-screen amusement. The Chinese's endeavors succeed as Leslie and Joyce make the payoff, and Mrs. Hammond's desire for more personal revenge in Leslie's death also pays off albeit with Mrs. Hammond's arrest. Given this success and the narrative's focus on the white characters, the effective Chinese conspiracy against Leslie springs from specific white fears and anxieties about Chinese competition within the Malayan economy. Previous readings of the film tend to overlook this fact in order to debate the extent of the film's racism. Douglas Heil has argued that

the film twists Maugham's ambivalent, objective characters into a more melodramatic mode which exploits as a threat "the widow's menace" and thus justifies "Leslie's racism" (23). In contrast Phebe Shih Chao reads Wyler as drawing on his Jewish diasporic identity and replacing "visually and through subtle changes in the narrative" Maugham's account of the East's corrupting influence on whites with "a far more active questioning of the premises of colonialism" (295). Heil's extended comparison of *The Letter* to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) feels overblown, but the narrative of the film tends to presuppose audience sympathy with the tainted white women who murdered the white husband of the fearsome woman of mixed ancestry. On the other hand, Chao teases out many of the complexities of the film's portrayal of colonialism, and provides good reason to further unpack the film's portrait of the colonial economy.

The conflict between white and Chinese characters in *The Letter* is more than a straightforward colonial relationship. Two classes of Chinese have come to Malaya. One segment came to serve as an additional labor force for the plantation economy, and the other more bourgeois group came "as economic imperialists, to exploit the natural resources and native labor force, as the Europeans would do later" (Chao 306). This class includes the individualized Chinese characters in the film, especially the aspiring lawyer Ong and the business owner Chung. This entrepreneurial class of Chinese immigrants often competes with whites in the rubber plantation business itself. Robert does not discover that Howard and Leslie spent almost all of his savings to buy the letter until he plans to purchase a Sumatra plantation for himself from "a Malaccan Chinese in financial difficulty." Robert has previously been a plantation manager for the L Rubber Company, and now seeks to invest in the business model himself for the sake of his wife

and their future. Competition and blackmail from other Chinese have ruined him and testify to the narrative's fear of Chinese entrepreneurial activity.

Chinese commercial ventures predated European ones in rubber harvesting, but by 1920 "European capital had far outdistanced Chinese in the rubber industry" mostly due to "long-term low-cost finance and corporate organization" (Drabble 60). Chinese capital operated within preexisting familial, societal, and prior entrepreneurial nexuses and had less standardized means of oversight while modernized European capital came specifically to be invested in rubber (Drabble 57, 60). From these differences sprang perceptions that Howard voices in *The Letter* about the "careless and haphazard" nature of Chinese plantations and Robert's response that the failing Chinese planter is "very progressive; he's had a European manager." Despite these generalizations "the Chinese as rubber planters, company promoters, or speculators, came in for a large share of the prosperity that then prevailed over Malaya" as rubber exports continued to increase after World War I and into the twenties, excepting a depression in 1920-21 (Song 448). The prosperity inspired the backlash of a quota system for rubber production in 1922 that "discriminated against the native smallholder" concerns run by Malay and Chinese (Andaya and Andaya 215). The fear of shadowy, informal networks of Chinese capital competing against white capital organized in corporate plantations accounts for the mysterious and elusive quality of the alliances formed by Ong, Chung, the Head Boy, and Mrs. Hammond against Leslie. The film and the story never explicitly explain the origins and the relationships of this network, though one might infer that kinship ties account for at least part of this Chinese association. The film's and the story's emphasis on this conspiracy against Leslie may reflect fears of the growing sway of Chinese nationalism

over Singapore Chinese in the period because it threatened Western control over colonial toeholds within the potential area of influence of an active, united Chinese state (Turnbull 132).

The Chinese network triumphs over the whites in the film when Ong suborns Howard into violating his oath as attorney to suppress evidence in order to protect his clients' reputations and Leslie's life as she goes up for trial. This violation strikes at the heart of the justification that the British were establishing peace and a consistent administration of justice in Malaya to promote European and Chinese capitalist investment and benefit the entire area (Andaya and Andaya 207). The film's and the story's narrative reveals white fears of competition from the Chinese as well as doubts that the British's colonial mission succeeded in its ostensible aims. The film enhances this critique by zeroing in on aspects and taboos of British Malaya's plantation economy that relate it to plantation slavery in the American south.

2. “Out Here One Gets so Lazy; The Boys Take Such Good Care of Us”:

*The Letter* in the (Global) Southern Imaginary

William Wyler directed Bette Davis in a trilogy of films; all three adapt plays and cast Davis as an imperious and morally dubious aristocrat in a plantation economy.

Wyler and Davis split over their last collaboration *The Little Foxes* (1941), an adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s 1939 play. Against Wyler’s desire for a more sympathetic lead, Davis played Regina Hubbard Giddens as ruthless, icy matriarch scheming over cotton mill construction in the early twentieth century south. Wyler and Davis’s first collaboration, *Jezebel* (1938), also took place in the American south; New Orleans and the plantation, Halcyon, in a parish that “always has been above the fever line,” provide the setting for the film whose action occurs in 1852-53. The film adapts Owen Davis, Sr.’s 1933 play with Bette Davis as spoiled, rebellious southern belle Julie Marsden. Davis had long been interested in the role, and it provided a sort of compensation for her not getting the role of that other famous plantation mistress in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) (Anderegg 85).

Despite similarities between the heroines of *Jezebel* and *Gone with the Wind*, Jessica Adams describes Julie as “a kind of anti-Scarlett O’Hara” in a narrative where “the plantation owner eclipses the slave as the problematic element of plantation life” (179-80). Julie’s defiance of the rigid strictures of southern conduct and dress associates her with blackness “because she does not conform to notions of white womanhood” (Dyer 157). Adams reads Julie’s transgressions as marking her as an octoroon prostitute and evidencing a disturbingly close association with blackness. Barker’s and McKee’s association of *Jezebel* with the romantic period pieces of the thirties only accounts for

part of the film's operations; *Jezebel* also discusses the south in terms of savagery and decadence accountable in part to the close relation between the nominally white southern plantation mistress, Julie, and her slaves (7). The film's associations of Julie with slavery and blackness become most pronounced when she, dressed in white, joins a group of black children in singing "Let's Raise a Ruckus Tonight," and "the mass of darkness juxtaposed against Julie's pale skin and white skirt does not actually make her appear more white; instead, it emphasizes...the point that the belle is not really white—she is tainted by a 'black' heart" (Adams 181).

*The Letter* came out two years after *Jezebel*, and the dislocation of Wyler's and Davis's plantation narrative from Louisiana to Malaya brings to the fore certain racial themes to which *Jezebel* can only allude. Both films have similar settings that emphasize sweltering weather conditions in a way that speaks to Brasell's "Humid Time." The films transition between scenes set on plantations and in bustling, polyglot port cities with shady reputations for vice and racial mixing, New Orleans and Singapore. The films associate the heat of both climates with disease. *Jezebel* uses the 1853 yellow fever outbreak in New Orleans as a climax and assigns responsibility for the epidemic to the city fathers' antimodern reluctance to invest in sanitation and public health (Jeter 40). Julie's redemption of herself during the yellow fever epidemic enhances these associations of racial taint and fever given the probable African origins of the disease and its transmission to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade. *The Letter* associates Leslie's fervent and transgressive passion with a rhetoric of disease brought on by her stay in the colonial tropics. Leslie draws on the image in the extended confessional

speech she makes to Robert and Howard about her affair with and her premeditated murder of Geoff:

I was like a person who was sick with some loathsome disease and doesn't want to get well. Even my agony was a kind of joy. Then there came a time about a year ago....Then I heard about that - that *native* woman. Oh, I couldn't believe it, I wouldn't believe it. The last I saw her, I saw her walking in the village with those hideous bangles, that chalky painted face, those eyes like a cobra's eyes.

Leslie confesses to murdering Geoff out of racist-tinged jealousy for his Eurasian wife, whom the film depicts as an inscrutable, ruthless dragon-lady. By killing Geoff Leslie becomes the enforcer of the colonial taboo against miscegenation, which Geoff flaunts in an unforgivable public fashion by having married the film's fearsome dragon-lady product of miscegenation. Mrs. Hammond's Eurasian identity is an invention of the film; in the story Leslie kills Geoff for his having a Chinese mistress. Cha argues that the film's opening shot of the latex dripping out of the tapped rubber tree not only stresses the economic motives behind plantations but symbolizes the white man's semen that Geoff spills in his miscegenated marriage, and so this theme becomes a predominant concern of the movie's narrative (296). *Jezebel* can only allude to the intermixing and blending that are the frequent, unintended consequences of plantocratic society by depicting Julie in situations suggestive of classic octoroon imagery.

*The Letter's* Asian setting allows overt suggestions of miscegenation, but like *Jezebel* it also offers more oblique darkening of its female protagonist. Geoff's desire for and marriage to the mixed-ancestry Mrs. Hammond marks his own whiteness as suspect

in the eyes of the all-white Singapore jury bent on exonerating Leslie for his murder. After the murder Geoff's corpse is repeatedly enveloped by shadows cast by Leslie and the full moon. The Chinese workers drag his corpse off to the shack where strips of rubber dry, and this continues the film's visual association between colonial extraction and an oversexed masculinity. The blackening of Geoff's character via his forbidden marriage also makes his supposed assault on Leslie less surprising; Robert and the district officer often refer to him as an animal in their interview with Leslie after the shooting. However, Leslie's desire for the racially suspect Geoff renders her own whiteness dubious. Leslie upholds the colonial taboo against miscegenation and the "yellow fever" of Geoff's sexual desire for the product of miscegenation by murdering Geoff, but the fact that she still loves the tainted and dead Geoff renders her an ambiguous figure. She perhaps kills more out of a jealous (and still bigoted) competition with the other than out of a simple racist aversion to the other.

The film *Jezebel* and its red (black) dress darken the figure of the plantation mistress, and likewise the wardrobe choices in *The Letter* darken the figures of Leslie and Geoff. As Andergg observes, all of the British men wear the colonial uniform of white tropical clothes excepting Geoff's "dark jacket," and Leslie's costumes "usually have some dark tones to them; they stress Leslie's individuality while they serve to...hint at the soft contours of her body" (99). Leslie's time in the tropics as a plantation mistress being served by exploited laborers has rendered her sensual and made her whiteness contingent.

*Jezebel*, as an American film imagining a decadent south, can assign registers of darkness and blackness to the plantation mistress too long among her slaves fairly simply.

But a too close equivocation of the Louisiana plantation mistress and the Malay plantation mistress can be misleading. Granted, darkness has long been a trope assigned to European imperial projects and colonization efforts, but the associations and stereotypes of black American slaves and East Asian colonial subjects vary. Black slaves are assumed to be physical, sensual, superstitious, emotional, etc., while Asian colonial subjects are painted as cerebral, reserved, cunning, abstemious, etc. (Chao 302). Nonetheless, *The Letter* manages to have it both ways by depicting the “coolie” workforce of the rubber plantations as simple, docile, undifferentiated agricultural laborers who lounge about the frame in the opening shot of the film, and then scurry about after the sound of their mistress’s gunfire. On the other hand, *The Letter* depicts an already discussed network of manipulative, entrepreneurial Asian colonial subjects who live up to the vicious stereotypes and compete with white planters and professionals. This class includes the two entrepreneurial Chinese characters, Ong and Chung, as well as the revenge-oriented Mrs. Hammond and Head Boy.

*The Letter* visually and morally blackens Leslie through the course of the narrative, and she takes on some of the stereotypical attributions of blackness in the sensuality of her long affair with the dubious Geoff and the violent passion that erupts when she murders him. This affair with a practitioner of miscegenation put Leslie at a thin layer of sexual remove from engaging in race-mixing herself. However, the most remarkable trait of Leslie’s character comes from her control and concealment of these passions and sensualities. Maugham’s story emphasizes in the lines quoted in the first paragraph the transformation Leslie undergoes by reining in her inhuman excitement back to her normal dull placidity. Having the charismatic Davis play Leslie means that in

the film she can never appear that dull; she of course is always Bette Davis. As recourse, the film emphasizes the epistemological trouble Leslie provides for the men. Howard refers to Leslie's long concealment and remarks to Leslie on the strangeness of how "a man can live with a woman for ten years and not know the first thing about her."

I contend the stereotypical tainting Leslie undergoes from her time in British Malaya comes from her absorption of the caricatured Chinese traits of concealment and duplicity. Howard has to navigate both the incredible reserve of Leslie and the unctuous fawning that sometimes borders on outright mockery from his subordinate Ong. Leslie and Ong both present epistemological dilemmas in interpretation to Howard and to the film's critics, which accounts for various readings of Ong as either a racist stereotype or a figure of colonial resistance (Heil 21-22, Chao 306-08). Leslie and Ong make excellent doubles in their troubling of Howard, but the film more explicitly doubles Leslie with Mrs. Hammond. Both are in a love triangle with Geoff. Both solicit male accomplices, Howard and the Head Boy. Both act on their passions and murder, albeit in a methodical and premeditated way. These acts are motivated by a passion for revenge and performed coolly, but they do lead to their respective downfalls. Leslie opens the film with a murder and a prepared story of threatened rape but does not account for the incriminating letter. Mrs. Hammond ends the film with a murder despite having already succeeded in her blackmail scheme and in disgracing Leslie privately. After the murder she is immediately apprehended. Despite these miscalculations in their crimes of passion, both women maintain a sense of calm control that only occasionally fractures. Leslie's connections with Ong and Mrs. Hammond and her reserve demonstrate an assumption of

some of the more stereotypical assigned qualities of the Chinese, while also maintaining the associations with excessive passion and visual blackness that *Jezebel* cultivates.

### 3. “It Was so Terribly Cold-Blooded”: *The Letter* as an Early Film Noir

Critics normally position film noir as beginning in 1940 with an RKO B-film called *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Filming on *The Letter* wrapped a couple weeks after filming for *Stranger on the Third Floor*, and *The Letter* saw release almost three months after *Stranger on the Third Floor*. *The Letter* already manifests many typical aspects of noir, including a shadowy visual style, a femme fatale murdering her lover, a bleak and violent ending, and blackmail requiring the two main characters, Leslie and Howard, to venture into the Chinese section of Singapore. Many film noir reference works including *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*; *Film Noir: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Reference to Movies, Terms, and Persons*; *Dark City: The Film Noir*; and *Film Noir Guide: 745 Films of the Classic Era, 1940-1959* list *The Letter* as an early example of film noir, though other critics like prefer to emphasize *The Letter*'s status as a women's melodrama. Thomas Schatz sees Bette Davis as a “dominant figure” in the women's film representing “a fundamental ambivalence...in her capacity to personify victimization and to willfully destroy those who might victimize her. And in films like *The Letter* and *The Little Foxes*, Davis also anticipates the femme noire of war and post-war thrillers” (111). Blake Lucas sees the relationship between Leslie and her lawyer as “precursor” to “countless protagonists destroyed by women in latter classics of the noir cycle” (171). Michael Stephens argues for the aesthetic superiority of *The Letter*'s code-mandate ending's “existential fate [for] the characters,” and he anticipates Brasell's point about “Humid Time” by emphasizing “the mysterious, repressive ambiance of its tropical setting” (226).

One of the most relevant points about the noir of *The Letter* for this discussion is its dark visual style. *Jezebel* shares a similar obsession to *The Letter*'s darkening of its main characters, but lacks noir devices. Shadow-play becomes a constant effect in the later film. Repeatedly light cast on Leslie's face and figure is cross-cut by the shadows of Venetian blinds, ceiling fans, the leaves of ferns, fences, the bars of the Singapore prison, etc. These visual devices recall the criss-crossing shadows created by the barn slats and the brothel latticework in *The Story of Temple Drake*. Anderegg remarks that this "'bar' motif...points to where Leslie legally deserves to be" and to "the 'prison' formed by her life as a Malayan planter's wife" (97). Beyond the moral implications, these shadows also mark Leslie as a visually mixed figure, her face striped in both black and white by the patterns of light and shadow. The indeterminacy of Leslie's figure mirrors her absorption of the moral blackness and racially stereotypical qualities from her experience in the colonized tropics, yet this mixed quality also implicates Leslie and her desires within the practices of miscegenation that she seemingly reacts against with gunfire in the film's opening.

*The Letter* provides an early example of a film noir with many of the cycle's associated traits, but the film also demonstrates the importance of colonial themes and spaces to film noir from the outset. Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland summarize Julian Murphet's argument that "American noir's racial logic is partly what attracted French critics to this cycle of films....American racism and slavery find their analog in French colonial racism," making noir devices particularly appropriate for a colonial setting like British Malaya (Fay and Nieland 166). Stanley Orr demonstrates that "many prominent films noirs foreground the white adventurer against a dark canvas of racial otherness,"

which can occur in a colonial setting or explore more domestic racial otherness as when white noir protagonists cross “borders into Mexico or Chinatown” (Orr 89, Oliver and Trigio 1). James Naremore describes how “the Orient” or the Far East in the noir imagination is “associated...with enigmatic and criminal behavior,” but “was also depicted as a kind of aestheticized bordello, where one could experience all sorts of forbidden pleasures” (225). *The Letter* doubles down on the potential for racial otherness by occurring in an exotic, British imperial possession, then having its two main white protagonists venture into the even more exotic space of Singapore’s Chinese district. Leslie and Howard pay Mrs. Hammond in Chung’s Chinese curio shop, redolent with suggestive imagery of the opium den and the brothel. Furthermore, Mrs. Hammond drops the incriminating letter on the floor, and this action forces the white Leslie to kneel before her Eurasian rival in order to pick up the letter. The sense of Leslie’s moral and racial degradation in this scene highlights even further the immorality associated with such exotic spaces.

The classic image of film noir mires itself in alienation stemming from the experience of urban modernity, but the line running from *Sanctuary*, *The Story of Temple Drake*, *Jezebel*, and *The Letter* points towards an alternate genealogy for film noir. *The Story of Temple Drake* uses dark shadows in both its depictions of Memphis and the Old Frenchman Place, but it is in the dilapidated, ruined plantation of *The Story of Temple Drake* that Karl Struss’s cinematography achieves its most noir effects as candles and oil lamps cast huge shadows of the characters on the wall and Trigger (Popeye) creeps through the house and barn as figure dressed all in black, sometimes invisibly enveloped in the darkness but for the lit tip of his cigarette. Likewise despite the centrality of the

scene where Leslie and Howard visit the Chinese quarter of Singapore, the narrative is dominated by the similar big houses that frame the opening and closing of the film. Both the striking opening and closing scenes have Leslie walk out of these homes, bastions of white colonial authority, into shadowy gardens where patches of clouds often obscure the moonlight, casting an almost total darkness on the scene. Here, in the liminal space inside/outside the colonial plantocratic order, is where both Geoff and Leslie are murdered. These shadowy stylistics create a noir vision of the plantation as a darkened space perfect for “film noir’s relentless cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks” to “constantly though obliquely invoked the racial dimension of this figural play of light against dark” (Lott 543).

*The Letter* offers a direct causal link between the style of film noir and the colonial narratives like Maugham’s as well as a plantation film like *Jezebel*. *The Letter* makes explicit some of *Jezebel*’s themes of miscegenation and the viewing of whites in close contact with racial otherness as problematic. Noir often posits the corruption of institutions or of (white) human nature, which *The Letter* suggests can stem from the experience in a colonial, tropical environment. The noir style becomes a vehicle for visually representing the miscegenation that horrifies and fascinates Leslie about Mrs. Hammond and Geoff as well as the metaphoric miscegenation of Leslie’s character traits that terrify and fascinate Howard. The film as a global southern noir incorporates its noir visual style and plot motifs along with the context of the plantation economy and its associated racial fears from the southern imaginary.

### Chapter III: “But Why Talk to One Shadow about Another Queer Shadow?”:

#### Noir Parody and Appropriation in Richard Wright’s *Eight Men*

Locating the point at which the excesses of a noir style shade into the parodic, the hyperbolic, the burlesque, or the simply ridiculous proves difficult for critics of noir. James Naremore claims “we cannot say exactly where parodies of noir begin, and we cannot distinguish precisely between parody, pastiche, and ‘normal’ textuality” (201). Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland ask, “Given noir’s familiar detours, excesses, and exaggerated sexualities, is it even possible to make a noir with heightened stereotypes that can signify as something other than the genre’s familiar types? When does noir seriousness cross the threshold into farce or parody?” (173). This ambiguity of noir pastiche is a likely example of noir’s inheritance from the long tradition of ambiguous and under-recognized gothic parody for writers like Edgar Allan Poe (Lloyd Smith 51). I argue in this chapter that three stories in Richard Wright’s story collection *Eight Men* appropriate noir tropes to deflate and discredit narratives of black male criminality, narratives which noir’s emphasis on whiteness darkened and blackened by criminality can assist in upholding.

Wright’s parodic appropriations of aspects of noir style differ from Faulkner’s early fracturing of the noir narrative and Wyler’s application of noir plot tropes and stylistics to a plantation melodrama. Faulkner’s utilization of noir depends upon the contrasts between literally white noir protagonists being metaphorically blackened by

dark descriptions and associated with negative stereotypes about African Americans. Wyler's film noir also plays with the racialization offered by noir tropes but expands them to include contacts with negative stereotypes about Chinese and the sense of colonialism as an endeavor of darkness.

The uneasy coexistence of sensationalistic noir excesses along with a parodic tone in three of *Eight Men's* stories helps account for much of the critical discontent and uncertainty surrounding the collection. Word Publishing Co. issued *Eight Men* in January 1961, a couple of months after the writer's death. Contemporary reviews often combine *Eight Men* with muted obituary notices as if the alleged failures of the collection tarnished the memory of the writer, and the collection has attracted scant scholarly attention compared to Wright's more popular works *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy*. A favorable review appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, but Saunders Redding in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* characterizes four of *Eight Men's* stories as "bizarre" while "two are eccentric experiments in technique, and three are grotesque in subject matter" (Sullivan 348-49; Redding 345-46). The grotesque stories are "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," "Man of All Work," and "Man, God Ain't like That," and this study will engage with their noir elements.

The bizarre and grotesque matter Redding observes in *Eight Men* led to harsh reviews; for instance, the *Commonweal* declared the collection "embarrassing" and Wright "simply not a good writer, not even a competent one" (Gilman 352). Several months later Redding revisited Wright's legacy for *The New Leader*, arguing that his friend's "art suffered" as self-exile from the United States removed Wright from the materials that made his writings authentic and compelling, the experience of black

Americans, thus making the alleged shortcomings of Wright's prose style apparent and Wright's insights into racism dated due to changes in the American scene ("Home" 359). Redding represents a consensus from both reviewers and scholars on most of Wright's work after *Black Boy*. Paul Gilroy quotes Arnold Rampersad making similar remarks and teases out three variants of the position: 1) "Wright's work was corrupted by his dabbling in philosophical modes of thought [Existentialism, etc.] entirely alien" to his experiences; 2) Europe excessively exacerbated Wright's interest in Freudian psychoanalysis; 3) exile removed Wright "from the vital folk sources" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 155-56). Gilroy goes on to identify the problematic and patronizing assumptions inhering in this critical view of Wright's later work, and Gilroy, in both his study *The Black Atlantic* and his introduction to the latest edition of *Eight Men*, recognizes the relevance of Wright's later work for questions about modernism and gender in the black diaspora.

This chapter takes Gilroy's rebuttal of the truism that exile diminished Wright's work as a starting point to examine the three stories from the understudied *Eight Men*. The collection's stories exhibit a hodge-podge of various forms and tones originating from all three decades of Wright's writing career; this eclecticism leads many scholars to dismiss the possibility of a cohesive unity among them (Bradley xxiv). Edward Margolies groups the contents of *Eight Men* into the stories of the thirties ("The Man Who Saw the Flood," "The Man Who Was Almost a Man") that

deal with oppressed southern Negro peasants; the stories of the forties ("The Man Who Lived Underground," "The Man Who Went to Chicago," "The Man Who Killed a Shadow") employ an urban setting to depict the Negro's "invisibility," outsider, or underground status; the stories of the

fifties (“Man of All Work,” “Man, God Ain’t Like That,” “Big Black Good Man”) celebrate in an odd sort of way a kind of Negro nationalism—Negro virility as opposed to the white man’s flabbiness (74).

Margolies probably had no way of knowing, but the pieces “The Man Who Went to Chicago,” “Man of All Work,” and “Man, God Ain’t Like That” all stretch the use of the term story. “The Man Who Went to Chicago” is an extract from the intended second part of Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy*. The second part remained unpublished until it came out in 1975 under Wright’s intended title for the whole autobiography, *American Hunger*. “Man of All Work” and “Man, God Ain’t Like That” were meant to be radio plays for a Hamburg station, and this intention accounts for their experimental form, constituting solely of unattributed dialogue.

*Eight Men*’s apparent lack of formal and thematic unity combined with its bizarre, grotesque, and parodic qualities have led to the critical downgrading of the collection, and critics who attempt to rehabilitate *Eight Men* do so by attempting to discover this lost unity. Robert Butler assumes a New Critical perspective and asserts the coherence of *Eight Men*’s existential vision. He compares the collection to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg Ohio* and James Joyce’s *Dubliners* by arguing that *Eight Men* “is a carefully arranged sequence of thematically related stories which are also unified by....images of entrapment, fire symbolism, and ocular imagery” (151-52, 156). Gilroy takes a different approach to rehabilitation by asserting “that, as its title suggests, its contents are unified through the bond of masculinity that links the eight protagonists” (*Black Atlantic* 178). I do not want to overstate these thematic connections. The eight stories of *Eight Men* all engage situations of threatened and thwarted masculinities, but they represent a variety of

definitions of masculinity, techniques, and eras in Wright's career. This chapter's emphasis on Wright's use of noir does not aim at restoring a missing unity but to comprehend how "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," "Man of All Work," and "Man, God Ain't like That," assimilate and redeploy situations and devices from noir literature and film. These noir elements complicate the collection's purported theme and somewhat paradoxical title concerning masculinity.

*Eight Men's* inclusion of noir tropes in several stories explains the disdain and indifference that often greets the collection. Critics have longed recognized the influence of popular narrative forms on Richard Wright, and *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* contains entries on "Detective Fiction," "Dime Novels," "Film Noir," and "The Gothic (Literary Style)" (Ward and Butler 97-99, 131; Hoeveler 153-56). Indeed, much of Wright's literary output shows the influence of noir, or could be labeled as noir. The characters of *Uncle Tom's Children* enact violent and doomed rebellions. *Native Son* "unties the ideological novel and the modern descendent of the gothic, the crime novel" (Sundquist 22). Rabinowitz reads "Wright's second [published] novel, *The Outsider*, as a literary version of film noir" (84). The noir connections of *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* did not jeopardize their critical successes because of the perception that both books had their anchor in "the vital folk sources" that Gilroy mentions above (*Black Atlantic* 156). *The Outsider's* combination of noir melodrama and unseemly European ideas like existentialism and Freudianism appeared anathematic to Wright's prior black authenticity. Critics compared Wright repeatedly to Mickey Spillane, a popular writer of private eye noir and dismissible as a rightwing hack. One reviewer objects to *The Outsider* as "the worst novel I have ever read....without the intellectual and symbolic

trappings, it might have been a corking good Mickey Spillane sort of thriller,” another complains of soap opera plots “forced into what is basically a novel of ideas...[I]f Mickey Spillane were to rewrite *The Outsider*, even he—with his formula that nothing succeeds so well as excess—would not tax credulity as much as Wright has” (Rhea 201-02; Altshuler 203-04).

In the sections below, I intended to demonstrate the importance of noir touches and elements in suggesting and elaborating on the themes of masculinity Wright seeks to explore in *Eight Men*. Far from being a sensationalist tack-on, these excesses provide a necessary part of the narrative Wright constructs. Critics might loathe Wright’s abandonment of supposedly authentic folk culture for tropes from popular commercial narratives. However, Wright’s deployment, investigation, and parody of the despair and pleasures of a noir aesthetic connects to his interest in the “strange and emotional joy found in contemplating the blackest aspects of life” that he found in the blues and the dozens (*Black Power* 754).

Selecting *Eight Men* to scrutinize in this southern noir context may appear strange. Unlike *Sanctuary* and *The Letter*, most of the stories in *Eight Men* do not occur in spaces that are or even are reminiscent of southernscapes, although “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” does track the progress of its protagonist from the rural south to Washington, D.C. In terms of southern noir, the desperate and violent last stands made by characters like Big Boy Morrison, Mann, Silas, An Sue, and Johnny-Boy against white supremacist violence might seem to make *Uncle Tom’s Children* the more fitting collection to classify and interrogate as southern noir. The two thirties stories from *Eight Men*, “The Man Who Saw the Flood” and “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” fit a

similar mode of southern noir as these two stories emphasize a sense of entrapment for the rural black title characters although they lack much of the sensationalistic violence of the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*. But reading these stories from *Eight Men* as southern noir brings this study to an interesting conclusion. The prior chapters consider the influence of noir on two white narratives that use the south. These chapters challenge notions of southern exceptionalism founded on accounts of alienation and racialized and gendered violence by placing southern literature in the context of noir “as a leit-motif running through mid-twentieth century American culture” (Rabinowitz 14). Reading work by a southern writer living abroad and writing of noir themes set in primarily northern and European urban settings shifts the conversation to the south’s continuities with modernist and noir works enmeshed in comparable shadowy representations.

1. “The Dead Bodies of Rats Were No Shadows”: “The Man Who Killed a Shadow”

Wright’s “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” (written in 1946, first published in 1949) is the most straightforward example in *Eight Men* of Wright’s investment in noir tropes. The story interpolates noir imagery with its black protagonist negotiating race and gender dynamics with his white employers and provides the template that Wright’s fifties stories “Man of All Work” and “Man, God Ain’t like That” would fracture and parody. Wright’s story makes explicit and literal the black and white race relations underlying noir’s chiaroscuro style. Eric Lott and Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo describe film noir as “always and everywhere about race” in implicit and metaphorical terms (Oliver and Trigo 4). Manthia Diawara discusses how Wright’s contemporary and sometimes protégée, Chester Himes, provides an early example of “*noir by noirs*.” Diawara dismisses the possibility that black appropriation of noir tropes merely includes African Americans into a narrative form that previously provided whites the pleasing luxury of assuming the connotations of blackness:

It is misleading, for example, to see black *femmes fatales*, neurotic detectives, and grotesque bad guys as poor imitations of their white counterparts; these characters may be redeployed...to represent such themes as black rage at white America. In a paradoxical sense, the redeployment of *noir* style by black filmmakers redeems blackness from its genre definition by recasting the relation between light and dark on the screen as a metaphor for making black people and their cultures visible. In a broader sense, black *film noir* shines light (as in *daylight*) on black people. (263)

White noir obfuscates even as it testifies to the metaphorical and figurative resonances that American culture associates with blackness, whereas black noir demonstrates how the dominant white culture attaches those ambiguous or negative resonances to black characters. Most of Himes's novels, including his more literary works of the forties, invest black characters with noir tropes, but he did not begin an overt project of black noir until the late fifties with his absurdist Harlem Detective Cycle. Richard Wright and the first known black detective novel, *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932) by Rudolph Fisher, provide early examples of noir by African Americans.

Fisher, like James M. Cain, likely took inspiration for his crime novel from the much publicized trial and executions of Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray for the murder of her husband Albert in the late twenties (Bailey 28). Similarly, Wright based "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" on the case of a black janitor killing a white librarian in 1944, and he "worked from some hundred pages of testimony and cross-examination records" (Fabre 108-09). The opening narration of "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" provides a noir protagonist, Saul Saunders, and it presents his alienation as springing from boyhood fears of shadows, "not those beautiful silhouettes of objects cast upon the earth by the sun...But there were subtler shadows...and he lived to kill one of them" (185).

Saul's alienation has specific origins in his displacement as he undergoes multiple moves among rural, southern small towns that culminate in a move to the white-controlled urban world of Washington, D.C. to labor for white employees. These frequent movements recall similar incidents in Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*. They separate Saul from the senses of community and place that are used broadly to

characterize southern life for both whites and blacks, and as a result “people became for Saul symbols of uneasiness, of a deprivation that evoked in him a sense of the transitory quality of life” while “even physical landscapes grew to have but little emotional meaning for the boy” (186). This black nomadism originates in the poverty imposed on black southerners by the white-dominated economy, and Saul going directly “to work for the white people of the South” exacerbates “the shadowlike quality of his world” as it “became terribly manifest, continuously present” (187). Saul’s work for the rural and later the Washingtonian white elites traps him in a noir epistemology where “[h]e understood nothing of this white world....[I]t was just there, a faint and fearful shadow cast by some object that stood between him and a hidden and powerful sun” (187).

The story tracks Saul’s different jobs as a chauffer, butler, exterminator, and so on for white Washingtonians and reveals the solace Saul finds in alcohol. The story climaxes when Saul, now working as a janitor in the National Cathedral, is propositioned by a spinsterish white librarian in her forties, “a strange little shadow woman there who stared at him all the time in a most peculiar way” (190). Saul demurs from acknowledging Maybelle Eva Houseman’s advances, she calls him a “black nigger,” Saul slaps her, she begins to scream, and he bludgeons her with a log of firewood and stabs her in the throat with a knife to end her screaming. Saul hides Maybelle’s corpse and uses her pink panties to sop up the blood. Dazed and bewildered, he continues about his life before being arrested during a suicide attempt, tried, and convicted for the murder. In the clutches of the white judicial system, he “surrender[s] to the world of shadows about him” (200). The story ends with a doctor’s testimony that Maybelle was a forty-year old virgin.

Michel Fabre argues that what emerges from this shadow-play is the didactic lesson that “given the sexual/racial taboos, any white woman means danger for a black man, and it is not surprising that black men react erratically in the presence of a white woman” (119). Paula Rabinowitz interprets this lesson as how “in Richard Wright’s inversion of film noir, white women offer black men the transgressive power of the femme fatale. Like the femme fatale, she is desirable because she is trapped” (96). This femme fatale connection emerges from how Wright depicts the situation of black masculinity in a racist society, beset by the myth of the black rapist. In “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” and several of his earlier works, Wright renders this situation as a noir tale. Saul begins the story with the sort of alienation and disillusionment that, as discussed in the *Sanctuary* chapter, is a hallmark theme of noir. The narrative characterizes the alien white world with shadow imagery to demonstrate Saul’s disconnection. Wright’s use of shadow imagery works in line with the classic interpretation of noir shadows signaling an alien and threatening environment for the protagonist, but the black noir protagonist experiences these qualities as a result of society’s reactions to his own blackness. This point finds further emphasis when the black noir protagonist moves into the additionally alienating white space of the city, and his encounter with a sexually predatory white woman provokes a violent disavowal of her advances because of the systemic threat association with women poses for black men in a white supremacist society. Wright positioning of Maybelle as a repressed virgin suggests that even a sexually inexperienced white woman can pose the lethal danger of the femme fatale for a black man. Saul’s violence against Maybelle leads to his legal condemnation, which Saul greets with a resignation equal to that of Faulkner’s Popeye or a James Cain

protagonist. “The Man Who Killed a Shadow,” then, utilizes a standard noir template to describe black male experience in a white supremacist society.

“The Man Who Killed a Shadow” deploys the emblems of rape with Maybelle’s bloody pink panties, but exonerates Saul of that particular charge through the concluding medical testimony. Fabre concludes that this move occurs because Wright wants to stress that “the black man, in fact, cannot perform effectively the role of rapist into which white lust and guilt have cast him; rather, he feels castrated” (119). Saul fears the white virgin’s advances and her screams in which “he heard the sirens of the police cars that hunted down black men in the Black Belts” (194). He remembers “how whites always got the black who did a crime” and realizes that “this woman was screaming as though he had raped her” (194). Oliver and Trigo suggest that the ambivalence of the femme fatale originates in her status as “a fetish object that both protects against castration and threatens it at the same time. With her powerful will, cigarettes, and guns...the femme fatale is phallic and thereby helps the male deny the possibility of castration” while her “same phallic and sexual power over him...threatens to render him powerless and castrated” (xxviii).

Maybelle lacks the standard phallic accoutrements of the femme fatale, but the taboo status of her virginal female white sexuality threatens castration for Saul all the same. The story drives this danger home with the above pun about hunting “down black men in the Black Belts.” Maybelle’s job as a librarian helps emphasize her spinsterish virginity in contrast to the typical femme fatale’s experienced sexual aggressiveness, but her propositioning of Saul occurring in a library filled with books that Saul (who never goes beyond the third grade) must dust becomes a further emblem of Saul disempowered

situation relative to this educated white woman who threatens both metaphoric and literal castration. Maybelle also differs from the femme fatale archetype in another significant way. White noir narratives most often present the danger of the femme fatale's body as "a potential epistemological trauma" where "[s]exuality becomes the site of questions about what can and cannot be known" (Doane 1). These narratives often take the whiteness of the femme fatale for granted, and for the male observer her mysteriousness locates itself in the supposed inscrutability of her sexuality. To be sure this formulation of the femme fatale in white noir is hardly ever free of racial implications. As discussed in the *Sanctuary* chapter, these narratives often associate verbal or visual blackness with her figure to suggest the mysteriousness of her sexuality in racial terms. Mary Ann Doane's dissection of "Freud's use of the term 'dark continent' to signify female sexuality" and its connection to the femme fatale also links female sexuality with tropes of colonialism and racism (209). But the point remains that in white noir narratives the dangers of white femmes fatales springs from their alleged unknowable femaleness, which is imagined in but not reducible to racial terms. On the other hand, black noir narratives foreground race in their account of the threat of the white femme fatale for black males. This threat does not originate in black fears of or epistemological difficulties with female sexuality (white or otherwise) but in the specific cultural meaning attached to white female sexuality. Maybelle's scream poses no ambiguity or confusion for Saul; he knows very well what it signifies: lynching and castration at the hands of white law enforcement officials or a white mob.

Saul's response to this threat of castration is to take up a supplementary phallic object, his knife, and penetrate Maybelle by "plung[ing] it deep into her throat" (196).

Despite the seriousness of the subject matter and the tone of the story, Wright's satirical and burlesquing tendencies appear here. "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" both deflates and fulfills the lurid expectations accompanying the noir plot structures and narratives of black male criminality. On one hand Wright presents a black man frightened to the point of symbolic castration by white female sexuality, so that he cannot engage in consensual sex or rape. The effect of this inability undermines the southern rape complex. On the other hand, Saul's dread of the consequences that a misreading of Maybelle's screaming will produce causes him to assault and penetrate her in a desperate bid to quiet her. The self-fulfilling threat of lynching and castration attached to black male interaction with white female sexuality frightens Saul into penetrating Maybelle anyway, and Wright's noir narrative shows southern white terror producing the same actions that it claims to abhor and suppress. "Man of All Work" continues in this vein with even more parodic results.

2. “Did You, For Some Reason, *Make Him Wear that Dress?*”: “Man of All Work”

Befitting the transition to a more overtly comedic story, the central dilemma of “Man of All Work” alters Saul’s problem of quieting Maybelle then concealing her corpse. Carl Owens, the title character of “Man of All Work,” conceals his own body for most of the narrative to earn money for his wife and two young children. “Man of All Work” also deflates the narrative of the black rapist via its use of the potential of white women to be femmes fatales and the castration motif in the manner of “The Man Who Killed a Shadow.” As in “The Man Who Killed a Shadow,” the central plot point of “Man of All Work” comes from a black protagonist’s progress through a labyrinthine white world where any misstep could result in violence against him. While “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” locates its protagonist in the white-controlled labor economy of Washington, D.C., Carl, excluded from the male labor economy due to discriminatory hiring, must enter white domestic space for work gendered as female.

“Man of All Work” follows Carl, a professional cook who can find no work as a male cook despite a proliferation of ads seeking female black cooks and housekeepers. In frustration Carl decides that if “I’ve got on a dress...I look just like a million black woman cooks. Who looks that close at us colored people anyhow? We all look alike to white people” (116). Carl dons his wife’s clothes despite her strong opposition to his scheme and assumes her name, Lucy Owens. The Fairchilds, a white family with white-collar working parents and a daughter, hire Carl-Lucy. Despite Carl-Lucy’s proficiency at childcare and kitchen work, he finds himself threatened by the danger of discovery as well as by sexual violence upon entering white domestic space. The daughter, Lily, notices something is amiss with the family’s new worker and comments on Carl-Lucy’s

many masculine traits: “you hold your cigarette in your mouth like Papa holds his, with one end dropping down” (Wright 126). The wife, Anne, makes Carl-Lucy wash her back and evaluate the size of her breasts and thighs, causing Carl-Lucy visible discomfort as she forces him into breaking this color line taboo. Dave, the drunken husband, has a history of sexually assaulting the family’s black domestic employees, but Carl-Lucy assures both Anne and Lily that Dave “isn’t going to touch me” (130). Lily remains skeptical and responds to Carl-Lucy’s assertion that he can outrun Dave by explaining “he’ll catch you like he did Bertha [the previous housekeeper] and make you wrestle with him” (133).

True to Lily’s word, her drunken father does catch Carl-Lucy, and the two men wrestle back and forth in front of Lily. Carl-Lucy’s struggles against Dave only entice Dave, and during their fight he keeps up an abusive invective that denigrates Carl-Lucy while praising his strength: “damn, if you’re not like steel” and “you’re a sassy nigger bitch, aren’t you?” (138). Anne arrives home to discover their struggles, which she misinterprets as amorous, and determines to take her revenge on Carl-Lucy for breaking his word against having relations with her husband. She shoots Carl-Lucy, and the two white adults panic before calling Anne’s brother-in-law, Dr. Burt Stallman. Both the adult Fairchilds begin to experience great remorse as Anne declares “I should’ve shot myself, rather than that poor fool of a gal!” while Dave attempts to concoct a plausible story and begs Anne unsuccessfully to let him take the blame (142).

Burt arrives and manages to save Carl-Lucy with a blood transfusion in the Fairchild living room. He informs the Fairchilds that their servant is a man, which allows Dave to declare sans irony: “*See?*....I was protecting white womanhood from a nigger

rapist impersonating a woman! A rapist who wears a dress is the worst sort!” (146-47). Anne refuses to go along with Dave’s fantasy, so Burt negotiates a payoff to keep Carl silent. Dave’s and Anne’s relationship returns to an equilibrium of recrimination and false promises as Burt takes Carl home for a tearful reunion with his family.

Like Maybelle in “The Man Who Killed a Shadow,” Anne also occupies the position of a forbidden, fatal white woman for a black man like Carl. Unlike Maybelle, Anne appears more conscious of the transgressive potential of her position. After Burt reveals to Anne and Dave that Carl-Lucy is a man, Anne recalls how she ordered Carl-Lucy into scrubbing her back and evaluating her naked physical features. Dave seizes that gazing upon his wife as a sufficient pretext for her shooting Carl-Lucy, yet Anne refuses to lie and actually invests the moment where Carl-Lucy looked at and touched her with pity and perhaps even a nervous sort of eroticism: “that is why she was so scared this morning in the bathroom....She...he...she was sweating, trembling....If she is a man, she was scared to death, could barely move” (146-47).

Anne’s cross-racial empathy has definite limits as she shoots Carl-Lucy when she perceives him as a participant in adultery. Anne can conceive of the terrors looking at her body might inspire in a black man, but she blames black female domestic workers for her husband’s sexual coercion of them. This jealousy leads to the shooting and puts her in a long line of femmes fatales menacing their same-sex rivals: Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947), Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat* (1953), Gaby Rodgers in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1953), etc. The danger Wright’s story poses to black masculinity by white female sexuality recalls the castration anxieties of “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” especially when Anne’s gunshot causes Carl “a

flesh wound in the thigh” with a “great loss of blood” (145). Abbott posits that this noir fear of castration prefigures “a collapse of gender” which captures the situation of “Man of All Work” as characters play multiple, differently gendered roles (43).

The blurring of gender roles in “Man of All Work” utilizes a similar plot trope to how noir’s protagonists “navigate the borders of race in ways that manifest an anxiety over lost boundaries and racial ambiguity” (Oliver & Trigo 2). On first look Carl appears a poor fit for a noir protagonist as he lacks any trace of the hardboiled. Gilroy sees Carl “embedded in circuits of responsibility that derive from the roles of provider, father, and husband” such that Carl parodies “the machismo that Wright supposedly celebrated” (Introduction xix). Embedding Carl in a domestically-oriented masculinity demonstrates a different fantasy structure for black masculinity than typical white narratives. The southern rape complex conceives of black men’s desires centering on white women in contrast to the related hardboiled fantasy where white men desire to remain free and unencumbered while surreptitiously incorporating and disavowing aspects of racial and sexual otherness (Abbott 48). This black fantasy from the beginning of the story has Carl overtly incorporate stereotypically feminine qualities including his skill as a cook and his assumption of domestic duties from his sick wife such as bottle-feeding their infant daughter. Placing Carl in a noir role where he must navigate in foreign (white) space and disguise his sex provides a mirror structure to the noir narrative where instead of a white protagonist’s autonomy being threatened by “dark” forces, the actions and fantasies of white people compromise the masculinity of a black man and threaten his family.

Carl recognizes his affinity for work gendered as female; as he explains to his wife Lucy, “I know how to handle children. I can cook....I’m an army trained cook. I can clean a house as good as anybody. Get my point? I put on your dress. I looked in the mirror. I can pass. I want that job—” (115). Marjorie Garber notes how “‘passing’ here itself passes from the category of race or color to the category of gender; a black man sees that he can pass as a woman because he is, in white eyes, always already a woman” (293). As noted by Garber, Wright alters the dominant trend of passing narratives from race to gender and engages with the tendency of such narratives to stress the social preferability of whiteness or maleness to blackness or femaleness, yet still punish characters in the narrative who insist on passing to improve their condition (Oliver and Trigo 21).

Garber as well as Oliver and Trigo present several interesting avenues along which to approach “Man of All Work.” One possible reading of Carl-Lucy in “Man of All Work” is that he demonstrates the feminization of black men under systems of white supremacy and economic deprivation, which helps explain the reduction of Carl and his whole family to tears at the end although Carl’s gender-bending has saved the family’s home, etc. The figure of Carl potentially castrated at the hands of Anne becomes the apocalyptic end place for black masculinity towards which this line of argument points. In this sense “Man of All Work” might argue against a form of passing given how gender passing results in Carl being shot and his whole family weeping and wailing, despite the positive economic results from his deception. An argument in this context for stable gender identities even becomes an argument against white supremacy and economic inequality as it stresses how these two things degrade black masculinity and force Carl

into a feminine performance to survive. Furthermore, Lucy and Carl in the end seem to vindicate an innate, albeit sympathetic, account of gender identity where women “learn it [how to survive as a (black) woman]” by “instinct” and Carl promises “I wouldn’t be caught dead again in a dress” (154).

The observations and comments above make “Man of All Work” seem a story that draws attention to the limits of and troubles gender identities only to reestablish and strengthen those identities in the end, thus playing into the stereotype of Wright as a writer of machismo and misogynistic violence. Another plausible reading, however, vindicates what Gilroy calls Wright’s “proto-feminist” insights (*The Black Atlantic* 176). Even, Lucy, who reaches near hysteria when she sees her husband in drag, assures her young son that despite his protestations, he used to look exactly like, “not a bit different” from his infant sister (110). Furthermore, Wright’s story suggests concepts of gender and sex cannot be understood without reference “to various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete” (J. Butler 21). Carl does not just pass for a woman, he passes for a relatively asexual, older, black, female domestic worker who can explain to Lily that her arm hair is “nothing,” her strength comes from labor, and her voice is heavy from singing (125-26). While the narrative may reestablish black masculinity for Carl in the end, the complicity of the authority figure; the altering gender roles of Dave, Anne, and Carl-Lucy; and the way the story understands gender not as a universal trait but a category modified by and bound up with other identity categories all demonstrate a complex understanding of gender.

The contingency of gender recognition on factors of race means more than the ease with which white racial assumptions and his own efforts allow Carl to pass as a

woman. This passing puts Carl in a position of a common but often peripheral character in noir narrative, the black maid. Black maids loyal to their white employers have long been a staple character in films noirs. The fatal couple Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson have an offhanded conversation in *Double Indemnity* that underscores the white hardboiled male's dependence on black female labor early in the film:

Phyllis: It's nice here, Walter. Who takes care of it for you?

Walter: A colored woman comes in twice a week.

Other films noirs like *Out of the Past* and noir melodramas like *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949) make the black maid a fairly important onscreen character aiding her white female employer. Rabinowitz concludes that “the black maid, like the detective or the femme fatale, by occupation, slides between two worlds....[T]he black woman is rarely the center of the action in film noir...but her presence appears necessary to the complex postwar sexual and racial dynamics that films noirs track by linking domestic melodrama to hard-boiled proletarian culture” (62-63). In Rabinowitz's formulation the black maid provides a necessary supplement to the white figure of the femme fatale. On the material level, the domestic labor of the black maid frees and privileges the femme fatale to create and cultivate an enticing, aggressive sexuality apart from the normal requirements of household work for a woman of the times. The frequent association of black maids with the sexual danger they allegedly pose to white males doubles with how the white femme fatale's own racialized sexuality can taint white masculinity.

Wright makes the implicit, necessary connection between the femme fatale and the black maid explicit by appropriating the maid's liminal figure to serve as a femme

fatale for the white imagination in “Man of All Work.” Anne treats her husband Dave like a child and absolves him of most of the responsibility for his sexual coercion of the help. She explains to Carl-Lucy that “any strong-minded person can handle Dave when he’s like that. But if you’re like Bertha, then the trouble’s bound to come,” which blames the prior black maid, Bertha, for insufficient resistance to Dave (130). Yet, Carl-Lucy’s resistance excites a passion for domination in Dave. When Anne enters the scene of their struggles her assumptions about the power of black female sexuality and the weakness of her husband lead her to misread their struggles and attempt to murder Carl-Lucy as the femme fatale source of the problem.

Dave’s conduct towards Carl-Lucy ostensibly seems like an attempt “to recover his virility in drink and Negro girls” from Anne’s view of him as childish (Margolies 146). As noted by Marlon Ross, Dave’s arousal by Carl-Lucy’s resistance “insinuates that the assaulting man finds masochistic pleasure in the prospect of a woman who could conceivably fight back and instead force her sexual desire upon him. The desire to penetrate potentially sublimates a desire to be penetrated” (324). The story ridicules Dave’s misunderstanding of his desires while playing “delicately but never explicitly with notions of homosexuality, transvestism, castration, and hermaphroditism” (Margolies 145). Dave’s shame and anxiety at the revelation of Carl-Lucy’s true gender and his discovery that his desires have manifested themselves in an attempt at same-sex rape, hint at what Nathan Scott calls “the sexual panic of American whites” (161). The story mocks Dave’s emasculation, but it also demonstrates how “modern white masculinities are deeply contradictory, eroticizing submission and victimization while trying to retain a certain aggressively virile edge, offering subject positions that have

been marked historically as being both masculine and feminine, white and black” (Savran 9). Dave’s joy in Carl-Lucy’s resistance—“Look who’s threatening. You’re going to grab me, hunh? Baby, that’s just what I want”—and his self-derogating pleas to Anne bespeak an eroticized willingness to submit (137). His childish, drunken, violent, possibly homosexual, white masculinity and submission to his wife offers a parodic and even more abased vision of white masculinity juxtaposed against the feminization that Carl-Lucy’s masculinity is forced to undergo.

Both the Fairchilds project a femme fatale image of dangerous sexual virility on Carl-Lucy as a black maid. Dave’s enjoyment from their struggle derives for Carl-Lucy’s ability to physically resist his advances and offer a more violent sexual encounter, whereas Anne assigns Carl-Lucy a threatening and tempting sexual allure. These white fears of black maids reassign the aggressive sexuality of the white femme fatale to the marginal figure of the black maid whose supporting domestic labor supplements the glamour and lifestyle of the white femme fatale. The black maid becomes the central dangerous female figure in the fantasies of the Fairchilds, and Carl-Lucy’s experience as a black maid clues him into the persecution undergone by such a femme fatale figure, augmented by the doubly disempowered status of being black and female in white domestic space.

Dave declares to Lucy at the end of the story “I was a woman for almost six hours and it almost killed me. Two hours after I put that dress on I thought I was going crazy....I didn’t know it was so hard” (154). The story sets up an explicit lesson for Dave, though it never exactly specifies what the lesson is. I discussed above the ambiguity in regards to “Man of All Work” as a passing narrative; in its end the story

reasserts traditional gender boundaries and again separates Owens's black domestic space from that of the Fairchilds' white domestic space, although Dave's and Lucy's household will survive for several more months on the hush money from the Fairchilds. The characters reject cross-dressing; however, Carl emerges from the experience with the dangerous knowledge of what being a black female worker in white domestic space means. Cross-dressing becomes a method for Carl to learn how whites use noir narratives of femmes fatales and seduction to project white anxieties and moral failings onto their employees.

The fact that the maid is a man in disguise and that Dave's assault testifies to the common sexual exploitation of black maids deepen the irony of Wright's appropriation of popular narrative forms. "Man of All Work" incorporates and parodies conventions of melodramas and noir fiction and films to tell a resonant story of gender-passing. Like "The Man Who Killed a Shadow," "Man of All Work" places its protagonist in an inscrutable, white-dominated world with conventions that are the hallmark of noir narratives: the shadow imagery, alienation, and femme fatale of "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" and the ambiguity of borders and identities along with the triangular relationship involving a femme fatale of "Man of All Work." "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" begins the project of relating noir tropes to the experiences of black masculinity in a white supremacist society, and those tropes help discredit the myth of the black rapist. "Man of All Work" continues that project by demonstrating the attempted perpetration of rape by a white man on a seeming black woman and parodically intertwining Carl-Lucy as a potential black rapist figure with the figure of the black maid and the white femme fatale. Both stories, no matter how satiric, rely on an appropriation

of elements of the noir narrative to offer a vision of the black experience, male and female, in racist, white America as narrative requiring classic noir elements of persecution and alienation. Both stories demonstrate an important positive political function of black literature appropriating noir narratives, but “Man of All Work” also demonstrates how whites project noir narratives of unrestrained criminality and sexual license onto black characters as the Fairchilds do to Carl-Lucy. The final story in this examination, “Man, God Ain’t like That” also parodies noir forms. But like the ending of “Man of All Work” it demonstrates the racist misreadings possible in a noir narrative.

3. “We’ve Had Cases like This Before”: “Man, God Ain’t like That...”

“Man, God Ain’t like That” hinges, as do “The Man Who Killed a Shadow” and “Man of All Work,” on a black man’s entry into a confusing and threatening white space as an employee. Saul enters Washington, D.C., Carl-Lucy enters the Fairchild domestic space, and Babu’s arc touches on both the urban and the domestic as he enters the Franklin vacation household in Ghana, then the urban labyrinth of Paris. “Man, God Ain’t like That” details this introduction of a postcolonial subject to the European, white city of Paris and the empowering, violent result of this action.

The postcolonial aspects of “Man, God Ain’t like That” make the story an intriguing example for noir studies, which like American and southern studies before it, has undergone a transnational turn supported by the works of Naremore and Stanley Orr as well as Fay and Nieland. Fay and Nieland attempt to reconstruct a fragmentary look at “one international noir history” linked with “the mobile and dislocated social and cultural relations of modernity itself” (xiii). Orr’s contribution to this noir history locates the origins of noir chiaroscuro in the late Victorian/Edwardian eras’ “oppositions essential to imperial adventure—white/black, dark/light” (4). These global contextualizations of noir help situate “Man, God Ain’t like That” in the postcolonial connections between Ghana (colonized by Britain) and Paris. The story can work as a postcolonial noir, a category that Wendy Knepper deploys in her analysis of a Martinican detective novel by Patrick Chamoiseau. Chamoiseau satirizes his detective character’s “efforts to impose a generic French worldview on Martinique....Despite his claims to rationality, he does not attempt to understand the milieu or to listen to what the witnesses have to say. Rather, he adopts what Jacques Derrida refers to as the ‘madness’ of policing the borders of genre” (1437).

Babu develops an obsession too with the disparities between white and black men. He is a Ghanan who learned English from the British colonizers and picked up some French while working in the neighboring Côte d'Ivoire. Babu's religious practices meld Methodism learned in mission churches with a "blood religion" of chicken sacrifices and prayers to Babu's papa, whose bones Babu carries in a suitcase (164). An American couple consisting of John Franklin, a painter who works out of Paris, and his wife, Elise, comes to Ghana so John can paint landscapes and they can escape his mistress, Odile Dufour. John hits Babu with a car while driving recklessly through a storm, and the Franklins take him to a doctor in Kumasi. Babu is in awe of John, calls him "Massa" and believes John's "red beard and blue eyes" look like the "Jesus picture in Sunday school book" (163).

Babu becomes the Franklins' cook and paternalistically regarded servant as well as a subject for a series of paintings where "Massa make Babu look like black burning rose!" (161). The relationship models the traditional, reinvigorating conception of the colonial relationship for the colonizer as painting Ghanan subjects revitalizes John's art career. The Franklins return to Paris for a gallery showing with Babu in tow. Babu immediately disappears into "white man's jungle" of Paris, "God's city," for a month, almost long enough for the Temptation of Christ (175-76). Babu returns to the Franklins convinced that John is God because John as an art student used to work as a model for the Sunday school paintings of Jesus that Babu has seen. Babu now "want to know where white men get all those fine buildings [Chambre des Députés, Versailles, etc.]—" (177). Babu notices that Ghana lacks France's spectacular architecture, but Babu will not accept that "God gave white man buildings and...black man live in jungle" because "God ain't

like that” (178). From Babu’s understanding of the sacrifices in Christianity, the only way to rectify this problem and create power for black people is to kill John/God since “white man kill you [Jesus] and prove you God. Then you rose from dead in three days and you make white man powerful. Now it’s *black man’s* turn!” (181).

Babu beheads John with his knife, and the story concludes with a brief epilogue set five years later, as a unnamed Parisian police detective, *l’Inspecteur*, and his subordinate, Jacques, reexamine John’s unsolved murder. The police at the time of the murder concluded that Babu, despite his and Elise’s claims that he had murdered John, was an innocent religious fanatic and sent him back to Ghana. Jacques theorizes that the real killer was John’s spurned mistress, and they reopen the case and “send out a tracer for Odile Dufour. By God, it’s never too late to bring a guilty person to justice” (184). In this way they dismiss the religiopolitical underpinnings of Babu’s act to construct a noir narrative of denied female sexuality.

Critics have not really known what to do with this story, described by Yoshinobu Hakutani as “the least accomplished piece of fiction in *Eight Men*...a series of obscure, bizarre incidents, [with] the elements of irony and humor added from time to time sound[ing] gratuitous” (240). The *Student Companion to Richard Wright* offers a more dubious postcolonialist reading in which Babu is a victim of a situation where “Western colonial policy undermined local culture and generated a deformed version of European culture in its wake” (Felgar 109). This reading prizes a problematic conception of Western and African cultures as unified wholes and entails dismissing creolization and cultural blending as deformations. It also overlooks how even if Babu gets the causal relationships between Christianity and European landmarks awry, he still understands

and acts on the shared sacrificial logics underlying his ancestor worship and Christianity. The movement allows the materialist, rationalist Wright a way to criticize Christianity's violent sacrificial roots while showing the readers that "alone among Wright's black killers, Babu murders for an intellectual reason—and gets away with it," suggesting the story valorizes his murder (Bradley xxii). Despite its embrace of Babu's killing, the story portrays Ghana as primitive and France as advanced, even if beset by the irrationalities of racism and imperialism; Subramanian Shankar contends that the story shares "the dominant themes of *Black Power* [containing Wright's non-fiction writing about Africa]...the contrast between the West and Africa as the difference between rationality and irrationality, science and religion" (134). Wright's story critiques western rationality as the Parisian gendarme fails to regard the black Babu as having sufficient intelligence to be a subject capable of inflicting violence.

Amidst these reflections about Wright's ambivalent feeling about both African traditions and Western rationalism, critics miss the obvious debt "Man, God Ain't like That" owes to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855). Babu beheading with a knife his God bears a marked resemblance to how in the first story "the orangutan (itself an allusion to Jefferson's notorious remarks on the Negro's place in the chain of being) escapes the whippings of his master and murders a white woman with a razor, nearly cutting off her head" and how in the novella "Babo, in a magnificent inverted scene of enslavement and torture, turns his shaving of Benito Cereno into a mock execution" (Sundquist 21). Fears of blacks, fears of the upward mobility of black barbers and the vulnerable position of white men under their razors, a museum exhibit of monkeys in a barbershop, and racist assertions of

the evolutionary connections among blacks and primates formed a potent cultural stew in Philadelphia as Poe published the first detective story (Lemire 183-88). Wright clearly intends Babu beheading Franklin in a domestic scene to repeat and embody the same white fears that Poe's orangutan and Melville's Babo manifested a century earlier. John Franklin's vicious racism continually identifies Babu with the primate killer in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" as John expounds on how "you can't hurt these monkeys" and calls Babu "an ape" or "you baboon" (157, 162, 178). Unlike the recaptured orangutan or Babo, whose head ends up on a pike, Babu murders and gets away it. The reason for Babu's success resides in how "Man, God Ain't like That" parodies a classic product of Western rationalism, the detective story. This parody shows the ambivalence of Wright's criticism of the "primitivism" of Africans and the limits of his embrace of Western rationality.

Before considering the direct ways that Wright parodies Poe's detective formula, it useful to note how Poe and Melville can be seen as two progenitors of the mood underlying the noir style in America. Nicholas Christopher describes "Poe; our first poet of the industrial, extended city, an avatar of the exotic and the macabre, he was also the inventor of the modern detective story" (36). David Reid and Jayne Walker note noir's indebtedness to the nineteenth-century American popular writing cataloged by David Reynolds, the British and American contemporaries of Poe writing urban gothics as listed by Benjamin Fisher, and more "literary" writers like Hawthorne and Melville (Reid and Walker 66; "Urban Scene" 45-46). Wright's satire in "Man, God Ain't like That" understands noir as common, racially-inflected American narrative pattern that may serve to obscure as much as it reveals about violent crimes. Lindon Barrett has explained how

the central point on which Dupin's ratiocination revolves in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" comes as a variety of witnesses from different countries presents auditory accounts of the orangutan's chattering, but each identifies it as another European language. For Barrett "Dupin fathoms the mistake each witness makes is to draw the scope of their reckoning much too narrowly....Dupin's brilliance rests on the fact that he fully recognizes that what is most strange, peculiar, and unfamiliar lies, with certainty, without rather than within European geographies" (165). Dupin's deductive logic ultimately rests on a willingness to "provide an account of the unquestionably and unimaginable other—which is, as gingerly outlined as it may be, sketched in nineteenth century codes of racialization...to provide most unexpectedly a logical account of circumstances seeming to defy all logic" (172). The character understands when to look beyond the confines of Europe for the perpetrator, which is exactly what Jacques and *l'Inspecteur* fail to do at the end of "Man, God Ain't like That," blinded and tempted as they are by the potential noir figure of a femme fatale.

Detectives are a frequent character-type in noir works. If they do not provide the main focus for the narrative, then they are frequently dense, overzealous, or corrupt obstacles for a noir protagonist to contend with, like the detectives played by Laird Cregar in *I Wake up Screaming* (1941) or Sterling Hayden in *Crime Wave* (1954). In "Man, God Ain't like That" the theory Jacques outlines to *l'Inspecteur* bears no relation to the reality of the story or to Dupin's reasoning process. Jacques believes the Parisian police must "look for that *other woman*....What fouled up this investigation were the wild ideas of that crazy African..." (184). In other words Jacques and his superior dismiss out of hand both the possibility that Babu could have violent agency enough to

murder John or even have sufficient rationality to reliably testify. In this respect they resemble Captain Amasa Delano, who cannot even conceive of the idea of a slave mutiny or Babo's unfaithfulness until the violent visual reality of it becomes unmistakable. Instead Jacques concocts an elaborate alternative theory that bases itself on the stereotypically French/noir maxim to find the woman and molds Odile into femme fatale while sending the noir murderer back to Africa. Jacques warps the events to suit his theory where Dupin adjusts his theory to suit events.

The criticism of Jacques's ratiocination process should not therefore valorize Dupin's, despite Dupin's recognition of some degree of agency for non-European forces. Here Wright gets in blows at a Western rationalism deeply and perhaps inextricably wound up with colonial racisms. Barrett explains how Dupin's detection hinges on an ability and willingness to look at testimonies and infer the existence of a non-European, exotic other to resolve contradictions and exonerate Europeans from the crime. On the other hand, Jacques's and his superior's racism does not even allow for a correct reasoning process; it is inconceivable to them that a primitive Ghanan could commit such a crime since "only an insanely jealous woman could behead a man like that" (183). The result of the parodic force of this statement and others in "Man, God Ain't like That" allows Wright to take a basic feature of popular culture and noir narratives, detection, and show its deep origins in racially tinged logic. This failure of detection allows a successful black murderer and challenges a separate narrative of black criminality than "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" and "Man of All Work." All three stories intertwine elements of noir plot tropes and aesthetics in the Wright's work with developed considerations of black masculinity.

As this chapter has explained at length “The Man Who Killed a Shadow,” “Man of All Work” and “Man, God Ain’t like That” all present black males in noir situations. This inclusion of black characters into the scenarios and tropes of noir does not rest on a simple integrationist premise. Instead these black noir protagonists serve to reveal and literalize the racial tropes behind noir effects and to dismantle yet complicate simplistic, racist narratives like those of the black criminal rapist and the African primitive, incapable of resistance to white western masculinity. Wright, in this reconceptualized appropriation of noir, achieves a parody marked by the bizarre and the grotesque as well as a critique of simplistic deployments of noir devices in white racial narratives.

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## VITA

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